"A burden in your heart": Lessons of disclosure from female preadolescent and adolescent survivors of sexual abuse[☆]

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Abstract

Objectives: To enhance understanding of the sexual abuse disclosure process from the perspective of preteen and teenage survivors. To reconsider prominent models of the disclosure process in light of our findings.

Methods: We conducted a secondary analysis of data from four focus groups in which 34 preadolescent and adolescent female survivors of sexual abuse had been asked about their treatment experiences. Girls often recounted disclosing their victimization to others. Using the *disclosure segment* as our unit of analysis, we isolated 106 for study. During analysis, we wrote narrative summaries of each segment's significance, grouped these conceptually, and examined their interconnectedness. When synthesized, individual experiences of disclosing contributed to understanding the overall disclosure process.

Results: Three phases were identified: *Self*, where children come to understand victimization internally; *Confidant Selection-Reaction*, where they select a time, place, and person to tell and then weather that person's reaction (supportive or hostile); and *Consequences* (good and bad) that continued to inform their on-going strategies of telling. The actions and reactions of adults were significant and informed the girls' decisions.

Conclusions: We advocate integrating existing theories and research into a model which views the disclosure process from the child's perspective and includes pre-disclosure and a post-initial public disclosure stages. The model conceptualizes disclosure as an iterative process in which children interact with adults and incorporate responses into their on-going decisions about telling (recant, deny, affirm, etc.). The combined model should recognize the concerns and position of adults as well as the perspective and logic of youth.
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Introduction

> *I never told anybody except for my friends and so I guess, I mean, I told one of my friends which is my Dad's girlfriend and she's the one who told CPS what happened, so um, my family has been there for me, but some of them would believe me one day and the next day they won't.*

Embedded in this quotation, from a female teenager and survivor of sexual abuse, is evidence of her logic in initially disclosing her abuse and its subsequent consequences. First, in her worldview, telling "*my friends*" was telling no one. Yet, one of those "*friends*" turned out to include an adult, in a parent-like relationship to her who moves the account into the sphere of child protective service responders. With her story out, some family members are supportive but others, it seems to her, have responses that vary by the day. How and why should a child tell her secret in a world of such fickle adults? Why would she stick by the account if it meets such skepticism? What are the benefits and costs of doing so?

For professionals working in the area of child sexual abuse (including police officers, lawyers, protective services workers, judges and social workers) it would be easier if children affirmatively disclosed abuse to a responsible adult in a trustworthy, detailed, consistent, and unwavering fashion (and better still if they could provide corroborating evidence to bolster their credibility). Authorities could assess the credibility of children, punish or treat offenders expediently, and intervene to promote child safety and recovery more effectively.

In the real world, however, the disclosure process is neither so complete nor so linear. Children delay, partially disclose, retract, affirmatively disclose, accidentally disclose, recant, and reaffirm. Furthermore, ostensibly responsible adults can act unpredictably. They can discredit, denounce, challenge, threaten, and disbelieve. In short, the path of disclosure can be bumpy. The net result is that it may be the exception, rather than the rule, that children disclose their abuse in a timely, thorough, and tidy fashion.

For this reason, at least one avenue of sexual abuse research includes investigating the processes of disclosure among children, adolescents, and adults. Researchers and practitioners have studied patterns of disclosure (Faller, in press), including reasons for denial and/or delay (Alaggia, 2004; Berliner & Conte, 1995; Goodman-Brown, 1997; Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Gomez-Schwartz, Horowitz, & Cardarelli, 1990; Kellogg & Huston, 1995; Lyon, 2002; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Sas, Hurley, Austin, & Wolfe, 1991); phases of disclosure (Sas & Cunningham, 1995; Sgroi, 1982; Summit, 1983); the types of disclosure, such as accidental or purposeful (Alaggia, 2004; Berliner & Conte, 1995; Nagel, Putnam, Noll, & Trickett, 1997; Sgroi, 1982; Sorenson & Snow, 1991); the nature of the description including complete, incomplete, partial, and incremental disclosure (Alaggia, 2004; Bidrose & Goodman, 2000; Dubowitz, Black, & Harrington, 1992; Terry, 1991); false negative and false positive disclosures (Chaffin, Lawson, Selby, & Wherry, 1997; Fergusson, Horwood, & Woodward, 2000; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992; Oates et al., 2000; Tully, 2002); the nature and meaning of retracting all or part of the account and the reaffirmation of it; and the factors inhibiting or facilitating disclosure (Berliner & Conte, 1995; DeVoe & Faller, 1999; DiPietro, Runyon, & Fredrickson, 1997; Elliot & Briere, 1994; Everson, Hunter, & Runyan, 1989; Goodman-Brown, 1997; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Gries, Goh, & Cavanaugh, 1996; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Paine, 2000; Sas & Cunningham, 1995).

Several models have been proposed to help make sense of the disclosure process (Paine & Hansen, 2002). Of these, some are stage-based and posit that disclosure must be understood as a process (Sorenson & Snow, 1991; Summit, 1983). Others are theory-based, arguing that disclosure processes

may be understood in light of particular theoretical orientations. Among these are social exchange theory (Leonard, 1996); social-cognitive theory (Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995), and communication management of privacy (Petronio, Flores, & Hecht, 1997; Petronio, Reeder, Hecht, & Ros-Mendoza, 1996).

