



**Effects of Childhood Trauma on Emotional Attachment and Romantic Relationships in
Adults: A Correlational Study**

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Abstract

The current study aimed to explore the effects of childhood trauma on emotional attachment and romantic relationship satisfaction in adults. The sample consisted of 206 adults (111 males, 95 females) aged 20-48. Data was collected using three self-report inventories; Childhood Trauma Questionnaire-Short Form (CTQ-SF) assessed childhood trauma exposure across five subscales (emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect), Adult attachment Scale (AAS) measuring three subscales close, depend and anxiety, and the Love & Relationships (B), which includes three scales (love, conflict and ambivalence) from the four-factor inventory of intimate relations developed by Braiker and Kelley (1979). It is

based on the hypothesis that higher levels of childhood trauma will be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction by an increase in level of conflict and ambivalence in adult romantic relationships, and will be associated with higher levels of attachment anxiety with lower levels of closeness and dependency. The results indicated that childhood trauma had a significant positive correlation with attachment anxiety and a negative correlation with close and depend subscales. Relationship conflict and ambivalence were also significantly and positively correlated with childhood trauma.

Keywords: *Childhood trauma, Emotional abuse, Sexual abuse, Physical abuse, Emotional Neglect, Physical Neglect, Close, Depend, Anxiety, Ambivalence, Conflict, Romantic Relationships*

INTRODUCTION

Research indicates that childhood trauma can have long-term effects (Spataro et al., 2004). As defined by the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2000), trauma refers to a perceived event that poses a risk of harm, death, or physical harm and leads to feelings of fear, horror, and powerlessness. Exposure to traumatic situations is pervasive and does not show bias based on gender, age, colour, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

According to the American Psychiatric Association (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), these events may occur during a single event (acute) or as a result of repeated exposure (chronic). Traumatic experiences include abuse, violence, neglect, loss, accidents, calamities, war, and other emotionally damaging experiences (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Such experiences are challenging for individuals, which impairs their capacity to establish secure emotional foundations and, consequently, reduces their potential for cultivating healthy relationships (Burke Harris et al., 2011).

Love, companionship, and a stable emotional base are essential and individuals feel them through romantic relationships which are indispensable in fulfilling the human experience (Fraley & Shaver, 2004). Research has shown that attachment patterns developed in childhood are impacted by early childhood trauma, which in turn affects these crucial intimate bonds (Busby et al., 2010). Conflicts and ambivalence can substantially negatively affect romantic relationships, resulting in a detrimental environment and a general decline in relationship satisfaction. Unresolved conflicts can result in anger, unfavourable exchanges, and a sense of emotional detachment, while ambivalence can lead to bewilderment, uncertainty, and a tendency to retreat emotionally. This establishes a detrimental pattern, intensifying more discord and generating discontentment. Ambivalence is a prevalent concern within romantic partnerships, as individuals may experience conflicting emotions regarding their partner. This can have substantial implications for both the individual and the overall well-being of the relationship. Research has shown that experiencing extra-dyadic desire, which involves desiring individuals outside of a committed relationship, poses a common obstacle in monogamous relationships (Joel et al., 2020).

Bowlby (1969, 1982), who primarily developed the Attachment theory, discusses how people form and maintain close relationships based on early caregiver interactions. A caregiving setting that is dependable and attentive fosters a secure attachment style characterized by trust and ease with intimacy. Conversely, an inconsistent and inattentive caregiving environment results in an insecure attachment style.

Moreover, Research has established a relationship between childhood trauma and insecure attachment styles (Kim et al., 2018). Those individuals who have survived a trauma are more susceptible to anxious attachment. Research has also suggested a connection between childhood trauma and decreased relationship satisfaction (Bifulco et al., 2009). Trauma hinders trust, prevents partners from sharing their feelings, and increases conflict sensitivity (Levant & Poole, 1997).

According to Greenberg and Goldman (2008), having insecure attachment styles can make it difficult to find comfort and may lead to experiencing relationship dissatisfaction. In a study conducted by Shah et al. (2018), it was found that individuals who were married experienced greater levels of happiness when they had a secure attachment style, rather than an insecure one. A later study confirmed that attachment style and attachment behaviours play a vital role in relationship satisfaction and have a significant impact on the quality of marriage (Sandberg et al., 2017). Despite the presence of previous studies, there is still a lack of comprehensive understanding of how traumatic childhood experiences impact adult attachment types and, therefore, satisfaction in romantic relationships.

