

An Overview of Sexual Abuse: A Literature Review

Crystal J. Williams

Alliance Graduate School of Counseling

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Sexual abuse is becoming a topic that is talked about more and more in the American society today, rather than previous years. Initially a taboo subject, sexual abuse is something that occurs more than it is reported and should not be ignored. Due to the aftershocks of trauma, examining the effects of sexual abuse on its victims and the profiles of sexual offenders, is essential to creating potential prevention strategies of sexual abuse. One of the first steps in trying to create prevention strategies is first understanding what sexual abuse is. According to the American Psychological Association, sexual abuse is defined as the following:

Sexual abuse is unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats or taking advantage of victims not able to give consent. Most victims and perpetrators know each other. Immediate reactions to sexual abuse include shock, fear or disbelief. Long-term symptoms include anxiety, fear or post-traumatic stress disorder. While efforts to treat sex offenders remain unpromising, psychological interventions for survivors — especially group therapy — appears effective (American Psychological Association, 2020.)

Getting an idea of what groups of people are normally affected by sexual abuse is a crucial factor in creating potential prevention strategies, as researchers can get to the root of this increasingly spreading problem within society. According to Kanak and Arslan (2018), “child abuse is the most common type of violence in childhood while sexual abuse is generally the more difficult one to detect among the types of abuse.” This sparks a debate of whether or not most sexual abuse is going unnoticed because of its possible origins in childhood. The following literature review will explore an overview of the possibilities of the kinds of roles some sexual offenders maintain in society and the effects of sexual abuse on its victims in the future.

Authority and Power

Researching the basis of sexual abuse and its origins is the starting point of creating a catalyst for change in the rates of sexual abuse. One question that may arise regarding the research is, “what do sexual offenders use as a ploy to attract the victim?” “The Sexual Maltreatment of Students with Disabilities in American School Settings” (Caldas & Bensy, 2014), offers some insight to this perspective. The study used a survey to acquire its results. Some of the questions on the survey were geared toward finding out “the profile of the sexual abusers and its victims and the effects the sexual abuse had on the victim/student.” According to Caldas and Bensy (2014), only 15.8 % of the respondents identified themselves as the victim of the abuse, while the other 85% of respondents identified as either familial relatives of the victim or an advocate/ caring professional of victim. This information supports the hypothesis that sexual abuse in children is underreported by the victim. Why is this? The results of the study showed that many of the victims were in need of serious support and struggled with learning and developmental disabilities. It can be assumed that abusers may take advantage of a child with disabilities more often than a typically developing child because the offender may believe that the child may not know that what’s being done to them is wrong - in turn being less likely to tell another adult what’s happened to them. Caldas and Bensy (2014) also state that of the different types of roles that a sexual abuser may have had, “school personnel” had the highest number of incidences as the abuser, in the respondents’ experiences. Teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school staff more than likely, due to their positions, have tried or have already developed a relationship with the student, where trust is established. The staff may use their positions of authority, knowingly or unknowingly, as leverage in situations of child sexual abuse. In this case, the child may not give any thought to telling another adult about the abuse.

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“Sexual Abusers in the Eyes of Preschool Teachers: A Qualitative Study” by Mehmet Kanak and Ali Arslan, interviews people who are normally in a position of authority, preschool teachers in the Province of Sivas, Turkey, about their opinions of sexual abusers. The questions about the sexual abusers included, “the age of the sexual exploiter during the exploitation period, the proximity of degrees to the victims, the actions they performed to cheat the victim to gain the victim’s trust, their personality traits, their physical appearances, and levels of education” (Kanak & Arslan, 2018.) The results of the study showed that people who impose sexual abuse on victims can be in any age group. However, following the pattern of creating trust and using their position of authority or power, Kanak and Arslan (2018) found that the abuser was normally an acquaintance, relative or family member. Supporting these findings, Kanak and Arslan quote Finkelhor (1994) adding childcare workers, teachers, religious service personnel and sports coaches, to the list of possible sexual offenders. There seems to be a relationship between trust and authority as it relates to sexual abuse. It is important to note that not all authority figures or people in positions of power, automatically have a trusting relationship with their subordinates. However, in the cases of sexual abuse where the offenders exercise authority over victims in other settings, it is hard to ignore trust as a factor in the turn of these events.

The counseling field teaches that what takes place in childhood has an effect on the rest of your growth, whether it manifests consciously or subconsciously. Following the natural progression of life, adolescence comes after childhood. According to Morrison Beedy and Grove (2018), social media has recently given a platform to women to begin the nationwide conversation about sexual abuse. The #METOO movement speaks to the of sexual abuse experiences of women, more specifically by men in positions of power and authority. Morrison-Beedy and Grove (2018) conducted a study in which 735 adolescent girls completed audiovisual

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surveys, that asked about their sexual experiences with regards to coercion and abusiveness. The questions specifically asked about respondents' sexual experiences with men in authoritative positions, being put in argumentative and pressuring environments, threats of force and drugs and alcohol. The majority of the respondents attested to surrendering to attempted or actual intercourse by threats and physical force (Morrison-Beedy & Gove, 2018.) Most respondents came from impoverished backgrounds and were young women of color. The social economic status of this group of women may cause them to be more preyed upon by sexual abusers. The violence these young women may witness within their neighborhoods, may be associated with the physical force used in sexual abuse as something they may already be familiar with. The physical force can create another mode of power struggle that the victim may feel inclined to give into because they may not feel that there is any choice. The social economic status of this group of women may also make them more vulnerable to men in power. Many victims may have relationships with drug dealers, gang members, etc. to ensure safety in their neighborhoods. The layers to this paradigm are limitless.

