

The Psychological Impact of Sexual Abuse: Content Analysis of Interviews with Male Survivors

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Autobiographical interviews with 26 adult male survivors of childhood sexual abuse were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim and content analyzed to identify common psychological themes. Approximately equal numbers of men were abused by male and female perpetrators, almost half came from disrupted or violent homes and a majority had a history of substance abuse. Fifteen psychological themes were identified: Anger, Betrayal, Fear, Homosexuality Issues, Helplessness, Isolation and Alienation, Legitimacy, Loss, Masculinity Issues, Negative Childhood Peer Relations, Negative Schemas about People, Negative Schemas about the Self, Problems with Sexuality, Self Blame/Guilt and Shame/Humiliation. The themes are discussed and illustrated with examples drawn from the transcripts.

KEY WORDS: sexual abuse; male survivors; post-traumatic stress disorder.

INTRODUCTION

The increased awareness among mental health professionals of the sexual abuse of males has produced an emergent data base on both the prevalence and the long-term effects of this abuse. Prevalence estimates vary remarkably depending on the nature of the sample, the method of assessment, the types of questions used and the definition of abuse adopted by the investigator. Low-range estimates include: 3.0% (Kercher and McShane, 1984), 3.8% (Siegel *et al.*, 1987), 4.8% (Fritz *et al.*, 1981),

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6.0% (Finkelhor, 1984), 7.3% (Risin and Koss, 1987), 8.0% (Baker and Duncan, 1985) and 8.7% (Finkelhor, 1979). Higher-range estimates include: 11.0% (Murphy, 1987, cited in Urquiza and Keating, 1990), 16% (Finkelhor *et al.*, 1990), 17.3% (Urquiza, 1988, cited in Urquiza and Keating, 1990), 24% (Fromuth and Burkhart, 1987), and 34% (Lisak and Luster, 1994).

Reports on the long-term consequences of this abuse have come from two, somewhat distinct sources; either systematic investigations of symptom severity using standardized measures, or qualitative studies of more complex, psychological themes, usually based on individual or cumulative case studies. From the former group, it has been demonstrated that abused men tend to score significantly higher on measures of depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsiveness, dissociation, hostility, low self-esteem, sleep disturbance, sexual dysfunction, impaired relationships and suicide attempts (Briere *et al.*, 1988; Fromuth and Burkhart, 1989; Hunter, 1991).

Qualitative investigations have identified a number of psychological themes which characterize the long term adaptation of men who were sexually abused as children. These include: *sexual problems, dysfunctions or compulsions* (Johnson and Shrier, 1987; Dimock, 1988; Lew, 1988; Myers, 1989; Hunter, 1990); *confusion and struggles over gender and sexual identity* (Nasjleti, 1980; Johnson and Shrier, 1987; Dimock, 1988; Lew, 1988; Myers, 1989; Gilgun and Reiser, 1990); *homophobia and confusion about sexual orientation* (Nasjleti, 1980; Lew, 1988; Myers, 1989; Gilgun and Reiser, 1990); *problems with intimacy* (Dimock, 1988; Lew, 1988; Krug, 1989; Hunter, 1990); *shame* (Nasjleti, 1980; Lew, 1988; Myers, 1989; Gilgun and Reiser, 1990; Hunter, 1990); *guilt and self-blame* (Lew, 1988; Myers, 1989; Hunter, 1990); *low self-esteem and negative self images* (Lew, 1988; Myers, 1989); and *anger* (Lew, 1988; Hunter, 1990). Other findings include: *substance abuse* (Krug, 1989); *a tendency to deny and de-legitimize the traumatic experience* (Nasjleti, 1980; Myers, 1989); *symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Myers, 1989); *fear* (Lew, 1988; Hunter, 1990); and *depression* (Krug, 1989).

While these qualitative descriptions of the aftermath of abuse in men provide invaluable information, using single clinician's observations renders them open to the usual biases of such research. This study was intended to contribute to a cross-validation of previous qualitative findings. To this end, interviews with adult male survivors of childhood sexual abuse were content analyzed and coded by independent raters to derive a reliable set of psychological themes which together describe some of the legacy of abuse in men.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 26 men, 23 students and three employees, at an urban, commuter university in New England. With a mean age of 33.7 years, and a range from 21 to 53, the sample was somewhat older than the campus mean of 27. The ethnic composition of the sample was less diverse than that of the university: One subject was African American, two were Native American, and the remaining 23 were European American. Seven of the subjects' mothers (26.9%) had less than a high school education, eight (30.8%) had completed high school, and 11 (42.3%) had college degrees. Among the fathers, 5 (19.2%) had less than a high school education, 9 (34.6%) had completed high school, and 12 (46.2%) had college degrees. Five of the men were raised at least partially by step-parents (three step-mothers and two step-fathers).

Procedures

Subjects were recruited via posters placed around the university which asked for volunteers to participate in an interview study concerning male sexual abuse. Examples of sexual abuse were described to help potential subjects identify themselves. Responses to the posters came from 29 men, 3 of whom decided not to participate after the initial informational phone conversation.

Each subject was given a written consent form to read before beginning the interview, and the consent issues were then explained by the interviewer. In addition to the usual issues of the subject's right to withdraw, etc., each subject was told what the limits of confidentiality were, i.e., under what circumstances the interviewer would be forced to break confidentiality either to inform appropriate social services or to warn an identified, intended victim. The interviews were described to subjects as "autobiographical," and began with the simple instruction that their entire life story was of interest and that they could begin at any point in their lives and proceed in any order or manner that felt comfortable. The interviews were audio-taped. Questions were asked only to clarify information or to inquire about prominent topics which had been left out of the subject's narrative. Following the interview, subjects completed questionnaires consisting of demographic information and the Symptom Check List (SCL-90R) (Derogatis, 1977).

