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Article in *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* · September 2000

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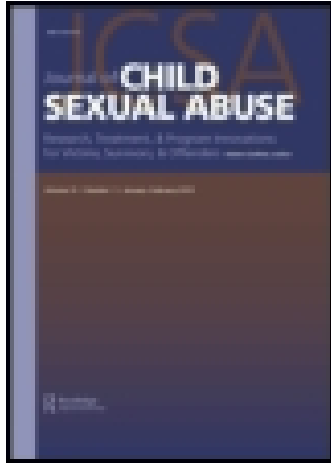
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## Journal of Child Sexual Abuse

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wcsa20>

### The Prevalence and Effects of Self-Reported Childhood Sexual Abuse Among Sadomasochistically Oriented Males and Females

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Published online: 22 Oct 2008.

To cite this article: Niklas Nordling, N. Kenneth Sandnabba & Pekka Santtila (2008) The Prevalence and Effects of Self-Reported Childhood Sexual Abuse Among Sadomasochistically Oriented Males and Females, *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 9:1, 53-63, DOI: [10.1300/J070v09n01\\_04](https://doi.org/10.1300/J070v09n01_04)

To link to this article: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J070v09n01\\_04](http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J070v09n01_04)

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# The Prevalence and Effects of Self-Reported Childhood Sexual Abuse Among Sadomasochistically Oriented Males and Females

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**ABSTRACT.** The prevalence and consequences of self-reported sexual abuse among 164 male and 22 female practitioners of sadomasochistic sex was explored. A questionnaire exploring psychological health, social adjustment, and sexual behavior was distributed among members of two sadomasochistically oriented clubs. The results showed that the prevalence of self-reported sexual abuse was higher among the participants as compared to the general Finnish population norms. Also, the participants that reported abuse were more likely to have attempted suicide, to have sought psychological support, and to have visited a physician due to physical injuries. Self-reported sexual abuse was also associated with poorer social adjustment, and higher sexual neuroticism. Further, the higher the frequency of abuse, the poorer the body image of the abused male participants. In conclusion, even though the majority of the participants did not report childhood sexual abuse, it had adverse consequences and altered some aspects of the sexual behavior of the individuals that had been abused. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>>]

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Submitted: 6-23-98; first revision: 12-3-98; second revision: 10-22-99; accepted: 10-25-99.

**KEYWORDS.** Sexual abuse, sadomasochism, psychological health, sexual adjustment

The question of whether childhood abuse experiences have etiological significance for sadomasochistic behavior has remained largely unresearched. Some clinical case reports have suggested that abusive experiences are in fact important factors (Blos, 1991; Blum, 1991; Coen, 1988; Rothstein, 1991). However, there are problems in generalizing from these reports as they are not based on systematic empirical research. On the contrary, they are exclusively concerned with people who have sought psychological help. Due to the complexity of sadomasochistic sexual behavior (sm-sex) and the significance of social influences on it, it is unlikely that any simple association between childhood abuse experiences and later sm-sex can be identified. Nevertheless, it is important to ascertain empirically what the role of sexual abuse is with respect to the development of sadomasochistic sexual interests and for the choice of either the sadistic or the masochistic position. Higher levels of reported sexual abuse among individuals engaged in sadomasochistic sexual activities compared to general population surveys would offer support for sexual abuse having a correlative role. The present study also sought to explore the role of self-reported sexual abuse for the social and psychological adaptation as well as sexual behavior of self-identified practitioners of sm-sex.

Sexual abuse of children has been associated with adverse long-term effects (Briere & Runtz, 1988, 1993; Finkelhor, 1986, 1990), including increased levels of anxiety, depression, suicidal behavior, substance abuse, personality disorders, low self-esteem, somatization, and sexual maladjustment. In addition, sexual abuse in women is often associated with a specific pattern of adult sexual behavior including earlier first intercourse, more sexual partners, teenage pregnancies and promiscuity (Polit, White, & Morgan, 1990; Springs & Friedrich, 1992). There is also evidence that intrafamilial sexual abuse is associated with lower levels of sexual satisfaction as well as distorted body image (Jackson, Calhoun, Amick, Maddever, & Habif, 1990). Consequently, similar results were expected in the present study.

