

The Relationship Between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Dysfunctional Metacognition among Young Adults

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Abstract: *The study aims to investigate the relationship between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Dysfunctional Metacognition among young adults. Childhood emotional neglect is defined as the failure of caregivers to adequately respond to a child's emotional needs, while dysfunctional metacognition refers to maladaptive patterns of thinking about one's own thoughts, including worry, rumination, and poor cognitive regulation. The main goal of this study was to evaluate whether a significant relationship exists between these two psychological constructs. A sample of 300 young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 participated in this study using a convenience sampling technique. The study used the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ-28) and the Metacognition Questionnaire (MCQ-30) to collect data from each participant. Descriptive analysis and Pearson's product-moment correlation were used to analyze the collected data. The study revealed that the mean score for childhood emotional neglect was 13.58 and that for dysfunctional metacognition was 71.41. Correlation analysis revealed that there was a non-significant negative relationship between childhood emotional neglect and dysfunctional metacognition ($r = -.096, p = .096$). The results indicate that childhood emotional neglect is not significantly associated with dysfunctional metacognitive processes, suggesting that metacognition may be influenced by multiple interacting psychological and environmental factors rather than a single adverse experience.*

Keywords: Childhood Emotional Neglect, Dysfunctional Metacognition, Young Adults, Metacognitive Beliefs

1. Introduction

Childhood emotional neglect is an important psychological construct that refers to the failure of caretakers to respond to the child's emotional needs such as warmth, affection, and validation (Bernstein et al., 2003). Unlike other forms of child abuse that are easily recognizable, childhood emotional neglect is subtle. Despite its subtlety, childhood emotional neglect has serious psychological effects on the child. Childhood experiences in emotionally unresponsive environments can have serious effects on the child's psychological development. Childhood experiences shape one's internal working model, which affects one's perceptions of the self and others (Bowlby, 1969). Childhood experiences in emotionally unresponsive environments can result in insecure attachment styles. This can lead to negative perceptions of the self and poor regulation of emotions. Such effects can have serious effects on one's cognitive and emotional development.

Metacognition refers to the cognitive ability to reflect on one's own thinking processes. It encompasses the cognitive awareness and regulation of one's own thinking (Flavell, 1979). This cognitive process has a significant role to play in how people perceive and deal with their own emotions. The model of Self-Regulatory Executive Function (S-REF), which was introduced by Wells and Matthews, emphasizes the importance of metacognitive beliefs in human functioning (Wells & Matthews, 1994). Dysfunctional metacognitions involve unhelpful beliefs such as the perceived uncontrollability and danger of thoughts, as well as excessive intrusiveness. This was further explained by Wells that these unhelpful patterns result in the Cognitive Attentional

Syndrome (CAS), which includes worry, rumination, and threat monitoring (Wells, 2000). This interferes with the adaptive regulation of one's own emotions and leads to psychological distress, making it difficult to cope.

The objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between emotional neglect in childhood and dysfunctional metacognition in young adults. Childhood emotional neglect is an issue that needs to be addressed because it can impact an individual's understanding and coping with thoughts and emotions. By exploring this relationship, we can develop a better understanding of how emotional experiences in early life contribute to dysfunctional thinking patterns like worry and rumination. This can help in developing more effective interventions to address these patterns and ultimately promote better emotional regulation and mental health in young adults.

Furthermore, this study may contribute to a deeper understanding of how early emotional environments shape cognitive processes and psychological well-being. Such insights can inform therapeutic approaches, including metacognitive therapy, which focuses on modifying dysfunctional thinking patterns and enhancing adaptive coping strategies. Overall, the study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on the long-term psychological impact of childhood emotional neglect and its role in the development of metacognitive processes.

Definition

- **Bernstein et al. (2003)** – defined childhood emotional neglect as “a caregiver's failure to respond adequately to a child's emotional needs, which may lead to long-term

difficulties in emotional awareness, self-esteem, and the ability to form healthy relationships.”

