

The Abused/Abuser Hypothesis of Child Sexual Abuse: A Critical Review of Theory and Research

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Introduction

A widespread belief among the general public and professionals alike is that “sexual abuse causes sexual abuse” (Finkelhor et al., 1986; Kempe and Kempe, 1984; Lanyon, 1986). That is, sexually abused children and adolescents who have engaged in sexual behavior with an adult (or a significantly older adolescent) are commonly thought to be at risk in later years of themselves becoming sexually involved with children and adolescents. This belief is referred to here as the “abused/abuser hypothesis of child and adolescent sexual abuse.”

Given the popularity of the abused/abuser hypothesis, it is perhaps surprising to find that there is a dearth of evidence supporting it. This is not to say that there is a substantial body of contradictory evidence. Rather, only a handful of studies have actually investigated the presumed association, and the designs and methods of these studies have been less than ideal. Most of the relevant data come from retrospective studies of adults that do not allow for direct causal analysis.

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Inasmuch as sexual behavior between adults and children and adults and adolescents intuitively appears to be a complex phenomenon determined by multiple factors, the uncritical acceptance of the abused/abuser hypothesis may lead to premature and faulty conclusions regarding the determinants of such behavior, as well as to social policy based on inadequate and inaccurate information. Clearly, the status of this hypothesis warrants scrutiny. Accordingly, this chapter critically reviews the theoretical formulations and major research findings (i.e., data and interpretations) pertaining to the abused/abuser hypothesis.

Theoretical Formulations

Several theoretical formulations have been suggested relating childhood and adolescent sexual behavior with adults to subsequent sexually nonnormative behavior in these children and adolescents when they become adults. Unfortunately, most of these theoretical formulations were developed to explain nonnormative sexual behavior in general rather than adult sexual behavior with children and adolescents in particular. These theoretical formulations can be loosely categorized as either cognitive-behavioral or psychodynamic.

Cognitive-Behavioral Formulations

Conditioning and/or modeling processes have been proposed as the means by which childhood and adolescent sexual behavior with adults may be related to subsequent sexual behavior with children and adolescents when these former children and adolescents themselves become adults (Howells, 1981).

McGuire, Carlisle, and Young (1965) hypothesized that nonnormative sexual arousal may become conditioned through masturbatory fantasies paired with orgasm. These researchers suggested that early sexual experiences, such as sexual behavior with an adult, supply the material for these masturbatory fantasies and that through classical conditioning (i.e., conditioned stimulus = fantasy, unconditioned stimulus = orgasm), the fantasy stimuli become increasingly sexually arousing. McGuire and colleagues suggested that these masturbatory fantasies might become progressively more nonnormative as a result of memory distortion and selection over time. They also allowed that other factors, such as feelings of physical or social inadequacy, might be important determinants of a preference for nonnormative sexual fantasies over more conventional ones.

There are two mechanisms by which conditioning can increase the probability of an adult's becoming sexually involved with a child or an adolescent. First, adult sexual behavior with a child or an adolescent often clinically manifests itself in the affected child or adolescent as sexual ^{[[p.490]]}precociousness and increased sexual behavior (Alter-Reid et al., 1986; Finkelhor et al., 1986; Yates, 1982). Theoretically, a child's or an adolescent's increased sexual behavior with peers could directly condition sexual arousal to children and could serve as the basis for subsequent conditioning through masturbatory fantasies. Second, through processes like memory distortion over time, the child or adolescent who had been sexually involved with an adult could develop a masturbatory fantasy that somehow results in the conditioning of sexual arousal to children (e.g., fantasizing the self in the role of the adult).

Modeling (observational learning) has also been suggested as a process by which childhood and adolescent sexual behavior with adults may be related to subsequent sexual behavior with children and adolescents (Freeman-Longo, 1986; Howells, 1981). The child or adolescent may learn through observation that adults can and do sexually interact with children, that they experience rewarding consequences as a result of such interaction, and that they are unlikely to be punished. No doubt, many such children and adolescents also are misinformed by the adult involved in the abuse about the propriety of such behavior (Burgess et al., 1978).

There is plausibility to these cognitive-behavioral formulations. In support of the conditioning hypothesis are the observations that sexual responses can be classically conditioned (Dougher et al., 1987; Rachman, 1966) and that some adjudicated adult sex offenders become sexually aroused (as assessed by penile plethysmography) by descriptions of their own childhood sexual experiences with adults (Freeman-Longo, 1986).

However, in two important respects, these formulations are limited. First, at an empirical level, for obvious ethical reasons there is no systematic evidence that either conditioning or modeling processes are operative in the development of adult sexual behavior with children or adolescents. Second, at a theoretical level, it is obvious that neither conditioning nor modeling processes alone can be necessary and sufficient causes. Other variables, such as social inadequacy, appear necessary for explaining why the child or adolescent who has been sexually involved with an adult remains sexually interested in children or adolescents when this child or adolescent becomes an adult (Howells, 1981). Consideration of other variables is especially important for the conditioning hypothesis. Many prepubescent and pubescent children experience sexual arousal and even orgasm with peers but do not later in adulthood engage in sexual behavior with children or adolescents (Howells, 1981; Langfeldt, 1981). Thus, while conditioning and modeling mechanisms may be determinants of adult human sexual behavior with children and adolescents, by themselves they are not adequate explanations.

