



Emotional abuse and emotional neglect subscales of the CTQ: Associations with each other, other measures of psychological maltreatment, and demographic variables

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to explore the conceptual distinctness between the constructs of emotional abuse and emotional neglect. This was achieved through a comparison of the emotional abuse and the emotional neglect subscales of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ). The two scales were compared with respect to each other, demographic variables, and other measures of psychological maltreatment. Two hundred and fifty three employees at a social service agency completed five scales of adult recall of childhood psychological maltreatment including the CTQ-EA subscale and the CTQ-EN subscale. Results revealed moderate associations between the two scales, strong associations with other measures of psychological maltreatment, and a mixed pattern of associations with demographic variables. Data suggest considerable but not complete overlap between these two subscales. Directions for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

While there has been longstanding lack of consensus regarding a definition of psychological maltreatment (PM), there is general agreement that it is a multi-dimensional construct. Exactly how to conceptualize the components has been the subject of some attention and debate. One common conceptualization of PM postulates that it is essentially a dichotomous construct, with an abuse dimension (acts of commission) and a neglect dimension (acts of omission), as there is with physical abuse and physical neglect. Iwaniec (1995) summarizes the distinction between psychological abuse and psychological neglect as that between hostile parenting and indifferent parenting. This distinction was also supported by Rohner (1975; Rohner & Rohner, 1980). Simultaneous to these efforts have been proposals that PM is categorical in nature, with varying subcategories depending upon the definitional system. For example, Garbarino, Guttman, and Seeley (1986) concluded that the abuse/neglect distinction may obscure the multifaceted nature of PM and offered five types: rejecting, isolating, terrorizing, ignoring, and corrupting. These categories – or a modification thereof – have been adopted or endorsed by several others including the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC), (Binggeli, Hart, & Brassard, 2001). Factor analysis of observational data derived from the Psychological Maltreatment Rating Scale (which is based on the APSAC five-category definition) resulted in two factors: one labeled psychological abuse (spurning, terrorizing, and exploiting/corrupting)

and the other labeled psychological neglect (denying emotional responsiveness) (Brassard, Hart, & Hardy, 1993). Thus, empirical data lend support to the dichotomous conceptualization.

At the same time, many of the measures used for adult recall of PM do not include items pertaining to the neglect component. In fact, of 14 measures used in the United States reviewed by Baker (2009), only three contained subscales specifically related to psychological neglect: the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein et al., 1994), the Life Experiences Questionnaire (Gibb et al., 2001), and the Psychological Maltreatment Inventory (Engels & Moisan, 1994). As noted by Baker (2009), most of the items in most of the measures of PM describe behaviors reflective of the spurning component of PM (e.g., verbal aggression). Thus, from a measurement perspective, PM is treated primarily as unidimensional construct.

The CTQ is by far the most widely used measure of PM and it does contain separate emotional abuse (EA) and emotional neglect (EN) subscales in later versions (the original 70-item version of the measure did not). Utilization of the CTQ subscales could move the field forward in terms of documenting whether and how these two forms of psychological maltreatment are distinct. However, based upon our review of the literature, it seems that significant gaps remain in understanding the relationship between EA and EN. Three types of questions that researchers could examine in studies that use both subscales are noted below, each related to the issue of convergent and discriminant validity.

1.1. Associations of the two sub-scales

Any study that employs a separate subscale of EA and EN could report the degree of association between them. However, this has

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rarely been done (Paivio & McCulloch, 2004; Sullivan, Fehon, Andres-Hyman, Lipschitz, & Grilo, 2006). Further, not one study has reported the portion of cases above the clinical cut-off on one subscale that was also above the clinical cut-off on the other. Thus, it is not known whether lack of concordance on the two subscales represents meaningful discrepancies. If it is found that individuals who are above the cut off on one subscale are always above the cut off on the other, a plausible conclusion would be that EA and EN are not distinct experiences. That is, it is not possible to be (or experience oneself as having been) emotionally abused without also being (and experiencing oneself as having been) emotionally neglected. Methodological as well as clinical implications would flow from this finding. For example, it would argue for collapsing the two subscales into a single PM scale in future research and it would influence the development and refinement of state legal definitions of psychological maltreatment, resulting in consequences related to services for children and parents in the child welfare system. For example, assessments of parental use of psychologically maltreating behaviors would not need to measure both EA and EN components, and children's abuse specific treatments would not need to explore the separate meaning of both EA and EN experiences, as that would essentially be redundant.

