

Child sexual abuse and couple adjustment: The mediational role of infidelity

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a traumatic experience associated with multiple negative repercussions in adulthood such as difficulties in sexual and couple functioning (Rumstein-McKean & Hunsley, 2001). For example, the prevalence of self-reported infidelity in CSA survivors is significantly elevated, with studies showing that the base rate of these behaviors may be four times higher as that observed in non-victims (Whisman & Snyder, 2007). However, even if CSA is associated to both lower couple adjustment and higher frequency of extradyadic affairs, it is not clear if the consequences of CSA on infidelity might explain a lower couple adjustment in survivors. In the present investigation, we tested a mediation model whereby CSA predicts infidelity, which in turn explains couple adjustment. The sample consisted of 602 adults engaged in a romantic relationship (134 men, 468 women), who completed online questionnaires. In this sample, 20.2% of participants reported a history of CSA (20.0% of men, 20.8% of women). A significantly greater proportion of CSA victims (36.1%) than non-victims (17.6%) reported having been sexually unfaithful in their current relationship. Results indicated that, for both women and men, CSA negatively affects couple satisfaction and that this association is completely explained by self-reported infidelity. The theoretical and clinical implications of these findings are discussed.

Introduction

CSA might lead to long-lasting sexual difficulties in adulthood, including,

- ✦ Hypersexuality and sexual compulsivity (Conley & Garza 2011)
- ✦ Risky sexual behavior (Aaron 2012)
- ✦ Sexual aversion and sexual dysfunction (Easton, Coohy, O'Leary, Zhang & Hua, 2011)

The link between CSA and couple satisfaction is increasingly studied; empirical data highlight:

- ✦ Couple dissatisfaction (DiLillo, 2001)
- ✦ Intimacy and trust issues (Davis & Petretic-Jackson, 2000)
- ✦ Difficulty establishing and maintaining intimate relationships (Colman & Widom, 2004; Godbout et al., 2006; Jacob & Veach, 2005)
- ✦ That couples which include a CSA victim frequently describe their sexual and marital relations as being of low quality (Nelson & Wampler 2000; Rumstein-McKean & Hunsley, 2001)

However, some studies reported weak or non-significant links between CSA and Couple adjustment (e.g., Godbout et al., 2006).

✦ **Specialists propose that CSA might exert a long-term influence on couple satisfaction through direct and indirect trajectories** (Godbout, Sabourin & Lussier, 2007; Godbout et al., 2013).

✦ As a contributing factor to poor marital adjustment, sexual difficulties and trust issues in the aftermath of CSA could lead to infidelity (Previti & Amato, 2004), but studies on infidelity in the aftermath of CSA remain scarce :

- ✦ Jacob and Veach (2005) discovered that half of male CSA survivors had been sexually unfaithful in their current relationship.
- ✦ Colman & Widom (2004) and Whisman & Snyder (2007) found that a history of CSA made women 3.5 - 4 times more likely to be unfaithful.
- ✦ Frias, Brassard and Shaver (2014) report that, among CSA survivors, the frequency of one's infidelity is doubled when compared to participants who did not experience CSA. Their results also suggest that a history of CSA in women is related to one's infidelity and that this relationship is partially mediated by attachment-related avoidance.

✦ Therefore, it seems relevant to explore a model in which CSA predicts infidelity, which in turn explains couple adjustment.

Objectives

1. Describe the occurrence of infidelity in CSA survivors

2. Explore the mediator role of infidelity in the relationship between child sexual abuse and couple satisfaction

Method

Participants

- ✦ 602 adults currently involved in a romantic relationship
- ✦ 468 women (77.7%)
- ✦ 134 men (22.3%)
- ✦ Age: M: 27.4, SE = 9.1
- ✦ Married : 15.0%
- ✦ Cohabiting : 30.2%
- ✦ Dating: 54.8%

Mesures

- ✦ **Childhood sexual abuse:** When you were a child (before you were 16 years old), have you had a sexual experience with one of the following people: natural or adoptive mother, natural or adoptive father, stepmother, stepfather, grandmother, grandfather, sister, brother, other family members (uncle, aunt, cousin), family friend or acquaintance at least five years older than you (e.g., neighbor, clergy), teacher, babysitter or instructor and/or stranger at least five years older than you?
- ✦ **Sexual infidelity:** Since the beginning of your relationship with your current romantic partner, with how many people have you had sexual intercourse, excluding your current partner?
- ✦ **Couple satisfaction:** Dyadic Adjustment Scale, four items (DAS-4, Sabourin, Valois, & Lussier, 2005)

Procedure

Participants responded to an anonymous online set of questionnaires on the Lime Survey website.

