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## A Retrospective Study of Factors Affecting the Disclosure of Childhood Sexual and Physical Abuse

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Although the number is declining, there are still approximately a million substantiated cases of child maltreatment in a given year in the United States, and about three times that many cases are reported to authorities (Jones & Finkelhor, 2003). These figures, however, are surely underestimates of the actual incidence of abuse. That is, as the chapters in this book reveal, many children, adolescents, and adults hide the fact of their childhood abuse, never telling anyone about their experiences. Little is known about the factors associated with nondisclosure of childhood maltreatment. In this chapter, we address this issue by examining the prevalence and correlates of nondisclosure of sexual and physical childhood abuse in a sample of young adults.

The data reported here were collected as a part of a larger retrospective study of abuse and other trauma described by Epstein and Bottoms (2002). Specifically, in an anonymous survey, we determined the form of abuse women had suffered and asked the victims if they had ever disclosed that abuse to others at any time up to the moment they completed our survey. The survey also included questions designed to measure characteristics of the abuse experience, including the frequency of the experience and the identity of and victim's emotional relationship with the perpetrator. Further, we measured victim characteristics, including the perceived emotional distress at the time of the experience and at present, age at time of the experience, tendency to self-label

as a victim of abuse, and individual differences in attachment style and in the use of avoidant psychological coping styles. In this chapter we report the results of analyses that allow us to construct a profile of factors related to the tendency of victims to disclose or not disclose childhood maltreatment to others.

A number of unique aspects of our research ensure that our findings add to the extant literature in significant ways. For example, we measured disclosure not only of sexual abuse, which has been the focus of most other studies in this literature, but also of physical abuse. In addition, our sample is diverse in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status, and it was collected from several geographical regions. We also included measures of factors that have not been previously studied in relation to disclosure, such as individual differences in psychological coping mechanisms and attachment style.

Because the extant literature on factors linked to disclosure has already been thoroughly reviewed by others in this volume (see, in particular, chapters by London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shurman, chapter 2, this volume; and Lyon, chapter 3, this volume), we forgo an extensive literature review and move directly to a description of our study. We refer readers to relevant findings from related research as we present our hypotheses and results and discuss their implications.

## METHOD

### Sample

Our full sample consisted of 1,411 young women who completed our anonymous survey in return for psychology course credit at colleges and universities in Illinois (77%), California (15%), and Virginia (7%). The students attended a session and filled out the survey without prior knowledge of the study. After being informed of the nature of the study, they were free to opt out of the study completely or leave survey items blank, although very few did. Of the total sample, 619 (44%) had experienced some form of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and/or emotional-verbal abuse.<sup>1</sup>

Our subsample of victims is among the most ethnically diverse of all existing studies of disclosure of abuse: 27% self-identified as African-American, 19% as Asian-American, 33% as Caucasian, 16% as Hispanic/Latino, and 5% as "other." Participants were on average 22 years of age (range = 18 to 58 years old). Of our sample, 37% were in their first year of college, 25% were in their sophomore year, 25% were in their junior year, and 13% were in their senior

<sup>1</sup> This number excludes one physical abuse victim who reported abuse that occurred prior to the age of onset of infantile amnesia (there were no sexual abuse victims who did this), and 25 teenaged sexual abuse victims who reported sexual abuse that was perpetrated by a romantic partner or boyfriend.

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year. We measured annual parental income (a proxy for the students' own socio-economic status) by asking participants to choose from among nine categories of per-annum income, ranging in ten thousand dollar increments from 0-\$9999 to over \$80,000. The median response was \$40,000-49,000, with a broad distribution of responses.

### Measures of Abuse Experiences

There were three separate sections of our anonymous survey, one each for experiences of childhood sexual abuse, physical abuse, and emotional abuse. In this chapter we focus on the experiences of physical and sexual abuse only, and only on those victims who told us whether they had disclosed their abuse prior to completing our survey.

Sexual abuse was assessed with the following question: *When you were 17 years old or younger, did you ever have any of the following experiences with someone at least 5 years older than you? (Note: this could mean that you did these things to someone or someone did them to you).* Respondents answered by choosing one

TABLE 10.1  
Percentage of Abuse Victims Who Chose Each of the Specific Forms of Abuse Listed in the Abuse Screening Questions

% of Abuse Victims	Item From Abuse Screening Question
Sexual abuse (N = 319)	
7	Viewed or took part in child pornography
32	Exhibitionism (inappropriately exposed to adult's genitals)
77	Fondling (touching) genitals, breasts, or buttocks directly or through clothing
22	Oral sex (mouth/genital contact)
7	Anal sex (penetration of anus with genitals, fingers, or other object)
30	Attempted vaginal intercourse (with penis, fingers, or other object)
27	Completed vaginal intercourse (penetration with penis, fingers, or other object)
17	Other sexual abuse
Physical abuse (N = 352)	
71	You were spanked, beaten, or whipped and it resulted in welts, bruises, bleeding, or other physical injuries
30	You were slapped or choked and it resulted in welts, bruises, bleeding, or other physical injuries
22	You were punched, kicked, or beaten up and it resulted in welts, bruises, bleeding, or other physical injuries
41	You were hit with an object and it resulted in welts, bruises, bleeding, or other physical injuries
25	Other physical abuse

