Self-Confidence as a Mediator of the Effect of Parental Abuse on Premarital Couple Satisfaction

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Abstract

This study investigates the hypothesis that experience of parental abuse in the family of origin is associated with subsequent premarital relationship difficulties in adulthood, and that this effect is mediated in part by low self-confidence. The participants were 520 Australian heterosexual couples participating in the PREPARE premarital program before their marriage. The PREPARE Inventory (Olson, 1996) provided measures of couple relationship satisfaction and individual levels of self-confidence, experience of parental abuse and idealistic distortion. Multiple regression analyses indicated that, independent of idealistic distortion, female experience of parental abuse was associated with couple dissatisfaction, and that low self-confidence was a mediator of this effect. This effect was not evident in the male data, perhaps largely due to the strong influence of idealistic distortion.

Keywords: *Parental Abuse; Self-confidence; Premarital Satisfaction*

Introduction

This study is concerned with the possibility that experience of parental abuse in the family of origin is associated with subsequent premarital relationship difficulties in adulthood, and that this effect is, in part, mediated by low self-confidence. It is a well-established finding that experience of parental abuse in the family of origin may contribute to long-term difficulties of personal adjustment (Margolin & Gordis, 2000). A study of college students in the United States indicated that family of origin variables (including experience of parental physical, emotional and sexual abuse) explained more than 50% of female and 25% of male variance in participants' current general psychological distress (Melchert, 2000).

Furthermore, many victims of abuse develop difficulties associated with self-concept, such as low self-esteem (Oates, Forest & Peacock, 1985) or dealing with self-criticism (Thomas, 2003). A review of 45 studies concluded that child sexual abuse has been shown to be frequently associated with low self-esteem (Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993) an association also reported in a recent study of children and adolescents (Feiring, Taska, & Lewis, 2002). However, it should be noted that a significant association has not always been found and the effect may be influenced by many other variables associated with the nature and severity of the abuse, age and gender of the victim, and factors associated with the discovery of the abuse (Kendall-Tackett, et al., 1993).

Physical abuse and emotional abuse by parents have also been reported to be associated with low self-esteem in children (Cerzo-Jimenez & Frias, 1994) and also in adult women (Stein, Burden, & Nyamthi, 2002).

This link between parental abuse and personal difficulties may be extended to include interpersonal difficulties. A common basis for this view is adult attachment theory, which regards the childhood experience of parental abuse as threatening the security of the attachment to parents and extending to destabilise subsequent views of self and significant others in adult life (Bartholomew, 1990). A number of recent studies provide evidence that parental abuse is related to general interpersonal difficulties (DiLallo, 2001; McCarthy & Taylor, 1999), risk of violence to and from an adult partner (Ehrenshaft, Cohen, Brown, Smailes, Chen, & Johnson, 2003), relationship aggression in dating relationships (Murphy & Blumenthal, 2000), and reduced marital happiness (Olson & Olson, 2000).

Given the evidence that parental abuse increases the risk of damage to the self-concept and to subsequent adult relationships, and if it can be shown that difficulties associated with the self-concept are linked to interpersonal difficulties, then it would seem reasonable to regard variables such as low self-esteem or low self-confidence as possible mediators of the effect of parental abuse on relationship satisfaction.

Support for this view is contained in a review of recent North American research that revealed highly satisfied married couples to be mutually higher in self-confidence (a specific aspect of general self-esteem) compared to dissatisfied couples (Olson & DeFrain, 1997). Also, Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, and Kusche (2002) examined how the need for acceptance might constrain people with low self-esteem as they seek to protect their relationships in the face of perceived difficulties with their partner. Having assessed participants' levels of self-esteem using a self-report scale, they led participants to believe that their

partner perceived a problem in their relationship. They then measured perceptions of the partner's acceptance, partner enhancement, and closeness. Low self esteem participants tended to read too much into problems, seeing them as a sign that their partner's affections and commitment might be waning, and then tended to derogate their partner and to reduce closeness. High self-esteem participants, being less sensitive to rejection, tended to affirm their partner in the face of threat.

Further support for linking self-esteem issues and relationship dissatisfaction may be found in a recent study reported by Murray, Griffin, Rose, and Bellavia (2003) in which sensitivity to self-esteem issues relating to perceptions of rejection were shown to be associated with deterioration in relationship satisfaction in married and cohabiting couples.

