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EXAMINING A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEXUAL SATISFACTION AND CHILD MALTREATMENT

Amanda Titone

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EXAMINING A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEXUAL SATISFACTION AND
CHILD MALTREATMENT

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Amanda Titone

May 2024

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ABSTRACT

Child maltreatment is prevalent despite extensive research informing interventions. While many risk factors have been identified, exploring additional determinants may improve existing methods or reveal better alternatives. This study's basis was family systems theory, and it utilized the post-positivist paradigm to explore the topics of relationship fulfillment, sexual satisfaction, and parenting. Qualitative interviews with five heterosexual, cisgender parents born between 1971 and 1991 (average age 39-40) revealed four main themes: participants' childhood/parental relationships, history of abusive relationships, current sex life, and role balancing between relationships and parenting. Although limited by a small sample size and a specialized population (social work students at one university), the data suggests a potential link between sexual satisfaction and parenting style. This was particularly evident in unhealthy relationships as participants tended towards harsher discipline or overprotection. Quantitative analysis of larger and more diverse populations is necessary to determine this assumption's validity.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Problem Formulation

Recent reports have shown that CPS agencies receive referrals that involve over 6 million children (about twice the population of Arkansas) nationwide per year (Chahine & Sanders, 2013). Researchers Chahine and Sanders (2013) concluded that underreporting of child abuse makes it difficult to accurately assess the magnitude of the problem, but the amount that has been reported is staggering, nonetheless. This number also seems to be growing, as it was estimated that 1,560 children were killed by abuse in 2009 and this increased to 1,750 by the next year. Child abuse creates macro problems such as fiscal costs, and strains health and welfare systems, in addition to the undeniable trauma inflicted on these children and family members. The social work field has made some progress in eradicating this terrible issue, but some pieces are missing in our understanding of the topic that requires further investigation.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are defined as conditions that create extreme stress, such as witnessing domestic violence or surviving abuse, and can result in numerous problems throughout the lifespan. “Adults with a history of ACEs have significantly higher odds of frequent, primary, emergency, and inpatient care relative to those with zero exposure” (Miller et al., 2020, p. 51).

Miller et al. (2020) reported that depression was more prevalent in welfare homes compared to the national average (23% to 7%), and caregiver's mental health is a determinant of child outcomes. They discussed how the long-term psychological effects of ACEs create a cycle of intergenerational trauma where people who were abused as children become more likely to abuse as parents.

Several risks for abuse have been identified and used to better inform preventative strategies for children and families. These factors involve socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, age, and gender, but the parental relationship is also strongly connected. Emotional regulation (ER) ability and the co-parenting relationship were found to predict successful parenting and abusive discipline was found to be more prevalent with caregivers who struggle with cognitive deficiencies (McElroy & Rodriguez, 2008). According to research by Meston and Trapnell (2005), sexual satisfaction can also be linked to aspects of relationship quality including love, commitment, and stability. More research is necessary to determine if this component of relationships is connected to child maltreatment, but it is logical to assume so since relationship quality and co-parenting are related.

Purpose of the Study

This project focused on the concepts of relational, sexual satisfaction, and parenting, to explore an additional risk factor for child maltreatment. There has been extensive research into the topic of child abuse and neglect, but not

specifically on whether parents' level of sexual satisfaction is directly related. This research focused on participants' personal experiences of sexual and relationship satisfaction and behavior around attentiveness and discipline in their parenting styles to determine if there is justification for further study. Due to the minimal research on a link between these topics, it was useful to employ an open-ended, qualitative framework to determine if there were any common themes among these variables. Interviews gained insight into the participants' views and experiences outside of a structured framework. This minimized the chance that the researcher's subjective assumptions would dictate the direction of the study and allowed for an open exploration.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

One of the primary goals of social work is to help people in need and address problems that lead to social injustices (National Association of Social Workers, 2017). Social workers utilize policies like the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) to ensure that children and families receive ethical and fair treatment and a consistent application of these principles. At a macro level, child welfare systems and similarly focused organizations could incorporate the material from this study into their family treatment models. Current programs, even if already successful, could still improve and benefit from having more information, since early intervention is vital for prevention. Instead of just slowly

evaluating the efficacy of current practices, policy reform would save time and energy with the knowledge of a protective factor for healthy parenting.

Data from this study could also benefit micro social work practice by informing the treatment strategies that professionals use with individuals, couples, and families. If parents' sexual satisfaction can affect their parenting behavior, intensive focus on relationship dysfunction and improving individuals' self-image could help to target this variable. Through more informed practices and policies, social workers could better assist their clients with preventing the mistreatment of their children. Becoming more informed about this risk factor would improve treatment modalities overall and make education on sexuality a method of preventing child abuse.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter two highlights relevant research on child maltreatment and instills the importance of further investigation into this topic. It points to gaps in the literature that led to the formulation of this study and explains the theoretical frameworks that justify the claim that sexual satisfaction may be linked to an abusive parenting style. This chapter is organized into subtopics that introduce the long-term effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACES), risk factors for child abuse, existing interventions, and *family systems theory*, the guiding theoretical concept behind this research project. Its purpose is to point to the logical conclusions that can be drawn from the existing literature and emphasize the importance of attending to this vast societal issue.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

There have been multiple studies regarding the ways that abuse, and the witnessing of it, affect individuals throughout their lifespan. Growing up in a household with domestic violence is considered one of these conditions. “Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) affect neurological, immune, endocrine, and genetic regulatory systems, resulting in negative short- and long-term effects on physical and mental health” (Miller et al., 2020, p. 2). Depression was one of

the five negative health outcomes found in those who met the criteria for having been exposed to ACEs (Miller et al., 2020). Out of the total caregivers studied with children who were later put into the welfare system, 23% were determined to have suffered from clinical depression compared to the national average of 7% within the same age range (McCrae et al., 2018). There is a financial burden associated with ACEs. Miller et al. (2020), reported that the national lifetime cost of one of these cases equals around 124 billion dollars and the healthcare costs for women with a history of physical or sexual abuse were 21% higher than those without.

