Traumatic Life Events and Quality of Romantic Relationships
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Background

A traumatic life event is defined as an experience that is anxiety-provoking and life-threatening (Birrell, Bernstein, Freyd, 2017). After the occurrence of a traumatic event, it is common for an individual to experience a variety of symptoms such as avoidance of stimuli relating to the trauma, numbing, hyperarousal, and intrusive thoughts (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While there is a plethora of research on how trauma is related to an individual’s negative mental and physical health outcomes, it is less clear as to how traumatic life events may relate to one’s quality of romantic relationships.

Romantic relationships are central to the lives of emerging adults, as romantic relationships become the closest relationship an individual has in early adulthood (Demir, 2008). Those that struggle with trauma related mental health issues may struggle to reciprocate qualities such as emotional support, help, and companionship in romantic relationships (Demir, 2008). Trauma related numbing and avoidance can reduce the amount of time a couple would spend doing pleasurable activities and lessen expressions of love (LeBlanc, Dixon, Robinaugh, Valentine, Bosley, Gerber, & Marques, 2016). This research investigated how traumatic life events may relate to a change in quality within romantic relationships among Latinx and African American college students.

Hypothesis

H1: Traumatic life events will relate to lower relationship commitment, intimacy, and passion in a college students’ romantic relationship.

Method

Participants: Latinx and African American college students (N = 145) attending a Midwestern PWI participated in a four-week diary study.

Sample characteristics
Race/Ethnicity:
- African American: 91
- Latino: 54
Gender:
- Female: 69.0%
- Male: 31.0%
Age:
Participants were on average 20 years old (SD = 1.32)
U.S. born: 96.6%

Measures

Relationship Quality. Participants completed the Perceived Relationship Quality Component (PRQC) (Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, 2000). They were asked to report on current relationship or their previous relationship.

18 items on a 5-point Likert scale.

Subscales include:
- Commitment:
  - “How committed/dedicated/devoted I am in my relationship.”
- Intimacy:
  - “How intimate/close is my relationship.”
- Passion:
  - “How passionate/lustful/sexually intense my relationship is.”

Responses ranged from 1 (“Not at all”) to 5 (“Extremely”).

Traumatic Life Events. Participants completed The Life Events Checklist for DSM-5 (LEC-5) (Weathers, Blake, Schnurr, Kaloupek, Marx, & Keane, 2013). Assessed the occurrence of various traumatic life events.
10 items- 3 scale responses
- Participants were asked if they experienced a natural disaster, fire/explosion, transportation accident, serious accident at work/home, exposure to toxic substances, combat, captivity, life-threatening injury/illness, and/or severe human suffering.
- Responses were 1 (“Happened to me”), 2 (“Witnessed it”) and 3 (“Doesn’t apply”).
- For the current study we used account of any traumatic event that happened or was witnessed by participants.

Results

Correlation analyses were conducted in order to see if there was an association between traumatic life events and three aspects of relationship quality: relationship commitment, intimacy, and passion. Results (Table 1) revealed that witnessing and experiencing a traumatic life event was significantly associated with relationship intimacy (r = -.18, p < .05) and passion (r = -.24, p < .01), but not relationship commitment (r = -.07, ns).

Table 1: Association Between Traumatic Life Events and Relationship Quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Traumatic life events</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>- .24**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Relationship commitment</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Relationship intimacy</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>- .18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Relationship passion</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>- .24**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. M indicates means. SD indicates standard deviations. * indicates p < .05. ** Indicates p < .01.

Conclusions and Implications

- Young adults who had witnessed and/or experienced more traumatic life events reported less relationship intimacy and passion.
- Trauma may not affect young adults’ commitment to their partners.
- However, trauma may be important for emotional and physical aspects of romantic relationships.
- Longitudinal research is needed to understand the associations over time.

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