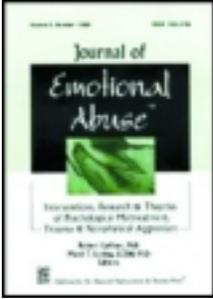


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INTRODUCTION

The Long-Term Impact of Emotional Abuse in Childhood: Identifying Mediating and Moderating Processes

Margaret O'Dougherty Wright

Until recently there has been limited attention paid to the long-term consequences of childhood emotional abuse (also known as psychological abuse), in contrast to the significant attention paid to the long-term effects of childhood physical or sexual abuse (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 2005; Binggeli, Hart, & Brassard, 2001). In part this has been because emotional abuse was not recognized as a distinct form of child maltreatment until quite recently, and there has been considerable difficulty defining and assessing emotional abuse. Unlike physical abuse,

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which results in immediate and observable harm, the immediate consequences of emotionally abusive behavior are more elusive. The actions and behaviors that comprise emotional abuse (humiliating, demeaning, threatening language or behavior, denial of affection, or isolating a child) are not uncommon occurrences in family life, and it has been difficult to determine the threshold for considering a particular act abusive. Many parents, if not most, have acknowledged criticizing, ignoring, or being unsupportive of their child on a given occasion (Barnett et al., 2005). So, in the emotional abuse area in particular, it has been hard to distinguish among less than adequate parenting, parenting mistakes, and emotionally abusive behavior. This has made it difficult for child protection workers, therapists, and other child-care providers to accurately assess if the emotional abuse involves a repeated pattern of parent-child interaction, or if the incident has been severe.

Yet despite these definitional and measurement difficulties, there is now considerable evidence that emotional abuse may be one of the most destructive and pervasive forms of abuse and that such abuse may also constitute a “core component” of all forms of child abuse and neglect (Barnett et al., 2005; Bingleli et al., 2001; Brassard, Germain, & Hart, 1987; Garbarino, Guttman, & Seeley, 1986). This realization has stimulated a great deal of research that has focused on documenting the long-term consequences of such abuse, which span intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intrafamilial domains. However, while there has been substantial research that has documented the link between emotional abuse and later negative adjustment, there has been far less research that has specifically addressed important mediators and moderators of this relationship. Research has rarely been driven by theory in this area and less attention has been given to the *processes* that lead to symptoms of distress or disturbed interpersonal functioning. The purpose of this special issue is to focus on empirical work emanating from a clear theoretical framework that examines these important risk-mediator-outcome relationships. For our understanding to be advanced in this area, it is critical that research begin to focus on *why* and *how* and *for whom* such abuse has such a pervasive impact across the life span. This work is critical in order to be able to identify points of intervention with survivors of emotional abuse. In this special issue we will present exciting new research that explores mediators and moderators of outcome for adult survivors of emotional abuse across biological, psychological, and social domains.

In the opening article of this special issue, Yates provides a comprehensive review of the empirical and theoretical literature examining

possible neurodevelopmental consequences of childhood emotional abuse. She outlines a multi-level, integrated, transactional model for understanding how experience and biology might interact to eventuate in the specific maladaptive outcomes we have observed following childhood emotional abuse. Her review focuses on two mammalian stress response systems: the limbic-hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal-medullary (L-HPA) and the norepinephrine-sympathetic-adrenal-medullary (NE-SAM) systems. Yates explores evidence from animal and human studies that recurrent patterns of hostile, indifferent, degrading, and unpredictable emotional interactions between a caregiver and offspring can have negative and enduring effects on these developing stress response systems and that such alterations in stress responsivity contribute to the types of adaptational difficulties that have been identified in survivors of child psychological abuse, such as increased vulnerability to stress, anxiety, depression, and other problems of adaptation. Yates proposes that emotional abuse can be conceptualized as a type of chronic relational adversity and highlights the importance of studying how such abuse disrupts development across multiple domains, including social, emotional, self, cognitive, and biological processes. Although research in this area is in its infancy, the evidence that she reviews suggests that emotionally abusive experiences in childhood have the capacity to initiate persistent alterations in neurophysiological stress response systems that can derail development. Her review provides a much-needed integration of theory and research in developmental neuroscience for understanding childhood emotional abuse and its long-term consequences.