Abusive parenting significantly inhibits children's capacity to develop at a normal rate, which later affects these individual's ability to successfully raise children themselves. McCrae et al. (2018) study's findings showed a consistent relationship between the mental health of parental figures and the health of their children at preschool, elementary, and adolescent ages. They discussed the likelihood of an intergenerational pattern of abuse that stems from subjection to adverse childhood experiences. Zhang et al. (2022) referenced extensive literature on child maltreatment victims which proved they are significantly more likely to commit acts of maltreatment after becoming parents.

Risk Factors

Identifying risk factors for child maltreatment helps to better explain the characteristics of perpetrators and distinguish which children and families are in

danger. It was discovered that parents who mistreat their children often have limited parenting skills, unstable households, extreme financial hardships, and domestic violence in the home. Abuse resulting in fatality often occurs in families that had previously been referred to the welfare system (Douglas & Gushwa, 2019). Parents who physically abuse their children have unrealistic expectations about the child's ability level and capability to control themselves, which causes them to believe that he or she is willfully misbehaving. This could be their reasoning behind reacting with aggression. They also lack empathy and find it difficult to view situations from the perspective of the child. Frustration intolerance has also been linked to the potential to commit abuse and utilize aggressive methods of discipline (McElroy & Rodriguez, 2008).

Some protective factors against child maltreatment are related to the parental relationship and how strong dynamics within this partnership can contribute towards healthy parenting. Allsop et al. (2021) identified a strong link between relational and sexual satisfaction and the positive cognitions that result from these conditions. They also found that empathy was a protective factor to build contentment in relationships that were experiencing short-term dips in sexual satisfaction levels, such as after having children. There has not been much exploration of connections between sexual satisfaction and dysfunctional parenting, but since relationship quality has been linked to both sexual satisfaction and child maltreatment, likely all of these factors are connected in some way.

Established Interventions And Treatment Programs

Early intervention is the best means of preventing child maltreatment and welfare workers advocate for specialized, evidence-based programs for high-risk parents that provide support and parenting skills training. Owens et al. (2019) introduced the Triple P-Positive Parenting program, which dispatches providers to families' homes to train parents on using positive behavior practices. The program is inclusive and widespread as it targets parents who experience challenges at all levels of severity. Utilizing a five-tier structure, the Triple P program allows providers to tailor their interventions for each family and avoid overextending themselves with unnecessary services.

Another noteworthy program is called Boys Town, and it provides a range of services, including in-home interventions and community support, parental training, and outpatient behavioral health programs. Their in-home family services model, like Triple P, offers an evidenced-based training program that promotes parental self-sufficiency and other life skills. Boys Town offers prolonged engagement and connects the family to outside resources and other pro-social support networks (Ingram et al., 2013). Programs like Triple P and Boys Town are integral in promoting healthy and safe familial relationships. These treatments could only be improved with a more complete understanding of all risk factors involved with maltreatment. Improvements in this field could allow for earlier prevention before children can be hurt.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Family systems theory (FST) is the theoretical foundation and rationale for this project. This approach views individuals as interdependent with their family members and it focuses on two measurements, tolerance for individuality and tolerance for intimacy, which are determined by the family's flexibility in its leadership and roles, and the cohesiveness, or emotional bond, of its members. At its core, this theory emphasizes the importance of not viewing the behaviors of an individual in a vacuum, but instead being mindful of their functioning within the entire family network. According to this perspective, child abuse is seen as, "insufficient emotional separation between family members" (MacKay, 2012, p. 236). Bortz et al. (2019) demonstrated how FST can be applied as a framework to related concepts such as attachment theory and Darling and Steinberg's parenting styles. For this reason, *family systems theory* is best suited to explore this project's research focus.

Conclusion

Due to the continued prevalence and extreme consequences of child abuse and neglect, it is vital to investigate any potential risk factors that are currently unexplored. Although there is little research that directly relates sexual satisfaction to dysfunctional parenting, *family systems theory* predicts that these relationships are all connected. The family systems approach supports the idea

that since parents are a significant variable in children's support systems, their intimate relationships and sexual satisfaction will directly affect the parent-child relationship. Previous studies that link relationship satisfaction to both variables further justify the formulation of this research aim.

CHAPTER THREE:

METHODS

Introduction

Chapter three explains the implementation stage of this project including the study design, sampling process, and the data collection procedures and analysis methods. There is a description of the study site which includes the population's demographics, and an explanation for why the sampling method was chosen. Specifics regarding the qualitative interview process, materials used to gather data, and example questions have been listed. Protections that were put in place to protect human subjects, such as confidentiality and avoidance of causing harm, are explained in detail. There is also an outline of the timeline for data collection, recording, and analysis.

