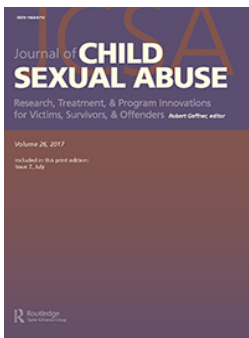

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# It Happened to Me: A Qualitative Analysis of Boys' Narratives About Child Sexual Abuse

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**ABSTRACT**

Previous research on children's narratives about sexual abuse written predominately by girls uncovered several themes, including: (a) memories of the abuse, (b) the disclosure and subsequent events, and (c) the healing journey and a meta-theme titled "fear and safety." This follow-up study explored how boys describe their life prior to, during, and after sexual abuse in the form of trauma narratives and if there are distinctive features of boys' experiences that differ from those of girls. Analysis of narratives written by males ages 3 to 17 (N = 19) found that boys ascribe to the same themes as the initial research but also have experiences and perspectives that are unique to being male survivors. This article focuses on the first two themes: memories of the abuse and the disclosure and subsequent events. Gender differences are discussed along with recommendations for prevention of male sexual abuse.

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adolescent; children; counseling; disclosure; males; memories; prevention; victim

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is "a type of maltreatment that refers to the involvement of the child in sexual activity to provide sexual gratification or financial benefit to the perpetrator, including contacts for sexual purposes, molestation, statutory rape, prostitution, pornography, exposure, incest, or other sexually exploitative activities" (USDHSS, 2013, p. 121). Statistics indicate that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are victims of CSA before the age of 18 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005; NAASCA, 2015), yet male sexual abuse (MSA) may be underestimated because males are less likely to disclose (Edinburgh, Saewyc, & Levitt, 2006; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2014; Priebe & Svedin, 2008). Children who do not disclose do not receive counseling services for their abuse, often experience ongoing abuse, and have a higher risk of revictimization than those who tell an adult (Collings, Griffiths, & Kumalo, 2005; Kogan, 2005).

Although there are commonalities between male and female victims, researchers have suggested distinct differences (Edinburgh et al., 2006; Hopton & Huta, 2013; Horner, 2010; Maikovich-Fong & Jaffee, 2010;

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Mohler-Kuo et al., 2014; Soylu et al., 2016). Edinburgh and colleagues and Mohler-Kuo and colleagues found boys were more likely to be exposed to pornography and be abused by a juvenile. In addition, Edinburgh and colleagues reported that boys were more likely to have a single perpetrator, report acts that vary from mainstream sexual activity, delay reporting, and state that there was no one that they could tell. Hopton and Huta noted that males' presenting symptoms frequently included posttraumatic stress, suicidal ideations, and substance abuse, and males were less likely to disclose and seek treatment for abuse by a female perpetrator. Maikovich-Fong and Jaffee indicated that boys were less likely to have their abuse substantiated and reported that gender was not a factor in emotional and behavioral problems, which is in contrast to other literature that has indicated boys were more likely to display behavioral problems (Horner, 2010). Soylu and colleagues found more boys experienced use of physical force and were more frequently diagnosed with an intellectual disability. Girls were more likely to experience abuse by known perpetrators, family members, and multiple offenders. There is disagreement with regard to who is more likely to experience penetration: boys (Edinburgh et al., 2006; Soylu et al., 2016) or girls (Maikovich-Fong & Jaffee, 2010; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2014). In sum, various gender differences have been identified, yet there remains a scant number of studies on the firsthand experiences of boys, thus more research is needed (Foster, 2016). The literature in this section focused on gender differences and studies with boy victims. For a broader view on adult MSA see Foster (2016), Easton (2013), Easton, Coohey, Rhodes, and Moorthy (2013), Easton, Saltzman, and Willis (2014), Lew (2004), and Siegel (2003).)

### *Initial study on children's narratives about sexual abuse*

Most research on CSA is limited to adult female participants, and, thus, little is known from the perspective of child victims, especially boys (Foster & Hagedorn, 2014a, 2014b; Maikovich-Fong & Jaffee, 2010). Studies with adult participants, although important, are unable to capture the vantage point of children as the adult survivors are removed from the experience in terms of time and have entered a different developmental stage. In the first known study to explore children's written trauma narratives about CSA, Foster and Hagedorn (2014a, 2014b) analyzed 21 narratives (18 girls: 3 boys), which uncovered one meta-theme, titled "fear and safety," and three themes: (a) memories of the abuse, (b) the disclosure and subsequent events, and (c) the healing journey. The study added to the limited research on children's first-hand accounts of sexual abuse and recovery experiences, yet there was minimal representation of boys. To address this limitation, boys' narratives were collected to answer two questions: How do boys describe their life prior

to, during, and after sexual abuse in the form of trauma narratives? and Are there distinctive features of boys' experiences that differ from those of girls?

