Maltreatment and Internal Representations of Relationships: Core Relationship Themes in the Narratives of Abused and Neglected Preschoolers

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Abstract

This study examined whether the predominance of particular themes in maltreated pre-schoolers’ stories about relationships is related to type of maltreatment they experienced. The MacArthur Story Stem Battery was administered to 49 maltreated and 22 non-maltreated children. Children’s representations of self and other were extracted from the resulting stories using the Core Conflictual Relationship Theme Method. Significant differences were found among the physically abused, sexually abused, neglected, and comparison subgroups with respect to the predominance of specific relationship themes in their stories. Both physically abused and neglected children represented the self as angry and opposing others more frequently than non-maltreated children. Neglected children represented others as hurt, sad, or anxious more frequently than both abused and non-maltreated children. Compared with all other children, sexually abused children represented others more frequently as liking them, and compared with physically abused children, expressed more frequent wishes to be close to others. This study supports the hypothesis that maltreated children’s internal representations of relationships are related to their experiences of specific types of maltreatment.

Keywords: child maltreatment; relationship schemas; narratives

People approach new relationships with models of how they will proceed—road maps of what can be expected from the self and others, and what the likely outcomes will be of interacting with a new person. Bowlby (1969), Stern (1995), and a host of other developmentalists have postulated the existence of such models. These models, or relationship schemas, generally include: (1) representations of the self, (2) representations of the other person, and (3) an interpersonal script that links self and other (Baldwin, 1992). Internal models of relationships summarize an immense quantity of data and in this way reduce the complexity of the interpersonal world to a manageable subset of important information. (Crittenden, 1992b). Empirical research has demonstrated
that these mental road maps of relationships can be reliably identified (Crits-Christoph, Luborsky, Dahl, & Popp, 1988b) and are relatively stable over time (Kulik, Sledge, & Mahler, 1986; Swann & Ely, 1984). Although most research on relationship schemas has been conducted with adults, studies have demonstrated the existence and stability of such schemas in young children (Luborsky et al., 1996; Oppenheim, Emde, & Warren, 1997).

How models of interpersonal relationships develop is a question of theoretical interest and practical importance. Developmental theorists point to the early experiences of children with their caregivers as primary influences. The psychoanalyst and pediatrician, D.W. Winnicott (1965b), wrote eloquently of the emergence of the child’s conception of self and other from a mother-child dyad that is intimately intertwined. Sroufe (1990) conceives of the origins of the self in similar terms, describing the self as an internally organized cluster of attitudes, expectations, meanings, and feelings that emerge from an organized care-giving matrix. According to many developmental theories, the self is organized and reorganized repeatedly as the child matures biologically and psychologically (Cicchetti & Schneider-Rosen, 1986; Erikson, 1959). Relationship schemas form an integral part of this self-organization.

The particular environment and the specific caregivers that surround the developing child will, over time, shape the child’s models of the self in relationships. The abuse and neglect of children involve extreme distortions in the caregiving environment in which the development of these models takes place (Rogosch, Cicchetti, Shields, & Toth, 1995). Children use previous experiences of maltreatment to construct road maps of relationships that predict similar experiences in the future and incorporate methods for coping with the expected dangers (Crittenden, 1992a). These models serve important self-protective functions—for example, when a physically abused child sees his role as behaving with extreme compliance in order to manage the real threat of violence from a parent who is intolerant of the child’s independent initiatives.

Such models, based on past painful experience, may not be applicable to many of the child’s new relationships. Under normal circumstances, children develop the capacity to revise and refine their images of relationships based on new information and new experiences with others. They become capable of constructing and evaluating alternative explanations for what they perceive in relationships and can tailor their responses accordingly. Bowlby (1980) and Crittenden (1985) have noted, however, that maltreatment may disrupt the process of revision and refinement of relationship schemas. The insensitive behavior of caregivers may lead a child to process information defensively and to exclude important information about relationships from perception—for example, when a child screens out awareness of her own anger or fear because such emotions are intolerable to the caregiver on whom she depends.

Even if the maltreated child does not screen out important information, the risks associated with trying new responses may be so great that the child cannot experiment with new behaviors. In this way, the maltreated child may be left with fewer possible responses to what occurs in new relationships, resulting in models that are rigid and likely to perpetuate negative experiences in relationships. Inflexible internal models of relationships may be important mediating links between child maltreatment and disturbed interpersonal behavior. Developmental theorists have long espoused the view that people are not simply shaped by their experiences with early caregivers, but that they go on to actively shape subsequent relationships by imposing earlier
models onto new experiences (Bretherton, 1995; Crittenden, 1990; Crittenden, 1985; Crittenden, 1992b; Fairbairn, 1952; Main & Goldwyn, 1984; Winnicott, 1965b). Harbor ing inflexible expectations of what others will be like in interactions, maltreated children may approach new people in ways that provoke old, expected behaviors, resulting in the repetition of disturbed interpersonal relationship patterns and making maladaptive patterns of relating difficult to change.

