

The relationship between early childhood trauma, personality and affect regulation: A study in primiparous parents

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1. INTRODUCTION

- Early childhood trauma has been associated with a wide range of psychiatric and (functional) somatic conditions (e.g., Luyten, Vliegen, Van Houdenhove, & Blatt, 2008)
- However, more research is needed about psychodynamic factors associated with early childhood trauma (Luyten et al., 2008)
- From a psychodynamic perspective, early childhood trauma may affect personality development (Luyten, Corveleyn, & Blatt, 2005) and affect regulation capacities (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002)

2. AIM OF THE STUDY

- The study is part of a larger research project, i.e. The Leuven Parent-Child Study
- The current study aimed at examining cross-sectional relationships between early childhood trauma, maladaptive personality dimensions and affect regulation capacities

3. METHOD

3.1 Participants

- Participants were 280 parents (couples) having a first child between the age 8-12 months
- The mean age of the sample was 30.1 years (S.D. = 3.98)

3.2 Assessment

- Early childhood trauma was assessed with the *Childhood Trauma Questionnaire* (CTQ; Bernstein et al., 2003)
- Maladaptive personality dimensions (i.e. self-critical perfectionism and interpersonal dependency) were measured with the *Depressive Experiences Questionnaire* (DEQ; Blatt, D'Afflitti, & Quinlan, 1976)
- Affect regulation was assessed with the *Toronto Alexithymia Scale* (TAS-20; Bagby, Parker, & Taylor, 1994) and the *Positive and Negative Affect Schedule* (PANAS; Watson & Clark, 1994)

4. RESULTS

4.1. Regression analyses

After controlling for demographic characteristics:

- Results showed a significant and positive relationship between early childhood trauma and self-critical perfectionism ($\beta = .311, p=.001$), but not interpersonal dependency ($\beta = -.100, ns$)
- Early childhood trauma showed a significant and positive relationship with the alexithymia dimensions difficulty identifying feelings (DIF) ($\beta = .216, p<.05$) and difficulty describing feelings (DDF) ($\beta = .247, p<.05$)
- Early childhood trauma was significantly and negatively associated with positive affect ($\beta = -.211, p<.05$), but was unrelated to negative affect ($\beta = .025, ns$)
- In particular emotional neglect as measured with the CTQ was associated with self-critical perfectionism, alexithymia dimensions and lower levels of positive affect

4.2. Mediation analysis

According to the Barron and Kenny (1986) criteria, results supported a model in which self-critical perfectionism (SC) completely mediated the observed relationship between early childhood trauma (ECT) and maladaptive affect regulation (MAR)

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|--|---|
| ECT \rightarrow SC: $\beta = .311, p=.001$ (a) | ECT \rightarrow SC: $\beta = .311, p=.001$ (a) |
| SC \rightarrow MAR (DIF+DDF): $\beta = .502, p<.001$ (b) | SC \rightarrow MAR (PANAS-P): $\beta = -.435, p<.001$ (b) |
| ECT \rightarrow MAR: $\beta = .106, ns$ (c') | ECT \rightarrow MAR: $\beta = -.068, ns$ (c') |

5. CONCLUSIONS

- Findings of this study suggest that early childhood trauma may give rise to higher levels of self-critical perfectionism, which, in turn, may be associated with maladaptive affect regulation
- These findings are consistent with the psychoanalytic assumption that early childhood trauma is associated with self-criticism, i.e. a defensive attempt to compensate feelings of inferiority and worthlessness by developing an achievement-oriented personality style characterized by a strong focus on cognition (Luyten et al., 2005)
- Yet, further research should investigate longitudinal relationships between early childhood trauma, self-critical perfectionism and impaired affect regulation