

Running Head: Fear and Depression CSA and Dating Violence From Childhood Sexual Abuse to Dating Violence: Investigating the Role of Fear and Depression

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Abstract

This study examined fear and depression as mediators of the relationship between history of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and adult dating violence victimization among a sample of 507 college women. Participants completed self-administered surveys containing the Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss & Oros, 1982), the Women's Experience with Battering Scale (Smith, Earp & DeVellis, 1995), The Center for Epidemiological Studies Scale for Depression (CES-D; Radloff, 1977), and the Modified Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979). Results from Structural Equation Modeling analyses indicated a statistically significant relationship between CSA and dating violence victimization in adulthood, mediated by fear. Depression was significantly related to CSA, but not dating violence victimization. Identifying modifiable mediators of the relationship between CSA and adult re-victimization, such as fear, is central to the development of violence prevention strategies aimed at young women.

From Childhood Sexual Abuse to Dating Violence: Investigating the Role of Fear and Depression

Previous research has demonstrated that the risk of intimate partner abuse, including dating violence, is high for those with histories of childhood sexual abuse (West, Williams, & Siegel 2000; Wyatt, Notgrass, & Gordon, 1995). A relevant theoretical explanation has been offered by Finkelhor and Browne (1985) in their model of traumatic sexualization. According to this model, the occurrence of CSA leads to a host of developmental problems that interfere with the individual's ability to form healthy intimate relationships with others. Consequently, the individual enters adulthood vulnerable to sexual, emotional, and physical victimization in intimate relationships. Based on this theoretical model, we investigated fear and depression

as possible mediators of the relationship between past childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and current dating violence victimization.

The Link between Childhood Sexual Abuse and Dating Violence

Childhood sexual abuse has been defined as forced penetrative intercourse, molestation, or unwanted sexual contact, often times accompanied by physical violence, inflicted on victims in the age range of 12 to 20 years (e.g. Miller, 1999). The National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS), one of the largest national survey of adults on this topic, estimated that one in six women have experienced an attempted or completed rape at some point in their lifetime, with the majority of first rape victimizations occurring before 18 years of age. For women, 22% of all first attempted or completed rapes occurred before the age of 12, and 32% between ages 12 and 17 years.

Dating violence has been defined as any physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse inflicted upon an individual by his/her dating partner that causes a certain amount of harm to the victim (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). The more common behaviors include insults, threats, and intimidation, such as being hit, slapped, or forced to have sex. The term intimate partner violence is inclusive of various types of violence women experience in their intimate relationships: physical assault, sexual assault, psychological abuse and battering (Basile, 1999; Campbell & Soeken, 1999; Coker et al., 2000; Smith, Smith, & Earp, 1999; Tjaden, & Thoennes, 2000).

Intimate partner violence has been found to be increasingly prevalent among adolescents and young, college-going women. In a study of adolescents in the age range of 13 to 17 years, it was found that 45% had experienced some degree of violence in their dating relationships (Cyr, McDuff & Wright, 2006). Carlson (1987) had predicted that as many as 36% of college students will encounter physical, sexual, or psychological aggression or violence in their dating relationships. In a study conducted by Luthra and Gidycz (2006), it was found that 25% of college women and 10% of college men experienced some form of partner violence. The incidence of partner violence has always been higher for women than for men. Also, as previously stated, the risk is higher for women with CSA histories, as compared to women not sexually abused in childhood. Wyatt, Guthrie and Notgrass (1992) found that women who have suffered CSA were 2.4 times more likely to be re-victimized in their adult intimate relationships. Findings from the 2003 National

Youth Risk Behavior Survey reported that adolescent female students who had experienced forced sexual intercourse at an early age, even if only once, were significantly more likely to report being victims of physical dating violence compared to those who had never been victims of forced sexual intercourse (Basile et al., 2006). The duration of the sexual abuse and the presence of violence or completed intercourse during the abuse have been found to significantly contribute to dating violence (Cyr et al., 2006).

Finkelhor and Browne (1985) attribute this link to an inappropriate development of the individual's sexuality. Their model of traumatic sexualization proposes that by interfering with or altering the individual's ability to form healthy intimate relationships with others, the CSA experience makes the individual vulnerable to re-victimization in adulthood. Although their theory explains that the adverse effects of CSA give rise to an unhealthy relationship schema by putting it into a broad developmental framework, it did not specify psychological consequences that bridge childhood victimization and adulthood re-victimization. In general understanding, a multitude of adjustment problems have been known to accompany CSA (such as fear, mistrust, hostility, low self-efficacy, depression, emotional distress, and distorted beliefs about self and others), which hinder the individual's ability to adopt a healthy lifestyle, part of which is the formation of non-violent relationships (Wolfe, Scott, Wekerle, & Pittman, 2001).

