



## Substance use predicted by parental maltreatment, gender, and five-factor personality



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### ABSTRACT

Parental maltreatment is suggested to result in negative outcomes for emerging adults, including substance use. Additionally, parental emotional and physical maltreatment are associated with a number of temperament changes, as suggested by attachment theory. Prior research suggests five-factor traits such as higher neuroticism, higher extraversion, and lower conscientiousness are associated with increased substance use and likelihood of substance abuse. Thus, the current study examined the relations among paternal and maternal emotional and physical maltreatment, emerging adult gender, five-factor traits, and substance use. Participants consisted of 585 (202 males and 383 females) emerging adult college students ( $M = 19.27$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ). Multiple regression analysis indicated that maternal and paternal emotional maltreatment and emerging adult extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism predicted substance use, whereas maternal and paternal physical maltreatment and emerging adult gender, openness, and agreeableness were not significant predictors. These findings suggest both parental maltreatment and emerging adult personality factors play a role in predicting emerging adult substance use and further distinguishes between paternal and maternal emotional and physical maltreatment in addition to associations between parental maltreatment and five-factor traits in emerging adults.

Maladaptive ways of coping with life stressors lead to negative outcomes, and in emerging adults some can become enduring, particularly substance use and abuse (Fishbein, Rose, Darcey, Belcher, & VanMeter, 2016; Hall et al., 2016). Although the use of substances such as alcohol and marijuana have become more normative over time, research supports that they are maladaptive for emerging adults, as they increase the risk of substance abuse, the use and abuse of more illicit substances, and brain development (Boulos et al., 2016; Fishbein et al., 2016). Most commonly, grey matter differences in the prefrontal cortex, associated with emotional dysregulation and inhibition, have been associated with emerging adult substance use (Boulos et al., 2016). Research has suggested that although these behaviors are often influenced by several factors, a particular significance may be on parenting factors that can impact substance use (McKinney & Renk, 2011).

Negative parenting practices, such as physical and emotional maltreatment, and emerging adult perception of their parents' behavior influences emerging adult behavior (Calafat, García, Juan, Becoña, & Fernández-Hermida, 2014). Moreover, studies have found support for associations between particular emerging adult personality traits, such as high neuroticism, low conscientiousness, and high extraversion, as well as substance use (Kotov, Gamez, Schmidt, & Watson, 2010).

Although the link between maltreatment and substance use has been well supported in the literature, the interplay among these factors and emerging adult personality is less established (Alati et al., 2014; Calafat et al., 2014; Kotov et al., 2010). Thus, the current study determined how parental physical and emotional maltreatment and emerging adult five-factor personality traits interplay in predicting emerging adult substance use.

### 1. Maltreatment and substance use

Evidence suggests that parents, through their parenting behaviors, play a crucial role in influencing their children's outcomes (e.g., delinquency and substance use; Hinnant, Erath, & El-Sheikh, 2015). Some parents engage in negative parenting practices, such as physical and emotional maltreatment, which have pronounced effects on substance use outcomes (Ammerman, Kolko, Kirisci, Blackson, & Dawes, 1999). Physical maltreatment includes any physical treatment that results in actual or potential harm to children's health or survival, and likewise, emotional maltreatment includes any act that results in actual or potential harm to children's dignity or self-worth (Norman et al., 2012), both of which increase the likelihood of substance use (Moran,

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Vuchinich, & Hall, 2004).

Throughout the literature, child maltreatment is not only associated with poorer emerging adult outcomes, but studies show that if one parent engages in child maltreatment then the other parent also is more likely to engage in maltreatment (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998). Conversely, research also suggests that even one parent with positive parenting behaviors acts as a protective factor against negative emerging adult outcomes (Ritchie & Buchanan, 2011). The amount of protection this provides may depend on which parent exhibits which behaviors, as some studies suggest maternal parenting is more likely to influence paternal parenting (Latham, Mark, & Oliver, 2016). Some studies suggest that differences in the association between parenting behaviors and emerging adult outcomes are based on the interaction between emerging adult sex and parent sex, such that maternal maltreatment may have a higher impact on daughters than sons (Oshio & Umeda, 2016).

## 2. Emerging adult personality

Non-pathological personality is often characterized by the five-factor model of personality (Costa Jr & McCrae, 1988). These characteristics are measured on a continuum of normal personality characteristics and are relatively stable over time (Sneed & Pimontel, 2012). In the literature, it is suggested that emerging adult personality traits are associated with particular outcomes as well as specific parenting behaviors (de Haan, Deković, & Prinzie, 2012). For example, children who experience parental maltreatment at a young age scored lower on agreeableness, lower on conscientiousness, and higher on neuroticism than children who had not experienced maltreatment (Gfroerer, Kern, Curlette, White, & Jonynienė, 2011; Rogosch & Cicchetti, 2004). Additionally, emerging adults higher in neuroticism may perceive parent behaviors, particularly past parent behaviors, as more hostile (Gerlisma, Emmelkamp, & Arrindell, 1990). Moreover, daughters were more likely to report higher levels of neuroticism than males, and females who had experienced childhood sexual abuse reported even greater levels of neuroticism (Weisberg, DeYoung, & Hirsh, 2011).