Study Design

This study explored themes of sexual satisfaction and parenting behavior, in the hope of starting the process of identifying an additional risk factor for child maltreatment. An exploratory method with a qualitative rather than quantitative design was best suited for this project since there was little precedent of research that tested whether these topics were related to one another. It focused on analyzing the themes pulled from participants' personal experiences to achieve this goal. There were some limitations in the methodological design, mainly

because the study site had few people available. Due to this reduced number of participants, convenience sampling rather than random sampling had to be taken, which made it difficult to draw conclusions that could be replicated and attributed to broader contexts. Language was another factor that could have inhibited diversity because the content of this study was only available in English. Using correct terminology was an important consideration to reduce any stigmatization against gender or sexual preference that might cause students in same-sex relationships to perceive it as biased and therefore avoid participating.

Sampling

This research project was conducted remotely with students from one of the California State Universities. In 2023, the school population was 18,510 students (87% undergraduate and 10% master). Among these students, 61% identified as female while 39% identified as male. The average age of undergraduate students was 23, and 31 for graduate students. The diversity was 69% Hispanic, 11% White, 3% non-resident foreign students, 5% African American, 6% Asian, 2% bi-racial, and 4% unknown. Notably, most of the student body were first-generation college students (79%) and 56% were low-income (Pell Grant recipients).

Students from all social work programs at this school were included in the selection process and were required to be older than 18 years old to participate. They also had to meet certain criteria including experience in a monogamous,

sexually active relationship; therefore, polyamorous identifying students were excluded. There were no restrictions on gender identity or sexual orientation. Since the population size was limited, the best option for participant selection was convenience sampling. This meant that anyone who met the study's requirements and was willing to participate was included. The most ideal method for eliminating sample bias would have been *random sampling*, but despite its limitations, the *convenience sampling* method was determined to be sufficient.

Data Collection and Instruments

Demographic data was gathered using the survey program Qualtrics, and qualitative interviews were conducted using the student researcher's Zoom account. The questions asked were age, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, and number of children. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions that explored the topics of sexual satisfaction and parenting style. Some example questions asked were: "How did you view discipline and autonomy granting when in sexually satisfied or unsatisfied relationships?", "In what ways did the birth of your child affect intimacy and the relationship with your partner?", and "How did you manage the different roles and expectations of parent and partner?".

Procedures

This study was designed to be entirely remote. Recruitment emails were sent using the school's secure email server, and all direct communication with students took place there as well. The consent form was signed in the Qualtrics demographic survey. Embedded in the email was a link to Calendly so that potential participants could schedule a time to meet over Zoom. The next step was conducting qualitative interviews which lasted twenty minutes on average. The researcher allotted one month for data collection to utilize the convenience sampling method while also adhering to a strict timeline.

Protection of Human Subjects

Since this study focused on sexual satisfaction, a taboo topic that can make people uncomfortable, the recruitment email was designed to minimize harm. It informed potential recruits that there would be questions on this subject, but that there was no obligation to participate. All participants signed a consent form, which emphasized ending the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable. However, there was still a risk that students could have felt pressured to finish the interview even if they did not want to.

Protecting confidentiality was a primary concern as participants revealed sensitive personal information. To ensure it was preserved, communication was restricted to email exchanges on the secure server and interviews using Zoom. During the data collection and analysis phases, names were converted to

identification numbers, and email addresses were omitted. The researcher's computer remained password-protected and was not used by anyone else. Both the university's Zoom account that was used to record and transcribe the interviews, and the Qualtrics account that collected the demographic data were secure. This data was then downloaded into Microsoft Word documents with no identifying information. Everything will be destroyed one year after the collection period.

Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis was performed using the “bottom-up” approach outlined by Morris (2013). The *open coding* of interview narratives was done manually using Microsoft Word software. This consisted of extracting quotations from the transcripts and creating *codes* to describe and pair with them. Some example *codes* were, “controlling sexual relationship” and “high sex drive when single”. For the next stage, *axial coding*, these codes were converted into overarching themes and subthemes. *Selective coding* was the process of refining and organizing data to develop a narrative and draw conclusions (Morris, 2013). Demographic data from Qualtrics such as birth year and marital status was also analyzed.

Summary

Qualitative data was gathered using the post-positivist framework to explore themes involving topics that had not previously been tested for a correlation. Data from studies on child maltreatment and relationship satisfaction prompted the question of whether sexual satisfaction might be linked to parenting style, and if so, could it be a risk factor for abuse or neglect? This project utilized a bottom-up approach for data collection so that reoccurring themes could be extracted from the interviewees' transcripts. Demographic data were also collected to better understand the sample and inform the themes.

CHAPTER FOUR:

RESULTS

Introduction

Chapter four is a report of this study's findings. Themes are identified and relevant quotes from participants are shared to support and clarify these themes. It contains a demographic section, which is an account of the participants' self-reported characteristics and their personal experiences. The next section is subdivided into the major themes and subthemes that emerged from coding the data. It concludes by summarizing these results and connecting them to the research focus.

Presentation of the Findings

Demographics

Participants were recruited during a five-week recruitment period (October 9th, 2023, to November 12th, 2023). The final sample consisted of five participants, 80% (n=4) were female and 20% (n=1) were male. All five of these participants completed a qualitative interview over Zoom and a demographic survey on Qualtrics between October 12th, 2023, to November 3rd, 2023. 100% (n=5) were MSW students, 20% (n=1) were enrolled on campus and 80% (n=4) studied remotely through the Pathway program. To ensure confidentiality during

data analysis they were titled Participants 1-5, and they are referred to in this way throughout this report.