## Method

The analysis of narratives was approved by the institutional review boards at the researcher's university and hospital associated with the partnering agency, hereafter referred to as "the center." The center was a large, child advocacy center that specialized in the treatment of abuse. To ensure anonymity, research assistants from the center removed all protected health information (PHI) from the narratives. Each narrative was authored by boys as a therapeutic intervention implemented by a counselor trained in trauma focused cognitive-behavioral therapy (TF-CBT). Narratives were organized into chapters that were outlined by the agency and followed the TF-CBT framework. All counselors adhered to TF-CBT guidelines for the narrative intervention (see NCTSN, 2004). Younger children drew pictures alongside their written memories, although permission was only attained for analysis of the written words. Narratives were shared with nonoffending parents/caregivers in a family session (Foster, 2014).

The narratives were written during counseling sessions, thus they were not created for research. This method had several disadvantages related to standardization, which are discussed in the limitations section. Yet there are clear advantages, which include the opportunity for children to share openly about their experiences in a safe, therapeutic relationship and complete narratives at their own pace over several weeks or months. Moreover, the use of documents eliminated the need for children to be interviewed by researchers yet retained the boys' voices on abuse and recovery experiences (McElvaney & Culhane, 2015).

### *Sample selection and demographics*

Boys' narratives were selected through purposive sampling. The research assistants were directed to identify approximately 20 narratives for initial analysis from current records and archives (which are kept for 7 years). Narratives were required to be complete (not missing more than one chapter). Other stipulations such as race or age were not set. One narrative was excluded because the child did not write about his own MSA. The 21 remaining narratives were authored by 19 boys (2 boys wrote 2 narratives each about different perpetrators).

The boys were 3 to 17 at the time of treatment ($\bar{x}$ = 8.5) and 3 to 11 ($\bar{x}$ = 5.8) at the time of abuse. Age of onset was unknown for 2 children. Racial diversity was represented: Caucasian (42%), Latino (37%), African American (11%), and "more than one race" (11%). Family income ranged

from $7,200 to $52,800 annually ($\bar{x}$ = 26,082). The center is grant-funded and able to provide counseling services to low income families for free or at minimal cost. Primary diagnosis from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM IV-TR), included (42%) posttraumatic stress disorder (42%), 9 adjustment disorders (47%), and 1 with code V61.21 "sexual abuse of a child."

Boys were abused by peers (7), biological fathers (4), a stepmother (1), step and half-brothers (4), unrelated, known male adults (3), a grandfather (1), and a male cousin (1). Over half (52%) were familial (biological or by marriage). Perpetrators included 12 child offenders (57%) and 9 adult offenders (43%). CSA by older or more dominant children accounts for 40% of all known offenses (Finkelhor, 2012), and boys are more likely to experience abuse by a juvenile (Edinburgh et al., 2006). All perpetrators were known to the boys, although the nature of these relationships greatly varied. This aligns with other research indicating children know their offenders in 70–90% of cases (Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2008). One perpetrator was a female. According to the center, the participants' demographics were highly representative of the treatment population. Each participant was assigned a number (1–19), which is reported in the findings section along with the boys' ages at the time of treatment. For the children who wrote two narratives, the quote is noted with an "a" or "b" (e.g., Participant 14a, age 4).

### *Data analysis*

Scanned copies of the boys' handwritten narratives were provided to the researcher and typed into Microsoft Word. Thirteen words or short phrases were bracketed as unknown, and 242 words qualified as protected health information (PHI) and were blacked out by research assistants at the center. Unreadable content and PHI accounted for less than 2% of the total data. Word counts and readability levels were analyzed using Microsoft Word's Flesch-Kincaid reading level analysis. Narratives ranged from 166–2,152 words ($\bar{x}$ = 754) and readability levels 1.1 – 8.8 ($\bar{x}$ = 3.8), reflecting their different cognitive levels. Six narratives were scribed by counselors, which is a common practice in TF-CBT, and counselors write what is said verbatim for young children. Six narratives were written below grade level, 5 were on grade level, and 2 were above grade level. Some narratives were more descriptive than others, yet all had similar features (e.g., information about themselves, their perpetrators, and parents/caregivers).

Text analysis software (Concordance; Watt, 2009) examined word frequency. This was a first step in identifying words of potential interest, which were then examined in context and aided the later development of themes. The most commonly used word was "mom" (in its various forms), which was used 116 times, which was followed by "dad" (87). Other family

members, friends, counselors, police officers, investigators, teachers, and perpetrators were also mentioned and had a wide range of roles (e.g., supportive, helpful, disbelieving, or harming).

