

Unwanted sexual experiences during childhood

Australian continuum data

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In order to place child sexual abuse in the broader conceptual framework of unwanted sexual experiences in childhood, this study explores a continuum of intrusive behaviours as reported in questionnaire data gathered from 345 first and second year Australian university students. The data provide evidence which is supportive of other findings on the nature and extent of child sexual abuse for females and males, including age of occurrence, identity of perpetrators, most commonly occurring behaviours, and gender differences in disclosure and prevalence.

INTRODUCTION

The present study explores the existence of a continuum of childhood unwanted sexual experiences, and within this context provides further data on the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse in Australia. It begins with a review of the literature on the existence of child sexual abuse for females and males, and a discussion of definitional issues and the consequent relationship between definition, measurement, prevalence, and effects. Finally, descriptive data from a survey of first and second year university students is reported.

The acceptance of children as sexual beings has only recently been acknowledged in the literature. Along with this acknowledgment has been the realisation that children's sexual behaviour is vulnerable to manipulation, coercion, and imposition. The present study has been conceptualised within the framework of the recent literature on child sexual abuse which focuses on the broad array of behaviours necessary to adequately identify the more subtle examples of these unwanted sexual experiences. More recently, researchers have not simply looked at the fact of the occurrence of an event such as child sexual abuse or rape; rather they have noted a range of behaviours which at the 'mild' end may start with a sense of mutuality, but soon result in feelings of uneasiness on the part of the child/woman (Amick & Calhoun, 1987; Christopher, 1988; Korman & Leslie, 1982; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987;

Padgitt & Padgitt, 1986; Parrot, 1989; Patton & Mannison, 1993). For example, Parrot's (1989) Teenage Sexual Expectations Scale (which ends with rape) begins with 'mutual sexual exploration', and Rapaport and Burkhart (1984) first ask about holding hands and kissing in their study of sexually coercive college males. Accompanying these unwanted sexual advances is a parallel range of coercive verbal behaviours. Christopher (1988) found a continuum of sexual pressures that begins with the use of 'positive verbal statements (promises and statements of affection that later turn out to be untrue)' (p. 257).

What is noticeable in this literature is the broad nature of the continuum of unwanted sexual advances which range from harassment (eg, catcalls, whistling) to violent sexual assault, and includes fondling, sexual kissing (of children), persistent and unwelcome touching, coerced intercourse, and verbal and physical threat for sex. What is also clear in the literature is that for women, these experiences often begin in childhood, are particularly evident around puberty and during early adolescence, and continue through adolescence and adulthood, with perpetrators being fathers, uncles, family friends, through to boyfriends and relationship partners (Mims & Chang, 1984; Patton & Mannison, 1993). For males, the existence of sexual abuse in childhood is only now being documented.

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Prevalence of unwanted sexual experiences in childhood – females

Estimates of women who have experienced unwanted sexual advances during childhood range from 10 per cent of the population (Finkelhor 1979), to 16 per cent (Russell 1983), 21 per cent (Wyatt 1985), and 28 per cent (Goldman & Goldman 1988a).

Definitional differences account for variations in prevalence rates, with Wyatt and Peters (1986) claiming that the prevalence of child sexual abuse reported in one study would have been reduced by 14 per cent if a more stringent definition had been employed. Many studies do not include exhibitionism or other sexual advances which do not culminate in direct physical contact, but those which do (Kilpatrick 1986; Fromuth 1986) note that kissing and hugging in a sexual way, exhibitionism and sexual fondling are the most common unwanted behaviours. Other definitional issues include legal definitions of rape which include oral and anal penetration by an inanimate object, occurrences which may not be perceived as included under the category of intercourse. However it is not the intention of this paper to comment in detail about definitions or prevalence rates, but rather to attend to the 'unremarkable' behaviours often overlooked by the victim because they are regarded as 'typical' (Stanko 1985), and often not recorded by the researcher because they are 'vague' (Miller, Johnson & Johnson 1991). As such, however, behaviours included in the questionnaire in the present study will necessarily mean that some individuals' experiences are not easily located within categories. This issue applies to female and male data.

