

He Said, She Said: The Influence of Childhood Adversity and Personality on the Intrasexual
Competition Strategy of Gossip Among Adults

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Abstract

Previous research indicates that childhood adversity has lasting effects as individuals transition from childhood to adulthood. The present study surveyed a sample of 524 adults in order to examine the influence of childhood adversity and personality upon rates of intrasexual competition. Participants completed the City Stress Inventory, HEXACO Revised Personality Inventory, and Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire. While general childhood adversity was not indicative of tendency to gossip, a significant relationship was found between the childhood adversity of neighborhood disorder and gossip about physical appearances and achievements of others as a means of intrasexual competition. Furthermore, high levels of extraversion and low levels of agreeableness were predictive of tendency to gossip in all areas, including physical appearance, achievement, and social information. These results support the idea that childhood adversity affects how individuals compete for the attention of mates, as well as reinforce the strong influence of personality traits upon mating behavior.

Introduction

Childhood affects adulthood in more ways than many individuals may be aware. The unique experiences children undergo throughout development have profound impacts on how they react to the world around them as adults. In particular, research has shown that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and early trauma have the potential to negatively affect individuals as adults in many different ways, including changes in brain structure, diminished executive functioning, and difficulty forming strong interpersonal attachments (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). According to the National Survey of Children's Health conducted

by the Health Resources and Services Administration in 2016, approximately 53.7% of children aged 0 to 17 years experienced one or more ACEs in Oklahoma alone, and 26.6% of children experienced two or more (Bethel, Davis, Gombojav, Stumbo, & Powers, 2017). Compared to a national average of 46.3% of children reporting one or more ACEs and 21.7% reporting two or more, Oklahoma ranks significantly higher in prevalence of adverse childhood experiences, placing Oklahoma children at greater risk (Bethel et al., 2017). These negative experiences often increase the likelihood of children undergoing trauma as well as affect their health, both physically, emotionally, and behaviorally (Bethel et al., 2017). Research has also indicated that adverse childhood experiences, particularly child maltreatment, can contribute to higher levels of general psychological distress among women compared to individuals who did not experience child abuse (DiLillo, Lewis, & Di Loreto-Colgan, 2007).

As individuals transition from childhood to adulthood, they may begin to experience these negative effects of early adverse experiences. Furthermore, they may begin to engage in romantic relationships, necessitating the question, how do negative childhood experiences affect the way adults engage in these relationships? In a study examining the connection between internal perceptions of attachment and romantic relationship quality among women who have experienced negative childhood experiences related to parenting, researchers found strong associations between women with secure attachment styles and fulfilling romantic relationships as adults (McCarthy & Maughan, 2010). While these women reported undergoing negative experiences with primary caregivers as children, as adults, they have learned to accept negative childhood and attachment experiences as well as how to blend those experiences into new conceptions of personal identity and attachment (McCarthy & Maughan, 2010). Conversely, women exhibiting insecure attachment styles were also likely to report negative adult romantic

experiences (McCarthy & Maughan, 2010). A different study found that women who were mistreated as children also expressed more difficulties in present relationships, and these romantic relationships were characterized by deficits in intimacy and vulnerability (DiLillo et al., 2007). Additionally, formerly abused women reported greater levels of physical aggression in their relationships as well as more negative views of sexual intimacy (DiLillo et al., 2007). The results of this study did not show similar trends for abused men, which researchers hypothesize could be related to the degree of maltreatment victims suffered or the type of abuse, such as physical versus psychological or sexual (Di Lillo et al., 2007).

Furthermore, research has found that young girls who grow up with absent fathers are likely to engage in higher levels of sexual behavior than girls with present fathers as well as exhibit more risky sexual behavior, such as not using contraceptives (Belsky, 1991; Peterson, 2007). Lower levels of father's education were also associated with more sexual risk-taking among daughters (Peterson, 2007). These high rates of unsafe sexual behavior places girls with absent fathers at higher risk of contracting sexually-transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies (Peterson, 2007). Additionally, frequent harsh parenting inflicted upon daughters by their mothers has been shown to be predictive of earlier onsets of puberty, which are linked to greater levels of risky sexual behavior (Belsky, Steinberg, Houts, & Halpern-Felsher, 2010). In a study examining suicidal ideation and attempts of individuals addicted to drugs, only one participant out of 28 who had attempted suicide did not report experiencing adverse childhood experiences (Rossow & Lauritzen, 2001). Moreover, results indicated that having parents with psychiatric issues and alcohol dependency was linked to persistent and enduring self-damaging behavior among participants (Rossow & Lauritzen, 2001). Taken altogether, these findings reinforce the influence of parenting on later mating behaviors.

