The Effects of Parental Abuse and Childhood Trauma on the Child's Future Romantic Relationship

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Abstract. Child abuse comes in various forms and typically result in serious consequences such as physiological reactivity and developing offender behaviors. This research paper focuses on three major types of child abuse or childhood trauma: divorce, negligence, and lack of parental approval. Multiple studies have shown that children who experienced parental divorce are more likely to have reduced commitment in a relationship and have fewer romantic relationships in general. Secondly, a study on parental neglect concludes that those who were neglected by their parents are more likely to develop fear for intimate relationships and depressive symptoms. Lastly, lack of parental approval leads to individuals experiencing distress in their relationships. Generally, the less perceived approval from parents, the more distress observed by the individuals. It is observed that many negative behaviors result from child abuse and likely lead to abuse cycles that continue to harm generations of people. Overall, it is recommended that more research be conducted on how to break the abuse cycle.

Keywords: divorce, neglect, lack of approval, childhood trauma, abuse

1 Introduction

Do families with various types of abusive behaviors or childhood trauma affect children? If so, how does the influence play along in his or her romantic life when the child reaches adulthood? Studies related to the effects of abusive behaviors on children often have implications for solutions to real-world problems as well as understanding the reasons behind certain behaviors and resolving these behavioral issues. Therefore, it is important to examine some of the research on this topic.

Child abuse can be in forms of direct abuse or exposure to IPV (intimate partner violence), or both. Abusive behaviors imposed on the children leave them with serious consequences that involve physiological reactivity and offender behavior development. Physiological reactivity refers to when the individual receives a stimulus from an external source (in this case, any act of abuse), they feel threatened and the body responds with protective reactions such as escalating heart beat rates. Offender behaviors are learned from the way children are treated by their parents, and such behaviors are later applied to others and the cycle of abuse continues [1].

Since the topic revolves around family of origin, its definition is crucial in order to understand the studies related to this concept. Family of origin is the concept of "the family that an individual was raised by and developed with. Family-of-Origin is credited with much of a person's early development, including norms and attitudes" [2]. Throughout the paper, phrases such as family atmosphere, families, family structure, and guardian relationships may be used, and all of these terms are similar concepts to family of origin.

There have been various studies in the field on family of origin, but there is difficulty in finding literature reviews on its effects on the individual's romantic relationships. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to offer an overview of previous research and find new research targets regarding the effects of three main types of negative family atmosphere, including divorce, negligence, and lack of parental approval, on young adults. It is acknowledged that a negative family environment has more aspects to it than the listed points such as violence, mental and physical abuse, and overly authoritarian parental style. This paper chooses to zoom in on divorce, negligence and a lack of parental approval because as compared to physically committing an act to punish children, all three of these negative treatments are indirect and present less deliberate efforts to harm the child. Therefore, it would be interesting to bring them together onto one paper and raise awareness of how sometimes overlooked parental styles influence the children.

2 Effects of Divorce on Individual's Future Romantic Relationships

One aspect of a negative family atmosphere is divorce, which is a common phenomenon. A divorced family can impact the child's romantic relationship as he/she enters adulthood.

In previous research projects, there had been suggestions that children who grow up in divorced families were more likely to carry over the characteristics of a parental relationship into their own romantic relationships. For example, Teachman suggested that "children of divorce are more likely to see their own marriage end in divorce compared to children from always-married homes" [3]. A similar study also stated that young adults with divorced parents likely see their own relationships with low satisfaction and less positivity [4]. Moreover, stressful situations such as experiencing parental divorce predicted a higher likelihood of the child also going through a divorce. One such stressful transition was associated with a thirty-six percent likelihood of divorce, two stressful transitions a thirty-nine percent, and three stressful transitions a forty-one percent [5].

All of the above studies had shown a trend, which was the association between the children's negative perception toward their own intimate relationships if they have gone through a divorce in their childhood. While these studies confirmed that there may be an association between divorce and the child's own romantic relationship in various aspects, relatively few attempts to report on both the child's perception toward divorce

and the relationship between parental marital status and the child's romantic relationship.

A recent study led by Tamar Frances Kaplan examined the differences between young adults from divorced households and young adults from always-married households [6]. They hypothesized that the young adults from divorced families would have more romantic relationships and lack investment for their partners because in previous studies, referring to the Teachman finding, which reported that individuals report lower satisfaction coming from a divorced family as compared to an always-married one. The researcher also hypothesized that, coming from a family with a high inter-parental conflict, young adults were more likely to hold positive views toward divorce. The results collected from the students were from an online survey that asked each person questions about their perceived child-parent bonding, attitudes toward divorce and related experience or perception toward their parents' marital status [6].