Thus, the purpose of the present study is to explore the possibility that self-esteem (in particular, self-confidence) is a mediator of the effect of past parental abuse on present couple satisfaction in a sample of Australian premarital couples. Premarital couples were chosen as the focus of the study so as to investigate whether there are already early indications of relationship distress associated with the experience of parental abuse, even for couples on the threshold of their marriage. The hypothesis is that individual experience of parental abuse is associated with couple dissatisfaction, and that low self-confidence is a mediator of this effect.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 520 heterosexual premarital couples, who were an anonymous random sample of couples participating in the PREPARE marital preparation program throughout Australia early in 2001. This program involves a series of feedback sessions facilitated by couples' responses to a relationship assessment inventory called PREPARE (VERSION 2000). This inventory is detailed below. In the 2000-2001 financial year 5,890 Australian couples participated in this premarital program.

This sample is not representative of all marrying couples since it consists of couples who participated in the PREPARE program as a means of premarital preparation. Their reasons and motivations for becoming involved were varied. Some did so because a marriage celebrant offered them the program and they chose to take up the offer. Others sought preparation from an educator, counsellor or pastor because they were enthusiastic and committed to making a strong start to marriage and others because they had uncertainties and

concerns about marriage. Approximately 45% of the 520 couples planned to marry within 2 months of taking PREPARE, 40% within 3 to 6 months, 11% between 7-12 months and the remainder more than 12 months after taking PREPARE.

The sample was diverse, as indicated by the descriptive statistics for the demographic variables detailed in Table 1. Most of the couples described themselves as single and never married (95% of the women and 93% of the men). In general, the couples tended to be young (79% are aged 30 or less) and well educated (69.5% have tertiary education experience). Most described their ethnicity as Australian (83%) and very few were unskilled or unemployed. They resided across all States and Territories of Australia (there were also a small number of New Zealand couples) and resided in a range of rural and urban settings. Just over 56% of these couples were cohabiting before their marriage, which may be taken to indicate that there was no strong conservative or religious bias in the sample.

Table 1: Sample characteristics.

Variable	Males	Females
Age		
Less than 25 years	35.8%	54.0%
26-30 years	39.6%	28.7%
31-35 years	16.0%	14.0%
36 or older	8.6%	3.3%
Education		
Completed tertiary	42.7%	49.4%
Some tertiary	22.9%	24.0%
Finished secondary	20.6%	15.6%
Some secondary	13.8%	11.0%
Occupation		
Clerical, sales, technician	19.8%	33.0%
Executive, doctor, lawyer	12.9%	7.8%
Manager, teacher, nurse	14.8%	25.6%
Skilled, farmer, student	34.0%	12.3%
Unskilled, unemployed	2.5%	1.9%
Other	16.0%	19.4%
Residence		
Rural	12.0%	10.8%
Town	19.6%	22.8%
Small city	18.8%	19.5%
Large city	49.6%	46.9%
Parents' Relationship		
Intact	74.2%	71.7%
Separated/divorced	14.8%	19.8%
Deceased (one or both)	11.0%	8.5%

Table 1: Sample characteristics (continued).

Variable	Males	Females
Current living arrangement		
Alone	6.9%	12.7%
With partner	56.2%	56.2%
With parents	26.3%	19.4%
With others	10.4%	11.3%
Ethnicity		
Australian	80.2%	86.0%
Asian	2.7%	3.8%
Anglo-European	10.4%	5.0%
Other	6.7%	5.2%

N = 520 couples

Materials

The PREPARE (VERSION 2000) inventory is a 165 item multidimensional Likert scale developed by David Olson (1996) at the University of Minnesota. These dimensions include 8 satisfaction dimensions, 4 personality dimensions (self-confidence, assertiveness, avoidance and dominance), 2 attitudinal dimensions (spiritual beliefs and role relationships) and 4 structural dimensions (closeness and flexibility of family of origin and couple relationship) and a measure of idealistic distortion. Only the satisfaction, self-confidence and idealistic distortion dimensions were of central relevance to the present study. These are listed in Table 2, which also details the test-retest and internal consistency reliability characteristics of these dimensions as they are reported in the PREPARE manual (Olson, 1996). It should be noted that the data files provided by the PREPARE National Office did not contain the raw responses to each item and hence the reliabilities could not be calculated for the present sample. In addition to these 165 items, the inventory also contains a set of 30 demographic and personal background questions, including a set of questions about experience of abuse.