In a landmark study, Sorenson and Snow (1991) challenged the notion that children disclose incidents of abuse readily and completely at initial investigation. They found that most children, when confronted, denied abuse but later disclosed and that about 20% of their subjects recanted, but the majority reaffirmed. Sorensen and Snow's stage-based model is sympathetic to the phases that children may move through in the process of disclosure. However, it conceptualizes the process from an adult's perspective by considering the spectrum of positions a child might take relative to an incident(s) of abuse (deny, disclose, recant, reaffirm) as it is *heard* by adults.

Others have recognized the child's station as a critical factor in sexual victimization. In his influential 1983 article, Summit argued specifically that children must make accommodations in order to negotiate their position relative to the adult world. He proposed a "simple and logical model" that accepted "the child's position in the complex and controversial dynamics of sexual victimization" (p. 177) called the Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome (CSAAS). Since 1983, CSAAS has undergone extensive critique (Lyon, 2002; Sorenson & Snow, 1991; Summit, 1992). Nonetheless, scientific support for the theory has been identified through the research of others including Sorensen and Snow, particularly the later three stages of CSAAS (Faller, in press; Lyon, 2002).

Leonard (1996) applied social exchange theory to each stage of Summit's model, arguing that individuals pursue "social relationships and interactions in which, based on perceptions of rewards and costs, they get the best payoffs, or the greatest reward for the least cost" (p. 107). Sas and Cunningham (1995) have explored the disclosure process and its characteristics using a cost-benefit analysis by designing a model conceptualized around facilitators and inhibitors of disclosure. In their work "Tipping the balance to tell the secret," they explored these factors and identify four pivotal points: recognizing the abusive behavior was wrong; overcoming the inhibitors to telling and making a disclosure; timing, when and where to tell; and deciding whom to tell (Sas & Cunningham, 1995; Sas et al., 1991).

Similarly, Petronio et al. (1996) examined how children regulate the disclosure discourse, using communication management of privacy theory. Like the social exchange, benefit-cost, or facilitator-inhibitor models, the communication management of privacy theory is structured around the notion that disclosure is regulated by children and adolescents pursuant to access rules that facilitate disclosure and boundary protection rules that inhibit it. Petronio et al. (1996) found that three rules permitted access, including receiving tacit permission from the confidant to proceed, selecting favorable circumstances in which to disclose, and testing the water through incremental disclosure. Rules protecting the privacy boundary and inhibiting disclosure include two criteria: evaluating target characteristics (including distrust, lack of responsiveness, and a perception that the person would not "understand the child's predicament," p. 193) and evaluating anticipated reactions. They found that abused children delayed disclosure when they anticipated undesirable outcomes.

In 1997, Petronio, Fores, and Hecht studied children's selection of confidants to whom to disclose. They found that "for these children, trust features predominately in their calculations. They assess whether a confidant will use the knowledge of abuse in careless ways, fostering gossip" (p. 104). Based on the children's logic, they identified five factors critical: credibility, support, advocacy, strength, and protectiveness. However, the study offers information only on those confidants who are good choices, it does not account for the situation where the child selects someone who turns out to be a bad choice, such as an adult who does not believe the child is telling the truth.

The purpose of this study is to build on what can be learned directly from adolescent survivors. Although Petronio et al. (1997) and Alaggia (2004) employed qualitative methods of inquiry, both studied discrete points in the disclosure process. The former study looked at factors influencing children's selection of a good confidant to tell and the later study at categories of disclosure. Furthermore, Alaggia (2004) used adult survivors who were reflecting on childhood abuse. This study seeks to learn how the entire process of disclosure unfolded for pre-adolescent and adolescent girls. We examine what facilitated and hindered disclosure and what consequences followed from it. In short this study provides a contextual examination of the entire process, closer to the point in time when the abuse and disclosure occurred.

Method

This qualitative project employed a secondary analysis of data originally collected to answer research questions about treatment. Small groups of preadolescent and adolescent girls who had survived sexual abuse served as consultants and were encouraged to share their knowledge about treatment for the benefit of professional practitioners. The results are published elsewhere (Nelson-Gardell, 2001). In this project we returned to the focus group data and asked a new research question, what can we learn from the girls about disclosure?

The original project consisted of four focus groups, each conducted within the context of an ongoing therapy group for girls who had experienced sexual abuse. There were 34 participants altogether. The minimum group size was 5 and the maximum was 10. Sessions were between 60 and 90 minutes long and were audiotaped and later transcribed. Attempts were made to cluster the ages of participants to within 2–3 years. The girls' ages ranged from 10 to 18 with an average age of 13.7 years; 70% were White, 21% were Black, and 9% were of some other race or ethnicity. Fifteen of them had their abuse experience prior to age 12, 13 after age 12, and those data were missing for 6 of the girls. Some girls had one offender, some had multiple offenders. Offenders included biological fathers, stepfathers, mother's live-in paramour, other male relatives, teachers, and strangers. Twelve of the girls had been abused only once or for less than 1 year, 13 for 1 year to more than 2 years, and those data were missing for 9 of the girls. The type of abuse varied, including penetration, fondling, and other sexual activities. Approval for the use of human subjects was obtained from the University of Alabama Institutional Review Board, and pursuant to those guidelines informed consent was obtained from each study participant.

Empirical evidence analysis

The secondary data analysis for this study began with the co-authors together listening to the tapes and reading the transcripts. The tape was stopped frequently and discussion ensued. This process of careful review took considerable time, often several hours for 3–4 pages of transcript. During this process, we became intrigued by the way youth talked about disclosure. Although the original research question asked them what was helpful to their recovery, in discussion the girls frequently acknowledged their abuse, reported experiences of disclosing to others, and spoke of the response of the listener, their feelings, and the impact the abuse and disclosure had had in their lives.

