

The Disclosure of Sibling Sexual Abuse: The Survivor's Experience

Marissa Saunderson

Dr Mark Sachmann
School of Allied Health
University of Western Australia

Dr Katie Carter
CEED Client: Anglicare WA

Abstract

Internationally and within Australia, there has been an increase in the number of children engaged in harmful sexualised behaviours against other children (Latzman et al 2011; Hall 2018). There has additionally been an increase in siblings engaging in harmful sexualised behaviours (Kieselica & Morrill-Richards 2007). This is a growing problem that has resulted in a Royal Commission that reviewed child sexual abuse services (Hall 2018). Anglicare WA has also observed an increase in the number of their young clients engaging in this behaviour and in light of this review they have started to evaluate their service delivery. This project is an exploratory thematic synthesis of the literature regarding the experience of sibling sexual abuse disclosure from the perspective of survivors of sibling sexual abuse. The aim of this project is to add to the body of literature around sibling sexual abuse, generate new insights, and increase understanding in relation to survivors' of sibling sexual abuse. With this knowledge Anglicare WA can target gaps in their service, improve client outcomes, and better support their clients and their client's families. The key deliverables of this project are a dissertation paper and a presentation to Anglicare WA staff to inform future practice.

1. Introduction

Historically, research and investigations into childhood sexual abuse have been targeted towards intrafamilial and extrafamilial perpetrators that are adults (Tapara 2012; Yates 2017). However, in more recent decades research has shown that there has been an increase in children engaging in harmful sexualised behaviour against other children (Hall 2018; Yates 2017). Harmful sexualised behaviours cover a wide range of behaviours that are considered harmful towards “the child’s own development or other children” (Hall 2018). These behaviours “vary along on a continuum from noncontact behaviours such as exposure to pornography to physical contact, and from fondling to forcible penetration” (Haskins 2003). These behaviours also occur amongst siblings (Ballantine 2012; Haskins 2003; Yates 2017).

Sibling sexual abuse will be defined in this paper as harmful sexualised behaviours that take place between two or more siblings (Hall 2018; Thompson 2009). In practice, when determining if these behaviours are abusive the level of “equality, consent, and coercion” should be considered (Boyd & Bromfield 2006). The term sibling sexual abuse will be used in this paper to highlight the difference between sibling related harmful sexualised behaviours and harmful sexualised behaviours generally. It is noted that the terminology chosen does not reflect possible criminal connotation, as sibling sexual abuse is often not pursued criminally

(Ballantine 2012). There are a variety of reasons that this does not occur. First parents or victims may not report the behaviours or file charges (Haskins 2003). Additionally, the age for criminal responsibility in Australia is 10 years old, therefore incidents that occur below the age of 10 cannot be criminally pursued (Boyd & Bromfield 2006; Pratt 2013). There is additionally the concept of “doli incapax” under common law, which recognises that children between 10-14 years of age mature at different rates and therefore may not be legally responsible for their behaviours (Boyd & Bromfield 2006; Pratt 2013). These reasons make it difficult to prosecute young children who engage in harmful sexualised behaviours both in relation to their siblings and other children (Boyd & Bromfield 2006; Hall 2018).

As previously mentioned, there has been an increase in incidents of children engaging in harmful sexualised behaviours (Yates 2017). In Western Australia alone, 70% of investigations into childhood sexual abuse have been believed to be perpetrated by other juveniles (Commissioner for Children and Young People 2018). Within this increase there has been an increase in intra-familial sexual abuse (Gekoski 2016). In regards to intra-familial incidents, it is believed sibling sexual abuse may be the most prevalent form of intra-familial sexual abuse (Boyd & Bromfield 2006; Caffaro 2017; Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro 2005; Haskins 2003; Kieselica & Morrill-Richards 2007; Pratt 2013). In fact Caffaro and Conn-Caffaro (2005) found that sibling sexual abuse occurs 3-5 times more often than sexual abuse between father and daughter. Additionally, a study that examined maltreatment reports in the US found that 2.3% of children were sexually abused by their siblings, compared to 0.12% of children were sexually abused by an adult family member (Caffaro 2017). However, it is difficult to know the exact number of cases, as it is underreported and under disclosed (Stathopoulos 2012; Tapara 2012).

