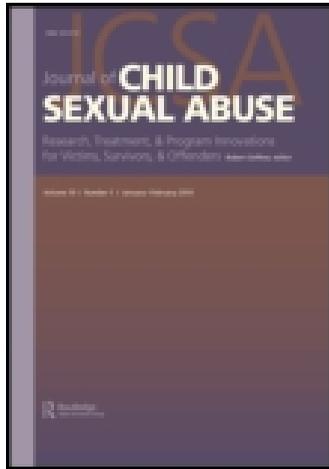


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Child Sexual Abuse and Adult Religious Life: Challenges of Theory and Method

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RESEARCH ON SURVIVORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Child Sexual Abuse and Adult Religious Life: Challenges of Theory and Method

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The religious consequences of child sexual abuse in adulthood remain relatively unexamined in the research literature, especially where abusers are not clergy. Some studies suggest child sexual abuse survivors may rely on religion as a source of support, though the majority document a decrease in religiosity. Given the propensity for psychological challenges among adult survivors with diminished spiritual coping, we are calling for increased research attention to religion in the context of child sexual abuse. The objectives of this article were to review the literature on intersections between child sexual abuse (perpetrated by nonclergy) and religiosity in adults and set forth relevant research approaches for future investigation. Findings revealed a comprehensive, multidisciplinary, and theoretically informed approach to research may be needed.

KEYWORDS *child sexual abuse, religiosity, spirituality, adulthood, gender, attachment, Christian, phenomenology*

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Child sexual abuse (CSA) is consistently reported as a serious international public health concern (McMahon & Puett, 1999). A large body of research has demonstrated a causal relationship between CSA and negative effects in adulthood (Kendall-Tackett, 2004; Wilson, 2010), with some data to suggest inconsistent and varying outcomes (Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001). Psychological difficulties in later life predicted by CSA include anxiety and depression (Freshwater, Leach, & Aldridge, 2001), suicidal ideation and behavior (Bridgeland, Duane, & Stewart, 2001; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1993), dissociation, eating disorders (Rind, Tromovitch, & Bauserman, 1998; Smolak & Murnen, 2002), hostility or anger (Wilson, 2010), low self-esteem and self-concept (Golding, Wilsnack, & Cooper, 2002; Romans, Belaise, Martin, Morris, & Raffi, 2002), problems in adult attachment (Rumstein-McKean & Hunsley, 2001), posttraumatic stress (Rodriguez, Ryan, Rowan, & Foy, 1996), substance abuse (Hall, 2000), sexual dysfunction and high-risk sexual behaviors (Holmes, 2008; Noll, Trickett, & Putnam, 2003), borderline personality disorder (Zlotnick, Mattia, & Zimmerman, 2001), and psychotic symptomology (Jumper, 1995). Somatic manifestations such as asthma and fibromyalgia have also been noted in this population (Alexander et al., 1998; Romans et al., 2002).

While the physical, psychological, and social consequences of CSA have been widely documented in the research literature, religious consequences remain relatively unexamined, especially where abusers are not clergy (Ganzevoort, 2000). This lack of attention is surprising as traumatic experiences such as CSA tend to raise existential and spiritual questions through survivors' personal confrontations with the deeper levels of self and reality (Grant, 1999). From the limited available literature, it appears CSA at the hands of nonclergy may diminish the religiosity of adult survivors (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1989; Imbens & Jonker, 1992; Kane, Cheston, & Greer, 1993; Pritt, 1998; Russell, 1986), particularly in conservative Christian families (Elliott, 1994). Acknowledging adult survivors' propensity for psychological challenges in response to lowered spiritual coping (Gall, Basque, Damasceno-Scott, & Vardy, 2007; Gall, 2006) and the effectiveness of spiritually integrated interventions in restoring their psychological and spiritual well-being (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005), it seems increased research attention to their religious lives may be warranted. Hence, the purpose of this article is to explore the critical and underdeveloped area of religiosity in the context of CSA.

