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Many ways of telling: expanding conceptualizations of child sexual abuse disclosure[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: The aim of this study was to explore influences that inhibit or promote child sexual abuse (CSA) disclosure.

Method: Face-to-face in-depth interviews of 24 female and male survivors of CSA were conducted, using the Long-Interview method to trace disclosure processes. Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed by hand and by using a computerized data analysis system (N*Vivo). The results of this investigation identified several patterns of disclosure. Prolonged engagement, persistent observation, negative case analysis, and peer debriefing were among the techniques used to ensure the trustworthiness of data.

Results: Through analysis of the interview data, previously undefined dimensions of disclosure emerged. First, three frequently used categories of ‘*accidental, purposeful, and prompted/elicited*’ disclosure types accounted for 42% of disclosure patterns in the study sample. However, over half the disclosure patterns described by research participants did not fit these previously established definitions. Results of the study facilitated expanding conceptualization of additional disclosure patterns to include *behavioral and indirect verbal attempts, disclosures intentionally withheld, and disclosures triggered by recovered memories*.

Conclusions: The author concludes that these supplementary definitions integrate complex facets of disclosure derived within the context of human development, memory and environmental influences. This expanded conceptualization provides professionals with a broader framework to understand and respond to child victims and adult survivor’s disclosures more effectively.

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Introduction

A concerning dynamic in the trauma of child sexual abuse (CSA) occurs when the child victim delays or completely withholds disclosure of the abuse. Estimates from studies of non-clinical and clinical populations suggest that between 30% and 80% of victims purposefully do not disclose CSA before adulthood (Arata, 1998; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Smith et al., 2000). The term “disclosure” in itself is fraught with difficulty. It has been argued that the concept of disclosure is fundamentally inadequate because of its general lack of specificity and the enormous variation in the way the term is used (Jones, 2000). This article is based on a study that addresses these definitional problems by presenting expanded ways of defining and conceptualizing disclosure processes. This topic is especially important since child sexual abuse is often difficult to identify, and disclosure by the child may be the only means by which adults have to respond to and stop prolonged victimization.

“A child’s self-disclosure of sexual abuse is a critical component in initiating intervention to halt the abuse, address its immediate effects, and decrease the likelihood of negative long-term outcome.”
(Paine & Hansen, 2002, p. 271)

In reviewing the disclosure literature, it becomes clear that the term is problematic for a number of reasons. Importantly, there is a lack of clarity as to whether the term refers to the act of simply telling someone, or to a more official act of reporting abuse to an authoritative body (Jones, 2000). In addition, the term sometimes has developmental connotations. For instance, the word “disclosure” is more commonly used in reference to a child’s reporting of abuse, while “telling” is more often used when adults share their abuse experiences. As well, disclosure has frequently been treated as a static event rather than being studied as a fluid process. Although Summit (1983) first began to conceptualize disclosure as a process through his proposed stage model, little empirical follow-up has been attempted. This conceptual model also posits that there is a high likelihood of victim’s recanting their allegations. He speculated this would be the result of prevailing societal attitudes that would presuppose that the child’s story fabricated, and that adults were more likely to be believed when the perpetrator denied the allegations. A child’s fears about the potential dissolution of their family, or safety concerns, would also contribute to a child’s recanting.

Following from Summit’s work, subsequent research has elaborated on different stages but when subjected to empirical testing have produced conflicting findings depending on the population studied (Bradley & Wood, 1996; Sorensen & Snow, 1991). Explanatory models, such as social exchange and social cognitive, have been applied to identify conditions influencing disclosure, but most of these have yet to be empirically challenged (Bussy & Grimbeek, 1995; Leonard, 1996).

The broad categories of disclosure frequently used in the literature are limited to: (1) purposeful; (2) accidental; (3) prompted/elicited (Jones, 2000; Mian, Wehrspann, Klajner-Diamond, LaBaron, & Winder, 1986; Sauzier, 1989; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Sorenson & Snow, 1991). Additional descriptors such as rapid, delayed, spontaneous, withheld, intentional, explicit and vague are used somewhat more idiosyncratically and inconsistently (Faller, 1988; Jones, 2000; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Smith et al., 2000).

