

Abstract

Childhood relational trauma is thought to cast a severe damage to trusted close relationships, which may be associated with altered empathic capacity. Although enhancement in recognition of salient emotions was found in child survivors, investigations for the long-term impact in adult survivors are rare and suffered methodological issues that may mask the true relationships beyond the visible trends. In a community sample of ninety-four subjects, this study aims to revisit the relationship between childhood relational trauma and empathic capacity, extending beyond emotion recognition to include vicarious emotions and perspective shift, while specifying the victim-perpetrator relationship and controlling for potential covariates such as intelligence, parental dysfunctions and mood. The roles of confounding variables were confirmed in correlations analyses. With their effects removed in hierarchical regression analyses, associations with childhood relational trauma were uncovered in more accurate emotion recognition and more flexible perspective shift from other to self. The manifestations of superior empathic abilities in real-life interpersonal relationships may not necessarily be beneficial. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, the direction of the associations cannot be established. The results call for attention to confounding variables, multiple dimensions of empathic capacity and appreciation of the unique role of relational context in childhood trauma in future studies.

Keywords: childhood trauma, relational trauma, empathic capacity