This increase in children engaging in harmful sexualised behaviour against other children has come to the attention of the Australian government (Commissioner for Children and Young People 2018; Hall 2018). As a result, the Australian government then conducted a Royal Commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse (Commissioner for Children and Young People 2018; Hall 2018). As a result of the Royal Commission services that offer treatment for child sexual abuse were reviewed and treatment recommendations were made for children impacted by sexual abuse (Commissioner for Children and Young People 2018; Hall 2018). In light of this review, Anglicare WA has decided to evaluate their service delivery. Anglicare WA has also noticed that there has been an increase in the number of their clients being children engaging in harmful sexualised behaviour towards other children. As a result they have begun to explore how they can improve their service delivery to better address this problem.

Even though, there has been an increase in prevalence of sibling sexual abuse, this is still an under researched area (Latzman et al 2011; Yates 2017). This is partially due to researchers and clinicians historically minimising the seriousness of sibling sexual abuse, and often claiming it is just experimentation, consensual, or a normal part of childhood development (Boyd & Bromfield 2006; Welfare 2008; Yates 2017). Additionally, this could also be due to the taboo nature of this topic (Stathopoulos 2012; Yates 2017). The research that has been conducted in this area, indicates that sibling sexual abuse is just as negatively impactful as other types of intrafamilial sexual abuse (Ballantine 2012; Kieselica & Morrill-Richards 2007). In fact, Hatch and Northam (2005) found that sibling sexual abuse tends to be both “more intrusive and occurs over longer periods of time” than other forms of intrafamilial sexual abuse. Which could result in victims experiencing more negative consequences when compared to other types of sexual abuse (Hatch & Northam 2005). Sibling sexual abuse has been found to lead to disassociation, hyper-arousal, relationship difficulties, depression, low self-esteem, future drug use, hyper-

sexuality, affective disorders, and sexual dysfunction in adulthood (Ballantine 2012; Stathopoulos 2012; Tener, Tarshish & Turgeman 2017; Welfare 2008). Stathopoulos (2012) stated that parental responses to disclosure can mitigate or exacerbate these impacts. Sibling sexual abuse presents a unique challenge for parents as both parties involved are their children, resulting in a complex change to family dynamics (Boyd & Bromfield 2006; Carroll, 2009).

Unfortunately, this type of abuse is often under reported and not disclosed for years (Tapara 2012; Welfare 2010). Some research has indicated that children will often not disclose sibling sexual abuse to their parents because they feel guilty, helpless, ashamed, or they are scared their sibling or themselves will be punished (Boyd & Bromfield 2006; Caffaro 2017; Tapara 2012). Siblings additionally may feel conflicted about their feelings towards their siblings, which can act as a barrier for disclosure (Ballantine 2012; Stathopoulos 2012). This project seeks to further explore how survivors of sibling sexual abuse experience disclosure. In order to explore this area further, this project will conduct a thematic synthesis of the literature in order to generate new insight and understanding around the experience of disclosing sibling sexual abuse. This project will allow Anglicare WA to have a better understanding of the experiences of survivors of sibling sexual abuse, so as to better support their clients and their clients' families.

In conclusion, sibling sexual abuse is an increasing problem both internationally and within Australia (Latzman et al 2011; Hall 2018). However, it is often underreported and under disclosed (Tapara 2012; Welfare 2010). Anglicare WA have observed this increase in prevalence and as a result Anglicare WA want to explore and better understand the experiences of survivors of sibling sexual abuse in order to better support their clients and their families. Therefore, this project aims to synthesise the literature on how survivors of sibling sexual abuse experience disclosure to generate new insights and understanding around the experiences of disclosure for survivors of sibling sexual abuse.

2. Methodology

2.1 Conceptual Framework

For this project, I conducted an inductive qualitative research study. I choose a qualitative design for this project in order to enable a more in-depth understanding of the survivor's experiences. This project is explorative in nature, meaning this project aims to investigate what the literature says about this population and synthesis their experiences in order to add to the body of research in this area (Bryman 2016).

