Mental Health and Men with Histories of Child Sexual Abuse:
Even in Darkness, There are Worlds That Shine!

9th Annual Social Work Conference
Brigham Young University
November 7, 2014

Scott D. Easton, Ph.D., ACSW, LMSW (IA)
Assistant Professor
Boston College
IT'S NOT DENIAL
I'M JUST VERY SELECTIVE ABOUT THE REALITY I ACCEPT
Roadmap

1. Background information
2. Study #1. Predictors of mental distress
3. Study #2. Barriers to disclosure
4. Study #3. Predictors of posttraumatic growth
5. Future directions
6. Questions
Self-care
Key Influences
Some Definitions…

**Child sexual abuse** includes:
“...unwanted or exploitative sexual contact involving force, threats, coercion, or a large age difference between the child and the other person.”  
(Source: Adapted from 1in6.org, 2014)

**Adverse child experiences (ACE) are:**
“10 specific types of abuse, neglect and household dysfunction experienced before the age of 18.”  
(Source: CDC, 2014).
Growing Public Awareness

Pope Apologizes for 'Evil' Clergy Sex Abuse
Pontiff tells Australia child abusers have damaged the church

Jul 19, 2008 6:15 AM CDT
Stigma Remains…

- General stigma of sexual abuse
- Additional stigma for boys
- Little room for victim status
- Impact: suffering in silence

Sources: Gartner, 205; Lew, 2004
Effects of CSA

• Short-term effects well-documented

• Lifetime psychiatric disorder (Molnar et al., 2001)

• Specific DSM-IV illnesses (Putnam, 2003; Spataro, 2001)

• Substance abuse, relationship conflict, high-risk sexual activities, etc. (Hunter, 2006)

• Suicide attempt: 4-11 times > likely (Molnar et al., 2001)
Sexual abuse is not simply an event that happened, ended, and is now over. It can have an impact on every aspect of a survivor’s life—attitudes, self-image, relationships, and sexuality. These are not past issues, but very real and current ones.

However....

...not all men with histories of child sexual abuse develop psychopathology.
Program of Research

To examine risk and protection factors that influence long-term mental health for men who were sexually abused during childhood, using theories such as complex trauma, account-making, masculinity, etc.
2010 Health and Well-being Study

- Partnered with national survivor orgs (recruitment)
- Anonymous, online survey
- Cross-sectional design
- ~150 items (standardized measures of MH & open-ended items)
- Result: $N=487$!
- First large-scale study of this population; rich, multifaceted dataset
STUDY 1

Predictors of Mental Distress

Research Question

Which factors are related to mental distress among men with histories of child sexual abuse?
Conceptual Model

**Abuse Severity**
- penetration
- duration
- physical force
- incest

**Childhood Stressors**

**Disclosure**
- Years until told
- Response

**Masculinity**
(conformity to norms)

**General Mental Distress**
(past 12 mos.)
Including depression, anxiety, suicidality, & somatization.

**Controls**
1. Demographics
2. Recent Stressors
3. Membership
4. Ever told
Sample (N=487)

Demographics:
- Age: 50 yrs. (range = 18-84 yrs.)
- Race: 91% White
- Education: 58% have bachelor’s degree (or higher)
- Income: $60,000-69,000
- Relationship: 70% cohabitating (spouse/partner)
- Average # of dependents: 2.5
- Survivor organization: 81% were members

Abuse Characteristics:
- 10 y.o. (mean age of first sexual abuse)
- 62% abused by member of clergy
- More than half reported that abuse involved penetration (54%) and lasted more than one year (58%)
- About one-third reported that abuse involved physical force (34%)
## Multivariate Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b (SE)</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.09 (.02)</td>
<td>-.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial minority</td>
<td>-.66 (.91)</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-.25 (.07)</td>
<td>-.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survivor group member</td>
<td>.09 (.65)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent stressors</td>
<td>1.20 (.13)</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever told</td>
<td>1.27 (1.61)</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penetration</td>
<td></td>
<td>.77 (.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td></td>
<td>.20 (.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incest</td>
<td></td>
<td>.74 (.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuser used physical force</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.47 (.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood adversities</td>
<td></td>
<td>.35 (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years until told</td>
<td></td>
<td>.06 (.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpfulness of response</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.88 (.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine norms</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.19 (.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>14.44 (2.04)</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td></td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
STUDY 2.

