CHILDHOOD MALTREATMENT AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP COMMUNICATION PATTERNS: A DYADIC DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH

by

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(Under the Direction of Anne Shaffer)

ABSTRACT

The current study aims to examine the relation between child emotional maltreatment and current romantic relationship conflict communication patterns. Data were collected from 58 heterosexual undergraduate couples (*M* age = 20.06 years, total *n* = 122). Childhood emotional abuse was measured using the CTQ (Bernstein & Fink, 1998). Conflict communication was assessed using the constructive communication and demand/withdraw scales of the CPQ (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984) as well as observational scores of global demand/withdraw (MLSPC, 2005). Data analysis will utilize the Actor Partner Interdependence Model (Kenny, Kashy, and Cook, 2006) to test for actor and partner effects of child emotional maltreatment on reported levels of couple demand/withdraw and constructive communication as well as observed couple demand/withdraw.

INDEX WORDS: Emotional Maltreatment, Couple Communication, Dyadic Data Analysis

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The study of emotional maltreatment has long played second fiddle to research on physical and sexual abuse, and researchers have only recently begun to understand of the outcomes of emotional maltreatment and the processes through with these outcomes become manifest. Specifically, there is great interest in studying the outcomes of emotional maltreatment that take place in late adolescence and young adulthood. Although this research is still in its infancy, the evidence suggests the impact of emotional maltreatment reaches far past the boundaries of childhood. One particularly important domain in which these survivors often experience deficits is intimate relationship functioning. Research suggests that survivors are more likely to perpetrate violence against, or be victimized by, their romantic partners than are individuals who did not have a history of emotional abuse (e.g., Wekerle et al., 2009). Men and women with histories of emotional maltreatment also report less satisfaction, intimacy, marital trust, and assertiveness than those who did not report such histories (DiLillo, Lewis, & Di Loreto-Colgan, 2007; DiLillo, Peugh, Walsh, Panuzio, & Trask, 2009; Paradis & Boucher; Riggs & Kaminski, 2010).

The current study aims to use dyadic data analysis techniques to examine the impact of the maltreatment history of both members of an intimate relationship. A review of the literature concerning emotional maltreatment and its documented outcomes and correlates in young adulthood and late adolescence is presented first. Then, the specific outcomes of emotional maltreatment in intimate relationships are reviewed, emphasizing the importance of this domain for young adults and adolescents.

Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood

For a majority of the population, romantic endeavors begin during adolescence and continue to be pursued throughout the lifetime. The romantic relationships of interest in the current study are those which occur during emerging adulthood--the late teens through the early twenties (Arnett, 1998; Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood constitutes the period when identity formation, begun in adolescence, is explored more deeply and with fewer restrictions or expectations imposed upon them by society. By the conclusion of emerging adulthood, around the age of 30, many individuals will have made more enduring relationship decisions, including having made a lifetime commitment to a partner (Arnett, 2000). However, research has shown that romantic relationship qualities measured as early as age 13 years predict romantic outcomes in young adulthood (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). Thus, beginning in early adolescence, there appears to be continuity in individuals' romantic relationship trajectories.

Among emerging adults, adaptive romantic relationships have been associated with a number of positive indices including identity formation, social support, and healthy attachment behaviors (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Markiewicz, Lawford, Doyle, & Haggart, 2006; Barry, Madsen, Nelson, Carroll, Badger, 2009). However, not all romantic encounters lead to positive results. Cross-national research has documented alarmingly high rates of physical violence and sexual coercion victimization and perpetration among undergraduate dating couples (Straus, Habmy, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996; Straus, 2004; Straus & Savage, 2005). Furthermore, maladaptive behaviors within emerging adult romantic relationships have been linked to the experience of depression as well as suicidal ideation (Chan, Straus, Brownridge, Tiwari, & Leung, 2008; Marchand-Reilly, 2009; Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004).

Emotional Maltreatment: Definitions and Outcomes

Emotional and psychological maltreatment are some of the most common forms of childhood abuse (Reyome, 2010). Despite this fact, emotional maltreatment is understudied compared to physical

and sexual abuse. Likely reasons for this discrepancy include the nebulous nature of emotional maltreatment. Even those who research emotional maltreatment do not agree on exactly how the construct ought to be defined. The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) has provide a formal definition of psychological maltreatment as "a repeated pattern of caregiver behavior or extreme incident(s) that convey to children that they are worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or of value only in meeting another's needs" (APSAC, 1995). Researchers generally agree emotional maltreatment encompasses acts of commission (emotional abuse) and omission (emotional neglect) by a parent or guardian that communicate to a child that they are unloved or worthless. As the APSAC definition specifies, these acts must be persistent. That is, a discrete incident (e.g., telling a child they are stupid during an argument) would not constitute emotional maltreatment by most standards. As their names imply, emotional abuse involves active instances of endangering a child's emotional welfare while emotional neglect involves failing to provide appropriate emotional environments for a child (e.g., a sense that one is loved, worthwhile, and safe).

One difficulty researchers encounter in the study of emotional maltreatment is that it commonly co-occurs with other forms of maltreatment (i.e., physical and sexual abuse) and is associated with a greater number of maltreatment reports overall (Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009). This fact makes it difficult to find cases of emotional maltreatment that occur in the absence of other form of abuse. However, this high comorbidity is also telling. Research has shown that both physical and sexual abuse, which co-occur with emotional maltreatment, are associated with a variety of negative outcomes in adulthood and adolescence. One study has shown that substantiated cases of childhood sexual and physical abuse as well as neglect predicted more cohabitation, walking out, and divorce than rates found among non-abused men and women. Abused women were also less likely to hold a favorable view of their partners and were less likely to be sexually faithful (Colman & Widom, 2004). Empirical evidence also suggests that retrospective reports childhood maltreatment (i.e., physical, sexual, and emotional) is

associated with adolescent dating violence. These effects were mediated by trauma symptoms and were found among both boys and girls (Wolfe, Wekerle, Scott, Straatman, & Grasley, 2004). Another study has shown that maltreatment reports (i.e., physical abuse, domestic abuse, and sexual abuse) were associated with adolescent dating violence. Patterns of result differed by gender with maltreatment associated with violence perpetration among boys and victimization among girls and boys (Wekerle & Wolfe 1998). Another study found that, among undergraduate students in 17 different countries, retrospective reports of childhood neglect were associated with more frequent endorsement of perpetrating violence against a romantic partner (Straus & Savage, 2005). Finally, the experience of childhood traumas, all of a physical nature, was associated with increased marital divorce and separation as well as lower levels of satisfaction (Whisman, 2006).

Emotional maltreatment and romantic relationship outcomes.

Despite the difficulties posed by definitional concerns and high rates of comorbidity, researchers have begun to examine the unique effects of emotional maltreatment on intimate relationships. Many of these studies have used violence as their primary outcome variable. In a self-report study of college undergraduates, individuals' retrospective reports of child psychological abuse were significantly associated with both violence victimization and perpetration within dating relationships even after controlling for variance explained by gender, age, income, parental substance use, and childhood sexual abuse (Crawford & Wright, 2007). In a study of over 1,000 undergraduate men and women, retrospective reports of emotional abuse predicted romantic violence perpetration and victimization over and above the variance explained by physical and sexual abuse and exposure to domestic violence. These effects were partially mediated by emotion dysregulation (Berzenski & Yates, 2010). Wekerle and colleagues (2009) found similar patterns of results among youth involved in Child Protective Services. Among these at-risk young men and women, emotional abuse predicted dating violence above and beyond variance explained by physical and sexual abuse as well as neglect. Furthermore, PTSD

symptomatology mediated the association between emotional abuse and dating violence perpetration among males and emotional abuse and dating violence victimization among females. Research has demonstrated a consistent association between emotional maltreatment and relational violence and researchers have begun to identify several pathways through which these associations are mediated.

Empirical work has also linked emotional abuse to a broader range of romantic relationship outcomes. In a study of heterosexual, undergraduate couples, DiLillo and colleagues (2007) found that child maltreatment was related to more self-reported relationship difficulties (e.g., intimacy, sexual functioning) among women but not among men. Of note, this particular study did not distinguish between maltreatment type (i.e., physical, sexual, emotional, or neglect). When DiLillo and colleagues conducted a study (2009) of heterosexual adult spouses, they did analyze maltreatment types separately and found opposite gender patterns. Spouses were assessed at three times during a two year period. Psychological abuse was related to lower rates of marital satisfaction among men at time one, but not among women. For husbands and wives, psychological maltreatment (both abuse and neglect) was more strongly associated with decreased marital trust than other forms of maltreatment. Psychological abuse was also associated with continued decreases in men's self-reported marital satisfaction over time. Yet another study found emotional abuse was negatively related to the self-reported dyadic adjustment of undergraduates involved in romantic relationships (Riggs & Kaminski, 2010). In a study of adult romantic relationships, retrospective reports of emotional abuse were associated with greater levels of domineeringness in women while emotional neglect was related to non-assertiveness in both women and men (Paradis & Boucher, 2010).

