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Maladaptive schemas as mediators of the relationship between previous victimizations in the family and dating violence victimization in adolescents

Esther Calvete^{a,*}, Manuel Gámez-Guadix^b, Liria Fernández-Gonzalez^a, Izaskun Orue^a, Erika Borrajo^a

^a University of Deusto, Spain

^b Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether exposure to family violence, both in the form of direct victimization and witnessing violence, predicted dating violence victimization in adolescents through maladaptive schemas. A sample of 933 adolescents (445 boys and 488 girls), aged between 13 and 18 ($M = 15.10$), participated in a three-year longitudinal study. They completed measures of exposure to family violence, maladaptive schemas of disconnection/rejection, and dating violence victimization. The findings indicate that witnessing family violence predicts the increase of dating violence victimization over time, through the mediation of maladaptive schemas in girls, but not in boys. Direct victimization in the family predicts dating violence victimization directly, without the mediation of schemas. In addition, maladaptive schemas contribute to the perpetuation of dating violence victimization over time. These findings provide new opportunities for preventive interventions, as maladaptive schemas can be modified.

Dating violence victimization in adolescents is a highly prevalent problem. A recent meta-analytic review indicated an overall prevalence of 20% for physical dating violence and 9% for sexual dating violence (Wincentak, Connolly, & Card, 2017). The same review revealed that there were no gender differences in physical victimization (21% boys and girls) but that the girls experienced higher rates of sexual victimization (14% vs. 8%). Dating violence victimization has severe outcomes for the victims; therefore, the identification of risk antecedents is important. Experiences within the family play a significant role in how adolescents relate to others. The model of the intergenerational transmission of violence proposes that intimate partner violence is influenced in part by exposure to violence in the family of origin (Debnam, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2016; Hamby, Finkelhor, & Turner, 2012; O'Leary, 1988). This approach is mainly based on the theoretical principles of social learning theory which holds that behaviors are learned from observation and imitation of significant others (Bandura, 1977).

A number of longitudinal studies have supported that adolescents who have been victims of family abuse are at a higher risk of also becoming victims of dating violence (Cascardi, 2016; Foshee, Benefield, Ennett, Bauman, & Suchindran, 2004; Gómez, 2011; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2014). For instance, in a sample of high school students from North Carolina, Foshee et al. (2004) found that being hit by an adult with the intention of harm was one of the most consistent predictors of serious physical dating victimization. Likewise, having been exposed to violence at home by witnessing violence between parents has also been found to predict dating

* Corresponding author at: Department of Personality, Psychological Assessment and Treatment, University of Deusto, Avenida de las Universidades, 24, 48007, Bilbao, Spain.

E-mail address: esther.calvete@deusto.es (E. Calvete).

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violence victimization (Cascardi, 2016; Ehrensaft et al., 2003).

Results from research on gender differences in the association between victimization at home and dating violence victimization are mixed. Whereas some studies find that child abuse is associated with dating violence victimization both in boys and girls (Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Foshee et al., 2004; Gómez, 2011; Wekerle et al., 2009; Widom et al., 2014), other studies' findings suggest that the pathways from exposure to family violence to subsequent dating violence victimization could be stronger for girls. For instance, Marshall and Rose (1988) found that, for women but not for men, experiencing abuse as a child significantly predicted dating violence victimization. In another study, childhood abuse was associated with the likelihood of dating violence victimization among females but not males (Gover, Kaukinen, & Fox, 2008). Moreover, results from a recent meta-analytic review indicate that the relationship between experiencing family-of-origin violence and subsequent intimate partner violence victimization is significantly stronger for females than for males (Smith-Marek et al., 2015).

1. Early maladaptive schemas as mediating mechanisms of re-victimization

An unresolved issue is the mechanisms involved in the perpetuation of victimization and/or re-victimization. Several studies have examined the role of the acceptance of violence as a mediating mechanism (Karlsson, Temple, Weston, & Le, 2016; Reyes et al., 2015). When adolescents experience child abuse or observe a parent being subjected to violence by an intimate partner, they may learn to expect and accept victimization in their own dating relationships (Cascardi, 2016). Several cross-sectional studies have indicated that the acceptance of violence contributes to explaining the association between exposure to family violence and victimization in the dating relationships (Allwood & Bell, 2008; Clarey, Hokoda, & Ulloa, 2010), and longitudinal studies have provided partial evidence for this mechanism (Karlsson et al., 2016).