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Psychodynamic Formulations

Identification and/or mastery processes also have been suggested as mechanisms by which childhood and adolescent sexual behavior with adults may lead to later adult sexual involvement with children or adolescents.

It is often suggested that adult androphilic pedophilia may be the long-term outcome of a previous emotionally gratifying experience of sexual contact with an adult during childhood or adolescence (Halleck, 1965; Rush, 1980; Seghorn, Prentky, and Boucher, 1987; Storr, 1964; Summit, 1983).

Theoretically, for the emotionally deprived and neglected male child, sexual interaction with an older male could prove comforting and enjoyable.

Through the mechanism of identification with the older partner, the male child or adolescent could be predisposed to become sexually involved with other male children or adolescents when he is an adult. Such an individual may identify with young males as the recipients of his affection and can therefore easily rationalize his behavior.

This formulation is supported indirectly by certain findings. Emotional deprivation, especially involving an inadequate or absent relationship with the father, has been suggested and found to be a correlate of male child and adolescent sexual behavior with adult males (Bender, 1965; DeJong, Emmett, and Hervada, 1982a; Finkelhor, 1984; Halleck, 1965; Ingram, 1979; Oliven, 1965; Pierce and Pierce, 1985; Rush, 1980; Virkkunen, 1981). Also, it has been found that adult males' retrospective self-reports of sexual contact during childhood and adolescence are not uniformly negative (Finkelhor, 1979; Fritz, Stoll, and Wagner, 1981; Landis, 1956) and that some young males may contemporaneously evaluate such an interaction as positive (Sandfort, 1982). Furthermore, it has been clinically observed that children sometimes interpret a disrupted sexual relationship with an adult as a loss (Burgess et al., 1978; Burgess et al., 1984). Finally, researchers have noted that androphilic pedophiles often retrospectively self-report disrupted or poor relationships with their fathers (Gebhard et al., 1965; Mohr, Turner, and Jerry, 1964; Paitich and Langevin, 1976). However, despite these suggestive findings, there is at present little or no direct empirical support for this psychodynamic formulation.

A second psychodynamic formulation emphasizes both identification and mastery processes. In this formulation, "identification with the aggressor" and the conversion of passive experience into activity done to others are the means by which sexual trauma is said to be related to "perversion" (Rosen, 1979; Stoller, 1975, 1979, 1985). Stoller, particularly, has articulated the process by which sexual trauma may lead to perversion.

It does have to be noted that this formulation pertains to perversion in general. However, the formulation can be easily applied to adult sexual behavior with children and adolescents.

Stoller theorizes that perverse fantasies or acts represent the recapitulation of actual trauma directed at an individual's sex or gender ^[p.492] identity. Perverse fantasies and acts are the means by which an individual symbolically attempts to gain revenge for and mastery over a childhood sexual trauma. As a result of identification with the aggressor, the individual, through such activities, is capable of temporarily turning a passively endured childhood trauma into an actively controlled adult triumph. Such activities preserve erotic gratification and a sense of potency.

Stoller's formulation is more comprehensive than are others in that he describes how additional factors mediate the effects of early sexual experiences. He proposes that the child involved must be susceptible to trauma and that this susceptibility is attributable to early life experiences.

Specifically, he suggests that excessive symbiosis with the mother and deficient identification with the father can render a male child especially vulnerable to sexual trauma. He presumes this potential cause-and-effect situation to be the case because such a male child's sense of gender identity ought to be less firmly established. Additionally, such a parent/child configuration may potentiate oedipal conflicts, which in turn contribute to future difficulties in the development of adult heterosexual behavior.

Studies of male children and adolescents involved in sexual behavior with adults and clinical observations of

adjudicated adult sex offenders of children provide some indirect partial support for Stoller's formulation and suggest its relevance for a hypothesized abused/abuser relationship.

Aggressive, antisocial behavior in male children and male adolescents is a common correlate of the disclosure of sexual involvement with an adult (Burgess et al., 1984; Burgess, Hartman, and McCormack, 1987; Carmen, Rieker, and Mills, 1984; Friedrich and Luecke, 1988; Rogers and Terry, 1984; Summit, 1983). This behavior commonly involves a sexual element (Rogers and Terry, 1984). Male children and adolescents who have been sexually involved with an adult often recapitulate their sexual experiences, with the exception that they enact the role of the older individual (Burgess et al., 1984; Burgess, Hartman, and McCormack, 1987; Rogers and Terry, 1984). The functions of this behavior are theorized to be the concealment of feelings of helplessness, the mastery of anxiety, and the reestablishment of masculinity (Burgess et al., 1984; Burgess, Hartman, and McCormack, 1987; Rogers and Terry, 1984).

