



Religion in child sexual abuse forensic interviews[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Religion is an under-studied factor affecting children's sexual victimization and their willingness to discuss such experiences. In this qualitative study, 39 child forensic interviewers and child advocacy center (CAC) directors in the United States discussed religious influences on children's sexual abuse experiences, their relationships to CACs, and their disclosures in the forensic setting. Participants reported both harmonious and dissonant interactions between religiously observant children and families on one hand and child advocacy centers on the other. Themes emerged related to abuse in religious contexts and religious justifications for abuse; clergy and religious supports for disclosures as well as suppression of disclosures; and the ways CACS accommodate religious diversity and forge collaborations with clergy. Participants discussed a wide range of religions. Recommendations for practice and research are included.

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1. Introduction

A vast and growing literature investigates and proposes evidence-based methodologies for suspected child sexual abuse (CSA) forensic interviews. Despite this helpful research, the complex issue of culture and how it interfaces with the forensic process has yet to be sufficiently explored (Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Tishelman & Geffner, 2010). Nevertheless, cultural issues are pervasive and relevant to every alleged sexual abuse victim and family. Cultural impacts include immigration status, language competence, child and family anxieties and fears, expectations, disclosure hesitations, sources of support, and reactions of others. In particular, religious influence constitutes one of the most understudied cultural issues in CSA, with great potential meaning for many CSA victims and families, including involvement in religious communities and organizations, as well as religious practices and beliefs (spirituality). This study examines the impact of religion on alleged CSA victims and their families as they navigate the stressful terrain of disclosure and criminal investigation.

Religious factors may be relevant to child forensic interviewing for CSA in a variety of ways including: increasing feelings of shame for victims, promoting notions of resigned suffering in silence, contributing to the sense that children are at fault for their victimization through having committed sins in this or a previous life, promoting premature forgiveness without accompanying child protection, and enhancing abusers' ability to claim a right to children's bodies, among other mechanisms, some of which may have yet to be identified (Fontes & Plummer, 2010). We must understand these variables in order to develop optimal clinical and interviewing practices for children and families during these difficult conversations (Fontes, 2008). The high visibility of CSA within the Catholic church has created a rich literature on how religious culture

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and institutions can silence children and allow abuse to flourish (e.g. Crisp, 2007; Collins, O'Neill-Arana, Fontes, & Ossege, 2014; Keenan, 2011). While research on sexual abuse in other religious communities is growing, it remains insufficiently explored (see McGuigan & Stephenson, 2015; Neustein, 2009).

Although negative effects of religion have been reported, a significant literature emphasizes the potential positive impacts of religion on resilience and trauma recovery (e.g., Brewer-Smyth & Koenig, 2014; Bryant-Davis & Wong, 2013; Bryant-Davis et al., 2002) as well as the importance of understanding religious and spiritual issues and meanings in trauma therapy, including as an aid in healing (Walker, Reese, Hughes, & Troskie, 2010). Some adult survivors report gaining strength from their religious and spiritual beliefs, enhancing their resilience in the face of abuse (e.g. Behrman, 2007; Chmiel, 2007; Collins et al., 2014; Featherman, 1995; Rivera, 2016). For instance, in a retrospective qualitative study of African American adult survivors of childhood physical and sexual violence, Bryant-Davis (2005) indicated that 55% of research participants reported that they had utilized spiritual practices as coping mechanisms. These included religious beliefs, religious rituals and spiritual counseling, as well as organized religious involvement, and were relevant to both male and female survivors. Religion is central in the lives of children and families in the United States, and can be a strong natural support in response to trauma and stress. Yet little is known of the potential positive impacts of spiritual beliefs and/or involvement in a supportive organized religious community on child survivors in the process of sexual abuse disclosure and forensic interviewing. It is critical to understand and enhance the possible positive influences of religion on sexual abuse victims and their families, while working to diminish those that are potentially harmful.

This article reports on religious influences on alleged CSA victims and their families, which formed part of a larger study on cultural competence in child forensic interviews. Fontes and Tishelman (2016) previously reported on language competence as a cultural issue relevant to the CSA forensic process using this research methodology. Forensic interviewers and Child Advocacy Center (CAC) directors in varying geographic, socio-economic and racially/ethnically diverse communities in the United States conveyed what they saw as the most frequent, important, and challenging issues related to religion and CSA, as encountered during their forensic interviews and related conversations.

