



Intergenerational Effects of Betrayal Trauma in a Mother-Child Sample

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Introduction

- According to Betrayal Trauma Theory (Freyd, 1996), dissociation is likely to occur when trauma is perpetrated by someone with whom the victim has a close relationship.
- Research has shown that persisting dissociative tendencies may be related to difficulties identifying future interpersonal threats in the environment (DePrince, 2005).
- Dissociation may be a mechanism by which the revictimization of childhood abuse survivors occurs in adulthood. When adults with a betrayal trauma history become parents, high levels of dissociation may contribute to an unawareness of dangers in the environment that can also affect their children.
- The current study examines intergenerational relationships between trauma and dissociation in a mother-child sample.

Method

Participants

- 67 mother-child dyads were recruited from the local community.
- Children were age 7-8 years old; 36 boys and 31 girls.

Measures

- Dissociation in the mother sample was measured using the Dissociative Experiences Scale (Carlson & Putnam, 1993). Dissociation in the child sample was measured with the Child Dissociative Checklist (Putnam, Helmers, & Trickett, 1993).
- Trauma histories of mothers and children were assessed using the Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey (BBTS; Goldberg & Freyd, 2006) and the BBTS-Parent Report (Becker-Blease, Freyd, & Pears, 2004).
- 1.High Betrayal Trauma (HBT) was classified if the individual experienced traumas perpetrated by someone “very close” (Mother $n = 53$, Child $n = 21$).
- Of the 67 mothers in the sample, 28 mothers who experienced HBT in childhood were revictimized in adulthood. Another 20 mothers had experienced HBT in childhood but were not revictimized in adulthood.
- 2.Lesser Betrayal Trauma (LBT) was classified when individuals reported no experience of HBT but instead reported traumas perpetrated by someone “not close,” witnessed interpersonal traumas, and non-interpersonal traumas. (Mother $n = 7$, Child $n = 25$).
- 3.Individuals who reported no experiences of trauma were placed into the No Trauma (NT) category (Mother $n = 7$, Child $n = 21$).

Results

Child Hypothesis

- 1.1. Based on Betrayal Trauma Theory, it was expected that children who experienced traumas high in betrayal would have higher levels of dissociation than children who did not experience high betrayal traumas.
- ANOVA found a significant omnibus effect, $F(2, 64) = 4.34, p = 0.02$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.12$.
- Linear contrast also significant, $F(1, 64) = 8.27, p = 0.005$. The pattern of means shows the highest dissociation level in the HBT group ($M = 1.59, SD = 0.92$), a decreased level in the LBT group ($M = 1.34, SD = 0.90$), and the lowest level in the NT group ($M = 0.82, SD = 0.80$).

Parent Hypotheses

- 2.1. Based on Betrayal Trauma Theory, it was expected that mothers who experienced traumas high in betrayal would have higher levels of dissociation than mothers who did not experience high betrayal traumas.
- ANOVA with Welch approximation found a significant omnibus effect, $F(2, 10.44) = 12.61, p = 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.19$.
- Linear contrast also significant, $F(1, 63) = 14.55, p < 0.001$. The pattern of means show that dissociation scores were highest among those with HBT ($M = 2.22, SD = 0.60$), followed by LBT ($M = 1.63, SD = 1.04$), and NT ($M = 1.36, SD = 0.39$).

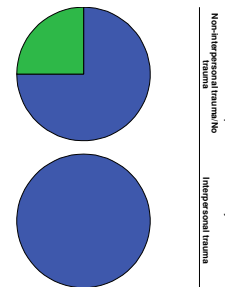
Results (cont.)

2.2. The group of mothers who experienced high betrayal trauma in childhood and then experienced interpersonal traumas perpetrated against them in adulthood (i.e., were revictimized) will have higher levels of dissociation than mothers who were not revictimized in this way, providing support for the theory that dissociation stemming from childhood trauma may lead to deficits in awareness for future interpersonal threats in the environment.

-Independent samples t-test revealed that revictimized mothers had a significantly higher mean dissociation score ($M = 2.31, SD = 0.66, n = 27$) than non-revictimized mothers ($M = 2.0, SD = 0.30, n = 18$), $t(39) = 2.10, p = 0.04$.

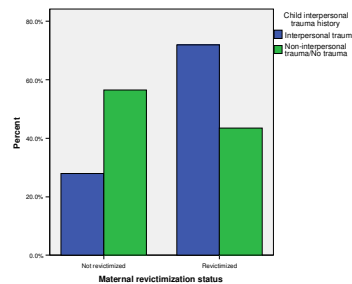
Parent-Child Relationship Hypotheses

- 3.1. Children’s history of trauma will be related to their mother’s history of trauma.
- A 2x2 chi-square with the Yates continuity correction revealed a significant association between maternal and child interpersonal trauma; $\chi^2(1) = 8.10, p = 0.004$.



One hundred percent of children in the sample with histories of interpersonal trauma had mothers with interpersonal traumas, while 75% of children with non-interpersonal traumas or no traumas had parents with interpersonal trauma.

- 3.2. Children of revictimized mothers were expected to be more likely to experience interpersonal traumas than children of non-revictimized mothers. This was hypothesized because high levels of maternal dissociation may contribute to an unawareness of threatening individuals in the environment, leading to child trauma exposure.
- Chi-square revealed a significant association between maternal revictimization status and child interpersonal trauma emerged, $\chi^2(1) = 4.01, p = 0.045$.



Seventy-two percent of children who experienced interpersonal trauma had revictimized mothers, while 28% of children who experienced interpersonal trauma had non-revictimized mothers.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate intergenerational associations between trauma and dissociation in a cross-sectional study. By examining a sample of parents and children with and without histories of betrayal trauma, short and long term consequences on dissociation were explored.

Experiences of high betrayal trauma were found to be related to higher levels of dissociation in mothers and children. Revictimized mothers were shown to have a significantly higher mean level of dissociation than non-revictimized mothers, providing support for the idea that dissociation may indicate a lower threshold of awareness for potential future perpetrators. Evidence was also found that is consistent with the hypothesis that dissociation may result in impairments in maternal ability to protect children from trauma; associations were found between maternal interpersonal trauma history and child interpersonal trauma history, as well as between maternal revictimization status and child interpersonal trauma.

This study overall provides compelling evidence that the experience of parental trauma has intergenerational effects on children. It represents a step towards longitudinal studies that can provide additional clarification of the nature of the associations between these variables, as well as parent-child intervention studies that may help to prevent child trauma exposure and reduce posttraumatic symptomatology.

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