



# Typologies of Lifetime Sexual Victimization in Female Emerging Adults: Differential Relations with Emotion Dysregulation



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## Introduction

Sexual violence (SV) against women is a major public health concern in the United States. Although usually examined in a categorical fashion (i.e., classifying participants as victims or non-victims), SV may vary along a number of dimensions, such as the nature, frequency, and duration of abusive acts, as well as the victim's relationship with a perpetrator, and number of perpetrators. These characteristics may each be considered an aspect of SV severity, and can operate independently or interact with each other to yield differential associations with psychological outcomes (DiLillo et al., 2010).

Another aspect of SV severity is the occurrence of repeated experiences of sexual abuse or assault across different developmental periods (e.g., childhood, adolescence, and adulthood) referred to as *sexual revictimization* (Messman-Moore & Long, 2003). Many studies demonstrate support for a cumulative and detrimental impact of sexual revictimization on psychological wellbeing of young women (e.g., Walsh et al., 2012). When compared to individuals who endure victimization as children or adults, victims of sexual revictimization may experience a cumulative impact on emotion regulation deficits (Walsh, DiLillo, & Scalora, 2011).

In the present study, we utilized detailed data collected from women about their lifetime sexual victimization experiences within a latent class analysis (LCA) to investigate the presence of different groups of women based on characteristics of their assault experiences. In doing so we aimed to highlight the multidimensional nature of SV, which has rarely been a focus in past work. Among the latent classes, we expected to find a subgroup of women characterized by sexual revictimization. We further expected that, compared to other groups, these participants would more frequently endorse adult victimization involving penetrative sex and use of force (Masters et al., 2015), as well as childhood sexual abuse that involved penetrative sex, a longer duration of abuse, a greater number of perpetrators, and more severe force (Arata, 2000; Steel et al., 2004).

To examine possible differences among our predicted groups, we compared the obtained classes on a measure of emotion dysregulation, which has previously been linked to sexual victimization more generally (Walsh, DiLillo, & Messman-Moore, 2012). Based on prior studies demonstrating the cumulative impact of sexual revictimization (e.g., Walsh, DiLillo, & Scalora, 2011) and the role of greater severity of abuse characteristics in psychological distress (Clemmons et al., 2007), we hypothesized that classes with a higher proportion of women with sexual revictimization experiences, and those endorsing more severe victimization characteristics, would be associated with greater difficulties in emotion regulation.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 335 young adult women who completed Wave 1 of a larger longitudinal study of sexual revictimization. Participant ages ranged from 18-25 years ( $M = 22.0$ ,  $SD = 2.22$ ). Racial makeup of the sample was: 64.2% White, 32.5% Black, 5.1% Asian, 3.6% American Indian, and 2.7% other (categories were not mutually exclusive so total exceeds 100%). Hispanic ethnicity was endorsed by 6.6% women in the sample.

### Measures

**Childhood and adolescent sexual victimization.** The presence and characteristics of sexual victimization during childhood or adolescence were assessed via the *Computer Assisted Maltreatment Inventory-Sexual Abuse* (DiLillo et al., 2010). The specific characteristics assessed were: relationship with perpetrator, frequency of abusive acts, nature of the acts, duration of sexual abuse, use of force/tactics, and number of perpetrators.

**Adult sexual assault.** The *Modified Sexual Experience Survey* (Messman-Moore, Long, & Siegfried, 2000; Messman-Moore et al., 2010) was used to assess presence and characteristics of the most severe adult sexual assault reported since age 18. Queries included information about the nature of act (contact and/or penetration), relationship with perpetrator (intimate and/or non-intimate), force used during the assault (verbal coercion, victim intoxication, threaten/held down), and injury/physical pain.

**Emotion dysregulation.** *Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale* (Gratz & Roemer, 2004) is a 36-item self-report questionnaire with six subscales. Here, the total score on DERS was used. Cronbach's alpha for the total score in the present study was 0.95.

Table 1

Fit indices for the latent class models with two to four classes for lifetime sexual victimization in sexually maltreated women.

| No. of classes | LMR (p value)        | Entropy     | AIC             | BIC             |
|----------------|----------------------|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 2              | 2,195.72 (0.000)     | 0.99        | 6,322.66        | 6,524.81        |
| <b>3</b>       | <b>685.58 (.000)</b> | <b>0.98</b> | <b>5,686.72</b> | <b>5,991.85</b> |
| 4              | 120.21 (.22)         | 0.93        | 5,619.74        | 6,027.85        |

Note: LMR = Lo-Mendell-Rubin test. AIC = Akaike's information criterion. BIC = Bayesian information criterion.