Research on romantic functioning outcomes suggest that emotional maltreatment is associated higher rates of violence, lower rates of self-reported satisfaction, and maladaptive communication among adult romantic partners. These relations have been demonstrated to varying degrees among adolescent dating relationships, adult dating relationships, and adult marriages. There has been

disagreement between studies regarding the effects of gender on these associations in heterosexual relationships.

Communication in Romantic Couples

Several communication patterns that romantic dyads engage in have been identified as both maladaptive and adaptive as they relate to other relationship indexes. Positive communication skills between romantic partners have been associated with improved health outcomes (Guyll, Cutrona, Burzette, & Russell, 2010), higher levels of openness and agreeableness (Heaven, Smith, Prabhakar, Abraham, & Mete, 2006), and increased relationship satisfaction and stability (Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999). Conversely, negative conflict communication patterns have been linked to maladaptive correlates including social anxiety, neuroticism, and low self-esteem (Cuming & Rapee, 2010; Heaven et al., 2006; Rill, Baiocchi, Hopper, Denker, & Olson, 2009).

One pattern of negative conflict communication that has been frequently studied is demand/withdraw. Demand/withdraw is characterized by one partner (the demander) "pressuring the other for change through emotional demands, criticism, and complaints while the other retreats through withdrawal, defensiveness, and passive inaction" (Christensen & Heavey, 1990, p. 73). Demand/withdraw has been associated with decreased relationship satisfaction in married women (Heavey, Christensen, Malamuth, 1995) fewer positive behaviors (e.g., compromise) in dating couples (Vogel, Wester, & Heesacker, 1999), less satisfaction with conflict discussion outcomes (McGinn, McFarland, & Christensen, 2009), and feelings of being less validated in married couples (Weger, 2005).

Another study of marital partners showed that husbands who perpetrated interpersonal physical violence against their wives were observed to engage in both higher demand and higher withdraw behavior than husbands who were non-perpetrators. That is, perpetrating husbands used demanding behavior to try to illicit change in their wives' behaviors but would withdraw when their wives made a request for change (Berns, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1999a; Berns, Jacobson & Gottman,

1999b). Similar results have been found among samples that include unmarried men. Using self-reports, Feldman and Ridley (2000) found that men who endorsed being violent with a romantic partner were also more likely to report bilateral verbal aggression, more male demand/ female withdraw behavior, and less mutual problem-solving.

Much of the extant research on conflict communication patterns has been conducted with married adults. Less is known about what these communication patterns look like or mean for younger adults' dating relationships. In one study that investigated this population, results were similar to those found in married couples. Negative communication skills, similar to those that characterize demand/withdraw (e.g. defensiveness and withdrawing), were significantly associated with higher rates of psychological and physical aggression (Cornelius, Shorey, & Beebe, 2010). In another study of undergraduate dating couples, self-disclosure and compromise in conflict communication were related to secure relationship attachment and satisfaction. These attributes also predicted the couple still being together six months later (Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999).

Overall, evidence suggests that healthy young adult romantic relationships are characterized by positive conflict communication. Communication characterized by a sense of affiliation, self-disclosure, and compromise is associated with greater relationship satisfaction and stability whereas communication marked by dominance, aggression, and withholding is associated with less satisfaction and increased violence in romantic relationships.

Rill and colleagues (2009) have noted that extensive research has been conducted on the outcomes and correlates of negative communication in romantic couples. They propose that the emphasis should now shift toward understanding potential causes of these negative communication patterns. The current study proposes past emotional maltreatment as a potential contributor to these communication patterns. Comparing the definition of demand/withdraw with the description of psychological maltreatment provided by the APSAC, similarities between the two constructs become

apparent. There are both empirical and theoretical reasons to believe that emotional maltreatment and communication characterized by demand/withdraw are linked. Early on, parents identified as neglecting and maltreating display poorer quality communication with their young children and have difficulty labeling and identifying their infants' emotions (Milot, St-Laurent, Ethier, & Provost, 2010; Wilson, Norris, Shi, & Rack, 2010). Research has shown that couples who engage in negative conflict communication patterns are more likely to also endorse instances of psychological and physical aggression, although the association was stronger for psychological aggression (Cornelius et al., 2010). It is possible that what begins as negativistic communication styles may then escalate toward more psychologically and even physically abusive acts (Cornelius et al., 2010). That is, maladaptive communication patterns in intimate relationships may be one factor involved in the intergenerational cycle of abuse.

Dyadic Data Analysis and the Influence of Partners' Developmental Histories

While existing studies demonstrate the deleterious outcomes of emotional maltreatment on individual's romantic outcomes, little research has examined how a partner's history of emotional maltreatment may impact this trajectory. Within intimate relationships, members' variable scores are often nonindependent—members of the same dyad are more similar than are members of different dyads. If this nonindependence is ignored, tests of statistical significance are likely biased (Kenny, Cashy, & Cook, 2006). For example, the effect of stress on couple satisfaction could be experimentally tested by assigning 20 couples to a high stress condition and 20 couples to a low stress condition. There are a total of 40 individuals within each condition. However, satisfaction is likely nonindependent (i.e., highly correlated within dyads). If the individual is treated as the unit of analysis, a large portion of the outcome variable is redundant. The statistical result will be variance that is underestimated, inferential statistics that are overestimated, and *p* values that are too small (Kenny et al., 2006). Conversely, dyadic data analysis accounts for this nonindependence and also informs researchers as to how an individual's

independent variable affects both their own outcome (i.e., actor effect) and their partner's outcome (i.e., partner effect). Studies have shown that, within intimate relationships, partner attributes can dramatically impact an individual's own reports of relationship satisfaction, irritation with their partner, and their own drinking behavior (Mushquach et al., 2011; Riggs, Cusimano, & Benson, 2011; Salvatore, I-Chun Kuo, Steele, Simpson, & Collins, 2011; Theiss & Knobloch, 2009). These same partner effects have yet to be studied among survivors of childhood emotional maltreatment.

While traditional, individual-centered research has provided a wealth of information regarding the interpersonal outcomes of childhood maltreatment, such research is limited in its ability to account for how both partners' histories relate to current relationship functioning. In comparison to individual-centered research, dyadic data analysis is well-suited to addressing relational questions (Simpson, 2006). Relational, or dyadic, data analysis differs from individual-centered analysis in that it treats the dyad rather than the individual as the unit of analysis. The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) is one such dyadic data analysis method. APIM accounts for both "actor" and "partner" effects on an individual's outcome variable. Actor effects refer to the variance in a given outcome explained by an individual's own independent variable score controlling for their partner's independent variable score. Partner effects refer to the effect an individual's predictor variable score has on their partner's outcome score controlling for the actor's predictor variable score. Dyadic data analysis analyzes both actor and partner effects while simultaneously accounting for interdependence between dyad members. Interdependence indicates that members of a dyad are likely to be more similar or more different among key variables than are two people who are not members of the same dyad (Kenny et al., 2006).

Partner effects are particularly compelling given existing literature regarding assortative mating. Research has demonstrated that married couples tend to be more similar than would be expected by chance on a wide range of variables including attitudes, religiosity, and values (Luo & Klohnen, 2005). Kenny and colleagues (2006) refer to this form of nonindependence that precedes a dyad formation as

compositional effect. It is possible that couples may also be more similar in terms of maltreatment history, although research is lacking in this area. If maltreated men and women are more likely to date and marry other maltreated individuals, partner effects would pose an additional risk on top of the maladaptive outcomes of maltreatment documented in individual-centered research. Although the authors are not aware of any studies examining assortative mating among maltreated individuals, one study has examined past perceptions of parenting (Lustenberger et al., 2008). In this study assessing retrospective reports of parenting experienced in childhood, couple similarity was found for the domain of parenting care received from a same-sex parent. That is, women who reported warm and affectionate parenting from their mothers were more likely to be married to men who reported warm and affectionate parenting from their fathers. This similarity effect held even after controlling for similarity effects found in levels of psychopathology and demographic variables. The authors found that similarity in recalled parenting care predicted concurrent reports of marital adjustment such that couples who both reported high levels of parenting care had the highest adjustment scores, mismatched couples (one member reported high levels of care and the other member reported low levels of care) had intermediate levels of husband and wife reported adjustment, and couples with both members reporting low levels of care had the lowest rates of husband and wife reported adjustment.