Narrative analysis (NA) was utilized to identify themes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; McLeod, 2011). Narrative analysis was selected because it allows researchers to uncover participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs and explore subjective experiences that are traumatic (Allport, 1942). Furthermore, NA is superior to other methods in capturing the boys' stories of CSA from their unique viewpoint. A research team was assembled, which was led by the primary investigator who conducted the initial study and consisted of two doctoral and one master's level student who were not part of the original research. Two members were males, and all members had worked with CSA victims. After an initial meeting, the team spent several weeks immersed in the data, which included repeated readings and noting initial impressions writing in reflexive journals. Next, eight narratives were divided among the researchers and reduced to meaningful segments, which were given codes. The team discussed the codes and emerging themes. A codebook was created, and the researchers returned to the remaining narratives to complete coding. The team met again to review the coding process, share journals, and name themes. Additional narratives were not sought because new themes did not emerge in the final set of narratives analyzed, thus data saturation was achieved and distinct, recurrent themes were identified.

### *Verification strategies*

This study was guided by six verification strategies: reflexivity, analyst triangulation, external audit, peer review, disconfirming evidence, and thick, rich description (Creswell & Miller, 2009). Reflexivity was utilized at every point of the study, beginning with a statement of positionality written by the primary investigator. Members shared their potential biases such as the expectation that boys' narratives would discuss externalizing behaviors (e.g., fighting, stealing, and destruction of property) and concerns about sexual identity. Reflexive journals were kept to monitor personal reactions, pose questions, and document interactions with the data.

Second, analyst triangulation was utilized to explore individual perceptions while interpreting the data. The process illuminated blind spots. The goal was not 100% consensus regarding codes and themes but rather to explore the different ways of viewing the narratives.

Third, an individual not associated with the study experienced in narrative analysis was selected as an auditor and was provided with coding records. The auditor's feedback increased the confirmability of the study by providing

an outside perspective through examination of the data collection and analysis procedures, which were deemed sound with no evidence of bias.

Fourth, the team consulted with a CSA expert who was not connected to the study and had experience as a counselor with child victims for over 15 years. This disinterested peer reviewed the coding process and provided feedback on the themes. The peer stated the themes were consistent with boys' oral narratives of abuse told during counseling.

Fifth, as themes emerged in both rounds of coding, the team looked for exceptions and unique cases, which are described in the findings. Sixth, thick, rich description was utilized to allow the reader to hear the boys' accounts as told in their own words. The quotes allow the reader to judge if the themes encompass the boys' experiences and determine the applicability in other contexts. Each verification strategy was important in establishing the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Findings

Narrative analysis uncovered the same themes from the initial study (Foster & Hagedorn, 2014a, 2014b): the meta-theme "fear and safety" and three themes: (a) memories of the abuse, (b) the disclosure and subsequent events, and (c) the healing journey. This article focuses on themes 1 and 2, which are presented chronologically. For a discussion of the healing journey and meta-theme fear and safety see Foster (in press).

The narratives begin with life before the abuse (except 4 boys whose abuse began at very young ages). Most boys ($n$ = 14) recalled only positive feelings (happy, safe) and described activities that they enjoyed such sports, traveling, Boy Scouts, and time with friends and family. Participant 5 (age 6) said, "Before the abuse I was happy. I never felt scared and I enjoyed the Wii. I felt good about myself." Only Participant 15 (age 5) shared varied memories. He wrote his stepbrother (his perpetrator) was mean, but they also used to play a lot of games together.

The narratives take a turn by describing first abuse experiences. The boys (53%) seemed to communicate that their abuse occurred once. Following the abuse, a major crossroads was the disclosure, which started a domino chain of events, including an investigation. This was the end of the abuse but the beginning of a foreign experience that involved the private becoming public. These experiences are captured by themes 1 and 2, which are described with direct quotes.

### *Theme 1: Memories of the abuse*

Each boy detailed the sexually abusive acts that he experienced, which are organized into three subthemes: abuse descriptions, perpetrators of the abuse, and thoughts and feelings.

### Boys' abuse descriptions

While 10 boys seemed to describe a single event, other boys described abuse that lasted for years. Descriptions varied in detail as well as level of severity. Sexual acts included: touching genitals ($n$ = 19), anal penetration (digital or genital) ($n$ = 8), oral-genital contact ($n$ = 6), and forcing child to perform sexual acts on another child victim (biological sister) ($n$ = 1).

Three participants recalled physical pain during the abuse. "His name was [perpetrator], and he hurt my butt with his private part" (Participant 9, age 11). "It hurt, and I felt sad" (Participant 8, age 4). Moreover, two participants recorded physical abuse concurrent with CSA. Participant 12 (age 7) wrote, "Then I started to make noise, and he hit me with the cord. I started to cry. Then he took me to my room, and he abused me by putting his penis in my mouth."

Four boys recalled trying to escape or saying "stop" or "no" to the perpetrator. Their pleas had no effect. "I said no, but he still did it. He touched my private part" (Participant 6, age 3). Participant 4 (age 10) wrote, "He use [sic] to tell me to pull my pants down. He use [sic] to pull his thing out. He use [sic] to keep begging me and begging me even though I said NO."

