

Childhood Emotional Abuse And Insecure Adult Attachment In Married Adults

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ABSTRACT

Young children are very vulnerable to abuse. In Pakistan, according to Dawn News in 2018, more than 10 children are abused every day. Childhood emotional abuse can be extremely stressful for individuals which forms emotional instabilities in their development related to their caregiver. As attachment theory suggest that early attachment with caregivers play an important role in forming healthy adult relationships, those children who experience emotional abuse can develop insecure attachment styles with their romantic partner. The objective of the study is to find out the association between childhood emotional abuse and insecure attachment style in married adults. This study further looked at the gender differences in emotional childhood abuse and insecure attachment style. A primary quantitative method through survey gathered information for this research based on The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire—Short Form, and Experience in Close Relationship Scale-Short Form. 200 married adults participated for our survey after which data was analyzed on SPSS to find a quantifiable relationship between our variables. The results were found that there is a positive association between childhood emotional abuse and insecure adult attachment. Moreover, the study further concluded that there is a significant gender difference, women experience more childhood emotional abuse than men. However, regardless of any sex difference, there isn't a significant difference when it comes to developing insecure adult attachment.

Keywords: childhood abuse, emotional abuse, adult attachment.

INTRODUCTION

Children are very vulnerable to any kind of abuse in their early years of life. The World Health Organization indicated that in 2016, 36% reported emotional abuse throughout the world (World Health Organization, 2017). According to Dawn, everyday 10+ children faces some kind abuse in Pakistan (Imdad, 2019). Persistent emotional abuse in childhood can result in severe long-term mental health problems. Emotional abuse refers to offenses that may lead to an individual doubting their worth and eventually isolating themselves from the people and

surroundings (McCoy, M. L., & Keen, S. M, 2013). Early childhood experiences are crucial as they are connected with the development of many psychological disorders (Kanel, 2014). Traumatic incidences in childhood and negative attachment styles adversely influence the individual's functioning which is observed in the way they develop different relationship in the span of their adulthoods (Kisiel et al., 2016). The nature and quality of our relationships in adulthood is highly dependent on the nature of our relationships we have in our childhood, and they have a direct as well as indirect effect on our psychological health

(J., Fosse, R., Moskowitz, A., & Perry, B., 2014). If a child faces any kind of emotional instability with their primary caregiver, research suggests that these individuals are unable to develop trust in adult relationships life (Saunders, Benjamin & Adams, Zachary, 2014).

Findings from studies reports that children with history of any type of abuse faces difficulties when forming attachment because of the negative internal model they have developed over the years (Riggs, Cusimano & Benson, 2011; W.A Collins & Sroufe, 1999). Research held by Riggs, Cusimino, Benson (2011), on the correlation between childhood emotional abuse and attachment during dating with a sample of 285 indicated that individuals with childhood abuse developed some kind of insecurity while dating and depressive symptoms. DiLillo et al. (2007) research presented that females who were abused in their childhood reported more psychological issues in romantic associations as compared to males. Another study by Perry, DiLillo, and Peugh (2007), indicated similar findings in terms of a significant correlation between early years emotional abuse and marital satisfactions in newly married couples. This association was mediated by the psychological distresses where there was a link between early childhood maltreatment and romantic factors of relationship. Results from Walker, Holman, and Busby in (2009) study stated that sexual abuse in childhood was the leading cause of depression as well as negatively affected romantic associations. The researchers observed that childhood stressors and violent behavior has similar effects as sexual abuse in early years of development. The children are unable to differentiate between different types of abuse in early ages and react in a similar way to all of them when they grow up i.e., anxious and depressed especially if there is a dispute in romantic relationships (Walker, Holman, Busby, 2009).

In Pakistan, due to lack of awareness on mental health and the effects of early developmental years in adulthood, there is limited research on childhood emotional abuse and their long – term effects. Childhood has a significant impact on attachment styles and few researches aims to find out the consequences of abuse on romantic relationship which is a significant part of adulthood. The present research aims to fill this gap and find the impact of abuse on individuals so that effective measures can be developed. This will help in creating awareness and therapeutic interventions to help minimize the effects of childhood abuse and its implications in romantic relationships.