In fact, maltreated children have been found to generalize negative representational models to new situations and relationship figures, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will perpetuate their relationship histories (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1991; Toth, Cicchetti, Macfie, & Emde, 1997; Toth & Cicchetti, 1996). Maltreated children are frequently re-victimized in subsequent relationships, and in identifying with the abuser, many adopt a victimizing stance toward other children in social settings (Main & George, 1985; Troy & Sroufe, 1987). Both of these phenomena may be indications of how internalized models of relationships play an important role in the intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment (Bowlby, 1984; Egeland, Jacobvitz, & Sroufe, 1988; Main & Goldwyn, 1984). We know that only a subset of maltreated children go on to become abusive parents (Cicchetti & Aber, 1980; Kaufman & Zigler, 1989), and it is possible that children who internalize victim-victimizer relationship schemas are more at risk for this outcome (Buchsbaum, Toth, Clyman, Cicchetti, & Emde, 1992).

In clinical settings, maltreated children commonly express the belief that they are to blame for their caregivers’ insensitive behaviors. Although some of these children harbor negative images of those who mistreat them, many idealize their abusive or neglectful parents and see themselves as responsible for solving family problems. Empirical research using projective techniques lends support to these observations. For example, McCrone and his colleagues (1994) found two recurrent themes in the stories of young (ages 6–8) children: 1) that parents are justified in their maltreatment of children because children are always to blame and deserve to be punished; and 2) that children can reciprocate the kind initiatives of adults, but adults are more often unresponsive to children’s kind initiatives. Across a number of studies, maltreated children have been found to see themselves as bad or unworthy, while they characterize their caretakers as unavailable, rejecting, and/or exploitive (Dean, Malik, Richards, & Stringer, 1986; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1991; Macfie et al., 1999; Stovall & Craig, 1990; Toth et al., 1997).

Examining links between maltreatment and the types of working models of relationships internalized by maltreated children can enhance our understanding of the ways that internal models of relationships develop and of the psychological sequelae of child maltreatment. To date, research on child maltreatment has focused more on external behavior than on the inner world of the maltreated child. However, in the last decade, researchers have begun to examine the effect of maltreatment on how children develop representational models of caregivers, the self, and the self in relation to others (Cicchetti & Barnett, 1991; Crittenden, 1990; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1991; Toth, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1992).

One powerful technique for gaining access to internal models of relationships is the analysis of narratives in which people describe their interactions with others. Although adults can provide such narratives when asked to do so (e.g., ‘Tell me about the last time you and your friend got together’), young children are less capable of this kind of explicit description in response to direct questions. The advent of doll-play techniques for eliciting stories about family life and interpersonal dilemmas has
allowed for systematic collection and study of children’s narratives. Storytelling techniques gather sensitive data about children’s inner worlds that may be unavailable from more directive clinical interviews of children. Buchsbaum et al. (1992) remark upon the frankness with which children share stories of maltreatment using dolls to complete story stems: ‘The same child who answered ‘fine’ when queried about his relationship with his maltreating mother during a clinical interview session, elaborated on themes of maternal neglect, rejection, and punitiveness throughout the course of the narrative technique’ (p. 617).

A question that arises in using storytelling techniques concerns what it is that children’s story completions represent. These techniques typically ask children to complete narratives about story characters, not about themselves or their family members. Recurrent themes in children’s stories are taken to represent internalized images of relationships, regardless of the extent to which they reflect the child’s actual personal experience. Bretherton et al. point out that story completion tasks may elicit a child’s developing understanding of family roles in general, along with representations of the child’s actual individual family experience (Bretherton, Prentiss, & Ridgeway, 1990b). In addition, internalized images may have a certain amount of fluidity—a character in a story may reflect not only a child’s representation of the self, but also a representation of others, or even an ideal image of how the child would like him/herself or others to be. Dividing narratives into those parts that represent the self and those that represent the other is, to some extent, an artificial distinction. Yet research has shown that in analyzing young children’s stories, it is possible to identify repetitive themes on the part of the speaker that are distinct from themes expressed by those with whom the speaker interacts (Luborsky et al., 1996). Moreover, images of self and other in these stories have been linked with parental reports of specific types of behavior (Oppenheim et al., 1997).

The MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB) (Bretherton, Oppenheim, Buchsbaum, Emde, & MacArthurNarrativeGroup, 1990a) is a storytelling technique that has been used in a number of studies with both normative and atypical populations to assess children’s psychological development (Buchsbaum & Emde, 1990; Macfie et al., 1999; Oppenheim et al., 1997; Warren, Oppenheim, & Emde, 1996). In the MSSB, children are asked to complete story beginnings that are presented by an examiner in the form of doll play vignettes. The stories depict a range of emotionally-laden family interactions and were designed to be personally relevant to the lives of children. They have been found to engage children emotionally in the task of storytelling (see description in Methods section below).

In addition to providing a window on the child’s internal representations of relationships, the MSSB may also provide information about the child’s actual caregiving environment and behavior in that environment. For example, Oppenheim and his colleagues (1997) found that, in telling stories about family life, preschoolers’ more negative and fewer positive representations of their mothers were correlated with mothers’ reports of their own subjective psychological distress. They also found that, controlling for mother’s level of psychological distress, five year-olds who told stories with more positive and fewer negative representations of their mothers were rated by their mothers as having fewer externalizing behavior problems than those children for whom the balance of maternal representations was more negative.

