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On Solid Ground I Stand: Narratives on Disclosure, Resilience, and Faith Amidst Recognition of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Wade Rhodes Dundee

Eastern Illinois University

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On Solid Ground I Stand: Narratives on Disclosure, Resilience,
and Faith Amidst Recognition of Childhood Sexual Abuse

(TITLE)

BY

Wade Rhodes Dundee

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Eastern Illinois University

Department of Communication Studies

2017

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Abstract

Childhood sexual abuse seems to be a hidden secret in American society; one of the famous, “If we don’t talk about it, it won’t happen” narratives. However, we know this is not true. Both the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2012) and Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2005) state one in four girls and one in six boys will fall victim to sexual abuse before they celebrate their 18th birthday. There is a high probability that because of the alarming lack of disclosure of male survivors, these statistics could be incorrect and could hinder creating or allowing for conversations regarding childhood sexual abuse (CSA). For this study, I use autoethnography to provide narrative about my experiences as a male survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Focusing on narrative as a way of knowing, I analyze the narrative through a mini-thematic analysis, using Owen’s (1984) definition of a theme. Through this analysis, I find four major themes: moments, hearing/listening to God, using conversations as tools, and concern for others. I examine literature on masculinity, disclosure, narrative, resilience, faith and social support. I then provide narratives from my own experiences with childhood sexual abuse, and seek out how disclosure and faith play a role in resiliency.

Chapter 1: Introduction

You need to know I am writing this because this is life. Life is real, and uncomfortable, and honest. That is, if we let it be those things. People deserve to know. They deserve to know because I know I'm not the only one. You need to know I am not the only one; that matters. These may be my words, these may be my experiences, but the haunting truth is they aren't, in fact, just mine. I am not alone in this fight. You need to know I stand on solid ground now, but I have experienced the metaphorical quicksand that many of us fall victim to. You need to know it hasn't been easy, but there is solace, and there is comfort, and there is hope. However, we must face the real, the uncomfortable, and the honest before we can experience the solid ground that follows.

Childhood sexual abuse seems to be a hidden secret in American society; one of the famous, "If we don't talk about it, it won't happen" narratives. However, we know this is not true. Both the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (2012) and Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2005) state one in four girls and one in six boys will fall victim to sexual abuse before they celebrate their 18th birthday. There is a high probability that because of the alarming lack of disclosure of both female and male survivors, these statistics could be incorrect. Even more specifically, accounts of male childhood sexual abuse are not only underreported, but understudied; and it's very possible these two are interrelated. Males who have experienced childhood sexual assault often feel hesitation when disclosing their traumatic experiences for many reasons, whether it be fear, confusion, denial, or a variety of other factors. Despite this, it is imperative for male survivors to continue sharing their stories of disclosure. By doing so, researchers, and fellow survivors, are able to develop more advanced knowledge regarding male

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childhood sexual abuse (CSA) as a whole. Through studying accounts of male CSA, researchers begin to allow for a space in which male survivors are able to highlight their experiences.

Looking at discourse through a Foucauldian approach, we come to recognize discourse as knowledge (Gordon, 1980). This knowledge becomes a product of particular “social, historical, institutional, and political conditions under which certain statements become truthful and meaningful, and other come to count as false, marginalized, and deviant” (Orgad, 2009, p. 135). Orgad (2009) discusses two ways in which a Foucauldian perspective informs our current discussion of discourse surrounding the survivor in contemporary culture. She states,

“Firstly, it suggests consideration of representations and cultural manifestations of survivors in contemporary cultural space, in the media and beyond, as constituting a discursive site in which knowledge is produced. Rather than regarding the variety of mediated depictions of survivor as communicating already-formed knowledge (e.g., about suffering, trauma, and struggle), this approach stresses the constitutive role of these cultural manifestations in creating a discourse that forms and transforms knowledge, and a space that establishes the truth and legitimacy of certain statements, and illegitimacy and deviance of others.

Secondly, a Foucauldian approach reminds us that while the discourse of the survivor is largely produced and reproduced through the media, it is continuously interacting with wider public discourses, and ways of talking and thinking” (p. 135).

I use this particular conceptualization of discourse in relation to my experience as a male survivor of CSA, as it unknowingly informed my decision to not disclose because of the way we culturally define abuse and “survivor” (e.g., weak, helpless, etc.).

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Pringle (2001) notes that “discourses available to people in particular social contexts are believed to discursively locate or position them. In this sense, discourse creates subject positions that give subjects varying ability to exercise power” (p. 426). However, these positions are in constant fluctuation, and because there is a presence of competing discourses, these positions are never stable (Foucault, 1978). For me, the competing discourse has been one of a battle between privilege and marginalization. With this, I have engaged in intersectional reflexivity by acknowledging both my privileged self and marginalized self, and reflecting on those intersecting identities. (Jones, 2010).

I often found myself struggling with this idea of power and privilege as a white, heterosexual, male, while still feeling a part of a marginalized group as a male survivor of CSA. As a result of this dichotomy, I felt there was not a space for me to disclose my abuse as a male survivor. This is why you need to know my story. Although mine is just one among many, through the telling of my story regarding disclosure and resilience, this study stands as an important, foundational piece of literature regarding CSA in the field of communication studies. It is also important to acknowledge the great importance of simply understanding the importance this study will have for other survivors of CSA, and even more specifically, me, as a researcher and survivor. Through the reading of survivor narratives, I had found an expanded sense of healing; a healing that has since expanded through writing my own story for others to see. Communicating my experiences have helped me heal through the honest words that have now left my being and entered into reality.

This is why you need to know that I drive by often; where it happened, that is. The overgrown weeds and cracked cement of the abandoned lot have formed a grim irony that I have often formed my reality around. It seems lonely, dark, uncared for; often how I made myself feel

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before I transitioned into my survivor mentality. I drive by not to remember, not to reflect, but to simply get to where I am going. I often pass the empty concrete spaces and I can clearly envision where the rusted trailers used to be situated. You need to know that when I pass by, my heart races and I remember like it was yesterday, like it was movie I had just seen. But it's not a movie, it's life, and it's real, uncomfortable, and honest, and I can't escape it. I can't escape it because I'm not allowed to. You need to know that I am not allowed to, not because I am trapped, but because I can't undo the real, the uncomfortable, and the honest. I spent many years being a victim. I spent many years denying that it happened, that I was there, and that I was never going to get past it. I am not a victim, though. I am a survivor; at least that is my mindset these days. I am here with purpose and intent to help; that's why I can't escape. Through disclosure, I have become resilient and have found purpose in the pain. I have come to recognize my abuse as something worth talking about, worth sharing; not with selfish intent, but rather, to give other survivors who are continuously silenced, a voice. I have accepted the responsibility of raising awareness, of breaking down socially constructed barriers surrounding male CSA survivors. I have been called to share my testimony, highlighting the healing I have experienced through my faith in Jesus Christ. I have recognized the importance of storytelling as a means of healing, and the importance of sharing so that others may have an opportunity to heal. Through the grace of God, my loving family, my friends, and my church community I was able to grow, and recognize my new resilience. This is why I don't drive by to remember or reflect, but to simply get to where I am going; you need to know that.

Childhood sexual abuse isn't something a survivor can escape. We can't escape the memories, we can't escape the feelings, we can't escape the truth. We can't escape the triggers, and we can't forget. However, we can grow. We can not only survive, but we can thrive.

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Survivors are able to thrive through the act of disclosure and faith. As my experience testifies, we are able to build interpersonal relationships, find support, and begin a conversation that makes it easier for future male survivors to disclose. Through faith we are able to become resilient and use something painful and ugly to create something beneficial and beautiful. Just because I drive by to get where I'm going, doesn't mean I become defeated. Although I am reminded of pain, I am also reminded of strength and growth; and that is what surviving is about.

This study, using an autoethnographic approach through reflective journaling, looks at my personal experiences of surviving CSA, and how I came to find solace and support as a result of disclosure. I also reflect upon how my faith and these acts of disclosure helped me in my process of becoming resilient and finding purpose.

Rationale

Studies highlighting the sexual abuse of men are highly understudied within academia, in general, as a result of the taboo nature surrounding the issue. With the underreporting of male sexual abuse, comes this notion that there is not actually an issue in which we should be concerned. Living in a society where being a man is traditionally looked upon as being strong, tough, and emotionless, disclosing information like CSA that could potentially make society perceive men as weak and feminine. This affects communication because the way CSA is socialized in this way directly affects the rate at which males disclose their abuse. As Kia-Keating, Grossman, Sorsoli, and Epstein (2005) note, "the sexual abuse of boys and men, unfortunately, has been even more difficult for society to accept or acknowledge, in part, because the experience stands in stark contrast to the notion of masculinity, damaging men's sense of power, control, and invulnerability" (p. 169).

