



SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

DELAY IN DISCLOSURE OF CHILDHOOD RAPE: RESULTS FROM A NATIONAL SURVEY

DANIEL W. SMITH

Department of Psychology, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, USA

ELIZABETH J. LETOURNEAU

United States Air Force Security Forces Center, Charleston, SC, USA

BENJAMIN E. SAUNDERS, DEAN G. KILPATRICK, HEIDI S. RESNICK, AND CONNIE L. BEST

National Crime Victims Research & Treatment Center, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, SC, USA

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study sought to gather representative data regarding the length of time women who were raped before age 18 delayed prior to disclosing such rapes, whom they disclosed to, and variables that predicted disclosure within 1 month. **Method:** Data were gathered from 3,220 Wave II respondents from the National Women's Study (Resnick, Kilpatrick, Dansky, Saunders, & Best, 1993), a nationally representative telephone survey of women's experiences with trauma and mental health. Of these, 288 retrospectively reported at least one rape prior to their 18th birthday. Details of rape experiences were analyzed to identify predictors of disclosure within 1 month.

Results: Fully 28% of child rape victims reported that they had never told anyone about their child rape prior to the research interview; 47% did not disclose for over 5 years post-rape. Close friends were the most common confidants. Younger age at the time of rape, family relationship with the perpetrator, and experiencing a series of rapes were associated with disclosure latencies longer than 1 month; shorter delays were associated with stranger rapes. Logistic regression revealed that age at rape and knowing the perpetrator were independently predictive of delayed disclosure.

Conclusions: Delayed disclosure of childhood rape was very common, and long delays were typical. Few variables were identified that successfully predicted disclosure behavior, but older age and rape by a stranger were associated with more rapid disclosure. This suggests that the likelihood of disclosure in a given case is difficult to estimate, and predictions based on single variables are unwarranted. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Daniel W. Smith, National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, Medical University of South Carolina, 165 Cannon St., P.O. Box 250852, Charleston, SC 29425. Electronic mail may be sent via Internet to smithdw@musc.edu.

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ALTHOUGH SEXUAL ABUSE of children is a crime, prosecution of such cases is often problematic. Without any witnesses or corroborating physical or medical evidence (which is commonly absent; Myers, 1992), decisions about prosecution often rest on the credibility of statements made by victims. From a legal viewpoint, a victim's immediate disclosure of abuse to caretakers, followed by a prompt notification of legal authorities, often represents the ideal response to childhood sexual victimization. However, both clinical (Herman, 1981) and empirical (Finkelhor, 1979; Sauzier, 1989) evidence indicates that such quick responses occur only in a minority of cases, and in fact, some delay in disclosure is typical. Such delays are often used to impeach the credibility of victims's accusations (Myers, 1992). In essence, long delays in disclosure are argued to be inconsistent with behavior that would be expected from a person who has been victimized. This assumption may be particularly strong if the allegations involve harsh or violent assaults. Whether such assumptions are consistent with actual patterns of disclosure bears investigation.

To date, much of the literature regarding the disclosure of childhood sexual assault has focused on the long-term mental health correlates of disclosure and non-disclosure (e.g., Arata, 1998; Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Roesler, 1994; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990). Studies of this type generally indicate that disclosures made in childhood, particularly disclosures of incest, are more negatively received by others than are disclosures made in adulthood (Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994; Roesler, 1994). This relationship may be confounded by the finding that most disclosures during childhood were made to parents, who were likely to be extremely upset by learning about incest (Roesler & Wind, 1994). In addition, results indicate that negative reactions following disclosure are associated with poorer adult psychological outcomes (e.g., Roesler, 1994), and that disclosure itself is not necessarily conducive to healing (Lamb & Edgar-Smith, 1994).

Other aspects of the disclosure phenomenon that have received empirical attention include the appropriateness of interview techniques aimed at eliciting information about abuse (e.g., Ceci & Bruck, 1993; Goodman & Bottoms, 1993) and the occurrence of recantation following initial disclosures of abuse (Bradley & Wood, 1996; Sorenson & Snow, 1991). Underlying both these latter issues is the widely accepted proposition that children normally find it difficult to disclose abuse. If children found it easy to make spontaneous, immediate disclosures, interview techniques would take on considerably less importance, and the motivations to deny abuse or recant disclosures would similarly diminish. These factors ought to stimulate significant interest in understanding the variables that affect young people's decisions about whether to disclose sexual abuse experiences, but unfortunately few empirical data that address this issue are available.

In order to make a disclosure, a child victim must make public an event that likely involves some combination of personal shame, fear, or anticipation of negative consequences (e.g., disbelief, stigmatization, blame) (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986). In addition, in cases of intrafamilial abuse victims often experience significant emotional conflict about making disclosures that implicate caretakers or other loved ones, and may fear family disruption (Lawson & Chaffin, 1992). These factors can be difficult to overcome, and as a result, children may not make immediate disclosures following sexual victimizations. Sauzier (1989) reported that 39% of 156 sexually abused children evaluated at a treatment clinic had never disclosed to anyone that they had been abused; abuse in these cases was discovered "accidentally" more than a year after its onset. Similarly, Lawson and Chaffin (1992) described a sample of children whose sexual victimizations were confirmed by the presence of medical findings. Many of these children had not disclosed until their medical examinations, and some still denied abuse even after positive medical diagnosis. Adult retrospective reports also reveal that child victims have difficulty disclosing sexual abuse. Herman (1981),

for example, reported that only a minority of her incest survivors had ever disclosed their victimization before reaching adulthood. Clearly, delayed disclosure, or even the lack of disclosure of childhood sexual abuse, is not uncommon.