Note: Percentages do not add to 100% because victims could have experienced more than one form of sexual activity within their abusive experience

or more of the specific items listed in table 10.1. Our definition of sexual abuse was modeled after others used in the literature (e.g., Finkelhor, 1979) and is ecologically valid in terms of ages of victim and perpetrator, as per laws in states such as Illinois and California. This objective "checklist" method of measuring abuse is arguably more accurate than subjective measures that require victims to self-label as victims of abuse without specifying types of events experienced. Of the 1,411 subjects who completed our survey, 26% (N = 367) of respondents reported at least one instance of sexual abuse, which is consistent with prior estimates [e.g., Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990 (27%); Martin et al., 1993 (25%)]. Of those victims, 48 failed to answer the disclosure question (described below) and were not, therefore, included in further comparisons in this chapter. Table 10.1 shows the percentage of the remaining sexual abuse victims (N = 319) who indicated each of the specific types/forms of sexual abuse. These percentages do not add to 100% because victims could have experienced more than one form of sexual activity within their abusive experience. Separately, we asked if victims had suffered multiple sexual abuses (distinct abuse events at the hands of different perpetrators), and if so, they were asked to complete the survey about "the experience you feel was most traumatic."<sup>2</sup>

Physical abuse was assessed with the following question (based on work by Straus & Gelles, 1988): "When you were 17 years old or younger, did you ever have any of the following experiences where someone at least 5 years older than you used excessive physical force on you that resulted in welts, bruises, bleeding, or other physical injuries?" Respondents answered by choosing one or more items from among those listed in table 10.1. Of the total sample, 27% (N = 385), reported physical abuse. Of those, 33 who failed to answer the disclosure question were dropped from additional analyses. Table 10.1 shows

<sup>2</sup> Defining sexual abuse is a controversial task. We were sensitive to the issue of our sample including cases of older teenagers involved romantically with the perpetrator (such as a 17 year old with a 22 year old). Although some would argue that any case captured with our definition would be abuse (and it would be legally defined as such in some states), others would argue that these types of cases are not abusive. Given the controversy, we chose to exclude cases in which the perpetrator was specified to be a romantic partner or boyfriend. In addition, we conducted an additional series of analyses matching those we report in this paper but dropping the 42 sexual abuse victims who were older than 16 years old. The pattern of results was very similar to those we report in this paper. For example, the percentage of disclosure, perhaps the most important variable in this study, differed by only one percent, with 79% of sexual abuse victims and 66% of physical abuse victims disclosing. Finally, some might argue that some forms of abuse on our checklist, especially exposure to child pornography (if viewed only) and exhibitionism, might not be as traumatic as other forms of abuse and might affect disclosure rates. Of all victims who answered the disclosure question, only one was exposed to child pornography without also experiencing some other form of sexual abuse, and only 18 were exposed to exhibitionism without experiencing some other form of sexual abuse. Analyses revealed that removing these victims from our sample had no impact on disclosure rates.

the percentage of the remaining victims (N = 352) who indicated each specific type of physical abuse. Respondents who had suffered multiple physical abuses answered the remainder of survey questions about the most traumatic experience.

### Measure of Disclosure

We measured our key grouping variable, disclosure, with the following question, "Did you ever tell anyone about your abuse experience?" Table 10.2 reveals that although disclosure was more likely than nondisclosure for both types of abuse, a substantial minority of victims failed to ever tell anyone about their abuse prior to completing our survey: 22% of sexual abuse victims and 33% of physical abuse victims. Our nondisclosure rate for sexual abuse (22%) is much lower than the 46% rate found by Ussher and Dewberry (1995) in a British magazine survey study. Our rate is closer to but still lower than (a) the 28% rate found by Smith and colleagues (2000), who asked adults in the community via a national telephone survey whether they had ever disclosed their abuse; (b) the 33% rate found by Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, and Smith (1990); and (c) the 31% rate found by Arata (1998), whose study is perhaps the closest to ours in terms of methodology and college sample. Note that Arata asked victims to indicate if they disclosed at the time of the abuse; thus, one would expect our nondisclosure rate to be lower because our victims had a more extended time period following the incident to tell someone about the abuse. We do not know why our rate is somewhat lower than the community samples. College students might be, on average, more educated and of higher SES, and one might speculate that education could give victims more courage or opportunity to discuss issues of abuse openly.