Barriers to Disclosure

Research Question

What do male survivors perceive are the reasons why it may be difficult for men to tell someone about being sexually abused?
Data Analysis
Results

Socio-Political
Masculinity
Limited Resources

Personal
Internal emotions
Naming the experience
Sexual orientation

Interpersonal
Mistrust
Homophobia
Abuser factors
Safety/protection
Past responses
Socio-political Domain
Masculinity

“In Western culture, men are taught to be the tough ones: they’re not to cry, they’re supposed to have the answers, be the providers, and above all it’s not okay to show emotion. Would you tell under circumstances like that?”

(participant 274)
Limited Resources

“Society has gone to great lengths to get the issue of women’s abuse out of the closet, and out in to the open. The notion that men can be victims has unfortunately not evolved in the same way….In my early explorations about possibly seeking help I can’t tell you how many sexual assault centers simply do not provide services to men with historical abuse.”

(participant 220)
Interpersonal Domain
“Sexual abuse, especially between a male perpetrator and male victim is problematic …because it tends to be a societal statement about a person’s manhood and sexual orientation. That is, gay sex = bad. Abuse = bad. Gay abuse = really bad. I think many men who were abused by men assume that people will think that they are gay even when they are not.”

(participant 22)
Safety and Protection

“We are soldiers of an unpopular war and no one wants to see us on parade. We remind them of something that makes them uncomfortable. We’re like burn victims, except people either are mad at us or hate us, not the person who poured gasoline on us and lit the match.”

(participant 073)
Personal Domain
Internal Emotions

“Because the pain is so intense you don’t think anyone will understand it. As a man you’re not supposed to feel that level of pain, that level of loneliness, that deep, deep, deep feeling of being utterly and completely alone. Of being lost in a darkness so complete there’s no hope of light.”

(participant 90)
Sexual Orientation Concerns

“The analogy that fits best for me is one likening the abuse to the experience of men on the beaches of D-Day. The experience is so overwhelmingly traumatic… that it is almost impossible to describe. When the guilt and shame of having participated in the experience is acknowledged, it raises questions about one’s own sexuality that are difficult to confront and, for some, impossible to face.”

(participant 395)
Study 3. Posttraumatic Growth

What is post-traumatic growth (PTG)?

Positive psychological change as a result of the struggle with “... circumstances that represent significant challenges to the adaptive resources [and]...ways of understanding the world and their place in it”


An active or intentional response to trauma...
People who report greater PTG typically describe improvement in 3 areas of their lives . . .

1. **view of self** (e.g., increased personal strength, efficacy, compassion to self)

2. **life philosophy** (e.g., increased sense of meaning or spirituality, reordering of life priorities, appreciation of their life), and

3. **relationships with others** (e.g., increased empathy and altruism, sense of closeness to others)
Research Question

Which factors are related to PTG among men with histories of CSA?
Conceptual Model

- **Time**
- **Supportive Response to Disclosure**
- **Understanding of Sexual Abuse**
- **Turning Point**
- **Masculinity** (conformity to norms)

**Posttraumatic Growth**
(Tedechi & Calhoun, 1996)
21 items (5 domains)

**Controls**
1. Race
2. Income
3. Clergy abuser
More Time Since the Sexual Abuse (NS) 0.04
Received a Supportive Response when Disclosed Sexual Abuse (NS) 0.07
Had Less Traditional Masculine Norms** 0.11
Had a Greater Understanding of Their Sexual Abuse**** 0.24
Experienced a Turning Point**** 0.29
Future Directions
Applying What We’ve Learned…

A little knowledge that acts is worth infinitely more than much knowledge that is idle.

--Khalil Gibran (Lebanese-American poet)
Urgency for New Research & Interventions

“I would have killed myself in high school if not for the music of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band. Sometimes the only way to deal with the pain was to blast Bruce at ear splitting levels and let Max Weinberg’s drum beat drive the pain a short distance away. Clarence Clemmons sax (would) call me out of the darkness and remind me that even in the darkness, there are worlds that shine.”

--54 year old survivor
Funding Acknowledgements

National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Aging, R03 Award (R03AG048768)

John A. Hartford Foundation (Hartford Doctoral Fellowship)

Boston College, Office of Provost (Research Incentive Grant)

Boston College, Institute on Aging (Aging Research Incentive Grant)
Additional Acknowledgements
Thank you!

Contact Information:

Scott D. Easton, Ph.D, ACSW, LMSW (IA)
Assistant Professor
Department of Mental Health
Boston College, Graduate School of Social Work
Email: scott.easton@bc.edu
Ph: (617) 552-4047