- **Wells (2000)** – defined dysfunctional metacognition as “maladaptive patterns of thinking about one’s own cognitive processes, including excessive worry, rumination, and ineffective strategies to control thoughts.”

2. Literature Review

Mansueto, G. & Wells, A. (2019) conducted a review study titled *Metacognitive Beliefs and Childhood Adversities: An Overview of the Literature* to examine the influence of childhood adversities, including emotional neglect, on maladaptive metacognitive beliefs in adulthood. The study involved a comprehensive review of existing literature utilizing retrospective measures such as the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) and the Metacognitions Questionnaire-30 (MCQ-30) to assess metacognitive processes. The findings indicated that exposure to emotional neglect and other childhood adversities is associated with dysfunctional metacognitive beliefs, including negative beliefs about worry, perceived uncontrollability of thoughts, and repetitive negative thinking patterns. The study concluded that maladaptive metacognitive beliefs play a mediating role in the development of emotional distress following childhood adversities, highlighting the importance of targeting these beliefs in therapeutic interventions.

Hosseini Ramaghani et al. (2019), in the study titled “The Mediating Role of Metacognition and Time Perspectives between Childhood Trauma and PTSD Symptoms,” examined how childhood trauma, metacognition, time perspectives, and experiential avoidance influence PTSD symptoms. The study used standardized measures including the CTQ, PCL-5, ZTPI, AAQ-II, and MCQ-30 to assess the variables, with the purpose of understanding their direct and indirect effects on PTSD. The sample comprised 432 adult patients referred to psychological, psychiatric, and medical clinics in Shiraz, Iran, who had experienced a traumatic event according to DSM-5 Criterion A. A correlational research design with mediation analysis was employed. The findings indicated that childhood trauma was directly associated with PTSD symptoms, metacognition, and time perspectives, and indirectly associated with experiential avoidance and PTSD. Metacognition, time perspectives, and experiential avoidance were found to mediate the relationship between childhood trauma and PTSD symptoms. The study concluded that these psychological factors are crucial in explaining PTSD, supporting metacognitive models and Time Perspective Theory.

Gray, Sweller, and Boag (2024) conducted a study titled *Child Abuse and Neglect and Obsessive–Compulsive Personality Traits: Effects of Attachment, Intolerance of Uncertainty, and Metacognition* to examine the indirect role of attachment-anxiety, intolerance of uncertainty, and metacognition in the relationship between child abuse and neglect (CAN) and obsessive–compulsive personality traits (OCPT). The study used validated self-report questionnaires to assess child abuse and neglect, attachment patterns, intolerance of uncertainty, metacognition, OCPT, and depression. A correlational research design with mediation analysis was adopted, and data were collected from a sample

of 291 undergraduate psychology students through an online survey. The findings revealed that attachment-anxiety and intolerance of uncertainty had a serial mediating effect in the relationship between CAN and OCPT, while metacognition mediated the relationship between child emotional abuse and OCPT. The study concluded that metacognitive processes, along with attachment and intolerance of uncertainty, play a significant role in explaining how early adverse experiences contribute to later psychological traits, highlighting the importance of these factors in assessment and therapeutic interventions.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Objectives

- To assess the level of childhood emotional neglect among young adults
- To assess the level of dysfunctional metacognition among young adults
- To examine the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and dysfunctional metacognition among young adults aged 18–25 years

3.2. Hypothesis

H1: There will be a significant relationship between childhood emotional neglect and dysfunctional Metacognition among young adults aged 18-25 years.

3.3. Research design

A quantitative correlational research design was adopted to examine the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and dysfunctional metacognition among young adults. In this study, childhood emotional neglect and dysfunctional metacognition were the two major variables examined in order to understand how early emotional experiences influence cognitive processes related to thinking and self-regulation. Childhood emotional neglect was the independent variable and dysfunctional metacognition was the dependent variable.

4. Sample and Sampling Technique

The population selected for this research consisted of young adults aged between 18 and 25 years. The sample size for this study was 300 participants. The sampling technique used in this study was convenience sampling, as participants were recruited based on accessibility and willingness to participate. Convenience sampling was used to obtain a readily available sample from the general population while ensuring that both male and female young adults were represented.

