



# UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA ON ADULT INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

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**Abstract :** Childhood trauma has emerged as a significant psychological concern due to its long-lasting effects on emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal functioning. Experiences such as abuse, neglect, and dysfunctional family environments disrupt early developmental processes, often leading to persistent relational difficulties in adulthood. While previous research has extensively examined the psychological consequences of trauma, there remains a need for deeper qualitative exploration of how individuals experience and interpret these effects within their interpersonal relationships. The present study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of individuals who have encountered childhood trauma and its impact on their adult interpersonal relationships. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal key patterns including trust issues, emotional dysregulation, fear of abandonment, communication difficulties, and low self-esteem. Additionally, the study highlights the presence of resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms among participants.

The study emphasizes that childhood trauma significantly shapes relational patterns but does not entirely determine them. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of trauma-informed relational dynamics and highlight the importance of therapeutic interventions focused on emotional regulation, attachment repair, and self-concept development.

**Keywords:** Childhood trauma, interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, attachment, qualitative research, resilience.

## 1. Introduction

Childhood represents a foundational period in human development during which individuals acquire essential emotional, cognitive, and social competencies that influence functioning across the lifespan. The quality of early experiences plays a crucial role in shaping personality development, emotional regulation, and the capacity to form meaningful interpersonal relationships. While nurturing and supportive environments facilitate healthy development, adverse experiences during childhood can significantly disrupt these processes, leading to long-term psychological and relational challenges.

Childhood trauma refers to distressing experiences occurring before the age of eighteen that overwhelm an individual's ability to cope effectively. These experiences include various forms of abuse (emotional, physical, sexual), neglect, and exposure to adverse family environments such as domestic violence, parental substance abuse, or mental illness. Such experiences are collectively conceptualized under the framework of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which have been widely studied for their long-term impact on health and well-being.

One of the most significant yet complex consequences of childhood trauma is its impact on interpersonal relationships in adulthood. Interpersonal relationships are central to human functioning, contributing to emotional well-being, social support, and overall life satisfaction. However, individuals with a history of trauma often experience difficulties in forming and maintaining healthy relationships. These difficulties may manifest as mistrust, fear of intimacy, emotional instability, and maladaptive communication patterns.

Although existing research has extensively documented the association between childhood trauma and adverse psychological outcomes, much of this research has relied on quantitative methodologies. While such approaches are valuable in identifying patterns and correlations, they often fail to capture the depth, complexity, and subjective meaning of individuals' lived experiences. There is a growing need for qualitative research that explores how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences, particularly within specific cultural contexts.

In the Indian context, the study of childhood trauma and its relational implications remains relatively underexplored, especially from a qualitative perspective. Cultural factors such as family dynamics, societal expectations, and stigma surrounding mental health significantly influence both the experience and expression of trauma.

Therefore, the present study aims to explore the lived experiences of individuals with a history of childhood trauma and to understand how these experiences shape their adult interpersonal relationships. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the study seeks to provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the relational impact of trauma.

## 2. Review of Literature

The relationship between childhood trauma and adult interpersonal functioning has been extensively examined across various theoretical and empirical frameworks.

Attachment theory, proposed by Bowlby (1988), provides a foundational lens for understanding how early caregiver relationships influence later relational patterns. Secure attachment develops in environments characterized by consistency and emotional responsiveness, whereas traumatic or neglectful environments often lead to insecure attachment styles. Individuals with anxious attachment may exhibit fear of abandonment and emotional dependency, while those with avoidant attachment may struggle with intimacy and emotional expression.

Neurobiological research further highlights the impact of trauma on brain development. Studies indicate that prolonged exposure to stress during childhood affects key brain structures, including the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex. These changes result in heightened emotional reactivity, impaired emotional regulation, and difficulties in decision-making, all of which influence interpersonal functioning (van der Kolk, 2014).

Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated the long-term effects of childhood trauma on relationships. Felitti et al. (1998), through the ACE study, established a strong association between early adverse experiences and negative outcomes in adulthood, including relational difficulties. Similarly, Cloitre et al. (2009) found that cumulative trauma is associated with impaired interpersonal functioning and emotional dysregulation.

Despite these contributions, several gaps remain in the literature. A majority of studies adopt quantitative approaches, focusing on measurable outcomes rather than subjective experiences. Additionally, there is limited exploration of resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms among trauma survivors. Furthermore, research within the Indian cultural context remains scarce, particularly qualitative studies that capture lived experiences.

