



Loneliness and Childhood Exposure to Domestic Violence among Adolescents and Adults with High Fear of Intimacy

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Abstract: Previous research has highlighted the adverse effects of childhood exposure to domestic violence (CEDV), and with fear of intimacy and feelings of loneliness as key psychological constructs intertwined with these experiences. Understanding the complex interplay among fear of intimacy, loneliness, and CEDV contributes to addressing the multifaceted challenges arising from early trauma and shaping interventions. To investigate the relationships between fear of intimacy, loneliness, and childhood exposure to domestic violence (CEDV) among adolescents and young adults. This is a cross-sectional observational study. A purposive sample of 215 individuals (102 female) from the Hazara division, aged 13 to 35 years ($M=22.25$, $SD=4.23$), were selected based on a fear of intimacy cut-off score. Instruments included the CEDV scale, Fear of Intimacy Scale, and UCLA Loneliness Scale. Data collection employed a paper-based survey. Data was analysed using SPSS version 23. Descriptive (measures of central tendency and variability) and psychometric (item-total correlations, Cronbach's alpha) analyses were carried out. In addition, multiple regression analysis examining the relationship between predictor and outcome variables and between-subjects analyses (independent sample t -tests) across age and gender were also employed. The study reveals satisfactory alpha reliability (above .70) for the above instruments, alongside a positive correlation among them. Through multiple regression, it was determined that both loneliness ($\beta = .192^{**}$, $t = 2.91$, $p = .004$) and child exposure to domestic violence ($\beta = .344^{***}$, $t = 5.23$, $p = .000$) positively predict fear of intimacy, with the model explaining 18% of its variance. Further analysis using t -tests shows slight to moderate differences in fear of intimacy and CEDV scores between adolescents and young adults, and substantial gender differences in both Fear of Intimacy and CEDV scales. Findings provide insights into the long-term impacts of CEDV on fear of intimacy and loneliness. The implications of these findings extend to shape clinical interventions and prompt social considerations.

Key words: Childhood domestic violence, Loneliness, Fear of intimacy, Developmental trajectories, Psychosocial impacts

1. Introduction

Childhood exposure to domestic violence (CEDV) has long been recognized as a significant adverse experience that can have lasting effects on psychological functioning. Children who witness domestic violence between

caregivers may internalize the distressing and traumatic nature of these interactions, leading to the formation of maladaptive psychological schemas and coping mechanisms. These early experiences can potentially shape individuals' perceptions of relationships, trust, and emotional vulnerability, thereby exerting a profound influence on their capacity to establish meaningful and intimate connections during adolescence and adulthood. Concurrently, the emergence of a fear of intimacy, characterized by a reluctance to forge close emotional bonds and share inner sentiments, stands as a conceivable intermediary between CEDV and subsequent experiences of loneliness. CEDV has been linked to increased loneliness in adolescence and adulthood. Research suggests that childhood trauma, including experiences of abuse and neglect, can contribute to chronic loneliness later in life (Ambre, 2023; Landry et al., 2022; Khiron Clinics. 2021; Lovering, 2022). Childhood trauma, such as emotional abuse, is associated with greater loneliness among young adults (Landry et al., 2022). Childhood abuse and neglect can lead to relational trauma, which can result in difficulties with emotional closeness, maintaining relationships, and feeling safe with others (Khiron Clinics. 2021; Lovering, 2022). Loneliness can be a consequence of the shame and isolation that young people exposed to childhood violence often feel (Barnes et al., 2022). It is important to note that these findings highlight correlations and associations, and individual experiences may vary.

CEDV can affect the fear of intimacy in several ways. Childhood trauma, including exposure to domestic violence, can lead to relational trauma, which can result in difficulties with emotional closeness, maintaining relationships, and feeling safe with others (Lovering, 2022, Rodriguez & Venzor, 2022). Children exposed to domestic violence may develop insecure attachment styles, which can affect their ability to form healthy relationships in adulthood (Godbout et al., 2009). Feelings of loneliness and isolation are common among individuals who have experienced childhood violence, which can make it difficult to form close relationships and increase the risk of poor mental and physical health (Landry et al., 2022; Barnes et al., 2022). Childhood abuse, particularly emotional abuse, has been associated with greater loneliness among young adults (Landry et al., 2022; Barnes et al., 2022). There is no clear evidence that any specific type of domestic violence is more likely to affect fear of intimacy in children. However, exposure to any form of domestic violence can have negative impacts on children's emotional and psychological development, which can affect their ability to form healthy relationships in adulthood. Exposure to domestic violence in childhood can lead to relational trauma, which can result in difficulties with emotional closeness, maintaining relationships, and feeling safe with others (Rodriguez & Venzor, 2022; Lukin, 2022). Witnessing violence between parents may increase the risk of children being violent in their future relationships (Women's Health, 2019).