4.1. Inclusion criteria

- Young adults aged between 18 and 25 years.
- Both male and female participants were included to enhance generalizability of the findings.
- Participants drawn from the general population rather than clinical settings to examine normative variation

4.2. Exclusion Criteria

- Young adults below 18 years or above 25 years of age.
- Participants who were studying or have been trained in psychology or related mental health fields were excluded from the study to eliminate response and expectancy biases.
- Individuals who have previously been diagnosed with any form of psychiatric or neurological Disorders.

4.3. Tools used and description:

a) Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ):

The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ), developed by Bernstein et al. (2003), is a self-report scale that comprises 28 items designed to assess experiences of childhood maltreatment. This scale includes five dimensions, namely, Emotional Abuse, Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Emotional Neglect, and Physical Neglect. For the purpose of this study, the Emotional Neglect subscale was used to measure the extent of childhood emotional neglect experienced by individuals. Each item is rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1, which stands for 'never true,' to 5, which stands for 'very often true.' The Emotional Neglect subscale has demonstrated good internal consistency. The scale has also shown good reliability and validity across different populations. Higher scores on this subscale indicate higher levels of perceived emotional neglect during childhood (Bernstein et al., 2003).

b) Metacognition Questionnaire (MCQ-30):

The Metacognition Questionnaire (MCQ-30), developed by Wells and Cartwright-Hatton (2004), is a self-report measure consisting of 30 items designed to assess dysfunctional metacognitive beliefs. This scale includes five dimensions, namely, Positive Beliefs about Worry, Negative Beliefs about Uncontrollability and Danger, Cognitive Confidence, Need to Control Thoughts, and Cognitive Self-Consciousness, with each dimension comprising six items. Individuals respond to each item using a Likert scale ranging from 1, which stands for 'do not agree,' to 4, which stands for 'agree very much.' The scale has demonstrated good internal consistency, along with good reliability and construct validity in assessing metacognitive processes. Higher scores on this measure indicate higher levels of dysfunctional metacognitive beliefs, including worry, rumination, and impaired cognitive regulation (Wells & Cartwright-Hatton, 2004).

4.4. Statistical analysis

The collected data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods with the help of SPSS Software. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to summarize the levels of childhood emotional neglect and dysfunctional metacognition among the participants. In order to examine the relationship between the variables, Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was used as an inferential statistical method. This analysis helped to identify the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and dysfunctional metacognition, and draw conclusions based on the obtained results.

5. Result

This chapter discusses the results and interpretation of the analysis done to understand the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and dysfunctional metacognition among young adults.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics showing the mean and standard deviation between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Dysfunctional Metacognition among Young adults.

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	N
Emotional Neglect	13.58	4.455	300
Metacognition	71.41	12.787	300

The descriptive table shows the mean and standard deviation for the variables. The variable IV: Emotional Neglect has a sample N=300, mean=13.58 and standard deviation=4.455 and variable DV= Dysfunctional metacognition has a sample N=300, mean=71.41 and standard deviation=12.787.

Table 2: Correlational analysis showing the relationship between Emotional Neglect and Dysfunctional metacognition among Young adults.

Variables	Pearson's correlation	p value	Decision
Emotional Neglect Metacognition	-0.096	0.096	Rejecting (H1)

Table 2 revealed a Pearson correlation coefficient of $r(300) = -.096$, $p = .096$ between childhood emotional neglect and dysfunctional metacognition. This finding indicates a negligible and non-significant negative relationship between the two variables, suggesting that levels of childhood emotional neglect are not reliably associated with levels of dysfunctional metacognition among the participants. Given that the obtained p value was above the established level of statistical significance ($p > .05$), the alternative hypothesis (H1: There will be a significant relationship between childhood emotional neglect and dysfunctional Metacognition among young adults) is rejected, and the null hypothesis is accepted.