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Little research has been conducted on the disclosure of men and their experiences with sexual abuse. Although research has failed to incorporate a substantial amount of male disclosure, it does not mean that there is not a need for it. Sorsoli, Kia-Keating, and Grossman (2008) state, “understanding men’s disclosure experiences, including any barriers that may have been encountered, is a vital step toward alleviating males survivors’ considerable, if often silent, suffering” (p. 333). The authors go on to say, “overall, little research has examined the disclosure experiences of boys and men, and the available research has yielded mixed findings, suggesting that further research is necessary to understand the disclosure experiences of male survivors” (p. 334). O’Leary and Barber (2008) talk about silencing, which takes place because of how the perpetrator attempts to normalize the abuse or force the survivor into remaining silent. This can be done through manipulation and threats, among other things. O’Leary and Barber (2008) also state that silencing is more of an issue for male survivors than for female survivors. This is due, in part, to the patriarchal society that has been constructed in the United States. Men are easily silenced due to the fear of being outcast or perceived as weak. Roland Summit’s (1983) Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome (CSAAS) theory is a theory of disclosure that “emphasizes that disclosure is not a single event but a process that is highly dependent on the reactions of others” (Tang, Freyd, Wang, p. 5). This theory is vital to my story because mine was one that took place as a process, not a single event. The fact that I disclose now in the ways I do, is highly connected to the reaction and support I received upon my initial disclosure. Through receiving positive reactions from those close to me, I felt comfortable to continue to disclose. Luckily, for me, the majority of my disclosure experiences were positive and supportive.

This study also stems from the need for further communication literature on the subject of male survivors of CSA. A majority of the research conducted on male child sexual abuse stems

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from disciplines such as Psychology, Health, Sociology, Social Work, and Trauma. This study will serve as a contribution to the field of communication. Research about childhood sexual assault is a highly understudied topic in the communication discipline, and I believe the discipline could greatly benefit from research regarding CSA. One particular way communication research will benefit from this study is through the discussion of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure of traumatic experiences, specifically CSA in males, is one major addition this study could contribute to the field of communication studies. It will provide additional literature on how males choose to disclose despite the socialized stigmas attached to masculinity, why they choose to disclose, and why they choose to disclose to specific individuals. An additional benefit to the field of communication studies that will arise from this study is the use of narrative as a way of knowing. Polkinghorne (1988) posits “narrative meaning is one of the processes of the mental realm, and functions to organize elements of awareness into meaningful episodes” (p. 1).

Although the lack of disclosure, and underreporting of childhood sexual abuse in boys remains an extremely valuable element of this study, the heart of study stems from the resilience that follows the abuse. For this study, resilience will be defined as a process containing three levels: adapting, growing, and thriving (Crete & Singh, 2015). Beyond this, this study also heavily focuses on the use of the Christian faith as a tool to achieve resilience through disclosure. As a man in American society I must participate in intersectional-reflexivity (Jones, 2010), because I am inherently placed in a category of privilege; however, there is often not a discursive space available for males who have experienced such traumatic events as CSA because of the nature of masculinity and manhood in our society. However, through my experiences I have been able to find that space through the use of my faith and working in ministry; which has heavily influenced my ability to remain resilient and in a survivor mentality.

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The overall purpose of this study is to use autoethnographic means to uncover how I, the researcher, self-disclose to become a resilient survivor, and how faith influenced resilient behaviors, and helped sustain and further my healing.

Literature Review

A multitude of concepts factor into the disclosure of male sexual abuse survivors, their narratives and their resilience. The following review of literature will briefly cover some important scholarly literature regarding masculinity, disclosure, narrative, resilience, faith and social support. Literature in these areas will help garner a better understanding of male survivor experiences and their relation to interpersonal communication. More specifically, for the purpose of this study, the literature will connect to my personal narrative regarding my experiences with sexual abuse and the resilient behaviors that have emerged since. I will begin with a discussion of literature regarding masculinity.

Masculinity

One particular reason stories of male survivors are often unheard or not spoken is because male survivors of CSA are often made invisible and are unable to acknowledge the experiences or even seek help (Anderson, 2011). Although this study does not heavily focus on struggles of masculinity, it is important to acknowledge that the way masculinity is socialized in our culture heavily affects disclosure rates of males. From early childhood, we are taught what a man is supposed to be. Traditionally men are portrayed as strong, independent, confident, and levelheaded, because the concept of masculinity in American culture has been socialized them to be this way. But what happens when men don't feel as if they fit into one of these categories? What happens if a man is, in fact, broken? What happens when men, as young adults or children,

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experience abuse and they feel less than a man? Men are not strong all of the time despite what we have come to know through our culture and society as a whole.

Male survivors suffer many consequences that result from the dominant ideology of what is means to be a man. Gender is socially constructed, and the way American culture has constructed manhood provides these strict guidelines that males must follow. Allen (2011) states, “gender classifications are based on a ‘web of socially constructed meanings that differentiate humans on the basis perceived physical, social, and psychological characteristics;” and “Gender is not something we have, but something we do, over and over again in one setting or another” (Allen, 2011, p. 42). Masculinity is also something that men aren’t, but do. For instance, hegemonic masculinity is understood as “the pattern of practice” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832), meaning, not just having a masculine identity, but enacting traditionally masculine behaviors. When a male does not fall within this binary, problems arise. Questions regarding their sexuality, manhood, etc. are all brought into question. Unfortunately, these questions are not only raised by the general population, but those close to survivors, even their parents. McGuffey (2008) suggests that parents of male CSA survivors question how their children will develop a sexual and gender identity. As a result, males are often forced to adapt, or assimilate, to the male scripts. Because of this, males often must protect their face through identity management techniques. It is not uncommon for men to “act” masculine or tough to counteract their self-perception of being less manly due to their abuse. Identity management stems from Goffman’s work on self-presentation and facework (Gudykunst, 2003). Male survivors often have to work on self-presentation and facework; however, different types of facework will take place depending on whether disclosure has taken place.

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As far as masculinity, males who disclose their experiences with CSA often feel as if they need to over exemplify a masculine persona to combat the “weakness” associated with being a male victim of sexual abuse. Often times males who feel their masculine identity is being threatened begin to enact hypermasculine behaviors (Pascoe, 2012; Kia-Keating et al., 2005). As a result of cultural and social expectations of men, weakness is not an acceptable trait for men to embody. Because men are culturally expected to be strong and masculine, if they do choose to disclose they are only a limited amount of resources available for them because of the little-known knowledge about male CSA. One respondent in Eastman, Saltzman, and Willis’ (2013) study stated, “male sexual assault is often believed to be a myth by many. It seems [people] easily understand men raping women, but the idea of men being raped is something they just cannot fathom” (p. 464).

Ultimately, perceptions of masculinity and the perceived attack on a survivor’s manhood and masculinity are informed by the dominant ideology of what it means to be a man in Western culture. The conversation regarding male sexual abuse as a whole has become dictated by this notion. As a result, the fear of demasculinizing taking place directly affects the disclosure process for male survivors. Disclosure has become a very gendered process, with research regarding gender differences in disclosure showing that women traditionally disclose more than men beginning as early as adolescence (Papini & Farmer, 1990; Valkenburg, Sumter, & Peter, 2011; Landoll, Schwartz-Mette, Rose, & Prinstein, 2011; Altermatt & Painter, 2016)

Disclosure

Male survivors, for a variety of reasons, often feel unable to disclose their experiences with abuse. I felt my disclosure wouldn’t be welcomed because society struggles to see men as victims (Andrews, 2014). Andrews (2014) also states, “we often see men as resilient and self-

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sufficient, emotionally closed, and highly sexed: men are in charge and display controlling behavior; men are strong, unemotional, and dominant. [...] We teach our children that boys don't cry, that it is a weakness to show vulnerability, helplessness or pain" (p. 29). Kia-Keating, Grossman, Sorsoli, and Epstein (2005) state, "the sexual abuse of boys and men, unfortunately, has been even more difficult for society to accept or acknowledge, in part, because the experience stands in stark contrast to the notion of masculinity, damaging men's sense of power, control, and invulnerability" (p. 169). Female survivors of sexual abuse are often questioned and fall victim to various rape myths society has socialized to be true; men however, are almost consistently questioned about their masculinity. Males are often questioned on how or why they weren't able to escape the attack (Arttime, McCallum, & Peterson, 2014).

It is important to note that research indicates there are great differences between how men and women disclose as a whole, and there is an ample amount of research regarding gender differences and self-disclosure. Girls show a stronger connection to disclosure than boys do as early as third grade (Altermatt & Painter, 2016). Adolescent females also partake in more emotional self-disclosure to parents and friends than adolescent males do (Papini & Farmer, 1990). Boys are socialized to keep things to themselves, whereas girls are free to share and be open with their emotions and feelings. Parents also report discussing emotions with daughters more so than sons (Adams et al. 1995; Fivush et al. 2000), and this could affect their son's disclosure with their peers and how these boys feel about disclosing emotional information among their peers (Landoll et al. 2011).

Easton, Saltzman, and Willis (2013) point out that, "there is still considerable stigma attached to being a male survivor of childhood sexual abuse" (p. 460). The authors also discuss three domains of disclosure barriers, which include sociopolitical, interpersonal, and personal.