Some children, however, do make purposeful disclosures very soon after the assault. In Sauzier's (1989) sample, for example, 24% disclosed within 1 week. Little research attention to date has focused on what may differentiate those children who make relatively rapid disclosures from those who delay their reports. Sauzier (1989) found that child age, gender, race, and family composition were unrelated to delays in disclosure, but penetration assault (i.e., rape), abuse by a biological parent, and single episodes of assault were associated with longer delay. Those children who made rapid reports were more likely to have experienced "minor" forms of abuse (attempted molestation, exhibitionism); however, a substantial number of children who never disclosed had also experienced these milder types of assaults. Similarly, aggressive perpetrator attempts to maintain victim compliance were associated with both immediate reporting and with long-term non-disclosure.

Using a different method and sample, Farrell (1988) attempted to identify characteristics that distinguished children who made intentional disclosures of incest from those whose abuse was discovered without a direct disclosure by the victim. Survey data from state protective service caseworkers revealed that abuse severity was unrelated to purposeful disclosures, but that child age was associated with intentional disclosure. Older children were more likely to disclose (regardless of age at time of abuse), as were victims of incest who had been abused for more than 24 months. However, these results should be interpreted very cautiously because of the selective nature of the sample (founded cases of incest described by caseworkers) and because no inferential statistics are provided in the report.

As valuable as these studies are, it must be remembered that all of the cases in these studies were identified during childhood and adolescence. Every participant in Sauzier's (1989) sample had been identified as a child sexual abuse victim within 18 months of abuse. Farrell's (1988) data included only cases that had been reported to, and founded by, a protective service agency. However, many victims of abuse are not reported or identified during childhood, either as the result of purposeful or accidental disclosures (Herman, 1981; Russell, 1986). Furthermore, some identified victims may never present for clinical evaluations. This observation raises questions regarding the applicability of Farrell's (1988) and Sauzier's (1989) findings to the larger population of child sexual assault victims, those whose abuse may not be reported to authorities or revealed within 18 months following the abuse. For example, do a significant number of children wait longer than 18 months before disclosing sexual abuse experiences? If so, do the correlates of these longer delays correspond to those identified by Sauzier (1989) and Farrell (1988)?

These questions are not possible to answer using clinical samples of child victims because, by definition, their abuse experiences will have been discovered by the time of the assessment. By asking adult women to report on their past experiences, however, longer periods of delayed disclosure can be identified. Two studies have utilized this methodology. Roesler (1994) analyzed disclosure among a sample of 188 men and women who reported histories of child sexual abuse. Although he was not specifically interested in length of delayed disclosure, Roesler's (1994) data indicated that roughly one-third of respondents disclosed in childhood (prior to age 16), whereas two-thirds did not disclose until they were adults (older than 16). Abuse severity (e.g., penetration, use of force) was unrelated to adult versus childhood disclosure in this sample. Arata (1998) also found that nearly one-third of her female college student respondents had disclosed their abuse in childhood (prior to age 14), but her data did reveal a significant relationship between the physical severity of abuse and disclosure: women reporting severe assaults were less likely to disclose. One possible explanation of these contradictory findings lies in the highly selective nature of the samples used. Roesler's (1994) data were collected from several diverse sources: people receiving treatment for child abuse sequelae, children's center volunteers, professional conference attendees, and callers to a national hotline following a celebrity's televised disclosure of her own incestuous

past. Arata's (1998) data, on the other hand, were collected from a convenience sample of college women. Thus, representative data regarding the length of time women may delay prior to disclosing child sexual abuse, as well as the correlates of such delays, are still needed. Data from a probabilistic national sample could be generalized with greater confidence than those obtained from clinical or convenience samples, and would therefore present a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of child rape disclosure than is available from previous research.

For this reason, data from a large nationally representative sample of adult women, the National Women's Study (NWS; Resnick et al., 1993), were analyzed for the present study. The NWS involved a three-wave telephone survey of 4,009 adult women in the United States that focused on the prevalence of interpersonal victimization, important characteristics of such violence, and the presence of various mental health consequences (post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, and substance abuse) among women. Part of the telephone survey assessed retrospective reports of women's childhood experiences of sexual and physical victimization. In the second wave of the three wave design, women who reported having experienced sexual victimization prior to their 18th birthdays were asked a series of questions regarding the characteristics of the abuse experience. Included were queries regarding the length of time, if any, that the woman waited before telling anyone about her victimization, the identity of the person told, and several questions about the nature of the abuse.

The purpose of the present study was to gather information about the length of time that women who experienced a rape in childhood delayed before disclosing their experiences to others, and to whom such disclosures were typically made. We chose to examine retrospective reports of childhood rape experiences, as opposed to other types of childhood sexual victimizations, because we believed that asking about assaults that were more salient (i.e., those involving physical penetration) would minimize distortions of memory that might accompany retrospective reports of other events. An additional purpose of the study was to identify variables that differentiated women who made more rapid disclosures from those who delayed longer periods of time before disclosing. Based on the literature reviewed above, and on predictors of post-traumatic stress identified in previous studies of adult women crime victims (Kilpatrick et al., 1989), three types of variables were examined: victim characteristics (age at assault, race), assault characteristics (type of penetration, single versus series rapes, perception of life threat during rape, presence of a weapon during rape, victim injury during rape) and perpetrator characteristics (relationship to victim, use of threat, use of force).

