

**TH-PM-02**

**CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE & EARLY LIFE VICTIMIZATION**

**Development and Pilot Testing of Two New Instruments Measuring Emotional Attributions to Experiences of Childhood Sexual Abuse**

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Though prior research has demonstrated that survivors of childhood sexual abuse may experience a range of negative emotions following the abuse (Feiring et al., 2007; Maschi, Bradley, & Morgen, 2008), studies have failed to consider the perspectives of youth, males, and the potential existence of positive emotions being attributed to the experiences (Barker-Collo, 2001; Daigneault, Hébert, & Tourigny, 2006; Leclerc, Proulx, McKibben, 2005; Seto, 2008). The objective of the current study was to develop and determine the psychometric properties of two new scales – The Negative Emotional Attributions to Childhood Sexual Abuse (NEA-CSA) and Positive Emotional Attributions to Childhood Sexual Abuse (PEA-CSA) – developed by the researcher to capture the range of negative and positive emotional attributions that youth may assign to their experiences of childhood sexual abuse victimization. This study addressed the following research questions: To what extent do the NEA-CSA and PEA-CSA scales demonstrate validity and reliability as measures of the emotional attributions that youth make with regard to their experiences of childhood sexual abuse?

The two measures were developed following the seven steps of scale development (Tay & Jebb, 2017), and guided by general strain theory (Agnew, 1992) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1986; Burton & Meezan, 2004). After completion of the development process, a sample of incarcerated youth ( $N = 136$ ) were recruited and surveyed from community corrections and residential treatment centers in a Midwestern state to pilot the measures. Item Response Theory was used to test the performance of the measures and their individual items with the subsample of youth who reported a history of childhood sexual abuse ( $n = 40$ ). Utilizing the information gained from item response theory, the measures were refined and re-tested using the principles of rating scale utility analysis (Linacre, 1999).

The NEA-CSA and PEA-CSA measures demonstrated high internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = .935$  and  $\alpha = .945$ , respectively) and construct validity, appropriately capturing the range of positive and negative emotions youth may experience following childhood sexual abuse. The final refined measures were the 25 item NEA-CSA and the 18 item PEA-CSA, both with 3-point Likert scale response options ranging from *Disagree* to *Agree*. The present study provides the first empirical evidence that youth who have experiences of childhood sexual abuse attribute both negative and positive emotions to the experience and the individual who committed the sexually abusive behaviors. High levels of emotional conflict were also observed, whereby youth were grappling with simultaneous positive and negative attributions, exhibited by the moderate strength, positive correlation between the total scores on each measure ( $r(37) = .557, p < .001$ ). A pre-existing relationship with the perpetrator could explain why youth were likely to have high levels of both negative and positive emotions attributed to their experiences of childhood sexual abuse, as

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the most common perpetrator is a parent or caregiver of the child (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2018).

Future research will explore refinement of the NEA-CSA and PEA-CSA measures by eliminating irrelevant items, rewording items for clarity, and assessing item discrimination. The measures will then be validated with a larger sample of children who have experienced childhood sexual abuse. From a practice and assessment standpoint, it becomes a clinical imperative to assess for emotional attributions early in the treatment process to reduce stigma associated with positive emotions and to address cognitive dissonance associated with conflicting emotional attributions.

This paper is rated: Youth | Advanced | Research

### **Learning Goals**

- Upon completion of this educational activity, learners should be better able to describe the current measurement of emotional attributions to childhood sexual abuse and articulate the areas that are insufficiently measured.
- Upon completion of this educational activity, learners should be better able to discuss which methods for scale development were chosen and what information was gained through the process of measurement creation.
- Upon completion of this educational activity, learners should be better able to identify ways that the study expands the current knowledge base around emotional recovery from childhood sexual abuse, the role of perpetrator relationship in emotional attributions, and the importance of measurement to destigmatize cognitive dissonance associated with childhood sexual abuse.