The considerations that shaped my theoretical framework are the following. My epistemological assumptions come from an interpretivism perspective meaning that I believe the human experience is subjective (Bryman 2016). My ontological assumptions come from a constructivist worldview, meaning I believe we cannot separate our beliefs, values, and feelings from the facts and that our realities are continuously evolving (Bryman 2016). Each survivor represented in the literature will have their own experiences, views, and beliefs that influence their perceptions and this study will seek to better understand the experiences of this population and synthesis the common experiences of this vulnerable population. Additionally, this worldview recognises that the researcher cannot completely separate their own beliefs and experiences when engaging with the data, but rather the researcher is recognised as a part of the analysis process (Bryman 2016). The methodology that will be used to analyse the data is a thematic analysis using a thematic synthesis approach (Bryman 2016).

2.2 Data

The search "brother-sister incest" OR "sister-sister incest" OR "brother-brother incest" OR "sibling sexual abuse" AND "disclosure" was conducted using the search engines Google Scholar and The University of Western Australia's One Search and Informit. This resulted in 1,503 results across the 3 databases. It is noted that a significant number of papers that resulted from the search were either duplications across the databases or related to literary or historical discussions around sibling sexual abuse rather than real life individuals.

The above mentioned papers were narrowed based on set inclusion criteria that included the use of the English language, the use of a qualitative research methodology that included original data from the perspective of survivors of sibling sexual abuse and were either peer-reviewed articles or dissertation papers. No time restrictions were implemented. These papers were narrowed down through reading either the titles, abstracts, or full-text papers in order to select literature that met the inclusion criteria. Papers that were kept directly spoke about in full or in part the experience of disclosing sibling sexual abuse from the perspective of the survivors. This resulted in 11 papers left for analysis.

2.3 Procedure

As previously mentioned the papers were narrowed down and the papers that met the inclusion criteria were kept for analysis. After this was completed, the collected papers were read in random order and the "results" or "finding" sections were extracted and written into a transcript. This included both the quotes from participants and the authors related discussions and interpretations. This transcript was uploaded to NVivo, a data analysis software, for coding. The text was coded line by line (Bryman 2016). Once all the transcripts were coded the data was then examined for descriptive themes (Bryman 2016). The themes were created by combining similar coding to reflect similar experiences (Bryman 2016). Next, overarching analytical themes were identified (Bryman 2016).

Additionally, two papers out of the thirteen, included both survivors of sibling sexual abuse and other types of sexual abuse. However, the participant's stories were individually separated and identifiable within the papers. Therefore, in both of these papers the quotes from the participants who experienced sibling sexual abuse and discussion from the authors about this participant were extracted from the "findings" section, opposed to the whole "findings" section.

2.4 Limitations

2.4.1 Delimitations

It is noted that several papers were excluded from this study due to the fact that all types of sexual abuse were included in the research criteria and participants were not individually identifiable. In these incidents, it was not possible to separate the experiences of survivors of sibling sexual abuse opposed to other types of sexual abuse and therefore their experiences could not be included in this study. Future research should analyse the differences between survivor's experiences of different types of childhood sexual abuse.

Another delimitation of this research, is the fact that non-English papers were not included in the analyses. Therefore this thematic synthesis has not captured non-English speaking survivor's experiences.

2.4.2 Limitations

It can be very difficult for survivors of sexual abuse to speak to others about their experiences (Tapara 2012). Therefore, it is highlighted that participants that have volunteered to participate in the research being analysed may not be generalisable towards the whole population of survivors of sibling sexual abuse. As there may be a bias in the literature towards survivors that are more willing to discuss their experiences or engage in services and research.

3. Conclusion and Future Work

Due to the change in direction of the project, at this stage the analysis of the literature is not complete. The next step for this project will be completing the thematic analysis of the literature. After the completion of this task, the findings will be written into my final dissertation paper and will be additionally presented to the key stakeholders at Anglicare WA.

Future research should seek to speak to Anglicare WA's clients directly, to examine whether or not the findings of this project are transferable to Anglicare WA's clients specifically. Additionally, Anglicare WA would additionally benefit from exploring cultural differences within Western Australia context.

4. Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Dr Susan Young, who has been an invaluable asset to this project by providing ongoing mentorship regarding my methodology and research ideas. Additionally, I would also like to thank my fellow MSW colleagues, Alison Watson and Gemma Kirkby for their support and critical feedback. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my husband, Abraham Saunderson, without your ongoing support and encouragement this project would have not been possible.

5. References

- Ballantine, M.W. 2012, "Sibling Incest Dynamics: Therapeutic Themes and Clinical Challenges", *Clinical Social Work Journal*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 56-65.
- Boyd C.R. & Bromfield, L. (2006) *Young people who sexually abuse: Key issues*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Bryman, A. (2016) *Social research methods* (Fifth edition.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Caffaro, J. (2017) Treating Adult Survivors of Sibling Sexual Abuse: A Relational Strengths-Based Approach. (Original Article)(Report). *Journal of Family Violence*. [Online] 32 (5), 543–552.
- Caffaro, J.V. & Conn-Caffaro, A. (2005) Treating sibling abuse families. *Aggression and violent behavior*, 10 (5), 604-623.
- Carroll, T. (2009) *Adolescents Who Sexually Abuse: Exploring the Impact on the Family*. [Online]. Dublin Institute of Technology.
- Commissioner for Children and Young People (2018) Discussion paper – Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, Perth.
- Gekoski, A., Davidson, J. & Horvath, M. (2016) The prevalence, nature, and impact of intrafamilial child sexual abuse: findings from a rapid evidence assessment. *Journal of Criminological Research, Policy and Practice*. [Online] 2 (4), 231–243.

- Hall, N. (2018) 'Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours seminar' [PowerPoint presentation]. Available at <https://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/media/3013/seminar-presentation-children-and-young-people-with-harmful-sexual-behaviours-12-june-2018.pdf> (Accessed: 20 March 2019).
- Haskins, C. (2003) Treating sibling incest using a family systems approach. *Journal Of Mental Health Counselling*, 25, 324-337.
- Hatch, J.M. & Northam, E. (2005) Adolescents who sexually abuse their siblings: A study of family factors and victim selection (PhD thesis). Melbourne: School of Behavioural Science, University of Melbourne.
- Kiselica, M.S. & Morrill-Richards, M. (2007) Sibling Maltreatment: The Forgotten Abuse. *Journal of Counseling & Development*. [Online] 85 (2), 148–160.
- Latzman, N.E., Viljoen, J., Scalora, M.J. & Ullman, D. (2011) Sexual Offending in Adolescence: A Comparison of Sibling Offenders and Nonsibling Offenders across Domains of Risk and Treatment Need. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*. [Online] 20 (3), 245–263.
- Pratt, R. (2013) A Community Treatment Model for Adolescents Who Sexually Harm: Diverting Youth from Criminal Justice to Therapeutic Responses. *International Journal of Behavioral Consultation and Therapy*. [Online] 8 (3-4), 37–42.
- Stathopoulos, M. (2012) *Sibling sexual abuse*. Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Tapara, A. (2012) Best practice guidelines for health service professionals who receive initial disclosures of sibling sexual abuse. *Kotuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*. [Online] 7 (2), 83–97.
- Tener, D., Tarshish, N. & Turgeman, S. (2017) 'Victim, Perpetrator, or Just My Brother?' Sibling Sexual Abuse in Large Families: A Child Advocacy Center Study. *Journal of interpersonal violence*. [Online] 886260517718831.
- Thompson, K. (2009) Sibling Incest: A Model for Group Practice with Adult Female Victims of Brother–Sister Incest. *Journal of Family Violence*. [Online] 24 (7), 531–537.
- Welfare, A. (2008) How Qualitative Research Can Inform Clinical Interventions in Families Recovering From Sibling Sexual Abuse. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*. [Online] 29 (3), 139–147.
- Welfare, A. (2010) *Sibling sexual abuse: Understanding all family members' experiences in the aftermath of disclosure*. (Doctor of Philosophy Degree), La Trobe University, Bundoora.
- Yates, P. (2017) Sibling sexual abuse: why don't we talk about it? *Journal of clinical nursing*. [Online] 26 (15-16), 2482–2494.