

An Exploratory Study of Spontaneous Recollections of Female-Perpetrated Childhood Abuse by Men Convicted of Sexual Offenses

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Abstract Female-perpetrated sexual abuse of boys is not especially well understood, but the research into this behavior is steadily growing. Due to a constellation of factors, the little we do know about this phenomenon often comes from survivors, many years after the abuse has occurred. This study contains the interview narratives collected from 71 adult men incarcerated for serious sexual offenses and released in the northeastern United States. Although their experiences of abuse during childhood was not a specific focus of the original questionnaire, three quarters of the sample (75.7%, $n = 56$) spontaneously reported childhood maltreatment of some kind and a fifth of the sample (20.3%, $n = 15$) reported specific examples of physical or sexual abuse by one or more women. The emergent themes of female perpetrated sexual abuse, including their experiences of disclosure, and how they have since come to understand their own offending is discussed. Implications for practice and directions for future research are presented.

Keywords Childhood sexual abuse · Male survivor · Female offender

Introduction

It is well known that women commit only a small proportion of reported crime and this is especially true for sexual

offending (Akers & Sellers, 2004; Harris, 2010; White & Haines, 1996). There are many explanations for this observed gender disparity in crime rates. These include such issues as the underreporting of crime more generally, as well as the observation that even when arrested or convicted for the same or similar behaviour, women often appear to be held to a different standard. This double standard is not only reflected in the eyes of the law, but also by the mainstream media, and by the larger community. Understanding crime by women requires criminologists to think outside of a typically male perspective and describing female sexual offending requires an even bigger paradigm shift (Cortoni, 2009; Harris, 2010).

The number of women who are identified as perpetrators of child sexual abuse continues to be relatively small and their behaviors are less well understood than when they are committed by men (Cortoni, 2009; Harris, 2010; Hislop, 2001; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). The lack of attention paid to the phenomenon is likely due to a constellation of obstacles that surround disclosure, reporting, prosecution, and treatment. Research indicates that women account for less than 5% of all officially reported incidents of child sexual abuse (Strickland, 2008) and less than 10% of all officially identified sexual offenders (Finkelhor and Ormrod 2001). Incidence rates differ substantially however, when samples of survivors of sexual abuse are questioned. In these studies, as many as 75% of anonymous, adult respondents report having been abused by women during their childhood (Strickland, 2008). More specifically, Strickland found that 15% of college students and 39% of abuse survivors currently receiving psychological treatment identified female perpetrators. Finally, and of particular relevance to the present sample, more than half (59%) of male rapists in Strickland's (2008) study reported having been sexually abused by a woman during childhood.

What we do know about sexual abuse by women often comes from their survivors, many years after the abuse has

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occurred. In fact, a recent meta-analysis revealed that prevalence rates of sexual offenses committed by women from victimization surveys were six times higher than those extracted from official data (Cortoni, Babchishin, & Rat, 2016). Indeed, all of the usual caveats about unreported crime apply (Harris, 2010), but, as will be discussed below, there are even more obstacles to disclosure for survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse (Hislop, 2001). For example, it is alleged that crimes are less likely to be reported when: the perpetrator is female, the victim is male, the offender is in a position of authority, or the abuse seemingly occurs within the context of a relationship (Briggs, 1995; Strickland, 2008; Turner, Miller, & Henderson, 2008). Each of these characteristics intersect when we consider sexual abuse of boys by women.

There is a strongly held but erroneous assumption that the absence of a penis (Hislop, 2001) renders female-perpetrated child sexual abuse less traumatic, less violent, and less physically damaging than sexual abuse by a man (Briggs, 1995). On the contrary, survivors of sexual abuse perpetrated by women consistently describe similarly or *more* severe psychological and behavioural symptoms as victims of male perpetrators (Hislop, 2001). For those who have survived abuse by both men and women, it has been found that it is against the woman that they feel more anger (Saradjian, 1996). It has been reasoned that this anger is a product of the higher expectations of one's maternal and caretaking qualities that create a far greater sense of betrayal and powerlessness (Saradjian, 1996, Strickland, 2008; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004).

The Present Study

The present study presents the analysis of several compelling themes that emerged naturally during interviews conducted originally for a different purpose. This paper reviews the numerous and spontaneous disclosures made by interview participants regarding female-perpetrated sexual abuse that they experienced during their childhood. We collected data from survivors and our focus on women as perpetrators was entirely post hoc. The analysis of emergent themes was entirely exploratory. The value of this study is therefore in highlighting a neglected area of research by considering the unexpected extent of childhood sexual and physical abuse committed by women, as reported by this sample of men who were later convicted of sexual offenses as adults.