## Results

### Latent Class of Lifetime Sexual Victimization

A three latent-class solution was found to fit the data best, based on a number of fit indices (see Table 1) and conceptual meaningfulness of the classes. The classes were labeled according to the presence of sexual abuse/assault specific characteristics during child/adolescence and adulthood. Class 1 ( $N = 66$ ) was labeled *Child/adolescent Sexual Abuse (CASA)*, as all women in this group endorsed characteristics of childhood abuse (prior to age 18). Class 2 ( $N = 122$ ) was labeled *Adult Sexual Assault (ASA)* as all women in this group endorsed characteristics of abuse experienced during adulthood. Class 3 ( $N = 147$ ) was labeled the *Sexual Revictimization (RV)* class, as all women in this group had endorsed maltreatment characteristics of child/adolescent sexual abuse and adult sexual assault. Distribution of childhood sexual abuse, and adult sexual assault characteristics are shown in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

### Comparison Among Classes on Characteristics of Sexual Victimization

In contrast to women in the CASA class, those in the RV class were more likely to endorse penetrative sex during childhood sexual abuse. Similarly, more women in the RV class experienced contact type of assault (i.e., unwanted fondling and kissing), and injury, compared to women in the ASA class.

### Class Differences in Emotion Dysregulation

Results indicated that there was no difference in difficulties in emotion regulation among CASA and RV classes ( $\beta = -0.08$ ,  $t [2] = 1.35$ ,  $p = 0.18$ ). However, ASA class-membership had significantly lower scores on difficulties in emotion regulation, when compared with the reference class RV ( $\beta = -0.16$ ,  $t [2] = 2.79$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ).

## Discussion

In the present study we found support for the presence of three latent classes based on childhood and adult sexual victimization characteristics. Classes 1 and 2 comprised women endorsing abuse characteristics during childhood and adult victimization, respectively, whereas Class 3 comprised women who had experienced sexual revictimization. Class 3 reported higher rates of penetrative sex during childhood and unwanted fondling and physical injury due to assault during adult sexual assault when compared with women endorsing childhood abuse or adult sexual assault characteristics (Classes 1 and 2), respectively. These findings are consistent with prior studies that support the presence of more invasive childhood sexual abuse acts, and more unwanted fondling and use of force during adult sexual assault in women with sexual revictimization (Arata, 2000; Messman-Moore & Long, 2000).

Our hypothesis that RV class-membership would be associated with greater difficulties in emotion regulation was partially supported in that the RV class compared to the ASA class reported higher on emotion dysregulation; however, the RV and CASA classes did not differ on emotion dysregulation. These findings suggest that, although the ASA group may have experienced some level of emotion dysregulation as an immediate consequence of sexual assault, these difficulties may be transitory in nature compared to the RV group, which demonstrated cumulative and heightened problems in emotion regulation more persistent in nature. However, we did not find an incremental effect of revictimization compared to CSA-only on emotion dysregulation. These results reiterate the role of childhood sexual abuse as an early-life experience with the potential to disrupt the development of adaptive emotion regulation skills (Gross & Thompson, 2007) in ways that may linger into adulthood.

### Limitations

First, the current findings are based on a cross-sectional design and hence the causal or temporal relations posited here should be corroborated in a longitudinal design. Second, lifetime sexual victimization was assessed via retrospective self-report, which introduces the possibility of underreporting due to difficulties recalling past victimization or concerns about the stigma of victimization (Widom & Morris, 1997).

### Implications

Our findings reiterate the importance of considering victimization as a multi-dimensional construct rather than simply combining different victimization experiences under the labels of "victims" and "non-victims." The three latent classes that emerged here align with the conventional way of classifying victims: CSA only, ASA only, and sexually revictimization. Hence, the person centered approach used here lends validation to the large extant literature examining the prevalence and consequences of sexual victimization. The present findings also highlight the need for programs aimed at improving emotion regulation skills which may hold a particular benefit in preventing the occurrence of revictimization.

Figures 1-2.

