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Impact of Sexual Experience

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The Relationship Between Sexual Experiences Before
The Age Of 12, And Severity Of Impact

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Running Head: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEXUAL
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Abstract

According to the literature, the extent of negative impact from sexual experiences at an early age is influenced by the age of the child at the time of the event(s), the age of the other person, and the frequency and duration of the behaviour. The aim of the present study was to investigate and explain the impact of sexual interaction with another person before the age of 12. It involved comparisons between 100 sex offenders representing the experimental group, and 100 "other" offenders, representing the control group, all incarcerated in prison in South East Queensland, Australia. The results indicated that in general, the less the frequency and duration, and the less the force or coercion used during the sexual interaction with another person, the more the subsequent impact on that child. Children who undergo such interaction in the middle years of childhood (8 - 11 years) seem particularly likely to experience an adverse impact.

Most sexual behaviours are consumatory in nature and species specific, that is, individuals desire to seek out a partner of their own species with whom they can share intimacy. In the majority of cases, the object of erotic affection is an opposite gender, same age peer. However, increasing attention needs to be focused on the consequences of the sexual molestation of children, many cases of which are unreported or undetected.

While definitions of incest and paedophilia vary within the literature, emerging from the debate is the issue of the ages of the perpetrator and victim versus their relationship with each other. In referring to incest, the focus is typically on the sexual interaction between biologically or step-related people for example, incest between an adult brother and an adult sister. Paedophilia and child molestation, whether incestuous or not, must involve a child. The stance adopted in this paper is to define paedophilia and child molestation as involving a child whether s/he be a blood relative of the perpetrator or not.

From the Australian legal perspective, sexual offences against children are increasing in number (Sturgess, 1985). In Queensland (Australia) during 1990/1991, 3110 sexual offences (excluding rape) were reported to police over a six month period. This represents 19% of the offences against the

person statewide (Queensland Police Service, 1990/1991). Sexual offences (excluding rape) represent a category of offence against the person larger than all except serious and minor assault which represent 31% and 37% respectively.

From a social perspective Marshall and Barbaree (1990) suggested that both the family and factors outside the family take on increasing importance in shaping sexual and personal attitudes and behaviours as a young boy develops. During puberty, youths are exposed to a significant number of conflicting messages. For those who as a consequence of poor self esteem are ill-prepared to function adaptively, the messages that they are most likely to adopt may be those which meet their needs for power. As parents, these adolescents will probably behave in ways which have been learned from their parents, and thus pass the needs for power on to the next generation.

In examining the relationship between exposure to, or the experience of, varying types of sexual behaviour by children and their later adult child sexual abuse, Glick (1970) addressed the issue of long-term psychological harm caused to the victim. Results indicated that the degree of harm is determined by the age of the child, nature of the attack, identity of the attacker, and the duration of the attack. Overall, Glick suggested that the experience may

hamper the ability of the victim to develop reliance on the outside world, but did not investigate the effects upon adult sexual behaviour.

Plummer (1981) further noted that arguments presented around the notion of threat centre on the concepts of consent and exploitation. The issue of consent focuses on the notion that a child is not capable of making a judgement - that the child is incapable of arriving at a decision on the matter. Argument following from this position suggests that a child could never willingly participate in sexual acts with adults. Further, the exploitation argument states that adults are stronger and have developed a notion of their own sexuality. This leaves a child in a vulnerable position should the adult choose not to consider the child's feelings but to focus on his/her own personal gratification.

Finkelhor (1979), collected data from 530 female and 266 male American college students with regard to their childhood sexual experiences with adults and adolescents. Eleven percent of the females reported having had such an experience before the age of 12, while 4% of males reported age and gender inappropriate sexual contact during the same period of their development. Finkelhor's analysis indicated that when force was used and the perpetrator older, the more trauma females reportedly experienced.

In an extensive Canadian study (Committee on Sexual Offences, 1984a; 1984b) of the 2008 persons sampled, 54% of females and 31% of males had received unwanted sexual attention during some stage of their lives. The types of behaviours inflicted upon females involved offender exposure (41%), threatening (7%), touching (30%) and an assault or attempted assault (22%). For males, exposure comprised 37%, threat 6%, touching 42% and assault or an attempt at assault in 15%. For males, 56% of the contact involved physical coercion and 6% threats, while for the females, 58% coercion and 3% threats.