We began to focus exclusively on the segments of text that contained information about disclosure. The unit of analysis for this study was a disclosure segment. Each researcher read through each transcript

and identified segments. To the extent disagreement existed, disputes were about where to bracket a disclosure segment and were resolved through negotiation. In general, we favored broader inclusion of text. We never disagreed about the core text.

Our study sample consisted of 106 disclosure segments. Of these, 24 were from a site in Ft. Meyers, FL; 27 were from Huntsville, AL; 12 were from Pensacola, FL; and 43 were from Springhill, FL. The uneven distribution across groups is understandable, because each focus group had its own conversational flavor, and disclosure segments were the by-product of that conversation. Each disclosure segment was prepared for use with HyperRESEARCH, a qualitative data analysis software program.

There were many false starts in the subsequent analysis. To omit discussion of them would be to deny the essence of the analysis and to fail to trace our progress toward the final product. Analysis started by coding the text using a constant comparative method. As each new code was added, all previously coded segments were re-examined for evidence of the newly emerged theme. Code development began by concentrating on specific words that appeared frequently such as *talk*, *told*, *listen*, *understand*, and *felt*. We also added structural codes, such as to whom the girls disclosed (friend, parent, teacher, etc.). As we examined the list of codes and considered their meanings, it became evident that this was not the most useful method of analysis. Although it had seemed a logical place to start, coding disaggregated the overall messages and lessons. This micro-analysis did a disservice to the stories being told. The power of the girls' overall logic was lost in the process.

Thus, we switched to a more holistic approach of analyzing the empirical evidence. First, we wrote a brief narrative summary of each disclosure segment and recorded it as an annotation to the original data. This process involved summarizing the core idea embodied in each segment and allowed us to consider the complexity and variety of concepts being expressed such as feelings, advice, fears, observations, family disruptions, and institutional interventions. Some categories began to appear particularly relevant. For example, the girls continually drew distinctions between talking to insiders (other abuse survivors) and outsiders (those who had not shared the experience). Another theme had to do with the psychological benefits of disclosing as opposed to keeping the secret. These two thematic categories may be partly explained by the fact that our informants were all members of an ongoing therapy group. Nonetheless, the benefits of talking, in general, and talking to others who had had similar experiences specifically were important to them. Although we could identify these as discrete and unrelated ideas (e.g., insider/outsider, psychological benefits), we still lacked a coherent conceptual framework to report the findings.

Finally we returned to our basic research question: what can we learn from the girls about disclosure? It became clear that we were not only hearing lessons about disclosure as a discrete event but that when we put the accounts together we were hearing about the process itself. We began to map the process and perhaps not surprisingly in hindsight, found that the accounts best fit into a time-ordered conceptual framework. First, girls had to make the decision to disclose by themselves, which meant wrestling with understanding their feelings about the perpetrator(s) and the nature of the experience(s) alone. Second, they had to find a time, place, and person to tell and they had to weather that person's reaction to the disclosure. These reactions were always significant, and girls were confronted with both supportive as well as hostile responses, so they gathered additional information about how to proceed during this period. Finally, they were subjected to a wide range of consequences (both good and bad) in a post-initial disclosure period and continued to gain additional information about the consequences of telling that informed their on-going strategies of telling.

Findings are reported in three major sections: Self Phase, Confidant Selection-Reaction Phase, and Consequences Phase. The Consequences Phase is further subdivided into four aspects: (1) gossiping and news networks, (2) changing relationships, (3) institutional responses and the afterlife of telling, and (4) insider and outsider communities.

Results

"Maybe I can help them, I'm not a shrink or nothing, but a tip or two . . ."
Self Phase: "I didn't say no . . . I must have been saying yes."

The first step of the process of disclosure, particularly the very first public disclosure, is to get comfortable with oneself: "*I would tell them to talk to themselves first, I mean get to understand yourself more before you share things with other people.*" This notion of getting comfortable is particularly difficult when the abuse seems confusing and the girl is attempting to sort through the confusion without the help of others. It can lead to self-doubt as well as delay in telling.

While other researchers have found that variables such as blame, shame, and responsibility factor into children's decision-making process, the girls in our study offer some explanations about the logic behind those feelings, including mixed emotions about both the abuser and the abuse. For example, in discussing what sounds like an assumption of responsibility, this youth situates her feelings of blame or guilt, in her positive regard for her abuser: "*I still feel like, maybe I did like him. I mean, because in a way I felt like I did like him, you know, I did want him to like me, but I didn't mean like this, you know, so afterwards I was like, I led him on.*" In addition to feeling conflicted their personal relationships with the offenders, girls were also confused about their feelings about the physical sensation and the guilt associated with those feelings. For example:

> *You get confused with how far someone's suppose to go especially if it's somebody you trusted, you know, is he meaning to put his hands that far? And it doesn't feel bad, and then you have to wonder wait a minute did I do something wrong. Cause, I, I was wondering to myself you know where, where am I supposed to say stop. Sexual abuse is not always going to feel physically bad but just because of that, it doesn't mean you're saying, please touch me touch me here you know. That's not the case at all and that took me awhile to understand but I'm glad I did because that gives you a real guilty self-conscience, you know you're feeling like, 'God I didn't say no so inside I must have been saying yes,' and that's not the case.*

In this example, she wrestles both with the external process of saying "*no*" but also the internal conflict that failing to externalize or verbalize the "*no*" meant that psychologically she may have be saying "*yes*." Furthermore, although she has absorbed an adult-world message that she is supposed to say "no," that did not help her with the issue of timing when to say "stop."

