

Relationship between Childhood Maltreatment, Perception of Partner, and Relationship Satisfaction in Survivors of Childhood Violence



Putri Aisya Pahlawani¹, Suroso², Niken Titi Pratitis³

^{1,2,3} University 17 August 1945 Surabaya

ABSTRACT: This study aims to examine the relationship between childhood maltreatment, perception of a partner, and relationship satisfaction among survivors of childhood abuse. The research employed a quantitative correlational method with a sample of 115 survivors aged 20–30 years from Tenggiling Mejoyo District, Surabaya. Data were collected using three Likert scales measuring childhood maltreatment, perception of a partner, and relationship satisfaction. The results showed a significant negative correlation between childhood maltreatment and relationship satisfaction ($t = -5.747, p < 0.05$), indicating that higher levels of adverse childhood experiences are associated with lower relationship satisfaction. Conversely, a significant positive correlation was found between perception of a partner and relationship satisfaction ($t = 4.884, p < 0.05$), suggesting that a more positive perception of a partner is linked to higher relationship satisfaction. Multiple regression analysis revealed a significant relationship between childhood maltreatment, perception of a partner, and relationship satisfaction ($F = 54.697, p < 0.05$). Together, childhood maltreatment and perception of a partner contributed 49.9% to relationship satisfaction. This indicates that childhood experiences and perceptions of a partner significantly influence the level of satisfaction in relationships.

KEYWORDS: Childhood Maltreatment, Perception of Partner, Relationship Satisfaction

I. INTRODUCTION

The stages of maturity in an individual's life are marked by the ability to fulfill developmental tasks, such as seeking and establishing intimate and meaningful relationships (Khairani & Maemonah, 2021). Satisfaction in these relationships is expected to lead individuals toward more serious commitments, such as marriage. Mattson (2013) states that relationship satisfaction reflects an individual's level of contentment with their intimate relationships, while Arnett (2000) links it closely to commitment, including aspects like time, sharing feelings, and other actions within relationships during early adulthood. These factors play a crucial role in finding love, which is an important factor in relationship satisfaction (Barutçu Yildirim et al., 2021).

Unfortunately, not all individuals easily achieve satisfaction in interpersonal relationships, especially survivors of childhood abuse. Abuse survivors often face difficulties in forming trust and secure attachments, which frequently result in dissatisfaction within relationships, negatively impacting mental health (Lefebvre et al., 2021). Low relationship satisfaction is known to be a contributing factor leading couples to divorce (Rochmawati et al., 2023), as reflected in the increasing divorce rates, which serve as an indicator of declining marital satisfaction (Nugraha et al., 2023).

In Indonesia, divorce cases have been significantly increasing. According to a survey conducted by the Badan Pusat Statistik (2023), the number of divorce cases in Indonesia in 2023 reached 463,654. Among the factors behind these divorce cases, disputes and arguments were the leading causes, accounting for 251,828 cases (Ayu, 2024). Additionally, the survey recorded 5,174 divorce cases due to Domestic Violence (DV), with the highest number found in East Java Province, totaling 1,636 cases. The ongoing disputes and arguments were also cited as the cause of 35,940 divorce cases in East Java. Wang (2017) highlights that prolonged and unresolved disputes in a relationship are key indicators of low relationship satisfaction (Abreu-Afonso et al., 2021). Relationship satisfaction can be measured through indicators such as emotional communication, conflict management, physiological reactivity, positive affirmation, emotional involvement, and power balance. However, minimal communication, unresolved conflicts, lack of emotional closeness, and the absence of attention and appreciation from partners contradict these indicators. Poor communication can lead to broader issues, such as one partner feeling unappreciated, unsupported, and absent when needed (Manna et al., 2021). Ultimately, these conditions can cause disharmony and reduce overall relationship satisfaction.

Childhood maltreatment (CM) refers to harmful experiences, such as physical, verbal, emotional, sexual abuse, and neglect, during childhood (Thoma et al., 2021). These experiences significantly impact adult romantic relationships by fostering insecure attachment styles, like avoidant or anxious attachment, which make it difficult to trust partners and form healthy emotional

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connections. Individuals may struggle with expressing or understanding emotions, leading to miscommunication and frustration. CM also increases the likelihood of engaging in unhealthy or abusive relationships, diminishing overall relationship satisfaction and well-being. Experiences of violence can also lead individuals to unknowingly engage in unhealthy or abusive relationships, reducing overall relationship satisfaction and well-being.