The present study addresses these gaps by providing an in-depth qualitative exploration of how childhood trauma influences adult interpersonal relationships, with a focus on lived experiences and cultural context.

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### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Objectives

- To explore the impact of childhood trauma on adult interpersonal relationships
- To understand emotional and behavioral patterns associated with trauma
- To identify coping mechanisms and resilience among individuals

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#### 3.2 Research Design

The study follows a qualitative phenomenological research design aimed at understanding the lived experiences of individuals. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of subjective meanings and interpretations.

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#### 3.3 Sample Size

The study includes a sample of 10–15 participants within the age range of 18–45 years who reported experiencing childhood trauma.

#### 3.4 Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants who meet the inclusion criteria and are able to provide rich, relevant data.

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### 3.5 Inclusion Criteria

- Individuals aged 18–45 years
  - Individuals with self-reported childhood trauma
  - Willingness to participate
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### 3.6 Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals without trauma experiences
  - Participants unwilling to provide consent
  - Severe psychiatric conditions affecting participation
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### 3.7 Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility while ensuring consistency across participants.

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### 3.8 Procedure

The research was conducted in the following stages:

1. Identification of research problem
  2. Selection of participants
  3. Conducting interviews
  4. Transcription of responses
  5. Thematic analysis
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### 3.9 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving coding, categorization, and identification of key themes.

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed multiple interrelated patterns that reflect the profound and long-lasting impact of childhood trauma on adult interpersonal relationships. These themes highlight not only the psychological consequences of early adverse experiences but also their manifestation in relational behaviors, emotional responses, and self-perceptions. The findings suggest

that childhood trauma influences how individuals perceive others, regulate emotions, and engage in interpersonal dynamics.

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#### 4.1 Trust Issues

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the analysis was the presence of persistent trust deficits among participants. Trust is a foundational component of healthy interpersonal relationships; however, individuals who experienced childhood trauma often reported significant difficulty in trusting others. These difficulties were frequently rooted in early experiences of betrayal, inconsistency, neglect, or emotional unavailability from primary caregivers.

Participants described a constant sense of uncertainty in relationships, often anticipating disappointment or harm even in safe environments. This hypervigilance led to protective behaviors such as emotional distancing, reluctance to disclose personal information, and avoidance of deep connections. In some cases, participants reported testing their partners or friends to “prove” their reliability, which sometimes strained relationships further.

Additionally, trust issues were not limited to others but also extended to self-trust. Many participants expressed doubt in their own judgment when choosing partners or making relational decisions. This internal conflict often resulted in confusion, indecisiveness, and dependency on external validation.

These findings are consistent with attachment theory, which suggests that early caregiver relationships shape internal working models of trust and security. Individuals with insecure attachment patterns may struggle to perceive relationships as safe, leading to long-term relational instability.

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#### 4.2 Emotional Dysregulation

Emotional dysregulation emerged as a significant and pervasive theme across participants’ narratives. Many individuals reported difficulty in identifying, expressing, and managing their emotions effectively. These challenges often manifested as intense emotional reactions, sudden mood changes, or emotional numbness.

Participants described experiencing overwhelming feelings such as anger, anxiety, sadness, and frustration, often triggered by seemingly minor relational situations. In contrast, some individuals reported suppressing their emotions entirely as a coping mechanism, leading to emotional detachment and reduced intimacy in relationships.

This pattern can be understood as a consequence of disrupted emotional development during childhood. When children grow up in environments where emotions are invalidated, ignored, or punished, they may fail to develop healthy emotional regulation strategies. As a result, they may either overreact to emotional stimuli or avoid emotional experiences altogether.

Emotional dysregulation significantly impacted interpersonal relationships by increasing conflict, reducing effective communication, and creating misunderstandings. Participants often reported feeling misunderstood by others, which further reinforced feelings of isolation and frustration.

These findings align with trauma theory and neurobiological research, which indicate that childhood trauma affects brain regions responsible for emotional processing and regulation. This highlights the need for therapeutic interventions focusing on emotional awareness and regulation skills.

### 4.3 Fear of Abandonment

A pervasive fear of abandonment was another critical theme identified in the study. Many participants expressed a deep-seated anxiety about being rejected, left alone, or emotionally abandoned by significant others. This fear often stemmed from early experiences of neglect, separation, or inconsistent caregiving.

