

Child Sexual Abuse: Disclosure and Investigation

Care-Giver Support in Child Sexual Abuse: An Investigation into Factors That Impact Disclosure Rates

Cassidy Wallis, BA
Michael Woodworth, PhD
University of British Columbia – Okanagan

Intervention in child sexual abuse (CSA) cases is heavily reliant on victim testimony, as there is rarely substantial physical evidence (Tashjian, Goldfarb, Goodman, Quas, & Edelstein, 2016). Even in the presence of evidence (video recordings, medical examinations, or presence of STDs), children may deny allegations, recant statements, or simply fail to disclose during investigative interviews (D. M. Elliott & Briere, 1994; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992; Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002). In fact, 1 in 5 victims of abuse do not disclose until adulthood, if at all (Hébert, Tourigny, Cyr, McDuff, & Joly, 2009). Nondisclosure may result in higher levels of psychological distress and posttraumatic stress as well as lower rates of perpetrator convictions. This is highly problematic as more prolonged or repeated abuse prevents victims from receiving psychological support and often puts other children at risk (Olafson & Lederman, 2006).

Abuse-specific factors have the potential to impact disclosure rates (Bottoms et al., 2016). For instance, disclosure rates peak at age eleven after which there is a sharp decline (Leach, Powell, Sharman, & Anglim, 2017). Girls display higher disclosure rates than their male counterparts (Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005). Willingness to disclose may be further exacerbated when perpetrators are intrafamilial and the abuse is severe and frequent (Hershkowitz et al., 2005; Hershkowitz, Lanes, & Lamb, 2007). Lack of care-giver support is another potentially strong, although underexamined, factor that exacerbates rates of recantation and disclosure, even when abuse is extrafamilial (Tashjian et al., 2016). Care-giver support may come in the form of reporting abuse and restricting contact between child and perpetrator (Lippert, Cross, Jones, & Walsh, 2009). This research will be conducted through special access to classified RCMP case files on CSA. It is hypothesized that high levels of care-giver support will be instrumental in increasing rates of disclosure. Lack of disclosure and recantation rates will be amplified by severity and frequency of CSA. Intrafamilial abuse will lower disclosure rates as a function of degree of closeness and increase recantation. Age and gender will serve as moderating variables.

The complexity of factors related to CSA make it exceedingly difficult for children to disclose experienced abuse (Bottoms et al., 2016). Due to court emphasis on testimony for conviction, it is crucial to investigate factors that influence disclosure rates. Previous research indicates that sexual offenders offend serially and a child's self-disclosure may

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2018 ATSA Conference | Friday October 19 | 3:30 PM – 5:00 PM

lead to identification of a dangerous offender, interruption of abuse, and prevention of abuse against future victims (M. Elliott, Browne, & Kilcoyne, 1995; Paine & Hansen, 2002). It is easy for victims to be caught in the detrimental cycle of sexual abuse. A large percentage of sexual offenders have in fact been offended against in their childhood (Kaseweter, Woodworth, Logan, & Freimuth, 2016). Indicating this is an ongoing societal issue which requires intervention. If we acknowledge and understand factors affecting disclosure, it may be possible to mitigate them and create a safe and trusting environment in which children will be more likely to disclose during investigations.

Learning Goals:

- To outline some of the main findings from RCMP childhood maltreatment case files regarding investigative factors and their impact on victim disclosure rates.
- To examine the influence of interacting victim characteristics and their effect on a child's willingness to disclose. Our overarching goal is to create a vulnerability profile from which victims who are unlikely to disclose can be identified.
- To discuss the relation of abuse-specific factors to disclosure rates.
- To disseminate new and unique findings on the importance of caregiver support and its impact on childhood disclosure and rates of recantation.
- The purpose of this presentation is to discuss a multitude of factors affecting disclosure in cases of childhood maltreatment and how they relate to each other. This is important to understand as it may better inform best practice and the need for specific investigative measures to increase comfort of victims and conviction rates of offenders.

Cassidy Wallis is a Masters student studying Psychological Science at the University of British Columbia – Okanagan. She graduated with a BA (Hons) with a double major in Psychology from MacEwan University in 2016. Cassidy's research background includes an honours thesis on psychopathic traits, gender, risky behaviour and informed consequences, as well as, experience in researching the evolutionary theories of attraction and the social psychology of attention. Cassidy has received numerous merits and scholarships for her academic performance. She has also had clinical and volunteer experience in a forensic setting at Forensic Assessment and Community Services. Her research interests involve childhood maltreatment and disclosure rates, public perceptions on judicial decision making and proceedings, and psychopathy.

Dr. Michael Woodworth is a Professor at UBC Okanagan. He received his Doctor of Philosophy in 2004 from Dalhousie University. His primary areas of research include psychopathy, criminal behaviour, and deception detection. Dr. Woodworth and two other colleagues were awarded Canadian Foundation for Innovation funding to create a unique research space at UBC Okanagan. He has received additional grants (such as SSHRC) to study criminal behavior, language and psychopathy, and deception detection in on-line environments. Dr. Woodworth has collaborated on numerous research projects with the

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RCMP and Correctional Services of Canada, as well as forensic psychiatric services in both British Columbia and Nova Scotia. He has published widely in the field of Forensic Psychology, regularly presents at national and international psychology conferences, consults with law enforcement agencies, and serves as an expert witness for the courts.

