

SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR DISCLOSURE OF CHILD OR ADULT SEXUAL ABUSE AMONG COLLEGE WOMEN.

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The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between history of childhood sexual abuse (CSA), dating violence, victim disclosure, and dating violence. It was hypothesized that women who were sexually abused as children, and who received negative or no support for disclosure would have higher rates of dating violence. The study surveyed 126 single, college women. The results did not show a statistically significant relationship between CSA disclosure and dating violence. In addition, results regarding CSA, negative or no support for disclosure, and dating violence were also non-significant. However, the patterns of results appeared to be in line with hypotheses. Factors and limitations that may have contributed to the lack of significant findings are discussed.

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) has been defined primarily as forced penetrative intercourse, molestation, or unwanted sexual contact, often accompanied by physical violence, with the usual cut-off age ranging from 12 to 20 years old (e.g., Miller, 1999). Most estimates for childhood abuse in the general population show a prevalence ranging from 15 to 33 percent for women, and 13 to 16 percent for men (Briere & Runtz, 1988; Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewi, & Smith, 1990; Saunders, Villepontoux, Lipovsky, Kilpatrick, & Veronen, 1992; Wyatt, 1985). Many victims of CSA do not disclose their experience and are left to deal with the problem on their own. They often do not receive any help, such as counseling, and may suffer from psychological and physical health as a consequence (Ullman, 2003). For example, researchers have found that women who suffered from sexual abuse have a range of psychological and social consequences such as depression, anxiety, self-destructive behavior, social isolation, poor sexual adjustment and dysfunction, low self-esteem, suicidality, relationship difficulties, and increased likelihood of re-victimization (Beitchman et al., 1992; Briere, 1992a; Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Polusny & Follette, 2000; Ullman, 2002). In addition, some research suggests that the risk of domestic and intimate partner abuse (including dating violence) is increased for those with childhood sexual abuse histories. For example, a study of 165 African American women from a lower socioeconomic community in San Francisco found that women who reported a history of childhood sexual abuse were more likely to have had physically abusive sexual relationship partners (Wingood & DiClemente, 1997). Another study found that many black survivors of CSA will be re-victimized in adulthood (West, C. M. et al., 2000; Wyatt, Notgrass, & Gordon, 1995).

Dating violence can be defined as any physical, emotional, and psychological abuse that causes some level of harm to the victim (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Such violence can be a problem among college women across the United States. For example, sexual violence, rape and abuse can, and often do take place in the context of a dating relationship. As many as 12% high school and 36% of college students (Carlson, 1987) will encounter physical, sexual, or psychological aggression or violence in dating relationships. Further research shows that approximately one-third of Black undergraduates were victims or predators of physical aggression, such as pushing, slapping, and hitting (Clark et al., 1994).

The underlying mechanism(s) for the relationship between CSA and dating violence, is yet unknown. It may be the case that extensive experience with sexual violence decreases a woman's ability to cope effectively in future relationships. Women with a history of childhood sexual abuse may have become so familiarized with unwanted sexual behavior that when they encounter a similar situation, they may come to think it is normal, i.e., that every woman goes through the same thing. Alternatively, they may have learned that it is best to accept the circumstances, and hope it ends as soon as possible. For example, Ziegler and colleagues (1991) found that women with a history of childhood sexual abuse lacked, relative to their peers, the skills needed to refuse unwanted sexual activities. Similarly, another study found that women who reported a history of childhood sexual abuse were more likely to have had physically abusive sexual relationship partners (Wingood & DiClemente, 1997). This research suggests that among college students, a history of childhood sexual abuse puts women at risk for dating relationships that are sexually or physically harmful. It is likely that because childhood abuse is linked to abusive relationships in adulthood, different experiences of support for disclosure may moderate the association between the two. In fact, research has shown that positive reactions, especially maternal support, are associated with better child adjustment, whereas negative reactions show less consistent relationships with adult survivors' adjustment (Ullman, 2003). In the next section a set of hypothesis and rationale are presented.

Hypothesis 1: It was hypothesized that women who were sexually abused as children would have higher rates of dating violence than those who experienced sexual abuse as adults because their early experiences make them less likely to refuse unwanted sexual activities later in life (Zierler et al., 1991).

Hypothesis 2: It was hypothesized that women who disclosed their child sexual abuse to any one and received positive support, such as mental support (Ullman, 2002), would be less likely to be victims of dating violence than those who did not tell any one about their history of sexual abuse, or received negative support, (e.g., blaming the victim) (Ullman, 2002) for their disclosure.