During this period of isolation, girls acknowledged that delay in disclosure meant that the abuse could continue unimpeded. "*It can happen again, it can happen again, it can happen the day after the day, like, like one day then the next day. It can happen for a long time. And it can go on and on until somebody tells because you can't read people's minds.*" The youth must also come to the realization that the onerous responsibility of telling (and stopping the abuse) rests exclusively on them because adults "*can't read people's minds.*" Of course, until a girl discloses, she is left to wrestle with all these feelings—about the person, the act, and appropriate boundaries—on her own.

This period of isolation is difficult for children, and in hindsight, the girls offer advice to others to disclose *quickly*; however, they also provide some evidence of their logic for delaying:

Moderator: What advice would give to other girls?
    Girl 1: *To tell somebody, I waited for about 3 or 4 weeks.*
Moderator: Tell somebody?
    Girl 1: *Yeah, tell someone quick.*
    Girl 2: *Call 911*
Moderator: Tell somebody quick, it's harder when you don't tell right away?
     Girl: *Yeah.*
    Girl 3: *I already found that.*
Moderator: It's real hard when you wait.
    Girl 3: *Something's on your shoulders. It's like you have like, this like feeling, like, it's there you know. Then like, after you tell someone it just is such a relief. You know? It's not weighing you down anymore. Yeah, when you keep it too long you kind of get the feeling that you don't have tell them. It also feels like it didn't happen.*
    Girl 4: *Yeah, don't try to wipe it out 'cause it just comes back to you and makes it worse. Well like, dreams, I can't sleep or nothing at night you know what I mean? I had like flashbacks and stuff. I'd be scared to sleep at night sometimes.*

Girl 3 offers as explanation for extended delay that you may get the feeling you "*don't have to tell*" or that it "*didn't happen*" at all. However, Girl 4 understands that this type of denial is not sustainable permanently and the experience may come back and haunt them.

Even before disclosure, youth understand intuitively that their story may be more believable with additional evidence, particularly of the kind adults find persuasive. This can include the opinion of experts, or medical evidence, which support their allegations. One girl suggested that therapists provide personal testimonials to parents and vouch for the credibility of the victim. Another noted that her parents did not really believe her until law enforcement authorities supported the claim. In one of the more haunting exchanges captured in our data two girls speak:

Girl 1: *I don't, I don't have no marks that my dad did it, but I, I know he did it to me.*
Girl 2: *You will always have marks.*
Girl 1: *My mom believes me.*

Consider the significance of this exchange. From the child's perspective, physical marks make better and more believable proof for the adult world. But, young survivors know that the emotional marks will be there "*always.*" The act of faith of a mother who "*believes*" even without physical evidence which the child thinks would be useful, suggests the kind of supportive position adults can take. Finally, note the critical importance of Girl 1's starting point that "*I, I know he did it to me.*"

This returns us to our basic point: the girls have to believe and make peace with themselves first, and independently of others. Asked by the group moderator if the most important thing in the process was that others believed them, these girls returned to the fact that even more important was that they believed in themselves:

Girl 1: *Well no because you believe in yourself and you know what happened.*

Girl 2: *You've got to be confident in yourself. Cause you can't make the whole world bring you down just because they don't believe you. Cause life still goes on but you have this burden in your heart, you want them to believe you because it did happen, but on the other hand they don't believe you so you just have to go along with it.*

So this study participant recognizes that she must accommodate the disbelief of adults ("*you just have to go along with it*") even though she carries a "*burden in* her *heart.*" This speaks to the powerlessness of preadolescents and adolescents relative to adults in this process. It is not difficult to imagine that for girls who are less self confident than these a possible, and even reasonable, reaction in an uncertain environment (or state of personal confusion), would be to deny or recant all or part of their account.

Confidant selection-reaction phase: another form of danger: "and the door was wide open"

The decision to tell someone about abuse is fraught with danger for the child. In keeping with existing research, the girls note that the choice of whom to tell is very significant, however, they also reported that the adults whom they selected were not always trustworthy. So they offer the following advice to other children, "*the first person to tell, be sure it's somebody you can talk to. It doesn't have to be like a therapist or even a parent, be sure it is somebody you can talk to. So if you can't tell anybody else, then maybe you can depend on them to help you.*" Furthermore, contained in this advice is an explanation as to why the initial selection is so important. First the child might "*not be able to tell*" anyone else, and second the child "*maybe*" (but not certainly) will be able to "*depend on*" the selected confidant. So the outcome of this step is uncertain and she wavers in her confidence in being able to repeat her account in the future. She seems hopeful that responsibility will be transferred to the adult once she has told. This is quite different from what adults generally expect of children when they demand that children share responsibility by maintaining account consistency throughout lengthy investigations and/or legal proceedings.

In addition to selecting a person to tell, there is also the problem of timing and location. Girls must carve out safe disclosure spaces but this is not always easy to do even if they have selected a person in whom to confide. One of our study participants offers a particularly poignant example of the demons and dilemmas she faced in doing so:

The person who did it to me was my step dad . . . my mom wasn't there or else she would have stopped it automatically. She wouldn't even let it happen. She wasn't there. So whenever she got there, and that's when . . . I told her, he was even in the same house. I mean I was scared that he was going to hear and everything but at that point I didn't care about anything except about telling my mom cause I wanted to get out of the house because, I mean he was in the next room and the door was wide open. He was doing something, I don't remember what it was, and I was just sitting on the couch telling my mom what had happened.