Table I. Percentage Agreement Between Raters and Percentage of Subjects in Which the 15 Themes Appeared

Theme	No. and Percentage Appearing in Transcripts					Chi Squ ^b
	% Agree	% Agree	Men Abused	Men Abused	Total <i>n</i> = 20 ^a	
	Rater #1	Rater #2	by Men <i>n</i> = 9	by Women <i>n</i> = 9		
Anger ^a	97.1	94.3	9 (100.0)	7 (77.8)	18 (90.0)	ns
Betrayal	78.1	75.8	4 (44.4)	4 (44.4)	10 (50.0)	ns
Fear ^a	97.1	98.2	9 (100.0)	9 (100.0)	20 (100.0)	ns
Homosexuality issues	96.8	96.8	7 (77.8)	1 (11.1)	10 (50.0)	<i>p</i> < .01
Helplessness ^c	80.5	82.9	7 (77.8)	5 (55.6)	14 (70.0)	ns
Isolation and Alienation ^c	91.5	84.7	8 (88.9)	7 (77.8)	17 (85.0)	ns
Legitimacy ^c	91.7	100.0	3 (33.3)	2 (22.2)	6 (30.0)	ns
Loss ^c	100.0	100.0	4 (44.4)	3 (33.3)	9 (45.0)	ns
Masculinity issues	83.9	93.8	8 (88.9)	6 (66.7)	15 (75.0)	ns
Negative childhood peer relations	92.6	95.7	2 (22.2)	5 (55.6)	9 (45.0)	ns
Negative schemas about people	88.2	89.8	7 (77.8)	5 (55.6)	14 (70.0)	ns
Negative schemas about the self	88.4	89.7	6 (66.7)	7 (77.8)	14 (70.0)	ns
Problems with sexuality	96.9	93.8	3 (33.3)	4 (44.4)	8 (40.0)	ns
Self-blame/guilt ^c	90.8	87.5	7 (77.8)	7 (77.8)	16 (80.0)	ns
Shame/humiliation ^c	93.7	90.5	3 (33.3)	8 (88.9)	13 (65.0)	<i>p</i> < .05

^aOf the 20 men whose transcripts were content analyzed, two were abused by both a man and a woman.^bFisher's Exact Test.^cTheme identical to one appearing in Lebowitz (1990).

Audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Six of the transcripts were selected at random to be used by a five-member team whose task was to identify the common, salient themes which appeared consistently. These themes were then compared to themes derived by Lebowitz (1990) in a content analysis of interviews with women survivors of rape. The two sets of themes were reconciled by adopting from Lebowitz the themes which were identical to those identified by this team and adding new themes, unique to men, derived from the six sample transcripts (see Table I for a list of the themes).

A coding manual was created consisting of detailed descriptions and examples of the 15 themes. The manual was used to train two coders who were naive to the study. These coders, working independently, read through the remaining 20 transcripts. There were 1004 codable passages which had been marked, and each coder identified the theme which they judged best described the marked passage. Reliability of the coding system was assessed by measuring the agreement between the ratings of the author and each independent coder. Cohen's Kappa, a measure of percent agreement which removes the effect of chance agreement, was .89 between the author and rater No. 1 and .91 between the author and rater No. 2. Table I presents the percent agreements between each coder and the author for each of the 15 themes, as well as the percentage of subjects in which each theme appeared.

RESULTS

Descriptive Information

All 26 subjects experienced contact sexual abuse. The mean reported age at the onset of the abuse was 7.6 years, with a range of four to 16. In 24 cases (92.3%) the abuse involved multiple incidents. The perpetrators of the abuse included seven mothers, one father, five siblings, three aunts, two uncles, one priest, one scout master, three neighbors and six strangers (the total exceeds 26 because several men were abused by more than one perpetrator). Fourteen men (53.8%) were abused by intrafamilial perpetrators and 12 (46.2%) by extrafamilial perpetrators. In 12 (46.2%) cases the perpetrator was a male, in 11 (42.3%) cases it was a female, and in three (11.5%) cases there were both male and female perpetrators.

The family environments in which the men were raised were often characterized by disruption and/or violence. Eleven (42.3%) of the 26 men came from families of divorce, separation or parental death. Twelve (46.2%) of the men were physically abused, and nine (34.6%) witnessed violence

between their parents. Half of the men had at least one alcoholic or drug abusing parent. Twenty-one of the 26 men (80.8%) had a history of substance abuse, 13 (50%) had actively thought about suicide, six (23%) had attempted suicide, and 18 (69.2%) had received psychological treatment.

Almost a third of the men (31%) had victimized others at some point in their lives. The types of victimization included sexual abuse of children; rape of adult women; battery of female intimate partners; and sadistic, physical assaults on adult men.

Quantitative Measure of Symptoms

Completed SCL-90R forms were available from 22 of the 26 men. The mean Global Severity Index (GSI) score for the abused men was 1.43 (standard deviation of 0.75) compared to a mean GSI score for non-patients in the SCL-90R normative sample (Derogatis, 1977) of 0.31 (standard deviation of 0.68). The mean score on the SCL-90R PTSD subscale (Saunders *et al.*, 1990) was 1.48 (standard deviation of 0.85) compared to a mean of 0.39 (standard deviation of 0.41) for the non-PTSD sample reported in Saunders *et al.*, (1990).