Stoller's psychodynamic formulation, too, is supported by the similarities between offense characteristics and retrospective self-report data in incarcerated adult sex offenders of children or adolescents. Freeman-Longo (1986) and Groth (1979) have reported that incarcerated adult sex offenders who as children or adolescents themselves were sexually involved with adults often replicate their sexual experiences with children or adolescents when they, the incarcerated offenders, are adults. The ages of the children or adolescents with whom they become involved and the types of sexual acts performed have been noted to correspond to their own previous childhood and adolescent sexual experiences with adults.

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Summary and Commentary

Several theoretical formulations for the abused/abuser hypothesis have been proposed. These formulations have invoked conditioning, modeling, identification, and mastery processes. While each formulation has some explanatory power and some indirect empirical support, none have been shown to offer superior explanatory and predictive potency over competing formulations. Additionally, each formulation awaits more systematic research.

Clearly, variables in addition to previous sexual behavior with an adult have to be considered in evaluating the merits of the abused/abuser hypothesis. By itself, childhood or adolescent sexual contact with an adult is inadequate to explain subsequent adult sexual behavior with children or adolescents. These additional variables probably should include characteristics of the involved child (e.g., social competence and the stability of gender identity) and of the sexual interaction itself (e.g., the quality of the child's relationship with the involved adult) and the sequelae of the sexual experience (e.g., masturbatory conditioning to sexual fantasies based on the sexual experience). Numerous researchers have suggested that sexual contact between adults and children and adults and adolescents has no inevitable consequences but that the consequences depend on a complex network of interrelated variables (Bender, 1965; Bender and Grugett, 1952; Constantine, 1980; Finch, 1973; Halleck, 1965; Rieker and Carmen, 1986; Seghorn, Prentky, and Boucher, 1987). What is indicated, therefore, is that research should attempt to identify those conditions under which the abused/abuser hypothesis has merit, inasmuch as previous sexual behavior with an adult does not in itself adequately explain adult sexual behavior with children and adolescents. Unfortunately, most of the research conducted to date has focused primarily on the prevalence of childhood or adolescent histories of sexual contact with adults among adult sex offenders of children and adolescents.

Childhood and Adolescent Histories of Sexual Contact with Adults Among Identified Sex Offenders of Children and Adolescents

A number of studies have investigated the prevalence of childhood and adolescent histories of sexual behavior with adults among sex offenders of children and adolescents. Many of these studies have been relatively unsophisticated in that few attempts have been made to integrate these childhood and adolescent sexual experiences with other factors. Additionally, the sophistication of many of these studies has been

compromised by methodological issues relating mainly to the composition of sex offender groups and to the utilization of comparison groups. The authors of this ^{[[p.494]]} chapter will progress from the least to the most sophisticated of the prevalence studies in the following review.

Research Findings

The least sophisticated of studies give the prevalence of self-reported childhood or adolescent sexual behavior with adults among more or less well-defined samples of sex offenders. These studies include no comparison groups, making it impossible to directly evaluate whether the prevalence of childhood or adolescent sexual contact with adults is greater for sex offenders than it is for individuals with similar demographic characteristics who are not sex offenders.

Regrettably, all of the reviewed studies of adolescent sex offenders fall into this category. Additionally, the adolescent studies utilized heterogeneous sex offender samples, including, for example, exhibitionists, voyeurs, rapists, and pedophiles.

Longo (1982) found that 47% of his sample of adolescent sex offenders reported that they had engaged in sexual behavior with an adult during childhood. Of Longo's sample, 40% were identified sex offenders of children. Fehrenbach et al. (1986) found a childhood history of sexual behavior with adults in 18% of their sample of adolescent sex offenders, 63% of whom were sex offenders of children. Finally, Becker et al. (1986), studying a sample consisting of 77% intrafamilial adolescent sex offenders of children, noted that 23% of them had previously engaged in sexual behavior with an adult when they were children.

Those studies of adult sex offenders of children that did not include comparison groups are Frisbie (1969) and Abel (unpublished manuscript, cited in Knopp, 1984). Frisbie (1969) found that 24% of a group of sex offenders of children reported childhood histories of sexual contact with an adult. Frisbie's data suggested that childhood sexual behavior with an adult was more prevalent among sex offenders of male or of both male and female children as compared to sex offenders exclusively of female children. Abel (unpublished manuscript, cited in Knopp, 1984), too, found a self-reported history of childhood sexual behavior with adults to be more prevalent among sex offenders of male children (40% prevalence rate) versus sex offenders of female children (20% prevalence rate).

Two studies of adult sex offenders of children and adolescents attempted to deal with the issue of comparison groups by comparing the prevalence rates of childhood and adolescent sexual contact with adults among sex offenders of children with such contact among rapists (Seghorn, Prentky, and Boucher, 1987; Tingle et al., 1986). Unfortunately, both studies placed sex offenders of male and of female children and adolescents into a common group, thus obscuring the detection of any potential differences in prevalence rates between these two subtypes of sex offenders of children and adolescents.

