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Literature Review

Southern Adventist University

24 April 2019

### **Statement of the Problem**

For my research paper, I have chosen the research question of “How Does Childhood Sexual Abuse Effect Women in Romantic Relationships?”. There are multiple purposes of this question such as exploring how a woman who has experienced sexual abuse as a child will be effected in romantic relationships later in life. Another will also seek to examine if there is a relationship between violence and abuse in romantic relationships and childhood sexual abuse. One last but not least purpose of this paper is to determine how these women choose to cope with the scars of sexual abuse in positive and/or negative ways. The limitations I have chosen to set for this research project are first of all limiting the abuse to sexual abuse. There are many types of abuse that children are subjected to, but I have specified sexual abuse in this project. Another limitation I have set is to specifically deal with women. I have also narrowed my research to women who have experienced sexual abuse as a child. Sexual abuse can occur throughout any period of the lifetime, but I have chosen to focus on women who have been exposed to sexual abuse in their childhood. With these limitations, I hope to be narrow enough to answer the specific question but broad enough to be able to find adequate research that has been done on this topic.

Studying the effects that childhood sexual abuse has on romantic relationships will help me as a social worker be more competent and aware of behaviors and attitudes that may be seen when working with women who have suffered this trauma. The knowledge that I gain through completing this research will also allow me to be aware of both myself and others when working with children who have suffered from this abuse and will allow me to work on specific areas of treatment in an attempt to lower the effects the children will have later on in life, specifically in romantic relationships. Since my goal is to work with children who have suffered from

childhood sexual abuse, it is essential for me to be knowledgeable in the areas that it effects in romantic relationships. Our job, as Social Workers, is to advocate for these women, to broker for them, to provide counseling services to provide them as well as provide them with all the resources they need to heal and move on in life. We, as Social Workers, need to be prepared and know what and where they are coming from so we can efficiently guide them in the process of recovery.

The knowledge of how widespread childhood sexual abuse throughout our nation cannot be exactly pinpointed by a specific number because many women never report that they were abused. While I have not found exact numbers that answer this question, I do know, from what I have read, that it is increasingly widespread and is over 50%. This only speaks for the women who have spoken up about their abuse. Many women, however, stay silent because they are scared, or they must for their own safety. This greatly saddens my heart especially for those who cannot speak up about their abuse because they are not able to obtain the help and resources available to them to guide them in the process of recovering and coping from such a traumatic experience of their past.

Many women are put into a “damaged” box based on their life experiences. Many of these experiences the women had no control over but are still judged for them. They may define themselves as damaged or others give them that definition but in reality, they are beautiful individuals. Unfortunately, many women are victimized and then left to deal with the effects on their own. After a woman has experienced childhood sexual abuse, they most often suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD, anxiety, depression, and attachment avoidance. More often than not, these women are prone to revictimization when they move into dating or romantic relationships later in life. Violence lowered sexual pleasure, and attachment avoidance can be

seen within a dating relationship and can be damaging to both individuals within the relationship. While it is not possible to know everything, it is essential to help women who have come from an abusive past to see that they are beautiful, unique, special, talented, and created for a specific God-sized dream.

I have been effected by this topic because some of my friends were victims of childhood sexual abuse and now struggle with maintaining a romantic relationship. They struggle with doubts about their worth, depression, anxiety, harboring feelings, and many other effects of the trauma they have experienced in their childhood. I, myself, have not had a good experience with men from my childhood growing up but there are many other women who have been effected much more than I have regarding childhood sexual abuse. My specific goal for this research project is to learn all I can about this topic, so I am better equipped to help those women who have been victimized by this whether they be children or adults. God has created each and every woman for a specific purpose and it is my goal to help them reach the full potential God created them to be.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The topic I chose to research and learn more about was sexual abuse in childhood and how the abuse effects women in romantic dating or married relationships later in life. Therefore, I refined my research question to be as follows: How does childhood sexual abuse effect women in romantic relationships? The research I found approached the topic from a variety of angles and perspectives and allowed me to gain knowledge about many things such as patterns that were seen as well as intervention techniques that can help an individual develop resilience and help to lessen the risk of revictimization. Although I limited this research to how childhood sexual abuse effects women, I should note that women are not the only ones that are