Although one study found that women experience childhood sexual abuse slightly more than men with 25% of women reporting abuse compared to 16% of men, results show that both male and female victims have the same risk of substance abuse issues, marital and family difficulties, and suicide attempts (Dube, Anda, Whitfield, Brown, Felitti, Dong, & Giles, 2005). Male victims of childhood sexual abuse report lingering feelings of shame and guilt and often blame themselves for what happened to them as children (Easton, Saltzman, & Willis, 2014). These victims may have more difficulty reporting the abuse that occurred to them, even as adults (Easton, Saltzman, & Willis, 2014).

As individuals look for mates and attempt to engage in romantic relationships, they often participate in intrasexual competition. Intrasexual competition is a component of sexual selection characterized by competition with members of the same sex for the relevant reproductive resources of the opposite sex and is aimed at advertising qualities the opposite sex finds attractive (Darwin, 1871). In a study examining the mating habits of fruit flies, researchers found that the number of offspring of a male fruit fly increased with the amount of mates he had (Brown, 2009). The same was not true for female fruit flies, as the number of mates a female had did not increase her amount of offspring (Brown, 2009). Among humans, men are theoretically unlimited as to the amount of offspring they can produce; thus, obtaining more mates can serve as a way to ensure the successful continuation of one's genes (Brown, 2009, Cashdan, 1998). When searching for a potential mate, men are often attracted to women considered physically beautiful, as historically, physical attractiveness has been perceived as indicative of fertility and strong genes (Dijkstra & Buunk, 2002).

Contrarily, as the sexual partners who carry offspring, women are more restricted in reproduction due to the high investment required to produce and raise children (Cashdan, 1998).

For this reason, women often seek partners who are able to protect and provide for them and their children during the vulnerable state of pregnancy and for the first few years afterward (Cashdan, 1998). Women also tend to be more particular about their sexual partners and prefer to establish an emotional connection prior to intercourse as a way to elicit commitment and prevent abandonment (Cashdan, 1998). Moreover, research indicates that female participants are more likely to be threatened by other females who are perceived as more physically attractive than them and who receive more male attention (Buunk & Fisher, 2009). On the other hand, males show a greater desire to be perceived as superior to their male colleagues and have higher socioeconomic statuses rather than more physically attractive in order to entice mates (Buunk & Fisher, 2009).

Among participants who complete personality assessments such as the Big Five and HEXACO personality inventories, the trait of extraversion has been found to be strongly related to sexual promiscuity; moreover, men who exhibit greater levels of extraversion and neuroticism have also been shown to participate more readily in intrasexual competition (Buunk & Fisher, 2009; Schmitt, 2004). A study by Buunk and Fisher (2009) indicates that neuroticism is the most predictive personality trait of intrasexual competition, consistent with the idea that highly neurotic individuals often exhibit less positive responses to highly successful people (Buunk & Fisher, 2009).

Furthermore, research shows that low levels of both agreeableness and conscientiousness are also linked to higher rates of infidelity within relationships (Schmitt, 2004). Those who exhibit high levels of conscientiousness are often described as being reliable, responsible, and orderly; thus, individuals lacking conscientiousness may be described as undependable, unstructured, and less likely to consider the feelings of others, thus creating a greater inclination

to seek extra relationship involvement (John & Srivastava, 1999; Schmitt, 2004). Similarly, highly agreeable people are typically very trusting, while those who are low in agreeableness often possess little empathy and trust for others, perhaps leading to higher rates of relationship infidelity (John & Srivastava, 1999; Schmitt, 2004).

The present study examined the effect of personality traits upon the relationship between intrasexual competition strategies among college men and women and the presence of adverse childhood experiences. Through an online survey, a sample of adult participants as well as college students completed the Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire, the City Stress Inventory, and the HEXACO Revised Personality Inventory (Ewart & Suchday, 2002; Lee & Ashton, 2018; Nevo, Nevo, & Derech-Zahavi, 1993). The hypothesis is that individuals who have experienced childhood adversity will be more likely to exhibit aggressive levels of intrasexual competition as well as higher levels of extraversion, while highly agreeable individuals will display lower levels of competitiveness.

Method

Participants

524 participants were recruited to participate in an online Qualtrics survey through Oklahoma State University. The data of 54 participants was deemed unusable due to incompleteness. Out of the 470 valid participants, 67.7% of the sample were females and 32.3% were males. The mean age of the sample was 19.5 years. 72.3% of participants reported being White (Non-Hispanic), 8.9% were multiracial, 6.4% were African American, 5.3% were American Indian/Alaskan Native, 4% were Hispanic, 1.3% were South Asian, 0.9% were East Asian, 0.4% were Middle Eastern, and the remaining 0.4% classified themselves as other.

