Research article

# Predictors of victim disclosure in child sexual abuse: Additional evidence from a sample of incarcerated adult sex offenders

Benoit Leclerc [a,*], Richard Wortley [b]

[a] School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Mt Gravatt Campus, Griffith University, Queensland 4111, Australia
[b] Jill Dando Institute of Security and Crime Science, University College London, 35 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9EZ, UK

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

The under-reporting of child sexual abuse by victims is a serious problem that may prolong the suffering of victims and leave perpetrators free to continue offending. Yet empirical evidence indicates that victim disclosure rates are low. In this study, we perform regression analysis with a sample of 369 adult child sexual offenders to examine potential predictors of victim disclosure. Specifically, we extend the range of previously examined potential predictors of victim disclosure and investigate interaction effects in order to better capture under which circumstances victim disclosure is more likely. The current study differs from previous studies in that it examines the impact of victim and offense variables on victim disclosure from the perspective of the offender. In line with previous studies, we found that disclosure increased with the age of the victim and if penetration had occurred. In addition, we found that disclosure increased when the victim came from a non-dysfunctional family and resisted the abuse. The presence of an interaction effect highlighted the impact of the situation on victim disclosure. This effect indicated that as victims get older, they are more likely to disclose the abuse when they are not living with the offender at the time of abuse, but less likely to do so when they are living with the offender at the time of abuse. These findings are discussed in relation to previous studies and the need to facilitate victim disclosure.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## Introduction

The under-reporting of child sexual abuse by victims is a serious problem that may prolong the suffering of victims and leave perpetrators free to continue offending. In a review of the research, London, Bruck, Ceci, and Shuman (2005) found that the modal rate of disclosure by child sexual abuse victims during childhood was 33%, and even then the reporting may have occurred months or even years after the event. Among 104 participants who had disclosed the abuse, Lam (2014) found that 70% of them had disclosed it within one month and 63% of them had disclosed the abuse to 2 to 5 people, most often to friends. Sauzier (1989) indicated that almost half of reported child sexual abuse cases come to light through discovery by an adult.

Moreover, increased *fear* of disclosure plays an important role in shaping the behaviour of offenders and potentially preventing abuse. The risk of getting caught is likely to be a significant consideration for many offenders. A number of

studies have found that, when asked what victims could do to better protect themselves, offenders advised that children should be taught to tell someone else if they are sexually abused (Budin & Johnson, 1989; Elliott, Browne, & Kilcoyne, 1995). Leclerc, Wortley, and Smallbone (2011) found that around a third of offenders reported that their victim was able to avoid incidents of abuse by saying that they would tell someone else about the abuse. Increasing disclosure rates by victims would assist in the detection and arrest of offenders.

However, disclosure of sexual abuse is not a simple process for victims. The victim must first recognise the incident as sexual abuse and then find a trusted adult to whom to report. The child may have difficulty distinguishing sexual abuse from the legitimate exercise of adult authority or care-giving behaviour, or may be reluctant to report abuse because of pre-existing emotional ties and loyalty to the offender (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Smallbone, Marshall, & Wortley, 2008). Offenders may also take measures after the abuse to minimise the chance of disclosure, such as saying he (the offender) would go to jail if the child told anyone, or giving the child special treats or privileges (Leclerc, Proulx, & MicKibben, 2005; Smallbone & Wortley, 2000). The low rates of victim disclosure indicate the need to investigate the factors that facilitate victim disclosure, and this is the objective of the current study. Specifically, with a sample of incarcerated adult sexual offenders, potential predictors of victim disclosure including victim and offense-related variables are examined as well as interaction effects between these variables.

*Previous Empirical Research on Children Disclosure of Sexual Abuse*

The predictors of victim disclosure have been studied by a number of scholars (see a review by London et al., 2005). The most common variables included in these studies were victim characteristics (age and gender), offender–victim relationship, family support, and variables measuring the severity of abuse. However, this body of work is characterised by inconsistent and contradictory findings. Gender and age of the victim and the offender–victim relationship have been the most investigated predictors of victim disclosure. With regard to the gender of the victim, some studies have reported that boys were less willing to disclose the abuse than girls at forensic interview (e.g., DeVoe & Faller, 1999; Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005; Lippert, Cross, Jones, & Walsh, 2009) but other studies found no differences (e.g., Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Keary & Fitzpatrick, 1994; Lam, 2014). The evidence is also mixed in relation to the age of the victim. Kogan (2004) found that younger girls may be more likely to disclose the abuse at the onset than older girls while Bottoms, Rudnicki, and Epstein (2007) and Lam (2014) found no relationship between age and disclosure and a recent study by Lippert et al. (2009) found that victims are more likely to disclose the abuse as they get older. The evidence is also mixed when using the age of the victim at the forensic interview as a potential predictor of victim disclosure (see Lippert et al., 2009). As for the offender–victim relationship, the evidence is again mixed. Some studies have reported that victim disclosure is more likely when the victim is not related to the offender because the caregiver would be more supportive of the offender in these cases (e.g., Lippert et al., 2009; London et al., 2005). However, Lippert et al. (2009) or Lam (2014) did not find any association at the multivariate level between offender–victim relationship and victim disclosure. No relationship was found either between whether the victim was living with the offender at the time of abuse and victim disclosure.

The investigation of offense variables as potential predictors of victim disclosure has mostly focused on the severity of abuse. Paine and Hansen (2002) found that victims who suffered penetration and physical aggression by the offender were less likely to disclose the abuse, possibly because they were more likely to fear retaliation from the offender. In their review, London et al. (2005) reported either the opposite or no relationship. Using a severity ranking (the highest the score the more severe the sexual activities), Lam (2014) recently found that severity was predictive of victim disclosure. She explained this relationship by indicating that the worry of what might happen if one would tell does not have the same impact on maintaining silence because the real negative consequences of the abuse outweigh the perceived negative consequences of disclosing in this context (see also Lippert et al., 2009). The evidence is mixed in regards to the relationship between duration of abuse and victim disclosure (Paine & Hansen, 2002). In the recent study completed by Lippert et al. (2009), no relationship was found between duration of abuse or penetration by the offender and victim disclosure at a multivariate level even though penetration was significant at a bivariate level. Lam (2014) did not find an association between duration and victim disclosure.

It is difficult to know what to make of these previous findings because of the inconsistency across studies. As reviewed by London et al. (2005), there are number of methodological issues that can explain the contradictory nature of these findings, such as the various definitions of child sexual abuse adopted in the literature. Related to this point is how the predictors examined in these studies were operationalised. For instance, different variables have been used to measure the severity of abuse. Lippert et al.'s (2009) measure of severity consisted of whether or not penile penetration was performed on the victim whereas Lam (2014) constructed a severity ranking. London et al. (2005) reviewed a number of studies that have used the method of coercion as a measure of severity of abuse. Paine and Hansen (2002) indicated that both physical aggression and penetration were used to measure the severity of abuse.

The inconsistency in previous findings argues for the need of further research in the area. The current study re-examines traditional predictors of disclosure but also makes three important contributions to the existing literature. Our first contribution is that we extend the range of potential predictors of victim disclosure beyond those covered in previous research. With respect to victim-related variables, we investigate the effect on disclosure of whether the victim was from a dysfunctional background and whether s/he resisted the offender during the offense. These new variables may be especially relevant to predict victim disclosure because they specify the circumstances under which the victim was sexually abused.