

The Role of Psychological Flexibility in the Relationship Between Childhood Abuse and the Quality of Adult Dating Relationships in Female University Students

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Introduction

Past research has suggested that childhood abuse can have lasting effects, which impact later romantic relationships (Cherlin, Burton, Hurt, & Purvin, 2004; Colman & Widom, 2004). Childhood abuse can have several long-term effects such as depression; dissociative patterns; somatic concerns; denial; repression; anxiety; sexual problems; relationship problems; higher risk of developing eating disorders; and high levels of guilt, shame, and self-blame (Fairweather & Kinder, 2013; Hall & Hall, 2011; Maniglio, 2009). These factors can make it difficult for individuals to develop healthy and quality relationships. Previous research has not examined the role of psychological flexibility in the relationship between childhood abuse/neglect and later romantic relationships. However, the components of psychological flexibility have been examined within romantic relationships, suggesting promise for the incorporation of psychological flexibility in treatment of couples with relationship problems (Peterson, Eifert, Feingold, & Davidson, 2009).

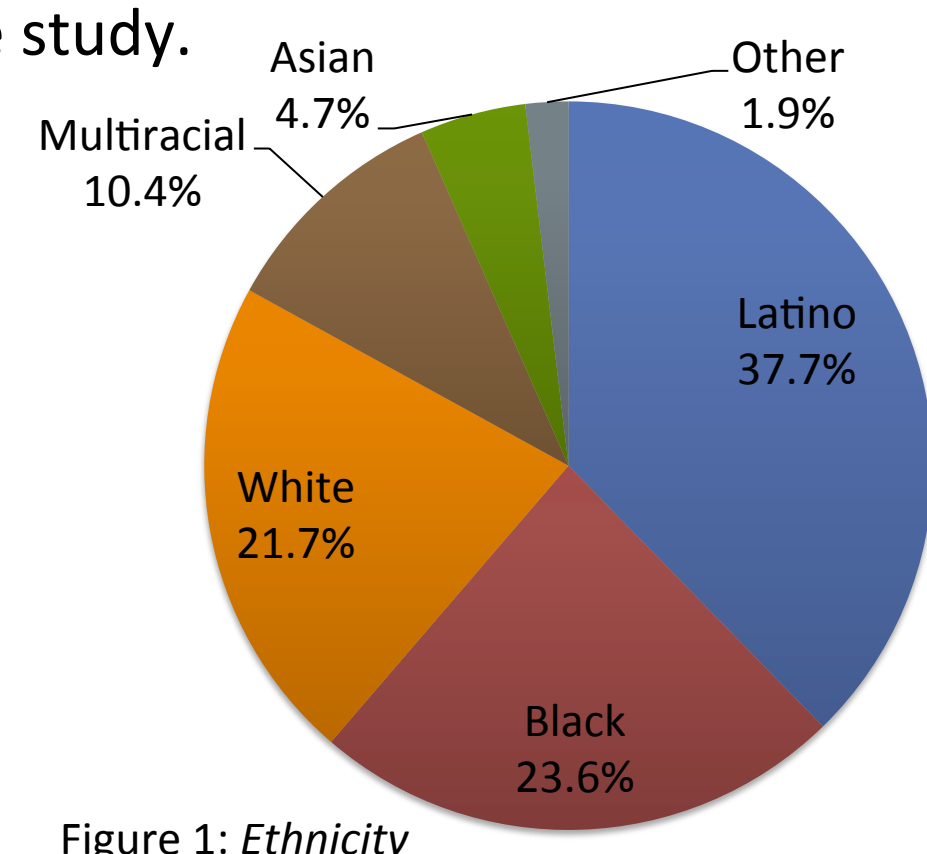
Hypotheses:

- (1) There will be a significant linear relationship between childhood abuse and relationship quality, such that participants who disclose a higher level of childhood abuse will report lower levels of relationship quality.
- (2) There will be a significant linear relationship between psychological flexibility and relationship quality, such that participants who disclose a higher level of psychological flexibility will endorse higher levels of relationship quality.
- (3) The relationship between reported abuse and perceived relationship quality will be mediated by the degree of psychological flexibility, such that for those participants who report higher levels of abuse, higher levels of psychological flexibility will lead to increased relationship quality.
- (4) The different types of childhood abuse (i.e., physical, sexual, and emotional) will have different impacts on perceived relationship quality.

Methods and Materials

Participants

Participants were a sample of 105 students attending a mid-sized university in the Northeastern United States. This sample included females diverse in ethnicity (Figure 1), 18 years and older, in a committed dating relationship at the time of the study.



Measures

The questionnaires chosen for this study have been widely used in past research and are all measures with good psychometric properties. Participants completed the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire 2 (AAQ-II), and the brief version of the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (PRQC). They also completed a short demographic survey.