Accidental disclosures account for a significant number of disclosures and often involve third-party discovery through witnessing or medical examinations. Studies suggest that younger children under the age of 6 are least likely to disclose and that developmental factors may account for young children’s inability to disclose purposefully (Campis, Hebden-Curtis, & Demaso, 1993; Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Nagel, Putnam, Noll, & Trickett,

1996; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Roesler & Wind, 1994; Sorensen & Snow, 1991). For example, Mian and colleagues (1986) found that purposeful disclosures decreased significantly when the child was of preschool age (Mian, Marton, & LeBaron, 1996). Furthermore, Roesler and Wind (1994) discovered three interesting patterns of disclosure relating to age. In a sample of 228 female victims of incest, three groups emerged. The first group was made up of survivors who had told in childhood, most often telling a parent first. The second group was survivors who had told in adulthood, primarily to friends, other family members or partners. The third group was comprised of survivors who told their therapists and generally waited to a later age in adulthood to tell.

Delayed disclosure is also a common occurrence. Investigators who have examined delay between the onset of sexual abuse and disclosure (latency to disclosure), often report a wide range of time between victimization and telling. These studies report a mean delay from 3 to 18 years (Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Oxman-Martinez, Rowe, Straka, & Thibault, 1997). Sixty-four percent of the women in Roesler and Wind's study (1994) did not disclose until adulthood, and Arata (1998) found that almost two-thirds of the women in her sample had not told anyone at the time of the abuse. Smith and colleagues (2000) estimated that close to one half (48%) of victimized girls in their national survey told no one for more than 5 years after the event, and that 28% of the women in that sample had not told anyone of their victimization until the research interview.

Delayed disclosures are also linked to repressed, recovered, or delayed memories (Flathman, 1999; Pope & Brown, 1996). Delayed memory (DM), a term preferred by some researchers (Flathman, 1999), encompasses a range of mechanisms involved in the loss of traumatic memory through repression, psychological blocking and forgetting. There is a growing body of knowledge that shows evidence of repression and forgetting of memories (Fish & Scott, 1999; Herman & Schatzow, 1987). This literature reveals that those childhood memories that are difficult to access are most often associated with trauma where secrecy is an operative dynamic and where the child is relatively powerless compared to the perpetrating adult (Melchert & Lance Parker, 1997). For example, in one study, fully one quarter of the women who reported being sexually abused had forgotten the abuse for a period of time and then remembered on their own (Wilsnack, Wonderlich, Kristjanson, Vogeltanz-Holm, & Wilsnack, 2002). Alpert and colleagues (1995) also concluded that traumatic abuse can be "stored so that access is difficult and only occurs in later life, in response to triggers and cues, or the introduction of a supportive interpersonal environment." (p. 144). These findings are important to the understanding that disclosure processes can be connected to the recovery or remembering of memories in circumstances of DM.

Some research points to multiple factors that may operate in individual situations of disclosure. In addition to age, other variables such as gender, relationship to the perpetrator, and cultural considerations may all play a part in disclosure (Alaggia, 2001; Arata, 1998; Bradley & Wood, 1996; Fontes, 1993; Gartner, 1999; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Nasjleti, 1980; Smith et al., 2000; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990). Boys are less likely to disclose for varied reasons, including the increased risk of stigmatization attached to males admitting to being victimized. The fact that boys are more often abused by males frequently raises associated fears of being labeled homosexual which, in a homophobic society, further prevents them from telling (Faller, 1989; Gartner, 1999; Goodman-Brown et al., 2003; Gries, Goh, & Cavanaugh, 1996; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Reinhart, 1987; Summit, 1983). In addition, sexual exploitation of boys by older women is often mistakenly viewed as desirable, and therefore, their victimization is minimized or denied.

Relationship to the perpetrator is another factor cited for explaining why some child victims do not disclose (Mian et al., 1996). Wyatt and Newcomb (1990) found that the more closely victims are related

to the perpetrator the less likely they are to disclose childhood sexual abuse. When the perpetrator is a significant caregiver, then attachment issues, traumatic bonding, and the child's need to protect the integrity of the family unit are cited as possible explanations for withholding or delaying disclosure (Alexander, 1992; Hindman, 1989; Paine & Hansen, 2002; Summit, 1983).

Certain cultural issues may act as deterrents to disclosure. Disclosure may be inhibited in cultures that hold negative attitudes and taboos about sexuality, and that place a high premium on preservation of the family (Alaggia, 2001; Fontes, 1993; Paine & Hansen, 2002). As well, structural factors such as discrimination, migration, and poverty have been identified as potential deterrents to disclosing CSA (Fontes, 1993). Children who have been marginalized because of discrimination related to race, ethnicity, and poverty, may feel too disempowered to tell about abuse.