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The sociopolitical domain consists of many cultural values that interfere with the disclosure of male CSA. The first, not surprisingly, is masculinity, followed by limited resources. Not only is male sexual abuse often not discussed to the extent female sexual abuse is, but there are also fewer resources for male survivors. These may include counseling services or access to sexual assault/rape crisis centers (Eastman, Saltzman, and Willis, 2013). The interpersonal domain includes the mistrust of others, fear of being labeled as gay, safety and protection issues, past negative responses from others, and abuser factors. Males feel a sense of hesitation in disclosure due to who their abuser was and the negative effects that may come as a result of that disclosure. Lastly, the personal domain consists of internal emotions, naming the experience as “sexual abuse,” and concerns about sexual identity.

Other interpersonal factors include: fear of being labeled as gay, abuser factors, safety and protection issues, and past negative responses from others (Easton, Saltzman, & Willis, 2013). As I wrote earlier, being able to name the act of what happened is a difficult process, and it is a clear personal barrier to disclosure. Along with being able to name it sexual abuse, internal emotions and concerns related to sexual orientation/identity also serve as personal barriers to the process of disclosure (Easton, Saltzman, and Willis, 2013). Once the naming process has taken place, it is imperative for survivors to begin sharing these stories to obtain additional narratives that help us understand CSA.

Narrative

Telling our story offers survivors a way to reclaim our experiences (Lemelin, 2006). As narrative beings, we come to know ourselves and our experiences through stories. We are social beings who live storied lives (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992), and we come to know a part of who

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we are through the stories we take on as our own (Bochner, 1997). According to Clair et al. (2014),

“narratives include many purposes: to entertain, to educate, to persuade, to provide catharsis and aesthetic resolution, to create community and simultaneously to ostracize, to oppress, and yet to offer resistance, to heal, to emancipate, and to grant future possibilities” (p. 10-11).

Clair et al. (2014) also posits that narrative can be used to explore different modes, from artifacts to lived experiences. Hunter (2010) provided four ways that individuals narrate their abuse stories, and those include: narrative of silence, narrative of on-going suffering, narrative of transformation, and narrative of transcendence. While this particular study suggested that the participants identify with one particular narrative, Hunter (2010) points out that it is possible to move from one narrative to another. The narrative of silence occurs when survivors coping method involves remaining silent. Survivors who experienced the narrative of on-going suffering were silenced as children. The narrative of transformation includes stories of going from identifying as a victim to a survivor, whereas the narrative of transcendence takes place when individuals reject ever being a “victim.”

For a majority of my journey I fell victim to the narrative of silence, but eventually made my way to the narrative of transcendence; which is why for this study I feel it necessary to include my own personal story to help the reader understand how, through disclosure and a strong, daring Christian faith, I was able to transition from one narrative to another. It is important, now that we have discussed this transition from one narrative to another to discuss the potential aftermath of disclosure and the telling of a survivor narrative. Also, I will discuss some initial research on resilience as it was a major aspect of my post-disclosure narrative.

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Resilience and Faith

Baljon (2011) points out the fact that we don't really know how to treat men who are victims of CSA. One reason is because no matter what, society still struggles with seeing men as victims (Andrews, 2014). Baljon (2011) also references the biological differences in men and women and how "for men who have suffered sexual abuse in their youth, masculinity is at stake by the very nature of the trauma" (p. 153). Trauma as such provokes anxiety and aggression. Easton, Coohy, Rhodes, and Moorthy (2013) state, "traumatic child experiences, such as sexual abuse, are associated with long-term mental health problems and risky health behaviors throughout survivors' lives (e.g., depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity)" (p. 213). Unfortunately, there is very little research regarding the aftermath and long-term effects on male CSA survivors, once again due to the lack of research to begin with on male survivors.

Although there is a potential for serious issues evolving from childhood sexual abuse, there is also room for resilience. Although resilience is an important factor among male survivors, it has become difficult to operationalize (Marriot, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Harrop, 2014). However, for this study we will discuss resilience as a process containing three levels: adapting, growing, and thriving (Crete & Singh, 2015). It is often easy to seclude yourself as a victim, but resilient males often transition from the victim stage to self-identifying as a survivor, and then to thriving from that point. Studies show that to be resilient males often come to this awareness to turning their situation into a positive (Crete & Singh, 2015). A connection has been made between high resilience and certain factors such as: "interpersonal skills; competence; high self-regard and lack of self-blame; spirituality; helpful life circumstances; lack of stigmatization; social support and family support" (Chouliara, Karatzias, & Gullone, 2014, p. 70). Survivors also

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describe healing as living a satisfying life, putting an end to the abuse cycle, disclosing their abuse, and spiritual transformation as well as engaging in altruistic behaviors (Chouliara, et al., 2014).

As previously stated, one element of resilient male survivors is a spiritual transformation. “Religious beliefs and values offer people a framework for understanding and evaluating the stressful events they encounter. Having religious beliefs or faith can sustain a person in difficult times” (Stone, et al., 2003, p. 331). Bryant-Davis and Wong (2013) note that adult survivors of CSA indicate they utilize religious and spiritual coping throughout their recovery. However, abuse and/or trauma may cause difficulty for children and adolescents to maintain their beliefs (Bryant-Davis & Wong, 2013). Survivors have asked: “‘Where was God when I was abused,’ and ‘I couldn’t even trust God not to hurt me’” (Kennedy, 2000). Although this is true, we know through the previous discussion of resilience that many males often find some sort of spiritual transformation throughout their recovery process. This process of transitioning from questioning God to finding support and purpose through my faith and those involved in my spiritual journey is a major premise of my story.

An additional aspect of faith and resilience is the idea of resilient faith (Luce, 2001). Resilient faith can be defined as the kind of faith that

“will sustain us for a lifetime. It is a faith that does not change with the weather or weaken when times get hard. Resilient faith holds up when hit by life’s setbacks and curve balls. It chooses to follow the Savior *no matter what*” (p. 51).

Luce (2001) also discusses the notion of training to be resilient by highlighting such ideas: strength training vs. endurance training, building spiritual muscle, spiritual nutrition, and focusing on the finish line. Strength training vs. endurance training refers to not simply having

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faith that starts out strong, but having a faith that endures. Luce (2001) references stamina as the key to resilience, and states, “we need the ability to bounce back and sustain our strength” (p. 124). To build muscle, we must stretch those muscles. Luce (2001) compares this to building spiritual muscle, when life stretches us we are able to grow and build spiritual muscle. In regards to spiritual nutrition, Luce (2001) talks about the things we fill our lives with that can be compared to either good or bad foods. For example, where are we getting our nutrition? Are we simply listening to what our pastor says and nothing more, or are we digging into God’s word ourselves? In addition to this, what are we filling our lives with in regards to media, movies, news, etc. All of these factors come together to form our spiritual nutrition. The discussion of resilience continues with the idea of staying focused on the finish line. For instance, as Christians, a part of our resilience and resilient faith is focusing on the finish line. The finish line in this instance refers to making it to Heaven.

Ganzevoort (2002) reminds us that research regarding the coping process in male sexual assault is understudied, but tells us more specifically that research connecting religion and male sexual abuse is merely “invisible” (pg. 313). Unfortunately, research looking at coping processes through religious or spiritual social support remains an understudied area. Despite this, there are many benefits to seeking support and empathy from the church following traumatic experiences, specifically childhood sexual abuse. “Child abuse studies have found that adult survivors of child abuse, and to lesser extent child survivors of abuse, indicate that they make use of religious and spiritual coping in the recovery process” (Wong, 2013, 677). Ladd and McIntosh (2008) discuss different reasoning that differentiates seeking social support within a religious context versus seeking it through a non-religious outlet. Two of the positive outcomes of religious social support are a more coherent understanding of life and prayer. When referring to a religious social

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network, Ladd and McIntosh state (2008) state that “such a network may facilitate integration of stressful or traumatic events into one’s beliefs about the world and oneself that leads to more positive postcrisis outcomes” (pg. 28). Walker et al. (2009) propose that trauma survivors often seek religious and spiritual outlets to make meaning and sense of their experiences.

As previously stated, the purpose of this study is to examine how through my experiences of self-disclosure I became a resilient survivor, and how my faith influenced my resilient behaviors. I will be seeking to find answers to the following research questions to fulfill the purpose of this study.

Research Questions

RQ1: In what ways does self-disclosure help male survivors of CSA find healing following their abuse?

RQ2: How does faith play a role in resilient behaviors for male survivors of CSA?

Chapter 2: Method

Autoethnography

For this study, I used autoethnography as a method by reflecting on my personal experiences of childhood sexual abuse, self-disclosure, faith, and resilience in attempt to expand our current ways of understanding the experiences of male survivors of childhood sexual abuse. “Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 273). In relation to this particular study, autoethnography is used to analyze my personal narratives to help better understand male experiences of CSA. Beyond this, ethnographers seek to use the “diversity and unity of cultural performance” to help deepen our understanding of the meaningfulness of life (Conquergood,

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1985). Autoethnography, as a method, has been seen as an autobiographical approach to research and writing (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2008), while combining a traditional ethnographic approach to create what we know as both the process and product of autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011). One key factor of autoethnography is the requirement of the researcher's personal narrative to be present (Tedlock 1991). In this study, I look at five of my personal narratives that serve as turning points in my life.