Method

Participants

We examined the interview narratives of 71 men convicted of and incarcerated for serious sexual offenses and released to the community (Harris, 2014; Harris, 2015; Harris, 2016). These

men were interviewed between 2011 and 2013 in the North Eastern United States as part of a study of desistance from sexual offending. The emphasis of the original study was on their post release experiences and the kinds of variables that impacted their success or failure in the community (Harris, 2014; Harris, 2015; Harris, 2016). Representing the limited ethnic diversity of national samples of men convicted of sexual offenses, most of the present participants identified as white (88%). The men were older than many typical criminological samples with an average age of 53 years (Range = 24–78 years). The average length of their most recent custodial sentence length was 10.1 years (Range = 4 months - 38 years) for a sexual offense, and they had been living in the community for a mean of 4.1 years (Range = 4 months - 21 years). All participants denied offending sexually since their most recent release. Most of the men still attended some kind of individual or group therapy related to their offending.

Almost all of the participants (86%) had been convicted of sexual offenses against child victims. Most of the men had committed extra-familial child molestation ($n = 28$) or incest ($n = 14$). A smaller group of men had raped adults exclusively ($n = 8$). A further six men had records for noncontact sexual offenses exclusively (including possession and/or distribution of child pornography or voyeurism). No particular trends were noted with regard to their childhood victimization experiences or their subsequent offending behaviors or victim selection.

Three quarters of the sample (75.7%, $n = 56$) volunteered that they had experienced some form of childhood maltreatment at some point during their life. This measure was broadly characterized to capture physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, neglect, and vicarious violence. Of those men, 47 (83.9%) reported experiencing contact physical or sexual abuse before their eighteenth birthday. More than two thirds (68.1%, $n = 32$) of them identified exclusively male perpetrators and 12.8% ($n = 6$) reported exclusively female perpetrators. A further fifth of the survivors (19.1%, $n = 9$) reported having been physically and/or sexually abused by both women and men. Table 1 contains frequencies for individual mentions of various kinds of maltreatment by gender of perpetrator. The results for those 56 men are arranged with each row representing an individual participant and separate columns for male and female perpetrators. The table also includes the survivor's age during the abuse and their relationship to the perpetrator (if known).

We did not classify the female perpetrators into categories preemptively. We simply noted the characteristics of the behavior and generated a list of offense types, age of victim, age of perpetrator, relationship to victim, and so on, and they naturally sorted into four groups. These groups are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive. Evidently, as will be seen below, someone could have been abused by more than one woman, and the woman mentioned might have had many more victims.

It should also be clear that not everyone in the sample reported having experienced abuse. A small group of men

Table 1 Types of self-reported maltreatment by gender of perpetrator

ID	Male perpetrator (relationship/age of victim in years)	Female perpetrator (relationship/age of victim in years)
B3	S ^a (older brother/7–10) S (uncle/7–10) S (older cousin/7–10) S (older cousin/7–10) S (older cousin/7–10)	N ^c (mother/4–12)
B4	P ^b (father/12–15) N (father/ongoing) E ^d (father/ongoing)	S (babysitter/5) N (mother/ongoing) E (mother/ongoing)
B5	N (father/ongoing)	N (mother/ongoing)
B6	P (father/ongoing) V ^c (father-mother/ongoing)	S (teacher/13–19)
B7	S (father/7–10) S (family friend/7–10) S (family friend/7–10) P (father/7–10) P (family friend/7–10) P (family friend/7–10)	
B8	V (father-mother/ongoing)	N (mother/ongoing)
B10	V (father-mother/ongoing)	S (aunt/6–18) S (aunt/6–18) P (mother/6–12) N (mother/6–12)
B11	V (father-mother/ongoing)	S (older sister/4–14) S (older sister/4–14) S (sister’s friend/4–14) S (sister’s friend/4–14) S (adult woman/17) N (mother/12–17) E (mother/12–17) V (mother-sister/ongoing)
B12	S (family friend/11–15) P (father) V (father-mother/ongoing)	S (adult/15) N (mother/11) P (mother/ongoing)
B13	S (family friend) N (father/5–15)	S (stepmother/3) S (step-aunt/3) S (family friend) N (mother/5–15)
B15	S (uncle/8)	P (mother/2)
B16	P (father/10–15) E (father/10–15)	
B18	N (father/ongoing) S (stepfather/ongoing) S (family friend/7) S (family friend/ongoing)	S (adult woman)
B19	P (stepfather/ongoing) S (friend/11) P (bullies/ongoing)	N (mother/ongoing)

Table 1 (continued)