2. Method

Using a phenomenological design, we conducted semi-structured qualitative individual interviews with professional child forensic interviewers and directors working within CACs across the United States. Semi-structured interviews use a pre-determined set of open-ended questions that allow both the participant and the interviewer to explore the themes that emerge over the course of the conversation (Patton, 2014). Researchers gather data in an orderly way with specific questions, while also allowing participants to speak about themes that were not included in the original interview guide (Esterberg, 2001). Semi-structured interviews have been used in other studies to explore religion and child sexual abuse (e.g. Collins et al., 2014). Semi-structured interviews also seemed appropriate because the participants in this study conduct semi-structured interviews regularly themselves in their work with children; we thought this would increase their comfort in the research process. In fact, more than one participant responded to a prompt such as, "Tell me more about that," with a laugh, saying that this was the kind of comment they make regularly in their work. Individual interviews allowed participants from diverse geographical regions with differing religious cultural concerns to address those issues that were most salient to their CAC work.

2.1. Participants

Thirty-nine CAC forensic interviewers and CAC directors who work within CACs across the United States participated. Thirty-seven were female and two were male with a mean of 8 years' experience as forensic interviewers. Participants reported a mean number of forensic interviews conducted as 1084, with a range from zero (two participants were center directors who had not served previously as interviewers) to over 10,000. Participants reported having conducted a total of over 42,000 interviews and observed many more as members of multidisciplinary teams and during peer review. It should be noted here that the number of interviews conducted by our participants and indeed the number of years of experience at CACs are approximations and may be underestimates. For instance, a number of participants had conducted child forensic interviews as affiliated child protective service social workers before they became CAC employees. Several had moved in and out of the role of center director, and several had worked at CACS in more than one state. All in all, participants generally were experienced and knowledgeable about interviewing children at CACs in varied cultural and geographic contexts.

Our sample included participants from the four CAC regions in the United States (Northeast, Midwest, South and West) with participants currently working in twenty-two states. All participation was completely voluntary and no compensation was provided. To assure anonymity, neither state directors nor CAC directors were informed of forensic interviewer participation. Ethnically, 72% (N = 28) identified as White/Caucasian or European-American only, while the remaining 28% (N = 11) identified as Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian, or Multiracial. (Some multiracial participants mentioned Native American ancestry and affiliations). Participants were not asked about their own religious affiliations.

2.2. Procedures

We obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this study prior to initiating participant recruitment. Participants were recruited via an email on a list-serve for forensic interviewers, requesting CAC director and forensic interviewer volunteers to participate in a study of cultural issues in child forensic interviewing. The email included researcher contact information. Potential participants contacted the researchers, indicating their interest in learning more about and possibly participating in the study. The researchers responded to inquiries with basic information about the study and to set up an initial telephone call, when appropriate. During the interview call, the researcher obtained verbal consent using a standard consent form approved by the IRB, and conducted an audio-recorded semi-structured interview. Following the interviews, all audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription agency.

The researchers posed open-ended questions geared toward addressing the most salient cultural issues encountered. In many but not all the interviews, participants spontaneously raised cultural issues related to religion, which the researchers pursued with open-ended prompts such as, "Tell me more about that." The researchers posed the open-ended question, "Tell me about ways religion comes up during forensic interviews, or might influence the interview process." The researchers sought to understand the themes generated by the participants, and probed some responses with clarifying questions. The researchers frequently asked the participants for specific examples to illustrate their assertions.

2.3. Data analysis

The two researchers initially reviewed the transcripts for terms and discussions related to religion. All of the interviews were then collapsed into one file. The authors conducted a search for the identified terms in the file, and used the terms to identify excerpts related to religion. For this article, we searched for numerous general terms related to religion such as "religion/religious," "pray/prayer," "faith," "God," "confess," "sin," and "elder," as well as words related to specific religions including the names of those religions and religious leaders and places of worship such as "pastor," "priest," "imam," "rabbi," and "church," "synagogue," etc. After relevant passages were identified through these searches, they were extracted from the interviews to create an overall file of related content, which the researchers then analyzed and classified by theme. After drafting the article, the researchers read through the transcripts one more time to incorporate any relevant data that had been missed.

For the final preparation of this manuscript, fillers such as "um," and "you know" were removed. Some longer statements were shortened for concision with the missing words or sentences indicated with ellipses.

3. Findings

The data analysis described above led to the identification of themes related to the impact of religion on children presenting at CACs for forensic interviews for suspected child sexual abuse. The themes are enumerated below, along with selected relevant participant statements. Usually statements by two or more participants supported each theme. We include more than one statement related to a single theme only where they provide additional elaboration on the theme.

Participants identified ways in which they perceived children's religious affiliations and beliefs as influencing them at every stage of the process from victimization to disclosure with an emphasis on how these religious influences affected their interactions with CACs. Findings related to detrimental and supportive impacts are interwoven into sections, as relevant. Findings are arranged according to the phase of the CAC process, including religious influences prior to CAC contact, engagements with formal systems, and religious impacts on children and team members during the forensic interview process.