Toth et al. (1997) used the MacArthur Story Stem Battery (MSSB) to examine positive and negative representations of self and other in a sample of physically abused, sexually abused, and neglected five-year-olds. The results of this study shed light on both
behavior and internal models of self and other. These investigators found that mal-
treated children told stories with more negative representations of self and mother than
did a comparison group of non-maltreated children, but that the two groups did not
differ on the frequency of positive self- and mother-representations. The study findings
also suggested that representational models of self were related to interactions with an
unfamiliar adult—specifically, that maltreated preschoolers were more controlling and
less responsive to the examiner than were non-maltreated children.

The present study is an effort to move beyond distinctions between positive and
negative representations of self and other in order to characterize with greater speci-
ficity the types of relationship models internalized by maltreated children. We exam-
ined the frequency with which specific relationship themes were present in the
MacArthur Story Stem Batteries of maltreated and non-maltreated five-year-olds.
Stories about relationships were studied through the lens of a widely used empirical
method for categorizing interpersonal themes according to standard categories gleaned
from analysis of a broad range of narratives about individuals’ dealings with others
(Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1998).

The current study examined whether the predominance of particular relation-
ship themes in a subject’s stories is related to type of maltreatment. Based on theory
and prior research (Crittenden, 1992a; Dean et al., 1986; Fairbairn, 1952; Macfie
et al., 1999; Stovall & Craig, 1990; Toth et al., 1997), it was hypothesized that mal-
treated children would express images of self and other that were distinct from
those of non-maltreated children, and that these images would be generalized across
narratives about caregivers and peers. It was hypothesized that several themes
would emerge in the narratives of maltreated children: the sense of the self as bad or
angry, the image of others as hurtful, images of the self as distressed, and images
of others as helpful and caring. We specifically predicted that physically abused chil-
dren would be less desirous of interpersonal closeness and would see themselves as
bad and angry more frequently than non-maltreated children, and that neglected chil-
dren would see themselves as distressed more frequently than their non-maltreated
counterparts.

Methods

Participants

This study is a secondary analysis of data from a subset of a sample of preschool chil-
dren studied by Toth and her colleagues (1997). Participants in this study consisted of
71 low-SES preschool children with a mean age of 5.10 years (range 4.33 to 5.8 years,
SD .34). Of these, 62% of the sample was male and 52% was of minority status,
including 34% African American and 17% Hispanic children. The 49 participants in
the maltreated group attended a preschool for children who had been identified by the
Department of Social Services (DSS) in that state as in need of intervention due to
concerns related to child abuse and neglect. These children had experienced a variety
of forms of maltreatment, including sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect. Seventy-one percent of the maltreated group had experienced more than one type of
maltreatment, which is consistent with the percentages of multiply-abused children
reported in the literature (Cicchetti & Rizley, 1981).

Twenty-two comparison children were recruited from families receiving Aid to
Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), because the majority of the maltreating
families were receiving this supplement. The non-maltreatment status of the comparison group was verified by checking the DSS State Central Child Abuse Registry after having obtained the families’ consent to do so. Maltreated and non-maltreated children were comparable with respect to age, gender, minority status, number of adults in the home, family income, family education level, and child’s receptive vocabulary (as measured by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test—Revised) (Dunn & Dunn, 1981).

In the maltreated group, subtypes of maltreatment were assessed through coding of each child’s clinical, medical, and DSS records using operational definitions contained in the Barnett, Manly, and Cicchetti (1993) maltreatment classification system to determine the presence or absence of neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. All coding was completed by Ph.D. level psychologists or doctoral students in clinical psychology who had no prior knowledge of the child or family and who were not aware of the hypotheses of this study.

Because the majority of children had experienced more than one type of maltreatment, subtype classifications were made based on a hierarchical system: children who experienced only neglect were classified as Neglected (NE, n = 9), those who had experienced physical abuse with or without neglect were classified as Physically Abused (PA, n = 27), and those who had experienced sexual abuse with or without physical abuse and/or neglect were classified as Sexually Abused (SA, n = 13). There were gender differences in the composition of the maltreatment groups. There were more boys (n = 21) than girls (n = 6) in the physically abused group, and more girls (n = 10) than boys (n = 3) in the sexually abused group. These differences are consistent with the gender balance of physically and sexually abused groups of children in the general population (DHHS, 1988). In addition, there were more boys (n = 8) than girls (n = 1) in the neglected subgroup. By contrast, the non-maltreated comparison group was evenly divided among boys and girls (11 boys and 11 girls). Therefore, gender was co-varied in all analyses.

Procedures

MacArthur Story-Stem Battery (MSSB). All children were administered 10 story stems selected from the MacArthur Story Stem Battery (Bretherton et al., 1990a) in individual sessions lasting approximately 45 minutes. Sessions were conducted by one of two female examiners and were videotaped through a one-way mirror. The MSSB contains story stems that describe a range of emotionally-laden family interactions addressing content areas including child injury, oppositionality, exclusion, parental conflict, stealing, and prohibition in the face of temptation. (For scripts of the MSSB stories, see Buchsbaum, et al. (1992).) For example, in one story, the child comes into the room as mother accuses father of losing her car keys, father denies it, and an argument ensues.