Although more traditional ways of research have been held to a higher value in the past, methods like autoethnography have emerged as a valuable and important contribution to the research process. Unfortunately, autoethnography has had some difficulties garnering respect within some areas of the academic community and has been criticized for being more artful in nature, rather than following traditional, canonical, scientific ways of conducting research (Ellis et al., 2011). However, when looking at narrative as a way of knowing, we come to understand that ethnographic methods are a useful and important methodological choice; specifically, using lived experiences as a way to understand broader social and communication constructs. Scholars such as Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue that autoethnography is a valuable method so the researcher can “concentrate on producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274). Autoethnography continues to “open a wider lens on the world, eschewing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 275).

An autoethnographic approach also allows the researcher to “speak personally by focusing on their lived experience in direct relation to the social context” (Cook, 2014, p. 271).

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Another valuable aspect of autoethnography is the ability for the researcher to compose useful narrative to help better understand various cultural and communication phenomena. My study takes the form of what Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) call narrative ethnography, defined as “texts presented in the form of stories that incorporate the ethnographer’s experiences into the ethnographic descriptions and analysis of others” (p. 278). Reed-Danahay (1997) referenced autoethnography as a way to rewrite the self. Hughes (2008) discusses autoethnography in regards to it being an emergent method in pedagogy and communication, and discusses three distinct connections between autoethnography and reflexivity, teaching, and learning.

Autoethnography is the only method that allows for the researcher to “speak personally by focusing on their lived experience in direction relation to the social context” (Cook, 2014, p. 271). By this logic, as the researcher I am able to garner research based off my own experiences to help provide foundational research regarding CSA in the communication field while sparing other survivors of potentially triggers or revictimization. Taking into consideration different triggering factors, I want to minimize the triggering or revictimization of other male CSA survivors. By using an autoethnographic approach, and drawing upon personal experiences and narratives, I eliminate the possibility of the research process triggering or revictimizing additional survivors. Also, with the intimate and vulnerable topic at hand, gathering participants who will openly discuss the topic at hand could prove to be difficult.

For this study, to generate personal narrative, I reflect on my personal experiences with childhood sexual abuse through reflective journaling. Hubbs and Brand (2005) posit that using journaling as a learning strategy offer students with opportunities to “mull over ideas, uncover inner secrets, and piece together life’s unconnected threads” (p. 62). I believe using journaling as

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a way of collecting stories as data will be beneficial because, as a survivor of CSA, it will help generate ways of knowing through written narratives of my experiences.

I reflect upon five major events regarding my abuse, disclosure, faith, and resilience. I chose these specific narratives to include in my study as they were major turning points in my story of resilience. Although my abuse has shaped me as an individual, and I experience the aftermath of the abuse daily, these specific stories stood out as the most important stories regarding my abuse. These narratives highlight vital lived experiences along my journey to resilience, they highlight turning points from a victim to survivor mentality, and they discuss how my faith was a major turning point in how I dealt with my abuse pre-and-post-disclosure. The five narratives I include are *The First Wave*, *Silent Night*, *Help Me*, *Help You*, *Sail On*, and *On Solid Ground I Stand*. *The First Wave* directly deals with the moment I realized that I had been abused in my childhood. *Silent Night* refers to the first meaningful, full-length disclosure I had participated in. *Help Me*, *Help You* highlights a major turning point in my faith and resiliency, explaining the moment I realized the good that could come from the past. *Sail On* discusses the need for support and relationships and how I went about a major chain of disclosure. Finally, *On Solid Ground I Stand* uses elements from my personal testimony as a tool to show the growth and resilience I have experienced, and how I am thriving as a survivor of CSA.

Procedures & Participants

For this study, to generate personal narrative, I reflect on my personal experiences with childhood sexual abuse through reflective journaling. As previously mentioned, Hubbs and Brand (2005) posit that using journaling as a learning strategy offer students with opportunities to “mull over ideas, uncover inner secrets, and piece together life’s unconnected threads” (p. 62).

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I believe using journaling as a way of collecting stories as data will be beneficial because, as a survivor of CSA, it will help generate ways of knowing through written narratives of my experiences.

Richardson (1990) describes storytelling as “a method of knowing” and a way of expressing our lives. Because we as humans live storied lives (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992) our identities are shaped through the stories passed down to us and the ones we take on as our own (Bochner, 1997). I provide specific, in depth narrative in hopes to make sense of my experiences of sexual abuse, and the events that have happened there after. Polkinghorne (1988) states we use narrative as a way to construct experience into conversation, and that we use narrative as a way of knowing. We as humans begin to know ourselves and make sense of our world through stories (Bruner, 1990; Ricouer, 1991; Pasupathi, Fivush, Hernandez-Martinez, 2016). For me, I came to understand different parts of myself through the writing of my narratives. Having tangible compositions of my lived experiences has given me an opportunity to reflect and, I believe, grow even more. Through my personal narratives, I have a better understanding and appreciation for the growth I’ve experienced and where I continue to see myself going.

As I stated previously, I reflect upon five major events regarding my abuse, disclosure, faith, and resilience. These specific narratives include: *The First Wave*, *Silent Night*, *Help Me*, *Help You*, *Sail On*, and *On Solid Ground I Stand*. I choose to discuss these specific narratives because they served as major turning points in my life and my resilience. They highlight major changes in my life and my faith, and were vital moments through my experiences.

Although this is the best possible method for this study, there are ethical considerations to take into account when conducting an autoethnographic study, such as the inclusion of interpersonal relationship partners in your narratives. Relational ethics are prominent for

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autoethnographers (Ellis 2007), because they not only involve themselves, but those close to them (Ellis et al., 2011). For my study, I protect the individuals within my narratives by trying to fully tell the story while still not giving away full parts of their identities. I also do my best to protect our relationships and the intimacies of the moments we shared by not sharing specific dialogue that took place. Another concern with autoethnography as a method is its relation to reliability, validity, and generalizability. Whereas more traditional methods are able to support reliability, validity, and generalizability, in autoethnography, reliability is heavily influenced by the author's credibility (Ellis et al., 2011). Ellis et al. (2011) also describe validity by stating

“For autoethnographers, validity means that a work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true. The story is coherent. It connects readers to writers and provides continuity in their lives. What matters is the way in which the story enables the reader to enter the subjective world of the teller - to see the world from her or his point of view, even if this world does not match reality (p. 282).

For my study, I make sure to provide narratives that remain accurate and narratives that are true to the actual events that took place. The stories I provide will offer an opportunity for the readers to become a part of the story, and to understand male CSA through my experiences.

With this being said, not only will this study be important to the communication discipline in regards to the content, it will also benefit the discipline by providing another example of effective autoethnographic research. Autoethnography, although becoming more popular in recent years, is still an emerging method, so tangible examples of research that utilize this method, especially within communication and dealing with male CSA, provides opportunities for future research using this method.

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Going through the composed narratives, I conduct a mini-thematic analysis where I draw on multiple concepts that relate to broader themes of knowing; specifically, in regards to faith and resilience. To conduct this analysis, I use Owen's (1984) criteria for identifying a theme. "A theme was noted in relational discourse when three criteria were present: (1) recurrence, (2) repetition, (3) and forcefulness" (Owen, 1984, p. 275). Recurrence takes place when the same meaning is present in at least two places throughout the same report; in this case, the narratives. While the same meaning is present, recurrence does not require the same wording to be used. For repetition to take place however, there does need to be repetition of the same words, phrases, or sentences. Lastly, forcefulness would refer to "the underlining of words and phrases, the increased size of print or use of colored markers circling or otherwise focusing on passages in the written reports" (Owen, 1984, p. 256).

As I discussed earlier, we draw upon narrative in an attempt to make sense of our experiences as humans. With that being said, by drawing upon the themes from the narratives, we have the opportunity to make connections to the broader experiences of male CSA survivors. By focusing on elements within the narratives that meet the requirements of either recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness, we have the ability to understand experiences of male CSA, faith, and resilience in a broader more relatable context. While the experiences included in this study are mine, they can serve as a part of the larger story; therefore, by analyzing and understanding the various elements of my particular story, we are able to understand some aspects of the larger story of male CSA as a whole.

Chapter 3: And the Story Goes Like This

The First Wave

It began as a typical summer day in my small town of Charleston, Illinois. Although some may perceive our town to be large because we house a state University and there are more than five stoplights, growing up in Charleston felt like growing up in typical small-town USA. If you weren't involved in athletics or agriculture, your summer days were probably spent driving around aimlessly listening to Top 40 hits, or Fast Car by Tracy Chapman; at least, that's how it was for my friends and I. While this day began as what I perceived would be just another typical summer day, it quickly transitioned into a day that would change the course of my life forever.

I sat as patiently as I could, beads of sweat dripping down my adolescent skin as I waited outside of her house, longing for just the smallest of breezes to creep into the space I occupied. Both front windows were purposefully rolled down in my 1997 Chevy Grand Prix. This became a regular attempt to combat the lack of a working air conditioner, however, it never seemed to fully satisfy the need of cool air. Despite knowing this, I continued to sit there I hoping for a small breath of wind to pass through, maybe just enough to help push the stagnant summer air through my vehicle. I waited as patiently as I could, the beads of sweat growing stronger.

