Child Sexual Abuse and Psychological Impairment in Victims
Results of an online-study initiated by victims of sexual abuse

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Overview

• Sexual abuse of children has been a topic of scientific investigation for the past few decades.
• Research in this area however, is rarely initiated, conceptualized, and conducted by victims themselves.
• Apart from possibly having painted a one-sided picture of sexual abuse, this presumed dominance of nonvictims might also have marginalized victims in a research area central to their lives.
• This study was conducted by a victims interest group as an effort to meet the need to add victims’ perspectives to our current understanding of this topic.
• The online survey focused on investigating victims’ psychosocial impairment, which was found to be extensive.
• Results indicate that an intact social support system facilitates better health, especially when offered early on.

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MOGiS e.V. has been founded in 1. April 2009 as “MissbrauchsOpfer Gegen InternetSperren” (Victims of sexual Abuse against Internetblocking).

After preventing compulsory Internet Filtering in Germany we were enhancing our mission.

MOGiS wants to use its acceptance by nonvictims to further the interests of victims of sexual abuse.

With MOGiS Victims are speaking up for their own needs (as we did in the roundtable talks about sexual abuse in 2011).

We are: A Voice of Victims – for Victims.

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Child Sexual Abuse and Psychological Impairment in Victims
• Studied Applied Maths in Rostock, Brighton (UK) and Leipzig.
• Does a PhD in Engineering (Computational Electromagnetics).
• Has been sexually exploited by a male (non-relative) for a period of more than one year.
• Is Founder and Chairperson of MOGiS e.V. and represents MOGiS in German and European politics.
The Study - Conceptualization

- Over the past several decades, public awareness regarding the societal problem of child sexual abuse has grown steadily.
- But specific aspects of child sexual abuse might not have received appropriate attention, producing a one-sided picture of the phenomenon and its ramifications.
- Victims are being talked about, and research is conducted on them, when instead a mindset promoting togetherness and cooperation is likely to be more appropriate and promising.
- More important, by ignoring the “insider” perspective, the wrong message may have been sent to victims, suggesting that they shall remain predominantly passive in academia’s dealing with the problem.
- Against this background, MOGiS e.V. conducted this study to investigate whether impressions and experiences gained from working in the field could be supported empirically.
The study was initiated and conceptualized by Christian Bahls, the president of MOGiS, a victim of child sexual abuse.

An aim of the study was to determine the magnitude of symptoms of impaired psycho-social functioning among victims, as this can be one indicator of an impaired quality of adult life. Some concrete assumptions were also tested.

On a broader note, however, the main objective of this study was to take on an active and visible role in the scientific investigation of a topic that has been, and for many always will be, a central part of their daily life.

Thus, this research was triggered by the need to add victims’ perspectives to academia’s discussion on the topic rather than to confront gaps in the literature.
The main hypotheses were:

(a) victims, their relatives and partners, and professionals working in the field estimate the incidence of CSA to be higher compared to people who are not involved with the topic;
(b) females are more likely to be victims than males;
(c) very young and young children (before age six) are less likely to be victims than schoolchildren;
(d) below the age of 10, boys and girls experience sexual abuse in equal proportions;
(e) with increasing age (older than 10 years of age), a higher proportion of females experience sexual abuse whereas boys experience less, as they become less interesting to heterosexual abusers (who become appalled by boys’ masculinity/maturity).
The Study - Hypotheses #2

- The main hypotheses contd.
  - (f) victims often experience other adverse childhood experiences in addition to CSA;
  - (g) victims experience a large pattern of psycho-social impairment;
  - (h) due to their personal difficulties, a large percentage of victims report problems integrating themselves into society;
  - (i) more severe forms of sexual abuse coincide with a higher incidence of psycho-social impairment; and
  - (j) the more the victim can distance himself or herself from taking on responsibility for the abuse, the less he or she will be affected by psycho-social impairment.

