



The Relationship between Childhood Maltreatment and the Social Concerns of Anxiety Sensitivity



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INTRODUCTION

- Childhood maltreatment is highly prevalent, with more than 30% of adults reporting a history of childhood maltreatment (Tiecher & Samson, 2013).
- The World Health Organization (WHO, 2006) distinguishes five types of childhood maltreatment: sexual, physical, emotional abuse, as well as physical and emotional neglect.
- Childhood maltreatment has been associated with social anxiety symptoms (Bruce et al., 2013; Nanda et al., 2016), though research is needed to better understand this link.
- Anxiety sensitivity (AS) social concerns refers to the tendency to fear physical sensations associated with anxiety due to concerns about potential negative social consequences (e.g., "When I begin to sweat in a social situation, I fear people will think negatively of me;" Baek et al., 2019).
- Although related, AS social concerns is conceptually distinct from social anxiety itself and instead involves one's response to social anxiety symptoms, or the 'fear of fear' (Naragon-Gaine et al., 2010).
- There is a growing body of evidence that suggests AS, broadly, is related to childhood maltreatment (Martin et al., 2014), although the specific effects of AS social concerns has not been explored.
- Consequently, the present study sought to examine the separate relationships between forms of child maltreatment and AS social concerns.

METHOD

- Participants ($N = 614$) were individuals who participated in a larger online study about sexual assault and risky behaviors.
- Inclusion criteria for the study included:
 - 18 years or older
 - Resided in North America
 - Fluent in English
 - Endorsed the experience of sexual trauma in their lifetime
- 52.1% of our sample identified as women, 46.7% as men, and 5.2% as another gender (e.g., non-binary).
- The sample identified as 73.9% White, 12.9% Black, 6.5% Hispanic or Latinx, 6.4% Asian, 1.5% American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 1.1% as another or multiple racial/ethnic backgrounds.
- Mean age was 34.57 years ($SD = 11.01$).
- Measures:
 - Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1998) is a self-report measure examining childhood maltreatment including both abuse and neglect.
 - Anxiety Sensitivity Index-3 (ASI-3, Reiss et al., 1986) is a self-report measure examining AS social concerns.

RESULTS

- We used SPSS (IBM SPSS Statistics, 2012) to conduct Pearson product-moment correlations among the primary variables of interest.
- Our results demonstrated that AS social concerns were significantly positively correlated with sexual abuse ($r = .23, p < .001$), emotional abuse ($r = .23, p < .001$), and physical abuse ($r = .15, p < .001$).
- However, childhood emotional neglect ($r = -.09, p = .06$) and physical neglect ($r = .09, p = .05$) were not found to be significantly related to AS social concerns.

Table 1: Zero-order Correlations for Variables of Interest

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. CTQ Emotional Abuse	14.58	4.63	2-25	—	—	—	—	—	—
2. CTQ Physical Abuse	13.91	4.52	2-25	.557*	—	—	—	—	—
3. CTQ Sexual Abuse	14.58	4.90	2-25	.508*	.599*	—	—	—	—
4. CTQ Emotional Neglect	10.81	4.90	1-21	-.008	-.010	.050	—	—	—
5. CTQ Physical Neglect	11.55	3.79	1-23	.374*	.455*	.406*	.358*	—	—
6. ASI-3 Social Concerns	18.54	5.66	6-30	.232*	.145*	.234*	-.093	.089	—

Note. * $p < .001$. CTQ = Childhood Trauma Questionnaire. ASI-3 = Anxiety Sensitivity Index – 3.

DISCUSSION

- Findings from the present research suggest that childhood maltreatment – specifically sexual, emotional, and physical abuse – is positively associated with AS social concerns.
- However, AS social concerns were not significantly correlated with emotional neglect or physical neglect; more research is needed to understand why these experiences do not lead to anxiety in social situations (Nanda et al., 2016).
- This is important because research suggests that targeting maladaptive symptoms related to these types of maltreatment in early childhood might prevent various aspects of anxiety symptomatology in adulthood (Rehan et al., 2017).
- Moreover, results from this study indicate a need to explore beneath the surface to understand the behavioral, neurobiological, social, and environmental mechanisms that mediate the association between exposure to childhood abuse and AS social concerns (Petersen et al., 2014).
- Conclusively, accurately assessing lifetime exposure to child maltreatment is a crucial first step in better understanding, detecting, and responding to child maltreatment in the context of AS social concerns.
- Despite the strengths of the present study, there are some important limitations worth mentioning.
 - First, the CTQ relies on retrospective, self-reports of participants' childhood trauma histories without any additional information regarding the accuracy of those reports.
 - Secondly, the cross-sectional and correlational nature of the data precludes determination of the nature and precise direction of the relations examined.
- Future studies may address these limitations, such as by using administrative data on childhood abuse and by investigating the nature and direction of these relations through longitudinal investigations.

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