3.1. Religions encountered in forensic interviews

The participants reported encountering clients from numerous religions in the course of their forensic interviewing work. Using their terms, this list included, in alphabetical order: "Amish," "Assembly of God," "Baptist," "Catholic," "Christian," "a cloistered Christian sect," "Conservative Christian," "Evangelical," "Fundamentalist," "Jehovah's Witnesses," "Hasidic," "Jewish," "Lakota Lutheran," "Lutheran," "Mennonite," "Methodist," "Mormon," "Muslim," "Orthodox Jewish," and "Pentecostal."

3.2. Religious influences prior to CAC contact

Participants described ways in which religious affiliations and beliefs made children vulnerable to abuse. This included risk factors in religious communities as well as religiously-oriented grooming, justifications for abuse, and disclosure suppression.

3.2.1. Abusing within religious communities. Participants discussed CSA cases involving alleged perpetrators with roles as religious and spiritual leaders, volunteers, camp counselors in religious-based camps, staff in religious schools, and others associated with religious communities.

We have a lot of youth ministers as perpetrators, a lot!

There was a lot of sex abuse that happened in boarding schools, through the church.

I was shocked. . . when they said that this elder had a strip pole in one of the rooms that he used to abuse them in.

One participant told the story of a victim who reported that after the youth minister sexually abused her on repeated occasions, he would ask her to get down on her knees and pray with him and then make her pinky-swear that she would not tell. Some participants spontaneously tried to explain the prevalence of sexual abuse in religious contexts. One participant suggested that abusers within religious institutions are often not paid staff but rather adults from the community who gain access to vulnerable youth through religion-sponsored volunteer work:

The church organizations may be more trusting than more secular organizations, and not looking as cynically at people who want to be involved with kidsMaybe also it is a setting where they are put into a situation with youth where they are talking about very personal issues which makes it easy to create a bond with an adolescent. Church settings might appeal to kids that are more vulnerable to that kind of thing. In other words, they may be in a youth program because they are having some particular need.

3.2.2. Religious grooming, justification and disclosure suppression. Participants also reported situations where abusers within children's own families used religion as part of their grooming process.

The children would report that they thought this was normal, that dad told them that this is what fathers do, that this is part of their job as religious leaders of the family.

We have a lot of perpetrators that blame religion and say things like, "You know it's my duty as a father. It's our religious belief that the father is the mentor and the teacher of the family, and I am teaching my daughters how to have sex." We hear that a lot.

Participants provided examples of abusers using religion and the authority of the religious institution to groom a child and to justify CSA.

The alleged offender used the church and, "God has ordained me to do this, and I need to verify to make sure of your sexuality," and things like that. . .to justify why they were doing it. . . So the child would be more compliant.

We had the adoptive children who were molested by their adopted dad, a strong Mormon influence in play there...Part of his grooming process was to teach his boys, and to keep the teaching and training at home....The strong tie of closeness, or family, of his being in charge, again needing to train and be the teacher, when in actuality it was a grooming process. But it was very interesting when it came to court in trial, the strong Mormon contingency that was present to support the perpetrator.

Participants described abusers using religion to actively intimidate, coerce, or prevent children from disclosing sexual abuse. Several participants described the special vulnerability of children abused in the home who are home-schooled and have little contact with outsiders. One said that a victim of paternal abuse had been told:

"Do not betray the head of the household because bad things will happen to you because it's in the Bible. . . revenge comes to people who betray."

Sometimes, religious pressure not to share information with outsiders contributed to victims maintaining silence for years:

I have plenty of adult clients who were from Evangelical Christian families who didn't disclose at all that were now disclosing, you know, in their twenties. So I think that the religiosity layer is a really important thing that we do try to find out for all of our clients.

Several participants discussed CSA in religious families and communities as being linked to male dominance:

There's a very strong thread of male dominance . . . in these religions of fathers as the head of the household. . . very paternalistic groups that practice these religions.

3.3. Religion and engagement with formal systems including CACS

Youth and families often turn to clergy for support when children first disclose sexual abuse, affording religious leaders an opportunity to help child victims and their families engage with child protection authorities and hold offenders legally accountable. Participants described some clergy as facilitating this engagement with the child protection system including the CACS.

3.2.1. Clergy contacting authorities. Participants described religious institutions and leaders providing shelter and rescue for isolated and vulnerable youth by receiving children's disclosures and contacting appropriate authorities. They gave examples of youth identifying a trusted individual within a place of worship and disclosing CSA to that person, who then contacted

the police or child protective services. One participant described a young Latina who had been sent to live with her uncle, who then began abusing her sexually.

The girl was starting to get more into religion and was feeling like what she was doing was wrong. And then confided in the pastor, and since she's a minor, of course they have to be reported.