- Overall, as the literature disproportionately focuses on female victims, it was of interest how the findings differ for men and women.
The Study - Method

- This was a cross-sectional study using an online survey.
- As online surveys are very useful for discussing topics that are considered taboo, taking a network approach and implementing a freely available Web formula for data collection was considered helpful in achieving a large sample size.
- Potential participants were made aware of the opportunity to take part through various sources: via the initiators’ Website (http://mogis-verein.de/umfrage), using Twitter, through references made by several well-known political activists, and via contacts with other victim support groups.
- It was explicitly mentioned that both victims and non-victims were invited to participate.
The Study - Method #2

- As a victims’ organization, MOGiS has a strong standing in the civil rights movement and, thus, it was assumed that people in general were keen to support this study.
- As an incentive especially for non-victims to participate, all participants were offered the opportunity to register with an undisclosed recipient list that was detached from the questionnaire and to which the results of the study would be e-mailed once they were published.
- It was clearly stated that participation was voluntary.
- Its scope and content was fully transparent from the onset.
- To make their data available for analysis, participants had to consciously submit their completed questionnaire. To withdraw from participation, the window could be closed at any time, without data being submitted.
- Any part of the questionnaire could be skipped if found too distressing.

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The Structure of the Sample

- 493 participants between 20.10.2009 and 6.03.2010.
- 80% of the questionnaires filled in before 31.12.2010 and therefore before the broad discussion about sexual abuse in catholic and other schools in Germany.
- Because not all questions have been answered by all participants the sample size for the several variables varies between 116 and 493.
- Almost as many women (46.3%) as men (53.7%) filled out the questionnaire (N = 490).
- The reported age spans from “younger than 14” (1) to “older than 65” (1) where most participants were 25-30 year old (25.4 %) (N = 484).

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The Structure of the Sample #2

Abbildung: Structure of the sample

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Child Sexual Abuse and Psychological Impairment in Victims
Who has been affected? At what Age?

Abbildung: Victims Age at First Abuse
Who are the Abusers?

Abbildung: Relationship to the Abuser

Angaben in %

- Fremde: 16,8%
- Betreuer: 8,7%
- eigene Freunde / Bekannte: 27,4%
- Freunde / Bekannte der Familie: 19,2%
- sonstige Verwandte: 8,2%
- Großeltern: 4,8%
- Onkel, Tanten: 9,6%
- Geschwister: 5,8%
- Eltern: 34,6%

Mädchen (Prozentangaben bezogen auf weibliche Stichprobe; n = 136)
Jungen (Prozentangaben bezogen auf männliche Stichprobe; n = 72)
Gesamt (Prozentangaben bezogen auf Gesamtstichprobe; N = 208)
By what kind of Abuse have Victims been affected?

Abbildung: Severity of Abuse Victims reported

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Child Sexual Abuse and Psychological Impairment in Victims
What impairs the everyday life of victims/survivors?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impairment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angst vor/Gefühl eigener Täterschaft</td>
<td>23,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fortgesetzte Opferschaft (sex. Übergriffe)</td>
<td>15,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angst vor Elternschaft</td>
<td>19,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>starkes Bedürfnis nach Nähe</td>
<td>49,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>starkes Bedürfnis nach Distanz</td>
<td>45,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fortgesetzte/häufige missbräuchliche Beziehungen</td>
<td>11,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probleme mit der eigenen Sexualität</td>
<td>58,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfähigkeit, Beziehungen aufzubauen und zu erhalten</td>
<td>46,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobbing Opfer</td>
<td>27,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfähigkeit regelmäßig oder Vollzeit zu arbeiten</td>
<td>33,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entwicklungs- und Lernstörungen</td>
<td>32,4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Abbildung:** What kind of impairment has been reported?
What impairs the everyday life of victims/survivors? #2

Abbildung: What kind of impairment has been reported?
How was the reaction to the disclosure?

Abbildung: How did the environment react on the disclosure of the abuse?
Discussion

- The higher rate of female victims, frequent multiple victimizations, and higher rate of victims within the extended family were not surprising.