Objectives

The broad aims of the current study were to identify influences that inhibit or promote children's disclosure of child sexual abuse. The study objectives were designed to address gaps in knowledge about how, when and under what circumstances victims of CSA disclose, and understand issues that interfere with disclosure. To date, the disclosure literature identifies important factors related to age, gender, relationship to the perpetrator and non-offending parent, yet less is understood about various processes and patterns of disclosure. Specifically, the objectives of the current investigation were examined through the following questions: (1) From the perspective of the victims, what are the psychological tactics used by perpetrators of CSA to suppress disclosure? (2) In what specific ways do these tactics interact to have an impact on the victim's ability to disclose? (3) What individual, familial and environmental influences impact disclosure? These questions seemed best answered by employing an inductive, discovery-oriented approach. Through detailed examination of individual experiences of victims, professionals may improve their understanding of disclosure processes. Qualitative approaches have been recommended for this type of investigation:

“Qualitative studies which are able to track the individual experiences of children and their perception of the influences upon them which led to the disclosure of information are needed in order to complement the picture obtained from [this] very impressive quantitative study of disclosure in the field of childhood rape.” (Jones, 2000, p. 270)

Method

The study employed the Long-Interview method (McCracken, 1988), a qualitative methodology that is well suited to uncovering and describing underlying complex processes. Purposive sampling was implemented to recruit both: (1) women and men; (2) those survivors who disclosed during the time of the abuse and those who withheld. Recruitment occurred through community agencies, two university campuses and word of mouth. The study participants reflected a mixed clinical and non-clinical sample, although the majority had received treatment for their victimization at some point in their lives.

In qualitative investigations, ensuring trustworthiness of the data and transferability of findings are essential for maintaining rigor (Drisko, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 1998). In other words,

detailed descriptions of the sample and data collection methods, checking analysis through peer debriefing with other researchers and practitioners, and extensive memos are undertaken for possible transfer of findings to similar contexts. Reliability issues in the present study issues were also addressed through: (1) credibility that included prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and team analysis of data; (2) dependability through evidence of data generation that included audio-taping, verbatim transcriptions of the interviews, and use of a computerized data analysis system to reduce researcher bias; and (3) confirmability that the findings were grounded in the data by providing quotes as evidence.

Data were generated through intensive interviewing, and the interviews, on average, were two hours long. The interview guide was developed from an extensive review of the literature and input from CSA experts. Areas for exploration included: individual and family history; age of sexual abuse onset, duration, and type; rewards and threats used by the perpetrator; disclosure attempts and outcomes; strategies used by the perpetrator in maintaining secrecy; misperceptions and beliefs developed by the victim or victim's partner; nature and quality of primary/significant relationships in childhood and adolescence; family background and dynamics; and environmental and cultural influences. Approval for the use of human subjects from the ethics review board of the University of Toronto was received prior to recruitment. Participants were explained the study procedures, including risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, provided with the opportunity to ask questions, and then signed consent forms.

All interviews were coded and categorized through line-by-line micro-analysis that was initially conducted by hand, employing an established five-stage procedure wherein the data are scanned, edited, refined and reassembled (McCracken, 1988). Themes were extracted, and interpretations made based on emerging categories of the study data and triangulated with previous literature. In the next stage of analysis, the transcriptions were imported into N*Vivo, a software package commonly utilized in the analysis of qualitative data. This allowed for the use of trained multiple coders, and testing of inter-rater reliability on coding and consistency of category development.

Analyses of the completed narratives of 24 participants revealed themes around types of disclosures. It was at this point that categorical saturation was reached on disclosure patterns. While initial codes for data analysis were based on previous conceptualizations, these were found to be insufficient for labeling the range of disclosure patterns the participants were actually describing. This discovery then led to the development of an expanded framework for disclosure types, primarily for coding the remaining interviews, but also for consideration in clinical work.

Results

Sample description

Participants were 24 adult survivors between the ages of 18 and 65 who were sexually abused by a family member. Almost one third had also been sexually victimized by people outside of their family. Of the participants, 57% were female. The average age of the participants was 41.2 years. Two-thirds had started or obtained post-secondary education, although 25% had difficulty maintaining employment. The average age of onset of abuse was 6.5 years. The vast majority of the male perpetrators were biological fathers, stepfathers, mother's partners and grandfathers. An older sister had sexually abused one male survivor. The sexual abuse included sexual touching, masturbation (made to witness and participate in), oral sex, digital penetration, and vaginal and anal intercourse.

Forty two percent of the participants had disclosed the abuse during childhood, while the remainder (58%) had not disclosed until adulthood. Of the 42% who had disclosed during childhood, only 6 were purposeful disclosures. Of the 58% ($N = 14$) who had not disclosed, half did not disclose either because they had repressed or forgotten the memory, or the abuse had occurred in preschool years and they had difficulty with recall. Thus, this group of participants who recovered the memories in adulthood constituted 29% of the total sample. Seven other participants withheld disclosure intentionally and not as a result of forgotten memories.