Couple Satisfaction For each of the 8 satisfaction dimensions PREPARE scoring provides individual percentile scores (based on Australian norms) that are corrected for idealistic distortion. The individual responses to the satisfaction items also provide the basis for deriving couple satisfaction scores, these expressing the extent of mutual agreement about the level of satisfaction occurring in their relationship. Couple satisfaction scores indicate agreement about satisfying behaviours and outcomes as expressed by the percentage of response choices within a satisfaction dimension for which the couple give similar positive responses (agreeing or strongly agreeing about an item describing a positive feature of the relationship; or disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with an item describing a negative feature).

Table 2: Internal consistency (IC) and test-retest (TR) reliability indices for relevant PREPARE dimensions.

Dimension	Description	N. Items	IC	TR
Personality Issues	Satisfaction with partner's personality, behaviour, habits and lifestyle.	10	.79	.79
Communication	Satisfaction with the use of open and constructive communication skills.	10	.78	.78
Conflict Resolution	Satisfaction with the way differences are resolved.	10	.81	.80
Financial Management	Satisfaction with the discussion about, and handling of budgets and spending.	10	.75	.81
Leisure Activities	Satisfaction with the use, amount and enjoyment of leisure time.	10	.76	.79
Sexual Relationship	Satisfaction with the expression of affection, approach to birth control and having children.	10	.78	.74
Children and Parenting	Satisfaction with discussion of expectations and attitudes to future parenting.	10	.82	.75
Family and Friends	Satisfaction with handling relationships with one another's family and friends.	10	.79	.78
Self Confidence	Level of confidence with personal abilities and goal attainment potential.	8	.82	-
Idealistic Distortion	The tendency to answer in a socially desirable manner.	7	.84	.79

High scores indicate a high level of agreement between the partners about the presence of satisfying or positive features of their relationship. Low scores indicate that there is little agreement about the presence of such positive features and/or agreement that unsatisfying or negative features are present. There are 8 such couple satisfaction scores per couple. These couple scores provide the basis for the analyses reported in the present study since these scores provide measures of joint levels of relationship satisfaction. Using individual measures of satisfaction may obscure the possibility that, for some couples, one partner's satisfaction may be attained at the expense and dissatisfaction of the other. Hence, couple satisfaction scores are preferred in this study.

Self-Confidence   PREPARE includes 4 sets of items that assess aspects of individual personality. Of these, only the self-confidence dimension involves items that are answered generally rather than with reference to a person's relationship with their partner. The others are assertiveness, avoidance and dominance. The 8 self-confidence items are designed to assess "…a sense of mastery, the general and stable level of confidence a person has in their own abilities and being able to accomplish what they desire (Olson, 1996). Sample items are: "I have a positive attitude about myself" and "I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life" (a reversal item).

Parental Abuse   The focus of the present study is experience of parental abuse. The relevant PREPARE question is: "Were you ever abused (verbally, emotionally, physically or sexually) by your parents?" Response choices are: never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often.   It should be noted that these responses only provide a very general indication of the occurrence of abuse by one or both parents. Detailed specific information (about the exact nature of the abuse and the gender of the abusing parent) is simply not available. There are also similar questions about observing abuse between parents and substance abuse by parents.

Idealistic Distortion   Since reporting of parental abuse, self-confidence and relationship satisfaction are all likely to be influenced by idealism and social desirability, the analyses that follow examine the role of idealistic distortion using the individual scores provided by the 7 items assessing this category that are included in PREPARE. These items, derived from the Marital Conventionalisation Scale (Edmonds, 1967), provide a measure of the tendency to answer in a socially desirable and over-idealised fashion.

Overview of procedure

Couples included in this study had contacted a marriage celebrant or marriage education agency before their marriage and had been offered PREPARE by accredited psychologists, marriage counsellors, marriage educators or pastoral counsellors (who were also marriage celebrants). The inventory was primarily designed to be a diagnostic and facilitative tool for professionals working with couples in marriage preparation, relationship counselling or relationship education programs. There are currently over 6,000 PREPARE-accredited administrators working throughout Australia. Participating couples individually complete the PREPARE inventory under standardised conditions as part of their marriage preparation program. Response sheets are mailed to the national PREPARE scoring centre where they are scanned and computer scored. Computer summaries for each couple are generated and mailed to the PREPARE administrator to facilitate the feedback process. De-identified, randomly selected copies of 520 scored archived data files used to generate these summaries were provided to the author by the PREPARE National Office for this study.

