

CONTEMPT AND DEFENSIVENESS IN COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS RELATED TO CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE HISTORIES FOR SELF AND PARTNER

Eric C. Walker, Rachel Sheffield, Jeffrey H. Larson, and Thomas B. Holman
Brigham Young University

This study examined the relationship between a history of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) for one or both members of a romantic couple and perceptions of contempt and defensiveness for self and partner. Data from the Relationship Evaluation (RELATE) were analyzed for 10,061 couples. The findings suggest that when either or both partner(s) has a history of CSA, contempt and defensiveness in the couple relationship are greater than when neither reports a history of CSA. Furthermore, the males' experience of CSA had a greater impact on their perceptions of self and partner's contempt and defensiveness than females' experience of CSA. Explanations of gender differences are offered and implications for future research and practice are suggested.

Past research has studied adult outcomes related to childhood sexual abuse (CSA), including adult intimate relationship factors; however, the majority of this research is based solely on the females' reports of CSA. Little research exists on the effects of CSA on adult relationships when the male reports CSA. Furthermore, fewer studies have examined adult relationships when both partners report histories of CSA.

The purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between a history of CSA for one or both members of a romantic couple and the level of contempt and defensiveness in their relationship. Besides mere presence of CSA, we were interested in how the frequency of the abuse affected each partner's perception of contempt and defensiveness in their interactions. A unique feature of this research is that we have CSA data and contempt/defensiveness data from both members of the relationship.

Six research questions are addressed. First, do male and female survivors of CSA (this applies to all six research questions) report higher levels of contempt and defensiveness for themselves compared with individuals reporting no history of CSA? Second, do survivors of CSA report higher levels of contempt and defensiveness for their nonabused partners? Third, do partners of CSA survivors report higher levels of contempt and defensiveness for themselves, and fourth, do the partners report higher levels of contempt and defensiveness for the CSA survivors? Fifth, are there significant differences in perceived contempt and defensiveness among couples and between sexes when neither partner reports CSA, when only the female or male reports CSA, and when both partners report CSA? Finally, does the frequency of abuse affect reports of contempt and defensiveness? Our research and conclusions addressed each of these questions as we sought to explore the relationship between CSA and contempt and defensiveness within adult intimate relationships. Explanations for differences between male and female participants are also explored and explanations are offered.

Eric C. Walker, LPC, is a PhD candidate, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University; Rachel Sheffield is a master's student, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University; Jeffrey H. Larson, PhD, LMFT, is a professor of marriage and family therapy, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University; Thomas B. Holman, PhD, is a professor of marriage, family, and human development, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Family Studies Center and the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University.

Address correspondence to Eric C. Walker, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah 84602; E-mail: ericwalk@byu.net

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Trauma can result from a variety of childhood experiences. CSA is one form or source of trauma in childhood. Some evidence suggests that survivors of CSA judge themselves negatively compared with those with no history of abuse. Negative perceptions of self may include low self-esteem, negative body image, and feeling, they have “little control in interpersonal relationships” (Jackson, Calhoun, Amick, Maddever, & Habif, 1990). For example, Meston, Rellini, and Heiman (2006) found that female survivors of CSA have difficulty seeing themselves as passionate and romantic due to the negativity linked with sexuality from their past compared with women reporting no history of CSA.

Researchers have generally suggested that survivors of CSA rate their partners more negatively than do nonabused peers (Bacon & Lein, 1996; Colman & Widom, 2004). One possible explanation for this finding is that survivors and their partners actually do possess more negative characteristics and are thus functioning more poorly than those couples in which neither partner reports CSA. Adult men and women with histories of CSA have a higher risk of victimization in adulthood (Arata & Lindman, 2002; Kalichman, Gore-Felton, Benotsch, Cage, & Rompa, 2004), suggesting that survivors are more likely to partner with an abuser—a likely reason why those with past histories of abuse report more negativity in their relationships and partners.

A second possible explanation for the positive relationship between CSA and negative views of others involves the potential for CSA to influence an individual’s schema or perspective (Meston et al., 2006). Survivors of CSA may perceive themselves more negatively than they would be perceived by other people, and survivors may perceive their partners more negatively than their partners would be perceived by others with no history of CSA. Ornduff and Kelsey (1996), using object relations research, observed significant differences between sexually or physically abused girls and a clinically distressed comparison group with no abuse history. The results showed that victims of CSA exhibited “more grossly pathological functioning” and were more “likely to see people and relationships as profoundly malevolent and threatening” (p. 101). Liem, O’Toole, and James (1996) found that survivors engage in high levels of power imagery and indicate a greater need for power within interpersonal relationships. Survivors often express more fear of power, and refer more to their own powerlessness and betrayal by others than nonabused individuals. Greater need for and fear of power are related to low self-esteem, depression, and negative psychological symptoms (Liem et al., 1996). These findings suggest that CSA has a negative effect on couple relationships or at least a negative effect on the survivor’s perception of the relationship and partner.