ID	Male perpetrator (relationship/age of victim in years)	Female perpetrator (relationship/age of victim in years)
B20	S (priest/5–14) S (priest/5–14) S (priest/5–14) S (priest/5–14) S (priest/5–14)	
M2	S (father/4–9) P (father/4–9)	N (mother/8–17)
M3	E (father/4–9) S (stepfather/6–7)	N (mother/ongoing)
M4	V (father-mother/ongoing) P (father/ongoing) S (father/ongoing)	P (mother/ongoing) E (mother/ongoing) S (older cousin/7)
M5	S (older cousin/6) P (father/ongoing)	
M6	N (father/ongoing) S (priest/15)	
M7	N (father/ongoing) V (father-mother/ongoing)	N (mother/ongoing) V (mother-father/ongoing)
M8	N (father/ongoing)	
M9	S (family friend/14–16)	
M10	P (stepfather/ongoing)	N (mother/9–15)
M11		S (babysitter/4)
M14	S (stranger) P (bullies/ongoing)	
M15	P (babysitter/1)	
M16		E (bullies/ongoing)
M17	V (father-mother/ongoing)	S (acquaintance/14)
M18		E (acquaintance/14)
M19	P (bullies/ongoing)	
M20	S (family friend/9–10) S (family friend/9–10) P (bullies/ongoing)	S (family friend/9–10)
M21	E (bullies/15–16)	
M22	S (older brother/12–14) S (uncle/7) S (family friend/11)	
M23	S (family friend/12) S (uncle/10)	
M24	S (older brother/ongoing)	
M26	E (bullies/ongoing)	
M28	P (father/12–14)	
M29	S (step-uncle/12–15) S (stepfather/12–15)	E (mother/ongoing)
D1	P (father/ongoing) V (father-mother/ongoing)	
D3	S (priest/10)	
D6	S (family friend/6–8)	
D9	P (father/ongoing) E (father/ongoing)	
D10	N (father/ongoing) P (father/ongoing)	

Table 1 (continued)

ID	Male perpetrator (relationship/age of victim in years)	Female perpetrator (relationship/age of victim in years)
D11	N (father/ongoing)	N (mother/ongoing)
D15	P (father/6)	N (mother/ongoing)
	V (father-mother/11)	
R1	P (older brother/ongoing)	S (older cousin/12)
	S (priest/9–11)	
R2	S (stranger/12)	P (mother/ongoing)
	S (stranger/16)	
R3		P (mother/ongoing)
R4	N (father/ongoing)	
	P (father/ongoing)	
R5	P (father/5)	N (mother/ongoing)
	N (father/ongoing)	
	V (father-mother/ongoing)	
	V (father-stepmother/ongoing)	
	S (family friend/7)	
	S (family friend/7)	
R6	S (family friend/6)	
R7	N (father/ongoing)	N (mother/ongoing)
R8	P (father/1–6)	
	V (father-mother/ongoing)	
	S (father/ongoing)	
	S (older brother/ongoing)	
R9	P (father/ongoing)	
R10	S (father/9–12)	
	S (uncle/9–12)	
	S (older brother/9–12)	
	V (father-mother/ongoing)	

^a S = contact sexual abuse

^b P = physical abuse/punishment

^c N = neglect

^d E = emotional/psychological abuse or bullying

^e V = vicarious violence, witnessing domestic violence

(*n* = 8) either responded negatively to a specific follow-up question or voluntarily stated at some point during their interview that they had *never* been abused or neglected. In an additional 10 interviews, maltreatment of any kind was simply not discussed. Taken together, those 18 men were excluded from the qualitative analysis described below.

Procedure

Therapists in cooperating outpatient treatment programs advertised the study to their clients and the contact details of interested men were forwarded to the first author. The semi-structured, face-to-face interview lasted approximately 90 min and followed McAdams’ (1993) Life History Interview Protocol (see also: Laws and Ward 2011; Maruna 2001; Harris 2014). The research was described to respondents as a project

designed to focus on the time since their most recent release to the community, with emphasis on their positive and negative experiences of that release. The explicit research question presented during the original data collection was on understanding the process of desistance (that is, *not* reoffending) (Harris, 2014; Harris, 2015; Harris, 2016). The interview protocol instructed individuals to think of their lives as a story with a series of chapters. It then focused on several key life events and asked for descriptions of a specific high point, low point, turning point, earliest memory, childhood scene, adulthood scene, positive and negative influences, role models, and political and religious views (McAdams 1993; Harris 2014).

The men were neither formally questioned about their experiences of abuse in childhood, nor were their very early relationships with women a subject of any direct probing. Instead, the themes that we explored herein of female-

perpetrated abuse emerged entirely naturally. If the men disclosed any abuse at all during the interview, the first author followed up by asking if they had ever told anyone. This line of questioning mostly included prompts like “did you require or seek medical attention?” “Did you ever tell a doctor?” “Did you report it to the police?” And “what were the consequences for you and for the abuser?” “Did the abuser get into any trouble?” The experiences that were mentioned, unprompted, by the men often constituted quite serious contact sexual offenses over a protracted period of time, with adult women who often held a trusted role in their lives (for example: biological mother, babysitter, or teacher).

Interviews were conducted by the first author, individually, in the private offices of a church, at various probation departments, or in centrally located homeless shelters, all of which were familiar and accessible to the men. All participants consented to having their interviews recorded digitally and received a \$25 gift card for a local grocery store for their cooperation. The study was conducted in accordance with the university’s Institutional Review Board and all participants were required to provide their informed consent prior to their interview.