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Seghorn, Prentky, and Boucher (1987) found that 23% of a sample of rapists and 57% of a sample of sex offenders of children and adolescents reported childhood and adolescent sexual contact with adults. Tingle et al. (1986) investigated both homosexual and heterosexual childhood and adolescent sexual behavior with adults among rapists and among sex offenders of children and adolescents. These investigators observed that 38% of the rapists and 56% of the sex offenders of children reported childhood or adolescent histories of sexual behavior with adults. Among the rapists, 62% had been sexually involved with males, 0% had been sexually involved with females, and 38% had been sexually involved with both males and females. For the sex offenders of children, 70% had been sexually involved with males, 13% had been sexually involved with females, and 17% had been sexually involved with both males and females.

Two studies investigated childhood and adolescent histories of sexual contact with adults among sex offenders of children and among multiple comparison groups (Condy et al., 1987; Groth, 1979). These studies were more sophisticated in that prevalence rates for sex offenders of children were compared with the

rates for other sex offenders, nonsexual offenders, and/or normal nonoffenders. However, sex offenders of male and of female children again were placed into a common group.

Groth (1979) examined self-reported histories of childhood and adolescent sexual experiences in the backgrounds of sex offenders of children, of rapists, and of police officers. He found that less than 3% of the police officers reported either forcible sexual assault or coerced sexual contact with an adult during childhood or adolescence. In contrast, 13% of the rapists and 25% of the sex offenders of children reported such experiences. Condy et al. (1987) found that 37% of sex offenders of children, 57% of rapists, 47% of nonsexual offenders, and 16% of nonoffenders reported sexual behavior with females at least five years older than themselves during their own childhood and early adolescence.

Finally, there are the most sophisticated of the studies, those that utilized differentiated groups of sex offenders of children and adolescents as well as multiple comparison groups.

Gebhard et al. (1965) investigated the prevalence of self-reported childhood sexual contact with adults among a number of groups, including nonoffenders, nonsexual offenders, and a variety of sex offenders. Among their findings concerning the prevalence of prepubertal sexual contact with adults (including sexual approaches, exhibitionism, and actual physical contact) were the following: (a) nonoffenders—3% heterosexual contact, 8% homosexual contact; (b) nonsexual offenders—10% heterosexual contact, 31% homosexual contact; (c) rapists—10% heterosexual contact, 22% homosexual contact; (d) nonincestuous offenders of female children—10% heterosexual contact, 24% homosexual contact; (e) incestuous offenders of female children—8% heterosexual contact, 19% homosexual contact; (f) sex offenders of male children—8% heterosexual contact, 32% homosexual [p.496] contact; (g) nonincestuous offenders of female adolescents—16% heterosexual contact, 14% homosexual contact; (h) nonincestuous offenders of male adolescents—6% heterosexual contact, 35% homosexual contact; and (i) incestuous offenders of female adolescents—6% heterosexual contact, 13% homosexual contact.

Langevin et al. (1985) examined the prevalence of self-reported childhood sexual behavior with adults for nonoffenders, for incestuous offenders of female children and adolescents, and for nonincestuous offenders of female children and adolescents. These researchers found that 4% of the nonoffenders, 21% of the incestuous offenders, and 10% of the nonincestuous offenders reported adult/child sexual contact with adult males during childhood. Additionally, 15% of the nonoffenders, 24% of the incestuous offenders, and 41% of the nonincestuous offenders reported adult/child sexual contact with females four or five years older than themselves during childhood.

Finally, Langevin and Lang (1985) studied self-reported childhood sexual experiences in the backgrounds of nonoffenders, of sex offenders of male children, of sex offenders of female children, and of other sexually anomalous males (e.g., exhibitionists and voyeurs). These researchers found that 15% of the nonoffenders, 5% of the sex offenders of male children, 21% of the sex offenders of female children, and 8% of the other sexually anomalous males reported prepubertal sexual contact with females at least four years older than themselves. Also, 4% of the nonoffenders, 14% of the sex offenders of male children, 3% of the sex offenders of female children, and 21% of the other sexually anomalous males reported prepubertal sexual contact with males four or five years older than themselves. Finally, 4% of the nonoffenders, 14% of the sex offenders of male children, 0% of the sex offenders of female children, and 15% of the other sexually anomalous males reported prepubertal sexual contact with adult males.

Summary and Commentary

There is significant variability in the prevalence of self-reported childhood and adolescent sexual behavior with adults among nonoffenders, nonsexual offenders, sex offenders of children and adolescents, and other types of sex offenders. The findings of the studies of adult sex offenders of children and adolescents are summarized in Table 19.1. If one ignores whether the reported intergenerational sexual behavior was heterosexual or homosexual in nature, childhood and adolescent sexual contact with adults was reported by

3-16% of the nonoffenders, 10-47% of the nonsexual offenders, 0-57% of the sex offenders of children, and 8-57% of the other sex offenders or the sexually anomalous males.

