

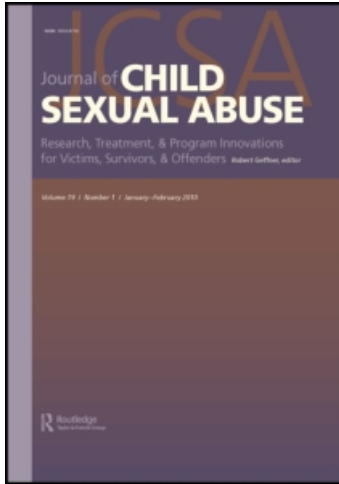
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## Cultural Issues in Disclosures of Child Sexual Abuse

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## CULTURAL AND DISCLOSURE ISSUES

# Cultural Issues in Disclosures of Child Sexual Abuse

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*Cultural norms affect the likelihood that child sexual abuse will be discovered by an adult or disclosed by a child. Cultural norms also affect whether abused children's families will report child sexual abuse to authorities. This article explores the ways ethnic and religious culture affect child sexual abuse disclosure and reporting, both in the United States and internationally. Guidelines for culturally sensitive child abuse interviewing are provided to facilitate disclosures of abuse from culturally diverse children in formal settings.*

**KEYWORDS** *child sexual abuse, disclosure, culture, cultural competence, interviewing, forensic interviewing, multicultural, international*

Disclosure of child sexual abuse (CSA) is complicated, often delayed, and has implications for long-term recovery from the effects of abuse. CSA is found in most cultures and is almost uniformly shrouded in secrecy and silence. The process and outcomes of disclosures of CSA vary greatly by culture as well as by the child's age, gender, and other variables. This article explores cultural issues in the disclosure of CSA and culturally competent

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ways to facilitate disclosures. We begin by establishing disclosures as a subset of discovery of CSA, which can also take other forms. Next, we briefly review what is known about disclosures of CSA in general. While these studies have informed our practice work, they often fail to untangle cultural variation in disclosures. We then examine the ways culture plays a significant role in issues of CSA disclosure and reporting, looking at both United States and international examples. Finally, we provide guidelines for culturally sensitive interviewing for CSA, based on both the available data and our clinical experience.<sup>1</sup>

### DISCOVERY OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

CSA is revealed in many ways, only one of which is direct disclosure by child victims to an adult when seeking protection or help. CSA often does not come to light because of a child's disclosure about it but rather through multiple other routes that lead to discovery. For instance, children may drop hints to parents or teachers that they hope will alert them to something unpleasant ("I don't like that babysitter" or "I couldn't sleep last night"). An adult may catch a glimpse of an inappropriate action that may not be obvious abuse but rather, more likely, appears to be only "odd" or suspicious behavior. Another child or adult may accidentally mention something that alerts an adult or at least creates suspicion. A parent may notice a child's bloody or otherwise suspiciously stained underwear when doing laundry. A note or diary may be found. Children may show signs of physical trauma through difficulty walking or chronic sore throats, or they may present with unexplained somatic complaints such as repeated head- or stomachaches. Children may present at the emergency room with genital damage, a sexually transmitted disease (STD), or even pregnancy. From our clinical experience, family members most commonly sense that something "is not right" and notice a certain amount of secrecy but cannot put their finger on what's wrong.

As noted by Tishelman, Meyer, Haney, and McLeod (this issue), few studies examine paths to discovery other than disclosure. In one study (Plummer, 2006), almost half of mothers of sexually abused children ( $N = 125$ ) had a feeling that something was amiss before there was any clear evidence of sexual abuse. These mothers (66% White,<sup>2</sup> 22% African American, 12% biracial) reported taking a total of 301 actions in an attempt to make sense of their vague suspicions. Actions taken included talking with friends or family, seeking more information about abuse, watching the child more carefully, addressing the suspected perpetrator, and talking with the child. This informal response, prior to any official systems intervention, illustrates that in coming to learn of sexual abuse and in considering actions to take once it is suspected, families make decisions both within and outside

formal structures. These mothers first came to learn of abuse from a variety of sources: the child's statement (42%), a professional (15%) and a nonprofessional (generally friend or family; 13%), seeing something (6%), and a doctor's report, abuser confession, or other sources (9%). Fifteen percent of these mothers stated they first learned of the abuse through their child's behavior. When asked to list all of the types of evidence that increased their confidence that abuse had occurred, the mothers in this study stated they were most convinced by the following evidence: child's disclosure (74%), child's behavior (66%), and child's emotional reactions (60%). While many factors increased maternal *uncertainty* about whether CSA had occurred, 33% of the mothers mentioned denial by the suspected abuser as especially influential. One-third of the suspecting mothers confronted the suspected abuser, who denied the abuse or constructed an alternative explanation that alleviated the mothers' suspicions.

How key adults believe they would recognize CSA influences what actions, if any, they will take to intervene. When asked about how a person could detect sexual abuse, African American and Latina women in one study discussed observing a child's behavior as the most likely way to detect CSA, such as seeing a child acting withdrawn or crying a lot (Fontes, Cruz, & Tabachnik, 2000, 2001). In the same study, African American and Latino men responded differently, talking about irregularities in the suspected offender (such as "walking funny" or "always hanging around kids"). They also described behaviors that they considered suspicious, such as a man "always trying to pull children onto his lap and give them rides and stuff." Interestingly, neither the men nor the women in this study mentioned the possibility that children might respond to sexual abuse with aggression or other acting out behaviors. The first step toward discovery, for professionals and caregivers, is the willingness to notice, receive, and act on indications of CSA that may be indirect and not immediately clear.

## DISCLOSURE OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Disclosure by the victim is one significant way incidents of CSA are discovered, yet disclosure is often delayed and many children keep abuse secret into adulthood (Alaggia, 2004; London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005; Smith et al., 2000). In fact, the majority of sexually abused children do not reveal sexual abuse during childhood (London et al., 2005). Often, the child is "groomed" to become accustomed to an escalating set of events that progress from "innocent" touch to serious abuse incidents (Salter, 1995). By the time the child is experiencing severe abuse, several things may have occurred: the child may feel responsible or feel guilty for not telling sooner and the child may become inappropriately acclimated to the abuse as a normal life event and may even enjoy certain aspects of the relationship with the offender and

thus take steps to protect the offender. Children are also frequently threatened not to tell (Salter, 1995). Active disclosure in childhood results in more violent abuse for some children (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004). Furthermore, 20% to 50% of children may be initially asymptomatic, making detection even more difficult (Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993). All of these factors can be reinforced or influenced by cultural mores.