More recent research emphasizes the importance of studying the partners of females who have experienced CSA because their partners are also likely to be “first- or second-generation” (Oz, 2001, p. 295) survivors of some type of trauma. Unfortunately, little research has examined the influence of the survivor’s CSA on the adult romantic partner (Oz, 2001). Maltz (1988) and Bacon and Lein (1996) found that survivors’ partners also report feeling negative about themselves. Furthermore, some researchers suggest that survivors and their adult partners report higher levels of avoidance, arousal, traumatization, and individual stress symptoms compared with a clinical sample control group (Nelson & Wampler, 2002). These findings support secondary trauma theory, which suggests that partners see themselves as more inadequate and experience guilt due to a perceived inability to take away the survivors’ pain (Oz, 2001). Thus, it appears that the abused partner’s CSA may have at least some impact on his or her partner’s well-being.

Husbands of female CSA survivors report that their wives’ anger seems to be a result of the wife’s need to vent as well as a response to the wife’s perception that the husband is not responsive or sensitive enough (Bacon & Lein, 1996). Husbands of sexual abuse survivors also report that the survivors perceive and treat husbands as being abusive, controlling, perpetrators, or similar to perpetrators (Bacon & Lein, 1996; Chauncey, 1994). This may result in the nonabused partner feeling hurt that his spouse or partner sees him in such a negative light (Maltz, 1988).

Only one study was found that examined the effects of dual-partner CSA. Lev-Wiese and Amir (2003) studied two groups of couples with experiences of childhood trauma including CSA. One group consisted of couples in which both partners were Holocaust survivors and

both had experienced CSA while in concentration camps; the second group consisted of couples in which neither had experienced the Holocaust and only one partner experienced CSA. While this study did not separate the two types of trauma (CSA and Holocaust experiences), the results showed that the couples with shared childhood traumas experience more posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, somatization, hostility, phobic anxiety, and depression than the one-partner CSA group. However, the couples with shared childhood traumas also reported higher marital quality. Thus, a shared history of CSA may influence specific interaction patterns of intimate partners but may or may not affect overall relationship quality.

In addition to the CSA itself, the frequency of abuse is also important in predicting survivor outcomes (Cecil & Matson, 2001; Feinauer, Mitchell, Harper, & Danes, 1996). As expected, the more frequent the abuse, the more negative the outcomes in adulthood.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Family systems theory suggests that individuals in a couple system are interconnected and affect one another in a reciprocal manner (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In order to understand the effects of CSA on an intimate relationship it is necessary to study both partners' histories, instead of just one, as has frequently been the case in previous research. For example, Holman and Birch (2001) showed that the quality of a wife's childhood relationship with her parents had as much influence on her husband's marital quality as the husband's own childhood relationship with his parents. Furthermore, a wife's marital quality was influenced twice as much by her parent-child relationship than a husband's marital quality was influenced by his relationship with his parents (Holman & Birch, 2001). Thus, the parent-child relationship seems to influence women more than men in outcomes of marital quality. Although this study did not necessarily assume that partners were abused by parents or that the presence of abuse history indicated a poor relationship with parents, this finding suggests that past relational experiences have the ability to influence not only one's own adult romantic relational experience but also the adult romantic relational experience of one's partner. Furthermore, this finding suggests that women's past relationship experiences have a greater influence on couples' relationship quality than men's.

METHOD

Participants

Data were obtained from couples who completed the RELATIONSHIP Evaluation (RELATE), an Internet-based survey used to measure couple relationship quality. The RELATE inventory was taken by couples across the United States, with a large portion coming from the Rocky Mountain region. Participants were exposed to the RELATE assessment from a variety of sources such as participation in university relationship courses, as a result of Internet searches for relationship assessments, or through referrals from relationship enhancement programs or therapists. Responses from both partners were recorded and matched (Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001). These data were accessed through the permission of the RELATE Institute (Busby et al., 2001), which maintained the expanding database. We analyzed data from 20,122 individuals ($n = 10,061$ males and 10,061 females) in heterosexual relationships from 1999 to 2006. Twenty-three percent of the couples were married when they took RELATE (19% first marriage and 4% remarried). The majority of the other couples (70%) was engaged or was in serious dating relationships (54% single/never married, 15% cohabitating, and 0.2% widowed). A history of divorce was reported by 13% of the respondents and 0.7% reported being married but separated. The average length of the current relationship (dating or married) was 4 years. The mean age of male respondents was 30.7 years ($SD = 8.2$). The mean age of female respondents was 28.9 years ($SD = 7.8$). Participants' yearly income average ranged between \$60,000 and \$80,000 for males and \$40,000 and \$60,000 for females. The majority of participants had completed some college. The most frequent racial and ethnic profile was Caucasian (87%), followed by Asian (3.2%), Latino (2.9%), African American (2.6%), mixed race (1.9%), Other (1.7%), and Native American (less than 1%). Sexual preference was

reported as 98.9% heterosexual. The remaining participants reported either bisexual or homosexual orientation.

Measures

Childhood sexual abuse was defined and measured by a RELATE question about physical contact, i.e., fondling, penetration, etc. (Briere, 1988; Larson & Lamont, 2005); abuse without physical contact, i.e., exhibition involving the child or perpetrator, pornography, etc. (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990); and attempted sexual acts such as harassment and propositioning (Belt & Abidin, 1996). Furthermore, the CSA must have occurred prior to age 18; CSA was measured using two RELATE items, asking: "How often" a specific family member or someone outside the family was "sexually abusive toward you?" Answers were scored on a 5-item Likert scale ranging from 1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*.