CONCEPTUALIZING RELIGIOSITY AND SPIRITUALITY

The integration of religion into the study of psychology has presented serious challenges to scholars and academicians, with no shortage of definitional confusion (Nelson, 2009). Further complicating the issue is that, while

earlier conceptions regarded spirituality as religion's most central function, contemporary use of the term *religion* apart from *spirituality* has become increasingly common (Wulff, 1991). The word *religion* derives from the Latin *religare* denoted "a state of life bound by monastic vows" (Little, Fowler, Coulson, Onions, & Friedrichsen, 1974). Though the early Latin usage survives, it generally affords little insight into contemporary views regarding the nature of religion (Lemert, 1999). Religion (or religiosity) has been thought to exist across all times and societies (Cela-Conde, 1998) and not surprisingly continues to elude adequate definition (Peet, 2005). Some say to define religion is a contradiction as the function of religious life is to be immersed in that which is limitless (Smith, 1963). To make sense of human religiosity, then, we must consider the characteristics that distinguish the religious from the secular rather than seek a single, all-encompassing definition. Three principle characteristics compose the working definition of religiosity, including: (a) belief in a spiritual dimension, (b) observance of a set of spiritual rituals or practices, and (c) adherence to a doctrine of ethical conduct arising from spiritual teachings (Fontana, 2003). The first characteristic is considered the most significant of the three, being the guiding principle of several prominent religions.

With the rising number of definitions, the term *spirituality* continues to emerge as increasingly broad and vague, leaving the academic community at a conceptual loss (Bregman, 2004). The word *spirituality* comes from the Latin *spiritus*, meaning both breath and spirit. From a psychological standpoint, spirituality denotes "the experiential and personal side of our relationship to the transcendent" (Nelson, 2009, p. 8), though religious perspectives favor a definition that does not separate the religious from the spiritual, such as the following: "the quest for attaining an optimal relationship between what one truly is and everything that is" (Van Ness, 1996, p. 5). Broadly speaking, spirituality includes a belief in the nonmaterial dimension where people are more than their physical bodies and human life carries meaning and value (Fontana, 2003). It may be represented in the extent to which an individual recognizes her or his spiritual nature and expresses it through behavior in the material world (e.g., compassion for others). Nine major components of spirituality have been proposed, including transcendent dimension, meaning and purpose in life, mission in life (a sense of vocation), sacredness of life (all of life as sacred), material values (knowledge that "ontological thirst" cannot be satisfied through material things), altruism, idealism, awareness of the tragic, and fruits of spirituality (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988).

Although both religiosity and spirituality share a sacred core and search process that renders the two phenomena nearly inseparable (Pargament, 1999), secular understandings that separate the two concepts persist (Hill et al., 2000). Consistent with the tradition of psychology, the current research

will use the term *religiosity* as a broadband construct that includes spirituality, except in cases where the literature makes a distinction between the two terms.

EXPLAINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEXUAL ABUSE AND RELIGIOSITY

Religiosity as a Source of Suffering

Generally, CSA at the hands of nonclergy may diminish the religiosity of adult survivors. Adult survivors, more than their nonsurvivor counterparts, have been noted to change their religious affiliation or abandon formal religion altogether (Kane et al., 1993; Russell, 1986). Prevalent themes associated with survivors' relationship to God include loss of trust, betrayal and abandonment, and disconnection and isolation (Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1996; Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005). A few interpretations have been advanced by research scholars to account for the compromised religiosity of adult survivors. The majority propose that survivors assume a view of God that is tangled in male and father images, particularly where God is captured in the masculine term *Father* (Elliott, 1994; Imbens & Jonker, 1992; Kane et al., 1993; Pritt, 1998). Accordingly, the survivor's experience of God may parallel that of the abuser (the correspondence hypothesis), who is usually a male and sometimes a father figure.