In addition to childhood maltreatment, perceptions of a partner also influence relationship satisfaction. Perception refers to an individual's subjective assessment of the quality of a romantic relationship. Research shows that perception plays a crucial role in determining satisfaction or dissatisfaction in a relationship. Negative experiences, such as childhood maltreatment, can shape an individual's negative view of their partner, leading to suspicion and uncertainty, as well as perceptual distortions that result in inaccurate evaluations of the relationship (Hosseini & Soleimani, 2021). Individuals with a negative perception of their partner tend to feel dissatisfied in the relationship.

Overall, positive perceptions can enhance relationship satisfaction, while negative perceptions can hinder happiness within the relationship. Based on the explanation above, the researcher will analyze the relationship between childhood maltreatment (CM), perceptions of a partner, and relationship satisfaction among survivors of childhood abuse.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Relationship Satisfaction

Levenson and Gottman (1983) explain that relationship satisfaction involves physiological interconnectedness, intra-individual physiological measures, and patterns of affective exchange between individuals through self-assessment (Levenson & Gottman, 1983). Rusbult and Buunk (1993) describe satisfaction in romantic relationships as an evaluation where positive traits in the relationship outweigh or even eliminate negative traits (Arikewuyo et al., 2022). When individuals experience satisfaction in their romantic relationships, it greatly benefits their well-being, health, and longevity (Bühler et al., 2021). Conversely, dissatisfaction in relationships is the opposite of satisfaction, leading to a generally negative evaluation. Dissatisfaction can be observed from the frequency of conflicts between partners or data related to domestic violence (DV) and divorce. Levenson and Gottman (1983) identified aspects or dimensions of relationship satisfaction that focus on the emotional dynamics and interactions within romantic relationships. These include emotional communication, conflict management, physiological reactivity, positive affirmation, emotional involvement, and power balance. Relationship satisfaction can be influenced by several factors, such as intimacy, commitment, and passion, as described in Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love. Buhler (2021) explains that unmet relationship expectations or ideals can contribute to a decline in relationship satisfaction, such as when individuals demand that their partner be ideal in every way.

B. Childhood Maltreatment

Childhood maltreatment is defined as an unpleasant experience involving violence or abuse experienced by an individual during childhood (Thoma et al., 2021). Abuse or violence during childhood typically occurs to children under the age of 18, though the upper age limit defining child abuse varies across countries or legislative regions, with the youngest upper limit being 12 years (Russell, 1983). Finkelhor et al. (2009) categorize child abuse into four main types: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect (Finkelhor, Ormrod, et al., 2009; Finkelhor, Turner, et al., 2009). Briere (1992) highlights factors contributing to childhood maltreatment (Briere et al., 2020), including family and environmental factors such as parents or caregivers experiencing stress or economic problems, social and cultural factors that tolerate violence or trivialize certain forms of abuse, weaknesses in child protection systems, and the child's personality factors. Gothard (1985) further explains that some children may be more vulnerable to maltreatment, such as those born prematurely, experiencing mental retardation, having physical disabilities, or being twins (Gothard dkk., 1985).

C. Perception of Partner

Perception is a series of sensory experiences through the senses, such as vision, touch, hearing, smell, taste, and proprioception, in relation to the environment. It encompasses how individuals recognize and interpret the sensory information they receive. Sensory information received from the environment is given meaning (Baron & Byrne, 2004). Based on this definition, perception of a partner is a cognitive process or an individual's interpretation of information about their partner, which can lead to either positive or negative impressions. Positive impressions of a partner and the relationship can foster a sense of satisfaction with the relationship. Conversely, if an individual develops negative impressions, dissatisfaction with the relationship is likely to emerge. According to Baron and Byrne (1991) and Myers (2002), there are three aspects of perception (Baron & Byrne, 1991; Myers, 2002). The first is the cognitive aspect, which involves components related to knowledge, views, and beliefs—things associated with how individuals perceive an attitude object. The second is the affective aspect, which relates to feelings of liking or disliking toward the attitude object. Lastly, the conative aspect refers to components that indicate the degree of tendency to act or behave toward the attitude object. Schultz (2020) explains that personal factors can serve as underlying factors in an individual's perception of their partner