Follow-up studies have shown consequential negative effects - both short and long term - experienced by those involved during the early part of their life. The short-term effects reported include reactions of fear, anxiety, depression, anger and hostility, and inappropriate sexual behaviour. Long-term effects are summarized as the continuing experience of depression, self-destructive behaviour, anxiety, feelings of isolation and stigma, poor self-esteem and substance abuse. Inability to trust others and sexual maladjustment have also been reported (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Oates, 1990).

Not only are the sexual acts reported to cause severe and continuing trauma for the victim(s), but the legal,

social and psychological ramifications for the offender and his/her family are enormous. The literature suggests that the greater extent of the negative impact from sexual experiences accords with the earlier age of the child and older status of the other person at the time of sexual molestation (Hunter, 1990), the greater the frequency and the prolonged duration of the behaviour (Finkelhor, 1979) and the greater degree of force or coercion exerted upon the individual (Finkelhor, 1979; Hunter, 1990; Kilpatrick, 1990). The aim of the present study was to investigate and explain the impact of sexual interaction with another person before the age of 12.

Method

The present study was conducted with adult male inmates held in prisons throughout South East Queensland. Those offenders who participated included a sample convicted for a wide variety of illegal activities and who were deemed by the system to range from maximum to minimum security risks to the community.

Subjects

One hundred offenders comprised each of the experimental and the control groups. They participated voluntarily in the project.

The age range of these men, which was determined by the

ages of incarcerated offenders at the time they responded to the protocol, was 22 to 59 years. The terms of imprisonment for which they had been sentenced ranged from one year to life. All had been incarcerated for more than three months, and had thus settled into their prison sentences and environment.

The sample of experimental subjects was drawn from those offenders who had been incarcerated for all manner of sexual offences involving children. The control group was selected from inmates serving sentences for other offences, including rape.

For both groups, many of the inmates were serving terms of imprisonment which involved more than one offence. None of the controls were currently serving a sentence for any child molestation offence.

Data collection

The protocol, in the form of an eight part questionnaire, addressed demographic characteristics of each subject, his sexual experiences, social experiences, perception of self, physical health, present perceptions, and sexual and other offending history. Except for the last four parts (which addressed health issues, personal perceptions, and offending behaviour) each section was divided into experiences before the age of 12, and experiences between the

ages of 12 and 16 years.

Staff and discrete (rather than mixed) groups of inmates from the prisons were addressed independently by the first author at the commencement of data collection so as to maximise the participation rate by providing clear and accurate information. This strategy also served to minimise interference from staff and to allow inmates to question the researcher personally and to have the issues of their personal and legal protection outlined.

Defining Impact

The concept of impact was defined in terms of a five point scale. The limits involved fear on one end of the spectrum and pleasure on the other, with the gradations between including bewilderment, surprise and interest. "Surprise" was included with some reservations. However, it was viewed as suitable if the other polarized choices were rejected by the subjects.

Test-retest reliability of the questionnaire was evaluated using the Kappa Statistic (Cohen, 1968; Fleiss, Cohen & Everitt, 1969).

Statistical Analysis

For hypotheses which proposed a relationship between two categorical variables, cross-tabulations were generated, and the Chi-square statistic, using Yates' Correction, was

employed to determine differences between groups. A series of multiple regression analyses, producing beta weights, were also undertaken to determine the severity of the impact of sexual behaviours.

Results

The offender's experiences of sexual activity before the age of 12 are depicted in Table 1 where more sex offenders than control offenders were involved with viewing, fondling, masturbation and oral sex before the age of 12.

insert Table 1 about here

In term of sexual experiences involving a person who was four or more years older, Table 2 indicates that except for intercourse the sex offenders reported more sexual molestation than the control offenders before the age of 12. During the same period and except for masturbation, the sex and control offenders reported similar occurrences of sexual activity. Except for intercourse, more of the control offenders reported not having had any sexual experiences before the age of 12.

insert Table 2 about here

In order to determine the impact, a series of multiple regression analyses was undertaken to determine the severity

of the impact of sexual behaviours experienced by sex offenders before the age of 12 years. This produced a series of Beta weights which indicate the impact of the variables in terms of the degree of their significance and the direction of their impact.