Exline, Yali, and Lobel (1999) have explained from a cognitive standpoint that confrontation with tragic and unjust circumstances beyond an individual's explanation could prompt an attributional search where God may be pinned the source of suffering. In line with this conception, survivors of CSA have been found to manifest feelings of blame and anger toward God and even vengeful and malevolent God concepts (Kane et al., 1993; Pritt, 1998). Furthermore, it appears members of particular religious groups may be more vulnerable to religious defection than others. According to women's qualitative accounts, stigmatizing beliefs and blaming attitudes may be more prominent in Catholic and Protestant faiths toward followers with CSA histories (Imbens & Jonker, 1992; Russell, 1986).

Religiosity as a Source of Strength

There is limited data to suggest religiosity may provide a source of strength to adult CSA survivors. A qualitative investigation by Valentine and Feinauer (1993) showed that in a group of women survivors, religion or church was integral to affording a supportive network of people and making sense of CSA in way that reduced feelings of guilt and blame for the abuse. Another qualitative study noted women survivors seek support in relationships with God, church, religion, angels, and nature (Glaister & Abel, 2001). Reasons

why some but not others will experience improved religiosity in the face of CSA has received increased research attention over the past decade. A phenomenological investigation found religious coping was experienced by a group of adolescent sexual abuse survivors largely in terms of their relationship to the sacred, with those experiencing positive religious outcomes having formulated adaptive meaning potentials such as “God knew I had the strength to deal with this experience [sexual abuse]” (Nkongho, 2006). To further support these findings, Gall and colleagues (2007) documented no association between sexual abuse and survivors’ relationship to God, suggesting perhaps the relationship may serve a compensatory role for some with CSA histories. Quite notably, research has also revealed adult survivors who process the experience of CSA may be more likely to use spiritual support, religious forgiveness, and active surrender in coping efforts (Gall, 2006).

Empirical data on the religiosity of adults with a history of CSA at the hands of nonclergy is highly limited in quantity and theoretical focus (Ganzevoort, 2000). Although there are some studies indicating CSA survivors may rely on religion as an important source of support (Glaister & Abel, 2001; Valentine & Feinauer, 1993), the majority document a decrease in overall religiosity (Finkelhor et al., 1989; Imbens & Jonker, 1992; Kane et al., 1993; Pritt, 1998; Russell, 1986). Because psychological challenges such as depression or anxious mood may be more pronounced in adult survivors who do not experience a sense of closeness to God (Gall et al., 2007; Gall, 2006) or disengage from religious forms of coping (Bryant-Davis, Ullman, Tsong, & Gobin, 2011), we are calling for increased scholarly attention to religion in the context of CSA. The objectives of this article were to review the extant literature on the relationship between CSA (perpetrated by non-clergy) and religiosity in adults and set forth relevant research approaches for future investigation.

METHOD

A search of seven databases (PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, ERIC, CINAHL, Social Science Citation Index, PubMed, ATLA Religion Database) was conducted to retrieve published articles on CSA and religiosity in adult survivors. Relevant search terms included “child sexual abuse,” “incest,” “religion,” “spirituality,” “Christianity,” and “God.” Articles were excluded from review if (a) survivors were less than 18 years old, (b) abusers were members of clergy or unidentified, (c) religiosity was not examined in the main analysis, or (d) an intervention was used in the study. Intervention research was not included because the focus of this review is on representation of theory formation, although interventions could be used to further the aims of these representations. To garner as much data as possible, no time restriction was

set on our search. Studies included qualitative case reports ($n = 2$), survey research ($n = 1$), correlational research ($n = 3$), and descriptive and qualitative evaluation ($n = 2$).