METHODS

Participants

Two sets of probability samples were selected for this study based on a multi-stage sampling system. First, in Wave I, a random sample of 2,009 respondents was selected from stratified samples of counties within areas defined as Central City, Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA), and Non-SMSA within the four regions of the country. Within these sample sites, random digit dialing was used to solicit households to insure that both listed and unlisted telephone numbers were used. A second random sample of 2,000 women between the ages of 18 to 34 was selected. This oversampling of younger women was conducted because previous research has indicated that this age group has a higher reported rate of sexual assault than older women. All data were weighted by age and race to 1989 estimates of the apportionment of these attributes in the US population of adult women.

Demographic characteristics of all subjects from Wave I are presented by Resnick and colleagues (1993). Comparison of these data with the population parameters obtained from the US

Census Bureau indicated that the sample closely matched the demographic attributes of the population of US women. The Wave I sample of women was re-contacted 1 year later in the Wave II data collection phase. Of the Wave I respondents, 14.0% could not be relocated, and 6% refused to participate, resulting in an absolute interview completion rate for Wave II of 80%, and a Wave II sample size of 3,220. As with the Wave I data, the Wave II data were weighted to conform to the 1989 Census statistics.

The mean age of Wave II participants was 44.9 years ($SD = 17.5$). The majority of women (63%) were high school graduates. An additional 21% graduated from college, and 16% had fewer than 12 years of education. Most women were employed at least part-time or were students (58%), with similar percentages of women working as homemakers (18%) and retired/disabled (18%). An additional 4% were unemployed, and 2% reported other employment circumstances. In terms of income, 26% of women reported annual incomes at or below \$15,000. Another 38% of the participants reported annual incomes between \$15,000 and \$35,000; 30% reported incomes of over \$35,000, and 6% either refused to answer or were not sure of their incomes. Most of the women were married (62%) or living with a partner (4%); 14% were single/never married, 10% were widowed, 8% were divorced, and 2% were separated. The sample comprised 86% Caucasian women, 11% African Americans, and 3% other categories (fewer than 1% of women refused to provide racial status). Five percent of women identified Hispanic ethnicity.

Measures

The telephone survey consisted of several measures designed to elicit information on demographics, psychiatric symptoms, substance use, and victimization history. The present study reports on data from the demographic and child rape victimization questions. Information about other aspects of the interview data is described in Resnick and colleagues (1993).

Child rape. Each respondent's history of child rape was assessed using a modified and shortened version of the Incident Classification Interview (Kilpatrick et al., 1989; Kilpatrick, Saunders, Best, & Von, 1987). This is a highly-structured, closed-response set of questions that asks about the occurrence of specific types of sexual events in a behaviorally specific manner. Respondents were asked about the occurrence of different types of rape incidents (e.g., vaginal, oral, and/or anal penetration by a penis, finger, or object) that occurred prior to age 18. These incidents had to be characterized by the use or threat of force, as defined by the participant, to be considered rape. For purposes of the present study, the endorsement of any penetration sexual assault prior to age 18 placed the respondent in the Child Rape group.

Case characteristic data. Each woman who reported a childhood rape incident was asked a series of questions to gather additional information about their first (if they reported more than one) or only childhood rape. Respondents were queried regarding their age at the time of the incident, the nature of their relationship to the perpetrator, and several characteristics of both the rape itself (presence of a weapon, use of threats and/or force by perpetrator) and their reactions to the rape (perception of life threat, receipt of physical injury).

Disclosure. In addition, all women who reported a childhood rape were asked the following questions: "Have you ever told anyone about this (these) incident(s)?" Subjects indicating they had disclosed to someone prior to the interview were also asked "Whom did you tell first?" and then "How long after the (first) incident before you told someone?" It should be emphasized that these questions assessed whether respondents told anyone about their child rapes, not whether they had told authorities. Reporting to authorities was assessed separately.

Table 1. Perpetrator Relationship to Victim of Child Rape (*N* = 288)

| Relationship | Percent |
|---------------------------------|---------|
| Father/Step-Father | 15.4 |
| Brother | 5.6 |
| Other Relative | 22.1 |
| Boyfriend/Friend | 22.4 |
| Other Acquaintance ^a | 22.0 |
| Stranger | 10.1 |
| Refused | 2.4 |

Note. ^aThis category includes co-workers, neighbors, and other non-relatives that the victim knows.

Procedure

Structured telephone interviews were utilized to collect all data for the present study and lasted approximately 35 minutes. All interviews were conducted by Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvalas, Incorporated (SRBI), a survey research firm with considerable experience managing similar types of surveys. All respondents were interviewed by trained female interviewers. All telephone interviews were conducted using a computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) system that prompted interviewers with each consecutive question on a computer screen. The interviewer entered respondents' answers and the CATI program automatically provided the next probe or followed the programmed skip pattern.

Respondents were assured of the confidentiality of the information obtained in the interview, which respondents had the opportunity to end at any time simply by hanging up the phone. Respondents who had questions about the legitimacy of the survey were provided a toll-free telephone number to contact project representatives for additional information about the study. More comprehensive information about these procedures is available in SRBI's final report on the NWS methodology (Boyle, 1992).