It also has been suggested that sexually abused girls are vulnerable to revictimization in adulthood (Messman & Hirschman, 1981; Russell, 1984). Messman and Long (1996) found that several studies on this topic indicate that these girls are at an elevated risk for re-experi-

encing sexual abuse as adults compared to non-abused children. One possible mechanism for this effect is that abused women may see violence and domination by their partners as a normal part of sexuality and this may lead them to seek out punitive relationships. Another possible explanation is that abuse victims may become targets for someone because they suffer from poor self-image and a lack of assertiveness and consequently do not know how to take care of themselves (Kohn, 1987). On the other hand, in boys, sexual abuse seems to be associated with sexual aggression in adulthood (Ferrenbach, Smith, Monastersky, & Deisher, 1986; Friedrich & Luecke, 1988). Thus, the coping mechanisms of boys and girls seem to differ. Consequently, it can be assumed that some sexually abused individuals would be drawn to sadomasochistic sexual relationships. Females may be more likely to take masochistic roles and males sadistic ones.

A problem with many of the studies on the consequences of sexual abuse is that they have failed to control for adverse effects of negative interaction patterns or downright physical abuse in the families where sexual abuse takes place. Nash, Hulsey, Sexton, Harralson, and Lambert (1993) have, for example, demonstrated that pathological family interaction may account for some of the differences in psychological problems between sexually abused and non-abused individuals. In the present study, an attempt was made to assess for this by checking whether the abused participants also had experienced more physical punishment in their childhood compared to the non-abused participants.

The following hypotheses were tested in the present study:

1. Compared to the Finnish population in general (Sariola & Uute-la, 1994, 1996), a larger number of the participants will report having experienced sexual abuse in their childhood.
2. The participants that report sexual abuse will also report more psychological problems (attempted suicides, in- and outpatient psychiatric/psychological treatment, substance abuse) and more serious injuries caused by their sexual behavior (visits to a physician due to physical injuries).
3. The participants that report will show poorer social adjustment (level of income, living in a steady relationship).
4. The participants that report sexual abuse will have more problems with their sexuality and their body image (as measured by

the Body Image subscale of the Derogatis Sexual Functioning Inventory (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1979) as well as two subsections of the Eysenck Inventory of Attitudes to Sex (Eysenck, 1976), namely, Neurotic Sex and Satisfaction). Furthermore, the more severely traumatized participants (higher frequency of abuse) will report more of these problems.

5. Among participants reporting abuse, a higher percentage of females will be masochists while a higher percentage of males will be sadists.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

A total of 164 men (estimated mean age 36 years) and 22 women (estimated mean age 29 years) who were members of the two sadomasochistically oriented clubs that exist in Finland participated in the study. Ninety-five were recruited from Kinky Club, a club for mainly heterosexual people with a variety of sexual preferences. Ninety-one participants were recruited from the MSC-Finland association with mainly gay male members. Of the participants 43.0% reported being mainly heterosexual, 5.4% bisexual and 51.6% mainly homosexual in their sexual orientation. Of all the participants 27.0% identified themselves as mainly sadistic, 22.7% as both sadistic and masochistic and 50.2% as mainly masochistic in their sadomasochistic sexual behavior.

The participants were highly educated (over a third had a university degree). They also had a higher income level than the population in general (*Statistical Yearbook of Finland*, 1993) with half having a monthly income of more than 2000 USD. The demographic and sexual characteristics of the sample have been described in detail previously (Sandnabba, Santtila, & Nordling, 1999).

### *Materials*

The questionnaire was created specifically for this study. It contained items relating to attempted suicide, in- and outpatient psychiatric/psychological treatment, substance abuse, and visits to the physician due to physical injuries. The occurrence, type, and frequency of

childhood sexual abuse as well as the identity of the perpetrator were also explored. For one participant the sexual abuse was solely verbal in nature whereas for the remaining 17 participants it also included physical sexual contact. Social adjustment was measured by having the participants indicate their level of income and if they were involved in a steady relationship. The Sexual Satisfaction Scale of the Derogatis Sexual Functioning Inventory (DSFI) (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1979) was included as well as the subsection Satisfaction of the Eysenck Inventory of Attitudes to Sex (Eysenck, 1976). This was done in order to increase the validity of the findings. The correlation between the two measures of sexual satisfaction was significant,  $r = .73$ ,  $p < .001$ . Analysis of reliability with the alpha-coefficient indicated the following results for the different scales: Sexual Satisfaction (DSFI) .70, Satisfaction (Eysenck) .79.