There is some evidence that gender differences may exist in the impact of domestic violence on children's fear of intimacy. A study found that women who experienced childhood violence were more likely to report fear of intimacy in adulthood than men who experienced childhood violence (Godbout et al., 2009). Another study found that men who experienced childhood violence were more likely to perpetrate intimate partner violence in adulthood than women who experienced childhood violence (Fang & Corso, 2008). While there is some evidence of gender differences in the impact of domestic violence on fear of intimacy, more research is needed to fully understand these differences. It is important to note that the impacts of domestic violence on children can vary depending on their developmental stage, individual experiences, and other factors (Rodriguez & Venzor, 2022; Women's Health, 2019; Wathen & Macmillan, 2013; Howell et al., 2016; Ahmadabadi et al., 2017). While there is some research on the impact of intimate partner violence exposure on children's fear of intimacy; there may be a need for more research on how the impact varies across different developmental stages (Howell et al., 2016) to fully understand the long-term effects of CEDV, as well as the factors that may contribute to individual differences in these effects. It is plausible that individuals who have been exposed to domestic violence during their formative years may develop a heightened fear of intimacy as a protective mechanism. This fear of being emotionally hurt or betrayed may subsequently contribute to a sense of social isolation and loneliness, as forming and maintaining intimate relationships becomes challenging. Importantly, more research needs to be done on the impact on different populations, such as children from different cultural backgrounds or with different levels of exposure to violence (Holmes et al., 2022).

By investigating the potential links between CEDV, fear of intimacy, and loneliness, this research aims to shed light on the complex psychological pathways that underlie these phenomena. Understanding how these factors interact and contribute to individuals' experiences can inform the development of targeted interventions and support strategies to alleviate loneliness and promote healthy relationship formation. Henceforth, current research is designed to examine the long-term impact of childhood trauma on fear of intimacy and loneliness, offering insights into the intergenerational transmission of relational patterns and emotional struggles. Such findings can inform

clinical practice and the development of interventions to improve the lives of individuals affected by these complex psychological dynamics.

1.1 Objectives

1. To investigate the effect of loneliness and childhood exposure to intimate partner violence on fear of intimacy among adolescents and young adults.
2. To find out the age and gender differences in loneliness, child exposure to intimate partner violence, and fear of intimacy among adolescents and young adults.

1.2 Hypotheses

1. Loneliness and childhood exposure to intimate partner violence will have a significant effect on fear of intimacy among adolescents and young adults.
2. Adolescents experience more childhood exposure to intimate partner violence, loneliness, and fear of intimacy than young adults.
3. Males will have a higher level of fear of intimacy, while females have a higher level of loneliness and childhood exposure to intimate partner violence

2. Method

2.1 Study Design

This is a cross-sectional observational study examining loneliness and CEDV among adolescents and adults with high fear of intimacy.

2.2 Participants

Current research utilized a purposive sampling technique to form a sample comprising adolescents and young adults from diverse areas within the Hazara division between April 2022 to January 2023. Initially, 700 individuals were approached to examine the fear of intimacy. With a response rate of 70% (n=493), 215 individuals (n=102 female) scored above the established cut-off score, indicating high fear of intimacy, were selected for further investigation. The age of the participants ranged from 13 to 35 years (M=22.25 years, SD=4.23). Regarding education levels, the sample consisted of 94 individuals with Inter/below Inter education, 75 with Undergraduate degrees, and 46 with Postgraduate qualifications.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 Children's Exposure to Domestic Violence scale (CEDV)

It is a 33-item self-report tool used to measure the degree of exposure to domestic violence (Edleson et al., 2008). Participants are asked to rate their responses on a scale of 0 to 3, with 0 indicating "never" and 3 indicating "almost always." (Descutner & Thelen, 1991). The total score ranged from 0 to 99, with higher scores indicating higher levels of violence exposure and involvement.

2.3.2 Fear of Intimacy Scale

It is a 35-item self-report questionnaire that examines fear of emotional and physical intimacy, fear of commitment, loss of independence, and engulfment (Russell, 1996). Participants are asked to rate their responses on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating "Not at all characteristic of me" and 5 indicating "extremely characteristic of me." Fifteen items were positively worded (items no. 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 14, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 25, 27, 29, and 30) and reverse-scored to ensure consistency. Total scores ranged from 35 to 175 with a cut-off score of 80, with higher scores indicating a high level of fear (Russell, 1996).

2.3.3 UCLA Loneliness Scale

It is a 20-item scale examining how often a person feels disconnected from others (Edleson & Johnson, 2007). Participants are asked to rate their responses on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 indicating "never" and 4 indicating "always." Nine items were positively worded (item no. 1, 5, 6, 9, 10, 15, 16, 19, and 20) and reverse-scored to ensure consistency. The total score ranged from 20 to 80, with higher scores indicating higher levels of loneliness (Edleson & Johnson, 2007).