Results

Prevalence and characteristics of child rape events. Of the 3,220 women interviewed in Wave II, 288 (9%) reported experiencing at least one event that met the study's definition of childhood rape. The average age at the time of the first or only rape was 10.9 years. The majority of women reported that their childhood rapes were single events (55%), although a considerable proportion of women reported series assaults (45%), defined as multiple, similar assaults by the same perpetrator over time. Consistent with much of the literature regarding adult rape, most women reported that they knew the perpetrator; only 29 (10%) identified the perpetrator as a stranger. Table 1 presents the identities of the perpetrators reported in this sample. Although a minority of women (41%) reported that the perpetrator explicitly threatened them during the rape, nearly three-fourths (73%) reported that the perpetrator used some type of physical force to complete the rape. Few women reported the presence of guns, knives, or other weapons (11%), although considerably more reported that they experienced fear that they would be killed or seriously injured (44%) during their rapes. Finally, fewer than one-third (29%) of child rape victims reported receiving any type of physical injury during their rapes.

Disclosure of child rape. Of the 288 women who reported a child rape, 81 (28%) stated that they had never told anyone about this sexual assault until specifically queried by the interviewer for this study. The remaining 207 women had told at least one other person about their childhood rapes

Table 2. Victim Relationship to Initial Disclosure Confidant (N = 288)

| Relationship to Victim | Percent |
|-------------------------------------|---------|
| Close Friend | 22.5 |
| Mother | 20.7 |
| Other Immediate Family ^a | 8.0 |
| Husband | 7.4 |
| Police/Social Worker/Clergy | 6.6 |
| Other Relative | 5.5 |
| Not Sure | 1.2 |
| Never Told Until Interview | 28.1 |

Note. ^aThis category includes sister, brother, and father, in descending order of endorsement.

prior to the interview. As shown in Table 2, among women who disclosed prior to their NWS interview, close friends were the most common person to whom victims made disclosures, followed by mothers and other immediate family members. Fewer than 10% of victims reported making their initial disclosure to social workers or law enforcement personnel. A slightly larger percentage of child victims reported that authorities were eventually notified about their child rapes, even though they were not the initial confidants. Overall, 12% of child rape victims stated that their assaults were reported to authorities at some point.

In response to the question "How long after the (first) incident did you wait before telling someone?" respondents were allowed to answer using their own units of time (e.g., days, weeks, or months). The only exception to this data reduction method occurred for 28 women who reported latencies greater than 100 months prior to disclosing (e.g., respondent waited 9 years or more before telling someone). Because of the CATI system used for this study, three digit responses could not be entered in the data set, so '99' was used as a default answer. Therefore, the latency data reflect an artificial ceiling at 99 months for those women who disclosed prior to the interview. Fifty-two (18% of 288) women stated that they were not sure, or could not estimate with any confidence, when they first told someone else about their experience. Table 3 presents the reported latencies to disclosure, reduced to common units of time, of the other 236 women (the 81 women who had never disclosed until the interview are included in Table 3; their latencies were calculated by subtracting their reported age at the time of rape from their current age). For all other analyses, however, disclosure latency responses were converted into months. Therefore, responses given in days were divided by 30, and those given in weeks were divided by four. The majority of women did not disclose immediately, or even within several months of their rape. Nearly half of women

Table 3. Time Between First/Only Child Rape and Initial Disclosure (N = 236*)

| Length of Time | N | Percentage | Cumulative N | Cumulative Percentage |
|-----------------|-----|------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Within 24 Hours | 42 | 17.8 | 42 | 17.8 |
| 1 Month | 21 | 8.9 | 63 | 26.7 |
| 6 Months | 17 | 7.2 | 80 | 33.9 |
| 12 Months | 9 | 3.8 | 89 | 37.7 |
| 24 Months | 12 | 5.1 | 101 | 42.8 |
| 36 Months | 6 | 2.5 | 107 | 45.3 |
| 48 Months | 6 | 2.5 | 113 | 47.8 |
| 60 Months | 10 | 4.3 | 123 | 52.1 |
| After 60 Months | 113 | 47.9 | 236 | 100.0 |

Note. *This includes the 81 women who had never disclosed until the research interview but excludes the 52 women who could not estimate the latency between rape and disclosure.

who remembered making their first disclosure waited longer than 8 years to do so. However, a sizeable minority ($N = 42$, 18% of 236) made immediate disclosures (i.e., within 1 day of the rape).

The 81 women who had never disclosed prior to the interview were compared to the other 207 child rape victims in a series of analyses of demographic (age at rape, race), rape (e.g., single versus series event), and perpetrator variables (identity, use of force, etc.). Few differences were detected between groups. Women who disclosed for the first time during the research interview were significantly less likely to report that a weapon was used during their rape (5% versus 13%), $\chi^2(1, N = 288) = 3.87, p < .05$, and less likely to report that the perpetrator used some type of threat to gain their compliance with the rape (32% versus 45%), $\chi^2(1, N = 288) = 4.09, p < .05$, than were women who had disclosed to someone else prior to the interview. No other perpetrator or crime variables, and neither of the demographic variables, differentiated between groups.

Similarly, the 52 women who could not remember when they had disclosed were compared to remainder of the sample. Those who were unsure of how long they waited before disclosing were significantly younger at the time of rape (8.9 years versus 11.3 years), $t(247) = 3.41, p < .001$, and less likely to have experienced force during the rape, $\chi^2(1, N = 288) = 6.2, p < .02$. No other differences were detected. Because they could not estimate the length of time prior to their disclosure, these 52 women were excluded from subsequent analyses predicting delayed disclosure.