## RESULTS

Next, we present a descriptive profile of the circumstances surrounding the disclosure of abuse (i.e., to whom victims disclosed, what happened as a result of the disclosure). Then, we present a series of analyses examining factors that

TABLE 10.2  
Percentage (and Number) of Victims Who Disclosed and Did Not Disclose  
Their Abuse to Others, as a Function of Abuse Type

	Abuse Type	
	Sexual	Physical
Disclosed	78% (248)	67% (236)
Did not disclose	22% (71)	33% (116)
Total Number	319	352

were associated with disclosure and nondisclosure. Specifically, we used *t*-tests and *chi* squared analyses, as appropriate, to compare the characteristics, experiences, and circumstances of victims who disclosed and victims who did not disclose their abuse. For these analyses, our sample comprised all victims who answered the disclosure question (see table 10.2). We conducted all analyses separately for sexual abuse victims and physical abuse victims because some victims experienced both sexual and physical abuse, which precludes direct statistical comparisons between the two forms of abuse.

### Persons to Whom Victims Disclosed and Outcomes of Disclosure

We asked victims who disclosed their abuse to indicate the person(s) to whom they disclosed. As shown in table 10.3, victims were most likely to disclose to friends, followed by parents, other relatives, and significant others. Of particular interest, very few victims (9% or fewer) disclosed to any type of recognized authority figure. This low percentage of victims making a formal report of abuse is very close to the rates for sexual abuse reported by Arata (1998, 10%) and Smith and colleagues (2000, 12%), and it is troubling: It suggests that when child abuse is disclosed, it is not usually disclosed in a manner that leads directly to an official investigation of the abuse. In turn, abuse might not be interrupted and perpetrators are undeterred from future abuse.

TABLE 10.3  
Percentage (and Number) of Victims Who Disclosed and Did Not Disclose Their Abuse to Others, as a Function of Abuse Type

	Abuse Type	
	Sexual (%)	Physical (%)
<i>Persons to whom victims disclosed</i>		
Friend	65	78
Parent	45	34
Other relative	29	35
Significant other	32	26
Therapist	17	19
Teacher/Clergy	8	8
Authorities	9	9
Other	2	3
<i>Outcomes of disclosure</i>		
Abuse stopped	28	25
Legal action ensued	8	5
Parents divorced	1	3
Abuser confessed	8	4
Nothing (i.e., abuse continued)	16	40
Other	63	31

To investigate this issue further, we asked victims to tell us what happened as a result of their disclosure. As reflected in the large percentage of victims choosing the "other" response category in table 10.3, this survey item failed to capture many of the outcomes of disclosure, which underscores the need for future research to explore the consequences of disclosure in victims' lives. Even so, the findings are interesting. Disclosure ended the abuse for only about a quarter of the sexual or physical abuse victims. Legal action and perpetrator confession were rare, occurring in less than 8% of either type of abuse case.

Physical abuse victims were particularly likely to indicate that nothing occurred as a result of their disclosure. This might reflect the greater extent to which some forms of physical abuse, especially parental corporal punishment, are accepted in American society (Straus, 1995; Straus & Gelles, 1988). Thus, even if these victims tell others about their abuse, nothing is likely to happen as a result. This highlights the importance of psychological research into the short- and long-term effects of physical abuse, and for public awareness about the potential negative effects on children's well being of physical abuse (Kolko, 2002) and severe corporal punishment (Gershoff, 2002).

### Demographic Factors

Before conducting analyses comparing the circumstances and characteristics of abuse that was disclosed versus abuse that was not disclosed, we conducted analyses to ensure that there were no significant differences between disclosers and nondisclosers in terms of the demographic profile we discussed previously. Indeed, there were no differences in terms of parental income [for sexual abuse victims,  $t(297) = .32$ , ns; for physical abuse victims,  $t(328) = 1.94$ , ns], or victims' age when they completed the survey [for sexual abuse,  $t(316) = 1.06$ , ns; for physical abuse,  $t(345) = 1.03$ , ns]. Finally, a comparison of the four major categories of participant race/ethnicity described previously (excluding the "other" category) revealed no significant differences in terms of race or ethnicity [for sexual abuse,  $\chi^2(3, N = 302) = 5.09$ , ns; for physical abuse,  $\chi^2(3, N = 329) = 1.02$ , ns].

The lack of differences associated with ethnicity is particularly interesting because some argue that culture can affect disclosure rates (e.g., Fontes, 1993). As London et al. (chapter 2, this volume) note, other disclosure studies have generally failed to include diverse samples, even the large national sample study conducted by Smith and colleagues (2000). Thus, our study provides one of the first reasonable tests of relations between race/ethnicity and disclosure, and our results suggest that nondisclosure is no more or less likely for some racial or ethnic groups than for others. Of course, our results relate only to differences among different ethnicities within North American society, namely people of European (Caucasian), African American, Hispanic/Latina, and Asian descent. It is not a test of differences among other cultures within

our society or cultures outside of our society, and it is a test that warrants replication with other samples.