Results

Couple Satisfaction – Data Reduction

In order to reduce the 8 couple satisfaction dimensions to a smaller number of variables (since it is likely that some couple satisfaction dimensions will be highly correlated) a principal components factor analysis was carried out. Two components were extracted. Factor 1 consisted of couple satisfaction in the personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, leisure activities and family and friends dimensions (46.23% of the variance). Factor 2 involved the financial management, sexual relationship and children and parenting dimensions (12.81% of the variance). Factor 1 appears to be a general satisfaction factor whereas Factor 2 is more specific, strongly involving financial, sexual, birth control and parenting issues. Together, Factors 1 and 2 account for 59.04% in the couple satisfaction data.

Descriptive Statistics   The means, standard deviations and ranges for the general and specific couple satisfaction, parental abuse and self-confidence variables are presented in Table 3. The parental abuse responses were coded as "never" = 1, "seldom" = 2, "sometimes" or "often" = 3, since in practice there were no responses in the "very often" and very few in the "often" categories. Of the males: 80.3% reported no abuse, 10.9% responded "seldom", 8.8% responded "sometimes or often". Of the

females: 81% reported no abuse, 9.4% responded "seldom", 9.6% responded "sometimes or often". There was a very wide range of scores for the couple satisfaction and self-confidence variables. There was no indication of a "ceiling effect" for the couple satisfaction or self-confidence variables, but the tendency was for self-confidence to be skewed towards higher scores.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for couple satisfaction and personal variables.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Range	*N*
General Satisfaction	64.16	17.82	12.00-98.00	520
Specific Satisfaction	59.76	15.89	13.33-96.67	520
Male Parental Abuse	1.28	0.62	1-3	512
Male Self-Confidence	79.15	21.16	10-99	520
Female Parental Abuse	1.28	0.63	1-3	510
Female Self-Confidence	76.56	22.78	10-99	520
Male Idealistic Distortion	66.98	17.64	10-99	520
Female Idealistic Distortion	68.13	16.62	25-99	520

Correlations Between Variables In order to test the hypothesis that experience of parental abuse and self-confidence are predictors of couple satisfaction these variables need to be included in an appropriate multiple regression analysis, if the predictors are significantly ($p < .05$) correlated as expected with the couple satisfaction variables. Table 4 presents the correlation matrix for these variables. Male and female experience of parental abuse and self-confidence were significantly correlated with general couple satisfaction, but only female parental abuse and male and female self-confidence were significantly associated with specific couple

satisfaction. It is noteworthy that experience of abuse was significantly and negatively associated with self-confidence for females but not for males.

Importantly, idealistic distortion was not significantly correlated with female reports of parental abuse, but it was (negatively) for males. There were also significant but moderate positive relationships between idealistic distortion and couple satisfaction, male self-confidence and female self-confidence. However, partial correlations, in which idealistic distortion was controlled, indicated that the significant associations, though reduced, remained significant between female parental abuse and couple satisfaction (general .18; specific .12), female self-confidence and couple satisfaction (general .28; specific .18) and for male self-confidence and couple satisfaction (general .26; specific .22). However, when idealistic distortion was controlled, neither of the correlations between male parental abuse and couple satisfaction was significant (general -.04; specific -.02).

Regression Analyses

It is clear from the correlations, that after idealistic distortion was controlled, the expected relationship between parental abuse and couple satisfaction was only present in the female data. Hence, the regression analyses were conducted solely on the female data. Since female experience of parental abuse and self-confidence were significantly correlated with couple satisfaction after controlling for idealistic distortion, these were both entered as predictors of couple satisfaction in two regression analyses (one for general couple satisfaction and one for specific couple satisfaction). Idealistic distortion was also included in order to provide a more exact assessment of the contribution of idealistic distortion. The first predictor variable entered was female idealistic distortion, the second was female self-confidence and the third was female experience of parental abuse. This order reflects the increasing magnitude of the correlations between each predictor and the couple satisfaction variables.

Table 4: Correlations between couple satisfaction and personal variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. General Satisfaction	-	.53*	-.09*	.37*	0.19*	.38*	.49*	.46*
2. Specific Satisfaction		-	-.06	.31*	-.14*	.26*	.37*	.33*
3. Male Parental Abuse			-	-.07	.00	.03	-.12*	-.12*
4. Male Self-Confidence				-	-.04	.15*	.30*	.21*
5. Female Parental Abuse					-	-.18*	-.03	-.08
6. Female Self-Confidence						-	-.14	.30*
7. Male Idealistic Distortion							-	.47*
8. Female Idealistic Distortion								-

Note. *$p < .05$

Table 5: Multiple regression analyses with female predictors of couple satisfaction.