Analytical Strategy

Our analytical strategy followed closely the techniques described by Atkinson (1996) and Presser (2008). Interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed verbatim (for example, rather than correcting “wanna” to “want to,” the former was retained for authenticity). Significant pauses (while holding back tears, for example) and nonverbal actions such as waving arms around or miming something were noted. Unless distracting or excessive, verbal ticks or fillers such as “um,” “like,” or “y’know” were retained. Each transcript was checked against the original recording for accuracy at least twice by the first author and each interview was experienced multiple times throughout the study. Interview transcripts were then coded by the second author (a trained graduate student) in frequent consultation with the first author, to ensure inter-rater reliability using both Microsoft Word and NVivo software (Version 10).

The present study employed thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to code and examine various pathways to desistance (Harris, 2015, 2016). It is important to note that the disclosures of female-perpetrated abuse occurred entirely spontaneously and arose as unexpected details contained within the men’s responses to other questions. The prompts that most often elicited discussion of childhood abuse were “think of a low point in your life,” “try to recall your earliest memory,” or they emerged simply within the context of explaining why they think they offended. These prompts are discussed in more detail below.

Although the emphasis here is necessarily on emergent themes and spontaneous utterances, it is worth noting that it was seldom the case that child abuse or neglect did *not* arise naturally during the interview. In some cases, abuse was asked about as part of a follow up question to a comment the participant made. For example, if the participant said that he knew a cousin who was abused, or that he had frequently seen his father hit his mother, the interviewer asked “did anything like that ever happen to you?” or “do you remember your father ever hitting you or your siblings as well?”

Each transcript was reviewed and specific mentions of any type of childhood maltreatment were recorded by the second author. We included only those incidents when it was clear that the experience had occurred before the participant turned 18. Where possible, we identified the perpetrator of the abuse (by gender, age, and relationship) and noted the participant’s age at the time the abuse began. We coded individual mentions of various kinds of maltreatment including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional/psychological abuse, and neglect. We also included mentions of vicarious violence (i.e. most often in cases where the men reported witnessing physical or verbal aggression between their parents, for example).

Results

Abuse by Women Of the men who reported experiencing abuse at the hands of women, two fifths of the sample (39.2%, $n = 29$) reported female-perpetrated maltreatment or abuse. Half of those men (51.7%, $n = 15$) reported that the abuse involved physical contact. We further identified 12 men who reported that their female-perpetrated abuse was sexual in nature, often consisting of incidents of completed sexual intercourse.

The types of abuse experienced and the women who were identified as perpetrators fell into four clear categories: sexual abuse by biological relatives ($n = 5$), sexual abuse by other caretakers ($n = 5$), sexual abuse by adult acquaintances ($n = 2$), and physical abuse by biological mothers ($n = 3$). Unlike the sexual abuse they had experienced at the hands of men, it is important to note that no one in the sample described their female-perpetrated sexual abuse as a discrete, or one-time event. In every case, when sexual abuse occurred, it occurred over a protracted period of months or years, and some men reported having been abused by more than one perpetrator.

Disclosure Experience The way that the men reported their experience of disclosure emerged as an important consideration. Although this is not identified specifically as an ‘emergent theme,’ we find it necessary to comment on this aspect of their experience and describe their responses. Discussing the

challenges and obstacles to disclosure helps to illustrate the dark figure of unreported crime and underscores the importance of investigating this phenomenon further.

It was extremely rare for the men to report having disclosed their abuse very long (or at all) before the interview. It was never reported to have occurred at the time of the actual event. For example, of the 29 men who spontaneously reported in their interviews that they had been maltreated by women, only four shared that they had *ever* disclosed the abuse to anyone. The modal explanations for their silence was that there would not have been any point in disclosing their experience. Their various reasons followed a similar theme: they didn't know it was wrong at the time; you didn't talk about things like that back then, or (and most frequently); they didn't think anyone would believe them. Participants M23 and R1 shared their experiences:

I told my brother about it the next day, and he just laughed at me. Made me feel even more...this big [*holds thumb and forefinger an inch apart*] y'know? So I didn't tell no one else. I was afraid I would get laughed at some more. So I didn't. I never told anyone else about it. (M23).

It humiliated me. I never told anyone. (R1).

For the men who did recall having disclosed their experience, the consequences of telling anyone almost always amounted to nothing. B13 told his mother that his stepmother and step-aunt had forced him to have sex with them. He told the interviewer that as a result of him telling his family, "nothing happened" except that he didn't get to see his dad for a few years. More than thirty years after being sexually assaulted by his babysitter, B4 finally told his parents and they completely disregarded his disclosure and continue to deny his experience to this day:

My parents denied it. They have never accepted it. I didn't tell them [at the time]. I told them later, later on in life. We moved around, we were a military family, so by the time they knew we had already moved three times, y'know? [and their reaction was:] "Oh no sir, that couldn't have happened," [and] "you're making it up! Come on, that's crazy!" and I'm like, "no, it did, it really did." What parent ever wants to accept responsibility for the fact that they would let something like that happen to their child and my parents won't...will not accept it, y'know? They just won't. (B4).