subjected to sexual abuse as children. Men experience sexual abuse as children too and even though the numbers tend to be lower for this population, those numbers only reflect those abuse situations that have been reported. Unfortunately, many men and women who have experienced sexual abuse as a child do not speak up and report it. The reasons for this vary from fear of the unknown or protection of themselves, and even protection for the abuser (DiLillo, Peugh, Walsh, Panuzio, Trask, & Evans, 2009, p.689) It is essentially important for all individuals planning to work in any helping profession to become competent in this area knowing the signs to look for and interventions to use so when we come in contact with those who have been abused, we are aware of what we can offer to help them overcome this obstacle and reach the full potential God created them for.

Throughout many articles and studies that I read, some focused on the effects childhood sexual abuse has on women when they start dating while others focused more on down the road into marriage and the hurdles, challenges, and struggles that may occur during each phase of intimacy. Even with the range of diversity, there was one fact that struck me throughout each article I read. This fact was that no matter who the individual was, everyone was effected in some way. It is reported that one in every four girls has had sexual trauma occur in their lives by the time they turn eighteen (Get Statistics, 2018). The even sadder part of this statistic is that those are only the reported cases. This shows even more how important it is to become competent in this area.

There were three main themes that I found while researching this topic. Although many more areas could be developed, I found that much of what I learned fell into these different categories. These categories consisted of the how childhood sexual abuse effected a person emotionally, physically, and what lessened the effects of the abuse. Each of these categories

tends to overlap within the research but there are also some factors that are distinctly found within their category.

### **Emotional effects**

Throughout my research, there was countless mention of different emotions that a woman normally feels after being exposed to sexual abuse as a child. The memories of childhood abuse seemed to significantly impact how the college kids formed attachments with their partners. Some areas that were noted suffered in the relationship were lack of trust, distancing, low-self disclosure, fear of abandonment, clinginess, and overdependent (Riggs, Cusimano, & Benson, 2010, p.133) These symptoms only include a small percentage of the effects that take a toll on romantic relationships, they offer a pretty clear understanding of how traumatic sexual abuse as a child can be.

Another aspect of my research showed that self-criticism was also an area that was more prominent within a romantic relationship (Lassri, Fonagy, Luyten, & Shahar, 2017, p.121). While this already seems like a lot of effects and emotions that occur as a result of childhood sexual abuse, there are still more. Another finding was that PTSD and depression were common and that those who had more of these symptoms struggled with emotional control (Chang, Kaczurkin, McLean, & Foa, 2017, p.319). I found it interesting that all the symptoms were related and depending on how severe one symptom was caused other symptoms to be greater or lesser.

A study was done testing how survivors responded when talking with their partner about relationship-threatening conversations. It was found that there was a lack of motivated inaccuracy during these conversations and the study suggested that the altered threat coping strategy could be to blame for this due to childhood experiences which prohibited the individual

from protecting themselves against these relationship-threatening situations (Miano, Roepke, Weber, & Dziobek, 2017, p.309). Experiential avoidance is the process of avoiding thoughts, feelings, and emotions related to a particular event or experience. It was found that those who had high experiential avoidance were at a greater risk of revictimization (Fiorillo, Papa & Follette, 2013, p.566). However, there proved to be effective treatments to lessen the effects and revictimization.

### **Physical effects**

During the research I did, there was many points of evidence towards revictimization and violence within a relationship where the women was a childhood sexual abuse survivor. Sadly, dating violence is a wide spread dilemma and between 20%-48% of people say they have experienced some form of violence within their relationships (Fiorillo, Papa & Follette, 2013, p. 562). Although these numbers are high, there is active effort to reduce the number through counseling and other forms of treatment. A lot of the revictimization was due to the women being sexually coerced by their husbands within a marriage relationship (DiLillo, Jaffe, Watkins, Peugh, Kras, & Campbell, 2016, p.212). The relationship between childhood sexual abuse in women and coercion in later relationships was surprising and proved the trauma symptoms were increased in women who experienced sexual revictimization within a new marriage. Due to this as well as attachment avoidance and other violence in the relationship, there was significant decrease in relationship satisfaction (Godbout, Daspe, Sabourin, Lussier, Dutton, & Hebert, 2016, p.127). When all these physical and emotional effects are added up and considered, one can wonder how a childhood sexual abuse survivor manages. However, because of these effects, there was a greater outcome of the marriages ended in divorce (DiLillo, Peugh, Walsh, Panuzio, Trask, & Evans, 2009, p.689-690).