Researchers have taken advantage of the development of APIM to examine the contribution of actor and partner effects across a wide range of variables among individuals in a romantic relationship. In one study of undergraduate couples conducted by Theiss and Knobloch (2009), both actor characteristics as well as partner characteristics predicted an individual's rating of irritation with their partner. Specifically, actor effects were found for self ratings of uncertainty about the relationship as well as self ratings of how much one perceives their partner as interfering with goal attainment. Partner effects were found for partners' uncertainty about the relationship, severity of irritations with the actor, and reported directness of communication. Thus, an individual's own rating of how irritating they find

their partner was significantly affected by how irritated their partner was with them as well as how direct their partner was with them about his or her irritations (Theiss & Knobloch, 2009). In another longitudinal study conducted over a period of approximately one month, time one drinking behaviors evidenced both actor and partner effects on time two drinking (Mushquash et al., 2011). For both men and women, their own drinking behavior at time two was significantly predicted by both their own and their partners' drinking behavior reported at time one. In another study of young adults, partner characteristics but not actor characteristics predicted actor satisfaction (Salvatore et al., 2011). Individuals whose partners demonstrated better conflict recovery abilities (i.e., ability to move past conflict and re-focus on a pleasant interaction) rated themselves as more satisfied than individuals with partners who demonstrated poorer conflict recovery. Individuals' own conflict recovery scores were not related to their own reports of satisfaction. Furthermore, actors with secure attachment histories were more likely to have partners who were effective at conflict recovery. Finally, actors with a history of insecure attachment who had partners with better conflict recovery ability were more likely to still be in the same relationship two years later than were insecurely attached actors who had partners with poorer conflict recovery abilities. Collectively, studies utilizing APIM suggest that interpersonal factors (i.e., partner effects) are often just as impactful, and sometimes more so, as intrapersonal variables on an individual's report of relationship functioning.

To date, there is one existing study that utilizes APIM to specifically examine the association between childhood emotional maltreatment and romantic relationship functioning. In this study, heterosexual undergraduate couples completed a retrospective measure of childhood emotional maltreatment and concurrent measures of adult romantic relationship attachment and dyadic adjustment (Riggs et al., 2011). Results indicated that both attachment avoidance and anxiety mediated the relation between an individual's (i.e., the actor's) own emotional abuse history and that same individual's current report of dyadic adjustment (i.e., significant actor effects). Furthermore, partners'

attachment anxiety mediated the relationship between the partner's emotional maltreatment history and the actor's dyadic adjustment score (i.e., significant partner effect). The dyadic adjustment outcome variable used was a composite of various indices of general functioning including cohesion, agreement/disagreement, and satisfaction. The current study will build upon these findings by examining the more specific dyadic outcome of constructive communication and demand/withdraw.

Measurement modality is another important factor when answering relational questions. Dyadic data analysis requires that data be collected from both members of the dyad. However, couples may not always be insightful or willing to disclose their true feelings about their communication patterns. Observational report offers data from someone not intimately involved in the day-to-day reality of the relationship. However, most studies of young adult relational communication rely on single reporter or observational analysis without self-report (e.g., Cordova, Jacobson, Gottman, Rushe, & Cox, 1993; Feldman & Ridley, 2000; Straus & Savage, 2005). Past research has rarely used multiple reporters combined with observations (see Berns et al., 1999a for exception). The current study will address these limitations by using self and partner reports of the same variables as well as observations collected by a third party.

Study Aims

The current study aimed to examine the relations between retrospective reports of childhood emotional maltreatment and current communication patterns in romantic dyads among heterosexual undergraduate couples. Data collection included outcome measures of demand/withdraw from both self and partner report as well as observations of couple communication coded by research staff. At the level of self and partner reports, each dyad member reported their impression of the overall amount of demand/withdraw in their relationship as well as their impression of their own demandingness and their partner's demandingness. Thus self-reports of demand/withdraw yielded three subscales: total

demand/withdraw, self demand/partner withdraw, and partner demand/self withdraw. Self and partner report of constructive communication were also collected.

Based upon extant research, it was expected that there would be statistically significant actor effects (i.e., an individual's history of emotional maltreatment would relate significantly to their reports of conflict communication) such that individuals who reported more childhood emotional maltreatment would report higher rates of total demand/withdraw and lower rates of constructive communication. Significant partner effects were also expected such that having a partner with an emotional maltreatment history would also relate to higher rates of self-reported total demand/withdraw and lower rates of constructive communication. Given past research documenting significant relations between emotional maltreatment and various romantic relationship outcomes among both men and women, these relations were expected to hold for both genders. No specific hypotheses regarding the association between emotional maltreatment and self demand/partner withdraw and partner demand/self withdraw were given due to a lack of extant research on communication outcomes of childhood abuse. Lastly, emotional maltreatment was expected to be associated with higher observed levels of demand/withdraw within the couple as well as lower levels of observed conflict resolution. Given that it was possible that couples in which at least one member has experienced higher levels of emotional maltreatment would show a general avoidance of discussing meaningful conflict, a measure of conflict avoidance was also assessed.

CHAPTER 2

Method

Procedure

The current study utilizes data collected over two phases. Procedures for each phase were approved by the university Institutional Review Board.

Phase I. Participants were recruited through the Department of Psychology's Research Participant (RP) Pool and through flyers placed around campus. All participants had to be 18 years of age or older and currently enrolled as an undergraduate student to be eligible to participate in Phase I of the study. Students enrolled in an introductory psychology course register in the RP as part of a mandatory class assignment. As reimbursement for their time, these participants received research credit toward their class. In the event that a student does not wish to complete research credit, they may opt to write summaries of scientific articles. Those who were recruited through campus flyers were entered in a raffle to win a $50 gift card. Participants received a link to the online web site, Survey Monkey, through an email along with instructions on how to proceed. Each link was unique to the participant and could only be accessed once. Participants were invited to participate on their personal computers but were allowed access to the lab computers. At the beginning of the survey, an electronic consent form was presented that each participant had to acknowledge reading before proceeding. Participants entered a four digit PIN number assigned to them by the researcher. This PIN number was used in subsequent Phases of the study in order to consolidate index participants' information. Every question had the response option of "prefer not to answer." The survey took approximately 2 hours to complete and consisted of questionnaires pertaining to the participants' past and, if applicable, current romantic relationships, family experiences growing up, current risk taking behaviors, and relevant demographic

information. After exiting the program, the data was encrypted and participants were not able to re-access their responses. Data was imported to the statistical program PASW 18.0 to be analyzed. All participants who endorsed being in a current romantic relationship were invited to complete phase II of the study by coming into the lab with their partner.

Phase II. Interested participants who endorsed being in an exclusive romantic relationship came to the lab with their partners for a two and a half hour assessment. Independent *t*-tests revealed no significant differences in terms of gender, age, romantic relationship duration, or retrospective reports of emotional maltreatment between phase I participants who chose to come in for phase II versus those who did not. All partners had to be at least 18 years of age in order to participate. Participants and their partners completed a 15 minute video taped conflict discussion in which dyads were instructed to discuss and come to a solution or compromise on a mutually agreed upon topic of conflict. Couples were presented with a list of common areas of disagreement that included intimacy, time spent together, goals, and communication. Both participants and their partners then independently filled out a battery of self-report measures. As reimbursement for their time, participants received either additional research credit hours or $20. All partners received $20 for their time.

Measures

Childhood maltreatment. The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire – Short Form (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1998) is a 28 item retrospective self-report measure of past abusive and neglectful experiences within the family of origin. Responses are given on a 5-point Likert scale and indicate the frequency of maltreatment, with values ranging from Never true (1) to Very often true (5). There are five subscales: physical abuse, physical neglect, emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and sexual abuse. The current study will utilize the emotional abuse and neglect subscales. An example of an emotional abuse item is, "People in my family called me things like 'stupid,' 'lazy,' or 'ugly.'" An example emotional neglect time is "I felt loved." All emotional neglect items are reverse scored. Internal reliability of the emotional

abuse subscale for the current sample was α = .73 for men and α = .75 for women. Internal reliability of the emotional neglect subscale was α = .96 for men and α = .95 for women.

Conflict communication. Conflict communication was measured in two modalities: self-report and independent observation.

Self-report. Participants' and partners' self-reports of conflict communication styles were collected with the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984). The CPQ is a 35 item self-report measure of couples' communication styles at three stages of conflict: (1) when the conflict arises, (2) during the discussion, and (3) after the discussion has concluded. Each item is asked twice, once for woman's behavior and once for man's behavior. For the current study, "woman" and "man" were replaced with "I" and "my partner." Responses are given on a 9-point Likert scale and indicate how likely participants view themselves and their partners as responding to conflict in a certain way. Values range from Very unlikely (1) to Very Likely (9). Scales used in the current study included total demand/withdraw, self demand/partner withdraw, partner demand/self withdraw, and mutual constructive communication. Total demand/withdraw is a composite of both self demand/ partner withdraw and partner demand/self withdraw questions and thus reflects the total amount of demand/withdraw endorsed. An example demand/withdraw statement is, "I try to start a discussion while my partner tries to avoid a discussion." Mutual constructive communication was calculated by summing five items measuring mutual discussion, expression, understanding, negotiation, and resolution of problems (e.g., "Both of us express our feelings to each other"). The internal reliability of the self demand/partner withdraw in the current sample was α = .69. Partner demand/self withdraw reliability was α = .63. The internal reliability of the total demand/withdraw scale was α = .68. Finally, the internal reliability of the constructive communication scale was α = .84.