In comparison to those men victimized by women, two men with male abusers disclosed their abuse. Although M3 described having been profoundly neglected by his mother as a teen, he indicated that soon after disclosing to her that his stepfather had sexually abused him for a year, she left her husband. Alarmingly, only one participant (B16) formally reported his abuse to law enforcement. He further recalled that no action was ever taken by police.

The remaining qualitative results are arranged in two parts. First, we consider each of the four female perpetrator categories by presenting quotations from the interviews that are

relevant to each one. Next, we explore the common themes that emerged most clearly from the men's narratives.

Biological Relatives Of the 12 men who reported being coerced to have sexual intercourse with a woman, five (41.7%) identified the woman as an older female family member. This abuse was typically committed by cousins, sisters, or aunts and in all of these cases, the men were biologically related to their abusers. For two of these men, their recollections included having their older sisters and cousins forcing their female friends to participate as well. In all of these examples, the abuse began when the man was very young and continued for many years. The men frequently reported being coerced to have sexual intercourse with multiple women and were at least for a time, under the impression that this was normal, unremarkable, or expected. For example, B10 explains how the apparently normal cultural norms of the South influenced his youth:

Back in the day, in Alabama, people never said anything about relatives sleeping together. We just sleep in the same bed, play around with one another, and it just happened, y'know? She's [my aunt] older than me, they're [my aunts] older than me, but I didn't think I was doing anything wrong. I didn't think they were doing anything wrong. I liked it. It happened. We'd have sex and kids came about... Down south there were no laws (B10).

The extent to which this behavior had become normalized for B10 was jarring. For example, upon finding out that his aunt was pregnant with his child (when he was 12) he said:

The way I looked at it, believe it or not, that it was a kid, that, y'know? Another woman—welcome to the family!—that maybe I would have a chance to have sex with. (B10).

Similarly, it was quite confronting to hear the way that B11 described the extensive abuse he experienced as a very young child, while also clearly trying to take ownership of (or credit for) the behavior:

I have been having sex since I was four years old...Around the age of five I remember one of my oldest sisters also helped introduce me to sex...And having five sisters it created the opportunity for a lot more females to come around. (B11).

He further detailed the extensive bribery that frequently involved him being coerced to have sex with other girls in the neighborhood, as well as with his sisters:

...the other neighbor or friend, whoever I'm going to have sex with would also want me to have sex with my sister so that I could not talk about my experience with her, so it's sort of like that's the way I'll keep quiet because I don't want nobody know I'm having sex with my sister because that is supposed to be a taboo. So it's sort of like a bribe and it creates a certain amount of comfort for me to have sex with my sister then I get to have sex with you, a neighbor, or friend, or whatever (B11).

Although some participants still voluntarily shared that they had been victimized by a woman, they were decidedly

less descriptive about their specific experiences. For example, M4 was dismissive of the sexual contact he experienced with an older cousin. He was especially vague in his recollection and seemed somewhat surprised that this was his response when the interviewer asked him to “recall an important childhood memory:”

Yep, when I was five years old I got molested by my cousin, Rose. I was five. She must have been around 10. Doesn't matter. [pause] I don't know why that memory sticks with me, but it does. (M4).

R1 stumbled as he shared a similarly difficult experience, also with an older cousin:

We used to visit my aunt's house and I was forced to go to the basement with my 15 year old cousin. We would play house and she would make me do stuff with her; sexual stuff. When I couldn't get an erection she would make fun of me and say my penis was too small and she would say “no woman will ever want a man that couldn't satisfy her.” (R1).

Caretakers A second group of five men (also representing 41.7% of those who endured sexual abuse by women) reported being molested by adult women or older teenagers who had a temporary caretaking role in their lives. Three men identified babysitters as their abusers and the two men reported being victimized by women who their parents or neighbors had taken in as boarders.

I didn't molest them until they were 9 or 10 years old. That's when I was molested as a child...It was about 1943, I was 9 or 10 years old. My grandmother died and my mother took in migrant workers. One of the men molested me, and then there was a woman... she was our babysitter... I don't even like thinking about it. (M20).

At the age of 5 I was sexually abused by my babysitter... This babysitter came into my room, she took off her clothes, she pulled down my pajamas and she climbed on top of me and started rubbing herself on me. I remember feeling the fact that she had pubic hair and how weird that was. To this day, do you know that I can still remember how her hair smells? (B4).

[From the age of 3] I was abused, numerous times, um from every, well I'm not going to say everyone but, from older females, next door neighbors, my mother's friends, uh, camp counselor, uh, godmother's daughter. (B13).

In each of these cases, the abuse experiences were described as having occurred within the context of bathing or bedtime. This is consistent with the available categories within extant typologies of identified female sexual offenders (e.g. Harris, 2010; Harris, 2012; Mathews, et al., 1989; Sandler & Freeman, 2007; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). These studies suggest that a very small group of female offenders abuse younger, pre-pubescent children. They also indicate that because they tend to be more embedded in family systems than men, women typically have substantially more domestic opportunities that permit them to commit undetected sexual crimes. For example,

it has been shown that women who abuse young children characteristically do so by disguising their behavior in routine caretaking activities such as bathing, clothing, or feeding (Harris 2010; Harris, 2012; Hislop, 2001; Saradjian, 1996).