Participants reported constantly seeking reassurance in relationships and feeling distressed when their expectations were not met. This fear manifested in two contrasting behavioral patterns: some individuals became overly dependent and clingy, while others adopted avoidant behaviors to protect themselves from potential rejection.

The fear of abandonment also contributed to heightened sensitivity to relational cues. Minor disagreements, delayed responses, or perceived changes in behavior were often interpreted as signs of rejection, leading to anxiety and emotional distress. This hypersensitivity frequently resulted in conflict, miscommunication, and instability within relationships.

Furthermore, this fear influenced participants' decision-making in relationships. Some individuals reported staying in unhealthy or unsatisfying relationships due to fear of being alone, while others avoided relationships altogether to prevent emotional pain.

These findings are consistent with the concept of anxious attachment, where individuals exhibit a strong desire for closeness combined with fear of rejection. Addressing this fear is essential for improving relational functioning and emotional well-being.

### 4.4 Communication Difficulties

Communication difficulties emerged as a significant barrier to healthy interpersonal relationships among participants. Effective communication is essential for expressing emotions, resolving conflicts, and building intimacy; however, individuals with a history of trauma often struggled in this area.

Participants reported difficulty in articulating their thoughts and feelings, often due to fear of judgment, rejection, or conflict. Many individuals avoided discussing sensitive topics, leading to unresolved issues and emotional distance in relationships. In some cases, participants expressed their emotions indirectly through withdrawal, silence, or passive-aggressive behavior.

Another common pattern observed was difficulty in understanding others' perspectives. Participants sometimes misinterpreted neutral or positive interactions as negative, reflecting underlying insecurity and mistrust. This often resulted in misunderstandings and unnecessary conflict.

Communication difficulties were also influenced by early family environments where open expression was discouraged or unsafe. Participants who grew up in such environments lacked role models for healthy communication, which affected their relational skills in adulthood.

Improving communication skills is crucial for enhancing relationship quality. Interventions focusing on assertiveness, emotional expression, and active listening can help individuals develop healthier interpersonal patterns.

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### 4.5 Low Self-Esteem

Low self-esteem was a recurring theme that significantly influenced participants' interpersonal experiences. Many individuals reported negative self-perceptions, feelings of inadequacy, and a lack of self-worth. These beliefs were often internalized from early experiences of criticism, neglect, or emotional abuse.

Participants described feeling unworthy of love, respect, or attention, which affected their behavior in relationships. This often led to overcompensation, people-pleasing tendencies, or acceptance of unhealthy treatment from others. In some cases, individuals avoided relationships altogether due to fear of rejection or belief that they were not deserving of positive connections.

Low self-esteem also contributed to dependency in relationships, where individuals relied heavily on external validation for their sense of self-worth. This created imbalanced relationships and increased vulnerability to emotional distress.

These findings highlight the importance of self-concept in shaping interpersonal dynamics. Addressing negative self-beliefs through therapeutic interventions can significantly improve relational outcomes and overall well-being.

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#### 4.6 Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Despite the challenges associated with childhood trauma, the study also revealed the presence of resilience and adaptive coping mechanisms among participants. This highlights that individuals are not solely defined by their traumatic experiences but possess the capacity for growth and change.

Participants reported various coping strategies, including self-reflection, journaling, mindfulness practices, and seeking social support. Some individuals actively worked on understanding their emotional patterns and making conscious efforts to improve their relationships.

Therapeutic interventions, such as counseling and psychotherapy, played a significant role in fostering resilience. Participants who engaged in therapy reported increased self-awareness, improved emotional regulation, and healthier relational patterns.

Additionally, supportive relationships with friends, partners, or mentors contributed to positive change. These relationships provided a sense of safety and validation, helping individuals rebuild trust and develop secure attachment patterns.

The presence of resilience suggests that while childhood trauma has a significant impact, it does not deterministically dictate future outcomes. With appropriate support and intervention, individuals can overcome challenges and develop meaningful, healthy relationships.

#### 5. Conclusion

The present study provides an in-depth exploration of the enduring impact of childhood trauma on adult interpersonal relationships, highlighting the complex ways in which early adverse experiences shape emotional, cognitive, and relational functioning. Through a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study captures the lived experiences of individuals, offering a nuanced understanding of how trauma influences trust, emotional regulation, communication, and self-perception.