Independent observation. Communication style was also measured via independent observation. The current study utilized coding schemes adapted from Christensen and Heavey's (1990)

conceptualization of demand/withdraw (MLSPC Conflict Strategy Scales, 2005). Mutual avoidance and conflict resolution were also coded.

Demand/withdraw is characterized as a conflict escalating style in which each partner plays a complementary role. One partner demands change through criticism, complaining, or using "ought" or "should" statements while the other partner avoids conflict either through active means (e.g., hostility, defensiveness, changing the subject) or passive means (e.g., retreating into themselves, refusing to respond). Each couple received a global score for demand/withdraw. The scores ranged from one to five with one indicating no evidence for demand/withdraw and five indicating that partners were entrenched in demand/withdraw.

The conflict resolution scale assesses the ability of the couple to work together to make decisions or resolve conflict in a manner that leads to mutual satisfaction. High conflict resolution scores indicate that a couple listened to one another, were open about their own feelings, and came to a mutually satisfying conclusion. Scores ranged from one to seven, with one indicating "No or very low satisfaction" and seven indicating "Very high satisfaction."

The mutual avoidance scale assesses the extent to "which both partners deflect, ignore, or withdraw from conflict" (MLSPC Conflict Strategy Scales, 2005). Scores range from one to five, with one indicating "No evidence of mutual avoidance" and five indicating "Extreme mutual avoidance."

Each couple was independently coded by at least two research assistants. Interrater reliability was calculated among 39% of couples (n = 24 couples) using intraclass correlation coefficients. Reliability for demand/withdraw was 0.87. Conflict resolution had a reliability coefficient of .69 and mutual avoidance was .60.

CHAPTER 3

Results

Planned Analyses

Data were analyzed in PASW 18. Preliminary data analysis yielded descriptive statistics (i.e., means and deviations) for our participants on all of our variables of interest. Next, bivariate correlations between all variables were conducted. Partial correlations were conducted controlling for actor and partner reports of emotional maltreatment in order to confirm statistical nonindependence among the outcome variables. Kenny and colleagues (2006) do not report formal cutoffs for determining nonindependence. Therefore, statistical significance was utilized to determine meaningful nonindependence. Data was analyzed using APIM procedures for distinguishable data with a mixed independent variable outlined by Kenny and colleagues. Data was entered in a pairwise data set in which each individual's data is entered once as the actor and once as the partner. Therefore, there were 116 rows of data for the 58 couples in the current sample. Next, we centered our predictor variables. Using mixed models procedures, APIM tested the relation between an individual's retrospective report of emotional maltreatment on both their own and their partner's reports of conflict communication. Gender was entered as a moderator. Given that we identified four outcome variables, (i.e., self-reported self demand/partner withdraw, self-reported partner demand/self withdraw, self-reported total demand/withdraw, self-reported constructive communication) and two predictor variables (i.e., emotional abuse and emotional neglect) eight APIM models were tested. See Figure 1 for a depiction of the APIM model tested.

Because couples received only one score for each of the observational measures, their association with emotional abuse and neglect was assessed via traditional hierarchical regression

techniques. Because there were two predictor variables (i.e., emotional abuse and emotional neglect) and two criterion variables (i.e., observed demand/withdraw and observed conflict communication) there were four regression models run with sex entered as a moderator in each.

Sample Characteristics

Participants were 58 heterosexual undergraduate romantic dyads (*N* = 116). Couples' relationship length ranged from one to 66 months (*M* = 18.04, *SD* = 15.76). A majority (*N* = 51) of the couples described themselves as dating, five were married or partnered, and one was engaged. One couple did not report this information. The average participant age was 20.96 years (*SD* = 2.26). The ethnic composition of the sample was 68.1% Caucasian, 14.7% Asian, 6.0% Hispanic, 6.0% mixed race, 3.4% African American, and 0.9% "other."

Data Preparation

The original sample included 62 romantic dyads. Of this group, one same-sex couple was dropped, one was dropped because their ages (46 and 43) excluded them from being considered young adults, and two other couples were dropped because the partners failed to complete the Childhood Maltreatment Questionnaire. This left a final analysis sample of 58 heterosexual romantic couples. Within this final sample, eight participants received incomplete copies of the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire. Another two participants did not complete the back side of the Communication Patterns Questionnaire. Following the recommendations put forth by Hawthorne and Elliot (2005), missing data were replaced using the mean of the items at the level of the individual for scales in which less than half the items were missing. The Physical abuse and Sexual abuse scales of the CTQ were missing more than half the items for these eight participants. Therefore, only the emotional abuse and emotional neglect scales were retained for analysis.

Preliminary Results

Bivariate correlations revealed that relationship length and marital status were not significantly associated with any of the criterion variables. Among women, race and age were positively and significantly associated with self-reported levels of total demand/withdraw ($r = .28$, $p < .05$) and observed conflict resolution ($r = .38$, $p <. 01$), respectively. Therefore, these variables were entered as covariates in all relevant analyses. To test if emotional abuse or emotional neglect were associated with couples' avoidance of meaningful conflict discussion, these variables were entered into a bivariate correlation matrix with observed mutual avoidance. No significant associations were found among men's reports of emotional maltreatment. However, among women, retrospective reports of emotional abuse were significantly related to higher levels of observed mutual avoidance during the conflict discussion. Therefore, observed mutual avoidance was also entered as a covariate in all relevant analyses. Descriptive information as well as results of *t* tests can be found in Table 1. Partial correlations controlling for actor and partner reports of emotional abuse and emotional neglect revealed that actor and partner self-reports of demand/withdraw (total, self, and partner) and constructive communication were significantly correlated, indicating statistical nonindependence among the criterion variables. The results of independent samples *t* tests revealed no significant difference between women and men on the variables of interest.

APIM Analysis

Using the MLM procedure for analyzing nonindependent, distinguishable dyads put forth by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006), eight APIM models were tested in PASW 18. Following the guidelines prescribed by Kenny and colleagues, all predictor variables (i.e., emotional abuse and emotional neglect) were centered on the sample mean. The data was structured in a pairwise dataset in which each individual's data was entered once as an actor and once as a partner. Eight APIM models were tested to analyze the association between emotional abuse and neglect with each of the four self-reported

communication criterion variables. In each of these models, sex was entered as a within-dyad variable and the interaction between sex and the predictor variables was included.

Table 2 summarizes the results of the APIM models. Models 1-3 tested the actor and partner effects of emotional abuse on each demand/withdraw scale. Model 4 tested the actor and partner effects of emotional abuse on constructive communication. Models 5-8 tested the actor and partner effects of emotional neglect on these same criterion variables. Models 1, 2, and 4 indicated significant partner effects of emotional abuse on conflict communication. Specifically, higher levels of partner-reported emotional abuse were related to higher levels of actor-reported total demand/withdraw and self demand/partner withdraw and lower levels of actor-reported constructive communication. Model 2, which tested the association between emotional abuse and reports of self demand/partner withdraw, indicated a significant interaction between emotional abuse and sex. A two-intercept APIM model was run to further test the difference between men and women. This analysis revealed significant actor effects for men (Estimate = .49, t = 2.71, p < .01) but not women (Estimate = .26, t = .98, p =.32) and significant partner effects for women (Estimate = .86, t = 3.82, p < .01) but not men (Estimate = .08, t = .38, p = .70). Model 3 revealed no significant main effects of the predictor variables in relation to actor-reported partner demand/self withdraw. However, there was significant interaction between sex and actor emotional abuse. Another two-intercept APIM model was run to probe this interaction. Significant actor effects were detected for men (Estimate = .46, t = 2.56, p < .05) but not for women (Estimate = -.09, t = -.51, p =.60).

These analyses were repeated with emotional neglect variables entered in place of emotional abuse. Neither actor nor partner effects were detected for any of the four self-reported conflict communication variables. Model 7 indicated significant main effect of sex on the criterion variable of partner demand/self withdraw. However, t tests did not indicate significant differences between men and women on this variable.