The current study helps to examine the potential effects that childhood trauma has on emotional attachment (close, depend, anxiety) and romantic relationship satisfaction (love, conflict, ambivalence) in adults. This study aims to develop a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of childhood trauma on emotional attachment and adult romantic relationships.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A meta-analysis study conducted by Cao et al. (2020) found a modest negative link that exists between childhood emotional maltreatment and adult romantic well-being. The study showed that those with childhood emotional maltreatment reported low relationship satisfaction and more conflict. Interestingly, the specific type of maltreatment didn't matter, and the effect was stronger for conflict and ambivalence than positive aspects like love.

Further study by McClure and Parmenter (2020) investigated factors predicting intimate partner violence (IPV) in college students. They attempted to study the relationship between childhood trauma, trait anxiety (general anxiety proneness), and anxious attachment styles with IPV perpetration and victimization. The findings of the study strongly assert that all three factors were associated with increased risk for IPV. This suggests that childhood

traumatic experiences, heightened anxiety, and insecure attachment patterns might be contributing factors to violence within college dating relationships.

Erozkan (2016) examined how types of childhood trauma like physical, emotional, and sexual abuse/neglect are connected to adult attachment styles (secure, anxious, avoidant) in university students. The study using self-report measures found that higher levels of childhood trauma were associated with a greater likelihood of developing insecure attachment styles compared to secure styles.

Lassri et al. (2016) revealed self-criticism and attachment styles as potential mediators in their study of the effects caused by childhood emotional maltreatment on young adults' romantic relationships. They found that higher levels of childhood emotional maltreatment were associated with lower relationship satisfaction, which is partially explained by self-criticism and anxious attachment.

Feeney and Noller (1990) tried to explore attachment styles as a predictor for adult romantic relationships. The study reflects an attachment theory that offers a valuable way of understanding adult romantic relationships. The study found that while secure attachments are linked to positive relationships, avoidant attachment styles were associated with trust issues, and anxious-ambivalent styles associated with a desire for intimacy along with a fear of abandonment.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

To study the effects of childhood trauma on emotional attachment and romantic relationships in adults.

Objectives

- To understand the relationship between childhood trauma, adult emotional attachment, and romantic relationship
- To study the effects of childhood trauma on emotional attachment and relationship satisfaction

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Higher frequency of emotional maltreatment or sexual abuse in childhood will be associated with increased conflict in adult romantic relationships.

Hypothesis 2: Higher frequency of physical abuse and neglect in childhood will be associated with increased ambivalence in adult romantic relationships.

Hypothesis 3: Higher levels of childhood trauma will be associated with higher levels of attachment anxiety and lower levels of dependence and closeness.

Hypothesis 4: Childhood trauma will be negatively correlated to secure attachment style and positively correlated to insecure attachment styles (anxious and avoidant).

Variables

- **Independent Variable-** Childhood trauma (emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect)
- **Dependent Variables-** a) Emotional attachment (close, depend, anxiety)
b) Relationship Satisfaction (love, conflict, ambivalence)

Inclusion Criteria

- The participant should be above 19 years of age

- The participant should be involved in any romantic relationship or should have past experiences with romantic relationships
- The participant should be willing to give consent

Procedure

The study involved a sample of 206 adults (m=111, f=95) aged 20-48 with varying relationship experiences. Individuals who did not meet the criteria are excluded. This study employs a quantitative, correlational design. Data was collected through a survey containing three standardized scales. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS software. Descriptive Statistics & Pearson's Correlational analysis were performed to find the relationship & effect of independent variables on the dependent variables.

Tools

Childhood Trauma Questionnaire-Short Form (Bernstein & Fink, 1998): The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ-SF) is a prominent and extensively employed instrument for assessing the level of childhood trauma across different age groups. The CTQ-SF consists of 28 items, 25 of which assess five subscales: Emotional Abuse (EA), Physical Abuse (PA), Sexual Abuse (SA), Emotional Neglect (EN), and Physical Neglect (PN). It uses a 5-point Likert scale to score. The CTQ-SF has a strong internal consistency. The Cronbach's α values ranges from 0.491 to 0.857 across subscales, indicating high reliability. Additionally, the alternative CTQ-SF also shows good reliability with a Cronbach's α of 0.851 and a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.548 over a 6-month period. In this study, childhood emotional maltreatment consists of emotional abuse and neglect sub-scales. Similarly, childhood physical maltreatment consists of physical abuse and neglect sub-scales.