Procedure

Students were primarily recruited through the university's SONA research pool. Students completed informed consent forms followed by a self-report measure of demographics, the CTQ, the AAQ-II, and the brief version of the PRQC. These procedures were approved by the university's institutional review board.

Results

Assumption testing revealed that the data collected were not normally distributed. The data collected from the CTQ indicated that a disproportionate number of participants denied childhood abuse, and data collected from the PRQC indicated that a disproportionate number reported higher levels of relationship quality. In order to address the abnormal sample distribution, subsequent analyses were performed using bootstrapping (10,000 samples). Correlational analyses were performed with the CTQ, AAQ, and PRQC (Table 1). Correlation analyses revealed that psychological flexibility was significantly correlated with perceived relationship quality, overall level of childhood abuse, childhood physical abuse, and childhood emotional abuse. Perceived relationship quality was significantly correlated with childhood sexual abuse.

Hypothesis 1: Childhood Abuse and Relationship Quality

A simple regression analysis was conducted using bootstrapping (10,000 samples), based on scores on the CTQ and the PRQC. Total level of childhood abuse, as represented by the total score on the CTQ, was not found to be a significant predictor of relationship quality, ($R^2 = .031$, $F(1,103) = 3.334$, $p = .071$, $B = -.088$, 95% BCa CI [-.216, .018]).

Hypothesis 2: Psychological Flexibility and Relationship Quality

A correlation analysis was conducted using bootstrapping, based on scores on the AAQ-II and the PRQC. Psychological flexibility was found to be a significant predictor of relationship quality, ($R^2 = .116$, $F(1,104) = 13.613$, $p < .001$, $B = -.213$, 95% BCa CI [-.355, -.067]).

Hypotheses 3 and 4: Mediation Models

A mediation analysis was performed using the PROCESS model (Hayes, 2013). Mediation analyses revealed that psychological flexibility significantly mediated the relationship between childhood abuse and perceived relationship quality (Figure 2).

For the fourth hypothesis, follow up analyses focusing separately on physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse were conducted. Using a mediation analysis, it was discovered that psychological flexibility was a significant mediator between childhood physical abuse and perceived relationship quality $B = -.200$, 95% BCa CI [-.434, -.037] and childhood emotional abuse and perceived relationship quality, $B = -.248$, 95% BCa CI [-.466, -.041]. Psychological flexibility was not a significant mediator between childhood sexual abuse and perceived relationship quality $B = -.152$, 95% BCa CI [-.338, .006].

Table 1

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Total Abuse/Neglect ^a	—	—	—	—	—	—
2. Physical Abuse ^a	.77**	—	—	—	—	—
3. Sexual Abuse ^a	.49**	.31	—	—	—	—
4. Emotional Abuse ^a	.85**	.53**	.21**	—	—	—
5. Psychological Flexibility ^b	.55**	.31**	.20	.54**	—	—
6. Relationship Quality ^c	-.18	-.13	-.12**	-.20	-.34**	—

Note. ** Correlation is significant when the BCa CI does not include zero.

^a Measured by the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire-Short Form (CTQ). ^b Measured by the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ-II). ^c Measured by the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (PRQC)