Hierarchical Regression Analyses

Because each couple received a single global score on observations of demand/withdraw and conflict resolution, their associations with the predictor variables were analyzed through linear regressions rather than through APIM. Four hierarchical regressions were run to test the association between emotional abuse and neglect with observed conflict resolution and observed demand/withdraw. Sex was entered in each model as a moderator to test for significant differences among men and women. Observed mutual avoidance was entered in all models containing emotional abuse as the predictor variable, and age was entered as a control variable in all models with observed conflict resolution as a criterion variable. These models are summarized in Tables 3. The emotional maltreatment variables and the control variables were not significantly associated with observed demand/withdraw. Both age and mutual avoidance were significantly associated with observed conflict resolution such that couples with older participants had higher conflict resolution scores ($\beta = 2.59$, $p < .05$) and couples with higher mutual avoidance scores had lower conflict resolution scores ($\beta = -2.84$, $p < .01$). Emotional abuse and emotional neglect were not significantly associated with observed conflict resolution.

Table 1

Correlations and Descriptives of Key Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Emotional abuse	**.01**	.51**	.00	.12	-.06	-.17	-.08	-.10
2. Emotional neglect	.53**	**.30***	.01	.09	.08	-.16	-.24	-.08
3. DW_Total	.21	.06	**.53****	.90**	.59**	-.54**	.30*	-.30*
4. DW_Self demand	.34**	.07	.77**	**.82****	.43**	-.53**	.31*	-.30*
5. DW_Partner demand	.32*	.13	.65**	.60**	**.72****	-.1	.09	-.22
6. Constructive comm	-.09	-.10	-.46**	-.41**	-.31*	**.53****	-.26	.32*
7. Observed DW	-.04	.01	.43**	.40**	.17	-.27*	**1.00**	-.52**
8. Observed Conflict res	-.05	.00	-.28*	-.25	-.29*	.22	-.52**	**1.00**
M (*SD*)								
Total	7.64 (2.99)	8.33 (3.26)	17.67 (8.89)	9.4 (5.44)	7.78 (4.21)	35.33 (7.15)	1.55 (0.95)	4.04 (1.50)
Women	7.71 (2.74)	8.18 (3.15)	16.67 (8.31)	9.55 (6.15)	7.36 (3.80)	35.69 (7.47)		
Men	7.57 (3.24)	8.50 (3.38)	18.67 (9.41)	9.24 (4.67)	8.21 (4.58)	34.97 (6.85)		
t tests	-0.24	0.56	0.23	0.03	0.26	-0.54		

Note. DW = Demand/withdraw. Correlations for women are depicted above the diagonal. Correlations for men are depicted below the diagonal. Correlations between male and female partners are depicted in bold along the diagonal.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2

Multilevel Models for Emotional Abuse

Predictor	Estimate	*SE*	*t*
Model 1. Emotional abuse predicting total demand/withdraw			
Sex	1.48	1.12	1.32
Actor emotional abuse	-0.07	0.38	-0.20
Partner emotional abuse	1.02	0.32	3.19**
Sex X Actor emotional abuse	0.71	0.55	1.28
Sex X Partner emotional abuse	-0.88	0.57	-1.53
Model 2. Emotional abuse predicting self demand/partner withdraw			
Sex	-0.38	0.45	-0.85
Actor emotional abuse	0.23	0.27	0.85
Partner emotional abuse	0.85	0.22	3.72**
Sex X Actor emotional abuse	0.26	0.33	0.80
Sex X Partner emotional abuse	-0.81	0.32	-2.52*
Model 3. Emotional abuse predicting partner demand/ self withdraw			
Sex	0.75	0.41	1.83
Actor emotional abuse	-0.11	0.19	-0.61
Partner emotional abuse	0.11	0.15	0.69
Sex X Actor emotional abuse	0.58	0.26	2.10*
Sex X Partner emotional abuse	-0.11	0.27	-0.41
Model 4. Emotional abuse predicting constructive communication			
Sex	-0.9	0.88	-1.02
Actor emotional abuse	-0.37	0.34	-1.08
Partner emotional abuse	-0.7	0.29	-2.44*
Sex X Actor emotional abuse	0.21	0.45	0.47
Sex X Partner emotional abuse	0.51	0.45	1.12

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$.

Table 2, continued

Multilevel Models for Emotional Neglect

Predictor	Estimate	*SE*	*t*
Model 5. Emotional neglect predicting total demand/withdraw			
Sex	2.21	1.14	1.94
Actor emotional neglect	-0.14	0.36	-0.39
Partner emotional neglect	0.52	0.34	1.55
Sex X Actor emotional neglect	0.28	0.58	0.49
Sex X Partner emotional neglect	-0.55	0.59	-0.93
Model 6. Emotional neglect predicting self demand/partner withdraw			
Sex	-0.34	0.44	-0.76
Actor emotional neglect	0.09	0.27	0.35
Partner emotional neglect	0.26	0.25	1.02
Sex X Actor emotional neglect	0.05	0.37	0.15
Sex X Partner emotional neglect	-0.44	0.36	-1.22
Model 7. Emotional neglect predicting partner demand/ self withdraw			
Sex	0.88	0.41	2.10*
Actor emotional neglect	0.08	0.16	0.49
Partner emotional neglect	0.04	0.15	0.25
Sex X Actor emotional neglect	0.00	0.27	-0.03
Sex X Partner emotional neglect	0.31	0.28	1.12
Model 8. Emotional neglect predicting constructive communication			
Sex	-0.63	0.89	-0.71
Actor emotional neglect	-0.27	0.32	-0.83
Partner emotional neglect	-0.38	0.3	-1.27
Sex X Actor emotional neglect	-0.02	0.46	-0.05
Sex X Partner emotional neglect	0.71	0.46	1.54

Note. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$.

Table 3

Summary of Observations Regressed on Emotional Maltreatment

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	β
Model 1. Emotional abuse predicting observed demand withdraw			
Step 1			
Mutual Avoidance	-0.13	0.08	-0.15
Step 2			
Mutual Avoidance	-0.12	0.08	-0.14
Emotional Abuse	-0.01	0.03	-0.03
Step 3			
Mutual Avoidance	-0.12	-0.12	-0.13
Emotional Abuse	0.00	0.04	-0.03
Emotional Abuse x Sex	0.00	0.06	-0.01
Model 2. Emotional abuse predicting observed conflict resolution			
Step 1			
Age	0.14**	0.06	0.22**
Observed Mutual Avoidance	-0.37**	0.12	-0.26**
Step 2			
Age	0.15**	0.06	0.23**
Observed Mutual Avoidance	-0.35**	0.12	-0.25**
Emotional Abuse	-0.02	0.04	-0.05
Step 3			
Age	0.16*	0.06	0.24*
Observed Mutual Avoidance	-0.37**	0.13	-0.26**
Emotional Abuse	-0.11	0.14	-0.23
Emotional Abuse x Sex	0.06	0.09	0.19
Model 3. Emotional neglect predicting observed demand/withdraw			
Step 1			
Emotional Neglect	-0.03	0.02	-0.11
Step 2			
Emotional Neglect	0.08	0.08	0.28
Emotional Neglect x Sex	-0.07	0.05	-0.41
Model 4. Emotional neglect predicting observed conflict resolution			
Step 1			
Age	0.15*	0.06	0.24*
Step 2			
Age	0.16*	0.06	0.24*
Emotional Neglect	-0.02	0.04	-0.05
Step 3			
Age	0.16*	0.06	0.24*
Emotional Neglect	-0.04	0.13	-0.08
Emotional Neglect x Sex	0.01	0.09	0.03

Note. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$.

Post Hoc Analyses

Both emotional abuse and emotional neglect exceeded or approached the limit of acceptable skewness (1.72 and .97, respectively). To account for this violation of the assumption of normality, all APIM analyses and all hierarchical regressions were re-run using log transformed maltreatment variables. The results of the log transformed APIM models are summarized in table 4 and were largely the same as the untransformed pattern of results. Significant partner effects of emotional abuse on total demand/withdraw, self demand/partner withdraw, and constructive communication were detected as were significant interactions between partner emotional abuse and sex on self demand/partner withdraw and actor emotional abuse and sex on partner demand/self withdraw. Additionally, both models with significant interactions also showed significant main effects of sex, which were not seen in their corresponding untransformed models. Two-intercept APIM models probed these interactions and revealed identical result patterns to those found in the untransformed analyses. There were significant actor effects among men (Estimate = 4.10, $t = 2.39$, $p < .05$) and significant partner effects among women (Estimate = 7.11, $t = 3.31$, $p < .01$) for self demand/partner withdraw. There were significant actor effects among men (Estimate = .46, $t = 2.56$, $p < .05$) for partner demand/self withdraw

There were no significant actor or partner effects of emotional neglect on any criterion variable. There was a main effect of sex on self demand/partner withdraw. However, *t* tests revealed no significant differences between men and women on this criterion variable. Finally, log transformed regressions failed to result in any significant associations between emotional abuse or neglect and observed demand/withdraw or observed conflict resolution.