After what seemed like forever, but in reality, totaled about five minutes, she finally stepped out the side door of her house adjacent to the driveway. Sporting a cigarette in one hand and a middle finger in another, I accepted the unique hello I had become accustomed to from her. Her vintage, tie-dyed Grateful Dead shirt, which frayed at the bottom blew in the wind, interestingly in sync with her long, curly hair. She quickly made her way to my car, opened the door and seated herself in the passenger seat, turned on the radio, and mumbled *let's roll*.

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It continued to be a typical summer day, as we began our time together simply driving the same country roads we drove every day. Not much was said during this time, nor was it ever. It just a mixture of music and cigarettes, as the open windows finally created that breeze I had longed for. This was living, I thought. Young, carefree, and just loving every moment of life. Little did I know, though, that once we made our way back to her house, this feeling would soon subside, and I would transition into the darkest time of my life.

Upon exiting the car, instead of enjoying our lunch inside, we headed to the back yard and sat on our brick patio, pulled out our cigarettes, lit one, and inhaled. We sat there for hours at a time sometimes, talking about typical high school things such as our dreams, relationships, faith, fears, and regrets. But, on this particular day we didn't sit long. As we sipped on our drinks and took synchronized drags from our cigarettes, she began to tell me yet another story about a love interest of hers; and as disinterested as I was, I listened with intent.

Like most high school girls, my friend was boy crazy and I had the unfortunate responsibility of listening to every boy crazy moment she had experienced. However, this time seemed oddly different. She had been pining after this guy for some time now, and had actually seemed to be taking the relationship a reasonable pace, but I had only known little about the situation, and him. Maybe because she hadn't told me much or maybe because I had started to tune her out, however, this time I listened. She seemed to have such terrible luck with relationships, and deserved the happiness I saw radiating from her huge smile. As she told me more about him, the bigger her smile got. The more she told me about him, the more excitement escaped from her already excitable voice. Her tone was filled with joy, and I became joyful for her. I became excited for her. I became happy for her.

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The typical-ness of the day was soon to diminish. She continued to share her feelings towards him, and while doing so she continued to disclose more information about him as a person. As the disclosures continued, the unfamiliarity began to transition into distinct familiarity. I asked for his name. As soon as the name escaped her lips, it hit me like a tidal wave. I instantly remembered the name, and other memories crept through with it. I remembered that he grew up just a few doors down from me, I remembered that we would race on our bikes, and I remember the field we would play in; I remembered we were friends. It didn't stop there however. My memories, after all of these years, continued to resurface and I continued to recollect information. I continued to remember things I had forgotten, but I knew there was no way I would forget again.

I remembered the fresh smell of the trees, I remembered the beautiful, clear, sunny skies, I remembered the way the prickly grass felt against my knees... I remembered his still child-like voice telling me *this is what friends do, don't tell anyone, it's our secret, and friends keep secrets*. The air I had wished before as I patiently waited in my car was still not present, and not only was there no moving air surrounding me, but I felt as if I couldn't find any at all. All air that had been in my body had escaped, and I couldn't find any to replace it. It was in this moment that I not only realized who my friend was dating, but that I knew him. It was in this moment that I not only realized I knew him, but I realized what had actually happened to me nearly 9 years earlier. This, was the first moment I realized I was sexually abused as a child, and that there was no "game."

I sat there, waiting for the air to fill back into my lungs again. I sat there, my hands nervously shaking as I searched for my cigarettes; helpless. I sat there confused and silent. There, on what had simply begun as a typical summer day, I sat on the brick patio I had sat many times

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before as my friend told me she was dating my abuser, but she didn't know, and I couldn't tell her. I couldn't tell her because of the happiness in her voice and the fear in my body. I couldn't tell her the realization that had just come to me, and I never did; and that, I regret.

This was the first wave, and many more came in the days to follow. Not only had I realized what happened that first day in the field, but the countless other instances and places; and that he wasn't the only one. Everything that happened within those four years came back to me like a dam that had bust and flooded my mind and heart with the guarded, blocked-off, and backed-up memories. The waves continued to come, and I continued to be taken under. I continued to remain silent.

It was in the days to follow that I also, for the first time, turned my back on God, and abandoned any sort of faith I developed prior to this. In that moment, my thoughts turned to *why would God do this to me, why would God let this happen to me, why didn't God stop this, why wasn't He here for me?* It was in that moment I chose to do things on my own, and the months and years to follow became dark and a constant struggle to not let anyone know what I was going through.

Silent Night

Silent night, holy night!

All is calm, all is bright.

Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child.

Holy infant so tender and mild,

Sleep in heavenly peace,

Sleep in heavenly peace.

-Gruber (1818)

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I reflect on the popular Christmas carol, *Silent Night*, and the story behind the classic lyric. I stand in awe at the almost haunting contradiction between the lyric and the story. I think about what Mary and Joseph must have been thinking, what they must have been feeling. I think about, how despite everything that could have deterred Mary and Joseph from trusting in God, they stayed His course. Despite all of the events that took place on that unforgettable night, and all the things that could have gone array, the account is still described as silent, calm, and peaceful. *Wow*.

In no way am I trying to compare my night to the birth of Jesus, but instead the comparison of being in a situation where things could turn overly hectic and still feeling an overwhelming sense of peace, calmness, and beautiful silence. Reflecting upon the night that my first disclosure took place, although in the moment I was ridden with fear, anxiety, and thoughts of backing out, the night ended with an overwhelming sense of peace.

I had been working as a manager at a fast-food restaurant for a few years, and I was going through the motions of a typical lunch rush, my gaze departed from my mindless work and I began to scan across the lobby. To no surprise, I saw a sea of familiar faces crowded in the lobby. I scanned the high school students who were rushing to get lunch before the lunch hour was over, young parents with their small children, and our normal retired crowd who would sit for hours at a time, just letting the time pass while sipping their afternoon coffee. It was nice, in a way, to see familiar faces. It provided a sense of comfort in knowing that some things are constant. As I remained disengaged with my work, while aimlessly scanning the familiar faces of the patrons, my eyes came in direct contact with a face that was too familiar. I lost my breath. I looked away, and then looked back to make sure I wasn't hallucinating. I wasn't hallucinating. In

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that moment I realized, after nearly 13 years, I had been within twenty feet of the person who sexually abused me. He didn't see me, or at least I don't think he did. I left my position before I even noticed I had retreated towards the back of the store. I sat in the manager's office, trying to fight through the emotions, not to cause a scene among the other workers. There he was, going about his day as if everything was okay and as if he wasn't affected in any way while I had been silently dying for all of those years.

I left work early that day. I couldn't tell the other managers why. I couldn't outwardly explain what seemed, on the outside, like irrational emotions. I was feeling things for the first time, and I was surrounded by people I didn't trust and by people who didn't need to know; or at least I felt that way then. I just left work early, and I can't recall what happened over the next few hours. I remember wanting it to be over. I remember being so afraid, because I felt disclosure was inevitable at this point. I knew I didn't have to disclose for others' sake, but I knew I couldn't carry the burden alone, and for the sake of what remaining sanity I was still clinging to, I had to talk to somebody.

I couldn't be alone because the thoughts that were entering my mind in that space were scary, dangerous, and thoughts I did not feel I could escape had I stayed by myself. So, we drove to the park, my fiancé and I, and we sat there in silence and she knew something was wrong. She knew I was not okay, she always knew. I knew I was not okay. I knew I had to tell her, I knew I wanted to tell her, I knew I wanted to but I didn't know how. I knew so many things could go wrong, and I wasn't sure what I would do if they did.

I lit a cigarette. It sounds cliché to say, but I sat there with my hands shaking; but I knew I was having an anxiety attack, and my hands were the first thing to go, followed by my steady

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breathing, then my mind. My mind was racing with such an intensity and I felt like nothing was going to be right. All of the feelings of guilt and shame I felt surrounding my abuse came rushing back to me. All the memories of the field and beyond came back to me. I replayed my abuse in my head to make sure that is what had really happened to me before I decided to tell her. The multiple pictures played in my mind like a movie, clear as day. There was no question of what was real or not. I replayed the scenes over and over within the silence. It was cold outside but I was sweating, I took my jacket off and lit another cigarette. The silence broke.

I can't provide the exact narration of the conversation that followed, for multiple reasons. The exact words that were said are unknown to me. I remember the conversation, but I also felt as if it is a distant memory. The weird contradiction between being able to remember, but feeling lost within the moment is ever so present. I feel I was outside of my body looking in on a conversation that was taking place, like I was watching a movie that I was in, but I was not there. In addition to this, I feel as if this was not only a very pivotal turning point for my life, but my relationship with my fiancé, it was a very intimate and scary moment, I think, for both of us, and I would like to keep the exact details of this conversation between her and I to protect the intimacy of the moment for our relationship.

For this study, however, it isn't even the exact conversation that matters in this situation. It is the importance of the act of conversation that remains at the heart of my story; so, the fact that the conversation took place is what remains important as a turning point for my journey towards resilience. This was the first real, meaningful act of self-disclosure I had participated in regarding my childhood sexual abuse. This conversation opened doors for future conversation, it opened up opportunities for growth and resilience, and I no longer had to be the only one who

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knew. I no longer had to carry the weight of this secret alone. This conversation, and even the silence in between, is the foundational moment for what has happened since. This conversation was the birth of a new era, this was the beginning of my transition from victim to survivor, the beginning of my resiliency. A night that could have easily gone array, changed the course of history and my life forever.