### Multiple Abuse Experiences

As mentioned previously, we asked participants whether they had experienced each type of abuse multiple times (i.e., separate abuse incidents at the hands of different perpetrators), and if so, to complete the survey about the experience they felt was most traumatic. We examined whether experiencing a form of abuse multiple times was related to disclosing the one target abuse experience that victims had in mind when completing our survey. For both sexual abuse and physical abuse, victims who disclosed were more likely than nondisclosers to have suffered multiple abuses. Specifically, 34% of sexual abuse victims who had disclosed had suffered multiple sexual abuse events, while only 11% of nondisclosers had suffered multiple sexual abuses,  $\chi^2(N = 280) = 11.65, p < .001$ . Thirty percent of victims who disclosed physical abuse reported multiple physical abuses, compared to 18% of non-disclosers,  $\chi^2(N = 305) = 4.84, p < .05$ .

### Identity of and Relationship with Perpetrator

Abuse perpetrated by loved, trusted adults is theorized to be more psychologically severe than abuse by acquaintances or strangers, and is therefore less likely to be disclosed and, some suggest (Freyd, 1996), perhaps even likely to be repressed. Researchers such as Goodman-Brown and colleagues (2003), Sas (1993), Sauzier (1989), and Smith et al. (2000) have found that victims are less likely to disclose, or at least more likely to delay in disclosing, as emotional closeness to the perpetrator increases (especially if parents are the perpetrators). They generally explain this tendency in terms of victims' concerns about betraying loved ones and disrupting families by disclosing.

In our sample, as would be expected, physical abuse was usually perpetrated by trusted family members (i.e., parents, 72%; stepparents, 4%; and other family members, 14%), which probably reflects that much of this abuse stemmed from overzealous discipline. The perpetrator was rarely a nonfamilial trusted adult (5%), acquaintance (4%), or stranger (1%). The pattern for sexual abuse was different, but generally in keeping with the sexual abuse literature: Parents (4%) and stepparents (3%) were not commonly the perpetrator. Instead, most abuse was perpetrated by other relatives (35%) and trusted adults (30%). The perpetrator was an acquaintance in 18% of cases, and a stranger in 10% of cases.

We compared the rate of disclosure for victims abused by parents and stepparents versus all other perpetrators. There was no statistical difference for either sexual abuse,  $\chi^2(1, N = 310) = 2.74, ns$ , or physical abuse,  $\chi^2(1, N = 341) = .37, ns$ . Nor were there significant differences in disclosure for sexual abuse,  $\chi^2(1, N = 310) = .23, ns$ , or physical abuse,  $\chi^2(1, N = 341) = .07, ns$ ,

when the comparison was between victims abused by a broad category of "trusted adults" (parents, stepparents, other family members, friends, and trusted adults) and victims abused by acquaintances and strangers. Because of very small numbers of victims in some cells for these analyses, especially for sexual abuse victims, we also compared disclosure as a function of intra-versus extra-familial abuse. Again, there were no statistical differences for either sexual,  $\chi^2(1, N = 310) = .85$ , or physical abuse,  $\chi^2(1, N = 341) = .24$ .

In these types of analyses, we assign more emotional closeness to adults who are more closely related to the victim than to adults who are more distantly related to the victim. Although this is a widely accepted assumption, we also obtained victims' own ratings of their emotional closeness to the perpetrator. Specifically, we asked victims to indicate how emotionally close they felt to the perpetrator prior to the abusive incident, using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not close at all*) to 7 (*extremely close*). Even with this subjective measure, however, our analyses failed to uncover significant differences in disclosure tendencies: Disclosers ( $M = 3.34$ ) and nondisclosers ( $M = 3.08$ ) of sexual abuse indicated feeling similarly close to their perpetrators,  $t(313) = .95, ns$ . For physical abuse, there was a difference that approached, but did not reach, significance: Disclosers ( $M = 4.63$ ) reported being slightly less close to the perpetrator than nondisclosers ( $M = 5.03$ ),  $t(344) = 1.74, p = .08$ .

To summarize, across several types of comparisons, we found no evidence of a link between disclosure and perpetrator identity. Our results are similar in this respect to those reported by Arata (1998). We also found no relation between subjectively rated emotional closeness and disclosure of sexual abuse, although there was a trend for the nondisclosure of physical abuse to be linked to feelings of emotional closeness. This is consistent with the theory that victims protect trusted abusers, who, in physical abuse cases, were often the parent or other relatives. Alternatively, this trend might also reflect a tendency for some physical abuse victims to not consider the actions abusive but instead to be a part of parental discipline, and therefore, they would see no need for disclosure. We consider the issue of self-labeling as an abuse victim next.