Preliminary analyses indicated little difference in reports of contempt and defensiveness between participants reporting CSA history frequencies of *sometimes*, *often*, and *very often*. Therefore, in order to have sufficient group sizes for analysis, those reporting abuse histories of sometimes, often, or very often were placed into a *more often* group (*more often* indicating "more often than rarely"). Based on the responses of frequency and preliminary analysis, we grouped respondents into three categories: (a) those reporting no abuse were placed in the *none* group; (b) those reporting rare frequency of CSA history were placed in the *rarely* group; and (c) those reporting a more frequent CSA history were placed in the *more often* group. Differentiating between CSA occurring within or outside the family of origin was beyond the scope of our current research.

Contempt and Defensiveness

Contempt and defensiveness were the dependent variables based on the findings of Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson (1998), which suggested that contempt and defensiveness were among the most destructive patterns in couple conflict resolution processes and often led to marital instability. Contempt is more than criticism, as the intention of contempt in couple interaction is to insult and psychologically abuse one's partner (Gottman, 1994). It includes insults, name-calling, hostile humor, mockery, and sneering. Defensiveness usually follows close behind the use of contempt. The natural inclination is to defend oneself when one's partner has been contemptuous by denying responsibility, making excuses, repeating oneself, or folding the arms across the chest (Gottman, 1994). Furthermore, in their research, Gottman et al. (1998) found that it was not necessarily the anger that was present during the marital conflict that led to marital instability but rather the use of contempt and defensiveness as well as belligerence. In fact, couples that ended up stable and happy were those who approached conflict with low negative affect. Thus, contempt and defensiveness appeared to have a strong link to relationship discord and instability.

The dependent variable of contempt and defensiveness is a four-item scale from RELATE measuring *self-report of contempt and defensiveness* (male reports: $\alpha = .76$; $M = 8.78$, $SD = 2.94$; female reports: $\alpha = .77$, $M = 8.62$, $SD = 3.02$, with higher scores indicating higher rates of contempt and defensiveness). Items included were "I have no respect for my partner when we are discussing an issue," "When I get upset I can see glaring faults in my partner's personality," "When my partner complains I feel that I have to 'ward off' these attacks," and "I feel unfairly attacked when my partner is being negative" (1 = *never*, 5 = *very often*; $R = 1-5$). Reports of *partner's contempt and defensiveness* were also measured with a four-item scale (both male reports: $\alpha = .82$, $M = 9.30$, $SD = 3.44$; female reports: $\alpha = .83$, $M = 9.01$, $SD = 3.57$). Items included were "My partner shows no respect for me when we are discussing an issue," "When my partner gets upset, my partner acts like there are glaring faults in my personality," "When I complain, my partner acts like he or she has to 'ward off' my attacks," and "My partner acts like he/she is being unfairly attacked when I am being negative" (1 = *never*, 5 = *very often*; $R = 1-5$). We looked at reports of self for both partners as well as both partners' reports of the other. The use of self and partner reports from male and female participants resulted in four reports for all contempt and defensiveness measures: (a) males' self-report of contempt and defensiveness, (b) females' self-report of contempt and defensiveness, (c)

males' report of partner's contempt and defensiveness, and (d) females' report of partner's contempt and defensiveness.

Analyses

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine the effects of the nine different combinations of CSA histories within adult couple relationships (male never/female never, male never/female rarely, male never/female more often, male rarely/female never, male rarely/female rarely, male rarely/female more often, male more often/female never, male more often/female rarely, and male more often/female more often) on the four dependent variable combinations of contempt and defensiveness for male and female self and partner. The frequency of female reports of CSA in our sample (23%) was within the range of other studies (Finkelhor et al., 1990). Males' reports of CSA (8%) were lower compared with other research (Finkelhor et al., 1990; Kalichman et al., 2004). While adult retrospective surveys may provide one of the most reliable sources of CSA data, it is reasonable to assume that these percentages may be low because of some participants falsely reporting no CSA history due to "embarrassment, privacy concerns, or simply because they did not remember" (Finkelhor, 1994, p. 42).

Overall, there were small but significant differences between the nine groups on the four dependent measures, Wilks's $\lambda = .97$, $F(32, 74,164) = 17.46$, $p < .001$. The partial eta-squared based on Wilks's lambda was small, partial $\eta^2 = .007$. These small differences were not unexpected, as historical influences like CSA on current couple interactions might be mediated by current factors of emotional health and social support that might buffer some of the direct effects of CSA on contempt and defensiveness. Table 1 contains the mean scores, standard deviations, and sample sizes for contempt and defensiveness for the nine groups. As expected, generally, the contempt and defensiveness scores were relatively low for the entire sample. This might be due to the characteristics of most individuals who took RELATE, i.e., mainly seriously dating and engaged couples who were relatively happy with their relationship but wanted to enrich it.

Analyses of variance were then conducted for each dependent variable as follow-up tests to the MANOVA. Using the Bonferroni's method, each ANOVA was tested at the .001 level. The ANOVA for the male report of self scores was significant, $F(8, 20,113) = 35.53$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .014$. The ANOVA on the male report of partner scores was also significant, $F(8, 20,113) = 41.31$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .016$. The ANOVA on the female report of self scores was significant, $F(8, 20,113) = 43.91$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .017$. The ANOVA on the female report of partner scores was significant, $F(8, 20,113) = 52.40$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .020$. Post hoc analyses following the univariate ANOVAs for contempt and defensiveness consisted of conducting pair-wise comparisons to find the CSA couple history combinations that most strongly affected perceptions of contempt and defensiveness.

