

# The Influence of Social Ostracism and Traumatic Experiences in Childhood on Personality Disorder

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**Abstract.** Human beings are social animals and inevitably have to have relationships and interactions with others to instinctively survive and thrive. In the process of social interaction, it is inevitable to encounter malicious or non-malicious injuries. Based on whether the injuries are malicious or not, they are classified as social ostracism and traumatic experiences, which are further subdivided into verbal and physical violence, the death of a friend or relative, and the deaths of strangers. The correlation between psychological injuries inflicted on the individual by such injurious events that occur during childhood and personality development as well as personality disorders is analyzed and presented through the study of past research in related fields. The analysis finds that, since some individuals in childhood do not have a good ability to cope with such events, even injurious events with different causes and different kinds of injuries could easily cause psychological injuries to individuals, these psychological injuries can further impede the development of the individual's personality, leading to abnormal tendencies in the individual's personality, or even to personality disorders. This paper summarizes the main points of previous empirical studies and provides evidence for further understanding of the relationships between variables.

**Keywords:** Childhood social ostracism, childhood traumatic experiences, personality disorder, personality disorder.

## 1. Introduction

Human beings are social animals, interactions and associations with others are inevitable in order to better survive in society and to gain opportunities for reproduction and development. Such interactions may be positive, such as intimate relationships between relatives and friends, which can give individuals social support and provide positive guidance; however, there may also be negative interactions, such as malicious competition, hostility, and enmity, which can cause injury to individuals and even seriously threaten their lives.

Once given a relationship, the individual will give emotions about the connection, and the emotions will mobilize one's feelings and mental state. As the individual gives emotions to the relationship, the other person connected by the relationship will also express different emotions to the individual.

Because of the existence of social interactions, individuals will inevitably be harmed by the outside world, maliciously or non-maliciously, physically or psychologically. Whether the relationship is positive, neutral, or negative, it has the potential to cause harm to individuals.

When a negative relationship exists, then social ostracism may occur and the individual may be subjected to malicious physical or verbal violence from others, leading to psychological injury to the individual. When positive or neutral relationships suddenly disappear, such as when a friend or relative passes away or when a disaster occurs that results in multiple deaths or injuries, the individual may be psychologically traumatized, even if the occurrence is non-malicious. The impact on the individual is compounded when the injury occurs during a key period of the individual's development.

Childhood is a key period in an individual's psychological development, during which the individual gradually develops his or her unique personality traits under the influence of the environment, such as extroversion, introversion, and so on. If the injury is suffered during the key period, it will have a strong negative impact on the development of personality, resulting in personality defects and even further personality disorders.

## 2. Research Subjects

### 2.1. Social Ostracism

Social ostracism denotes the phenomenon and process of being excluded, rejected, or ignored by a social group or individuals, which hampers a person's fundamental needs for belonging and relationships [1]. This experience is common in negative interpersonal relationships and is widely found in social life, including verbal and physical violence. People are inherently social creatures, relying on the group for better chances of survival and development. When subjected to social ostracism, their lives will be seriously threatened and there will be serious negative impacts on their cognition, emotions, behaviors, and many other aspects.

Individuals who suffer from social ostracism will feel high levels of negative emotions such as pain, sadness, and anger as individual needs are not satisfied and are threatened. Following that the individual, to avoid more psychological harm from social ostracism, will show some defensive behaviors, and even maybe show aggression, withdrawal, and decreased pro-social behaviors. Negative emotions and behavioral tendencies can negatively affect an individual's personality traits, especially when social ostracism occurs in childhood, which can affect the development of the individual's personality, resulting in the formation of more paranoid personalities, or even the development of personality disorders.

Although psychological theories of the need for belonging and self-esteem as fundamental human motivations have been around for a while, the investigation of exclusion, rejection, and ignorance by a single person or group has just recently emerged as a major field of study in social psychology. Social psychologists' investigation of social ostracism commenced in the 1990s, emerging with the presentation of the sociometric theories of belonging needs and self-esteem.

### 2.2. Traumatic Experiences

The scope of traumatic experiences here refers specifically to distressing or overwhelming events that occur in the context of the death of another person, especially when the relationship between the other person and the individual is neutral or positive. Often positive and neutral relationships do not directly harm an individual. However, the disappearance of the relationship can result in a lack of support and guidance for the individual, as well as triggering negative and uncomfortable emotions, like despair and anger. Those emotions may be difficult to control and regulate, further evolving into psychological injuries that are more likely to have a profound impact on the individual's mental, emotional, and sometimes even physical health. The experience can often be extremely troubling, distressing, or threatening to the individual's sense of security, stability, or understanding of the world. The death of another person can stem from a variety of events, including accidents, illnesses, and natural disasters.

