Letter of Intent
Impacts of Childhood Trauma and Abuse on Couple Relationships: A Clinical Summary for Counsellors and A Consumer Pamphlet

GCAP Final Project Requirement

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Problem Statement

Although childhood abuse experiences may impair victims’ capacities to form long-term intimate bonds, individuals who have experienced childhood abuse and trauma are often engaged in partnerships and pair bonding relationships (Davis & Petretic-Jackson, 2000; Godbout, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2006; Reid, Wampler, & Taylor, 1996). Childhood trauma survivors and their partners are referred to in the literature as survivor couples, single trauma couples, one partner experienced trauma, or dual trauma couples, both partners experienced childhood trauma. Distress in trauma couple relationships has been shown to impede survivor recovery through such mechanisms as re-enactments of abuse, re-victimization, and projective identification (Basham & Miehls, 1998a; Buttenheim & Levendosky, 1994; Maltas, 1996; McCollum, 1993), and partner secondary traumatization (Balcom, 1996; Nelson & Wampler, 2000; Nelson & Wampler, 2002; Mills, 2001). Survivors may partner with other survivors who present with similar interpersonal difficulties (Basham & Miehls, 1998a) and psychological distress. A positive and healthy partnership may be instrumental for healing and recovery from the terror and helplessness of childhood trauma and abuse (Hecker, 2007; Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998; McCollum, 1993; Whiffen, Judd, & Auben, 1999).

It is important that clinical and empirical investigations explore the impacts of childhood maltreatment on these couples’ relationships and identify interventions that address these impacts and strengthen couple bonds. Thus, the purpose of this project is to review the clinical and empirical literature investigating how childhood trauma and abuse impact the couple relationship and the mechanisms of this impact. The secondary purpose of this project is to
identify the clinical and empirical information counsellors and consumers should have about the
impacts, the consequences, and the treatment methods for single or dual trauma couples.

Project Rationale

The most common presenting problem for clients who have experienced childhood
maltreatment and trauma is the breakdown of their relationships (Kahn, 2006). According to
Anderson and Miller (2006), the principal presenting issue for many individuals engaged in
therapeutic treatment is interpersonal, couple, and marital distress and dissatisfaction. Therefore,
it is likely that couple, individual, and family therapists will encounter many clients with
histories of childhood abuse and trauma (Anderson & Miller, 2006; Leonard & Follette, 2002;
Nelson & Wampler, 2000). Couples in which one or both partners experienced abuse are
typically be more distressed and have lower family cohesion; however, connections between
past trauma and current couple distress are often disregarded or unnoticed by clinicians (Nelson
& Wampler, 2000). These couples may require therapeutic interventions designed to address the
impact of the specific abuse experiences on couple functioning (Basham & Miehls, 1998a;
Basham & Miehls, 1998b; Siegel & Geller, 2000). An understanding of the mechanisms through
which childhood trauma and abuse impact couple relationships is necessary to optimize both
individual and couple treatment.

Project Objectives

The main objectives of the project are threefold: (a) provide a systematic critical review
of the literature with respect to the impact of childhood traumas on couple relationships; (b)
produce a clinical summary for counsellors regarding the impacts of childhood trauma and abuse
on couple functioning, including theoretical and empirical literature and literature regarding
treatment modalities; and (c) produce a consumer pamphlet based on clinical and empirical findings from the literature review.

Supporting Literature

Definitions

The use of the term couple encompasses married, cohabitating, dating, opposite-sex, and same-sex adult couples aged 18 years and older. Childhood trauma survivors and their partners will be referred to as trauma couples or survivor couples. Single trauma couples will refer to a coupling in which one partner experienced childhood trauma and abuse. Dual trauma couples will refer to a coupling in which both partners experienced childhood trauma and abuse.

Forms of Abuse

Childhood abuse and trauma will include witnessing or experiencing a variety of forms of violence, abuse, and neglect, including: (a) intra-familial sexual child abuse, including sibling incest; (b) physical and emotional neglect; (c) physical, psychological, and emotional violence and maltreatment; (d) extra-familial child sexual abuse; and (e) witnessing parental violence.

Impacts of Trauma and Maltreatment.

A number of long-term intrapersonal and interpersonal effects have been associated with experiences of childhood maltreatment and trauma; some researchers have concluded that many of the long-term outcomes associated with childhood maltreatment are consistent across sub-typess of childhood abuse (DiLillo, Lewis, & Di Loretto-Colgan, 2007). However, there appear to be differences in impacts mediated by factors such as types of abuse experiences, existence of co-occurring abuse experiences, childhood social support networks, and parental environment (Davis et al., 2001). Studies that investigate the presence of multiple abuse experiences have found that they often co-occur and are associated with unique patterns of adult symptomology
(Briere & Runtz, 1990; Davis et al., 2001). For example, Rudd and Herzberger, (1999) and Wiehe (1997) found that brother-sister incest is more intrusive, violent, and destructive than father-daughter incest and that the negative impacts to victims of brother-sister incest have been found to be often more severe. Briere and Runtz (1990) found that psychological abuse is associated with low self-esteem, physical abuse associated with aggression, and sexual abuse associated with maladaptive sexual behavior. The effects of witnessing marital violence may depend upon the co-occurrence of childhood abuse (Feerick & Haugaard, 1999).

