

Avoidant Coping and Post-Traumatic Stress among College Students after Campus Sexual Assault



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Background

- Sexual assault is three times more likely to happen for an individual attending college versus someone who is not (“Campus sexual violence: Statistics”, n.d.)
- Victims of sexual assault (SA) often develop symptoms of PTSD (Peter-Hagene & Ullman, 2014).
 - Trauma survivors try to avoid stimuli that might trigger the event
 - Leading to symptoms of avoidance
- Therefore, campus sexual assault (CSA) may be especially detrimental for college students being that:
 - They will need to endure constant avoidance of trauma reminders
 - Symptoms of PTSD may cause students to avoid areas of campus, such as skipping class or opting out of social events with friends.
- Over time, these avoidance methods would greatly impact the college experience (Wilson & Miller, 2016).

Background

- Coping is defined as a conscious effort to deal with a problem.
 - There are many different ways of coping; however, some victims of CSA may engage in avoidance
- Avoidant coping is maladaptive (Krause, Kaltman, Goodman, & Dutton, 2008)
- Although avoidant coping can create temporary relief, avoidance may ultimately
 - Worsen PTSD symptoms
 - Interfere with recovery
 - Lead to poorer psychological adjustment
 - Repress emotions and prevents processing
 - (Ullman, Townsend, Filipas, & Starzynski, 2007)

Background

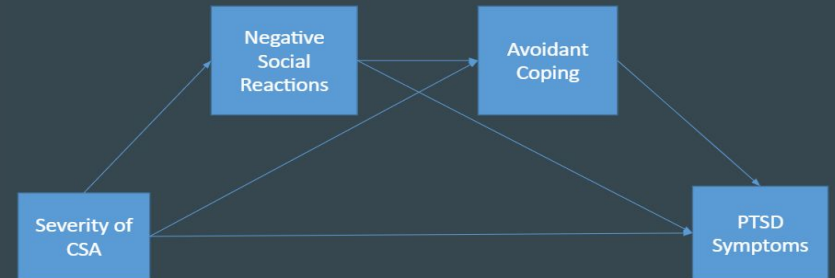
- SA victims who experience more negative social reactions (NSRs) may be more likely to engage in avoidant coping (Hassija & Gray, 2012).
 - NSRs are associated with a lowered likelihood of confiding in or seeking help from others (Hassija & Gray, 2012).
- Social reactions can be categorized as:
 - Turning Against
 - Unsupportive Acknowledgement
 - Positive Reactions
 - (Ullman & Filipas, 2002)
- If an individual reaches out for social support and receives a negative reaction, it can cause them to feel worse about the assault (Leiner, Kearns, Jackson, Astin, & Rothbaum, 2012)

Background

- The severity of the sexual assault (physical violence/completed versus attempted) has been shown to predict avoidant coping and the severity of PTSD symptoms (Ullman & Filipas, 2001)
 - Women perceive more severe assaults to be more legitimate and are more likely to acknowledge that they were raped (Ullman, Townsend, Filipas, & Starzynski, 2007).
- Assault severity has a positive relationship with negative social reactions and as a result, victims may feel ashamed after disclosure (Ullman et al., 2007).

Current Study

- We proposed a serial mediation that looks to have multiple effects
- Therefore, the current study had five hypotheses:
 - (1) severity of the assault would predict negative social reactions
 - (2) negative social reactions, in turn, would predict the use of avoidant coping methods following sexual assault
 - (3) avoidant coping would then predict the use of PTSD symptoms
 - (4) negative social reactions would mediate the link between severity of the assault and avoidant coping methods
 - (5) avoidant coping would mediate the relationship between severity of the assault and PTSD symptoms and between negative social reactions and PTSD symptoms.



Methods (Participants)

- First branch recruited → 253 attending The College of New Jersey
- Second branch recruited → 269 four-year college students from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk).
- For Race → 68.8% ($n = 291$) White, 13.7% ($n = 58$) Black, 13.7% ($n = 58$) Asian, 10.2% ($n = 43$) Hispanic, 0.5% ($n = 2$) American Indian or Native Alaskan, 0.5% ($n = 2$) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 1.7% ($n = 7$) another race.
- For Gender → 30.0% ($n = 127$) cisgender male, 66.7% ($n = 282$) cisgender female, 0.9% ($n = 4$) transgender male, 0.5% ($n = 2$) transgender female, and 1.9% ($n = 4$) another gender (e.g., gender fluid).