Help Me, Help You

Before I knew it, I was excited to attend church, I had started to show interest, I had started praying, and I had really started to develop a relationship with Jesus Christ in which I could feel my spiritual life changing. It was the conversation that took place that night at the park that helped me let God in again. Like Mary and Joseph, I turned my attention to God, started to trust him with elements of my life, but I was still not fully committed. I ended up attending a college retreat at church camp in Central Illinois where I was saved, where I prayed that God would take control of my life, and where I would eventually place all of my trust in Him. While at this retreat, they promoted an opportunity to become a camp counselor for junior high and high school students, something of which I had no experience in doing. However, I felt this strong pull to go. I would later recognize this as God calling me to go, but in that moment, I couldn't explain it. So, I just went, and it was an experience that would change my life, my faith, and my resilience more than I could have ever imagined.

It was the second night at camp. The air was soft and chilled. The grass was damp on my bare toes as a slight breeze swept through the air. The worship service had come to an end, and as all of the campers and counselors quietly made their way back to their respective cabins, I was praying that God would show up in powerful ways throughout the remainder of the night. I was

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new at this, so I sat somewhat in the background as my fellow counselors lead our small group discussion. The atmosphere was silently peaceful as the campers really considered what the message was about, and how it related to their life. As I was considering these things myself, I scanned across the cabin from my uncomfortable, wooden bunk and noticed one camper in particular, visibly trying to hold something in. *Go*, I heard in my head, but I sat still and continued to contemplate whether or not I should interrupt this student's personal reflection time. *Go*, I heard again as I sat there, goosebumps spreading across my forearms. The student stood from his bunk and exited the cabin in what seemed like one, swift motion. *Go*, I heard a final time. I went.

I quickly rose from where I was seated, made my way through the crowd of other campers and out of the cabin, where I followed a dim shadow of the student who had left the cabin. My toes still damp from the dew that laid over the grass like a blanket. I came to meet the student at the small, wooden jungle-gym located near the center of cabin area. He sat there silently, wiping a small tear from his red cheek. I didn't say anything, not because I didn't have words to say, or because I didn't want to, but because I thought back to the silence that night in my truck, as I sat there waiting to say something; I wanted to offer him that same opportunity. So, we sat there side-by-side as I looked up to the stars and prayed to God that this student would be willing to open up to me. The silence continued until quietly and softly I heard, *I was sexually abused and I haven't told anyone*. I sat there for what seemed like hours as I remembered my abuse, but in reality, it was only seconds. I tried my hardest to maintain long, deep breaths. I tried my best to remain selfless and calm, but then before I knew it, it was no longer a struggle. I felt a peace rush over me, an assurance. This moment wasn't about me, it wasn't about my abuse, but it was about me being available to this student, to this young man who had the

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courage and bravery to open up to me. It was about making sure he knew it was not his fault, making sure he knew he is not alone, and making sure he knew he was loved.

I'm sorry, I said. The silence continued from both the student and I. I didn't know what would happen next, I didn't know what to say, or what to do, but I was there and I felt I was there for a reason. *Me too*, I softly spoke amidst the silence. I put my arm around the young man and he put his around me, and we sat for a few seconds, once again succumbing to the silence that was ever so present. It was then I realized I had purpose. It was then I realized I could change my circumstances by being open and available, by being a vessel, and I could use what had happened to me combined with my faith and I could make a difference. It was then, in the silence as we sat there, that I had first realized God's calling on my life. It was then, when I first really felt free and I felt okay. I knew things were going to get better.

Sail On

The newly warm, April sun hit my face as the feelings inside remained somewhat ice cold. It had been nearly a year and a half since that silent night became filled with the soft stories that had remained on the dusty shelf for years. It had been almost a year since the star-filled evening, where the breeze blew low across the ground, where I heard *Go* for the first time. I began to fulfill the calling that I first felt that night, by making myself accessible to be a vessel. However, I became like a ship, stagnant, anchored in shallow waters, afraid to fully give control to the captain. So, as the newly warm, April sun hit my face, I felt a breeze begin to work in my soul. The sails that had tied down wanted so badly to break free and sail into new territory. A territory where I knew that no matter the storms that would arise, no matter the strength of the current and waves, it was a territory where my ship would always be kept safe with the help of

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the faithful captain. I knew I could not sail alone, however, and although I knew the captain would never lead me astray, I knew I needed fellow sailors to board my ship, to help me sail.

I nervously situated myself on the wicker chair. A moment had finally come where I was face-to-face with one individual, that no matter what, had never experienced anything but support from. My mom, my best friend, my comforter, my support system, my partner in crime, sat across from me. *I have to tell you something.* The words barely made it out of my mouth. My stomach in knots, my mind grasping at anything that would make sense in that moment. I could sense her nervousness, and I didn't blame her; she was only reacting to the nervous energy that radiated from my presence. *I have to tell you this thing...* At this point, I still had no idea what to say, or how to say it. How do I tell my mother, the one person on this earth who has literally known me every second of every day? What is she going to say? Will she be okay? Will she understand? Will she be mad I didn't tell her?

I'm not entirely sure how long I sat there, I'm not entirely sure what happened in the moments in between, but eventually details of my abuse started to pour out of me like a dam had burst, releasing a mighty force of water that couldn't be stopped. I finished sharing, and as my words begin to fade away, I couldn't help but anticipate the response. In complete honesty, I felt deep down I would receive support, but the perceptions of abuse support I had seen portrayed in various contexts previous had my stomach uneasy. My mom looked at me, I could see the pain in her eyes, but it wasn't pain for her; it was pain for me. *I am so sorry, my baby. I love you.*

My mom, my best friend, my comforter, my support system, my partner in crime, sat across from me, an overwhelming sense of support escaping with every word she spoke. Every question she asked wasn't for personal gain, but rather, to comfort, empathize, and console.

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Disclosing my abuse to my mom, something I had dreaded since the very moment I realized my abuse had taken place, was finished. She knew, and I knew she was okay; and I knew I'd be okay too. Although I was still shaken and emotional from our conversation, I felt invincible in that moment. I asked my step-father to join my mom and I on the porch, where I proceeded to tell him the same story I had just finished telling. Once again, nothing but support came rushing my way.

I grabbed my cell phone, opened my Notes app, and began to construct a message. There was a part of me who wanted to share with everyone, right then, but knew I could not reach every one within a timely manner. Although a neatly constructed text message may not be everyone's preferred mode of disclosure, it was fast, and it was easy. I figure, why not let the dominos continue to fall? The message I constructed was sent out, individually, to my father, step-mother, grandmother, both of my brothers, both of my sisters, my aunt, my cousin, my future in-laws, my future brother in-law, and a few close friends.

It was finished, the perceived "hard part" I had been dreading for years. There was only one final group of people I felt I needed to share, and that was the youth group I had been working with for almost a year. It was April, National Sexual Assault Awareness month, and I felt what better time to share my testimony. Before I knew it, two weeks later, I stood in front of nearly 30 kids, sharing my story of resilience and God's grace, and how that resilience came through God's calling on my life.

It was a simple April day, where the newly warm sun hit my face as I sat aboard my ship. It was this day when my captain, fearless, loving, and forgiving, gave me the courage to open the sails and trust that he would protect me in uneasy waters. It was this day when my captain,

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generous, merciful, and humbling, gave me strength to fearlessly recruit others to board my ship.

It was this day when I began to unashamedly sail, unafraid of what lay ahead.

On Solid Ground I Stand

*In Christ alone my hope is found,
He is my light, my strength, my song;
this Cornerstone, this solid Ground,
firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace,
when fears are stilled, when strivings cease!*

*My Comforter, my All in All,
here in the love of Christ I stand.*

*In Christ alone! who took on flesh
Fulness of God in helpless babe!
This gift of love and righteousness
Scorned by the ones he came to save:*

*Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied -
For every sin on Him was laid;
Here in the death of Christ I live.*

*There in the ground His body lay
Light of the world by darkness slain:*

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*Then bursting forth in glorious Day
 Up from the grave he rose again!
 And as He stands in victory
 Sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
 For I am His and He is mine -
 Bought with the precious blood of Christ.*

*No guilt in life, no fear in death,
 This is the power of Christ in me;
 From life's first cry to final breath.
 Jesus commands my destiny.*

*No power of hell, no scheme of man,
 Can ever pluck me from His hand;
 Till He returns or calls me home,
 Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.*

-In Christ Alone (Getty and Townend, 2001)

Some people don't understand it; that unexpected and unanticipated feeling of helplessness that arises from doing things on your own for far too long. Some people don't understand it, but I do, and that's why I am where I am today. I felt it on a Sunday morning at a local church camp where I had spent the weekend at a young adult retreat. *It's going to be okay.* These words came over me so unexpectedly, sending chills across my body. I never understood what people meant when they would say that God has spoken to them, but here I was lost and

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afraid on an empty bench surrounded by nothing but myself and my baggage, and God revealed himself in that moment. It was in that moment the helplessness escaped me and I began to pray. Prayer came from me like a prayer I had never heard, or said. I felt something I had never felt before, and I began to pour out my heart and soul. I begged for forgiveness, I cried for help, I lifted my burdens to the Lord in prayer.

