

Childhood sexual abuse and abuse-specific attributions of blame over 6 years following discovery[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of this study was to examine patterns of change in attributions for childhood sexual abuse (CSA) over a 6-year period and whether such patterns were related to abuse severity, age, gender, and subsequent symptoms of depression and PTSD.

Methodology: One-hundred and sixty children, 8–15 years old, were interviewed within 8 weeks of the time the CSA was reported to child protective services (i.e., the time of abuse discovery). Follow-up interviews were conducted 1-year later on 147, and 6 years later on 121 of the original participants. Abuse-specific attributions were obtained using two methods. Participants first responded to an open-ended interview question about why they believed the CSA had happened to them and then completed a rating scale about the extent to which possible attributions for the CSA applied to them (e.g., “Because I was not smart enough”).

Results: Over time, perpetrator-blame attributions were consistently more common than self-blame attributions for CSA (using both interview and rating measures). Youth were more likely to report self-blame attributions on the rating measure than the open-ended interview question. The interview method indicated that youth often felt confused about why the abuse happened up to a year following discovery but this response diminished by the third assessment. On average, ratings of perpetrator-blame attribution remained high over time ($p < .05$), whereas ratings of self-blame decreased ($p < .01$). Penetration was related to more self-blame ($p < .05$) and less perpetrator-blame ($p < .05$), and the use of force was related to more perpetrator-blame. The initial level of self-blame attribution ratings predicted subsequent symptoms of depression ($p < .05$) and intrusive experiences ($p < .05$) after controlling for age at abuse discovery, gender, and self-blame attributions for common events. Perpetrator-blame attributions were not related to symptoms.

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Conclusions: The findings of this study suggest that assessing responses to open-ended interview questions about the perceived reasons for the abuse and ratings of attributions are important for understanding how youth make sense of their abuse. Abuse-specific self-blame attributions at abuse discovery have a persistent effect on internalizing symptoms and should be assessed and the target of treatment as soon as possible after CSA has been reported to the authorities.

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Keywords: Child sexual abuse; Self-blame; Perpetrator blame

Introduction

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) motivates a search for meaning to make sense out of experiences that violate beliefs in a safe and just world. Understanding the abuse and its consequences involves making causal attributions about why the abuse occurred. Abuse-specific attributions are recognized as important for explaining adaptation to abuse and for the design of treatment (Celano, Hazzard, Campbell, & Lang, 2002; Valle & Silovsky, 2002). Although attributions for abuse events are likely to change as individuals gain more distance from the time in their lives when the abuse occurred most of the research on abuse-specific attributions is cross-sectional. This article examines the nature of abuse-specific attributions over 6 years in a sample first evaluated soon after the abuse was reported to child protective services (Feiring, Taska, & Lewis, 1998).

Youth spontaneously make both self and perpetrator attributions about sexual abuse (Dalenberg & Jacobs, 1994; Feiring, Taska, & Chen, 2002; Hunter, Goodwin, & Wilson, 1992; McGee, Wolfe, & Olson, 2001). Typically victims attribute more blame to the perpetrator than the self (Feiring et al., 2002; McGee et al., 2001; Spaccarelli, 1995). Most of the knowledge about abuse-specific attributions comes from children assessed within 6 months of the time the CSA is reported to child protective services (referred to here as abuse discovery) or from adults seen long after the abuse has occurred (e.g., Coffey, Leitenberg, Henning, Turner, & Bennet, 1996; Hunter et al., 1992; McGee et al., 2001). Little is known about how abuse-specific attributions around the time of abuse discovery are related to changes in attributions in the short- and long-term. The current study uses a longitudinal design to examine intraindividual continuity in abuse-specific attributions over a 6-year time span following abuse discovery. Intraindividual continuity involves stability over time within individuals (e.g., the same person remains consistently high in self-blame attributions over time). Intraindividual continuity was of interest because we wanted to understand when individuals were likely to maintain patterns of attribution considered to be emblematic of poor functioning and when others were likely to show patterns of positive change (e.g., a decrease in self-blame attributions or increase in perpetrator-blame attributions). The first major focus of this study was to identify patterns of self-blame and perpetrator blame attributions for CSA over time. Next, the extent to which patterns of attributions were related to abuse severity, age at abuse discovery, participant gender and internalizing symptoms was examined.

Abuse severity and abuse-specific attributions

The clinical literature suggests that more severe sexual abuse leads to both more self- as well as more perpetrator-blame (Herman, 1992). More severe and particularly persistent abuse might lead

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