



Siblings' Perspectives of the Impact of Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure on Sibling and Family Relationships

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Child sexual abuse (CSA) may have significant consequences for siblings; however, limited research has been conducted on the impact of the abuse on sibling and family relationships following the disclosure of CSA. This study sought to investigate sibling responses to disclosures of CSA among a group of adult siblings in Ireland, and the impact on sibling and family relationships through an online survey. A thematic analysis was conducted on a sub-set of participants who responded to open-ended questions (n = 45). Three main themes were identified as follows: (a) intense emotional reactions, (b) relationship support and strain, and (c) managing family dynamics. CSA disclosure may have a substantial impact on sibling and family relationships. Supporting siblings in the aftermath of CSA disclosure is essential, both for the well-being of the individual who was sexually abused and for the wider family.

Keywords: Child Sexual Abuse; Disclosure; Siblings

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Siblings serve as one of the most enduring relationships over an individual's life span. In contrast to peers, siblings may be a constant presence in a child's life, starting at birth and continuing until death (Noller, 2005). An appreciation of the impact of siblings on each other's development has emerged in the research literature in recent years. Despite this, in the child sexual abuse (CSA) literature, there has been limited focus on how siblings and sibling relationships may be negatively impacted by the occurrence of CSA. As a large number of survivors only disclose CSA in adulthood (Alaggia et al., 2019), the disclosure may significantly impact family and sibling relationships, enhancing relationships or placing a strain on them (Crabtree et al., 2021). Given the importance of sibling relationships as a source of support for those recovering from the impact of CSA, a closer examination of siblings' experiences is warranted. This study sought to explore

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sibling responses to CSA and the impact, if any, on sibling and family relationships, from siblings' perspectives, following disclosure of CSA experiences.

Child Sexual Abuse and Sibling Relationships

The worldwide prevalence of child sexual abuse has been estimated as ranging from 8% to 31% for girls and from 3% to 17% for boys (Barth et al., 2013). Studies in Europe and North America have reported prevalence rates from 15% to 33% in adolescent and adult females (Fergusson & Mullen, 1999) and 3–10% among males (Pereda et al., 2009). One possible explanation for the variability in findings is the different methodologies used, particularly whether studies rely on self-reports or statistics provided by authorities. Researchers have reported that sexual abuse is most common between the ages of 12 and 14 (Negriff et al., 2014), with the specific age of onset varying between school age and adolescence, and the lowest percentage of CSA perpetrated against preschool children (Perdahli Fis et al., 2010). There is an extensive evidence base outlining the long-term and severe mental health and physical difficulties following CSA. Survivors of CSA are at a significantly higher risk of developing physical and psychological difficulties compared with those who have reported no abuse. According to Maniglio (2009), adults who have been sexually abused in childhood are up to eight times more likely to develop a mental health difficulty, compared to those who have not been abused. Intrafamilial abuse has been reported as having a more severe impact on the abused child (Loinez et al., 2019). Family processes are also challenging following sexual abuse, characterized by poor family communication due to distress, lack of skills to support the survivor and the stigma associated with CSA (Hernandez et al., 2009). Thus, the relationship between the child and the nonoffending parents is often compromised at a time when enhanced family support is most needed.

While attention has appropriately been given to parent–child relationships in CSA, less is known about the relationship between abused and nonabused siblings. Siblings can have an impact on one another's development both directly and indirectly through the sharing of physical and emotional resources, including critical attention and support (Feinberg et al., 2012; Kracht & Sisson, 2018). They serve as social partners, role models, and influence one another indirectly through wider family dynamics, such as affecting the development of the family structure, holding a favored role in the family or diluting family resources (McHale et al., 2006). Research has revealed that, through processes such as identification, modeling, and imitation (Feinman & Lewis, 2013), older siblings can have a direct or indirect impact on their younger siblings' motor development (Berger & Nuzzo, 2008), cognitive development (Dai & Heckman, 2013), and emotional development (Song et al., 2016).

High quality relationships, characterized by closeness with siblings, are related to higher levels of well-being (Bedford, 1998). According to Thomas et al. (2017), sibling relationships become more important for well-being as individuals age and social networks diminish. Despite this acknowledgement of the importance of sibling relationships as compared with, for example, parent–child relationships, limited research has been conducted on sibling relationships in general, not only in the field of CSA.