Methods (Procedure)

- IRB approval & APA ethics
- Informed consent was given
- Anonymous online survey link
- TCNJ students were added to a raffle
- MTurk participants were compensated with \$2.00 from the website

Methods (Measures)

- Demographics→ Race, Gender, Sexual Orientation, GPA, Living Situation, Athletics, Students Organizations, Greek Life
- Sexual Contact Scale → Campus Sexual Assault
 - 17 item
- PTSD Checklist→ PTSD Symptoms
 - 20 item
 - PCL-5; Weathers et al., 2013
- Brief COPE→ Coping Strategies
 - 28 item with 14 subscales
 - Only Denial and Behavioral Disengagement was used
 - Carver, 1997
- Social Reactions Questionnaire→ Social Reactions
 - 16 item with 3 primary scales: Turning Against, Unsupportive Acknowledgement, and Positive Reaction
 - SRQ-S; Ullman, 2000

Results

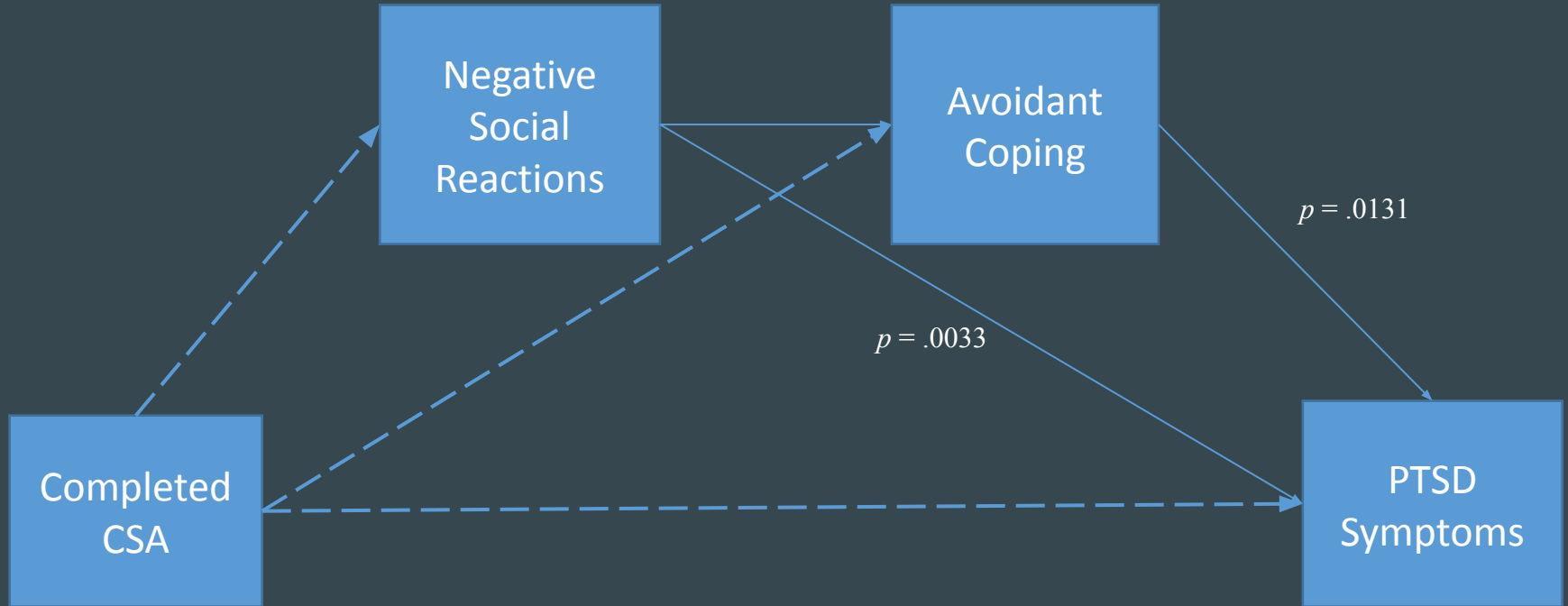
Table 1
Pearson's correlations among study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Completed CSA	--	.053	-.027	.114	.006	.094
2 Physical CSA	.053	--	.058	.267*	.153	.182
3 Avoidant Coping	-.027	.058	--	.477**	.545**	.59**
4 Negative Social Reactions (Unsupportive Acknowledgment)	.114	.267*	.477**	--	.693**	.608**
5 Negative Social Reactions (Turning Against)	.006	.153	.545**	.693**	--	.67*
6 PTSD Symptoms	.094	.182	.59**	.608**	.67**	--