### Tendency to Self-label as a Victim

Some individuals fail to self-label as victims even though they have had experiences that would be considered abusive by most researchers and professionals in the field of child maltreatment and that would be considered abuse by legal definitions. People who self-label as victims differ in some ways from those who do not self-label (Epstein & Bottoms, 2002; Martin, Anderson, Romans, Mullen, & O'Shea, 1993; Silvern, Waelde, Baughan, Karel, & Kaersvang, 2000). There has been little discussion of this issue in the disclosure literature, perhaps because few if any researchers have included both objective and subjective measures of victimization. We expected that victims who did not think they were abused would be less likely to disclose their experiences than victims

who self-labeled as victims. This is because those who do not self-label would probably see little reason for disclosing: If a victim does not think an action is abusive, she probably would not believe that others would be motivated to stop the action even if informed about it. Also, such victims might even think that they deserved or instigated the actions. Victims are likely to believe all of these things in cases of parentally inflicted severe corporal punishment or in cases of sexual abuse where the victim has been carefully groomed by a perpetrator to believe that the experience is a special and positive event.

We tested our hypothesis by asking respondents, after they had completed the objective measure of abuse experiences described earlier, "When you were 17 years old or younger, were you a victim of childhood [sexual abuse/physical abuse]?" Only 60% of sexual abuse victims and 44% of physical abuse victims self-labeled (surprisingly low proportions that have serious implications for defining child maltreatment). In support of our hypothesis, labeling was significantly related to disclosure tendencies for both sexual abuse,  $\chi^2(1, N = 297) = 19.04, p < .001$ , and physical abuse,  $\chi^2(1, N = 336) = 27.06, p < .001$ . Specifically, 67% of sexual abuse victims who disclosed labeled themselves as sexual abuse victims, while only 37% of those who did not disclose labeled themselves as victims. Similarly, 53% of physical abuse victims who disclosed labeled themselves as victims, but only 23% of those who did not disclose self-labeled.

Thus, victims do not label as abusive many experiences that researchers and the law would define as abuse. This finding suggests a need for more public awareness about the definitions of abuse, which might lead some victims to understand that their experiences are abusive, and perhaps, in turn, foster their disclosures. It might also lead more observers to recognize abuse when they encounter it.

### Frequency of the Target Abuse

We asked victims to estimate the number of times their abuse experience occurred on a 6-point scale comprising the following intervals: 1 (*once*), 2 (*twice*), 3 (*3 to 5 times*), 4 (*6 to 10 times*), 5 (*11 to 20 times*), 6 (*21 or more times*). Sexual abuse victims who disclosed reported that their abuse occurred significantly more frequently ( $M = 2.98$ ) than did nondisclosers ( $M = 2.48$ ),  $t(310) = 2.09, p < .05$ . Physical abuse victims who disclosed also experienced more frequent abuse ( $M = 3.91$ ) than did nondisclosers ( $M = 3.09$ ),  $t(330) = 4.12, p < .001$ .

These mean differences stand in contrast to Smith et al.'s (2000) finding that higher frequency was related to delayed disclosure. Of course, our study is of disclosure versus nondisclosure during childhood instead of immediate versus delayed disclosure. We suspect that our results reflect a pragmatic tendency for more severe abuse to attract the attention of others and in turn lead to disclosure, even if that disclosure is not an active outcry from the victim, a possibility also suggested by Hanson, Resnick, Saunders, Kilpatrick, and Best

(1999). Future research should include measures of abuse circumstances that are more capable of testing this possibility (e.g., more specific questions about the nature of the abuse, such as whether the child received medical attention as a result of the abuse or whether injuries were noticed by persons such as teachers or friends). Alternatively, the more frequent the abuse, the greater the possibility that the victim would reach the point of being unable to stand it any longer, and disclose in an attempt to end the abuse. These explanations may also be relevant to understanding the finding reported earlier that disclosers were more likely than nondisclosers to suffer multiple incidences of abuse.

### Victim Age

Some studies have shown that older children are less likely to delay in disclosing sexual abuse than are younger children (Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Smith et al., 2000); others have found no relation (e.g., Arata, 1998; Bradley & Wood, 1996). We did not measure age at disclosure, but we did measure victims' age at the time the abuse started and

TABLE 10.4  
Mean Victim Age (in Years) and Ratings of Emotional Distress as a  
Function of Abuse Type and Disclosure

	Abuse Type	
	Sexual	Physical
<i>Age abuse began</i>		
Disclosed	9.73	8.45
Did not disclose	9.70	7.76
<i>Age abuse ended</i>		
Disclosed	11.70	14.42
Did not disclose	10.81	12.78
<i>Worry about serious injury at time of abuse</i>		
Disclosed	2.49	3.23
Did not disclose	1.42	2.12
<i>Emotional distress at time of abuse</i>		
Disclosed	4.77	5.52
Did not disclose	3.65	4.48
<i>Emotional distress at time of survey</i>		
Disclosed	4.13	3.21
Did not disclose	3.46	2.47

Note: See text for the wording of all measures. Worry was measured with a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*no, not at all*) to 7 (*yes, very much*). Emotional distress was measured with a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*no, not at all upsetting*) to 7 (*yes, very upsetting*).

when it stopped. As table 10.4 reveals, there was no difference in the age abuse began for disclosers and nondisclosers of sexual abuse,  $t(310) = .05$ , ns, or physical abuse,  $t(328) = 1.51$ , ns. There was also no significant difference in the age at which sexual abuse ended,  $t(310) = 1.53$ , ns. There was, however, a significant but small difference in the age physical abuse ended: Disclosers were older than were nondisclosers when the abuse ended,  $t(331) = 4.20$ ,  $p < .001$ .