Adult Attachment Scales (Collins & Read, 1990): The AAS has 18 items rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (not characteristic) to 5 (highly characteristic). The questions will assess adult attachment type, including comfort with closeness and intimacy (Close subscale), dependence on others (Depend subscale), and fear of rejection or unloved. Collins & Read (1990) revealed Close, Depend, and Anxiety Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .69, .75, and .72. The 2-month test-retest correlations for Close, Depend, and Anxiety were .68, .71, and .52. The AAS has demonstrated high reliability and validity in assessing adult attachment style. These attachment types were described: *Secure = high Close and Depend scores, low Anxiety; Anxious = high Anxiety, moderate Close and Depend; Avoidant = low scores on Close, Depend, Anxiety.*

Love & Relationships (B) (Belsky et al., 1985): The 20-item Love & Relationships (B) assesses married or close relationship interpersonally. It uses three scales—Love, Conflict, and Ambivalence—from Braiker and Kelley's (1979) four-factor inventory of intimate interactions. Love is a measure of how much a person attributes feelings of love and belonging to themselves, as well as the level of interdependence or connection. Conflict measures behavioural conflict and negative emotion expression through communication. Conflicting sentiments or attitudes about the relationship are called ambivalence. Each of the 20 items is scored on a 7-point scale, with 1 being the lowest and 7 being the highest. Belsky et al. (1985) observed that the four scales on the original Braiker and Kelley (1979) measure had internal consistency estimates of .61 to .90, with an average of .76. At 6-, 9-, and 12-month intervals, the four scales' test-retest coefficients varied from .51 to .81.

RESULTS

The SPSS data shown represents data results for 11 different variables.

Table 1

Representing the descriptive statistics of all the variables (N=206)

Descriptive Statistics									
	N Statistic	Range Statistic	Mean Statistic	Std. Deviation Statistic	Variance Statistic	Skewness		Kurtosis	
						Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Emotional abuse	206	19	10.17	4.436	19.677	1.006	.169	.785	.337
Physical abuse	206	19	8.03	3.968	15.745	1.451	.169	1.581	.337
Sexual abuse	206	20	7.58	4.290	18.400	1.942	.169	3.366	.337
Emotional neglect	206	19	11.13	4.729	22.364	.563	.169	-.525	.337
Physical Neglect	206	14	9.03	3.436	11.804	.752	.169	-.196	.337
Close	206	23	19.10	4.090	16.726	.088	.169	-.075	.337
Depend	206	24	16.06	4.361	19.016	.075	.169	.125	.337
Anxiety	206	24	18.98	6.055	36.658	-.116	.169	-.750	.337
Love	206	60	50.40	12.509	156.465	-.769	.169	.573	.337
Conflict	206	30	18.67	6.328	40.047	.243	.169	.023	.337
Ambivalence	206	30	17.93	6.655	44.282	.251	.169	-.223	.337
Valid N (listwise)	206								

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for 11 variables. The statistics indicate that each variable is within the normal range for skewness and kurtosis. The acceptable range for skewness is between ± 10 and ± 3 for kurtosis (Brown, 2012).

Table 2

Representing correlations of all the variables (N=206)