### **What helped**

Throughout my research, there were several different methods that have been proven effective when working with women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse. The first major point that the research discovered is that the connection between the intensity of PTSD and satisfaction in a relationship varied greatly depending on whether or not the individual was pursuing treatment to help them process their past. The study concluded by mentioning that greater intensity of PTSD and less satisfaction in a relationship was to be expected with women who have experienced a sexual trauma and have not received treatment (DiMauro, & Renshaw, 2018).

Another finding related to what helped within these situations was based on the time frame that women sought counseling and treatment. It was found that if an individual sought counseling early on, the effects of the childhood sexual trauma were decreased and when focus was put on improving the internalizing symptoms, less severe sexual problems and trouble in romantic relationships were noticed (Feiring, Simon, & Cleland, 2009, p.127). This shows the importance of seeking treatment and how that can significantly decrease the adverse effects that childhood sexual abuse brings. Fiorillo, Papa and Follette found that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy was effective in helping women process and deal with the traumatic events of their past with a specific emphasis on reducing experiential avoidance and increasing the use of psychological flexibility (2013, p.567). By using this intervention method, practitioners were able to help clients improve some of their behavioral skills and self-care practices which in turn helped to significantly lower revictimization within a romantic relationship.



Another intervention method that was talked about briefly in the same research was Cognitive Processing Therapy. This form of therapy focused on "...recalling, reexperiencing, and processing trauma-related events" (DiLillo, Jaffe, Watkins, Peugh, Kras, & Campbell, 2016, p.212) Fiorillo, Papa & Follette, 2013, p.567). Although this approach was not discussed as much, it was also proven very effective in helping women cope with the abuse and trauma that they have experienced at young ages which in turn helped to lower revictimization in relationships later on in life.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

One of the theories that I found in the textbook that related to the topic of how sexual abuse as a child affects women in romantic relationships later on in life was Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development. The reason I chose this theory is because it has specific sections for each stage of life. If a woman was abused as a child, she might develop mistrust instead of trust, shame and doubt instead of autonomy, guilt rather than initiative, inferiority rather than industry and so on with the rest of the different stages. This can be a helpful tool in determining if someone may have been abused as a child. If an assessment is done and it is found that there are many of the "negative" aspect developed rather than the "positive" qualities developed, more additional assessments may be needed to help determine the cause of these developed qualities.

While this theory does not give a definite yes or no to if a woman was sexually abuse as a child, it does give a starting point to go from. There has been some research been done on the effects of these qualities, positive or negative, later on in life that can give insight on issues and give practitioners information on what can be expected and things to watch out for when

working with individuals who have developed certain qualities and how that could be related to childhood sexual abuse.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Some aspects that could continue to be address and researched more closely include but are not limited to evaluating differences in emotions and struggles, if any, of women who were abused by someone they know versus someone they did not know. This could provide differences in how they view romantic relationships going forward and the emotions and struggles they go through.

Another aspect that could be researched more for the statistical side of research could be the percentage of women who experienced sexual abuse as a child that came from single family homes verses two parent homes, and the socioeconomical status of these families to see how that could have affected the women getting treatment. While there are many more aspects that could be researched to provide a broader understanding of all the effects of childhood sexual abuse with women and how that effects them going into romantic relationships later on in life, these are just a couple that could be studied.

### **Conclusion and Position**

Enduring sexual abuse as a child has many adverse effects upon those that experience it. These effects range from emotional and mental struggles to physical challenges. While many of these effects may seem small and unimportant, they can severely affect and damage one's life. Some of the struggles that can be found in women in romantic relationships include lack of trust, distancing, low-self disclosure, fear of abandonment, clinginess, and overdependent (Riggs, Cusimano, & Benson, 2010, p.133). PTSD and depression were also

noted along with struggling to gain emotional control (Chang, Kaczurkin, McLean, & Foa, 2017, p.319).

