

Gender Differences in the Impact and Subjective Interpretation of Childhood Sexual Abuse Survivors

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Abstract : Research on child sexual abuse has predominantly focused on female survivors. This has resulted in less research looking at the particular context in which this abuse takes place for boys and the impact this abuse may have on male survivors. The aim of this study is to examine the sex and age of the perpetrators of child sexual abuse and explore gender differences in the impact along with the subjective interpretation that survivors attribute to these experiences. The data for this study was obtained from Ecuadorian university students (M = 230, F = 293) who reported sexual abuse using the ISPCAN Child Abuse Screening Tool Retrospective version (ICAST-R). Participants completed Horowitz's Impact of Event Scale (IES) and were also requested to choose among neutral, positive, and negative adjectives to describe these experiences. The results indicate that in the case of males, perpetrators were both males (adults =27%, peers =20%, relatives =10.3%, cousins =7.4%) and young females (girlfriends or ex-girlfriends =25.6%, neighborhood =20.7%, school =16.7%, cousins =15.3%, strangers =12.8%). In contrast, almost all females reported that adult males were the perpetrators (relatives =29.6%, neighborhood =11.9%, strangers =19.9%, family friends =9.7%). Regarding the impact of these events, significant gender differences emerged. More females (50%) than males (20%) presented symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Gender differences also surfaced in the way survivors interpret their experiences. Almost half of the male participants selected the word "consensual" followed by the words "normal", "helped me to mature", "shameful", "confusing", and "traumatic". In contrast, almost all females chose the word "non-consensual" followed by the words "shameful", "traumatic", "scary", and "confusing". In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that young females and adult males were the most common perpetrators of sexually abused boys whereas adult males were the most common perpetrators of sexually abused girls. The impact and the subjective interpretation of these experiences were more negative for girls than for boys. The factors that account for the gender differences in the impact and the interpretation of these experiences need further exploration. It is likely that the cultural expectations of sexual behaviors for boys and girls in Latin American societies may partially explain the differential impact in the way these childhood sexual abuse experiences are interpreted in adulthood. In Ecuador, as is the case in other Latin American countries, the machismo culture not only accepts but encourages early sexual behaviors in boys and negatively judges premature sexual behavior in females. The result of these different sexual expectations may be that sexually abused boys may re-define these experiences as "consensual" and "normal" in adulthood, even though these were not consensual at the time of occurrence. Future studies are needed to more deeply understand the different contexts of sexual abuse for boys and girls in order to analyze the long-term impact of these experiences.

Keywords : abuse, child, gender differences, sexual

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