Sample

Eight studies met the criteria for inclusion in this review (see [Table 1](#)). Samples of adult survivors, all recruited from the community, ranged in size from 1 to 2,964, totaling 6,796 survivors. Survivors' age spanned from 18 to 75 years, although two studies did not specify the upper limit of their age range (Finkelhor et al., 1989; Russell, 1986), and one provided only the average age of women participants (Elliott, 1994). Overall, there were considerably more women sampled (83%) than men. Based on the four studies that provided information on ethnocultural background, White participants were most frequently included; however, Latina, African, Asian, and other populations were represented (Elliott, 1994; Kane et al., 1993; Pritt, 1998; Russell, 1986). Three studies reported the income distribution and/or socioeconomic status of families; one included predominantly lower-income families (Pritt, 1998), while the other two sampled middle-upper class families (Elliott, 1994; Russell, 1986).

Measures

SEXUAL ABUSE

All studies relied on survivors' self-reported history, based on self-report measures and interview data, as evidence of sexual abuse. Studies varied considerably across CSA characteristics (duration, frequency, severity, age of abuse), with one investigation omitting this information (Kane et al., 1993). Abusers were reported as family and/or nonfamily members (Elliott, 1994; Finkelhor et al., 1989; Ganzevoort, 2000), family members (Imbens & Jonker, 1992; Russell, 1986), or exclusively father figures (R. R. Ganzevoort, 2001; Kane et al., 1993).

RELIGIOSITY

All studies examined the effects of CSA on religiosity using self-report data based on interviews and/or questionnaires. Interview procedures included structured (Finkelhor et al., 1989), semi-structured (Imbens & Jonker, 1992; Kane et al., 1993; Russell, 1986) and narrative interviews (Ganzevoort, 2000, 2001). Semistructured interview questions used by Imbens and Jonker (1992), Kane and colleagues (1993), and Russell (1986) were validated through pilot testing before they were administered to study samples. No information on validity or reliability was available for Finkelhor and colleagues' (1989)

TABLE 1 Review of Studies on Child Sexual Abuse and Religion

Author(s) and Year	Sample	Measures	Main Findings
Elliott (1994)	<i>N</i> = 2,964 women, 918 CSA survivors and 2,046 non-CSA survivors, average age of 41.8 years, community	Trauma Symptom Checklist-40 (TSC-40), the Family Environment Scale (FES)	Christian survivors of CSA were more likely to be religious nonpractitioners than non-CSA survivors, with the opposite true for participants with agnostic, atheistic, or other religious identities
Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, and Smith (1989)	<i>N</i> = 2,630 including 1,145 men and 1,485 women, 584 CSA survivors and 2,046 non-CSA survivors, 18 years and older, community	Structured interview procedure	CSA survivors were more likely than non-CSA survivors to identify as nonreligious
Ganzevoort (2000)	<i>N</i> = 1 male CSA survivor (in his fifties), community	Narrative interview procedure	Contrasting images and attitudes toward religion and God were demonstrated in the CSA survivor's narrative
Ganzevoort (2001)	<i>N</i> = 1 male CSA survivor, community	Narrative interview procedure	The meaning of religion showed considerable variation in the CSA survivor over discernible story lines, periods, and relationships
Imbens and Jonker (1992)	<i>N</i> = 19 Christian women CSA survivors, 25 to 57 years old, community	Structured interview procedure	CSA survivors experienced the Christian religion and the image of God as highly negative
Kane, Cheston, and Greer (1993)	<i>N</i> = 66 women, 33 CSA survivors and 33 non-CSA survivors, 26 to 75 years old, community	Structured interview and self-administered questionnaire procedures	CSA survivors had a more negative image of God than non-CSA survivors
Pritt (1998)	<i>N</i> = 185 Mormon women, 115 CSA survivors and 70 non-CSA survivors, 20 to 50 years old, community	Spiritual Effects Questionnaire (SEQ), Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ)	CSA survivors showed lower spiritual well-being and had a more negative conception of God than non-CSA survivors
Russell (1986)	<i>N</i> = 930 women; 149 CSA survivors and 781 non-CSA survivors; 18 years and older; community	Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS), Inner Core Scale, Adjective Rating of God Scale, Images of God Scale Semistructured interview procedure	CSA survivors showed higher rates of religious defection than non-CSA survivors

structured interview questions. Three studies employed self-administered questionnaires, assessing the concept of God (Kane et al., 1993; Pritt, 1998), attributional style, spiritual well-being (Pritt, 1998), and religious and moral beliefs (Elliott, 1994). All questionnaires were adequately validated and reliable and have been used widely in prior investigation.