The examiner presented the beginning of each story to the child using a combination of family dolls including a mother, a father, and two same-sex children. The gender and race of the dolls were matched to that of each participant, and the examiner handed the participant one of the child dolls with which to act out the story with the other dolls. Narratives were always presented in the same order, and for each narrative the child was instructed to ‘listen to the beginning of the story, and then finish it in any way you would like to.’ In introducing each story, the examiner spoke with dramatic inflections in a different voice for each character, moving dolls and props...
around as though in a play. After every story beginning, the examiner asked the child
to ‘show me and tell me what happens now.’ Standardized probes, such as ‘Does any-
thing else happen in the story?’, were used to facilitate the child’s storytelling. An
initial story about a birthday party was used to establish rapport and to familiarize the
child with the procedure, and was not included in coding or data analysis.

**Core Conflictual Relationship Theme (CCRT) Method.** Videotaped sessions were
coded using an adaptation of the Core Conflictual Relationship Theme (CCRT)
Method (Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1990). The CCRT Method is a widely-used
assessment system for reliably extracting relationship themes from narratives about
interpersonal interactions (Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1989). It has been empirically
demonstrated in the narratives of adults that the CCRT Method guides the delineation
of relationship elements that have considerable stability over time and across rela-
tionships, and there is good evidence for the reliability and validity of this instrument
(Crits-Christoph et al., 1988b; Levine & Luborsky, 1981; Luborsky & Crits-Christoph,
1988; Luborsky, Crits-Christoph, & Mellon, 1986). In a review of interrater reliability
coding relationship themes across eight CCRT studies (Luborsky & Diguer, 1998),
mean weighted kappas were: wishes .60, responses of others .68, and responses of self
.71. Relationship themes as measured by the CCRT Method have been correlated
with accuracy of interpretations in psychodynamic psychotherapy (Crits-Christoph,
Cooper, & Luborsky, 1988a), with mastery of central conflicts in psychotherapy
(Grenyer & Luborsky, 1996), and with other measures of central relationship patterns
(Perry, 1989). The CCRT Method has been used primarily in the study of adults in
psychotherapy (Crits-Christoph et al., 1988a; Grenyer & Luborsky, 1996; Luborsky,
1984). However, it has more recently been used to study psychological development
in non-clinical samples (Waldinger et al., 2000).

CCRT scoring begins with the identification of relationship episodes (REs) in inter-
view material, in which the subject speaks of an interaction with another person in
sufficient detail to enable scoring of specific components. Within each RE, the CCRT
rater identifies the types of wishes (Ws), responses from others (ROs), and responses
from the self (RSs) in the interaction with the other. Each wish, RO, and RS is then
categorized using a set of standard categories, with both the best-fitting and next-best-
fitting categories recorded for each. The 30 or more standard categories used for
wishes, responses of other, and responses of self are grouped into eight clusters of
Ws, ROs, and RSs respectively (Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1990). Studying a group
of middle-class preschool children, Luborsky and his colleagues found that relation-
ship themes could be reliably extracted by applying an adaptation of the CCRT Method
to the stories told by preschool children who were administered the MSSB (Luborsky
et al., 1996).

Four undergraduate and master’s level psychology students were trained to code the
videotaped MSSB stories reliably, using a manualized adaptation of the CCRT Method
developed specifically for direct coding of videotaped material (Hillygus, Chao,
Harris, & Waldinger, 1997) (Manual available from first author on request.) Prior to
this study, coding of narratives using the CCRT Method had been carried out almost
exclusively using transcriptions of audio- or videotapes. More recently, investigators
have demonstrated that coding directly from videotape is no less reliable than coding
from transcripts (Zander, Strack, Cierpka, Reich, & Staats, 1995).

Coders were unaware of all background variables of the participants, including mal-
treatment, and were unaware of the overall purpose of the study. Children did not iden-
tify themselves as maltreated or non-maltreated in any of the videotaped stories. Each
story in the MSSB was treated as a relationship episode, and coders rated only those stories in which there was sufficient detail to allow for rating of an interaction between two characters. Where the primary interaction was between a child and a parent, the child’s responses were treated as the ‘self’, and the parents’ responses as the ‘other’ in the relationship episodes. Where the primary interaction was between the two children, Dick or Jane (the main protagonist in each story) was treated as the ‘self’ and the other sibling was treated as the ‘other’. (For an example of how stories are coded using this method, see Appendix A.)