Chi square analyses were performed on the frequency with which each of the 15 themes appeared in the transcripts of female-abused vs. male-abused subjects (see Table I). There were only two significant differences: Homosexuality Issues appeared more frequently in the transcripts of male-abused subjects, and Shame/Humiliation appeared more frequently in the transcripts of female-abused subjects.

Thematic Analysis of the Interviews

What follows are descriptions of the 15 coded themes, with verbatim examples extracted from the transcripts.

Anger

Anger emerged in the men's autobiographies in many different forms. They talked about the experience of feeling overwhelmed with rage, of being afraid of their anger, of suppressing it, and of discovering its existence. In the following example a subject describes the anger he uncovered when, years after being abused, he wrote a letter to his abuser:

S: It was the first time in my life that I felt anger. Like I could take the friggin' wall apart, a brick at a time. I could pick up the world and throw it. I used to tell

people I feel like, like my anger is like a raging fire, it's like molten, burning just like it won't go out.

Many of the men, having discovered the well of anger within them, described the discovery as unsettling. For some it seemed to conflict with their view of themselves, to make them see themselves in a less favorable light. Others expressed their fear of their violent fantasies or of losing control of their anger:

S: If they knew what I thought, they wouldn't let me in society. No way. There's an incredible amount of violence and stuff that runs through my mind. And I'm real scared of it.

The fear of this anger, or confusion about how and when to express it appropriately, caused some men to actively suppress it. However, control and suppression of anger does not always work, and some of the men described what several of them termed "snapping." One subject described a confrontation with an abusive father:

S: And I looked at him and I was enraged. He didn't even say that much. But I just looked at him and I said shut the fuck up. I can't see the sides. My peripheral vision is gone when I get into a rage. And I'm like I've got to be careful here. Because I thought I was going to take him and kill him.

For some of the men, the "snapping" resulted in the perpetration of considerable violence, as described in the following quotations:

S: One evening I strangled her, I was choking her. I never really felt that anger before. And it was not just television sitcom choking. I was feeling for her larynx with my thumbs. I had tunnel vision. It was frightening.

S: And I started beating him up. And I clearly won. What I did was I took his face and shoved it into the bicycle spokes, and then I stamped my foot into the back of his head in there. And it cut his face.

Finally, some men expressed anger at a world which they perceived to have turned its back on them as male victims:

S: For women, you just call your local 800 rape line and you've got everything from a place to stay, food, money. They take care of your bills and your kids and everything else. I can call up and plead all I want, I can't get a cup of coffee. And that is like one of the biggest, most frustrating things in the world for me.

Betrayal

The essence of this theme is a subject's sense of having had their trust or faith in someone violated by that person, either directly or by the person's perceived actions or thoughts or feelings. Subjects rarely used the word "betrayed." Rather they expressed, often subtly, a hurt feeling resulting from their disappointment in another's behavior, or a violation of their expectations, or frequently, a feeling of having been abandoned by the

other person. Most frequently, men expressed these feelings toward a parent, and most often because the parent failed to protect them from the abuse. One man described one of several attempts to signal his father that he was being abused by a neighbor:

S: And I remember going to my dad and telling him...It was my way of telling him, just like, "I can't go over to the D's anymore." I didn't directly say this is what he's doing because I didn't know what he was doing. But I remember nothing happened. And I was raped about an hour later. And that's when I just knew nothing was safe.

A similar recollection was described by another man:

S: And I'd go to my mother, even when she wasn't drunk, to plead for some protection. And never got it. She didn't see it. She just ignored it.

Some men explicitly told a parent what was happening to them and were still rebuffed and offered no protection:

S: And her response to me when I told her that he used to make me suck his cock was "how dare you make up something so horrible about another human being, how dare you!"

Fear

Fear was the most frequently coded theme, with fully one sixth of the 1004 codable passages falling into this category. Men described fear pervading their lives, during the abuse, in the childhood aftermath of the abuse, and throughout the rest of their lives into adulthood. They described fear which could be a dull, ever present reality, or a dizzying experience of abject terror. And they described the effects of the fear, alienating them, confining them, and undermining their self confidence. Some descriptions of fear experienced during the actual abuse included:

S: My hands were sweating, my knees were shaking. I mean I'm shaking now just remembering how scared I was that night.

S: I can remember waking up one night with him, having me in a bear hug, and being scared shitless.

Perhaps the most common experience of fear described by the men was of fear associated with intrusions. The intrusions might be images of events which then evoked fear reactions, or they might be purely affective intrusions—unbidden and sudden experiences of raw fear or panic:

S: I remember the first night I spent in there I screamed just to get out of there. Because that's where I had been molested. Though I didn't know that's why I was screaming. I was just terrified of that room.

For some, the fear became so pervasive that they were paralyzed and terrorized by their fear of the fear, and by the disorientation caused by the fear:

S: I started having panic attacks and I was afraid to have anybody in the house and I was afraid to go out and socialize with people.

S: And I was afraid I was going insane.

S: I would visualize Jesus, because I was so fucking scared, I mean I was just constantly scared. To even sit down and be alone in my room and have my body be floating around me, imagining that, it was terrifying. It was the most terrifying experience that ever happened.

Some men recalled a specific fear which gripped them in the aftermath of the abuse, the fear that they would be “discovered,” that the secret they harbored would be revealed:

S: And I would be petrified, utterly petrified that somebody might find out about me.

Helplessness

One of the most crucial aspects of the experience of abuse is a fundamental loss of control: over one's physical being, one's sense of self, one's sense of agency and self-efficacy, and one's fate. The profound helplessness inherent in this loss of control was one of the most deeply felt, yet also difficult to articulate aspects of the abuse experience for these men. This difficulty in expressing helplessness may have stemmed, in part, from the conflict between helplessness and a person's basic sense of self. Men talked directly about feeling helpless, or gave detailed descriptions of incidents in which they were helpless, or related dreams which expressed helplessness:

S: It's like my reoccurring dreams, like I can't run. I always have dreams of the same thing. If I'm running, I can't move my legs and my arms. And somebody is coming down on top of me, and I can't get up. And I'll wake up and I'll jump out of my bed.