In this case, the girl had the courage to tell her mother even though the perpetrator was "*in the same house*" and, in fact, "*in the next room*" and "*the door was wide open.*" *In the logic of her world, the scale was tipped in favor of telling out of a sense of urgency to the point of wanting to be "out of the house" and not because she felt she had found a safe space to tell.*

Once a child has decided to make a public disclosure, perhaps the most critical and difficult moments involve weathering adults' responses. According to these girls, a substantial number of adults simply do

not believe them or they react angrily. The girls are very clear about how they feel about disbelieving adults, "If they don't believe you that's, that's wrong" and it made them angry:

> *I mean, the whole idea just pisses me off that here I was I couldn't have been like, seven or eight, why would I lie about something like that? I don't see stuff like that on TV, when I was watching Scooby Doo then. Scooby Doo didn't teach me that. You know, I wasn't going to lie about it and I didn't. They didn't believe me, and it was just pathetic.*

Thus, disclosure is not a one-way process. Children receive, process, evaluate, and react to information based on how adults respond to them.

> *Consequences Phase*—"*they deny you, then they start to discredit you, and turn your whole family against you.*"

Gossiping and news networks. According to our preadolescents and adolescents the problem of gossip is serious and pervasive. Even if the child makes a good first choice in her confidant, she may experience a subsequent chain reaction of telling. Once told, an account can take on a life of its own. To a large extent, this means that the child has lost control of her own life story. Its effect on girls and their relationships with others is significant. Consider this disclosure story and the subsequent chain of events, "*I didn't tell my Mom, I told my best friend, and she went and told her mom. Her mom called the police but when the police called my mom she didn't believe me. And my grandmother did not believe me and that wasn't too cool.*" So after the initial private disclosure, the information began to flow on its own and this girl was faced with a surprising and powerful impediment (a disbelieving mother and grandmother). A possible response to this scenario might be to waver in her account or even deny it altogether. Seen in this light, the common question asked about why children recant can be reframed by wondering why they would stick by an account that jeopardizes their relationships with caregivers.

The girls disliked becoming the subject of the gossip among family, friends, and strangers. They argued against being treated "*like you had a disease or something,*" and hated what one called the "*pity act, I hate when people give you the pity act, 'oh did you hear about that girl, she got molested.' You know, that's just pathetic and I appreciate them not treating me weird, afterwards.*" Furthermore, they found that gossip constituted a test of friendship, "*I've had a lot of friends that have known and they haven't jabbered or anything, so they're probably good friends.*" Nonetheless the reaction of classmates, once the buzz is out, can be hurtful and cruel: "*Well when people find out its really upset[ting] because sometimes they'll make fun of you. Sometimes they'll like, they'll make fun of you [and] they'll spread rumors.*" This gossip may be even worse when it is in the hands of family:

> *Um like, when my Mom told my grandma—she never really liked me before—but now she goes around telling everyone I've got sex problems. And like now she told all my neighbors and they're all going around threatening my Mom every time she goes somewhere.*

Changing relationships. There may be no worse situation for a child than when the abuse is within the family and the disclosure results in additional family rift. Children feel the full brunt of that disruption, as well as the divisiveness, within the family and the organized attacks against them: "*Sometimes if you do tell and it gets to another part of your family, they don't believe you and they think,—like if it's their son or their daughter that did it to you—they don't believe you and they say 'oh they didn't do this to you' then they deny you, then they start to discredit you, and turn your own family against you.*" This

girl's interpretation of the consequences of disclosing are pretty damning, first they "*deny you*," then they "*discredit you*," and then they organize the family "*against you*."

Children who are victimized by family members have to deal with a changing array of feelings toward the perpetrator. One girl noted how important it was to talk about "*how they feel about the abuse, what they think of the abuser now. Like if they dislike him or hate him a little*." Presumably, the gradation between "*dislike him*" and "*hate him a little*" has to do with the level of anger. However, children who have been victimized by someone within the family must also deal with grief and loss:

Girl 2: *How to deal with missing somebody that was always there for you. Well at least that's how I feel, I mean I know that's not a lot to it but that's how I feel.*

Moderator: I think probably that is true for lots of people if it was someone that they trusted and cared about all of a sudden that person is not there.

Girl 2: *It's almost like a death.*

Furthermore, adults—even those with good intentions—can thwart attempts of children to try to resolve conflicted feelings about being abused by a trusted adult. For example, one girl wished she could talk to her daddy about the abuse but when she asked her mother if she could "*write him a letter . . . she said no because he'll tell his lawyer*."

Institutional responses and the after-life of telling. Children need not only to deal with family skirmishes and their own sense of loss, grief, and anger in the aftermath of victimization, they may suddenly have to deal with child protective services, school social workers, police officers, lawyers, and judges. This process may involve court appearances and multiple compelled "re-tellings" of the abuse account itself. It is unlikely that most children fully anticipate the subsequent sequence of events before they tell. For example:

> *I told my, I didn't tell my grandma or no one, I told my principal Mr. D. and so he had the officer come over. He had some kind of officer come over and they asked me questions. Then when I got home from the bus, a CPS lady and the same officer was over and my uncle denied it and um my grandma won't visit me. [pause] Still.*

For this youth, the chain reaction after telling her *principal* led to having to deal with the police, a "*CPS lady*," family denial, and family disruption.