Table 4

Multilevel Models for Log Transformed Emotional Abuse

Predictor	Estimate	*SE*	*t*
Model 1. Emotional abuse predicting total demand withdraw			
Sex	4.51	9.05	0.49
Actor emotional abuse	0.06	3.20	0.02
Partner emotional abuse	8.98	3.02	2.96**
Sex X Actor emotional abuse	4.81	5.00	0.96
Sex X Partner emotional abuse	-6.37	5.04	-1.26
Model 2. Emotional abuse predicting self demand/partner withdraw			
Sex	8.83	3.72	2.31*
Actor emotional abuse	2.59	2.31	1.11
Partner emotional abuse	7.15	2.19	3.26**
Sex X Actor emotional abuse	1.57	2.96	0.53
Sex X Partner emotional abuse	-6.14	2.92	-2.10*
Model 3. Emotional abuse predicting partner demand/ self withdraw			
Sex	-7.87	3.46	-2.71*
Actor emotional abuse	-0.61	1.57	-0.38
Partner emotional abuse	1.37	1.49	0.92
Sex X Actor emotional abuse	5.00	2.31	2.16*
Sex X Partner emotional abuse	-0.67	2.32	-0.29
Model 4. Emotional abuse predicting constructive communication			
Sex	-10.49	7.26	-1.4
Actor emotional abuse	-3.34	2.87	-1.16
Partner emotional abuse	-6.46	2.71	-2.38*
Sex X Actor emotional abuse	1.40	3.98	0.35
Sex X Partner emotional abuse	3.52	3.97	0.88

Note. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$.

Table 4, continued

Multilevel Models for Log Transformed Emotional Neglect

Predictor	Estimate	*SE*	*t*
Model 1. Emotional neglect predicting total demand withdraw			
Sex	6.06	8.01	0.75
Actor emotional neglect	0.10	3.23	0.03
Partner emotional neglect	3.98	3.16	1.25
Sex X Actor emotional neglect	2.73	5.33	0.51
Sex X Partner emotional neglect	-4.95	5.35	-0.92
Model 2. Emotional neglect predicting self demand/partner withdraw			
Sex	7.94	3.2	2.47*
Actor emotional neglect	1.73	2.41	0.71
Partner emotional neglect	1.93	2.35	0.82
Sex X Actor emotional neglect	-0.86	3.35	-0.26
Sex X Partner emotional neglect	-3.21	3.33	-0.96
Model 3. Emotional neglect predicting partner demand/ self withdraw			
Sex	-5.62	3.06	-1.83
Actor emotional neglect	0.66	1.50	0.44
Partner emotional neglect	0.51	1.47	0.35
Sex X Actor emotional neglect	0.55	2.44	0.22
Sex X Partner emotional neglect	2.53	2.45	1.03
Model 4. Emotional neglect predicting constructive communication			
Sex	-9.44	6.31	-1.49
Actor emotional neglect	-2.6	2.83	-0.91
Partner emotional neglect	-3.14	2.77	-1.13
Sex X Actor emotional neglect	-0.76	4.17	-0.18
Sex X Partner emotional neglect	5.05	4.16	1.21

Note. $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$.

Chapter 4

Discussion

The results of the current study reveal the dyadic context in which relations between childhood emotional abuse and conflict communication occur within heterosexual undergraduate couples. Although no actor effects were detected between individuals' own histories of emotional maltreatment and relationship outcomes, several partner effects were found. Specifically, results supported the hypothesis that partner effects would emerge between childhood emotional abuse and reports of total demand/withdraw, self demand/partner withdraw, and constructive communication. This is consistent with findings by Riggs and colleagues (2011) who found that participant reports of current romantic relationship functioning were significantly associated with partners' retrospective reports of childhood emotional abuse.

The results of the current study imply that, among college couples, perceptions of conflict communication style are more strongly related to a partner's emotional abuse history than one's own emotional abuse history. Participants in a relationship with a partner who reported higher levels of childhood emotional abuse were more likely to report lower levels of constructive communication as well as higher levels of total demand/withdraw and self demand/partner withdraw during a conflict. The total demand/withdraw scale of the CPQ is derived by summing the self demand/partner withdraw and partner demand/self withdraw scales. Because the association between emotional abuse and partner demand/self withdraw was nonsignificant, the significant partner effects between emotional abuse and total demand/withdraw were likely driven by the significant association between partner emotional abuse and self demand/partner withdraw. This pattern suggests a process whereby the abusive communication styles that characterize emotional abuse experienced in childhood are carried

forward into close adult relationships where they are manifested as communication styles marked by low levels of compromise , and higher levels of criticisms, complaints, defensiveness, and avoidance, which are reported by partners.

Both attachment theory and social learning theory have been invoked as explanations for the adult relational outcomes of childhood maltreatment, and both are plausible explanations for the current results. Attachment theory posits that early experiences between children and their caregivers create a stable framework, often referred to as a working model, with which individuals approach all future important relationships (Waters & Cummings, 2000). For example, if a child is constantly criticized and verbally demeaned by a parent figure, they will learn that any attempt at positive communication (e.g., compromise, listening to another's ideas and expecting to be heard in turn) is unlikely to succeed. That child will also likely learn to avoid making themselves vulnerable to verbal attacks and withdraw both emotionally and possibly physically from the parent figure. While these tactics would be adaptive in an abusive parent-child relationship, they would cause problems in an adult romantic relationship where emotional and verbal give and take are hallmarks of relational success (Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999; Guyll, Cutrona, Burzette, & Russell, 2010; Heaven, Smith, Prabhakar, Abraham, & Mete, 2006). Social learning theory suggests that individuals learn how to behave in any given situation by watching others' behaviors in a similar situation (Grusec, 1992). Because abusive parents are likely to engage in lower quality and maladaptive communication with their children (Milot, St-Laurent, Ethier, & Provost, 2010; Wilson, Norris, Shi & Rack, 2010), these children are exposed to negative models of communication deprived of an important positive communication modeling experience from a very early age.

The most novel finding of the current study is that the relation between emotional abuse and communication outcomes were detected by partners rather than the abuse survivors themselves. Contrary to the hypotheses, actor effects were not detected in any of the APIM models tested. That is,

in the current sample, one's own emotional maltreatment history was not associated with one's own perceptions of current adaptive or maladaptive communication in a romantic relationship. Instead, it was the partner of the abuse survivor who was cognizant of the communication problems within the relationship. The vast majority of emotional abuse literature, as well as maltreatment outcome literature in general, has examined and reported only actor effects. An individual's childhood emotional abuse experience has been associated with their own reports of various relational outcome indexes including increased violence, decreased trust, and decreased satisfaction within romantic relationships (Berzenski & Yates, 2010; Crawford & Wright, 2007; DiLillo et al., 2009; Riggs & Kaminski, 2010). However, very little research has investigated relational communication as an outcome of emotional maltreatment.

The current results support the findings by one of the few studies that included communication variables and which failed to find actor effects of emotional abuse for the outcomes of relational domineeringness or non-assertiveness among undergraduates (Paradis & Boucher, 2010). One possible explanation for why an adult survivor of emotional abuse may not report as many maladaptive communication traits as their partner may be that the survivor is working with a skewed frame of reference. Growing up in an emotionally abusive environment indicates that an individual suffered repeated acts which communicated to them that they were unloved and unwanted, several of which would have been actively communication through criticisms and complaints about themselves. Furthermore, research has demonstrated that maltreating parents demonstrate generally poor quality communication with their children during observed laboratory tasks (Wilson et al., 2010). It is noteworthy that in the current study only acts of commission (i.e., emotional abuse) and not acts of omission (i.e., emotional neglect) were related to communication outcomes. One of the distinguishing factors between these forms of maltreatment is that the former requires active verbal hostility while the latter is defined by what is not said or done. Thus, if young adults judge the competence of their own

and their partners' communication by comparing it to their previous experiences then the adult survivor of childhood emotional abuse may be less likely than non-abused individuals to detect problems within a current relationship. This would be especially true among a non-clinical sample of college undergraduates, most of whose relationships are relatively non-distressed.

Several gender effects emerged within the relation between childhood emotional abuse and communication outcomes. For female participants, male partners' childhood emotional abuse histories were positively and significantly related to their own perceptions of how much they (the female) engaged in demanding communication behaviors while their male partners engaged in withdrawal behaviors (i.e., partner effect). This was not true for male participants. Secondly, although there were no significant main actor effects, there was significant interaction between actor emotional abuse and participant sex for the outcome of partner demand/self withdraw. Specifically, men's childhood emotional abuse histories were associated with their own report of their female partners' demanding communication behaviors and their own withdrawing communication behaviors. These two patterns intuitively support one another. Interpreted together they imply that both men and women reported increased female demand/male withdraw communication for couples in which the male partner reported higher levels of childhood emotional abuse.