The theoretical literature underpinning the influence of siblings on development draws upon social learning theory (Bandura, 1971), attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958) and systemic family theory (Pam, 1993). These theories serve to explicate research findings on how siblings are negatively impacted, both in the short term and long term, by exposure to maltreatment of a family member, such as domestic violence or violence toward a sibling. For example, Teicher and Vitaliano (2011) reported that witnessing violence toward a sibling is associated with symptoms of depression, anxiety, somatization, anger-hostility,

dissociation, and “limbic irritability.” Few published papers have directly focused on the psychological impact of CSA on nonabused siblings and these have primarily focused on child siblings (Hill, 2003; Katz & Hamama, 2018; Schreier et al., 2017; Tener & Katz, 2021). Such papers have highlighted the psychological impact of CSA on nonabused siblings and the need to include these children in therapeutic responses to CSA. In addition to the psychological consequences for siblings, tangible consequences include having to move school, being taken away from their parents and having to deal with law enforcement (Baker et al., 2001). Polarized responses have been identified in siblings following CSA disclosure, such as feelings of anger, blame, and resentment toward the victim while also feeling an urge to protect or support them (Schreier et al., 2017). Hill (2003) reported that it was more difficult to come to terms with the abuse for siblings who found out the perpetrator was a close family member. Hill also highlighted the challenge for parents of explaining the nature of the abuse to young siblings at a level appropriate to their age.

The emotional impact of CSA on adult siblings, although recognized by mental health practitioners (Han & Kim, 2016), has largely been neglected in the research literature. Studies in recent years have focused on sibling sexual abuse (SSA), where the primary focus was on the victim of SSA or how the nonoffending sibling responded to the victim (e.g., Tener et al., 2020). Welfare (2008) noted that for most nonabused siblings in her study, the loss of family integrity was a major issue. Siblings had different recovery needs depending on their role in the family. To our knowledge, only one study has been conducted on nonabused adult siblings’ experiences that was not confined to a focus on sibling abuse, that is, where the perpetrator was a sibling. Crabtree et al. (2018) interviewed five adult siblings in Ireland, exploring their experiences following CSA disclosure by their sibling, and the impact of the disclosure on family relationships. They identified six key themes: (a) trying to make sense of it all, (b) struggling to provide support, (c) managing the impact on the wider family, (d) feeling isolated, (e) finding a voice, and (f) rescripting the future. Participants reported a loss of connection with their family, and ambivalent feelings toward both their sibling and the once-trusted family member now accused of sexually abusing their sibling. They described struggling to cope with the legacy of their sibling’s abuse by trying to make sense of it in the context of what they thought had been a happy family context; having to re-negotiate their sibling relationship over time; supporting other distressed family members; supporting their sibling with their distress; and re-evaluating their future aspirations in light of the ongoing impact of the sexual abuse on their sibling, on themselves and on the wider family.

Crabtree et al.’s sample was small, involving female participants attending a support service where the abuse was perpetrated by someone outside the family. The authors acknowledged the need to capture more diverse views, including the perspectives of siblings who have not sought support from professional services, those who may have known from childhood about the abuse and those whose parents or siblings were the perpetrators of the abuse. As an Irish study, and the first such study to explore in depth siblings’ experiences of CSA, it sets the context for the current study and a rationale for investigating changes in family relationships following the discovery of CSA.

The Current Study

The qualitative studies described above have highlighted the emotional struggles experienced by siblings of those who have experienced CSA. These studies largely draw on small sample sizes (under 30), recruited through support services. Therefore, it is likely that there is an overrepresentation of siblings’ experiences of distress in this literature. The current study sought to capture a broader representation of siblings through a population-based survey design to further elucidate siblings’ experiences of CSA

disclosure by a sibling and changes in family relationships following disclosure. Thus, the aim of the study was to investigate sibling experiences of relationships within the family following CSA: siblings' responses to the disclosure of CSA and their understanding of how CSA had impacted on their relationships with their siblings and other family relationships. As most children do not disclose their experiences of CSA during childhood (Alaggia et al., 2019), the focus in this study was on perceived changes in relationships before and after disclosure rather than before and after the period of abuse.

METHOD

Design and Procedure

A national population-based electronic survey design was adopted, targeting adult siblings of victims of CSA to explore sibling responses to disclosures of CSA and the impact of such disclosures on relationships within the family, in the immediate aftermath and at the present time. The full survey contained questions about family structures, relationships between family members (whether close or not) during childhood and at the present time; the type of abuse their sibling experienced and by whom, how this information came to light and what action was taken as a result; and questions about accessing help as a result of the sexual abuse. Data were collected using Qualtrics, an online survey platform. Participants were provided with a link to the online survey, and were presented with an information sheet and a consent form. If they declined the invitation to participate, they were automatically directed to a debriefing sheet that contained information about support services. Each survey took approximately 20–30 minutes to complete.

