

THE MALE SURVIVOR

The
Impact
of
Sexual
Abuse



Matthew Parynik Mendel

Foreword by Kathleen Coulborn Faller

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THE MALE SURVIVOR

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The Male Survivor: The Impact of Sexual Abuse
by Matthew Parynik Mendel

*The Male Survivor is dedicated to the men
who participated in my study, and to male survivors
of childhood sexual abuse everywhere.*

Foreword

In the early 20th century child sexual abuse was considered a very rare occurrence, and most accusations were thought to derive from the child's wish to have sex with an adult, rather than from actual abuse. In the 1950s and 1960s, a small number of case studies about incest involving fathers and daughters appeared, but often the writers blamed the victim or the mother rather than the father for the abuse.

In 1974, federal legislation was passed that led to mandatory reporting of suspected child maltreatment by professionals involved with children. Although initially most of the cases identified involved physical maltreatment, as time passed increasing numbers of sexual abuse cases were reported. Thus, in 1976, only 6,000 cases of sexual abuse were referred to protective services agencies in the United States, 3% of maltreatment reports. In 1986, however, 132,000 cases were identified, almost 16% of reports, a 22-fold increase over a 10-year period (American Association for the Protection of Children, 1988). This trend continues so that in 1992 almost 500,000 sexual abuse cases were reported, these making up 17% of maltreatment cases (McCurdy & Daro, 1993).

Concurrent with these system changes were the activities of the feminist movement, which brought attention to the plight of sexually victimized girls. Moreover, researchers began to undertake studies of college students and community-based populations of adults, asking them about sexual victimization as children.

These efforts focused primarily on female victims and found the overwhelming majority of offenders to be men. Only about 20% of victims reported to protective service agencies were boys (American Association for the Protection of Children, 1988), and many prevalence studies did not survey males (e.g., Russell, 1983; Wyatt, 1985). When men were included, although study findings vary greatly, the rates of victimization for men were about half (3%-31%) of those for women (6%-62%) (Peters, Wyatt, & Finkelhor, 1986). Moreover, when men described their sexual contact with adults as children, they often reported less trauma than women (Finkelhor, 1979) and might not characterize the experience as abusive, especially if the offender was a female (Risn & Koss, 1987).

In the past 5 or 6 years, however, clinicians have begun to recognize that these findings may be misleading. The increasing knowledge and publicity about sexual abuse has caused men victimized as children to seek treatment.

What is being learned about the population of male survivors suggests that the impact of sexual abuse upon them can be severe and pervasive. Such observations are reflected in the small number of books and articles about male survivors (e.g., Bolton, Norris, & MacEachron, 1989; Grubman-Black, 1990; Hunter, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c; Lew, 1988; Sanders, 1991; Thomas, 1989). These works are instructive for the clinician but somewhat parochial, being based primarily on the individual writer's experience. Moreover, there have been almost no efforts to collect information systematically about male survivors.

Matt Mendel's work represents a significant contribution to our knowledge about sexual abuse of boys and about men who were so harmed by child sexual abuse that they have sought treatment. It is the first national study of male survivors and therefore is really a pioneering effort. The results of the study are sobering. The extent of sexual abuse these men endured is dismaying, in terms of types of sexual activity and number and gender of perpetrators. The reported impact on their sexuality and other aspects of functioning destroys myths about the invulnerability of male

victims. These men needed and continue to need extensive treatment. This book is not just about the numbers, however. Included as well are case histories of men who were interviewed intensively. These vignettes add depth to our appreciation of the impact of sexual abuse on boys and men.

This is a landmark study that will lead us into the 21st century in our endeavor to understand and address the phenomenon of sexual abuse.

Kathleen Coulborn Faller, Ph.D.
The University of Michigan

Preface

This book includes an original study of male survivors of childhood sexual abuse, based on questionnaire responses of 124 men and semi-structured clinical interviews with 9 of those men. The first five chapters of this work are intended to provide a context within which the study may be read. The introductory chapter presents a brief history of the topic of sexual abuse and describes the “lens” through which this topic will be examined. Chapter 2 explores factors that stand in the way of recognizing male sexual abuse. Chapter 3 surveys the literature on the prevalence, incidence, and descriptive characteristics of male sexual abuse. Chapter 4 reviews major conceptual frameworks regarding the long-term impact of sexual abuse. Chapter 5 reviews the literature on the short- and long-term impact of sexual abuse on boys.