Children often grapple with whether to tell, whom to tell, what to tell, and when to disclose so as to obtain protection while minimizing negative outcomes for themselves and their families. Children frequently experience disbelief, confusion, and unreality as they try to understand the trauma they have suffered in a context in which their lives continue as if nothing has happened. Children may not have the linguistic or cognitive abilities to understand completely what has happened, or the offender may have deliberately provoked confusion, and so children often dismiss the early incidents as “a dream,” “a nightmare,” or just their imagination and therefore are hesitant to disclose (Everson, 1997). Rarely does a child simply make a straightforward report after the first incident of abuse (Alaggia, 2004).

Even when they are interviewed in the best of circumstances by well-trained personnel, children who have been abused often resist disclosing. Lawson and Chaffin (1992) found that 57% of the interviewed children in their sample ( $N = 28$ ) denied abuse initially in cases that were later confirmed through diagnosis of a STD. The authors found disclosure rates to be 3.5 times greater when the nonoffending caretaker accepted the possibility of abuse. And yet, as we discuss, the costs of disclosing to both children and their families may seem to offset its possible benefit as children and nonoffending family members consider their options.

The act of disclosing does not necessarily result in increased safety for a child. Children who disclose to their pets or other children, for example, may experience some catharsis but are not likely to obtain meaningful protection. Adults who receive disclosures are often unprepared to respond appropriately because of lack of information, fear, and their own emotional reactions. Even when adults listen to a disclosure, they may respond in ways that upset the child or contribute to a retraction of the report, or they may misinterpret the situation by either exaggerating or minimizing its significance (Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Mossige, Reichelt & Tjersland, 2005; Staller & Nelson-Gardell, 2005). If the person to whom a child discloses then confronts the abuser and the abuser successfully defends himself or herself against the accusations, this often results in both punishment and increased suffering for the child, who has learned that—indeed—he or she will not be believed. (Offenders will often admonish children that if they tell what has happened, they will not be believed.)

Children who try to disclose are often punished for “lying.” Here is a rather typical description by a mother of her reaction when her teen daughter accused her stepfather of making a sexual pass toward her: “I discounted

her accusations at the time due to Roger's anger and claim she was lying. He compared it to her track record with running away, suicide attempts, and substance abuse" (C. Plummer, unpublished clinical experience).

Children who try to disclose may be instructed to avoid falling victim again through inadequate suggestions such as "Never sit on your uncle's lap" or "Make sure you wear panties when you go to sleep at night." While these kinds of suggestions may be well-intentioned, they fail to take into account the power differential between the abuser and the child, and they leave the child feeling inadequate for being unable to fend off the abuser. Children who disclose may be sent to live with relatives in another city, leaving the offender home with other potential victims and leaving the victim to feel as if he or she is being banished. In this way, a child learns to stop talking about the abuse.

In the next section, we will explore how a victim's ethnic culture affects his or her disclosure process. We base this discussion on the published literature and on our own clinical and research experience.

#### DISCLOSURES OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

Hanson and colleagues (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of articles about adolescent sexual assault reporting and noted that while methodological and definitional differences among studies make comparisons hard to interpret, some factors seem to affect disclosures. In particular, they note that victim age, the relationship between the victim and perpetrator, and the victim's use of substances at the time of the assault all influence disclosures. The picture they paint of cultural influences is less clear; some researchers found significant differences, whereas others did not. For example, Katerndahl, Burge, Kellogg, and Parra (2005) found more of a correlation between acculturation level and reporting of CSA than with ethnicity itself and reporting. In examining specific groups more carefully, differences in how the abuse happened and how secrecy is maintained were revealed. Some studies show that Hispanic victims may be more likely to live with their perpetrator (Rao, DiClemente, & Ponton, 1992) or to be abused by a parental figure (Feiring, Coates, & Taska, 2001) than are non-Hispanic Whites or African Americans. In a study comparing Hispanic and African-American families, 159 girls and their parents were surveyed. Hispanic girls experienced more abuse incidents, waited longer to disclose, and were also significantly more likely to be abused by fathers and stepfathers than were African-American girls (Shaw, Lewis, Loeb, Rosado, & Rodriguez, 2001). Apparent differences in ethnicity or culture in reporting, therefore, may be more related to differences in these abuse characteristics among groups than to cultural differences per se.

Even as the literature remains underdeveloped in the area of culture and disclosures, our own research and clinical work leads us to believe strongly that cultural values and families' position within society impact the likelihood of disclosure and also impact the steps professionals need to take to support disclosures. The decision to disclose or report CSA is not a solitary, individual decision. These decisions are made in social contexts (see Cromer & Goldsmith, *in press*, for a discussion of the relationship of societal myths and child disclosures). Children and their families are influenced by the awareness that others—both within and beyond their culture and social networks—are watching, judging, encouraging, and demanding certain responses.

### Cultural Values Impacting Disclosure

No culture is defined solely by one value, nor is any particular value held by one culture exclusively. However, understanding values that are often held closely by people in a specific culture can enhance our ability to overcome barriers to the disclosure of CSA among families within that culture. Discussion of the values that support or stifle disclosures is largely speculative; this has not been widely studied. Certain issues that present differently and are weighted heavily in various cultures may silence disclosures of CSA. These issues include shame; taboos and modesty; sexual scripts; virginity; women's status; obligatory violence; honor, respect, and patriarchy; and others.

#### SHAME

Fontes (2005) discussed the centrality of shame in many cultures and the ways in which shame can inhibit disclosures of CSA. This is particularly important because shame also may be a strong predictor of postabuse adjustment (Feiring, Taska, & Lewis, 2002). Many aspects of sexual abuse can contribute to feelings of shame, including the topic, the involvement of the authorities, and the possible perceptions of neighbors and friends. Religious taboos around sex can inhibit disclosures, as children try to refer to something that's happening "down there" without using prohibited words. Children are also often inadequately educated about both their bodies and appropriate sexuality. Children may feel shame about coerced involvement in specific acts, such as sexual interaction with a person of the same sex or being sexually penetrated with objects. Offenders often take advantage of children's feelings of shame to enforce silence by making children break rules (e.g., by imbibing alcohol, going to a prohibited place, or posing for pornographic photographs) and then telling children they will "get in trouble" if they disclose (Fontes, 2007).