This paper is based on the qualitative data provided by participants in the open-ended questions about their response to the disclosure and the impact of CSA on sibling and family relationships following the disclosure and at the present time. As the focus of this paper is on family relationships, it was considered relevant to include data on participants' own reactions to the disclosure for those participants who had provided qualitative data on changes in family relationships. The data thus represent a sub-sample of the larger study ($N = 45$), which is ongoing. Demographic data about these participants, their siblings and the type of abuse that occurred are also presented to provide a context for participants' experiences. The study received institutional ethical approval from (university).

Participants

Participants for the larger study were recruited through a wide range of sampling strategies between March and September 2019. These strategies included circulating a link to the study through: (a) key organizations in Ireland that provide services for people who have experienced CSA; (b) articles in 17 national and local newspapers (print and electronic) throughout Ireland; (c) speaking on eight national and local radio programs throughout Ireland; a Facebook page about the study and Facebook Sponsored Advertisements over a two-month period; (d) a recruitment poster on the first author's website, with the accompanying link to the study; and (e) a recruitment poster in local libraries, General Practitioner and Dental practices in Dublin city. Participants were eligible to participate if they were over 18 years of age, had a sibling who experienced CSA and were not a victim themselves. In their responses to the survey, 45 respondents (out of a total of 83) indicated that their relationship with their sibling had changed following the CSA disclosure and, in response to an open question seeking elaboration on this change, provided data relating to these experiences, and to the impact of CSA on sibling and family relationships. The current paper reports the analysis of this qualitative dataset from this sub-sample ($n = 45$).

TABLE 1
Participant Characteristics

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	9	20
Female	33	80
Relationship status		
Single	8	18
Married/co-habiting	32	71
Separated/divorced	4	9
Widowed	1	2
Relationship to sibling		
Biological	44	97
Adopted	1	2
Described family as		
Matriarchal	16	36
Patriarchal	10	22
Neither	19	42

The sample consisted of 45 participants (36 women and nine men). The mean age of the sample was 45 years ($SD = 11.8$). Families ranged in size from nine siblings (4%; $n = 2$) to seven siblings (27%; $n = 12$) to one sibling (7%; $n = 3$). Table 1 presents additional demographic characteristics of the sample.

A minority of participants (33%, $n = 15$) had another sibling who was abused, other than the sibling about whom they completed the survey. Data on the type of abuse were available for 87% ($n = 39$) of the participants. The most typical form of abuse experienced by participants' siblings was penetrative/oral sex (48%, $n = 22$), followed by contact abuse (38%, $n = 17$), indecent exposure (20%, $n = 9$), and being involved in or shown child pornography (4%, $n = 2$). A small proportion of participants did not know what type of abuse was experienced by their sibling (13%, $n = 6$). Perpetrators of the abuse ranged from close family relatives (siblings, parents, brother-in-law) (43%; $n = 20$) to extended family members (cousins, uncles) (18%; $n = 8$), to friends and members of the local community (36%; $n = 17$).

Data Analysis

Prior to analysis, all qualitative data from the open-ended questions were exported into an Excel spreadsheet and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method; familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing these themes, defining and naming the themes and preparing the report. Thematic content was identified that related to the participants' reactions to disclosure, the perceived impact of CSA on sibling and family relationships following the disclosure, and how this impact was experienced over time through adulthood. Initially, this analysis followed a deductive thematic analysis process based on the themes identified in Crabtree et al.'s (2021) study; trying to make sense of it all, struggling to provide support and managing the impact on the wider family. Additional themes were identified that characterized siblings' perceptions of their relationships with their family members before, during or after the CSA disclosure occurred. These themes were agreed upon by the first two authors. As these additional themes represented the bulk of the data, a decision was made to re-analyze the data using an inductive thematic analysis. Consensus on themes in terms of

consistency and coherence was reached by the first and second authors through discussion, re-visiting the data, until a mutually agreed theme was identified.

