



# Childhood Sexual Abuse and the Effects of Relationships Pertaining to Interpersonal Adjustment, Relational Interdependence, and Sympathy

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## Abstract

- There is a lack of research exploring the effects of childhood sexual abuse and its impact on individual characteristics in social relationships in adulthood.
- The current study examined the effect of CSA on relational development, focusing on relational interdependence, sympathy, and interpersonal adjustment.
- The study conducted a secondary analysis of the data from Midlife in the United States (MIDUS Refresher): Biomarker Project, 2012-2016 and focused on a sample of 863 noninstitutionalized adults across the United States.
- Multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to predict interpersonal adjustment, relational interdependence, and sympathy based on childhood sexual abuse, age, sex, and minority status.
- Overall, the results of the study do not support the hypothesis that childhood sexual abuse negatively affects interpersonal adjustment, relational interdependence, and sympathy. However, the study does provide a foundation to address the limitations and gaps for future research.

## Introduction

### Significance of the Study

- Despite evidence supporting the impact of CSA on relational development, less focus has been focused on individual characteristics that contribute to social and relational development such as interpersonal adjustment, relational interdependence, and sympathy.
- All three of these characteristics have an impact on social relationships. While there have been few studies that focus on CSA and interpersonal adjustment, few to no studies review sympathy and relational interdependence.

### Purpose

- The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of CSA on relational development, focusing on relational interdependence, sympathy, and interpersonal adjustment.

### Research Questions

- What is the relationship between childhood sexual abuse and relational interdependence among adults?
- What is the relationship between childhood sexual abuse with sympathy among adults?
- What is the relationship between childhood sexual abuse with adjustment among adults?

### Hypothesis

- Childhood sexual abuse would negatively affect relational interdependence, sympathy, and interpersonal adjustment among adults.

## Literature Review

### Research on Interpersonal Adjustment

- Long-term consequences regarding interpersonal adjustment could be related to the use of threat or force by the perpetrator. The use of threat or force can significantly increase the victims' distress levels, making it one of the most traumatic parts of abuse, which in turn negatively affects the interpersonal adjustment of victims (Bennet, Hughes, & Luke 2000).

### Research on Relational Interdependence and Childhood Sexual Abuse

- Developing a sense of self in social relationships is crucial in the quality of friendships with children. A child's sense of self contributes to how the child thinks, feels, and acts in response to their environment (Kawabata & Nakamura, 2019).

### Sympathy

- Previous research has provided substantial evidence to hypothesize the possible significant relationship between CSA and the development of sympathy among victims of CSA.
- Sympathy promotes prosocial behaviors, while distress impedes it (Trommsdorff et al., 2016). Prosocial behaviors can be promoted through other mishaps that create an emotional response, such as sympathy (Trommsdorff et al., 2016).

### Gaps

- The major gap experienced in the existing literature is the lack of research on the individual social characteristics of interpersonal adjustment, sympathy, and relational interdependence.

## Methods

### Research Design

- The current study is a secondary analysis of the data from Midlife in the United States (MIDUS Refresher): Biomarker Project, 2012-2016.
- The MIDUS Refresher Biomarker Study obtained information from 863 respondents (746 participants were selected from the participants of the main MIDUS Refresher study and, 117 African Americans were from Milwaukee subproject of MIDUS Refresher but this African American sample) did not participate in the main MIDUS Refresher Study Survey.
- Participants of the original MIDUS Refresher Study Survey were recruited through random telephone digit dialing through five metropolitan areas.

### Sample

- The participants were noninstitutionalized adults living in the United States.
- The sample of the study was recruited through random sampling. Researchers conducted random digit dialing across the nation to recruit participants.
- The sample size of the MIDUS Refresher Biomarker Study (Project 4) contains participants from the main sample who completed the MIDUS Refresher Survey Study (MIDUS, 2007).
- The MIDUS Refresher Biomarker Study (Project 4) included a sample of participants from MIDUS Refresher ( $n=746$ ) and African Americans from Milwaukee sub-project ( $n=117$ ).

### Measures

Independent Variable:	Dependent Variable:	Dependent Variable:	Dependent Variable:
Childhood Sexual Abuse	Interpersonal Adjustment	Relational Interdependence	Sympathy
• Self-report questions	• Self-report questions	• Self-report questions	• Self-report questions
• Childhood Trauma Questionnaire-Short Form (CTQ): Sexual Abuse Scale	• Adjustment Scale	• Relational-Interdependent Self Construal Scale	• Sympathy Scale
• 5-point Likert scale	• 7-point Likert scale	• 7-point Likert scale	• 7-point Likert scale

## Results

### Childhood Sexual Abuse and Interpersonal Adjustment

- Relationships among CSA, interpersonal adjustment, interpersonal adjustment, and sympathy were examined using multiple regression.
- The results of the regression equation was not significant ( $F(4, 844)=.562, p=.691$ ) with an  $R^2$  of .003.

