Men who haven't been victims less likely to believe child sex abuse claims

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UO study finds level of sexism feeds a man's denial

Some guys just don't get it. In this case, that commonly used setup line doesn't result in a joke. A University of Oregon study has found that young men who have never been traumatized are the least likely population to believe a person's recounting of child sexual abuse.

The study - published in the March issue of the journal Psychology of Women Quarterly - also finds that males with highly sexist beliefs also tend to believe that such incidents, if they happened at all, were not harmful to the victim.

Some 80,000 cases of child sexual abuse are reported annually in the United States, according to federal statistics. Jennifer Freyd, a UO professor of psychology and co-author of the new study, reported in the journal Science in 2005 that abuse involving sexual contact between adults and children has been experienced by at least 20 percent of women and as many as 10 percent of men worldwide, and that 86 percent of sexual abuse cases are never reported to authorities.

Freyd has since been studying the factors that may explain why some people don't believe that such abuses occur, a phenomenon that discourages victims from speaking out and allows perpetrators to escape unpunished and possibly repeat such crimes.

"Until we change societal attitudes, abuse victims are less likely to speak up," said lead author Lisa DeMarni Cromer, a former UO doctoral student who has since graduated. "That means that abuse can keep occurring to them, and that they won't get the societal support they need. It's positive social support and being believed that is most likely leading to positive mental health outcomes."

In the new study, 318 university students were divided into groups based on self-reporting of abuse history and sexist attitudes. They heard short vignettes in which a male or female described an incident that occurred at age 9 involving an adult figure. The victim in each case also reported whether the memory has always been available to recall since the incident or was recently recalled.

Females, including those who had and had not suffered from some kind of betrayal of adult trust, and males who had experienced such betrayal all were willing to believe such an allegation, even more so in the cases where memory had always been present. There was a dramatic decline in believability for men with no abuse history. "I was surprised that this was such a big effect, and that there was such a difference between males and females," Freyd said.

"In psychology, we often hear about main effects - men vs. women, trauma history vs. no trauma history - but here what we have is an interaction, where trauma history really mattered with the men, and their ability to believe a story depended on their personal experience," she said.

The findings, she added, suggest that educational efforts may need to be more heavily focused toward men to help them understand that such acts do occur and that the abuse often can contribute to a number of societal ills. Among the problems, she noted, are mental and physical health problems, substance abuse, victimization and criminality in adulthood.

"There is a very high prevalence of child sexual abuse both in our country and around the world," she said. "It clearly has negative impacts on people. It doesn't mean that everybody who is sexually abused has a bad outcome, but, like smoking, it increases the risks for bad outcomes."

The biggest obstacle to addressing the issue, Freyd said, is an unwillingness to talk about it, "and this is very much related to people's unwillingness to believe that it occurs and is so problematic."

Another obstacle to men's ability to believe such allegations is that previous research by Freyd and her colleagues has shown that men are rarely betrayed by adults close to them, and that when they are abused it is more likely to not be sexual in nature. Women most often are betrayed by adults close to them, and sexual abuse is more readily seen as a threat to them, Freyd said.

There are two forms of disbelief, she said. One is that such things never happen - similar to denying the Holocaust occurred. A second is that no one is harmed - that kids are sexual beings who sometimes experiment with grownups, which feeds into widely held mythology, Freyd said.

"There may be legitimate debates on the prevalence of child sexual abuse and how it is measured," she said, "but this study involved 9-year-old victims, and it's hard for me to believe that any sexual contact between an adult and a 9-year-old is not abuse and can't cause harm."

Cromer has since received her doctorate from the University of Oregon and now works in the psychiatry department at the State University of New York Upstate Medical University.

Both the Trauma and Oppression Research Fund at the UO Foundation and the UO Center for the Study of Women in Society supported the just-published research, which is part of an on-going project.

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