

Pressured and Sometimes Forced: the Context of Boys' First Sexual Encounter in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

That girls' first sexual encounters usually occur in a context where they are forced and pressured is well known and the adverse implications on the girls' futures are also widely appreciated. Despite this wealth of information, little effort has been made to understand how the same unfortunate circumstances may impinge on boys, and the implications such experiences portend for their futures are not clear; for instance, such encounters may dispose them towards subsequent unhealthy relationships with women. The current paper analyzes 31 in-depth interviews of teenage boys from the NIH-funded Gendered Sexual Contexts (GSC) study in two communities in Southeastern Ghana. The interviews indicate that about one-third of the boys had their first sexual encounter while they were minors and felt that they were pressured or coerced into doing so. A proportion of those encounters were with females older than them, with some actually being with adult women. This study describes the phenomenon of the cross-gender sexual abuse of boys in the two communities, highlights the effects the boys' themselves report it has had on them, and discusses the potential implications for their future relationships. Further research will analyze three longitudinal survey data waves collected on the same boys, to try to untangle the chronological developments associated with their situations.

Introduction

Ratican (1992) defines childhood sexual abuse as 'any sexual act, overt or covert, between a child and an adult (or older child), where the younger child's participation is obtained through seduction or coercion. Regardless of how this phenomenon is defined, it connotes significant adverse psychological impact on victims. Childhood sexual abuse impinges on the basic rights of human beings. Again, it is a public health problem in its own right. Children should be able to have sexual experiences at the appropriate developmental time and within their control and choice (Hall and Hall, 2011).

One area that continues to be highly tabooed is the sexual abuse of boys in most societies. Recently, it has become increasingly clear that the number of unreported cases could be much higher than previously assumed and that research has paid far too little attention to this problem thus far (Erulkar, 2004). Yet, even though it has recently become apparent that many boys have been subjected to sexual abuse, an awareness of the problem and the corresponding sensitivity are growing slowly, relative to sexual abuse cases of girls (Finkelhor, 1997). To a large extent, this is only likely because many in society still think such sex with boys is consensual as they presume that it is impossible to force males to be aroused; a fair amount of the skepticism is probably also related to the notion that this cannot be rape because boys will likely be pleased in these encounters.

Unfortunately, we can imagine that boys who have not attained the age of maturity may not be psychologically able to handle the effect of being raped, and this so the further they are from the age of adulthood. As well, the implications such experiences portend for their futures are not clear; for instance, such encounters may dispose them towards subsequent unhealthy relationships with women. Indeed, several studies have suggested that there are long-term effects of such abuse (Miller, 1999; Andersson et al, 2012), which often result in “avoiding, fearing, or lacking interest in sex; approaching sex as an obligation; experiencing negative feelings such as anger, disgust, or guilt with touch; having difficulty becoming aroused or feeling sensation; feeling emotionally distant or not present during sex; experiencing intrusive or disturbing sexual thoughts and images; engaging in compulsive or inappropriate sexual behaviors; experiencing difficulty establishing or maintaining an intimate relationship” (Maltz, 2002). The increasing reports of young male students being preyed upon by female teachers in U.S. schools suggests that looking at this issue is timely. Similarly, the well-advertised rape of young boys by male priests across the world should underscore the potential magnitude of adverse psychological impacts.

Data and methods

As part of the larger longitudinal NIH-funded Gendered Sexual Contexts (GSC) study in two communities in Southeastern Ghana, 86 adolescents were recruited to participate in in-depth interviews, following three waves of survey data collection. The methodology used to gather data relied on a narrative inquiry process. Here, in-depth interviews allowed respondents to tell their own stories in a reasonable and recursive way, and also allowed for probing of contextual details. These interviews were conducted in March, 2013, and lasted between 27 minutes to about two hours. Interviews were conducted separately and privately, given the sensitive nature of the research, and respondents were generally open and willing to share information. Following data collection, recorded interviews were transcribed and typed. Subsequently, all the 31 in-depth interviews of teenage boys were analyzed. The analysis began with a careful examination of the data, and involved the reading of transcripts and field notes written after the interviews.

Preliminary Results

Analysis of the 31 in-depth interviews of teenage boys from the NIH-funded Gendered Sexual Contexts (GSC) study revealed that about one-third had their first sexual encounter while they were minors (and even at ages below 10 years and as young as six years). A significant proportion of those encounters were with older females, with some actually being adult women. At the time they were abused, they felt that they were pressured or coerced into having sexual intercourse.

Accounts of these victims seem to suggest that coercion by these older females usually took the form of visual effects such as movies with scenes of romance, baiting (such as cooking dinner for the victim and creating a homey atmosphere), as well as giving gifts and money.

The consequences of sexual abuse on these victims, after several years, included re-victimization, risky sexual behavior, and traumatization. Importantly, these early experiences seem to have shaped subsequent sexuality and sexual relationships of these young men. Accounts from the IDIs suggest that the trauma of such experience may lead to aversive, anxious and even hostile reactions to sex. For instance, one victim reported not

having had any sexual encounters since his abuse, and he also reiterated his lack of desire for sex after that first experience. He makes several assertions throughout the interview about women being overbearing, which he dislikes most about them. This account was from a victim who had experienced re-victimization. Other victims report similar concerns.

In addition, these childhood sexual experiences may reinforce risky sexual behavior as a result of the anxiety and other disturbing emotions associated with abuse. An example of this involves a victim who is currently dating an older woman although he denies wanting to do so. All the girls he has ever dated, after his first encounter, have been older than he is. This respondent also has multiple partners, and is not passionate about the use of condoms.

Respondents' accounts also suggest that after the index sexual encounter, they felt an array of emotions ranging from guilt, sadness, fear, shame, regret, as well as physical effects such as hunger and tiredness. They also failed to report to their parents because they feared being punished or stigmatized as naughty children. A thematic table is shown, with examples of quotes from the interviews (Table 1).

Future Directions

Further research will analyze three longitudinal survey data waves collected on the same boys, to try to get a handle on the chronological developments associated with their situations. The survey includes additional questions on current sexual behavior, making it relevant to the study, on how sexual abuse during childhood influences sexual behavior at older ages. Altogether, this study will highlight the need to address this important yet silent issue of cross-gender sexual abuse, as it may have implications on reducing sexual violence, reducing psychological distress and curtailing risky sexual behavior.

References

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Table 1 Summary Table of Themes and Examples of Quotes

Theme	Quote (Examples)
Relationship to person	"...when I was younger I remember that our house help (maid) did something of that sort me"
Age at first sex	"It happened when we were kids. (How old were you then?) About 5 years old"
Age of perpetrator	"when I was about ten years, she was about 17 or 18 years; because she was older and taller than me"
Re-victimization	"the same thing happened, she did it three times while it was raining"
Difficulty of reporting	"When we were younger; anytime a child did that, they would beat and apply pepper to your genitals; so i was scared to tell my parents. I told only my sister about it"
Psychological Impact	"I'm ashamed of myself"
Effect	"...that was the reason why I've refused to have anything to do with girls"
Pressure	"I wouldn't have done it but because the girl was so persistent, I started to oblige with her and it happened..... It is because she had a craving for it and since she saw me as a prey, she went for it"
Force	"It was not my intention, it was kind of a force, and I didn't even know she would do that to me. She just held my head strongly and started kissing me; so I also kissed her back and then we had sex"
Coercion	"She persisted, she never stopped; she sent gifts to me through my friends"
Power-relations	"So it continued that way till she went to the University; then she started misbehaving; she wanted to be controlling me because I was in the Secondary School and she was ahead of me"