Willingness to disclose child maltreatment: CSA vs other forms of child abuse in relation to gender

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A B S T R A C T

The aim of the study was to examine the role of gender in willingness to disclose childhood sexual abuse (CSA) compared to other forms of abuse (physical, emotional and neglect) in young adolescents. Willingness was examined through two terms: reluctance— the level of unwillingness or disinclination to disclose, and urge—the need to share in order to get rid of unbearable feelings. The sample consisted of 3,156 boys (n = 1,544) and girls (n = 1,612) between the ages of 11–16 who reported having been abused at least once during their life. Participants were divided into three groups: experiencing other than CSA, sexual abuse with no physical contact, and sexual abuse with physical contact. Regarding measures, a self-report questionnaire incorporating the following instruments was administered: Demographics, the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ), and the Disclosure of Trauma Questionnaire (DTQ). Study results indicated that CSA victims were more reluctant to disclose than victims of other than CSA forms of abuse. The more severe the CSA (physical contact) the lower was the willingness to disclose. Boys were more reluctant than girls to disclose sexual abuse whether or not it involved physical contact. Reluctance to disclose was positively associated with emotional reactions to disclosure while urge to talk was negatively correlated with emotional reactions to disclosure.

1. Scientific review

Child maltreatment (CM), sometimes termed as child abuse, usually includes four subtypes: physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and psychological abuse, all of which result in actual or potential harm to the child's health, development or dignity (Gilbert et al., 2009). CM poses significant public health problems (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, Hamby, & Kracke, 2015), and affects hundreds of millions of children globally (Stoltenborgh, Vanijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011). It has been linked to a variety of short- and long-term physical and mental negative consequences (e.g., Norman, Byambaa, De, Butchart, & Scott, 2012; Ullman & Brecklin, 2003; Heim, Mayberg, Mletzko, Nemeroff, & Pruessner, 2013; Annerbäck, Sahlqvist, Svedin, Wingren, & Gustafsson, 2012; Herrenkohl & Herrnekohl, 2007).

The current consensus among clinicians and researchers maintains that the delay o avoidance of disclosure may entail an increased future risk of repeated victimization resulting in more severe outcomes (Lee, Coles, Lee, & Kulkarni, 2012) such as impaired capacities for trust, intimacy, and sexuality, as well as a variety of chronic mental health problems (Somer & Schwarcberg, 2001). In addition, the delay of disclosure is also likely to prevent the victimized child from receiving therapy (Paine & Hansen, 2002).

However, the overlapping and the interrelationships between the four different types of child maltreatment (sexual abuse,

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physical abuse, psychological maltreatment, and neglect), make it harder to evaluate each type's sole impact in terms of mental consequences and disclosure (Higgins & McCabe, 2000). This, in turn, will likely make it harder for investigators and practitioners to develop techniques aiming to increase victims' willingness to disclose.

Disclosure is defined as "the telling of abuse," regardless of the specific individual (formal or informal network) to whom the victim discloses (Lovett, 2004; Ullman, 2003). Yet, whereas the latter is applicable to all forms of CM, most studies focus on the role of disclosure in CSA (e.g., Bottoms et al., 2014) and point out that CSA victims frequently either fail to disclose the abuse or delayed disclosure for years (Ullman, 2003). It is estimated that less than one in four CSA victims disclose to someone immediately following the abuse (Paine & Hansen, 2002). However, it is important to note that despite the fact that it is often asserted that young people who experience sexual abuse do not disclose, recent studies conducted by Allnock and Miller (2013), and Radford et al. (2011) found that the majority of sexually abused children do make an attempt to disclose the abuse to at least one person; 80% of the samples in these studies attempted to disclose the abuse when it happened or before they were 18 years old, yet just like many high profile cases, not all of these disclosures were heard or acted upon (Shackel, 2009; Ungar, Barter, McConnell, Tutty, & Fairholm, 2009). In general, girls appeared to be more likely to disclose child sexual abuse than boys who were also found to ignore the question why they did not disclose (De Jonge, 2013). In forms of non-CSA abuse, delay disclosure is estimated to be a 7-year period (London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005).

