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Childhood sexual abuse, mental health, and religion across the Jewish community

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ABSTRACT

Current estimates of childhood sexual abuse among Jews in the United States are only available for females and do not include a spectrum of religiosity. We examined sexual abuse, mental health, and religion, in a religiously diverse sample of male and female Jewish adults from North America, using a novel methodology to minimize sampling/response biases. A total of 372 diversely religious Jews participated. Prevalence of any form of childhood sexual abuse was statistically equivalent to national rates, except that females reported less involuntary penetration ($OR = 0.53$). All Jewish religious groups reported equivalent levels of sexual abuse, except that history of involuntary penetration was greater among formerly (but not presently) Orthodox Jews ($OR = 3.00$). Across our sample, sexual abuse was associated with increased likelihood of psychiatric diagnosis ($OR = 1.34$), greater mental distress (F ranging from 2.99 to 9.08, $p < .05$ for all analyses), lower religious observance ($F = 4.53$, $p = .03$), and lower intrinsic religiosity ($F = 4.85$, $p = .03$). Further, across our sample we observed a moderate buffering effect of spiritual/religious factors against mental distress (ΔR^2 values ranging from 0.028 to 0.045, $p < .01$ for all analyses). Thus, we found childhood sexual abuse to occur across the spectrum of Jewish religious affiliation and greater prevalence among formerly Orthodox individuals. Furthermore, history of childhood sexual abuse was associated with greater risk for psychiatric distress and less religious involvement, however spiritual/religious engagement and belief appeared to facilitate resilience in the context of abuse.

1. Introduction

It is well known that history of childhood sexual abuse is a robust risk factor for a host of mental health problems (Beitchman et al., 1992; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1996; Pérez-Fuentes et al., 2013). It is also well known that childhood sexual abuse is unfortunately very common, with worldwide prevalence rates ranging from 8 to 31% for females and 3–17% for males (Barth, Bermetz, Heim, Trelle, & Tonia, 2013; Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2014; MacMillan, Tanaka, Duku, Vaillancourt, & Boyle, 2013). Perhaps for these reasons, all major world religions have moral codes governing sexual conduct including restrictions on sexual engagement outside of committed relationships (Parrinder, 1980). Furthermore, prospective research shows that religious involvement is associated with lower impulsivity and less illegal

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activity including sexual offenses (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009; Pirutinsky, 2014). Living within a religious community may therefore provide a buffer against incidence of sexual abuse.

Empirical studies, however, have found statistically equivalent levels of sexual abuse between religious and secular groups, and also when comparing various religious groups to one another (Doxey, Jensen, & Jensen, 1997; Elliott, 1994; Spröber et al., 2014). In fact, owing perhaps to greater opportunities for perpetrators to victimize males due to religiously sanctioned gender segregation, current data suggests that males suffer from sexual abuse as often as females within many religious communities (Al-Fayez, Ohaeri, & Gado, 2012; Holt & Massey, 2013), representing an increased risk to males overall. Unsurprisingly, when sexual abuse is experienced in a religious context, effects can be particularly severe and may include changes in subsequent spiritual/religious development alongside development of mental distress (McLaughlin, 1994).

There has been a paucity of research on the prevalence of sexual abuse among Jews. In 2000, Schein and colleagues conducted a well-designed population-based study in Israel, and found that 25% of respondents reported childhood sexual abuse overall (Schein et al., 2000). Interestingly, religious males were 3.3 times more likely to experience abuse compared to secular males, but religious women were 2.4 times less likely to experience abuse as secular women. No indices of mental health or spiritual/religious functioning were included in this study, however. More recently, Feinson and Meir conducted a broad study on women's health among Israeli females, and similarly found sexual abuse during childhood to be higher among secular relative to religious women (Feinson & Meir, 2014). They also assessed for mental health variables including depression, anxiety and somatization, and found that the ultra-Orthodox women experienced significantly less distress compared with secular respondents (Feinson & Meir, 2015). However, among survivors of childhood abuse, levels of distress were not significantly different for religious and secular individuals. The only published report we are aware of regarding sexual abuse among Jews in the United States appeared a decade ago. Yehuda, Friedman, Rosenbaum, Labinsky, and Schmeidler (2007) found that 26% of a sample of married observant (Orthodox) Jewish women reported a history of sexual abuse overall, with greater incidence reported by ultra-Orthodox relative to modern-Orthodox women, and greater incidence among individuals raised secular relative to those raised Orthodox. However, the authors did not include males or non-Orthodox Jews in their sample. They also did not examine spiritual/religious sequelae of sexual abuse or the relevance of spiritual/religious life to resilience, and their sampling methods may have selectively recruited a disproportionate number of ultra-Orthodox individuals with a history of abuse (discussed below).