The descriptions were a vivid reminder of the sexually abusive acts that the boys experienced.

### Perpetrators of the abuse

The narratives provided a firsthand account of those who perpetrated the abuse, their behaviors, and how they used environmental opportunities to abuse boys. As stated, all perpetrators were known. Children described their perpetrators, with some drawing pictures with descriptions. "That's my penis in her [sister's] butt and dada's penis in her butt" (Participant 14a, age 4). Several included a physical descriptions. "He was very fat and he still is. He had dirty blonde short hair. He had bike that was blue" (Participant 18a, age 8). "He was really tall, two times the size of my mom and bigger than my dad" (Participant 4, age 10).

Children also recorded things their perpetrators said to them, which included excuses and minimizations. Participant 17 (age 13) wrote, "He would say he was just playing." Participant 7 (age 10) said, "She opened the shower curtains and started touching … my butt and my private part. She started rubbing and said, 'I'm just helping you because I need to speed it up… . Oh, don't worry this isn't the first time'" (Participant 7, age 10). In addition to writing about her excuse for touching him, he stated that he believed she would continue the abuse because she seemed to indicate she had abused other children before him.

Most of the narratives lacked descriptions of typical grooming behaviors used by offenders (e.g., giving gifts, asking to keep secrets, exposure to pornography). This was surprising, especially as exposure to pornography is reported more frequently by boy victims (Edinburgh et al., 2006; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2014). Narratives that indicated some aspects of grooming were three boys (Participants 4, 10, and 18) who thought their child perpetrators were "friends" or a "role model" prior to the abuse starting and three boys (Participants 2, 17, and 19) who reported that their abuse started out as a "game" or included a bribe. One boy (Participant 18) shared that his cousin told him about his own abuse prior to abusing him, which may have been to normalize the sexual act. It was unclear if the child perpetrators strategically cultivated friendships to later abuse their peers, whereas the games (by two adults and one older child) seemed intentional as grooming strategies that escalated over time. Participant 2 (age 14) wrote,

> He started off as if it was a game. He would see how far each of us would go with something sexual like touching. At first he would rub his hand up my leg, and then he would touch my private area and then he would ask me to do the same thing basically. It started off over the clothes, but then moved under the clothes.

It is possible that other boys did not recognize their perpetrators' use of grooming strategies, thus they were not explicitly reported in the narratives. Alternatively, the lack of a clear process may have been due to 57% of the offenders being other children who were more opportunistic.

Lack of supervision appeared to be a factor in a variety of settings (e.g., school, home, and outdoor play), which opened a door for sexual abuse to occur. "So the teachers were busy and didn't pay attention to everyone. They were not the brightest teachers. This [the abuse] happened about four times" (Participant 16, age 10). "He would abuse me whenever he got the chance to when his parents were not around, which was pretty much like always… . He abused me in his room … in the pool … in his living room" (Participant 4, age 10).

The boys articulated that they were caught off guard when the child or adult crossed a line by sexually touching them or asking the boys to perform a sexual act.

> I had just woken up and the abuser asked me if I wanted to see something, and I said sure… . I followed him into my room. He told me to sit down and then he pulled down my pants. Then he put his mouth on my private. During the abuse I felt confused and shocked. (Participant 11, age 11)

In addition, the boys described a variety of strategies used by perpetrators, including force, threats, pressure, manipulation, and bribes. Examples of each are provided.

### Force

"My brother held me down on the bed and put his penis in my mouth. I felt grossed out, and I felt helpless because I couldn't fight back" (Participant 12, age 7). "He grabbed onto me and threw me on the bed. I felt bad, and he laughed" (Participant 15, age 5).

### Threats

"A few days later in class he put his hands down my pants… . He then made me put my hands down his pants. He kept threatening me the whole time" (Participant 16, age 10). "He use [sic] threaten me with a BB gun. He use to say that he won't be my friend if I didn't do it" (Participant 4, age 10). "He said if I told anyone he would take away my 4-wheeler and my tree house" (Participant 19, age 8).

### Pressure

"He only made me perform oral sex on him one time. It was super nasty. The only reason I did it was because every day all the time he just kept asking me to do it" (Participant 2, age 14).

### Manipulation

[Perpetrator] told us he was "ready for pussy," but we didn't exactly know what that meant. He told us to follow him and so we followed him… . He told us he needed to practice on us and somehow the conversation was steered into me and [other child victim] pulling our pants down, and so we did just that. Right then and there he anally raped both me and [other child victim]. (Participant 10, age 17)

### Bribes

"He told me that he would only buy me the video game if I let him touch my private part for one month" (Participant 17, age 13).

In sum, boys provided detailed descriptions of their perpetrators, who were known to their victims and took advantage of lack of supervision or created opportunities for isolation. Strategies perpetrators used were outlined along with their excuses and minimizations of the abuse. The following section explores boys' thoughts and feelings about the abuse.