Another unintended consequence of first-time disclosures can be child welfare responses that threaten sibling groups, disrupt the child's living situation, and alter schooling arrangements. This girl recounts her history starting with her first disclosure at the age of 6:

> *. . . like when I was six I was being sexually abused by my uncle, and then one day—because my mom, she was never home, right—so then one day when she came home and my uncle was out, I told her. And then, after that they put, um me in foster care and my other sisters and brothers. I've been in like, fourteen or more different foster homes, one after another. It's hard when you switch different schools.*

The girls' experience of the legal system varied. One explained how supported she felt by a police officer who investigated her case, in part, because he found a way to relate her abuse to his own life and family. She struggled to distinguish this positive interaction with a police officer from her general disdain for cops:

> *And I told him and ah, he was there all night pretty much with me and making jokes drawing pictures of me. He drew a witch and he drew and sat with me. I mean he was just, most cops you know, I don't like cops . . .. I don't have trouble with them or anything but he was like different. So I mean I don't like all cops, I'm not saying that but there are ones that are . . .. Well he had couple of daughters at home. And he said he knows that, um, quote unquote he said if anything like that happens to his daughters he'd hang him. You know he says if it was up to him he would, but it's not.*

So this girl felt supported by the officer not because he was able to take affirmative action against the offender but rather because his attitudes and sympathies were with her and she felt supported by him.

Of course with these proceedings come multiple required re-tellings of the account; thus, the disclosure process is no longer in the control of the child but rather is in the hands of adults. One girl, who was facing an upcoming court hearing, wrestled with her limited power, "*We're suppose to, they're gonna try to make me testify, but I don't want to. I'm not saying I'm not.*" She cannot decide whether to think in terms of *we*, *me* or *they*; nor to what extent she must concede control and tell her account when others demand it.

Furthermore, study participants provided information on how professionals, who seek to gain information about the victimization, should relate to the children. For example, girls recommended that the clinical or forensic interviewer, "*tell them about yourself also, don't make them feel like you're the stranger, like a stranger is asking you questions.*" They even urge that the interviewer reach beyond his or her personal abilities, "*make them feel comfortable, enjoy it. If you're funny be funny. If you're not, pretend like you're funny.*" In short, the girls argued that how the adult related to them mattered.

Insider and outsider communities: disclosure process never finished. Following sexual abuse, the child's world gets divided into new communities. One of these bifurcations involves the world of those who have been abused and those who have not. Girls identify a variety of others who have been abused and consequently are easy to talk with, this included best friends, "*Yeah, because we both have been through it and we can talk to each other about it* and *some of them been through kind of similar things, and they kind of understand you more,*" a mother, "*especially my Mom 'cause her own dad did it to her when she was little;*" and a teacher:

> *I had a teacher at my school . . . and she was like date raped and stuff. So she like definitely knows what I'm going through and we just talked about it . . . it's easy to talk to her now. She knows what I'm talking about and she's just not sitting there listening and acting like she knows what I'm saying.*

There was little doubt that these girls found the company of others who had experienced abuse helpful and supportive. In part, the benefits stemmed from learning that they were not alone in their experience, "*what helped me was to hear other things that had happened to other girls.*" So the comfort level among group members, coupled with shared experience, seemed to facilitate understanding: "*You feel more comfortable talking to them. I mean especially if it never happened to you before. You just can't make up something you know. So it's always helpful to have other examples.*" In other words, a child could not "*make up*" the information necessary for support in isolation, they need to hear examples from experienced others in order to situate their own understanding of the abuse.

A second of these bifurcated communities involves the universe of people who know and those who do not. Thus, the child has secrets with some segments of the world but not others. One girl explained that her "*guidance counselor knows*" but her "*teachers don't know.*" Another girl explained the usefulness

of having people in different spheres of her life who "know" and she can trust, "*my mom told my teachers,* [not] *all of them, two, just my third and fourth grader teachers, and then, whenever I need to tell her something my teachers, they always listen to me and I can trust them.*" Thus, the need for safe space necessary for the initial disclosure may also extend to a continued need for safe space in other environments (such as school) later in the recovery process.

This notion that there are communities who know and do not know has life-long implications for the girls. It means they must continue to make "first disclosure" decisions with every new relationship. They will have to face continually the decision who to include in the circle of those who know and whom to exclude. In the end, of course, the girls themselves offer the most eloquent summary of the life-long nature of this process.

> *I mean every one of us is scarred for life. Whether we're successful in the future or not, that memory is always going to be with us . . .. I mean it leaves so much pain and so many mixed emotions inside of you that you . . . can't even explain how much they feel in a life time. I mean it's just so much that goes on that people just don't understand and you can't really express everything that you have to say or feel because a lot of it is still hidden inside of you. I still have a lot of feelings and emotions inside of me that I don't even understand or don't even feel at this point. But as I grow, I mean, they are going to come along. So, I mean it's, it's like a chain reaction. It's never finished, never. Nothing is ever fully brought about or you know, fully explained, I mean, you question a lot as you go through.*

Discussion

Theoretical implications

In this study, using information provided by preadolescents and adolescents and concentrating on the logic they employed, we learned that the process of disclosure must be viewed as a whole (rather than in parts); is ongoing and includes pre-disclosure, disclosure (tentative or complete) and post-disclosure stages; and it involves interactions with others (particularly adults). Based on our empirical evidence, we argue the need to revisit existing models. Specifically, we recommend integrating models from both the stage-based and theoretical perspectives; to situate the model from the child, not adult, perspective: to extend the notion of the disclosure process to include a pre-disclosure stage and post-initial public disclosure consequences stage; and finally to understand disclosure as an interactive process in which children gain additional information from adults which will inform their future decisions as they proceed with their account (recant, denial, affirm, etc.). The combined framework should value the concerns, position, and practical world of adults but also respect the perspective and logic of youth. We propose a three-step framework that utilizes these findings and is consistent with the disclosure process from the preadolescents' and adolescents' perspective: Self, Confidant Selection-Reaction, and Consequences.