CSA, Fear, Depression, and Dating Violence Victimization

In intimate romantic relationships, women have been found to be subjected to abusive behaviors, other than physical or sexual assault, that are sufficient to create or sustain fear, provoke a loss of power and control, and induce shame and disempowerment in a relationship (Smith et al., 2002). For female victims, a sense of fear of the other is already present that can be easily ignited by a simple suggestion of or tendency toward abusive behavior. This heightened sense of fear coupled with an increased tolerance for abuse (Capaldi & Gordon-Smith, 2003) makes them increasingly vulnerable to re-victimization. On the other hand, re-victimization may also occur in the absence of a conscious (or subconscious) fear of the dating partner. Sexual and physical abuse victims have been found to have trouble recognizing and acknowledging abusive behavior (Wolfe et al., 2004). Therefore, whether affecting them consciously or unconsciously, fear of one's intimate partner is prevalent among abuse victims, making them prone to re-victimization in adulthood.

Since the documentation of the connection between CSA and depression by Browne and Finkelhor (1986), ample related evidence has been reported for an increased risk of depression in women with sexual abuse histories (compared to women without such histories) (Burnam et al., 1988; Kilpatrick et al., 1992; Mullen et al., 1993; Resnick et al., 1993; Stein et al., 1988; Winfield et al., 1990). Additionally, the number of depressive episodes has been found to vary according to the severity of the sexual abuse experienced: more severe the sexual abuse, more the number of depressive episodes in the victims' lifetimes (Bifulco et al., 1993).

CSA, dating violence victimization, fear and depression have been studied together in various sequences and combinations, with similar conclusions regarding the connections between them. CSA has been found to be a significant predictor of both depression as well as adulthood victimization (Virkler, 2006). Fear and depression have been studied as significant consequences of trauma and victimization (Callahan, 1998; Callahan, Tolman & Suanders, 2003; Holt & Espelage, 2005). In our paper, our proposed model will combine and extend these pathways by examining the role of fear and depression as mediators of the relationship between CSA and dating violence victimization.

The Present Study

Our proposed model proposes three paths from CSA to dating violence victimization: one direct path, and two indirect paths mediated by fear and depression, respectively (see Figure 1). First, the direct path states that dating violence victimization can be predicted by previous childhood sexual histories: women who were sexually abused in childhood are more likely to be victims of dating violence. Second, women with CSA histories tend to be fearful of their dating partner, which further predicts their tendency toward victimization by dating partners. And third, dating violence victimization is also predicted by a depressive self-schema held by victims of CSA.

Method

Participants

Participants were 507 female undergraduate students from two Southern California State University campuses. College women received extra course credit for their participation in the study. The sample consisted of 207 Caucasians, 186 Hispanics, 66 Asians/Pacific Islanders, 19 African-Americans, and 28 of other ethnicities. The women's ages ranged from 18 to 52 years, with the mean age being 21.72 years.

Ten women were aged 40 or older. Since the removal of age outliers did not modify the significant pathways in our model, we decided to keep them in our analysis. Only 9.6% of the women were married; the remaining women were never married (78.2%), living with someone (8.4%), or divorced (3.3%). In our sample, 59.3% of the women had experienced childhood sexual abuse. As for dating violence, 76% of the women had been victimized by their dating partners (see Table 1).

Procedure

Women were originally recruited for participation in a larger study of dating violence among college women. Paper and pencil surveys were administered to women in a research laboratory in the presence of a trained research assistant. To ensure participants' confidentiality, the surveys contained no identifying information, and upon completion, the surveys were placed in a sealed box until a different research assistant entered the data.

Measures

Four measures were used to assess each of the four factors: CSA, fear, depression, and dating violence victimization. A latent variable was constructed for each measure, and items with insignificant factor loadings were dropped from the analysis.

Childhood Sexual Abuse: To assess whether the participant experienced childhood sexual abuse, a modified version of the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES; Koss & Oros, 1982) was utilized. The original scale consists of 12 questions about contact molestation, coerced sexual acts, attempted rape, and rape. Five additional questions about attempted sexual coercion and molestation were added. For example, items ranged from "Did someone ever make you kiss him/her when you did not want to" to "Have you ever been raped?" For each type of abuse, additional questions were added to ask respondents their age when they first experienced the CSA event. Sexual abuse experienced until the age of 17 years was classified as childhood sexual abuse. The average age at which CSA first occurred was 6.6 years. Reports of internal consistency (.74) and test-re-test reliability (.93) for the SES have been good (Koss & Gidycz, 1985). Two items were dropped due to insignificant factor loadings. The factor loadings of the remaining 15 items were moderate and statistically significant, ranging from .30 to .70.

