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Adult Victims of Sexual Abuse and Their Sexuality

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Running head: ADULT VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Abstract

The differences between adult victims of child sexual abuse and non-abused females were determined by using specific questions taken from Finkelhor's Sexual Victimization questionnaire. The results indicated that the abused group was more likely to have problems with sexual performance, sexual self esteem, and sexual identity, and have more feeling of guilt or shame.

Adult Victims of Sexual Abuse and Their Sexuality

It has only been within the last two decades that sexual abuse is no longer considered a taboo topic that should be kept hidden or remain a deep family secret. The overwhelming information available on child sexual abuse has encouraged many to seek help, although it is still grossly unreported. The definitions of abuse varies. Most legal and clinical definitions consider sexual abuse to include both contact and non-contact acts (Wissow, 1990). Contact activities include penetration, oral sex, or fondling of breasts, genitalia, or rectum. Non-contact activities include exhibitionism, involvement in child pornography, attempts to involve a child in sexual activity, and adult sexual activity (Wissow, 1990).

Based on reports, the majority of victims are female, with males accounting for a smaller percentage. It is believed sexual abuse occurs more frequently among males than what reports indicate, but data is

inconclusive because males are less likely to report cases of abuse (Wissow, 1990). According to Wissow's data, sexual abuse occurs more frequently among the middle class, accounting for 43 percent of all abuse and neglect cases.

The effects of sexual abuse can be dramatic. Childhood abuse has effects on victims sexuality, including sexual self esteem and sexual identity, that continue into adulthood. Sexuality refers to how a person feels about his/her body, and how he/she expresses those feelings. Healthy sexual expressions involve intimacy and the exchange of positive regard and acceptance. However, those who have been sexually abused many have great difficulty in having positive, healthy feelings of sexual identity and sexual self-esteem.

Tharinger (1990) concludes that such difficulties include sexual dysfunction and emotional problems regarding sex. Sexual dysfunction includes difficulty with arousal, vaginismus, and flashbacks. Emotional

problems can be described by victims experiencing feelings of sexual guilt and shame, sexual anxiety, and low sexual self-esteem (Tharinger, 1990). Maltz and Holman (1987) claim that sexual abuse victims have difficulty in maintaining positive self regard and acceptance toward their sexuality. They also claim in order for victims to overcome such problems they must meet five basic conditions: consent, equality, respect, trust, and security (CERTS).

If met, sexual activity can become enjoyable, nurturing, and a true expression of caring without feelings of guilt or shame. Maltz and Holman (1987) indicated that sexual emergence in early adulthood with victims of abuse can appear at either end of the spectrum regarding sexual activity. A teenager may become sexually withdrawn, Maltz and Holman (1987) claim, because the victim feels that the only reason why anyone would be interested in them is for sexual purposes only. Celibacy may also be practiced in an effort to compensate for what they believe was their sin. Another reason for celibacy is because many

victims feel that they might be put in an awkward sexual situations and fear that they may not have the power or ability to decline any or all sexual gestures (Maltz & Holman, 1987).

On the other end of the spectrum are those victims who become promiscuous and claim it is due to their mixed feelings regarding their sexuality. Many survivors use sexual promiscuity to prove to themselves that their sexuality is now their own. Many claim that if they choose who they sleep with will give them that control over their sexuality. Many victims have intense feelings of guilt and shame about the sexual abuse and present sexual activities, and reflect such attitudes by making such statements as, "I'm just a whore anyway, so why not?"

Often sexual abuse leads to negative sexual attitudes before, during, and after sexual intercourse. Victims usually find it difficult to anticipate, enjoy, express, and receive love in a sexual manner (Maltz & Holman, 1987). One survivor states, "I have a very diminished sexual appetite with little curiosity or

interest." According to the Cahill, Llewelyn, and Pearson (1991) study victims of child sexual abuse (CSA) , show sexuality problems in adulthood. Briere (1984, cited in Finkelhor & Browne, 1986) randomly selected subjects from a community health center, 45 percent of those who sexually abused had at some time experienced problem with their sexuality. Their study indicated survivors had problems having sexual relations, especially during the arousal phase which includes such activities as caressing and touching. Some victims even reported that they felt repulsed about their own bodies as well as their partner's. A study by Meiselman (1978) found 87 percent of incest victims experienced sexual dysfunction such as frigidity, vaginismus, or orgasmic dysfunction Data also suggests a relationship between celibacy or promiscuity in victims of sexual abuse or incest (Herman & Hirschman, 1981,cited in Cahill et al.,1991). Finkelhor (1979) devised a sexual self esteem score to show the effects of sexual abuse on feelings and behaviors. His study indicated subjects who were

abused had lower scores of sexual self esteem than did controls. Finkelhor (1979) results also shows that female victim got into more awkward sexual situations with their partners.

By using Finkelhor's 1979 questionnaire, I expect to find that subjects who have been sexually abused will have lower levels of sexual self-esteem and more problems with their sexuality.

Method

Participants

Forty females enrolled in an introductory psychology class at Southern Illinois University completed Finkelhor's 1979 Sexual Victimization questionnaire. Twenty females who were reported abused were randomly put into one group. Another twenty female subjects who were reported as non-abused were randomly placed into a second group, with forty participants in all. The average age for the abused group was 18 and for the non-abused group was 20.

Materials

Subjects were asked to complete Finkelhor's 1979 Sexual Victimization questionnaire. After completion, nineteen questions were pulled for this experiment.

Design and Procedure

After twenty subjects for each group were selected, their answers to nineteen specific questions were compared. In this experiment, I attempted to identify the differences between the two groups by placing results on a tally system for each question. After the tally, results were reported as percentages.

