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The Impact of Sexual Abuse Upon Males

Many of the issues raised by the men interviewed by the author in the course of research for his book *The Male Survivor* (Sage Publications, 1994) resemble those cited in the literature as common responses of women to sexual abuse. I will briefly review these before turning to issues which are especially salient to males. Issues related to each of the four traumagenic dynamics proposed by David Finkelhor and Angela Browne (1985) — stigmatization, betrayal, traumatic sexualization, and powerlessness — were apparent in the present study. Numerous respondents described feeling stigmatized as a result of their abuse. They felt that they were bad, worthless, different from those around them, unable to be "one of the guys," and so forth. Several men cited the lack of societal recognition of the sexual abuse of boys as an additional source of their stigmatization.

Betrayal was a recurrent theme in the interviews. The ten men interviewed as part of the present study experienced incestuous abuse, most of which was perpetrated by adults in a caretaking role. Like their female counterparts, male survivors struggle with issues of trust and closeness. Many asked variations of the question: How could someone who was supposed to love me and take care of me abuse me instead? In several cases, the perpetrator was a primary — or even the solitary — source of warmth and positive interaction. This resulted in a sense that the affection had been contaminated by the abuse. Difficulties with trust and intimacy appear to be an almost inevitable residue of intrafamilial childhood sexual abuse. Another issue frequently mentioned by participants in the current study and commonly cited in literature on female survivors is difficulty establishing and maintaining appropriate interpersonal boundaries. Several men discussed their tendencies to become immersed in or "engulfed by" relationships, once they allow themselves to become emotionally involved.

A striking aspect of the interviews was the emphasis placed by the respondents on intrafamilial abuse. Two men had experienced mild to moderate abuse by members of their family and been anally raped by an unrelated male. In each case, the men presented the rape in a casual, almost off-hand manner, while emphasizing the impact of the incestuous sexual interaction. This supports the statistical finding of the dissertation study from which this presentation is taken — that intrafamilial abuse is more damaging than extrafamilial abuse in terms of each outcome measure. It is also consistent with Judith Herman's argument (1981) that the source of the traumatic impact of incest lies in the "corruption of parental love" more than in the sexual act itself.

Traumatic sexualization was prevalent in the lives of these men. One pattern of response to the abuse appears to be an atrophying of sexual drive. Two men stated that their abuse had "ruined" sex for them. One said that through therapy he has become able to seek out affection, but that his capacity for sexual desire is virtually non-existent. Conversely, others indicated that sex is the only way they know to achieve human contact and to express warmth or affection. The notion of the fusion or confusion of sex and affection was a recurrent theme in the interviews.

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Powerlessness was also a pervasive issue for the participants in this study. It appears that powerlessness has different meanings for men than for women, due to the socialization of males as powerful and active beings. Therefore, concerns related to power and the meaning of victimization for men will be discussed in greater depth in the following section.

Issues of Particular Salience for Male Survivors

A number of sequelae of childhood sexual abuse appear to be especially characteristic of male survivors, due to differential male and female socialization. These issues may be divided into three categories: dissonance between the male role-expectation and the experience of victimization; shame and gender-shame; and identification with the perpetrator and fear of continuing the cycle of abuse.

Masculinity and Victimization

Virtually all of the men in this study reported difficulty integrating their sense of themselves as men with their childhood experiences of victimization. Their schemas of what it is to be male do not incorporate feelings of helplessness and passivity. One man put this most succinctly: "The abuse tells me that I'm not a man." Men who have been sexually abused appear to live in a state of dissonance, struggling to find congruence between their masculinity and their victimization. They often feel very ambivalent about masculinity and what they perceive to be male attributes.

The experience of helplessness and being-acted-upon appears to be very threatening to men's sense of themselves as men. Several expressed doubts about their capacity to be masculine in the aftermath of their abuse. Fran Sepler (1990) argued that providing male victims with assurances of their blamelessness in the face of abuse (or even using the jargon of victimization) is counter-productive because it evokes men's sense of helplessness, which is their greatest fear. In her view, male victims gravitate toward activity and aggression because they find the state of helplessness and weakness unbearable. The interviews conducted in this study do not appear to support Sepler's theory that men are hurt by efforts to affirm their blamelessness: a number of men indicated gaining psychological relief through accepting that they were not responsible for their abuse. However, it may be that with the passage of time and the assistance of therapy, these men have reached a level of comfort in their sense of self as men that has enabled them to begin to integrate their victimization. Boys and younger men may mobilize a number of defensive mechanisms to distance themselves from their helplessness. The implication for therapy with a male victim is that one must first assist him in affirming his masculinity, strength, and competence before helping him to accept that despite these attributes he was victimized and acted-upon.