Hypothesis 3: It was hypothesized that women who received negative or no support for child sexual abuse would be more likely to be victims of dating violence than both of those who received negative or no support for adult sexual abuse.

Method

Participants

Participants were 126 single, undergraduate, college women from San Diego State University, ranging in age from 18 to 40 years old, who have had at least one dating experience in the last year. Mean age was 20.8. Students' participation served as partial fulfillment of a psychology course requirement.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from a web based experimental subject sign-up. Participants completed the self-administered, paper/pencil survey in a reserved room with a trained researcher present. The survey was anonymous.

Participants were first asked to come in to the room and sit apart from each other in order to protect confidentiality. Next, the experimenter read out loud a script protocol and part of the consent form to all the participants. After reading the protocol, the experimenter collected the signed consents forms from every participant and handed them a blank survey. At this time, participants began completing the survey.

Upon completion, participants placed their surveys in a box, and received a packet with a list of counseling references and a direct number of a trained psychologist who would be on call in case any participant needed it.

Measures

Socio-Demographic Characteristics. In this section participants were asked to indicate age, gender, marital status and ethnicity. This information served as a filter, to exclude participants who did not fit eligibility criteria, such as males and married women.

Modified Conflict Tactics Scale (MCTS) (Straus, 1979). This scale was used as a self-report measure designed to assess ways in which intimate partners resolve conflicts. This is the most widely used measure of intimate violence. This scale consists of 52 short statements about the number of times during the past year that the participant was a victim of violent acts or acts of aggression (e.g., I insulted or swore at my date). It was scored on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 "never" to 7 "more than 20 times". Reliability ranges from $\alpha = .79$ to $\alpha = .95$ (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). An index was created using all the items that had to do with victimization. All odd numbers on the scale were addressing victimization (e.g., My date did this to me).

Koss and Oros Sexual Experiences Survey (SES). This scale is a modified version of the Sexual Experience Survey (Koss & Oros, 1982) and was used to assess whether participants experienced child or adult sexual abuse, and whether or not they were supported after disclosure of the sexual abuse. The scale consists of 17 questions that ask about different sexual events. Participants were additionally asked to report their age at the time of each corresponding event, their relationship to the predator, whether or not the abuse event was reported and to whom, and the results of their disclosure; whether they felt supported or not supported. Reports of internal consistency (.74) and test-retest reliability (.93) for the SES have been good (Koss & Gidycz, 1985). Data on age at time of unwanted sexual events from this scale were used to classify sexual abuse as child or adult. For purposes of this study, child was defined as age 1 to 17 years old and adult was defined as 18 and older. Participants were classified as victims of child abuse if any event occurred prior to the age of 17, and victims of adult sexual abuse if any/all events occurred only after age 18. For example, if a participant answered yes to question #3 (i.e., Did someone ever make

you touch their genitals or did someone ever touch your genitals when you did not want him/her to?), reported they were 12 years old at the time of the event, also answered yes to question #6 (i.e., Has someone ever gone farther sexually than you wanted to go?), and reported they were 21 at the time of the event, they would be considered a victim of Child Sexual Abuse. However, if an individual experienced sexual abuse only when they were adults, they would be considered a victim of adult sexual abuse.

In order to address various problems such as instances were participants would answer by writing in responses to questions that needed a “yes” or “no” response (e.g., were you supported when you told someone?), two researchers re-coded the responses. The inter-rater correlation for this was .993.

Psychologically abusive dating experience (PADE). This 11 question scale measures the extent to which participants report feeling coercion, lack of control, fear, and shame in their intimate relationships, fear of physical aggression, sexual coercion, and sexual force. This scale was modified to reflect dating relationships from the Women’s Experience with Battering (WEB) Scale. Content validation of the WEB Scale (Smith et al., 1995) has found a strong relationship with actual physical markers of battering, providing evidence of external validity. Items are scored on a 6-point Likert type scale ranging from “Agree Strongly” to “Disagree Strongly”. Reliability for this scale was .92.

Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were generated using SPSS. The research design involves a 2x2 between subjects model, (positive support vs. negative support by child vs. adult). A between the subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was then run to test the results of the differences between the groups.

Results

To test hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 a between-subjects analysis of variance was run using fear and victimization as the dependent variables. We conducted a 2X2 (supported and not supported for disclosure of sexual abuse by adult vs. child) between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) on both dependent variables, dating violence victimization and dating fear (psychologically abusive dating experience).