Research Objectives

1. To explore if emotional abuse in childhood is linked with insecure attachment styles in married adult.
2. To explore if there is a gender difference in experiencing childhood emotional abuse.
3. To explore if there is a gender difference in developing insecure adult attachment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Abuse

Abuse is an unfair treatment with another person in order to gain some benefits. Many people think about abuse, they consider physical violence, but abuse can take many forms such as sexual abuse, verbal abuse/emotional abuse and psychological abuse. Physical abuse involves some physical force on another person in order to show power and control to the person. It involves kicking, slapping, hitting or keeping a person against their will. Sexual abuse involves sexual act without a person's consent such as rape or using sex as a mean to gain some personal benefits. Emotional abuse is more like a hidden form of abuse which is rarely pointed out. It is a kind of abuse where a person's self-worth is undermined. Mental or psychological abuse involves a person doubting

their own sanity as their mental health has been compromised by the abuser (McCoy, M. L., & Keen, S. M, 2013). There are chances that young children are susceptible to abuse. According to national statistics on childhood abuse (2020), each year 700,000 children are abused in the US. The statistics also show that in the US in 2018, 10% or more children were abused physically and 7% were sexually abused. The statistics also state that many children experience two or more forms of abuse together. However, It is to be noted that in Pakistan not much importance is given to emotional abuse. There is no official data which states the prevalence of emotional abuse in childhood, which needs to be addressed. Childhood abuse causes developmental trauma for the children which poses a risk factor for their future developmental outcomes and may lead to physiological and psychological issues. (Petersen, 2014).

Attachment Style

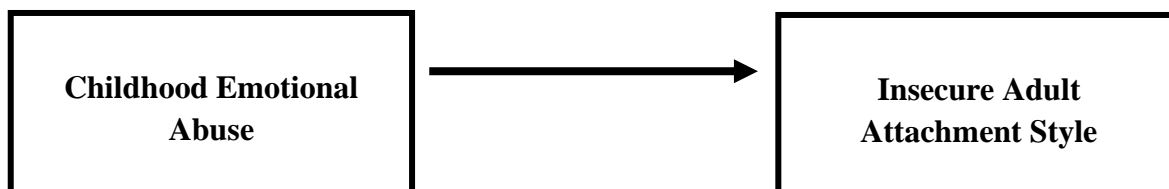
A system developed by Bartholomew and Horowitz involving one secure and two insecure types – attachment avoidant and attachment anxious. These show that adults with a secure attachment type generally had received well-grounded caregiving in their childhood, had constructive views of themselves and of others and experienced no difficulties in trusting other people. Whereas people with an avoidant type of attachment had experienced unresponsive caregiving which causes them to view themselves as self-sufficient because of the inability to rely on others. Individuals with avoidant attachment type had inefficient and inconsistent caregivers which causes them to believe that they are unlovable, unwanted and although others are capable of providing support, they do not necessarily plan to (K. Bartholomew, L. M.

Horowitz, 1997). Individuals with an anxious type of attachment usually have rejecting experiences with caregivers which lead to having a desire for intimacy whereas they are afraid to be rejected. So, they alternate between engaging and avoiding other people to get close to them (E. Wood, S. Riggs, 2009).

Abuse and Attachment Style

The subject has recently garnered more interest and therefore some research is being conducted to look into how adults who have gone through the aforementioned periods of abuse have dealt conflict in their romantic relationships later in life. Previous literature has indicated that there is a significant correlation between childhood abuse and poor quality of romantic relationships in later life. Individuals who have suffered from emotional maltreatment in their childhood contributed to insecurity in their adult attachments. While this maltreatment has an impact on future relationships, it is not significant in leading to psychological aggression or victimization. Depression, on the other hand, was one of the most important factors reported. According to attachment theory, early attachment with caregivers play an important role in forming healthy adult relationships (Howe, Brandon, & Hinings, 1999). The loss or the lack of consistent caregivers; emotional, physical or sexual abuse and different forms of neglect cause an increase in susceptibility to trauma in early childhood. This is especially important in the case of abuse instigated by maternal caregivers - the quality of an individual's relationship with a maternal caregiver during the former's childhood is a key factor in determining how they would perform in conflicts with romantic partners later in life, particularly conflict-resolution qualities (Labella et. al., 2018).

Conceptual Framework



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The participants for this research are 200 heterosexual adults (i.e., 100 males and 100 females) who were married for minimum 2 years and maximum for 20 years. These 200 respondents belong to the age group of 18-45 years middle socioeconomic class. Purposive sampling technique was employed along with snowball technique where individuals who agreed to be a part of the study suggested other couples to meet the sample size requirement. The Background Information Questionnaire was developed to find out the demographics of our respondents such as age, gender, occupation. The questionnaire also asked information on the length of their marriage and type of marriage (arrange/love).

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire—

Short Form was used to measure childhood emotional abuse. It is a self-report questionnaire by Bernstein & Fink (1998) which determines 5 different kinds of maltreatment in childhood of individuals. For current research, the sub set of emotional abuse is being used. This sub-scale are based on 5 items each. The questionnaire is scored according to the respondent's chosen option for each item. The higher the score, the greater the severity of the maltreatment. Experience in Close Relationship (Wei, Russel, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007) is a self-report 12 item questionnaire which was used to find out the adult attachment style. A total sum of two subscales attachment avoidant and attachment anxious is used to find out the insecure adult attachment. The responses are based on 7 point

Likert Scale where 1 is referred to strongly disagree and 7 is strongly agree. The survey was filled electronically through google forms. Consent was taken from all the participants to use the information given by them. The participants had free will to fill the survey and reserved the right to withdraw at any moment if they feel uncomfortable answering the questionnaire. The participants' confidentiality is maintained throughout the research.

