

Men's self-definitions of abusive childhood sexual experiences, and potentially related risky behavioral and psychiatric outcomes[☆]

William C. Holmes^{a,b,c,*}

^a Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion, Philadelphia Veterans Affairs Medical Center, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, Philadelphia, PA, United States

^b Division of General Internal Medicine, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, Philadelphia, PA, United States

^c Center for Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics, Leonard Davis Institute, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, Philadelphia, PA, United States

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Abstract

Objectives: To estimate how many heterosexual and gay/bisexual men self-define abusive childhood sexual experiences (CSEs) to be childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and to assess whether CSA self-definition is associated with risky behavioral and psychiatric outcomes in adulthood.

Methods: In Philadelphia County, 197 (66%) of 298 recruited men participated in a telephone survey. They were screened for CSEs and then asked if they self-defined abusive CSEs to be CSA; they also were asked about risk behavior histories and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression symptoms.

Results: Of 43 (22%) participants with abusive CSEs, 35% did not and 65% did self-define abusive CSEs to be CSA ("Non-Definers" and "Definers," respectively). Heterosexual and gay/bisexual subgroups' CSA self-definition rates did not significantly differ. When self-definition subgroups were compared to those without CSEs ("No-CSEs"), Non-Definers had lower perceived parental care ($p = .007$) and fewer siblings ($p = .03$), Definers had more Hispanics and fewer African Americans ($p = .04$), and No-CSEs had fewer gay/bisexual men ($p = .002$) and fewer reports of physical abuse histories ($p = .02$) than comparison groups. Non-Definers reported more sex under the influence ($p = .001$) and a higher mean number of all lifetime sex partners ($p = .004$) as well as (only) female sex partners ($p = .05$). More Non-Definers than Definers reported having experienced penetrative sex as part of their CSA (83% vs. 35%, $p = .006$). Different explanations about self-definition were provided by subgroups.

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* Corresponding author address: 733 Blockley Hall, 423 Guardian Drive, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6021, United States.

Conclusions: Many men with abusive CSEs do not self-define these CSEs to be CSA, though not in a way that differs by sexual identity. The process by which men self-define their abusive CSEs to be CSA or not appears to be associated not only with self-explanations that differ by self-definition subgroup, but also with behavioral outcomes that impart risk to Non-Definers.

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Introduction

Many men and women with childhood-documented histories of sexual abuse do not subsequently report a childhood sexual abuse (CSA) history when asked in adulthood (Widom & Morris, 1997). Numerous factors likely figure into this nonreporting, including forgetfulness, repressed memories, unwillingness to disclose one's sensitive history to unknown researchers, and not defining one's abusive childhood sexual experiences (CSEs) to be CSA even though others would. This latter possibility has been a subject of increased interest, particularly for men in whom CSA nonreporting appears more frequent than in women (Widom & Morris, 1997).

Some posit that the cognitive appraisal of CSA events as abusive or not plays a different or more complicated role for men than for women (Fondacaro, Holt, & Powell, 1999). Emerging data not only suggest (1) that not all men with abusive CSEs cognitively appraise their abusive CSEs to have been CSA, but also (2) that the cognitive appraisal of abusive CSEs as CSA or not appears to drive whether CSA is associated with poor outcomes (Carballo-Diequez & Dolezal, 1995; Fondacaro et al., 1999; Stander, Olson, & Merrill, 2002; Stanley, Bartholomew, & Oram, 2004; Steever, Follette, & Naugle, 2001). Some argue that this latter dynamic is particularly at play for gay/bisexual males, hypothesizing that the social constraints limiting young gay/bisexual males' ability to have sexual encounters with peers drive them to have sexual encounters with older gay/bisexual man that are, by definition, CSA, but that are on the whole more of a benefit than a liability to their development (e.g., the benefit of affirming their sexual identity in a self-empowering way that encourages self-acceptance overwhelms any negative influences that experiencing an abusive CSE may cause) (Stanley et al., 2004; Steever et al., 2001).

Of the CSA self-definition publications noted above, only Dolezal and Carballo-Diequez (2002) and Stanley et al. (2004) studied gay/bisexual men ($n = 100$ [all Latino] and $n = 50$, respectively). The sexual identities of the other three samples were not characterized, though the samples were from populations in which heterosexual identity likely predominated. Fondacaro et al. (1999) studied predominantly Caucasian inmates; Steever et al. (2001) studied a convenience sample of undergraduate men; and Stander et al. (2002) studied predominantly Caucasian Navy recruits ($n = 86$, 40, and 615, respectively).

Of men from the gay/bisexual samples, 38% to 59% self-defined abusive CSEs to be CSA, though only 18% reported that they had initially perceived the abusive CSEs to be CSA at the time of the experience(s). Similarly, 15% to 59% of men from the likely-heterosexual samples self-defined abusive CSEs to be CSA. Stander et al. simultaneously reported on a female subsample with similar CSE histories; they self-defined abusive CSEs to be CSA three times more often than the male subsample.

Variables associated with gay/bisexual men self-defining their abusive CSEs to be CSA were younger age at the time of the abusive CSE(s) and a larger victim-perpetrator age difference (Dolezal & Carballo-Diequez, 2002; Stanley et al., 2004). There was no reported difference in perpetrator age by self-definition

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