

## **The early childhood sexual experiences functioning in adult partner relationship**

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### **Summary**

**Aim.** The aim of the present research was verification of the hypothesis for the influence of negative sexual experiences in sexual development on the quality of partner relationships in the adult life. Special attention was given to the influence exercised by the level of erotization in the environment of the family of origin and to the experience of child sexual abuse. The quality of partner relationships was recognized using Jurg Willi's concept through the analysis of intensity of dysfunctions (collusions) in those relationships.

**Methods.** The study was conducted on a population of 170 adults in partnerships. The surveyed group filled in the Questionnaire on Models of Sexual Upbringing in Families, the Couples Collusion Questionnaire and the Questionnaire on Sexual Abuse of Children.

**Results.** Positive interrelation has been confirmed between the level of erotization in the family of origin and the oral, anal and oedipal partner collusion in the procreative relationships of individuals. Such link has not been confirmed for narcissistic collusion. The interrelation between the sexually abusive experiences and the partner collusion has only been confirmed in masculine group within the oral collusion and the anal collusion.

**Conclusions.** The findings largely support the assumption that there is a connection between the character of sexual experiences in childhood and functioning in adult partnership.

**Key words:** sexual abuse of a child, psychosexual development, couples

### **Introduction**

Childhood is a key period for the development of core personality structures. Adverse experiences like sexual traumas are deemed relevant factors in the process of nervous system formation and thus, in the regulatory mechanisms of personality [1–3]. In particular, the sphere that bears the severe consequences of sexual abuse in

childhood is the one of intimate partner relations [4–9]. The examination of such negative determination, which is described in the psychodynamic theories, is in the focus of the research presented in the paper.

Childhood abusive sexual experiences were defined twofold. Firstly, they were understood as experiencing of any forms – contact and non-contact – of sexual interactions with an adult person until adolescence [10]. Secondly, it has been assumed that these experiences may not take the form of direct acts of sexual abuse, but might be based on entanglement into atmosphere of excessive sexual excitement inadequate for the level of child's development. Such type of adult behaviour was conceptualized by Bolton, Morris and MacEachron [11]. These authors distinguished types of family environments differentiated by intensity of erotization connected with messages on sexuality, and thereby intensity of the victimization of the child. The erotization-victimization intensity continuum begins with the ideal environment (normative) and ends with the overtly sexual one (extreme pathology). The negative effects of early experiences of sexual socialization in the future contribute to the formation of a dysfunctional partnership. In the assessment and description of partnerships Willi's concept of collusions in partner relationships was used.

Willi's [12, 13] concept embraces the processes of choice of life partner, intimate relationships formation and mechanisms governing these relationships. It provides the typology of dysfunctional couples, the so-called couples in collusion. The term of collusion, which Willi borrows from Dicks [14, 12, 13], denotes a relationship based on unconscious interplay between the partners. Crucially, it presupposes existence of a mutual elementary conflict which has its origins in a disturbance ascribed to one of development stages: narcissistic, oral, anal or oedipal. Partners involved in collusion realize two polarized positions: progressive, adopted by one partner, and regressive, adopted by the other partner. The division, which initially draws the partners together, later becomes the breeding ground for the conflict. It is defensive in nature and results from denial and projection, which is defined as ascribing tendencies one cannot accept onto the partner. The initial congruence between the partners proves to be illusory since with time the unconsciously denied tendencies emerge in both sides and result in growing conflicts.

Willy [13] distinguishes four types of collusive relationships:

- Narcissistic collusion that embraces the dilemma of to what extent one has to abandon oneself in favour of the partner and to what extent one can be himself in the relationship. The collusion might develop in two complementary variants: resignation of one's own self in favour of the partner (regressive role) or annexation of the partner for oneself (progressive role).
- Oral collusion that embraces the dilemma of to what extent one can be dependent in a relationship, and how much of care one might demand from the partner and – on the contrary – how much of care one might devote to the partner not asking for anything in return. People pertaining to the regressive form tend to be careless about one's own needs and rather seek partners who could take care of them and satisfy their needs. People who represent the progressive form of the collusion are perpetually driven by the will to help others, whilst denying their own needs.

