



## Mediators of the childhood emotional abuse–hopelessness association in African American women<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Although there is an association between experiencing childhood emotional abuse and feeling hopeless as an adult, it is critical to understand the factors that may be protective in this relationship. The goal of this study was to determine if two protective factors, namely spiritual well-being, including both religious and existential well-being, and positive self-esteem, served to mediate the association between childhood emotional abuse and adult hopelessness. The sample for this investigation was low-income African American women suicide attempters who were abused by a partner in the prior year ( $N = 121$ ). A path analysis revealed that in this sample, the childhood emotional abuse–hopelessness link was mediated by existential well-being and positive self-esteem, as well as by the two-mediator path of emotional abuse on existential well-being on self-esteem on hopelessness. Results suggested that existential well-being may be a more salient protective factor for hopelessness than religious well-being among abused, suicidal African American women who experienced childhood emotional abuse. Findings highlight the value of culturally relevant strategies for enhancing existential well-being and self-esteem in this at-risk population to reduce their vulnerability to feelings of hopelessness.

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Childhood maltreatment, which includes abuse (physical, sexual, emotional) and neglect (physical, emotional) is one of our nation's most vexing, concerning, and costly public health and social challenges (Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2009). When social class and family constellation are taken into account, there are no differences in rates of maltreatment between African American and Caucasian youth (Sedlak, McPherson, & Das, 2010). Among African Americans, childhood maltreatment has been linked to psychological symptoms, emotion dysregulation, interpersonal difficulties, and daily hassles (Bradley et al., 2011; Santorelli, Woods, Carlin, Marsic, & Kaslow, 2012).

Despite the fact that emotional abuse is prevalent and associated with serious negative outcomes, more attention has been paid to the impact of childhood physical and sexual abuse and neglect on adult functioning (Behl, Conyngham, & May, 2003). The overall estimated prevalence of childhood emotional abuse worldwide is 3/1000–363/1000 (self and other reports, respectively) (Stoltenberg, Bakermans-Kranenbyrg, Alink, & van IJzendoorn, 2013). In the U.S. child protective services system, case records show that although at the time of referral only 9% of youth were reported as having a history of emotional abuse, almost 50% actually were emotionally abused, and often experience other forms of maltreatment (Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009). Long-term, childhood emotional abuse is associated with negative adjustment within interpersonal, social, and familial domains (Wright, 2007) and poor mental health outcomes (Edwards, Holden, Felitti, & Anda, 2003; Kim & Cicchetti, 2006).

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In an extension of the hopelessness theory of depression (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989), it has been theorized that childhood emotional (rather than physical or sexual) abuse, predicts the negative inferential style that fosters the development of hopelessness (Rose & Abramson, 1992). In this model, negative inferences in response to single stressful events lead to the formation of a negative inferential style as those interpretations are confirmed over time. Consistent with this, individuals emotionally abused as children are at increased risk for hopelessness in adulthood (Courtney, Kushwaha, & Johnson, 2008; Schneider, Baumrind, & Kimerling, 2007), a finding also true in African American women (Meadows & Kaslow, 2002).

Despite evidence of an association between being emotionally abused as a child and feeling hopeless as an adult, no studies have examined mediators of the childhood emotional abuse–hopelessness link, which is the justification for the current investigation. Examining mediators of the relation between trauma exposure and hopelessness may inform our understanding of factors that protect against hopelessness and subsequent suicidality given this established association (Hawton, Comabella, Haw, & Saunders, 2013), particularly in individuals emotionally abused as children (Meadows & Kaslow, 2002). Indeed, hopelessness has been found to be a strong predictor of suicide ideation in African American women (Lamis & Lester, 2012). Although a negative inferential style may be a primary factor driving the association between childhood emotional abuse and adult hopelessness, other variables that influence one's worldview, including spiritual well-being and self-esteem, may be critical to explaining this link.