Whether witnessed in person or heard about these encounters after the fact, a variety of psychological and emotional effects can be elicited, including post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, dissociation, and other mental health challenges [2]. Some of the effects of traumatic experiences could persist long after the event, affecting an individual's thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and overall quality of life, and often necessitating therapies and supports to help individuals effectively process and manage these experiences constructively and adaptively.

Children's relatively weak capacity to tolerate and adjust to traumatic experiences and their low level of acceptance of traumatic experiences and injury, are prone to greater negative impacts on individual development and may even lead to personality disorders.

### **3. The Influence of Social Ostracism on Personality Disorder**

#### **3.1. Verbal Violence**

Verbal violence is often considered a form of emotional abuse and has been found to be associated with exacerbated symptoms of certain personality disorders, meaning that verbal violence is also a risk factor for developing a personality disorder [3].

Multiple personality disorders or psychological disorders are associated with childhood experiences of violent abuse. During the latter half of the 20th century, researchers examined data derived from a community-oriented longitudinal study to explore whether children's exposure to verbal violence might amplify the susceptibility to developing personality disorders in the future. Offspring subjected to verbal violence from their mothers during childhood exhibited a more than three times increase in the possibility of the development of borderline personality disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, obsessive-compulsive personality disorder and paranoid personality disorder during adolescence or early adulthood, in comparison to those who were not exposed to such verbal violence [4].

Further research, through a cross-sectional questionnaire study among patients with mood disorders, concludes that the characteristics of borderline personality disorder have a moderately strong correlation with reported experiences of violent childhood abuse, in which insecure attachment may mediate the relationship to some extent, and even that experience of violent childhood abuse is one of the independent predictors of borderline personality disorder [5]. In addition to the above, a study that adjusted for a variety of other confounders such as education level, race, and marital status, even though the risk of developing the disease is reduced, still obtained the significant result that experience of violent abuse in early childhood increases the risk of positive symptoms of schizophrenia, which may lead to psychological and physiological changes that increase the possibility of developing schizophrenia [6].

#### **3.2. Physical Violence**

The current findings suggest that physical violence in childhood is not significantly correlated with the development of personality disorders [7]. Although displaying physical violence in front of children may lead them to imitate and develop violent tendencies, such tendencies are much less likely to reach the level of personality disorders [8].

However, sexual violence, as a specific type of physical violence, can have serious negative effects on individuals. Many researchers have shown that the possibility of the development of borderline personality disorder, multiple personality disorder, and other disorders in adulthood may be related to exposure to sexual violence in childhood.

Beyond the above, a study focusing on the impulsivity trait, one of the diagnostic criteria for some personality disorders, which may lead to undesirable events (e.g., suicide), obtained the results by analyzing several self-report questionnaires. The results show that this trait is associated with individuals who have suffered physical violence during their childhood, and this correlation is even more obvious in victims of sexual violence [9]. Using a large sample of more than 1,000 hospitalized mental patients, one study interviewed and documented each individual's personality traits and a childhood history of sexual and physical violence. The results showed that those who had been exposed to physical violence, especially sexual violence during childhood, had a higher probability of developing borderline personality disorder [10]. In summary, individuals who have been subjected to sexual violence in childhood are more severely traumatized, both physically and psychologically, and are more likely to suffer from personality development problems leading to personality disorders and even uncontrollable consequences.

## **4. The influence of Traumatic Experiences on Personality Disorder**

### **4.1. The Death of a Friend or Relative**

Childhood is a key and important period in the whole development of a child's personality, during which traumatic events, especially the death of a close family member or friend, may traumatize a child, leading to personality deficits and a likelihood of developing a personality disorder. Research on children in the area is lacking for the time being. However, one study explores the factors that contribute to the development of personality disorders in elderly depressed patients through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, whereas the results show that the death of a close relative or friend leads to impaired social support for the individual, which is associated with the development of personality disorders [11]. From this, it can be inferred that the death of a close relative or friend may have a contributory role in the development of personality disorders.