The oldest boy, when he reached a certain age. . . he was out of dad's targeted group for victimization, so he booted that kid out. . . he went to the Mormon, whatever they call them, Bishop, I think, and disclosed to him first, and . . . the Mormon Bishop did report it to the authorities and that's how the whole thing started.

3.3.2. *Clergy supporting children and families at the CAC.* A number of participants reported working with families who felt supported by clergy and other members of their religious institutions and asked them to be present at the CAC while their child was interviewed and/or during team meetings.

[The family] had actually come to our center with the priest from their community as a support person and they wanted the priest in the post-interview kind of debriefing that we had with the team.

[With] the few Jewish families that we've had come in, usually the Rabbi will come. . . so there is another community support piece that is coming in with the families, which I just think is great.

Other participants reported families maintaining telephone contact with their clergy member throughout the CAC process:

We did have a woman who kept. . . checking in with her pastor throughout the day, keeping the pastor up to date with what was going on and finding peace in that. And I think it was comforting her.

One participant described parents of a child victim who felt that support from their church eased some of the potential shame of being involved with law enforcement around issues of child sexual abuse.

3.3.3. *Handling CSA allegations within the community.* Many participants described religious leaders, institutions, and communities preferring to handle child sexual abuse allegations “in house,” and suppressing children’s disclosures. They reported religious leaders actively or passively impeding children and families from moving forward with official disclosures and/or cooperating with the child protection and criminal justice systems concerning CSA allegations. This occurred in various religions.

We just see a lot of religion used to keep kids quiet. . . probably the biggest cultural issue.

I had one case within a church. . . They wanted nothing to do with the system. Like, “We deal with it, you know, within our church.”

Mom was receiving a lot of pressure from the outside, the elders of their population, because it had already been reported to them, and they were trying to take care of it within their group, within their church. And mom stepped to the outside and was receiving help from the outside, and was cooperating, yet feeling some pressure from the elders and the ones of the church, about, like, “We should have kept this to ourselves. We could have taken care of this ourselves.”

Participants described victims and their families experiencing pressure to forgive the abusers and avoid formal secular channels.

There are a lot of Mennonites who are not super conservative, but the Mennonites who are more likely to wear the bonnet are more likely to be conservative. [It's] more of a, “The man is head of the house and listen to your bishop” type scenario.... They are also a very pacifist culture, and so they often signal a lot of wanting to deal with it in their own church, own community. It's a lot about not wanting to call out the defender or go through a legal process and punish them outwardly.... And Mennonites are known for wanting to do more of a restorative justice type of reconciliation rather than legal avenues. So it's pretty rare when we actually have conservative Mennonites who are willing to go through the whole process that would involve any type of legal outcome.

There are a couple of small Evangelical kind of churches here where I feel like... where we have pastors who are, you know, shutting the family down, wanting it not to get to authorities.

3.3.4. *Prayer and forgiveness replacing formal interventions.* Participants discussed children’s reports of their families and congregations using prayer to find the truth and or “heal” when faced with allegations, and victims praying for forgiveness for “their sins.” Often, prayer was considered sufficient resolution to the allegations, preempting any possible need to pursue formal child protection or legal charges.

[The siblings] told their parents that one of the elders was sexually abusing both of them... They brought the children forward, prayed, the whole congregation prayed, they told the children that they had to forgive the perpetrator. The perpetrator confessed and said that, you know, he was sorry and it would never happen again. Then it happened again, of course.

Some participants described religiously observant families as believing the secular interventions such as CAC investigations were unnecessary or even redundant:

They were wary of us, off-putting, like, “We’ve already handled this. They’re going to pray about it.” It’s like the classic question, “What do you want to have happen with your perpetrator?” You know, sometimes the detective asks that of the family, and some are like, “Yeah, throw them in jail,” and their classic answer is, “We believe. We’ll pray about it.”

Participants noted that some Christian families rely on the family patriarch’s ability to handle family problems, including CSA allegations.

The [allegations] were interfamilial and the parents were pretty upfront in saying, ‘We will follow, we will cooperate, but we have our own judgment, basically, and our own system, that will be going on kind of at the same time.’ And then when I talked to the girl. . . She expressed that as well: “It happened a while ago, but my dad has taken care of it, because that is his job to take care of us, and he handled it and nothing is going to happen anymore because he promised.” And they completely, completely had faith in that. So, they didn’t want things to move forward because they had already handled it internally.

Participants also discussed the pressures on families and youth within certain Jewish and Mormon communities.

I think sometimes with the Orthodox families, they were so devotedly religious that in the way the community structure, it’s sort of like, “Yeah, we don’t really care about the police, and we don’t care.” So it was kind of like there was a cultural component, ‘Well, we deal with this ourselves’”.

In the Orthodox Jewish community, we have a community there obviously very closed in, that it’s not reported outside. It’s handled within their population. . . They would be very hesitant to come through the system. . .