The next paper in this section by Newton and Weigel expands on our understanding of the potential biological consequences of interpersonal mistreatment. These authors explored whether a history of interpersonal mistreatment acted as a potential contributor to heightened cardiovascular reactivity during social interaction. Prior work in this area had indicated that elevations in blood pressure can occur following exposure to a close partner's hostile social interactions or actions that communicated disrespect or an attempt to dominate (Brown, Smith, & Benjamin, 1998; Ewart, Taylor, Kraemer, & Agras, 1991; Newton & Sanford, 2003). Newton and Weigel's study expanded on this prior work by examining patterns of cardiovascular reactivity in relation to a history of interpersonal mistreatment and explored the moderating effect of gender and ethnicity (African American and European American participants). The study utilized a mild interactive stressor—a brief, problem solving discussion with an opposite gender partner—to explore cardiovascular responses during actual dyadic interaction. Prior mistreatment was

associated with higher resting blood pressure levels and heightened blood pressure reactivity, with some surprising gender and ethnicity patterns. Their research highlights the important role that exposure to chronic interpersonal stress may play in long term negative health outcomes, such as cardiovascular disease, and opens up exciting avenues for future exploration. This research project also provides an interesting laboratory analogue that might be very well suited to adaptation for children and their parents, and could provide an important window on early patterns of altered cardiovascular reactivity in children who have experienced parental emotional abuse.

The final four papers in this special issue focus more directly on identifying mediators and moderators of negative outcome in intrapersonal and interpersonal domains following childhood emotional abuse. The first paper by Gibb, Benas, Crossett, and Uhrlass provides an extension of prior work by Gibb and colleagues (Gibb, Abramson, & Alloy, 2004) linking a history of childhood emotional abuse by parents to a subsequent cognitive vulnerability to depression. This study examined the importance of the *source* of emotional mistreatment by including reports of parent emotional abuse as well as that of peer verbal abuse. Gibb and colleagues then tested a mediational model, which explored whether the victimization-later depressive symptomatology relationship was mediated by increased negative automatic thoughts and decreased positive automatic thoughts. The mediational model was fully supported, and victimization experiences were more closely related to heightened negative automatic thoughts rather than to diminished positive automatic thoughts. Interestingly, lower levels of positive thoughts were only related to emotional abuse by parents, not by peers, suggesting that the development of these thoughts may occur and be consolidated earlier and/or be more influenced by parental messages to the child. This was not the case for negative automatic thoughts, which were significantly associated with both peer and parental abuse. This paper raises a number of provocative questions that await further research study pertaining to the developmental antecedents of negative and positive automatic thoughts and suggests the need to study not only the source of victimization, but the timing of it as well, since such factors may lead to different developmental effects.

The papers by both Messman-Moore and Coates and Crawford and Wright illustrate the potential of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) and interpersonal schema theory (Benjamin, 1996; Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003) to provide a useful framework for examining the deleterious consequences that can be associated with a history of childhood emotional

abuse. Based on a broad base of empirical data obtained with normal and maltreated children, these theories propose that early interactions with caregivers, most notably parents, contribute to the development of cognitive schemas, or internal working models of self-in-relation to others (Baldwin, 1992; Bowlby, 1982; Cicchetti & Toth, 2000). These working models form templates for how the child expects to be treated by others based on how he or she was treated and whether the “self” is thought to be worthy of love, care, and respect. Exposure to experiences of emotional abuse in childhood is likely to threaten the security of these attachment relationships, and may result in maladaptive models of self (e.g., the self is flawed, defective, shameful, unlovable) and/or other (e.g., others are not trustworthy, they will not care for me, they may abandon or abuse me). If such schemas are persistent, they may interfere with the child’s ability to form secure and satisfying relationships with others later in life.