Findings

Of the eight studies reviewed, six reported diminished religiosity in adults with CSA histories. Kane and colleagues (1993) found that among women survivors, 27% left the faith community of their family of origin, specifically because of incest, while 33% of the remaining survivors left to join another church. Women CSA survivors reported more anger toward God and perceived God to be more distant, disapproving, and rigid than their non-CSA counterparts. Pritt (1998) found sexually abused Mormon women experienced more pessimism and less spiritual well-being (spiritual and life satisfaction) and feelings of personal worth, wholeness, and connection with their inner core than those who reported no such abuse. Women survivors also reported more wrathful, unkind, distant, and unloving concepts of God than nonsurvivors. Sexual abuse in this study was directly predictive of pessimism, spiritual well-being, and negative views of God.

Russell (1986) found a greater religious defection rate among women with incest histories (53%) than women with no such histories (32%). Religious defection was highest in Protestant and Catholic survivors (both 56%) and lowest in Jewish survivors (14%). A qualitative study by Imbens and Jonker (1992) that did not include a comparison group found strong negative perceptions of the Christian church (e.g., as intolerant, strict, hypocritical) and God (e.g., as cruel, uncaring, punishing) in women survivors from Christian families. Finkelhor and colleagues (1989) found survivors of CSA to report greater nonreligiosity than their non-CSA counterparts, with significant differences primarily among Protestant men and Catholic women. Sexual abuse in this study was predictive of nonreligiosity in men but not women. Elliott (1994) found that among women raised in conservative Christian homes, those with CSA histories were more likely to be religious nonpractitioners than those with no such histories. This trend was reversed in women raised by parents who had agnostic, atheistic, or other religious identities; that is, a history of CSA increased the likelihood of women's involvement in religious practice.

Two qualitative case studies reported mixed and equivocal religious effects. In the first case study of a male CSA survivor, Ganzevoort (2000) found a variety of conflicting images of God such as forgiving and harsh judge. This survivor rejected the image of God as a father in favor of God as a son. He also underwent several conflicts with religious groups, including the Jewish community, a Pentecostal group, and the Roman Catholic church.

A second case study of a male CSA survivor found the meaning of religion varied across discernible story lines (being invisible, living in conflict, and serving), periods, and relationships, with each story line representing a collection of individual meanings (Ganzevoort, 2001). With regard to the story line *Serving*, for instance, the survivor came to recognize how his serving and self-sacrificial attitude was instilling a sense of meaning in his life while at the same time keeping him in abusive situations.

In summary, most studies revealed CSA perpetrated by nonclergy may compromise the religious lives of adult survivors, which has been previously noted to foster psychological and spiritual disharmony (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005). Accordingly, these studies support the notion that greater attention needs to be paid to religiosity in the lives of adults who have been sexually abused as children.

RELEVANT RESEARCH APPROACHES

Four recommendations (two theoretical, two methodological) for research approaches emerged from gaps identified in the present review that may facilitate future scholarship on CSA and religion. These research recommendations include: continued analysis of feminist theory, use of attachment as a theoretical framework, use of longitudinal rather than cross-sectional analysis, and inclusion of alternatives to self-report measures.