## TABOOS AND MODESTY

It is difficult for children to disclose in a cultural environment that suppresses discussion of sexuality. One Puerto Rican psychotherapist described sex education in Puerto Rican families as, “*Chiton! De eso no se habla!*” (Hush! We don’t speak about that!). Elena, who grew up in a fundamental Christian family and community in Puerto Rico, describes the way her abusive father maintained her silence about the abuse, which began when she was 9 and progressed to full intercourse when she was 12. Elena would occasionally flee to neighbors’ houses when her father’s sexual demands became overwhelming. Her father would inevitably find her and beat her in front of her mother and neighbors, contributing to the general perception that she was a “bad girl”:

At first he would tell me, “This is something that happens between fathers and their daughters, and mothers and sons. But we can’t speak about it.” And since there were constantly so many taboos, and every time a question was asked, “That cannot be spoken about here.” At first I thought that was what was going on. Then later I would say, “It hurts! It’s hurting me!” And when I started with actions and pushing him and trying to run away and so on, that’s when he started with, “I’m going to kill you. If you speak up and say something I’m going to kill you.” (Fontes, 1993, p. 32)

After years of abuse, Elena disclosed in a sex education class at school at age 15. The teacher was the first person she had met who seemed comfortable talking about sex. Elena’s disclosure did result in subsequent protection, perhaps because she managed to disclose in a public way. However, rather than being legally prosecuted, the father was sent to live with relatives in the mainland United States.

The values of *haya* (modesty) and *sharam* (shame/embarrassment) in Arab cultures (Gilligan & Akhtar, 2006) and *pudor* (shame, modesty) in Spanish silence both sex education and disclosures. A girl in India described being told she was “a dirty girl with a vivid imagination” who was lying when she told her mother that her neighbor had taken her into a park and “done something to her” (Gupta & Ailawadi, 2005, p. 180). One Puerto Rican girl, Yanira, tried to disclose to her mother that her uncle was sexually abusing her. Her mother slapped her across the face and said, “Where are you going to go if not to heaven? What if God catches you speaking—or even thinking! And what are you saying? If it occurs to you to say that your uncle touched you, watch out!” (Fontes, 1993, p. 32). In this way, the girl learned that speaking about sexual abuse was taboo. Her mother’s response was an enactment of the common Spanish phrase, *De eso no se habla* (“One doesn’t speak about that”). Yanira learned to suffer the abuse in silence, and her plea for help was ignored.



## SEXUAL SCRIPTS

Culturally supported sexual scripts can make disclosures more difficult. Most cultures traditionally see sexual interaction as a male–female struggle in which he should always want it and she should try to avoid it, at least outside of marriage. Cáceres (2005) described how these ideas present themselves in Peru: “All ‘normal’ men but no ‘decent’ women willingly engage in heterosexual activity” (p. 127). This gender struggle model of sexuality can make situations where males prey on younger females seem normal. One psychotherapist described the gender struggle model of sexuality among traditional Puerto Rican families in stark terms:

They teach their children to have the most traditional attitudes; they educate them to be enemies. The girls have to keep their legs closed, because the boys are raised so that if the girls open them, they’re going to take advantage of it. . . . The education that they get is that if you expose yourself you’re going to suffer because [boys and men] cannot control themselves. (Fontes, 1992)

In a psychoeducational group for low-income Puerto Rican parents, when asked about differences in raising boys and girls the major difference stressed by participants was the need to educate girls from a young age to keep their legs closed, hide their bodies, and avoid arousing men. If a girl is abused in a culture that follows these gender battle sexual scripts, it may be seen as the girl’s fault for having tempted a man by dressing or acting in a certain way. Additionally, the girl’s caretakers may be faulted for having failed to adequately keep the girl safe (Cáceres, 2005). The boy or man in question is seen as having done what boys or men will do.

This view of sex as a gendered battlefield also makes it difficult for boys to disclose sexual abuse by women, since such a disclosure would seem to imply that the boy is less manly than he should be for not wanting the sexual act with the older female. A study documented the way boys in Mexico City reframed their discussions of sexual assault by older women to make themselves sound more powerful and active in the interaction (Marston, 2005). After describing the older women engaging in such assaultive and coercive behaviors as rubbing the boys’ legs, grabbing their genitals, exposing themselves, and taunting the boys as possibly gay for their lack of interest, the boys described acquiescing and then used language to make it seem as if they were “in control and enjoying the activity” (p. 290).

Sexual scripts can also make it difficult for boys to disclose sexual abuse by men, because such an admission requires “confessing” to having been victimized, which is a blow to their masculine image. In a variety of cultures, boys who have been abused sexually by men are suspected of being gay, which is a highly stigmatized identity for a boy to assume. This silencing of

male victims, based on cultural norms for masculinity, is one reason for significant underreporting of male victims (Cermak & Molidor, 1996). We need to examine cultural differences in male/female socialization to distinguish factors that may differentially impact boys and girls in any given community.

The gendered expectation that once they are aroused men cannot control their sexual impulses may lead to a discourse that explains and permits sexual assault. For instance, Cambodian young men explained their group sexual assaults of girls, called *bauk*, by referring to themselves as being “blindly stricken with passion” (Wilkinson, Bearup, & Soprach, 2005, p. 164). It is not hard to understand, then, that when girls are sexually assaulted they might feel that they had been in some way responsible for the abuse because they had provoked such a response in men. One South African girl described hiding her body even from family members: “When my father, my uncle, or my brother is there I don’t wear [tight trousers] because if they rape me, I can’t blame them” (Jewkes, Penn-Kekanna, Rose-Junius, 2005). If they cannot blame their male assailants, girls blame themselves and therefore do not disclose.