No doubt, sampling and methodological differences among the studies account for much of the variability in findings. A variety of methods were used to assess the prevalence of childhood and adolescent sexual behavior

TABLE 19.1. Percent of various groups reporting childhood or adolescent sexual contact with an adult

Study	Undifferentiated Adult Sex Offenders of Children and Adolescents	Adult Sex Offenders of Female Children and Adolescents	Adult Sex Offenders of Male Children and Adolescents	Other Sex Offenders or Sexually Anomalous Males (e.g., rapists and voyeurs)	Nonsexual Offenders	Non-offenders
Gebhard et al. (1965)	—	6-24	6-35	10-22	10-31	3-8
Frisbie (1969)	24	—	—	—	—	—
Groth (1979)	25	—	—	13	—	< 3
Abel (unpub. ms., cited in Knopp) (1984)	—	20	40	—	—	—
Langevin et al. (1985)	—	10-41	—	—	—	4-15
Langevin and Lang (1985)	—	0-21	5-14	8-21	—	4-15
Tingle et al. (1986)	56	—	—	38	—	—
Condy et al. (1987)	37	—	—	57	47	16
Seghorn et al. (1987)	57	—	—	23	—	—

Note: The percents listed include heterosexual and/or homosexual contact with an adult during childhood or adolescence. Ranges are given when the column headings reflect more than one group in the original study. Studies of adolescent sex offenders are not depicted in the table.

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with adults, including reviews of clinical records, self-report questionnaires, and personal interviews. There were differences in how childhood and adolescent sexual behavior with adults was defined. Finally, the data were collected at different times and in different contexts.

Despite this variability, self-reported childhood and adolescent sexual behavior with adults is more prevalent among adjudicated sex offenders of children and adolescents than among comparison groups of nonoffender males. However, it also appears that the self-reported prevalence of childhood and adolescent sexual behavior with adults is roughly comparable among adjudicated sex offenders of children, adjudicated nonsexual offenders, and other types of adjudicated sex offenders. (Refer to Table 19.1.) The prevalence of homosexual child and adolescent sexual contact with adults appears greater for sex offenders of both sexes of children as compared to rapists (see, for example, Gebhard et al., 1965, and Tingle et al., 1986). Also, the prevalence of childhood and adolescent sexual contact with adults appears greater among sex offenders of male children and adolescents than it does among sex offenders of female children and adolescents (Abel, unpublished manuscript, cited in Knopp, 1984; Frisbie, 1969; Gebhard et al., 1965; Langevin and Lang, 1985). However, the significance of the latter two findings is obscured by the data that show that childhood and adolescent sexual behavior with adults, both homosexual and heterosexual, is comparably prevalent among adjudicated nonsexual offenders (Condy et al., 1987; Gebhard et al., 1965) and among other sexually anomalous males (e.g., exhibitionists and voyeurs) (Langevin and Lang, 1985). Thus, while the prevalence of childhood and adolescent sexual behavior with adults may differentiate nonoffender males from adjudicated sex offenders

of children, it does not clearly differentiate the latter group either from other adjudicated sex offenders or from nonsexual offenders.

However, even this conclusion is tentative because of the methodological limitations of the studies reviewed. First, the majority of the studies reviewed used only adjudicated and incarcerated sex offenders.

Finkelhor et al. (1986) have questioned whether this group can be considered representative of sex offenders of children and adolescents. This group most likely represents a very biased sample of all adults who have engaged in sexual behavior with children and adolescents. Such incarcerated sex offenders are likely to be the ones who are the most “pathological” and who come from the most disadvantaged segments of society. Second, none of the reviewed studies included formal matching procedures or any statistical means for controlling for differences among the research groups (e.g., ethnicity and presence and type of psychopathology). Thus, other, uncontrolled factors could have contributed to the variability of the self-reported prevalence of childhood and adolescent sexual contact with adults among the groups and, perhaps, even to future adjudication as an adult sex offender.

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The conclusion that seems warranted from the review is that childhood and adolescent sexual contact with adults is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause for becoming an adjudicated sex offender of children or adolescents.

A reasonable overall estimate of the percentage of adjudicated sex offenders of children and adolescents who report having experienced sexual contact with an adult during childhood or adolescence is approximately 30%. Childhood or adolescent sexual contact with an adult thus characterizes only a fraction of such adjudicated sex offenders. One might argue that more adjudicated offenders of children and adolescents actually had such experiences but have “repressed” them. If this argument is used, however, the reason or reasons why sex offenders of children and adolescents would be more prone to repress such sexual experiences than would other groups of individuals must be explained. Thus, sexual contact with an adult during childhood or adolescence is not a necessary cause for becoming an adjudicated adult sex offender of children and adolescents.