Intrapersonal impacts. Intrapersonal difficulties associated with childhood maltreatment and trauma include impaired self-esteem, damaged self-concept, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, isolation, dissociation, shame, and personality disturbance (Briere & Runtz, 1990; DiLillo, 2001; MacIntosh & Johnson, 2008). Adult survivors of childhood traumas often experience emotional dysregulation and symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), particularly avoidance, numbing, and hypervigilance (Balcom, 1996; DiLillo et al., 2007).

Interpersonal impacts. Interpersonal impacts of different forms of childhood abuse experiences include social isolation, difficulties with establishing and maintaining intimate and sexual relationships, reactivity, distrust, marital difficulties (Briere & Runtz, 1990; Davis & Petretic-Jackson, 2000; Davis et al., 2001; Godbout et al., 2006; Rumstein-McKean & Hunsley, 2001), disturbed internal working models (Basham & Miehls, 1998; Maltas, 1996) and attachment insecurity (Alexander, 2003; Belt & Abidin, 1996; Johnson & Williams-Keeler, 1998).

Couple relationships: impact and treatment. There has been a recent interest concerning the intimate relationships of childhood trauma survivors and the impacts of the trauma on partners (MacIntosh & Johnson, 2008). However, most existing empirical studies and theoretical
literature have focused on the impacts of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) on couple relationships. This research has generally failed to assess for co-occurrence of abuse experiences when assessing the impacts on interpersonal and couple relationships (Davis et al., 2001). A relatively small number of studies have assessed the outcomes of physical and psychological abuse on adult relationships (Whisman, 2007).

Whisman (2007) found that three childhood traumas were associated with a greater probability of marital dissolution (a) physical abuse, (b) childhood rape, or (c) serious physical attack; he suggested that childhood traumas that are assaultive and violent in nature are more predictive of marital outcomes than other forms of childhood abuse. The result of these forms of abuse to couple relationships may be greater intimacy disturbance, increased physical violence and re-victimization, emotional avoidance, and attachment disturbance (Whisman, 2007). Briere and Runtz (1990) found that childhood physical abuse may lead to marital violence. Siegel and Geller (2000) found that a high incidence of witnessing parental violence has been found among men who batter their partners. Studies that review the impacts on partners who partner with abuse survivors have primarily focused upon partners of survivors who experienced CSA. Partners of childhood sexual abuse survivors identify isolation, pain, anger, and marital dissatisfaction as their primary issues (Poulsny & Follette, 1995; Reid et al., 1996). Since women often experience more instances and varieties of childhood maltreatment than men, lesbian couples are more likely than heterosexual couples to have at least one member who experienced childhood maltreatment (Kerewsky & Miller, 1995).

Conceptualization and treatment of trauma couples from an object relations perspective contends that trauma contagion, projective identification and re-enactments of the abuse are central to the difficulties experienced by couples (Blizard & Blum, 1994; Buttenheim &
Levendosky, 1994; Maltas, 1996). Psychological distress (LiLillo et al., 2007) and attachment difficulties may be the mechanisms of marital distress (MacIntosh & Johnson, 2008). A lack of emotional engagement and withdrawal, which involves detachment and restricted affect, is a common problem for CSA couples and predicts divorce (Leonard, Follette, & Compton, 2006). Davis et al. (2001) found that experiences of childhood psychological abuse and emotional neglect may impair victims’ capacities for intimacy in relations. The change in identity and self-development of the recovering partner may lead to relationship dissatisfaction as she discovers that the original marital contract is no longer satisfactory (McCollum, 1993).

Balcom (1996) developed an approach to conceptualizing and treating dual trauma couples. He identified common dynamics and themes that impact the relationship and the impact of defensive coping and secondary traumatization on partners. Basham and Miehls (2004) developed a treatment approach that integrates object relations developmental theory with trauma theory. Their treatment approach follows the three stages of Herman’s approach to treating individual trauma. Johnson (2002) developed emotionally focused couple therapy with trauma survivors to address early childhood traumatic attachment experiences in relation to couple relationships. Compton and Follette (2002) applied Behavioural Marital Therapy (BMT) to couples where one partner is a CSA survivor. Leonard et al. (2006) developed a principle-based intervention based on Integrative Behaviour Couple Therapy (IBCT). A more detailed analysis of clinical and empirical literature with respect to impacts and treatment approaches will be addressed in the final project.