Finkelhor and Browne (1985) proposed four traumagenic dynamics—traumatic sexualization, betrayal, stigmatization, and powerlessness—that were identified as the core of the psychological injury caused by the abuse, and helped practitioners pinpoint the likely cause of the low disclosure rates among girls. Mainly, two fears—the fear of being stigmatized by others and the fear of having one's family stigmatized—prevent a girl from telling and sharing her story. Regarding boys, Spiegel (2003) introduced the concept of concealment—the profound silence that engulfs sexual abuse as a social phenomenon and life experience—that describes the common dynamics and effects of sexual abuse for boys. Spiegel (2003) explains that concealment of sexual abuse is maintained by the perpetrator, supported by social mythology, reinforced by other people within the man's environment, and upheld by the man. Low rates of disclosure therefore can be explained, in large part, by the repercussions of social mythology and myths surrounding the sexual abuse of men. This points to the role of cultural barriers in inhibiting or encouraging disclosure (Alaggia, Collin-Vézina, & Lateef, 2017). Although evidence in this field, is scarce, several recent studies suggested that CSA disclosure process is shaped by the cultural belief systems such as taboos about sexuality, patriarchal attitudes, and devaluation of women (Brazelton, 2015), and that in turn influence the familial climate which either hinders or allows children to disclose abuse (Fontes & Plummer, 2010).

Based on (1) the general agreement among researchers (e.g., Herrenkohl & Herrnekohl, 2007) that there is an overlap in various forms of child maltreatment (i.e., physical abuse is usually accompanied with emotional abuse, etc.), which jeopardizes the ability to compare the level of willingness to disclose between forms of CM; (2) since the characteristics of CSA are unique in terms of body penetration from other forms of abuse, and (3) there seems to be a lack of attention to victimized boys (Alaggia & Mishna, 2014; Easton, 2013), although CSA prevalence and incidence statistics point to high rates of CSA for girls and boys (Lev-Wiesel, Eisikovits, First, Gottfried, & Mehlhausen, 2016), it follows that the purpose of the current study was to further inquire into the willingness to disclose child maltreatment in adolescents in relation to the form of abuse and gender. Note that disclosure referred to any person whether a family member, friend, or professional. The specific aims of this study were (a) to investigate the willingness to disclose among CSA victims compared to non-CSA forms of CM (physical, emotional and neglect); (b) to compare the willingness to disclose according to CSA severity (with or without physical contact); and (c) to assess the willingness to disclose CSA according to gender. Note, that penetration was found to impact the victimized child beyond and above all other variables such as duration of CSA abuse, identity of the perpetrator etc (e.g., Lev-Wiesel & Markus, 2013).

It was expected that youth who were sexually abused will exhibit higher levels of reluctance to disclose compared to those who experienced non-CSA forms of abuse; victims of sexual abuse that included physical contact will be more reluctant to disclose compared to non-physical contact CSA victims ; and, girls in general will exhibit higher levels of willingness to disclose compared to boys.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The findings reported in this study are part of a large scale epidemiological national survey focusing on the prevalence and disclosure factors of child maltreatment in Israel (Lev-Wiesel et al., 2016). Data presented in the present study weres drawn during 2013–2016, from a representative sample of 12,035 Israeli Jewish and Arab children and youth from 254 public schools located throughout Israel (i.e., excluding Jewish orthodox religious schools). The current study's sample consisted of sixth, eighth and tenth grade students who reported having been victims of at least one of the four forms of abuse during their life.

A stratified two-stage random sampling method was applied, with the strata consisting of the following factors: (1) school level (i.e., elementary/middle school/high school); (2) school sector (i.e., Jewish/Arab sector); (3) geographic area (i.e., North/Central/ Jerusalem/South) (4) school Socio-Economic Status (SES) indicator (i.e., calculated by accounting for parental education (40%), family income per capita (20%), geographic peripherality (20%); and the fraction size of students with migration backgrounds). It is important to note that in order to assess the SES of the students participating in this study, the Israeli Ministry of Education's school database was used. This database contains the SES of each school's entire student body rather than each individual student's status. Thereby, in all analyses presented, the school is the unit of analysis rather than the student.

In the first stage of the sampling method, schools were randomly selected from the sampling frame according to their appropriate