Prediction of delayed disclosure. In order to identify the predictors of delayed disclosure, a three-step analytical strategy was followed. Although time is by definition a continuous variable, the method used to measure latency before telling in this study precluded its legitimate use as a continuous variable. Therefore, participants were first grouped according to a criterion for delayed disclosure. Once groups were established, then univariate analyses (either chi-square or *t*-test) were performed to identify victim, crime, and perpetrator characteristics that differed between groups. Third, variables that differentiated between groups in the univariate analyses were then included in multivariate logistic regression equations in order to identify their relative ability to predict group membership.

Examination of the delayed disclosure variable revealed a natural break in the data at 1 month, with approximately one-quarter ($N = 63$, 27%) of women having disclosed within this time frame. Therefore, this was chosen as the cutoff to represent delayed disclosure. Although this value is somewhat arbitrary, it is intuitively appealing because delays of 1 month might be considered "typical" or acceptable, but delays longer than 1 month might be problematic for a victim's credibility in a legal or forensic context. The final groups included 173 women in the group that delayed disclosure beyond 1 month (Long Delay) and 63 in the group that disclosed within 1 month (Short Delay).

A series of univariate tests were conducted to identify differences between the Long Delay and Short Delay groups on victim (white versus minority race, age at rape), crime (single versus series rape, perception of life threat, receipt of injury, presence of a weapon), and perpetrator variables (relationship to victim, use of threats, use of force). In terms of victim variables, Table 4 reveals that the Long Delay group was, on average, significantly (2.3 years) younger than the Short Delay group at the time of rape. Race was unrelated to length of time prior to disclosure.

Of the crime variables analyzed, only whether the rape was a single event versus series of assaults was related to group membership, with the Long Delay group more likely to experience series rapes. This relationship is not surprising because series rapes, by their ongoing nature, would be much less likely to have been terminated by a disclosure within a short period of time. Three-quarters (75.3%) of the 118 series child rapes reported by women in this study took place over a period of time longer than 1 year (the smallest measurable duration). Presence of a weapon, victim injury, and perceived life threat were unrelated to group membership.

Prior to analyzing the perpetrator variables, the perpetrator identity variable was transformed. To avoid conducting individual chi-square analyses for each type of perpetrator identified, data were

Table 4. Comparison of Short Delay and Long Delay Groups on Victim, Crime, and Perpetrator Variables

| Variable | Short Delay (<i>N</i> = 63) | Long Delay (<i>N</i> = 173) | Univariate Statistic ^a | Odds Ratio | <i>df</i> |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Victim Characteristics | | | | | |
| Average age at rape | 12.9 | 10.6 | 3.80* | — | 229 ^b |
| White race | 80.2 | 85.0 | 0.76 | 1.39 | 1 |
| Crime Characteristics | | | | | |
| Single rape | 74.8 | 50.1 | 11.45* | 2.95 | 1 |
| Perceived life threat | 41.4 | 45.5 | 0.33 | 1.19 ^c | 1 |
| Received physical injury | 33.0 | 28.7 | 0.40 | 1.22 | 1 |
| Weapon present | 13.6 | 10.5 | 0.44 | 1.34 | 1 |
| Perpetrator characteristics | | | | | |
| Stranger | 22.0 | 5.3 | 14.60* | 5.02 | 1 |
| Related to victim ^d | 24.2 | 47.7 | 10.45* | 2.85 ^c | 1 |
| Father/step-father | 12.0 | 17.6 | 1.05 | 1.56 ^c | 1 |
| Used force | 68.8 | 80.3 | 3.48** | 1.85 ^c | 71 |
| Used threats | 32.3 | 43.9 | 2.59** | 1.64 ^c | 1 |

Note. ^aAll statistics are Pearson χ^2 s except for Age at Rape, which is a statistic. Odds ratios are presented only for χ^2 statistics.

^bFive subjects were missing data for the Age at Rape variable, resulting in a lowered degrees of freedom for this analysis.

^cFor purposes of clarity, the odds ratios for variables that were associated with increased odds of Long Delay are presented as the inverse (i.e., 1/odds ratio) of the obtained values, rather than values less than 1.0.

^dThis category includes both immediate (e.g., father, brother) and extended family relatives.

*Denotes a significant test statistic at $p < .01$.

**Denotes test statistics that approach significance at $p < .10$.

collapsed into four categories: father/step-father, other relative, non-relative acquaintance, and stranger. A multi-category chi-square comparing the Short and Long Delay groups across these four classes of perpetrator identity was significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 236) = 19.9, p < .001$. As presented in Table 4, three follow-up univariate chi-squares revealed that perpetrators in the Short Delay group were over four times more likely to be strangers than were those in the Long Delay group (22% to 5%), whereas Long Delay perpetrators were twice as likely to be related to the victim (48% to 24%). Relatives included both immediate and extended family members. However, fathers and step-fathers were reported to be perpetrators equally often in the Long and Short Delay groups. Thus, for victims, being related to the perpetrator was associated with longer delays before telling, whereas having no relationship with the victim was related to more rapid telling. Both use of threats and use of force by the perpetrator were slightly more common in the Long Delay group, suggesting that these factors may have inhibited victim disclosure, but neither factor achieved conventional levels of significance (for force, $p = .06$, for threats, $p = .10$).

