

California State University, San Bernardino

CSUSB ScholarWorks

Theses Digitization Project

John M. Pfau Library

2012

Child sexual abuse and adult attachment styles

Carey Anne Soares

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project>



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Soares, Carey Anne, "Child sexual abuse and adult attachment styles" (2012). *Theses Digitization Project*. 4102.

<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project/4102>

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the John M. Pfau Library at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses Digitization Project by an authorized administrator of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND ADULT ATTACHMENT STYLES

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Carey Anne Soares

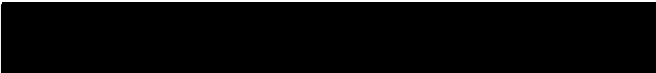
June 2012

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND ADULT ATTACHMENT STYLES

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino


by
Carey Anne Soares
June 2012

Approved by:



Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, Faculty Supervisor
Social Work

5/29/12
Date



Dr. Rosemary McCaslin,
M.S.W. Research Coordinator

ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between child sexual abuse and adult attachment style to a romantic partner. It predicted that an individual who has experienced sexual abuse will form an insecure attachment style to his/her romantic partners in adulthood. This is due to the fact that a child forms his/her attachment style at a young age and this attachment style continues throughout the life span. Participants in this study included male and female students from California State University, San Bernardino. Questionnaires related to child sexual abuse and adult attachment style to a romantic partner were administered. A t-test analysis was made to establish any associations between the two. Results of this analysis revealed there was an association between child sexual abuse and adult attachment style to romantic partners.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. McCaslin for all of her encouraging words that helped me stay motivated in making it through these last two years. I also want to thank her for her time and dedication to my research project and the countless hours she has spent reading and editing.

Thank you also to all of the CSUSB students that participated in this project. Without you time spent filling out the questionnaire this project would not have been possible

DEDICATION

To my mom, who encouraged me to apply to this program and stood by my side and supported me through this incredible journey. You are truly my inspiration and I appreciate all that you do for me. You have faith in me when I question my own abilities. You have been there to catch me when I fall and help me pick back up the pieces. You are my strength when I am weak and I could not have made it without you.

To my amazing sister Sarah, I cannot express the appreciation that I have for having such a beautiful sister like you. Through the sleepless nights and countless hours of homework you have taken care of my son and lifted my spirits during the hard times. You have given me the strength and courage to make it through this and I can't thank you enough. I would not have wanted Yuriah anywhere else but in the care of the one he adores.

To my lil sweets Reece, this has been quite a journey for the both of us. All of the competitions we had seeing who could make the best grades when really all it meant is that we were in this together. You stood by my side through the good times and the bad. We were best

friends before I started this program and we drifted apart. Thank you for your patients and all of your help. You are such an amazing young man and I am excited to get back to what matters when this is all over with and that's family.

My beautiful baby boy Yuriah, you were brought into this world half way through the first year of this program and I didn't know how we were going to make it through but I did know that we had to in order for you to get the life that you so deserve. You sacrificed mommy time in order for me to get through this. Through our sometimes late nights and early mornings, we made it my son. You are the greatest blessing I could ever ask for. I promise to provide for you the best life that I possibly can. I love you! Mommy is so proud of you for being so supportive even if you didn't realize it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iv

LIST OF TABLES vii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

 Problem Statement 1

 Policy Context 4

 Practice Context 5

 Study Purpose 6

 Significance for Social Work Practice 8

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

 Introduction 10

 Sexual Abuse 10

 Erikson's Theories of Development 12

 Theories Guiding Conceptualization 15

 Child Attachment Theories 15

 Internal Working Model 17

 Adult Attachment Style Theory 21

 Summary 23

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

 Introduction 24

 Study Design 24

 Sampling 26

 Data Collection and Instruments 27

| | |
|---|----|
| Procedures | 28 |
| Protection of Human Subjects | 29 |
| Data Analysis | 30 |
| Summary | 31 |
| CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS | |
| Introduction | 32 |
| Presentation of the Findings | 32 |
| Frequency Distribution of Sexual Abuse | 32 |
| Means of Attachment Style | 33 |
| Association between Sexual Abuse and Attachment Styles | 34 |
| Summary | 35 |
| CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION | |
| Introduction | 37 |
| Discussion | 37 |
| Limitations | 40 |
| Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research | 40 |
| Conclusion | 43 |
| APPENDIX A: DEBRIEFING STATEMENT | 44 |
| APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT | 46 |
| APPENDIX C: QUESTIONNAIRE | 48 |
| REFERENCES | 51 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|--|----|
| Figure 1. Frequency Distribution of Sexual Abuse..... | 33 |
| Figure 2. Mean Values of Attachment Styles..... | 34 |
| Figure 3. Association between Sexual Abuse and Attachment Styles..... | 35 |

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore the association between child sexual abuse and the effects on adult attachment style to romantic partners. Because the effects of abuse can be carried into adulthood, this study evaluates whether or not being sexually abused as a child has long lasting effects on attachment styles in adulthood. Often times these effects are complex but necessary to understand in order for social workers to provide appropriate support and services.

Problem Statement

Child abuse with its devastating effects on its victims is a serious issue worldwide. Statistics reported that this issue has been slowly declining but not at a fast enough rate. In 1990, 36.1 per 1,000 children and in 2004, 11.9 per 1,000 cases were substantiated as being maltreated (Popple & Leighninger, 2008, p. 323). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau (2010) reported that 3.6 million cases were reported in 2010 and

one-fifth of them have been substantiated as child abuse and neglect (pp. 20-22). At a national level, 1,750 children died from child abuse and neglect in 2009 (p. 58). In 2010, 9.2 percent of cases reported were for sexual abuse (p. 24). With the prevalence of this issue it is important to discuss the attention that has been brought forth in the safety and protection of children.