The findings clearly indicate that childhood trauma disrupts the foundational processes required for healthy relationship development. Individuals exposed to early adversity often develop maladaptive relational schemas characterized by mistrust, fear of abandonment, and difficulties in emotional expression. These patterns are not isolated but are interconnected, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and others within relational contexts. Emotional dysregulation further compounds these difficulties, leading to heightened reactivity or emotional withdrawal, both of which negatively affect relationship stability and satisfaction.

At the same time, the study highlights that the impact of trauma is not deterministic. A significant contribution of this research lies in its emphasis on resilience and adaptive functioning. Participants

demonstrated the ability to reflect on their experiences, develop coping strategies, and engage in personal growth. This suggests that while childhood trauma creates vulnerabilities, it also opens pathways for transformation when individuals are provided with supportive environments and appropriate interventions.

The study reinforces the relevance of theoretical frameworks such as attachment theory and trauma-informed perspectives, while also contributing to the literature by providing culturally grounded insights within the Indian context. The findings underscore the importance of incorporating trauma-informed approaches in psychological practice, particularly in interventions aimed at improving relational functioning.

From a practical standpoint, the study emphasizes the need for therapeutic approaches that focus on emotional regulation, rebuilding trust, enhancing communication skills, and strengthening self-concept. Mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers must recognize the long-term relational impact of childhood trauma and work towards creating supportive systems that facilitate healing and growth.

Overall, the study concludes that childhood trauma has a profound and lasting influence on adult interpersonal relationships, but with awareness, intervention, and support, individuals can move toward healthier and more fulfilling relational experiences.

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## 6. Limitations

While the present study provides valuable insights into the impact of childhood trauma on adult interpersonal relationships, certain limitations must be acknowledged.

Firstly, the study is based on a relatively small sample size, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Although qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, the experiences captured may not fully represent the diverse range of individuals affected by childhood trauma across different socio-cultural contexts.

Secondly, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to recall bias and subjective interpretation. Participants' recollections of childhood experiences and their current relational patterns may be influenced by memory distortions, emotional states, or personal perceptions. This may affect the accuracy and objectivity of the data.

Thirdly, the qualitative nature of the study, while rich in detail, does not allow for statistical validation of findings. The absence of quantitative measures limits the ability to establish causal relationships or compare the strength of associations between variables.

Another limitation is the potential influence of researcher bias during data interpretation. Although efforts were made to maintain objectivity through systematic thematic analysis, the interpretation of qualitative data inherently involves subjective judgment.

Additionally, the study does not extensively account for other influencing factors such as socio-economic status, cultural background, or current life circumstances, which may interact with childhood trauma in shaping interpersonal relationships.

Finally, the study focuses primarily on individuals who were willing to share their experiences, which may exclude those with more severe trauma or those who are less comfortable discussing personal issues. This may result in a partial representation of trauma experiences.

Despite these limitations, the study provides meaningful insights and lays a foundation for further research in this area.

## 7. Scope for Future Research

The findings of the present study open several avenues for future research, emphasizing the need for continued exploration of childhood trauma and its long-term relational impact.

Future studies can expand the sample size and include participants from diverse socio-cultural and demographic backgrounds to enhance the generalizability of findings. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts would provide valuable insights into how cultural factors influence the experience and expression of trauma in interpersonal relationships.

Incorporating mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative techniques would strengthen the research. Quantitative measures can be used to validate themes identified in qualitative analysis, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between childhood trauma and interpersonal functioning.

Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in examining how the impact of childhood trauma evolves over time. Such studies can provide insights into developmental trajectories, identifying factors that contribute to resilience or vulnerability across different life stages.

Future research can also explore specific types of trauma, such as emotional abuse, neglect, or exposure to family conflict, to understand their distinct effects on interpersonal relationships. Additionally, examining gender differences and developmental stages can further enrich the understanding of trauma-related relational patterns.

Another important area for future research is the evaluation of therapeutic interventions. Studies can assess the effectiveness of trauma-informed therapies, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), attachment-based therapy, and mindfulness-based interventions, in improving relational outcomes.

Furthermore, there is a need to explore protective factors that promote resilience among individuals with trauma histories. Factors such as social support, emotional intelligence, and coping strategies can be studied in greater detail to identify pathways for positive adaptation.

Research can also focus on the role of digital and online interventions in addressing trauma-related relational difficulties, particularly in the context of increasing accessibility to mental health services.

Overall, future research should aim to adopt interdisciplinary perspectives, integrating insights from psychology, neuroscience, and social sciences to develop a holistic understanding of childhood trauma and its impact on interpersonal relationship.

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