



Research article

Neuroticism as a risk factor for child abuse in victims of childhood sexual abuse



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ABSTRACT

Findings on the relationship of experienced sexual abuse and abuse behavior in adulthood are ambiguous. However, associations between experienced abuse and neuroticism as well as between neuroticism and active child abuse have been reported repeatedly. In our study, we compared pedosexual child abusers with consumers of internet child pornography and control subjects with adult-sexual preference with regard to traumatic childhood experience (Childhood Trauma Questionnaire, CTQ), personality traits (NEO – Personality Inventory – Revised, NEO-PI-R), and sexual abnormalities (Multiphasic Sex Inventory, MSI). In an initial analysis, sexual abuse experienced in childhood was not directly linked to sexual abuse behavior in adulthood. However, this relationship was mediated by neuroticism. In a second step, the CTQ scales were conflated and, using a structural equation model, direct links between the overall level of abuse experienced in childhood (generally high CTQ levels) and sexual abuse behavior in adulthood revealed again the mediation by neurotic personality. We conclude that the overall level of abuse experienced in childhood in general, and less sexual abuse experience in particular, modulates the tendency for child sexual abuse behavior in adulthood. Data suggest that, depending on the resilience of an individual, abuse experience during childhood increases the likelihood of developing neurotic personality traits in later life, which are in turn considered to increase the risk of child sexual abuse in child sex offenders.

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1. Introduction

Traumatic life experiences in childhood, as for example physical and emotional abuse, are widespread and have often negative social and health consequences ('World Health Organization: Child and Adolescent Health. Europe.&, 2016). Anda et al. (2005) reported a prevalence of 64% of at least one traumatic childhood experience in an epidemiological US study. With regard to sexual abuse experienced prior to the age of 18 years, a meta-analysis of 65 epidemiological studies across 22 countries showed a prevalence rate of 7.9% in men and 19.7% in women, also pointing out a considerable variance of these rates across studies (Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gómez-Benito, 2009). In addition to acute physical injuries, such traumatic experiences, in particular by sexual abuse, have been associated with grave long-term effects such as memory problems,

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affective symptoms, or behavioral abnormalities, like aggression towards sexual partners (Anda et al., 2005; Browne & Finkelhor, 1987; Glaser, 2000; Mullen et al., 1996).

In Switzerland, in 2015, 1.4% (6756) of all convictions were based on sexually-related offences. 18.2% of these involved sexual acts against children (Art. 187 StGB) ('BFS – Polizeiliche Kriminalstatistik (PKS) 2015', 2016). In the public view, child abuse is often synonymous with pedophilia (Beier, Bosinski, & Loewit, 2005; Braun, Hasebrink, & Huxoll, 2003; Bundschuh, 2001; Seto, 2008). However, only 12–20% of sexual crimes against children are actually committed by pedosexual perpetrators (American Psychiatric Association, 1999). Nevertheless, pedophilic preference needs to be considered as an important risk factor for repeated child abuse (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). The recurrence rate for sex crimes committed by pedosexual perpetrators is high: in homosexual pedophilia, the rate is over 50%; in heterosexual pedophilia, the rate is between 25% and 50% (Nedopil, 2010).

A prominent theory on child abuse is the presumption that especially men who were victims of sexual abuse in childhood show a higher risk of sexually abusing children themselves (Glasser et al., 2001; Seto, 2008). Several studies found evidence that experiencing sexual abuse in childhood is a risk factor for active child abuse in later life, both in adolescent and adult child abusers (Babchishin, Hanson, & Hermann, 2011; Jespersen, Lalumière, & Seto, 2009; Seto & Lalumière, 2010; Whitaker et al., 2008). This is contrasted by a prospective epidemiological study, which could not identify sexual abuse experience as a predictor for later child abuse (Leach, Stewart, & Smallbone, 2016). Also, with regard to pedophilic child abusers, previous results do not allow a reliable conclusion about how experienced sexual abuse in childhood relates to active pedosexual abuse behavior in later life (Jespersen et al., 2009). Thus, previous findings on the relationship between experienced sexual abuse in childhood and child sexual abuse behavior in adulthood are ambiguous. Nevertheless, it has repeatedly been shown that the experience of child abuse has long-term and far-reaching effects on victims (Anda et al., 2005; Browne & Finkelhor, 1987; Glaser, 2000; Mullen et al., 1996).

For instance, previous studies have provided some evidence for an impact of sexual abuse experienced in childhood on the development of the victim's personality (Allen & Lauterbach, 2007; Becerra-García, García-León, Muela-Martínez, & Egan, 2013; Rogosch & Cicchetti, 2004). In particular, the experience of sexual abuse in childhood is associated with higher levels of neuroticism (Gamble et al., 2006; Kendler et al., 2006; Roy, 2002). In his personality model, Hans Jürgen Eysenck conceptualized neuroticism as the lack of emotional stability, characterized by anxiety, low self-esteem, and sensitivity, as well as nervousness and restlessness (Eysenck, 1950). The experience of sexual abuse in childhood might be more devastating if, due to insufficient resilience, physical and social resources are limited, which in turn can impair the development of adequate resilience (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005; Bowen et al., 2008; Edwards, Sakasa, & Van Wyk, 2005).

Of importance, neuroticism has in turn been associated with active child abuse: Dennison, Stough, and Birgden (2001) and Becerra-García et al. (2013) reported higher neuroticism levels in convicted child abusers compared to a control group of non-offenders. Egan, Kavanagh, and Blair (2005) showed a positive correlation of increased neuroticism levels with the presence of thoughts approving sexual acts involving children in child abusers. In addition, the average neuroticism levels for child abusers determined in this study were higher compared to normative values according to the personality test applied. Previous studies, however, often did not clearly differentiate between child abusers with and without pedophilic sexual orientation. Only Wilson and Cox (1983) specified the sample and examined 77 pedophilic men, which had not yet necessarily become criminal offenders. The pedophilic men showed higher neuroticism levels compared to the male adult sexual control group.

These findings led us to the consideration that the diverging results in the literature of how experienced sexual abuse during childhood relates to own active sexual child abuse behavior might possibly be explained by a mediating influence of a person's neurotic trait. The aim of this study was to examine the influence of neuroticism on the link of sexual abuse experience and sexual abuse behavior in pedosexual child abusers. To our knowledge this triadic interplay has not been investigated in previous studies.

Our hypothesis was that the relation between experienced sexual abuse and sexual child abuse in male pedosexual sex offenders is more likely to become apparent if the experience of abuse contributes to a neurotic personality development. To test this assumed relation, the data of adult male pedosexual sex offenders were compared to an adult heterosexual non-offending control group, as well as to a group of convicted child pornography consumers without sexual acts committed against children. The postulated relations between the three factors (experienced child abuse, neuroticism, active child abuse) were tested on the basis of a mediation analysis.

The data reported here originate from the Basel MIPS study (Measurable Indicators of Pedosexual Offenders), which intended to psychologically, neuropsychologically, and electrophysiologically differentiate child abusers with pedophilic responsiveness (Child Sexual Assaulters, CSA) and child pornography consumers without child contact (Child Sexual Exploitation Material, CSEM, users) from a non-offending heterosexual control group (Controls, CTL).

2. Method

2.1. Study participants

The sample consisted of $n = 22$ CSA, $n = 21$ CSEM and $n = 23$ CTL. Due to subsequent exclusions from the study, in case of detected organic brain deficits as well as missing information in the individual tests, the descriptive results reported here refer to a sample of $n = 22$ CSA, $n = 20$ CSEM and $n = 21$ CTL, and for the mediation and structural equation models to a

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