## VIRGINITY

The emphasis on a girl’s virginity and the shame around “losing it” can create great barriers to disclosure for girls and may make it difficult for parents to seek professional help for their daughters’ abuse. As noted by Newton and Vandeven (in press), girls may be seen as less valuable as brides because of their abuse. When knowledge that a 12-year-old girl had been sexually assaulted became public in one Puerto Rican community in the United States, the girl learned quickly that she had been ruined: “All her life from then on they would tell her that she couldn’t wear white to her wedding because she was no longer a virgin” (Fontes, 1993, p. 31). Similarly, Yuksel (2000) described the importance of virginity among the majority Muslim population in Turkey:

The absence of virginity may mean that a young girl loses her chance for marriage. If the situation is known, she loses her prestige within the family [just] as the family loses it in their close neighborhood. . . . The first reaction of the nonoffending parent and other relatives is to take the child or young girl for an examination of her virginity, when they find out about the abuse. If the hymen is left intact, the sexual abuse cannot be proved, and this makes the denial easier for the family. (p. 157)

These kinds of formal and informal “virginity tests” are common in cultures throughout the world. Not only are they extremely inaccurate and subject to all kinds of pressures, they can also be traumatic for a child. The

touching of a girl's genitals performed by anyone other than a licensed medical provider for a legitimate medical reason is apt to be considered a sexual assault according to U.S. law and is also considered a violation of international human rights (Pollack, 2008). Nevertheless, this "hymen worship" (B. Mirabal, personal communication, June 2005) serves as a disincentive to disclosure and reporting.

Even where the sexual abuse did not involve penetration, rumors of sexual abuse might interfere with a girl's marriage prospects. The girl's value does not rest solely on her actual virginity but also on her "honor" or her reputation. The notion that girls are less valuable as brides if they are not virgins inhibits disclosure of sexual assaults in numerous countries throughout the world and in numerous ethnic communities in the United States. In some Arab communities, if a child is rumored to have been abused sexually, it may hurt the marriage prospects of all the child's siblings (Baker & Dwairy, 2003).

In some cultures, girls and women who have been sexually assaulted are seen as having disgraced the family and may be subjected to violent assault or murder by family members to cleanse the family name and restore honor. The prospect of such an assault naturally makes it harder for girls to disclose their victimization.

#### STATUS OF FEMALES

Where cultural norms value males over females, a girl's report of sexual abuse by a boy or man may be discounted. The literature is rife with these kinds of reports, as when a girl in India described disclosing to her father that her brother was sexually abusing her, only to be told that this report was a way for her to cover her "madness" and his son "was not capable of doing any such thing" (Gupta & Ailawadi, 2005, p. 180). A Chinese poet of the Jin dynasty is widely quoted as saying, "How sad it is to be a woman! Nothing on earth is held so cheap!" It is a huge step for a girl who is being victimized by a boy or man to challenge his authority by exposing the abuse.

Other culturally based gender expectations can also inhibit disclosure. For instance, Black women and girls are often expected to be able to bear whatever burden is placed on them unquestioningly and uncomplainingly. Wilson (1994) described these superhuman expectations in this way: "Black women are strong and can handle anything life throws at them—whether rape at the hands of white slave-owners; the trauma of being separated from their children in slavery; racism; violence against us within our communities; or sexual abuse" (p. 10).

Black girls and women may therefore feel that their abuse is not a legitimate cause of complaint. Additionally, they may be seen as "race traitors" if they exercise their right to a life free from violence by disclosing to authorities that they have suffered abuse by a Black boy or man (Wilson, 1994).

## OBLIGATORY VIOLENCE

When the sexual abuse of a child is discovered, in some cultures men in the family will feel obligated to avenge this dishonor through perpetrating violence publicly against the alleged abuser (Fontes et al., 2001). This “obligatory violence” can tremendously wound a family, which then risks the family member being arrested for the violent revenge enacted. Although we do not know how many family members discuss this equation overtly, many seem to prefer to deny the abuse or keep secret the knowledge of it to prevent the retributive violence that would be required to avenge the family’s honor. Indeed, Franco (2006) and Fontes (1993) both found a tendency for mothers to advise their children to protect their fathers from knowledge of the abuse for fear of his possible angry and violent response.

## HONOR, RESPECT, AND PATRIARCHY

Children in South Asian communities may be inhibited from disclosures and parents may hesitate to make formal reports because of the strong values of *izzat* (honor/respect) (Gilligan & Akhtar, 2006). This is similar to East Asian ideas of filial piety, which require honoring older male relatives. This value is also similar to the Latino concept of *respecto* (respect), in which children are expected to be respectful to elders, particularly to older male relatives (Comas-Díaz, 1995). In traditional Anglo-American families, the father is seen as dominant and as having both the responsibility and the entitlement to rule over his family (Schmidt, 1995). In each of these broad cultural areas, we are essentially seeing how patriarchy may be used to justify the sexual abuse of children by their fathers or father figures and also how it can inhibit disclosures.

## OTHER CULTURAL BARRIERS TO DISCLOSING ABUSE

Girls in India gave the following reasons for not disclosing sexual abuse, starting with the most common: wanting to forget, fearing what people would think, self-blame, distrust, minimizing its importance, feeling guilty for experiencing pleasure, fearing being disbelieved, feeling she had been a willing participant, threats and bribes, and feeling confused or not knowing whom to tell (Gupta & Ailawadi, 2005). Clearly, many of these reasons may be related to the girls’ culture. In cultures throughout the world and in subcultures throughout the United States, cultural influences impact hesitancy to disclose abuse and inhibit children’s ability to speak openly about incidents (Fontes, 2008). A child’s refusal to disclose may even be conceptualized as an unfortunate side effect of a highly adaptive trait—that of protecting one’s community from hostile outsiders. Religious ideas also tie in closely with ethnicity and culture but affect broader groups. In the next section, we discuss examples of some religious ideas that may impact people beyond particular ethnic cultures.