All participants shared three measures in common: all were parents, cis-gendered, and heterosexual. Of the sample, 60% (n=3) were married and 40% (n=2) were not, although one of them was engaged to be married. Participants were born between 1972 to 1991, which made the average age 39-40 years old depending on birth month and day. The group identified as three distinct races: 20% (n=1) were White/Caucasian, 60% (n=3) were Hispanic/Latino, and 20% (n=1) were Black American. The average number of children per participant was 2.8 with a range of 1-6 and a median value of 2. The women with 2, 3, and 6 children had them with different fathers, and one was engaged to a man with a child of his own. Noteworthy, was that all women in the study verbalized that they had been in an unhealthy relationship with the father of their first-born and were no longer with that person.

Theme 1: Relationship with Parents

The first theme identified during data coding was the participants' relationship with their parents. Although the study's primary focus was on the parenting style of the participants themselves, their relationship with their parents and the parenting style in which they were raised became an important theme for the research. Two subthemes also emerged: non-traditional family structure during childhood and authoritarian disciplinarians. Nuclear families (biological mother and father as guardians) are often considered the societal norm, but this

was not the case with the subjects in this study. 80% (n=4) had non-traditional guardians, with 20%, (n=1) in maternally run households, and 20%, (n=1) raised by their grandparents. The remainder, (20% n=1) did not specifically mention family structure.

Participant 1 stated that, "I always just saw her [mother] as like the main person running the home" and that she "...didn't really talk about being with somebody or that a significant other would be like the one to make her happy". Participant 2 reported, "So, since you know my dad wasn't there when I was little, I feel like I have that responsibility of, you know, being there for my kids". Both people were raised by single mothers who demonstrated certain attitudes and behaviors, but they processed this lesson differently. In Participant 1's case, she was taught that single moms are strong and independent women who do not need a partner. Although Participant 2, at times, may have believed this about his mother too, he resolved that he would not be the kind of father that left his family the way his own did. There was a similar subset of participants (20%, n=2) whose grandparents adopted the role of guardian during their childhood. One subject explained, "I was mostly raised by my grandparents... my mom always had to work". She also explained that "[she] didn't want to be like her mom. [She] didn't want to be a single parent".

Domenech Rodriguez et al. (2009) referred to the four parenting styles of authoritarian, permissive, neglectful, and authoritative in terms of responsiveness (warmth), demandingness (parental control), and autonomy granting. "An

authoritarian parenting style is characterized by low responsiveness, high demandingness, and low levels of autonomy granting” (Domenech Roderiguez et al., 2009, p. 196). Many (60%, n=3) participants, in the group with non-traditional families, described their mother as an Authoritarian parent, even if she was not their primary caregiver. Participant 1’s mother had low responsiveness and high demandingness, “She was strict, and she yelled a lot... She would hit us to punish us.” Another participant, whose mother was not their caregiver, described her as highly demanding and reluctant to grant autonomy. She said, “My mom is very strict. She like, had control over everything... I wasn't allowed to do laundry. You can't, like, use a towel without her knowing.” The subtheme of authoritarian parenting within the topic of relationship with parents was evident.

Theme 2: Past Relationships

Experience in a traumatic or abusive relationship was a prevalent theme in the sample population. Every female participant (100%, n=4) revealed that the relationship with the father of their first child had been traumatic in some way. Measuring abusive behavior in relationships is difficult when the definition is unclear or does not include all its forms. The *Power and Control Wheel* was developed to highlight eight equivalent kinds of abuse: “intimidation, emotional abuse, coercion and threats, economic abuse, using male privilege, using children, using isolation, and blaming, denying and minimizing abuse behavior” (Pence & Paymar, 1993, as cited in, Brown, 2016, p.404).

The *Power and Control Wheel*, a guideline for defining abuse, supports the theme that the female participants experienced measurable trauma. Although their experiences differed in some respects, they generally felt trapped without options, financially dependent, unsupported, or abandoned. This behavior became more pronounced after giving birth to their first child. With Participant 1, her partner used isolation and neglect towards her and their children. She expressed, "I felt like he wasn't attentive to the kids, and he wasn't attentive to me." This left her feeling unsupported as a parent and abandoned by her partner. Another participant said, "But I remember like we would be arguing over like, who's gonna like, change the baby". Since her partner struggled to care for himself, she had to perform all familial duties by herself.

One of the participants noticed a change after the birth of her first child, experiencing emotional abuse that escalated into physical violence. She described, "It wasn't violent at that time until I became pregnant with my second child. That's when things really got out of hand." Concurrently, economic abuse and financial dependence on her partner hindered her ability to leave the relationship. She had rationalized, "Okay, it's either their safety or mine, because, at the time, it was more like I depended on him financially." Constant fear of how she would care for herself, and her children resulted in trauma that was slow to heal. It took a long time for her to become willing to trust another man.

Participant 3 minimized her experiences of abuse and trauma by using terminology that continued to downplay her partner's behavior. She explained,

“He could be very verbally aggressive. I’m not gonna say abusive, but verbally aggressive”. Although her perspective is not unique, the *Power and Control Wheel* defines these types of interactions as emotional abuse, not merely aggression. Additionally, his actions should also be interpreted as a pattern of minimizing the abuse. Unfortunately, this behavior escalated as she recalled, “He was like, this close to my face, and I could do nothing but push his face out of my face. And, I remember in that moment, I felt like, this is not safe”. His actions ensured that the only option to care for herself and her children was to run away.