2.4 Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Review Board, Department of Psychology, International Islamic University Islamabad, Ethics Committee. Further permission was obtained from the concerned authorities of participating colleges and universities before data collection.

2.5 Procedure

Data was obtained through the paper-based survey, which was distributed using participant mailing lists and social media. The survey was in English and it comprised of participant information sheet, consent form, UCLA loneliness scale, and CEDV scale. It took approximately 15 to 25 minutes to complete the survey. The obtained data set was completely anonymous as no identifiable information was obtained. Data were analysed using SPSS (Version 23; IBM Corp, 2015) following ‘Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology’ (STROBE) guidelines (von Elm et al., 2008) psychometrically (item-total correlations and Cronbach's α), descriptively (mean, SD), and analytically (correlational matrix, regression analysis, two-tailed t -tests).

3. Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients for the Fear of Intimacy scale, UCLA loneliness scale, and CEDV scale. Results show that all variables have a satisfactory level of alpha reliability ($\alpha > .70$) and a weak positive correlation.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlation Coefficients

| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | α | <i>I</i> | <i>II</i> | <i>III</i> |
|------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|------------|
| Fear of intimacy scale | 96.40 | 13.74 | .78 | - | .261** | .383** |
| UCLA loneliness scale | 47.83 | 7.20 | .75 | - | - | .202** |
| CEDV scale | 51.88 | 9.10 | .85 | - | - | - |

** $p < .01$.

A follow-up analysis was carried out using multiple regression to examine the strength of the relationship between an outcome (fear of intimacy) and predictor variables as well as the importance of each of the predictors to the relationship. The R^2 value of 0.18 indicates that the model explains 18% of the fitted data around its mean. Both loneliness ($\beta = .192^{**}$, $t = 2.91$, $p = .004$) and child exposure to domestic violence ($\beta = .344^{***}$, $t = 5.23$, $p = .000$) predicted fear of intimacy in a positive direction.

Table 2: Age and Gender Differences on Fear of Intimacy, Loneliness, and CEDV.

| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>T</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>p</i> | Cohen's <i>d</i> |
|-------------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-------------|------------------|
| Age | | | | | | |
| <i>Fear of Intimacy Scale</i> | | | | | | |
| Adolescents | 99.58 | 13.87 | .96 | 213 | .044 | 0.28 |
| Young Adult | 95.67 | 13.67 | | | | |
| <i>UCLA Loneliness Scale</i> | | | | | | |
| Adolescents | 47.29 | 8.23 | -.83 | 213 | .41 | 0.12 |
| Young Adult | 44.16 | 6.51 | | | | |
| <i>CEDV scale</i> | | | | | | |
| Adolescents | 54.36 | 9.22 | 3.07 | 213 | .002 | 0.45 |
| Young Adult | 50.36 | 8.73 | | | | |
| Gender | | | | | | |
| <i>Fear of Intimacy Scale</i> | | | | | | |
| Male | 99.93 | 11.38 | 3.749 | 213 | .021 | 0.53 |
| Female | 92.87 | 15.00 | | | | |
| <i>UCLA Loneliness Scale</i> | | | | | | |
| Male | 48.42 | 7.10 | 1.159 | 213 | .473 | 0.16 |
| Female | 47.24 | 7.30 | | | | |
| <i>CEDV Scale</i> | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|--------|-------|------|-------|-----|-------------|------|
| Male | 48.17 | 7.19 | 6.297 | 213 | .010 | 0.89 |
| Female | 55.59 | 9.34 | | | | |

Note: Male (n=113), female (n=102), adolescents (n=111), young adults (n=104).

Further analyses were carried out using independent sample *t*-tests (two-tailed) using age group and gender as between-subjects variables (See Table 2). Small to medium differences were observed between adolescents and young adults on the Fear of Intimacy scale [$t(213)=-0/83, p=.044, d=0.28$] and CEDV scale [$t(213)=3.07, p=.002, d=0.45$]. Whereas, medium to large gender differences were observed on the Fear of Intimacy scale [$t(213)=3.749, p=.021, d=0.53$] and CEDV scale [$t(213)=6.297, p=.010, d=0.89$].