- Anal collusion refers to the dilemma to what extent one might control the partner, or to what extent one might stay under control of the partner. Within the anal collusion one of the partners represents a progressive position – requires absolute obedience and seeks control over the other person. The other partner occupies a regressive position and stays under total control of the other partner.
- The phallus-oedipal collusion in which the basic conflict common for both partners is connected with the conflictual relation towards their gender roles. A woman cannot accept traces of aggressiveness and strength in herself and instead, accepts a passive (regressive) position. A man, in turn, consciously rejects the need for passiveness leaving it to his partner, whilst pursuing the active and stereotypically masculine role (progressive role).

The analysis of the above research studies [3, 4, 5, 7–9] and theoretical models became the basis for formulation of the hypothesis that the early negative sexual experiences namely the experience of sexual abuse and high level of erotization in the family environment is connected with collusion in adult partner relations.

### **Material and method**

The research was realized within the research tasks conducted at the Institute of Psychology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań [15] under the supervision of professor Maria Beisert. The research was confidential and the participation was voluntary. There has not been any relation of dependency between the participants and the researcher. Participants were recruited from among full-time, part-time, extramural and post-graduate students. According to the eligibility criteria, the included participants were 18 years old and above and had been involved in partnerships – formal or informal – for at least a year.

Of a total of 360 distributed sets of questionnaires, 170 were used in statistical analyses (received back completed accordingly).

#### Study group

The study group consisted of 94 women (55.3% of the subjects) and 76 men (44.7% of the subjects). The participants were aged from 18 year old (3 men) to 69 year old (2 men). Most subjects were aged between 22 and 29 years (97 subjects). In the group of men the mean age was 32.7 years, whereas in the group of women it was 27.73 years. Most of the participants were involved in informal partner relationships (99 subjects: 57 women and 42 men).

#### Research tools

##### *Couples in Collusion Questionnaire (KKP)*

The tool is a modified version of the Collusion in Marriages questionnaire [16] elaborated by Izdebska [15]. It was developed – except for the control scale – on

the basis of the theory of collusions by Willi. The questionnaire consists of 71 items, ascribed to 5 scales: 4 of them examine the type and intensity of complementary collusions of each type (oral, anal, narcissistic and oedipal), and a control scale. For narcissistic, oral and anal collusions 2 scales have been identified that relate to regressive (R) and progressive (P) positions that can be taken by partners in a given type of collusion. The participants rate the items on the Likert scale by selecting the answer that they think describes their relationship the best. Table 1 contains the juxtaposition of scales with exemplary items and the Cronbach's reliability test results.

**Table 1. Partners in Collusion Questionnaire scales and the reliability of scales**

Scale	Scale description and example of item	Reliability – women	Reliability – men
Narcissistic collusion WR–MP	narcissistic collusion – regressive position of a woman and progressive position of a man. e.g. I share the desires, feelings and aspirations of my partner and it suits him	$\alpha = 0.503$	$\alpha = 0.649$
Narcissistic collusion WP–MR	narcissistic collusion – progressive position of a woman and regressive position of a man e.g. I like to be admired, and my partner is full of admiration for me.	$\alpha = 0.692$	$\alpha = 0.767$
Oral collusion WR–MP	oral collusion – regressive position of a woman and progressive position of a man e.g. I think one should take as much as possible, and my partner is able to give.	$\alpha = 0.613$	$\alpha = 0.725$
Oral Collusion WP–MR	oral collusion – progressive position of a woman and regressive position of a man e.g. I pull my partner out of trouble and take care of him.	$\alpha = 0.668$	$\alpha = 0.624$
Anal collusion WR–MP	anal collusion – regressive position of a woman, progressive position of a man e.g. Partner gives the orders and I follow them unreservedly.	$\alpha = 0.779$	$\alpha = 0.794$
Anal collusion WP–MR	anal collusion – progressive position of a woman, regressive position of a men e.g. I like to rule and my partner likes it when I guide him.	$\alpha = 0.738$	$\alpha = 0.761$
Oedipal Collusion	oedipal collusion – accordingly to the theory progressive position is ascribed to a man, regressive position is ascribed to a women e.g. Partner feels of a little worth as a man when I do not admire his manhood.	$\alpha = 0.565$	$\alpha = 0.607$

### *Questionnaire on Models of Sexual Upbringing in Families*

It is a questionnaire developed by Beisert [17]. The theoretical basis for this tool was concept of types of family environments by Bolton, Morris and MacEachron [11]. The Questionnaire consists of 10 unfinished statements pertaining to the models of sex education in the subject's family. For each statement there are 7 possible endings ascribed relating to one of the 7 models combining the dimension of erotization. The subject chooses a statement which best describes the situation in his family of origin. The choice is made for the educational models perused by the father and by the mother, separately. Scores ascribed to each answer and measuring the level of erotization range from 1 to 7. The higher the score, the higher rates of pathologization (erotization) of the environment. For example, for the position: "When I started to grow up and physical changes became observable..." the statement that was scored the highest was "men in the family were excited, they touched me and kissed me" and the lowest "mother/father were happy about it, they were telling me about adulthood."