The impact of the death of a relative on personality development is due not only to the negative psychological impact of the loss of a person with whom one has a close relationship but also to the absence of the relative's role in guiding the child's personality development in the normal way, which leads to undesirable consequences, such as causing the formation of insecure attachments and so on, which may lead to the emergence of personality disorders. The immediate family is an extremely important learning teacher in the development of a child's personality, and in the absence of care and guidance from the immediate family, the child's personality may develop in an extreme direction.

### **4.2. The Deaths of Multiple Strangers**

Disasters usually result in large numbers of human casualties, where the casualties are mostly in a neutral relationship with the individual. Whether it is a natural disaster such as an earthquake, volcanic eruption, or epidemic, or a man-made disaster such as a war or terrorist attack, disasters that result in multiple human casualties can also traumatize those who witness or experience them.

Most current research suggests that more attention has been paid to post-traumatic stress disorder caused by disasters. However, if a victim experiences or witnesses a mass casualty disaster as a child and multiple individuals with whom he or she was in a neutral relationship die, the resulting psychological trauma may also partially lead to certain personality deficits that can adversely affect his or her personality as an adult [12].

The current specific research in this area is relatively lacking, and the focus of research on the psychological impact of disaster deaths and injuries has focused more on the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, with fewer studies analyzing the negative impact of disaster trauma on personality development and personality disorder.

## **5. Discussion**

Although a large quantity of research confirms that social ostracism and traumatic experiences in childhood are among the causal factors for personality disorders, and even that social ostracism and traumatic experiences suffered in childhood can predict certain personality disorders, it does not mean that individuals who experience social ostracism or traumatic experiences in childhood will exhibit personality disorders in adulthood. Some individuals have experienced psychological harm in childhood, and who have been sharpened by that harm, instead, have been inspired to develop wonderful personality traits such as strength and independence.

Many factors contribute to the large differences in outcomes, different psychological damage suffered, different ways in which individuals tolerate and cope with the damage, and the availability or lack of assistance from other people. For example, the psychological damage caused by different traumatic experiences varies among individuals, and the psychological trauma caused by the death of an immediate family member is usually more serious than that caused by the death of a collateral family member. Individuals have unique characteristics, such as the ability to tolerate and self-repair from psychological damage. While some individuals may be able to adjust their emotions and

psychological state without the assistance of other people, some individuals are unable to cope with the psychological damage suffered.

In terms of the results of the current study, due to ethical and moral constraints, the methods of the study are limited, with the commonly used methods being participants' independent recall reports, self-report questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews, and within the result. Studies with those methods possess a very large number of interfering variables. Moreover, substance abuse is also a strong factor affecting personality disorders which should be considered in future studies [11]. In this restricted environment, the analyses provide limited results and do not completely remove the interference of other factors.

To avoid the negative influence of psychological trauma on personality development, once an individual has been socially ostracized or has suffered a traumatic experience, regardless of whether it is short-term or long-term, malicious harm done by another person or a disastrous external trauma, appropriate psychological counseling or treatment should be carried out to channel the negative emotions. In some cases, medication may even be necessary to prevent the psychological trauma triggered by the experience from having a long-lasting negative impact on the individual, resulting in the formation of psychological or personality disorders.

## 6. Conclusion

From several studies, it is clear that both social ostracism and traumatic experiences can negatively affect children's personality development to varying degrees, and even cause psychological injury leading to developmental abnormalities of a significant magnitude.

Among these, non-sexual physical violence without emotional harm is the least psychologically damaging and least likely to lead to personality disorders in children, but still has the potential to lead to the development of undesirable tendencies such as violence.

In contrast, the psychological injury caused by disaster deaths and deaths of a relative and friend has not been definitively investigated, but it can be inferred that the occurrence of a disaster may affect the child because of the negative emotions it brings, with the possibility of affecting the development of normal personality; the death of a relative or friend may have a negative impact on the child's personality due to the loss of the individual's social support and the loss of the relative's or friend's own guiding role in the child's development of normal personality. The mechanisms involved are not clear and need to be further clarified.

For the time being, definitive research analysis suggests that other types of negative experiences, such as ostracism and verbal abuse by an individual or a group, are particularly emotionally damaging to children and increase an individual's risk of developing one or more personality disorders. Sexual violence is the type of physical violence that is most likely to lead to impulsive and uncontrollable consequences for the victim, causing the most serious and profound psychological damage to the individual, and having the strongest impact on the development of the individual's personality, as well as leading to the development of personality disorders in the individual.

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