TESTING OF HYPOTHESIS

All the statistical analysis was done with the use of SPSS (V-21.0). Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the demographic variables of age, gender, duration of marriage and type of marriage. Pearson product moment coefficient of correlation is used to find out if the variables has a positive or negative relationship and linear regression is used to find the association between childhood emotional abuse and insecure adult attachment style. Further t-test was conducted to check and analyze any gender difference on our independent and dependent variable.

For the demographic variable, Descriptive statistics for frequencies and percentages, mean and standard deviation were analyzed and are described in Table 1 and Table 2. Table 1 describes the mean age and duration of marriage through descriptive statistics. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for the demographic variable type of marriage in frequency and percentage form. Table 3 shows mean, standard deviation, alpha reliability for the scale of childhood emotional abuse and insecure adult attachment.

Both the scale shows high reliability as indicated by Alpha reliability coefficient values. Table 4 indicates the Pearson coefficient of correlation between childhood abuse and insecure attachment styles. The variable of childhood emotional abuse and insecure attachment style were included for a linear regression to find out the association between these two variables in Table 5. Table 6 outlines that 1 unit change in

childhood emotional abuse brings .869 ratio change in insecure attachment style. The statistically significant gender difference for childhood emotional abuse is included in Table 7 which clearly reports that women face greater emotional abuse in their childhood comparatively. Whereas in Table 8, no significant difference is observed in experiencing insecure attachment style in adulthood.

TABLE 1 Mean age and duration of marriage

Variables	N	M	SD
Age	200	31.46	6.864
Duration of marriage (years)	200	7.40	5.812

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics of demographic information on type of marriage

Type of Marriage	Frequency	Percent
Arrange	117	58.5%
Love	83	41.5%
Total	200	100.0%

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics and Cronbach alpha for childhood emotional abuse and insecure adult attachment

Descriptive Statistics

	A	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Childhood emotional abuse	.799	200	5.00	20.00	10.8150	4.10671
Insecure adult attachment	.712	200	13.00	64.00	38.9850	10.90548
Valid N (listwise)		200				

TABLE 4 Pearson product moment Coefficient of correlation between childhood emotional abuse and insecure attachment styles

Variables		
Scale	N	Insecure attachment style
Childhood emotional abuse	200	0.327**

Note: Table 3 ($p < .001^{**}$, $p < .05^{*}$) shows that there is a statistically significant positive relationship between the variables childhood emotional abuse and insecure attachment style.

TABLE 5 Model summary of Linear Regression analysis

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	F change	Sig.
1	.327 ^a	.107	.103	23.764	.000

Note: $P < .05$. Dependent Variable: sum of attachment avoidant and attachment anxiety. It shows that childhood emotional abuse can predict insecure attachment style of attachment avoidant and attachment anxiety.

TABLE 6

Coefficients^a

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	p
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	29.584	2.062		14.345	.000
childhood emotional abuse	.869	.178	.327	4.875	.000

Note: $P < .01^{**}$ $p < .05^{*}$ 1 unit change in childhood emotional abuse brings .869 ratio change in insecure attachment style

TABLE 7 Mean, SD and t-test of Males and Females of Childhood Emotional Abuse

Gender	N	Mean	SD	T	df	p
Male	100	9.6500	4.01607	-4.174		
Female	100	11.9800	3.87684		198	.000

Note: $p < .05$. Statistically significant gender difference for childhood emotional abuse.

TABLE 8 Mean, SD and t-test of Males and Females of insecure adult attachment

Gender	N	Mean	SD	T	df	p
Male	100	36.8800	10.11877			
Female	100	41.0900	11.30129	-2.775	198	.006

Note: $p < 0.05$. No significant gender difference in experiencing insecure adult attachment style.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study is to explore the association between childhood emotional abuse and insecure adult attachment style. The first hypothesis i.e., There is a positive association between childhood emotional abuse and insecure adult attachment style is supported by the results and is found significant $p < 0.05$. The results of the study suggested that childhood emotional abuse is positively linked with insecure adult attachment style. The analysis found a significant correlation between the two variables. This suggests that the result of current research is in line with the previous studies conducted which supports the idea of how early childhood experiences, especially interaction with one's immediate caretakers and families play a major role in our romantic lives as adults (W.A. Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Dattilio, 2006). It is through our relationships with our primary care givers that we learn to recognize and develop our capacity for intimacy and empathy (W.A. Collins & Sroufe, 1999).