RESULTS

Our study proposed six questions to answer. First, did male and female survivors of CSA report higher levels of contempt and defensiveness for themselves compared with individuals reporting no history of CSA? Our findings indicated that they did. There was an increase in perceiving oneself as more contemptuous and defensive when one reported a history of CSA (see Table 1).

Second, did male and female survivors of CSA report higher levels of contempt and defensiveness in their partners? Again, our findings suggest they did show an increase in viewing one's partner as higher in contempt and defensiveness toward oneself when the participant reported a history of CSA (see Table 1).

Third, did nonabused partners of CSA survivors report higher levels of contempt and defensiveness for themselves? The answer was yes. Compared with couples in which neither reported a history of CSA, both males and females whose partners reported a history of CSA rated themselves significantly higher in contempt and defensiveness. The difference between the groups was even more pronounced when both partners reported CSA histories (see Table 1).

| CSA groups | Four reports of contempt and defense | Male report of self | | | Male report of partner | | | Female report of self | | | Female report of partner | | |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|-----|--------|------------------------|-----|-------|-----------------------|-----|--------|--------------------------|------|--------|
| | | M | SD | n | M | SD | n | M | SD | n | M | SD | n |
| Male none | Female none | 2.15 | .73 | 14,510 | 2.28 | .85 | 14510 | 2.10 | .73 | 14,510 | 2.19 | .86 | 14,510 |
| Group #1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Group #2 | Female rarely | 2.27 | .73 | 2188 | 2.41 | .85 | 2188 | 2.28 | .79 | 2188 | 2.42 | .94 | 2188 |
| Group #3 | Female m/oft | 2.30 | .74 | 1834 | 2.49 | .87 | 1834 | 2.33 | .81 | 1834 | 2.48 | .95 | 1834 |
| Male rarely | Female none | 2.39 | .74 | 710 | 2.52 | .89 | 710 | 2.32 | .76 | 710 | 2.39 | .89 | 710 |
| Group #4 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Group #5 | Female rarely | 2.34 | .78 | 174 | 2.55 | .96 | 174 | 2.38 | .82 | 174 | 2.46 | .90 | 174 |
| Group #6 | Female m/oft | 2.4 | .75 | 170 | 2.61 | .93 | 170 | 2.36 | .75 | 170 | 2.56 | .94 | 170 |
| Male m/oft | Female none | 2.45 | .84 | 346 | 2.66 | .89 | 346 | 2.38 | .79 | 346 | 2.61 | 1.00 | 346 |
| Group #7 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Group #8 | Female rarely | 2.63 | .83 | 98 | 2.88 | .95 | 98 | 2.46 | .87 | 98 | 2.70 | .95 | 98 |
| Group #9 | Female m/oft | 2.63 | .73 | 92 | 2.84 | .79 | 92 | 2.52 | .79 | 92 | 2.72 | 1.04 | 92 |

m/oft = more often.

Fourth, did nonabused partners of CSA survivors report higher levels of contempt and defensiveness for their partners? Again, this study indicated that they did. Both male and female partners of CSA survivors appeared to see their survivor partners more negatively (see Table 1).

Fifth, were there significant differences in perceived contempt and defensiveness in couples in which neither reported CSA, only the female reported CSA, only the male reported CSA, and couples in which both partners reported CSA? Once again, our findings indicated that significant differences did exist (see Table 2). In couples reporting no CSA history, both males and females were significantly lower in perceptions of self-contempt and defensiveness compared with individuals in all other groups for all four measurements (i.e., male self measurement, male measurement of partner, female self measurement, and female measurement of partner). Couples in which only the males report a history of CSA reported higher negative perceptions compared with couples in which females only report a history (see Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4). For example, among couples with some history of CSA, couples in which the female only reported a history of CSA did not score significantly higher in contempt and defensiveness than other CSA groups. They did score significantly lower than other groups 14 times. On the other hand, couples in which the male only reported a history of CSA scored significantly higher than other groups seven times, and scored significantly lower than other groups only five times (see Tables 1 and 2). This differential between significantly higher scores was most noticeable in male perceptions of self and partner and female perceptions of partner. This would suggest that a male partner's history of CSA can impact couple characteristics such as contempt and defensiveness more than a female partner's history of CSA.

Not all differences shown in Table 1 were significant, but the trends were consistent with male CSA histories and generally consistent with female CSA histories. General trends indicated increased mean scores for contempt and defensiveness for couples in which both reported CSA histories compared with couples in which only one partner reported a history of CSA. These trends were not significant for female perceptions of self or partner, but were generally significant for male respondents. Readers may contact the first author for a full report of the mean scores.

To conclude with the final question, did the frequency of abuse affect reports of contempt and defensiveness? The answer appeared to be yes, but not all increases in frequency resulted in increases of current negative perceptions. There were trends of increases for all four dependent variable measurements with increased CSA frequency for both male and female respondents, but the increases alone were not significantly different. Once again the male history of CSA was particularly striking. The most noticeable and significant increases were for male increases from *rarely* to *more often* (see Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4). Increases in contempt and defensiveness associated with increased frequency of female CSA histories occurred within the larger influence of the male's history.