Two participants admitted to changing their parenting style in response to the relationship trauma they experienced. They started to become more protective and hyper-aware of their child’s needs. One claimed, “I was really protective of my son’s emotional well-being”. Another described, “Parenting to make sure that my child at the time wasn’t, like, exposed or hurt or injured in any way. I always made sure that he was safe”. Family systems theorists have found that chronic anxiety occurs when a family member tries to maintain harmony by becoming excessively focused on another’s needs. This dynamic, known as *reciprocal functioning*, results in that person overextending themselves to care for the other, while neglecting their well-being (MacKay, 2012). These mothers resorted to *reciprocal functioning* in response to the abuse by protecting their children at any cost, including their safety.

Theme 3: Views on Sex

Participants discussed their beliefs about sex and intimacy. One person emphasized, “I feel that in a marriage there should be intimacy, there should be respect and communication”. According to another, “It doesn’t have to be sexual. It could be, you know, just spending time together cuddling, watching a movie, snuggling. You know that type of thing”. For someone else, “There’s space for talking about what I need, what you need, what I can give, what you can give, and how we are making each other feel”. A currently single participant described, “If anything, it would be like just for sex. I would finally, like, have sex, and then it would suck, and then I wouldn’t think about it again for like another year, year and a half. So that’s like, been my pattern over the last eight years”.

The relationships of participants changed after they had children. One person attributed this to, “...time consumed with the baby, you know, like with the child or the baby, and also like different schedules”. The progression of another participant’s marriage began, “So like, when we were dating, you know, we were obviously sexually active.” Then, after children, “We weren’t having as much, you know, like interaction as we were before, right? But we didn’t feel like there was pressure because we were still focused on our kid”. Eventually, once the children were older, “We had like no restriction, you know like it was just like when we met and stuff”. In another participant’s marriage, now that the children are all adults, “We try different things. We like to go out on dates. We never had that opportunity.”

Several people shared that, at certain times, sex had become obligatory in their relationship. One man and his wife had struggled to get pregnant. He explained, “It felt at one point like, you know, having intercourse just to kinda like get the job done... We weren’t actually enjoying it to the point that it was just more like- Oh, I have to do this than I want to do this”. Another participant stated, “I feel like there’s something about obligatory intimacy that turns me off. So, if you are making it seem like I have to do something, then it’s almost like... I’m not doing it because you’re telling me to do it”. In her opinion, “It took more for me to be interested because it felt like it was something that was expected”. Another woman shared this same perspective. Sex in her previous relationship, “...wasn’t something that was free. It wasn’t something that was, like, natural to do. It was something that I felt like was obligated. It was like a chore to me”.

Theme 4: Competing Priorities or Roles

Mothers and fathers both undergo an identity transformation following new parenthood as they attempt to reinterpret their sense of self and their roles in the relationship with one another. This can be a challenging time for both people since quality partner time is often reduced due to the re-organization of the family unit (Williamson et al., 2022). According to Williamson et al. (2022), after motherhood, a woman must suddenly face the competing priorities between her child's and her partner's needs. This role transition might include a loss of sexual identity, independent of relationship status, and a change in the dynamics of the romantic relationship for those who are partnered. In one woman’s opinion, “I

think that each of those parts of life require you to assume a role". For her, "It was like I had totally different identities depending on the week... I could almost turn off Mom... and then turn it back on when I was home with my son". The priority of her roles changed, " When I was in the relationship it was a little bit different. I was focused on family and not thinking about anything else. Whereas, when I was single, it was more like a balancing act... sometimes one thing outweighed another".

Fatherhood, according to Renshaw (2005), is a confusing concept for men because society has conveyed conflicting expectations and assumptions about this role. These messages are, "...be a good provider; be an aggressive workplace competitor; be a fearless protector; be wide, gentle and sensitive in difficult times plus be a considerate lover to your children's mother" (Renshaw, 2005, p. 7). A male participant spoke about the roles in his marriage saying, "We had the responsibility of a kid, but we still tried to make time, you know, for ourselves". The challenge was, "...all the surrounding things, you know, like work, and school... We end up like, really tired". It could be, "...really difficult sometimes to manage". While a recent father, he needed to figure out how to still be an attentive partner, successful student, and employee, while navigating a relationship with the new addition to his family.

Single mothers have additional responsibilities and must juggle obligations to their children, their existing individual identity, and career pressures. These stressors and the time demand of motherhood affect their perception of

themselves and can make sexual or romantic relationships incredibly difficult (Williamson et al., 2022). Participant 5 described her life as a single mother, “I work full time, I go to school, and I also do like soccer and basketball, and all this stuff”. So, therefore, “How am I gonna take away time from my kid and my responsibility to go on these dates that are, like, short-lived”. She explained, “To decide to pursue a romantic relationship which, like obviously, he's not involved in it feels like a little guilty”. According to her, “There's no choice, you know like that's time spent away from him”. Williamson et al. (2022) reported that mothers felt pressured to be *good moms*, which left them feeling guilty when this conflicted with their other roles or an identity that did not include their child.