Child abuse and neglect was not recognized as an issue until 1793 when a law was passed in Massachusetts stating that a parent must provide appropriate support for their child's development (Popple & Leighninger, 2008, p. 321). There are three main reasons for the lack of recognition in the issue of child maltreatment. Before the Industrial Revolution children were used for economic gains and their needs were not considered to be of importance (p. 329). Another reason for the lack of recognition on this issue is that if a child's parents failed to care for their child appropriately then the church, community, or extended family would take over the child's care (p. 330). Last, there was a change in society's views about a child's needs (p. 330). Before the nineteenth century, society did not perceive children as having needs that required specific care (p. 330). It

wasn't until the nineteenth century the United States started to consider the child's needs and their right for safety and protection (p. 331).

After the first law was established in 1735 supporting children's development, society started understanding the importance of providing protection and safety for their children (Popple & Leighninger, 2008, p. 334). Several laws were adopted and established in order to provide an environment for children that would support their growth potential. In 1874, New York City passed a law protecting children from abuse (p. 335). In 1968, all states in the U.S. had child abuse reporting laws set forth (p. 337). In 1993, focus was put on the prevention and intervention of child abuse (p. 337). Last, from 1997 to current, the main focus for social workers is on the safety, well being, and permanency of the child (p. 337).

As seen throughout the history of sexual abuse, society started recognizing the negative effects that lack of safety and protection was having on children. Kim (2009) states that abuse can have psychological, emotional, physical, and sometimes fatal consequences on the child (p. 761). A child may also experience poor

functioning that can be carried into adulthood (p. 761). Kwako, Noll, Putnam, and Trickett (2010) reported that child sexual abuse can also increase the risk for substance abuse and mood disorders in adults (p. 407). Other effects may include dysfunctions in sexual development and functioning, and disruptions in relationships with family members and other adults. Also, women who reported being abused tend to have attachment related anxieties and insecure attachments and mothers who reported being abused are more likely to be in abusive relationships (p. 417).

Policy Context

There are various policies seen that help facilitate the safety and protection of children. According to Popple and Leighninger (2008), the child welfare system has one main goal and two secondary goals that follow (pp. 337-338). The main goal is the protection of children from harm. The secondary goals are family preservation and promoting child development. Provisions to the Social Security Act established in 1962 required all states to offer child protection services. In 1967, all states required professionals to report child abuse. In 1972, the National Center for the Prevention and

Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect was established which conducts research and provides training to professionals in the area of child abuse and neglect. Last, in 1980 the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act which directs funds toward family reunification and adoption services was enacted.

Practice Context

Social workers' roles in providing services to clients that have been sexually abused are guided by the Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (1999). The main goal of the professional is to "enhance human well being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (p. 1). The Code of Ethics focuses on six core values which include service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. All of these values are considered in promoting social justice and change.

Study Purpose

The problem being addressed in the current research proposal is the effects of child sexual abuse on adult attachment styles to romantic partners. The concern is how a child that experiences sexual abuse will form attachments when they are older. Will a child who has been sexually abused be able to form healthy relationships that will be experienced into adulthood with their romantic partner or will they have insecure attachments and not be able to form healthy relationships? The main attachment styles of focus will be from previous research that utilizes three attachment styles. These styles include secure, insecure-anxious, and insecure-avoidant and are closely related to adult attachment styles which include secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful (Bifulco et al., 2006; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

Attachment theory plays a role in the introduced hypothesis because the way an individual forms relationships as a child will influence later relationship styles. Children who experience maltreatment such as sexual abuse often times have negative effects that are usually carried into adulthood. The main issue

with sexual abuse as a form of maltreatment is that it often goes unreported. This is due to the fact that the victim may feel a sense of shame or guilt from the act. Also it does not typically happen in one single incident but over a period of time. The severity, duration, and time elapsed can also play a significant role in attachment styles. If an individual has been sexually abused for a length of time by a close relative as oppose to a sexual assault incident by a stranger then they may suffer from severe psychological issues.

The method of this research project was quantitative. Subjects included MSW students on campus at the University. Demographics were not collected. A questionnaire was distributed which included a Child Sexual Abuse Survey (CSA) and a Relationship Questionnaire (RQ) (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Aalsma et al., 2002). The CSA Survey determines whether or not the participant has been sexually abused and the RQ determines what Adult Attachment qualities they more likely resemble. Analyses was conducted to determine if there is an association between adult attachment style to romantic partner and sexual abuse.

Significance for Social Work Practice

This issue is of significance to social work practice and individuals affected. It is important for a social worker to be aware of and take into consideration the various dynamics of sexual abuse when assessing for risk and safety on a CPS case and providing treatment. Because sexual abuse often goes unreported it is important to know what to look for and things to consider before the child is taken away. While a social worker is providing services for a client it is important to be able to understand the dynamics of sexual abuse and the various effects it has on the child's well being. When providing therapy for a child, various risk factors should also be taken into consideration in order to prevent sexual abuse. If one has negative childhood experiences then they would want to consider getting therapy so they are able to establish secure attachment styles.

It is important to understand this issue because of the effects of sexual abuse on a child's adult attachment styles. If a child experiences sexual abuse and adopts an insecure attachment style then that may hinder the child's well being. The child may in turn suffer from

emotional, physical, and psychological issues, and lack healthy relationship building skills, which can be carried into adulthood. Research shows that sexual abuse and attachment style is intergenerational so being aware of this will hopefully influence therapy approaches.