Undergraduate students were recruited from the University of Arizona Subject pool and given incentives. Each participant was given several self-assessment forms on their attitudes toward divorce, past romantic relationships, levels of bonds with father and mother, and perceptions toward inter-parental conflicts. Fifty-five students from divorced households and one hundred and twenty students from always-married households were the subject of this study.

As a result, findings revealed that those from divorced households tended to have a significantly fewer number of romantic relationships as compared to young adults from always-married families. This was contradictory to the hypotheses. The other conclusion drawn from the study showed that young adults from divorced households stated that their lack of investment was a reason that ended the romantic relationships, which supported the hypothesis.

There were limitations to this study. Kaplan acknowledged that the group of students from a divorced background only had fifty-four participants, which was not a large sample. In addition, because this was a voluntary and convenient sample, all participants were college students thus could not represent the population. Lastly, the identification that categorized the subjects of the study was binary (either always-married or divorced), which could interfere with the results. Kaplan pointed out that further research could be conducted with a wider range of parental marital status such as always-married, divorced, always together but not married, and never married and no longer together [6]. Also, noticeably all other hypotheses were not supported by the study but are valuable and related points on the effects of parental marital status on young adult romantic relationships. Therefore, it is suggested that each hypothesis by itself should be tested again with a more representative sample so that it provides a better and clearer image of how and to what extent each hypothesis relates to the topic of young adult romantic relationships.

Nonetheless, the study underscored the difference between young adults from always-married families and young adults from divorced families and that connection contributed to psychology as well, as it explained the reasons behind certain behaviors in young adults when they face a romantic relationship. Finally, this research deepened the current understanding of some behaviors of young adults in romantic relationships. Therefore, with an increasing amount of research put into it, this topic could be used

potentially to help young adults to have a better experience in their romantic relationships.

3 Effects of parental neglect on Individual's Future Romantic Relationships

Another type of negative family atmosphere that has a profound impact on the child is negligence. Childhood parental neglect refers to "the failure of the parent or caretaker who is responsible for the child to provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care or supervision to the extent that their well-being and/or safety is threatened" [7]. Emotional abuse and childhood neglect had shown an immense impact as they could lead to long-term depression, anxiety, lack of confidence, and mental disorders [8]. Because of emotional abuse and negligence, individuals may struggle with having a healthy relationship in adulthood. More so, if these problems are not well addressed through psychological, physical, or other types of healings, they may stay traumatic to the abused for lifetimes and influence their ability to work, interact with others, and form new relationships. In some cases, the abuse one receives continues on to the next generation and constructs an abuse cycle that simply increases the number of victims [1]. Studies from researchers like Dodge Reyome (2010) suggested that "victims of childhood emotional abuse experience more difficulty and dissatisfaction in their adult intimate relationships" [9].

To further examine the relationship between parental emotional abuse and neglect and young adults' intimate relationships when they grow up, Majumdar et al. (2017) conducted a study that sent self-report questionnaires to all the participants. All of the 275 were told to rate on a 5-point scale, from the on 24 items including questions on the child's developmental needs, fear of intimacy, severity of depression, and others [10].

The result confirmed many existing hypotheses. First of all, the scores of childhoods parental emotional abuse and those of childhood parental neglect had a positive correlation. Next, emotional abuse correlated with fear of intimacy and depressive symptoms. This result agreed with an earlier finding by Feeney & Noller (1990), which showed that the individuals who had received an abusive experience tend to fear and avoid intimacy in their relationships as young adults [11]. A possible explanation for this correlation was that in interpersonal relationships, the feelings of anxiety and fear were provoked from maltreatments in past childhood experiences. In addition to the findings from this study, the researchers also concluded that those who experienced parental neglect and emotional abuse also have a higher likelihood of having depression and suicidal actions.

The results of this study provided a clear picture of an enormous impact of parental emotional abuse and neglect on the children's romantic relationships. However, there are aspects of the study that can be improved. In this study, questionnaires completed by the individuals themselves were used as the only factor to determine the correlation between emotional abuse and negligence. In the future, it will be more desirable if the research team reaches out to the participants' parents, friends, or teachers, as it can

provide more perspectives and better support the results. More importantly, if the questions were phrased in a way of more depth with quantitative measures, it could be of greater benefit. For example, the research might want to include questions like the amount of time the parents spend with their child and create a scale that sets the low boundary of how much time spent would be defined as negligence instead of using self-report emotional perceptions toward parents' neglect.

4   Effects of Lacking Parental Approval on Individual's Future Romantic Relationships

The third type of parental abusive behavior discussed in the paper is a lack of approval. It was already established that receiving support from others would have an effect on an individual's relationship (e.g., Cox, Wexler, Rusbult, & Gaines, 1997) [12]. In addition, Sprecher & Felmlee (2000) had also concluded that if that support comes from parents, the quality and stability of the child's relationship would also be positively affected [13]. With these study results, the social capital theory was introduced as the concept of the network that connects people together being a vital social resource, and the usefulness of this resource depends on the strength of the ties in various situations [14].