Each identified W, RO, and RS was coded for the best-fitting of 16 standard categories, and where appropriate, the next-best-fitting category. (The 30+ wishes, ROs, and RSs in the Luborsky manual were condensed to 16 to facilitate coding.) These standard categories were collapsed into clusters, or broader themes—e.g., the wish to be close to others—according to the method outlined by Luborsky (1990). In this system, each component of a relationship episode is finally coded as one of 8 wishes, 8 responses of other, and 8 responses of self. Luborsky and his colleagues derived standard categories and the more condensed clusters from analysis of the relationship narratives of a sample of adults (Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1990). Because several clusters were used very infrequently in coding the children’s stories, infrequently-used clusters were collapsed into related ones, resulting in the 7 wish clusters, 6 RO clusters, and 6 RS clusters listed in Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. CCRT Categories (clusters) Used to Code MSSB Narratives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>WISHES</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1—I wish to assert myself and be independent</td>
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<tr>
<td>2—I wish to oppose or hurt the other person</td>
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<tr>
<td>3—I wish to be controlled by the other and not responsible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4—I wish to avoid conflict, to not be hurt</td>
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<tr>
<td>5—I wish to be close to, helped by, and loved by the other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6—I wish to feel good and happy</td>
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<tr>
<td>7—I wish to be good (obedient), to help others</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>RESPONSES FROM OTHERS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1—the other is independent, happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2—the other is controlling, strict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3—the other is hurt, sad, or anxious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4—the other is angry, rejecting, bad, or hurts me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5—the other is helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6—the other likes me, is understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>RESPONSES OF SELF</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1—I am helpful, obedient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2—I am ashamed or anxious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3—I am angry, oppose the other, am hurt, or am out of control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4—I feel happy, liked, comfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5—I am independent, self-controlled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6—I am helpless, dependent</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Interrater reliability was calculated on clusters of Ws, ROs, and RSs using kappa (k) to correct for chance agreement (Cohen, 1988). Reliability calculations were based on 5 story stem batteries containing 39 codable relationship episodes with a total of 60 wishes, 84 ROs, and 104 RSs. Average results among the four coders were: wishes, $k = .71$; ROs, $k = .56$; and RSs, $k = .67$. These results are comparable to those obtained in other CCRT studies (Crits-Christoph et al., 1988b; Luborsky & Diguer, 1994). In all, twelve tapes were rated by multiple raters for purposes of achieving interrater reliability and preventing coder drift. For tapes coded by more than one judge, only the ratings from the rater with the highest average reliability with other judges were used for the analysis.

Results

The number of narratives coded for each participant varied for two reasons: some children did not complete all doll play narratives in the MSSB protocol, and not all completed narratives met the criteria for codability using the CCRT system. The average number of REs coded per subject was 6.8 (range 2–10, s.d. = 1.9). The number of codable stories told did not differ by maltreatment group or by gender. However, rates of story stem completion did differ by maltreatment group in the case of Stories #3 (Band-Aid Story) and #7 (Grocery Store Story). Story #3 involves a moral dilemma in which the children are prohibited from touching anything on the bathroom shelf while mother is away, and one child cuts himself and asks the other to get a bandage from that shelf. Physically and sexually abused children completed this story with significantly greater frequency than their neglected and non-abused counterparts (completion rates were PA = 89%, SA = 92%, NE = 44%, CO = 64%; chi-square = 11.1, df = 3, p < .05). It is possible that the physical injury or the threat of punishment in this story was stimulating to abused children in a way that resulted in more consistent completion of the story. Story #7 involves a scenario in which mother prohibits the child from taking a candy bar in the grocery store, and the child steals a candy bar and walks away. Again, physically and sexually abused children completed this story with significantly greater frequency than their neglected and non-abused counterparts (completion rates were PA = 100%, SA = 100%, NE = 67%, CO = 64%; chi-square = 16.8, df = 3, p < .001). As with the Band-Aid story, the fear of maternal retribution for stealing a candy bar may have been stimulating to abused children in a way that prompted them to complete the story with greater frequency. Completion rates for the other 8 story stems did not differ significantly by maltreatment group.

To examine the prevalence of particular themes expressed in a child’s stories, the proportion of stories that contained at least one mention of each of the 19 cluster themes was calculated. (For example, if a child told 10 stories and 6 contained the wish to be close, then the proportion for that wish was calculated to be 0.60). A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to assess the effect of maltreatment type and gender on the prevalence of the 19 CCRT themes. Gender was included as a between-subjects factor in the MANOVA because of the uneven distribution of boys and girls among the maltreatment subgroups. The MANOVA revealed a significant relationship between type of maltreatment and CCRT themes, Wilks’ approximate F (57, 138) = 2.10, p < .001. There was no significant multivariate relationship between gender and CCRT themes, nor was there a significant interaction between gender and maltreatment type. In addition, the prevalence of particular themes
did not differ by minority status. (All tests of significance reported here and throughout the results section are two-tailed tests.)

