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History of Child Sexual Abuse and Current Life Satisfaction: The Moderating Role of Resilience

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the relationship between instances of child sexual abuse and life satisfaction. Specifically, we investigated the role resilience may play as a potential moderator between past child sexual abuse and current satisfaction with life. Participants were 95 undergraduate students at a large southeastern university. Participants completed questionnaires assessing history of traumatic life events, current level of resilience, and current satisfaction with life. There was a strong positive correlation between resilience and satisfaction with life and a strong negative correlation between history of child sexual abuse and life satisfaction. However, resilience was not a significant moderator in the current study.

INTRODUCTION

Previous literature establishes certain predictable outcomes in those with a history CSA, including resiliency. Resilience is defined as the process of effectively negotiating, adapting to, or managing significant stress or trauma (Windle, 2010). In studying levels of resilience, Liem et al. (1997), found a significant number of participants, about 40%, reported resilience despite having experienced sexual abuse. The explanation for differing patterns of resiliency following trauma is still unclear. A difference between men and women has been found, with women reporting slightly higher levels of resilience compared to men. Several other factors have been tested, such as age when abuse occurred, severity of abuse, and duration. However, there is little significant evidence to support these factors as affecting resilience (Liem et al., 1997).

Life satisfaction is defined as an individual's conscious, cognitive appraisal of the quality of his or her life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The relationship between life satisfaction and resilience has yet to be examined in those with a history of CSA. However, several studies examined the relationship between resilience and life satisfaction in those experiencing stress. Shi et al. (1997) found a positive correlation between life satisfaction and resilience, such that as life satisfaction increased, resilience to stress increased. Interestingly, there differences are found by gender in quality of life measures in those with a history of sexual abuse, with women reporting higher quality of life compared to men (Lev-Wiesel, 2000); the present research will attempt to replicate and expand on these results.

Resiliency may be used to cope with stress and may explain why people with histories of abuse have differing levels of satisfaction with life. The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC25; Connor & Davidson, 2003) was administered to assess levels of resilience in those participants reporting a history of CSA. We examined the relationship of resilience to life satisfaction by administering the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, 1985) to assess levels of life satisfaction in those reporting a history of CSA. Understanding the outcomes of CSA is vitally important because there is a gap in the current literature, and filling that gap may lead to a greater understanding of those with a history of CSA.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 95 undergraduates at a large southeastern university who completed surveys assessing previous life events (i.e., childhood sexual abuse), current level of resilience, and current satisfaction with life. Please see Table 1 for demographic information.

METHOD

Students enrolled at a large southeastern university were recruited to participate in a study assessing previous life experiences and current attitudes. Participants answered questions related to previous trauma (e.g., "Have you ever been coerced into performing sexual acts?"; "Have you ever witnessed someone hitting someone else?"). Participants also answered questions assessing their level of resilience to life events on the CD-RISC (e.g., "I am able to adapt when changes occur"; "I tend to bounce back"; "I give my best efforts not matter what."). Finally, participants answered questions assessing their overall satisfaction with life via the SWLS (e.g., "In most ways my life is close to ideal"; "The conditions of my life are excellent."). Questions were randomly presented to participants.

Table 1: Demographic Information

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	19.79	2.13
	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	81	85.3
Male	14	14.7
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	53	56.4
African American	33	34.7
Asian	4	4.2
Hispanic	2	2.1
Bi/Multi Racial	2	2.1

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RESULTS

Initially, bivariate correlations were conducted to examine relationships among all the variables. As expected, instances of child sexual abuse were negatively related to scores of resilience ($r = -.20$). Consistent with expectations, instances of child sexual abuse were negatively related to life satisfaction ($r = -.23$). Finally, as expected, resilience was positively correlated with life satisfaction ($r = .55$). Overall, all variables were significantly related in the expected direction and to the expected degree. Inter-correlations among the study's variables are located in Table 2. To examine moderating effects, a hierarchical regression was analyzed. Regression effects on satisfaction with life were first explored through main effects of the predictor and moderator variables. These main effects were not significant ($p > .05$). In the second step, the interaction effect between instances of child sexual abuse and resilience was added to the model. This interaction term was non-significant ($p > .05$). Variance explained in this step did not statistically increase (from 32% to 32%; $p > .05$). Table 3 presents the results of the hierarchical regression. Considering these findings, resilience did not moderate the relationship between instances of child sexual abuse and satisfaction with life. Given that our results did not yield resilience as a significant moderator of the relationship between a history of child sexual abuse or life satisfaction, we cannot assume that resilience influences this relationship or decreases negative outcomes in those with a history of child sexual abuse.

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of the current study was to investigate the relationship between a history of child sexual abuse and satisfaction with life. Specifically, this study examined whether resilience moderated this relationship. It was hypothesized that there would be a negative relationship between history of child sexual abuse and satisfaction with life and a negative relationship between a history of child sexual abuse and resilience. It was also hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between resilience and satisfaction with life. The bivariate correlations do support these hypotheses. These findings suggest that individuals with a higher level of resilience reported a higher satisfaction with life.

Resilience moderates the relationship between stress and life satisfaction (Shi et al., 1997). There is no current research studying resilience as a moderator between history of child sexual abuse and life satisfaction. The intent of this study was to expand the research on stress to include a specific event, child sexual abuse, and how it relates to life satisfaction and resilience. Unfortunately, the results do not support the hypothesis that level of resilience moderates the relationship between history of CSA and current satisfaction with life. It is unclear why this relationship does not show a similar pattern with other stress relationships as seen in Shi et al.'s research (1997).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The current study used a college sample, so examining this relationship utilizing a more generalizable sample is important to determine the consistency of this relationship across other demographics. Previous research shows resilience as a moderator to satisfaction with life in stressed individuals. Future research should expand this idea to other independent variables, such as child sexual abuse, or other traumatic life events. Future research should examine these relationships in other samples to see if these results are generalizable and consistent, particularly among emerging adults who do not attend college.

There are likely other variables that do moderate the relationship between history of CSA and current satisfaction with life. Some potential variables may be age of CSA onset, CSA severity and duration, or other variables such as current social relationships and support.

Table 2: Inter-correlations among Measures of Child Sexual Abuse, Resilience, and Satisfaction with Life

Variables	1	2
1. CSA	--	--
2. RES	-.202*	--
3. SWLS	-.227*	.554**

Note. *Correlation is significant at the .01 level. ** Correlation is significant at the .001 level. CSA= Child Sexual Abuse RES=Resilience SWLS= Satisfaction with Life Scale

Table 3: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis (N = 95)

Variables	Predicting Satisfaction with Life			
	Step 1		Step 2	
	B	95% CI	B	95% CI
Predictors				
CSA	-.67	[-1.66, .32]	-.67	[-1.66, .32]
RES	.23	[.15, .31]	-.56	[-1.75, .63]
CSA*RES			-.78	[-2.33, .76]
R ²	.32		.00	
Change in R ²			.32	

Note: All models include covariates. Entries for predictors and interactions are unstandardized *B*s. Effects and CIs that contain only zeros (.00 and -.00) were rounded to the nearest decimal and represent the direction of the effect (positive or negative). CSA=Child Sexual Abuse RES=Resilience

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