### ***Procedure***

The questionnaires were mailed to all the members of the two clubs with the approval and cooperation of the boards for the two clubs. Full confidentiality was guaranteed and the individuals who voluntarily decided to participate sent their addressed and stamped return envelopes to the researchers. As both clubs had members with differing sexual preferences it was emphasized that only individuals who defined themselves as sadomasochists should complete the instrument. This procedure is similar to that applied by Moser and Levitt (1987). In all, 534 questionnaires were distributed, 327 via the Kinky Club and 207 via the MSC-Finland. A reminder was published in the membership bulletins of the clubs. Responses were received from 186 persons, of which 22 were females. The response rate was 35%. This can be seen as reasonable when taking into account that both clubs are also open to individuals who are interested in sexual activities (e.g., fetishism, cross-dressing) other than sadomasochism. In addition, the response rate was lowered because some individuals may have been members of both clubs and, therefore, received two questionnaires, returning only one of these.

### ***RESULTS***

Of the male participants 7.9% ( $n = 13$ ) and of the female participants 22.7% ( $n = 5$ ) reported having been sexually abused in their

childhood. A significantly larger proportion of the female participants reported sexual abuse experiences compared to the male participants, ( $\chi^2(1, N = 186) = 4.86, p < .014$ ). The abuse had occurred once for two participants, from 2-10 times for 10 participants, and more than 10 times for five participants. Among the participants reporting abuse, male and female participants were equally likely to have had frequent abusive experiences. The perpetrator was a family member in 61.1% of the cases.

Of the participants reporting abuse 38.9% had attempted suicide compared to 3.6% of the non-abused. The participants reporting abuse were significantly more likely to have attempted suicide compared to the non-abused participants ( $\chi^2(1, N = 186) = 31.19, p < .001$ ). Similarly, 33.3% of the participants reporting abuse had been inpatients in a psychiatric hospital compared to 5.4% of the non-abused participants ( $\chi^2(1, N = 185) = 17.03, p < .001$ ). The participants reporting abuse also had significantly more outpatient psychological counseling (22.2%) compared to only 2.4% of the participants not reporting abuse ( $\chi^2(1, N = 184) = 15.33, p < .001$ ). No differences between participants reporting abuse and participants not reporting abuse were found concerning their intake of alcohol or other substances in connection with sm-sex with 18.8% of the whole sample reporting that they often or always did so.

Visits to a physician due to injuries obtained during sm-sex were significantly more common among the participants reporting abuse (11.1%) than among the participants not reporting abuse (1.8%), ( $\chi^2(1, N = 186) = 5.40, p < .010$ ).

It was found that the participants reporting abuse had a significantly lower level of income compared to the participants not reporting abuse (Mann-Whitney U Test (M-W),  $z = 2.61, p < .005$ ). However, it was also found in this sample that the male income level was higher than the female income level (M-W  $z = 4.85, p < .001$ ). Therefore, the difference in income level between the abused and the non-abused participants may be due to there being more females among the abused participants and not due to a real difference in income level caused by abuse itself. However, further analysis showed that male participants who reported abuse had a significantly lower level of income (M-W  $z = 1.98, p < .024$ ), when compared to male non-abused participants.

The results also showed that the participants reporting abuse were more often single (61.1%) compared to those not reporting abuse

(37.7%), ( $\chi^2(1, N = 185) = 3.71, p < .027$ ). Participants reporting abuse were more prone to participate in sm-club activities (M-W  $z = 1.66, p < .048$ ), therefore, possibly explaining their relative isolation.

As shown in Table 1, the participants reporting abuse scored significantly higher on sexual neuroticism compared to participants not reporting abuse. There was a tendency for the latter to be more satisfied sexually. Likewise, there was a tendency for the male participants who reported abuse to possess a poorer body image than the non-abused male participants.

The frequency of reported abuse experiences was negatively correlated with sexual satisfaction ( $r = -.42, p < .048$ ) and with body image of the male participants ( $r = -.49, p < .045$ ). Correlations were not significant between the frequency variable and sexual neuroticism or body image of the female participants.

As expected, the female participants who reported sexual abuse were significantly more likely to engage in masochistic sexual behavior than those female participants not reporting abuse ( $\chi^2(1, N = 22) = 7.48, p < .003$ ). On the contrary, the male participants who reported abuse did not engage in sadistic sexual behavior more often than those male participants who did not report abuse.