The study conducted by Kyung-Hee Lee and others utilized this theory to examine the ways of different social ties that may influence romantic relationships. They conceptualized that the relationship with one's own parents is seen as a strong tie whereas the relationship with one's partner's parents is a weak tie [14]. The strengths of the ties are decided by the "combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and their reciprocal services which characterize the tie" [15]. The goals of this study included determining whether the approval from the strong tie affects the relationship differently than approval from the weak tie and how the parents' approval predicts the quality of the relationship.

To investigate parental approval, it was first important to establish what it means to receive parental approval. By approving their children's relationships, parents accept the partner to enter the family. After becoming a member of the family, the child's romantic partner thus has access to the family's social resources. Whether the approval comes from the family of origin or one's partner's family will be important, so two hypotheses were set forth in the study. As reasoned in earlier theories on weak ties and strong ties, the first hypothesis stated that approval from one's own parents would better predict the stability of the relationship. Secondly, the researchers hypothesized that each partner's relationship distress would be more strongly predicted by that person's perception of approval from his or her own parents, as compared to one's partner's [14].

In the study, 194 college students were recruited and asked to participate in several data-collection sessions. During these sessions, participants sat across from their partners (a step that aimed to reduce response bias) and completed a survey that addressed the background of their relationship. The survey asked for ratings on a five-point scale with questions such as the extent to which they think each of their parents and their partners' parents approved of their dating relationship and the negative aspects of the

relationship including disillusionment, uncertainty and perception of partner's negative behaviors [14].

In the results, the female's relationship distress was predicted by her and her partner's perceptions of the female's own parents. The less perceived approval from the parents, the more relationship distress experienced by the female. In addition, the female's perception toward the male's parents' approval did not predict the female's level of distress in the relationship. This supported an early theory that relationship ties with one's own parents and the partner's parents. Both of the conclusions supported previous theories and hypotheses, as one's partner's parents form a weaker tie with the individual thus was less likely to influence the couple's relationship experience [14].

The research was successful in the following aspects. In previous research, studies often examined the approval from only one set of parents in romantic relationships. By examining approval single-sidedly, those studies failed to consider the differences that may result from various levels of influence on the individual's perception due to whichever side the parents are on. In this study, however, it looked at approval from both the partner's and the individual's parents. Not only does it provide a more comprehensive view of the relationships, but it also helps to establish that the tie with one's own parents is stronger than that with the partner's parents.

5   Conclusion

With the established studies, it can be concluded that each type of negative family atmosphere that sometimes include abusive behaviors (divorce, neglect, and lack of parental approval) all have a high likelihood of resulting in pessimistic perceptions or behaviors in the child's romantic relationships. Such influences include, but are not limited to, lack of investment, exposure to less intimate partners than others, fear, depression, and avoidance in relationships.

There is one thing to note regarding the research in child abuse. Because many studies examine trauma from early childhood, they tend to rely on participants' memories. Whether consciously or unconsciously, there is memory bias that is likely to affect the study results. In order to mitigate that effect, researchers try to ask quantitative questions instead of qualitative ones involving emotions. Moreover, some may even try to contact the participant's family members and friends to have a better view of his/her current situation. In addition, some studies may be longitudinal depending on the observed period and the amount of information needed. All of these considerations combined take time and some may increase expenses, so there is a limited number of studies found related to the topic of interest.

From the current studies that studied related factors that may influence an individual, it is possible to lose the ability to maintain a healthy relationship, thus continuing the abuse cycle by targeting his/her partner or child.

There are theoretical solutions to break the abuse cycle. The abused must learn to work through the emotions and thoughts that formed as a result of part experiences and move on to learn healthy ways to express themselves and relate to others. These individuals should also try to maintain a support system that helps them to walk away from

the trauma and start a new life [7]. Nonetheless, it is recommended that researchers take a step forward and examine how to break the abuse cycle. For example, a variety of traditional therapeutic ways that treat abusive behaviors and traumas can be tested in a controlled setting, with dependent variables such as the amount of time the abusive behavior is observed to see whether the method has an effect. Of course, there are more ways to determine the most effective methods to treat such behavior, but it is on the researchers to reach a conclusion.

Research that studies childhood abuses is crucial for understanding the reasons behind various behaviors in relationships despite personality differences. While it is true that there are social, environmental, and cultural factors that may also contribute to these behaviors, on the individual level, the way a person is treated by his/her parents remains a significant element to the way that person will behave in future situations.

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