		Correlations											
		Emotional abuse	Physical abuse	Sexual abuse	Emotional neglect	Physical Neglect	Minimization	close	depend	anxiety	love	conflict	ambivalence
Emotional abuse	Pearson Correlation	1	.579**	.530**	.530**	.300**	-.602**	-.325**	-.317**	.313**	.068	.179**	.110
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.166	.005	.057
	N	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206
Physical abuse	Pearson Correlation	.579**	1	.480**	.338**	.441**	-.399**	-.211**	-.131**	.172**	.005	.093	.145**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000	.001	.031	.007	.469	.092	.019
	N	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206
Sexual abuse	Pearson Correlation	.530**	.480**	1	.300**	.214**	-.362**	-.207**	-.197**	.231**	.095	.191**	.107
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.001	.000	.001	.002	.000	.087	.003	.062
	N	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206
Emotional neglect	Pearson Correlation	.530**	.338**	.300**	1	.549**	-.717**	-.309**	-.155**	.178**	.028	.161*	.127*
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000	.013	.005	.346	.010	.034
	N	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206
Physical Neglect	Pearson Correlation	.300**	.441**	.214**	.549**	1	-.433**	-.296**	-.058	.121*	-.093	.088	.285**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000	.001	.000		.000	.000	.205	.042	.093	.103	.000
	N	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206
Minimization	Pearson Correlation	-.602**	-.399**	-.362**	-.717**	-.433**	1	.328**	.304**	-.254**	-.097	-.212**	-.132*
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000	.082	.001	.029
	N	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206
close	Pearson Correlation	-.325**	-.211**	-.207**	-.309**	-.296**	.328**	1	.429**	-.308**	.218**	-.124*	-.249**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.001	.001	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000	.001	.038	.000
	N	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206
depend	Pearson Correlation	-.317**	-.131**	-.197**	-.155**	-.058	.304**	.429**	1	-.562**	-.098	-.303**	-.244**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.031	.002	.013	.205	.000	.000		.000	.080	.000	.000
	N	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206
anxiety	Pearson Correlation	.313**	.172**	.231**	.178**	.121*	-.254**	-.308**	-.562**	1	.169**	.407**	.402**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000	.007	.000	.005	.042	.000	.000	.000		.008	.000	.000
	N	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206
love	Pearson Correlation	.068	.005	.095	.028	-.093	-.097	.218**	-.098	.169**	1	.369**	.077
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.166	.469	.087	.346	.093	.082	.001	.080	.008		.000	.137
	N	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206
conflict	Pearson Correlation	.179**	.093	.191**	.161*	.088	-.212**	-.124*	-.303**	.407**	.369**	1	.506**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.005	.092	.003	.010	.103	.001	.038	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206
ambivalence	Pearson Correlation	.110	.145**	.107	.127*	.285**	-.132*	-.249**	-.244**	.402**	.077	.506**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.057	.019	.062	.034	.000	.029	.000	.000	.000	.137	.000	
	N	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206	206

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

The above analysis indicates significant correlations between EA, PA, SA, EN, PN, and the relationship variables (love, conflict, ambivalence). It also shows significant correlations between childhood trauma variables and attachment variables (close, depend, anxiety).

According to Table 2, there is a significant positive correlation between emotional abuse and conflict at 0.01 level ($r = .179$; $p < 0.01$). There is a low but significant positive correlation between emotional neglect and conflict at 0.05 level ($r = .161$; $p < 0.05$). There is a significant positive correlation between sexual abuse and conflict at 0.01 level ($r = .191$; $p < 0.01$).

The correlation between physical abuse and ambivalence is found to be low, positive, and statistically significant at 0.05 level ($r = .145$, $p < 0.05$). The correlation between physical

neglect and ambivalence was found to be very high, positive, and statistically significant ($r = .285, p < 0.001$). The anxiety subscale is positively and significantly correlated to emotional abuse ($r = .313, p < .001$), physical abuse ($r = .172, p < .01$), sexual abuse ($r = .231, p < .001$), emotional neglect ($r = .178, p < .01$), and physical neglect ($r = .121, p < .05$). The close sub-scale is significantly and negatively correlated to emotional abuse ($r = -.325, p < .001$), physical abuse ($r = -.211, p < .01$), sexual abuse ($r = -.207, p < .01$), emotional neglect ($r = -.309, p < .001$), and physical neglect ($r = -.296, p < .001$). The depend sub-scale is significantly and negatively correlated to emotional abuse ($r = -.317, p < .001$), physical abuse ($r = -.131, p < .05$), sexual abuse ($r = -.197, p < .01$) and emotional neglect ($r = -.155, p < .01$). But there is no significant correlation between depend and physical neglect.

