Domestic Violence Moderates the Association between Childhood Maltreatment and Anxiety and Avoidance in Adult Romantic Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

Research and clinical work based on attachment theory suggests that childhood experiences with caregivers influence one’s expectations, beliefs, and feelings of “felt” security about close relationships (Bowby, 1969/1982), which can then be influential in relationships experienced across the lifespan, especially romantic relationships (Berlin, Cassidy, & Appleyard, 2008). However, significant differences in adult romantic relationships can also influence one’s expectations, beliefs, and feelings of “felt” security about close relationships (Feeney, 1994). Childhood maltreatment and domestic violence are two types of interpersonal violence that can significantly impact one’s response in close relationships, and experiencing childhood maltreatment puts females at increased risk for experiencing domestic violence (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Renner & Slack, 2006).

AIM: To investigate whether childhood experiences with caregivers (i.e., childhood maltreatment) interact with adult experiences of domestic violence to influence one’s feelings about adult romantic relationships.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS:
A community sample of primarily low-income women (N = 120) participated in an interview during the third trimester of pregnancy as part of an ongoing study on women’s transition to motherhood. The interview lasted approximately 2 ½ – 3 hours, and as part of a larger assessment battery, participants completed questionnaires regarding their experiences of interpersonal trauma and adult romantic relationships. Participants were compensated with a $25 gift card.

- Age: Mean = 26 (Range = 18 – 42, SD = 5.7)
- Ethnicity: 47% = African American, 36% = Caucasian, 13% = Biracial, 4% = Other Ethnic Groups
- Education: 20% = High School Diploma/GED or less, 44% = Some College or Trade School, and 36% = College Degree
- Monthly Income: Median = $1,500
- Relationship Status: 64% = Single, 28% = Married, 4% = Separated, 4% = Divorced

MEASURES:
1 – Childhood Maltreatment. The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1998) is a 28-item self-report inventory designed to assess experiences of five types of childhood maltreatment: emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, and emotional and physical neglect. Five items make up each of these five scales of maltreatment. Items are scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale based on frequency. Higher scores indicate greater severity of childhood maltreatment.

2 – Domestic Violence. The Conflict Tactics Scale-2 (CTS-2; Straus, Hamby & Warren, 2003) is a 35-item questionnaire designed to assess partner psychological, physical, and sexual violence, and injury resulting from partner violence. Domestic violence (DV) was assessed for three time periods: pregnancy, year before pregnancy, and anytime before the year before pregnancy. The weighting system suggested by the authors was used to score the measure in which values are recoded (1 = 1, 2 = 2, 3 = 4, 4 = 8, 5 = 15 & 8 = 25). Higher scores indicate greater experience of partner violence.

3 – Adult Romantic Attachment. The Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire-Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) is a 36-item self-report designed to measure the attachment dimensions of anxiety and avoidance in adult romantic relationships. The anxiety and avoidance subscales are made up of 18 items each. Each item is scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly), and participants are instructed to indicate how they generally experience romantic relationships. Higher scores indicate higher endorsement of anxiety and/or avoidance in close relationships.

RESULTS

The association between childhood maltreatment and anxiety in adult romantic relationships was moderated by chronicity of domestic violence (β = .21, p < .05). There was also a main effect for childhood maltreatment (β = .36, p < .001).

Post-hoc analyses revealed that there was a significant positive slope for those with high chronicity of domestic violence (β = .57, p < .001), but not for those with low chronicity of domestic violence (β = .15, p > .05).

The association between childhood maltreatment and anxiety in adult romantic relationships was stronger for those with a more chronic domestic violence history than those with a less chronic domestic violence history.

The association between childhood maltreatment and avoidance in adult romantic relationships was moderated specifically by domestic violence during pregnancy (β = .37, p < .05). There were also main effects for childhood maltreatment (β = .21, p < .05) and domestic violence during pregnancy (β = .40, p < .05).

Post-hoc analyses revealed that there was a significant positive slope for those with less domestic violence during pregnancy (β = .45, p < .01), but not for those with higher domestic violence during pregnancy (β = .04, p > .05).

The association between childhood maltreatment and avoidance in romantic relationships was stronger for those with lower amounts of domestic violence during pregnancy than those with higher amounts of domestic violence during pregnancy.

DISCUSSION

These findings suggest that experiences of childhood maltreatment and domestic violence during adulthood uniquely interact to impact feelings of anxiety and avoidance in adult romantic relationships. These unique interactions between childhood and adulthood interpersonal trauma may be helpful in further understanding the intergenerational transmission of trauma and in further developing intervention services.

REFERENCES