To examine this possibility, Messman-Moore and Coates explored the relationship between childhood emotional abuse and later interpersonal conflict and examined whether schemas pertaining to mistrust, abandonment, deprivation, and defectiveness/shame mediated this relationship for women. Their measure of interpersonal conflict assessed difficulties across several different contexts (friendships, romantic relationships, work and school relationships). Difficulty in these areas was linked to emotionally abusive experiences in childhood, even after controlling for general parenting behaviors of warmth and control and this relationship was fully or partially mediated by three of the internalized schemas proposed. Messman-Moore and Coates also examined whether different ways of coping with these internalized schemas, through overly accommodating behavior, avoidant social behavior, or domineering and controlling behavior, mediated the particular schema of mistrust and abuse. Although all three coping styles were partial mediators of interpersonal conflict, domineering and controlling behavior was the most robust factor. This paper provided clear evidence that the long-term impact of emotional abuse may be perpetuated through the individual’s internalization of this experience and provided rich evidence of the multiplicity of ways in which these childhood messages of abuse can shape self-perception and guide coping behavior.

Crawford and Wright’s paper highlights the importance of considering the impact of multiple forms of abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction, since different types of child maltreatment frequently overlap. In addition, it hasn’t always been clear in prior reports on the sequelae of emotional abuse whether observed findings are specific to the experience of

emotional abuse or are the result of exposure to multiple abuse trauma. Their paper provides evidence that even after controlling for childhood physical abuse, sexual abuse, and problematic parental alcohol use, emotional abuse remains a significant predictor of both intimate partner victimization as well as self-reported acts of adult aggression. Crawford and Wright's study also explored whether specific early maladaptive schemas mediated the relationship between early emotional abuse and later relationship aggression experiences. Romantic relationships were selected as a focus of study because they were thought to be prime targets for the possible enactment of maladaptive "interpersonal scripts," given the demands for trust, intimacy, affection, and conflict resolution in such relationships. Two schemas, mistrust and emotional inhibition, emerged as full mediators of dating victimization and as partial mediators of perpetration of aggression, which paralleled findings reported by Messman-Moore and Coates with respect to interpersonal conflict. The schema of self-sacrifice also mediated dating abuse, suggesting that overly accommodating behaviors and compulsive caregiving may have been learned as a way of appeasing an abusive caregiver and thus coping with early abuse. Feelings of entitlement and insufficient self-control emerged as schemas that were uniquely associated with perpetration of aggression and not with victimization. These schemas suggested that some survivors may have learned patterns of interaction that reflected an identification with the abusive parent and indicated that issues pertaining to limited ability to tolerate frustration and a disregard for others feelings might lead to serious relational difficulty for some survivors.

The final paper by Perry, DiLillo, and Peugh provides an in-depth look at the impact that emotionally abusive and neglectful behavior experienced in childhood might have on later marital satisfaction and explored critical mediators and moderators of this relationship. This is a particularly important area of research and one in which there are very limited prior reports. Problems with trust, intimacy, closeness to others, and sexual difficulties have been identified as problem areas for abuse survivors in general (Davis, Petretic-Jackson, & Ting, 2001; DiLillo, 2001), and difficulties in these areas are likely to be very salient for adults who experienced contempt, ridicule, and rejection from their primary attachment figures. Perry and colleagues examined whether adult psychological distress played a mediating role in the relationship between emotional abuse and marital satisfaction. They also explored whether this mediational pattern was moderated by gender and remained significant even after controlling for exposure to all other forms of childhood abuse. Their

findings revealed that symptoms of psychological distress were significant mediators of this relationship, and that gender did moderate this relationship, resulting in slightly different patterns for men and for women. For men, the symptom of paranoia was the strongest mediator. This finding is similar to the findings reported by Messman-Moore and Coates and Crawford and Wright for both men and women and suggests that schemas reflective of mistrust and suspiciousness of others are one part of the enduring legacy of childhood emotional abuse. For women, hostility emerged as most salient in interfering with marital satisfaction, suggesting a possible identification with the emotionally abusive parent and perhaps difficulty regulating one's temper and negative mood. The potential for bi-directional influences between psychological distress and marital difficulty is also discussed by the authors and represents an extremely important area needing further investigation.

The research presented in this special issue represents an important first step in moving beyond the need to document that emotionally abusive experiences in childhood are damaging to finding possible explanations for the persistence of these negative effects. The studies have also broadened the focus to a wider range of outcomes for both men and women and explored potential mediating and moderating mechanisms that were grounded in theory and that might hold potential promise as avenues for clinical intervention. It is hoped that this exploratory research will contribute to a richer understanding of some of the processes involved in carrying the effects of abuse forward to adult life, and most of all, will serve to inspire others to pursue research in this area.

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