



Behavior Problems and Abuse Duration: Influence on Perceived Responsibility in a Hypothetical Child Sexual Abuse Case

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Introduction

Victims of child sexual abuse (CSA) are a heterogeneous group with several risk and protective factors playing an important role in victim resiliency (Maniglio, 2009). Youth who are blamed for their abuse may be more likely to experience negative outcomes (Walsh, Cross, & Jones, 2012).

To study the attribution of blame, researchers most commonly have participants read a vignette depicting a hypothetical child sexual abuse case and then complete a questionnaire asking who they believe is responsible for the abuse (e.g., victim, perpetrator, non-offending parents). Studies consistently show that respondents place more blame on older compared to younger victims (e.g., Rogers et al., 2007) and that male respondents attribute more responsibility to victims compared to female respondents (e.g., Davies & Rogers, 2009).

Currently there is a gap in research efforts examining clinically-relevant, non-demographic victim variables, such as victim trait variables and abuse-related variables that may associate with attributing blame to the victim. Several longstanding theories (e.g., Lerner, 1980) support the hypothesis that youth exhibiting problematic or delinquent behaviors may be more likely to be blamed for the abuse. Further research is needed to understand how duration of abuse (i.e., single vs. multiple occurrences) relates to ascription of responsibility. As such, the purpose of this study was to examine the roles of behavior problems and duration of abuse on the attribution of blame in a hypothetical child sexual abuse case.

Method

Participants

Participants were 742 undergraduates at a Midwestern university. Students were 19 to 55 years old ($M = 20.4$, $SD = 2.6$) and 74.3% female. Of the sample, 78.7% identified themselves as European American and the majority of participants were in their second (33.6%) or third year (29.4%) in college. The majority of students were single (82.1%) and did not have any children (93.1%). Using chi-squared analyses, the four conditions did not significantly differ ($p > .05$) in any demographic variable.

Design

The study employed a two (behavior problems: three suspensions in one school semester vs. no mention of behavior problems) by two (one abuse occurrence vs. five abuse occurrences) between-subjects design.

Material and Measures

- **CSA vignettes:** Four vignettes were used to describe the two-by-two variable manipulations. Vignettes outlined a hypothetical CSA case in which a 15-year-old female named Talia was sexually abused by a 35-year-old male neighbor named Asher.
- **Attribution questions:** Three attribution questions assessed how responsible participants believe the victim, victim's parents, and perpetrator are for the abuse occurring. These questions were rated on a Likert-type scale.
- **Demographic questions:** Participants responded to a variety of demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through the university's psychology department research participation website. Once students chose to participate, they were immediately linked to the online study.

Results

A 2x2 ANOVA examined the effect of victim behavior problems and abuse duration on ascription of responsibility to the victim, parent, and perpetrator. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for each condition. Results showed significant mean differences in victim responsibility ratings among the four conditions, $F(3, 738) = 14.87$, $Mse = .35$, $p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons revealed that those who read a vignette where the youth experienced multiple abuse occurrences rated the victim as more responsible regardless of whether or not the youth was described as having behavior problems. Results also showed significant mean differences in parent responsibility ratings, $F(3, 738) = 4.00$, $Mse = .45$, $p = .008$. Pairwise comparisons revealed that those who read a vignette where the youth experienced multiple abuse occurrences and was described as having behavior problems rated the parents as more responsible compared to those who read a vignette where the youth was described as having one abuse incident regardless of whether or not the youth was described as having behavior problems. There was no difference among the conditions in ratings of perpetrator responsibility.

Table 1

Summary of Victim, Parent, and Perpetrator Responsibility Ratings

		No Behavior Problems			Behavior Problems		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
Victim Responsibility	One Abuse Occurrence	1.36	.565	183	1.26	.496	184
	Multiple Abuse Occurrences	1.59	.600	191	1.59	.695	184
Parent Responsibility	One Abuse Occurrence	1.39	.635	183	1.41	.612	184
	Multiple Abuse Occurrences	1.49	.687	191	1.61	.746	184
Perpetrator Responsibility	One Abuse Occurrence	3.92	.322	183	3.92	.345	184
	Multiple Abuse Occurrences	3.86	.494	191	3.84	.504	184

Discussion

Higher victim responsibility ratings for multiple abuse occurrences may be due to the belief that the youth should have verbally communicated the abuse through a disclosure after the first occurrence. These findings likely reflect a lack of knowledge about the grooming process perpetrators use to manipulate their victims into not disclosing.

Results suggest that respondents may have attributed more blame to the victim's parents if they believed the parents could have monitored the adolescent's activities more closely over several time points, particularly for a youth with identified behavior problems. Past research has shown that non-offending mothers often receive blame from others due to the perception that she must have been negligent for the abuse to occur. These perceptions rely on unrealistic expectations of parents being able to sense abuse and then stop it.

It is imperative that cognitive-behavioral treatments for CSA assess and address youth's feelings of blame from others. Based on the study's findings, this is particularly relevant given the majority of victims experience multiple abuse episodes before disclosure (Berliner, 2011). It is also necessary to address these issues with family members to help them cope and appropriately attribute blame.