Post hoc Tukey’s analyses were conducted to elucidate the relationships between maltreatment types and the proportion of each child’s stories in which they expressed individual CCRT themes. As stated in the introduction, our original hypotheses predicted differences among maltreatment subgroups with respect to four specific CCRT themes (the sense of the self as bad or angry, the image of others as hurtful, images of the self as distressed, and images of others as helpful and caring). These particular themes were singled out based on a distillation of findings from prior research, but no prior research has systematically applied the broad range of categories included in the CCRT system to the examination of relationship themes. We were therefore interested in possible group differences in the frequency with which children expressed any of the 19 CCRT themes. We chose to use post hoc Tukey’s analyses because, following up the statistically significant MANOVA, this technique allows for examination of group differences on all 19 themes. The results of these analyses are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Proportion of Children’s Stories Containing Specific CCRT Themes by Maltreatment Subgroup*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CCRT Theme</th>
<th>Physical Abuse mean (sd)</th>
<th>Sexual Abuse mean (sd)</th>
<th>Neglect mean (sd)</th>
<th>Comparison mean (sd)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wishes</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1—to assert myself and be independent</td>
<td>.13 (.02)</td>
<td>.15 (.03)</td>
<td>.08 (.03)</td>
<td>.08 (.02)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2—to oppose or hurt the other person</td>
<td>.41 (.05)</td>
<td>.38 (.07)</td>
<td>.47 (.07)</td>
<td>.29 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3—to be controlled and not responsible</td>
<td>.05 (.02)</td>
<td>.04 (.03)</td>
<td>.05 (.03)</td>
<td>.05 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4—to avoid conflict, to not be hurt</td>
<td>.21 (.03)</td>
<td>.24 (.04)</td>
<td>.17 (.04)</td>
<td>.15 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5—to be close to or helped by the other</td>
<td>.15 (.04)a</td>
<td>.34 (.06)b</td>
<td>.28 (.06)</td>
<td>.26 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6—to feel good and happy</td>
<td>.19 (.04)*</td>
<td>.17 (.05)</td>
<td>.18 (.05)</td>
<td>.30 (.03)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7—to be good (obedient), to help others</td>
<td>.15 (.04)</td>
<td>.12 (.05)</td>
<td>.08 (.05)</td>
<td>.14 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responses of Others</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1—the other is independent, happy</td>
<td>.15 (.03)</td>
<td>.12 (.05)</td>
<td>.13 (.05)</td>
<td>.21 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2—the other is controlling, strict</td>
<td>.58 (.05)</td>
<td>.59 (.07)</td>
<td>.49 (.07)</td>
<td>.42 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3—the other is hurt, sad, or anxious</td>
<td>.11 (.03)a</td>
<td>.05 (.04)c</td>
<td>.23 (.04)b</td>
<td>.06 (.03)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4—the other is angry, rejecting, hurts me</td>
<td>.44 (.04)</td>
<td>.42 (.06)</td>
<td>.43 (.06)</td>
<td>.38 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5—the other is helpful</td>
<td>.13 (.03)</td>
<td>.15 (.04)</td>
<td>.13 (.04)</td>
<td>.13 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6—the other likes me, is understanding</td>
<td>.16 (.04)a</td>
<td>.34 (.06)b</td>
<td>.20 (.06)c</td>
<td>.19 (.04)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responses of Self</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1—I am helpful, obedient</td>
<td>.37 (.04)</td>
<td>.40 (.06)</td>
<td>.25 (.06)</td>
<td>.31 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2—I am ashamed or anxious</td>
<td>.20 (.04)</td>
<td>.15 (.05)</td>
<td>.28 (.05)*</td>
<td>.12 (.03)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3—I am angry, oppose the other</td>
<td>.54 (.05)a</td>
<td>.46 (.07)</td>
<td>.59 (.07)c</td>
<td>.36 (.04)b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4—I feel happy, liked, comfortable</td>
<td>.23 (.04)</td>
<td>.24 (.05)</td>
<td>.18 (.05)</td>
<td>.22 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5—I am independent, self-controlled</td>
<td>.41 (.04)</td>
<td>.33 (.05)</td>
<td>.47 (.06)</td>
<td>.33 (.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6—I am helpless, dependent</td>
<td>.26 (.04)</td>
<td>.25 (.06)</td>
<td>.30 (.06)</td>
<td>.31 (.04)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Means with different superscripts (a, b) are significantly different (p = .05 or less).

*Means with asterisks are different at a near-significant level (.05 < p < .070).
Statistically significant results (p < .05) and near significant trends (p = .05–.07) are described below:

**a. Physical abuse.** Consistent with our hypothesis, PA children represented the self as opposing and angry toward others more frequently than non-maltreated children (means: PA = .54, sd = .05; CO = .36, sd = .04; p = .02). There was a trend toward physically abused children expressing the wish to feel good and happy less frequently than non-maltreated children (means: PA = .19, sd = .04; CO = .30, sd = .03; p = .05). Physically abused children expressed the wish to be close to others less frequently than sexually abused children (means: PA = .15, sd = .04; SA = .34, sd = .06; p < .01), but did not differ from non-maltreated children on this variable.

**b. Sexual abuse.** As noted above, sexually abused children told stories in which the self-characters expressed the wish to be close to others more frequently than did physically abused children (means: SA = .34, sd = .06; PA = .15, sd = .04, p < .01). They also represented others as liking the self-character with greater frequency than physically-abused, neglected, and non-maltreated children (means: SA = .34, sd = .06; PA = .16, sd = .04, p < .001; NE = .20, sd = .06, p = .03; CO = .19, sd = .04; p < .01).

**c. Neglect.** Neglected children represented others as hurt, sad, or anxious more frequently than physically-abused, sexually-abused, and non-maltreated children (means: NE = .23, sd = .04; PA = .11, sd = .03, p = .02; SA = .11, sd = .03, p < .01; CO = .06, sd = .03, p < .01). Neglected children represented the self as opposing and angry toward others more frequently than non-maltreated children (means: NE = .59, sd = .07; CO = .36, sd = .04, p = .03). Finally, there was a trend toward neglected children representing the self more frequently as anxious and ashamed than non-maltreated children (means: NE = .28, sd = .05; CO = .12, sd = .03, p = .06).

