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THE RELATION OF CHILDHOOD ABUSE AND EARLY PARENTING EXPERIENCES TO CURRENT MARITAL QUALITY IN A NONCLINICAL SAMPLE

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Abstract—This study examines the relation between adults' reports of the nature of the early parenting they received, including abuse, and the quality of their marital relationship. This community sample of 159 married women and men experienced relatively low levels of abuse. The regression analyses indicated that for women verbal abuse in childhood was predictive of marital conflict, and the caring parenting they experienced predicted the depth of their marital relationship. For men, the abuse variables did not predict any dimension of their current marital relationship. Of the parenting variables, overprotection was significantly predictive of conflict in their marriage. No demographic variable—income, education, and number of siblings—predicted any dimension of marital quality for either men or women. Given the skew of the abuse data for this nonclinical sample, log transformations were performed on the data and the regression analyses were reported. One change was noted: that for men, physical abuse and overprotection were equally predictive of marital conflict. The results suggest that abuse and early parent experiences are predictive of marital functioning in a nonclinical sample, but that differences exist in the pattern for men and women.

Key Words—Verbal abuse, Physical abuse, Sexual abuse, Parenting styles, Marital relationship.

INTRODUCTION

FOR THE PAST two decades, psychologists have devoted increasing attention to the correlates of childhood abuse. Until recently the attempt to understand abuse led researches to adopt methodology that simplified their task. They typically studied abuse (a) in isolation, outside the context of the parenting environment; (b) in its most discrete forms (physical and sexual abuse); (c) separately, rather than in combination studies of several types of abuse; (d) in its most severe manifestations, as a pathological aberration rather than as a point along a continuum; and (e) as a phenomenon with short-term correlates rather than lifetime implications.

As abuse has become better understood, methodologies have become increasingly sophisticated. Researchers have widened their gaze to consider the context of parenting within which abuse occurs, and have suggested that factors such as parenting environment may mediate its impact on later functioning (Fromuth, 1986). Rather than an aberrant experience with its own particular impact, perhaps abuse is a simple extension of the parenting environment within which it occurs. Erickson and Egeland (1987) conclude that "it is that pervasive insensitivity to the child's needs, rather than incidents of abuse *per se*, which is a primary factor accounting for long-term psychological consequences" (p. 164). Maybe it is not abuse that disrupts functioning so much as poor parenting generally. Despite calls for studies to disentangle these

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variables, however, there has been little research into early parenting and abuse and their long-term correlates.

As abuse research is developed, so has theory emphasizing the importance of childhood attachment and object relations. According to this theoretical perspective, from interactions within their primary caregiver children develop an internal working model of relationships that carries over into their adult functioning. Given this orientation, researchers have begun to look at how childhood abuse might correlate with the quality of a person's long-term relationship functioning.

Correlates of Childhood Abuse

Over the past two decades, researches have catalogued various negative sequelae of childhood abuse, from low self-esteem and academic problems to depression and personality disorders (Steele, 1986). Sexual abuse has been associated with a long list of deleterious outcomes, including depression and mental health impairment (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Finkelhor, 1987; Gold, 1986), psychological maladjustment (Gold, 1986; Greenwald, Leitenberg, Cado, & Tarran, 1990), and problems with sexual behavior (Briere & Runtz, 1990; Gold, 1986; Tharinger, 1990). Physical abuse sequelae have included anger and aggression (Briere & Runtz, 1990), poor academic performance, sleep problems, drug abuse, and suicidal ideation (Farber & Joseph, 1985). Until recently, studies of the correlates of verbal and psychological abuse have been more rare. One study (Briere & Runtz, 1990) found a relationship between reports of psychologically abusive parenting and low self-image. Another found correlations to dependency, depression, scholastic underachivement, and such "problem" behaviors as stealing, lying, and aggression toward others (Briere & Runtz, 1988).

Predictably, researchers have associated abuse not only with poor outcomes in individual functioning but with deficits in relationship functioning as well. Psychological, sexual, and physical abuse have all been connected with poorer interpersonal relationships (Briere & Runtz, 1988), as well as deficits in self-esteem (Briere & Runtz, 1990; Finkelhor, 1987; Gold, 1986). If object relations theory is correct in its emphasis on infants' early model of relationships, one might expect abuse experiences to be a significant predictor of both short- and long-term relationship functioning. Research into abuse's correlation with later relationship quality, however, has been lacking.

As adverse outcomes of abuse have proliferated, the complexity of the relationship between abuse and subsequent functioning has become increasingly apparent. That a significant number of abused children grow into well-functioning adults (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990; Steele, 1986) is evidence that factors exist that may mediate outcomes associated with abuse. Many researchers have thus called for studies that distinguish the correlates of various types of abuse both from each other and from family dysfunction generally (Alexander & Lupfer, 1987; Fromuth, 1986; Steele, 1987). To this end they advocate assessing different forms of maltreatment simultaneously and including mediating family background variables (Briere, 1992; Briere & Runtz, 1990; Tharinger, 1990).

Parenting Context

In considering mediating variables, researchers have begun to look at the parenting context within which abuse occurs. The result has been that, after years of being studied in isolation, abuse is again being seen as one feature of a complex parenting environment within which a child grows. Is it possible that specific abuse experiences are less important to later functioning than the general quality of parenting that a child receives? Or is abuse best seen as a distinct and uniquely harmful feature of the parenting environment?

In her review of research findings on developmental outcomes associated with all types of

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