## Religious Values Influencing Disclosure

While no mainstream religion advocates the sexual abuse of children, a wide variety of religious norms and expectations may make disclosure of sexual abuse difficult. For instance, Catholic women and girls may be expected to suffer sexual abuse in silence, with the abuse seen as a cross that they simply have to bear. The relevant terms for this in Spanish are *aguantarse*, *resignarse*, and *sobreponerse*, meaning, respectively, enduring, resigning oneself, and overcoming adversity. These are values that would encourage a Latino child—particularly a girl—to put up with what she needs to, resign herself to her circumstances, and triumph despite the abuse rather than necessarily speaking out and changing the conditions of the abuse (Comas-Díaz, 1995). A related Christian saying that would promote resignation is, “God never sends us more than we can handle.” One Catholic survivor describes a priest telling her to go to confession and ask for forgiveness after she disclosed CSA by her brother (Kennedy, 2000).

Children with certain religious beliefs may pray for the abuse to stop and accept their abuse as “fate” if it continues (Kennedy, 2000). The Catholic mother of a sexual abuse victim stated, “God allows things to happen in our lives to shape our character, or to bring us to a closer relationship with Him. I can see areas in my life and my child’s life and the abuser’s life that I know God is leading, but the outcome is beyond what I can see at this point” (C. Plummer, unpublished clinical experience).

A belief in an all-powerful, infallible Father in heaven who has absolute authority over people may translate for a child into a belief that his or her earthly father or father figure has similar rights to do what he pleases (Kennedy, 2000). This can make resisting or disclosing sexual abuse extremely difficult. A Baptist minister was recently convicted for paddling a 12-year-old girl every week for a year and a half in response to her claims that her stepfather was sexually abusing her, claims that the minister and the girl’s mother did not believe at the time (Allen, 2009). The minister failed to report the case to child abuse authorities and—in his defense—claimed he was “over his head” in handling the allegations of sexual abuse. The girl’s stepfather was eventually charged with criminal sexual assault.

If sexual abuse is discovered to have affected a child from a charismatic Christian church, the child may be subject to a “deliverance ministry” in which procedures are undertaken to “cast out the devil” or the “evil spirits.” This can be a frightening procedure, in which children feel both psychologically and physically threatened. In one study, almost half of children subjected to this described the experience as harmful. They described the deliverance procedures (essentially exorcisms) as leading them to feel as if they had something evil within them and were indelibly tainted as a result of the abuse (Fouque, 1997, as cited in Kennedy, 2000).

A Buddhist may believe that abuse is Karmic retribution for a misdeed committed in a previous life, thereby stigmatizing victims and their families. In an article on rape in Taiwan, Luo (2000) wrote, "This belief system suggests that any negative life event, such as rape, is caused by the individual's karma from previous lives and that revenge (e.g., punishment of the rapist) should not be sought to avoid a karmic vicious cycle." In this way, victims and their families are encouraged not to proceed with prosecutions so that they can end the cycle of negative karma in this lifetime rather than extending it into the next lifetime.

Jewish religious proscriptions to honor one's parents can make children believe they should not fight off assaults or disclose. *Lashon Hara*, a prohibition against speaking ill of others, is also often referred to as the reason why abusers cannot be publicly named (Silberg & Dallam, 2009). However, the Jewish Talmudic legal tradition offers exemptions that allow rejection of parents when they have committed abusive acts against the child and justifications for speaking out against abusers (Dorff, 2003).

The Quran refers to Mohamed taking his final bride, Aisha, when she was six years old and consummating their marriage when she was nine years old (Admon, 2009). This has been used by some Muslim clerics to justify child brides and undoubtedly contributes to high rates of child marriage (usually of young girls to much older men) in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and other Muslim nations. Child marriage is not only a violation of international human rights, but a girl who is pregnant before she is physiologically ready may die or suffer lifelong debilitating injuries when she tries to give birth. Professionals should not accept at face value this religiously based explanation of child marriage as a justification for child rape in Muslim families or communities.

The original founders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS, or the Mormons), Brigham Young and Joseph Smith, promoted the taking of "plural" wives. Young and Smith each had dozens of wives, some as young as 14. Smith's wives included two sets of sisters who had been entrusted to his care when their parents died. In both cases, he married both sisters and incorporated their family fortunes as his own personal wealth (Smith, 2008). The mainstream LDS church has denounced polygamy since 1890, initially taking this stance as part of its efforts to attain statehood for its home base of Utah. However, people with LDS family backgrounds frequently claim a religious justification for polygamy, child rape, and incest, claims that the mainstream LDS church resoundingly rejects.

Often, cultural/religious values are used as a screen to oppress girls and women (Okin, 1999). On the other hand, recent immigrants may not be aware of expectations around the protection of girls in their new country and may need to be informed of these. If the adults and children in a group think the marriage of young girls to older men is desirable, certainly this would inhibit their motivation to report such marriages (or relationships) to

authorities. Professionals should also note the gulf between a ceremonial marriage, which occurs between an adult male and a young girl, and the sexual use of a girl without marriage. While both are illegal in the United States, sexual exploitation without marriage does not have any religious justification whatsoever. These examples, though by no means comprehensive, shed some light into how the intersection of ethnic culture and religious values may affect disclosures.

### Reporting Costs that Vary by Ethnic Group

African American and Native American children are significantly overrepresented in the child protection system in the United States (Hill, 2006; Mederos & Woldegiorgis, 2003). The multiple contributing causes of this disproportionality include: disproportionate poverty, institutional racism, high rates of neighborhood crime and deterioration in some minority communities, pervasive joblessness, and impoverished access to protective formal and informal systems such as neighborhood networks and quality healthcare (Derezotes & Hill, 2008). Once Native American, Latino, and African-American children are removed from their home, interventions are more likely to be adversarial rather than supportive (e.g., a larger number of petitions to terminate parental rights and fewer referrals for mental health services) (Roberts, 2002). Black, Native American, and Latino children in foster care are apt to stay in care longer and are less likely than non-Latino White children to ever know another permanent home (Derezotes & Hill). The human toll is tremendous; these vulnerable children will sometimes languish for years in the foster care system or in institutions before they eventually “age out” of care, which places them at higher risk of homelessness, prostitution, and criminality (Derezotes & Hill). The disproportionate impact of the child welfare system in ethnic minority communities is one reason members of these communities may be hesitant to disclose abuse to authorities and prefer to handle the abuse themselves. The risk of family dissolution and the enforced orphaning of the children may just seem too great in these communities.