Cronbach's alpha reliability rate for the Questionnaire on Models of Sexual Upbringing in Families was  $\alpha = 0.774$ .

### *Questionnaire on Sexual Abuse of Children*

This questionnaire is a modification of a tool construed by Beisert [18] and based on the specialist literature on sexual abuse of children. This tool allows for assessing whether the subject was exposed to sexual abuse in childhood, and – if tested positive – for evaluation of the severity of the abuse. The Questionnaire consists of 17 positions relating to different forms of sexual abuse, which are arranged in line with the growing invasiveness. If the respondent chose more than one form of abuse, the severity was calculated as the total sum of the respective results. The whole method was published by Beisert [18] and is available in book "Pedofilia. Geneza i mechanizm zaburzenia" (Paedophilia. The origin and mechanism of disorder).

### **Research hypotheses**

1. There is a relationship between the type of family environment in childhood, and the intensity of the collusion in partner relationships: the higher the level of erotization in a family environment, the greater the intensity of collusion.
2. There is a difference in the intensity of the partnership collusion between those who have experienced child sexual abuse and those who have not experienced it: in individuals who have experienced sexual abuse, partnership collusion occurs with greater intensity.
3. There is a relationship between the severity of child sexual abuse and the intensity of collusion in partner relationship: the higher the level of severity of abuse, the greater the intensity of collusion.

## Results

The first hypothesis regarded correlation between the extent of erotization in family of origin and the intensity of collusion in procreative partnerships. The Pearson's  $r$  correlation was calculated for the results of questionnaire measuring the intensity of erotization and questionnaire measuring collusions in partnerships.

The analysis indicates that there is an interdependence between the extent of erotization in families of origin and the intensity of collusion in partnership. The dependence was tested positive at the level of significance 0.01 in case of oral collusion type WR-MP ( $r = 0.28$ ), oral type WP-MR ( $r = 0.26$ ), anal type WR-MP ( $r = 0.39$ ), anal type WP-MR ( $r = 0.21$ ) and in case of oedipal collusion ( $r = 0.29$ ). However, such dependence has not been discovered in any sub-type in case of narcissistic collusion. The extensions of the used abbreviations of the types of collusions are presented in Table 1.

Additionally, correlations were calculated for the results on collusion scales, and levels of erotization related separately to the models used by the father and the mother. Apparently, model adopted by the mother scored higher values when compared to the model followed by the father. Calculated output is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation between the level of erotization in family of origin and partnership collusion

	Level of erotization in family	Father's model (level of erotization)	Mother's model (level of erotization)
Narcissistic collusion WR-MP	0.03	-0.02	0.08
Narcissistic collusion WP-MR	-0.03	-0.04	-0.01
Oral collusion WR-MP	0.28**	0.25**	0.26**
Oral collusion WP-MR	0.26**	0.17*	0.30**
Anal collusion WR-MP	0.39**	0.26**	0.41**
Anal collusion KP-MR	0.21**	0.15	0.22**
Oedipal collusion	0.29**	0.18*	0.33**

Correlation significant (two-tailed) at the level \*0.05, \*\*0.01. WR-MP – regressive position of a woman, progressive position of a man; WP-MR – progressive position of a woman and regressive position of a man.

The subsequent analyses investigated the differences in the intensity of partner collusion between subjects who have and have not been sexually abused in childhood.

In the study group 51 subjects were exposed to some form of sexual abuse in childhood, which constitutes 30% of the research population. This group included 33% of examined women (31 subjects) and 26.3% of examined men (20 subjects). For the group of subjects exposed to sexual abuse the severity of the abuse was measured.

Collusion intensity test in subjects who experienced sexual abuse as opposed to subjects who did not experience sexual abuse were conducted separately for men and women. Mann-Whitney U test was applied in case of anal collusion WR-MP, while

acknowledging the irregular character of the variable distribution. In all other cases, Student's t-test was applied.