This framework focuses attention on two areas that are underdeveloped in the current literature. The first is the pre-disclosure period in which the child must come to understand what is happening or has happened to them. Although much of the current research focuses on the factors influencing the decision to tell or not, our subjects reported being confused at an even earlier stage. This stage involved becoming

self-aware and having confidence in that self-awareness. They did not know at what point to say stop, or whether by not saying no they had consented, or how to handle mixed feelings about the pleasurable sensations or love of the offender. To better understand disclosure, it is critical to investigate these moments of private and personal negotiation. Second, in the later two stages the framework focuses attention on the reaction of the person being told. This is critical because the girls repeatedly reported that adult responses mattered. This is consistent with studies that report children test the waters. More recently Alaggia (2004) found some children attempted disclosure through behavioral manifestations but if the adults did not understand these attempts the child abandoned the efforts. These findings consistently point to the significance of the response the child receives. Yet many of our models focus primarily on the child's actions and do not incorporate the response as a necessary and integral part of any disclosure model.

The three-step proposed framework can be used to integrate existing theoretical models that are both stage-based and theory-based. For example, the theoretical orientations proposed by other writers such as social exchange theory (Leonard, 1996), social-cognitive theory (Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995), and communication management of privacy (Petronio et al., 1997; Petronio et al., 1996) can be folded in along the three-phase continuum. In addition, categories of disclosure such as those identified by Alaggia (2004) can be incorporated as well. Table 1 places the elements of these other models and these disclosure categories within this framework. The primary importance of our framework is that it situates the disclosure process from the perspective of the child, it extends consideration of the process to pre- and post-initial disclosure phases and it recognizes the importance of the response that the child receives to the disclosure.

In short, we argue that models involving disclosure patterns must honor the child's position relative to the adult world and must incorporate the logic that results from that inequitable power position. Second, disclosure must continue to been seen as a process and not an outcome-oriented activity. Third, disclosure models must be expanded to include pre- and post-initial disclosure periods. Fourth, disclosure models

Table 1
Three-phase disclosure process and selected models

	Self phase	Confidant selection-reaction phase	Consequences phase
Summit (1983)	Secrecy, helplessness, entrapment, delay	Retraction	Retraction
Sas and Cunningham (1995)	Recognizing, overcoming	Time/place, selecting other	
Sorenson and Snow (1991)	Denial	Disclosure (tentative or complete) recant, reaffirm	Recant, Reaffirm
Petronio et al. (1997)		Credibility, support, advocate, strength	
Petronio et al. (1996)	Boundary protection	Boundary access	
Bussey and Grimbeek (1995)	Attentional and retention processes	Production and motivational processes	
Leonard (1996)	Social exchange costs	Social exchange benefits	
Alaggia (2004)	Behavioral manifestations, purposefully withholding, triggered disclosures	Purposeful disclosure	

must be seen as interpersonal and interactive which means that children continue to collect information that informs their decision-making process as they proceed. Children's reactions, particularly recanting, retracting, or wavering in the account, must be interpreted in the interactive context of communication and consequences.

Practice implications

There are implications for professional practice, as well. For example, if it is true that children make adjustments in narrating their victimization in light of the cues that they take from adults, then there are implications for practitioners who utilize structured interview protocols to obtain legally persuasive accounts for the purposes of prosecution. While professionals have worried for some time about children's suggestibility, the findings herein point to an equally dangerous alternative. Children may be dissuaded from telling complete, thorough, and linear stories when they encounter adults who appear to be less than sympathetic and supportive.

For example, Petronio et al. (1997) noted that many children choose "confidants who they perceive are able and willing to relay the information to those who could stop the abuse," in short selecting someone "who will be able to accomplish something the children believe they cannot do themselves" (p. 107). In this way "they transfer the responsibility to a person they perceive capable of ending the abuse—an advocate" (p. 107). The girls in our study confirmed that it was important to select confidants carefully so that "*maybe you can depend on them*" because you might not be able to "*tell anyone else*." If some children are attempting to transfer responsibility when they tell, and they take clues from adult responses, then structured interview protocols that attempt to minimize adult responses and reactions may, in fact, discourage thorough disclosure. In this case, the interview protocols, designed to protect adults from fraudulent accusations, might be silencing victims prematurely. Since disclosure is a process, forensic interviewers should allow children more than one opportunity to tell their story, particularly if the child is slow to trust the interviewer. The interviewer's attempt to elicit information may be competing with a variety of other negative consequences that the child has already experienced—within her family and beyond—that influences how she chooses to proceed with her account.

Models such as the extended forensic evaluation model (Carnes, Nelson-Gardell, Wilson, & Orgassa, 2001) offer children more than one opportunity to tell. But these models are far from universally accepted and are often used only in special cases. In many jurisdictions, one interview is the rule. And for many prosecuting attorneys, hesitation or recantation means cases are not pursued. The "process nature" of disclosure needs more universal respect.