Previously established definitions of disclosure

The analyses of these data revealed examples of purposeful, accidental and elicited/prompted disclosures, as defined in previous research, and together these types constituted 42% of disclosures. The most frequent type, based on previous definitions, was purposeful, with 6 participants purposefully disclosing. Examples included the following two participants' experiences: "I told my mom when I was in grade one about our neighbor's daughters, that they were doing things with each other and to me, but it caused a whole lot of ruckus." and "I just described what he did to me one day and she just told me to stay away from him."

Elicited or prompted disclosures have been commonly described as occurring through investigative interviewing, counseling, art, play and talk therapy, and supportive environments. Of interest, in this sample, when disclosures occurred as the result of prompting, these often occurred in adulthood, well after the abuse had happened and often in therapeutic environments, since only two were elicited or prompted during childhood. For example, the following participant disclosed her childhood abuse during an intake interview for an adult outpatient program: "This lady who took my initial interview, intake, she did the intake. After the interview was over, I had disclosed a major part of my abuse."

Disclosures that resulted from accidental discovery through a third-party (e.g., witnessing, medical examinations) again were in the minority. Only two participants reported that their disclosure was precipitated by accidental discovery. "She came in and saw what he was doing to me. She just stopped it, took me out of the room and asked me if it had happened before."

While purposeful, elicited/prompted or accidental disclosures accounted for 10 of the disclosure patterns following categories were developed from the analysis of participant narratives to explain the remaining patterns.

Emergent types of disclosure

Behavioral. This category emerged from narratives of participants depicting the intentional use of non-verbal behavior as children and adolescents to convey a message that something was amiss. These behaviors included clinging, temper tantrums in young children, angry outbursts in adolescents, withdrawal, avoiding being at home and/or running away to alert adults to problems. Participants described behaviors connected to the abuse and their wish to have an adult detect that there was something wrong.

"I remember grade ten through twelve, I would be terrified to go home. I would stay until the doors closed at school and the teachers always wondered why are you staying here so late, why don't you go home? I don't want to go home."

The following example was provided by a participant who hoped her angry outbursts, as a teenager, would be interpreted as something more:

“It was hard, you know, cause there would be days I’d come home all angry and she [mother] would be ‘what’s wrong?’ ‘Like nothing, I’d say.’ ‘Nothing is wrong, don’t worry about it.’ Yeah, I think at one point I didn’t feel resentment to her, but I was like ‘Why aren’t you picking up on you know, maybe I am dropping small hints, my moods?’”

She described these conscious gestures, through her moods, as hints given out about sexual victimization.

As well as non-verbal behavior, in some cases, indirect verbal hints were made in attempting disclosure. These attempts were beyond mere behaviors, yet were not detected as disclosure attempts.

“. . . there were times when we tried to tell my mother or I did, like, leave her little hints . . . Um, I would say something like, oh ‘can you come early tonight’ or ‘do you have to go to work?’ Um, I couldn’t come out and say it.”

This previous statement highlights the complexities and ambiguity of indirect verbal hints. On the one hand, the participant states ‘we tried to tell my mother’ yet concludes his statement by acknowledging that ‘I couldn’t come out and say it.’ Many of these indirect verbal hints could be attributed to a range of childhood problems and adolescent moods, not necessarily related to abuse and trauma. Notably, almost two-thirds (15 participants) of the sample participants reported that their (largely ineffective) strategies had included non-verbal behavioral and indirect verbal hints as ways of telling.

Disclosure intentionally withheld. A group of participants emerged who had intentionally decided to withhold disclosure. This group accounted for almost one-quarter of the sample. Their narratives detailed a conscious process based on their resolve to withhold. This was entirely unrelated to an inability to access memories. Their reasons for not telling included feelings that they would not be believed, self-blame, shame, fear, and not wanting to hurt people’s feelings. The following statements are examples from participants who withheld disclosing well into adulthood:

“I wish I could tell people, like my mom, what happened . . . but I never would tell it to them because I don’t like to hurt them and I have seen them have a lot of hurt and I don’t want to hurt them anymore by burdening them with my stuff.”

“I couldn’t talk about it. There just weren’t any words for it. But the therapist I was with had me doing art therapy. So I was able to actually draw stuff that had happened and get it out that way.”

Their reasons for not telling were so compelling that even to this day some participants felt threatened by their family for disclosing or worried about hurting their family. This is exemplified by the following participant: “I do have the reality that I have death threats from my family for talking about the abuse, and I do have the reality that I could be killed.”