Short and Long Delay groups were also compared on their choice of confidants for initial disclosure. No differences were detected, $\chi^2(3, N = 207) = 2.1, ns$. Both groups disclosed most frequently to close friends, followed by mothers, other relatives, and professionals, respectively.

Thus, one victim variable (age at rape), one crime variable (single versus series rape), and two perpetrator variables (biological relationship to victim, stranger to victim) were significantly different between groups at the univariate level. In order to identify the unique predictive value of each variable, a logistic regression analysis was conducted to predict membership in the Short Delay group using these four variables as independent variables. As seen in Table 5, both age at rape and stranger perpetrator variables remained significant in the final model. Odds ratios indicate that when the perpetrator was a stranger to the victim, the probability that the victim told someone about the rape within 1 month was 3.69 times greater than if the victim knew the perpetrator in some way (either as an acquaintance or a family member). Also, for each year of the victim's age, the probability of telling someone within 1 month increased by a factor of 1.11. Thus, both older

Table 5. Logistic Regression Predicting Membership in Short Delay Group ($N = 231^a$)

| Predictor | <i>B</i> | Standard Error | Wald Statistic | Odds Ratio | 95% CI |
|----------------|----------|----------------|----------------|------------|-----------|
| Age at Rape | .10 | .04 | 5.24* | 1.11 | 1.02-1.21 |
| Single Assault | -.41 | .37 | 1.25 | 1.51 | 0.32-1.36 |
| Stranger Perp | 1.30 | .49 | 6.94** | 3.69 | 1.39-9.73 |
| Relative Perp | .39 | .40 | 0.95 | 1.48 | 0.67-3.28 |

Note. CI = Confidence Interval; Perp = Perpetrator. The Stranger Perpetrator variable was dummy coded 0 = Not a Stranger, 1 = Stranger. The Relative Perpetrator variable was dummy coded 0 = Unrelated, 1 = Related; however, for purposes of clarity, the inverse of the Relative Perp odds ratio is reported here. Disclosure groups were dummy coded 0 = Long Delay, 1 = Short Delay.

^aThe five participants with missing data for Age at Rape are excluded from this analysis.

*Denotes a significant Wald statistic, $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

age and lack of relationship to the perpetrator predicted victims' disclosure of child rape within 1 month.

Penetration type and disclosure. In order to determine whether the type of penetration (e.g., penile-vaginal, penile-oral) was related to delayed disclosure, a separate analysis was conducted. Penetration type was not included in the larger analyses because this variable was not available for the entire sample of 288 women. Specifically, if any woman reported more than one type of penetration (penile-vaginal, penile-oral, penile-anal, or digital/object penetration of the vagina or anus) during her lifetime, it was unknown which type of penetration occurred during a childhood rape. However, for the 110 women who reported that they had experienced only one rape during their lifetime, and that this rape had occurred prior to age 18, penetration type could be determined. Of these, 16 could not confidently estimate the length of time that passed before they disclosed. Therefore, data regarding both disclosure latency and penetration type were available for 94 women. Table 6 presents the percentages of each penetration type in the Long Delay and Short Delay groups. Chi-square analyses reveal that penile-vaginal penetration was more common among those women who told within 1 month than among those who did not, and that, conversely, digital penetration was more common among non-disclosers. Rates of penile-anal and penile-oral penetration were comparable in both groups.

DISCUSSION

This study examined a nationally representative sample of women who were raped in childhood and focused on describing their disclosure patterns and identifying variables that distinguished

Table 6. Rates of Sexual Penetration Type Across Disclosure Groups ($N = 94$)

| Penetration Type | Short Delay ($N = 34$) | Long Delay ($N = 60$) | χ^2 ^a | Odds Ratio |
|------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Penile-Vaginal | 88.8 | 69.7 | 4.44* | 3.46 |
| Penile-Oral | 20.1 | 22.7 | 0.09 | 0.85 |
| Penile-Anal | 7.7 | 6.1 | 0.08 | 0.78 |
| Digital/Object | 22.7 | 48.1 | 5.88* | 3.15 ^b |

Note. Participants may have experienced multiple types of penetration during the same rape incident.

^aFor all χ^2 , $df = 1$, and $N = 94$.

^bThe inverse of the Digital/Object odds ratio is presented here.

*Denotes a significant test statistic at $p < .05$.

between those women who made relatively rapid (within 1 month) disclosures and those who did not. Results strongly support the proposition that delayed disclosure of child sexual assault is quite common. Moreover, the very long latencies prior to disclosure reported by women in this sample suggest that the phenomenon of delayed disclosure is more prevalent, and that the typical length of delay is longer, than previous research has revealed. Sauzier (1989) reported that 61% of her sample of clinically identified children had told someone about their sexual abuse before 18 months, the upper limit of that study, had passed. In the present sample, the corresponding figure is less than 40%, indicating that nearly two-thirds of the child rapes reported in the National Women's Study would not have been discovered within the 18 month time frame used by Sauzier (1989). Thus the present data provide the best picture to date of the disclosure patterns of women child rape victims.

From women's reports of their disclosing behavior it can be estimated that four out of five child rape victims do not tell anyone about their rapes within 24 hours. By the time 1 month has elapsed, roughly one in four victims has told someone, but almost half of all child rape victims do not disclose to anyone for more than 5 years. This suggests that children who actually do disclose rape experiences relatively quickly are atypical, and that professionals should not be surprised when girls and women make initial disclosures of rape several months, even years, after the reported rape took place. It is especially noteworthy that over one-quarter of the victims in this sample had never told anyone—not mothers, best friends, or husbands—about their assaults. While this group was less likely to have been exposed to weapons or perpetrator threats, all these women experienced non-consensual sexual penetrations; also, levels of force used by the perpetrator were similar to those reported by women who disclosed. Therefore, it is unlikely that these victims never told anyone because they deemed these experiences insignificant or unimportant. We can only speculate about the motivation these women had to disclose these experiences over the telephone to an unknown interviewer.