## Thoughts and feelings

Boys described thoughts about life: "During the abuse my life sucked" (Participant 2, age 14), the abuse: "I didn't want him to touch me there" (Participant 5, age 6), themselves: "I had this big thing with people thinking that I'm gay, so that's why I didn't really tell anybody" (Participant 2, age 14), and their perpetrators: "I thought like what's wrong with him and what the

heck?" Some experienced flashbacks, which were termed "daymares" by Participant 3 (age 7): "It happens sometimes in school and prevents me from actually paying attention because instead of learning and listening to what the teacher is saying. I just sit there and think of nothing but the abuse" (Participant 10, age 17). Others suppressed their memories to try to forget: "The thought of what happened got pushed away, and I didn't think about it" (Participant 11, age 11).

During initial readings of the narratives, the team noted that the boys frequently used feeling words to describe life before, during, and after CSA. Text analysis software was utilized to look at frequency (Concordance; Watt, 2009). The feeling words were then examined in context to better understand the boys' experiences. Anger was the most prevalent feeling (53 times total; e.g., "I felt so very, very angry. I punched him in the tooth, and his tooth came out" [Participant 3, age 7]). A close second to feeling angry was scared (52 times; e.g., "Scared because [abuser] was not touching the right place" [Participant 14b, age 4]). Sadness was next in terms of frequency (43 times; e.g., "Now my face is frowning and sad because of what happened" [Participant 7, age 10]). The word happy often referred to life before or after CSA (29 times; "Before all of this happened I lived a really happy and cool life with my mom and dad and of course my sister" [Participant 17, age 13] and "My mom kicked him [perpetrator] out and I was so so so very happy" [Participant 3, age 7]). Other feelings expressed throughout the narratives included: safe (9), bad (9), confused (6), embarrassed (5), shocked/surprised (5), brave (3), relieved (3), disgusted (3), and disappointed (2). Feeling words used to describe perpetrators included fear, anger, hatred, and sadness. Some boys struggled to pinpoint their feelings: "I didn't know what to feel or think, but I felt uncomfortable" (Participant 11, age 11).

In sum, theme 1: memories of the abuse revealed the inner world of sexually abused boys. Their descriptions of their abuse experiences and their perpetrators were detailed and provide important information for counselors working with victims as well as CSA prevention efforts. The following section explores what occurred after the abuse was disclosed or discovered.

### *Theme 2: The disclosure and subsequent events*

Although initial disclosures ended the abuse for boys in this study (they were believed and the abuse was reported), it was followed by a series of difficult experiences and events. The boys were thrust into the unfamiliar world of interviews, investigations, and sometimes court proceedings. Their arduous experience was far from over. This theme captures their journey with the following subthemes: the disclosure, the investigation, and the justice system.

## *The disclosure*

Sixteen boys disclosed their abuse, and although one said he waited only a day, the others who reported a specific length of time said they waited years to tell (1–9 years). The time between the abuse and disclosure was excruciating for many boys. Reasons for waiting included: embarrassment, fear of perpetrator retaliation, worrying about others' reaction to the disclosure, and fearing what may happen to the perpetrator. "My worst memory with this whole experience was thinking about when, who, and if I should tell. I was worried how I was going to encourage myself to tell and also how the person would react that I told" (Participant 11, age 11).

Although many boys waited to tell, the disclosures themselves seemed spontaneous. "It was one Sunday afternoon, we just came from church and my brother told that I got on top of the couch. So I told that he put his penis in my mouth" (Participant 12, age 7). Another child told as his mother was getting ready to leave the house to have dinner with clients. "When she was putting her ear rings on in the mirror next to the bed I exploded. I had to tell her but I couldn't. I blurted out crying" (Participant 16, age 10). His mother still went to dinner. "I didn't sleep while my mom was gone. I just sat there hoping she would come back soon."

The researchers noted that Participant 18 (age 8) did not record his disclosure in either of his narratives. The remaining two participants' abuse was discovered without the boys initiating telling. Participant 17 (age 13) said, "I felt bad about waiting, because I felt that for me waiting that long, it made things even worse." His sister was the one who finally reported his abuse, and when asked about it by his mother, he affirmed that it was true. Participant 7 (age 10) confirmed his abuse when his mother asked him directly if his stepmother had abused him. He wrote, "She was shocked and she cried. She got all upset. I said, 'It's nothing big,' and she said 'Yes, it is [child's name]. You don't understand.' Now I realize how big it is." His description of not realizing its significance stood out to researchers as he was the only one abused by a female.