S: The world was evil, it's coming to get you, and you could do almost nothing to defend from it.

S: I didn't realize how much of a little boy I was compared to this size. He was a grown man. It was just that kind of feeling that I had living there of like helplessness.

S: I just had to put up with it. That's the way she was. They were her rules. If she said I have to kiss her, I have to kiss her. If she says I have to hug her, I have to hug her. It was like I kept trying to fill her cup and it just kept running out. And she's standing there screaming “fill it, fill it, fill it!”

For many men, the helplessness they experienced during the abuse seemed to generalize to other domains of their lives. Most commonly, particularly for men who were abused by adult women, the helplessness characterized their sexual encounters with women:

S: The defeat that I felt with my mother comes back often. I find it in my sexual relationships. A lot of times I'll allow people to be invasive because I'm used to it. And I've had a hard time setting up boundaries. I've had a hard time believing that my boundaries were worthwhile, that they were worth keeping. I guess I often felt like I was the property of somebody else. And that anybody could just do whatever they wanted. And that I didn't have a right to have feelings about it.

S: All the scenes in college where the girls would seduce me, and I'd just kind of let them do whatever they want to do. Or I would do for them whatever they wanted me to do. And then just get out.

Another common expression of helplessness emerged in men's need for control, in their descriptions of the emotional consequences of feeling out of control, in the ways they compensated for the underlying feeling of helplessness:

S: I'm not going to be that vulnerable. And I know that's all part of the control thing I have.

S: And sometimes if I lose the slightest control, I think I'm going to die inside, I really do. I feel like I'm going to lose it, I'm going to die.

For a minority of the men, the need to feel in control drove them to victimize other people:

S: The joy of seeing other people hurt, maybe not hurt... I guess it's hard to describe. Feeling that I was in control of dominating somebody. I had control over them, and they were below me.

S: So I always felt somewhat powerless in sex for awhile, except with the younger kids, where I felt in control.

Homosexuality Issues

Many investigators have noted the pervasive concerns among sexually abused men about their sexual orientation (e.g., Myers, 1989; Nasjleti, 1980). These concerns were evident in this sample, but they were primarily voiced by men who were abused by men (see Table I). Most often the men expressed confusion over their sexuality and sexual orientation:

S: And a lot of it for me was being okay with my own sexuality—was it a gay thing or wasn't it.

S: Sometimes I wonder because of it, until I really got into therapy and things, if, you know, if it was me. Maybe I was bisexual or things like that.

Many of the men expressed a fear of homosexuals and homosexuality, a fear that was traceable to their fear that they themselves were, or had the potential to be, homosexual:

S: And it's like am I gay? And then the homophobia comes in, being afraid of gay people. And I'm like paranoid to death because maybe inside I am.

S: I have a lot of like internalized homophobia. And I don't know what my sexuality is. Like I don't know if I'm bi, or if I'm gay.

For other men, the conflict over sexual orientation was expressed overtly in hostility toward homosexuals. For several men, the hostility was obsessive, suggesting its roots in a powerful, unconscious conflict:

S: If I get in a crowd, and I think a person is of questionable character towards the offensive-gay type, ah, that I will defend myself and ah, I would not think twice of doing violence to that person or anyone else associated with him that tried to do the same thing to me again.

S: And everybody that I do meet, I look at, you know, are you straight, are you gay, or what? That's about the first thing I want to know.

Isolation and Alienation

One of the most destructive legacies of childhood abuse is the stigma which attaches itself to the child, separating him from his peers, robbing him of his sense of belongingness, and seeding the potential for a lifelong struggle with alienation from other people. This sense of differentness, almost always linked to a deeply ingrained feeling of inferiority, interferes with the survivor's ability to seek and accept intimacy with others, sometimes resulting in a history of problematic relationships and chronic isolation (e.g., Lew, 1988; Lisak and Luster, 1994; Urquiza and Capra, 1990):

S: But we had talked about intimacy and pain. And how I equate intimacy with pain. The people that I was intimate with from childhood, I went through incredibly painful experiences. Who would want to get intimate with someone... Basically if you get that intimate someone could kill you, if you make one false move.

S: Nobody cares, nobody loves me. And no matter how much people tried to care and love me, I always said nobody did, because I couldn't feel it.

For many of the men, the stigma of abuse was then exacerbated by the alienation which stemmed from having to keep the abuse a secret. The secret wedged between them and any form of support or validation, breeding more and more isolation:

S: I didn't have anybody to talk to. There was nobody I could confide in. Or nobody I thought I could confide in. Nobody I thought would be able to understand or do any good. And I thought just to reveal this secret to anybody would just kill me.

S: During that period of time I think I was out of contact with my friends. And I felt like I couldn't talk to them because I felt like everybody knew what was going on. And I don't think any of them knew where I was living. I kept that a secret. Imagine that, some of your best friends didn't know where you are living.

The men described a sequence, from the abuse to the internalization of the stigma, to the alienation from their peers, that became unbridgeable:

S: I didn't feel like everyone else. I felt different. I was different. I was different because I had done this weird thing with this man, and I don't know what that's about but I did it. And definitely no ordinary person would do that.

S: I remember clearly being on the playground and just not fitting in. I've heard a lot of people talk about being on the outside looking in. That was me.