**Discussion**

Applying a widely-used system for extracting themes from relationship narratives, this study found that maltreated and non-maltreated 5 year-olds differed in the stories they told about relationships in response to the MacArthur Story Stem Battery. There were significant differences in the frequency with which these preschoolers expressed certain themes in their stories depending on type of maltreatment they had suffered. Consistent with findings from related studies using different coding systems and examining different variables (Buchsbaum et al., 1992; Macfie et al., 1999; McCrone et al., 1994), maltreated children in our study expressed negative images of the self more frequently than non-maltreated children. As pointed out by McCrone and his colleagues (1994), the greater presence of emotionally negative material in the stories of maltreated children supports the theory that maltreated children interpret new situations (particularly ambiguous ones) in light of negative models of interpersonal relationships. In our study, theoretically meaningful differences in images of others emerged as well. We next discuss differences in relationship themes among maltreatment subtypes.

Physically abused children evidenced some predictable differences from other children. Compared with non-maltreated children, physically abused children told proportionately fewer stories in which the self-character expressed wishes to feel good and happy. In the CCRT scoring system, this wish was commonly scored when a story character expressed an explicit desire to have fun, and it is likely that, compared with their non-maltreated counterparts, physically abused children had fewer expectations that pleasurable interactions and activities were possible. When compared with
sexually abused children, physically abused children expressed significantly fewer wishes to be close to others. This is understandable, in that closeness was routinely associated with violence for physically abused children, while this association was less consistent among those in the sexually abused group. In addition, physically abused children told proportionately more stories in which they represented the self as angry toward and opposing others. Studies of the sequelae of physical abuse consistently find that physically abused children are more aggressive toward others than their non-maltreated peers (Knutson, 1995; Malinosky-Rummell & Hansen, 1993), and the image of self as angry and opposing may be the psychological counterpart of aggressive behavior. It is noteworthy that physically abused children did not differ from non-maltreated children on the frequency with which they represented others as angry and hurtful. Keeping in mind the possibility that the sub-sample of physically abused children was too small to detect existing differences, if replicated, this negative finding would support the idea that children who are physically victimized by caregivers are more prone to internalize negative images of themselves than of their maltreating parents (Crittenden, 1992a). This would be consistent with the clinical finding that many physically abused children are prone to see their own bad behavior as the reason for their parents’ physical violence toward them.

Neglected children represented the self as angry toward and opposing others more frequently than the comparison group, and in this respect were similar to physically abused children. Observing young children’s behavior, Crittenden & DiLalla (1988) found that neglected children were more passive than their non-maltreated peers at age 1 but became increasingly negative and resistant up to the age of 2 1/2 when the study ended. While links between a young child’s internal representations and the child’s behavior can only be inferred, the more frequent angry and oppositional self-representations found among the neglected 5 year-olds in the current study suggest a continuation of this line of oppositional self-development into the preschool years.

Neglected children represented others as hurt, sad, or anxious more frequently than abused and comparison children. This was the only negative image of others that emerged among our maltreated subgroups. Children are commonly neglected in the context of parental impairment—for example, depression or substance abuse. While abused children frequently idealize maltreating parents so as not to perceive malevolence and anger in a needed caregiver, it may be that accurate perception of parental distress and impairment is less threatening to the neglected child and therefore more likely to emerge in their relationship narratives.

The trend toward neglected children representing the self as ‘anxious and ashamed’ more frequently than their non-maltreated counterparts warrants further study. Increased anxiety would be understandable, given the fact that neglected children cannot rely on caregivers to provide for their basic needs. One might expect shame to feature more prominently in the self-images of abused children than in those of the neglected group. It is not clear whether the increased frequency with which this category was coded in the narratives of neglected children represents more frequent expressions of shame or anxiety or both.

Most striking are the findings for sexually abused children, who had more frequent positive images of others in their stories than did the non-maltreated, physically abused, and neglected children. More frequently than children in all other subgroups, including those without maltreatment histories, the sexually abused subgroup saw others as liking and understanding the self-character. These findings are interesting in
light of the Toth et al. study (1997), in which representations of the self and mother were examined using a different and less detailed coding system. Toth et al. found significantly more positive self-representations among sexually abused subjects than among physically abused, neglected, and control subjects. At the same time, these children exhibited more controlling behavior and less positive responsiveness toward the examiner than controls.

Toth and her colleagues point out the possibility that the more positive self-images of sexually abused children may represent a ‘false self’—that is, a persona based on expectations from others that is at odds with one’s true feelings (Winnicott, 1965a). Particularly when the abusing parent portrays his sexual abuse as stemming from loving feelings for the child, there may be considerable pressure on the child to reciprocate with a portrayal of the abuser as loving. This, coupled with bodily intrusion and sexual over-stimulation that the sexually-abused preschooler cannot fully understand, may foster a confusing mix of cognitive behavioral manifestations that reflect interpersonal difficulties such as the ones noted in the sexually abused children’s relationships to the examiner during administration of the MSSB.