If we are not provided a healthy base, then it can distort our perception of intimacy and affect our ability to attach or connect with others. Emotional abusive interactions and relationships during our early developmental years can affect our interpersonal skills, as these types of early relationships end up distorting our understanding of relationships, intimacy, and what constitutes a healthy relationship (Riggs, 2010). If a child does not feel securely attached, there is a higher likelihood of them developing dysfunctional patterns in their relationships as the child ends up developing a negative internal working model in regard to themselves, and the child is not able to effectively self-regulate, a skill that children learn through secure interactions with their primary caretakers. This problem is exacerbated in situations where the caretaker is both a source of anxiety and calm for the child

(Main & Hesse, 1990) in these scenarios, the child suffers from a perpetual case of an activated sympathetic or fight-or-flight response. When this is happening, it is very difficult for the child to self-soothe their anxious and fearful thoughts, further adding to the feelings of dysregulation in the child (Lyons-Ruth et al., 2004). Consequently, the child is not able to deal with these activated emotional states properly, and ends up internalizing their negative feelings, and blaming themselves for their inability to handle themselves, labelling themselves as damaged or faulty. The child can also develop a negative view of the world and people around them, viewing them as untrustworthy and bad (Riggs, 2010). Current's research second hypothesis is that there would be a gender difference in childhood emotional abuse and insecure adult attachment in married adults. It has been observed from our result that there is a statistically significant gender difference when it comes to childhood emotional abuse. Women experience more childhood emotional abuse compared to men. However, the consequence of forming an insecure adult attachment style is not detrimental to a specific gender. Our finding is similar to research conducted by World Health Organization (2013) where it was found that women experience more childhood emotional abuse (11.7%) than men (9.7%). In context to our society, abuse is a socially taboo topic and many people in our society do not even consider emotional abuse a proper form of abuse. This is a reason where many cases of childhood emotional abuse go unreported. Studies based on Asian and Pacific regions have shown a widespread child maltreatment including emotional abuse against women. This issue has recently been considered a 'global public health' issue (Fulu et al., 2017). In reference to Pakistan, we live in a society where many believe that women's freedom should be restricted (Ali, T. S., & Khan, N., 2007)

These social or cultural norms can lead to women developing low self-esteem with the idea forming in their mental head that their parents do not wish for them to be born. In a study, a statement was reported from a government official in Lahore that here women from their childhood only are taught to be dependent on others for their survival. The family members discriminate against the rights of women, induce different kinds of abuse and with this environment to grow up, women usually lose their identity (Qaisrani, A., Liaquat, S., & Khokhar, E. N., 2016). Moreover, it is also possible for males not to report childhood emotional abuse due to the fact that in our society, male are supposed to be strong, and a report conducted by Thabet (2008) suggested that boys usually play outside and spend less time with their family compared to girls (Al-Zboon et al., 2015). Many studies that have been conducted on gender difference for the child abuse and its long term consequences found mixed results usually concluding on females being the victims more often.

Conclusion

The present study is beneficial as it contributes to more knowledge concerned with childhood emotional abuse and insecure adult attachment especially in context with Pakistani society. The findings of the result suggested that there is an association between childhood emotional abuse and insecure adult attachment in married adults. Thus, the hypothesis of this research proved to be correct. The result has further proved that childhood emotional abuse and insecure adult attachment is positively correlated in married adults which is in line with the previous researches conducted. This shows that those research findings can be administered in context of Pakistan as well. Moreover, the study further indicated that there is a significant gender difference, women experience more childhood emotional abuse than men. However, regardless of any sex difference, there isn't a significant

difference when it comes to developing insecure adult attachment.

Recommendations

While the current study can be useful for many interventions, there are few limitations. Starting with the research's limited sample size. More significant results can be found if a larger sample size was employed. Secondly, generalized insecure adult attachment idea is assumed. The research does not particularly talk about the association of childhood emotional abuse with each type of insecure adult attachment. Following with the research has not stratified socioeconomic status of married adults. Finally, the respondents are from a metropolitan city, Karachi, which has adults from different ethnic or cultural groups. Concludingly, limiting the result's generalizability for the study.

The limitations that are mentioned in the study should be addressed for future research. participant's cultural or ethnic background can be reviewed to examine if this affects the association between childhood emotional abuse and insecure adult attachment. The current research can further be extended to a more diverse range of romantic couples such as dating couples or compared people with different professions, age group or clinical and non-clinical samples. Furthermore, to increase the effectiveness of this study, longitudinal study can be used to address the causal issue with the variables. The findings that are found in the research show that emotional abuse is positively associated with insecure adult attachment hence awareness programs should be initiated that talks about the long term consequence of emotional abuse during childhood. Moreover, there should be interventions implemented at a macro level to prevent children from emotional abuse especially girls.

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