The significant finding for physical abuse is counterintuitive in one sense: One would expect that disclosed abuse would have been cut short by the disclosure and therefore would have ended earlier than undisclosed abuse. But as we reported earlier, disclosure was unlikely to stop either form of abuse. Thus, we think it is more likely that these results are supportive of the idea we raised previously: that more severe abuse, which could be defined as abuse that continues longer and perhaps more likely to be noticed by others, is more likely to be disclosed than less severe abuse.

### Perceived Emotional Impact of the Abuse

We included several measures of victims' emotional reactions to and feelings about the abuse, and explored their relation to disclosure and nondisclosure (see table 10.4). First, we asked participants, "When you experienced your [sexual/physical] abuse, did you worry about being seriously injured or killed?" Overall, the level of worry about such extreme injury was fairly low, but even so, sexual abuse victims,  $t(314) = 4.38$ ,  $p < .001$ , and physical abuse victims,  $t(345) = 4.87$ ,  $p < .001$ , who disclosed were significantly more worried than were those who did not disclose. Kellogg and Hoffman (1995) and Hanson et al. (1999) also found that sexual abuse involving threat of serious injury was associated with higher disclosure rates.

We also asked victims, "At the time it occurred, was your [sexual/physical] experience emotionally upsetting or distressing to you?" and "Is your [sexual/physical] experience emotionally upsetting or distressing to you now?" For physical abuse, the disclosers reported being significantly more upset at the time of the abuse and more upset at the time of the survey than did the nondisclosers, both  $t_s(> 344) > 3.12$ ,  $p_s < .01$ . The same pattern held for sexual abuse victims, both  $t_s(> 315) > 2.15$ ,  $p_s < .05$ .

Thus, according to multiple indicators, as subjective levels of distress increased, so did the likelihood of disclosure. These findings, like our abuse frequency findings, might indicate that more severe abuse is harder to hide and leads to disclosure, whether that disclosure is wanted by the victim or not. This disclosure could be initiated by the victim who cannot live with the severe abuse any longer or who cannot hide it any longer, or it might be initiated by someone else who observes the results of the severe abuse, which is harder to miss than less severe abuse. Even so, we note that our results are not consistent with many studies of delayed disclosure, which have found that increased

abuse severity, in terms of more intrusive abuse and factors such as victims feeling fearful, leads to delayed disclosure and nondisclosure. Nor are our findings consistent with Arata's (1998) conclusion that "disclosure is least common for assaults that produce the greatest distress."

### Temporary Forgetting

Is disclosure linked to memory for abuse? It might be argued that victims are less likely to disclose abuse if they experienced periods of time during which they did not remember their abuse. We asked victims, "Was there ever a time when you could not remember your sexual abuse experience?", an item similar to measures used by researchers such as Briere and Conte (1993), Feldman-Summers and Pope (1994), Melchert (1996), Melchert and Parker (1997), and Williams (1995). A marginally significant trend,  $\chi^2(N = 317) = 3.05$ ,  $p = .08$ , indicated that sexual abuse victims who disclosed were somewhat less likely to report temporary forgetting (14%) than those who did not disclose (23%). In contrast, there was no significant difference in the percentage of disclosers (9.8%) and nondisclosers (10%) who reported temporary forgetting of physical abuse,  $\chi^2(N = 344) = .00$ , ns.

Thus, we uncovered only a marginally significant tendency for disclosers to report less temporary forgetting than nondisclosers, a trend that might reach significance in larger samples of victims who report forgetting. Arata (1998), in fact, did find a relation between forgetting and disclosing among sexual abuse victims. As we discuss elsewhere (Epstein & Bottoms, 2002), analyses of other measures included in this survey revealed that victims who reported temporary forgetting in response to this survey question rarely meant that they repressed the abuse totally and completely. Instead, they often meant that they failed to label the experience as abuse until later in life, or that they purposely tried to not think about the abuse. These would be consistent with failure to disclose: First, as we discussed previously, victims might be less likely to disclose experiences that they do not label as abusive. Second, victims would probably be less likely to discuss abuse that they are actively trying not to think about. This could be a mechanism for coping with the abuse (by avoiding it), an issue we take up more directly next.

### Individual Differences in Coping and Attachment Styles

A unique feature of the present study is that we measured several individual difference factors, which we examined in relation to disclosure and non-disclosure of abuse.

**Avoidant Coping.** We measured three types of avoidant coping styles proposed by clinical and personality theorists (although there is some controversy about their construct validity, e.g., see Spanos, 1994, for discussion): repressive coping style, dissociation proneness, and fantasy proneness. Generally,

avoidant coping styles are characterized by attempts to avoid acknowledgment of painful traumatic experiences and efforts to evade affect, memories, and retrieval cues associated with traumas (Briere, 1996; Maynes & Feinauer, 1994; Putnam, 1985). We reasoned that evading thoughts about trauma could lead to avoiding disclosure and discussion of trauma, and therefore that people who are prone to use avoidant coping styles would be more likely than others not to disclose their abuse.