Boys disclosed to mothers most frequently ($n$ = 11), followed by fathers ($n$ = 3), both parents ($n$ = 1), and another child who then reported the abuse ($n$ = 1). Participant 10 (age 17) wrote, "The person I told was my mom. I told her because I didn't feel too comfortable telling my dad, and I felt like she could help me more." Participant 19 (age 8) recalled,

> One night, I was saying my prayers with my mom. I said I wanted to pray about the secret. My mom asked me, "What secret?" I told her most of what happened with gramps. My mom was very upset and cried. I cried too. We talked for a long time.

Boys often felt a burden lifted off of their shoulders following telling along with an increased sense of safety. “I felt safe after I told because it wasn’t going to happen anymore” (Participant 17, age 13). The boys also recorded reactions of those they disclosed to: anger (7), sadness (5), shock (2), self-blame (1), hurt (1), scared (1), calm (1), and ashamed (1). Most children were believed immediately, but some experienced disbelief or unprotective behaviors: “I told my mommy that daddy put his penis in my butt on the couch. I went to mommy’s work and told her. Mommy said don’t let daddy do that again or he will get arrested. And daddy got arrested” (Participant 1, age 4). One child described his father refusing to believe him about his stepbrother’s abuse. “My dad called my mom like screaming at her saying that she was brainwashing me into saying that, and it had to be someone else” (Participant 2, age 14).

The disclosures were accompanied by a series of consequences, for the child victim, the family, and the perpetrator. The following subthemes capture boys’ experiences during the investigation, and for some with the justice system.

### *The investigation*

Following a report of the abuse, an investigation ensued. Locations of interviews varied (e.g., child’s school, parent’s workplace, home, or at the center). “I talked to them [police officers] in my bedroom right before bedtime. I was sitting on my bed, and they were sitting in a rocking chair” (Participant 7, age 10). Interviews at the center took place in a play room specifically designed for forensic interviews, which was equipped with a video camera and two-way mirrors. The school’s media center and mother’s workplace seemed to lack privacy, which was observed by the children. “[They] interviewed me in my mom’s office she owns, but other people were next door. My mom was asked to step out for a second” (Participant 16, age 10).

Many boys wanted to help the investigators and desired for the truth to be known. “They asked me questions about what happened to me with the abuse, and I answered with a good loud clear voice. I told the truth. That’s a fact. I would never lie about anything that serious” (Participant 7, age 10). Only Participant 11 (age 11) was asked to make a written statement. “I was also nervous about having to write it, having official people see it, and about messing up.”

Several children were interviewed multiple times. “A little investigator dude he came to our house in [city] and asked me about what had happened, and after that I … talked with some pretty lady. I was told I was videotaped … I told her everything” (Participant 2, age 14).

Six children mentioned that the investigator or police officer with whom they spoke was a woman. It is unknown if this was intentional since all but

one of the perpetrators were male. The narratives did not indicate fear or discomfort with the female investigators. Conversely, three boys who were interviewed by men specifically recalled feeling anxious. “When he was asking me questions, I felt nervous. Then he called my sister. When she got back she told me that she was shivering from being scared” (Participant 12, age 7). Other boys feared they were in trouble. Some officers tried to help children know they were not to blame. For example, Participant 5 (age 6) recalled the police saying that the abuse was not his fault. Another child said the police said that they would “do the best they can to put him [the perpetrator] in jail” (Participant 9, age 11). Most children reported positive feelings after the interview. Participant 13 (age 10) wrote, “I talk [sic] to a lady about daddy. It felt good because someone was listening to me.” Only one interview seemed to have a negative tone to it. Participant 16 (age 10) wrote, “They slapped the little recorder on the table and told me to tell them what happened. I told them through a painfully slowly conversation. I cried maybe once or twice.”

Overall, the subtheme “the investigation provided insight into what boys experience during interviews about their sexual abuse. Some investigators were kind and assured the boys that the abuse was not their fault. Unfortunately, several boys felt a great deal of fear.

### *The justice system*

The subtheme “the justice system” depicted boys’ limited experiences with lawyers, depositions, witness statements, and trials. Most ($n$ = 17) of the narratives included scant or absent discussions regarding this topic. The researchers hypothesized that this may be due to 12 of the perpetrators being other children. The team considered merging this subtheme with “the investigation” but decided to highlight the voices that captured this unique experience as well as explore the realities of those who did not have an opportunity to seek justice.

Some children articulated concerns about going to court. For example, Participant 9 (age 11) stated, “One of my worst memories is now all of this court stuff, and the trial has been stressing me out.” According to Participant 11 (age 11), “The part that made me most nervous was having to speak in front of such official people in an official place. I was nervous about it, if I did have to go, [I would] mess up in front of them.” Some boys expressed relief when they learned that they would not have to go to court. “I didn’t go to court, and it felt good … I did not want to go to court, especially at my age. Nobody should be going there for this kind of stuff” (Participant 7, age 10). “I got a letter saying the guy who attack [sic] me took the plea. I felt so overjoyed and excited that I didn’t have to go to court” (Participant 9, age 11). While some knew that they would not be required to go to court, others

were still waiting, which was difficult. “I’m going to court very soon, but they keep pushing it back” (Participant 12, age 7).

