

Cumulative trauma and Couple Adjustment: The Role of Affect Dysregulation

Noémie Bigras¹, Marie-Ève Daspe¹, Natacha Godbout¹ & Stéphane Sabourin²

Université du Québec à Montréal¹

Université Laval²

Centre de recherche interdisciplinaire sur les problèmes conjugaux
et les agressions sexuelles (CRIPCAS)

Introduction

- ▶ Even though all types of traumas create suffering, interpersonal traumas might be particularly deleterious especially when they are experienced in childhood – relational context
 - Examples:
 - Child sexual abuse (CSA)
 - Physical abuse
 - Psychological abuse
 - Neglect
 - Exposure to interparental violence
 - Bullying

Introduction

- ▶ However, despite a growing body of research on short and long term effects of childhood interpersonal traumas in the last decades, research on their associations with couple functioning remains scarce.

Introduction

- ▶ Exposure to one kind of victimization increases the risk to be exposed to any additional form of victimization (polytrauma, cumulative trauma)

(e.g., Arata, et al., 2005; Briere & Runtz, 1988, 1990; Clemmons, et al., 2003; Clemmons, et al., 2007; Finkelhor, et al., 2007; Finkelhor, et al., 2005; Higgins & McCabe, 2001)

- ▶ Cumulative trauma: early and repeated exposure to different types interpersonal trauma during childhood
 - Operationalized as the total number of different types of traumas experienced by one person

(e.g., Briere et al., 2010; Briere et al., 2008; Cloitre et al., 2009; Follette et al., 1996)

Introduction

- ▶ Cumulative trauma has been found to lead to more complex symptoms than a single trauma exposure (Hodges et al., 2013)
 - Psychological distress
 - Affect dysregulation problems
 - Psychosocial functioning– interpersonal problems, fear of intimacy

(Álvarez–Lister et al., 2014; Arata et al., 2005; Ducharme et al., 1997; Ellonen & Salmi, 2011; Godbout et al., 2006; Hodges et al., 2013; Richmond et al., 2009; Vranceanu et al., 2007)

Introduction: Affect regulation

- ▶ Affect regulation develops in childhood with attachment figures or attuned caretakers (Bowlby, 1973; Calkins et Hill, 2007)
- ▶ Affect dysregulation is a common trauma-related response in survivors (Briere et al., 2010)
- ▶ Affect dysregulation includes strategies to distract, anesthetize, or temporarily forestall negative experiences, thereby redirecting attention away from overwhelming emotions (Briere & Scott, 2006)
- ▶ Trauma overwhelms the child's capacity to deal with the event

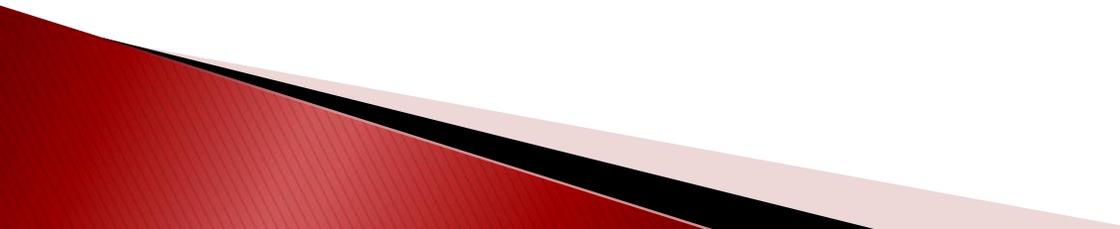
Introduction

- ▶ Despite a growing interest on long term effects of cumulative trauma in adulthood, there are very **few studies on cumulative trauma survivors' couple functioning**
 - Greater fear of intimacy (Davis, Petretic-Jackson, & Ting, 2001; Ducharme et al., 1997)
 - More couple distress in men and women who experienced co-occurring childhood trauma (Godbout et al., 2006)

The current study

- ▶ The relational nature of interpersonal traumas
- ▶ Cumulative trauma sends messages from different contexts, different people
 - Confirming the survivor's negative internalized representations
- ▶ Relational issues or barriers related to the trauma that might be triggered in the romantic relationships

Objective of the current study

- 1) To examine the associations between cumulative trauma, affect dysregulation and couple satisfaction among adults from a community sample
 - 2) To examine the mediational role of affect dysregulation between childhood cumulative trauma and couple satisfaction
- 

Procedure

- ▶ Participants aged 18 or more, engaged in a romantic relationship for more than six months, recruited in the community via social medias and serve-lists (e.g., Facebook, Qc society for research in psychology).

Participants

▶ Participants:

- 239 women and 43 men ($n = 285$)
- Mean age = 28 (18 to 64; $SD = 8.60$)
- Language: 74% French, 24.7% English
- 70.5% Canadians
- 54% students and 35% full time workers; 34.5% completed undergraduate studies and 31.7% did graduate studies
- 16.5% married ($n = 47$), 25.4% ($n = 72$) cohabiting, 57% ($n = 162$) in a relationship without cohabiting
 - Average length of the relationship = 4.78 ($SD = 6.22$)

Questionnaires

- ▶ Cumulative trauma range from 0 to 8 types (i.e., CSA, physical and psychological violence, physical and psychological neglect, exposure to physical and psychological parental violence and bullying)

(Early Trauma Inventory, Bremner et al., 2007; CIT checklist, Godbout et al., 2006)

- 19 items, 7–points Likert scales from 0 (never) to 6 (almost everyday) in a typical year before 18 years
- Each trauma was dichotomized (0 = absence; 1 = presence)