These participants were steadfast in their determination not to disclose. As adults, many had physically moved away from their perpetrator so that distance became a factor in their decision to tell. For example, two women had moved considerable distances, altered their names and had their phone numbers unlisted, before feeling safe enough to disclose.

Perhaps the most striking example of one's determination not to disclose is outright denial of the sexual abuse. Some participants described instances of being asked directly as children about whether they were being sexually victimized. They recounted denying the abuse at the time, even though they were conscious of their victimization. One participant described her denial in this way:

"I was removed from my family because my sister was sexually abused by our father. Even though he had sexually abused me, while I was going through the investigation I never admitted to it. I didn't admit to anything until I was twelve years old [three years later]. Then I began to tell everything to my counselor."

Despite efforts to elicit this participant's victimization, she was determined not to disclose for a host of reasons that included fear of being removed to an unknown situation.

Triggered disclosure. Close to one third (29%) of the participants explained that there was nothing to disclose when they were children because they had no awareness or recall of the sexual abuse. This lack of self-awareness is an important phenomenon that emerged as a theme involving disclosures where recovered or remembered memories were involved. Only when they began recovering their memories in adulthood did they disclose purposefully. This pattern of disclosure was described by participants who had either lost their memory of the abuse, or whose abuse occurred at such a young age that their recall was limited. These survivors described being flooded by memories they did not understand. They were usually not in therapy when these occurred, and only some described a specific event, which triggered flashbacks. Their statements are strikingly similar when they recount this process, as exemplified by two participant transcripts:

"... and it was like just like, one day, I had this huge flashback, and it was like (pause) at the end of one of the most severe incidents and then I remember the last part when I was being cleaned up ..."

"I had been doing a lot of work on myself spiritually, became a Buddhist. I was doing a lot of deep meditation, um, and a lot of work that way. And I just think it was, um, a lot of the memories got unlocked ... The images were 'bang!' and it was just sort of 'What are these images about?' And then it was, well, you're having flashbacks ..."

Events that triggered flashbacks varied. As well as the aforementioned triggers, one woman described watching a baby shampoo commercial which suddenly brought back fragmented memories of being abused while being bathed; another started gaining recall when her foster child disclosed sexual abuse.

Once memories were sufficiently recovered, their disclosure processes were similar in nature to those who had never lost their memories. They described being faced by the same questions, dilemmas, fears and anticipated responses. The main difference, however, was that they were adults and had distance between themselves and their perpetrator. This distance provided a measure of safety and control over their current circumstances. Their powerlessness was also reduced because they were no longer in a dependant relationship with the abuser.

Summary of analysis

The first stages of analyses resulted in [Table 1](#), which represents previously established and defined types of disclosure, as well as those that emerged through the current study.

Table 1
Types of disclosure: established and emergent

Types of disclosure	Description/definition	Previous reference
Purposeful	Intentional disclosure of the sexual abuse through direct verbal means.	Campis et al. (1993); Sorensen and Snow (1991)
Accidental	Third-party detection through witnessing, physical evidence and symptoms, which results in verification of abuse.	Campis et al. (1993); Mian et al. (1986)
Elicited/prompted	Disclosure through investigative interviewing, counseling, art, play or talk therapy, supportive environments.	Keary and Fitzpatrick (1994); Sorensen and Snow (1991)
Behavioral	Victim intentionally attempts to tell through behavior, non-verbal communication, or indirect verbal hints.	Emergent category
Purposefully withheld	Despite opportunities or interventions to disclose, the victim chooses not to tell. Includes false denial.	Emergent category
Triggered	Disclosure precipitated by recall of heretofore forgotten or repressed memories of the sexual abuse.	Emergent category

Although this Table provides a helpful means of viewing how the emerging categories build on previously established definitions, it stops short of integrating this new information. Based on the final stages of analyses, Figure 1 provides an integrated graphic representation of the expanded conceptualization of disclosure.

While it still seemed appropriate to include as a primary category, purposeful disclosure whereby direct or indirect verbal attempts to disclose were made, there was also evidence in the interview data to indicate behavioral attempts to disclose through intentional, non-verbal communication. Thus, a category

