

# Effects of Childhood Trauma on Self-Construal in Adulthood

Emily Golden  
Department of Social Work



## Abstract

The objective of the present study is to examine the relationship between five different categories of child abuse and relational interdependent self-construal in adulthood. A secondary data analysis of the MIDUS 2 Biomarker study (Ryff et al., 2019) was conducted to assess these relationships through a cross-sectional correlational survey design and a multiple linear regression analysis. The sample population consisted of 1,035 English speaking non-institutionalized Americans aged 25-74. The data was examined to analyze the impact childhood trauma had, if any, on one's perception of oneself as an adult. The findings of this study support the hypothesis that the experience of childhood trauma negatively impacts the way one views themselves in the context of relationships. These findings indicate a need for expanded investigation into the impacts of childhood trauma beyond physical and mental disorder, the need for increased treatment options to address these impacts, and for social welfare policy to reflect these needs by funding research and treatment programs.

## Introduction

### Significance of Study

-Experiencing trauma can lead to problems related to physical and cognitive functioning such as hyperarousal, anxiety, emotional numbness and/or dysregulation, sleep disturbances, increased cortisol levels, intrusive thoughts or memories and inappropriate guilt (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014).

-Individuals who experience trauma in childhood are at an increased risk of developing mental and emotional problems due to their fragile developmental state and their dependence on their caregivers for their physical and emotional needs (De Young et al., 2011).

-Survivors of childhood trauma were shown to experience elevated rates of depression, substance use, anxiety, eating disorders, psychosis, and personality disorders (Teicher & Samson, 2013).

### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the impact that childhood trauma has on social-emotional functioning in adulthood, specifically in the area of self-concept.

### Research Question

What is the impact of childhood trauma on self-construal among adults in the United States?

### Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that those who have experienced any of the five kinds of child abuse will score lower on self-construal in comparison to those who have not.

## Literature Review

### Childhood Trauma

-This study focuses on 5 types of childhood trauma: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect and emotional neglect.

-There were 656,000 reported victims of child abuse and neglect in 2019. (Administration for Children and Families, 2021).

-Individuals exposed to adverse childhood experiences experienced higher incidence of poor mental and physical health as well as increased substance use, pointing to an association between childhood trauma and health outcomes in adulthood (Mersky et al., 2013).

### Self-Construal

Those with independent self-construal will express their sense of agency through an effort to meet one's own internal needs, while those with interdependent self-construal express their agency through an effort to meet the needs and demands of others (Cross et al., 2011).

### Gaps in Research

-Lack of diversity in sample recruitment opportunities.  
-Lack of intersection of childhood trauma and self-construal.

-Self-construal research focuses heavily on the comparison of collectivistic and individualistic cultures to measure interdependent vs independent self-construal, leaving out comparisons among the same culture.

## Methods

### Research Design

The current research was a secondary data analysis of the MIDUS 2 biomarker study collecting data from 2004-2009. The biomarker study was part of the larger MIDUS longitudinal study, a national survey of over 7,000 Americans beginning in 1994.

### Sampling Method

Participants were selected through purposive sampling of individuals in the MIDUS 2 biomarker study who had fully completed the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire scale and the Relational Interdependent Self-Construal scale and had experienced one of the 5 types of child abuse. The current study's sample consisted of 1,035 participants out of the 1,255 MIDUS 2 biomarker participants.

### Measures

**Childhood Trauma:** A self-reported Childhood Trauma Questionnaire consisting of 5 subscales assessing emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect on a 5-point Likert scale (Bernstein et al., 1994).

**Relational Interdependent Self-Construal:** A 10-item scale assessing the individual's thoughts about themselves in relationship to others on a 7-point Likert scale (Cross et al., 2000).

## Results

-Study participants who reported lower levels of physical abuse and physical neglect had higher levels of relational interdependent self-construal; however, in these models, age and gender were not significant predictors of relational interdependent self-construal ( $p > .05$ ).

-Study participants with lower levels of emotional neglect experienced higher levels of relational interdependent self-construal; however, in this model, age, gender, and marital status were not significant predictors of relational interdependent self-construal ( $p > .05$ ).

-In this study, emotional abuse and sexual abuse were not significant predictors of relational interdependent self-construal.

**Table 2**

Regression Model for Relational Interdependent Self-Construal

Predictor	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
Constant	4.901 (.155)***	10.461 (1.394)***	11.618 (1.296)***	7.753 (1.292)***	9.501 (1.314)***
Age	.001 (.003)	-.065 (.020)	-.078 (.020)	-.065 (.019)	-.083 (.019)
Gender	.008 (.059)	-.088 (.472)	.382 (.482)	.034 (.454)	.061 (.465)
Marital Status	.146 (.071)*	-2.359 (.524)*	-2.229 (.527)*	-1.916 (.506)	-2.149 (.517)*
Emotional Abuse	-.014 (.007)				
Physical Abuse		.429 (.082)*			
Sexual Abuse			.337 (.065)		
Emotional Neglect				.542 (.051)***	
Physical Neglect					.684 (.087)*

Reference groups: Female; Separated, Divorced, of Never Married. \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

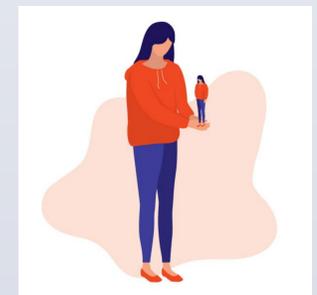
## Conclusion

The present study concludes that higher rates of childhood trauma in the areas of physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect and physical neglect are negatively associated with self-construal ratings, indicating a decreased rate of social-emotional functioning for those impacted by child abuse. Attachment theory makes it clear that childhood interactions with caregivers have a direct impact on personal development (Hutchinson, 2017), including the way one views themselves in the context of relationships with others. With this knowledge it is critical to implement treatment practices that address these impacts of child abuse in order to improve survivors' chances of developing healthy social-emotional functioning in adulthood.

### Implications for Future Research

-Increases awareness of covert mental and social effects of childhood trauma in adulthood and the need for services to address said effects.

-Highlights the need for further investigation of the impact of childhood trauma on social-emotional functioning.



## References

- Administration for Children and Families. (2021). *Child maltreatment 2019*. Children's Bureau. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/child-maltreatment-2019>
- Bernstein, D. P., Fink, L., Handelsman, L., & Foote, J. (1994). *Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ)* [Database record]. APA PsycTests. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t02080-000>
- Cross, S. E., Bacon, P. L., & Morris, M. L. (2000). The relational-interdependent self-construal and relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(4), 791-808. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.78.4.791>
- Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. (2014). Understanding the impact of trauma. *Trauma-informed care in behavioral health services*. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/?report=printable>
- De Young, A. C., Kenardy, J. A., & Cobham, V. E. (2011). Trauma in early childhood: A neglected population. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 14(3), 231. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-011-0094-3>
- Hutchinson, E. (2017). *Essentials of human behavior: Integrating person, environment and life course* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Mersky, J. P., Topitzes, J., & Reynolds, A. J. (2013). Impacts of adverse childhood experiences on health, mental health, and substance use in early adulthood: A cohort study of an urban, minority sample in the US. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 37(11), 917-925. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2013.07.011>
- Ryff, C. D., Seeman, T., & Weinstein, M. (2019). *Midlife in the United States (MIDUS 2): Biomarker project, 2004-2009*. MIDUS series. <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR29282.v9>
- Teicher, M. H., & Samson, J. A. (2013). Childhood maltreatment and psychopathology: A case for ecophenotypic variants as clinically and neurobiologically distinct subtypes. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 170, 1114-1133. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2013.1207>