

Exploring the Effects of Early Life Sexual Abuse in Later Life among Catholic Nuns

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Gary U. Behrman, PhD, MSW, M.Div., LCSW



BACKGROUND

- SAMPLING SOURCE

- Sample comes from a survey that was the first empirical investigation of the prevalence of sexual abuse among Catholic women religious (nuns)

- Chibnall, J., Wolf, A., & Duckro, P. (1998). A national survey of the sexual trauma experiences of Catholic nuns. *Review of Religious Research*, 40(2)



Two questions guide this research:

- How do these women religious interpret the effects of early life sexual abuse in later life?
- What resources do they identify as most effective in being resilient in later life with their histories of sexual abuse in early life?



Objectives for this Research

1. To generate knowledge about the effects of early life sexual abuse in later life among this particular sample

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Objectives cont.

2. to provide an opportunity for these women to tell their stories of sexual abuse.

Of those who were sexually abused, 23.6% had never discussed the abuse with another person.

These women kept their experience of sexual abuse a secret for a mean of 54.3 years (SD = 11.0)" (Chibnall et al, 1998, p. 16).



Objectives cont.

3. What are the implications for serving older adults with histories of early life sexual abuse?

Should sexual history be included in assessment?

How might clinicians address this issue effectively?



Significance of this Research

Given the aging population projections and trends in healthcare services & costs:

- it is imperative for health care workers to continue to exert influence and expertise in the arena of research & practice that promotes healthy aging in later life.



Why include spirituality?

- Koenig, McCullough, & Larson (2000; 2007) analyzed data findings from 850 studies to correlate the potential benefits of religion & spirituality upon health.
- Most scholars agree that religion and spirituality become increasingly important in old age, especially following trauma producing events (Bianchi, 1984; Koenig, 2000; Moberg, 1990; Stokes, 1990; Schultz-Hipp, 2001; Kimble, McFadden, Ellor, Seeber, 1995; Koenig, 1994; 1995; 1997; Ferraro, 1997)



Description of Spirituality

Two perspectives offered in the literature:

- substantive
- functional
 - Both are helpful in achieving some level of coherent and reasonable classification of spirituality as it pertains to these participants.

Pargament, K. (1997). *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. New York: The Guilford Press.



Substantive Spirituality

- the person is conscious of the sacred and a relationship with God or whoever comes to be associated with a Supreme Being



Functional Spirituality

- shifts from a supernatural force or being to a process of integrating the fundamental issues of life such as the meaning of life/death, suffering, tragedy, evil, pain, and injustice.



Practical Spirituality

- Spirituality is that which CONNECTS us
 - To Self
 - To Others
 - To Our Purpose in Life
 - In responsible, creative, meaningful ways
 - Behrman, G. (2012) The community as family: Resilience in older women religious sexually abused in early life. In: *Handbook of Family Resilience*. Ed. Dorothy Becvar, Springer Pub.
 - Behrman, G. (2009) Exploring the effects of early life sexual abuse among aging Catholic nuns. *Critical Social Work*. April



Criteria for Sexual Abuse

- In order to ensure goodness of fit with the Chibnall study (1998), the same criteria for early life sexual abuse was used:
- “Any sexually-orientated contact with a person of the same or opposite sex, including hugging and kissing (with clear sexual intent), genital fondling, disrobing, genital contact, and/or sexual intercourse, where the target of sexual behavior is less than 18 years of age” (p. 5).



Descriptions of Perpetrators

- Participants reported a variety of sexual perpetrators.
 - Four participants reported older male siblings
 - Three reported a father or stepfather
 - Two older neighborhood boys
 - One a grandfather
 - One a janitor
 - One a brother-in-law
 - One a priest
 - One a religious sister
 - NOTE: Some participants reported more than one sexual abuser.



Sample

Sampling Description (12)

- Participants: 65+ y/o
- Oldest participant: 89 y/o
- Mean age: 74 y/o
- All participants self report sexual abuse before entering the convent & the age of 18 with various levels of accompanying self identified disruptive post abuse effects.