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### **Relationships Between Early Life Victimization, Antisocial Traits, and Sexual Violence: Executive Functioning as a Mediator**

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The relationship between victimization and executive functioning has been explored among youth in both the general population and the juvenile justice system (Augusti & Melinder, 2013; Davis, Moss, Nogin, & Webb, 2015; Nikulina & Spatz Widom, 2013). Research suggests that trauma incidents can adversely impact neurological zones responsible for higher order thinking or executive function (Perry, Pollard, Blakley, Baker, & Vigilante, 1995; Steinberg, 2008), which can contribute to a host of psychological and behavioral deficits (Jaffee & Maikovich-Fong, 2014). Yet, there are few research studies that explore how the relationship between trauma and executive functioning can influence sexual offending behaviors among adolescents. The current study tests an adapted theory of sexual violence that includes executive functioning (Knight and Sims-Knight, 2004) to propose three distinctive hypotheses: H1: There will be direct relationships between physical abuse, sexual abuse, and domestic traumatic events and executive function deficits. H2: There will be associations between early victimization and sexual violence, early victimization; and callousness, and executive function deficits and sexual violence. H3: Executive functioning deficits and callousness will mediate the relationship between early victimization and sexual violence.

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This study uses data on residentially placed youth in a western state ( $N = 200$ ). Youth were given validated measurement tools and asked to retrospectively report on their early victimization experiences, meta-cognition features of executive functioning, antisocial characteristics, type of criminal behavior, and caregivers' attachment characteristics. The measures included the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein et al., 1994), Domestic Trauma Experiences (Burton et al., 2011), Behavior Rating Index of Executive Function (Guy et al., 2004), and the Inventory of Callous and Unemotional Traits (Kimonis et al., 2008). This study employed a multiple mediated structural equation model (SEM) by first determining model fit using a confirmatory factor analysis to solidify the latent factors' structures, and then conducted a path analysis between the factors.

Results revealed good model fit in all models. The standardized path analyses revealed we could partially accept  $H_1$ ; there were statistically significant direct pathways between experiences of sexual abuse and features of executive function including difficulties with working memory ( $Y = .307 (.13), p < .05$ ), task completion ( $Y = .318 (.15), p < .05$ ), organization of materials ( $Y = .397 (.14), p < .01$ ), and planning and organizing ( $Y = .341 (.14), p < .05$ ). However, physical abuse and domestic trauma experiences were not significant. We could partially support  $H_2$ : there were bivariate associations between variables of interest indicating potential mediation. This was verified in  $H_3$ : for each domain of executive function, there were either 1) linear associations between sexual abuse, executive function, callousness, and sexual violence or 2) a multi-mediated effect of executive function, and callousness in the relation between sexual abuse and sexual violence.

This study's findings demonstrate that executive functioning was indicated as a significant mediator in the relationship between sexual abuse and sexual violence perpetration. For practitioners who work in prevention, these findings suggest that universal screenings are needed for differential forms of abuse and among youth who exhibit symptomatology mirroring features of executive functioning impairments. Further, Conventional treatment programs can be adapted to include a neurological trauma-based component that considers the developmental timing of events, neurological processing, and relative amenability to treatment. Such trauma-based offender approaches can be delivered within a restorative justice framework that also builds empathy and emotional relatedness within relationships.

This paper is rated: Youth | Intermediate | Research

### **Learning Goals**

- Upon completion of this educational activity, learners should be better able to articulate the basic principles of Knight & Sims-Knight developmental etiological theory, including how developmental adversities including sexual and physical abuse are salient risks for development of antisocial traits.
- Upon completion of this educational activity, learners should be better able to draw upon critical emerging research that indicates clear linkages between trauma and executive functioning while developing a new model of executive functioning as the missing etiological link in the relation between trauma and sexual violence.
- Upon completion of this educational activity, learners should be better able to identify what victimization experiences stand out in the connection to executive functioning and how callous traits play a role in this model.

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