There was not a lot of previous research done on the direct association between child abuse, specifically sexual, and its effects on adult attachment style. Theories that were used in the research are systems and attachment theory. Future theories to consider could be an ecological theory where other outside factors might also effect sexual abuse and attachment styles such as life stressors, personality traits, and lack of support networks.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Within the literature review, an environmental theory approach will be discussed in relation to sexual abuse and its effects and risk factors on a child's well being. Developmental theory approach will also be discussed introducing Erikson's eight stages of development. Both adult and child attachment styles will be introduced using an article from Nosko et al. (2011) on child attachment styles and an article from Alexander discussing adult attachment styles. Last, an internal working model will also be introduced in relation to how attachment is observed throughout the entire lifespan.

Sexual Abuse

There are various ways sexual abuse is defined among researchers. Occurrences defined as sexual abuse include "molestation with genital contact and intrusion which are acts involving penile penetration orally, anally, and/or genitally" (Popple & Leighninger, 2008, p. 325). Bifulco et al. (2006) define sexual abuse as "involved physical contact or approach of a sexual nature by any adult

excluding consensual sexual contact with peers" (p. 798). The most common types of child sexual abuse include both rape and molestation (Popple & Leighninger, 2008). While defining sexual abuse it is also important to consider various risk factors.

Alexander (1992) discussed the risk factors of sexual abuse in the context of family characteristics. These risk factors include absence of a biological parent, maternal unavailability, marital conflict and violence, child's poor relationship with parents, and the presence of a stepfather (p. 185). These risk factors are the result of family dysfunctions within the home and are the main causes of child sexual abuse. Other risk factors include if the parent or caregiver experienced abuse as a child, lack of social support, structure of the family, stressful life events, and parents' psychological and behavioral problems (Kim, 2009, p. 761).

Research suggests that traumatic childhood experiences can lead to dysfunctional behaviors in adulthood. According to Liang, Williams, and Siegel (2011), children that have been abused or neglected are more likely to have insecure attachment styles. Insecure attachment style is associated with "relational problems,

hostility, antisocial behavior, impulsiveness, passivity, helplessness, lack of empathy, and difficulty approaching peers and forming supportive relationships" (p. 43).

Various interpersonal problems that are also seen in adults who have been sexually abused as a child include "maternal impairment, risky sexual behaviors, partner abuse, avoidance of men resembling the perpetrator, and generalization of trauma experiences to and avoidance of intimate relationships" (Liang, Williams, & Siegel, 2011, p. 43). Other consequences of sexual abuse include a lack of trust, emotional and sexual dysfunctions, avoidance of intimacy, and possibly being re-traumatized while experiencing an intimate relationship (Liang, Williams, & Siegel, 2011). Other relationship problems are discussed by Walker, Holman, and Busby (2009) and include lower relationship satisfaction and stability leading to divorce or separation, and also less time in a relationship with less time spent between one relationship to the next (p. 399).

Erikson's Theories of Development

Erikson proposed eight different developmental stages which cover birth to adulthood. These stages are

characterized by specific developmental crisis. According to Berger (2005), any problems that are seen in adulthood are due to unresolved conflict among the developmental stages in childhood (p. 37). An individual who tries and fails to form a healthy, secure relationship with a romantic partner is believed to have never resolved the trust vs. mistrust crisis.

The stages he introduced are trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and integrity vs. despair.

In the trust vs. mistrust stage, which is seen from birth to one year old, infants will learn that their needs including cleanliness, physical contact, nourishment, and warmth, will be met or they will lack confidence that others will provide them their basic needs (p. 37).

In the autonomy vs. shame stage, which is seen from one to three years of age, children are taught how to become independent in completing basic tasks such as toileting, walking, exploring, talking, and feeding or

they learn to doubt their own abilities in task completion (p. 37).

In the initiative vs. guilt stage, which is seen from three to six years of age, children want to accomplish several adult natured activities or they feel guilty because of the limits their parent set for them (p. 37).

The industry vs. inferiority stage is seen from ages six to eleven and children are consumed with learning how to become industrious at doing things or they may feel inferior and lack the ability to accomplish tasks with satisfaction (p. 37).

The identity vs. role confusion stage is developed throughout adolescents. During this stage adolescents try to figure out their identity or who they are. During this stage many identities are developing which include sexual, career, and political. If adolescents are unable to establish their identity then they become confused about their role (p. 37).

There are three stages of development in adulthood proposed by Erikson. The first stage is intimacy vs. isolation. In this stage young adults are exploring commitment and intimacy with a romantic partner or they

adopt a fear of disappointment and rejection and avoid these types of relationships (p. 37). The generativity vs. stagnation stage, which is experienced in middle adulthood, is dedicated to the next generation through creative activities, meaningful work, and raising a family or they experience stagnation (p. 37). The integrity vs. despair stage is when older adulthood are either able to reflect on their past as being meaningful and productive or despair at goals never accomplished (p. 37).

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Child Attachment Theories

According to Bowlby (1969), attachment is a "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" (p. 194). Bowlby's main focus was on the infant-mother relationship. Bowlby reported that from ages zero to three is the most critical period for a child to have a consistent, responsive, sensitive, warm caregiver that is essential for healthy human development (p. 194). Bowlby introduced three different attachment styles that coincide with the infant-caregiver interaction. These

attachment styles include secure, insecure-anxious and insecure-avoidant (Nosko et al., 2011, p. 646).

In secure attachment style, the caregivers' childrearing style is that of warmth, sensitively attuned and responsive to the child's needs. The caregiver uses positive child guidance instead of punishment techniques (Nosko et al., 2011, p. 646). Secure attachment tends to lead to more optimal mental health (Bifulco et al., 2006). This type of attachment also seems to be associated with "effective personality functioning" (Styron & Janoff-Bulman, 1997, p. 1015).