Results of Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Relational Characteristics from CSA, Sex, Age, and Minority Status

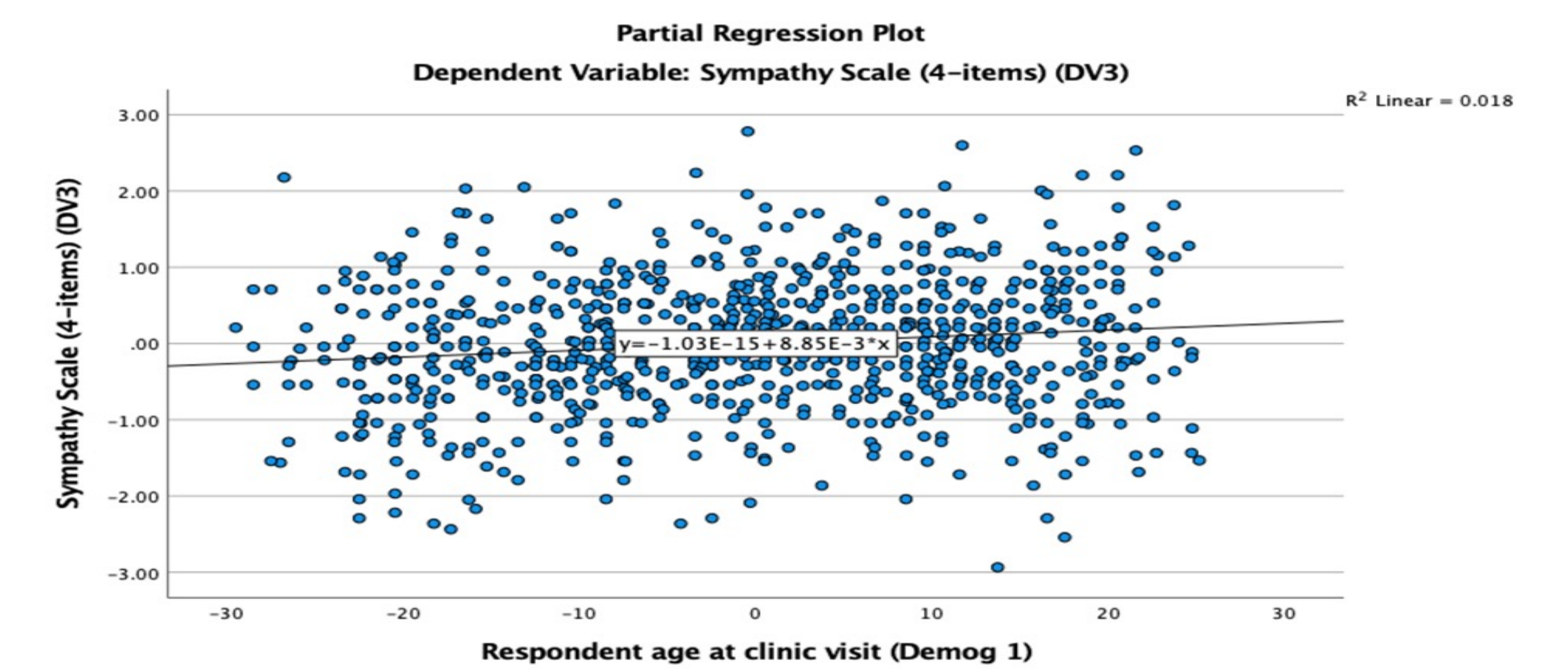
Variable	ANOVA	R <sup>2</sup>	B	SE	Beta	t	Sig.
<b>Interpersonal Adjustment</b>	$F(4, 844)=.562, p=.691$	.003					
Childhood Sexual Abuse			-0.005	0.008	-0.022	-0.614	0.539
Sex			0.075	0.067	0.041	0.002	0.998
Age			5.142E-6	0.002	0.000	1.124	0.262
Minority Status			-0.004	0.072	-0.002	-0.056	0.955
<b>Relational Interdependence</b>	$F(4, 845)=1.431, p=.222$	.007					
Childhood Sexual Abuse			-0.006	0.008	-0.027	-0.760	0.448
Sex			0.021	0.068	0.011	0.314	0.754
Age			-0.003	0.002	-0.043	-1.212	0.226
Minority Status			-0.141	0.073	-0.068	-1.937	0.053
<b>Sympathy</b>	$F(4, 845)=8.390, p<.001$	.038					
Childhood Sexual Abuse			0.005	0.007	0.025	0.719	0.473
Sex			-0.19	0.062	-0.112	-3.150	0.002
Age			0.009	0.002	0.137	3.967	0.000
Minority Status			0.190	0.066	-0.068	2.873	0.004

### Childhood Sexual Abuse and Relational Interdependence

- The results of the regression equation was not significant ( $F(4, 845)=1.431, p=.222$ ) with an  $R^2$  of .007.

### Childhood Sexual Abuse and Sympathy

- The regression equation was significant ( $F(4, 845)=8.390, p<.001$ ) with an  $R^2$  of .038. However, childhood sexual abuse was not a significant predictor of sympathy ( $b=.005, p=.473$ )
- Age positively and significantly predicted sympathy ( $b=.01, p<.001$ ).
- Being a male predicted lower levels of sympathy ( $b=-.195, p=.002$ ).
- Minority status positively and significantly predicted sympathy ( $b=.190, p=.004$ ).



## Discussion

### Interpretation of Findings and Implications for Future Research

- The current data did not support any of the hypotheses.
- However, there has been very little research in previous literature, and thus future research should further explore the relationships among interpersonal adjustment, relational interdependence, and sympathy.
- The current study utilized secondary data, and the methodological limitation may explain the insignificant findings from the study.
- The lack of variance in CSA might have affected the insignificant findings. Thus, future research should include a sample population of individuals who have experienced CSA.
- CSA was quite broadly defined, which can indicate that insignificant findings do not necessarily rule out the possibility of a more severe level of CSA experience and interpersonal adjustment, relational interdependence, and sympathy.
- Future research should include participants who have experienced more severe levels of CSA to examine if severity of CSA has a relationship with individual relational development characteristics.

### Strengths and Limitations

- The findings of the current study may not be generalized to other racial and ethnic groups.
- The surveys and questionnaires utilized in this study did not allow participants to expand on their answers because they were asked to choose a response on the Likert scale.
- The study only focused on CSA and not other forms of abuse.
- The information gathered in this study can begin to contribute to the lack of research of CSA on interpersonal adjustment, relational interdependence, and sympathy.
- The information provided from the research will inform the design of treatment modality and intervention strategy.

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