The attempt to identify variables that predicted immediate versus delayed disclosure was only partly successful. At the univariate level, victim's older age at rape, rape by a stranger, and having a single rape experience (as opposed to a series of similar rape events) were all associated with disclosure within 1 month, and having a family relationship with the perpetrator was associated with longer delay before disclosure. Several possible explanations may be generated to account for these relationships.

The finding that age at rape was associated with length of time prior to disclosure is at odds with previous results. Both Sauzier (1989), using child clinical cases, and Arata (1998), using college women, found age at victimization and disclosure delays to be unrelated. This discrepancy may be attributable to the differences in sampling and design between studies. One explanation for quicker disclosures among older victims is that they may be more aware of standards for sexual behavior and quicker to recognize the magnitude of the violation that rape represents. The average age of victims in the Short Delay group at the time of rape was 12.9 years, which is within the age range associated with puberty onset and the resulting development of sexual awareness. Herman (1981) postulated that the onset of puberty led many victims to disclose incestuous abuse that had been going on for some time. Alternatively, it is possible that older victims, by virtue of their greater social involvement outside the home, have more opportunities to disclose than younger children. Finally, older children and adolescents may possess sufficient self-assurance to risk potential disruption of their families lives by disclosing; younger children, on the other hand, may be more fearful of upsetting others (or perhaps of being blamed themselves) and consequently keep the assault secret.

The observed relationships between perpetrator identity and delayed disclosure replicate earlier research (Arata, 1998; Sauzier, 1989). Female children raped by relatives are twice as likely to keep the assault secret for more than a month than are those raped by non-relatives. Sauzier (1989) speculated that was due to a greater sense of loyalty or emotional bond to familial perpetrators

(especially parent figures): to disclose would be tantamount to breaking that bond. As Summit (1983) has pointed out, in cases of intrafamilial sexual abuse, the child victim is burdened with the responsibility of keeping silent and maintaining family togetherness. It is likely that some children recognize this fact on their own, and that in other cases the perpetrator explicitly establishes it. Although most often these dynamics are presumed to apply primarily to cases of father-daughter incest, similar processes may occur in any case in which the perpetrator is a family member. Having to confront a perpetrator who is a relative is likely to be a more upsetting experience for most families than confronting an extrafamilial perpetrator (Roesler & Wind, 1994). However, the findings of this study suggest that familial connection may not be the only type of relationship associated with delayed disclosure. Rapes perpetrated by strangers were much more likely to be disclosed to someone within 1 month than rapes by either family members or non-family acquaintances. This suggests that the presence of any kind of relationship with the perpetrator may lead children to delay telling someone about an experience of child rape.

Experiencing a single childhood rape was associated with more rapid disclosure, whereas series events were more common among women who delayed disclosure. Interestingly, Sauzier (1989) found the opposite relationship between single versus series events and time before telling. In her study, single episodes of abuse were associated with delayed disclosure. This discrepancy is difficult to explain, and in fact the counter-intuitiveness of this finding seems to have troubled Sauzier, who ultimately argued, based on clinical experience, that disclosure is easier for children who experience one-time assaults. Indeed, Arata (1998) speculates that children who do not tell immediately may be increasingly reluctant to disclose as abuse continues, perhaps out of fear of being blamed for not telling right away.

In the present study, other variables pertaining to the severity of the rape experience were found to be unrelated to delayed disclosure. Perpetrators' use of threats and force, victim injury, victims' subjective perceptions of life threat, and the presence of a weapon were all unrelated to delays in disclosure (although women who never disclosed until the interview were less likely to have been threatened or to have had a weapon present during their rape). Similarly, Arata (1998) found no overall relationship between disclosure and coercion variables in her college sample. In contrast, Sauzier (1989) found that aggressiveness and the use of manipulation and threat by the perpetrator seemed to inhibit disclosure. This discrepancy may be due to several factors, including the narrow range of events examined in the present study. Only rape events, which by definition involve force or the threat of force, were included in the analyses reported here, and this very likely restricted the range of perpetrator aggression that could be used to predict disclosure group membership. Had less violent or extreme forms of sexual assault been included, these variables may indeed have been associated with disclosure. Of course, it is also possible that due to the clinical nature of Sauzier's sample, the association between aggressiveness by the perpetrator and victim functioning was artificially increased.

On a broader level, however, the absence of any clear association between disclosure and indicators of assault severity in this study and the conflicting findings in some previous research suggest that children's decisions about disclosing rape experiences are not reliably related to the severity of their assaults. In some instances, severe assaults probably motivate help-seeking and rapid disclosure. In others, however, severity likely inhibits disclosure. This variability is very likely mediated by other characteristics of the assault, such as perpetrator identity or level of fear experienced by the victim, and the relationships among these factors and disclosure behavior are certainly complex. Therefore, generalizations about the likelihood of disclosure based solely on severity of assault (e.g., "if there was a weapon, children will surely tell" or "children who are threatened are too scared to tell") are unwarranted.