Boys expressed diverse views on what justice would look like for their perpetrator. Some wanted to see their perpetrators punished.

> I would like to bring the perpetrator to justice. It’s not just because I feel like being mean, I just want to refresh his memory and let him know what kind of impact it had on my life… . I think he should get as much time as it takes to think about what he did and how much it has really affected me. (Participant 10, age 17)

Others continued to care for their perpetrators and did not want to see them face consequences. “I told my mom no punishment so no courts. I don’t want my Gramps to get in trouble. I don’t want to go to court either” (Participant 19, age 8). A few boys commented on the sentence that the perpetrator received. “The abuser got probation. I agreed with the decision and felt content about it” (Participant 11, age 11). The narratives reflected the reality that many cases are not prosecuted, and many perpetrators are not convicted.

In sum, the second theme, “the disclosure and subsequent events,” provided descriptions coupled with direct quotes from boys about the chain of events that began with the disclosure and included interviews and interactions with the justice system. Together themes 1 and 2 paint a picture of sexual abuse, disclosure, and subsequent events from the vantage point of boy victims.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to capture the experiences of sexually abused boys told through trauma narratives and to identify potential gender differences. The themes add to the scant research on the firsthand experiences of boy victims and have implications for CSA prevention efforts.

### *Gender differences and the nature of male sexual abuse*

There were distinct differences between the initial study by Foster and Hagedorn (2014a, 2014b), which included 18 girls, and this study with 19 boys. Although the samples were small, the findings may add to the limited literature on boy victims’ demographics and experiences.

First, age differences were present. Boys were younger at the time of treatment when compared to girls ($\bar{x} = 8.5$ versus $\bar{x} = 10.8$) as well as younger at the age of abuse ($\bar{x} = 5.8$ versus $\bar{x} = 9$). Spiegel’s (2003) summary of 39 studies indicates the mean age of abuse for boys is 8–11, with 28% of boys below the age of 7. The average age of onset for boys is lower for intrafamilial abuse ($\bar{x} = 7$) than abuse outside of the family system ($\bar{x} = 10$). “Although it

remains unclear whether boys tend to be younger than girls when first abused, a greater proportion of males are represented in younger age categories, across a number of studies" (Spiegel, 2003, p. 40).

Second, boys in this study were also more frequently abused by other children than the girls in the initial research (57% versus 33%). This finding has been noted in other research (Edinburgh et al., 2006). Although reasons for this difference have not been well explored, one possibility is that boys are more likely than girls to have unsupervised time (Diamanduros, Cosentino, Tysinger, & Tysinger, 2012), which may provide a window of opportunity for abuse by other children to occur. For a comprehensive review of child perpetrators and their victims along with evidence-based approaches to evaluation and counseling, see Vizard (2013).

Third, all 18 girls described their abuse occurring multiple times; conversely, 10 (53%) of the boys seemed to describe a single event. This finding aligned with some research (Edinburgh et al., 2006; Soylu et al., 2016) but was in contrast to a large study of men (N = 67) that indicated multiple episodes were common ($\bar{x}$ = 53.75 episodes) (Kelly, Wood, Gonzalez, MacDonald, & Waterman, 2002). It is possible the experience of single incidents in this study was connected to the greater number of child offenders in this sample.

Fourth, 5 girls in the initial study underwent forensic exams in an attempt to collect physical evidence, whereas none of the boys discussed this experience. Other studies have highlighted gender differences with regard to attempts to collect physical evidence. For example, a large scale study (N = 1762) of children examined for suspicion of sexual abuse over the course of a year at an Institute of Forensic Medicine reported that only 238 (13.5%) of the children who were brought for exams were male (Modelli, Galvão, & Pratesi, 2012).

Fifth, although all perpetrators were known in both studies, only girls described broken trust and betrayal. Boys were more likely to describe feelings of shock or surprise when the sexual abuse occurred. There is extensive literature on Freyd's (1996) betrayal trauma theory as it relates to CSA, though much of this research has been conducted on predominately female samples and focuses on offenders on whom children depend for survival (e.g, parents and caregivers). A sample of boys who were sexually abused by parents or caregivers may yield different results related to broken trust and betrayal.

Sixth, grooming strategies were absent from 13 of the boys' narratives. The 6 boys who included grooming strategies said that they though the other child was a friend before the abuse started or that their perpetrator began the abuse as a game. In contrast, other grooming methods such as secret keeping, gifts, and special privileges were evident in many of the girls' accounts. Several girls thought their perpetrator planned the abuse, whereas none of

the boys mentioned planning by perpetrators. Many of the offenders' actions seemed opportunistic and occurred during unsupervised times. The boys' perpetrators used coercion through force, threats, pressure, bribes, and manipulation, which are often part of the MSA experience (Spiegel, 2003).

