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SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION OF CHILDREN
IN A NORMAL POPULATION*

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ACQUISITIONS

Within the last several years, child protective workers, physicians and psychotherapists have witnessed a mushrooming in reports of cases of childhood sexual abuse. This has prompted increased interest in knowing what the true dimensions of this problem are.

In an attempt to do just this, the author undertook a survey of 795 college undergraduates at 6 New England colleges and universities. Students in a variety of social science courses filled out questionnaires about childhood sexual experiences. Although the sample is not representative of any larger population, it is quite diverse in terms of the religious, ethnic, social class and urban-rural background of the students (with the exception of there being very few blacks) and in terms of the types of schools included. Participation rate was very high; over 90% of the students in attendance in the classes filled out the questionnaire.

INCIDENCE

Nineteen per cent of the women reported a sexual victimization experience as a child. Three kinds of victim relationships are included in that count. The first group includes children 12 or under who had a sexual experience with an adult 18 or over. Eleven per cent of the women had had such an experience.

It is also well known that many children are sexually victimized by adolescents and older children. Babysitters are a common example. So we included a second group of children twelve or under who had an experience with a child or adolescent at least five or more years older. Six per cent of the women related such an experience.

In addition to children, young adolescents are also sexually abused, but we needed to distinguish such events from more conventional adolescent sexual experimentation. So a third group included children 13 to 16 who had a sexual experience with an adult at least 10 years older. This group comprised 4% of the women in the sample. Correcting for those who had multiple experiences, almost one in five women had had a sexual experience of one of these three types. (For data on boys, see below. The following paragraphs treat only girls' experiences.)

These girls were victimized primarily by older males within their intimate social network, not by strangers, as "child molesters" have conventionally been stereotyped. This corresponds exactly to conclusions about the sexual abuse problem coming out of clinical experience (Benward and Densen-Gerber, 1975; Burgess et al., 1977; De Francis, 1969; Queen's Bench, 1976; Peters, 1976; Weiss, 1955). Seventy-five per cent of the experiences reported were with older persons known to the child. Forty-four per cent were

with family members, including uncles, grandfathers, brothers-in-law, fathers and brothers. Twenty-two per cent were within the nuclear family, and six per cent were with fathers and stepfathers.

These figures confirm the growing suspicion that sexual victimization of children is very widespread. They also show that it is very much a family problem. If we were to extrapolate on the basis of this data, something we are not really entitled to do, given the limitations of the sample, we would estimate that about 9% of all women are sexually victimized by a relative, and about one and a half per cent are involved in father-daughter sex.

KINDS OF EXPERIENCES

What are we considering a sexual experience here? The experiences included in our tally ranged from intercourse, oral-genital contact, through exhibitionism and fondling. In the most frequent instance, the older partner touched or manipulated the child's genitals or the child touched the partner's. This accounted for 40% of the experiences. Intercourse was rather infrequent. This may surprise some people, but even among cases reported to agencies and cases prosecuted in the courts, intercourse is not the predominant kind of sex act in adult-child sex. Adults who sexually approach girls do not attempt to have intercourse with them in part because it is physiologically difficult with a prepubertal girl, and in part because the offenders in most cases are motivated to seek a kind of childlike form of gratification that is not fulfilled by intercourse (Mohr et al., 1964).

About a fifth of the experiences were with exhibitionists. Some people question whether experiences with exhibitionists are truly sexual abuse. From our survey and from interviews with respondents, we found that the experiences with exhibitionists were among some of the most upsetting. Since the motivation behind exhibitionism is usually to frighten or shock, it often achieves this aim. In this sample, the experiences with exhibitionists often had more of an assaultive nature than many of the more intimate sexual experiences. Thus we feel justified in including them in a tabulation of sexual victimization experiences. For similar reasons, we also included four cases where adults made overt and frightening sexual overtures to young children, but where no further sexual activity took place.

Here are some other features of the childhood sexual victimization experience as it appeared from our survey. The sexual victimization of children seems to differ from rape in that it less often occurs under severe duress and threat of bodily harm. Children are physically weak and gullible and thus similar results can be obtained through

the use of authority, subtle pressure, persuasion or outright misrepresentation. Many of the offenders are relatives whom children are in the habit of trusting and obeying. Nonetheless, 55% of the respondents said that at least some force had been used to gain their compliance. A common kind of coercion was, for example, the threat of doing something awful to the child if she did not cooperate or tried to tell anybody.