In the case of women statistical differences as regards the intensity of collusion have not been found between subjects exposed to child sexual abuse and those who did not have such experience. This is in contrast with the research results in the men, where subjects sexually abused in childhood were obtained higher results on the scale of oral collusion WP-MR ( $t = -2.68$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ) and anal collusion WR-MP ( $Z = -3.07$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) as compared to subjects who did not have such experiences (see Table 3). In accordance with Cohen's d effect size indicators, greater differences between groups were noted in case of anal collusion WR-MP ( $d = 0.86$ , large effect size), rather than in oral collusion WP-MR ( $d = 0.67$ , average effect size).

Table 3. Intensity of partner collusions in different groups

	Child sexual abuse victims		non-victims		Significance of differences			
	M	SD	M	SD	test	df	p	d
Women								
Narcissistic collusion WR-MP	2.66	0.69	2.71	0.62	0.33 <sup>1</sup>	92	0.742	0.08
Narcissistic collusion WP-MR	3.06	0.64	3.07	0.70	0.01 <sup>1</sup>	92	0.991	0.01
Oral collusion WR-MP	1.98	0.45	2.00	0.55	0.14 <sup>1</sup>	92	0.888	0.04
Oral collusion WP-MR	1.79	0.48	1.72	0.41	-0.77 <sup>1</sup>	92	0.443	0.16
Anal collusion WR-MP	1.34	0.43	1.43	0.48	-0.93 <sup>2</sup>	92	0.346	0.19
Anal collusion WP-MR	1.79	0.56	1.78	0.56	-0.12 <sup>1</sup>	92	0.908	0.02
Oedipal collusion	1.95	0.49	1.92	0.42	-0.33 <sup>1</sup>	92	0.739	0.07
Men								
Narcissistic collusion WR-MP	3.03	0.71	3.06	0.66	0.13 <sup>1</sup>	74	0.895	0.04
Narcissistic collusion WP-MR	2.68	0.68	3.02	0.86	1.78 <sup>1</sup>	74	0.083	0.41
Oral collusion WR-MP	2.28	0.53	2.02	0.50	-1.92 <sup>1</sup>	74	0.058	0.51
Oral collusion WP-MR	2.29	0.55	1.92	0.52	-2.68 <sup>1</sup>	74	0.009*	0.67
Anal collusion WR-MP	2.26	0.71	1.71	0.55	-3.07 <sup>2</sup>	74	0.002*	0.86
Anal collusion WP-MR	1.66	0.43	1.61	0.52	-0.40 <sup>1</sup>	74	0.687	0.1
Oedipal collusion	2.27	0.47	2.13	0.48	-1.16 <sup>1</sup>	74	0.250	0.29

<sup>1</sup> results of Student's t-test. <sup>2</sup> results of Mann-Whitney U test. \* $p < 0.01$

In the next step, the correlation between the severity of sexual abuse and partner collusion was investigated separately for men and women. The analysis was conducted on a sample of 51 subjects who had experienced sexual abuse from an adult perpetrator before the age of 12. Table 4 contains the results of the conducted analysis.

Table 4. Pearson's *r* correlation analysis between the severity of sexual abuse and partner collusion in men (M) and women (W)

	Severity of sexual abuse	
	W	M
Narcissistic collusion WR–MP	0.05	-0.04
Narcissistic collusion WP–MR	-0.02	-0.16
Oral collusion WR–MP	-0.06	0.21
Oral collusion WP–MR	0.14	0.26*
Anal collusion WR–MP	-0.04	0.31**
Anal collusion WP–MR	0	0
Oedipal collusion	0.1	0.13

Correlation significant (two-tailed) at the level \*0.05, \*\*0.01.

The results indicate that only in a group of men there was a positive correlation between the severity of child sexual abuse and the intensity of oral collusion WP–MR ( $r = 0.26$ ) and anal collusion WR–MP ( $r = 0.31$ ). In a group of women none of the assumed relations was verified positively.

## Discussion

The main objective of the current research confirmed the assumption that abusive childhood experiences influence the quality of partnerships in adult life. The results of the research also allow for a more accurate revision of existing compliance between early sexual socialization and the intensity of different types and sub-types of collusion in partner relationship.