First, we examined repressive coping style. People who use a repressive coping style ("repressors") tend to avoid acknowledging their own experiences of negative affect and avoid thoughts, information, and memories that are negative and stressful (Weinberger, 1990). We reasoned that, in turn, repressors would also avoid disclosure of traumas. In keeping with other research (e.g., Weinberger, 1990), we combined respondents' scores on the short forms of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MCSDS, Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; 1964) and the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale (Bendig, 1956) to obtain a measurement of repressive coping style.

Second, we studied dissociative coping style. People who are high in dissociative coping are said to lack an integration of thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Bernstein & Putnam, 1986) and to have disturbances in memory, awareness, and identity (Nemiah, 1980). We theorized that dissociative-prone individuals might use dissociation to escape thoughts and memories associated with abuse and therefore be less likely to disclose than nondissociative-prone individuals. Dissociative proneness was operationalized as scoring 30% or higher on the Dissociative Experiences Scale (Carlson & Putnam, 1993).

Finally, we studied fantasy proneness, which refers to a tendency to be deeply involved in fantasy and to avoid remembering memories of trauma, which is, for the highly fantasy prone, like vividly re-experiencing the traumatic events (Wilson & Barber, 1983). Thus, we expected that fantasy prone individuals would also avoid disclosing and discussing traumatic experiences because this would necessitate remembering and reliving the experience. We measured fantasy proneness with the Inventory of Childhood Memory and Imaginings (Wilson & Barber, 1983), where scores greater than or equal to 28 are considered high on the construct.

Our analyses revealed that the likelihood of disclosing abuse was unrelated to any of the three avoidant coping styles that we measured. Specifically, among sexual abuse victims, 76% of repressors and 78% of nonrepressors disclosed their abuse,  $\chi^2 (N = 317) = .09$ , ns; 83% of the dissociative prone and 77% of the nondissociative-prone participants disclosed,  $\chi^2 (N = 317) = .93$ , ns; and 83% of the fantasy prone victims and 76% of the nonfantasy-prone victims disclosed,  $\chi^2 (N = 316) = 1.47$ , ns. Among physical abuse victims, 69% of repressors and 66% of non-repressors disclosed,  $\chi^2 (N = 350) = .12$ , ns; 66% of dissociative prone and 67% of nondissociative-prone participants

disclosed,  $\chi^2 (N = 351) = .06$ , and 71% of fantasy prone and 66% of nonfantasy-prone disclosed,  $\chi^2 (N = 351) = .87$ , ns.

To our knowledge, no other researchers have examined a link between disclosure and these individual differences in coping styles. At least two groups of researchers, however, have measured general psychological functioning. Specifically, neither Hanson and colleagues (1999) nor Arata (1998) (who used the SCL90-R and TSC-40 measures of psychological functioning) found a relation between disclosure and global measures of current psychological functioning. Our null findings for avoidant coping styles are consistent with this prior research to the extent that persons high in such coping strategies might also be less psychologically healthy generally.

**Attachment Style.** We also measured individual differences in participants' attachment style. The basic premise of attachment theory is that early life interactions with an infant's primary caregiver mold the infant's mental representations for others and for the reactions one can expect from others in close relationships (Bowlby, 1969/1980). For example, supportive, attentive parents foster secure relationship schemas in their children, which leads to the children expecting support and emotional stability from relationships with others (a secure attachment style). Hazan and Shaver (1987) provided the first evidence for the enduring nature of these relationship schemas, illustrating that adult romantic attachments often reflect early life attachment styles. According to Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), there are four main types of adult attachment styles: secure, preoccupied, dismissing-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant. As described by Fraley and Shaver (1997), secure individuals are positive in their view of the self, trust in the responsiveness of others, and enjoy close relationships. Preoccupied individuals are insecure in their relationships with others and constantly worry that they are getting less from others than they give. People with a dismissing-avoidant attachment style tend to value emotional independence over close relationships and therefore avoid relationships. Individuals who are fearful-avoidant avoid, but want, relationships. They have low feelings of self worth and negative expectations of how responsive others will be to their needs.

A close, but imperfect, relation between adult and childhood attachment styles suggests that secure attachment in young adulthood results from supportive parenting. If so, then compared to insecurely attached adults, securely attached adults might have experienced a relatively high degree of perceived parental support during childhood. Throughout life, they also might have felt more emotionally close to others, more certain of others' emotional support for them, and therefore, we reason, more comfortable discussing close emotionally wrought issues such as childhood abuse. Thus, we hypothesized that securely attached individuals would be more likely to disclose abuse than insecurely attached individuals.