Notifying official systems of possible CSA involves “reporting costs” (Massat & Lundy, 1998). These include loss of privacy and family support and financial losses for many families. Some mothers have claimed that these costs, especially financial ones, are central to their postreport experience but not addressed by involved professionals (Plummer & Eastin, 2007). While the loss of privacy may be seen as a universal disincentive for calling authorities, other costs vary by social class, social power, immigration status, and culture. In one of our clinical cases, for example, an Ecuadoran girl in the United States told her mother about abuse by the mother’s boyfriend, who was a U.S. native. Appropriately, the mother immediately asked the boyfriend to move out. She then asked her immigration lawyer what to

do. The attorney grilled the daughter for hours about exactly what had happened, and they waited weeks before filing a report with child protective services. The girl refused to discuss the abuse ever again because she had found the attorney's interview so traumatic. This example demonstrates how immigration concerns might complicate disclosure and, combined with insensitive and untrained interviewing, result in the child never officially "disclosing."

Children often fear that their disclosure will cause problems for their family (Crisma, Bascelli, Paci, & Romito, 2004). Many children tell social workers that if they had it to do again, they would never disclose (Folman, 1998). A Mexican American survivor of CSA explains why she did not disclose her victimization to authorities:

Who were we going to go talk to about this? How many agencies do you know that welcome unauthorized Mexican immigrants with very little English fluency? And in our culture, you know, there's also this fear of being discriminated against, of being deported if you're unauthorized, of being taken out of your family because a white person thinks there's too many of us living together or something. Most people in this country don't understand Mexican culture and customs. And so yeah, there's a serious fear at the thought of sharing information outside the family. (Franco, 2006, p. 49)

In a study in Chile, shantytown residents described how when they were children, they kept silent about the sexual abuse they suffered because the generally miserable conditions under the Pinochet dictatorship led them to believe that their abuse was a trivial matter (Fontes, 1995a). Children in families who are struggling with other acute issues such as homelessness, poverty, illness, and unemployment may also choose to keep silent so as not to add to their parents' worries.

Members of oppressed groups face further stigmatization as a unique cost of reporting sexual abuse. In a book that included the advice of experts from eight U.S. minority cultures on treating CSA with people from their culture, every author described children's concerns that the reputation and position of their group would be jeopardized if knowledge of their sexual abuse became public (Fontes, 1995b). Telling an outsider is considered "washing one's dirty laundry in public." African Americans, for instance, may hesitate to discuss sexual abuse for fear that it "will be used in some damnable way to further exclude African Americans from the American mainstream (Abney & Priest, 1995, p. 11). Jews' hesitation to reveal problems to people from outside the culture is revealed in the Yiddish expression *shandeb fur die Goyim*, which roughly means a shameful situation that non-Jews might use as a weapon against Jews. In minority cultures, the act of sharing personal matters with people from outside the inner circle may be



seen as leading to unwanted and threatening attention that might jeopardize family and community integrity.

Families from cultures that rely on broad and extensive family networks may face losing all of their support system if an abuser within that network is exposed. This loss is especially egregious if the offender manages to rally the network in his defense. The loss extends beyond the economic, social, and emotional domains and can also include “in-kind” resources, such as losing the grandmother who babysits, the auntie who picks the children up from day care, or the brother-in-law who plows snow from the driveway. When the abuser supports a family economically, the loss of his or her income may entail homelessness for a low-income family. Additionally, the family’s health insurance is often tied to the abuser’s employment.

A family’s ruined reputation is a “reporting cost” that is too great for many families to bear. Families that are deeply connected to their communities or religious institutions may face being shunned if they let outsiders know about a child’s abuse. In an immigrant couple, an abuser may threaten his wife with ruining her reputation and that of her extended family in their community and in their country of origin if she presses charges against him or refuses to comply with his requests.

### Structural Barriers to Disclosure

In addition to the cultural factors that can make it difficult for children to disclose, numerous societal and agency issues can also serve as barriers to disclosure. We think these are exceedingly important and have discussed how to change these at length elsewhere (see Fontes, 1993, 1995b, 2005, and 2008 for more information). These structural barriers include lack of linguistic competence during investigations and interventions, lack of documents in families’ native languages, unfair immigration laws, racism and other forms of discrimination, economic barriers that interfere with investigations and interventions, lack of adequate health insurance, overcrowded schools where teachers do not know their students well enough to detect abuse, and others. Both the structural changes and the individual and agency efforts discussed in this article are essential to help children from all cultures disclose when they are abused and stick by true disclosures in the face of pressures to recant.

### Cultural Supports for Disclosure

We want to be careful not to give the impression that cultural factors, and particularly cultural factors affecting members of minority groups in the United States, are wholly negative. Indeed, just as cultural factors may make it difficult for children to disclose, cultural factors may also facilitate disclosures. Little research or even clinical literature addresses this. One area

that deserves particular note is the centrality of a strong mother–child relationship, which has been shown to lead not only to more disclosures and fewer recantations (Elliott & Briere, 1994; Lawson & Chaffin, 1992) but also can predict improved outcomes for the child victim after abuse (Deblinger, Stauffer, & Landsberg, 1994; Lipton, 1997). While an in-depth exploration of this topic is beyond the scope of this article, the importance of the maternal reaction to abuse allegations cannot be overemphasized and is largely shaped by the culture in which this relationship is embedded.

Factors that might protect children in a given culture from sexual abuse and facilitate disclosures include: intolerance of adult sexual practices with children, a high value placed on women and children, extended family supervision of children, men's direct involvement in raising children, close relationships between mothers and their children, strong social sanctions against abuse, views of children as nonsexual beings, support for children to speak up and make their needs known, socialization toward cooperative, mutually agreeable sexual activity, open discussions of sexuality, and both formal and informal resources that protect children. However, without further research in this area, experts disagree as to practices that might increase or decrease children's safety from abuse. For instance, some may believe separating children by gender protects girls, while others might label it a risk factor since it tends to depersonalize the other gender and makes interactions with them unfamiliar (Plummer & Njunguna, 2009).