Prevalence of unwanted sexual experiences in childhood – males

There is considerable variation in the reported prevalence of male abuse (Peters, Wyatt & Finkelhor 1986), with reports ranging from 3 to 31 per cent. As in the case of females, definitional differences contribute to this variation. Using a non-contact definition with a community sample, Baker and Duncan (1985) reported a rate for males of 8 per cent; using a similar definition, Fromuth and Burkhardt's (1989) study reported a

figure of 15 per cent in one group and 13 per cent in another. Fritz, Stoll and Wagner's (1981) study, with a contact definition, reported a rate of 4.8 per cent. All studies acknowledge that under-reporting may also be occurring, as males fear the taint of homosexuality (Browne & Finkelhor 1986), and may be even less likely to tell than girls (Kaufman, DiVasto, Jackson, Voorhees & Christy 1980). Other factors cited by Watkins and Bentovim (1992) in their review paper include boys being perceived as not needing protection, indicators relevant to girls not being relevant to boys, denial of abuse by mothers, and denial of abuse by fathers, even though fathers and stepfathers are cited as the most frequent abusers of boys (Pierce & Pierce 1985; Reinhart 1987).

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Definitions

It is widely acknowledged that there is a paucity of empirical and clinical research with male subjects, and a consequent difficulty for conclusions to be drawn (Browne & Finkelhor 1986). Issues of definition, prevalence, victim profile, types of abuse, and effects are only starting to be studied (Genuis, Thomlinson & Bagley 1991). The issues of definition within the child sexual abuse literature for girls abound in this research field also, with definitions including both contact and non-contact abuse. The least restrictive definition suggested for research with males, and one which incorporates the notion of continuum most closely, is suggested by Genuis et al (1991) who recommend that 'child sexual abuse be operationalised as unwanted sexual contact (genital and fondling through to intercourse) while the victim is still a child' (p. 3). This definition is similar to the Miller et al (1991) continuum discussed earlier which started with 'another person showed his or her sex organs to you' (p. 54). Both of these scales fail to gain

information about unwanted advances which are important but easy to disregard, and therefore likely to contribute to an under-representation of prevalence.

Assumptions about effects

Although this study does not focus on effects, it is important to include a discussion about effects as there is a relationship in the literature between the presumption of effect and the nature of the sexual abuse, the identity of the perpetrator, and the duration of the abuse. Inclusion of a broad continuum in identifying child sexual abuse contributes to an understanding of effects. Although several major reviews (Beitchman et al 1992; Browne & Finkelhor 1986) indicate that the most damaging form of abuse is experiences involving father figures, genital contact, and force, and that longer duration of the abuse is associated with greater impact, other studies provide evidence to the contrary (DiVasto et al 1984; Goldman & Goldman 1988a; James 1988; Mims & Chang 1984; Sedney & Brooks 1984). First, there are indications that the intensity of the reaction does not decline with the apparent inconsequence of the aggressive act, suggesting the inappropriateness of a hierarchy of abuse based on 'seriousness' (DiVasto et al 1984; James 1988; Mims & Chang 1984; Sedney & Brooks 1984). Using a sample of 500 women drawn from the general population, DiVasto et al (1984) report that non-invasive incidents (obscene phone calls, exposure, peepers) were as stressful as invasive incidents (fondling, attempted rape and rape). Mims and Chang (1984) and James (1988) note that the types of unwanted sexual experiences perceived as stressful cover a far greater range of behaviours than generally assumed. In their major survey, Goldman and Goldman (1988a) concluded that long-term trauma was experienced across the range of unwanted sexual experiences, from an invitation to do something sexual, to exhibitionism and fondling, through to actual or attempted sexual intercourse.

Second, there is evidence that the effect of an abusive incident is not necessarily related to its occurring more than once. Sedney and Brooks (1984) found that even when an incident happened only once (the case in over half their sample)

and did not involve intercourse, the women exhibited higher symptom levels (anxiety, depression, thoughts of hurting oneself, becoming a victim of a crime or an accident) than the control group. The authors propose that this finding is counter-intuitive, as 'adults might hypothesise that intercourse has more negative long-term consequences ... since it is really sex' (p. 218). Sedney and Brooks' finding suggests that children make no such distinctions.