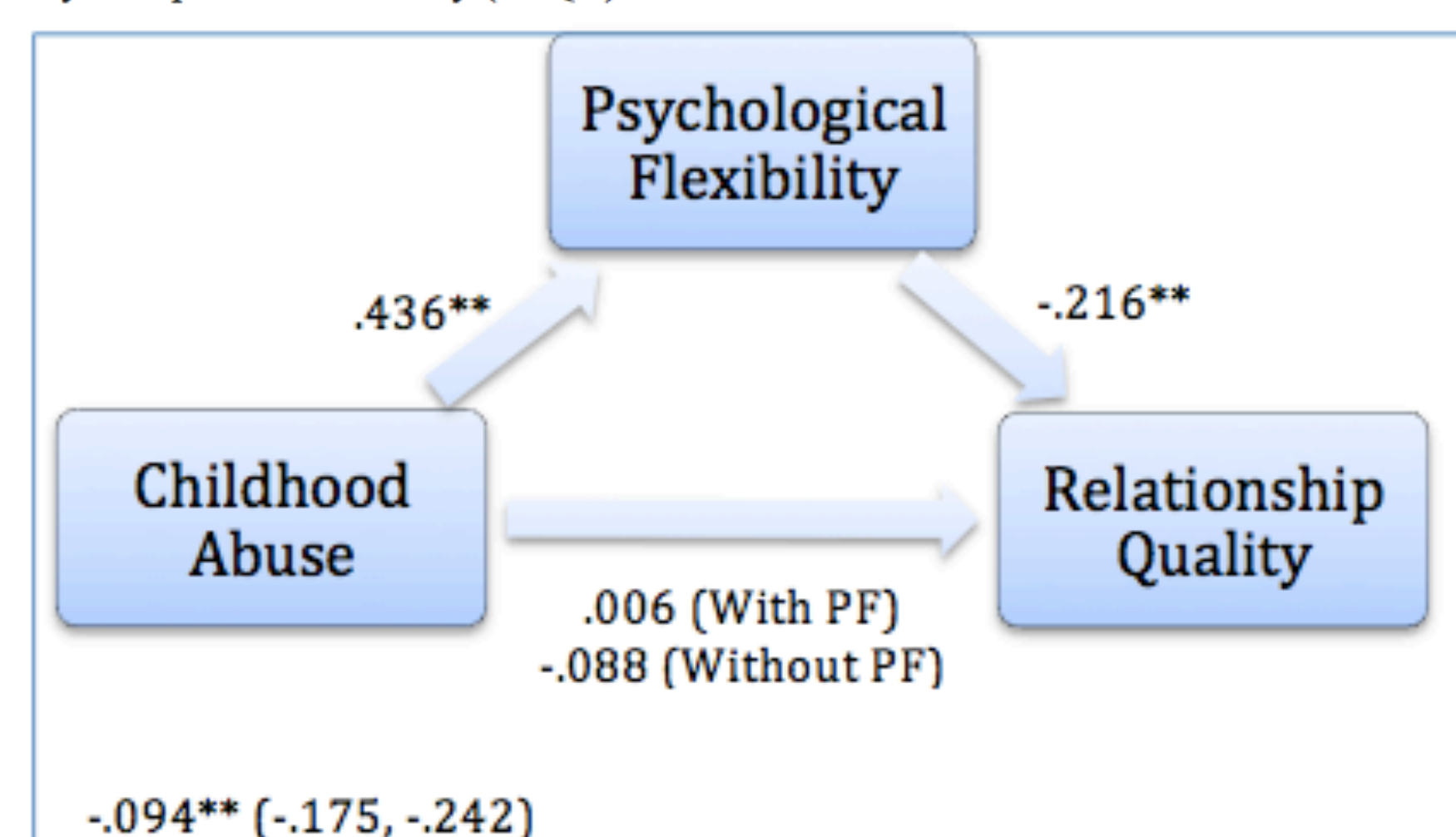


Figure 2: Mediation Analysis

Discussion

Contrary to previous findings, results from this study did not support the relationship between level of childhood abuse/neglect and relationship quality represented by the related literature. However, in correlational analyses, which examined specific types of abuse separately, the results indicated that a greater level of sexual abuse was associated with lower relationship quality. This finding sheds light on the possible unique effects of sexual abuse in how it influences relationships later in life.

Regression analyses revealed a significant relationship between participants' psychological flexibility and relationship quality. This finding supports the importance of promoting psychological flexibility to increase relationship quality in populations who may have experienced childhood abuse.

While total level of childhood abuse did not predict perceived relationship quality, psychological flexibility was still found to be a significant mediator, thereby confirming this hypothesis. This result indicates that, although there was not a significant direct effect, any effect that childhood abuse did have on relationship quality was due to psychological flexibility. When exploring the different subtypes of abuse, follow-up analyses revealed that psychological flexibility was also a significant mediator between both physical abuse and perceived relationship quality and emotional abuse and perceived relationship quality.

Limitations

One limitation of the current study is that many participants endorsed remarkably high levels of perceived relationship quality, and, due to this factor, bootstrapping was utilized. This relatively high level of relationship quality among participants might imply that the current study sample is not representative of a more diverse population of females in dating relationships.

This research focused on relationship quality, which means that participants were already in relationships at the time of their participation, and, thus, it excluded individuals who are not currently in a relationship. Another limitation is that participants were all female and currently attending an undergraduate university in the Northeastern U.S. Future research should include a wider variety of participants from different areas as well as different levels of education in order to increase generalizability.

Implications

There is a vast body of research that supports the relationship between childhood abuse and adult romantic relationships (Cherlin, et al., 2004; Colman & Widom, 2004). Findings from this study aim to advance this research literature to include the possibility of an intervening variable, psychological flexibility.

While the research on promoting psychological flexibility in couples who have experienced abuse is not well developed, there are studies which support the fostering of psychological flexibility for reducing symptoms of PTSD (e.g., Boals & Murrell, 2016; Dick et al., 2014; Jansen & Morris, 2016).

The identification of psychological flexibility as a mediator in the relationship between childhood abuse/neglect and romantic relationship quality can positively contribute to interventions promoting psychological flexibility among therapy clients who are survivors of abuse and/or neglect. Therefore, clinicians who treat couples should screen for childhood abuse so that interventions can include skills to address the possible effects of that abuse.

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