There was no doubt that the experiences were considered unpleasant and noxious by the majority of respondents. Sixty-six per cent rated them as negative experiences. Well over a majority said their predominant reaction was fright, and about a quarter registered shock. A small number said they experienced some pleasure or interest. From our interviews, it is clear that such positive reactions, which often relate to feelings of physical stimulation, are not incompatible with a general negative feeling about the whole experience.

Few of the respondents (37% of the girls) told anyone about the experiences at the time they occurred. As interviewees explained it, many feared that they would be blamed themselves for what had happened. Others were afraid of retaliation by the older partner, and did not believe parents or other authorities could adequately defend them. Considering the reactions many of those who told actually received -- parents who went to pieces or who punished the child or who pretended it hadn't happened -- it is hard to fault the children for refusing to tell. Their behavior probably reflected an accurate assessment of the situation.

VICTIMIZATION OF BOYS

One of the main surprises of the study was the large number of men who reported childhood sexual victimization. Nine per cent of the men had had an experience with an older person similar to those we have been describing for women. This is about half the rate for women, and a surprise because, judging only from clinical reports, girl victims would appear to outnumber boys 9 to 1 or worse (De Francis, 1969). Our findings suggest that many more boys are sexually victimized than would appear on the basis of clinical reports alone.

The boys' experiences were somewhat different from girls. They were primarily homosexual, meaning only that, like the girls' experiences, they are mostly with older men. These offenders against boys were mostly known to their victims, as in the case with girls, but they were less often actual family members. Moreover, the boys seemed to be less traumatized by their experiences. And boys were even less likely to tell anyone than girls: only about a quarter did so. This reticence could help explain in part why boys' experiences make up so few of the reported cases.

The boys' experiences did not seem to be more consensual, however. They were almost always initiated by the older person, and force was used as often as in the case with girls. Some clinicians have begun to pay attention to the sexual abuse of boys (Swift, 1977), but obviously much more investigation and consciousness-raising need to take place on this subject.

AGE OF VICTIMS

Another important finding of the study is that children appear to be most vulnerable to victimization prior to puberty. The mean age for girls, for example, was 10.2 years. Even experiences in the 4-6 year old bracket were common in our sample. This seems to contradict the popular idea that it is the arrival of puberty in a girl that sparks the attention of a potential sexual abuser (Schechter and Roberge, 1976). It is our impression that physiological development is less important than two other things in making a child vulnerable to victimization. 1) Children become more vulnerable as they become more independent and are out and about on their own. And 2) children, especially girls, become more vulnerable as they begin to experiment with adult sex role behavior, something that happens well before physiological puberty. Because they are inexperienced, they are unprepared for the reactions their behavior may provoke. This is supported by the fact that victimization seems to decrease after age 12, as children become more skilled in discouraging sexual overtures.

SOURCES OF TRAUMA

The study provides some insight into what things about a childhood sexual experience make it traumatic, and this may be of some use to clinicians working with victims and families. There is a common belief that sexual experiences are more negative if among other things they last longer, if they involve a closer rather than more distantly related partner, or if they involve intercourse and more intimate sexual activity (Groth, 1978; McFarland, 1978). From our respondents reports, however, these factors were of minor importance. Longer experiences were not more negative. Father-daughter incest was the most negative, but on the whole, experiences with strangers were as bad as those with relatives. And as we mentioned before, encounters involving exhibition or fondling were equally as traumatic on the average as ones involving intercourse. One cannot predict how negative an experience was simply from the level of sexual activity.

Only two things were very important in the trauma of the experience. Experiences involving force were much worse than experiences not involving force. And experiences with much older partners were more negative than experiences with younger partners.

The finding about force is important because there is at least one school of thought that says that coercive experiences should be less traumatic than non-coercive ones. The reasoning here goes that experiences are more traumatic when children feel they somehow contributed to their own victimization, that it was their fault. When acts are forced on them, they realize that it was all imposed on them, and they feel less guilt in the long run. The data here suggest this theory is wrong. Coercive experiences are more traumatic not less.

