



Research article

Emotional security in the family system and psychological distress in female survivors of child sexual abuse



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ABSTRACT

The Emotional Security Theory (EST) was originally developed to investigate the association between high levels of interparental conflict and child maladaptive outcome. The objective of the present study was to analyze the effects of emotional security in the family system on psychological distress among a sample of young female adult survivors of child sexual abuse (CSA). The role of emotional security was investigated through the interactive effects of a number of factors including the type of abuse, the continuity of abuse, the relationship with the perpetrator and the existence of disclosure for the abuse. Participants were 167 female survivors of CSA. Information about the abuse was obtained from a self-reported questionnaire. Emotional security was assessed with the Security in the Family System (SIFS) Scale, and the Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R) was used to assess psychological distress. In the total sample, insecurity (preoccupation and disengagement) was correlated with high psychological distress scores, whereas no relationship was found between security and psychological distress. The relationship between emotional insecurity and psychological distress was stronger in cases of continued abuse and non-disclosure, while the relationship between emotional security and distress was stronger in cases of extrafamilial abuse and especially isolated or several incidents and when a disclosure had been made. No interactive effect was found between any of the three emotional variables and the type of abuse committed. The results of the current study suggest that characteristics of CSA such as relationship with the perpetrator and, especially, continuity of abuse and whether or not disclosure had been made, can affect the impact of emotional security on psychological distress of CSA survivors.

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Introduction

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a serious social problem, common in every society, with prevalence rates that range between 8% and 31% among women internationally (Barth, Bermetz, Heim, Trelle, & Tonia, 2013). Research has consistently found that victims of CSA are at a high risk of developing psychological and interpersonal problems, ranging from depression and dissociation symptoms to sexual disorders and revictimization (e.g., Mansbach-Kleinfeld, Ifrah, Apter, & Farbstein, 2015; Sigurdardottir, Halldorsdottir, & Bender, 2014; Vaillancourt-Morela et al., 2015).

Despite evidence of the negative consequences of CSA, psychological adjustment after CSA varies widely and a significant portion of survivors do not show significant impairment (Barth et al., 2013). Thus, the research on the impact of CSA on victim

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impairment has focused on the variables that contribute to differences in survivor adjustment following abuse. Research on factors that may explain the variability of the CSA victim's symptomatology has mostly focused on abuse-related variables, such as the type of acts committed, the relationship of the victim with the perpetrator, or the continuity of abuse (e.g., Easton, 2012; Evans, Steel, & DiLillo, 2013; Melville, Kellogg, Perez, & Lukefahr, 2014).

However, recent studies have indicated that the CSA survivor's socio-cognitive factors are more significant than characteristics of the abuse in determining psychosocial adjustment after CSA (Cantón-Cortés & Cortés, 2015). Attributions of blame and of stigmatization, attachment style and coping strategies have all been studied for their potential role in the healing process from CSA (e.g., Beaudoina, Hébertb, & Bernier, 2013; Cantón-Cortés, Cortés, & Cantón, 2012; Swannell et al., 2012). The focus of the present study was on the CSA survivor's emotional security on the family system (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

The Emotional Security Theory (EST) (Davies & Cummings, 1994) is an important theoretical framework in the understanding of the effects of marital conflict on child development and has recently received much empirical support (e.g., Cummings, Cheung, & Davies, 2013; Li, Cheung, & Cummings, 2015; McCoy, Cummings, & Davies, 2009). According to the EST (Davies & Cummings, 1994), the maintenance of a sense of protection and security within the family is vital for children, including cases of conflicts between parents. Interparental conflict can lead to emotional insecurity among children and those children exposed to destructive conflicts are at a higher risk of exhibiting a high reactivity, maladjusted regulating to conflicts and developing insecure representations of the relationship among their parents. Following Forman and Davies (2005), the EST identifies 3 patterns of child security in community samples: Secure, Preoccupation, and Disengagement. Cohesive and warm family relationships promote child security, which is reflected in the child's confidence in their ability to trust family members as sources of support, safety and predictability. Emotional security arises from family relationships that are stable and positive, even in the face of common stressors such as interparental conflict, and is associated with reduced psychosocial adjustment problems (Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006). For example, a child who witnesses successful management and solutions of parental arguments that result in the maintenance of the well-being of the family may place more confidence on the family as a reliable source of security (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

However, when children are exposed to frightening or inaccessible family members, or the response of the family to the child's distress is inconsistent, trust in family as a way to recover security is diminished. As a result, despite a child's understanding of family relationships, the EST proposes that children modify reality in an active way in order to maintain emotional security (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Preoccupation and disengagement strategies are used by children to alter family representation. Children who employ preoccupation strategies overstate the importance of the difficulties within the family in order to preserve a sense of emotional security. Conversely, a disengagement strategy relies on the inclination to emotionally disengage from the family system and disregard its importance (Davies & Forman, 2002). In the short term, not only disengagement but also preoccupation may be adaptive in the context of family discord. The vigilance distinctive of the preoccupied child's expectancies of family relationships may provide resources for effectively perceiving and recognizing signs of threat in the family system and in turn, may stimulate coping strategies to deal quickly with stress (Davies, Winter, & Cicchetti, 2006; Forman & Davies, 2005).

In spite of the short term success of regaining some security with preoccupation and disengagement strategies, the EST postulates that the physical and psychological resources used in order to maintain security deplete resources for other essential developmental processes. Therefore, as several cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have demonstrated, children who employ these types of strategies have a higher probability of developing psychological difficulties (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2002; Davies et al., 2006). For example, in a longitudinal analysis of EST, Davies et al. (2002) showed that a child's emotional security played a role in connecting interparental conflict with children's future internalizing and externalizing difficulties. The effect of emotional security remained when other related variables such as self-blame or perceived threat were taken into account. Another three-wave study of 235 families with children between 5 and 7 years of age (McCoy et al., 2009), found that when prosocial behavior at wave 1 was controlled for, child's emotional security within the family system acted as an intervening factor between both destructive and constructive interparental conflict and future prosocial behavior.

Moreover, the EST emphasizes the psychological significance of specific patterns of emotional insecurity as mediators of adjustment. Forman and Davies (2005) posited that a disengaged pattern was linked to problems with social rule violations and deviance outside the family environment (externalizing symptoms). Conversely, a preoccupied pattern was associated with a higher risk for the development of depressive and anxiety related symptomatology (internalizing symptoms).

Although the EST maintains some of the same premises as attachment theory (e.g., secure-based system; internal working models), it also differs from attachment theory in meaningful ways. The primary focus of attachment theory is the way in which children form dyadic relationships with an attachment figure to maintain a sense of security (Bowlby, 1973). However, the child's emotional security is a meaningful variable in the context of multiple relationships, calling attention to the contribution of the family as a whole to the child's emotional security. In contrast to attachment theory, the Emotional Security Theory emphasizes that in addition to parent-child attachment, multiple family characteristics such as family violence and conflicts between parents can directly disrupt the maintenance of security (Forman & Davies, 2005). Research has shown that the sense of security developed in the context of interparental conflict is different from the sense of security developed in a child's attachment relationship with their parents (Cummings & Davies, 2010). For example, Davies et al.

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