Racial/Ethnic Disparities in Child Sexual Abuse Substantiation: Influences of Caregiver and Child Characteristics

Rebecca L. Fix, PhD
Reshmi Nair, PhD
Johns Hopkins University

In 2015, approximately 3.4 million children were reported to child protective services in the United States (Administration for Children and Families, 2018). There are racial/ethnic disparities in substantiation of child abuse and neglect cases in the United States (Drake et al. 2011). More specifically, African American and Hispanic American/Latinx youth are significantly more likely to be referred for child abuse and neglect (Lanier et al., 2014). Further, while research has well-documented such racial/ethnic disparities, there is a paucity of research successfully identifying influential factors of these disparities (Dettlaff et al., 2011); there is a particular oversight of child sexual abuse (CSA) in this vein. Lastly, few studies consider gender in their examination of racial/ethnic disparities of child abuse and neglect (Putname-Hornstein et al., 2013), and no known studies have examined the interaction of race/ethnicity and gender on substantiation in CSA cases.

Research aim 1: Test for a racial/ethnic and gender disparity in CSA cases reported and substantiated cases relative to population estimates.

Research aim 2: Examine whether child gender, caregiver risk factors (e.g., financial difficulties, history of domestic violence perpetration) and child risk factors (e.g., disability, caregiver substance abuse) predict child sexual abuse substantiation beyond child race/ethnicity.

Information for the proposed study was obtained from the 2015 National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System. A total of 261,974 reported CSA cases were included.

Results

Results from a Chi Square Test of Independence indicated an association between race/ethnicity and substantiated CSA, with a significantly different distribution of reported compared to substantiated CSA ($p < .001$). The largest differences occurred in European American child cases of CSA (52% substantiated versus 48% unsubstantiated), and the smallest difference was in Asian American/Pacific Islander (1.4% substantiated versus 1.3% unsubstantiated). Gender was also significantly associated with substantiated CSA ($p < .001$); there were more females with substantiated CSA (23.7%) compared to males (12.6%).

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2018 ATSA Conference | Friday October 19 | 3:30 PM – 5:00 PM

A hierarchical logistic regression was performed to examine predictors of substantiated and unsubstantiated cases. In the first step, race/ethnicity was added to the model (with European American/White children as the reference group), and most racial/ethnic groups had a significantly lower chance of substantiated CSA; Asian American/Pacific Islanders did not.

In step 2, child age was added as a predictor, with older age predicting substantiation ($OR = 1.08, p < .001$). Variables entered in step 3 (female gender; $OR = 1.94, p < .001$), step 4 (whether the child was prior maltreatment victim; $OR = 0.98, p = .004$), and step 5 (child had at least one risk factor; $OR = 1.10, p < .001$) meaningfully added to the model's predictive power, reducing the AIC at each step. In step 6, whether the caregiver had at least one risk factor was added to the model ($p = .750$); the AIC did not decrease at this step; thus, the final model was determined to have all above stated predictors except the caregiver risk factor.

Discussion

The present study addresses gaps in the literature on CSA reporting and substantiation disparities by including all reported child abuse and neglect cases in the United States, focusing specifically on CSA, including a wider range of child racial/ethnic identities, and including unique effects of case characteristics on child sexual abuse substantiation. In general, findings indicate CSA cases are more likely to be substantiated than not among European Americans, whereas most other racial/ethnic groups have a reduced likelihood of CSA substantiation. Further, results indicate a unique subset of factors may contribute to racial/ethnic disparities in CSA case substantiation.

Learning Goals:

- Define the problem of racial/ethnic and gender disparities in reported and substantiated child sexual abuse cases in the United States.
- Examine relevant factors that could contribute to racial/ethnic and gender disparities in child sexual abuse case substantiation.
- Prepare the audience to consider how race/ethnicity and gender not only influence outcomes for reported cases of child sexual abuse from a research perspective, but also how such outcomes can be meaningful for clinicians and policy makers.

Rebecca L. Fix, PhD Johns Hopkins University - Rebecca L. Fix is an Assistant Scientist in the Bloomberg School of Public Health, working within the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse. Her research interests include child sexual and physical abuse prevention, and trauma-informed models of juvenile violent and sexual offending, with an emphasis on underrepresented populations like racial/ethnic minorities.

Reshmi Nair, PhD Johns Hopkins University - Reshmi Nair is a Data Manager and Analyst in the Bloomberg School of Public Health. She is a mathematician by training and her primary interest is in working with large and complex data sets. She applies statistical methods to study development and issues in criminal justice and public health.

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Luciana Assini-Meytin, PhD Johns Hopkins University - Luciana Assini-Meytin is a Research Associate in the Bloomberg School of Public Health. Her work is concentrated on the prevention of child sexual abuse and the long-term consequences of adverse childhood experiences for both, men and women. She is interested in prevention science, life course research, teenage parenting, and gender differences in mental health outcomes.

Elizabeth Letourneau, PhD Johns Hopkins University - Elizabeth Letourneau is a Professor in the Department of Mental Health, Bloomberg School of Public Health and Director of the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse. For 30 years she has lead a program of research on child sexual abuse prevention policy and practice.