

## Women's voices on recovery: A multi-method study of the complexity of recovery from child sexual abuse<sup>☆,☆☆</sup>

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### Abstract

**Objective:** The current study was exploratory and used multiple methods to examine patterns of stability and change in resilient functioning across 7 years of early adulthood. Second, qualitative data were used to examine in greater detail survivors' own narratives about correlates of healing.

**Method:** This study was longitudinal and used both structured and open-ended interviews. Eighty women with documented hospital records of child sexual abuse were interviewed at two time points 7 years apart in early adulthood. Structured interviews including investigator-based questions and standardized measures of trauma exposure and functioning were conducted. A subset of 21 survivors participated in in-depth, open-ended interviews about coping with sexual abuse.

**Results:** Quantitative findings showed patterns of both stability and change on an index of resilient functioning across multiple domains in the 7 years between interviews with 76% of participants showing less than a one standard deviation change in scores. Lower resilience was associated with exposure to additional trauma between the two interviews ( $r = -.44$ ) while positive functioning was related to social role satisfaction and positive sense of community. Qualitative data permitted examination of the dynamic quality of recovery over time including the role of "turning points" across the lifespan.

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**Conclusions:** The findings extend previous studies of resilience in the examination of how it changes over the course of one segment of the life cycle. This study supports recent work that described resilience as a non-linear process and further highlights factors including the role of re-traumatization, social supports, and opportunities for making new choices that may be important correlates of recovery processes among sexual abuse survivors over time.

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## Introduction

Merrill, Thomsen, Sinclair, Gold, and Milner (2001) describe “third generation” studies in the field of child maltreatment that go beyond documenting prevalence and direct links between abuse and negative outcomes to a more complex analysis of intervening mediating and moderating processes. One part of this developing area of research focuses on notions of resilience and recovery to understand variability within groups of survivors. While a growing volume of research on this topic has examined samples of children, less attention has focused on adult survivors (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). This paper uses longitudinal data from a sample of female survivors of child sexual abuse to examine in an exploratory manner aspects of resilience and well-being across the early adult portion of the lifespan.

### *Defining terms*

A central question in this work has to do with definitions and terminology (e.g., Glantz & Sloboda, 1999). Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) described three types of resilience, including individuals who exhibit exemplary outcomes after adversity, those who while not exceptional in their functioning show positive development in the context of adversity, and finally those who may initially show negative consequences of trauma but over time recover adaptive functioning. Some researchers have applied these findings to an understanding of adult survivors of trauma (e.g., Bonanno, 2004; Carver, 1998; Harvey, 1996; Poorman, 2002). Palmer (1997, 1999) challenged models of resilience that reflect a more linear pattern of increasing growth across time. Harvey described a model of resilience composed of several stages or types of resilience and using qualitative data showed how individuals may move back and forth between these levels over time. Her work fits with that of Barringer (1992) who described survivors’ healing process from child sexual abuse not as linear but “as spiral, as a repeated traversing of the issues, layer by layer, piece by piece, sorting and resorting, until the toxicity of the abusive experiences has been released (p. 15).” Luthar et al. (2000) provided a definition to span such complexity. They stated, “resilience refers to a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543).” They further note “that positive adaptation despite exposure to adversity involves a developmental progression, such that new vulnerabilities and/or strengths often emerge with changing life circumstances (p. 544).” An important implication of this is that all elements of resilience are not necessarily captured in childhood but should be examined across the lifespan (Grossman, Cook, Kepke, & Koenen, 1999; Luthar et al., 2000; Palmer, 1997; Stein, Fonagy, Ferguson, & Wisman, 2000). The current study is grounded in this broad definition while focusing on a sample that exemplifies Masten et al.’s third “recovery” category.

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