Theoretical Recommendations

FEMINIST THEORY

Sexual abuse, in itself, has long been identified as a problem rooted in gender inequality (Dominelli, 1989). It is nothing new that there are a greater proportion of women affected by CSA and that it is primarily males who are abusers (Banyard, Williams, & Siegel, 2004). Social constructivist views of masculinity (as dominant, aggressive force) and femininity (as passive, submissive force) that legitimize patriarchal power have been advanced by feminist theorists as a key dynamic in men's sexual victimization of girls (Dominelli, 1989). According to feminist theory, sexual abuse may in large part be because of a male-dominated society that implicitly and explicitly subjugates both women and girls (Solomon, 1992). Such power dynamics tend to arise in religious systems, especially the pronouncements and practices of the Christian tradition (Japinga, 1999). There is little question of women's exclusion and dismissal from a typical history of Christianity, a history that is particularly androcentric. Post-Christian feminists emphasize the male-centered nature of the Christian faith by pointing to the lesser power of female clergy, masculine image of God, and valuation of women in traditional family roles over their vocation or contribution to society (Hampson,

1990). Generally, the accounts of women with CSA histories confirm the presence of a patriarchal Christian culture in which sexual abuse can thrive (Imbens & Jonker, 1992). This becomes apparent in women's ability to articulate with ease patriarchal aspects of Christianity and their direct influence on the experience of CSA (Imbens & Jonker, 1992; Russell, 1986).

A feminist theoretical approach may be essential to capturing the religious experience of women survivors. In this approach, the importance of intersectionality, or "the mutually constitutive relations among social identities" (Shields, 2008, p. 301), cannot be overstressed. African American women survivors, for instance, must contend with not only the discourses of sexism but racism in the Christian representation of God's holiness and purity as synonymous with White people in general and White female virgins in particular (Robinson, 2000). It should be noted that this review identified only two studies that integrated feminist theory into their conceptual framework (Imbens & Jonker, 1992; Russell, 1986). A priority for future research may thus be to adopt a feminist perspective with an eye on intersectionality (Robinson, 2000) and the potential for religion to heal women survivors (Glaister & Abel, 2001; Valentine & Feinauer, 1993). Critical questions for psychological inquiry might include the following: (a) What are women survivors' lived experiences of Christianity? (b) What aspects of the Christian faith contribute to the marginalization of women survivors? and (c) How might Christianity act as a beneficial force in the lives of women with CSA histories?

ATTACHMENT THEORY

John Bowlby, considered the grandfather of attachment theory, described attachment as a biologically based bond between a child and his or her attachment figure (usually the primary caregiver; Bowlby, 1969). Attachment behavior such as seeking and maintaining proximity to a caregiver may protect the child, particularly during periods of stress (Ainsworth, 1985). It is presumed early experiences with the attachment figure form the basis of the child's internal working model (IWM), a "mental representation of an aspect of the world, others, self, or relationships to others that is of special relevance" (Main, 1985, p. 68). Notwithstanding the potential for "reorganization," the child's IWM is thought to be relatively stable over time and developmental periods (Ainsworth, 1989).

The value of attachment theory to research on sexual abuse rests in its basic unit of analysis, the dyad (the self and other), which provides a relational context that is ideal for understanding the relational trauma of CSA (Alexander, 1992). From a Bowlbian perspective, the child who experiences a traumatic situation within a primary relationship may *defensively exclude* it from consciousness, resulting in a sort of incoherent IWM or multiple conflicting models (Bowlby, 1998). Developments in cognitive psychology

indicate that defensive exclusion may not only lead to a change in the content of the child's IWM but a diminution in the ability to operate on those contents (Main, 1991). We see the result of this in adults with CSA histories who display distorted perceptions of the self and others in relationships. To illustrate, a case study of a woman who suffered CSA at the hands of her father reported unbounded notions of self as bad, dirty, and unworthy and a strong belief that others, particularly men, presented a threat (Straker-Bryce, Watson, & Robinson, 2002).

