

Childhood Maltreatment, Emotional Dysregulation and Intimate Partner Violence

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Abstract

Physical, sexual or psychological abuse and neglect, as well as witnessing domestic violence during childhood are forms of child abuse and neglect known to affect adult intimate relationships (Godbout et al., 2014). Previous research suggest that survivors of child abuse and neglect are at greater risk of perpetrating and sustaining (Daisy & Hien, 2014; Iverson, 2013) intimate partner violence (IPV) as well as presenting emotional dysregulation, which is, in turn, considered as a robust predictor of IPV (Berzenski & Yates, 2010). Yet, no research has evaluated this relationship by examining the impact of a behavioral component of emotional dysregulation, the use of tension reduction activities, on the experience of psychological IPV. Thus, the goal of this study is to examine the role of tension reduction behaviors in the relationship between child abuse and neglect and psychological IPV. A total of 117 adults consulting in a sexology clinic completed questionnaires assessing their experiences of child abuse and neglect (Bremner et al., 2007), IPV (CTS-2; Straus et al., 1996) and tension reduction behaviors (Briere & Runtz, 2002). Path analyses confirm the importance of tension reduction behaviors in relation to child abuse and neglect and psychological IPV perpetration and victimization.

Introduction

- Most survivors of child abuse and neglect have been exposed to more than one type of abuse (i.e., cumulative trauma) but previous studies have often failed to consider the effects of having experienced several types of abuse on adult functioning (Arata et al. 2005; Higgins & McCabe 2001).
 - Yet, the psychosocial repercussions of cumulative trauma are known to be more severe than those associated with exposure to one type of trauma (Briere et al., 2010).
- Child abuse and neglect are associated with an increased risk of sustaining or perpetrating intimate partner violence (IPV) during adulthood (Daisy & Hien, 2014; Godbout et al., 2009).
 - As such, psychological IPV, which includes screaming, insulting, threatening or controlling one's partner, is the most prevalent form of IPV (Strauss et al., 1996).
- Although the underlying mechanisms relating cumulative trauma to IPV remain unknown, researchers have suggested that emotion regulation difficulties in survivors of child abuse and neglect could explain the use of IPV (Gratz et al. 2009).
 - More precisely, in the absence of sufficient internal affect regulation skills, some people may respond to internal distress with tension reduction behaviors, such as self-injury, excessive risk-taking and some instances of aggression (Briere & Rickards, 2007).
 - The use of tension reduction behaviors in trauma survivors could lead to a higher risk of experiencing psychological IPV.
- However, no study has explored the specific role of tension reduction behaviors as an indicator of emotional dysregulation in the relationship between cumulative trauma and psychological IPV.

Objective

Examine the role of tension reduction behaviors in the relationship between cumulative childhood trauma and psychological IPV.

Participants

- $N = 117$ adults consulting for sexual and relational difficulties:
 - 75 women (64%)
 - 42 men (36%)
- Mean Age**: 37 years old ($SD: 13,3$)
- Status**
 - Single/not committed to a relationship: 15,4%
 - Single/with occasional partner(s): 4,3%
 - In a relationship with a regular partner: 23,1%
 - Law partnership or cohabiting: 37,6%
 - Married: 19,7%

Measures

- The Early Trauma Inventory-Self Report (ETI-SR)** (Bremner et al., 2007; Godbout et al., 2011). Measures the experience of more than one type of childhood interpersonal trauma (from 0 to 8); sexual, physical and psychological abuse, physical and psychological neglect, witnessing physical and psychological violence, bullying.
- The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-2)** (Straus et al., 1996). Measures perpetrated and sustained psychological intimate partner violence during the past 12 months (current or last partner).
- The Inventory of Altered Self-Capacities (IASC)** (Briere, 2000). Measures tension reduction behaviors.

Results

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

Table 1. Prevalence of child abuse and neglect and psychological IPV

	%
Sexual Abuse	43,5
Psychological Abuse	43,5
Physical Abuse	23,3
Psychological Neglect	48,7
Physical Neglect	31,3
Bullying	46,6
Witnessing Psychological IPV	58,3
Witnessing Physical IPV	20,9
Cumulative Trauma	69,8
Perpetrated Ψ IPV	57,9
Sustained Ψ IPV	60,0

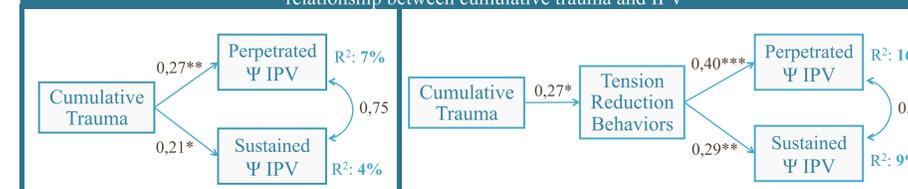
Table 2. Prevalence of tension reduction behaviors and psychological IPV by number of traumas experienced during childhood (%)

	No trauma N = 8	1-2 traumas N = 27	3-5 traumas N = 28	6+ traumas N = 11
Tension Reduction Behaviors				
Not problematic	8,3	23,6	25,0	9,7
Clinically Significant	2,7	9,7	13,8	6,9
Psychological IPV				
Perpetrated	4,4	20,4	21,2	12,4
Sustained	4,4	21,9	20,2	14,0

Table 3. Correlations

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Cumulative Trauma	-	-	-	-
2. Tension Reduction Behaviors	0,20	-	-	-
3. Perpetrated Psychological IPV	0,26**	0,40**	-	-
4. Sustained Psychological IPV	0,21*	0,28*	0,76***	-

Figure 1. Path analysis of the mediating role of tension reduction behaviors in the relationship between cumulative trauma and IPV



Model fit indicators: CFI: 0,98; NFI: 0,96; RMSEA: 0,10; IC [0,00; 0,23]; $\chi^2[2] = 4,40$; $p = 0,11$; Ratio $\chi^2/dl = 2,20$.

Discussion

- Results indicate that individuals from a clinical population show high levels of IPV and child abuse and neglect: About 70% of them have experienced more than one type of trauma during childhood, 60% report being a victim of IPV and nearly 58% report having perpetrated IPV.
- Path analysis confirm the mediating role of tension reduction behaviors in the relationship between cumulative trauma and psychological IPV; Cumulative trauma survivors tend to react to painful internal states with externalizing behaviors, which in turn increases the risk of experiencing psychological IPV.
- Limitations and future studies:** Results should be replicated with longitudinal designs and in other samples since they might not describe individuals from the general population, who generally present lower prevalence rates of child abuse and neglect as well as more subtle forms of IPV (Godbout et al., 2009).
- Clinical Implications:** Results highlight the relevance of assessing for a history of child abuse and neglect early in the therapeutic process, namely the experience of cumulative trauma. Emotion regulation training could prevent psychological IPV in survivors of childhood maltreatment.