Presentation of the study itself begins with Chapter 6, which describes the methodology. Chapter 7 presents the men who participated in the study and describes their demographic characteristics, psychiatric histories, current psychosocial functioning, and the characteristics of the abuse they experienced. Chapter 8 examines the relationship between these abuse characteristics and adult psychosocial functioning, and suggests

avenues for future research. Chapter 9 focuses on the interview portion of this study as it examines aspects of abuse and recovery of particular salience to male survivors and explores implications of these findings for treatment.

There are two purposes for this book. The first is "clinical." I hope to reduce the stigma and isolation that male survivors of childhood sexual abuse experience. The depth and intensity of the stigma surrounding abuse have often been noted.

A consistent finding in clinical as well as research interventions with incest survivors is that, for several reasons, there is enormous difficulty around disclosure. These reasons include the incest taboo itself, threats directed at the victim should he or she tell, and the utilization of dissociation and denial as defenses against the overwhelming and disorganizing experience of abuse. As a result of the efforts of researchers, clinicians, and survivors who have called attention to the experience of female survivors, I believe that the stigmatization associated with sexual abuse has been somewhat reduced. As more publicity is afforded the topic of sexual abuse, ever-increasing numbers of women recognize their experiences as less rare than they had once believed. As long as the experience of the male survivor is virtually unexplored, the taboo against disclosure will remain as fierce as ever. A primary goal of this work is, therefore, to contribute to an atmosphere in which more men are able to join their female counterparts and embark on the road to recovery. Thankfully, this process appears to be gaining momentum. Over the years I have been involved in this research, the sexual victimization of boys has received increasing attention, both in academic circles and in the popular media.

The second purpose is to add to the state of knowledge about male survivors of child sexual abuse. It should be noted from the outset that this work is specifically about the impact of *childhood* sexual abuse upon males. Research on the sexual assault of adult males is cited but not systematically reviewed. It is hoped that the present study, with its multimethod format of questionnaire and semi-structured clinical interview, will contribute to the understanding of male survivors.

Conceptual frameworks regarding the long-term sequelae of childhood sexual abuse are examined in order to determine to what extent they are appropriate to male experience and to what extent these models must be modified to accommodate male experience. Modifications and revisions

of these frameworks are proposed. Especially little is known about the impact of various characteristics of sexual abuse upon males. Browne and Finkelhor (1986) and Conte and Schuerman (1987) have addressed these issues with respect to female victims, but to date there have been no systematic studies of long-term variations in outcome depending on differences in factors related to the abuse for male victims. A central focus of the study contained in the second portion of this book is therefore upon within-group comparisons to assess the effects of such variables as relationship to perpetrator, victim's age at time of abuse, duration and severity of abuse, number of abusers, the existence of physical abuse along with the sexual abuse, and the use of alcohol or other drugs by the perpetrator.

Interspersed throughout this book are the "life-stories" of six men. The histories presented here represent distillations of lengthy clinical interviews, the focus of which was upon the impact of abuse on the lives of these men. How do men who were sexually victimized during childhood experience their abuse? How do they understand its impact on various aspects of their lives? How have they dealt with their abuse and worked to overcome it? These pages chronicle the particulars of the abuse and other aspects of the respondents' lives fairly briefly, and emphasize the various sequelae of the abuse. It should be noted that a particular life-story is not intended to correlate specifically with the chapter it follows or precedes. Rather, the stories are intended to illustrate and bring to life typical experiences of male survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Prominent themes that emerged from these interviews are discussed in Chapter 9. Details of the interview procedure are provided in Chapter 6. Nine men were interviewed. These six histories were selected in order to depict a wide range of abuse histories. The sample of nine men, however, did not include anyone who was solely abused by someone outside of his family. Therefore, all of the histories involve intrafamilial abuse. One of the six men, "Ben," experienced "emotional incest" (Love, 1990) rather than overt or covert *sexual* activity. Three of the 124 men in the total sample explicitly identified themselves as survivors of ritual abuse. One of these men, "Ned," enclosed a brief piece of prose describing his childhood experience. I have included a verbatim transcript. (The topic of ritual child abuse is not explored here. I believe it to be an extremely important area that demands increased study.) All names and other identifying information