Interestingly, empirical data has established a corresponding relationship between one's IWM and attachment orientation and religious beliefs and experiences (Granqvist, Ivarsson, Broberg, & Hagekull, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 1998). That is, individuals with a *secure* working model have shown a greater sense of security (trust, comfort) in their perceived relationship to a deity or other religious figure (Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010). On the other hand, those with *insecure* working models were found to relate to the divine in a more distant and untrusting (avoidant) manner or in a deeply emotional and clingy (preoccupied) way. Even with limited scholarship, three of the reviewed studies provided anecdotal evidence for (negative) correspondence between adult survivors' relationship to the abuser and God, with reciprocal characteristics identified as *male* and *father* (Elliott, 1994; Imbens & Jonker, 1992; Pritt, 1998). A woman CSA survivor writes, "If Heavenly 'Father' is anything like my earthly Father I don't even want to meet him" (Pritt, 1998, p. 137).

Until now, very few studies on CSA and religiosity in adults have employed an attachment theoretical lens despite available data clearly demonstrating its relevance. An individual's relationship to God is indeed not only an attachment in itself but a reflection of one's IWM of attachment, often uniquely affected in the case of CSA (Alexander, 1992; Brokaw & Edwards, 1994). Quite notably, a recent study broadly examining child maltreatment (physical, verbal, sexual) found that individuals who reported higher levels of sexual abuse than other forms of maltreatment showed a more insecure attachment to God (Reinert & Edwards, 2009). CSA investigators are strongly encouraged to build on this contribution by allowing attachment theory to guide their future research and hypotheses.

Methodological Recommendations

LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS

The psychology of religion has long recognized spirituality is not a stable, substantive entity but a dynamic process that involves discovering the sacred, conserving a relationship to the sacred once it is discovered, and *transforming* that relationship in response to internal and external states (Pargament, 1997). According to Pargament (2006), spiritual transformation refers to a

fundamental shift in “the place of the sacred or the character of the sacred in the life of the individual” (e.g., from God as “personal” to a sense of divinity in all things; p. 18) and in “the pathways people take to the sacred” (e.g., from alcohol and drug use to ritual prayer; p. 20). It becomes evident from this conceptual stance that spiritual transformation is by no means novel, unusual, or arcane but intrinsic to the fabric of religious experience. Despite this fundamental truth, cross-sectional rather than longitudinal analysis has been used exclusively to examine the religiosity of adults with CSA histories.

Qualitative data reveals that at some point(s) following sexual abuse, the survivor may enter a period of spiritual struggle or a crossroads that may stimulate either spiritual transformation or spiritual disengagement (Ganzevoort, 2000, 2001). Consider the words of a woman survivor of frequent molestation by her stepfather: “Although I haven’t let go of the anger completely, I am working towards God. . . . I notice the anger coming down. I see myself growing in that way” (Murray-Swank & Pargament, 2005, p. 197). Researchers should also be aware that religion and spirituality in America reflect a changing landscape in which traditional religious practice is decreasing while personalized and individualized forms of expression and a culture of religious pluralism is increasing (Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Recognizing the challenges in implementing longitudinal designs (Briere, 1992), their value in capturing survivors’ experience of spiritual transformation along with the new and emerging meanings of religion cannot be overstated.

ALTERNATIVES TO SELF-REPORT

Assessment of religiosity in CSA survivors has relied solely on methods of self-report. Such methods present concern given vulnerability factors, including social desirability bias, participant expectations, and general affect (Hill & Pargament, 2003). Self-reports may very well be our only way of evaluating “ideological” aspects of religion (e.g., attitudes, belief salience); however, they may be inappropriate for predicting behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2005). Self-reports fall short of capturing the broad range of social and behavioral expressions of religion by which survivors may encounter the sacred, such as participation in ritual prayer, cultivation of compassion for self and others, and the performance of certain social roles (e.g., mother, healer) (Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Mahoney, 2008). The nature of religion is indeed multidimensional, with intricately interconnected “belonging, believing and behaving” facets (Layman, 2001). While the emphasis on self-reports in the literature has, to some degree, reflected the implicit assumption that ideological aspects of religion in turn guide the social and behavioral, this idea may be subject to inconsistency. It has been shown, for example, that even the atheist may turn to God during times of high psychological distress,

suggesting that perhaps certain psychological responses could override individual systems of belief (Sosis, 2007).