Disclosure

- In the Chibnall study (1998) the mean time from the sexual abuse event to disclosure was 54 yrs.
- For this study, the mean time of disclosure was 40 years excluding two outliers who did not report their abuse to anyone except me.
- For these two participants disclosure with me took place 55 and 75 years respectively after the sexual abuse.



Interviews

I traveled to the participants' domiciles.

- east to west coasts
- northern to southern borders within the U.S.
- Interviewed in ten different states
- four Sisters were retired in the community's Motherhouse, while the remaining eight lived in private homes, either fully or partially employed.



Background

- These participants were children and young girls in the 1930's – 1950's.
- They came from diverse socio-economic, ethnic backgrounds
- All were raised Catholic
- All entered the convent before the age of 20



Surfacing their cultural context

- *“We were treated as having no faces*
- *I felt like a cog in a machine*
- *We were a cheap labor force*
- *The cult of patriarchy ruled our lives*
- *I felt like silly putty and you squeeze it real hard*
- *For years I felt like I’m in a net”*



GENERALIZABILITY

- The findings of this study are not intended to be representative of other populations' experiences of sexual abuse. These self reports are intrinsically biased because of these participants' unique frames of reference. The complexity and diversity of aging cohorts, along with the purpose of this study, make it difficult to apply these findings to other aging populations.



Effects of Sexual Abuse as reported by participants

- Anxiety and depression
- Guilt and shame
- Disassociation
- Compulsivity & need for perfection and control
- Feeling used
- Uneasiness with adult persons in authority
- Suicidal ideation
- Substance abuse
- Low self esteem
- Inability to take care of oneself physically, emotionally and socially
- Sense of a lost childhood that either is attempted to be relived in adulthood or developmentally frozen at the emotional stage that the sexual abuse occurred.



First Category: Effects of Sexual Abuse

“I always felt half baked”

- I don't know if it is the abuse, but the fact that I was like afraid of adults. I have an expression, 'I always felt half-baked.' Like I was never a real mature adult. I took the courses, I got the degree but, I just never felt really, really comfortable, if it's someone I know real well then I am fine. A stranger I find pretty hard today, but it is much better. Some fearful adult encounters, and then the tree, the early life is the thorns, and right now during the fall when I was at my last place or one of the places (teaching assignment), across the street was the most beautiful maple tree. It was so red and so beautiful, and there was one on this property, too. I just picked this off as a reminder that I think in my later life, not that I am beautiful, but that I am at peace (she shows me the red maple leaf). Because all during my life I was filled with anger. I talked to different priests and psychologists and so forth. There is always like a civil war within me fighting within myself, but not just the civil war, the Vietnam War because in Vietnam they could not tell the enemy, he looked the same, the same as the good guys. So I did not know what the heck I was fighting, but something always was.



“It took all my energy to be okay”

- *So, I think the most difficult piece of, like, trying to heal completely is that sometimes this depression comes in and it makes me stop trying to, I just have to, I have to use all my energy towards just trying to be okay, you know, so then it doesn't help me concentrate on trying to be better myself, as a person, so, well, I think that the part that troubles me is, I think to myself once in a while, ‘now if I didn't have it (sexual abuse) happen,’ okay, ‘if I didn't have it happen? Would I have so much trouble with the Sisters I live with?’*



“I was always fussing”

- *The fact I was like angry, always fussing at something. I am never really at peace. I myself cannot see how the connection is there, but there must have been something. I felt like an empty shell just functioning. You know, teaching doing my job, but like nothing inside.*



“They’re out to get me”

- *I have, still have a feeling that there is always something going on that's harmful to me but I'll never know and I can't really, some of the stuff that bothers me because I might make everybody mad. I mean, that's still there and I'm sure that's why in my childhood, I believe the world's not a very nice place and they're out to get you and I'm sure that's the atmosphere. For a while, I felt I was weak because I didn't like the fact that I was sexually abused.*



“Will I make it?”