In insecure-anxious attachment style, caregiver's childrearing style includes being insensitive to but not rejecting of infants needs, inconsistent, unpredictable, less psychologically aware, and placing one's own needs before the child (Nosko et al., 2011, p. 646). Last, Insecure-avoidant attachment style reflects caregiver's childrearing style to include being insensitive and unresponsive to child's needs, rejecting of infants signals, neglectful, psychologically and emotionally unavailable, cold, and disengaged (p. 646).

In insecure attachment styles there are certain types of psychopathologies that are carried into

adulthood which include anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Bifulco et al., 2006, p. 796). Other psychopathologies as a consequence of insecure attachment style include "lack of empathy, hostility, antisocial behavior, impulsivity, passivity, and helplessness" (Styron & Janoff-Bulman, 1997, p. 1016).

Bifulco et al. (2006) use attachment theory to explore attachment styles and their association with depression and anxiety. The attachment styles discussed in this article are secure, insecure, and avoidant. Insecure attachment directly relates to a parenting style that is inconsistent and insensitive. It states that a lack of social networks, impaired relationship functioning, and distorted perceptions of oneself, as a consequence of childhood insecure attachment, can lead to social anxiety disorder. Being separated from parent and severe abuse and neglect can also lead to an unhealthy attachment style, anxiety, and depression. Results show that insecure attachment is most strongly associated with anxiety and depression (p. 796).

Internal Working Model

According to Alexander (1992), there is an internal working model that establishes a template of relationship

roles and is created during early childhood. This template is created by the early attachment of the child to his or her caregivers. Early childhood experiences can influence this template that is carried into adulthood. The model is influenced by whether or not the child's needs are being met which can in turn define their self worth. This established template is then internalized and carried into adulthood. The internal working model is a person's mental representation of self and others and is constructed by early relationships to the caregiver (Turney & Tanner, 2001, p. 196). This model shapes expectations and beliefs about relationships (Turney & Tanner, 2001). It is suggested that the parents' attachment style will influence their reaction to the child's needs leaving them met or unmet (Turney & Tanner, 2001).

Early childhood experience sets the foundation for adult attachment styles. Child abuse and neglect can be the root of attachment problems found in adulthood. In cases where physical or sexual abuse and neglect were present there were higher levels of insecure attachment (Bifulco et al., 2006). A study conducted by Aber and Allen (1987) concluded that abused infants and toddlers

lead to insecure attachment to their caregiver. Alexander (1992) concluded that children who experience sexual abuse also experience insecure attachment style and that the abuse may inhibit trust for a child that typically experiences secure attachment styles. Previous attachment style appears to have an impact on later intimate relationships with a partner and the individual's own children.

A study conducted by Styron and Janoff-Bullman (1997) concluded that subjects who reported being abused reported having a "less secure" attachment (p. 1016). Individuals reporting being abused also reported using more aggressive behaviors in the form of physical abuse in times of conflict which included grabbing, slapping, hitting, kicking, and biting (p. 120). This study also reported that young children that reported being abused are more likely to be in abusive relationships in adulthood.

Dixon, Hamilton, and Brown (2005) report children who experience abuse may perceive their caregiver as "unresponsive, rejecting, and unavailable" (p. 58). These children may grow up and have difficulty forming healthy interpersonal relationships. Experiencing abuse as a

child may have negative effects on the ability of that child to maintain healthy relationships as an adult.

Styron and Bullman (1997) stated that in order for secure attachments to occur, a child must be able to depend on their caregiver to provide them with "security or protection" (p. 1015). This study also concludes that if a child is abused then the child will be more apt to experience insecure attachments to others. The styles of attachment a child experiences will set the foundation for later attachment styles. A secure attachment style experienced as a child may serve as a buffer from the psychological effects of child abuse. Alexander (1992) concludes that attachment is needed the most when children experience stress and is a "basic need of human survival" that is carried into adulthood (p. 186).

Dixon et al. (2005) utilized attachment theory and stated that early experiences influence relationships that form in adulthood. This article suggests that if one is unable to form secure relationships then they will not be able to form a healthy attachment to their child because they lack the skills needed to form these relationships. Research states that maltreatment is a precursor to insecure attachment which leads to poor

interaction with the child. The results show that maltreatment can also lead to an unhealthy parenting style and that maltreatment can be passed on from one generation to the next.

Adult Attachment Style Theory

According to Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), there is an Adult Attachment Model that explores adults' representations of childhood attachments through an Internal Working Model (p. 227). The four attachment styles are secure, dismissing, fearful, and preoccupied.

An adult with a secure attachment style is typically comfortable with intimacy and autonomy and has a positive sense of worth (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 227). These individuals typically view others as being "accepting and responsive" to their needs and are comfortable with disclosure (p. 227). They are reported as having an ability to reflect on their past experiences, are comfortable with different degrees of emotion, trust in others, and are confident in themselves (Alexander, 1992, p. 187).

Adults who have a preoccupied attachment style are typically pre-occupied with relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 227). They are reported as having a

negative sense of self worth (p. 227). They tend to have feelings of inadequacy and feelings of being unlovable although these individuals do have a positive evaluation of others (p. 227). These individuals tend to be "confused, anxious, clingy, dependent, jealous, and overly expressive" (Alexander, 1992, p. 187). People who adopt this attachment style have an idealization of their partner due to a negative perception of self (p. 187). They seem to be constantly disappointed in others, are possibly re-victimized, and tend to be a compulsive caregiver (p. 187)

Dismissing adult attachment style tend to deny intimacy in order to avoid disappointment, are counter-dependent, adopt a positive self view of their worth, and view others in a negative manner and lack trust (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 227). These individuals are idealizing and unable to recall childhood experiences, uncomfortable with intimacy, and have poor self confidence (Alexander, 1992, p. 187). They also tend to be lonely and hostile, are isolated and estranged from others, and have compulsive sexuality (p. 187)

Individuals who have a fearful attachment style show some avoidant and preoccupied traits (Alexander, 1992,

p. 187). They tend to be fearful and avoidant of intimacy in order to protect themselves from rejection (p. 187). They are typically socially avoidant and unassertive, (p. 187). Usually they have negative feelings of self worth and view others as untrustworthy and rejecting (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 227).