Findings which illustrate that the negative consequences of an abusive act can occur from one incident of a seemingly minor nature, and increase the likelihood of a child so treated becoming a victim as an adult (Aizenmann & Kelley 1988; Gidycz, Coble, Latham & Layman 1993; Stevenson & Gajarsky 1992), have led to proposals that a broad range of sexual behaviours should be included in investigations of unwanted sexual contact in childhood, and that a single instance, even if 'mild', should receive attention (Sedney & Brooks 1984). The present study adopts this proposal in its aims and methodology.

Research bias

The adult-centred approach criticised by Sedney and Brooks (1984) is also evident in other studies in determining how to measure child sexual abuse and how to define its effects. In their study of the effects of child sexual abuse, although defining abuse as 'sexual exploitation involving physical contact between the child and another person' (p. 19), Mannarino and Cohen (1986) excluded 'hugging and kissing' because although 'exploitative and inappropriate ... the interpretation of these activities was deemed to be too subjective to include in this study' (p. 19). Similarly, Miller et al (1991) excluded 'hugging in a sexual way' from their checklist of early unwanted sexual experiences because they felt it too vague to be reliable. They selected items which they considered '... direct and straightforward' (p. 50), and start their 10-item checklist with 'another person showed his or her sex organs to you' (p. 54). In reporting results, Miller et al (1991) divided their checklist into 'less severe' and 'more severe', and justified this division by using the responses of a separate sample of 58 male and 77 female subjects who were asked to judge how 'stressful',

'traumatic', and 'severe' each experience *would be* (emphasis added) for a victim. Considering that the health professionals interviewed by Eisenberg, Owens and Dewey (1987) had no doubt that 'intercourse would result in greater harm' (p. 114), it is not surprising that the non-professional sample queried by Miller et al (1991) confirmed their selection of 'severe' and 'less severe' experiences. From these examples, it appears that researchers who exclude items at one end of the continuum on the grounds they are too vague, are also likely to believe they are less important in their effect on the child. The continuum developed for the present study was designed to include a wide range of behaviours.

Effects for males

Clinical reports support the contention that sexual abuse of boys has deleterious effects for the boys, both short- and long-term, although much research remains necessary to determine issues with respect to the perpetrator and the nature of the abuse. In addition, as distinct from most reports of girls' experiences, there is often concurrent physical abuse in the sexual abuse of boys, and this compounding factor has not been isolated in impact studies. Rogers and Terry (1984) have suggested that some specific effects may include anxiety/confusion over sexual identity, inappropriate attempts to reassert masculinity, and recapitulation of the victimising experience, that is the male becoming a perpetrator. Long-term effects identified in the review by Watkins and Bentovim (1992) include less depressive and anxiety disorders than women, and more substance abuse disorders than women. These authors also cite studies in which lowered self-esteem, increased relationship difficulties and potential for suicide have also been reported. These effects have not yet been related to type and duration of the abuse.

The present study

Several aspects of the research referred to in this introduction have influenced the formulation of the present study. In particular, it includes a family of behaviours, not only presence or absence of child sexual abuse. Thus participants would be asked to consider a range of behaviours drawn from experiences identified in a number of studies, all of

which have been shown to have negative effects. Miller et al (1991) elicited a variety of non-coital experiences through the use of a checklist, but categorised them as severe and non-severe. These authors also decided against use of the word 'unwanted' and asked participants to name sexual experiences. While supporting the minimisation of conceptual problems by using a simple checklist, we differed from Miller et al (1991) in choosing to include a broader range of behaviours, in asking subjects to name an unwanted sexual experience (language implying abuse was not included), and in choosing to report the full range of behaviours without identifying them as severe or non-severe.

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The participants have not been drawn from a clinical population but from a naturally occurring group, a recommendation of Browne and Finkelhor (1986). In this case the participants were university students who agreed to complete a questionnaire about their sexual development and experiences. Childhood experiences reported in this article were only part of a larger questionnaire. The study also contributes to the data on male child sexual abuse, a major gap identified by many researchers (Finkelhor 1984; Genuis et al 1991; Watkins & Bentovim 1992).