The use of alternatives to self-report measures of religiosity may be essential for a more “holistic” approach that could advance our understanding of CSA research. Fortunately, a number of alternative methods are presently being developed and evaluated. Newberg, D’Aquila, and Rause (2001) have proposed the use of physiological indicators of religiosity such as computerized tomography, positron-emission tomography scans, and immunological functioning. Hill (1994) has explained that religious attitude may be measured in terms of its associative strength between the presentation of a religious object (such as the Bhagavad Gita) and an evaluation of that object in which the strength of the association is reflected in the time required to respond to an attitudinal inquiry. Still, Hill and Pargament (2003) have suggested there is considerable value in gaining observers’ reports on religiosity, particularly within clinical populations. We believe each of these approaches are worthy of investigation in their own right, and scholars of CSA should keep them in mind as they focus their research agendas.

CONCLUSION

Future research on the religiosity of adults with CSA histories needs first to carefully attend to gender. As a variable affected by socially constructed aspects of identity, gender provides a basis for understanding the subjugation of sexually abused women by the church. Feminist theory affords the theoretical foundation for such analyses, although it is imperative methodological thinking reflects the overarching theme that encompasses this theory. Perhaps the single most important element of feminist research is the valuation of women’s lived experience or “being in the world” (Garko, 1999). Linda Fisher (2011) recently stated in *Time in Feminist Phenomenology* (and we would agree here) that

the category of gender calls out for a phenomenological treatment, and relevant phenomenological analyses need to be gendered . . . to the extent that gender, as a complex specification of both our natural embodiment and cultural being, conditions how we are in the world, it is constitutive of our subjective experience and being and can be seen . . . as a modality of our subjectivity. (p. 92)

Second, religiosity in adult CSA survivors may be characterized by spiritual transformation and a multiplicity of expressive modes, and, hence, it is the critical task of investigators to capture the changing and multidimensional nature of this construct. In contemplating methodology, scholars in the area are called to meditate on the following important and interrelated questions:

(a) How might the religious experience of CSA survivors change over the life course? (b) How is religion represented in the broad scope of survivors' behavioral manifestations? and (c) What is the place of religion in the family, culture, and larger social context of CSA survivors? (Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005). These questions are not readily amenable to experimental study, and despite the diversity of religious measures becoming available to the field of psychology, it seems any one discipline will fall short of grasping the imperceptible nature of religious experience (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). With this in mind, we hope CSA researchers in psychology seriously consider integrative and multidisciplinary approaches to religiosity that encourage collaboration across academic and theoretical traditions.

Third, investigation into sexual abuse and religiosity, two constructs rooted in relational dynamics may very well benefit from adopting the perspective of attachment theory. What is the impact of CSA on adult attachment to God? Researchers are urged to consider this question by paying particular attention to the IWM as a third variable factor. In addition, to address the apparent correspondence between the survivor's relationship to the abuser and that of God, future scholarship should determine the consistency across these two attachments concurrently and, where possible, longitudinally. Bearing in mind the assessment of IWMs necessitates reflection on unconscious representations of relationships that may run counter to the conscious processes of survivors (Bolen, 2003), investigators ought to take extra care in the measurement of attachment.

It is clear the suggestions provided in this article are intended for research purposes. Nevertheless, we want to alert clinicians to the importance of exploring the issue of religion with survivors of CSA, as it becomes apparent attention to their religious concerns may be central to recovery. For many survivors, a dialogue around religiosity may elicit a full range of explosive affects such as shame and despair (Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Mahoney, 2008), and while it may be difficult for survivors to "bear witness" to these emotions, encouraging them to do so may create a space where they can begin to access distinctive religious resources that may facilitate the process of healing.

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