Summary

In summary, child sexual abuse has devastating consequences to a child's emotional, physical, and psychological well being, and can sometimes even lead to death. A child that had experienced a previous secure attachment often times experiences insecure attachment styles after the trauma of child maltreatment or more specifically sexual abuse. Because an internal working model, which sets the foundation for future expectations in relationship roles, insecure attachment can be carried into adulthood, hindering the individual from experiencing healthy intimate relationships with others.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

Within the methods section, the study design, sampling, data collection, and instruments, procedures, and data analysis will be discussed in detail. In the study design section the research method, design, limitations, and the research question will be addressed. The sampling section will cover the sample that was selected, how many were surveyed, and why this sample was chosen. The collection and instrument section will cover what data were collected, what the independent and dependent variable are and how they are measured, and any instruments that were used to collect the data. The procedures section will describe specifically how the data were collected. In the protection of human subjects section confidentiality and anonymity will be discussed. Last, in the data analysis section concepts, constructs, and variables used will be identified and discussed.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to examine the association between a child's experience of sexual abuse

and their adult attachment style with romantic partners. Previous research has concluded that a child that has been sexually abused will be more likely to have an insecure attachment style as compared to a child that has not been abused. This study predicts the same outcome due to the fact that early attachment styles tend to stay consistent throughout the life span.

This particular study used an association design in which the relationship between child sexual abuse and adult attachment styles to romantic partner were determined. Variables measured under child sexual abuse included the Sexual Abuse Scale. Variables measured under attachment styles were broken into four categories which included secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful styles.

A quantitative approach was used in this research design in which a two-part self-reporting survey was conducted measuring child sexual abuse and adult attachment styles to romantic partners. This survey used a Likert scale to measure the variables. Using a survey allowed for a larger number of subjects to be studied and also data can be collected in order to establish an association between variables.

There were various limitations to this particular study. Due to the sensitivity of this topic, subjects may have not answered the surveys accurately. Also because traumatic experiences are sometimes difficult to recall in their entirety, it is important to take this aspect into consideration. It is also important to note that there are various mediating variables that influence adult attachment styles to romantic partner such as mental illness and adult stressors. Furthermore, because the subjects that were surveyed were students at a university their level of education on the topic of sexual abuse should be considered.

The research question in this study is whether or not child sexual abuse affects adult attachment styles with romantic partners. It is predicted that children who have been sexually abused will adopt an insecure attachment style with their romantic partners in adulthood.

Sampling

Data were be collected from Master and Bachelor level students who were majoring in social work at California State University, San Bernardino including

both full time and part time students. These subjects were both male and female. Education level varied and the sample consisted of subjects over the age of 18. Various ethnicities and SES groups were included. A sample size of forty individuals was included in order to collect enough data to test the variables.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data were collected using a quantitative design in which subjects completed a survey that included questions about sexual abuse and also their adult attachment style to a romantic partner. The instrument is a self-reporting two-part questionnaire (Appendix A).

The dependent variable of adult attachment styles with romantic partners was measured using the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ). This four-item Questionnaire was created by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) and utilizes a seven-point scale. Its intent is to measure the four categories of attachment defined as secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful. Points on the Likert scale are as follows: 1 "not at all like me", 4 "somewhat like me" and 7 "very much like me." The RQ has reported an alpha coefficient of .90 on average. The

questions asked correspond to the subjects' model of self and model of others.

The independent variable of sexual abuse was measured by administering the Childhood Sexual Abuse Scale (CSA) which is a four-item Questionnaire (Aalsma, 2002). Subjects were instructed to place a checkmark next to each item that pertained to them. The alpha coefficient for this scale is from .81 to .84. The questions on this scale are related to whether or not the subject experienced sexual abuse.

Using these scales in this study allowed high validity and reliability as reported by the alpha-coefficient. Also these scales measure the independent and dependant variable directly. The RQ questionnaire has been used throughout research in adult attachment styles.

A limitation in using the CSA scale is that there were not a lot of previous studies that utilized this tool.

Procedures

The two-part questionnaire, informed consent, and debriefing statement, and instructions were put in each

student's mailbox located in the Social Work Student Resource Room. This packet included information about the purpose of the study. Subjects were given an informed consent that used a check mark in lieu of signature in order to maintain confidentiality. Subjects were informed that this process is voluntary and could be stopped at any time. Subjects were also informed of the amount of time needed in order to complete the entire process. At this time the students choose whether or not to complete the survey and read the debriefing statement. Information on the debriefing statement thanked the students for their participation and gave them referral information for counseling services if needed. Students were asked to return the completed informed consent and questionnaire to the front desk located in the main office. There they put it in a box located on the front desk during office hours or slid the packet under the door after business hours.

Protection of Human Subjects

Subjects' confidentiality and anonymity were protected in this study by not using any names on the questionnaires administered and the informed consent form

(Appendix B) which included a checkmark instead of a signature. There was also be a debriefing statement (Appendix C).

Confidentiality and anonymity were also protected by keeping the questionnaires in a closed box with a slit on the top for privacy. These surveys remained in this box until the due date. After the due date the surveys were collected and put in a sealed manila envelope where they were stored.