Theme 5: Parenting

The final theme that emerged from participants' data was their style of parenting, independent of what they experienced from their parents. According to McElroy and Rodriguez (2008), parents' use of abusive discipline is connected to their level of frustration tolerance, capacity for empathy, and developmental expectations of their children. Parents in this study described their use of discipline as it related to the satisfaction they were experiencing in relationships at that time. Participants also attributed the successful components of their parenting style to general knowledge about children that was gained through studying social work.

When people were in healthy relationships, they felt better about their parenting compared to the times that they were not supported by their partner.

As one participant stated, “If we’re meeting each other’s needs then we’re happier. You’re not as stressed and you’re not as angry.” Another reflected on the differences in her current relationship compared to the abusive one. She said, “I do feel like my parenting style changed, because before I felt alone and all by myself... so it was very hard. And now, with my husband, I feel like it's totally different, especially because I have somebody who’s supporting what I’m saying. It’s like we’re working as a team instead of against each other.”

Participants who experienced abusive dynamics in previous relationships believed that it later affected their interactions with their children. One woman commented that her views on parenting were shaped by the abuse she experienced. She noticed that with her new partner, “When he became more involved in our lives you could see more of how dominant I was in my parenting style. I was really protective of my son’s emotional well-being.” Their views also differed, “He’s more of a disciplinarian from an old-school perspective... And I’m the opposite. I’m seeking to understand them as individuals... I think we impacted one another in how we parent.”

A participant who reported romantic and sexual satisfaction in his marriage spoke to his philosophy on discipline. He said, “When we do something that we’re not supposed to, there are consequences. Those are gonna be, you know, fixing whatever we broke, cleaning up whatever we do on the floor.” His actions model this humbly, “I try to kind of like stay on his level. And sometimes, I’m like, oh, yeah, I shouldn’t have done that.” He also encourages

independence, “I try to encourage them to do things on their own, you know, before asking me for help.”

Knowledge and skills gained through formal education on healthy parenting and child development were attributed to successful parenting. According to one participant’s opinion, “I feel like it has to do with learning, like being in school and getting educated, and kind of just getting that third perspective of what a healthy parenting style should look like.” Another participant spoke of her social work education, “I kind of have like a clinical perspective now... Let’s teach him coping skills. Let’s pay attention to our bodies so we can figure out what emotion you’re feeling.”

Summary

This chapter reported the results of participants’ demographic data and explained themes discovered during the analysis of the qualitative interviews on sexual satisfaction and parenting. All participants were parents, although not required to be, and social work students. The five major themes that emerged were subjects’ relationship with their childhood guardians, women’s history of an abusive relationship with the father of their child, views on sex and intimacy after parenthood, competing priorities between the roles of parent and partner, and parenting styles. Subthemes within these topics included having non-traditional family structures and authoritarian guardians as children, changes in sexual

relationships after becoming parents, and feelings of sexual obligation with past partners.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study aimed to explore any potential connections between the variables of sexual satisfaction and parenting style, specifically discipline and attentiveness. If participants were to share commonalities between these topics, it could be argued that the level and quality of sexual satisfaction is related to parental behavior and a risk factor for child maltreatment behaviors such as abusive discipline and neglect. Four main themes emerged from the qualitative data: experiences in childhood, abusive relationship dynamics, views on intimacy, competing priorities, and parenting style. This chapter explores these themes as they relate to the study's purpose, and it provides recommendations for future social work research and practice. It includes the limitations that must be considered when analyzing the results of this study.

Discussion

Relationship with Childhood Guardians

Participants' relationships to their families of origin, although not specifically targeted by the study's aim, showed significant trends that are worth mentioning and may justify further exploration. During the interviews, many people discussed their childhood guardians, and two subthemes emerged: non-

traditional family structures and authoritarian parenting. In this study's demographics, the birth years of participants ranged from 1972 to 1991, which corresponds to a dramatic shift in family structure trends in America during this period. According to Casper and Bryson (1998), the U.S. Census Bureau found that in 1970 only 3.2% of children under 18 lived in a household maintained by their grandparents, and by 1997 this had increased to 5.5%. The biggest increase occurred during the 1980s, which is when this set of participants was growing up. Although less than 6% of households during this period matched this trend, 40% of subjects in this study had this experience. This disparity is likely due to the unique characteristics of the population that was studied, but it could be seen as a limitation on external validity.

Both participants raised by single mothers described parenting that fit the description of authoritarian. This parenting style is characterized by a lack of warmth and an expectation that children will strictly adhere to demands without being told why. Authoritarian parenting was also more common in homes with single mothers who emphasized obedience more than other households did (Kelly et al., 1992, as cited in Spera, 2005). It is also noteworthy that both participants who reported to have been raised by single mothers identified as Hispanic/Latino. According to research by Domenech Rodriguez et al. (2009), immigrant Latina mothers emphasized the importance of increased control and monitoring of adolescents as well as low autonomy granting, which matches the authoritarian parenting style that these participants experienced. It is unclear

whether this variable could be related to their sexuality and parenting style as adults, but it was a significant theme identified in the qualitative data.

