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CHILDHOOD ABUSE CAN IMPACT VICTIM'S ADULT RELATIONSHIPS STUDY RESULTS REPORTED IN PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY BULLETIN

Thousand Oaks, California, London, United Kingdom, and New Delhi, India (October 24, 2006) – Abused children may have a difficult time developing adult relationships with new people who reminded them of their abusive parent, even if only implicitly, according to a recent study published in the November issue of ***Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin***, an official publication of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, published by SAGE Publications.

Kathy R. Berenson and Susan M. Andersen, of New York University's Department of Psychology, used groundbreaking methods to study how two groups of adult women, those with a history of childhood abuse and those without, reacted to a stranger whose characteristics were similar to their own parent (or were not). The researchers found that for both groups, the participants' feelings about the abusive parent tended to "transfer" to the new person – presumably without the participants realizing it. Both groups of participants reacted to the new person with facial expressions of positive emotion (presumably deriving from love for the parent). Among participants who had been abused, however, this was accompanied by negative reactions as well, such as expectations for rejection, mistrust, dislike, and emotional distancing. Notably, no such pattern occurred among abused participants when the new person bore no resemblance to the parent (a control condition).

Researchers additionally found that the abused participants reported a decrease in negative mood when the new person resembling the parent was also described as explicitly threatening (as compared to when there was no explicit threat). They showed no such response in the absence of parental resemblance. "A possible interpretation of this," write the authors, is that this may have evoked, for abused individuals, their "well-practiced affective responses to threat. These individuals may have self-protective strategies that are set into motion when a person acting in threatening ways reminds them of their abusive parent."

Berenson and Andersen conclude that the process of transference can lead previously abused individuals to use behavioral patterns from their relationship with the abusive parent in later interpersonal relationships, even when such patterns may be inappropriate or ineffective for the current interpersonal situation. "The study demonstrated the differences between abused and non-abused participants in their responses to a new person and highlights the pains and pleasures that past significant relationships can bring when experienced in the present." This work truly has practical applications for understanding those who live with or treat formerly abused adults.

"Childhood Physical and Emotional Abuse by a Parent: Transference Effects in Adult Interpersonal Relations" is published in the November issue of ***Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*** and can be accessed for a limited time at no charge at <http://pspb.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/32/11/1509>. To contact the researchers, email Kathy R. Berenson at berenson@psych.columbia.edu.

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