DISCUSSION

The current study used correlational analysis to examine the relationship between Childhood Trauma, Emotional attachment, and Relationship satisfaction. It aims to explore the effects of childhood trauma on emotional attachment and romantic relationship satisfaction. The results revealed several significant correlations between childhood trauma and relationship satisfaction. The conflict sub-scale is significantly and positively correlated with emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional neglect, which supports the hypothesis that higher frequency of emotional maltreatment (emotional abuse and neglect) or sexual abuse in childhood is associated with increased conflict in adult romantic relationships. Moreover, we can observe that the ambivalence sub-scale is significantly and positively correlated with physical abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. These findings suggest that higher frequency of physical maltreatment can increase ambivalence in romantic relationships.

Another significant result from the table is the strong negative correlation between the Close variable and all the sub-scales of childhood trauma ($p < .001$). Similarly, the Depend sub-

scale is negatively and significantly correlated with emotional, sexual, physical abuse, and emotional neglect while the Anxiety sub-scale is strongly and positively correlated with the childhood trauma variables. These findings indicate that higher levels of childhood trauma will be associated with higher levels of attachment anxiety and lower levels of dependence and closeness, which also suggests that people who have experienced childhood trauma are most likely to develop insecure attachment styles i.e. anxious or avoidant attachments. The scoring manual for the adult attachment scale indicates that individuals with a secure attachment style will have high scores in close and depend sub-scales, and low scores on the anxiety subscale. Similarly, the manual defines the anxious attachment style as having a high score on the anxiety subscale and moderate to low scores on the close and dependence subscales. Low scores on the close, depend, and anxiety subscales are indicative of avoidant attachment style. These results imply that unstable early relationships with attachment figures can influence the ability to feel secure and connected in an adult romantic relationship.

Hence, H1, H2, H3 & H4 have been accepted.

These findings indicate that childhood trauma can directly impact emotional attachment and romantic relationships. It can also play a significant role in the development of attachment styles in adults leading to the formation of more insecure attachments. The study also shows that childhood trauma can decrease the levels of relationship satisfaction through higher levels of conflict and ambivalence. These findings align with previous researches that have been conducted throughout the years. It supports the understanding that childhood trauma can influence attachment styles and contribute to relationship risk. However, we have observed that no significant correlation was found between childhood trauma and the love sub-scale, which suggests that childhood trauma may impact the emotional attachment styles and relationship dynamics, but its influence on love within intimate relationships may be more nuanced. From

these findings, we can also observe that individuals who scored low on closeness and dependency whereas high on anxiety, are found to score more on conflict and ambivalence as well, suggesting that people with insecure attachment styles are more likely to experience dissatisfaction in romantic relationships.

CONCLUSION

The study found significant correlations between childhood trauma, emotional attachment, and relationship satisfaction. The sub-variables for adult attachment scales were also related to each other. Love and ambivalence were associated with conflict, but no association was found between love and ambivalence. The findings support the theory that childhood trauma predisposes individuals to develop insecure attachment styles in adulthood, which can lead to difficulties in trust, intimacy, and maintaining healthy emotional boundaries. The increased conflict, ambivalence, and difficulty maintaining healthy connections in adult relationships are consistent with previous research, highlighting the negative impact of childhood trauma on forming and sustaining healthy romantic partnerships.

Implications

The current study emphasized that early childhood maltreatment can have a lasting negative impact on emotional attachments and romantic relationships. There is considerable evidence and studies that childhood trauma can impact attachment styles and relationship satisfaction. The results highlight the need for interventions to address the long-term effects of childhood trauma on interpersonal dynamics as well as the individual's ability to form secure and stable attachments. Family members and partners should understand that trauma can impact the whole system. The present study stresses the importance of addressing childhood

trauma through therapeutic interventions as unhealed trauma from the past can deteriorate the overall quality of interpersonal relationships.

Limitations

One important limitation is that the CTQ, attachment as well as relationship measures are all self-report. The reports need the individuals to recall events from the past. These recollections may be inaccurate or some individuals may struggle to recall them. There are numerous sensitive and personal questions in the report, and there's no assurance that participants are answering honestly, which might affect the study's conclusions. Additionally, trauma can occur at any point of life even as an adult, which can alter a person's stress response system, coping mechanisms as well as relationship dynamics. So, focusing only on childhood traumatic experiences could be a limiting factor. There may be additional elements that affect a person's attachment style and capacity to create healthy connections. Thus, it is evident that individuals who have experienced minimal childhood trauma can nonetheless develop insecure attachments and encounter unhappiness in their relationships.

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