DISCUSSION

Prior research on CSA presumes a negative directional influence of CSA on adult relationship outcomes. Such findings are also implied in the results of our study. These results support the hypothesis that CSA is a risk factor for relational challenges of satisfaction and stability for survivors and partners. The direct relationship, while significant, appeared to be small. As such, CSA should not be interpreted as a major direct contributor to adult perceptions of contempt and defensiveness, but rather as one piece of the adult relationship puzzle. These findings indicate that the presence of CSA for either partner increases the likelihood that one will perceive oneself and one's partner as somewhat more contemptuous and defensive.

Adding to previous research, there is some influence of gender on contempt and defensiveness in the couple relationship. It appears that a male's history of CSA may have a slightly greater impact on contempt and defensiveness in the couple relationship than a female's history of CSA. For example, a general trend in the data indicated that when the male has a history of abuse, the female perceived herself more negatively than if she herself had a history of abuse. Furthermore, when the male's frequency of CSA increased from rarely to more often, the

Table 2
Significant Differences in Means for the Nine Groups in All Four Reports of Contempt and Defensiveness

| These nine groups are significantly different | Male report of self | Male report of partner | Female report of self | Female report of partner |
|---|--|---|--|--|
| From Group #1: Male none and female none | These groups 2***, 3***, 4***, 5*, 6***, 7***, 8***, 9*** | These groups 2***, 3***, 4***, 5**, 6***, 7***, 8***, 9*** | These groups 2***, 3***, 4***, 5***, 6***, 7***, 8***, 9*** 1*** | These groups 2***, 3***, 4***, 5**, 6***, 7***, 8***, 9*** 1***, 7** |
| Group #2: Male none and female rarely | 1***, 4**, 7**, 8***, 9*** | 1***, 7*, 8***, 9*** | 1*** | 1***, 7** |
| Group #3: Male none and female more often | 1***, 7**, 8***, 9** | 1***, 7*, 8***, 9** | 1*** | 1*** |
| Group #4: Male rarely and female none | 1***, 2** | 1***, 8**, 9* | 1*** | 1***, 7**, 8*, 9* |
| Group #5: Male rarely and female rarely | 1* | 1** | 1*** | 1** |
| Group #6: Male rarely and female more often | 1*** | 1*** | 1*** | 1*** |
| Group #7: Male more often and female none | 1***, 2**, 3** | 1***, 2***, 3* | 1*** | 1***, 2**, 4** |
| Group #8: Male more often and female rarely | 1***, 2***, 3*** | 1***, 2***, 3***, 4** | 1*** | 1***, 4* |
| Group #9: Male more often and female more often | 1***, 2***, 3** | 1***, 2***, 3**, 4* | 1*** | 1***, 4* |

*Significant at .05 level, **significant at .01 level, ***significant at .001 level.

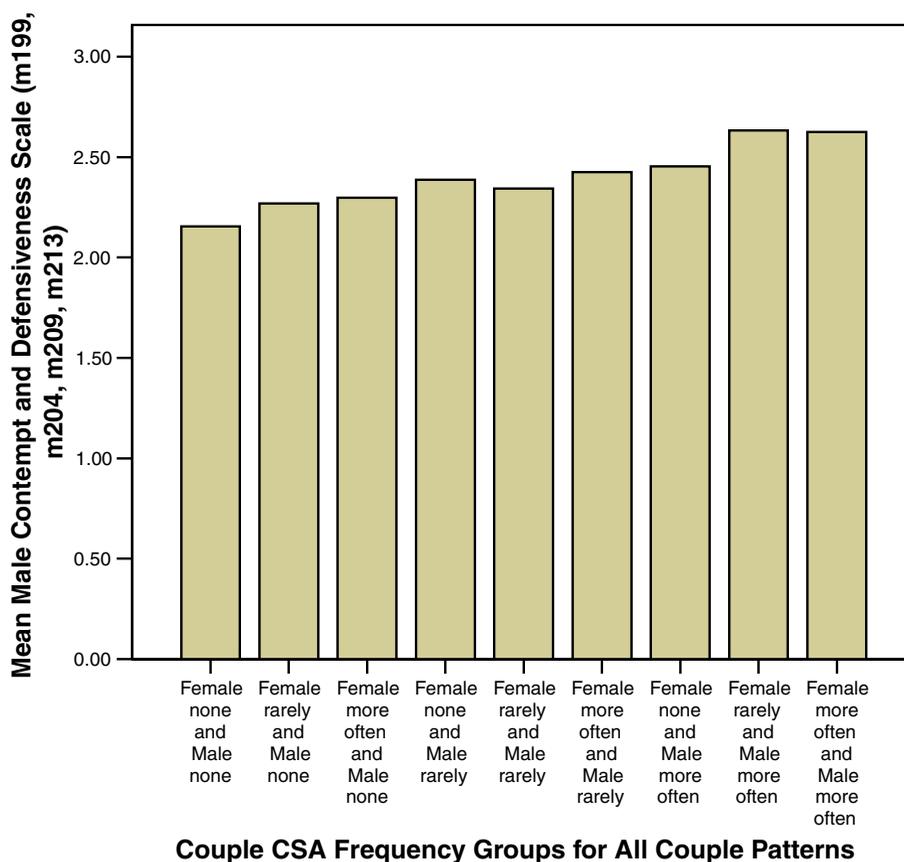


Figure 1. Male perception of self for the nine groups.

