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The Relationship Between Childhood Maltreatment and a Woman's Desire to Have Children

Tayah Simpson

Dominican University of California, tayah.simpson@alumni.dominican.edu

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Tayah T. Simpson

INTRODUCTION

One life task for many adults, especially women, is the task of parenting. Many factors can be associated with becoming a parent, but one of the most foundational is the desire to have children.

Rholes et al (1997) concluded that regardless of attachment style, a lower desire for children was associated with more negative perceptions of parenting abilities.

Harel and Finzi-Dottan (2018) found that a history of childhood maltreatment was associated with viewing parenting as potentially threatening.

Bailey et al (2012) found that;

- ❖ emotional abuse, neglect, and witnessing family violence were associated with hostility towards future children
- ❖ a mother's experience of physical or sexual abuse was associated with a self-perceived lack of parental competence and lower emotional availability

Given that a common human response to anything potentially unpleasant is avoidance, the desire to have children becomes diminished for children of abuse. The present study evaluates the relationship between a history of childhood maltreatment and the desire to have children in females.

HYPOTHESIS

Adult women with a history of childhood maltreatment will have less of a desire to have children compared to women of similar age, who were not abused as children.

METHOD

Participants

51 Adult Females

Age Groups: **Younger** 20-34 years ($n = 29$)
Older 35-74 years ($n = 22$)

Childhood Abuse History Groups

No/Minor Maltreatment = No abuse or single incidences of neglect, no sexual or physical harm ($n = 15$)

Low Maltreatment = Multiple incidences of neglect, physical harm only once, no sexual harm ($n = 13$)

Severe Maltreatment = Multiple incidences of several types of neglect and physical harm more than once and/or one or more incidence of sexual harm ($n = 23$)

Relationship Status Groups

Single = No current relationship/never married ($n = 25$)

In a Relationship = Married, domestic partner, divorced, widowed or currently in a long-term relationship ($n = 26$)

Recruitment Process

College Classrooms and Social Media invites

Measures

Desire to Have Children Scale: 13-Items (Rholes et al, 1997)

Childhood Maltreatment History Questionnaire: (created by researcher)

Procedure

Anonymous, online survey

RESULTS

Single Factor ANOVA revealed:

- ❖ Low Maltreatment and Severe Maltreatment groups had a mean rate of Desire to Have Children that was significantly lower than the No/Minor Maltreatment group, $F(2,48) = 3.82, p = .028, \eta^2 = 0.14, MSe = 90.47,$ (see Figure 1).

- ❖ Post-hoc test analysis (Tukey's HSD) found that Desire to Have Children was not significantly different for females with Low and Severe childhood maltreatment histories, but both groups were significantly different than females with No/Minor history of childhood maltreatment.

Relationship of Desire to Have Children, Maltreatment History, and Age Group

t -test comparisons found that the previous findings were consistent across age groups (see Table 1).

Relationship of Desire to Have Children, Maltreatment History, and Relationship Status

t -test comparisons found that the previous findings were consistent for single females, and that same trend was present (but not a statistically significant difference) for females in a relationship (see Table 2).



CONCLUSIONS

The hypothesis was supported by the research findings.

- ❖ Females with histories of childhood maltreatment had less of a desire to have children than females without a history of childhood maltreatment.
- ❖ Similarities in the findings between females with Low and Severe maltreatment histories may indicate that any form or severity of maltreatment can lead to a lower desire for children.
- ❖ Age and relationship status were not factors in the way in which a history of maltreatment influenced a woman's desire for children.

Figure 1
Desire to Have Children in Females over 20 with No/Minor, Low, And Severe Maltreatment Histories.