There are dozens of examples with the Orthodox Jewish families, where it was just like the kids, “Well, I told my grandma. Why do I have to tell you? ”

With a Mormon population. . . it was like they didn’t use our system. Like, they wouldn’t report it to DHS. . . but they would report it to the elders, and then the elders would talk with the perpetrator and counsel the perpetrator and things like that . . . and it would kind of be quashed there, within their own little community. They wouldn’t take it to law enforcement.

3.4. Religious influences on the forensic interview

Participants described a range of ways in which religious beliefs and affiliations might support or impede the disclosure process at CACs. Participants saw religion influencing whether a child would disclose, how much the child might be willing to say about what happened, and how the child might feel about both the abuse and the disclosure process. Participants also described reassuring children who were wracked with shame during the disclosure process.

3.4.1. Religious beliefs promoting disclosures and truth-telling. Some participants described children and teens’ religious beliefs serving as an incentive for them to disclose sexual abuse and tell the truth about their experiences, when asked about these during a forensic interview.

They’ll initially deny anything happened, and then say, “Well. . . I need to tell you this. . . it’s the right thing to do in my faith, ” and they’ll talk about their faith and they’ll tell us if something happened. And so, it’s been my experience that a lot of kids have disclosed, maybe because of their religion.

Sometimes children will talk about . . . how they know they have to tell the truth based on their spiritual conviction.

One participant described talking about religious institutions as a way to help a child overcome nervousness.

Sometimes if a kid isn’t wanting to talk or is having difficulty to talk, and they can think of a positive thing about church, or that’s a safe place or something that excites them, it seems to sometimes break the ice, and they sometimes are more willing to open up about talking about religion or talking about church and the activities that they do there and the people that they see on a regular basis. . . And it seems to kind of break that nervousness.

3.4.2. Religious beliefs impeding disclosures. Participants gave numerous examples of ways in which religion complicated the forensic process or seemed to impede disclosures. For instance, participants discussed working with children from insular and isolated religious communities. They described instances where this isolation seemed to make it more difficult for children to find anyone to whom they could disclose, because all the adults in their lives had some kind of relationship with the offender. One participant described challenges interviewing a child from a “conservative and cloistered Christian sect.” This CAC typically calls families before initial appointments to tell them what they can expect, answer questions about the medical examination or the forensic interview, and “calm fears.” Because this community shuns telephones, this orienting conversation did not take place. *So the parents both came in and had told the girls not to talk and that kind of came out during the pre-meeting.*

One participant gave an example of how a child might respond to religious pressure in a forensic interview.

The parents may say . . . We are just going to work this out. . .and we don't need to be showing everybody our business. . . We need to stick together, this is our group. So someone speaking to the child about incidents that are supposed to be kept quiet just by the family and are supposed to be kept quiet by the church, and then an interviewer asking for those details, . . . I think that's going to cause the child to be a little bit more stand-offish and a little bit reserved in answering. . . I would say probably whenever I went to actually ask the child something about . . . talking about different kinds of touches, has something like that happened to you, just them being more reserved, and maybe taking a little bit longer, maybe not making eye contact whenever they're speaking to you, and maybe just do a head nod.

Another participant discussed the conundrum of working toward disclosure in a forensic interview with a child who feels that it is a “sin” to disclose.

You don't want a child feeling like they are sinning and going to be punished or have repercussions for not going with their beliefs in an interview room.

To pursue legal charges, forensic interviewers need highly specific information about the sexual acts. However, they reported it can be especially difficult for religiously observant children to speak explicitly about sex.

They don't want to say specific words, when I try to get them to describe what sex is, whether they said, “We had sex,” trying to get them to describe that act is extremely. . . is a lot more difficult than a normal child [sic], because. . . there's a stigma attached to it, and there's a lot more shame attached to it.

One participant described some conservative Christian victims worrying that disclosing might “make God unhappy.” They'd been told that praying about their problems should be sufficient.

The religious belief of this congregation was once you forgive someone you are not allowed to talk about it anymore...I know that was specifically an issue in the interview room with talking with the kids that it was actually a sin for them if they disclosed.

3.4.3. Guilt, self-blame, and virginity. A number of participants conveyed their perceptions that youth involved in religious communities were prone to greater levels of guilt and self-blame about the abuse itself than other alleged victims. They described children and teens' concerns that they had sinned by engaging in sexual activity and would experience divine punishment because of their sexual victimization. Naturally, their feelings of guilt and fear inhibited their ability to speak up during forensic interviews.

For any kid coming from a significantly religious background, there's many layers of shame and self-blame and fear of disclosure. We've definitely had White kids from Evangelical Christianity, Black kids, too, really from all ethnicities. The level of religion in the family definitely has an impact on the child's fear, shame, self-blame...I think there's more of a sense of, “What did she do to bring it on?” kind of a thing.