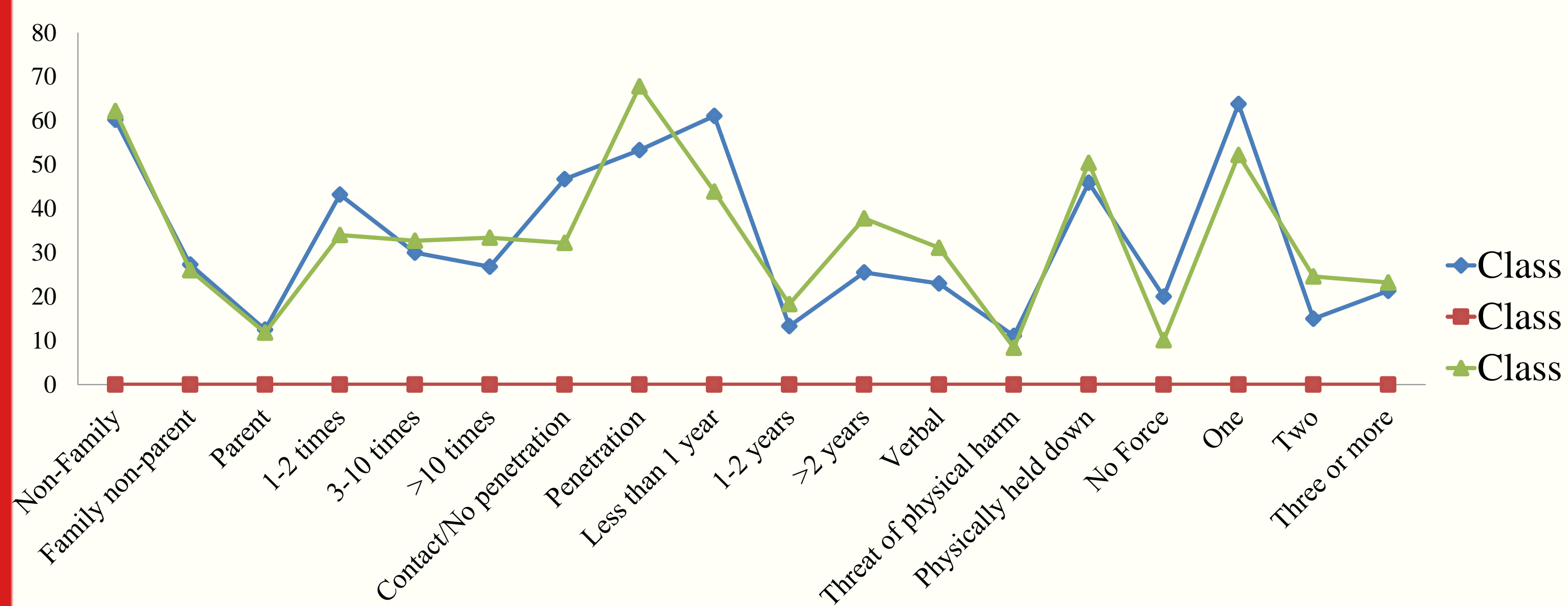


Figure 1. Distribution of childhood sexual abuse characteristics across the three latent classes.

Note: Class 1 = Child/adolescent sexual abuse (CASA;  $N = 66$ ). Class 2 = Adult sexual assault (ASA;  $N = 122$ ); Class 3 = Sexual Revictimization ( $N = 147$ ).

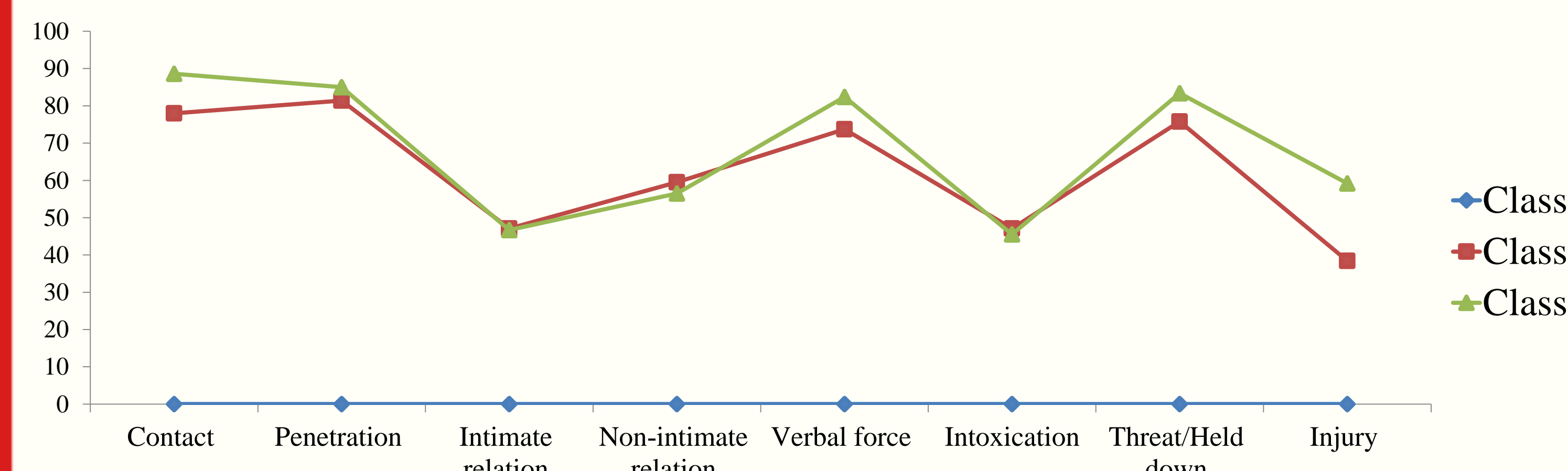


Figure 2. Distribution of adult sexual victimization characteristics across the three latent classes.

Note: Class 1 = Child/adolescent sexual abuse (CASA;  $N = 66$ ). Class 2 = Adult sexual assault (ASA;  $N = 122$ ); Class 3 = Sexual Revictimization ( $N = 147$ ).

### Acknowledgments

Data collection was supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development grant R01 HD062226-01A2 (PI: David DiLillo, University Nebraska-Lincoln). Contact: rcharak8@unl.edu