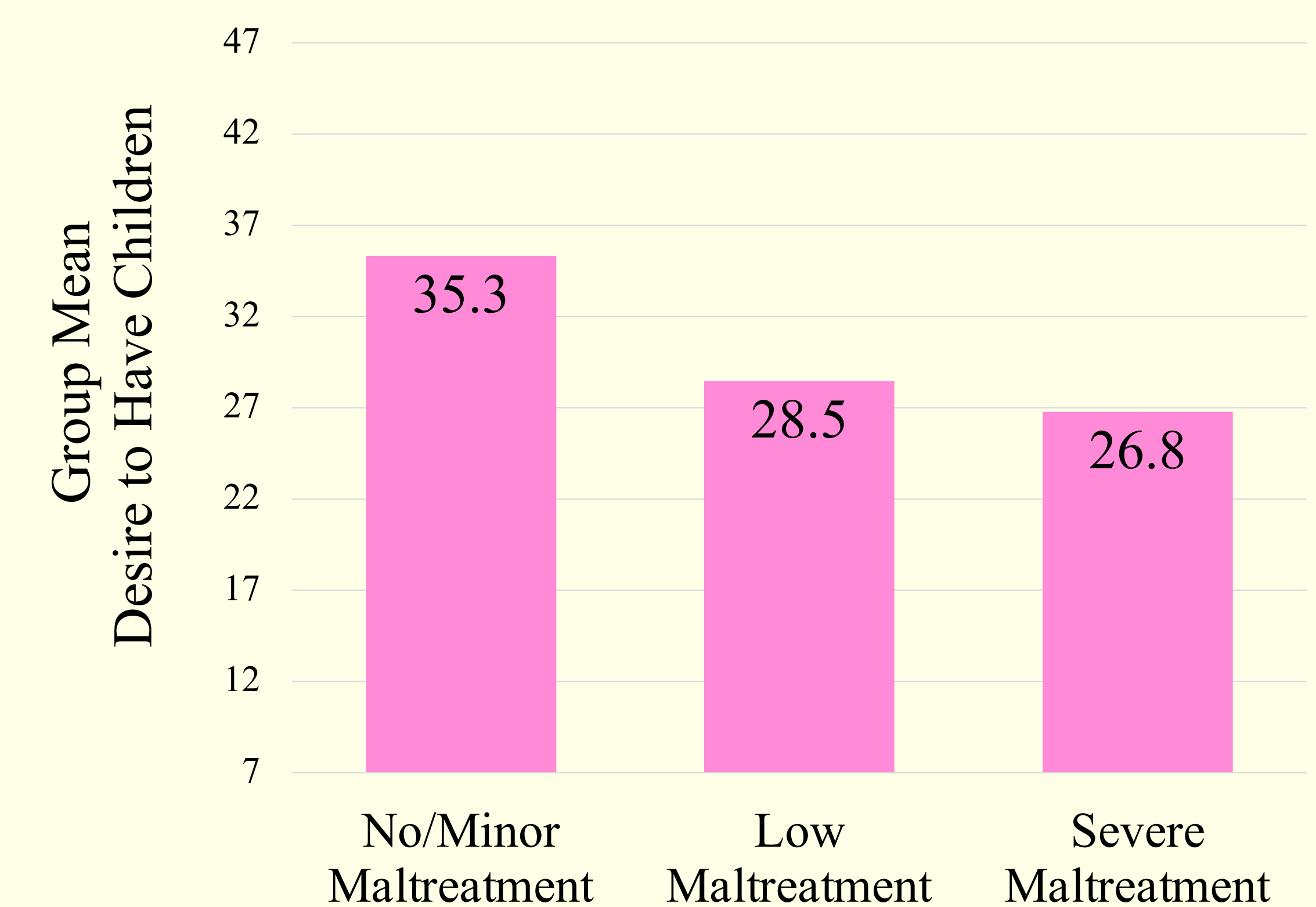


Table 1
Analysis of Desire to Have Children in Females with Maltreatment Histories by Age Group.

Age Group	Maltreatment History	Mean	Two-tail t -test Alpha Level
Younger	Low or Severe	27.81	$p = 0.02$
	No/Minor	34.42	
Older	Low or Severe	24.62	$p = 0.05$
	No/Minor	36.60	

Table 2
Analysis of Desire to Have Children in Females with Maltreatment Histories by Relationship Status.

Relationship Status	Maltreatment History	Mean	Two-tail t -test Alpha Level
Single	Low or Severe	26.41	$p = 0.007$
	No/Minor	36.25	
In a Relationship	Low or Severe	27.71	$p = 0.08$
	No/Minor	34.00	

Contact E-mail: Tayah.Simpson@students.Dominican.edu

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