A participant described the religion-based shame children may feel when forensic interviewers ask them to describe their sexual abuse experience(s) in detail. This participant suggested that frequent discussions of sexual immorality within a church increased the shame and self-blame of child victims.

Participants described religious child victims of CSA as being overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and concern about God's anger. One participant quoted a child victim as saying, “I feel like God is mad at me because I did this.” She was referring to participating in sexual acts with an adult.

Participants described some families' focusing their concern on girls losing their virginity through the CSA. Often, these concerns were tied to religious beliefs. Parents placed great emphasis on the medical exam as confirming or disconfirming a girl's purity after the alleged abuse.

[In this Latino Catholic family], the virginity of a girl is the most important thing in a girl's life, you know, that their daughter is not tainted or damaged in any way. That's a very big issue, and they're very concerned as to how this is seen by others.

They were both Latino families, and religious, practicing Catholic families, and the virginity issue was really of concern for those families...When they found out about the abuse that involved penetration, both of the families expressed, “Oh my gosh, the child's not a virgin anymore and no man will ever want her.”

Participants described similar concerns about virginity being expressed by families from a range of conservative religious groups.

One participant reported that in a suburb with a large “Fundamentalist Christian” population, the parents of some teenage girls told them they were going to hell because they had been sexually active. The girls arrived at their forensic interviews actively suicidal. Participants also described interviews where teen girls who had engaged in consensual sex confessed that they had felt pressured to claim they were raped, so as to preserve their reputation:

In a couple of cases, some of the girls originally had said they were raped, and then during the interview they actually said they hadn't been, but they told their parent that.

In some cases, the parents had actively encouraged them to make false claims, but in others the girls were afraid to tell their parents the truth, concerned about the severity of their parents' reactions to their consensual premarital sex.

3.4.4. *Responding to religious concerns during interviews.* Given the religion-related impediments to disclosure discussed above, some participants described providing extra support in interviews to children who felt ashamed about the abuse and/or the disclosure.

They may need more reassurance . . . "You can say whatever you need to in here with me, you're not in trouble with me today." . . . And asking if there are any other things they are scared or worried about, "Yeah, you know, I'm not supposed to talk about this, I'm afraid what's going to happen to him, or I'm afraid what, you know, the elders are going to do to him, or the church is going to do to him. "

One participant described a pregnant 16 year old who was struggling with the religious implications of her sexual behavior, after having been sexually involved with a 20 year old. The participant described the teenager's worries about going to Hell, which her mother had told her would happen. The interviewer tried to respond reassuringly, while still maintaining the integrity of the interview protocol.

I would say, "You know what, I want to know how you feel about it, and I don't think anything bad about you, " and that's pretty much the only way I could redirect it without addressing the religious part of it. . . . And that was kind of a standard thing that I would tell kids, "I'm, not going to think any differently of you or anybody else, I just want to know what happened so I can understand, " and kind of just redirect in that way. . . . In a couple of cases we did try to find counselors that dealt with, maybe a more religious slant on their counseling.

3.5. Modifications to accommodate religious diversity

Participants recounted challenges where religious cultural traditions conflicted with standard CAC practices, and discussed creative protocol modifications to accommodate family religious cultures. Several participants noted, for instance, that Amish and Mennonite families are uncomfortable with videotaping and photographing, which is typically the protocol at CACs.

We do have some challenges with videotaping them because that is really against their religion and their culture to have their image projected and recorded. But what we've been able to do is to accommodate the children by having their back to the camera so that you don't actually see their face, and the families have been okay with that.

We do videotape...They will never want their face to be seen, and so the equipment was an issue whenever we did interview the Amish children. It had to be discussed on what sort of accommodations we could make for the children so that the mother was willing to bring the child. The team member spoke with some of the elders of the church to talk with them about what could be done. And the accommodation we made was that the camera was pointing down at . . . shoes, so that their voices were on tape, and their feet were being shown but their faces were never shown on the recording.

Participants described adapting their standard set of rapport-building questions to accommodate children's diverse cultural experiences:

They were Jehovah's Witnesses. . . they didn't want certain things and interviewing the child was a little difficult because they didn't celebrate birthdays or any things like that. Most questions that I'm used to asking in interviews, "Oh what did you do on your last birthday?" . . . it wasn't something I was really familiar with at the time. . . . It was a hard case to interview them on because I couldn't get more background on them.

An interviewer described dressing differently for a conservative Mormon family, to increase their acceptance and comfort.

I dressed in a manner that would be appropriate for them, because they were already turned off of the whole process. They didn't want to be a part of this process, whatsoever. So I tried to dress in a manner that was respectful for them.

A CAC director described interviewers using an indirect approach to help children open up if they were reluctant to disclose because of religious beliefs.