While these may be some of the effects that are not always as notable, there were also physical effects of childhood sexual abuse in women. It was found that there were greater chances of revictimization and violence noting that between 20%-48% of people say that there has been violence within their relationship (Fiorillo, Papa & Follette, 2013, p. 562). Another study showed that relationship satisfaction was also decreased within relationships where the female had been subjected to childhood sexual abuse (Godbout, Daspe, Sabourin, Lussier, Dutton, & Hebert, 2016, p.127). Sadly, as a result of both the physical and emotional effects of childhood sexual abuse in women,, there is a greater outcome of marriages ended in divorce (DiLillo, Peugh, Walsh, Panuzio, Trask, & Evans, 2009, p.689-690).

Even though many of these results seem discouraging, through my research, I found that those who had not received treatment had a higher intensity of PTSD as well as lowered relationship satisfaction (DiMauro, & Renshaw, 2018). Those who received treatment and counseling early on to process the effects of the abuse and trauma had less adverse effects (Feiring, Simon, & Cleland, 2009, p.127). It was found by Fiorillo, Papa and Follette that an effective way to help women process childhood sexual abuse was to use Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (2013, p.567).

Throughout the extent of my study and research on this topic, I did not find there to be any tension between what the research showed and my own opinion on this topic. I have seen many times the effects of females who are sexually abused as children and feel that all the findings correlated with my experiences some way or another. As far as what helps women who were sexually abused as children process the abuse and trauma it was shown that different forms

of counseling and different techniques can be very effective in decreasing trauma and coping with the abuse. This may be the only part of my research that I had a hard time with. Not because I do not agree with what they are saying, but because I have personally been more harmed from counselors than helped. However, I still think that for others counseling with the different techniques used can be very beneficial to women who were sexually abused as children. I am addressing this tension by realizing that many people have very good and helpful experiences with counseling and that my bad experiences should not hinder me from encouraging others to seek help to process the abuse and trauma that they have experienced as a result of childhood sexual abuse.

I feel that childhood sexual abuse is something that is not talked about enough but that happens way too much. Although there are many resources available to individuals who have been abused, many people either do not know about the help there is, or they feel afraid to ask for help. The feelings and emotions that I found in my research such as PTSD, depression, lack of trust, distancing, low-self disclosure, fear of abandonment, clinginess, overdependent, as well as others are all things that I agree with and that are very real in the lives of many. I feel that this topic is not talked about enough. Proper education has been neglected to be given to teachers and others who work with children so that they might know what signs to look for. Children are vulnerable and often are taken advantage of. When this happens, the children often think it is a normal part of life, or they do not know who to turn to. While I do think that counseling is very beneficial to women to process the abuse and trauma that they were subjected to, I think it needs to be implemented at a much younger age.

I feel that social workers should be required to take classes on childhood sexual abuse so that they can be competent in the behaviors, feelings, and emotions that are associated with this

topic such as distancing, depression, lack of trust and others. I also feel that churches and other organizations that work with kids who may have been sexually abused should have required trainings on what to look for, what to do and who to call if sexual abuse is suspected or disclosed. Anyone who is in the counseling profession should do research and be competent in the different kinds of therapy that is most effective and learn how to use these techniques to be able to better help the clients based off of evidence-based practice.

On a macro level, I think there should be more education given to the church, teachers, social workers and anyone else that works with children. While childhood sexual abuse can not be stopped all together, more education would allow individuals to know what signs to look for, what to do if sexual abuse is suspected, as well as taking steps to prevent sexual abuse. Many organizations do background checks and detailed screening processes to ensure an individual is safe to work with children. This should also be used for the meso level within neighborhoods. However, this process does not screen parents or family members who have communication with a child. I also feel that on a micro level we should work to make abuse a less taboo topic to allow individuals who have been subjected to abuse to come forward and be open and honest about the experiences they went through. If we teach children that it is okay to be open about the things they are experiencing in life, then sexual abuse can be detected and dealt with at a younger age which would in turn lessen the amount of trauma endured.

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