Men appear to be very prone to blame themselves and shoulder responsibility for the abuse. As several clinicians who work with male survivors have noted, a man who has been sexually abused often feels like "less of a man" or like a failure as a man by virtue of "permitting" the abuse to occur. Finkelhor (1984) used the term "male ethic of self-reliance" to denote the male trait of seeing oneself as responsible for one's well-being and preservation. A number of men in the current study reported feelings of failure for being unable to protect themselves from the abuse. This appears to represent a divergence from a

pattern more characteristic of female survivors. Several writers have noted the tendency of female victims to blame their mothers for not protecting or rescuing them from incest by their fathers. This theme — anger at someone else for not protecting them from abuse — did not appear in any of these interviews. Instead, the failure to protect seems to be entirely internalized: men in this study experience themselves as deficient, unmanly, and incompetent because they could not provide themselves with adequate protection against the abuse. The sense of self-blame is exacerbated by the "myth of complicity," as Paul Gerber (1990) terms it, in which the male victim assumes he must have been an active, willing participant in his childhood sexual activity. The message to the male victim is not simply that if he was abused he must not be a man, but also that if he is a man he must not have been abused.

Obviously, victim-blaming is not limited to the male victim. Writers such as Judith Herman (1981) describe the pervasive cultural myth of the seductive daughter. Such notions are internalized by women, so that female survivors of sexual abuse are also likely to hold themselves accountable for their victimization. I believe, however, that male socialization and societal notions of masculinity make men even more vulnerable to self-blame. The myth of complicity and cultural schemas of men as strong, active, and competent militate against men perceiving themselves as victims of sexual abuse. Additionally, there is a societal equation of males with oppressors. The sexually abused male is told, in effect, not only that he is not a victim but that he is, by virtue of membership in the class of males, a perpetrator. Jim Struve (1990) refers to the dissonance of being a victim while a member of an "oppressor class." One participant in this study enlisted this argument in presenting his theory of the transmission of abuse: "Men can't express their pain and grief because they see themselves as the oppressors rather than the oppressed in society. Therefore, they identify themselves as oppressors and end up as perpetrators. Men lash out in anger because they can't express their pain." In short, the men in this study feel intensely and, I believe, understandably, that their victimization is unrecognized and invalidated. It is incumbent upon professionals in this area to recognize males as victims both for their sakes and, to the extent that this man's theory of the transmission of abuse is accurate, for the sake of future generations.

This respondent's theory is also consistent with Fran Sepler's (1990) model of male patterns of response to victimization. She asserts that male victims are only, or primarily, in touch with feelings of anger. Helping a victim to obtain access to such feelings, which may be effective with females, is redundant or counter-productive with males. The men interviewed in the present study, however, appeared to have considerable access to feelings of loss, sadness, pain, and vulnerability. In fact, such feelings emerged more prominently in these interviews than did expressions of anger. I would speculate that a critical distinction between victimized men who go on to perpetrate and those who do not is the ability of the latter to integrate their experience of victimization and access feelings of pain, loss, and vulnerability. Sex offenders, by contrast, may be unable to tolerate feelings of helplessness and weakness. They emerge from their childhood victimization primarily experiencing anger, which is expressed via sexually aggressive acts.

Along with doubts about masculinity, childhood sexual abuse also appears to evoke confusion and insecurity regarding sexual orientation. Several of the respondents indicated concerns about whether the abuse signified that they were gay. This study, like several

others before it, found a high incidence of homosexuality among a sample of sexually abused individuals. While a discussion of the relationship between childhood abuse and sexual orientation is beyond the scope of this paper, concerns regarding the implications of abuse for one's sexual orientation appear to be virtually universal among sexually abused men.

Shame and Gender Shame

Shame related to sexual abuse is a common characteristic of both male and female survivors. Both men and women may experience shame at having been victimized, shame for aspects of the abuse that they found pleasurable, shame for secondary gains accrued due to the sexual interaction (special privileges from a parent, for example), and shame for their perceived complicity or responsibility for the sexual interactions. However, there appears to be a somewhat different cast to men's shame regarding sexual abuse. One aspect of this, already discussed, stems from the lack of societal recognition of male victimization, and the consequent stigma experienced by male survivors. Men who were subjected to sexual abuse experience an additional stratum of shame, which Dimock et al. (1991) call gender shame. As the term implies, this refers to a sense of shame about oneself as a member of the class "men."

The notion of gender shame is closely tied with the equation of males and oppressors. As one man in the current study said, "I know who men are; they're the ones who abuse you." Male survivors experience a pervasive sense that men are evil, hurtful, and abusive. The sense of class shame is not limited to those abused by men. One man who was sexually abused by his sister and by his mother, noted that he grew up assuming that men were inferior and worthless. This elicits profound ambivalence and confusion in terms of male survivors' identities as men and their identifications with men. A recurrent theme in the interviews was the feeling of not belonging or fitting in. Gender shame may also contribute to the erosion of self-esteem which is characteristic of sexual abuse survivors: perceiving one's gender as loathsome is certainly not likely to facilitate the development of a positive sense of self. Another outgrowth of this dynamic, which will be discussed in the following section, is the fear that one, as a man, is destined to become a perpetrator. Many men appear to de-identify with all things male, as a means of distancing themselves from what they perceive as an opprobrious class.