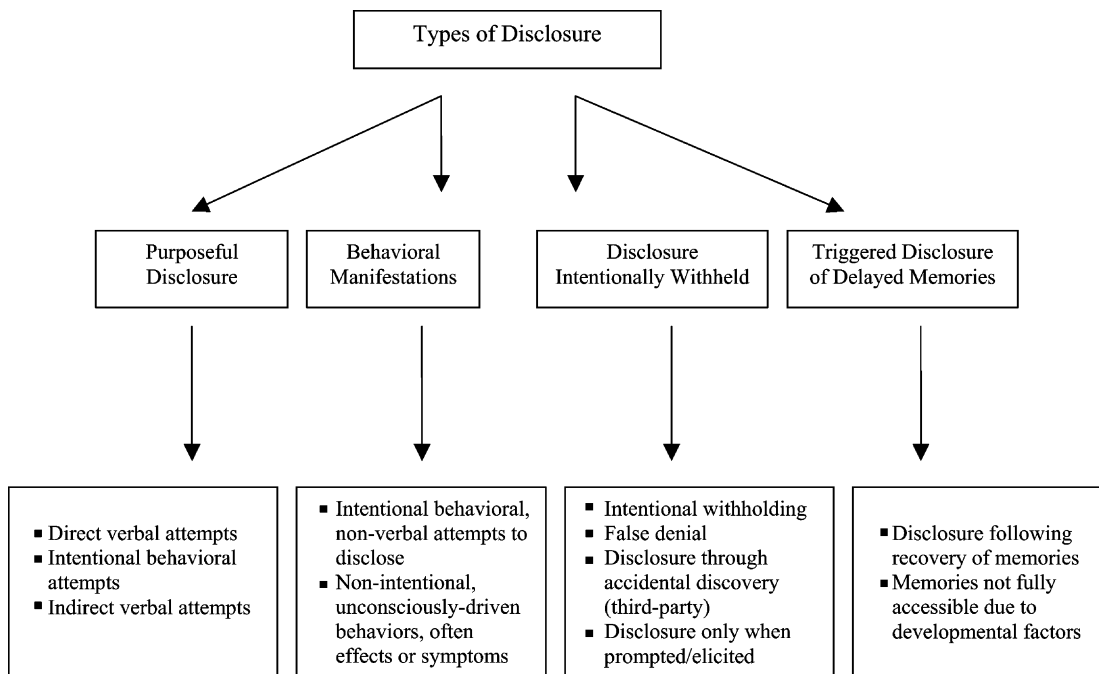


Figure 1. Expanded framework of disclosure types.

of behavioral manifestations was created to capture this type of disclosure attempt. Clearly there is overlap between these two categories but with distinct differences. Both categories imply intent to disclose but the child's strategy to tell is fundamentally different.

The next category to emerge from these data was intentional withholding. Although withholding disclosure is familiar to clinicians and researchers these data illuminate important features connected with this group. This group of victims was fully aware that they were being sexually abused, yet did not want to disclose. They represented about one-quarter of the respondents and among these were a smaller number who denied their victimization even when asked directly (false denials). This group also had the most behavioral manifestations that were not intentional behavioral attempts to disclose, but rather were effects of the abuse (e.g., eating disorders, substance abuse, suicidal gestures). It also seemed appropriate to include accidental discovery in this category because the abuse would never have been verified without third-party intervention (e.g., through a witness or the presence of physical evidence such as a sexually transmitted disease). Disclosures that occurred as the result of prompting or eliciting are also seen as withheld because they would not have disclosed without intervention.

A final category that emerged was those disclosures that were triggered by the recovery of memories. This is an important phenomenon, since nearly one-third of the sample lacked awareness of their sexual victimization and then faced disclosure decisions once they remembered the abuse.

Discussion

These results seem to suggest that victims of CSA disclose in varied and complex ways, which supports earlier research (Devoe & Faller, 1999; Paine & Hansen, 2002). These current study data were helpful in identifying and understanding a wider range of disclosure patterns. In the preliminary stages of this study, it became apparent that the conceptualizations available through previous investigations were insufficient to describe the broad range of themes emerging from the data. The emergent categories noted in [Table 1](#) and [Figure 1](#) embodies complex facets of disclosure derived from contextual factors such as human development, memory and environment.

Although professionals hope for disclosure of child sexual abuse in the earliest phases of victimization, disclosure should be anticipated at any age. Unfortunately, trends still indicate that, at any age, disclosure of child sexual abuse is viewed skeptically and victims suffer negative post-disclosure experiences (Arata, 1998; Berliner & Conte, 1995; Elliot & Briere, 1994; Everill & Waller, 1994; Everson, Hunter, Runyon, Edelsohn, & Coulter, 1989; Henry, 1997; Nagel et al., 1996; Roesler & Wind, 1994). Children are the most vulnerable after disclosing because of their immaturity and relative powerlessness. Even though adults are more likely to have their disclosure received more positively, those who eventually disclose still find that their credibility is questioned because of the long delays (why didn't they tell earlier?) or skepticism that they repressed the trauma (how can they forget something so horrible?).