Measures

Participants completed a survey consisting of three questionnaires measuring intrasexual competition, personality, and adverse childhood experiences. In order to assess levels of intrasexual competition, participants completed the Tendency to Gossip Questionnaire, a series of questions developed by researchers Nevo, Nevo, and Derech-Zehavi (1993) at the University of Haifa, Israel to assess how gossip is used as a function of intrasexual competition. The questionnaire examines four types of gossip: gossip directed at the physical appearance of others, the achievements of others, social information, and sublimated gossip (Nevo et al., 1993). For the purpose of this study, researchers did not measure levels of sublimated gossip. The 20-item questionnaire is scored on a 7-point scale in which participants respond to questions about gossip indicating their experience, with 1 meaning “never” and 7 meaning “always” (Nevo et al., 1993). Before partaking in the survey, participants were asked to read each statement and choose the score that best demonstrates their likelihood to exhibit such behavior (Nevo et al., 1993).

Study participants also completed the City Stress Inventory in order to measure a type of adverse childhood experience. The City Stress Inventory specifically examines the effects of stress-provoking childhood environments such as urban cities and neighborhoods upon the development of children (Ewart & Suchday, 2002). In the 18-item questionnaire, participants are asked to report the prevalence of certain experiences in their lives. These experiences are divided into two categories labeled Neighborhood Disorder and Exposure to Violence (Ewart & Suchday, 2002). Participants chose from one of four responses to each item in order to indicate their experience, such as “Never,” “Once,” “A few times,” or “Often” for questions about the frequency of certain events and “None,” “Some,” “About half,” or “Most” for questions of prevalence (Ewart & Suchday, 2002).

Researchers also measured personality traits of participants using the revised HEXACO Personality Inventory, a six factor personality assessment (Lee & Ashton, 2018). HEXACO is a self-report evaluation that measures one's levels of honesty/humility, emotionality, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience (Lee & Ashton, 2018). In this study, participants completed the 100-item version featuring statements relating to personality characteristics to which each individual indicated how much each statement reflected his or her personality (Lee & Ashton, 2018). In response to each question, participants gave a score from 1, meaning "strongly disagree," to 5, meaning "strongly agree" (Lee & Ashton, 2018). Some questions were reverse-keyed. Four questions also related to altruism as a facet of personality (Lee & Ashton, 2018).

Results

Multiple regression analysis was used to test if early childhood trauma significantly predicted participants' tendency to gossip. As a whole, childhood adversity did not predict tendency to gossip ($R^2 = .012$, $F(2,448) = 2.788$, $p < .063$). While it was found that exposure to violence did not predict tendency to gossip ($\beta = -.053$, $p < .082$), neighborhood disorder significantly predicted tendency to gossip about physical appearance ($\beta = .037$, $p < .019$). Similarly, general childhood adversity did not predict tendency to gossip about achievement ($R^2 = .012$, $F(2,448) = 2.720$, $p < .067$). It was found that neighborhood disorder significantly predicted aggressive tendencies ($\beta = .036$, $p < .023$), while exposure to violence did not ($\beta = -.039$, $p < .196$). However, childhood adversity did not predict gossip about social information ($R^2 = .008$, $F(2,448) = 1.726$, $p < .179$). Neither exposure to violence ($\beta = -.050$, $p < .073$) nor neighborhood disorder ($\beta = .014$, $p < .330$) predicted aggressive tendencies.

Multiple regression analysis was used to test if the personality traits significantly predicted participants' ratings of aggression. The results of the regression for tendency to gossip about physical appearance indicated the two predictors explained 18.9% of the variance ($R^2 = .189$, $F(7,460) = 15.364$, $p < .000$). It was found that extraversion significantly predicted aggressive tendencies ($\beta = .443$, $p < .000$) as did agreeableness ($\beta = -.486$, $p < .000$). The results of the regression for tendency to gossip about achievement indicated the two predictors explained 12.6% of the variance ($R^2 = .126$, $F(7,460) = 9.505$, $p < .000$). It was found that extraversion significantly predicted aggressive tendencies ($\beta = .331$, $p < .001$) as did agreeableness ($\beta = -.456$, $p < .000$). The results of the regression for tendency to gossip about social information indicated the two predictors explained 23.3% of the variance ($R^2 = .233$, $F(7,460) = 20.017$, $p < .000$). It was found that extraversion significantly predicted aggressive tendencies ($\beta = .503$, $p < .000$) as did agreeableness ($\beta = -.571$, $p < .000$).