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 253 female and 92 male first or second year university students attending a metropolitan university in an Australian capital city. The students were enrolled in social science courses, in

particular, Education, Nursing, and Justice Studies, in which the topic of child sexual abuse would be relevant at some time during the course of their studies and their professional lives. The mean age of females was 22 years with an age range of 17-40 years, and the mean age of males was 24 years with an age range of 17-41 years. Over 50 per cent of both females and males were between 17 and 19 years old.

Materials

Subjects completed the Intergender Relationships Questionnaire which included four sections; an attitude questionnaire, and sections asking about experiences in childhood, during high school, and since high school. The section which asks about childhood experiences is reported in this article. Demographic characteristics such as age, gender, place where attended high school, present course of study, and present relationship status were also gathered.

The continuum used in the present study (see Table 1) comprises checklist items, with participants being asked to remember the occurrence 'of an unwanted sexual experience before the age of 13 with an adult (a person over 16), including strangers, friends, or family members'. Participants were reminded that an unwanted sexual experience in the context of this questionnaire included 'any experience that either bothered you at the time or has left some sort of lasting impression'. Behaviours to check yes or no included contact and non-contact behaviours, and ranged from being followed and being flashed at, to being touched in sexual areas and penetration. Items were drawn from the work of a number of authors (DiVasto et al 1984; Finkelhor 1979; Mims & Chang 1984; Patton & Mannison 1993), and have been used in similar studies in various forms (Fromuth 1986; Stevenson & Gajarsky 1992). Decisions were made in a number of cases about the terminology which would be appropriate for the study. For example, Finkelhor (1979) used an item 'another person showing his/her sex organs to you' whereas DiVasto et al (1984) referred to 'flashed' or 'flashing'. We chose the latter term as it is idiomatic to the population in the study.

Following the pattern of Finkelhor (1979), participants were also invited to complete a brief descriptive section which asked them to describe a particular incident which they had ticked in the preceding checklist. Details requested included their own and the other person's age, whether they knew the other person, and if so how, the frequency of the pressure, and whether they told anyone at the time or since.

Procedure

Large introductory classes in each of the degree areas were invited to participate, thereby targeting all possible students in these groups at the participating university. The questionnaire was administered during class time by graduate research assistants who were working from standard instructions. The questionnaire took about 30 minutes to complete. Students who did not want to participate were asked to remain at their desks and work on class material so as not to be unduly noticed by walking out. In addition, students who began the survey and did not want to complete it were encouraged to close the survey booklet and remain at their desks. In each of the sessions, no student chose not to

participate; however, as students were introduced to the study during an earlier class, there may have been some who chose not to attend the class in which the survey was being conducted. The number of students who may have been in this category is unknown, although on recorded class size, it was less than 10 per cent. This number may also have included students absent for other reasons. Following completion of the session, participants were provided with information about counselling services for female and male survivors of sexual abuse. Respondents were also invited to contact the researchers at any time to discuss the research further.

RESULTS

This results section will report both statistical analyses and descriptive data. Preliminary analyses were conducted to determine similarity of females and males on age, place where attended high school, and present relationship status. Chi-square analyses were conducted to determine significance of female and male differences on the continuum. In the section where respondents were asked to provide descriptive data on one incident, a predominantly descriptive discussion is

TABLE 1. OCCURRENCE OF UNWANTED SEXUAL EXPERIENCE AS A CHILD (TO AGE 13); PERCENTAGE RESPONDING YES

Experience	% Females (n = 253)	% Males (n = 92)	p
Do you have memory of:			
• Being followed	32.6	18.2	<.01
• Being flashed at	23.6	2.3	<.001
• A request to do something sexual	20.9	10.3	<.01
• Being kissed or hugged in a sexual way	20.4	10.3	<.01
• Being shown sexual parts	27.4	13.8	<.01
• Being fondled in a sexual way	19.2	3.5	<.001
• Being touched in sexual areas	22.4	4.7	<.001
• Intercourse	1.7	1.2	n.s.

Note: All percentages have been rounded. Subjects may have responded to more than one item.

included as small sizes precluded further analysis.