Sexual contact with an adult during childhood or adolescence also does not appear to be a sufficient cause for becoming an adjudicated sex offender of children and adolescents. If such contact were a sufficient cause, the implication would be that all adults who were sexually involved with an adult when they themselves were children or adolescents would become sex offenders of children or adolescents. Three points belie this notion. First, there is the prevalence of self-reported sexual contact with adults during childhood and adolescence among adjudicated nonsexual offenders and sex offenders not involved with children or adolescents. Second, although approximately 25% of adult females report that they were sexually involved with an adult when they were children or adolescents, less than 10% of adjudicated sex offenders of children or adolescents are female (Finkelhor et al., 1986). Third, although the base rate in the general adult male population of males who have been sexually involved with children or adolescents is unknown, it is unlikely that this rate would approach 10%, a typical estimate of the prevalence of sexual contact with an adult during childhood or adolescence among adult males (Finkelhor et al., 1986).

In summary, the abused/abuser hypothesis—the belief that sexual behavior between adults and children or adolescents causes those children and adolescents, as adults, to become sexually involved with other children and adolescents—is inadequate and incorrect. If sexual behavior between adults and children or adolescents is at all a significant factor in the intergenerational transmission of such behavior, it is a factor that acts in combination with other factors to produce such an outcome (cf. Finkelhor, 1984; Finkelhor et al., 1986; Langevin and Lang, 1985).

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Additional Factors To Be Considered

One means by which to understand how adult sexual behavior with a child or an adolescent could contribute to the intergenerational transmission of such behavior is to consider additional pertinent variables. Some of these variables can be grouped within the following specific categories: the affected child's or adolescent's characteristics (including the family), the nature and the context of the sexual interaction itself, and the sequelae of the sexual interaction. The question is, how does sexual contact with an adult during childhood or adolescence interact with the variables within these categories so as to lead to the intergenerational transmission of sexual behavior with children or adolescents? With the question framed in this way, attempts can be made to assess these variables in future retrospective studies of adjudicated sex offenders and in future prospective (longitudinal) studies of children and adolescents who are identified as having been sexually involved with an adult. This type of assessment will require the use of multivariate designs and, perhaps, more sophisticated developmental models (e.g., see Zivin, this volume).

What follow are examples of some of the potentially relevant variables. They are discussed under the four categories—the characteristics of the child or adolescent, the nature and the context of the sexual interaction, and the sequelae of the sexual interaction.

Characteristics of the Child or Adolescent

There are a number of characteristics of the child or adolescent and the child's or adolescent's family that may interact with sexual contact with an adult to contribute to the intergenerational perpetuation of this behavior.

The child's or adolescent's sex is obviously important, although it may not only be biological sex per se but also something associated with it, such as socialization experiences (Finkelhor et al., 1986).

The child's or adolescent's age may be significant, although the literature is conflictual as to whether younger or older children or adolescents are more “traumatized” by sexual behavior with an adult (Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, 1984; Constantine, 1980; DeJong, Emmett, and Hervada, 1982b; Finkelhor, 1979).

Preexisting emotional disturbance or psychiatric disorder in the child or adolescent may contribute to the development of intergenerational sexual behavior in either of two ways. Emotional disturbance or psychiatric disorder may exacerbate the effects of any traumatic aspects of sexual interaction with an adult (Halleck, 1965). Conversely, emotional disturbance or psychiatric disorder may make sexual interaction with an adult an exceptionally positive experience, inasmuch as the child or adolescent may experience needed affection in such a relationship. Identification with the older partner may then occur and predispose the child or adolescent to act ^[p.501] similarly in the future (Halleck, 1965; Rush, 1980; Seghorn, Prentky, and Boucher, 1987; Storr, 1964; Summit, 1983).

The interpersonal skills of the child or adolescent seem especially important for determining whether sexual behavior with an adult during childhood or adolescence leads to the intergenerational perpetuation of this behavior. Deficits in interpersonal relationships and skills may make it difficult for the child or adolescent to progress to age-appropriate forms of affection and sexuality. Also, interpersonal deficits may result in variant environmental channeling of sexual behavior, which could be especially significant in a child or an adolescent with previous sexual experience with an adult (Gagnon, 1965; McGuire, Carlisle, and Young, 1965; Schwartz and Masters, 1983).

The stability of the child's or adolescent's sense of gender identity (i.e., the degree to which he or she feels masculine or feminine) also is likely to be an important variable. Stoller (1975, 1979, 1985) speculated that this variable critically determines the degree of “trauma” rendered by early sexual experiences and that it plays an important role in the etiology of what he terms “perversion.” Additionally, this variable may account for the predominantly male child's or adolescent's propensity for sexually aggressive behavior subsequent to sexual interaction with an adult (Burgess et al., 1984; Burgess, Hartman, and McCormack, 1987; Carmen,

Rieker, and Mills, 1984; Rogers and Terry, 1984; Rush, 1980; Summit, 1983).

The child's or adolescent's knowledge and attitudes about sex, too, may be important (Constantine, 1980). Deficient sex knowledge may increase the child's or adolescent's anxiety over the sexual behavior with an adult (Constantine, 1980) and may allow for the intrusion of unusual elements into the child's or adolescent's understanding of and fantasies about sex (Gagnon, 1965). Negative attitudes about sex may make appropriate sexual adjustment in later years more difficult (Abel, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner, 1984; Constantine, 1980).