1.2. Associations with other measures of psychological maltreatment

CTQ-EA and CTQ-EN subscales could be – but have not yet been – compared in relation to strength of association with other measures of psychological maltreatment. Studies have inter-correlated various PM scales (e.g., Berenson & Andersen, 2006), but none have done so with the CTQ-EA and CTQ-EN subscales. This information could be used to examine convergent validity of these two related constructs (that is, are they equally related to other measures of PM or are there theoretically distinct patterns). Again, this kind of basic knowledge could bring clarity to what has been an ongoing definitional debate regarding the meaning and measurement of psychological maltreatment.

1.3. Associations with demographics

CTQ-EA and CTQ-EN subscales could also be compared in relation to demographic variables. Only a few studies have presented such data and typically only with respect to age and gender. The findings present a rather mixed picture. In general, females report higher rates of both EA and EN than males (e.g., Flory et al., 2009) but no pattern has emerged regarding age. Clearly more work is required on this front including an examination of a broader set of demographic variables. This information could be used to determine which, if any, individual level characteristics are associated with incidence of these two types of psychological maltreatment and could determine whether there are profiles of individuals more likely to experience one form of psychological maltreatment than another. This information could be used to guide interventions as well as treatment programs.

1.4. The current study

The current study was designed to compare the emotional abuse and emotional neglect subscales of the CTQ with data that were collected as part of a larger study of adult recall of childhood psychological maltreatment. These analyses are premised on the belief that it is important to determine how EA and EN are similar and how they are distinct. Despite definitional challenges, research has established that behaviors associated with various forms of psychological maltreatment are harmful to children, both in prospective and longitudinal studies (Brassard & Donovan, 2006; Egeland, Sroufe, & Erickson, 1983). Exposure to PM behaviors can have long lasting psychological, emotional, and cognitive effects on children; but it remains unknown whether the experience of EA as opposed to EN is reflective of a meaningful distinction that needs to be incorporated

into assessment, intervention, and treatment efforts on behalf of maltreated children.

In the current study, three questions were addressed: (1) What are the associations between the two subscales with respect to their correlation, as well as the percentage overlap of scores on a clinical cut-off? In light of the consistent and moderate to strong association between the two subscales found in other studies, it was expected that some but not all individuals above the cut-off on one subscale would be above the cut-off on the other, no further specification of a hypothesis was supported from the literature review; (2) Were the CTQ-EA and CTQ-EN subscales similarly associated with four other measures of PM? It was expected that the CTQ-EA would be more strongly associated with the other measures because it is comprised of items that reflect acts of commission (abuse) rather than acts of omission (neglect); (3) Were the CTQ-EA and CTQ-EN subscales similarly associated with demographic variables including age, gender, education, marital status, and being raised by both parents? The expectation was that there would be no difference in associations between CTQ-EA and CTQ-EN and these variables as there is insufficient information in the knowledge base from which to develop hypotheses (that, for example, individuals who were married would report more or less EA than EN).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedures

Respondents in the present study consisted of 253 employees who worked 20 h or more per week at a large full-service child welfare agency in New York City. The procedures are described fully in Festinger and Baker (2010) and briefly here. Individually addressed packets were distributed via interoffice mail in July of 2008. Packets contained two introductory letters (one by the agency's executive director and one by the project directors) describing the study and requesting voluntary participation, the anonymous questionnaire, a \$5.00 gift certificate, and return envelope. The director's letter clearly stated that participation was voluntary, that no one would know who did and did not participate, and that participation was unrelated to job security. The project was approved by the University Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects, New York University. Five hundred and eighty nine (589) packets sent out, 85 of which were returned as not deliverable. Of the 504 packets that we assumed were delivered, 253 were completed and returned, a 50.3% rate of response.

The sample was comprised primarily of females (81.1%) and individuals with more than a college education (62.2%). About half were currently married (47.3%) and 68.6% had children. About 7 in 10 (69.6%) had been raised by both parents (some with additional caretakers as well). The sample was on average about 40 years ($M = 41.5$, $SD = 12.2$ years). The proportion of gender did not differ between the non-responders and responders, with between 16% and 19% males in each sample, $X^2(1, n = 472) = .83$, $p < .22$. They also did not differ on whether their job was clinical/direct service (a variable not used in the current study), with about 68% in both samples reporting that their jobs were clinical/direct care in nature, $X^2(1, n = 483) = .20$, $p < .36$. These were the only two variables available for such a comparison. All analyses were run with gender and whether the person held a clinical/direct service position with the agency (0 = no, 1 = yes) as covariates (as these are two variables on which the sample clearly differed from the general population). Because results remained the same, analyses without the covariates are reported for ease of interpretation.

2.2. Measures

Four measures used to assess adult recall of childhood psychological maltreatment (PM) were selected from the larger pool of existing

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