Adult Women The third category—sex as a teen with an adult woman—was typically characterized, with hindsight, as abusive, but the two men who shared these experiences both indicated that they felt at the time that it was consensual. For example, B6's recollection of his “relationship” with an older woman (beginning when he was 13 years old and she was 25) illustrates the difficulty that the men had in integrating the abuse into their lives. As can be seen in the quote below, B6 refers to the experience as abusive, but in the same breath, also describes it as “an affair:”

One of the things that I found over the years is that, people who have committed sexual offenses have been abused themselves, including myself. [pause] I had a six year affair with a teacher. (B6).

When asked to elaborate, he explained that the “relationship” began when he started high school and lasted six years. His initial characterization of the experience was decidedly positive:

This particular teacher was, I mean, uh, I mean, I loved her. She was wonderful. I mean, y'know? She was very caring, uh, she knew what was going on at my house, y'know? Um, so I'd stay sometimes at her place... I was a 13 and a half, 14 year old boy who was, y'know, in puberty and y'know, hormones raging and uh, y'know, this was great! Again, [it was a] different time, back in the 60's, y'know? Sexual abuse wasn't a, it wasn't a... [trails off] (B6).

This is again consistent with one of the main offender types that features in previously established typologies. Referred to in the literature as “teacher/lovers” (Mathews, et al., 1989) or “heterosexual nurturers” (Vandiver & Kercher, 2004), these women typically elevate an adolescent boy to adult status and tend not to see their behavior as criminal or abusive (Atkinson, 1996; Cortoni, 2009; Harris, 2010; Harris, 2012). These women typically act from a position of power that is achieved through either their age or through their role in the boy's life.

In his own words, B11 described how he “impregnated an older woman” when he was a teenager. He also described the “affair” as an “embarrassment.” When asked if he felt victimized by the 28-year-old woman, during this time, he shared:

I didn't see it that way. I just thought like, “wow, I'm a man. I can get an older woman.” Because when I was growing up I was always told that, or heard that girls like older men because they can look up to you like a father figure and they like to have someone who is older and more mature and can be in control. Like, they would say something like, “you're too young for me” if I'm talking to an older girl, it's like, “you're too young for me. You cannot control me.” Because they [had] given me the impression that girls like to be controlled. Or a

man has to control his woman. You're talking about... I'm a child of the 70's, so...(B11).

Biological Mothers The final group of three men spontaneously described having been severely physically abused and punished by their biological mothers. This number represents 20% of those men who revealed contact abuse perpetrated by a female. In each of these families, the boys' fathers were either often or completely absent.

One day I guess she had had enough of me, so she came up with a belt. She hit my brother two times, and she hit me four times, and I felt like I couldn't trust her and if I couldn't trust her, I couldn't trust any woman. (R2).

All my problems started then. It was just before my third birthday... Anyway, due to my mental health issues my mother abused me and I was always her favorite target. I have a bullet hole in my leg from where she tried to shoot me once, and my back is scarred from all the time she came at me with a butcher's knife. (R3).

I went to live with my dad, I guess that was a high turning point in my life as a teenager, cos I wasn't getting beaten by her [mother] anymore. (M4).

Analysis of Emergent Themes

The participants' descriptions of the contact abuse that they experienced at the hands of women clustered together in several themes. For example, in many instances, these disclosures led to a discussion about their resultant conflicted masculinity and was sometimes offered as an explanation for the eventual perpetration of their own offending. Some men indicated that this was the first time they had ever disclosed their abuse, and if they had told someone, it was only fairly recently. This section reviews a selection of quotations that provide evidence of two strong emergent themes: "Confused perception of harm" and "Explanation of offending."

Confused Perception of Harm The strongest theme that emerged for the sample was a profound sense of confusion over the apparent harm caused by the abuse. Almost no one recognized it at the time as damaging but with the benefit of hindsight (and likely years of therapy), they could articulate it this way as adults. Even decades after the abuse, many of the men still expressed confusion over whether these childhood experiences were truly harmful. B10's narrative provided a particularly good example of this theme after the interviewer sought clarification on the extent to which he consented to repeated sexual intercourse with his aunts:

They didn't *make* me because I liked it. What they were doing to me, it made me feel good so I just like, couldn't, I was like, "is it bedtime yet?" knowing that something was going to

happen at night in bed. I was just looking forward to going to bed, y'know? (B10).

At times he used quite positive language to describe these events and even recalled them when asked to describe a happy childhood memory or highlight of his adolescence:

I remember, like, the good things, like when my aunts and stuff were raping me, stuff like that. Y'know? I didn't look at it like rape, but things like that. Sex. (B10).