The schema therapy (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003) presents a theoretical model of the role that early maladaptive schemas exert in emotional and behavioral problems, which provides another explanation to understand the perpetuation of victimization. Early maladaptive schemas are the central concept of schema therapy. They are described as “broad, dysfunctional and pervasive patterns, consisting of memories, emotions, cognitions, and bodily sensations about oneself and one's relationships with others, developed in childhood or adolescence and elaborated throughout one's lifetime” (Young et al., 2003, p. 7). According to the model, there are several schema domains, depending on the child's need that was not adequately satisfied by caregivers. One of these schema domains, the disconnection/rejection domain, is particularly relevant in the context of victimization (Calvete, 2014). The disconnection and rejection domain includes schemas involving the expectation that one's needs for security, acceptance and respect will not be predictably fulfilled (e.g., mistrust, abandonment, emotional privation, and defectiveness schemas).

Although the above schemas are very negative, they are very resistant to change and tend to perpetuate themselves over time (Rijkeboer, van den Bergh, & Van den Bout, 2005; Riso et al., 2006). Maladaptive schemas fight for survival because of the human need for consistency. According to Young et al. (2003), people adopt inappropriate coping styles in an attempt to deal with their schemas and avoid the negative emotions that they generate. Inappropriate coping contributes to the perpetuation of the schemas. In particular, the model proposes several forms of coping that people can use to manage their negative schemas. One of them is particularly relevant in the context of victimization, and consists of the maintenance of the schemas. Maintenance of schemas is characterized by cognitive distortions and maladaptive behaviors that reinforce and perpetuate the schemas. In this way, for example, an adolescent with the mistrust schema, which consists of the belief that other people will hurt him/her intentionally, could more easily initiate relationships with abusers. The experience in the abusive relationship, in turn, would contribute to perpetuating the belief that people are abusive and intentionally harm other people. Similarly, a person with the emotional deprivation schema, which consists of the feeling that other people are not available for providing the love and care we need, could join cold and hostile people who provide little affection.

The potential role of maladaptive schemas in the intergenerational transmission of victimization is consistent with the concept of target vulnerability, which was proposed by Finkelhor and Asdigian (1996) to explain that some characteristics may make an individual more susceptible to victimization. Maladaptive schemas consisting of feelings of defectiveness and expectations of being rejected and abused by others could lead adolescents to appear weak and become a more likely target for abuse in romantic relationships (Brooks-Russell, Foshee, & Ennett, 2013). Furthermore, maladaptive schemas are highly associated with psychological distress, which could also contribute to increase the likelihood of victimization. This mechanism would be consistent with Cascardi (2016) study, in which psychological distress mediated between exposure to violence at home and dating violence victimization in a sample of female adolescents.

Applying the above ideas to the transmission of victimization in the family to victimization in the dating relationship via maladaptive schemas, it can be hypothesized that victimization in the family leads to the development of the disconnection/rejection schemas and that these, in turn, increase the risk of future victimization, because the schemas can be perpetuated through the choice of abusive partners, being the target of abusive partners, or staying in abusive relationships. Regarding the first part of this hypothesis, there are previous studies that have found that the experiences of victimization in the family are associated with certain maladaptive schemas both in samples of adults (e.g., McCarthy & Lumley, 2012; Thimm, 2010; Wright, Crawford, & Del Castillo, 2009) and adolescents (Calvete & Orue, 2013; Muris, 2006). However, one limitation is that most of these studies were cross-sectional. In a longitudinal study with adolescents, Calvete (2014) found that, although emotional abuse by parents was cross-sectionally associated with maladaptive schemas, the predictive relationship was not statistically significant. Nevertheless, this study focused on the form of direct victimization of emotional abuse, but did not evaluate the circumstance of having witnessed domestic violence. In a later study with adolescents, it was found that a composite measure including both direct and indirect victimization at home predicted a worsening of the disconnection/rejection schema domain one year later (Calvete, Fernández-González, Orue, &

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