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Emotional neglect and family structure: impact on student functioning

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Abstract

Objective: The goal of this study was to demonstrate the relationship between retrospective reports of child neglect, family of origin functioning, and current psychological distress. It was hypothesized that experience of childhood emotional neglect would be associated with lower levels of cohesion and adaptability in participants' family of origin and greater levels of current psychological distress. Gender effects were explored.

Method: Retrospective reports of emotional neglect in childhood were quantified by use of a parental bonding measure, specifically by assessing level of perceived parental care. Participants were assigned to one of three groups based on level of care scores: neglect by a primary male caregiver, neglect by a primary female caregiver, and no neglect. These groups were compared on three variables: current psychological functioning, retrospective report of family of origin adaptability, and retrospective report of family of origin cohesiveness. Amount of time left in the care of others was used as a covariate based on attachment theory literature.

Results: Data were analyzed for 69 female and 22 male undergraduate students. Participants who reported a childhood experience of emotional neglect by a primary female caregiver described greater current psychological distress than those reporting no neglect or neglect by a primary male caregiver. Participants who experienced emotional neglect by a primary female caregiver, as compared to those reporting emotional neglect by a primary male caregiver and those reporting no neglect, described lower cohesion and adaptability in their family of origin. There were no differences between male and female participants in terms of impact of emotional neglect.

Conclusions: This study suggests potential caregiver gender effects, regardless of respondent gender. Perceived neglect by female, but not male caregivers, led to psychological distress in adulthood and

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was associated with lower cohesion and adaptability in one's family of origin. Future research should attempt to account for the participants' expectations regarding male and female caregiver roles.

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Introduction

Previous studies have reported the deleterious effects of maltreatment in childhood on subsequent psychological functioning. According to data collected by the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), approximately 58% of child maltreatment cases in 1999 were classified as child neglect (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). NCANDS data from 1999 further indicated that approximately 38% of child maltreatment fatalities were associated with child neglect. Dubowitz (1994) stated that although child neglect is the most prevalent form of child maltreatment, "fewer than 2% of federally funded research studies on child maltreatment focused on child neglect in 1993" (p. 556). Wolock and Horowitz (1984) suggested that research studies are needed in the area of child neglect to determine what types of child neglect are associated with which types of family problems.

Burgess and Conger (1978) broadly defined neglect as the "harming of a child either through lack of care or supervision." They further state it is difficult to clearly define neglect because it deals with behaviors regarding caregiver-child relationships, which fall along a continuum, and often it is not clear where a specific case falls along this continuum. Dubowitz, Black, Starr, and Zuravin (1993) defined neglect as occurring "when the basic needs of children are not met, regardless of cause. Basic needs include adequate shelter, food, health care, clothing, education, protection, and nurturance." The National Incidence Studies describe child neglect by breaking the concept into three categories: physical, educational, and emotional neglect (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). All three categories involve the adequacy of care and assume that all children have basic needs that must be met.

Crittenden (1999) defined the core of emotional neglect as the "failure to connect emotionally." Ainsworth and Bowlby (as cited in Cassidy, 1999) described the importance of attachment bonds in relationships, especially child-caregiver relationships. In these relationships proximity to or contact with a specific person is sought and security and comfort are sought within the relationship. Gauthier, Stollak, Messe, and Aronoff (1996) view emotional neglect as falling on a continuum of parent behavior designed to maintain the attachment bond. Emotional neglect as falls on the extreme end of the continuum which ranges from "positive interactions" to "complete disengagement between parents and their children" (Gauthier et al., 1996). Despite the lack of a clear definition of emotional neglect, there is a general consensus that emotional neglect is related to the attachment or formation of a cohesive bond between a child and his/her parents. Olson, Bell, and Portner (1992) describe family cohesion as one dimension of family functioning representing the emotional bonds between family members.

Researchers have also suggested that children's attachment or emotional closeness with their parents is fundamental to their psychological wellbeing. Loos and Alexander (1997) found that young adults, emotionally neglected as children, were more likely to experience loneliness

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