For some of the men, that profound sense of alienation endured, leading to lives spent with few friends and few meaningful relationships:

S: I was alone. I was drifting. I would go from one social group to another, and just never stay anywhere enough time to develop any kind of deep relationship with any one. I felt very isolated and alone.

Legitimacy

Like many survivors of childhood abuse, many of the men struggled to acknowledge to themselves that they were in fact abused, and that the abuse had greatly affected them. And like many other survivors, the struggle centered on a crucial point: Either they were abused and the abuse is responsible for the distress they had been experiencing, or, they are fabricating or exaggerating the abuse to mask inherent deficiencies in themselves which are responsible for their difficulties:

S: I feel like I'm just defective and a depressed person and that's why I feel this way.

S: This is the voice that goes on in my head. It makes me think I made it up. And it's subtle, because I know that I didn't make up the abuse. I think I'm making up the memory. I know that happened, but I think I'm making a mountain out of a mole hill, is what I tell myself.

But there was a second obstacle to legitimizing their experience which many of the men voiced: Nobody, including they themselves, sees men as victims, so how could they take seriously what had happened to them?

S: It's like, men aren't abused? You know, who ever heard of that? Who talks about that? If men aren't abused how could I have been abused?

S: But as a man, in that same respect I feel like this is typical of my life, there are all these women's organizations that are starting, they're becoming very conscious of not treating women as victims, not having violence towards women. But women have been victims and now they're reasserting themselves and women are physically different from guys. So they can see themselves as victims. Maybe they can see themselves that victims are okay, they're good somehow, they martyred themselves. Some way if you can have a black and white, good or evil, women were good and men were bad, well, I'm the victim and I'm a guy, but guys are bad. So I can't even be a victim, right?

Loss

The experience of childhood abuse often became associated with loss, although fewer than half of the men were able or willing to articulate the connection. Those who did mourned the loss of their childhoods and the loss of their innocence. Some regretted the loss of whole chapters of their lives, buried with still-repressed memories of parts of their abuse:

S: It's like where is my childhood? It feels like somebody put it in a box somewhere and I'm not allowed to look at it. Like it's locked up. And going through recovery is like trying to get somebody to open that key for me. It's like I want my box, I know I got one. And who took it and who had the right to steal it from me?

S: Because I have a lot of lost history. And that lost history, I may never get back.

Masculinity Issues

Numerous clinicians and researchers have argued that to be victimized, to be the helpless object of another person's sexual gratification, is an experience that violates male gender norms (e.g., Dimock, 1988; Lew, 1988; Nasjleti, 1980). Men who have been victimized must struggle to reconcile this conflict, and it is a struggle which often endures lifelong, and which shapes much of their post abuse adaptation. Their descriptions of this struggle suggest that male gender norms inhibit the internal psychological processes necessary for healing from abuse. The norms dictate that "appropriately masculine" men do not acknowledge and certainly do not express their own pain, vulnerability or feelings of helplessness. Of the many affective sequelae of abuse, only anger fits well within the norms.

Thus, among the men interviewed for this study, there were two, divergent, clearly defined paths taken in the aftermath of their sexual victimization. One group of men could not or would not deny the victimization. They struggled with the "unmasculine" feelings which overwhelmed them, and the struggle left most of them convinced that they were inadequate men because real men would not have those feelings. The second group of men, a small minority in this sample, largely succeeded in denying the feelings associated with their victimization. To reinforce this denial, they took on hypermasculine attributes and dispositions and were much more expressive of their rage. Most of the men oscillated between the two paths. They were continually buffeted by deeply ingrained feelings of masculine inadequacy which they often countered with gestures toward hypermasculinity: masculine styles of dress, masculine hobbies, etc.

The feelings of masculine inadequacy described by the men emerged long before puberty. Many men described a profound sense of inferiority, of being alienated from their male peers, already well established during their early years in school:

S: And I remember watching the boys play basketball and I wanted to do that, but I wouldn't dare ask them or mess with them.

S: Like I was not well versed in all the cool sayings. I still don't know exactly what the guys say and all.

S: I always felt I was faking it...compared to the boys who...grew up with a real life and real family and that kind of thing, and had lots of support in their lives.

These feelings of inadequacy persisted into adulthood, undermining their self esteem and self worth:

S: Feeling like a man, an adult, that passage of adulthood and feeling significant and important, it was just not attainable for me.

S: I never hung out with the guys. I didn't have a girlfriend that often. I didn't get to do things a lot of the other guys did...When you're the brunt of people's jokes, people make fun of you, you're not as tough as the other guys are...I always backed down.

S: I worried a lot about the size of my manhood or whatever, the size of my penis. I did. I was always comparing. I'd ask my girlfriends. And then I felt like I was going to die when they told me no, you're not the biggest man I've been with. You felt like a piece of dog shit.

A few men were able to articulate some of the ways in which their need to be masculine, to be tough, conflicted with their experience of themselves, and their perception of the legacy of the abuse they carried within them.

S: I think what was harmful about the abuse was a number of things. One was that first of all I was like a tough from the projects. You got to be a man, you got to like football, and yet I had no control.

S: It embarrasses me to see somebody sad. If I had to guess, it probably has to do with male programming. That you're not supposed to be sad and you're not supposed to cry.

One man described how the abuse made him fear violence, his use of the words "wimp" and "pussy" indicating what this fear of violence had done to his feelings about his own maleness:

S: I hate violence. I was always the wimp or the pussy to back down in school. I always shied away from violence. I even get nervous if people are yelling. Like somebody being mad at me for whatever reason. It's all interrelated.

