The Impact of Child Neglect and Socioeconomic Adversity on Self-Representation in Young Children

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Prior research has shown detrimental effects of child neglect on many aspects of self-development.

• Young neglected children demonstrate deficits in autonomy and self-development.
• Young neglected children also show more shame in response to failure and less pride in response to success.

Measures

An administrative puppet interview adapted from Casidy (1984) was administered. The puppet interview assesses the self-representation of young children who lack advanced verbal and self-reflection skills necessary for a standard interview. Strategic questions were answered through the use of a hand puppet named Pippin, which was an anthropomorphic figure allowing measurements to open imperfection, or the child’s willingness to admit to flaws.

Procedure

Trained interviewers administered the puppet interviews to children at ages 5 and 6. Interviewers and research assistants followed the interviews were blind to the care-giving experiences of the child. The child’s responses were transcribed verbatim. Eight trained research assistants coded responses to 20 individual items on each interview using specific coding criteria adapted from Casidy (1986), Nilsenouarm (1996). Global ratings of affect and openness were also provided on a scale from 1 to 3, with inter-classified each interview as reflecting one of four self-representation categories: Negative Open (NO), Negative Perfect (NP), Positive Open (PO), and Positive Perfect (PP). Inter-rater reliability was high. Kappa ranged from .51 to .60 on the individual items (with a mean value of .77). Kappa > .71 for the self-representation classifications. Correlations between ratings on the global ratings were .80 for affect and .76 for openness. Each interview was coded separately by two research assistants, and discrepancies were resolved through consensus.

Results

These environmental profiles were associated with self-representation categories. Specifically, children raised in non-neglectful and relatively high SES environments were more likely to have Negative Open representations and least likely to have Positive Perfect representations. This detailed analysis revealed that children in these environments displayed significantly greater openness in self-representation at age 6 than children coming from either of the other two environmental profiles (F = 15.5, p < .006).

Patterns of Self-Representation over Time

The global ratings of affect and openness at age 5 and 6 were entered as the variables. This approach resulted in the identification of two groups of children whose profiles across the four clusters variables were similar to each other and different from members of the other group (see Table 2). The specific profiles indicate that there are likely two types of self-representation categories for young children as follows:

(1) Positive affect combined with low openness to imperfection
(2) Relatively low positive affect combined with relatively high openness to imperfection

Context of Neglect / Context:

Neglected child was associated with a broader context of socioeconomic status.

• Fewer adults
• Lower household income
• Low maternal education

Prediction of Self-Representation

Neglected child did not predict either global ratings or self-representation categories. Since child neglect occurred in a broader context of socioeconomic adversity, we conducted a cluster analysis to identify naturally occurring environmental profiles. The severity of child neglect (individual and family), the number of adults and children in the home, maternal education, household income, and SES were entered as variables. This approach resulted in the identification of three environmental profiles (see Table 1). The profiles reflected the following distinct patterns:

(1) High positive affect combined with low openness to imperfection
(2) No child neglect and low SES
(3) No child neglect and relatively high SES

Discussion

Environmental adversity predicted patterns of self-representation.

Child neglect occurs in a broader context of environmental adversity. Identification of three specific environmental profiles was critical in determining the effects of adversity on self-representation in young children. Neglected, non-neglectful and relatively high SES environments were associated with less positive and more open self-representation.

Examination of specific aspects of the environment confirmed that both child neglect and socioeconomic adversity predicted patterns of self-representation.

Maternal education may have a unique role in the development of self-representation in young children. Adolescent level may be associated with cognitive and economic resources that affect one’s ability to provide adequate care and attention to children.

Some patterns of self-representation appear to be more adaptive than others.

Environmental adversity predicted patterns of self-representation. The evidence suggests that less adverse, more supportive environments are associated with the low positive, more open patterns of self-representation. This finding leads us to conclude that the pattern of self-representation that is characterized by significantly greater positive affect is in fact less risky. These patterns may be considered to be more adaptive, while the less positive, more open pattern of self-representation may be considered to be more maladaptive.

With this in mind, the less positive, more open pattern of self-representation may reflect a defense mechanism that helps children avoid the discomfort of acknowledging negative aspects of themselves and their environment.

Neglected children may have a unique role in the development of self-representation. Specifically, children raised in non-neglectful, relatively high SES environments were more likely to display the low affect, high openness pattern of self-representation. Neglected children in less supportive environments may have a positive (primary) role that helps them avoid the discomfort of acknowledging negative aspects of themselves and their environment.

Neglected children also tend to be more socially controlled, providing fewer opportunities for social comparison. The result of this lack of prior school entry could contribute to unrealistically positive self-perceptions.

Environmental adversity predicted may actually represent a more accurate and socially competent that could indicate a healthier developmental outcome.

Longitudinal research is needed to confirm which pattern of self-representation is associated with healthier, more adaptive outcomes.

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