I became someone new in that moment. I became someone I no longer hated. I became someone unrecognizable to myself. I knew I couldn't live this life alone, I knew I could no longer live according to my plan; so, I gave it to God. I let go. I asked God to call me to places that would only glorify Him. I asked God to use me for something better. I asked God to give me direction, to give me wisdom, to give me a sense of peace. *It's going to be okay.* These words changed my life, and that's why I am where I am today.

I felt it, that unexpected and unanticipated feeling of helplessness during what seemed like a normal summer day as a high school student in small-town USA. I felt it, that unexpected and unanticipated feeling of helplessness during a normal work day. I felt it, that unexpected and unanticipated feeling of helplessness as I sat in silence awaiting the words to flee from my lips. I felt it, that unexpected and unanticipated feeling of helplessness as I was face-to-face with a young man who shared the same experiences as me. I felt it, that unexpected and unanticipated feeling of helplessness as I sat with my mother awaiting to finally tell her a long-held secret. I felt it, that unexpected and unanticipated feeling of helplessness as I began to draft a message that would change the course of my relationships. However, despite feeling it, I was not alone. In each of those moments, God was with me, protecting me, guiding me, and waiting for me to come to Him.

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I include the song, *In Christ Alone*, because of the direct connections to my life. I stand on solid ground, not based on my own successes or accomplishments, but because of the power of Christ and how God has worked in my life. I stand on solid ground because God was with me, not just in my highs, but also in the moments of unexpected and unanticipated helplessness. My faith has helped me grow and thrive as a survivor by having God as the foundation, and cornerstone, of my life. I know that because of the strength of Christ I am made strong. From beginning to end, Christ is with us. I don't stand on my own, but I stand in the power of Christ.

Chapter 4: Results

My story is just one of many and it is impossible to say that my story is identical to another. It is impossible to say that my story will break the silence for other unheard stories. However, it is possible that my story could resonate with others somehow or someday, it is possible my story could spark a conversation, it is possible that my story could result in healing. In those moments on the brick patio, I chose not disclose to my friend about my abuse. I chose not to disclose because I was scared and I was confused. I didn't even know, in that moment, if what I had experienced really was abuse because I had never heard of men being sexually abused. I couldn't comprehend the abuse in that moment, and I found difficulty operationalizing what had happened because I didn't think abuse happened to men; it was an idea, like many other men (Eastman et al., 2013) that I felt was a myth, something I couldn't fathom. As Anderson (2011) points out, men are made to feel invisible and unable to acknowledge the experience, and there on that brick patio I felt exactly that. Although I had minimally and ineffectively disclosed prior, it wasn't until that moment in the park parking lot that I felt a true disclosure occurred. This is not a foreign concept either, as disclosures are often tentative, partial, and not told all at once (Allagia, 2005). The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation

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Syndrome furthers this notion by saying that disclosure is a process dependent on others (Tang et al., 2007).

After conducting a mini thematic analysis, in accordance with Owen's (1984) criteria for a theme to be present, I noticed four themes that were present throughout. The four themes I recognized were the recognition of "moments," hearing/listening to God, using conversations as a tool for growth and resilience, and concern for others. As previously stated, a theme was present when one of three things took place: recurrence, repetition, or forcefulness. I specifically noticed elements of recurrence and repetition. There were times when the same meaning was present without using the same language, and there were also elements of repetition where the same words or phrases were present. I did not specifically notice any elements of forcefulness present within the narratives.

Moments

One very present theme that revealed itself was this talk about moments, specifically the repetition of the phrase "in that moment." After reflecting upon this, I found this to be a very interesting way of describing my experiences. What I notice here is that while a story is flowing and linear, there are specific moments of stories that stand out as turning points within a smaller story. I specifically cite "moments" 9 times throughout the five narratives I provide, and they all represent mini-narratives within that larger narrative. Typically, it seems as if these "moments" take place as mental shifts. For instance, some of these moments I describe include my thoughts changing, making decisions, coming to realizations, the arising of certain emotions, and even major spiritual transformations.

Upon reflection, the moments were pivotal turning points within the turning points. Certain emotions call for certain actions, and it was in these moments I became overcome with

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the ability to take on the challenges in front of me. Ultimately, there were moments within my story that made it easier to disclose, or more so, it made it more important to disclose. A lot of the moments present within the story were tainted with negative emotions and thoughts, but it was in those moments that disclosure became even more important.

From this, I conclude that it becomes easier for men to disclose when they feel like they have nothing left to lose. As grim as that may sound, when I reflect upon my narratives, it was those helpless moments, the moments when I questioned life, other people, God, and even myself, that created the right moment to disclose. For men who are struggling with the right moment to disclose their abuse, that decision is ultimately theirs, but based on my experience the best moment for disclosure is when you can no longer handle the small moments of helplessness and you feel as if there is only room for gain. The “right time” came for me when I knew that I literally could not go any lower than I felt. I knew if I wanted to start feeling better, and if I wanted to abolish those moments of questioning everything, I knew I had to bring people into my world instead of trying to run away from it.

Hearing/Listening to God

Hearing and listening to God was another theme that emerged through recurrence within my narratives. Within the *Help Me, Help You* and *On Solid Ground I Stand* narratives, I specifically mention times in which I heard God speaking to me. Specifically, I talk about when I heard the word “go,” in the *Help Me, Help You* narrative in which I felt God was truly telling me to go, and pushing me into action. I also talk about how God told me “it’s going to be okay” in the *On Solid Ground I Stand Narrative*. I believe the overall takeaway here, is that God speaks to us when we desperately need him, but in addition to that, by opening ourselves up to hearing God’s word, and entering situations with open hearts and open minds, God will change our lives.

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For me, these specific moments within these narratives are perfect examples of how listening for and to God greatly impacts the course of your life. By hearing God, I was able to make steps towards resilience and growth.

This honestly goes beyond listening and hearing God. I think being open minded is the first step. I talk a lot about how I turned my back on God after I came to understand my abuse, and did not identify as a faithful, spiritual, or religious person. I think it boils down to having faith in something though; and for me it was God. Once I placed my faith in God, I really began to see growth and resilience start to become more present.

I previously mention in the literature that survivors find healing and understanding through their faith (Stone, et al., 2003; Bryant-Davis & Wong, 2013; Ladd & McIntosh, 2008; Walker, et al., 2009). Once I opened myself up to hearing God, I was able to be lead to healing. My faith in God has really set me on a path towards something greater. Listening to God really helped open my eyes to what I was supposed to do with my story. I found immense healing in my faith, and I found immeasurable support within my church community.

Conversations as Tools

Another very important theme that emerged was the act of conversation as a tool for growth and change. This reoccurring theme was present in all five of the narratives I provide in this study; this also stands in direct connection to the idea the we come to understand our world and our experiences through words. This theme presents itself in *The First Wave* during the conversation my friend and I had, in which I first realized the nature of what had happened to me as a child. While in that moment I did not consider our conversation to be something good, it ultimately set the foundation and track for the course I am on now; and I would not be where I am without this conversation.

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I see the power of conversation come out in the *Silent Night* narrative heavily, likely due to the narrative surrounding one full conversation of disclosure. The same stands for *Help Me*, *Help You* and *Sail On*. However, one interesting thing I found within the *Help Me*, *Help You* narrative and the *On Solid Ground I Stand* narrative, was the mentioning of conversations with God; specifically, prayer. Beyond physical conversations with my fiancé, my mother, and the young man at camp, the conversations with God proved to be just as impactful and healing as the former. As a whole, though, the act of conversation became important amongst all of the narratives, and naturally, has served as an immeasurable tool for growth and resilience.

Reflecting on my stories even further, I have come to find more healing. I feel as if every time I retell my experiences I come to know myself better, and I feel better about what happened. I will never be happy with what I experienced, but through the telling of my story I have come to be at peace with it. While I still find myself in moments of hurting, or being triggered, there has been an overall healing I have experienced. Telling my story, and disclosing my experiences carries such a heavy importance, as it has helped me forge stronger relationships with people; even those who I already had strong relationships with. Through disclosure, I was able to take my relationship to the next level with my fiancé in regards to trust and emotional intimacy. I experienced the same emotional growth with the relationship between family and other loved ones. Disclosing my experiences has also helped me create stronger bonds with other survivors and allies. With all of this being said, being someone who once experienced great feelings of loneliness, these conversations have helped create, maintain, and grow my close relationships.

Concern for Others

One final theme that emerged was the presence of a concern for others. While I understand it is human nature to have some level of concern for others, this stood out to me in an

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interesting way for this study. Generally, I had always assumed my biggest reason for not disclosing was for fear of how I would be judged, how I would be portrayed, but what I noticed was this heavy concern for how my disclosure would affect others. I see this with my friend in *The First Wave* narrative. I was fearful to tell her about what had happened to me because I feared I would interrupt her happiness. I also feared this with my mother in the *Sail On* narrative. I feared I would break my mother if I told her about what had happened to me all of those years earlier. Reflecting on this now, I really think me wanting to protect others from what I perceived would hurt them, was a way to perpetuate the dominant, masculine ideology. A large part of the masculine ideology is that men are supposed to be protectors, and I feared that through disclosure I would not be able to protect those I loved, further playing in to this masculine norm. I also feared how disclosure would affect those close to me as a result of how others perceived my abuse. For instance, with my mom, I feared others would judge her parenting as a result of my disclosure. I feared others would judge my fiancé as a result of me being a survivor. I was constantly fearful of protecting others, while protecting myself.

