



## Associations between sexual abuse and family conflict/violence, self-injurious behavior, and substance use: The mediating role of depressed mood and anger<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To examine whether depressed mood and anger mediate the effects of sexual abuse and family conflict/violence on self-injurious behavior and substance use.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional national survey was conducted including 9,085 16–19 year old students attending all high schools in Iceland in 2004. Participants reported frequency of sexual abuse, family conflict/violence, self-injurious behavior, substance use, depressed mood, and anger.

**Results:** Sexual abuse and family conflict/violence had direct effects on self-injurious behavior and substance use among both genders, when controlling for age, family structure, parental education, anger, and depressed mood. More importantly, the indirect effects of sexual abuse and family conflict/violence on self-injurious behavior among both males and females were twice as strong through depressed mood as through anger, while the indirect effects of sexual abuse and family conflict/violence on substance use were only significant through anger.

**Conclusions:** These results indicate that in cases of sexual abuse and family conflict/violence, substance use is similar to externalizing behavior, where anger seems to be a key mediating variable, opposed to internalizing behavior such as self-injurious behavior, where depressed mood is a more critical mediator.

**Practice implications:** Practical implications highlight the importance of focusing on a range of emotions, including depressed mood and anger, when working with stressed adolescents in prevention and treatment programs for self-injurious behavior and substance use.

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### Introduction

Child abuse and family conflict have turned out to be salient risk factors for emotional and behavioral problems among children and adolescents (Haggerty, Sherrod, Garmezy, & Rutter, 1996; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2006). Being exposed

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to sexual abuse, family conflict, and violence has for example been linked to symptoms of depression (Branje, van Doorn, van der Valk, & Meeus, 2009; Kendler, Kuhn, & Prescott, 2004; Schraedley, Gotlib, & Hayward, 1999; Turner et al., 2006) and anger and aggression (Dilillo, Tremblay, & Peterson, 2000; Turner et al., 2006). Among behavioral problems identified are self-injurious, self-harming, and suicidal behaviors (Crowell et al., 2008; Gladstone et al., 2004; Martin, 1996; Weierich & Nock, 2008), and multiple use of drugs (Harrison, Fulkerson, & Beebe, 1997; Nelson et al., 2006).

Recently, it has been suggested that depression and posttraumatic stress disorder may be important mediators in the relationship between sexual abuse and self-injurious behavior (Klonsky & Moyer, 2008; Weierich & Nock, 2008). Within the criminological literature, negative emotional reactions to stressful life experiences have similarly been hypothesized to explain delinquent behavior among adolescents (Agnew, 1992). Accordingly, adolescents who experience stressful life events may experience negative emotional reactions, which can lead to desperate avoidance or anger-based delinquency (Agnew, 1992, 2006). Agnew (2006) has argued that it is likely that particular emotional states, such as anger and depressed mood, are especially conducive to producing certain types of delinquent behavior among stressed adolescents. A recent study among sexual abuse victims has supported this suggestion (Sigfusdottir, Asgeirsdottir, Gudjonsson, & Sigurdsson, 2008) by indicating that anger was a more critical mediating variable between sexual abuse and externalizing problems of delinquency while depressed mood was a more critical mediator in the relationship between sexual abuse and internalizing problems of suicidal behavior.

Other studies have suggested that by engaging in suicidal and self-injurious behaviors individuals intend to alleviate their negative emotions (Brown, Comtois, & Linehan, 2002). Although depressed mood may be of special importance in predicting both types of internalizing behaviors, results have indicated that anger expression and self-punishment may play a more salient role when predicting non-suicidal self-injury than suicidal behaviors (Brown et al., 2002). The mediating role of depressed mood and anger in the relationship between stressful life events and self-injurious behaviors has not yet been tested.

Substance use has been categorized as an internalizing or self-directed form of delinquent behavior within the criminological literature (Agnew, 1992, 2006; Jang & Johnson, 2003) but as an externalizing behavioral problem within the psychological literature (Achenbach, 1999; Brack, Brack, & Orr, 1994). A number of studies have revealed an association between stress, depression, and alcohol use and illicit drug use (Alva, 1995; Ayerst, 1999; Barnett, Duggan, Wilson, & Joffe, 1995; Hussong & Chassin, 1993; Jang & Johnson, 2003). However, studies have also suggested that anger or aggression may be more important predictors of alcohol and drug use than depressed mood (Pardini, Lochman, & Wells, 2004; Swaim, Oetting, Edwards, & Beauvais, 1989). A prospective study showed that while depressed mood and anger co-occurred to some extent, when both emotional reactions were included in the same model, anger predicted the start of alcohol use among males but depressed mood did not predict alcohol use (Pardini et al., 2004). Similarly, a recent comprehensive longitudinal study indicated that externalizing but not internalizing problems had both proximal and lagged within-person effects on alcohol use among adolescents living in high-risk family context (Hussong et al., 2008). In line with this, substance use may be more correctly categorized as an externalizing than internalizing behavior. The inconsistency that is present in these different studies may in part be due to inadequacies in measurement, where a comprehensive indicator of anger has not been included along with a measure of depressed mood, hence under-estimating the effects of anger on substance use.

In conclusion, the mediating role of depressed mood and anger, in the relationship between stressful experiences and self-injurious behavior and substance use, is unresolved. This paper will address these important issues.

## **The current study**

The main purpose of the present study was to examine the indirect effects of sexual abuse and family conflict/violence on substance use and self-injurious behavior through the emotional reactions of anger and depressed mood. The purpose was also to test whether the relationships under study differed by gender. Based on the literature it was hypothesized that depressed mood, related to sexual abuse and family conflict/violence, would be a stronger predictor of self-injurious behavior than anger. Anger related to sexual abuse and family conflict/violence, however, was hypothesized to be a stronger predictor of substance use than depressed mood. On the bases of research suggesting that females are more likely to internalize their reactions to stressful life events (Cyranski, Frank, Young, & Shear, 2000; Sigfusdottir & Silver, 2009) while males may be more likely to externalize them (Brack et al., 1994; Burns & Katkin, 1993) it was hypothesized that females would be more likely to respond to sexual abuse and family conflict/violence with internalizing problems while males would be more likely to respond to these events with externalizing problems.

When testing the hypotheses we controlled for the potentially confounding influence of age, family structure, and socioeconomic status (Finkelhor, 1993; Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990; Schraedley et al., 1999; Turner et al., 2006).

## **Method**

### *Participants and procedure*

A cross-sectional national survey was conducted including 9,085 16–19 year old students attending all high schools in Iceland on October 20th in 2004. The data represented 67% of all registered students in this age group in Iceland and

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