Data Analysis

A quantitative research design was utilized in this study. Bivariate analyses were completed to find the association between the two variables. A T-test was used to assess the probability of associations. These variables include child sexual abuse and adult attachment style with romantic partner. The associations that were examined in this study were whether child sexual abuse has an effect on adult attachment style with a romantic partner. Sexual abuse was measured in two categories which were yes the subject has been sexually abused and no the subject has not been sexually abused as a child. The adult attachment style was measured in four

categories which include: secure, dismissing, preoccupied, and fearful.

Summary

Within the methods section, the study design was described which included the purpose, research methods, and the research question. Sampling, data collection, and instruments were also explained which included the sample from which the data were gathered, what data were collected, and instruments used to collect data. Procedures were discussed, specifically how the data were collected. Protection of human subjects was addressed and how subjects' confidentiality and anonymity was protected. Last, data analysis was described for finding associations between the variables.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the association between child sexual abuse adult attachment styles with romantic partners. The sample population (N = 40) included Master and Bachelor level students who are majoring in social work at California State University, San Bernardino including both full time and part time students. No demographics were included. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was used in order to analyze the data.

Presentation of the Findings

Frequency Distribution of Sexual Abuse

Frequencies were run in this study in order to conclude how many participants (N = 40) experienced some type of sexual abuse. Nine participants (22.5%) reported yes when asked "someone tried to touch me in a sexual way against will." Five participants (12.5%) responded yes when asked "someone tried to make me touch them in a sexual way against my will." When asked "I believe that I have been sexually abused by someone," ten participants

(25%) answered yes. Three participants (7.5%) answered yes when asked "someone threatened to tell lies about me or hurt me unless I did something sexual with them." Last, eleven participants (27.5%) answered yes to at least one of the questions above on the CSA Scale which concluded they have been sexually abused.

Figure 1. Frequency Distribution of Sexual Abuse

| Variables | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------|-----------|---------|
| Tried to touch me | 9 | 22.5 |
| Make me touch them | 5 | 12.5 |
| Believe I was abused | 10 | 25.0 |
| Threatened to comply | 3 | 7.5 |
| Yes to abuse | 11 | 27.5 |

Means of Attachment Style

Attachment style was reported using the Relationship Questionnaire. Results indicate that the mean and standard deviation of participants (N = 40) under all four attachment styles were as follows: secure attachment style (\underline{M} = 4.90 and \underline{SD} = 1.57); fearful attachment style (\underline{M} = 3.05 and \underline{SD} = 2.03); preoccupied attachment style (\underline{M} = 2.85 and \underline{SD} = 1.82); and dismissing (\underline{M} = 3.48 and

SD = 1.96). These results indicate that more participants reported having a secure attachment style followed by dismissing, fearful, and last preoccupied.

Figure 2. Mean Values of Attachment Styles

| Variables | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|-------------|------|--------------------|
| Secure | 4.90 | 1.57 |
| Fearful | 3.05 | 2.03 |
| Preoccupied | 2.85 | 1.82 |
| Dismissing | 3.48 | 1.94 |

Association between Sexual Abuse and Attachment Styles

A t-test analysis was used to report the association between child sexual abuse and attachment style. Results indicated that participants that answered no to abuse reported having higher secure attachment styles ($M = 5.00$) than those who answered yes ($M = 4.46$). Participants that answered yes to abuse had higher fearful ($M = 3.36$), preoccupied ($M = 3.36$), and dismissing attachment style ($M = 3.82$) than those who answered no ($M = 2.93$, $M = 2.66$, $M = 3.34$ respectively). Results concluded that the strongest association was

between no abuse and secure attachment style followed by yes to abuse and dismissing attachment style, and yes to abuse and fearful and preoccupied styles which shared the same mean value.

Of the t-test comparisons, only the following was significant. Those who were abused had a higher mean score for preoccupied attachment ($t = -1.103$, $df = 38$, $p = .027$).

Figure 3. Association between Sexual Abuse and Attachment Styles

| Variables | | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|-------------|----------|------|--------------------|
| Secure | no abuse | 5.00 | 1.55 |
| | abuse | 4.46 | 1.69 |
| Fearful | no abuse | 2.93 | 1.98 |
| | abuse | 3.36 | 2.20 |
| Preoccupied | no abuse | 2.66 | 1.57 |
| | abuse | 3.36 | 2.38 |
| Dismissing | no abuse | 3.34 | 1.88 |
| | abuse | 3.82 | 2.23 |

Summary

Results of this study indicate that the hypothesis was supported. Individuals who experienced child sexual

abuse were also more likely to report having a preoccupied, fearful, or dismissing attachment style.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The findings of the data analysis will be discussed in this section. Also included in this section will be recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research. Last, a summary will discuss the conclusions of this study.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the association between child sexual abuse and adult attachment styles. These variables were collected using the Relationship Questionnaire and Child Sexual Abuse Scale. The Relationship Questionnaire included questions related to the four adult attachment styles which included secure, fearful, dismissing, and preoccupied. The Child Sexual Abuse asked questions about participants' reported occurrences of abuse.

This study predicted that there was an association between child sexual abuse and adult attachment styles to romantic partners. Specifically, individuals that have been sexually abused would form more insecure adult

attachment styles to romantic partners. Results of this study indicated that there was an association between the two. This supports evidence that child sexual abuse has lifelong emotion, psychological, and sometimes physical effects on the well being of its victim. Child sexual experiences included someone tried to touch the participant in a sexual way, someone tried to make the participant touch them in a sexual way, participants believes that they have been sexually abused by someone, and someone tried threaten to tell lies about the participant or hurt them unless they did something sexual with them. These occurrences happened prior to the age of 12.