Developmental theorists point out that a child’s symptoms are usually expressed in a manner consistent with child’s level of development (Leahy, 1985; Santostefano, 1978). Children at higher levels of cognitive and emotional development are more likely to express their distress as thought symptoms rather than through action. So, for example, the distress that is manifested in disruptive behavior in a preschooler and may be reorganized into thought symptoms such as self-reproach in the older child. The sexually abused child who manifests distress behaviorally at age 5 may reintegrate the memories of sexual abuse into an adolescent self that is more prone to internalizing symptoms such as low self-esteem and depression (Calverly, Fischer, & Ayoub, 1994).

Several limitations of this study must be taken into account when considering these findings. The relatively small number of participants in each maltreatment subgroup limits our power to detect between-group differences. Inter-rater reliability on CCRT coding was acceptable but not in the excellent (.8 and above) range. This, too, increases the likelihood that there may be other significant differences in this sample that were not detected, but suggests that the ‘signals’ of significant findings were all the more robust for having emerged through this level of ‘noise.’ Of course, the number of post hoc Tukey’s tests performed raises the possibility of chance findings. However, among a broad range of relationship theme categories where no significant differences emerged among subgroups, our statistically significant findings were theoretically meaningful and coherent. The influence of the scoring methods on findings must also be considered. In scoring stories, the doll who was the main character was presumed to be the one with whom the participant identified, but we cannot be certain that this was in fact the case in all instances, and so must allow for possible blurring of the distinction between images of self and images of the other. Because there was considerable overlap among the maltreatment subgroups (e.g., physically abused children who were also neglected), it is difficult to tease apart the influence of one form of maltreatment from another in understanding differences in relationship themes among subgroups. Finally, the CCRT categories used in this study were developed using samples of adults. Although this study and the Luborsky study of preschoolers (Luborsky et al., 1996) have yielded conceptually meaningful results, further empirical work to tailor the CCRT categories specifically to this age group and to lower
income and minority populations might bring the relationship themes of these preschoolers into sharper focus.

The study finding that maltreatment is linked with particular types of images of self and other internalized by young children has implications for how children approach new relationships, regardless of the extent to which these internalized images reflect the child’s actual experiences from the past. To the extent that internalized images of self and other shape the maltreated child’s expectations of relationships outside the family, these images may exert considerable influence on the course of the child's social and psychological development, and ultimately, on the likelihood that the maltreated child will be re-victimized and/or become a victimizer in subsequent relationships. The findings of this study suggest that seemingly well-adjusted maltreated children may be more in need of help than they appear in clinical settings—in particular, that sexually-abused children may present an image of comfort with self and others that belies underlying psychological distress. Assessment of these interpersonal schemas may be an important step toward identifying children who are in distress and tailoring interventions to the individual needs and vulnerabilities of abused and neglected children.

References


Robert J. Waldinger, Sheree L. Toth and Andrew Gerber


**Note**

1. Specifically, the wish ‘to be loved and understood’ was rarely used and was combined with the wish ‘to be close to others;’ the perception of the other as ‘bad’ was rarely used and was combined with ‘rejecting and opposing;’ the RO ‘understanding’ was rarely used and was combined with ‘likes me;’ and the RS ‘angry’ and the RS ‘dislike others’ were rarely used and were combined with the RS ‘oppose others.’

**Author Note**

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**Appendix A**

**CCRT Coding Procedure**

The CCRT coding process occurs in three basic steps:

1) Each response to a story stem is identified as a relationship episode. Spoken dialogue and verbal cues are transcribed for each story. Stories are codable if they demonstrate a clear interpersonal interaction—e.g., between a child and a parent, or between two children. Each story must contain at least one codable wish, response of other, and response of the self in order to be considered codable. Elements of the story stem and interviewers’ prompts to the child are NOT considered part of the codable relationship episode.

2) Within each codable relationship episode, each line of the dialogue or action is identified as a wish, a response of the other person (RO), or a response of the self (RS). A line of dialogue may represent more than one component. (For example, ‘I hate you! Get away from me!’ maybe identified as both a wish and response of the self to the other person if in response to something that the other has done or said in the story.)
3) Each wish, RO, and RS is assigned a best-fitting and a next-best fitting standard category from the list of 16 standard categories for each type of component. (For example, ‘I hate you! Get away from me!’ may be coded as both the wish to be oppose or hurt the other, and also as the ‘angry’ response of self.)

An example of a coded story stem

The Burned at the Stove story stem:

Mother and Jane are at the stove.
Mother: ‘We’re going to have a good supper but it’s not ready yet. Don’t get too close to the stove.’
Jane: ‘Mmm, that looks good. I don’t want to wait. I’d like some now.’ (Jane knocks the pot of soup off the stove.) ‘Ow! I’ve burned my hand. It hurts !!’
Interviewer: Show me what happens now.

One child’s completion of the story stem, including labeled components and assigned standard categories:

Mother: Now look what you’ve done. Get away from there. (RO—angry, strict)
Jane: Oh no! I burned myself. (RS—anxious) I need a bandaid. (W—to be helped)
Mother: Let’s put some ice on it. (RO—helpful) Now, go to your room until dinner is ready. (RO—strict)
Jane: OK. (RS—obedient, dependent)