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Associations Between Childhood Maltreatment and Young Adult Romantic Relationships: A Focus on Gender Differences

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DATA TRENDS

ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN CHILDHOOD MALTREATMENT AND YOUNG ADULT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: A FOCUS ON GENDER DIFFERENCES

SOURCES

1. Milletich, R. J., Kelley, M. L., Doane, A. N., & Pearson, M. R. (2010). Exposure to interparental violence and childhood physical and emotional abuse as related to physical aggression in undergraduate relationships. *Journal of Family Violence, 25*, 627-637.
2. Paradis, A., & Boucher, S. (2010). Research on interpersonal problems and codependency: Child maltreatment history and interpersonal problems in adult couple relations. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 19*, 138-158.

Two recent studies investigated the associations between experiencing maltreatment in childhood and dating aggression and interpersonal problems in young adult romantic relationships, with a focus on gender differences.

METHODS

Study 1: In order to examine the effects that interparental violence and childhood physical and emotional abuse have on physical aggression in undergraduate dating relationships, Milletich and colleagues used a sample of 658 participants between the ages of 18 and 30 recruited from a south-eastern Virginia university; 27% were male and 72% were female. Participants had never been married, were mostly heterosexual and had experienced one or more dating relationships. Data were collected via self-report surveys. Independent measures included retrospective assessments of exposure to violence during childhood, both in terms of witnessing interparental violence and experiencing abuse. Dependent measures assessed participant dating aggression.

Study 2: Paradis and Boucher investigated the associations between childhood maltreatment and interpersonal problems in a sample of 1728 French Canadian University students. Most participants were Caucasian (92%) and female (81%); the average age of the males was 27 years (SD = 8.0), and 24 years (SD = 6.2) for the females. Few (7%) were married, and an additional 38% lived with a romantic partner. Seventy-five percent of all participants had been in their current relationship at least six months. Data were collected via self-report surveys. Independent measures included retrospective assessments of experiencing neglect and physical, emotional, and sexual abuse during childhood. Dependent variables were measured by the 64-item Inventory of Interpersonal Problems for Couples (IIP-C). Results from this study used the following four subscales of relationship patterns derived from the IIP-C: cold/distant (e.g., "It is hard for me to feel close to my partner"), self-sacrificing (e.g., "I try to please my partner too much"), domineering/controlling (e.g., "I am too aggressive toward my partner"), and nonassertive (e.g., "It is hard for me to tell my partner to stop bothering me") (p. 146).

For females, more physical abuse experience was associated with a threefold increased likelihood of perpetrating physical aggression towards their dating partners. In contrast, males who reported childhood physical abuse and witnessed interparental violence were 3.5 times less likely than their female counterparts to report perpetration of dating violence.

RESULTS

Study 1: Milletech and colleagues found that reports of engaging in one or more physical aggression acts towards their partners were given by 16% of males and 40% of females. In the last year, 31% of men and 25% of women reported that they had been victimized by their romantic partners. Zero-inflated Poisson (ZIP) regressions were used to identify gender differences in the associations between childhood exposure to violence and dating aggression. For every one-

of childhood emotional abuse in males were associated a twofold increase in dating violence perpetration.

Study 2: In Paradis and Boucher's sample, 20% of males and 23% of females had experienced at least one type of childhood trauma. Chi-squared analyses and t tests were used to assess the differences between males and females on the rates of different types of childhood trauma. Males reported more physical aggression than females, while females had increased reports of child sexual abuse. Two-

ive, and self-sacrificing, whereas emotional abuse significantly predicted the likelihood of being domineering and distant.

CONCLUSION

These two studies contribute to our understanding of the associations between child maltreatment and later romantic relationships in two important ways. First, these studies indicate that different types of exposure to violence (e.g., witnessing interparental violence, physical abuse, and emotional abuse), are associated with different types of interpersonal problems later in life. Additionally, there are gender differences between the associations of these different types of childhood traumas and young adult romantic relationships. For example, Milletech and colleagues found that for females, childhood experiences with physical abuse were predictive of perpetrating dating violence, whereas emotional abuse predicted perpetration for males. Paradis and Boucher found slightly different patterns in how childhood maltreatment was associated with the interpersonal difficulties of young adults.

Limitations to these studies include that both samples were comprised of college students and relied on self-report measures. Additionally, childhood maltreatment was measured retrospectively, and thus vulnerable to inaccurate recollections. Nevertheless, these studies do offer findings that emphasize the importance of not only considering the impact a person's childhood maltreatment may have on later romantic relationships, but also that these early experiences may influence young men and women differently. Understanding these patterns is essential to better provide tailored support for young adults as they enter into intimate relationships.

AUTHORS

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unit increase in reported exposure to mother-to-father violence, females reported a one-unit increase in engaging in physical aggression toward their dating partners. Similarly, for every one-unit increase in reported exposure to father-to-mother violence, males reported a one-unit increase in physical aggression toward their dating partners. For females, more physical abuse experience was associated with a threefold increased likelihood of perpetrating physical aggression towards their dating partners. In contrast, males who reported childhood physical abuse and witnessed interparental violence were 3.5 times less likely than their female counterparts to report perpetration of dating violence. However, higher reported levels

way analyses of variance indicate that participants who experienced childhood physical abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect were more likely to report more interpersonal problems than those who did not experience childhood maltreatment. Stepwise regressions were used to examine gender differences in the associations between experiences with child maltreatment and later interpersonal difficulties. For males, physical abuse significantly predicted the likelihood of being domineering, distant, and self-sacrificing. Also for males, emotional neglect was significantly associated with being distant and nonassertive. For females, emotional neglect was significantly associated with being distant, nonassert-