Emerging adults high in extraversion and low in conscientiousness may be more likely to engage in risky substance use behaviors in a social context; however, emerging adults high in neuroticism may be more likely to develop a substance use disorder as a way of coping (Papachristou, Nederkoorn, & Jansen, 2016). Specifically, high neuroticism is associated with coping involving substance use, which has been evidenced to support a substance abuse framework positing that substances are used to cope with negative emotional states; using substances to cope is associated with an increase of substance-related dysfunction and higher risk of learned dependence on a substance (Kotov et al., 2010; Papachristou et al., 2016). Females may be more prone to use substances to cope with internalizing problems (Brady & Randall, 1999). Additionally, high openness to new experiences is associated with higher substance use (Kotov et al., 2010). Thus, emerging adult substance use may be predicted by both parental maltreatment and five-factor personality traits.

## 3. Current study

Attachment theory discusses emerging adult outcomes in the context of the psychological relationship between parents and children (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Although personality has biological origins, it continues to be shaped by the interaction between individuals' characteristics and their parents' behaviors (Gomez, Watson, & Gomez, 2016). If children exhibit certain characteristics (e.g., neuroticism or conscientiousness) and experience physical or emotional maltreatment, they may have more difficulty self-regulating emotional and behavioral responses to stressors, increasing their likelihood to engage in substance use (Hojjat et al., 2016).

Given the impact of parental behaviors on children's personality and

outcomes, the current study examined the relationships among perceived maternal and paternal emotional and physical maltreatment, gender, five-factor personality traits, and substance use in a sample of emerging adults. Advancing prior research (e.g., de Haan et al., 2012; Papachristou et al., 2016), the current study examined how parental maltreatment and emerging adult personality traits predicted substance use. It was hypothesized that parental maltreatment (i.e., physical and emotional) would be positively associated with neuroticism and substance use and negatively associated with conscientiousness. It also was hypothesized that higher extraversion, openness, and neuroticism and lower conscientiousness would predict higher substance use and that agreeableness would have no relationship to substance use (Kotov et al., 2010). Additionally, emerging adult gender was hypothesized to predict substance use, such that males may be more likely to engage in substance use than females (Brady & Randall, 1999).

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Participants

Emerging adults (202 males and 383 females) who ranged in age from 18 to 24 years ( $M = 19.27$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ) were recruited from a psychology participant pool and classrooms at a Southern United States university. The racial and ethnic composition of the emerging adult participants was 69.2% Caucasian, 25.0% African American, 1.5% Hispanic, 1.7% Asian American, and 2.4% "Other" ethnicity. Socioeconomic backgrounds were indicated by parental education and participants reported 33.2% and 20.5% high school diplomas or equivalent for fathers and mothers, respectively, 11.5% and 15.7% to have a 2-year degree, 28.9% and 36.4% to have a 4-year degree, 21.1% and 24.3% to have a graduate degree, and 5.5% and 2.0% "Other" degree. Participant's current household structure was 55.6% biological mother and father in the home, 16.6% with biological mother only, 3.9% with biological father only, 2.2% with biological father and stepmother, 9.1% with biological mother and stepfather, and 12.6% living with other combinations of family members (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents, adoptive parents, and foster parents).

## 5. Measures

### 5.1. Parental maltreatment

Parental maltreatment was assessed using the Conflict Tactics Scale: Parent-Child Version (CTSPC; Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998), a 22-item scale that assesses the frequency of physical and psychological tactics parents utilize using a scale from *This never happened* to *> 20 times in an average year*. Sample items from the physical assault scale include *shook you or hit you with a fist or kicked you hard* and from the psychological aggression scale include *shouted, yelled, or screamed at you or swore or cursed at you*. This scale has test-retest reliabilities up to 0.80 and good construct validity (Straus et al., 1998). The Cronbach alphas for the current study were 0.84 for the physical assault scale and 0.89 for the psychological aggression scale, which were used to assess maternal and paternal physical and emotional maltreatment in the current study.

### 5.2. Emerging adult personality

Emerging adult personality (i.e., extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness) was assessed using the M5-50 (McCord, 2002), a 50-item measure of normal personality assessing the five-factor model of personality traits using a scale ranging from *Very Inaccurate* to *Very Accurate*. Sample items from the scale include *make friends easily* on the extraversion scale, *believe that others have good intentions* on the agreeableness scale, *waste my time* on the conscientiousness scale, *has frequent mood swings* on the neuroticism scale,

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