Seventh, in the initial study girls disclosed to a variety of individuals: parents, relatives, adults at school, and other children, whereas boys were much more likely to disclose to their mother (58% of boys versus 32% of girls). This is similar to the finding of Edinburgh and colleagues (2006) who found boys were most likely to disclose to mothers and is in contrast to the work by Priebe and Svedin (2008) who found adolescents of both genders disclosed most frequently to peers. Disclosure is often very difficult for boys, and most wait until adulthood if they disclose at all (Gagnier & Collin-Vézina, 2016). Disclosure avoidance is especially common for boys when the perpetrator is a relative, especially a parent, which was the case for five boys in this study (Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003). This study sampled boys receiving counseling whose abuse was believed and reported, making them different from multitudes of boys who never disclose or who tell but are not believed or protected.

Eighth, anger was the most frequently described emotion by boys (53 times), which was closely followed by fear (52 times), whereas girls' most common emotion was fear, followed by sadness. Although boys' anger (e.g., toward self, the perpetrator, and the justice system) was documented, few externalizing behaviors were discussed. Previous research has indicated that boys are more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors (Horner, 2010), yet only Participant 2 (age 14) fit this by describing fights he got into. It is possible boys omitted these difficulties or that their young mean age at the time of counseling ($\bar{x}$ = 8.5) was a factor. This provides tentative support for Coohey's (2010) research that suggested younger boys have more internalizing behaviors, which may evolve into externalizing behaviors later in adolescence.

Ninth, the boys' narratives were typified by references to traditional gender preferences, including descriptions of racecars, video games, baseball, football, and fishing. Boy victims may distance themselves from anything that symbolizes femininity or homosexuality in the wake of MSA (McGuffey, 2008). Parents also may emphasize hypermasculinity, in part due to fear that abuse by a male would lead to their son's homosexuality.

A 10th and final difference was that one child in this study (Participant 2, age 14) mentioned fear that others would think he was gay if they found out about his abuse, which was his reason for not disclosing immediately. This fear has been frequently cited (Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gomez-Benito, 2009), and boys often worry that being abused by a male makes them gay, especially if they experienced pleasure (Moody, 1999). None of the narratives discussed "body betrayal," although it is a common experience. An erection

or orgasm during abuse can be very distressing for boys and often results in feelings of guilt, responsibility, and confusion (Alaggia & Millington, 2008).

This study added to others that have highlighted differences between boy and girl victims. Understanding boys' lived experiences is vital for professional helpers. Moreover, the results may inform prevention efforts, which are critically needed and discussed next.

### Protecting boys from child sexual abuse

Protection must start with parents and caregivers safeguarding their sons and daughters, which includes teaching body safety, screening adults and other children, and understanding the importance of supervision. Many parents are unaware that children are frequently abused by other children ($n$ = 11 in this study). The results of this study underscore the need for supervision as abuse occurred in multiple settings when adults were not present or attentive. This is especially important for boys as they are more likely to engage in unsupervised activities (Diamanduros et al., 2012). Another vital component of prevention is to intervene when children are engaging in abnormal sexual behaviors with other children (Vizard, 2013). By not addressing the behaviors, there is a high likelihood sexual offending will continue into adulthood. Conversely, juveniles who receive help have a very low recidivism rate (9–13% after 59 months) (Lobanov-Rostovsky, 2014).

### Limitations

This study had several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. First, a single site was used for data collection. Second, verification strategies through the lens of the boys could not be employed due to use of de-identified documents. Third, several variables were unknown: (a) child's length of time in counseling before beginning the narrative intervention, (b) quality of the counseling relationship, (c) counselor data (e.g., number of counselors in the study, years of experience, theoretical orientation), and (d) the degree to which counselors encouraged or directed clients to write detailed narratives. Last, permission was not attained to analyze the pictures drawn by the boys, which may have helped capture the experience of the younger boys. Despite these limitations, this study provided an exploration of the world of sexually abused boys. These findings increase counselors' understanding of boy victims as well as provide strategies for the prevention of CSA.

## Conclusion

In CSA research “exclusively male samples are rare” (Maikovich-Fong & Jaffee, 2010, p. 430). This study secured a sample of narratives written solely by boys (N = 19) and added to other small scale studies that have focused exclusively on CSA from the vantage point of children (see Foster & Hagedorn, 2014a, 2014b; Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Mossige, Reichelt, & Tjersland, 2005; Leander, Christianson, & Granhag, 2007; Mossige, Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Reichelt, & Tjersland, 2005; Nelson-Gardell, 2001; Nkongho, 2006; Simon, Feiring, & McElroy, 2010). The findings reveal the inner world of the boy victims and inform professional helpers along with those in law enforcement and the justice system and all who are engaged in CSA prevention efforts.

## Disclosure of interest

Author declares that she has no conflicts to report.

## Notes on contributor

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