RESULTS

The Disclosure

Information about the disclosure was available for 37 respondents (82%), with the exception of when respondents found out about the abuse, which was available for 36 respondents (80%). Many participants found out about the abuse more than a decade after it happened (48%, $n = 21$) while just 2% ($n = 1$) found out immediately and an additional 9% ($n = 4$) found out within weeks or months after it happened. The mean age for participants when they found out was 26 years of age ($SD = 13.2$). The most typical way that respondents discovered the abuse was that their sibling told them (49%; $n = 22$), followed by being told by other family members (11%; $n = 5$) or someone outside the family (11%; $n = 5$); two people witnessed the abuse (4%). Participants were asked about their reaction to hearing about their sibling's abuse; most reported not doing anything (27%; $n = 12$), with other respondents either contacting the sibling in question about it (18%; $n = 8$) or speaking to their parents about it (20%; $n = 9$), while three participants (7%) contacted the abuser about it. The majority (65%; $n = 29$) believed their sibling about the disclosure, while a small number either were not sure they believed (7%; $n = 3$) or did believe at first but indicated they did not know if they believed them at the time they completed the survey (4%; $n = 2$). One individual did not believe their sibling at first but did believe them at the time they completed the survey.

Impact on Sibling and Family Relationships

Three themes were identified from the data capturing respondents' experiences of the impact of CSA on sibling and family relationships: (a) intense emotional reactions, (b) change in sibling relationship, and (c) managing the family dynamics. Participants' quotes are included below to illustrate these themes. A participant's age and gender is denoted in brackets, where appropriate and/or available. Ellipses have been inserted in circumstances where quotations have been redacted for the purposes of brevity. Additionally, words in brackets have been inserted to add context to a particular quote, where necessary.

Intense emotional reaction

Participants described a turmoil of emotions following the CSA disclosure. For many, the initial reaction was one of intense shock and disbelief. An overwhelming sense of sadness seemed to engulf many siblings, along with feelings of anger or guilt; they spoke of the disclosure as an intense and tumultuous emotional experience. Many described the incomprehensibility of how someone would do something so terrible to their sibling. A 34-year-old woman noted: "To this day I still can't understand how someone would hurt a child like that, especially their own niece..." Such descriptions of incomprehensibility were often characterized by a strong feeling of hurt and upset that their sibling had not told them sooner. Another 37-year-old woman described her reaction of shock to her brother's disclosure: "When it came out, I was in shock as I thought he would have told me. I was very traumatized; I couldn't understand how it had happened. Because I was like a mother figure." Similarly, a 52-year-old man described his feelings on discovering that other family members knew: "After I found out and realized the rest of the family had known for 10 years. I was very upset ... I was extremely angry ... I was so disappointed

that I wasn't told. . ." A 55-year-old woman spoke about the torment she went through, having witnessed the abuse as a child:

I was seven she was nine, I didn't have the words to tell anyone and just buried the memory. . . I was too traumatized to tell anyone. So really, I've always known about it in some form, but I was never able to talk to her about it. She told other sisters about it long before she told me. When she did tell me, I wasn't able to get the words out that I was there when one of the attacks happened. . . The main thing holding me back from speaking out is being accused of lying, even at 55 years of age that would destroy me. I've never lost the feeling of being that helpless 7 year old, not able to stop what was happening and not knowing what to do to help my sister.

Participants spoke of sadness for what their sibling had endured, disgust toward the abuser, and anger and rage that someone could have harmed their sibling in such a horrific way. As one 31-year-old woman noted:

When you first find out, the reaction is likely to be a mixture of upset (that you had not been told before) and disgust that anybody could do that your sibling. It may also be that you get so outraged that you want to find and hurt the person who did this to the person you love.

Similarly, a 34-year-old woman described the shift in emotional reaction from distress to anger: "I will never forget how sore my face was from all the crying. . . After a while of talking I got angry at him and wanted to go kill him."

An overwhelming sense of guilt was also experienced by many of the respondents, as the reality of what their siblings had told them began to sink in. Many siblings described experiencing feelings of intense pain as they reflected on not having protected their sibling. For a number of siblings, this feeling of guilt continued to torment them. For instance, one 55-year-old woman spoke of her guilt at not having done more for her sister: "I feel I could have done more to help her, this feeling has got worse since she died. . . I wish I'd had the courage and the words to help her more. . . I feel that I could and should have done so much more." Many respondents also described feeling guilty for not having been a victim themselves. These conflicted emotions were portrayed by one 42-year-old woman who described that, although she experienced guilt for never being a victim, she also experienced relief that it had not been her, "I feel guilty that I was not a victim myself when three of my four sisters were abused. . . I felt huge guilt for having never been a victim. . . I struggle with feeling guilty and lucky for having escaped it."

