The Effects of Childhood Abuse on Young Adult Cohabitating Relationships

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Research Questions
- Are young adults who experienced abuse in childhood more likely to enter cohabitating relationships?
- Does the association vary by gender?

Significance
- Americans today are more likely to cohabit prior to and after marriage than ever before (Cherlin et al., 2004).
- Relationships in early adulthood are highly unstable, and young adults are forming higher order unions—the rise in serial cohabitation (Cohen & Manning, 2010; Lichter et al., 2010).

Background
- Childhood abuse can lead to early onset of sexual activity, riskier sexual activity, and multiple partners (Davis et al., 2000).
- Abuse beginning in childhood can predispose women toward more frequent sexual unions and multiple relationships (Loeb et al., 2002; Noll et al., 2003).
- Both men and women who experience abuse are more likely to report higher rates of cohabitation (Colman and Widom, 2004).

Hypothesis
- People who experience abuse in childhood are more likely to enter cohabitating relationships in young adulthood.
- Women who experience abuse in childhood are more likely than their male counterparts to enter into cohabitating relationships.

Data and Sample
- National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health)
- Wave 3 (2001-2002) public use data (N=4882)
- Respondents were aged 18-28 years old

Dependent Measure
Number of Cohabitating Relationships
- First asked whether they had lived with someone in a marriage-like relationship for one month or more.

Figure 1 Distribution of Cohabitating Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>None</th>
<th>1 Relationship</th>
<th>More than 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Independent Measure
Child Abuse
- Any physical or sexual abuse (0 = no abuse, 1 = any abuse)
- Based on two questions: "By 6th grade, how often had your parent or adult care-giver (a) slapped, hit, or kicked you or (b) touched you in a sexual way?"

Figure 2 Distribution of Childhood Abuse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No Abuse</th>
<th>Any Abuse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Control Measure
Gender
- Male 46%
- Female 54%

Analysis
- Cross tabulation and Chi-square test using SPSS

Results
Figure 3 % Distribution of the Number of Cohabiting Relationships By Childhood Abuse for U.S. Men

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>One cohabitation</th>
<th>More than 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No Abuse Childhood Abuse

The Chi-square test suggests that the differences are statistically significant at p<.01 level for men.

Figure 4 % Distribution of the Number of Cohabiting Relationships By Childhood Abuse for U.S. Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>One cohabitation</th>
<th>More than 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No Abuse Childhood Abuse

The Chi-square test suggests that the differences are statistically significant at p<.001 level for women.

Summary of Findings
- Both men and women who experienced abuse in childhood were more likely to have more than one cohabitating relationship than those who did not experience abuse.
- In regards to gender, for women the relationship between childhood abuse and adult cohabitating relationships seems to be stronger and more statistically significant than that of men.

Policy Implications
- This study suggests that more efforts should be made in order to address childhood sexual and physical abuse and the impact it has on adult relationships.

References