In addition to the child's or adolescent's characteristics, the characteristics of the child's or adolescent's parents and family may significantly interact with the experience of sexual behavior with an adult.

Psychological disturbance in the parents, parental histories of sexual abuse, and negative parental attitudes about sex are all likely to engender adverse long-term consequences for the child or adolescent (Abel, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner, 1984; Seghorn, Prentky, and Boucher, 1987). Such variables may operate by rendering the child or adolescent more susceptible to trauma or by exacerbating the trauma.

Family dysfunction, too, is likely to contribute to the traumatic aspects of a child's or an adolescent's sexual interaction with an adult (Abel, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner, 1984; Constantine, 1980; Halleck, 1965).

In this regard, there is evidence that family pathology increases the chances that the child or adolescent who has been sexually involved with an adult will intergenerationally perpetuate this behavior (Burgess, Hartman, and ^{[[p.502]]} McCormack, 1987; Seghorn, Prentky, and Boucher, 1987). Burgess, Hartman, and McCormack (1987) and Friedrich and Luecke (1988) found that sexually aggressive behavior among young males having previous sexual experience with adults was more common among those having a family background of nonsupport, disorganization, and violence.

Thus, a number of characteristics of the child or adolescent and of the child's or adolescent's family may interact with sexual contact with an adult and may contribute to the intergenerational transmission of this behavior.

Nature and Context of Adult/Child or Adult/Adolescent Sexual Interaction

The nature of the sexual interaction and the context in which the interaction occurs are important categories comprising variables that may influence the intergenerational perpetuation of sexual behavior among adults and children or adolescents. Included in the nature of the interaction are the characteristics of the relationship between the two partners. These characteristics constitute a variable that may mediate the extent to which the child or adolescent identifies with the adult and consequently the extent to which the child or adolescent is predisposed toward future sexual involvement with children or adolescents (Halleck, 1965; Rush, 1980; Seghorn, Prentky, and Boucher, 1987; Storr, 1964; Summit, 1983).

The child's or adolescent's perception of control over the sexual interaction and the use of force during the interaction, two more variables, appear to be related to the degree of trauma experienced by the child or adolescent. There is a consensus that threats or force greatly enhance the traumatic aspects of a child's or an adolescent's sexual interaction with an adult (Abel, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner, 1984; Burgess et al., 1978; Condy et al., 1987; Constantine, 1980; Finch, 1973; Finkelhor, 1979, 1984; Finkelhor et al., 1986; Friedrich and Luecke, 1988; Rogers and Terry, 1984). While it is unclear how such variables relate to the future development of sexual interest in children or adolescents, these variables may be associated with identification with the aggressor and active recapitulation of trauma as discussed by Stoller (1975).

The sex of the adult may be a relevant variable for the long-term effects of sexual behavior between adults and children or adolescents. One difference here is that adult females are less likely to use force than adult males (Condy et al., 1987; Johnson and Shrier, 1987). Additionally, heterosexual interaction between an adult

female and a male child or adolescent may not provoke the young male to doubt his masculinity or sexual orientation (Johnson and Shrier, 1987). Finally, there is in fact some empirical evidence (i.e., retrospective self-report data) to suggest that heterosexual interaction with adult females is not as traumatic for male children and adolescents as is homosexual interaction with adult males (Condy et al., 1987; Finkelhor, 1979).

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The duration and frequency of interaction with an adult would intuitively seem to be associated with the long-term effects on the child or adolescent. Specifically, one might think that the duration of the relationship with the adult would be related to the extent to which the child or adolescent comes to identify with the adult. There is, in fact, some evidence for this association in male children and adolescents: The longer young males have been involved with the adult male sexual partner, the more likely they are to maintain emotional, social, and economic ties with the adult male and to engage in sexually aggressive behavior against other children and adolescents (Burgess et al., 1984; Burgess, Hartman, and McCormack, 1987).

Likewise, one might argue that the number of adults who have been sexually involved with a particular child or adolescent and the types of sexual activities involved (e.g., fondling; oral, anal, or vaginal penetration) would be important determinants of outcome. These authors could find no data pertaining to the number of adult sexual partners. There are some data regarding type of sexual interaction, however. Friedrich and Luecke (1988) found that sexually aggressive children were more likely to report oral, anal, and/or vaginal penetration with adults than were non-aggressive children who also had sexual contact with adults. On the other hand, Finkelhor (1979) found no significant relationship between type of sexual activity and retrospectively self-reported trauma.

There is ample evidence, however, that as the age disparity between the child or adolescent and the adult increases, so does the degree of trauma for the child or adolescent and the likelihood of negative consequences as assessed by retrospective self-report and clinical judgment (Abel, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner, 1984; Constantine, 1980; Finkelhor, 1979, 1984; Finkelhor et al., 1986; Landis, 1956; Rogers and Terry, 1984; Simari and Baskin, 1982).

