



Religion in child sexual abuse forensic interviews[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Religion is an under-studied factor affecting children's sexual victimization and their willingness to discuss such experiences. In this qualitative study, 39 child forensic interviewers and child advocacy center (CAC) directors in the United States discussed religious influences on children's sexual abuse experiences, their relationships to CACs, and their disclosures in the forensic setting. Participants reported both harmonious and dissonant interactions between religiously observant children and families on one hand and child advocacy centers on the other. Themes emerged related to abuse in religious contexts and religious justifications for abuse; clergy and religious supports for disclosures as well as suppression of disclosures; and the ways CACS accommodate religious diversity and forge collaborations with clergy. Participants discussed a wide range of religions. Recommendations for practice and research are included.

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1. Introduction

A vast and growing literature investigates and proposes evidence-based methodologies for suspected child sexual abuse (CSA) forensic interviews. Despite this helpful research, the complex issue of culture and how it interfaces with the forensic process has yet to be sufficiently explored (Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Tishelman & Geffner, 2010). Nevertheless, cultural issues are pervasive and relevant to every alleged sexual abuse victim and family. Cultural impacts include immigration status, language competence, child and family anxieties and fears, expectations, disclosure hesitations, sources of support, and reactions of others. In particular, religious influence constitutes one of the most understudied cultural issues in CSA, with great potential meaning for many CSA victims and families, including involvement in religious communities and organizations, as well as religious practices and beliefs (spirituality). This study examines the impact of religion on alleged CSA victims and their families as they navigate the stressful terrain of disclosure and criminal investigation.

Religious factors may be relevant to child forensic interviewing for CSA in a variety of ways including: increasing feelings of shame for victims, promoting notions of resigned suffering in silence, contributing to the sense that children are at fault for their victimization through having committed sins in this or a previous life, promoting premature forgiveness without accompanying child protection, and enhancing abusers' ability to claim a right to children's bodies, among other mechanisms, some of which may have yet to be identified (Fontes & Plummer, 2010). We must understand these variables in order to develop optimal clinical and interviewing practices for children and families during these difficult conversations (Fontes, 2008). The high visibility of CSA within the Catholic church has created a rich literature on how religious culture

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and institutions can silence children and allow abuse to flourish (e.g. Crisp, 2007; Collins, O'Neill-Arana, Fontes, & Ossege, 2014; Keenan, 2011). While research on sexual abuse in other religious communities is growing, it remains insufficiently explored (see McGuigan & Stephenson, 2015; Neustein, 2009).

Although negative effects of religion have been reported, a significant literature emphasizes the potential positive impacts of religion on resilience and trauma recovery (e.g., Brewer-Smyth & Koenig, 2014; Bryant-Davis & Wong, 2013; Bryant-Davis et al., 2002) as well as the importance of understanding religious and spiritual issues and meanings in trauma therapy, including as an aid in healing (Walker, Reese, Hughes, & Troskie, 2010). Some adult survivors report gaining strength from their religious and spiritual beliefs, enhancing their resilience in the face of abuse (e.g. Behrman, 2007; Chmiel, 2007; Collins et al., 2014; Featherman, 1995; Rivera, 2016). For instance, in a retrospective qualitative study of African American adult survivors of childhood physical and sexual violence, Bryant-Davis (2005) indicated that 55% of research participants reported that they had utilized spiritual practices as coping mechanisms. These included religious beliefs, religious rituals and spiritual counseling, as well as organized religious involvement, and were relevant to both male and female survivors. Religion is central in the lives of children and families in the United States, and can be a strong natural support in response to trauma and stress. Yet little is known of the potential positive impacts of spiritual beliefs and/or involvement in a supportive organized religious community on child survivors in the process of sexual abuse disclosure and forensic interviewing. It is critical to understand and enhance the possible positive influences of religion on sexual abuse victims and their families, while working to diminish those that are potentially harmful.

This article reports on religious influences on alleged CSA victims and their families, which formed part of a larger study on cultural competence in child forensic interviews. Fontes and Tishelman (2016) previously reported on language competence as a cultural issue relevant to the CSA forensic process using this research methodology. Forensic interviewers and Child Advocacy Center (CAC) directors in varying geographic, socio-economic and racially/ethnically diverse communities in the United States conveyed what they saw as the most frequent, important, and challenging issues related to religion and CSA, as encountered during their forensic interviews and related conversations.

2. Method

Using a phenomenological design, we conducted semi-structured qualitative individual interviews with professional child forensic interviewers and directors working within CACs across the United States. Semi-structured interviews use a pre-determined set of open-ended questions that allow both the participant and the interviewer to explore the themes that emerge over the course of the conversation (Patton, 2014). Researchers gather data in an orderly way with specific questions, while also allowing participants to speak about themes that were not included in the original interview guide (Esterberg, 2001). Semi-structured interviews have been used in other studies to explore religion and child sexual abuse (e.g. Collins et al., 2014). Semi-structured interviews also seemed appropriate because the participants in this study conduct semi-structured interviews regularly themselves in their work with children; we thought this would increase their comfort in the research process. In fact, more than one participant responded to a prompt such as, "Tell me more about that," with a laugh, saying that this was the kind of comment they make regularly in their work. Individual interviews allowed participants from diverse geographical regions with differing religious cultural concerns to address those issues that were most salient to their CAC work.

2.1. Participants

Thirty-nine CAC forensic interviewers and CAC directors who work within CACs across the United States participated. Thirty-seven were female and two were male with a mean of 8 years' experience as forensic interviewers. Participants reported a mean number of forensic interviews conducted as 1084, with a range from zero (two participants were center directors who had not served previously as interviewers) to over 10,000. Participants reported having conducted a total of over 42,000 interviews and observed many more as members of multidisciplinary teams and during peer review. It should be noted here that the number of interviews conducted by our participants and indeed the number of years of experience at CACs are approximations and may be underestimates. For instance, a number of participants had conducted child forensic interviews as affiliated child protective service social workers before they became CAC employees. Several had moved in and out of the role of center director, and several had worked at CACS in more than one state. All in all, participants generally were experienced and knowledgeable about interviewing children at CACs in varied cultural and geographic contexts.

Our sample included participants from the four CAC regions in the United States (Northeast, Midwest, South and West) with participants currently working in twenty-two states. All participation was completely voluntary and no compensation was provided. To assure anonymity, neither state directors nor CAC directors were informed of forensic interviewer participation. Ethnically, 72% (N = 28) identified as White/Caucasian or European-American only, while the remaining 28% (N = 11) identified as Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian, or Multiracial. (Some multiracial participants mentioned Native American ancestry and affiliations). Participants were not asked about their own religious affiliations.

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