Questionnaires

- ▶ French version of the Inventory of Altered Self-Capacities (IASC; Briere, 2000)
 - Affect dysregulation subscale, 9 items (ranging from 1 = never; 5 = very often)
 - **In the last 6 months, how often have you experienced the following:**
 - **Ex. Not being able to control your anger**
 - **Ex. Being out of control emotionally**
- ▶ The 4-item Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS-4; Sabourin et al., 2005)
 - **Ex. “How often have you considered divorce, separation, or terminating your relationship?”**
 - **Ex. “Do you confide in your mate?”**

Always	Most of the time	More often than not	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
--------	------------------	---------------------	--------------	--------	-------

Results

Table 1. Number of trauma experienced

Nb of traumas	%	<i>n</i>
0	10.2	29
1	16.1	46
2	17.2	49
3	15.1	43
4	15.1	43
5	13	37
6 et +	13.3	38

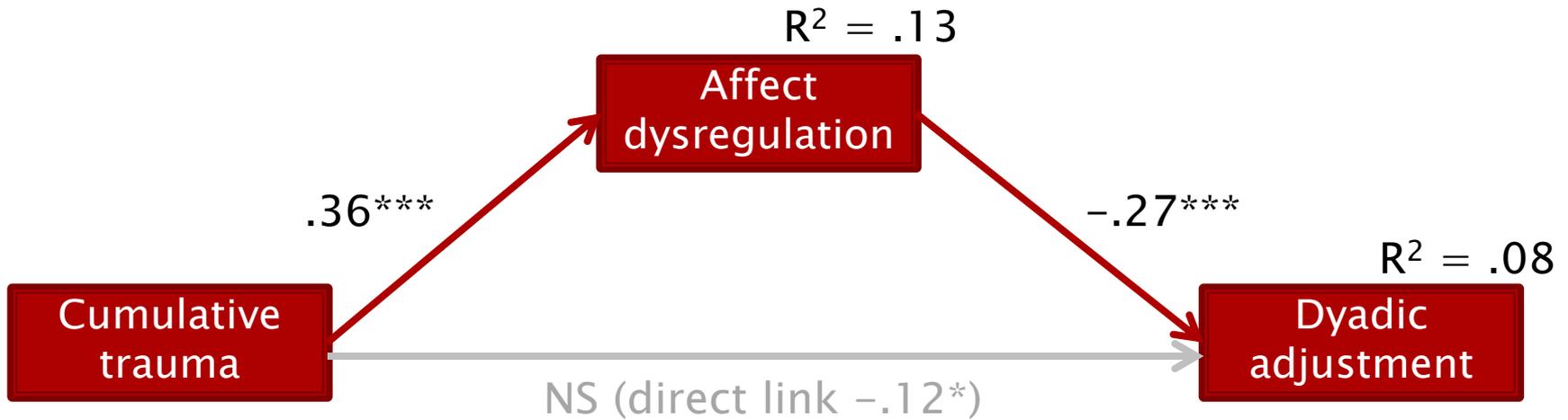
- ▶ The majority experienced multiple types (2 or more) of interpersonal trauma.

Results

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and correlations among cumulative trauma, affect dysregulation and dyadic adjustment

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.
1. Cumulative trauma	3.08	2.03	–	–	–
2. Affect dysregulation	29.43	12.56	.36**	–	–
3. Dyadic Adjustment	13.45	3.44	–.12*	–.27**	–

Integrative model



Path analyses of the mediational effect of affect dysregulation in the association between cumulative trauma and dyadic adjustment

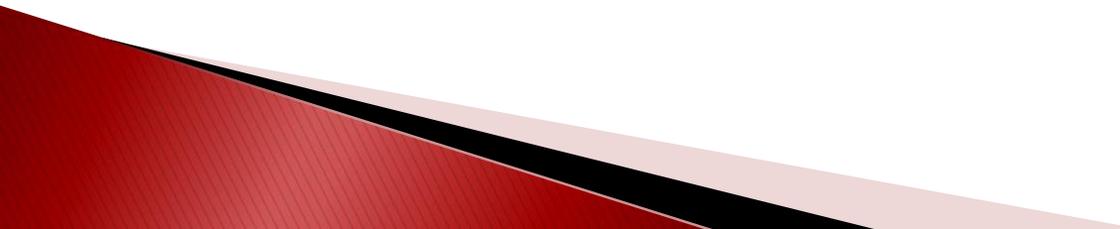
Fit indices: $\chi^2(1) = .17$, $p = .68$, $\chi^2/df = .17$, CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.06, RMSEA = .00, 90% [C.I = .00, .12]

Indirect effect: $b = -.17$, $p = .000$, 95% bootstrap CI = $-.27, -.09$.

Main findings and discussion

- ▶ Results confirm our hypotheses:
 - Cumulative trauma leads to more affect dysregulation, which in turn predicts more couple distress
 - Affect dysregulation is a significant mechanism of the relationship between cumulative trauma and couple satisfaction

Strengths and limitations

- ▶ Cross-sectional, retrospective design preventing definitive causality conclusions
 - ▶ Self-reported questionnaires
 - ▶ Modest explained variance
 - ▶ Among the first studies to document couple functioning in survivors of cumulative traumas
- 

Practical implications

- ▶ Affect dysregulation might be an efficient intervention target for couple therapists working with trauma survivors
 - Mindfulness-based treatments could promote a healthy way of dealing with unpleasant emotions (Kabat-Zinn, 1982; Linehan, 1993)
 - Emotion focused therapy for trauma survivors could also be particularly well-suited through the therapeutic relationship and “emotional processing” of trauma memories as the primary mechanisms of change (Paivio & Kunzle, 2007)

Thank you for you attention!
Questions / comments?

» bigras.noemie@courrier.uqam.ca