Subject background

Analyses of gender differences in age, place where attended high school and present relationship status revealed no significance, suggesting that the subjects in the study are from similar populations according to these variables. Chi-square analyses also revealed no significant differences between the responses of the Education, Justice Studies or Nursing students, and they will be treated as a homogeneous group in further analyses. Because of concerns of retrospectivity and age of some subjects, analyses were also conducted on questionnaire item frequencies for different age groups; as no differences were found, data will be reported from all subjects as one group.

(or disclose more) of these behaviours, with chi-square analyses revealing a significant gender difference for six of the items on the questionnaire (see Table 1 for probability values). Approximately the same percentage of females (1.7 per cent) and males (1.2 per cent) reported experiencing unwanted intercourse.

Descriptive data

Not all respondents who indicated an unwanted experience in the initial checklist chose to complete the descriptive section. Twenty males responded; of these equal numbers experienced an incident during ages 5-8 and 9-13. Of the 115 females who responded, 7.4 per cent experienced an incident during ages 1-4, 25.7 per cent during ages 5-8, and 66.9 per cent during ages 9-13. Table 2 illustrates the number and nature of incidents described.

In the majority of the cases described (18 of the 20), the incident occurred only once.

Sixty-six per cent of the males did not tell anyone at the time of the incident, and that same percentage responded no to the question 'Have you told anyone since?'. In the case of the females, 48 per cent did not tell anyone at the time, although a similar percentage responded yes to the question of having disclosed since.

DISCUSSION

These data illustrate the importance of incorporating a broad continuum into the identification of unwanted sexual experiences. As the possibility of experiences occurring in more than one category for one individual has not been taken into account, it is not possible to provide an overall incidence figure; however, it is clear that experiences occur for females right along the continuum. These data concur with a number of studies (Fromuth 1986; Goldman & Goldman 1988a; Kilpatrick 1986; Stevenson & Gajarsky 1992) which name experiences such as kissing and hugging in a sexual way, being shown sexual parts, and sexual fondling as those behaviours with the highest incidence for females. 'Being followed' was also reported strongly by both females and males. These data do not support the findings reported by Goldman (1993) of actual rape of females and males being 5 per cent and 15 per cent respectively, with the comparable figures in the present study being 1.7 and 1.2 per cent respectively. Similarly, the frequency of intercourse is lower than that reported by Stevenson and Gajarsky (1992), although these authors included experiences to age 16. These data also reflect the definitional problem discussed earlier.

The age of occurrence of the experiences named in this study is comparable to that identified in other Australian and American studies (Finkelhor, 1984; Goldman & Goldman 1988a;b) which indicate that the largest incidence is during ages 8 to 12. Goldman and Goldman (1988a) report that 41 per cent of female abuse and 62 per cent of male abuse occurs during ages 10-12; when their data for ages 7-9 and 10-12 are combined, the figures are 69 per cent and 95 per cent respectively. Data from the present study indicate 67 per cent of

TABLE 2. NUMBERS OF UNWANTED SEXUAL EXPERIENCES DESCRIBED IN DETAIL

Experience	Females (n = 115)	Males (n = 20)
• Being followed	31	11
• Being flashed at	24	—
• A request to do something sexual	11	1
• Being kissed or hugged in a sexual way	10	2
• Being shown sexual parts	13	5
• Being fondled in a sexual way	5	—
• Being touched in sexual areas	19	—
• Intercourse	2	1

Note: Females represent 45.6% of total sample, and males 21.8% of total sample.

Prevalence

Response frequencies (see Table 1) indicate that unwanted sexual experiences occur for both female and male children (before the age of 13) in both contact and non-contact behaviours, and occur more frequently at the non-contact end of the continuum. More than one in five females experienced being followed, being flashed at, and being shown sexual parts. The data also illustrate that females experience more

For the females, the perpetrator was age 16 and over in 85 per cent of the cases, and was known to the child in over 60 per cent of the incidents. In more than half of these, the perpetrator was a relative or family friend. For 63 per cent of the respondents, the incident occurred only once, for 27 per cent it occurred 'a few times', and for 10 per cent, 'fairly frequently'. In relation to males' experiences, the perpetrator was known in half of the cases, and more than half of this group was a relative or family friend.

females and 50 per cent of males have experienced abuse during ages 9-13.

