

Childhood risk factors for alcohol abuse and psychological distress among adult lesbians[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: This study examined the relationships between childhood and family background variables, including sexual and physical abuse, and subsequent alcohol abuse and psychological distress in adult lesbians.

Methodology: Structural equation modeling was used to evaluate relationships between childhood sexual and physical abuse and parenting variables and latent measures of lifetime alcohol abuse and psychological distress in a large community-based sample of lesbians.

Results: Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) directly predicted lifetime alcohol abuse, and childhood physical abuse (CPA) directly predicted lifetime psychological distress. In addition, CSA indirectly increased the risk of lifetime alcohol abuse through its negative effect on age at first heterosexual intercourse. Childhood physical abuse had only indirect effects on lifetime alcohol abuse through its strong relationship to lifetime psychological distress. Parental drinking problems and parental strictness directly predicted lifetime psychological distress; parental drinking problems indirectly predicted lifetime alcohol abuse through the mediators of age of drinking onset and lifetime psychological distress. White lesbians, younger lesbians, and those with lower levels of education were at greatest risk of psychological distress.

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Conclusion: While the cross-sectional design precludes causal conclusions, study findings—especially those related to CSA—are consistent with previous research on predominantly heterosexual women in the general population. Lesbians who experienced CSA were at heightened risk of lifetime alcohol abuse and those who experienced CPA were at heightened risk of lifetime psychological distress relative to lesbians without abuse histories. Given the dearth of research on childhood abuse and sexual orientation, studies are needed that examine the similarities and differences between lesbians' and heterosexual women's experiences of, and responses to, childhood abuse.

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Introduction

Child abuse is an important public health concern that has a significant impact on both individuals and communities. In addition to the immediate threat of physical and psychological harm to a child, studies show that physical and sexual abuse in childhood are strongly associated with a number of later adverse mental health outcomes. The effects of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) (which disproportionately affects girls and women) include substance use/abuse (Dube, Anda, Felitti, Edwards, & Croft, 2002; MacMillan et al., 2001; Wilsnack, Vogeltanz, Klassen, & Harris, 1997) and various forms of psychological distress, such as anxiety and depression (MacMillan et al., 2001). Research suggests that lesbians (and other sexual minority groups) may be at a heightened risk of childhood abuse (Balsam, Rothblum, & Beauchaine, 2005; Corliss, Cochran, & Mays, 2002; Tjaden, Thoeness, & Allison, 1999) and alcohol abuse (see Hughes, 2005, for review). Despite substantial empirical support for the association between childhood victimization and adverse mental health outcomes, the *pathways* that link these variables are unclear. This is particularly true for childhood physical abuse (CPA) as, to date, more research has focused on childhood sexual abuse than on CPA. The purpose of this study was to examine the mechanisms by which childhood abuse may be related to alcohol abuse and psychological distress among adult lesbians.

Progress in understanding the links between childhood abuse and adverse mental health outcomes has also been hampered by a number of theoretical and methodological limitations of research in this area. Among the most important is that many studies assume a single causal pathway leading from childhood victimization to later substance abuse or other mental health problems. A related limitation is that many studies conceptualize experiences of childhood abuse as isolated events separate from the cultural, familial, and relational contexts in which they occur. Further, studies examining the long-term outcomes of childhood abuse often rely on samples of college students, patients in clinical treatment, or women recruited based on their abuse experiences. Thus, little is known about how cultural differences and life trajectories shape the later health consequences of childhood victimization among women in the general non-clinical population. In particular, very few studies have assessed the sexual orientation of study participants, and most researchers appear to assume that participants are heterosexual. The lack of attention to sexual orientation may represent an important research gap given accumulating evidence that lesbians are at heightened risk of both alcohol abuse and psychological distress.

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