Hypothesis 1 stated, women who were sexually abused as children will have higher rates of dating violence than those who experienced sexual abuse. For the main effect of age of sexual abuse on dating fear, our hypothesis was not supported, $F(1,79)=.01$ $p=n.s.$ The analyses did not support our hypothesis about the effect of age on victimization, $F(1,79)=.280$ $p=n.s.$

Hypothesis 2 stated that women who disclosed their child sexual abuse to any one and received positive support, such as mental support, would be less likely to be victims of dating violence than those who did not tell anyone, or received negative support for their disclosure. For the main effect of support on dating fear, our hypothesis was not supported $F(1,79)=.81$ $p=n.s.$ With regard to the main effect of support on victimization, our hypothesis also was not supported, $F(1,79)=.441$ $p=n.s.$

Hypothesis 3 stated that women who received negative or no support for child sexual abuse would be more likely to be victims of dating violence than both of those who received negative or no support for adult sexual abuse and those who received positive support for disclosure of adult sexual abuse. For the interaction between support and age of abuse on dating fear our hypothesis was not supported, $F(1,79)=.047$ $p=n.s.$, and the results of the analysis of the interaction between support and age on victimization did not support our hypothesis either $F(1,79)=.216$ $p=n.s.$

Additional analyses

Since initial analyses yielded non-significant results we decided to re-examine our sexual abuse classification system as it may be too inclusive. Consequently, rather than using the collective experience of our participants to classify them as victims of child or adult abuse we chose to focus on their answer to the questions “has anyone gone sexually further with you than you wanted? (#6 from the Koss and Oros Sexual Experiences Survey scale) and “Have you ever been raped” (#17 from the same scale). Using our new classification system we reanalyzed our data for each of the two questions on each dating victimization question. Mean scores are reported on Table 1. F values, significance and effect size are reported on Table 2.

Table 1. Victimization means of support and age for sexual abuse.

	Question #6			Question #17		
	Support	No Support	Overall	Support	No Support	Overall
Child	.21	.62	.42	NA	NA	.77
Adult	.23	.24	.234	.27	1.23	.231 ^a
Overall	.22	.43		.27	1.23 ^a	

^a Based on modified population marginal mean.

Table 2. ANOVA Summary table for Question 6 & 17, Support and Age on Victimization.

	df	Mean Square	F	p	Effect size
Question #6					
Support	1	.38	2.86	.10	.37
Age	1	.29	2.15	.15	.30
Support/Age	1	.32	2.41	.13	.33
Error	31	.13			
Question #17					
Support	1	1.26	7.66	0.03	0.92
Age	1	0.01	0.06	0.81	0.66
Support/Age	0				0.06
Error	7	0.17			

When examining the means on question #6, we found that women who had experience child or adult sexual abuse and were supported, and adults who were not supported were at lower risk for getting involved in dating violence, than for those who were abused as child and had no support.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to test the importance of disclosure and social support for victims of sexual abuse. The desired outcome was to verify the importance of support to victims of childhood sexual abuse. Overall, results were non-significant for the proposed hypotheses. However we believe that by collecting a bigger sample of participants, the results can increase and show statistically significant findings.

When we compared the results of victimization and fear to the specific questions from the SES scale, results were yielding in the patterned direction. Figure 1 shows the interaction for question # 6 from the Koss and Oros Sexual Experiences Survey scale.

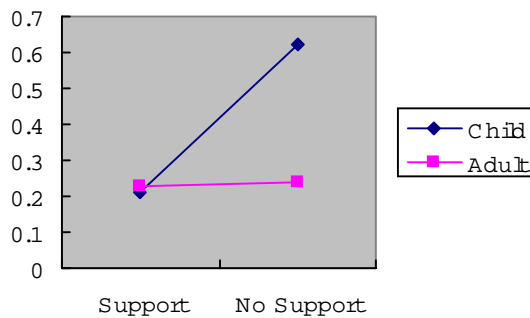


Figure 1. Interaction Pattern of Victimization Means for Question 6.

Limitations

The lack of significant results may have been attributed to the number of participants we collected. A larger sample of women who have suffered from sexual abuse may be necessary, due to the fact that we included every woman whether they have had a sexually abusive experience or not. Another problem may have been the age categorization system for child or adult sexual abuse that we used. Many people may have experienced sexual abuse both as child and adult, and if this were the case we would automatically categorize them as CSA leaving the experience of adult sexual abuse behind. age range may also have been a limitation. Since the median age was 20, if someone was 17 years old at the time of sexual abuse, and they were 20 years old at the time of completing the

survey, there would be a more restricted time frame between the abuse and subsequent relationships, or the abuse could have occurred during the current relationship.

Due to the results, very limited conclusions can be drawn. A larger sample will be drawn in order to collect more supporting data.

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