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(Schultz, 2020). An individual's perception of their partner can be influenced by personal experiences, emotions, motivations, and expectations, which may sometimes lead to perceptual illusions and misinterpretations of reality.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative correlational method aimed at examining the relationship between childhood maltreatment, partner perceptions, and relationship satisfaction among survivors of child abuse. A correlational design is utilized, where the researchers investigate the extent to which two independent variables—childhood maltreatment and partner perceptions—are related to the dependent variable, relationship satisfaction. The study population consists of residents aged 20–30 years in the Tenggilis Mejoyo District. The sampling technique was determined based on the requirements of statistical analysis, calculated using G*Power, resulting in a sample size of 115 respondents. The inclusion criteria include residents aged 20–30 years who are willing to participate in the study, are survivors of child abuse, have been married for at least one year, and do not have children. Data collection was conducted using three Likert-scale instruments: the Relationship Satisfaction Scale by Levenson and Gottman (1983), the Childhood Maltreatment Scale by Finkelhor (2009), and the Partner Perception Scale by Baron and Byrne (1991) as well as Myers (2002). Each scale consists of multiple statements with response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Instrument validity was tested using the corrected item-total correlation method, while reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of a partial correlation test between Relationship Satisfaction and Childhood Maltreatment, a t-score of 5.747 was obtained with a significance value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). This indicates a significant correlation between Relationship Satisfaction and Childhood Maltreatment. The results show a negative correlation, meaning the two variables are inversely related. In other words, the higher the level of childhood maltreatment (adverse childhood experiences), the lower the level of relationship satisfaction, and vice versa. Individuals who experienced childhood abuse also have difficulty expressing or understanding emotions, leading to miscommunication and frustration in relationships. Survivors of childhood abuse have relatively poor quality romantic relationships and tend to feel less secure and more reluctant to enter into relationships in adulthood. Trauma resulting from childhood abuse experiences can hinder trust, prevent partners from sharing their feelings, and increase sensitivity to conflict.

Similarly, the results of a partial correlation test between Relationship Satisfaction and Partner Perception showed a t-score of 4.884 with a significance value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). This indicates a significant correlation between Relationship Satisfaction and Partner Perception. The results demonstrate a positive correlation, meaning the two variables move in the same direction. In other words, the more positive an individual's perception of their partner, the higher their level of relationship satisfaction, and vice versa.

Based on simultaneous calculations using multiple regression analysis, an F-value of 54.697 was obtained with a significance value of $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.05$). These results indicate a significant correlation between Childhood Maltreatment (X1) and Partner Perception (X2) with Relationship Satisfaction (Y). Individuals who have experienced childhood maltreatment may carry negative thought and emotional patterns into their adult romantic relationships. Rogosch, Cicchetti, & Aber (1995) Childhood abuse can lead to emotional and cognitive deficits, resulting in negatively biased information processing (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1998). This can make trusting a partner difficult and lead to negative perceptions of them, increasing conflict and reducing relationship satisfaction. The effective contribution in this study is 0.499, indicating that childhood maltreatment and partner perception contribute 49.9% to relationship satisfaction, leaving 50.1% influenced by other factors beyond these two variables. Other factors influencing relationship satisfaction include emotional regulation (Heikin, 2019), personality similarity (Furler et al., 2014), self-perception and self-esteem (Sciangua & Morry, 2009), social support (Juniarly et al., 2022), and jealousy (Nabila, 2024).

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study explores the relationship between childhood maltreatment, partner perception, and relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction is a crucial aspect of adult development, often serving as the foundation for more serious commitments, such as marriage. Various factors influence relationship satisfaction, including past experiences and how individuals perceive their partners. The study found that individuals with a history of childhood maltreatment tend to carry negative mindsets and emotional burdens into their romantic relationships as adults. This can lead to difficulties in trusting their partners, forming negative perceptions, and increasing the likelihood of conflict, ultimately reducing relationship satisfaction. The findings revealed a negative relationship between childhood maltreatment and relationship satisfaction, where higher levels of childhood maltreatment are associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Conversely, the study also found a positive relationship between partner perception and relationship satisfaction, indicating that more positive perceptions of a partner can enhance relationship quality. These findings highlight the significant role of past experiences and partner perceptions in shaping the quality of romantic relationships.

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