Table 3 depicts a summary table of Beta weights in terms of the degree of significance and the direction of the impact. For example, the greater the age of the "other", the greater the negative impact of genital sex without penetration ($r = 0.716, p < .0001$).

insert Table 3 about here

A similar analysis was undertaken for the control offenders. This was based on numbers that were a great deal smaller because significantly fewer of the control offenders had had such experiences. Compared with the sex offenders, this yielded a very much smaller number of findings (22 versus 7) which were of lower significance (C's and D's). The only demographic variable which shared any consistency in its direction of effect was the age of the "other" person. When that person was older, the impact tended to be greater.

Table 3 indicates that the sexual experiences had the following impact on the offender who had had a sexual experience before the age of 12. In general, the younger the

age of the sex offender's sexual experiences in his own childhood, the less negative the impact of the experience upon him.

However note that many of the correlations are low and explain very little of the variance.

The other person being older (across all sexual behaviours except for fondling) usually had a more strongly negative impact upon the sex offender as a child.

In general, the more frequently an experience occurred (and to a lesser extent the longer its duration), the less its impact. Some of the correlations here are strikingly high. There are two related explanations for this: first that the boy became desensitized with repetition of the experience and second, the boy having become very upset when it first occurred, might have succeeded in avoiding its repetition subsequently.

Whilst the correlations are modest, a relatively high degree of reported coercion impacted positively rather than negatively on the offenders. Explanation of this result could relate to the victim's sense of guilt and complicity in the sexual experience. Thus when greater coercion was applied, the victim may have redefined his own behaviour in terms of his lack of control over the experience, and relinquished any self blame and guilt by attributing all responsibility to the

molester.

Analysis of sexual behaviours involving intercourse, anal sex and rape indicated frequencies too small to interpret.

So as to combat difficulties arising from small numbers, analysis of the combined groups of sex offenders and control offenders of "first-time" sexual experiences between the ages of 12 and 16 years was undertaken. The results were very much less decisive than for the group under the age of 12. Frequency appeared thus to be a much less important determinant of impact in the 12 to 16 years age group. The pattern produced by the younger group was replicated for oral sex and sex talk only, where the more these behaviours occurred, the less was the reported impact. Similarly, duration and age of the other person produced much less clear cut results (data not tabulated).

Discussion

Similar to other empirical studies (Conte & Schuerman, 1987), the data from the present study reveal that not all children are affected, or affected in the same way, or to the same extent by, the experience of sexual molestation.

Hunter (1990) in referring to the case histories of patients with whom he had worked, suggested that the earlier age at which the sexual molestation occurred, the more severe

the impact. Like Browne and Finkelhor (1986), Garland and Dougher (1990) noted that the literature conflicts as to whether younger or older children are more traumatized by early sexual contact with adults. However, they suggested that the age of the child may interact with other variables, and that emotional disturbance or psychiatric disorder in the child may make a sexual experience with another person a positive experience because the child may experience needed affection from such a relationship.

Generally in this study although the sex offenders were young when molested, for those under 12, the younger their age when the sexual interaction with another person occurred, the less was the reported impact. Those who were in the age range 8 to 11 years, experienced greater impact than those who were younger.

The present findings of less trauma experienced at a very early age, could be explained in terms of children younger than 8 years having limited cognitive and perceptual maturity whereby they were unable to understand the implications of the various sexual experiences to which they were subjected. They thus avoided significant trauma. Similarly, Browne and Finkelhor (1986) speculated that naivete may protect them from some negative effects.

Browne and Finkelhor's (1986) proposal that "the age at

which abuse begins is less important than the developmental stages of development through which the abuse persists" (p. 172), is based on the research findings of Tufts' New England Medical Centre (1984) who suggested that latency-age children, that is those between the ages of 6 and 11 years, were the most disturbed by sexual molestation. This is further supported by the present study: those offenders who were victimized as adolescents (that is both sex and control offenders between the ages of 12 and 16 years) report results which are much less decisive than in those under 12 years of age. This suggests that the 12 to 16 year olds experienced less impact from the sexual interaction than the 8 to 11 year olds.

Additionally, Reinhart (1987) attributed what he considered to be failure to disclose the sexual experience, to a trait developed during these latency years.