Relationship support and strain

Participants described an intense feeling of protection toward their sibling. As one 34-year-old woman noted: "From the second I found out about the abuse, I felt a very strong sense of protecting my siblings and my parents." Many reported offering support, for some this was emotional support, showing compassion and understanding for their siblings. Others provided more practical support, such as seeking therapy for their sibling, or providing financial aid. One 41-year-old woman described taking on all of the responsibility for her sibling following disclosure:

Despite my sibling being the elder. . . I assume the role and responsibility of the eldest child; providing emotional, financial and practical support. I care for my sibling in many ways. . . I became my sibling's advocate/protector. Always watching. . . feeling my siblings' struggles and pain.

Some participants described taking on this supportive role to protect their parents from this burden. As one 51-year-old woman noted, "The whole family has been torn apart by this. Our mother died 10 years ago, but my father is alive and, at 82 years of age, I'm still trying to protect him from the pain and enormity of this".

Another participant reported moving in with their sibling following the disclosure, while most others described providing support by talking with their sibling and by listening to them. This increased communication appeared to be a key factor underlying the increased closeness in sibling relationships. They described how, through open conversations between participants and their siblings, they were able to express their emotions, how they felt about the disclosure, which, they perceived, strengthened the sibling relationship. As one 57-year-old woman noted: “We are closer and there is no pretence as we can discuss the CSA and the impact on her and to me.” A 51-year-old man described a similar experience of how talking about the abuse helped relationships among siblings in the family:

A counsellor taught my sister how to talk more openly to me and our siblings about her sexual assault experiences, it made us all so much closer as we can talk to each other about anything now. It created a safe place for her to tell us how she feels, which in turn meant we all could share how we feel. We all are super close, always have been.

For other participants, relationships with their siblings appeared to become more strained following the disclosure. They spoke of their sibling not wanting to speak about the sexual abuse, leaving them feeling unsure about what had happened. They described how their sibling distanced themselves, contributing to an underlying tension. A 46-year-old woman spoke of avoiding speaking about anything which would remind her brother of the abuse: “Our relationship was distant for a long time I couldn’t understand why. He shut me out of that part of his life, I think it was too difficult for him to open up about it.” Participants also described their own difficulty in opening up about the CSA. For instance, one 48-year-old woman described how she used avoidant behaviors such as distancing herself from her sibling or avoiding conversations about childhood: “My sibling can be very cutting/negative about other family members and about childhood memories which I remember as happy memories so I avoid discussing those things.”

Managing family dynamics

Participants spoke of the challenge of managing family dynamics since the disclosure. These participants described the impact their sibling’s disclosure had on family relationships as profound. The difficulties reported ranged from strained relationships among the family, having to negotiate and liaise between different family members, to the complete breakdown of the family unit and major divides within the family. As one 19-year-old man described: “Everything I thought my family stood for was shattered.” In the case of intrafamilial abuse, many participants described conflicting emotions toward the abuser. For some, trying to make sense of their feelings toward the abuser appeared to be a source of torment and pain. One 41-year-old woman noted how her previously held view of her uncle had to be re-evaluated: “I was very upset as the abuser was a favorite uncle who I was very close to.”

A 56-year-old woman described this emotional ambiguity toward the abuser as “the most complicated and painful thing” she ever had to deal with, which continued to be a major source of confusion and stress: “Now, my brother [abuser] is blamed, and he is being shunned by many family members. Now that the other horrors have emerged, I feel sorry for him too, but still don’t know what to do.” This was further complicated in some cases when some members of the family were unaware of the abuse and the sibling had to keep the abuse a secret. Managing the family dynamics appeared to lead to strains in the relationship with those who were unaware of the abuse. A 51-year-old woman wrote of the pretence involved: “so there is a lot of pretending and this is very hard to manage”. Another 34-year-old woman spoke of the struggle to engage with her brother who was the abuser of her sister: “I can’t look at, talk to and think about older brother . . . I feel a wedge between

[us] because I can't tell him and it's a secret I carry alone. In more than 10 years since she told me it has only gotten harder and harder and my parents wonder why I don't talk to my brother...".