Abusive Relationships with Child's Father

Every female participant in this study reported being abused by the father of their child at some point in the relationship. Exposure to adverse childhood events (ACEs), such as witnessing domestic violence, has been found to affect the structure and function of children's brains as they develop. This results in dysregulation of the stress response that causes short- and long-term difficulties with immune function and hormone regulation. Those with ACEs have higher odds of experiencing several negative health outcomes in adulthood such as obesity, smoking, asthma, COPD, addictions, depression, and cardiovascular disease. These physical and emotional health challenges act to inhibit healthy functioning in adult relationships (Miller et al., 2020). Additionally, according to McCrae et al. (2018), "Findings show consistent, significant relationships between caregiver health and children's own experience of clustered physical, developmental, and mental health concerns across preschool-age, school-age, and adolescents" (McCrae et. Al, 2018, p. 52). After becoming an adult, children who witnessed domestic violence are likely to have negative effects that could cause them to continue this cycle by abusing their children later in life.

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) has not only been linked to psychological problems for mothers, but exposure to violence also impacts the child's health and development. According to Charles and Perreira (2007), male aggression

often temporarily subsides during their partner's pregnancy, but this decline does not continue post-partum. This trend was mirrored by participants in this study who reported that the abuse was not as evident until after their first child was born. Researchers also designated characteristics that increased this risk including Hispanic identifying, unmarried and cohabiting, less than college-educated, and women whose partners had a history of drug and alcohol abuse. The demographics of women in this study were consistent with these findings. Researchers also found that mothers who were financially dependent on their partners were less likely to leave abusive relationships (Charles & Perriera, 2007). The data suggests that when participants were in coercive and abusive relationships, their relational and sexual satisfaction was low, and they were preoccupied with protecting their children.

Sexuality as Parents

All participants in this study reported that becoming a parent had affected their sexuality. Many researchers have determined that a person's sexual identity changes drastically after parenthood and that women are particularly sensitive to the physical and interpersonal shifts that take place. Regardless of gender, 40-80% of people experienced one or more occurrences of sexual problems, depending on how long they had been parents. For women, common contributing factors were low desire, lack of lubrication, exhaustion, and insecurities, making the post-partum period an overall fragile time in relationships (Rahmani et al., 2023). Data from the present study indicated that women's physical changes

created additional insecurities that affected their sexual identity. When already in abusive relationships, negative body image was perpetuated by their partners and a central focus in the relationship. Feeling emotionally disconnected exacerbated sexual incompatibilities and acted to further reduce their interest in sexual activity.

Even in healthy partnerships, participants reported a natural decline in sexual frequency and the attention they directed toward intimacy with their partner. The data suggested that both men and women underwent this shift during the post-partum period. In one person's account, the relationship was focused almost entirely on parenting until recently, after all the children had become adults. This finding mirrored Allsop et al. (2021), who discovered that when new parents adjusted their behavior during this transition to be more in line with their sexual values, they experienced less relationship distress. In the present study, participants who remained in successful relationships reported a smooth transition through these life stages, as both partners had agreed to place less emphasis on romantic intimacy. Research by Leistner and Mark (2020) stressed, that "positive relational interactions and perceptions have a significant impact on sexual desire and overall relationship well-being for romantic couples" (Leistner & Mark, 2020, p. 269).

Conflicting Identities of Partner and Parent

Men and women both face difficulties transitioning from being solely a romantic partner to incorporating a new parental identity, although each gender

has distinct challenges during this transition. For mothers, internal beliefs and confusing societal expectations create a unique conflict that some researchers have termed, the *Madonna-Whore Dichotomy*, as being a good mother is associated with behaving non-sexually and vice versa (Leistner & Mark, 2023). Women in this study expressed that to be good mothers they had to put their children's needs above their own. A single mother claimed that it was not worth having romantic pursuits until her son was older because it would take attention away from parenting. She felt guilty when going on dates that led nowhere as she could have spent time with him instead. Another noted that when in a relationship she was focused solely on the family and, when single, it became a balancing act to parent without losing her sense of self. As she reflected on single parenting, she commented how bad it sounded that sometimes she had been more focused on her sexual satisfaction. According to Leistner and Mark (2023), research has shown that mothers have specific sexual experiences that set them apart from other women and fathers. The data from this study supports this theory.

Men also receive conflicting narratives regarding what constitutes a successful father and the kind of roles they should play in the family unit. Renshaw (2005) reported that men rarely learn how to give and receive love from their children, nor do they hear about supporting women in more secure mothering. Societal advice is confusing, "be a good provider; be an aggressive workplace competitor; be a fearless protector; be wise, gentle and sensitive in

difficult times plus be a considerate lover to your children's mother" (Renshaw, 2005, p. 7). Although only one father was studied, he emphasized the importance of both being present in his relationship and spending quality time with his children. Because he was not raised by his father, he was motivated to be patient and understanding with his children and engage in honest communication with them. Previous research indicated other fathers shared his attitude as many said, "I am trying to be for my children the father I never had, the father I wish I had when I was growing up" (Renshaw, 2005, p. 7).

Parent-Child Relationship

One theme was the co-parenting relationship, and the data suggested that this affected participants' personal parenting views and behavior. Calabrese and Schoppe-Sullivan (2023) introduced a co-parenting model that defined a high-quality relationship to have, "agreement in parenting goals, high mutual supportiveness and low undermining behavior, effective management of family boundaries and relationships, and satisfaction with the division of parenting responsibilities" (Calabrese & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2023, p. 3835). Participants who had experienced abusive co-parenting relationships compared the differences in their parenting with abusive versus healthy partners. When with unsupportive partners who undermined their decisions and did not equally divide parenting responsibilities, their parenting was characterized by frustration, high discipline, and low autonomy. The data suggested that parenting experience improved in

healthy relationships, and raising children was easier in emotionally supportive partnerships that emphasized teamwork.

