The Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
(Department of a Psychology)

Erin Eadie
2006 University of Victoria MSc
2004 University of Toronto Honours BSc

The Role of Health Risk Behaviours in the Link Between
Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms and Physical Health Among
Women with Histories of Interpersonal Trauma

Wednesday, February 19, 2014
1:00 p.m.
David Turpin Bldg, Room A144

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Marsha Runtz, Department of Psychology, UVic (Supervisor)
Dr. Julie Spencer Rodgers, Department of Psychology, UVic
(Member)
Dr. Marion Ehrenberg, Department of Psychology, UVic (Member)
Dr. Laurene Sheilds, School of Nursing, UVic (Outside Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Patricia Petretic, Department of Psychology, University of
Arkansas

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Gregory Andachuk,
Department of Hispanic and Italian Studies, UVic
Abstract

Women with histories of interpersonal trauma (physical, sexual, or psychological abuse experienced during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood) are more likely to experience posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) and to develop physical health problems than women without trauma histories. In fact, PTSS and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have been established in the literature as mediators of the relation between interpersonal trauma and physical health outcomes (e.g., Resnick et al., 1997; Schnurr & Green, 2004). What remains to be determined is a clear understanding of the various mechanisms explaining why individuals with trauma histories, and subsequently PTS symptoms, go on to develop physical health problems. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of health risk behaviours, specifically sexual risk taking and substance use, as possible mechanisms through which interpersonal trauma and PTSS might influence physical health. These relations were examined, through structural equation modelling, in a sample of 475 women currently attending university. Models were tested separately for sexual traumas (childhood sexual abuse and sexual assault experienced during adolescence and adulthood) and nonsexual interpersonal traumas (physical and psychological maltreatment by parents in childhood, witnessing violence between parents, and intimate partner violence in their own relationships). Results indicated that PTSS severity partially mediated pathways from both types of interpersonal trauma, sexual and nonsexual, to adverse health outcomes, contributing to the existing theory that one’s psychological response to a trauma may be more important in determining physical health outcomes than the trauma itself. Furthermore, a significant indirect pathway was found to link nonsexual trauma to risky sexual behaviours through PTSS severity. In addition, PTSS severity fully mediated the relation between nonsexual trauma and substance use behaviours. These latter findings suggest that the likelihood of engaging in substance use and/or risky sexual behaviours may be greater in trauma survivors who are suffering from posttraumatic stress symptoms. Contrary to hypotheses, no significant pathways were found from risky sexual behaviours or substance use to physical health outcomes in the context of trauma variables and PTSS severity. Consequently, these health risk behaviours were not found to operate as mechanisms explaining the link from PTSS severity to physical health outcomes. Limitations and alternative hypotheses are
presented. Implications for clinical interventions and recommendations for future research are discussed.

**Awards, Scholarships, Fellowships**

- **2012** Sara Spencer Foundation Research Award
- **2008/10** Doctoral Award - SSHRC
- **2008/10** President’s Research Scholarship - UVic
- **2009** BC Psychological Association Certificate Award
- **2007** Certificate of Academic Excellence: Outstanding Thesis Award – CPA
- **2007** Pre-Doctoral Fellowship – BC Medical Services Foundation
- **2006** Grant for Women Graduate Students – Soroptimist Foundation of Canada
- **2005/06** Canada Graduate Scholarship – SSHRC
- **2005/06** president’s Research Scholarship - UVic

**Presentations**


**Publications**