Results

Results from Finkelhor's 1979 Sexual Victimization questionnaire show a significant difference between the abused and non-abused groups regarding their attitudes toward sexual performance, sexual identity, and sexual self esteem.

Table 1.1 Questions 1-11 Deal with Sexual Performance

1. Sexual arousal while making out

	1 Always	2 Often	3 Occas.	4 Seldom	5 Never
Abused	25%	45%	25%	0%	5%
Non-Abused	30%	45%	25%	0%	0%

2. Tightness of vagina causing difficulty w/ or prevention of intercourse.

	1 Always	2 Often	3 Occas.	4 Seldom	5 Never
Abused	0%	5%	25%	50%	20%
Non-Abused	0%	5%	20%	40%	35%

3. Painful intercourse (during or after)

	1 Always	2 Often	3 Occas.	4 Seldom	5 Never
Abused	10%	10%	10%	40%	30%
Non-Abused	0%	5%	20%	45%	30%

Table 1.1 Continued.

4. Sexual pleasure from inflicting pain

	1 Always	2 Often	3 Occas.	4 Seldom	5 Never
Abused	5%	10%	15%	30%	40%
Non-Abused	0%	0%	0%	10%	90%

5. Sexual pleasure from experiencing pain

	1 Always	2 Often	3 Occas.	4 Seldom	5 Never
Abused	5%	5%	5%	25%	60%
Non-Abused	0%	0%	0%	10%	90%

6. Sexual pleasure from humiliating partner

	1 Always	2 Often	3 Occas.	4 Seldom	5 Never
Abused	5%	5%	0%	10%	80%
Non-Abused	0%	0%	0%	5%	95%

7. Sexual pleasure from being humiliated

	1 Always	2 Often	3 Occas.	4 Seldom	5 Never
Abused	5%	5%	0%	15%	75%
Non-Abused	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%

Table 1.1 Continued

	1 Always	2 Often	3 Occas.	4 Seldom	5 Never
8. History of physically abusing spouse/partner/date					
Abused	0%	5%	15%	15%	65%
Non-Abused	0%	0%	0%	5%	95%
9. History of being physically abused by spouse/ partner/date					
	1 Always	2 Often	3 Occas.	4 Seldom	5 Never
Abused	0%	10%	15%	20%	55%
Non-Abused	0%	0%	0%	10%	90%
10. Currently physically abusing spouse/partner/date					
	1 Always	2 Often	3 Occas.	4 Seldom	5 Never
Abused	0%	0%	5%	0%	95%
Non-Abused	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
11. Currently being physically abused by spouse/ partner/date					
	1 Always	2 Often	3 Occas.	4 Seldom	5 Never
Abused	0%	0%	5%	5%	90%
Non-Abused	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%

Table 1.2 Questions 12-19 Deal with Sexual Identity and Sexual Self Esteem

12. I am sexually desirable

	1 Strong Agree	2 Agree	3 No Opinion	4 Disagree	5 Strong Disagree
Abused	20%	25%	35%	10%	10%
Non-Abused	25%	60%	15%	0%	0%

13. Sex seems like a violation of our bodies

	1 Strong Agree	2 Agree	3 No Opinion	4 Disagree	5 Strong Disagree
Abused	5%	15%	20%	25%	35%
Non-Abused	0%	5%	10%	15%	70%

14. Sex is dirty and disgusting

	1 Strong Agree	2 Agree	3 No Opinion	4 Disagree	5 Strong Disagree
Abused	5%	15%	10%	15%	55%
Non-Abused	0%	0%	10%	30%	60%

Table 1.2 Continued

15. I am able to have sexual fantasies without guilt

	1 Strong Agree	2 Agree	3 No Opinion	4 Disagree	5 Strong Disagree
Abused	10%	25%	20%	15%	30%
Non-Abused	30%	20%	25%	5%	20%

16. I really like my body

	1 Strong Agree	2 Agree	3 No Opinion	4 Disagree	5 Strong Disagree
Abused	15%	10%	20%	40%	15%
Non-Abused	20%	25%	40%	10%	5%

17. I often find myself in awkward sexual situations

	1 Strong Agree	2 Agree	3 No Opinion	4 Disagree	5 Strong Disagree
Abused	10%	25%	15%	40%	10%
Non-Abused	0%	5%	10%	50%	35%

Table 1.2 Continued

18. After sexual experiences, I am often disappointed

	1 Strong Agree	2 Agree	3 No Opinion	4 Disagree	5 Strong Disagree
Abused	0%	15%	10%	50%	25%
Non-Abused	0%	5%	5%	40%	50%

19. Sexual activity with another person causes me to feel guilty

	1 Strong Agree	2 Agree	3 No Opinion	4 Disagree	5 Strong Disagree
Abused	10%	25%	10%	15%	40%
Non-Abused	0%	5%	5%	40%	50%

Discussion

The present data concludes that adult victims of childhood sexual abuse do in fact have more problems with sexual identity, sexual self-esteem, and sexual performance than non-abused females. Victims were more likely to rate themselves as not being sexually desirable and tended to put themselves more often in awkward sexual situations. The non-abused group reported having less problems with sexual dysfunction, such as vaginal tightness and painful intercourse (during or after). Abused females also were more likely than the non-abused group to feel disappointed after sexual intercourse. These findings of sexual dysfunction and dissatisfaction concur with Tharinger's study (1990). Maltz and Holman (1987) found that adult victims were more likely to have difficulty in maintaining positive self regard and acceptance toward their sexuality. This study found that 35% of abused females felt guilty about participating in sexual activities with another person.

This experiment supports the hypothesis that adult victims of child sexual abuse are more likely to have problems with adulthood sexuality in the areas of performance, self identity, sexual self esteem, and feeling of guilt, shame, and worthlessness.