Predictors	R^2	Beta	R^2 Change	F Change	p
Predicting General Satisfaction					
Model 1	.215		.215	139.48	<.0001
Female Idealistic Distortion		.46*			
Model 2	.277		.062	43.33	<.0001
Female Idealistic Distortion		.39*			
Female Self-confidence		.26*			
Model 3	.291		.014	9.85	.002
Female Idealistic Distortion		.38*			
Female Self-confidence		.24*			
Female Parental Abuse		-.12**			

Full Model: $R = .54$ $R^2 = .29$

$F (3,509) = 69.22$

$p <. 0001$

	R^2	Beta	R^2 Change	F Change	p
Predicting Specific Satisfaction					
Model 1	.104		.104	58.683	<.0001
Female Idealistic Distortion		.32*			
Model 2	.131		.028	16.237	<.0001
Female Idealistic Distortion		.27*			
Female Self-confidence		.17*			
Model 3	.139		.007	4.307	.038
Female Idealistic Distortion		.27*			
Female Self-confidence		.16*			
Female Parental Abuse		-.09***			

Full Model: $R = .37$ $R^2 = .14$

$F (3,509) = 27.16$

$p < .0001$

Note. $* p < .0001$, $** p < .002$, $p < .038$

The results are presented in Table 5. Both analyses produced highly significant F values, with each predictor providing a significant contribution at each step of the analysis in both areas of satisfaction. The results indicate that females' experience of parental abuse and lower levels of self-confidence and idealistic distortion were significant predictors of lower levels of general and specific couple satisfaction. Together, these predictors accounted for 29% of the common variance for general couple satisfaction and 14% of the common variance for specific couple satisfaction. Experience of parental abuse and self-confidence each contributed significantly to this effect independently of the effect of idealistic distortion.

Self-confidence as a Mediating Variable

The beta coefficients for the relationships between female parental abuse, female self-confidence and the two aspects of couple satisfaction, after controlling for idealistic distortion, are detailed in Figure 1. Additionally, to examine the possible role of self-confidence as a mediating variable linking abuse with couple satisfaction, the beta coefficient for parental abuse as a predictor of self-confidence (with idealistic distortion controlled) is also included. This was derived from a multiple regression analysis in which idealistic distortion and parental abuse were entered as predictors of self-confidence (see Table 6).

The relationships between abuse and self-confidence and between self-confidence and couple satisfaction are larger than the direct relationship between abuse and couple satisfaction. This suggests a sequence in which

the effect of abuse on couple satisfaction is partially mediated through an effect of self-confidence. Furthermore, the data fulfill the causal steps method for a test for mediation proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). The first step in this test requires that the initial variable (parental abuse) is a significant predictor of the outcome variable (couple satisfaction). The second step requires that the initial variable (parental abuse) is also a significant predictor of the mediating variable (self-confidence). The third step requires that the mediator (self-confidence) is a significant predictor of the outcome variable (couple satisfaction) when the initial variable (parental abuse) is controlled. The results of the multiple regression analyses summarised in Figure 1 indicate that the requirements for all three steps are met.

Table 6: Multiple regression analysis with female idealistic distortion and female parental abuse as predictors of female self-confidence.

Predictors	Beta	t	p
Female Idealistic Distortion	.28	6.75	<.0001
Female Parental Abuse	-.16	-3.75	<.0001