If purposeful disclosure generally is met with uncertainty, what happens when individuals tell in less clear ways through behavior, fragmented recollections, or later in life, long after the fact? While professionals might find themselves in a better position to provide supportive, therapeutic response, the reality is that many victims of CSA first disclose to family, friends or partners who do not have the training to know how to respond to this information. Thus, professionals can expect to work with children and adults who may have already told various people over time through an investigation, a conversation, or after a prolonged period of silence. By this point, the victim may have experienced a variety of

responses, both supportive and non-supportive. It is important to bear in mind that passage of time does not necessarily mitigate the negative effects of child sexual abuse. Victims who disclose in adulthood should not necessarily be assumed to have worked through some of their victimization simply because of their developmental maturity.

Perhaps the most problematic types of disclosure are behavioral manifestations, whereby the victim does not directly tell about their victimization verbally. Behavioral ways of telling are not limited to young children. As teenagers, some participants described themselves as displaying behaviors (e.g., eating disorders, substance abuse, suicidal gestures) that they hoped would result in someone finding out. An example of this occurred in those victims who were seriously abusing substances in their adolescence. They acknowledged using alcohol and/or drugs to “blank out the abuse” but had also wondered if others would notice that their substance use was out of the norm for teenage experimentation.

In addition, these behaviors were observed by parents and teachers who are perhaps the least likely to be trained to interpret such complex and often subtle cues. Behaviors described by participants might have been attributable to everyday stressors in a child’s or adolescent’s life, so that it would not have been prudent for these adults to jump to conclusions of CSA. However, these behaviors should not be dismissed altogether and need to be considered for detection of abuse, especially if they occur with other possible indicators. Important to note, many of these behaviors described by the study participants are the very ones that sexual abuse predators cite as characteristics which they identify in children who they choose to target for perpetration (Conte, Wolfe, & Smith, 1989).

Types of disclosure attempts are not necessarily mutually exclusive. These data indicate that non-verbal behavioral ways of telling preceded purposeful disclosures in a small number of the cases. As well, accidental discovery or prompts that precipitate clear disclosure can be tentatively viewed as lying on a continuum, again suggesting that categories are not mutually exclusive, and warrant further conceptual elaboration.

Developmental issues and memory noticeably intersect in disclosure patterns. Recall was affected by age for some respondents, which limited their ability to access the abuse event. Delayed memories also figured prominently as a theme in the narratives of the study participants. In this sample, participants reported repression of memories, forgetting and discontinuous memories, phenomena described in previous investigations. Indeed, the forgetting of abuse is a common occurrence even when the onset of abuse is not limited to the preschool years (Fish & Scott, 1999; Flathman, 1999; Herman & Schatzow, 1987; Pope & Brown, 1996; van der Kolk, 1996; Williams, 1994). For example, in Williams (1994) prospective study, 38% of women with documented CSA did not tell about it when interviewed as adults. Childhood memories are often difficult to access whether unpleasant or not, and especially when secrecy is imposed by an older person (Melchert & Lance Parker, 1997). However, when these memories are remembered or recovered, this can precipitate processes of disclosure that follow similar trajectories to those of victims who never lose their memories, forget or deny the abuse.

Limitations

The greatest constraint of this study lies in its retrospective design. Asking people to recount events that occurred in childhood is susceptible to memory failure, especially when memories were forgotten, delayed or repressed and later recovered. Distortion and revision of events are also potential problems in recall. Interviewing children under the age of 18 is also problematic for the obvious ethical reasons, in addition to a child’s inability to articulate complex processes.

Corroborating the sexual abuse through other sources was not possible in a study of this nature. This was due, in large part, to the relatively older subjects and the fact that very few participants had ever had their sexual abuse investigated by child protection workers. In the few cases where the participant did report that there was child welfare involvement or criminal charges, attempts were not made to access the corroborating documentation. Future investigation might focus on younger victims (still over the age of 18) whose sexual abuse was investigated by police or child welfare authorities and where files would be available.

Recanting disclosures was not specifically probed, and none of the participants mentioned recanting their disclosure, although there would have been opportunity to bring this up in the interviews. The lack of recanting experiences may have been because the majority of the participants did not go through a formal child welfare or police investigation. As well, over half disclosed as adults when they would be less likely to be influenced by pressures to retract their allegations and were generally not as fearful. In future research, it would be important to include a larger, younger group who may have been more likely to have gone through a formal investigation wherein recantation might be more likely.

Gender analysis was attempted but preliminary findings indicated that saturation (the concept of sampling in qualitative investigations that no more new information is coming forward) had not been reached, and that it would be unwise to rush to premature conclusions. As data collection continues the investigator will be attempting to match males and females on certain variables, such as age, ethnicity and type of abuse, in order to enhance the analysis.