In addition to this, I also notice a transition of concern. While initially my concern stemmed from interrupting people's happiness, and bringing them down, I now see this concern in shifting into an opposite direction. I now feel as if I don't share my story I am letting people down. I felt as if I didn't share my story with the young man at camp I would let him down. I feel if I am not open and transparent within my testimony and my ministry I am letting people down.

Discussion

My first research question asked, *in what ways does self-disclosure help male survivors of CSA transition into a resilient mentality following their abuse?* It was this first act of real

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disclosure when I first felt a sense of resiliency for the first time. I recount the following excerpt from my narrative:

For this study, however, it isn't even the exact conversation that matters in this situation. It is the importance of the act of conversation that remains at the heart of my story; so, the fact that the conversation took place is what remains important as a turning point for my journey towards resilience. This was the first real, meaningful act of self-disclosure I had participated in regarding my childhood sexual abuse. This conversation opened doors for future conversation, it opened up opportunities for growth and resilience, and I no longer had to be the only one who knew. I no longer had to carry the weight of this secret alone. This conversation, and even the silence in between, is the foundational moment for what has happened since. This conversation was the birth of a new era, this was the beginning of my transition from victim to survivor, the beginning of my resiliency. A night that could have easily gone array, changed the course of history and my life forever.

My story regarding experiences of childhood sexual abuse coincide specifically with Hunter's (2010) four ways we narrate our stories; these include the narrative of silence, narrative of on-going suffering, narrative of transformation, and narrative of transcendence. This then connects to Crete and Singh's (2015) levels of resilience, including adapting, growing, and thriving. After my abuse occurred, I took on the narrative of silence as I remained silent and continued to remain silent upon the recognition of abuse that summer day on the brick patio. I used silence as a coping mechanism, trying to shut it out and not talk about it in hopes that the fact that it did occur would be exterminated. This silence could also be a result of me being told not to tell anyone about the abuse, which then resulted in the narrative of on-going suffering. Not only did I not feel as if I was ready to tell anyone, but I felt as if I couldn't. I felt intimidated into

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silence, and I feared what the ambiguity of what would happen if I told anyone. I also felt like the moment hadn't come that I was ready to make peace with my experiences, and to experience resilience, I had to be ready. Hunter (2010) does point out, however, that there is a possibility to move from one narrative to another, and that was the case in my timeline of disclosure and resilience.

Upon my disclosure and the ability to talk to others about what had happened, I began to transition into a more survivor-like mentality versus the victim mentality I had succumbed to for so long before. Like the narrative of transformation posits, I transitioned from identifying as a victim to a survivor. Today, considering what I have now come to know about my abuse and my strengthened faith, I don't feel as if I was a victim at all. In my case, being a victim was a mentality and although what happened was not favorable, I have come to recognize that I did not let it defeat me and I will continue to use what had happened to me for something better. In accordance to Crete and Singh's (2015) process of resilience, I have gone through adapting to my circumstances, I have grown from it, and I am now thriving as a survivor, a leader, and an advocate. Without me disclosing my abuse, I wouldn't have given myself the opportunity to transition into this resilient stage of life. Other's responses also heavily influenced my ability to become resilient. Without the support of others, I'm not entirely sure where I would be. I can't answer whether or not I would have continued disclosing had I experienced a lack of support from people. I think the positive support I received from those around me fueled my desire to disclose further. The support from those close to me helped me feel more validated and confident in sharing my experiences, which in turn helped me become more resilient.

My second research question asked, *how does faith play a role in resilient behaviors for male survivors of CSA?* As previously stated, high resilience has been related to many factors,

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including spirituality (Chouliara et al., 2014). Faith can also help sustain individuals during difficult times (Stone et al., 2003), and adult survivors report using religious and spiritual coping throughout their recovery (Bryan-Davis & Wong, 2013). Survivors are also able to utilize religious networks to begin integrating their traumatic experiences to make sense of the world (Walker et al., 2009) and result in more positive postcrisis outcomes (Ladd and McIntosh, 2008).

For me, my faith was a foundational component of my resilience. Upon disclosure, it was my faith that fully helped me grow and thrive as an adult survivor. For instance, the story of the young man at camp was just the first instance of me being able to use my story, combined with my Christian faith, to make a difference. I have since stayed in contact with this individual, among many other camp kids I have counseled. I have become a member of the worship team, and I have become the Youth Director of our youth ministry, where I lead a group of roughly 40 kids. It was the moment that night at camp that began this journey for me, which I would consider my journey of resilience. Because of my faith, and the my faith-based community, I am able to thrive as a survivor in a place where I feel welcomed, appreciated, and important.

Conclusion

This is an imperative study to the future of the field of communication, and research in general, because of its inclusion of narratives regarding disclosure, resilience, and faith surrounding male childhood sexual abuse. The purpose of this study was to provide narrative accounts of the disclosure of CSA, and how through this disclosure and faith I was able to display resilient behaviors. Upon finding these answers, this study will add additional literature to an understudied topic. This study will begin a conversation that is heavily missing in the current literature and could potentially change the narrative of male CSA in academia. This study

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is not the end, however. Narrative must continue to be present in academia. Polkinghorne (1988) posits major ideas regarding narrative as a way of knowing. In my case, using narrative has allowed me to understand myself, as well as the opportunity to make larger connections to the literature on social constructions of masculinity, disclosure, resilience, and faith. Narrative is imperative for future research on male childhood sexual abuse regarding males to continue this notion. The continued use of narrative in academic research will allow researchers to continue to make connections to larger social constructs as well as provide accounts of events that may not have previously been discussed.

Limitations

Because of issues such as underreporting and revictimization, one could argue that a limitation to this study was not having an ample amount of survivor narratives to compare. However, while some may have the perception of this limitation, as stated, I feel this was the best methodological choice for this study and I feel as if having more voices could have been chaotic. While I agree that it is important to continue to collect survivor narratives, for this particular study, a lack of participants did not prove to be a limitation. Another limitation that slightly emerged was the difficulty of talking about the stories. While I am comfortable sharing my experiences, and I have vowed to no longer be ashamed, or let feelings of guilt control me, putting myself back in these intimate moments proved to be somewhat tiring. There were moments during the writing process where I questioned if I could keep going. Despite having experience sharing my story, the sad truth is that it doesn't get easier. It becomes more rewarding, and it becomes more fulfilling, but it doesn't get easier. I still get choked up, I still feel large amounts of anxiety, and I question my ability. During this process, I placed myself back in the mindset I was in during all of these narratives. I had to take it slow. I had to learn

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how to cope again, in a way. I wish it wasn't like this, but it is, and by including my personal narratives I spare other survivors from experiencing these same feelings. Despite experiencing some of these negative things during this process, I am proud of what I have accomplished here, and I feel that as I continue to grow, and continue to share my story this limitation will diminish, but I felt it necessary to include here.

Future Research

I also think an extension of this particular study would be valuable in regards to discussing more of the resilient behaviors connected to faith and how those played out. While I discuss resilience and how I find my resilience through disclosure and faith, I feel a separate study discussing resilience and faith would be beneficial. When discussing disclosure, I also think a study that looks at disclosure beyond its relation to vulnerability and relational closeness, and into disclosure as resilience. For instance, using disclosure as a way for individuals with marginalized or stigmatized identities as a way to find resilience and empowerment through the telling of their stories. I also would like to see future research regarding prayer as conversation. This was something that emerged within my narrative, and I feel studies on prayer, either solo-prayer or group-prayer, and the positive effects prayer can have on communication, relationship growth, and personal growth, would be very interesting and important for both communication studies and religious studies. One final aspect from this study I would like to see cross into future research would be this concern for others. I was very surprised by my findings regarding my lack of disclosure as a result of having concerns for others happiness and experiences, and I feel venturing further into this would be interesting. In addition, I also think highlighting this transition of concern for others would be something very interesting to look into further.

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Personal Achievement

In conclusion, this study has not only provided me with an opportunity to compose narrative that will hopefully help provide a better understanding of the disclosure of CSA, but it has provided me an opportunity to reflect on my experiences and myself, it has helped me learn about myself, and it has helped me heal. I read through these narratives, and sometimes I had to pause and read the words I had just written, as I had forgot the feelings I felt in those moments. Placing myself back in those places, feeling those feelings again, has proven somewhat more difficult than I originally anticipated. However, I was able to get through those moments today because of the solid foundation I stand on; the foundation of my faith in Jesus Christ. This study has provided with me with a sense of freedom. Writing my stories, reflecting on them, and sharing them, has provided me with an opportunity to grow. It has provided me with an opportunity to breathe a sigh of relief; seeing how far I've come. Despite everything, I would not change a thing.

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