It is suggested that from ages zero to three is the most critical time for a child to have a warm, responsive, consistent, sensitive relationship to their caregiver (Bowlby, 1969, p. 194). This type of caregiver-child relationship leads to a secure attachment style which is carried into adulthood. This representation of attachment to caregiver is explained by an internal working model. There is a mental template that is created by early attachments of a child to his or her caregivers. Early childhood experiences can influence

this template that is carried into adulthood. The model is influenced by whether or not the child's needs are being met which can in turn define their self worth. This established template is then internalized and carried into adulthood (Alexander, 1992). Children that experience sexual abuse seem to form insecure attachment styles that are carried into adulthood and observed in romantic partner relationships.

Consequently, these types of adult attachment styles to romantic partner including dismissing, fearful, and preoccupied appear to be more insecure in nature. Individuals with a preoccupied type of insecure attachment tend to be occupied with the relationship (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991, p. 227). They can be "clingy, anxious, jealous, dependent, and overly expressive" (p. 227). Those with a dismissing insecure attachment style tend to avoid relationship altogether in order to avoid any feelings of disappointment and uncomfortable feelings about intimacy (p. 227). Individuals with the fearful insecure attachment styles tend to avoid the feelings of rejection by not getting involved in a romantic relationship (p. 227).

Limitations

The sample size is a limitation of this study. Because there were only a small number of participants, this study does not accurately represent the general population.

Another limitation of this study is that it did not take into consideration demographics. This study did not ask questions such as gender, marital status, socioeconomic status, or age. This study represents social work students at California State University, San Bernardino. Demographics could include more information in this study and allow statistics to indicate any associations between these variables.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

Statistics report that child sexual abuse is a serious issue worldwide. Although the reported incidence rates are decreasing, its lifelong effects are devastating. The impact that it has on adult attachment styles to romantic partner are complex. In order for professionals to provide appropriate services to clients, the dynamics of child sexual abuse need to be better understood when assessing and treating romantic

relationship problems. It is suggested that organizations dealing with sexual abuse may not fully understand this issue and is therefore imperative that social workers fully understand the dynamics of child sexual abuse and the influence it has on social work practice, policy, and research.

It is recommended that social workers should understand the importance of a multidisciplinary approach when treating victims of sexual abuse. Because the effects are complex and lifelong it is far too complicated for one professional to treat. Utilizing a multidisciplinary approach will allow professionals to use their collective knowledge for the common goal of the client which includes providing services in order for him or her to live up to their full potential. This approach will allow professionals to come together and create a treatment plan that will offer specialized services from various disciplines.

Policies influencing the prevention of and intervention with child sexual abuse should consider the complex effects it has on its victims. It is recommended that mandatory training on this topic be in place for all professionals that have a responsibility in the

prevention and intervention process for sexual abuse cases. Some of these professionals should include social workers, law enforcement, teachers, judges, psychiatrists, psychologists, and healthcare professionals. This training should include signs to look for indicating sexual abuse victims, the dynamic effects it has on the family and individual, and proper procedures for assessing and treating these victims.

Further research should be conducted on the prevention of child sexual abuse. This research should consider risk factors that increase the chances for this type of abuse. Some of these risk factors include life stressors, revictimization, lack of social support, and having a step father present in the home. This research can help assist in creating appropriate educational programs that can address these risk factors before the abuse occurs. Individuals at risk for being the perpetrator of sexual abuse can be referred to appropriate services in order to properly address these concerns.

Conclusion

The complex, lifelong effects of child sexual abuse on adult attachment styles to romantic partners is an issue that will continue to be researched. The results of this study reported that there is an association between child sexual abuse and adult attachment styles. More specifically, children that have been sexually abused will have a higher likelihood of forming insecure attachment styles to their romantic partners. It is suggested that this is due to a mental representation of a child-caregiver relationship based on that child's needs being met by the caregiver. This mental representation is predicted to be carried into adulthood.

As previously discussed, there are various recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research. These include social workers utilizing a multidisciplinary approach in treating victims of child sexual abuse. Policies should be in place in order to offer a mandatory training program for all professional involved in sexual abuse cases. Last, further research should consider the various risk factors that increase the chances for sexual abuse in order to create an educational program that would target these issues.

APPENDIX A
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Child Sexual Abuse and Adult Attachment Styles with Romantic Partners Debriefing Statement

I would like to thank you for your participation in this study conducted by Carey Soares. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effects that child sexual abuse has on adult attachment styles to romantic partners. The information in this study will allow professionals to better understand the dynamics of this issue so as to provide services appropriately.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact Rosemary McCaslin, Ph.D., A.C.S.W. at (909)537-5507.

A copy of this study will be available in the Pfau Library, California State University, San Bernardino in September of 2012.

If you are interested in counseling services to further discuss these issues please contact the campus Psychological Counseling Center at (909)537-5040. Services provided include individual, group, and couples therapy; wellness workshops; outreach seminars, workshops, and presentations; and referrals. Office hours are Monday and Thursday from 8am-5pm, Tuesday and Wednesday from 8am-6pm, and Friday from 10am-5pm.

Also you may contact Community Hospital of San Bernardino, Behavioral Health Service at 800-962-HELP, which provides 24-hour crisis intervention services.

Thank you

Carey Soares

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

Child Sexual Abuse and Adult Attachment Styles with Romantic Partners Informed Consent

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effects that child sexual abuse has on adult attachment styles to romantic partners. The information in this study will allow professionals to better understand the dynamics of this issue so as to provide services appropriately. Due to the sensitivity of this survey, undesired feelings may arise. Please be advised that this survey is voluntary and you may choose to not complete it or to complete only part of the survey.