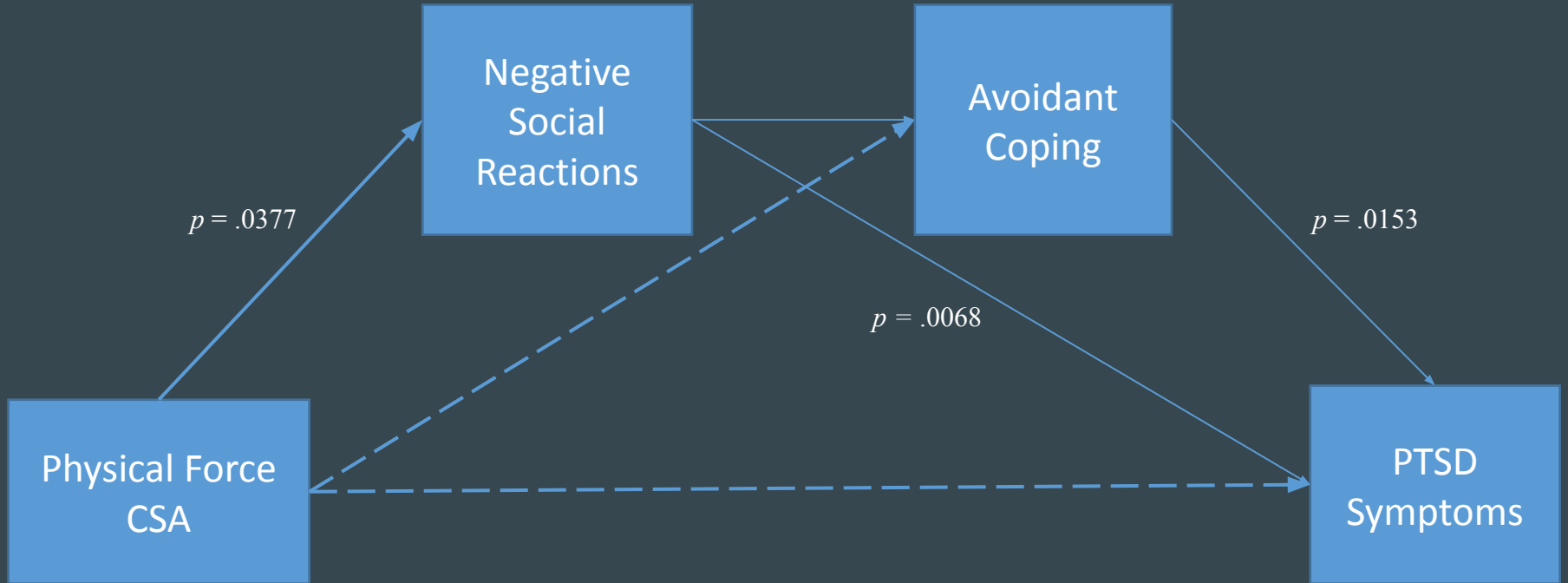
* = $p < .05$

** = $p < .001$

Results



Results



Discussion

- The first, second and third hypotheses were supported
- The mediational analyses were not supported.
- Although none of the mediational analyses were found to be statistically significant, there were still important trends in the findings.

Discussion

- While no mediation was shown, we conclude that our hypotheses are trending towards significance, and would have ultimately shown mediation if our analyses were not underpowered.
- Harsh stigmatizations about SA can lead to NSRs which can lead to avoidant coping
- SA victims that receive NSRs upon disclosure are more likely to internalize their assault and are less likely to seek out help (Hassija & Gray, 2012).
- Therefore, victims who confide in someone about their assault and then receive a NSR about their story, are left feeling discouraged.

Discussion

- After receiving an NSR, victims are left with shameful feelings of self blame and would rather avoid their trauma than process it (Berman, Assaf, Tarrasch, & Joel, 2018).
- Research has shown that when victims do not process their trauma in a healthy manner and instead turn to avoidance as a means of coping, their PTSD symptoms ultimately worsen over time (Berman et al., 2018)
- Although this hypothesis was not supported either, these findings are still important to consider in order to help treat PTSD in victims of SA.

Limitations

- Small sample size
 - Underpowered
- Sample is not generalizable
 - Large percentage of white participants, Large percentage of cisgender females, Large percentage of heterosexuals
- Avoidant coping measure was created
- Assault severity variable may have been limited
- Lacked longitudinal data

Implications & Future Research

- Emotion-focused coping
- Treatment should focus on helping the victim process their trauma
- Slowly introduce exposure to triggers rather than avoid them all together
- Future studies should look to replicate these findings with a larger, more diverse sample
- University trainings/seminars

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