female perceived the male as more contemptuous and defensive, even if she had no history of abuse. Also, if either partner had a history of CSA, the male perceived himself as more contemptuous and defensive than the female partner perceived herself. This suggested that the male's own history of CSA influenced the way he saw himself more than his partner's history of CSA influenced how he saw himself. Furthermore, trends showed that if a male had a history of CSA, he saw his partner more negatively than males reporting no history of CSA. This applied even if she had no history of CSA. This is especially interesting because while it seems that some aspects of a female childhood may have a greater influence on adult romantic relationships than a male's past (Holman & Birch, 2001), these results suggest that there may be other areas of childhood in which the male's history (i.e., CSA) may have a greater influence on some aspects of adult romantic relationships, such as perceptions of contempt and defensiveness.

Another important finding for males was that a shared couple history of *more often* CSA seemed to indicate slight improvements for a male's view of himself, as well as the male's view of his partner. However, this only held if both of the partners had a similar frequency history of CSA. For example, males appeared to have slightly less negative perceptions of themselves and their partners when both self and partner had a history of *more often* abuse compared with males who had a *more often* frequency of abuse and the female partners who reported an abuse frequency of *rarely*. While the difference between these two groups was slight, it seems to corroborate the findings of Lev-Wiese and Amir (2003), who found higher satisfaction in couples who had similar histories of childhood trauma.

These findings suggest that males who have been sexually abused as children tend to display contempt and defensiveness more strongly in intimate relationships than females who have

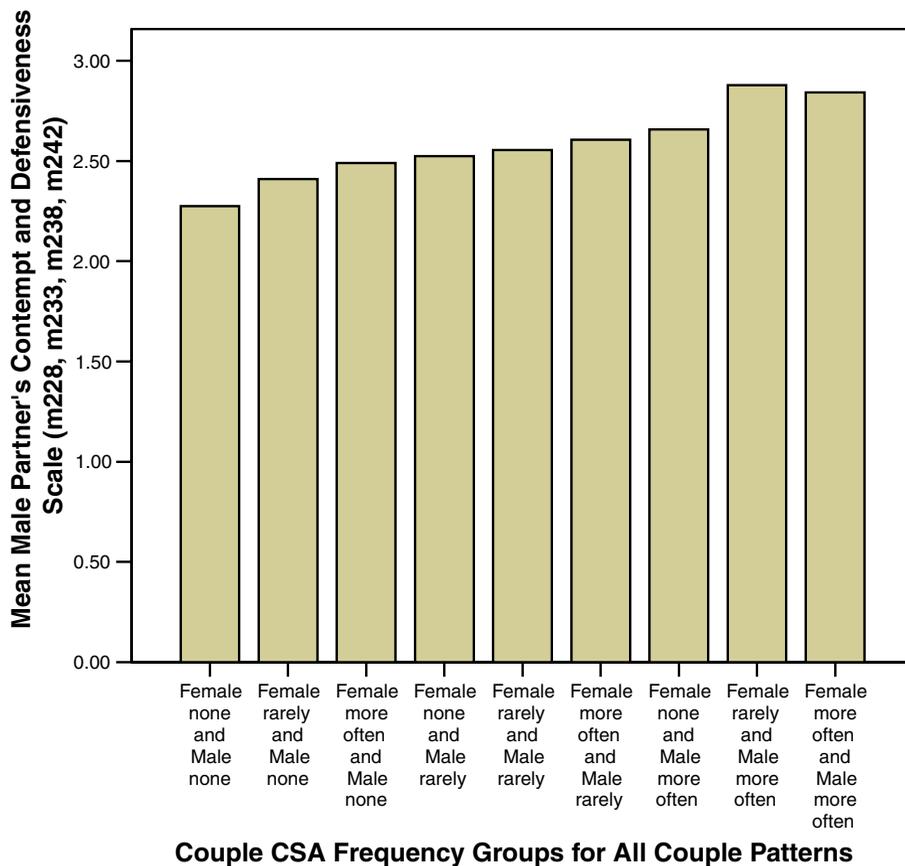


Figure 2. Male perception of partner for the nine groups.

experienced CSA. This is important because most of the previous research on CSA has focused mainly on females' experiences of CSA and its effect on the relationship. Thus, it is important to further investigate how males' experiences of CSA influence other relationship outcomes (e.g., sexual satisfaction, communication, or affection).

As stated earlier, one of our research goals was to better understand gender difference in CSA histories. Among this sample of survivors there was essentially no difference between male and female participants in the percentage of CSA perpetrators from within and from outside the family. The relationship with family-of-origin perpetrators was slightly different. Male participants reported a slightly higher frequency of abuse from female family members (sister, mother, stepmother, or foster mother) than female participants. Male participants also reported a slightly lower frequency of abuse from some male family members (father, stepfather, or foster father) than female participants, but none of this leads to an obvious explanation of the contempt and defensiveness gender differences reported in this study. A larger gender difference was found when we compared a history of CSA with a report of perpetrating sexually inappropriate behaviors on other family members. Of those males who had been sexually abused, 25% reported being sexually inappropriate to family members compared to 9% of female survivors who reported being sexually inappropriate to family members. This trend was similar whether participant CSA victimization had occurred from within or outside of the family of origin. If contempt and defensiveness were looked at as a lesser degree of a hostile or somewhat abusive interaction style, we might wonder if the increased frequency of perpetrating inappropriate sexual activity on family members combined with the history of CSA victimization might increase the propensity toward contempt and defensiveness in adult relationships. Of course this question needs further study.