The result suggests that childhood emotional neglect alone may not be sufficient to significantly influence dysfunctional metacognitive processes in young adults. Metacognition is a complex cognitive function that may be shaped by multiple interacting factors such as combined forms of trauma, environmental context, resilience, and social support. In young adulthood, a developmental stage characterized by cognitive maturity and adaptive coping, individuals may develop compensatory mechanisms that buffer the impact of early neglect. Therefore, the absence of a significant correlation may indicate that dysfunctional metacognition is more strongly influenced by a combination of adverse experiences rather than emotional neglect in isolation.

6. Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between childhood emotional neglect and dysfunctional metacognition among young adults. A sample of 300 participants was assessed using standardized self-report measures evaluating experiences of emotional neglect and

maladaptive metacognitive beliefs. The findings revealed a negligible and statistically non-significant negative correlation ($r = -0.096$, $p > 0.05$), indicating that childhood emotional neglect is not significantly associated with dysfunctional metacognition in the present sample. This suggests that emotional neglect alone may not directly influence maladaptive thinking patterns such as excessive worry, negative beliefs about thoughts, or impaired cognitive control.

The results highlight the complexity of metacognition as a higher-order cognitive process influenced by multiple interacting factors. The absence of a significant relationship suggests that variables such as resilience, coping strategies, attachment security, and supportive interpersonal experiences may buffer the impact of early emotional neglect. Additionally, dysfunctional metacognition may be more strongly shaped by cumulative adversities, including emotional abuse, chronic stress, and personality traits, rather than a single dimension like emotional neglect. This emphasizes the importance of considering a multidimensional framework when examining psychological outcomes.

From a developmental perspective, young adulthood is characterized by enhanced executive functioning, emotional regulation, and reflective thinking, which may enable individuals to adaptively process earlier adverse experiences. Environmental factors such as education, social support, and mental health awareness may further contribute to healthier cognitive functioning. Overall, the findings suggest that childhood emotional neglect may not be a significant independent predictor of dysfunctional metacognition, highlighting the need for future research to explore additional mediating and moderating variables to better understand this relationship.

7. Summary

The present study examined the association between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Dysfunctional Metacognition among young adults. The data were collected from 300 participants through standardized questionnaires: the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ-28) and the Metacognition Questionnaire (MCQ-30). The descriptive statistics indicated moderate levels of childhood emotional neglect and dysfunctional metacognition among the participants. Pearson correlation analysis indicated a negligible and statistically non-significant negative relationship ($r = -0.096$, $p > 0.05$) between the two variables. The findings suggest that higher levels of childhood emotional neglect are not significantly associated with dysfunctional metacognitive processes. The alternative hypothesis stating a significant relationship between Childhood Emotional Neglect and Dysfunctional Metacognition is rejected, and the null hypothesis is accepted. The results indicate that emotional neglect alone does not significantly influence maladaptive thinking patterns, and other psychological and environmental factors may play a more important role.

8. Conclusion

The present study's results show a non-significant correlation between the scores obtained using the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ-28) and the Metacognition Questionnaire (MCQ-30), indicating a negligible negative relationship between childhood emotional neglect and dysfunctional metacognition. Therefore, young adults who experience higher levels of childhood emotional neglect do not necessarily exhibit higher levels of dysfunctional metacognitive processes.

9. Limitations

- The study mainly focused on childhood emotional neglect as a predictor of dysfunctional metacognition. Other factors such as personality traits, emotional regulation, attachment patterns, coping strategies, and environmental influences were not included and may also affect metacognitive functioning.
- The sample was limited to 300 young adults aged 18–25 from the general population, excluding those with psychological training or psychiatric/neurological disorders, limiting generalizability.
- The sample consisted of 300 young adults, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to a wider population.

10. Recommendations

- Future research should explore additional variables such as resilience, emotional regulation, attachment styles, and other forms of childhood adversity to better understand dysfunctional metacognition.
- Studies should include larger and more diverse samples from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to improve the generalizability of the findings.
- Mental health professionals should focus on promoting adaptive coping strategies and healthy metacognitive skills, as dysfunctional metacognition may be influenced by multiple interacting factors rather than childhood emotional neglect alone.

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