The gender pattern that women predominantly take on the role of the demander and men take on the role of the withdrawer has been thoroughly replicated throughout the communication literature (e.g., Christensen et al., 2006). While it was long held that this pattern represented inherent sex differences in men and women's communication styles, empirical evidence now suggests that It reflects traditional gender power roles such that women, who traditionally have less social power, will most often be in the position to wish for a change in their relationship circumstances while men, who typically have more social power, will be most often motivated to retain the status quo of a male dominated relationship (Christensen et al., 2006; Holley, Sturm, & Levenson, 2010). However, the current study

suggests that women's demanding communication behaviors are related their male partners' characteristics, specifically their emotional abuse history. The current study's design limits the ability to make definitive statements regarding the nature of this association. It may imply that the women in the sample were influenced by their partners. The results could be interpreted to mean that emotionally abused men behave in ways that encourage or elicit demanding communication from their female partners. Because partner effects were not detected among men, this would also imply that women are more sensitive to the effects of emotional abuse in their male partners than are men in their female partners. It is equally possible that college men who were emotionally abused as children are more likely to seek out and form relationships with women who already engage in demanding communication. Similar questions can be found in the childhood sexual abuse literature where high rates of revictimization among female adult survivors of child sexual abuse have been repeatedly documented. This literature points to both women's behaviors and expectations as explanations. That is, female survivors have been shown to oversexualize relationships with men as well as choose dating partners that display aggressive behaviors (see Messman & Long, 1996 for review). The same causal pathways may be true for emotionally abuse men. They likely have adopted certain maladaptive communication techniques (e.g., defensiveness and avoidance) that decrease the chance of healthy conflict communication with partners while also choosing partners who display their own maladaptive communication patterns.

What can be interpreted from the current results is a consistent association between childhood emotional abuse and men's withdrawal communication behavior in undergraduate romantic relationships. Both men and their female partner's reports of men's withdrawal communication style were significantly associated with men's reports of emotional abuse. It is not readily apparent why the relationship between emotional abuse and communication behavior would be significant for men and not for women. These findings are consistent with those of research showing maltreatment history is

more consistently associated with romantic relationship difficulties among men than women (DiLillo et al., 2009; Paradis & Boucher, 2010). However, unlike these past studies, the current study showed that men's childhood emotional abuse was associated with their female partners' outcome variables, not the men's' own outcome variables. Thus, the current results do support the association between childhood emotional abuse and maladaptive interpersonal outcomes among men but also add that women appear more sensitive to these maladaptive results than do men, at least in the outcome of couple conflict communication.

Finally, the current results did not support the hypothesis that men or women's childhood emotional maltreatment would be associated with the couple's observed levels of conflict resolution or demand/withdraw. Only women's age was significantly associated with observed conflict resolution, such that couples with a relatively older female partner were more likely to receive higher conflict resolution scores, indicating better resolution. In the current sample, observed communication patterns were significantly correlated with self-reported communication constructs in the expected directions, indicating convergent validity. Furthermore, observations of mutual avoidance were low, (M = 1.78, SD = 1.08) suggesting that most couples did discuss meaningful conflict. The findings that childhood emotional abuse is associated with romantic partners' perceptions of couple conflict communication but is not associated with an outside observers' ratings of the same constructs is intriguing. It may be that in a college sample in which the median length of relationship was 12.5 months, discussion within an artificial laboratory setting may not generate the level of conflict necessary to elicit a demand/withdraw pattern. It is equally possible that partners who interact with each other across time and different situations will be more sensitive to adaptive and maladaptive communication patterns that would go unnoticed to outside observers of a brief exchange.

Limitations

The current study faced several limitations. First, the analysis sample was largely homogeneous. The participants were all undergraduates in their late teens to mid-twenties who were in heterosexual

romantic relationships. Over 60% of the sample was white. These demographic characteristics limit the ability to apply the current findings to a larger sample. A related limitation is that the current sample was comprised non-distressed college students. Thus, overall levels of maltreatment as well as reported and observed maladaptive communication were low, while levels of reported and observed adaptive communication were high. This pattern of reporting resulted in restricted range among the variables of interest which may have attenuated the results. It could be that, in a clinical sample of either distressed couples and/or adult survivors of childhood abuse, stronger partner effects may have been found and even possibly actor effects. Consequently, the results of the current study should be interpreted cautiously and necessitate further replication with a larger, more diverse sample. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the current study limits what can be said definitively about the direction of influence among the variables. While it is assumed that because childhood maltreatment preceded the formation of the participants' romantic relationships that it would be the causal factor in a statistical association, this cannot be empirically determined because both variables were measured at the same time. Longitudinal studies would answer questions about directionality.

Implications and Future Directions

This study represents one of the few attempts to analyze the relation between childhood emotional maltreatment and communication styles. To the author's knowledge, it is the first study to perform true dyadic tests of these associations. The results further bolster Kenny and colleagues' (2006) insistence that by overlooking nonindependence among variables researchers will also overlook important relations among variables that can be demonstrated by teasing apart actor and partner effects.

The finding that, at least through the perspective of a romantic partner, emotional abuse is associated with increased maladaptive communication and decreased adaptive communication has significant implications for young couples. Research has documented associations between both

emotional abuse and intimate partner physical violence as well as between demand/withdraw and physical violence. Given the current results, future work should examine demand/withdraw as a possible mechanisms through which emotional abuse is linked to physical violence. It is possible that maladaptive communication may be an early warning sign that a relationship is heading toward increased violence. If so, couples and clinicians would have an opportunity to change their trajectory before negative interactions escalated.

The current results raise several questions to guide future research. First, it is unclear why gender patterns emerged indicating that women are particularly sensitive to the association between their male partners' emotional abuse history and communication patterns. It is reasonable to wonder if this would be true in a sample of long-term (i.e., dating over 2 years) and married couples. In these more established couples, it may be that each dyad member, regardless of gender, has had enough time to learn and become more sensitive to the nuances of their partner's behaviors. A second direction for future research, as noted above, would be to address these research questions in a higher risk sample. Among the current convenience sample of undergraduates, reports of emotional abuse and neglect were low and the CTQ was measured as a continuous variable. Future research could utilize the cutoffs provided for the CTQ and re-examine these associations among young people who report low, moderate, and high levels of emotional abuse. It is possible that different actor and/or partner effects may arise at different levels of abuse or neglect.

Lastly, the current results emphasize the importance of assessing partner reports. While the current study utilized romantic partners, expanding "partner" can mean any other individuals that participants interact with. For example, assessing these same associations using parents, co-workers and friends would allow researchers to better understand if demand/withdraw takes on more trait or state characteristics. Also, assessing whether the partner effects found in the current study exist at

earlier ages (e.g., between childhood friends or young adolescent romantic dyads) may further illuminate causal pathways.

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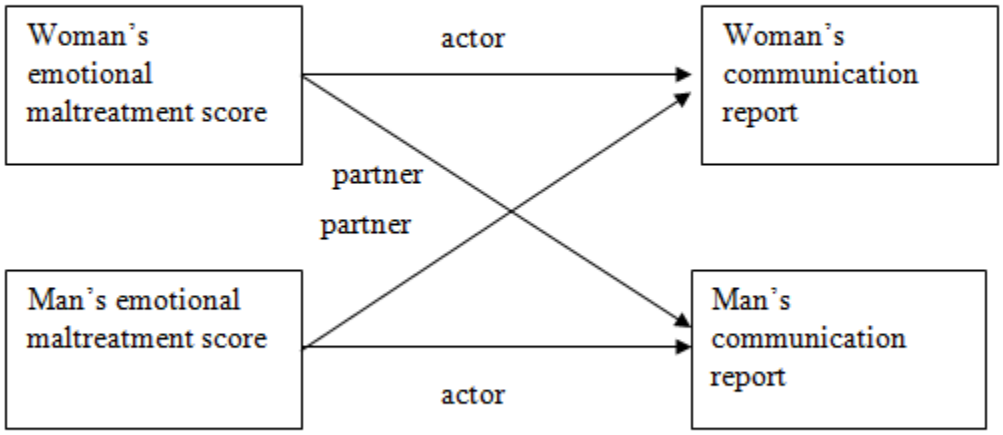
Figure 1

Model estimating actor and partner effects of childhood emotional maltreatment on couple conflict communication style



Note: actor = actor effects, partner = partner effects.

APPENDIX A

MLSPC Conflict Strategy Scale: Demand/Withdraw Pattern

Christensen & Heavey (1990) described the demand-withdraw interaction pattern as a negative process some couples use to engage in conflict. Demand-withdraw is a conflict-escalating pattern in which partners adopt complementary roles: one partner demands while the other withdraws (see below). This scale is a holistic assessment of the extent to which the demand-withdraw pattern characterizes couples' conflict interactions.