- *Yes, I did have some illness and it was mental illness and that was very, very, very hard time in my life, you know, and I had come through that and it was a very hard time for me to go through that and I never thought I would recover, but I did. So if anything scares me, it's that, that that would come back to me and I don't think it will but I use to have fears about it (sexual abuse) but now I'm resolved, pretty much resolved that I'm going to be okay with that.*



“There is a sense of turmoil”

- *Well, that's very easy to know because when, it was with my brother and I was all, like, kindergarten and so like, sometimes I didn't know exactly when it was going to take place. And he would just ask me, you know, then . Yes, and so, so I think, I just wasn't ever sure when it was going to happen so that brought me tension within my own personhood and not feeling relaxed. So, anxiety, well, I do feel, even though I feel like I try to bring peace, there is a sense of turmoil that sometimes I feel like that I'm not always at ease. I really have to work toward trying to be myself and I'm very tense. I'm very intense.*



“Like a Lightning Bolt”

- *so we would be sitting around and then one time I must have been alone because he kissed me, and I thought the weather, it was like a lightening bolt. I thought, what in the hell; I couldn't imagine what was happening. He was an adult and I was a little girl. I had nobody to tell, nobody to run to. I was just amazed; you know just, I don't know how to describe it.*



“All those years I missed”

- *I didn't realize how bad it was until I got put back together. Then I realized, ‘wow, all those years I missed for one woman (her abuser was an older religious Sister) who couldn't keep her hands to herself. People have told me this is how I was because I can't remember those years. Those 18 years I cannot remember.*



“Lack of feeling”

- *When I did think about it (sexual abuse), the pictures very vividly, as far as the words and the actions, but, and that lack of feeling, emotions... every once in awhile something would come up and I knew that it was there, but as I said, for, I mean, I didn't even think that, that would be considered abuse until a couple of years ago or so when we had more education*



“Taking care of myself”

- *I still do not know how to take care of myself. I probably do a reasonably good job because I am intelligent enough, you know. As far as my emotions, my concern is taking care of myself emotionally and anxiety and all that, I probably do not do as good a job. I probably do not make as good of decisions as I could about taking care of myself emotionally and so forth. I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that I never had a chance to really experience different kind of men growing up except for the kinds who were kind of out to get me.*



“Caught in a Net”

- *And it feels to me sometimes like I'm in a net and I'm just trying to get out of it because I've internalized some of the abuse too. I mean, me being abusive to my own body. So, where is it? The enemy is me. What made me accept it (sexual abuse)? Well, when I was a kid, I understand why I did not rebel against it.*



Protective Factors

- Protective Factors: Mitigating Effects of the Abuse:
 - i. Breaking the silence
 - ii. Professional healthcare
 - iii. Spiritual guidance
 - iv. Religious community life
 - v. Forgiving the perpetrator



Risk Factors

- Risk Factors
 - i. Not managing triggers
 - ii. Keeping silent
 - iii. Masking emotional pain
 - iv. Confusion around religious forgiveness



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

Effects of Sexual Abuse

- All of the participants experienced and reported unwelcome effects still present associated with sexual abuse, which support the findings in the original Chibnall study (1998) and the sexual abuse recovery literature.