Limitations

The most obvious limitation of this project is the small number of participants gathered. Using just one university as the study site and limiting the participant pool to the social work department created conditions that made convenience sampling the most realistic method for selecting subjects. Although many researchers use university students as their population of study, there are clear discrepancies between this group and the nation in general. The age of most college students is under 30, and young people often lack the life experiences that older adults have. Additionally, there are socioeconomic differences that make this population distinct because many people who come from low-income backgrounds cannot take time off work or afford schooling even with financial assistance.

There are differences between students in social work departments and those in other majors. According to a nationwide report by the Council on Social Work Education (2021), 87% of undergraduate and 85% of master's in social work students were female, and the majority in both groups were under 25 years old. The school's statistics in the Fall of 2023 closely resembled the national average as there were 328 female and 68 male students in all social work programs, and the average age was 28 years old. Although the convenience

sampling included all social work programs, every subject who participated was in the MSW program, which had 152 women and 34 men. Likely due to the disproportionate number of women in this discipline, it was difficult to obtain male subjects for this project, meaning that the data mainly reflected the female perspective. For these reasons, it is difficult to predict whether research findings from this small sample of people with unique characteristics can be generalized to a broader population.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

This study obtained qualitative rather than quantitative data because there was so little previous research that investigated a potential relationship between the topics of sexual satisfaction and parenting. Future research should further explore the identified themes using a positivist research design to obtain quantitative data. It is important to separate certain variables such as upbringing and relationship status in future study designs so that correlations and more specific conclusions can be drawn regarding causal relationships. If it can be proven that a parent's level of sexual satisfaction will predict the propensity for committing child maltreatment, this information can be used to improve the interventions used with individuals and families.

Social work research that determines causal relationships and risk factors for child maltreatment can dramatically improve policies and practices in the field at multiple levels. Micro-level practitioners apply this information in their work with

both children and families through individual and group therapy, trauma-informed care, school-based counseling, welfare work, and more. Positive effects on macro systems might include developing successful preventative strategies for families at high risk of maltreatment and creating better interventions to help children who are already experiencing familial abuse. Programs within school and welfare systems can also use knowledge of risk factors in the education of providers and families about warning signs and how to access resources for help.

Conclusions

Family systems theory links all these concepts together with the claim that all familial relationships affect members of the family unit. If the co-parenting dynamic is healthy, it has a positive effect on child development. When exposed to intimate partner violence, children develop negative cognitions that can cause them to become aggressive themselves and perpetuate a cycle of abuse. Previous research has shown that variables such as empathy moderate relationship satisfaction independent of sexual satisfaction and help emotional regulation, which is an important component of successful parenting. Empathy may act as a mediator between sexual satisfaction and emotional regulation and have a positive effect on parenting.

APPENDIX A:
INFORMED CONSENT

PURPOSE: This study aims to explore the themes of relationship satisfaction and parenting. It hopes to contribute to the field of social work and understanding of child welfare.

DESCRIPTION: This study consists of a confidential survey on Qualtrics regarding demographic information and five open-ended questions over a brief Zoom interview.

PARTICIPATION: Participation is completely voluntary, and you may skip questions if you are not comfortable. You are welcome to withdraw from the study at any time.

CONFIDENTIALITY: We will be gathering anonymous data. We will not collect direct identifiers (e.g., name, social security number, contact information). Consequently, the data will not be labeled with any personally identifying information nor a code that the research team can link to any personal identifying information.

DURATION: It will take approximately 15-30 minutes to complete survey and remote interview.

RISKS: Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your participation.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants. However, findings from the study will contribute to our knowledge in this area of research.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Co-PI Amanda Titone at 007732199@coyote.csusb.edu or PI Brooklyn Sapozhnikov Brooklyn.Sapozhnikov@csusb.edu

RESULTS: If you are interested in obtaining the results of this study, please email the researcher.

I have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study. Selecting "yes" means you agree with the information above. Selecting "no" will result in dismissal from your survey participation.

APPENDIX B:
RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Recruitment Email

Hello CSUSB students,

My name is Amanda Titone, and I am an MSW student in the Pathways program. This email is to recruit participants for a remote research study. The purpose of the study is to explore the topics of relationship satisfaction and child maltreatment and to determine if there are any commonalities between them.

Students who are over 18 years old and have experienced a monogamous sexual relationship are invited to participate in a short interview over Zoom. This will take no longer than 30 minutes to complete and students are free to leave at any time. If you meet the requirements and are willing to participate, please respond to this email to discuss the next steps. Thank you for your time.

Amanda Titone
Co-Principal Investigator
007732199@coyote.csusb.edu

Dr. Brooklyn Sapozhnikov
Principal Investigator
Brooklyn.Sapozhnikov@csusb.edu

This study has been approved by the California State University, San Bernardino International Review Board.

IRB-FY2023-188

APPENDIX C:
IRB APPROVAL

IRB #: IRB-FY2023-188

Title: Exploring a relationship between parental sexual satisfaction and child welfare

Creation Date: 1-26-2023

End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Brooklyn Sapozhnikov

Review Board: Main IRB Designated Reviewers for School of Social Work

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Exempt	Decision	Exempt
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Key Study Contacts

Member	Brooklyn Sapozhnikov	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	Brooklyn.Sapozhnikov@csusb.edu
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