Demand occurs when one partner pressures the other through emotional requests to change his or her behavior in some way. As opposed to constructive bids for change, demand takes the form of criticism, complaints, or negatively framed "ought," "should," or "want" statements. While the underlying motive is to maintain or increase closeness to the partner, demand bids are framed in a needy, insistent, or controlling way. Thus, demand bids may come across as nagging, clingy, or intrusive.

Withdrawal occurs when one partner retreats from conflict. Withdrawal may take active forms such as defensiveness, hostility, or changing the subject of discussion. Withdrawal may also take passive forms such as retreating into one's self, or refusal to discuss the issue further. The underlying motive of withdrawal opposes that of demand – the withdrawer seeks to distance him- or herself from the partner.

It is important to note that demand-withdraw cycles may begin with either demand or withdraw bids. Thus, it is possible that one partner's withdrawal initiates the other partner's demands. Alternatively, one partner's demands may lead the other to withdraw.

At the high end of the scale, the demand-withdraw pattern is the predominant theme of the interaction. Clear evidence indicates that partners are firmly established in complementary demand and

withdraw roles, and rely on this pattern to negotiate conflict. At mid-range, there is some evidence of the demand-withdraw pattern, yet other strategies are present. Demand-withdraw is not the predominant theme. At the low end of the scale, there is no evidence of the demand-withdraw pattern. Alternatively, there may be evidence of *either* demand *or* withdrawal bids, but such bids are not met by the complementary response of the other partner. A low score does not necessarily indicate that the couple resolves conflict with ease, mutual support, or other positive indices. Negative resolution strategies may be present; however, there is no evidence of the demand-withdrawal pattern.

Scale Points

5 *Extreme demand-withdraw*

Demand-withdraw is the only strategy employed by the couple to manage conflict. Partners are firmly entrenched in complementary roles.

4 *Strong demand-withdraw*

Demand-withdraw is a major theme of the interaction. One or more alternative conflict strategies are evident during the discussion, however, demand-withdraw is the predominant strategy.

3 *Moderate demand-withdraw*

Demand-withdraw is evident in some aspects of the interaction, but is balanced by other strategies employed to manage conflict.

2 *Mild demand-withdraw*

There is slight evidence of demand-withdraw (e.g., partners exhibit demand and complementary withdrawal at one point during the discussion). However, demand-withdraw is isolated; other strategies outweigh demand-withdraw.

1 *No evidence of demand-withdraw*

The couple does not exhibit the demand-withdraw pattern. Bids for change are not framed as demand bids, and lack of engagement in conflict does not take the form of defensive or passive retreat.

Conflict Resolution

This scale assesses the ability of the couple to work together to make decisions or resolve conflict in a manner that leads to mutual satisfaction. This scale is dyadic, and thus it should capture the essence of the interaction between partners. For instance, does the overall interaction style undermine one partner's self-confidence, is one partner dominant in making decisions or in conversation, or are both partners full participants in the interactive process?

This scale assesses the degree to which each partner's perspective is fully served by the process of resolving conflict, and whether the outcome is mutually satisfactory. Throughout the interaction, couple's conflict resolution ability should be scored at the manifest level. When discussing a topic that is a problem in their relationship, the assessment of a couple's ability to resolve a conflict should reflect observed interaction regardless of the issue a couple chooses to discuss.

In examining whether this couple is working together in a way that is mutually satisfying, there are several elements of the session to consider: when asked to discuss a topic that is a problem in their relationship, are they able to discuss each side openly, listen to each other's perspective, and come to a resolution that is mutually satisfying? When asked to describe an ideal couple using Q sort cards, is the couple able to work cooperatively or does one partner dominate? Clearly couples will utilize many different tactics and behaviors in the service of working together toward a given goal. Furthermore, some couples will resolve conflict with little effort, whereas for others, the process may be quite strenuous.

Within couples receiving high scores, both partners should appear satisfied with the process of decision-making, whether it requires a lot or a little effort to resolve disagreements. A low score may be given to couples in which one partner appears satisfied with the process of conflict resolution, while the other partner is passively or actively dissatisfied with the dynamic. For such couples, decisions may actually appear to require less effort than for a higher scoring pair.

Scale Points

1. Very low or no satisfaction with the decision-making process. Partners may not make any effort to work toward goals, or maybe the only agreed-upon goal is to finish the task quickly. They may seem uninvolved with each other, interacting only when absolutely necessary and giving the impression that the interaction is awkward and difficult to coordinate, requiring a great deal of effort. Alternatively, partners may be at odds in working toward the task goals such that the process is painful and there is little to no satisfaction with the final outcome.
2. Low satisfaction with the decision-making process. Perhaps the only agreed-upon goal is to finish the task quickly. There may be little discussion or little consideration for each other's feelings or the task. Brief collaboration may be seen, but interactions are often awkward and there is little sensitivity to the other person's perspective. Competition may be a problem, in that outcomes are won rather than achieved through compromise.
3. Low to moderate satisfaction. Partners make an adequate effort at collaborating, and generally manage to work together to pursue the goals of the session. Still, there is a lack of sensitivity and there is low satisfaction in the process or the outcome of the tasks. There may be times when insensitivity or competitiveness interferes with task goals. Alternatively, a couple may earn a 3 if there is little data to go by because opinions are being withheld. Overall, this couple manages to cooperate effectively during a good portion of the session.
4. Moderate satisfaction. Partners make some effort at collaborating, and are able to work together to achieve the goals of the session. However, these couples may not reveal much conflict because one or both partners tend to avoid challenging the other when there is the potential for conflict. Alternatively, a couple may be given this score if both partners are verbal and discuss their differing opinions, but the process seems to be somewhat strained or tense and leads to a less than satisfactory outcome.

5. Good satisfaction. Partners make a good effort at working together, and the majority of outcomes are agreeable to both partners. The process of getting there may be slightly strained; for instance, one partner may put him or herself down a few times during the process of coming to agree with the other. But overall, there is evidence of good cooperation and mutual pleasure.
6. High satisfaction. Partners work well together, and both partners feel good about the process of resolving conflict and about the outcome. The process is mature and cooperative. There is a high level of understanding and sensitivity between partners. There may be slight evidence of holding back or one partner may occasionally appear slightly dominant.
7. Very High satisfaction. Couples who earn a score of 7 are able to elaborate their positions on topics that come up during tasks, and come to resolutions using a mature and cooperative process. There is a high level of understanding and sensitivity between partners. These couples are able to communicate openly, and clearly respect each other's opinions.

Mutual Avoidance Pattern

Christensen & Heavey (1990) described the mutual avoidance interaction pattern as a negative process some couples use during conflict discussions. Mutual avoidance is a conflict-skirting pattern in which both partners deflect, ignore, or withdraw from conflict (see below). This scale is a holistic assessment of the extent to which mutual avoidance characterizes couples' conflict interactions. Conflict avoidance may take several forms. Partners may attempt to talk around the problem or about unrelated topics, or they may be unwilling to discuss much of anything so that very little is said during the conflict interaction. Mutual avoidance may also take the form of mutual hostility, in which both partners "wall off" or try to distance themselves from each other.

At the high end of the scale, the mutual avoidance is the predominant theme of the interaction. Clear evidence indicates that partners actively avoid confronting each other or the conflict at hand. At mid-range, there is some evidence of mutual avoidance, yet other strategies are present. Mutual avoidance is not the predominant theme, and partners do engage in conflict to some extent. At the low end of the scale, there is no evidence of mutual avoidance. Alternatively, there may be evidence that one partner avoids conflict but such avoidance is not met by avoidant responses of the other partner. A low score does not necessarily indicate that the couple resolves conflict with ease, mutual support, or other positive indices. Negative resolution strategies may be present; however, there is no evidence of mutual avoidance.

Scale Points

5 *Extreme mutual avoidance*

Mutual avoidance is the only strategy employed by the couple to manage conflict. Except their initial identification of the problem (required by the directions of the task), both partners actively ignore, deflect, or avoid discussion of the conflict they identify.

4 *Strong mutual avoidance*

Mutual avoidance is a major theme of the interaction. Partners make some effort to address conflict, but these efforts are outweighed by indicators of mutual avoidance.

3 *Moderate mutual avoidance*

There is a balance between mutual avoidance in some aspects of the interaction and other instances in which partners directly address conflict.

2 *Mild mutual avoidance*

There is slight evidence of mutual avoidance (e.g., partners avoid conflict engagement at one point during the discussion). However, mutual avoidance is isolated; other strategies outweigh mutual avoidance.

1 *No evidence of mutual avoidance*

The couple does not exhibit mutual avoidance. Partners use other strategies (either positive or negative) to address conflict.