Here, although he has clearly since learned to characterize the experience as "rape," (and to label it in those terms) he still refers to that specific example of victimization as a "good thing." B11 also described the way these experiences impacted his already conflicted feelings around masculinity and sexuality:

I was very timid at that time. I remember one of the experiences where my two oldest sisters said to me and umm I did not want to do it. I just was shy. I didn't want to do it and they said to me that if I did not I would be considered an anti-man, meaning gay. Well [in his native country] we called it anti-men back then, meaning that you're gay or homosexual or homophobic. So I was scared of that. That stuck with me 'till this day, like I didn't want to be gay, considered gay, I wanted to be a man. (B11).

B13 shared that his initial reaction to his abuse experience was positive, in particular because he received so much extra attention from a friend's mother:

I felt that I was lucky... I slept over my friend's house because, my mom was her friend and I was friends with Charlie, I can't remember his mother's name off the top of my head. Umm, but, umm, that transpired into getting into bed watching Saturday cartoons with his mom. She was naked and like, I was, uhh performing oral sex on her, umm, not obviously knowing what I'm doing but you know. After that happened, she treated me like I was special, better than, y'know? Like a little king or something. I was just treated differently, smiles and hugs and kisses and stuff, and I liked it, I liked that attention. (B13).

With the wisdom of hindsight B13 was later able to better articulate the damage done by those encounters:

I never really processed it when I was a kid... I've had time to, y'know, go back and really look at these things which, y'know, it's kind of upsetting, but like, the feelings from back then is like, y'know, things that don't feel normal, that's, it's, like, out of the norm, y'know? It's one of the, one of the things that umm, y'know, was a distortion, that was set in early (B13).

Over time, some of the men had changed the way they viewed these experiences. For example, B11 said that he now wishes his parents had protected him "from having been exposed to sex so early." He also made several comments that confirmed how much his sense of masculinity and ideas around sex and sexuality had been shaped and complicated

by those childhood experiences. Similarly, B13 expressed regret over not telling anyone sooner:

If I could have raised my voice then, there would have been a totally different story, but I couldn't. (B13).

The language that the men used to describe surviving objectively damaging experiences was striking at times. For example, upon being asked to recall his earliest memory, M11 initially used the word "molested" to describe abuse by his 15-year-old babysitter when he was "three or four." When asked to elaborate he said:

She'd be like, laying on the bed with no clothes on and tell me, "y'know, if you wanna go outside to play or anything then, yeah, you better...[trails off]. And I didn't know any better being that young. (M11).

But even as he was describing a clearly unpleasant memory of sexual coercion that occurred on more than one occasion, the language he used when asked for clarification of the nature of the sexual contact still gave the impression that *he* was in charge, or at least, an active participant rather than a victim.

I used to, um, play with her naked body... She would just lay there and I'd do everything (M11).

This reluctance to identify oneself as a victim emerged as a strong theme for many participants.

Explanation of Offending Some of the men used their abusive experiences at the hands of older women in their explanations (and justifications) for their subsequent offending. The process was rarely described as linear, but the overall negative influence that female-perpetrated abuse had on their sexually aggressive behavior later in life did emerge as a clear theme.

It took me maybe two years in prison to realize that like, I was in there for a reason, and the reason was because I chose to take advantage of my sisters. I couldn't understand why and then it hit me: I was abused as a child. I didn't see it. The reason I didn't see it is because like every opportunity that came up, I felt like it was a lucky opportunity (B13).

Again, with the luxury of hindsight, B6 acknowledged that once he began treatment for his *own* offending, he learned that "his affair with a teacher" was abusive. Like others, it seems that this characterization gave him a narrative to explain his own offending:

I didn't really, y'know? I mean, I wasn't getting beaten up, I wasn't being held down on the bed, y'know? But I think you have to go back a little bit, I think um, you know, you talk about a 13 year old boy being with a 25 year old woman and you know, even the news media doesn't know it's a 13 year old boy, flip the tables. Switch it around, you know. A male teacher with a female student (B6).

R5 was much more explicit about the development of his negative feelings towards women and girls:

That was the build-up. I had lots of anger towards my mother and the men who molested me. I saw women as objects. And girls are objects. That's how I developed the

deviancy. My being molested was a huge origin to my offending towards young girls. (R5).

Discussion

It is not controversial to observe that female-perpetrated sexual abuse is underreported. Although it is not yet especially well understood, research into this behavior is growing (Cortoni, 2009; Harris; 2010; Hislop, 2001; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). Due to a constellation of factors, the little we do know about this phenomenon often comes from survivors, many years after the abuse has occurred (Cortoni, Babchishin, & Rat, 2016; Strickland, 2008). The present study has exploited this observation and contributed to this emerging area of study by presenting a thematic analysis of the interview narratives of 71 men convicted of sexual offenses as adults. Our results indicate that an effective way of measuring the nature and extent of abuse by women is by addressing the paradox that those most likely to experience it (young boys) are also those least likely to disclose it.