Results

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

CSA prevalence	
CSA	20.3% (n = 119)
No CSA	79.7% (n = 466)

Infidelity prevalence	
Infidelity	21.3% (n = 125)
No Infidelity	78.7% (n = 461)

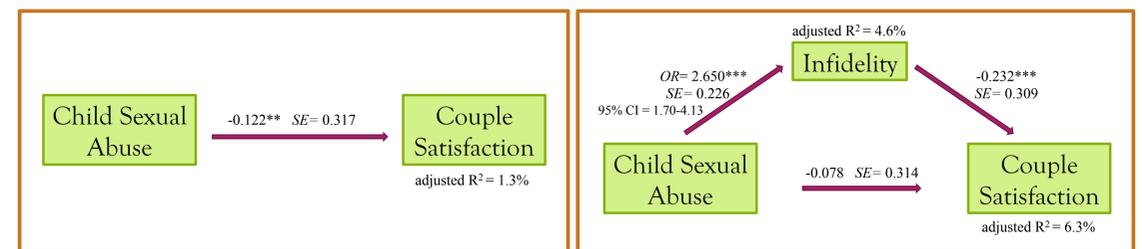
Proportions of groups with or without CSA and with or without infidelity

		CSA	
		No	Yes
Infidelity	No	82.4%	63.9%
	Yes	17.6%	36.1%
Total		100%	100%
χ^2		19.4**	

Couple satisfaction and infidelity				
	M	SD	t(587)	Cohen's d
No Infidelity (n = 470)	20.5	2.9	6.07***	0.61
Infidelity (n = 119)	18.6	3.3		

Couple satisfaction and CSA				
	M	SD	t(587)	Cohen's d
No CSA (n = 470)	20.3	3.0	2.98**	0.31
CSA (n = 119)	19.4	3.4		

Mediation



Graphic illustrations of the regression analyses predicting couple satisfaction

Discussion

- ✦ Results indicate that CSA survivors are twice as likely to be unfaithful than those who did not undergo CSA.
 - ✦ This study replicates the results of Colman & Widom (2004) and of Jacob & Veach (2005)
 - ✦ Results might reflect a tendency to sexualize a non-romantic interpersonal relationships as the only way to achieve intimacy and interpersonal closeness with other individuals or to gain affection (Briere & Runtz, 1993; Testa, VanZile-Tamsen, & Livingston, 2005).
 - ✦ Infidelity might also reflect a marital symptom of sexual compulsivity in CSA survivors.

- ✦ Regression analyses confirmed the mediator role of infidelity in the relationship between CSA and couple satisfaction.
 - ✦ CSA is associated to sexual infidelity which in turn predicts lower couple satisfaction

Strengths : Quantitative study; Presence of a control group and both men and women

Limits: Retrospective bias; Accuracy of the questionnaires used

Future studies

- ✦ Survivors' romantic partners might also be affected by the abuse (Frias & al., 2014, Jacob & Veach, 2005). Exploring a dyadic model taking the interaction between partners into account would bring new insight on the couple consequences of CSA and infidelity.
- ✦ Exploring the impact of CSA in "open couples"(i.e., partners not exclusively engaged to one another), and the role of fear of intimacy or sexual compulsivity.

Implications

- ✦ The mediational relationship between CSA, infidelity and couple satisfaction is a new finding allowing to better understand couple and sexual repercussions of CSA.
- ✦ The findings point sexuality and infidelity as potential intervention targets in couple therapy when one or both partners are CSA survivors.
- ✦ Interventions attempting to help patients understand how CSA can affect sexuality and couple relationships seem essential.