Living with the Pain

- *You know, I really thought I was pretty normal, you know, until . . . well, I mean, I always thought I had problems but I thought I was pretty normal but then when you wake up and you begin to realize what life is all about and you realize that, you know, you carry your wounds with you and you have to get them healed. You know, and I don't even know this, but when the pain gets bad enough, you'll do something about it. So, the pain would get excruciating for me until I was in my 40's.*



1. Breaking the Silence

- For this population, the **dominant strength was breaking the silence** that surrounded their abuse, through the help of professional therapists, spiritual directors and supportive friends in the community



“I found my voice”

– *“But through the years I’ve gotten a voice. I mean, I don’t really have anything to be ashamed of. When I was going through my traumatic experience of depression and anxiety, the anxiety I haven’t quite conquered but I had depression, is pretty capped. My therapist said to me, “You have a good mind.” It’s probably the most important thing she has ever said to me is, “You have a good mind.” And I thought, “Gee, maybe I do,” because she’s a very educated woman and a very knowledgeable therapist so that probably was one of the strongest things she’s said to me. And so if that’s a gift then I use it when it’s important, well good for me.”*



“Telling my story”

- *“You know, the effects of alcoholism and child abuse on keeping secrets and not trusting and being isolated are probably the hardest things. And once you can get into a 12 step program or once you can break the silence and it takes enormous, enormous . . . I’m beyond some of that now, you know. Now, I say again, that I don’t go from total keeping secrets to total blabbermouth, but that there’s a middle road and I’ve chosen that. And again, I get nothing but affirmation for this.”*



“no longer isolated”

- *“It’s like, God, is my whole life a waste? But it’s just all a part of the process is my healing, so I know I have come through and survived and it’s been very, very hard. But the hardest part for me was, you know, being isolated and not knowing I could trust people with this story, because I have disclosed to several presidents (religious superiors) because you were coming, I spoke to our new regional (superior). I had spoken to about forty of my friends in our congregation, all of whom, you know, have just loved me, you know, which blows my mind. ‘You love me anyway?’ And everyone has said the same thing, ‘Thank you for trusting me. I’m sorry this happened to you.”*



2. Professional Help

- The 2nd dominant resource is the value of professional counseling
 1. These resources include a confidential, competent and reliable professional with whom to disclose the sexual abuse. (Professionals are identified by participants as physicians, social workers and/or spiritual directors).



“Find someone trained in this”

- *“I have told several people...when you get into therapy, don’t go to a generalist. You go to someone without specialized training, they don’t get it. They miss it and I’ve suffered through that, when I think of it, money and time spent, and I, you know, I was dancing as fast as I could, so the spiritual piece comes last, they don’t all have the training, and the woman that I went to in the end was very, very good. She had training in bio-spirituality that you can use in spiritual direction very effectively.”*



“First you got to heal psychologically”

- *So you can get healed psychologically, you know sexually and psychologically, but spiritual healing is the last piece. So what I've learned is that you don't talk about spirituality to somebody who is on the front end coming in to it, first time breaking silence and telling the stories. You bring them through the process, like in spiritual direction, and then, finally you're looking at spiritual healing. Most people don't go through spiritual direction for sexual abuse, until they've healed the psychological thing because it's the last piece to be taken care of.*



“Who do you go to for help?”

- Twenty, twenty five years ago generalists didn't have a clue (about sexual abuse recovery), and so I stopped being angry with them, but the, I went through a time when I was very angry, you know that people were not helping me the way I needed to be helped, and even my own community said we don't know what you need but go get it. I mean who do you go to? Who'll believe you?
- I was doing much spiritual direction towards the end, but also what helped me make the jump from psychological to spiritual was I had that wonderful theological re-framing from that protestant woman on the west coast. She was able to say, in non-clinical terms, a framework that I was comfortable with theologically, what was going on, and she's brilliant with this in terms of power.

3. Community Support

The third resource was community support

“Because of the fact that we have lots of opportunity to get help. We have lots of opportunity for education and conversation, input, we have time to read or we have time to discern. I have good friends and they help, they help a lot. It’s the tangibles and so God puts people in our lives to help us get through. So, I am really grateful that I got help. I’m grateful that I came through it.”



Limitations of this Study

- These findings must be interpreted within the environmental contexts of Catholic religious life.
- All participants volunteered for this study and wanted to share their experiences.
- What is true about the effects of early life sexual abuse & their choice of resources pertain only to these participants.