Fear: A modified version of the Women's Experience with Battering (WEB) scale was used to measure the extent to which participants reported feeling coerced, lacking in control, and fearful in their intimate relationship in the last year. The original scale was developed for married couples and was modified to reflect dating relationships. In this 11-item scale, feelings of fear constituted fear of physical aggression, sexual coercion, and sexual force. The factors loadings of 10 items of this scale were statistically significant and ranged from .32 to .80. One item was dropped due to insignificant factor loading. The content validation of the WEB scale has provided evidence for its strong external validity (Smith, Earp & DeVellis, 1995).

Depression. The Center for Epidemiological Studies scale for Depression (CES-D; Radloff) was utilized to assess symptoms of depression in the past week. The factor loadings of 19 items of the original 20-items scale ranged from .32 to .80 and were statistically significant. One item was dropped from the scale because of insignificant factor loadings.

Dating Violence: The Modified Conflict Tactics Scale (MCTS; Straus, 1979) was used to assess the occurrence of dating violence victimization in the past year. To adapt the items to dating violence, all references to spouse were changed to dates or dating partners. Out of the original 56 items, only the even-numbered items, representing victimization (as opposed to perpetration), were used. Four items were dropped due to insignificant factor loadings. The factor loadings of the remaining 26 items ranged from .33 to .87.

Results

To examine statistical relationships between the four variables (CSA, fear, depression, and dating violence victimization) correlation coefficients were computed. The correlations between all four variables were statistically significant (see Table 2). Fear was positively correlated with all three variables: CSA, depression, and dating violence victimization (.31, .23, and .47, respectively; $p < .05$). Heightened fear and a sense of perceived threat were reported by participants who had been sexually abused in childhood, who were currently depressed, and who were being victimized in their dating relationships. Depression, was also significantly correlated with CSA ($r = .16$, $p < .05$), fear ($r = .23$, $p < .05$) and dating violence victimization ($r = .17$, $p < .05$). Current depressive symptoms were reported by participants with CSA histories as well as who were victims of dating violence.

Next, we tested our proposed model with Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with latent variables using maximum likelihood estimation to test the direct and indirect paths from CSA to dating violence victimization mediated by fear and depression. These analyses were performed using the EQS 6.0 computer program.

Determination of Model Fit

To determine model fit in the current study, the following measures were employed: (a) the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; Steiger, 1990); and (b) Standardized Root Mean-Square Residual (SRMR), with values less than .08 indicating reasonable model fit, for both test indices. A model was determined to fit well if both criteria were met. In evaluating the statistical significance of individual model parameters, a more stringent statistical significance level of .001 was employed.

In the first step of our analyses, we examined the extent to which fear and depression were inter-correlated. A Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA; Joreskog, 1969) was performed to test the fit of a two-factor model with correlated factors. This solution produced a good representation of the relationship between fear and depression, $\chi^2(452, N = 453) = 1212.95, p < .05, RMSEA = .070, SRMR = .059$. The correlation between fear and depression was .28 ($p < .05$). A two-factor solution provided a significantly better fit than a one-factor model, $\chi^2(1) = 1109.65, p < .05$. Therefore, the low, though significant, correlation between fear and depression indicates that they are related constructs, yet distinct enough to be measured and accounted for separately.

Effects of CSA, Fear, and Depression on Dating Violence Victimization

The next, and main, step in our analyses was to test the relationship between CSA and the occurrence of dating violence victimization in adulthood, and how fear and depression mediate this relationship. Our model proposed direct paths from CSA to fear, depression, and dating violence as well as direct paths from fear and depression to dating violence (see Figure 1). This model did not fit well statistically, $\chi^2(2139, N = 407) = 3279.93, p < .001$, but it did fit well descriptively, $RMSEA = .036, SRMR = .080$.

The standardized path coefficients are reported in Figure 1. As expected, CSA accounted for dating violence victimization, $\beta = .18, p < .05$. Women who experienced

sexual abuse in childhood tended to be victims of dating violence in their adult lives. The mediating influence of fear on this relationship was found to be significant. CSA accounted for fear experienced in romantic relationships, $\beta = .31, p < .05$; and fear, in turn, accounted for a significant amount of dating violence victimization, $\beta = .40, p < .05$. Women who had been sexually abused in childhood reported being fearful of their dating partners which lead to their re-victimization in these relationships.