Based on this study, we see several additional practice implications. We hope these promote deflecting some burdens of disclosing from children and place them with the adults responsible for protecting them. Practice implications are grouped according to the stages of the disclosure model.

Self phase

Children must be ready to tell about their abuse. Yet they may not provide sufficient information to substantiate it but that does not mean it did not happen. The result can be that children will be returned to abusive situations. It is important to find ways to aid or support them if and when they disclose more thoroughly in the future.

Providing safe space (both emotional and physical) may be critical in encouraging disclosure, particularly if the offender lives with, or has repeated access to, the child.

Confidant selection—reaction

Support and belief from significant others, particularly key family members, may be the difference between telling further or not, and recanting. Thus, collateral work with the non-offending caregiver is crucial. Recent initiatives, like the National Children's Advocacy Center Mother Advocate Program (Carnes & Leslie, 2000) recognize this, but are far from universally accepted or adopted. Non-offending caregivers, siblings, and extended family may all need some treatment or intervention to help them support children who have been sexually victimized.

The way an adult responds to partial disclosures, accidental disclosures, or indirect disclosures may be critical to whether a child will tell further. Thus, when these disclosures (which may be unintended as public disclosures) are made, not only is the initial reaction important but so is the response of adults who subsequently learn of the information and confront the child. Thus, public education as a method of secondary prevention is crucial.

Children who disclose may be attempting to transfer responsibility for the disclosure to an adult, so adults should be sensitive to the burden they place on children when they require them to remain steadfast in their accounts in the face of hostile or volatile reactions.

The characteristics of the confidant are critical to the process of disclosure. Forensic interviewers must establish their trustworthiness before they can expect children to cooperate. It is incumbent on the interviewer, not the child, to create the relationship necessary for the child to proceed. While this is generally recognized, the extent of implementation is unclear, especially when forensic interviewing is done by those lacking specialized training.

Treatment providers must be aware that additional details or new disclosures may emerge. So those who practice with sexually abused children may require training in forensic interviewing techniques in order to deal adequately with the new information (Carnes, personal communication, 2004).

Group treatment may be particularly valuable to child and adolescent survivors because it can provide a secure group of "insiders" who share the experience. Although the use of group treatment is supported in the literature, the availability of specialized group treatment for children is limited.

Consequences phase

Helping children to understand and anticipate the myriad personal and environmental consequences to disclosure may help them regain a sense of control of their own life story and allow them to respond proactively. This should be standard practice in any forensic interview protocol or for any practitioner who is the chosen confidant of a child.

It is critical for adults to recognize the losses that a disclosing child may face and to help them deal with the associated feelings including grief, sadness, and depression. They must recognize the validity of these feelings and provide support during periods of emotional and personal transition even if those feelings conflict with their own reaction to the offender or event(s).

Since disclosure is an on-going and life-long process, it is important to be sensitive to the different kinds of support and treatment children, adolescents, young adults, and adults might need at different life stages.

Research implications

By considering each of these three phases of the disclosure process separately (self, confidant selection-reaction, consequences), existing research can be understood as informing different phases of the model and a new set of research questions can be formulated. For example:

How do children come to understand that they have been victimized? How is this process similar and different for children who are abused by family members and non-family members?

Researchers have asked the question, how do children decide whom to tell, but conversely how do they decide whom *not* to tell? Why do some children by-pass adults generally assumed to be the ones they would start with?

How could/should adults be educated to respond if they hear a child disclose? For example Alaggia (2004) identified "behavioral" types of disclosure. How should this broaden education efforts of adults when the child is in the "self" phase?

What about the flow of information following first disclosure? If it follows an unexpected path that disrupts a child's life, is that child more likely to recant or retract than if the outcomes are as the child expected?

What more can be learned about the disclosure process by talking to children, preadolescents, and adolescents themselves?

It is important to reiterate that our study involved secondary data analysis. We do not contend that our findings represent all of what the girls might have said about disclosure had they been asked directly. Nonetheless, there is something compelling about the notion that even when the disclosure process was *not* the primary focus of investigation, it occupied such a dominant place in the conversations. Limitations to our findings include our inability to member check (checking with the research participants to enhance validity). We could not return to the original groups and ask them to discuss or respond to our analysis. Furthermore, our subjects were all preadolescents and adolescents, all girls, all had disclosed, and all were involved in on-going treatment. Thus, we make no assertion that this is a complete analysis of the disclosure process and all its complications. It is an early discussion, taken from the words of young survivors about the process, and an invitation to revisit our existing models and research findings in search of ways to integrate what we know in order to better understand.

We have highlighted the importance of listening to what youth have to say about the process of sexual abuse disclosure. Children do not delay, tell, recant, and reaffirm accounts of their sexual victimization in a vacuum. As Summit (1983) argued, they accommodate to the adult world. We call for critical review of disclosure models, not only by focusing on the actions and words of children, but also by incorporating the reactions and responses of adults and the consequences for the child, in order to understand better the behavior of children during the extended process of disclosing abuse. Most of the research literature associated with disclosure and forensic interviewing is conceptualized from the perspective of professional adults and is quantitative in method. That work is invaluable. We contend, however, that qualitative methods can add a missing voice to this discussion. In doing so, we can privilege voices of children that might otherwise be drowned out by the adults around them.

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Résumé

French-language abstract not available at time of publication.

Resumen

Spanish-language abstract not available at time of publication.