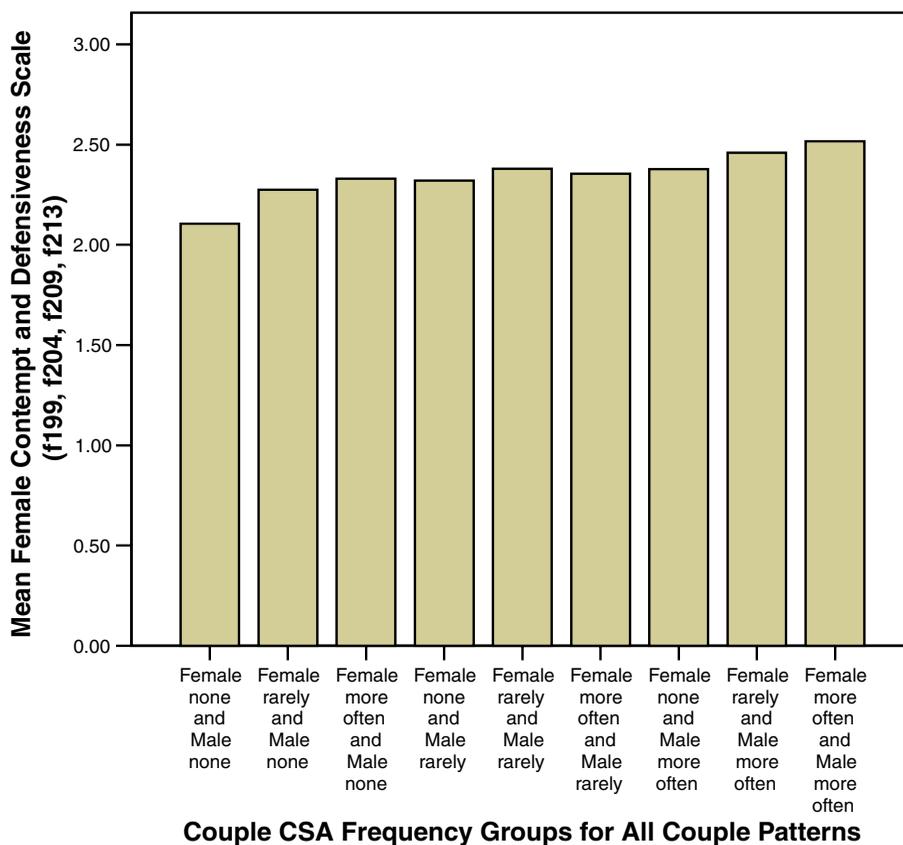


Figure 3. Female perception of self for the nine groups.

Another explanation may be that there are differences in relationship processes depending on whether the male or the female has the history of CSA. A feminist perspective may suggest that the imbalance of power in many intimate relationships results in the males holding more power than the women. If this applies to these couples, we may surmise that the slightly increased associations between males' history of CSA and couple contempt and defensiveness are a result of the imbalance of power typically held by males and therefore holding a larger capacity to influence them, their partners, and the relationship in aspects such as CSA related to contempt and defensiveness. The history of CSA may enhance men's emotional flooding and contempt and defensiveness. Compared with women, men generally get physiologically overwhelmed more easily and then are more likely to use contempt and defensiveness in conflicts (Gottman, 1994). Future studies should focus on why these gender differences occur and also should look at how couple processes (e.g., communication) differ when the male has a history of CSA as opposed to when the female has a history of CSA.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, the sample is not nationally representative in terms of race, ethnicity, education, or income. This is a concern because the effects of CSA may vary with demographic factors (Lodico, Gruber, & DiClemente, 1996; Ullman & Filipas, 2005). It is likely that the associations found in this study were weakened by limiting our study to crude frequency measures and not considering other sexual abuse mediating and moderating factors such as duration, number of perpetrators, the presence of other types of abuse (such as physical or emotional), or age at which abuse occurred. There are also limitations to interpretation due to the high percentage of participants in this study in the early stages of their relationships