It was possible to determine the existence and the direction of the relationship between the level of erotization in a family of origin and partner collusion in adult life. The higher level of erotization turned out to be a risk factor for collusion formation. The results are consistent with the concepts which examine the influence of socialization in the sphere of sexuality on the formation of personality [19]. The findings have also confirmed that sexuality messages received in childhood are a crucial element in experiencing relations in family, thereby participating in the formation of one's own personality and as such – basics for intimate relationships in the adult life.

The described correlation does not apply to narcissistic collusions of both sub-types which might be due to the fact that the origins of narcissistic collusion cannot be ascribed to a particular child development phase. According to Willi [13], the narcissistic dilemmas emerge in line with the development of libido. On the contrary, the level of family erotization may not be constant but may evolve along with child's development and also can be experienced by a child in a different way, depending on

the stage of development. The existence of factors beyond the sexual domain which also influence the development of narcissism might serve as another explanation for the lack of visible correlation between the level of erotization and narcissistic collusion. The relevance of these factors in the western culture is confirmed by the clinical observations, which establish narcissistic personality as “sign of the times” [20].

Furthermore, the current findings indicate that the correlation between the level of erotization in a family of origin and partner collusion is connected mainly to the influence of mother. Such view is grounded in concepts where mother is acknowledged to have the nearest contact with a child [21, 22] and have the greatest influence on a child, also in the sphere of sexuality. Moreover, some studies assert [23] that mothers are usually responsible for modelling of child’s sexuality in the early phase of life.

Another research problem was the relation between child sexual abuse and collusion in procreative partnership. The revealed connection in the group of men in case of oral collusion WP–MR and anal collusion WR–MP found justification in the psychological concepts dealing with long-term consequences of child sexual abuse of boys [18, 21, 24, 25]. Boys – unlike girls – may often identify with the abuser as a way of defence operation which in result may presuppose tendencies towards taking control over others typical for anal collusion type WR–MP and also impairment in ability of satisfying one’s own needs in a mature way and therefore abusing others in this respect typical for oral collusion WP–MR [24].

The results did not reveal any link between child sexual abuse and the tendency towards collusions in partnerships in the group of women. Lack of dependence in this group is not compatible with other study results which indicate a link between the experience of sexual abuse in childhood and functioning in partner relationships in adulthood [3]. It is most probable that the lack of such a result in the current study is due to the relatively low severity of the sexual abuse disclosed in the study population of women. Exposure to lesser traumas can lead to the deformation of personality and the ability to establish healthy bonds, but to a lesser extent. It can also – which requires further study – not at all be considered as sexual abuse by the participants. Lack of awareness of female victims regarding participation in the pathology does not remove the existence of the impact of abuse on their psyche, but it may modify it. For example, it may decrease a sense of stigmatization, which – according to the model of Finkelhor and Browne [26] – is considered to be one of the traumatogenic factors.

Another issue worth commenting is the relatively high rate of child sexual abuse obtained in the study (33% women, 26.3% of men). This result corresponds with the frequency of the phenomenon that was found in other studies, which used the tools, as in this study, that measured not only contact, but also non-contact forms of sexual exploitation. The report of Izdebski [27], incorporating in the definition of sexual violence – in addition to touching the intimate parts of the victim’s body, genital contact, oral sex and anal sex – being a victim of exhibitionism or being forced to perform masturbation against one’s will, showed that 33.8% of second year students of upper-secondary schools confirmed the experience of sexual violence defined in

the above mentioned way. The high rate of child sexual abuse obtained in this study could be also influenced by the fact that the names of the tools that were used did not indicate their relation to sexual exploitation. Therefore, one may conclude that some of the respondents – who do not have a subjective feeling of being victims of sexual violence who – when asked directly – would deny it – gave positive responses, unconsciously reporting the experience of sexual abuse.

The performed analyses and conclusions can be generalized to a wider group only acknowledging the limitations of the research. The research was conducted solely among participants who expressed willingness to be included in the sample. Thus, this sample group cannot be rendered representative for the whole population. Additionally, since the subject matter is not emotionally neutral it is reasonable to assume that – even for those who agreed to take part in the research - the disclosure resistance might have impeded the information to some degree.

### Conclusions

The current findings have confirmed the assumption that dysfunctional experiences connected with psychosexual development in the childhood are connected with malfunctioning in the adult life, especially in the sphere of intimate partnership.

Future research in this field should be broadened by a more in-depth analysis of the intermediate importance of chosen neuropsychological functions like executive functions, emotion regulation functions as well as the intermediate importance of the state and brain functions responsible for building of relations.

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