Interestingly, Groth, Longo and McFadin (1982), whilst investigating incarcerated child molesters, found that the modal age at the time of their first offence was 16 years. This result supports speculation that some offenders may not have experienced a negative impact from their own sexual molestation, but rather from that experience had themselves developed a sexual interest in children.

Here, the more frequently it occurred and the longer its

duration, the less impact the experience reportedly had on the individual. This was explained above in terms of the child's desensitization to these experiences or avoidance of the repetition of the more horrendous experiences.

Conversely, it may be explained in terms of gratification experienced as a consequence of the behaviour as suggested by Burgess, Groth, Holstrom and Sgroi (1978). Burgess et al. have suggested that the longer young males are involved with an adult sexual partner, the more likely it is that they develop and maintain positive emotional and social ties with him.

Hunter (1990) suggested that the degree of impact is greater when multiple incidents are "spaced closely together" (p. 47). This he claims, prevents the victim from "stabilizing between each occurrence" (p. 47). Utilizing this view, the results in the present study could be explained in terms of the victims having had adequate "spacing" between the incidents. They thus had the opportunity to regain stability before subsequent sexual experiences. However, "spacing" was not an issue that we specifically addressed.

The relatively high degree of coercion impacted positively rather than negatively on the sex offenders (Table 3). By functionally redefining his role as that of a passive child, the offender later provided himself with a sense of

control over choosing and changing the subsequent course of events in his life: "now I can choose, then I couldn't". By doing so he could once again believe that he has some control over and protection from random events in his life. This could facilitate the rebuilding of a positive self image.

The results of Conte and Schuerman's 1987 study, which investigated factors which are associated with increased impact, indicated that "the factors associated with a variation in symptoms are the victim's supportive relationship with an adult or supportive relationship with siblings; (and) the number of characteristics of the victim's family which are indicative of a poorly functioning (unhealthy) family" (p. 207). Where families had significant problems with life and/or indicators of pathology, the victims are negatively affected.

They also cite factors such as the victim's fear of negative consequences to him/herself if the abuse was revealed (but fail to specify what those negative consequences might be), the offender's denial of the behaviour, the victim's perception of his/her relationship with the offender, the age of the victim and, the victim's perception of some responsibility for the molestation as having a variable but negative impact on the later functioning of the victim (Conte & Schuerman, 1987).

Of particular interest however, were the variables involving efforts by the victim to oppose (by escaping, avoiding or successfully resisting) the abuse or, alternatively, passively submitting to the demands of the perpetrator. Both of these incompatible actions reportedly reduced the impact of the molestation by providing coping activities during the molestation. In recognizing that these variables are contradictory, Conte and Schuerman (1987) speculated that they possibly represent coping strategies which mirror the general coping behaviours utilized in life, that is to either actively attempt to control the events in one's life or, alternatively, to accept the events with which one is confronted. However Conte and Schuerman do not make it clear with what these conditions of reduced impact can be compared: but perhaps unsuccessful struggling against molestation may lead to the worst outcome.

In further discussing impact, Conte (in press) contended that sexual molestation may produce two different sources of trauma or impact. These have been referred to as first and second order factors. First order factors relate directly to the experience of sexual molestation such as actions taken by the perpetrator to gain sexual access. Second order sources of trauma result "from the victim's processing of the first order events" (p. 10). He speculated that some victims may

over time, "come to view their compliance with the abuse, compliance inducted by threat, bribe, or meeting other emotional needs, as evidence of their complicity" (p. 10). In time they may then come to develop associated problems which involve problems or symptoms such as self blame, poor self concept or poor esteem.

Methodological Issues

Similar to some other studies (Simon et al. 1992), data were derived from a captive population of men who had been prosecuted and convicted for committing sexual offences against children. For a number of reasons this sample is not representative of all men who have committed sexual offences against children. Firstly, not all men who have committed child-related sexual offences are apprehended. Secondly, there are individuals who have committed such offences who are apprehended but through lack of sufficient evidence, through the victims being too young to prove effective as witnesses or because of other legal considerations, are not prosecuted or prosecuted and not convicted.

Additionally, those who are incarcerated have typically been involved more often in sexually deviant behaviour and over a longer period of time. This has led some researchers to suggest that the offences committed by those who

subsequently find themselves in jail are most likely to be more numerous "and more depraved" (Herman, 1990).