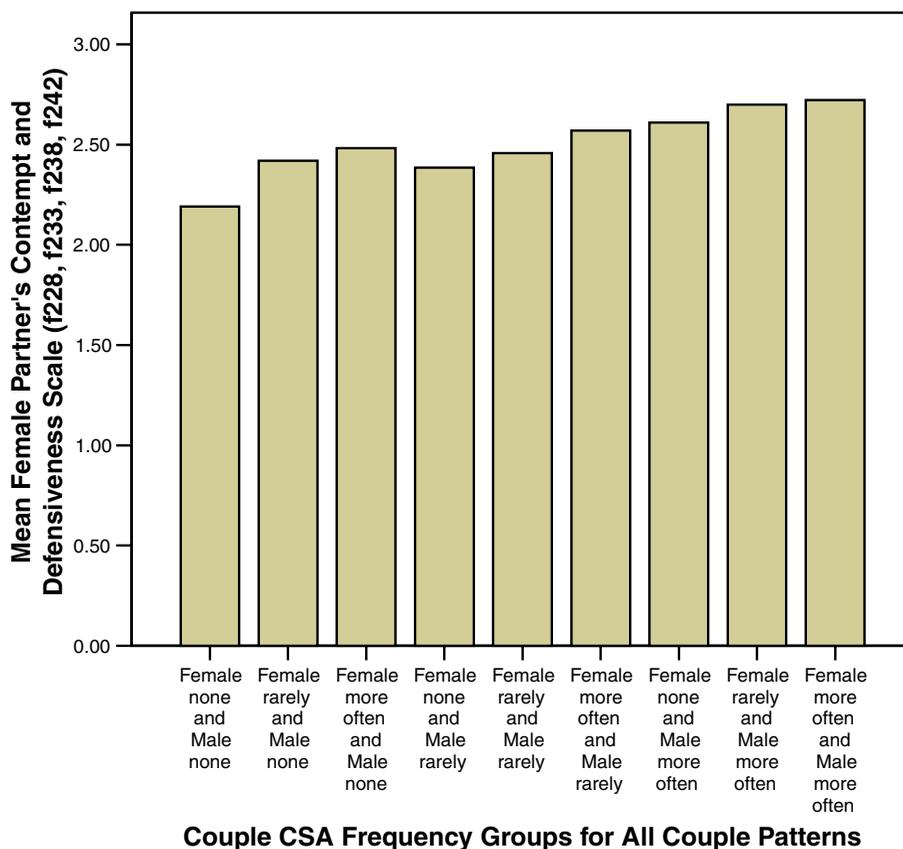


Figure 4. Female perception of partner for the nine groups.

(engaged or seriously dating). Since some relational problems related to CSA do not present until later in marriage (Bacon & Lein, 1996; Maltz, 1988), our cross-sectional survey may not have captured potential experiences of increased or decreased contempt and defensiveness for more mature couples.

Future research on CSA as it is related to contempt and defensiveness should explore additional childhood and adult factors frequently associated with CSA that might be considered in a more comprehensive model. These variables include the co-occurrence of childhood physical abuse, violence in the home, and additional family-of-origin factors such as quality of relationships with parents. Further exploration is also needed that uses more comprehensive models that include measures of mental health conditions.

TREATMENT IMPLICATIONS

Although it is beyond the scope of the present article to suggest detailed therapeutic approaches to treating CSA experienced in the past by adult couples, some general guidelines are presented. In addition to individual and group therapy for CSA survivors, researchers and clinicians have called for the inclusion of couple therapy as necessary (Balcom, 1996; Busby, Glenn, Steggell, & Adamson, 1993; Nelson & Wampler, 2002). Criteria for making clinical decisions of when and how to include couple therapy in the treatment of CSA couples are outlined by Busby et al. (1993). Specific relationship issues will vary from survivor to survivor and from couple to couple. From a family systems perspective, the results of our study suggest that the assessment and treatment of CSA should include both members of a romantic couple because not only do both partners experience communication problems as found in previous research, but more important, both may

experience increased levels of contempt and defensiveness, which are better predictors of relationship distress and instability than are poor communication skills (Gottman et al., 1998). It seems particularly important not to ignore the needs and history of male partners because a male history such as CSA may have a slightly stronger influence on some couple attributes, or perceptions of attributes, such as contempt and defensiveness.

Because contempt and defensiveness are so damaging to relationships, such processes must be reduced or eliminated as soon as possible. Teaching partners increased awareness of anxiety, hurt, and emotional flooding that lead to contempt and defensiveness should be priorities in couple treatment. Cyclic processes of contempt and defensiveness could result in increased negative perceptions of partners, which could lead to increased negative interactions, in turn leading to increased negative reactions from the partner, heightened negative perception of self and partner, and so on. The treatment of one partner without consideration of the other does not adequately intervene in the cyclic and systemic interactions within the relationship.

For couples where both are survivors of CSA, we recommend the clinical approach of Balcom (1996), who emphasizes that for couples wherein both have experienced some form of trauma there is a high probability that in conflict resolution or problem-solving interactions, both partners will simultaneously exhibit trauma responses or reactivity. Reactivity refers to the reaction by the other to the first partner's symptoms or enactment of the trauma (Balcom, 1996). These simultaneous trauma responses can transpire for dual-survivor couples in the process of couple therapy and should not surprise the clinician (Balcom, 1996), who must attend to both. Balcom (1996) describes a typology of intensity for dual-CSA couples that outlines the patterns these couples are likely to exhibit in couple therapy and suggests techniques to deal with these responses.

As suggested by Busby et al. (1993) and Balcom (1996), systemic treatment with CSA couples should focus on (a) helping each partner recognize and control (e.g., self-soothe) their acute reactions to each other in conflict situations that often result in insults, personality attacks, blaming, and labeling, as well as various forms of defending oneself (e.g., cross-complaining or rationalizing); (b) intervening directly in contempt-defend interactions with communication skills training or structured enactments (Davis & Butler, 2004); (c) helping partners distinguish the past CSA from the current relationship dynamics and issues to be resolved; and (d) helping partners build empathy and compassion for self and partner. Using these guidelines, therapists assist CSA couples in giving both partners active roles and skills for reducing their internal distress, replacing dysfunctional interaction patterns with more constructive, healthier ones, and separating early life trauma resulting from CSA from current couple dynamics (Balcom, 1996).

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