There has been some controversy too, about whether younger or older children fare better in such experiences. Some feel that younger children are protected because they are naive about the meaning of what has occurred. Others feel that, being so young, they are most developmentally vulnerable to trauma. On the basis of our respondents reports, there was little difference. Younger children seemed neither to be more protected by their naivete nor more traumatized by their helplessness.

BACKGROUNDS OF SEXUAL VICTIMS

On the basis of family information collected in our survey, we can draw some conclusions about things that may differentiate children who were victimized from those who were not. For one thing, the victims were more often from lower social class backgrounds. For another, children who grew up on farms were much more likely to have been sexually abused. This appears to confirm an idea, popular in the case study literature, that sexual abuse and incest result from social isolation. There were no religious differences of any importance and few ethnic differences between victims and non-victims. However, curiously, boys from Irish backgrounds had a much higher rate of experiences with older persons who were not family members. The Irish as an ethnic group are characterized by a high degree of sexual repression and sexual segregation (Greeley, 1972). This is evidence that some subcultural factors may play a role in sexual victimization.

Certain features of family background also seemed to increase a child's vulnerability. Girls who had stepfathers had particularly high rates of sexual victimization. But it was not just that stepfathers themselves abused these girls, although this explains part of it. They also were more likely to be victimized by men outside the family. This suggests that the presence of a stepfather either alters the whole environment for a stepdaughter or else raises conflicts in her that promote the possibility of sexual victimization. It coincides with other research that shows that girls with stepfathers are prone to various kinds of life difficulties like divorce and mental disorder (Pope and Mueller, 1976; Langner, 1962).

The study also confirms the idea that mothers are very important in the protection of daughters. Girls who ever lived without their natural mother were three times more vulnerable to sexual abuse than the average girl. If a mother was frequently ill, or was poorly educated, or alcoholic, her daughter was also more likely to be victimized. This suggests that there may be a connection between the oppression of wives and the victimization of their daughters. Such women may be unable to supervise their daughters. They may not adequately educate them about sexual matters. Or perhaps, as victims themselves, they model victim behavior for the child. There may be an important lesson here for the prevention of sexual victimization of girls. Two other factors, large families and unhappy marriages, were also predictive of sexual victimization.

There has been a great deal of speculation about whether the incidence of sexual victimization has been increasing. The number of reports in recent years has increased at such a spectacular rate that many people have felt that we are experiencing an epidemic. The data in this study can give some perspective on this because they can be compared to two studies done over a generation ago, one by Kinsey (1953; Gagnon, 1965) and one by Landis (1956), both on similar populations -- primarily college educated women.

The conclusion appears to be that the absolute incidence of sexual victimization is not increasing. If anything, certain kinds of offenses, particularly exhibitionism, may be decreasing. If we are to account for enormous increase in rates of reported cases, we will have to find some other explanation. Presumably, the climate of attitudes around sexuality has changed enough in recent years that people are now able to talk about this problem where they once could not. Victims are willing to speak out and get help, and professionals are willing to identify cases and take appropriate action.

CONCLUSIONS

There are three conclusions about childhood sexual victimization that I would like to stress on the basis of this research. 1) It is fairly widespread and needs to be incorporated into our image of typical developmental experiences in childhood. 2) It is very much a family problem. Not only are family members the offenders in many instances, but family variables seem intimately connected to whether a child is vulnerable to this kind of experience. This should alert us to pay more attention to the role of sex in family life. 3) Research on this subject is feasible. People will talk about such experiences. Surveys can be done with respectable participation rates. And from the quality of the information provided in this study, I am confident that the reliability and validity of data in such

research can be quite high.

I would point to some areas in immediate need of further investigation. 1) We need to learn more about the sexual victimization of boys. If their experiences are as similar to girls as indicated in this study, it is possible that this whole category of child abuse is being overlooked by child protective workers. 2) We need to look much more thoroughly into how these experiences affect victims in the long run. From personal interviews, it is clear that some seem permanently scarred and others are rather unscathed. The kinds of experiences themselves make a difference in their impact. But many other factors play a role: the natural resiliency of the child, the supportiveness of others in reaction to the experience, whether the child has later corrective sexual experiences, the sexual values of the family and culture within which the child grows up, and so forth.

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