Another variable that may affect long-term adjustment is the social visibility of the adult/child or adult/adolescent sexual interaction or relationship. This variable is one of two included in the category of the context in which the sexual interaction occurs. Burgess et al. (1984) noted that in male children and adolescents, involvement in pornography was one of the factors associated with what they described as identification with the aggressor and concomitant sexually aggressive behavior. It may be that this factor of social visibility enhances the young male's need to reestablish his sense of masculinity through aggressive, antisocial behavior. On the other hand, it may be that aggressive, antisocial males can be more easily persuaded to participate in the production of pornography.

The circumstances under which adult/child or adult/adolescent sexual interaction was terminated is the final variable in the category of context.

This variable is a potentially important, yet uninvestigated factor in the long-term adjustment of the child or adolescent (Finkelhor and Browne, 1985). A frequently endorsed position is that some children and adolescents ^{[[p.504]]} participate willingly in sexual behavior relationships with older individuals (Constantine, 1980; Finch, 1967, 1973; Ingram, 1979; Oliven, 1965; Virkkunen, 1981). This willingness may be especially characteristic of emotionally deprived children as well as of homosexual adolescent males (Halleck, 1965; Ingram, 1979; Rush, 1980; Storr, 1964; Summit, 1983). The termination of the relationship, therefore, could constitute a significant loss for the child or adolescent (Burgess et al., 1978). In turn, such an experience could facilitate the child's or adolescent's identification with the lost, older individual, thereby possibly predisposing the child or adolescent to behave like that individual in the future (Storr, 1964).

Sequelae of the Abusive Interaction

In the category of the sequelae of the sexual interaction or relationship, there are three sequelae that may substantially contribute to the child's or adolescent's long-term adjustment. These sequelae, i.e., variables, are the child's or adolescent's behavior following the termination of the interaction or relationship, the consequences for the involved adult, and the reactions of other individuals to the disclosure of the sexual interaction or relationship.

One relatively common reaction of children and adolescents to sexual behavior with an adult is excessive sexualization (Alter-Reid et al., 1986; Finkelhor et al., 1986; Yates, 1982). Obviously, excessive sexualization, in the form of increased masturbation, could contribute to the development of atypical sexual interests through masturbatory conditioning processes like the processes suggested by McGuire, Carlisle, and Young (1965).

Rogers and Terry (1984) noted that the consequences for the involved adult may be important, as young males appear to engage in sexually aggressive behavior more frequently when the legal system fails to punish the adult with whom they have had sexual contact

Finally, the reactions of others have to be considered as an important sequela of sexual behavior between adults and children or adolescents (Constantine, 1980; Finkelhor and Browne, 1985; Rogers and Terry, 1984).

Denying or minimizing the behavior, blaming the child or adolescent, and expressing unrealistic fears about the impact of the behavior are three reactions of parents, family, and others that may heighten the child's or adolescent's trauma (Abel, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner, 1984; Rogers and Terry, 1984). Inasmuch as these reactions may call the male child's or adolescent's sense of masculinity into question, they may potentiate adverse consequences for the child or adolescent. No doubt the child's or adolescent's adjustment also will be affected by the nature of legal proceedings in which the child or adolescent may become involved (Burgess et al., 1978; Finkelhor, 1984).

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Summary and Commentary

Inasmuch as the long-term impact of adult human sexual behavior with children and adolescents is the result of numerous interacting variables, researchers have to take these variables into account. To do so is especially important if researchers are to understand how sexual behavior with an adult during childhood or adolescence may be etiologically related to the intergenerational perpetuation of similar behavior. Examples of potentially significant variables having to do with the characteristics of the child and of the sexual interaction and examples of the sequelae of the sexual interaction have been presented, though, undoubtedly, other variables have been overlooked.

Conclusions

The belief that sexual abuse causes sexual abuse, the so-called "abused/abuser hypothesis," is simplistic and misleading. The available evidence indicates that sexual behavior between an adult and a child or an adolescent is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause of similar behavior in the child or adolescent when he or she becomes an adult. If sexual behavior with an adult is at all related to a child's or an adolescent's repeating the behavior during adulthood, it is related only in the context of other, interacting variables. Unfortunately, at this point, researchers do not know what all these other variables are or how they interact with childhood or adolescent sexual behavior with adults to lead to the intergenerational perpetuation of the behavior.

Nevertheless, the fact that some relation, albeit a complex one, appears to exist between sexual contact with an adult during childhood and adolescence and sexual involvement with children or adolescents during adulthood argues strongly for continued research on the issue. However, attention has to be given to those variables that may mediate the long-term effects of sexual contact with an adult during childhood or

adolescence.

Sophisticated multivariate research endeavors and more sophisticated developmental models may eventually allow us to specify the conditions under which adult sexual behavior with children and adolescents contributes to the intergenerational perpetuation of this type of behavior.

Summary

This chapter represents a comprehensive and critical review of the major theoretical formulations and empirical findings pertinent to the so-called “abused/abuser hypothesis of child sexual abuse.” The conclusion reached is that sexual contact with an adult during childhood or adolescence ^{[[p.506]]} is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause of adult sexual interest in children or adolescents.

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