Two women, aged 61 and 51 years, respectively, described how, following the disclosure of intrafamilial abuse, they chose to cut all ties with the sibling who abused: "I never spoke to my step-brother again"; "My brother who did this I want nothing to do with." This appeared to cause major strain and, in many cases, an ultimate breakdown in the relationship between the participant and those siblings who made the decision to stay in contact with the abuser. On occasion, these major divides were described as emerging among families as one side of the family believed the sibling who was abused, and the other side chose to remain close with the abuser. As one 31-year-old woman noted:

We never spoke to her . . . brothers, or their wives/girlfriends. To this day, we don't know them or their children, and no attempts have been made to come together apart . . . at family funerals. To be honest, unless my sister wanted us to, I see no reason to make amends with them when they didn't believe her all those years ago.

Participants described how their families denied the abuse and avoided "speaking the unspeakable". As one 56-year-old woman noted, the abuse was "the elephant in the room [. . .] To be honest, I feel that family members didn't fully believe my sister's story as they didn't want it to be true." Another 44-year-old woman described how her mother could not face the truth of the abuse: "To her dying day, my nan never accepted that her son was a pervert rapist that ruined my sister's life."

Having to negotiate family relationships appeared to be experienced as exhausting for some and overwhelming for others. As one 51-year-old man described: "It is a life sentence of negotiation of relationships, avoiding some, embracing others but a pit of fear and dread in my stomach when family gatherings have to happen." For many, avoiding family gatherings or terminating relationships among the family was described as the only way with which they could cope following the disclosure. One 51-year-old woman described how she has come to a decision to withdraw from such gatherings: "family events are dreaded and so stressful, almost impossible. It is impossible to negotiate relationships, so I am letting some go for my own mental well-being." Many participants described a mediating role that fell to them in the process of managing family dynamics, as one 48-year-old woman described it: "I live in the middle of the chasm..." A 48-year-old woman described this mediating role between siblings in the family: "As one brother refused to talk to her for a few years as he was in recovery I had to act as go between and that affected my relationship with her." Occupying this role seemed to reinforce the stressful and complex dynamics these siblings negotiated following their sibling's disclosure. A 34-year-old woman described the experience as "very lonely and isolating." She noted that she would never be able to "fully describe the fracturing nature of the damage which makes healing or hope seem permanently hopeless...."

Many participants spoke of their own struggle with their family relationships, such as anger toward parents for not protecting the abused sibling, for not seeing the signs that there could be something wrong, or for exposing their sibling to the abuse. One 34-year-old woman described her anger toward her father: "I blamed him for not noticing something was wrong with my sister," while another 45-year-old woman described her anger toward her parents: "They should have seen the signs." For several participants, this anger was considered the reason for a great deal of strain on the relationship they had with their parents. A 19-year-old man described his difficulty understanding his parents' role: "It was difficult to accept how it could have happened without my mother's knowledge.... [the relationship] was more strained as doubt and unanswered questions hung over us for years." Overall, it appeared that the disclosure had a severe and lasting impact

on family relationships. As siblings and parents became estranged, the nonabused siblings appeared to struggle to manage these complex family dynamics.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore the impact of CSA disclosure by a family member on sibling and family relationships in order to help guide policy makers and service providers in responding to families where sexual abuse has been experienced. The main themes that emerged from the current study include the following: (a) intense emotional reaction, which captured siblings' experiences of considerable distress following the discovery that their sibling had been sexually abused; (b) change in the sibling relationship, reflecting either an increased closeness in the relationship or an increased strain in the sibling relationship; and (c) managing family dynamics, whereby siblings found themselves struggling to manage family dynamics as the impact of the abuse and subsequent disclosure influenced family relationships. In particular, these findings highlight how siblings perceive the impact of the abuse on their sibling, family, and selves to continue into adulthood, confirming the need for studies on CSA to incorporate a lifespan perspective (Alaggia et al., 2019). This study contributes to the current literature on the psychological sequelae for siblings and families who continue to struggle in the aftermath of CSA disclosure.

A unique finding of this study, and one that warrants further exploration, is the value of adult siblings sharing negative experiences as a means of maintaining closeness in the relationship. The psychotherapy literature emphasizes the importance of sharing the narrative of an abuse in the journey toward healing for adult survivors of CSA (Draucker et al., 2011). However, the importance of sharing outside the psychotherapy context has only been discussed in the context of parent-child relationships. Research has found that parents were better able to support their children following CSA when they knew more details about what happened (Van Toledo & Seymour, 2013) and children's capacity to understand their experiences and manage their emotional responses has been found to improve when parents and children have reminiscing conversations about the child's negative experience (Salmon & Reese, 2016).