Some of the men who were abused by men contended with another complication in their feelings about being male: the contamination of their own sexuality by that of the abuser, the sense that male sexuality, their own now included, is dangerous and bad. This contamination is greatly exacerbated by what men perceive to be cultural messages about male sexuality. One man explained it this way:

S: And I feel like yea, I really have a hard time sometimes seeing myself as a male. I'm scared of my sexuality for all the reasons I had mentioned before plus the fact of being perceived as the perpetrator. I mean just because I'm a guy and I want to express myself sexually doesn't mean that I'm trying to become a perpetrator but there's a message out there that yea, guys are violent, they express themselves through sex in a violent way. You're a perpetrator of sex and maleness and violence. It's like this congealed thing.

Finally, some of the men described ways in which they compensated for chronic feelings of masculine inadequacy. They sought assurances

through institutional identifications (exactly one half of the men in this sample had served in the armed forces), and some resorted to victimizing others:

S: Well, I decided to go in because the Marine Corps has a reputation as being the toughest. And, of course, I could never picture myself being in anything except the Marine corps.

S: She was definitely raped. She definitely did that much of the thing against her will with my will. I didn't think that much about it. I didn't think it was wrong at all. I didn't have any remorse over that. I thought finally, wow, it wasn't that great, but at least I got that. I'm not a wimp. You can't tease me around like that. And I did what the man is supposed to do. And too bad she didn't love it. But she would next time if we had another time. And stuff like that.

(The rape described by this subject occurred 16 years prior to the interview, and, conscious of the stated limits to confidentiality, he did not name or otherwise identify the victim. At the conclusion of the interview, he expressed profound remorse, which led to a lengthy discussion of the links between his own abuse and his victimization of others.)

S: I want to assert myself as a man. I want to be recognized as a person, I want to achieve something as a human being, and I'm angry at women...

Negative Childhood Peer Relations

The chronic feelings of isolation and alienation described earlier, while being rooted in the experience of abuse and the stigma which then attaches itself, are consolidated by the abused boy's difficulties in interacting with peers. Many of the men recalled with considerable pain the profound insecurity they felt around other children:

S: I always had that insecure personality and sensitivity that I could never really make any real friends...I've never had any real best friends, like most of the other kids did.

S: I think the older kids more or less knew that I guess I was a sucker or a schmuck but I was just too little, I didn't know, and I think a part of it was always seeking for some kind of acceptance...I wanted to feel like I was a part or accepted somewhere...

Their insecurity and alienation often led to rejection, which seemed to deepen their feelings of insecurity:

S: When I had my first interaction with other people, children are very cruel. And I tried to hang around with the girls. And they didn't like guys because they were too young. And then the guys didn't like me because I tried to hang around with the girls.

For many of the men, alienation from their childhood peers both robbed them of the opportunity to develop desperately needed sources of validation and interpersonal skills, and also robbed them of a way out of an often miserable home life:

S: So now, when I look back at it, I felt like my only avenue to get out of that house was to make friends, make friends with people around me, and I felt like that avenue was cut off because I was a freak, I was a mutant.

Negative Schemas About People

One of the most pervasive and far-reaching consequences of childhood abuse is that it damages the victim's ability to trust, and therefore to connect to other people (e.g., Dimock, 1988; Lew, 1988; Myers, 1989). Having been abused as a child by someone typically older and more powerful, the victim finds himself unable to trust others. For many of the men, this evolved into a general philosophy of life, an expectation that people will hurt you if you give them the chance, and that you must only rely on yourself:

S: And a lot of it is lack of trust. It's like I know I'm on my own, and there's no way I can trust anybody.

S: So you have to do it for yourself. You cannot trust people.

Linked to this basic lack of trust was the expectation that people will not help you or care about you:

S: It's like walking into a hospital with a gunshot wound and people saying well, unless you have the money, you're just going to have to take your best shot at life with it. And that's the way I feel. It's like I feel I'm friggen' wounded. I'm dying. And everybody is saying well, sorry.

S: There's nobody else that's going to back you up. Even if there's 100 people watching, you get raped. Nobody is going to say or do a damn thing.

This expectation is so ingrained that when someone violates it by being caring or trustworthy, the outcome is often the same:

S: But every time somebody devotes themselves totally to me is the time when I say fuck this, I've got to get out of here. I think that relates back to what I'm here for. Because I really don't trust people at all. I really don't like people that much. I get scared.

The philosophy of life which grows out of these expectations is a bleak one, and one that is likely to be self-fulfilling. You can't trust people so you don't let them get close to you; nobody ever gets close to you so you never experience people as potentially caring or trustworthy:

S: To expose myself on a really intimate level, you get stomped is what I thought. If you give them something to hurt you with, they'll hurt you with it. That's basically it.

S: So it was a cycle where if you weren't a predator, you were the prey. So I was prey for no one.

S: It made me not trust people at all. Really not like people to a big extent. Because I feel like they'll abuse that trust. I just get the feeling that everybody wants something from me. There's always an ulterior motive to everyone.

Negative Schemas About the Self

Children who are abused often internalize the “badness” of the experience: Something bad is happening to them because *they* are bad (e.g., Briere, 1992). The men interviewed for this study expressed this basic sense of badness in myriad forms: As a feeling of inferiority, of insignificance, of being unacceptable and unlovable. Some men described this sense of badness in terms akin to “infection,” as though the abuse was in them, an indelible and eternally bad part of themselves:

S: I'll look at it now and I know the extent that this abuse, that it's in every pulsing cell I have in my body.

S: My fucking mother wants to fuck me. I mean, and I'm too ugly to be with people and my mother wants to fuck me. This is who I am, this is what I'm coming from.