4. Discussion

The present study conducted a comprehensive assessment of the interrelationships among fear of intimacy, loneliness, and CEDV. The findings indicate both loneliness and CEDV emerged as statistically significant positive predictors of fear of intimacy, offering insights into the intergenerational transmission of relational patterns and emotional struggles. Specifically, the magnitude of the effect exhibited by child exposure to domestic violence exceeded that of loneliness. The effect of child exposure to domestic violence in predicting fear of intimacy emphasizes the enduring impact of early traumatic experiences on adult relational tendencies. The amplified significance of CEDV relative to loneliness suggests that traumatic childhood encounters may potentially exert a more potent effect in shaping fear of intimacy compared to emotional experiences of loneliness. Further exploration discerned small to medium disparities between adolescents and young adults on fear of intimacy and CEDV. The age-based distinctions suggest developmental variations in the interplay between these constructs, potentially highlighting the evolving nature of fear of intimacy and its relationship with childhood trauma and loneliness during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Moreover, gender-based differences were observed, demonstrating medium to large effects, in responses to both fear of intimacy and CEDV. The identified correlations and predictive associations within this study underscore the intricate interplay between fear of intimacy, loneliness, and CEDV. The gender-based disparities spotlight the role of societal and cultural factors that may contribute to differing fear of intimacy experiences and responses to CEDV among individuals of different genders.

Our findings are consistent with earlier research. Children exposed to domestic violence may experience feelings of loneliness and isolation (Barnes et al., 2022). These feelings can persist into adolescence and adulthood, making it challenging to form intimate relationships. CEDV can result in relational trauma, which can affect a child's ability to form healthy attachments and feel safe in relationships (Lovering, 2022; Godbout et al, 2009). This trauma can contribute to the fear of intimacy in adulthood. Children who witness domestic violence may develop insecure attachment styles, such as anxious or avoidant attachment, which can impact their ability to trust and form close relationships in the future (Barnes et al., 2022). It is worth noting that the impact of domestic violence on fear of intimacy may vary between genders. For example, one study found that women who experienced childhood violence were more likely to report fear of intimacy in adulthood than men who experienced childhood violence (Godbout et al, 2009). It is important to recognize that individual experiences may vary, and not all children who are exposed to domestic violence will develop a fear of intimacy. The presented study has several strengths. The study utilizes well-established measures and reports on the suitability of its use in a specific population (Hazara, Pakistan). This validation enhances the clarity and precision of research in the use of standardised instruments particularly in low-and-middle-income countries (Tanveer et al., 2022). The identified associations offer valuable insights for designing targeted interventions that address the fear of intimacy and loneliness, helping mental health professionals tailor treatment approaches to effectively mitigate the psychological impact of early trauma. The findings offers insights into the intergenerational transmission of relational patterns and emotional struggles and underscore the importance of early intervention and support systems to minimize the long-term psychological effects of domestic violence on individuals' emotional well-being.

The study has some limitations. The study utilized a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables. Longitudinal research would provide more insight into the temporal and developmental aspects of fear of intimacy, loneliness, and childhood exposure to domestic violence. The use of purposive sampling may have introduced selection bias, and this limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of adolescents and young adults. Future studies could employ random sampling techniques to ensure a more representative sample of adolescents and young adults. The wide age range (13 to 35 years) might

have introduced variability in responses due to developmental differences and life stages, potentially impacting the homogeneity of the sample and affecting the internal validity. The reliance on self-report measures introduces the possibility of response bias and social desirability effects. Integrating qualitative methods alongside quantitative measures could provide a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and shed light on underlying factors contributing to the fear of intimacy and loneliness. Exploring additional factors, such as attachment styles, family dynamics, and cultural influences, would contribute to a more comprehensive model of the relationships among fear of intimacy, loneliness, and childhood exposure to domestic violence. While exposure to any form of domestic violence can have negative impacts on children's emotional and psychological development, there may be a need for more research on the specific types of domestic violence that are most likely to affect fear of intimacy in children (Tanveer & Croucher, 2022).

The implications of the findings presented in the study are manifold and offer insights that can shape interventions and prompt social considerations. Recognizing the significant impact of CEDV on fear of intimacy underscores the importance of trauma-informed approaches in therapeutic settings. Clinicians should be equipped to address the specific challenges and emotional barriers stemming from CEDV, focusing on building trust, emotional regulation, and enhancing intimacy skills. Additionally, the study accentuates the long-lasting effects of childhood exposure to domestic violence, shedding light on its implications for emotional and relational well-being in adulthood. This insight can fuel awareness campaigns and educational initiatives aimed at preventing domestic violence and its intergenerational transmission. By raising public consciousness about the potential psychological consequences of CEDV, society can work toward breaking the cycle of violence and promoting healthier family dynamics. The identified gender-based differences and developmental variations have implications for policy development and the provision of support services.

5. Conclusion

Findings provide insights into the complex interconnections among fear of intimacy, loneliness, and CEDV. The research sheds light on the differential impact of these factors across age groups and genders, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate psychological dynamics at play. The implications of these findings extend to the domains of clinical intervention and the development of targeted strategies to alleviate the deleterious effects of childhood trauma and foster healthier patterns of intimacy and social connection.

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