To explore whether the differences between the participants reporting abuse and those not doing so would be confounded with the effects of possible physical punishment in the family, the extent to which the parents in the families had used physical punishment was compared

TABLE 1. The means and standard deviations of the sexually abused and non-abused participants on sexual neuroticism, sexual satisfaction, and body-image

Measure	Abused		Non-Abused		Mann-Whitney U-test
	M	SD	M	SD	
Sexual neuroticism	5.17	2.93	3.47	2.25	2.44**
Sexual satisfaction	5.83	3.16	6.80	3.05	$\square$ 1.31+
Body-image male	50.38	16.67	55.97	12.36	$\square$ 1.38+
Body-image female	54.60	15.34	57.12	16.65	$\square$ 0.04

Note: \*\*  $p < .01$ , +  $p < .10$ .

between these two groups. The results showed that there was no difference in the extent to which the father had used physical punishment between the groups. However, the mothers in the families of the participants not reporting sexual abuse had punished their children more ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) than the mothers in the families of the participants reporting sexual abuse ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ), ( $M-W z = 2.18$ ,  $p < .014$ ).

### DISCUSSION

Hypothesis 1 received some support in the present study. The prevalence of reported sexual abuse was higher in the present study as compared to the findings of a study of sexual abuse of children in Finland (Sariola & Uutela, 1994). In the present sample 7.9% of the males reported sexual abuse compared to 1-3% in the general population. The corresponding figures for females were 22.7% and 6-8%. This again confirms the often-found result of females being more likely to report childhood sexual abuse (Darves-Bornoz, Choquet, Ledoux, Gasquet, & Manfredi, 1998; Sariola & Uutela, 1994). In a majority of the cases in the present study the perpetrator was a family member, which is not the case in the general population where incestuous abuse according to Sariola and Uutela (1996) is very rare (0.5%). It seems that for a subgroup of the sm-sex practitioners sexual abuse in childhood may be a contributory etiological factor.

An alarmingly high percentage of the participants reporting sexual abuse had attempted to commit suicide both compared to the non-abused participants and the general population where the rate of attempted suicides is less than 1% (Lehtinen et al., 1991). In addition, the results suggest that the abused participants had more psychological problems evidenced by the high rates of inpatient psychiatric hospitalization and outpatient psychological counseling. It was also interesting to note that the participants reporting abuse visited a physician more often due to injuries inflicted in sm-sex. This may suggest that they had difficulties in setting appropriate limits to their sm-activities. Although there were no differences concerning substance abuse, these results corroborate Hypothesis 2 to a large extent. The results also support previous studies that have documented the adverse long-term effects of child sexual abuse (Briere & Runtz, 1993; Finkelhor, 1986).

In the present study self-reported sexual abuse was associated with poorer social adjustment as measured by income level and ability to establish steady relationships lending credence to Hypothesis 3. However, it cannot be excluded that poor socioeconomic conditions in the family of origin might have contributed to both the sexual abuse and the difficulties of the abused participants in becoming socially adjusted although this was not directly assessed in the present study. On the other hand, Melton (1992) has stressed that perpetrators are found in all social groups.

Hypothesis 4 was only partially supported by the findings. Participants reporting sexual abuse were more sexually neurotic. This was in accordance with the findings of Springs and Friedrich (1992) who found that sexual abuse was associated with problematic sexual behaviors in female victims of child sexual abuse. Further, the reported frequency of abuse was associated with more severe disturbances in the body image of the male participants. Also, the frequency of abuse was negatively associated with sexual satisfaction for all participants. Repeated sexual abuse has previously been found to be associated with more severe pathology in the victim (e.g., Green, 1993; Terr, 1991). The lack of significant association between the frequency of abuse and the body image of female participants was probably due to the somewhat small number of female participants. This is a common problem for the major part of empirical studies concerned with sm-behavior (Breslow, Evans, & Langley, 1985; Levitt, Moser, & Jamison, 1994; Spengler, 1977). Although the number of female participants was low, it was interesting that the likelihood of the abused females to engage in exclusively masochistic sexual behavior was evident. This finding supports the notion of some abused women involved in sado-masochism seeking out punitive relationships involving violence and domination (Messman & Long, 1996). However, the findings suggest that sexual abuse does not play a major role in determining whether the male participants assume the sadistic or masochistic role in their sexual behavior.

In conclusion, childhood sexual abuse had clearly adverse consequences for the participants who had been sexually abused. Therefore, one should be aware that a subgroup of sm-practitioners seems to be both psychologically and socially maladjusted. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the majority of sm-practitioners did not report a background of childhood sexual abuse. However, the possibil-

ity of denial, amnesia, and shame surrounding disclosures of sexual abuse leading to underreporting cannot be excluded in the present study. This limits the validity of the results although one must keep in mind that special groups like sadomasochists cannot easily be studied using prospective designs.

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