Future Consequences

Sexual abuse is something that will inevitably affect its victims, whether it manifests presently, or in the future. However, this part of the literature review will focus on the lasting effects the sexual abuse has on the victim's future. "Experiences of Mothers Who Are Child Sexual Abuse Survivors: A Qualitative Exploration" examines the effects of child sexual abuse on Mothers and their parenting. Cavanaugh et al. (2015) used archival data from interviews with 44 mothers who are survivors of child sexual abuse. This study is significant because there needs to be ongoing research to help create parenting interventions to help not only mothers, but fathers as well, who may be having trouble with parenting. The results of the study showed that due to

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child sexual abuse, “mothers reported efforts to protect their children including educating them about child sexual abuse, prohibiting them from contact with their perpetrator, and keeping their daughters on birth control” (Cavanaugh et al., 2015.) A lot of the women reported intense worry about their children being take advantage of sexually and harmed in some way. Many of the women also said that as a result of their own child sexual abuse, the connection and affinity between mother and child was rather difficult to create and they also reported being afraid to have daughters in fear of being able to sufficiently protect them from potential abuse. The research shows that the effects of child sexual abuse on an adult is quite substantial. In this case of mothers and their children, the trauma of the mother’s abuse can affect one of the closest relationships a person can ever have. It is imperative that research continues as it seems as though sexual abuse survivor’s trauma can subconsciously or consciously be passed down to children, creating an ongoing future cycle of sexual abuse and sexual abuse related issues.

As previously mentioned, individual experiences of childhood are likely to be key determinants of their later parenting experiences. “The association between historical childhood sexual abuse and later parenting stress: a systematic review” is article in which a meta-analyses study was conducted to “determine the size and consistency of the effects, mediators and moderators of the relationship between child sexual abuse and later parenting” (Hugill et al., 2017.) Hugill et al. suggest that the results of the study showed that there is an association between child sexual abuse and parenting stress. However, the parenting stress is mostly affected by the parent’s depression. The research also highlights that it is very important for clinical professionals working with parents to ask questions about their early life. Interventions to combat parenting stress is also a topic that needs to be explored. Depression is a mental health disorder that can be derived from sexual abuse on its own. As a parent dealing with depression

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that may have been triggered by sexual abuse, one can see how this can affect parenting and the parenting style's effect on a child.

The previous articles have focused on victims of child sexual abuse, however, when assessing the profile of a sexual offender, future consequences can be examined as it relates to the offender's past. "General Characteristics of Child Sexual Offenders in Hatay, Turkey" assesses the relationship between criminal behavior and sociodemographic characteristics in a sample of sex offenders (Arslan et al, 2016.) This study used archival data from files of social workers who interviewed sex offenders. Most of the information in the interviews referred to the sexual offender's characteristics, family history, and criminal background. The sample used for the study were all men between the ages of 12-17. Results show that the number of sexual offenders who stop attending school on and off or had stopped attending school prematurely, was very high. Arslan et al. (2016) also suggest that the male children who did not live in two parent homes or broken families – specifically those lacking paternal supervision, were more likely to commit a sexual crime. Looking more detailed into a sexual offender's early life can help pinpoint some of the triggers that may have caused him or her to begin sexually abusing others. The sample of men analyzed in the article were still relatively young, however, it can be seen how their home life as a child could have brought on the consequences of their present circumstances.

The Hope of Tomorrow

Sexual abuse has occurred for a long time and it may be unreasonable to believe that it can be eradicated from society, once and for all. However, there is a hope that as research continues look into origins, profiles, and effects on sexual abusers and victims, the rate of its instances will decrease. There were many limitations to each article as it relates to diversity of

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sample size, but as more research is done, society can start working toward the goal of accurate reporting of sexual abuse and decreasing its chances. One of the major themes explored earlier was authority and power. The gap in the research provided in the mentioned articles and today's research is the question of how child sexual abuse survivors deal with authority figures later in life. This topic is important to counseling research because the majority of people in the workforce must deal with someone who has authority or power over them. The relationship between a subordinate and higher up can normally predict the success of the subordinate in their place of work and can essentially have an effect on their finances. Will victims of sexual abuse feel the need to be assertive, nonassertive, or controlling with authority figures in their lives? Research effects of sexual abuse on the victim's view of people in authority could truly help a significant population of people.

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