have been changed in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

This book would not have been possible without the support of a number of people and organizations. This volume, and the study included herein, grew out of my doctoral dissertation at the University of Michigan. For their advice, encouragement, and constructive criticism, I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee, Eric Bermann, Ph.D., Chair; Sallie R. Churchill, Ph.D.; Kathleen Coulborn Faller, Ph.D.; and Christopher Peterson, Ph.D. Generous financial support was provided by the following organizations: Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies; the Interdisciplinary Training Program in Child Abuse and Neglect; the Department of Psychology, and the Center for the Child and the Family, at the University of Michigan; and the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, Division Nine of the American Psychological Association. I received invaluable assistance with data analysis from Ken Guire of the Center for Statistical Consultation and Research at the University of Michigan and Anthony J. Ascianto, M.P.H., M.A., currently of Harvard Community Health Plan. For their help in transforming this work from a dissertation into a book, I would like to thank the reviewers of this volume, Kathleen Coulborn Faller, Ph.D., Larry Morris, Ph.D., and Jon Conte, Ph.D., Consulting Editor; and C. Terry Hendrix, Senior Editor at Sage Publications; Kristin Bergstad, Copy Editor; Astrid Viriding, Senior Production Editor; Dale Grenfell and Tricia Bennett, Editorial Assistants; and Marjorie Rigg, Indexer. I would also like to thank my parents, Arthur and Sara Mendel, for their inspiration, encouragement, and support. Thank you, S. P. Mendel, for helping me relax, and finally, a heartfelt thanks to my wife, Cynthia, without whom I could not have survived the research process, for all of her insight, assistance, advice, patience, and love.

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1 Examining the Lens

Masculinity and Child Sexual Abuse

The past 15 years have witnessed an explosion of interest in the topic of sexual abuse (Bolton, Morris, & MacEachron, 1989; Conte, 1982; Finkelhor, 1984) and a proliferation of conceptual frameworks aimed at explicating its impact on its victims. The vast majority of writings in this area, however, have been based upon female experience. As Faller (1989) writes with regard to intrafamilial sexual abuse, "historically, girl victims of incest by father figures have been the primary focus of inquiry and concern" (p. 281). With few exceptions, only in the past half-decade have serious efforts been made to evaluate the prevalence and incidence of male child sexual abuse or to assess its impact. Similarly, conceptual frameworks are, by and large, predicated upon clinical and research interventions with female survivors. The present work explores the phenomenon of sexual maltreatment of male children in an effort to redress this imbalance.

Male survivors of child sexual abuse constitute an extremely under-identified, underserved, and, all too often, misunderstood population. The lack of recognition of this phenomenon is, I believe, determined largely by a constellation of societal myths or beliefs regarding what it means to be male and by complementary myths or beliefs regarding what

it means to be female. Before turning to these specific notions, I should briefly like to discuss postmodernist theories, which provide a backdrop and a sort of litmus test for my thinking on this topic.

Postmodernism and the Male Survivor

As I understand this challenging, subtle, and intricate philosophy, postmodernism and constructivist theories of epistemology assert that “objective reality” or “absolute truth” do not exist; instead, one must constantly bear in mind the perspectives, assumptions, and subjectivity of the observer. “Without context, there is no meaning” (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1990, p. 1). “We do not discover reality, we invent it. Our experience does not directly reflect what is out there but is a selecting, ordering, and organizing of it” (Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1990, p. 27). The eye of the beholder inevitably influences the nature of the thing beheld. Thus, as Hare-Mustin and Maracek (1990) state in their discussion of postmodernism and gender, “differences between women and men, by and large, are made; that is, gender is not a natural category based on essential differences between the sexes. . . . Gender is an invention of human societies, a feat of imagination and industry” (pp. 3-4). In other words, the notions we hold of “masculinity” and “femininity” are not inherent, innate, or immutable; they are, instead, socioculturally derived. I believe this fact to be critical to any attempt at understanding males’ experience of sexual abuse: A central, and uniquely male, aspect of their reaction to sexual abuse is their struggle to understand, overcome, and integrate into their selves experiences antithetical to our cultural notions of maleness.

A second tenet of postmodernist theory is that information is power. Those who control the means of production and dissemination of information possess enormous power in that their subjective understandings of reality become diffused across society. Thus the assumptions, preconceptions, and mythology of the dominant culture tend to become the “reality” of the society that includes that dominant culture. Within the context of gender, a mythology that benefits males tends to hold sway. When one looks specifically at abused males, however, the issue becomes much more complicated than this simplistic rendering would indicate. Is a male struggling to overcome the impact of his childhood abuse truly