The literature frequently comments on the difficulties of undertaking retrospective studies which rely on self-report (Conte, 1985; Freund et al., 1991) and hence do not allow for direct causal analysis. Since this is one such study, cognizance of the consequential implications is required when interpreting the data.

Miller (1985) noted that, as a consequence of trauma, mechanisms may develop to "protect" the individual against the psychological effects of the trauma. In referring to sexual abuse of children, she argued that these may take the form of "repression, splitting off of the feeling connected with the recollected content, and denial by means of idealization" (p. 100).

It could well be the case in this study, that some subjects had so totally repressed early sexual molestation experiences that they could not report them. There is of course, no means of ascertaining the degree to which this occurred.

Finkelhor (1980) in his study of sexual molestation of children made the point that "many of the factors that describe the background of the victim are also describing the background of the offender" (p. 272). This is a finding of

the present study: many sexual offenders have been victimized themselves and later perpetuated sexual behaviour during their adult years similar to that experienced as children.

The findings in the present study differ from previous reports in that the less force and coercion used on the victim during early sexual interaction, the greater the impact later experienced by that victim. Further, as similarly reported in the bereavement literature (Raphael, 1994), children between the ages between 8 and 11 are more likely to experience greater trauma associated with sexual molestation than at any other age.

The reasons for this difference may be found in the nature of the sample investigated in this study. Incarcerated male offenders are more likely to have come from an emotionally disturbed background and hence differ from the samples used in many studies. Thus it is possible that their reported sexual experiences represent interactive associations with other unpleasant or traumatic experiences during their early years.

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Table 1. Occurrence of specific sexual activities before the age of 12 years.

No. With This Experience			

Occurrence of Experience	Sex Offenders N = 100	Controls N = 100	X (1df) p <

Talking	57	56	n.s.
Viewing	46	30	4.775 .05
Fondling	62	40	8.824 .01
Masturbation	54	20	23.360 .001
Oral Sex	32	7	18.345 .001
Genital Sex Without Penetration	34	24	n.s.
Intercourse	6	10	n.s.
Anal Sex	15	9	n.s.
Rape	12	5	n.s.

Note: Many offenders participated in more than one of these behaviours.

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Table 2. Occurrence of sexual interaction with a person four or more years older (sexual molestation), peer sexual activity, and no such childhood or adolescent sexual experience of offenders before the age of 12 years.

Occurrence of Sexual Activity	No. With This Experience			X (2df)	p <
	Sexual Molest.	Peer Sexual Activity Only	Neither Experience		
	N = 100				
	N = 100				
Talking	27	30	43		n.s.
* See Note 2	17	39	44		
Viewing	24	22	54	10.065	.01
	8	22	70		
Fondling	32	30	38	14.099	.001
	12	28	60		
Masturbation	29	25	46	25.395	.001
	13	7	80		
Oral Sex	29	3	68	20.326	.001
	7	0	93		

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cont.

Genital Sex Without Penetration	23	11	66	4.205	.05
	12	12	76		
Intercourse	5	1	94		n.s.
	10	0	90		
Anal Sex	14	1	85		n.s.
	9	0	91		
Rape	12	0	88		n.s.
	5	0	95		

Note 1: Many offenders participated in more than one of these behaviours.

Note 2: * In this table, the occurrences in the bold print represent the sex offenders. Underneath are corresponding numbers for the control offenders.

Table 3. Summary table of severity of the negative impact of sexual interaction with another person before the age of 12.

	Sex Talk	Sex View	Sex Fondle	Masturb. Sex	Oral Sex	Genital W/out Penet.	Sex Penet.
Age of Child	C + .174		D + .230	C + .148	B + .449		D + .178
Age of Other	A + .539	A + .438		A + .351	C + .350		A + .716
Freq. of Behaviour	A - .455	B - .333	A - .926	A - .835	A - .876		
Durat. of Behaviour	D - .179	A - .420					D - .308
Coercion/ Threat	B - .230		C - .242	C - .178			A - .373

Note: + = positive correlation between the respective variables and their impact on the individual
 - = negative correlation between the respective variables and their impact on the individual and

sig. p < .0001 A
 p < .001 B
 p < .01 C
 p < .05 D