In the current study, participants suggested that a reciprocal openness about what happened (on the part of both siblings and other family members) and knowing about what happened (on the part of sibling respondents) were features of close sibling relationships following a CSA disclosure. In contrast, not knowing the details of what happened and feeling afraid to mention the abuse were features of more distant sibling relationships. This adds to the sparse literature that suggests that post-traumatic growth can be enhanced by openness and social support (Schubert et al., 2016). Post-traumatic growth was not explored in this study. However, the findings suggest that it would be worthwhile exploring how siblings' understanding of the meaning of the abuse and its impact on families changes over time; how family members come to terms with the abuse and its impact on the victim; what helps families overcome difficulties; and what contributes to resilience processes within the family. Another noteworthy finding from the current study was that openness about the abuse on the part of their sibling helped the participants understand their sibling better and helped them make sense of their sibling's experience. Participants felt better able to support their sibling and felt closer to them in these conversations. Thus, it may be that openness about the abuse, within sibling relationships and within the wider family may contribute to family resilience following CSA.

Siblings' immediate responses to CSA disclosures were characterized in this sample by shock, distress, disgust, anger, guilt, and self-blame—all painful emotions that left some participants feeling devastated and experiencing their own personal distress. The authors

are unaware of any research that has attempted to capture the psychopathology of siblings of those who have experienced CSA. It has been acknowledged that parents experience considerable distress following a CSA disclosure, including feelings of shock, confusion, fear, anger, disbelief, denial, and self-blame (Bolen & Lamb, 2004; Elliott & Carnes, 2001; Lovett, 2004; Mathews et al., 2013). Some studies have reported that at least a third of parents experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (Cyr et al., 2018) or self-reported depression (Santa-Sosa et al., 2013) following a CSA disclosure. The literature on parents' experiences of their child's CSA disclosure has been described as sparse (McElvaney & Nixon, 2020); this becomes even more evident when considering siblings' experiences. An acknowledgement in both research and clinical literature that CSA may have a significant impact on all family members, not only the victim and the parents, is needed. In some instances, therapeutic support may be indicated for siblings who are struggling with their own reactions to the CSA disclosure and their relationships within the family. Community support groups or online fora may help mitigate the sense of isolation that siblings may experience, validate their experiences and support them in developing their own coping strategies for managing family relationships.

As most victims of CSA do not disclose until adulthood (McElvaney, 2015), it is important to consider the impact on adult siblings. Participants in this study spoke of feeling guilty about not knowing about the abuse, about not being targeted themselves and about assuming a caretaker role in relation to their sibling, sometimes to protect their parents from the burden of caring. These findings resonate with participants' experiences in Crabtree et al.'s (2021) study, which highlighted the somewhat unclear or unrealistic expectations of their siblings, thus creating a further burden. Those participants described feeling unsure of what their sibling wanted from them and struggling to "get it right." In the current study, participants spoke less of an expectation from their siblings and more of a desire to undertake responsibility for their sibling in order to support aging and distressed parents, a theme also highlighted in Crabtree et al.'s study. Hatfield and Lefley (2005) have described how aging parents may expect their adult children to take care of a more vulnerable sibling and indeed many authors have described this phenomenon in the context of siblings with mental illness such as psychosis (Bowman et al., 2015) and eating disorders (Areemit et al., 2010). In the current study, the sibling's motivation for adopting a caretaker role appears to derive more from a concern to protect parents from the worry and distress caused by their sibling's behavior or poor mental health.

Some participants in this study reported feeling upset that their sibling had not told them about the abuse. In Hill's study (2003) of child brothers of sexually abused children, brothers felt angry about not being told of the abuse. The sentiment described by participants in the present study related more to how they felt this reflected on their relationships with their siblings, much as parents felt this reflected poorly on how their children perceived them and their relationship, as found elsewhere (McElvaney & Nixon, 2020). In the present study, participants reported feeling guilty that they did not know about their sibling's experience and thus were unable to protect them and/or support them in the aftermath of the abuse.

While the ripple effects of CSA upon the wider family has been acknowledged in the literature, the role of siblings in managing the fallout of CSA for other family members has received very little attention. The findings of the current study highlight the difficulties experienced by participants in managing their own relationship with their sibling while also contending with family dynamics such as denial and pretending nothing had happened; conflict between family members, some of whom may not have believed the CSA disclosure; the CSA being withheld from some family members; and maintaining (or not) relationships with both the victim and the abuser where abuse took place within the family, all of which contributed to a strain in family relationships. The current study

highlights the unique role of siblings in managing these family dynamics and the impact and strain that this places on siblings.