- Likewise, with respect to female victims, the higher rate of CSA involving penetration found in this study confirms previous research (Maikovich-Fong & Jaffee, 2010).

- In this study, a fifth of the perpetrators were female, and male victims of female perpetrators were predominantly abused outside the family.

- This result supports the statement by Deering and Mellor (2010) that “female-perpetrated sexual abuse of children may occur with sufficient frequency to warrant much more attention”.

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Discussion #2

• Affected individuals (victims, relatives of victims, partners of victims, professionals working in the field) estimated the prevalence of CSA to be of similar prevalence to that found in a representative study using a broad definition of CSA (Wetzels, 1997).

• Interestingly, the significantly lower estimates by nonaffected individuals (acquaintances of victims, non-victims) in this study resemble those figures found when using a narrow definition of CSA (Wetzels).

• Some findings shed new light on aspects of inconsistencies from one study to another. For example, exclusively hands-off offenses were reported by 8.3% of the victims and, thus, reported to a lesser degree than in the literature (Wetzels).

• Wetzels also found more than twice as many perpetrators to be a stranger compared with this study (26.0% vs. 9.6%).

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Child Sexual Abuse and Psychological Impairment in Victims
Discussion #3

• A vast body of scientific literature identifies CSA as an important risk factor of developing psychological distress or other mental health problems.

• In line with two other studies (Banyard, Williams, & Siegel, 2004), the present study found a higher degree of psycho-social impairment for more severe forms of abuse.

• A disturbing finding in this study was the extent to which victims were not believed or the many cases in which no steps were taken after the incident had been uncovered.

• Arguably, such a hostile atmosphere can be seen as a considerable lack of social support and would increase feelings of guilt. Guilt, according to these results, is associated with increased psycho-social impairment.
Discussion #4

- In addition, the high amount of additional adverse childhood experiences reported by CSA victims in this study highlights another important risk factor.

- Although studies investigating male victims are becoming more common, research on CSA generally focuses on female victims. Thus, it remains unclear if findings to date are generalizable to male victims.

- The data in this study generally shows a stronger impairment in psycho-social functioning for female victims, with drug abuse or the fear (and compulsory thoughts) of being an offender reported more frequently by male victims.
Conclusions

- Without doubt, it would be best if CSA did not occur. However, as long as children and adolescents are sexually abused it is equally important to maximize victim’s chances to develop in good health despite their experiences.
- The results of this study strongly suggest that sexual victimization may have a less impairing effect on victims if they are believed and if measures are taken to reduce feelings of guilt.
- Since many victims wait a long time before they seek professional help, the provision of respective treatment should be offered regardless of how much time has passed.

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Child Sexual Abuse and Psychological Impairment in Victims
Some of its main results emphasize what some might assume to be common knowledge by now but, in fact, rather seems to have been forgotten in everyday (political) life.

From that perspective, reflecting on our reactions as adults to the voices of victims must develop into a conscious and regular behavior.

Listening carefully, getting involved, and being the victim’s advocate at the time when he or she voices what happened is the least we can and should do.

This may help ward off the cycle of shame and guilt and the development of symptoms of psycho-social impairment leading, ultimately, to the onset of mental health problems.
Conclusions #3

- Overall, the results of this study suggest that the approach of conducting respective research from an “insider” perspective (from the victims’ point of view) can be regarded as a valuable add-on.

- It is therefore hoped that other victims of CSA follow the example of getting actively involved in research within this field.

- In view of the magnitude of psycho-social impairment, it is also hoped that this pilot study will lead to more in-depth work looking at the quality of life of CSA victims.

- If based on results that come from such research, the measures initiated by politicians and/or health professionals will be well received by victims.
MOGiS e.V. - „A Voice for Victims“ would like to publicize the results of this study a little more for that we would like to make an English translation of our booklet available for a wider audience. Because we, as victim support group, are lacking the financial resources for printing and distribution of a booklet, we are asking for funding proposals to be able to do so.

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