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Variables with Childhood Adversity as the Independent Variable*

Variable	M	SD	F	P
Physical Attractiveness Gossip	4.129	.192	2.788	.063
Achievement Gossip	4.012	.191	2.72	.067
Social Information Gossip	2.153	.176	1.726	.179

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics for Variables with Personality as the Independent Variable*

Variable	M	SD	F	P
Physical Attractiveness Gossip	18.904	.612	15.364	.000
Achievement Gossip	12.638	.636	9.505	.000
Social Information Gossip	19.717	.547	20.017	.000

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the effects of adverse childhood experiences and personality traits on rates of intrasexual competition as adults. Researchers found that higher rates of aggressive tendencies were not associated with participants who disclosed general negative childhood experiences. However, participants who reported experiencing neighborhood disorder during childhood did exhibit higher rates of competitive behavior, specifically tendency to gossip about the physical appearances and achievements of others but not social information.

Furthermore, the results of the study indicated that participants who exhibited high levels of extraversion and low levels of agreeableness displayed higher levels of intrasexual competition, thus supporting the original hypothesis. Participants who encountered neighborhood disorder as children were more likely to gossip about the physical appearances and achievements as others as a means of intrasexual competition. Although this type of childhood disruption is not specifically relationship-oriented, previous research indicates that individuals who experience neighborhood disorder and exposure to violence are likely to participate in sexual relationships at earlier ages (Upchurch, Aneshensel, Mudgal, & Sucoff, 2001; Upchurch, Aneshensel, Sucoff, & Levy-Storms, 2000). Furthermore, onset of sexual activity can be delayed for children in disordered neighborhoods who have parents who make more decisions about children's personal lives as opposed to parents who set few rules and limits, indicating that involved, positively-attached parents may raise more sexually-responsible children (Roche & Leventhal, 2009).

Furthermore, associations between personality traits of extraversion and agreeableness and tendency to gossip were found as well. As hypothesized, individuals demonstrating high levels of extraversion were more likely to engage in gossip about physical appearance, achievement, and social information. Key features of extraversion include confidence, high

energy, and a strong preference for social activities, causing highly extraverted individuals to purposefully seek out social connections (Lee & Ashton, 2018). Increased interpersonal interactions could lead to more opportunities to gossip about other individuals. Thus, individuals who exhibit high levels of extraversion may be more likely to use gossip as a strategy to weaken opponents when competing for mates. These findings are consistent with previous research, which has found that highly extraverted individuals may be more likely to engage in intrasexual competition as well as relationship infidelity (Buunk & Fisher, 2009; Schmitt, 2004).

Conversely, participants who exhibited low levels of agreeableness were also more likely to engage in gossip about personal appearance, achievement, and social information. This is supported by other research, which has also found links between disagreeableness, infidelity, and sexual promiscuity (Buunk & Fisher, 2009; Schmitt, 2004). In HEXACO, agreeableness is posited against anger, indicating that highly agreeable people are non-judgmental, highly forgiving, and cooperative, while individuals low in agreeableness are often critical of others, stubborn, less trusting, and easily angered (Lee & Ashton, 2018). This may cause non-agreeable individuals to be more competitive when attempting to attract mates because they are less inclined to submit to others or consider the feelings of others. Research has found that individuals low in agreeableness also tend to engage in more relationship infidelity than those who are highly agreeable, perhaps due to having less concern for the feelings of others (Buunk & Fisher, 2009).

One limitation of this study was the specificity of the questionnaire measuring adverse childhood experiences. Childhood trauma is a broad category featuring many types of adverse experiences, including poverty, physical and sexual abuse, and neglect. However, this study solely focused on neighborhood disorder and exposure to violence. It would be beneficial for

future studies to examine other types of adverse childhood experiences more specifically in order to see their effects on intrasexual competition and mating strategies. Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine links between different personality traits and adverse childhood experiences. Research examining these potential connections could provide valuable knowledge concerning to what degree childhood trauma affects personality or conversely how personality affects one's response to adverse childhood experiences.

The results of this study provide interesting information about the connections between adverse childhood experiences, personality, and intrasexually competitive mating strategies. Because childhood experiences play a significant role in the development of an individual, it is important to understand how these experiences affect people as adults. Through understanding how intrasexual competition may be predicted by adverse childhood experiences such as neighborhood disorder and exposure to violence, researchers may be able to see more specifically how these early disadvantageous circumstances negatively affect individuals' interpersonal and sexual behavior and perhaps develop further ways to prevent the pervasiveness of adverse childhood experiences in society.

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