Finally, purposive sampling in this study focused on participants who were initially abused by a family member. This group of sexual abuse survivors generally would have more difficulty disclosing because of the more complicated implications for their family and themselves. A study comparing disclosures by victims of intra-familial abuse only and extra-familial abuse only would be useful in discerning any differences.

Conclusion

Understanding the processes by which victims of CSA disclose continues to remain multifaceted. Notwithstanding limitations of the current study, research participant narratives have a lot to offer towards understanding disclosure experiences. Building on previous findings, these results provide a broader appreciation of the complex processes, and various ways that victims of CSA attempt to tell and fully disclose. Regardless of whether disclosure happens in childhood, adolescence or adulthood, this is a momentous act. In the domain of therapy, it is important to elicit historical events, previous attempts to tell, responses following disclosure, and consequences of telling (positive and negative). On a larger scale, the many ways of disclosing need to be disseminated to all professionals working with children to assure early detection, prevention and sensitive responses.

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Résumé

Objectif: Cette étude a eu pour but d'explorer les influences qui ont un effet inhibiteur ou facilitateur sur la révélation d'abus sexuel (CSA) envers un enfant.

Méthode: Des entretiens en face-à-face approfondis ont été réalisés auprès de 24 hommes et femmes qui avaient survécu à des abus sexuels. La méthode de l'interview prolongé a été utilisée pour retracer le processus de la révélation. On a analysé à la main les transcriptions mot-à-mot des entretiens ainsi qu'à l'aide d'un système d'analyse de données traitées électroniquement (n* Vivo). Les résultats de cette recherche ont permis d'identifier plusieurs modèles de révélation. La longueur du rendez-vous, celle de l'observation, l'analyse d'un cas négatif, ainsi que des séances de verbalisation en groupe comptent parmi les techniques utilisées pour s'assurer de la crédibilité des données.

Résultats: Grâce à l'analyse des données des entretiens, des dimensions mal définies de la révélation sont apparues. D'abord, trois catégories fréquemment utilisées: comme "révélation accidentelle, intentionnelle et suggérée/arrachée" concernaient 42% des types de révélation dans l'échantillon de l'étude. Or près de la moitié des méthodes décrites par les participants de la recherche ne rentraient pas dans ces définitions préétablies. Les résultats de l'étude ont permis d'étendre la notion à des modèles supplémentaires de révélation et d'inclure "tentatives de s'exprimer par des moyens comportementaux et verbaux indirects, révélation volontairement retenue, et révélations provoquées par des souvenirs retrouvés."

Conclusions: L'auteur conclut que ces définitions supplémentaires permettent d'intégrer des facettes de la révélation issues du contexte du développement humain, de la mémoire et des influences liées à l'environnement. Cette conceptualisation élargie fournit aux professionnels un cadre plus vaste leur permettant de mieux comprendre et de réagir aux révélations des enfants victimes et des adultes survivants de façon plus efficace.

Resumen

Objetivo: El objetivo fue explorar las influencias que inhiben o promueven la revelación del abuso sexual infantil (ASI).

Método: Se llevaron a cabo entrevistas personales en profundidad a 24 mujeres y varones víctimas de ASI utilizando el método Long-Interview para seguir la pista de los procesos de revelación. Las transcripciones Verbatim de las entrevistas fueron analizadas a mano y utilizando un sistema informatizado de análisis de datos (n*Vivo). Los resultados de esta investigación identificaron varios patrones de revelación. La implicación prolongada, la observación persistente, el análisis negativo del caso y la toma de informe por "iguales" fueron algunas de las técnicas utilizadas para asegurar la confiabilidad de los datos.

Resultados: A través del análisis de los datos de las entrevistas aparecieron dimensiones de revelación del ASI previamente no definidas. Las tres categorías frecuentemente utilizadas para los diferentes tipos de revelación (accidental, intencionada y provocada) dieron cuenta del 42% de los casos de esta muestra. Sin embargo, más de la mitad de los patrones de revelación descritos por los participantes de la investigación no coincidieron con las definiciones previamente establecidas. Los resultados del estudio facilitaron una conceptualización ampliada de nuevos patrones de revelación que incluían "intentos conductuales y verbales," "revelaciones intencionalmente retenidas" y "revelaciones provocadas por la recuperación de un recuerdo."

Conclusiones: El autor concluye que estas definiciones suplementarias integran complejas facetas de la revelación derivadas del contexto del desarrollo humano, la memoria y las influencias ambientales. Esta conceptualización ampliada proporciona a los profesionales un marco de trabajo más amplio para entender y responder más efectivamente ante las revelaciones de los niños y los adultos víctimas de ASI.