## REPORTING ABUSE TO AUTHORITIES: THE CULTURAL AND STRUCTURAL CONTEXT

### Recognizing Sexual Abuse

People from different U.S. ethnic cultures may differ somewhat in how CSA is defined or understood, which would certainly affect their reporting behavior (Fontes, 1995b, 2005). While Lowe, Pavkov, Casanova, and Wetchler (2005) found no significant differences in how Blacks, Whites, or Hispanics living in the United States recognize sexual abuse nor their willingness to report most abuse, they did find some differences at the lowest levels of "severity," where the Black and Hispanic adults were somewhat more likely to recognize and claim willingness to report CSA than were the Whites.

One study found that African American and Latina women were more likely to describe sexual abuse in metaphoric terms such as "taking a child's innocence," while men in these cultures defined sexual abuse in terms of explicit sexual behaviors (Fontes et al., 2000, 2001). This same study found that while Black and Latino adults declared unhesitatingly that they would report sexual abuse by a stranger when they found out about it, when asked about reporting abuse committed by a loved one or a friend, they said they would handle it through unofficial means, by talking to the abuser and/or

the child victim, and keeping a closer eye on the child. We do not know how differences in definitions of sexual abuse or intentions around reporting might affect actual reporting behaviors in response to discoveries of abuse. However, since most abuse is committed by people known to a child, adults' hesitancy to report abuse committed by known parties is worrisome.

### Handling Child Sexual Abuse through Informal Channels

Insensitive responses, victim blaming, slow legal processes, and the enforced separation of family members can make families from all ethnic groups reluctant to report sexual abuse once it is suspected, discovered, or disclosed within a family. One White woman who had reported her son for sexually abusing her younger daughter stated, "If I knew then what I know now, I never would have reported the abuse" (Plummer & Eastin, 2007). In immigrant and ethnic minority communities in the United States, the reasons for keeping abuse out of the public response system and finding informal means to stop the abuse are even more compelling (as discussed in the section on reporting costs).

Our work in diverse cultures in the United States as well as in other countries provides ample examples of alternative responses to sexual abuse that bypass official reporting and legal responses. These alternative responses have been operating, sometimes as the only response to abuse, for generations and have become the "normal" way to respond to CSA. The informal arrangements used to handle CSA range broadly, and not all are effective. For example, a strong matriarch (e.g., a mother or grandmother) may make a man leave his home if his abusiveness has been too egregious, even if reports are never made to the authorities. A family may press a nonfamily abuser to marry a victimized girl to restore her reputation and the family's honor (Luo, 2000; Zaman, 2005). In response to a child's abuse history, the child may be made to enter a convent or monastery, go to boarding school, or move to another geographic location to live with extended family members. In many cultures, the father of an abused girl may demand financial payment for the loss of her honor, which benefits the father but not the girl. A victim of CSA may also simply be told that he or she needs to learn strategies to cope. In one study, girls from a variety of immigrant backgrounds report being given instructions, or themselves choosing, cognitive reframing, personal determination, and separation from the perpetrator as ways to stay safe and continue with their lives without disclosing the abuse (Tyagi, 2001).

### Disclosures and Culture in Professional Interviews

Interviewers in CSA cases are not nearly as diverse as the populations they serve (Child Welfare League of America, 2002). Whether working in child

protective services or forensic, medical, or other settings, professionals must make special efforts to become competent to interview, assess, and work with children and families from racial, cultural, and socioeconomic groups that differ from their own. Cultural competence is the ability to understand diverse people's worldview and their lives and adapt our work accordingly (Abney, 2001). To be effective, professionals who interview children about CSA need to conduct their interviews in culturally competent ways. Little has been written about how to do this (Fontes, 2005, 2009; Fontes & Faller, 2007). Being culturally competent is challenging in part because cultures are not static. How individuals and groups live their cultures changes regularly, in the larger context of societal change. A list of ethnic "differences" or suggestions soon becomes outdated and even counterproductive in the face of individuals and cultures that are forever developing and evolving.

Awareness of cultural *differences* is critical but can, unfortunately, lead to stereotyping by a professional who has obtained only basic information about people from a given culture. Guarding oneself from both operating without cultural awareness and stereotyping, professionals need to engage in an ongoing process of self-reflection regarding their responses and possible biases with each family with whom they work. Professionals' value system, theoretical practice orientation, class biases, and even presumed knowledge of another culture can influence their actions and ability to connect with a client. This self-awareness and habits of self-reflection have been called "cultural humility" (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998). Even when professionals are unaware of these biases and assumptions, clients often perceive them (Perez Foster, 1999). Professionals would do well to remember that they (and not only their clients) are cultural beings who bring their habits of formality/informality, warmth/coolness, proximity/distance, nonverbal behavior, preferred phrasings, etc. into each professional encounter (Fontes, 2008). Research by Davis and Bottoms (2002) indicated that warmth and a supportive tone enable children to make more accurate disclosures and to correct the interviewer when the interviewer makes a mistake. Interviewers who are unaware of the biases they carry are apt to fail to connect with children, leading to reduced accuracy.

Ultimately, interviewers cannot force people to speak about topics they would rather not discuss. At best, interviewers control only their own side of the conversation. However, interviewers can facilitate disclosures by children of diverse cultures by making sure they are as respectful, open, nonjudgmental, and engaging as possible, and making sure people have an opportunity to be interviewed in their preferred language. In the following sections are suggestions for improving interviewing practice from a cultural perspective. Although these are written with forensic interviewers in mind, we hope they will also be useful for others who interview culturally diverse children and their families about suspected CSA.

## Forensic Interviewer Questions and Suggestions

The following ideas, mostly posed as questions, give guidelines on important considerations that can enhance cultural competence in an interview. All are based on the authors' combined decades of clinical and forensic interviewing experience and are often bolstered as well by research. Where it exists, the empirical support is cited. In addition to tailoring interviews to the child's culture, of course interviewers also need to shape their work based on the interviewee's age and gender.