Although childhood abuse was not a specific focus of the original study for which the current sample were interviewed, the rate at which they spontaneously disclosed having experienced abuse was not inconsequential. Three quarters ($n = 56$) of the men in the sample voluntarily reported that they had experienced maltreatment of some kind before their eighteenth birthday. A full fifth of those men ($n = 15$) disclosed having experienced contact sexual or physical abuse by a woman, and in some cases, were abused by more than one perpetrator.

Our findings underscore the importance of examining female-perpetrated sexual abuse of boys, both clinically and theoretically. We have highlighted here the need to take such allegations seriously, and the potential significance of these experiences in the sexual development of children and adolescents, and their relevance in the etiology of sexually aggressive behavior in adulthood. We recommend future researchers further interrogate these questions to enhance our understanding of and ability to respond to this kind of abuse.

The policy implications of this study are vast. So far, our collective response to abuse of boys by women has been woefully inadequate. We fail to take seriously the extent of women's offending (especially that which is sexual), we underestimate their capacity for harm, and perpetuate a double standard of gender bias at almost every level of the criminal justice system (Harris, 2012; Hislop, 2001). This further entrenches community level ignorance of the issue, it increases the likelihood of disbelief or downplaying by law enforcement, and it shapes and reinforces the men's capacity for denial during treatment (Harris, 2010; Saradjian, 1996, Strickland, 2008; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). As Frei (2008) asks, "How can society properly address the issue of

sex offending as a comprehensive social problem if the media and general public continue to avoid serious acknowledgment of female perpetration of sex offense as dangerous or abusive?” (p. 497). Perhaps worst of all, is the profound disservice that this double standard provides to survivors.

Our continued failure to acknowledge the reality of male victimization by women serves to perpetuate the myth that men always want sex and that coercion of boys is rare, unlikely, or acceptable. The preservation of these myths discourage men from seeking help when they have been victimized and it is precisely that help that the present study’s participants were denied, yet almost uniformly wish had been available to them.

Others have commented on the deep double standard that is presented by the media, law enforcement, and so on, regarding abuse by women (Briggs, 1995; Harris, 2012; Hislop, 2001). What the present study reveals also is the differential way these events are experienced, understood, processed, and integrated by the survivors themselves. Failing to recognize the ability of a woman to offend in the same way sends an unfortunate message to survivors of their abuse.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations, particularly given the exploratory nature of the analysis and the preliminary nature of our results. Specifically, this section considers the limited generalizability of the present sample, the method of questioning, and the use of indirect prompts. We address each in turn.

The number of participants in this study is more than sufficient for a qualitative analysis. Having said that, the limited geographical reach of the sample and its ethnically homogeneous participants renders our results not especially generalizable beyond white men convicted of serious sexual offenses in the northeast of the United States. Although this limitation is unavoidable, this work still provides a considerable contribution to the literature, given the very little we understand about the phenomenon of sexual abuse perpetrated by women.

The study is limited by the nature of the interview protocol itself. Participants were neither asked specifically about their abuse experiences, nor questioned directly about victimization by women. While we acknowledge that this approach constitutes a second shortcoming, an appropriate alternative interpretation is that the evidence provided herein is especially compelling because it arose in conversation, naturally. This approach allowed us to engage in inductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in which the data was coded “*without* trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame” (p. 85).

A connected concern is that because participants were not routinely or systematically asked about their experiences of female-perpetrated abuse, it is impossible to determine whether the 18 men who *didn’t* volunteer any such information during the interview ever experienced such abuse. Of course,

it is clear, that not everyone in the sample experienced abuse or maltreatment during their childhood. Although this is a limitation, we note that the same constraint would arise if we had directly questioned everyone, and some had simply chosen to lie by omission. Although this is an unavoidable constraint of the study, given the considerable number of individuals who *did* share such experiences, we maintain that our results have value and are worthy of dissemination.

A final limitation concerns our inability to reliably triangulate these data with other sources. Although this might ultimately weaken the contribution of our results, we argue that reviewing official records would not have been particularly useful anyway. The abuse events that our participants described occurred many decades ago, and we know from the men themselves, that few if any were ever reported formally. Indeed, one of the advantages of thematic analysis is its emphasis on the subjective understanding of human experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allows us to focus entirely upon the participants’ perceptions and feelings around an experience, rather than fact checking the experience itself. Thus, we don’t consider our inability to verify allegations of abuse as a fatal flaw.

Conclusion

In closing, our results have revealed a notable amount of childhood sexual abuse of boys perpetrated by women. Both the survivors and perpetrators of this rarely acknowledged crime warrant further attention. We argue specifically that survivors of female perpetrated sexual offending deserve validation, respect, and support commensurate with the gravity of their experience. The news media, along with law enforcement officers, treatment providers, educators, parents, and the community at large would do well to manage this complex population more responsibly. An important first step is improving our awareness and appreciation of the nature and extent of the phenomenon and encouraging continued work in this line of research. We recommend continued research and focused interrogation on female-perpetrated abuse and the provision of services and support to their survivors.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest Danielle Arlanda Harris declares that she has no conflict of interest. Yevgeniy Mayba declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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