The two-part questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Participants' names are not included in this study.

This study was approved by School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board and is conducted under the supervision of Professor Rosemary McCaslin at CSUSB. This study is being conducted by Carey Soares who is a student in the Master of Social Work Program at California State University of San Bernardino. It is required that prior consent is given before your participation. Please note that your participation is voluntary and your confidentiality and anonymity will be protected by strict guidelines.

A copy of this study will be available in the campus library at California State University of San Bernardino in September of 2012.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact Rosemary McCaslin, Ph.D., A.C.S.W. at (909)537-5507.

- Please check here if you have read and understand the information provided and are at least 18 years old. Please note that you may discontinue your participation at any time and for any reason with no questions asked.

Date: _____

APPENDIX C
QUESTIONNAIRE

Childhood Sexual Abuse Scale

For questions 1-4, please place a checkmark next to the ones that apply to you prior to the age of 12.

- 1. Someone tried to touch me in a sexual way against my will.
- 2. Someone tried to make me touch them in a sexual way against my will.
- 3. I believe that I have been sexually abused by someone.
- 4. Someone threatened to tell lies about me or hurt me unless I did something sexual with them.

Bartholomew, K., & Horowitz, L. (1991) Attachment styles among young adults: A test of a four-category model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61, 226-244.

The Relationship Questionnaire

Please rate each of the following relationship styles according to the *extent* to which you think each description corresponds to your general relationship style.

- | Not at all
like me | | | | Somewhat
like me | | | | Very much
like me |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---|-----------------------------|---|---|--|------------------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | | |
- ___ 1. It is easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having others not accept me.
- ___ 2. I am uncomfortable getting close to others. I want emotionally close relationships, but I find it difficult to trust others completely, or to depend on them. I worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others.
- ___ 3. I want to be completely emotionally intimate with others, but I often find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I am uncomfortable being without close relationships, but I sometimes worry that others don't value me as much as I value them.
- ___ 4. I am comfortable without close emotional relationships, It is very important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient, and I prefer not to depend on others or have others depend on me.

Aalsma, M., Zimet, G., Fortenberry, D., Blythe, M., & Orr, D. (2002). Reports of childhood sexual abuse by adolescents and young adults: Stability over time. *The Journal of Sex Research, 39*, 259-263.

REFERENCES

- Aalsma, M., Zimet, G., Fortenberry, D., Blythe, M., & Orr, D. (2002). Reports of childhood sexual abuse by adolescents and young adults: Stability over time. *The Journal of Sex Research, 39*, 259-263.
- Aber, L., & Allen, J. (1987). Effects of maltreatment on young children's socioemotional development: An attachment theory perspective. *Developmental Psychology, 23*, 406-414.
- Alexander, P. (1992). Application of attachment theory to the study of sexual abuse. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 30*, 185-195.
- Bartholomew, K., & Horowitz, L. (1991) Attachment styles among young adults: A test of a four-category model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 61*, 226-244.
- Berger, K. (2005) *The Developing person through the life span* (6th ed.). New York, NY, Worth Publishers.
- Bifulco, A., Kwon, J., Jacobs, C., Moran, P.M., Bunn, A., & Beer, N. (2006). Adult attachment style as mediator between childhood neglect/abuse and adult depression and anxiety. *Social Psychiatry Epidemiol, 41*, 796-805.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. attachment*. New York: Basic Books.
- Dixon, L., Hamilton-Giachritsis, C., & Browne, K. (2005). Attributions and behaviours of parents abused as children: A meditational analysis of the intergenerational continuity of child maltreatment. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 46*(1), 58-68.
- Jinseok, K. (2009). Type-specific intergenerational Transmission of neglectful and physically abusive parenting behaviors among young parents. *Children and Youth Services Review, 31*, 761-767.

- Kwako, L., Noll, J., Putman, F., & Trickett, P. (2010). Childhood sexual abuse and attachment: An intergenerational perspective. *Clinical Child Psychology, 15*(3), 407-422.
- Liang, B., Williams, L., & Siegel, J. (2006). Relational outcomes of childhood sexual trauma in female survivors: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 21*, 42-57.
- Mennen, F., Kim, K., Sang, J., & Trickett, P. (2010). Child neglect: Definition and identification of youth's experiences in official reports of maltreatment. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 34*, 647-658.
- National Association of Social Workers. (approved 1996, revised 1999). *Code of ethics of the national association of social workers*. Retrieved from <http://www.naswdc.org/pubs/code/code.asp>
- Nosko, A., Tieu, T., Lawford, H., & Pratt, M. (2011) How do I love thee? Let me count the ways: Parenting during adolescence, attachment styles, and romantic narratives in emerging adulthood. *Developmental Psychology, 47*, 645-657.
- Popple, P., & Leighninger, L. (2008). *Social work, social welfare, and American society* (7th ed.). Boston, MA, Pearson Education, Inc.
- Styron, T., & Janoff-Bulman, R. (1997). Childhood attachment and abuse: Long-term effects on adult attachment, depression, and conflict resolution. *Child Abuse and Neglect, 21*, 1015-1023.
- Turney, D., & Tanner, K. (2001). Working with neglected children and their families. *Journal of Social Work Practice, 15*, 194-204.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,
Administration for Children and Families,
Administration on Children, Youth and Families,
Children's Bureau. (2010). *Child maltreatment 2009*.
Retrieved September 25, 2011, from
[http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/
index.htm#can](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm#can)

Walker, E., Holman, T., & Busby, D. (2009). Childhood
sexual abuse, other childhood factors, and pathways
to survivors' adult relationship quality. *Journal of
Family Violence, 24*, 397-406.