The logistic regression analysis revealed that both young age at time of rape and not knowing the perpetrator were independently associated with delayed disclosure. When included in a predictive model with these variables, single versus series rapes and victim's family relationship to

the perpetrator did not remain significant. Thus, even when the effects of other variables were controlled, older age at first rape was significantly predictive of disclosure within 1 month. Because age is a continuous variable, the resulting odds ratio (1.11) is somewhat difficult to interpret. Each additional year of age is associated with a 1.11 times increase in the odds of disclosure within 1 month, so the odds that a female 17-year-old rape victim would disclose within 1 month are 2.84 (1.11 raised to the 10th power) times greater than those for 7-year-old rape victim. Similarly, when the effects of other predictors are controlled, the odds that child victims who are raped by strangers will disclose within 1 month are 3.69 times greater than if the child were raped by someone known to them. Although these findings provide information pertinent to the prediction of child rape disclosure, neither odds ratio is so large that it permits firm conclusions about whether disclosure is likely or unlikely in a given case. In fact, although rape by a stranger was the best individual predictor of whether a child would tell someone else about her rape relatively quickly, only 10% of women in this nationally representative sample reported stranger rapes. Indeed, it is probable that each child's decision to tell or not tell is influenced by many variables not measured in the present study (e.g., personality style, family relationships), and future research must begin to identify their relative contributions.

Post-hoc analyses with a subset of women who experienced only one rape during their lifetime revealed relationships between disclosure and type of sexual penetration. Women who disclosed within 1 month were more likely to have experienced penile-vaginal penetration and less likely to have experienced digital penetration than those women who delayed disclosure. One possible explanation for this result is that experiences of digital penetration may be perceived as less serious, or may be so questionable in their seriousness that victims do not feel a need to disclose them. Forced penile-vaginal penetration, on the other hand, is more clearly a violation of sexual norms, which may in turn motivate disclosure.

The finding that close friends were the most common confidants contrasts with research showing that mothers are by far the most likely confidants (e.g., Sauzier, 1989) and is consistent with other retrospective reports indicating that close friends are frequent confidants (e.g., Roesler & Wind, 1994). However, the present data are the first to indicate that, even among women who disclosed immediately (i.e., during childhood), friends are the most common recipient of disclosure. It is possible that many victims, fearing the consequences of telling their mothers, made "trial" disclosures to friends and used those experiences to rehearse for subsequent disclosures to mothers. However, such speculations cannot be addressed by our data, which assessed only the identity of the first confidant. This finding underscores the importance of peer support among victims who choose to disclose and suggests that increased attention be focused on efforts to teach children appropriate ways to seek help for their friends who have been assaulted. When considered in light of the remarkably low percentage of childhood rapes that women said were ever reported to authorities (12%), this point takes on even greater significance.

This study has several important limitations. Most importantly, it is likely that some women in this study experienced childhood rapes but did not report them during the interview (Williams, 1994), though they may or may not have told others about their assaults. The predictors of disclosure may be different for this group of victims. Also, some women in this study may have fabricated stories of child rape, although this seems unlikely due to the amount of information gathered about reported incidents.

In addition, the retrospective design required women to try to remember how much time passed before they told someone about their child rape. It is not unreasonable to presume that women's memories of these periods of time are distressing, which when coupled with the passage of time between the rape and the research interview, inevitably introduces some degree of error into their recall (Bradburn, Rips, & Shevell, 1987). However, the impact of the error introduced by faulty memories is ameliorated somewhat by treating delayed disclosure as a categorical variable. Thus, if a respondent reported that she delayed 1 day before disclosing, when in actuality it was 1 week,

it would not significantly distort the predictive analyses. Of course, this does not eliminate the problem of memory distortion, which must be considered a potential limitation of any retrospective study.

Another limitation of the present study is that the sample includes only women. While research indicates that the great majority of child sexual abuse victims are female, increasing research attention is being paid to male victims (Haskett, Marziano, & Dover, 1996). It must be acknowledged that the results of this study may not be applicable to male victims, whose disclosure patterns may be influenced by a different set of variables. Future studies should examine these relationships among men.

Finally, the majority of child rapes reported by women in this sample occurred prior to the large scale child assault prevention education programs that were begun in the 1980's (cf. Daro, 1996). One of the main components of such programs is to teach children that assaults (including child sexual abuse) are wrong and should be disclosed to responsible adults. This information may have influenced (and may currently be influencing) young women's disclosure patterns. Indeed, other data from this sample indicate that younger women were more likely to report child rapes to legal or child welfare authorities than were older women, although reporting rates were still quite low among women under 30 (Saunders, Kilpatrick, Hanson, Resnick, & Walker, 1999). Whether this difference is due to different attitudes toward disclosure or to other variables cannot be determined. It must be acknowledged, however, that the patterns of disclosure identified in this sample of women, most of whom were not exposed to child assault prevention education programs, might be less descriptive of child rapes experienced by women who have been exposed to such programs, although this remains an empirical question worthy of additional attention.

Despite its limitations, this study demonstrates clearly that the large majority of women who experience childhood rapes do not disclose these events to others soon after they occur. In fact, it is possible that a large proportion of women may never tell about these experiences unless asked specifically, as was done in the National Women's Study. Nearly half of all women did not disclose within 5 years of their rape. That only two variables, age at first/only rape and rape by a stranger, were independently associated with disclosure within 1 month suggests that our understanding of what leads some children to disclose and others to keep silent remains poor and requires continued investigation.

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