If a child obviously had a block about getting someone in trouble, we call it "going behind the barn door," you know, there's another door on the other side of the barn, and you just go in another door, you back off and go in another door. So, if they knew that was an issue or they suspected during the interview, they're good at addressing those and opening a question about, "Is that something you're worried about", and trying to get that out in the open.

One participant said she would be reluctant to modify her interviewing style for a child from a particular religious group, since she did not want to deviate from standard forensic practice. However, she said she might accommodate children who are uncomfortable because of religion by spending more time developing rapport with them:

Maybe if I would do anything, it might be to elongate the time of rapport-building in my interview time. That's about all I can think of actually.

Regarding working with religious minority children, one interviewer suggested remaining open-minded:

I think just being open-minded and not too forceful with your own opinions on how something should go. It goes a long way with any different culture you are dealing with. And trying to understand why they might want to proceed in a different way than you would recommend.

Several participants suggested matching the interviewer gender with that of the child for members of some conservative religious groups, where the genders are typically quite segregated. For instance, several participants commented on difficulties with cross-gender communication in Orthodox Jewish communities. One male participant mentioned that he routinely conducted forensic interviews with Orthodox Jewish boys, rather than having a female colleague conduct them, saying that often these boys seem to feel more comfortable with a male interviewer.

Another participant described the need to assign male police officers to conduct investigations of abuse in Orthodox Jewish schools:

Part of it was not being allowed communication across genders. If it was a female officer, I don't remember specifics, but it was something like a female officer wasn't going to be able to have communication with a male administrator at the school.

3.6. Clashing belief systems

Participants discussed situations in which their own belief systems and/or the law clashed with children and families' religious belief systems. For instance, an interviewer described a family characterizing as abuse a teen's consensual sexual encounter with a same-age peer, based on religious rejection of such behavior.

It seemed like innocent behaviors like holding hands, and hugging, and maybe a kiss, but that was really awful for her to be doing before marriage. And it was just really confusing for the girl, because she was really feeling like she may have been sexually abused because of the way her grandmother was portraying it. . . . But it was very wrapped around religion when she was talking to the girl about it.

Participants discussed how different interviewers' religious and social beliefs sometimes manifest at the CAC. For instance, an interviewer might be more religiously conservative than a client family. One interviewer described colleagues' apparent discomfort with sexual or gender minority children and families.

The interviewers think that they're being pretty open-minded about it. But you can tell that they're very uptight-uncomfortable with the situation. I just think it's really hard for people to deal with something they. . . haven't really dealt with and it goes against their own morality even if they don't want to say that, they do have a problem with it. I have never seen somebody be blatant about it, but you know, after the interview. . . like if we have a peer review or something they'll say, "Well, I told them I didn't care."

Another participant talked about clashing assumptions within the team when working with a Hasidic Jewish family and how this was handled:

There were some assumptions being made about how this family was interacting, without consideration for the fact that this was one of the Hasidic community. . . . I facilitated the conversation. We were able to recognize that both [professionals] had made assumptions about what the other was saying.

3.7. CAC and clergy collaborating

Participants described effective collaborations between CAC staff and members of religious communities. The collaborations most often described occurred on an ad hoc basis, when both a clergy member and CAC staff were involved with a particular family. Sometimes, however, although these collaborations were initially reactive, they evolved into far-reaching joint interventions.

A participant described how a priest helped a family come to terms with the sexual abuse of their daughter in a team meeting. The parents were distressed to learn that their daughter had suffered penetration, and therefore they no longer considered her a virgin.

The priest piped in, in ways that our team couldn't necessarily do, about virginity in God's eyes. . . . And from the priest's point of view, why the child was still a virgin in God's eyes. I think the virginity issue comes up a lot for many of the Latino and Catholic families that we see. . . . and it taught me a lot about the accessing of resources within the culture that fits and that the family is still a part of and comfortable with. . . . They had another way of making meaning of that same thing through a cultural lens that still made sense to them.

Another participant described a pastor serving as an effective foreign language interpreter for a family meeting.

Sometimes these CAC/clergy collaborations involved reaching entire religious communities with prevention messages. This occurred in one Jewish congregation where the abuse had occurred within the institution:

It was absolutely quite extraordinary how the congregation and the rabbi addressed this within the community . . . Their spiritual safe place got invaded by this. . . They really expressed a lot about what it meant that it happened there. . . We actually went out. . . and met with the whole community. They had a community-wide meeting to talk about sexual abuse and sexual abuse in the Jewish community.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This study highlights the complexities of managing child sexual abuse allegations with sensitivity in the context of religious beliefs and traditions. In this case we focused on issues of diversity with regard to religious institutions and religious faith, and how they intersect with CSA forensic processes at CACs, using a qualitative methodology. We examined general themes that can be extrapolated and understood with regard to any religion, rather than aiming our lens solely at any one religious institution or practice. Most of the themes identified are applicable to the variety of religions brought up by our participants, and not particular to any single faith or religious group.