Method and Procedures

Procedures appropriate to the project scope will be outlined below. This project does not involve human subject research, rather it is a critical analysis of published empirical and
theoretical literature that address the mechanisms through which childhood abuse and trauma impact single or dual trauma couples. The primary populations influenced by the project will be counsellors, couple therapists, families and couples affected by childhood trauma and abuse. The review will also consider ethically and culturally sensitive issues.

Procedure One: Literature Search

In preparing this letter of intent, a literature search on childhood abuse, maltreatment, and couple relationships was conducted using a number of on-line databases, such as PsychINFO, Academic Search Premier, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, search engines, and scholarly indexes. Keywords and search terms used were as follows: childhood abuse, child maltreatment, childhood sexual abuse, childhood neglect, childhood trauma, and couple therapy, couples, couple treatment, and couple interventions.

Once the letter of intent is approved, an advanced literature search of childhood trauma and couple relationships literature will be conducted. This literature search will involve a search for information that will guide the inclusion of culturally sensitive assessment and treatment material. A minimum of five databases will be searched; these are Academic Search Premier, Eric, Psychology and Behaviour Sciences, PsychARTICLE, and PsychINFO. The search will also include a variety of search engines and scholarly indexes (e.g., Google Scholar) on the World Wide Web. Search terms remain to be determined but will include such terms as psychological maltreatment, childhood abuse, sexual abuse, and couple relationship. Paper copies of relevant articles will be obtained from the University of Calgary Library and books will be borrowed or purchased from on-line bookstores.

Criteria for literature selection. Particular care will be taken to ensure that literature pertinent to couple relationships impacted by childhood trauma or abuse will be selected for
review. However, recent literature regarding trauma in general and couple distress may be selected for the purposes of reporting on limitations in the couple trauma literature and to identify new directions for search and clinical practice. The appropriateness of including such literature will be discussed with the project supervisor.

Procedure Two: Critical Analysis of the Literature

The second step in this project will be to conduct an in-depth evaluation of the literature and clarify definitions. The review will include the history and origins of the topic, the main concepts, and the key relationships between the concepts, research methods and clinical conceptualizations (Torraco, 2005). The literature will be examined in order to appraise the strengths and limitations of studies or clinical writings and to provide an original assessment of their methods, procedures, and conclusions (Jesson & Lacey, 2006). Specifically, the review will evaluate the consideration of issues and topics related to the mechanisms of childhood trauma on couple relationships and therapeutic interventions in the literature. Suggestions for future research and, possibly, new conceptualizations relevant to the topic will be presented.

Procedure Three: Develop Clinical Summary and Consumer Pamphlet

The third step in the project will be to determine the appropriate content for the clinical summary and consumer pamphlet and produce the material. The clinical summary will include the following discussion topics: (a) a brief review of the clinical and empirical literature, (b) assessment procedures, and (c) treatment issues and approaches. The consumer pamphlet will include (a) what consumers need to know about the possible impacts of childhood maltreatment on their marriage and contributions to marital distress, (b) treatment options, and (c) the possible impacts of marital distress on survivor’s individual healing processes.

Potential Implications
A challenge to research and treatment is that victims often do not accurately report their experiences; overwhelming feelings of shame and strong desires to keep their experiences a secret often prevent them from disclosing to therapists or researchers (Finkelhor, 1980) or partners (Kochka & Carolan, 2002). Victims are inclined to deny their experiences, to retract disclosures, or to permanently conceal the abuse (Laviola, 1992). This project will provide counsellors with the knowledge and the skills required to deliver meaningful interventions to couple survivors. It is hoped that this project will benefit them by providing knowledge to counsellors who will provide a context for assessment and disclosure. Numerous adult men and women in couple relationships may be enduring effects of childhood trauma and abuse and may not receive appropriate help unless the childhood abuse is brought to clinical attention. Clarity regarding the impact of the abuse on the couple relationship may alleviate couple distress and provide the context for appropriate clinical focus in couple counselling. For women, effective assessment and treatment may intervene in or prevent life-long patterns of victimization in relationships with men. Children whose parents have childhood abuse histories may indirectly benefit from informed counsellors who are able to provide appropriate assessment and treatment for those parents.

Finally, it is hoped that the project will stimulate clinical and research interest with respect to the impact of childhood trauma on couple relationships. This interest will contribute to a greater social, theoretical, and clinical awareness of how childhood trauma impacts couple relationships. Identification of and knowledge about the impacts of their traumatic pasts on their couple relationship will provide a supportive and healing context for couples to understand and engage in the process of recovery.
References