Other men located the source of their negative feelings about themselves in their need to somehow make sense of the abuse:

S: I had to make sense out of what was going on. And the sense I made out of this was that I'm not really a good person. There's something different about me and something wrong.

The “something wrong” took many forms. Many of the men expressed profound self-hatred and a profoundly negative view of themselves:

S: But I just feel like if people really knew what really goes on with me, they wouldn't let me live.

S: I feel totally unacceptable. There's nothing about me that anybody else could possible enjoy or accept.

S: I was like a beaten dog.

S: That's what I mean about feeling inferior. I always feel inferior to people just as a whole person.

S: That's at the core of all this, is that I feel inaequate and terribly less than, and I'm never going to be good enough.

S: I was the most disgusting kid I knew on the inside. If anybody knew what was on the inside I would have been horrified, because they would have known what a jerk I was.

A few men countered this profound feeling of badness and inferiority by claiming the one domain that the abuse seemed to offer them:

S: I basically thought that the only thing I was good at, the only thing I was good for was sex. I knew how to do sex. I learned how to do sex when I was five. I knew sex. I wanted to be a sex machine because that's all I was good for. I didn't think my insides were worth paying attention to. And so if a woman no longer wanted to have sex with me, that was so incredibly painful to me.

Their profound sense of inner badness was yet another force driving a wedge between these men and other people. Most men believed that nobody could ever care about them:

S: I could not see anybody loving me, I could not see anybody liking me or wanting to be with me, I could not see myself as significant to the point where I would actually be in a relationship with someone else.

Problems with Sexuality

Almost all of the men evinced a profound effect of the abuse on their sexuality. For some, their internalized badness focused on their sexuality, as though it was primarily responsible for their victimization. This focusing typically led to confusion about their sexuality, and often to outright rejection:

S: I figured I was too much of a mutant for anybody to love me and any type of sexual feelings would probably be really unappreciated by a woman so I'd hide them, I tried not to show them at all. I figured the best thing I could possibly do was maybe try to figure out a way if I could take a, I don't know some drug I'd heard, maybe it's eldelpamine, that sex offenders took to discourage any type of sexual wantingness.

S: I guess I would be thinking how I didn't want to be attracted to this person. Or I needed to not be attracted to this person... And so the mental state was always I'm not attracted to them, I'm not attracted to them. And that relates back to how I didn't want to be... I couldn't have sex with my mother, so I had to cut that off, cut that part of me off.

For some men, sexual intimacy was frightening because it re-evoked feelings related to the abuse:

S: I'm sexually attracted to her and she's sexually attracted to me. So we went back to her house. And we started fooling around. And somehow intercourse came up. And I said not tonight. I was scared. I was scared because she wasn't scared. That scared me.

Other men went in the opposite direction, involving themselves in repeated sexual interactions, unable to protect their sexual boundaries:

S: I've been to bed with a lot of people I didn't want to go to bed with because I didn't know how to say no, didn't know I had any rights in that direction.

For other men, compulsive sexuality was focused more on fantasy and masturbation:

S: And the more that I talk about abuse, or have feelings around that, the more I feel less control over acting out sexually. I think that there's this incredible need for control around that. I think that I was able to keep whatever feelings I had in check by masturbating and sort of fantasizing about past sexual experiences.

Self Blame/Guilt

Self blame was almost universal among these men. As one man articulated it:

S: If sexual abuse occurs, you really feel like you're so bad that it's supposed to happen. That it's a punishment. That you did something wrong and this is more shame and guilt sort of coming down on you. And when you're that young you don't know any differently.

The men blamed themselves for not preventing or not stopping their abuse, often irrationally attributing to their childhood selves capacities that no child could possibly have:

S: I used to blame myself for it. I always thought I was a real smart two year old. So why didn't I get out of it. I blame myself. I don't blame him. I could have got out of it; I was plenty smart enough.

S: I still blame myself for all that happened... I feel I was real intelligent at that age, and I should have been able to get out of it.

Other men focused not on what they should have done, but rather on their inherent guilt; that there was something about them that provoked the abuse:

S: But it's so much easier to just take the blame for it. That there's something wrong with me. There was something defective from the beginning.

Self-blame often fused with the survivors' rage to become a potent and dangerous self-destructive force. One man described a transformative experience he had while in a hypnogogic state:

S: And just as I get up to the little boy, he turns around and looks at me and it's me as a little child. And I was like I, I'm going to kill him. And that was the first time in my life, like through all my suicide I realize, it's not so much I want to kill myself, but I want to kill that little boy that caused all that pain. It wasn't me. It's like that little boy is just a different person than me. I'm just a shell, but that little boy is living it, is what it is. And I wanted to kill him immediately.

For many of the men self blame generalized into a global feeling of guilt and hyper-responsibility:

S: And when someone says that something's wrong, like it's pathetic, the first thing I think it's me, that I did something wrong.

Shame/Humiliation

Feelings of shame and humiliation are some of the most persistent legacies of sexual abuse, and are often linked to feelings of badness and worthlessness. Few men talked easily about their feelings of shame, although many spontaneously referred to them. The most common reference was to chronic shame which linked directly back to their abuse:

S: I felt ashamed, like I had done something really dirty, really bad.

S: And God, he treated me like a whore. It was horrible. He shamed me so horribly.

For some men, the shame became separated from the abuse itself and attached to their selfhood, contributing powerfully to their negative feelings about themselves:

S: I feel ugly. There are physical imperfections that I have on my body that I focus on and I use that as a concrete tool to verify any type of psychological insecurities I have about this shame issue I have.