In line with most extant research (Finkelhor 1979; Russell 1983), the data illustrate that the perpetrator was known to the child in over 60 per cent of the female cases and 50 per cent of the male cases. This is also comparable to the major Australian study by Goldman and Goldman (1988a) which showed that 76 per cent of perpetrators were known to the child. These authors note that relatives made up 35 per cent of females' experiences and 18 per cent of males' experiences; the present study found relatives and family made up 60 per cent and 50 per cent respectively.

An interesting feature of the present data is the identification of the large number of both females (63 per cent) and males (90 per cent) who report that the experience only occurred once. Such a finding has also been reported in other research with males, with Fromuth and Burkhart (1989) reporting a figure of 50 per cent and Baker and Duncan (1985) a figure of 59 per cent. Miller et al (1991) reported 'less severe' experiences occurring once in 67 per cent of the cases and 'more severe' experiences occurring once in 29 per cent of the cases; however the data reported by these researchers were not broken down by gender.

A greater percentage of males (66 per cent) than females (48 per cent) did not tell anyone at the time; in the case of males this did not change up to the present, although more females had talked with someone since childhood. The difference in numbers of females (45.6 per cent) and males (21.7 per cent) who chose to describe an incident in more detail in the present study also illustrates male reluctance to talk about their experiences. That males are less likely to talk about such experiences is supported by the work of Browne and Finkelhor (1986) and Kaufman et al (1980). However the large number of both sexes who do not talk about the incident suggests under-reporting on a large scale, explained in part by the fact that most perpetrators are known to the child. Goldman and Goldman (1988a) comment that fewer than 5 per cent of the experiences described by students in their survey were reported to adults.

Summary

The present study has derived data from a naturally occurring population and provided supporting evidence of the nature and extent of child sexual abuse for females and males, including age of occurrence, identity of perpetrators, most commonly occurring behaviours, and gender differences in disclosure. Believing that self-definition is partly based on inferences made about how one is treated by others, the authors propose that the findings of the growing literature into unwanted sexual experiences during childhood suggest that the long-term effects on aspects of psychological development are only beginning to be determined. Studies of revictimisation for females (see Wyatt et al 1992) and increased risk of perpetrator outcome for males (see Watkins & Bentovim 1992) suggest the need to closely examine preceding child sexual abuse and the developmental continuity between child, adolescent and adult experiences.

In identifying the existence of unwanted sexual behaviours along a broad continuum, the present study has supported the importance of incorporating such a continuum into child sexual abuse research. It is important to identify the broad array of sexually coercive behaviours which begin in childhood and, especially for females, continue throughout life (Mims & Chang 1984; Patton & Mannison 1993).

Limitations

Variations in definitions of child sexual abuse contribute to varying reports of incidence levels. While several studies have broken behaviours down into very small parts (eg, Christopher 1988), the present study chose to outline broad categories in an attempt to define a continuum of behaviours. It is possible that for some respondents, behaviours experienced were not seen as belonging in the categories identified, for example, rape by an inanimate object would probably not be acknowledged as intercourse.

Second, data from the present study is retrospective, although this remains a feature of most research in this area. Respondents may have recalled only certain incidents. An associated problem is the difficulty in identifying the coercive nature of an interaction where coerciveness itself is viewed as a normal part of

the behavioural repertoire of child sexual abuse.

Generalisation from the data can only be made cautiously as the sample is small and drawn from particular courses within a localised university. Further, it is not clear how much the conclusions may be affected by the fact that respondents could nominate an experience in more than one category. In addition, the numbers who chose to respond in the more detailed section were even smaller; no account was taken of those who may have recorded an experience in the first section but who chose not to respond any further in the descriptive section.

Future research

Several questions have emerged as a result of placing child sexual abuse in the broader framework of unwanted sexual experiences in childhood. One regards the effects on the developmental process of seemingly minor intrusions; another concerns ways of bringing about the re-definition of experience. A broader range of experiences needs to be included in future research. More also needs to be known about the short-term and long-term effects of experiences at all points of the continuum in order that all unwanted experiences be acknowledged and the notion of a hierarchy of abuse rejected. ☉

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