Depression as a mediator, however, did not account for a significant effect. Although depression was significantly related to CSA ($\beta = .17, p < .05$), it did not account for dating violence victimization ($\beta = .05, p > .05$). CSA survivors displayed a tendency toward depression in their present lives, but this depression was not significantly related to dating violence.

Discussion

We proposed a model suggesting a link between childhood sexual abuse and adulthood dating violence re-victimization for young women mediated by feelings of fear and depression. Our results showed that women who had experienced CSA were more likely to experience dating violence as adults. Moreover, fear significantly accounted for the relationship between CSA and dating violence. Depression was significantly related to CSA, but was not a significant predictor of dating violence, nor did it mediate the relationship between CSA and dating violence as way hypothesized.

Nevertheless, our findings were consistent with previous research: women who had been sexually abused in childhood were more likely to experience dating violence in adulthood. This suggests the need for intervention strategies at an early age in order to prevent the occurrence of future violence victimization. Childhood sexual abuse often occurs at the hands of a known and trusted person in the individual's life, resulting in a sense of fear and mistrust in subsequent intimate relationships (Madu & Peltzer, 2001; Madu, 2001). In addition, because the abuse may have occurred at a young age the victim may not fully understand the complexity of the experience, long-lasting mental health consequences, and may experience feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame (Virani, 2000; Kenyan-Jump, 2006; Kristenson & Lau, 2007). Thus, it is important that screening and treatment for past abuse experiences be conducted routinely with young, college-age samples in order to prevent the cycle of violence victimization.

The significant direct relationship between CSA and dating violence victimization in adulthood highlights the risk for women with histories of abuse becoming re-victimized. In addition, the finding that fear mediates the relationship between history of CSA and dating violence suggests that the mental health consequences of CSA may result in a lack of healthy relationship boundaries or increased tolerance for conflicting experiences of affection and violence in abusive romantic relationships. This is consistent with Wolfe et al.'s (2004) findings that women with histories of abuse experience confusion regarding when "rough and tumble play" crosses the line and becomes abusive behavior. In addition, young women may disregard threats or occurrences of violence within their dating relationships because of the overwhelmingly positive affect they experienced during the early stages of that relationship (Capaldi & Gorman-Smith, 2003). This disregard of the warning signs for subsequent abuse could be a result of the learning acquired in childhood (from previous abuse experiences) that aggression is normative, justifiable, and expected, and will increase the likelihood of desired outcomes (Dodge et al., 1994).

The significant relationship between CSA and depression is consistent with previous research showing CSA often results in a sense of hopelessness, failure, and loneliness. Based on the circumstances of CSA, depression may result as an outcome of the break in trust that results from the sexual abuse as well as a consequence of the self-directed blame. However, in our study, depression failed to serve as a mediator and predictor of dating violence victimization in adulthood. One possible explanation for this may be that depression measure we used measured general depression as opposed to depression specifically related to CSA or dating violence victimization. Second, it has been reported by some researchers that a large number of sexual abuse survivors suffering from depression recover in relatively brief periods of time (Kendall-Tackett et al. 1993; Koss et al., 1994). However, the more severe the sexual abuse, the more time it took the victims to recover from the depression. Therefore, it is possible that for our sample of women, CSA was not severe enough to cause depressive symptoms which would make them vulnerable to re-victimization in adulthood, or enough time may have elapsed since the last CSA experience so that no relation to current symptoms of depression was present.

In the present study, a severity scale of CSA was not utilized because we wanted the creation of the indices of the CSA measure to be driven by factor analysis. The measurement of CSA experiences was limited to its incidence. This limitation does not permit us to examine the effect of severity of abuse on symptoms of depression.

Although, we speculate that women's symptoms of depression were not strong enough to make them prone to dating violence victimization.

Limitations of the Present Study

The median age of 18 years presents the first limitation of our study by making a clear-cut differentiation between CSA and dating violence victimization difficult. We used the cut-off age of 17 years for abuse to be classified as CSA. Therefore, the median age of 18 years poses ambiguity regarding differentiation of abuse experienced at that age as CSA or dating violence victimization. Although the average age of the first CSA experience for our sample was 6.6 years. Future research should apply more stringent age cut-offs for CSA, and differentiate between sexual abuse experienced in childhood versus adolescence. Owing to different developmental processes, abuse occurring at these two stages of the victim's physical and psychosexual development should be treated as having potentially different consequences and implications.

