

Dissociative Symptom Clustering in Adult Survivors of Prolonged Childhood Emotional Neglect: An Empirical Analysis of Structural Dissociation Profiles and Affect Dysregulation Trajectories

Skyler Campbell

PhD

Utrecht University

Heidelberglaan 1, 3584 CS Utrecht, Netherlands

Drew Thompson

Associate Professor

University of Toronto

27 King's College Circle, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1A1, Canada

Kai Lewis

Professor

University of Melbourne

Grattan Street, Parkville, Victoria 3010, Australia

Sam Davis

D.Sc

Heidelberg University

Grabengasse 1, 69117 Heidelberg, Germany

Abstract. Background: Structural dissociation theory posits that prolonged developmental trauma disrupts the integration of personality into distinct emotional parts, yet empirical mapping of dissociative symptom clusters in adult survivors of childhood emotional neglect (CEN) remains limited. Methods: This study examined 214 adults ($M_{age} = 34.7$; $SD = 9.2$) meeting CEN criteria via the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire-Short Form, administering the Multiscale Dissociation Inventory, Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale, and Depersonalization/Derealization Disorder scale. Latent profile analysis was employed to identify dissociative subtypes. Results: Three discrete dissociative profiles emerged—somatoform-dominant, derealization-predominant, and affective numbing—each exhibiting distinct affect dysregulation trajectories. Somatoform-dominant profiles demonstrated significantly elevated alexithymia scores ($p < .001$). Conclusions: Dissociative symptom heterogeneity in CEN survivors necessitates profile-informed treatment planning, with differential implications for trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral and EMDR interventions.

Keywords: childhood emotional neglect, structural dissociation, affect dysregulation, latent profile analysis, depersonalization-derealization, alexithymia, complex trauma, multiscale dissociation inventory, trauma-focused psychotherapy

Introduction

Childhood emotional neglect (CEN) has emerged as one of the most clinically underrecognized yet pervasive subtypes of early adverse experience, characterized by a caregiver's persistent failure to respond to a child's emotional needs, thereby disrupting foundational processes of affect regulation, self-referential processing, and relational schema formation. Unlike overt forms of maltreatment, CEN operates through omission rather than commission, rendering its sequelae particularly resistant to retrospective identification and, consequently, to systematic clinical investigation. Epidemiological data from the World Health Organization's 2023–2024 Global Burden of Mental Disorders report indicates that emotionally neglectful caregiving environments affect an estimated 18–22% of children globally, with downstream psychopathological consequences that frequently manifest in adulthood as complex posttraumatic stress disorder (CPTSD), persistent depressive disorder, somatic symptom disorder, and—critically—a spectrum of dissociative phenomena whose internal architecture remains poorly delineated. The theoretical framework of structural dissociation of the personality (SDP), originally formalized by Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele, provides a compelling neurobiological and phenomenological scaffold for understanding the fragmentation of self-experience that characterizes developmental trauma survivors. SDP theory distinguishes between apparently normal personality (ANP) subsystems oriented toward daily functioning and emotional personality (EP) subsystems fixated on traumatic material, with the severity of structural division mapping onto the complexity of the trauma history. Crucially, however, empirical validation of discrete dissociative subtype profiles—particularly in cohorts whose trauma exposure is limited to emotional neglect without co-occurring physical or sexual abuse—remains sparse. This gap is clinically consequential: treatment algorithms for dissociative presentations embedded within trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) protocols presuppose a degree of phenotypic homogeneity that may not withstand empirical scrutiny. Concurrently, the intersection of dissociation and affect dysregulation has attracted intensifying theoretical interest in the context of mentalization-based frameworks and polyvagal theory. Porges' neuroceptive model suggests that chronic emotional neglect during sensitive developmental windows produces lasting alterations in autonomic nervous system reactivity, with direct implications for the somatoform dissociative phenomena disproportionately observed in neglect-specific trauma populations. Yet the extent to which these autonomic dysregulation signatures map onto identifiable and clinically distinguishable dissociative profiles—particularly via person-centered statistical approaches such as latent profile analysis (LPA)—has not been systematically examined. The present study addresses these lacunae by applying LPA to a well-characterized adult sample meeting CEN criteria, with the objective of delineating empirically derived dissociative subtypes and characterizing their differential associations with affect dysregulation dimensions, alexithymic features, and depersonalization-derealization severity. The article

proceeds as follows: Section 2 details the sampling strategy, diagnostic instrumentation, and analytic procedures; Section 3 presents the LPA-derived profile solutions and between-profile comparisons; Section 4 discusses the clinical and theoretical implications of identified subtype heterogeneity; and Section 5 articulates limitations and directions for future longitudinal inquiry.

This is a preliminary version. To read the full version of the article, please purchase a subscription.

References

1. Спицька, Л. В. (2018). Правове регулювання адміністративної відповідальності посадових осіб органів публічної адміністрації за порушення у сфері надання адміністративних послуг. Наукові праці Національного університету “Одеська юридична академія”, 21, 103-110.
2. Спицька, Л. В. (2015). Соціально-психологічні засоби корекції проявів делінквентної поведінки неповолітніх в умовах закладів соціальної реабілітації. Теоретичні і прикладні проблеми психології, (2), 37.