### PLANNING FOR THE INTERVIEW

1. To what extent is the interview setting welcoming and/or comfortable for people from a variety of cultural backgrounds? Pay special attention to the background of the agency staff, the language of written materials, the magazines in the waiting rooms, and artwork on the walls.
2. To what degree have the involved professionals embraced cultural competency practices and cultural humility so that they can adapt their practices to the family's culture throughout the interview and intervention process?
3. What are the community(ies) of reference for this family? Each family may have obvious cultural connections or multiple communities, including social and religious networks that shape their cultural values and practices.
4. To what degree does that community influence the child and/or the family? This may depend on aspects of acculturation including how long the family has lived in this country or how much time they spend with members of their own ethnic community only. It is common to find acculturation differences within a single family.
5. How does the child's gender interact with cultural factors in this family? Since males and females face distinctive issues that may influence disclosure, examine these possible barriers prior to your interview.
6. What are identifiable barriers to disclosure in this cultural situation?
7. What are the likely fears of formal reports of CSA in this cultural and individual context?
8. What are the potential "reporting costs"? These can include social, financial, emotional, legal, and cultural losses incurred from not only the abuse but from the public acknowledgement of it and subsequent system interventions. Too often these costs are ignored and no help is given to remedy them. The result may well be a failure to disclose or report extant abuse, or a retraction.
9. What is needed to achieve linguistic competence? Children should be interviewed in their preferred language. Ideally, a trained bilingual interviewer would conduct the interview. The second and less-preferred option

is for a trained interviewer to enlist the help of a professional interpreter. Conducting an interview with an interpreter is not straightforward, and both the interpreter and the interviewer should give some thought as to how they will proceed (see Fontes, 2005 and 2008 for suggestions).

10. What are the pros and cons of ethnic matching between the interviewer and the child? The research on matching the ethnicity of the child with the ethnicity of the interviewer is both minimal and contradictory (Dunkerly & Dalenberg, 1999; Springman, Wherry, & Notaro, 2006). The question of ethnic matching needs to be explored individually. In some cases, a child will feel more comfortable with a person who is of the same race or ethnic group. In other situations, it can be difficult for children to disclose to people who are from the same small ethnic community, tribe, or clan, or to a person who reminds the child of the abuser. At the very least, the interviewer should be trained in child forensic interviewing and be knowledgeable about the cultural values and practices of the child's family. The need for linguistic competence is also central.
11. Is the interviewer aware of his or her professional ethical mandates? While forensic interviews are geared toward penalties and prosecutions, interviewers must recognize their ethical duty to place the child's well-being above the prosecution.

#### DURING THE INTERVIEW

1. Has the interviewer properly oriented the child to the interview? Specific information about the process and expectations of the interview will help the child feel comfortable. While important with all children, those from immigrant and minority cultural backgrounds may be even less familiar than other children with the setting and expectations and may need special guidance and reassurance.
2. Should the interviewer gently challenge habitual taboos? For example, interviewers may need to directly challenge assumptions that children will be silent with authorities, by saying something like, "In many situations, adults don't want children to speak a lot. Here, I really need to hear what you have to say."
3. Can the interviewer tolerate silence? Interviewers should allow some silence in an interview, without jumping in to ask a new question or rephrase an earlier one. Silence allows interviewees to gather their thoughts, find the right words, and summon the courage to speak.
4. Is the interviewer's manner warm and responsive? Interviewers should consider offering remarks that recognize the difficulty of the interview such as, "I know I'm asking a lot of questions." Interviewers can also demonstrate their caring with remarks such as, "How is it going for you?" or "You've been doing a fine job answering some really tough questions."

Warmth in an interviewer, contrary to concerns, does not lead to more false reports but rather to more accuracy in reporting (Davis & Bottoms, 2002).

5. Are the questions posed inclusive of diverse family structures? Interviewers need to ask questions in ways that acknowledge that families today come in many forms, including “single-parent families, re-constituted families, families with a mother and a series of male partners, families where grandparents play a major caretaking role, lesbian and gay families, informal adoptions, and structures where non-parental adults and sometimes older children have caretaking responsibilities” (Fontes & Faller, 2007, p. 168). Interviewers who ask questions in ways that assume the child lives within a stereotypical nuclear family may unwittingly confuse or insult children and therefore may be less likely to obtain complete and accurate information.

#### AFTER THE INTERVIEW

1. Did the interviewer or advocate link the child with sources of support after the interview? The child should be helped to identify a personal support system, both within and outside of the family, since the child may have feelings or recollections that emerge after the interview is completed or may be facing intense pressure to recant.
2. If the agency has an opportunity to continue working with the child and his or her family, what cultural values and strengths can be emphasized to facilitate sensitive interventions and safety for this child? How can nonabusive relatives be engaged in accepting, protecting, and rebuilding a relationship with their victimized child?

#### RECOMMENDATIONS: NEXT STEPS IN DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCE

Individual professionals must not only proactively learn more about cultures, dynamic changes in cultures, and familial differences in cultures; they must also learn how their own expectations, biases, countertransference, agency policies, and well intentioned interventions may regularly require alterations and updates as they work with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. Clearly, employing more diverse professionals and assuring high quality community and agency training in cultural issues would also advance cultural competence. Supervision that routinely includes a cultural lens would also be helpful. In line with these efforts, critically examining and eliminating organizational and systemic barriers to disclosure of CSA would move us toward the goal of protecting all children, regardless of ethnicity.

## CONCLUSION

Research about cultural influences on disclosures of CSA is new and limited. However, our research and clinical work lead us to the conclusion that culture stands prominently as a factor in *all* cases in which children are considering disclosing or being asked to disclose and not solely in cases in which children are from noticeable minority groups. No article, checklist, or set of principles will adequately address the range of unique individuals and families who present for child abuse interviews. Cultures are emerging, people are ever-changing, and learning about culture will always be an ongoing process that challenges interviewers to remain flexible to serve the diverse children and families affected by CSA.

## NOTES

1. Discussions of culture can contribute to a failure to examine the great variety of people and experiences that exist within any particular ethnic group. In this article, we try mightily to avoid contributing to overgeneralizations and stereotyping while still illuminating general cultural issues. It is not always easy.

2. We are aware of the inadequacy of current terminology to describe various demographic groups. In this article, we use the term *Latino* to describe people of Latin American or Spanish descent who live in the United States and Canada. We use *White* to describe people of European descent. We use *African American* to describe people of African descent who grew up in the United States. Where authors of particular studies use the terms *Hispanic* or *Black*, we use the terms employed by the authors when we discuss their study. We realize that many diverse peoples are collapsed into these broad, overly general headings, in a process called “ethnic lumping,” and we regret this (Fontes, 1995b).

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