The Jewish community is united by a common heritage and history, but sociologically divided along religious lines into two main groups: Orthodox Jews who believe in the authenticity and timelessness of the Torah and Oral Tradition and adhere to their directives (Schnall, 2006), and non-Orthodox Jews who share Jewish ancestry and identity but do not view these foundational commandments as binding in the present day (Meyer, 1988). Along these lines, Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish attitudes towards sexuality and gender differ substantially. Whereas single-gender schooling, traditional gender roles/dress, and numerous restrictive practices surround sexual engagement among Orthodox Jews (Ringel, 2007), none of these are common among non-Orthodox Jews since gender roles and sexual practices more closely resemble those of the general population. However, recent years have seen seismic shifts in Jewish religious affiliation in that it is now quite common for individuals raised non-Orthodox to convert to Orthodoxy, and also vice versa (Pew Research Center, 2013). We are unaware of any research examining sexual abuse among Jews characterized by both current as well as former affiliation with Orthodoxy/non-Orthodoxy.

We therefore sought to extend the scant literature on sexual abuse among Jews. Specifically, we evaluated and compared prevalence rates of childhood sexual abuse among four groups of Jewish North American adults: (1) Individuals who were raised Orthodox and remain Orthodox (Always Orthodox), (2) Individuals who were raised non-Orthodox and later became Orthodox (Formerly Non-Orthodox, also known as *Baalei Teshuva*); (3) Individuals who were raised non-Orthodox and remain non-Orthodox (Never Orthodox); and (4) Individuals who were raised Orthodox but no longer affiliate with Orthodoxy (Formerly Orthodox). We then examined mental health correlates of childhood sexual abuse history, including psychiatric diagnosis. We further examined spiritual/religious correlates of mental health, in the context of sexual abuse.

2. Methods

2.1. Procedure and participants

Participants were recruited as part of a larger longitudinal study on Judaism and mental health. In order to minimize sampling bias, neither sexual abuse nor sexuality was mentioned in the recruitment materials. Rather we inserted items to assess for childhood sexual abuse alongside many other aspects of human development and mental health, in the fifth wave of the parent study. This allowed us to gain the trust of participants over a protracted period of more than two years prior to assessing for this sensitive topic. Our approach was successful in that all individuals who participated in the fifth wave of the parent study completed the measure of childhood sexual abuse history, representing a 100% response rate.

Recruitment was conducted through collaboration with Jewish organizations across a wide religious spectrum such as the Agudath Israel of America (ultra-Orthodox), Orthodox Union and Yeshiva University (centrist Orthodox), United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and Union of Reform Judaism (non-Orthodox). We also partnered with organizations supporting individuals who were raised non-Orthodox and later became Orthodox such as Aish HaTorah and Ohr Somayach, and organizations devoted to supporting individuals who once but no longer affiliate with Orthodoxy such as Footsteps. Recruitment was also carried out through e-mails and advertisements on Jewish community list-serves, social media outlets, websites, and by word-of-mouth. Participants were eligible to receive up to a total of \$45 in Visa gift cards over the course of the entire study period. The institutional review board of McLean Hospital/Harvard Medical School provided review and approval for this study.

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