Second, we made an attempt to establish depression as a mediator in the relationship between CSA and adulthood dating violence victimization. Depression has usually been studied as a consequence, but not as a predictor, of victimization. Our unsuccessful attempt to establish the mediating role of depression in the relationship between CSA and adulthood dating violence victimization was not necessarily due to the inaccurate conceptualization of our proposed model. A reasonable explanation could be the lack of consideration of the moderating influences of other factors in this relationship. The mere occurrence of sexual abuse in childhood is not enough. The moderating influences of, for example abuse severity and disclosure and subsequent support, also need to be taken into consideration to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of CSA and how its adverse psychopathological consequences lead to re-victimization in adulthood. For example, the insignificant link between depression and dating violence victimization could also be explained by the level of support received by the victims upon disclosure of their abuse experience. Even though feelings of low self-worth and hopelessness persisted into adulthood, they were prevented from being strong and pervasive enough to lead to re-victimization by dating partners. Therefore, the moderating influence of disclosure, and subsequent support, on depression needs to be taken into consideration when trying to establish a link between CSA and adulthood dating violence victimization.

Another limitation of our study was the lack of context specificity of the depression scale. Since the scale was a measure of the symptoms of general depression

experienced during the past week, it failed to grasp the specifics of abuse-related depressive symptoms. Future research should adapt existing depression measures to include a measurement of the symptoms specific to the kind of victimization being studied to get an accurate assessment of the consequences of the victimization-related depression.

Finally, this study was cross-sectional and correlational. As such, it cannot be used to infer causality. Longitudinal studies that assess onset of dating violence victimization in relation to childhood sexual abuse will be more informative. The present study is also retrospective in nature, which can lead to potential recall bias. Moreover, the results of this study may not be generalizable to other groups of women, or even other groups of college women. The sample in this study was a convenience sample from one university and may not be representative of college women in other cities or college women as a whole.

Significance of the Present Study and Future Considerations

The rates of CSA and dating violence in our sample is alarming, and highlights the importance of intervening early in order to prevent re-victimization. Identifying factors, such as fear, which link childhood victimization with adulthood re-victimization provides us with an opportunity to enhance intervention strategies that would prevent victimization from re-occurring. Development of prevention strategies is needed for both victims as well as perpetrators of abusive acts, be it physical, sexual, or psychological in nature. Future research should attempt to identify additional moderators and mediators of the relationship between history of abuse and re-victimization in adulthood in order to better target changeable factors that may prevent future abuse.

In addition, to get a better understanding of the different effects sexual abuse victimization experienced at different time-periods in the woman's life has on her personality development, it would be advantageous to measure separately and compare/contrast childhood with adolescent sexual abuse victimization. In the present study, childhood sexual abuse was measured as victimization experienced prior to and until age 17. We did not differentiate sexual abuse into childhood and adolescent sexual abuse categories. The development process goes through different stages in childhood and adolescence. Having accurate information about how abuse experiences shape the victim's personality at these two different, and equally crucial, periods of development would enhance our knowledge and understanding of the consequences of victimization in healthy versus unhealthy psychosexual development. Furthermore, this differentiation would also allow for the invention of age-specific intervention programs for the prevention of dating violence victimization.

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Model 1

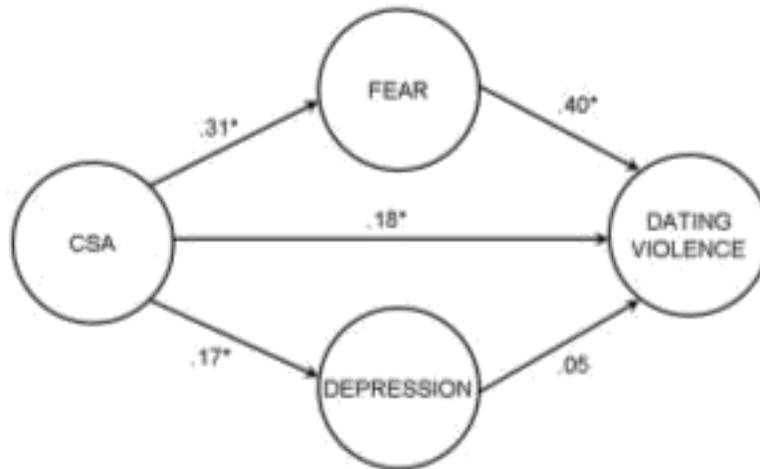


Figure 1.

Table 1. Incidence (in percent) of women who experienced CSA and Dating Violence victimization.

	Childhood Sexual Abuse	Dating Violence
Yes	59.3	76.0
No	35.4	16.7

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Table 2. Correlation matrix of study variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. CSA	--	*.31	*.16	*.31
2. Fear		--	*.23	*.47
3. Depression			--	*.17
4. Dating Violence				--

* p < .05, two-tailed.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