Finally, for some men the shame attached itself specifically to their sexuality:

S: It's like when I have sex with a girl, as soon as I have an orgasm the guilt and shame is incredible. Then I feel like the minute I ejaculate then I feel I should be killed. I should be shot for what I just did. The shame that comes out is incredible.

DISCUSSION

An empirically based, thematic content analysis of autobiographical interviews with sexually abused men validated the clinically based observations of numerous clinicians who have worked with male survivors (e.g., Dimock, 1988; Hunter, 1990; Lew, 1988; Myers, 1989). The analysis identified prominent affects and affective states (anger, fear, helplessness, loss, guilt, and shame), salient cognitive sequelae (inability to legitimize their experience as abuse, negative schemas about the self and about people and self-blame), pervasive issues around gender and sexuality (homosexuality issues, masculinity issues and problems with sexuality), and interpersonal difficulties (betrayal, isolation and alienation, and negative childhood peer relations). Together, these psychological themes describe a legacy of childhood abuse that permeates all of the important domains of its victims' lives: Their beliefs and feelings about themselves and about other people, and their basic sense of connection to others. The effects of this on the lives of these men are expressed eloquently by the men themselves, and they are also manifested in the increasing evidence of lives damaged, derailed or simply made more difficult by childhood abuse (e.g., Browne and Finkelhor, 1986; Lisak and Luster, 1994).

While the themes identified in this analysis appeared in many different forms among the survivors, a pattern of interconnections was evident, often described explicitly by the men themselves. Sexual abuse has the power to fundamentally damage a victim's relationship both to themselves and to other people. The men in this study expressed profound feelings of worthlessness, badness, ugliness, emptiness, and inferiority. These feelings, although rooted in their experiences of abuse, typically endured and often worsened with time, becoming ingrained, deeply negative identities. The depth and breadth of this negative identity is understandable given the many

sources feeding into it. Feeling inadequate about their masculinity, unsure of their sexual orientation, deeply shamed, blaming themselves for their victimization and fraught with often inexplicable fears, the survivor's ability to sustain a positive sense of self is subject to constant challenge and buffeting.

Paralleling this damage to the survivor's self is an equally pervasive assault on his connection to others. Almost every man described this breach beginning in childhood, with feelings of inferiority and alienation separating him from his peers. The alienation in turn prevents the formation of positive interpersonal connections, connections needed to mitigate their basic mistrust of others, their expectation that others can and will do you harm, and that you cannot expect help from others. For some, this outlook coalesced into a philosophy best described as "dog eat dog," and a commitment to never again be the underdog.

Together, the survivor's damaged sense of self and sense of community with others produced a profound and often lifelong isolation and separation from others. Men described their loneliness and aloneness, their fear of intimacy and their unsatisfied needs for intimacy, their friendlessness, their sense of being different and stigmatized. This isolation and alienation in turn served to consolidate their negative self schemas. Having internalized the negative experience of the abuse as "I'm bad," the men were over-prepared to interpret their isolation as further proof of their fundamental inferiority and worthlessness.

One of the most salient aspects of this analysis was the interaction of sexual abuse with its victims' perception of their own gender and sexual identities. These men described, often with remarkable eloquence, their struggle to reconcile the experience of sexual victimization with the demands which their culture places on them to be "masculine." Masculinity, as defined by cultural norms, rejects vulnerability, passivity and helplessness, psychological states which comprise the very core of the experience of sexual victimization. Thus, the male survivor, who has been given no choice but to experience these "nonmasculine" states intensively, feels himself to be at the core defectively masculine, inadequately masculine, a male who must struggle to hide and repress the inner stigmata of his "nonmasculinity." This profound sense of gender inadequacy feeds directly their more generalized sense of inferiority and negative self-image, and exacerbates their alienation and isolation from others. Some men actively fight the insecurity, compensating by adopting some or many of the emblems of hypermasculinity, from their dress, to their mannerisms, to styles of speech and, in some cases, to aggressive behavior.

For men who were abused by men, a second channel feeding into their feelings of insecurity was their confusion about their sexual orientation. Absorbing the culture's homophobia, as well as its confused fusion of sexual

orientation and gender identity, many men internalized their sexual victimization by another man as a sign of their own nonmasculinity, rendering them insecure about their adequacy as men and confused about their sexual orientation.

The culture's rigid gender norms harmed these men beyond creating feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. They also impeded the process of healing from sexual abuse by forcefully warning survivors away from the very capacities they needed to foster their own healing. Like all males, survivors hear from numerous sources one of the codes of masculinity: "Don't acknowledge your pain, don't express it, and don't talk about it with anyone else." Thus, they are compelled to reject their capacity to feel and empathize with their own pain, thereby dramatically reducing their ability to begin the process of healing the legacy of abuse.

Even men who actively struggled against this gender tide found little or no support for their efforts. Many men expressed how alone and ignored they felt as male survivors of sexual abuse, as though they belong to a nonexistent category in the culture's lexicon: "male victims." The same forces which drove them to reject the reality of their victimization also shaped the attitudes of the people they encountered in their struggle to recover from their abuse. Many men described numerous attempts at obtaining help, most thwarted by the disbelief of potential helpers.

What makes this feeling of rejection and nonexistence so poignant is that often the words and expressions used by these men to describe their feelings and experiences are identical to those used by women survivors. Most professionals who have worked with women survivors of sexual abuse would immediately recognize statements such as: "My only value is as a sexual object;" or, "I couldn't say no if they wanted sex," or "I'm always afraid," or "I feel like I belong to somebody else." Probably many professionals would be far less likely to recognize those same statements coming from male survivors. That they did come from male survivors underscores the common humanity which, despite the cultural overlay of gender norms, lies at the core of the response to childhood abuse.

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