Along with shame for being male, many male survivors are ashamed of themselves as males. In other words, they feel that they come up short as men by virtue of having been raped, abused, weak, helpless, passive, victimized, and any other "unmanly" attribute which may be applied to the abuse experience. To repeat one respondent's pithy summary of this issue: "the abuse tells me that I'm not a man."

Shame may also lurk beneath a number of other common features of the male sexual abuse survivor. Recent psychological writings on shame (e.g., Kaufman, 1989) view addictive behaviors as rooted in the shame experience. Such behaviors may be seen as efforts to avoid or dull one's sense of shame. Several studies have found very high rates of addictions and compulsive behaviors among populations of male sexual abuse survivors (Dimock, 1988; Kelly & Gonzalez, 1990; Stein et al., 1988). Many of the men in the current study reported extensive histories of substance abuse. Recently, compulsive sexual

behaviors have begun to be considered addictions. Sexual compulsivity was also quite common in the current sample. Such behavior may be understood in part as addiction, but would appear to be multiply-determined. A number of the respondents noted that sex is the only way they have learned to express affection or to gain intimacy. Additionally, sexual activity may be a way for men to reconfirm their sexual adequacy in the wake of victimization and the consequent damage to masculine identity.

Shame is a core dynamic for the sexual abuse survivor. It is placed in a prominent position by the twelve-step programs which comprise the "recovery movement." Such programs provide a group venue of non-judgmental others attempting to work on the same problems and a focus on ridding oneself of the shame connected to one's addiction. Many of the male survivors with whom I have had contact participate in twelve-step groups, whether for the sexual abuse itself or for various addictions. I would speculate that the recovery movement appeals to survivors largely through its attunement to shame dynamics. Other approaches to psychotherapy may be able to better serve this population through increased attention to shame.

Identifications and Fear of Perpetrating

Based on his clinical work with male survivors, Mike Lew (1990) asserts that there are three patterns of identification available to a sexually abused man: victim, rescuer, and perpetrator. Each pattern was evident in the interview responses of the men in the current study. However, while a few discussed recurrent victimization, this did not appear to be as wide-spread of a pattern as it is for female survivors.

"Rescuers" were very well represented in the current sample. A number of men reported repeatedly playing the caretaker role in relationships. This pattern was also apparent in the occupational choices made by respondents: of the ten men interviewed, three were medical doctors, two social workers, and one a chiropractor. One man indicated that becoming a doctor represented a natural evolution of his childhood role as caretaker for his younger siblings. Another noted that the fact that no one was there to help him during his childhood has fueled his attempts to help others. A third sees his career as a chiropractor as an adaptive response to the abuse. He feels able to provide others with what he wishes had been provided him — warm, healthy physical contact in the context of safe boundaries. Career choice was also motivated by another dynamic connected to the abuse. Several men indicated that they felt they had to reach the pinnacle of their field in order to attain self-esteem. They see their career development as compensatory to the diminution of self-worth caused by the abuse.

Perhaps the single most salient issue for the male survivor is the fear of perpetrating. As Bruckner and Johnson (1987) found in their groups with male survivors, the threat of becoming a perpetrator is the male survivor's Sword of Damocles. Though the present study did not explicitly address perpetration, to the best of my knowledge and clinical judgment none of the men who participated in the interviews had perpetrated sexual abuse. Almost all, however, expressed apprehension about this issue. There is a sense among male survivors that they are virtually fated to perpetuate the cycle of abuse. Three of the men stated that they had decided never to have children out of fear that they would do to their

children what was done to them. One said that he saw childhood as inevitably painful and had determined "not to inflict childhood upon someone else."

A central conclusion of the dissertation research out of which this presentation is taken is that males are abused and females perpetrate abuse far more often than is generally believed. However, for numerous reasons, it does appear that men are more likely to gravitate toward the perpetrator rather than the victim role. Sources of this tendency include male socialization as active and aggressive; a trend toward identification with the same-sex parent, thus perpetuating existing sex-differences in rates of perpetration; the need to master trauma through identification with the aggressor and thus reassure oneself that one is not weak or helpless; the societal equation of males with oppressors and females with victims; and the lack of resources and outlets available to male victims. The motivation displayed by men in the present study to escape this "destiny" underscores the need to recognize boys as victims. This is necessary for their sake, to assist them on the road to recovery. It is also necessary for children of future generations. By dealing more with boys as victims, we may be free to deal less with men as perpetrators.