$R = .33$ $R^2 = .11$
$F (3,509) = 31.90$
$p < .0001$
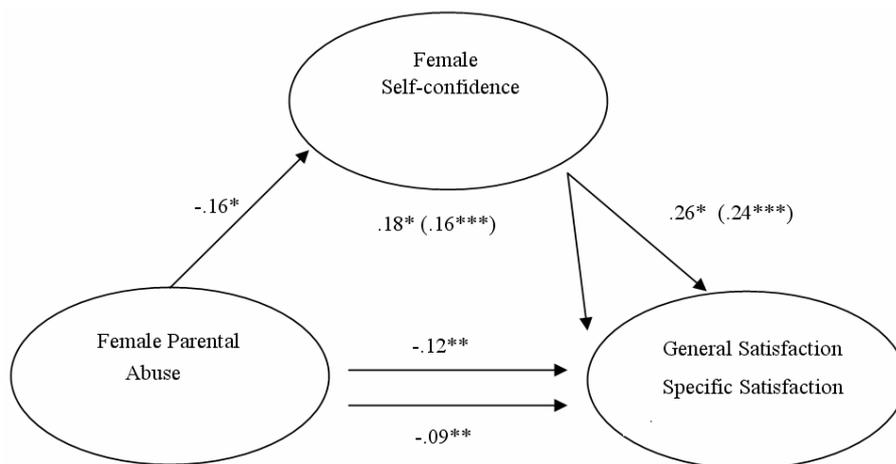
* With Idealistic Distortion controlled.
** With Idealistic Distortion and Self-confidence controlled.
*** With Idealistic Distortion and Parental Abuse controlled.

Figure 1: Significant beta coefficients for parental abuse and self-confidence as associated with general and specific couple satisfaction.

Discussion

The results of the analyses of the female data support the hypothesis that experience of parental abuse is associated with couple dissatisfaction, and that low self-confidence is a mediator of this effect. This finding is independent of the effect of idealistic distortion. However, the analyses of the male data do not support the hypothesis, and it is likely that this is due in part to the significant association between idealistic distortion and reports of parental abuse by the males. This overall outcome suggests that the nature of parental abuse, and the impact of parental abuse on self-confidence and future relationship satisfaction, is different for males and females. This suggestion is consistent with conclusions about gender differences drawn from general reviews in the child abuse literature (Feiring, Taska, & Lewis, 2002); Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993).

This finding has important implications for premarital counselling and premarital education. Couples experiencing relationship difficulties may have experienced parental abuse, particularly the female partner. This experience is worth identifying and exploring through an inventory such as Prepare and/or through discussion of the partners' perceptions of family of origin and its likely effect upon their own relationship.

Since self-confidence may be mediating the effect of parental abuse, it is clear that any relationship enhancement and communication skills training would benefit from complementary individual work that aims to improve levels of personal self-confidence for partners that have been victims of abuse and hence are inhibited and uncertain in their communication with their partner.

There are some limitations associated with the present study, but the exploratory nature of the study should be born in mind. The limitations are mainly associated with the "opportunistic" nature of the sample and the measures adopted in this study. The sample is selective, in that it consists of premarital couples participating in a marriage preparation program. It is possible that these couples were being influenced by a desire to be proactive because they already have some concerns about their relationship or were very idealistic and were enthusiastic to enhance an already very positive relationship. These motives may not be as strongly present in a non-program sample of premarital couples, but they do not represent a form of bias that ensures support for the hypothesis tested in this study, and the support for the study's hypothesis in the female data remains even after idealistic distortion has been controlled.

A further limitation is the test instrument itself. PREPARE (Version 2000) was not designed for the specific purposes of this study. In particular, the item dealing with parental abuse was designed to provide a very general and non-threatening indicator of parental abuse that could provide an initial basis for further elaboration and exploration in a couple's session with their counsellor. Hence, the experience of abuse reported in response to the Prepare item does not provide detailed information about the nature, severity and frequency of the abuse.

However, *post hoc* analyses involving correlations between parental abuse and the other areas of abuse assessed by PREPARE indicated that, in the male and female data respectively, abusive parents were more likely to abuse one another ($r = .56$ and $r = .63$) and to engage in substance abuse ($r = .35$ and $r = .29$). The fact that reporting of parental abuse was significantly correlated with reporting other, more common, areas of abuse within families may be regarded as indicative of the concurrent validity and utility of the parent abuse item as a simple and broad measure of parental abuse in an exploratory study.

Furthermore, the study was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal and hence could not directly assess the developmental sequences between parental abuse, self-confidence and relationship satisfaction. Instead, there was reliance on retrospective self-reports of past abuse and current self-reports of self-confidence and couple satisfaction.

Future research needs to address these sample, measurement and methodological limitations, but the general trends identified in this exploratory study suggest that this is very likely to be a fertile and useful area for such research.

Strengths of the study include the size and demographic diversity of the sample, the inclusion of a measure of idealistic distortion, and the provision of couple satisfaction measures that assess the degree of couple consensus about relationship satisfaction rather than measures of individual satisfaction.

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Research Profile

Alan Craddock's major area of research is in the dynamics of close relationships and the identification of implications and application of findings for the practice of relationship education and counselling in Australia