Implications of this Study

- First and foremost, the findings presented here dispel any notion that sexual trauma is not an issue among some Catholic Sisters
- This study reveals the importance of adequate education and training of health care workers who are serving older populations.
- With 40% of the general population reporting some type of sexual abuse during their lives it is critical that services meet the needs of aging populations who experienced the crisis of sexual abuse in early life



Implications of this Study

- Identifying resources that are most effective in mitigating the negative effects of sexual abuse is valuable knowledge
- The interventions and resources that are effective with one cohort may be both ineffective and harmful to another cohort when not taking into consideration cultural differences.



Implications of this Study

- It is a critical component of this study to raise awareness of the need to revisit the rationale behind assessing for histories of sexual abuse among aging populations who present with difficulties coping in later life.
- To inspire health care workers to re-examine how they assess for early life sexual abuse among aging populations and invite researchers and healthcare providers to re-visit what is assumed to be true about aging persons who were sexually abused in early life.



Areas of Future Research

- The role of spirituality in mitigating the effects of sexual abuse requires further study.
- Focusing upon the hypothesis that sexual abuse is a crisis event with significant spiritual consequences, may be beneficial in contributing to the literature that already exists about the effects of crisis and loss in old age.
- The need to study other aging subpopulations who report sexual abuse at an early age, to determine whether and how new data support and challenge the findings of this study.



Areas of Future Research

- Many of the resources that the Sisters report as beneficial in mitigating the effects of sexual abuse are supported in the literature.
- What may be unique in this study is the emphasis on spiritual direction and the influence this relationship has upon lowering the negative impact of sexual abuse.
- Studying the impact of spiritual direction with aging populations may be beneficial to examine.



Trustworthiness of the findings as Reported by Participants

- *“Your dissertation was a masterful work which undoubtedly involved countless hours and days of thought and work.”*
- *“The material flowed smoothly and expressed sensitivity and compassion. There was no intention to shock the reader or embarrass the participants.”*
- *“This was a magnificent exquisite tapestry woven with uniquely colored threads blending into a beautiful and meaningful whole.”*



Trustworthiness

- *“What a tremendous task and undertaking you took upon yourself. Briefly, yes, please publish this. Know that I am indebted to you for your respect, reverence and gentleness you showed all of the participants, especially myself.”*



Trustworthiness

- *“You have no idea how healing that interview was for me. That whole issue no longer hounds me. In fact, I have hardly thought about it since your visit. Thank you, thank you , thank you.”*
- *“God has given you many gifts, especially the gift of ‘holy hearing.’ May you continue to use your gifts for the glory of God and the healing of others. You must come back. Know that you have a special place in my prayers.”*



Trustworthiness

- *“Sometimes God allows people into our lives who bring a breath of fresh air and peace. I am grateful that you interviewed me. I have felt so free from that part of my past because you listened and made no judgments. Thank you.”*
- *“Your visit, your caring and listening are much appreciated. It was like putting a final ending to the whole thing. Thank you.”*
- *“I am happy for your visit and enjoyed lunch and our walk. I would like to invite you back sometime when your spirit needs refreshing.”*



Trustworthiness

- *“Your work was very professional and captured my experiences. Thank you for your work. You are gentle & understanding”*
- *“You are a real gentleman, polite, non-threatening in demeanor. A good listener, pleasant and sociable. I especially enjoyed sharing a glass of wine with you after the interview.”*



Resources

Center for Spirituality & Health

<http://www.spiritualityandhealth.duke.edu/index.php/harold-g-koenig-m-d>

Center for Spirituality & Aging

<http://www.spiritualityandaging.org>

CSWE Center for Gero-Ed

<http://www.cswe.org/CentersInitiatives/GeroEdCenter.aspx>

Washington University at St. Louis Center for Aging

<http://publichealth.wustl.edu/initiatives/CFA/Pages/default.aspx>

For further information contact:

- Gary U. Behrman, PhD
 - gb4546@yahoo.com