This examination yielded rich and poignant data, revealing participant reflections about ways they manage unanticipated and sometimes challenging or frustrating events. Participants described aspects of religion impacting the grooming process, the ways disclosures were handled prior to CAC contact, and events involving CAC staff and children and families.

Participants frequently discussed detrimental factors related to spirituality and religious involvement. They observed that perpetrators, religious traditions, religious tenets and religious leaders could manipulate youth, using religion perversely as a tool of corruption, exploitation, shaming, secrecy, and isolation. These latter detrimental effects of religion may be familiar, given recent widely disseminated and newsworthy stories of CSA in a variety of common religions. The participants' descriptions of the ways these harms appear in forensic interviews add specificity to the growing body of literature on religion-related child maltreatment (e.g., [Bottoms, Goodman, Tolou-Shams, Diviak, & Shaver, 2015](#)).

Conversely, participants noted positive aspects of religion, including factors that encourage protection, safety, and support, and offered solace at times of unique strain and sadness in their lives, and in the lives of their non-perpetrating parents and guardians. They provided examples of religious leaders and institutions providing protection and guidance to youth when their parents would not, or when family members were perpetrators. Forensic interviewers described ways in which religious explanations facilitated healing and diminished shame and hopelessness in victims and families.

The findings of the potential benefits of religion to victimized youth, as well as to non-perpetrating family members, are less well publicized, yet important. Religion is central to the lives of many families in the United States, and internationally. These results add to the literature on religion as a factor in improving resilience for CSA survivors (e.g., [Rivera, 2016](#); [Vieth, 2007](#)). Therefore, it is critical to be able to use the pervasiveness of religion to foster safety for children. This research highlights some of the ways in which forensic processes can join with religious institutions and leaders to encourage the potential positive impacts of religion in preventing CSA, and promoting recovery when it occurs.

Participants described accommodations they made for the religious needs of particular children and families. In most cases, these accommodations seemed to have been devised 'on the spot' when faced with a dilemma that needed an immediate solution to allow the investigation to proceed. Undoubtedly, greater foresight, outreach and planning would allow for more effective accommodations to meet religious needs that any given CAC may not have even yet identified.

4.1. Recommendations

In response to this research, we strongly recommend the development of CAC best practice guidelines with regard to the following: (1) Fostering respectful understanding with local religious communities. This can include CACs reaching out to clergy and congregations to learn about religious beliefs and practices, ways to create a comfortable environment at CACs, needed accommodations, and other factors that are meaningful within specific religious contexts; (2) Providing education to local religious communities about CSA, including helping them work with law enforcement on setting up mechanisms to screen people who wish to volunteer in youth-serving organizations; (3) Training CAC staff in relevant religious issues to help them overcome possible religious biases and achieve religious cultural competence; (4) Regularly holding open discussions of religious factors at team meetings and peer review, in a general way and tied to specific cases; (5) Increasing the religious diversity of forensic interviewers to help CACs reach families of a variety of backgrounds, regardless of whether "matching" is used ([Fontes, 2005](#)); and (6) Establishing relationships with local clergy from a variety of faiths to sow trust and help them disseminate prevention messages and support children and families who are recovering from the crises generated by CSA.

Much research is needed on child sexual abuse and religion generally, and on ways religion impacts child sexual abuse investigations in particular. Detailed case studies of particular religious groups can be informative (e.g. [McGuigan & Stephenson, 2015](#)). We also need information on how religion, gender, ethnicity, language, race, and other factors interact in the CAC setting. Research on risk and protective factors in particular religious settings (e.g., summer camps, schools, homes where children are home-schooled) would also be informative, as would more systematic study of religious contexts that promote child abuse prevention and protection. Finally, because several categories of family violence often co-occur, further studies should approach religious factors in family violence more generally to tease out ways particular families may be at risk of or protected from multiple forms of violence.

4.2. Limitations

The research participants were not randomly selected. Rather, they volunteered to participate due to their interest, without any other obvious incentive or reward. Thus, their responses may not be representative of all child forensic interviewers. Those many children who were not abused in a religiously observant family would be unlikely to be discussed in this research, leading to what might be an over-emphasis on risk factors. In addition, we did not specifically ask about CSA occurring in the context of agnostic or atheist families, and thus cannot comment on the experiences of alleged victims in non-religious families. Participants were not asked about their own religious affiliations or beliefs so we have no data on how these may have impacted research responses. Additionally, these responses are anecdotal, based on participant memories for religious issues that affected forensic interviews; data derived from systematically reviewed and coded forensic interviews might yield different conclusions.

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