Respondents completed Bartholomew and Horowitz's (1991) measure of attachment style by choosing from among one of four descriptions of attachment styles. Analyses revealed no significant differences in disclosure tendencies among victims having the four various styles, and therefore no support for our hypothesis, for either sexual abuse victims,  $\chi^2 (N = 286) = 5.18$ , ns, or physical abuse victims,  $\chi^2 (N = 312) = 4.42$ , ns. Specifically, among sexual abuse victims, 79% of the securely attached, 76% of the preoccupied, 92% of the dismissing avoidant, and 74% of the fearful avoidant victims disclosed their abuse. For physical abuse victims, corresponding percentages were 72%, 63%, 56%, and 67%, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we uncovered no evidence of a link between attachment and disclosure in this sample.

## CONCLUSION

The implications of our results must be considered in light of the study's limitations. As is true for any retrospective self-report study, we must rely on the victims' memories and reports, even though people are not always accurate in reflecting upon their past experiences, their motivations, or their cognitive processes (Azar, 1997). Furthermore, although our sample was large and diverse in terms of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity, it comprised a non-clinical sample of young women only. Our findings might not represent the experiences of men or of individuals who suffered extremely severe abuse or emotional sequelae and who therefore are less likely to appear in a sample of highly functioning college students (e.g., Duncan, 1999).

These limitations notwithstanding, the study has a number of strengths, particularly in light of the paucity of research on this important topic. Our participants knew nothing about the study before coming to the survey session, potentially reducing the underestimation of nondisclosure that can arise when people respond to requests for abuse victims. Thus, our approach is more likely to include participants who have never disclosed their abuse. Other methods of estimating rates of nondisclosure, including studies of cases reported to authorities or therapists, would be less able to access and study victims who had never disclosed. A second strength of our study is its large, nonclinical sample, which is diverse in terms of ethnicity/race and socioeconomic status. The diversity allowed for testing relations between disclosure and race, and the large number of participants allowed us to have confidence in making statistical comparisons between relatively large numbers of victims who did and did not disclose their abuse. The nonclinical sample also provides more information

than clinical samples about the relations among variables in the normal population at large.

Third, we defined abuse both objectively (with the checklist approach) and subjectively (with a question about perceived victimhood), an approach not used in previous studies. This allowed us to understand that disclosure is strongly linked to victims' own perceptions of the abusiveness of their experiences, with victims who self-labeled being approximately twice as likely to disclose abuse than were victims who did not self-label. This implies that many perpetrators of abuse are quite skilled in misleading their victims. It also suggests a need in our society for more education about physical and sexual abuse to help teachers, doctors, and parents, as well as victims themselves, recognize abuse.

Fourth, we examined patterns of disclosure and nondisclosure not only of sexual abuse, which is of course an important threat to children's well-being, but also of physical abuse, a more common form of child maltreatment. Our data provide insights concerning the extent to which physical maltreatment is not only undisclosed but also not even considered abusive by its victims. Research in the field of child maltreatment is entering a new era, in which forms of maltreatment other than sexual abuse are being given more attention. Future research should examine disclosure of all forms of maltreatment, including neglect (the most common form of child maltreatment, Myers et al., 2002) and emotional abuse. In fact, a significant minority of victims in our study reported traumatic experiences involving witnessing domestic violence and emotional/verbal abuse, forms of maltreatment that are gaining increasing recognition. We are currently examining our data to understand factors associated with the disclosure and nondisclosure of these forms of maltreatment.

Finally, our study is unique in examining the relation between disclosure and various psychological individual difference variables such as attachment style and avoidant coping style. That social and situational variables may be better predictors of disclosure than individual difference variables (at least the ones we measured) is a welcome finding given that social factors are likely to be easier to identify and change for children than individual difference factors. Social psychological and social developmental theories should be brought to bear on the problem of understanding the factors that lead to disclosure and nondisclosure so that child protection professionals will understand the conditions that facilitate disclosure.

In conclusion, our findings make an important contribution to a growing area of inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the disclosure and nondisclosure of childhood maltreatment. Our study reveals that a significant number of victims never disclose abuse at all, or they disclose in ways that do not lead to formal investigation and do not bring an end to their abuse (nor prevent the abuse of other children). Although it is of critical importance to ensure that investigation techniques guard against false disclosures of abuse, it

<sup>3</sup> Results did not differ when we analyzed a more sensitive measure of attachment style, on which respondents use a 7-point Likert scale to indicate the extent to which each style was like them.

is clear from the present study that techniques must also be sensitive to the huge societal problem of the under-reporting of child maltreatment. As psychologists, we must help front-line investigators of child maltreatment by providing tools that ensure better detection of actual abuse (for discussion, see other chapters in this volume by Bottoms, Quas, & Davis; Pipe, Lamb, Orbach, Stewart, Sternberg, & Espin; and Hershkowitz, Orbach, Lamb, Sternberg, Pipe, & Horowitz). We move closer to realizing this goal by studying the factors that facilitate and hinder the disclosure of maltreatment.

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