Strengths and Limitations

This study focused on a much neglected group in our society, that of siblings of those who have experienced CSA. In using an online survey, we succeeded in reaching siblings who had not sought professional help prior to completing the survey, thus capturing a broad range of perspectives. The online design enabled respondents to participate without fear of identification, and hopefully, provide an open account of their experiences of a sensitive phenomenon. Nevertheless, the authors were surprised at the low response rate (83 responses to the survey in 3 months), given the efforts at advertising the study and findings in an Irish study that one in five adults had experienced unwanted sexual experiences before the age of 17 (McGee et al., 2002). Welfare (2008) suggested that it is easier to recruit victims of sibling sexual abuse as other family members may wish to avoid confronting the pain and shame elicited through participation. The present authors' experience is that siblings appear to be a difficult cohort to access. It may be that raising awareness about the impact of CSA on siblings will help to validate siblings' experiences and act as an encouragement to participate in research.

The online nature of the survey did limit accessibility for those without internet access, resulting in bias in the study design. Although information on support services was provided at the end of the survey, participants did not have the benefit of an empathic interviewer when sharing these experiences and the questions may have triggered distress for participants as they reflected on what, for some, were difficult experiences. As a qualitative study, the current findings cannot be interpreted as representative when considering implications for practice. Also, we did not seek information on participants' race or cultural affiliation. As responses to CSA disclosure have been found to vary according to culture (Fontes & Plummer, 2010), this is important information to consider in understanding contextual factors in siblings' experiences. While the anonymous nature of the survey may have encouraged some individuals to come forward who might not otherwise have done so, the study design also limited participants' ability to speak in-depth about their experiences; it is challenging to investigate experiences in a survey that in reality reflect processes that unfold over time. More studies of siblings' experiences, using in-depth interviews, are needed to build on the findings from this study and previous qualitative studies.

The present study focused on siblings' perspective at a point in time. Family relationships are dynamic and change over time, influenced by a myriad of factors both within the family and the wider environment. In the present study, participants were asked to describe relationships in the past; clearly, their memories of relationships prior to disclosure are influenced by subsequent experiences. Conducting prospective longitudinal research that tracks the dynamic changes relating to the family context over time, such as reciprocal changes in family members' understanding of the abuse and changes in relationships over time, would be useful. Identifying what helps help families navigate these changes could be of immense benefit to those who co struggle with the long-term legacy of CSA.

Implications

This study has a number of implications for policy and service development. Support for siblings of those who have experienced CSA is vital, not only to address their own distress following the disclosure but also considering the protective and supportive role that siblings may assume with their sibling who was sexually abused. Supporting family members

could arguably have much more impact on the long-term psychological well-being of those who have experienced CSA than providing one hour per week counselling to survivors. Draucker and Martsof (2008) have described how family dynamics, left unaddressed, represent a family legacy of chaos that may pass on to future generations. The value of family therapy to address such issues is well recognized in children's service, however, in adult services the emphasis is often on individual therapy, and to a lesser extent, group therapy. Tailored support for siblings and other family members, where the abuse has been disclosed to the family, could be invaluable as part of a holistic response to CSA.

The current study depicts various ways in which siblings provided support to their sibling who experienced CSA, through believing them, listening to them and speaking openly and honestly about the abuse. Clinicians could support victims and their families in discussing sexual abuse more openly following a disclosure to enhance and support family relationships. Communication interventions (e.g., supportive listening, problem solving skills), which have been shown to have utility in other contexts in promoting openness and empathy among family members (e.g., Bowman et al., 2015), could be tailored for such families in order to strengthen supportive relationships.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper highlights the challenges facing siblings following the disclosure of CSA of a family member, suggesting the need for researchers and practitioners to consider how siblings are impacted by CSA. For some, supporting one's sibling following CSA may leave that family member additionally vulnerable. A CSA disclosure may bring siblings closer together or it may create a strain on relationships. Family roles may change and siblings may adopt caring roles, in relation to the sibling who experienced CSA, other siblings in the family (e.g., where a sibling was the offender) and parents. Our findings build on previous research, suggesting the need for support services for families of adult survivors. We know much about the longer term psychological impact of CSA on adults who continue to carry the legacy of CSA across the lifespan. The small but growing body of research on adult siblings demonstrates how these siblings share that legacy with those who have travelled through childhood with them, and continue to be impacted. Their needs must also be attended to in appropriate responses to CSA.

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