Spiritual well-being, a multidimensional construct that addresses religious and existential aspects of spirituality (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982), is associated with positive mental and physical health and quality of life outcomes (Campbell, Yoon, & Johnstone, 2010; Unterrainer, Ladenhauf, Moazedi, Wallner-Liebmann, & Fink, 2010). Although it has not been explored in the context of childhood emotional abuse, spiritual well-being mitigates sequelae associated with other types of trauma exposure such as combat (Nad, Marcinko, Vuksan-Æusa, Jakovljevic, & Jakovljevic, 2008) and intimate partner violence (IPV) (Meadows, Kaslow, Thompson, & Jurkovic, 2005). Moreover, higher levels of spiritual well-being are associated with lower levels of hopelessness and suicidality (Mihaljević et al., 2011). Some data suggest that existential well-being is more predictive of these effects than is religious well-being (Dalmida, Holstad, Dilorio, & Laderman, 2011; Maselko, Gilman, & Buka, 2009; Taliaferro, Rienzo, Pigg, Miller, & Dodd, 2009). In African American women, spiritual well-being is a critical coping resource amongst those facing homelessness or IPV (Douglas, Jiminez, Lin, & Frisman, 2008; Gillum, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006; Potter, 2007). In this population, higher levels of spiritual well-being are associated with increased physical and emotional well-being (Paranjape & Kaslow, 2010), including lower levels of depression and more reasons for living, which are associated with a lower risk of suicidal behavior (West, Davis, Thompson, & Kaslow, 2011).

Spiritual well-being may be a protective factor that mediates the link between trauma, including various forms of childhood maltreatment, and hopelessness. Although one's spirituality and religion may be negatively affected by trauma (Walker, Reid, O'Neill, & Brown, 2009), individuals who maintain their spirituality after traumatic events often experience lower levels of trauma-related symptoms (Krejci et al., 2004). A relationship with the divine also is associated with improved mental health well-being in individuals with histories of childhood sexual abuse (Gall, Basque, Damasceno-Scott, & Vardy, 2007; Krejci et al., 2004). In African American women with histories of IPV, spiritual well-being buffers against the risk of psychological symptoms and suicide attempts (Meadows et al., 2005; Mitchell et al., 2006). However, the role of spiritual well-being, and the relative contributions of specific aspects related to religious or existential well-being, is not well understood as a potential protective factor for hopelessness in individuals who were emotionally abused as children.

Self-esteem, which refers to one's views of the self and appraisals of how one is viewed by others (Beck, Brown, Steer, Kuyken, & Grisham, 2001), is important to consider in the childhood emotional abuse–adult hopelessness relation. Traumatic events, including maltreatment, can have negative long-term consequences on self-esteem (Gross & Keller, 2006) and identity (Robinaugh & McNally, 2011). Negative parent–child relationships and attachment difficulties that often correspond with maltreatment can influence self-esteem through the development of a negative self-image (Macfie, Cicchetti, & Toth, 2001). There is evidence that childhood emotional abuse and neglect, but not childhood sexual or physical abuse or physical neglect, are associated with lower levels of self-esteem (Kuo, Goldin, Werner, Heimberg, & Gross, 2011), though these findings are mixed.

A recent meta-analysis confirms the vulnerability model of depression, which posits that low-self-esteem is a risk factor for the development of depressive symptoms (Sowislo & Orth, 2012). Self-esteem also is a protective factor for hopelessness and suicide ideation (Chioqueta & Stiles, 2007). This finding is consistent with the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide (Joiner, 2005), which suggests that a key component of self-esteem is one's sense of connection and belongingness to others, which in turn, protects against suicidal ideation. Furthermore, the association between self-esteem and hopelessness has been confirmed in samples who have experienced IPV (Clements, Sabourin, & Spiby, 2004), leaving unanswered questions regarding whether these relations hold true in regard to survivors of childhood emotional abuse.

Attention has been paid to self-esteem in African Americans, with an emphasis on its relations to racial identity (Mahalik, Pierre, & Wan, 2006; Settles, 2006) and psychological distress (Szymanski & Gupta, 2009; Jesse, Walcott-McQuigg, Mariella, & Swanson, 2005). It has also been examined as a mediator of the associations between various risk factors and negative mental health outcomes, including in African American samples. For example, self-esteem mediates the relation between childhood emotional abuse and adult experiences of depression (Stein, Leslie, & Nyamathi, 2002). Self-esteem plays a similar role in African American women with histories of IPV and suicide attempts, mediating the relation between childhood maltreatment and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Bradley, Schwartz, & Kaslow, 2005).

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