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Child Maltreat 2001 6: 103
DOI: 10.1177/1077559501006002003

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Views of Child Sexual Abuse in Two Cultural Communities: An Exploratory Study Among African Americans and Latinos

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STOP-IT-NOW!

This exploratory study investigates knowledge and ideas about child sexual abuse among African Americans and Latinos through focus group discussions. Participants defined and described child sexual abuse, acknowledged that it occurred in their communities, and expressed their sense that family risk factors, risky institutions, and offender propensities were its root causes. Latino participants identified cultural transitions as another contributor. Responses and conversational style differed somewhat by gender and cultural identity. The authors discuss implications for child sexual abuse prevention, intervention, and research.

The sexual abuse of children is prevalent throughout the United States and affects people from all cultural groups in roughly similar proportions, although characteristics of the abuse may vary with the victim’s ethnic group (e.g., Bolen, 1998; Huston, Parra, Prihoda, & Foulds, 1995). As many as one in four girls and one in seven boys will be abused sexually before reaching the age of 18 (Finkelhor, 1994). Despite the widespread nature of the problem, and much recent research aimed at understanding it, little is known about how people’s cultural background affects their knowledge of sexual abuse, their experiences of it, or the strategies they use to prevent its occurrence (Fontes, 1995; Mennen, 1995). This study used focus groups to assess views of child sexual abuse among African Americans and Latinos.

PREVENTION

To be most effective, prevention programs must target the specific needs of the populations they are meant to influence (Thomas, 1998). Research and public health initiatives aimed to curb the spread of AIDS, for instance, include a myriad of programs targeting the specific circumstances of gay men (Rosser, Coleman, & Ohmans, 1993), Latino farm workers (Magana, 1991), high school students (Centers for Disease Control, 1990), Black and Hispanic drug users (Schilling et al., 1989), rural populations (Rounds, 1986), Asian and Pacific Islander communities (Yep, 1994), and so on. Similarly, programs aimed to reduce substance abuse among teenagers target the specific needs of different age, gender, and cultural groups separately.

In contrast, child abuse prevention programs remain remarkably “generic” (Thomas, 1998), meaning they are usually developed by and for members of the majority racial group (White). Most child sexual abuse prevention programs occur in schools, with a 1990 survey of 440 randomly selected elementary school districts in the United States finding that 85% offered some such instruction, and 64% man-

Authors’ Note: The authors thank MEE productions and Philadelphia Health Services for their probono donation of services. The authors also thank Kim Gerould, Carlos Santiago, and Roberto Irrizarry for their careful critiques of the manuscript. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lisa Fontes, 359 Montague Road, Shutesbury, MA 01072; e-mail: lfontes@javanel.com.
dated its instruction (Finkelhor, Asdigan, & Dzuba-Leatherman, 1993). These school-based programs tend to be addressed to children without regard to their cultural or linguistic background, or the circumstances in which they live (Thomas, 1998). Comprehensive school-based programs have been found to be effective in improving children’s knowledge of sexual victimization, increasing children’s likelihood of employing self-protection strategies when threatened, and increasing the likelihood that children will disclose victimizations or attempted victimizations (Finkelhor et al., 1993). Their effect on actual sexual victimizations is less clear. However, no information is available on whether these prevention programs work equally well across cultural groups.

Apart from the question of effectiveness, there is a certain sad irony in directing prevention programs toward children rather than toward the adults who should be protecting them or who might be at risk of offending against them. Sexual abuse prevention is alone among other child maltreatment prevention initiatives (e.g., physical abuse) in targeting children rather than adults. Prevention professionals are beginning to question the wisdom of making children responsible for their own safety (McMahon & Puette, 1999). Comprehensive sexual abuse prevention initiatives should involve education for parents, adolescents, young children, and people who work with children (Cohn, 1986). General public education campaigns can achieve the primary prevention goal of preventing abuse by encouraging caretakers to protect children better and by encouraging potential abusers to avoid behaving abusively and seek professional assistance. General public education campaigns can also achieve the secondary and tertiary prevention goals of making it easier for children and adults to recognize and seek help for child sexual victimization (Daro, 1994). This study was conducted to assist in the development of culturally competent sexual abuse prevention programming.

**CULTURAL ISSUES IN SEXUAL ABUSE**

As research into child sexual abuse matures, investigators are developing more specific ways of understanding child sexual abuse, including distinguishing between various forms of abuse (e.g., contact and noncontact, intrafamilial and extrafamilial, chronic and single incidents), teasing out the factors that lead to more severe effects, and developing notions of which interventions best fit which symptoms. Part of this maturation includes increased attention to cultural issues. Whereas early studies often “controlled for ethnicity” by using all-White populations (e.g., Herman, 1981) or failed to disclose the cultural or racial background of the participants (Fontes, 1993a), researchers now frequently include ethnic identity as a variable in their studies of sexual abuse. Fontes (1995) has criticized even this more recent research, however, as being marred by ethnic lumping (in which diverse peoples are combined into the category of Asian Americans, for instance) and an overly narrow focus on documenting comparative levels of prevalence rather than on understanding the dynamics of the abuse within groups. When ethnic identity is used merely as a demographic label in a prevalence study, it can serve as a proxy variable that in fact masks rather than illuminates the problem studied (Fontes, 1997b). The demographic label (e.g., African American, Italian American) is like a suitcase into which many diverse experiences are thrown and remain unexplored.

A number of recent studies unpack that suitcase. They reach beyond prevalence and seek answers to the more subtle and substantial questions of how cultural group membership might influence an experience of sexual abuse, whether through differences in cultural beliefs (e.g., Fontes, 1993a; Mennem, 1995), characteristics of the abusive acts (Huston et al., 1995), community awareness of sexual abuse symptoms (Thompson & Smith, 1993), differential rates of reporting (Ards, Chung, & Myers, 1998), or other mechanisms. These studies may be seen as “unpacking” culture.

This study follows in the second, unpacking tradition by trying to reach a textured understanding of how gender and ethnic culture shape views of child sexual abuse. The study was guided by an ecosystemic framework, which is the basic notion that human experience is conditioned by overlapping and interactive influences, from the individual, family, cultural community, and society. Effective intervention and prevention programs may be targeted at one or more of these levels. To understand a phenomenon, communities of researchers should examine every level of experience.

**METHOD**

**Qualitative Research on Sexual Abuse**

Qualitative methods allow patterns, themes, and categories of analysis to emerge from the data and thus are well-suited to studying complex social phenomena such as sexual child abuse. Although they lack the statistical precision of quantitative studies, qualitative methods are especially well suited to studying phenomena about which little is known (Patton,
Exploratory qualitative studies generate hypotheses and suggest themes that can later be confirmed, disconfirmed, or elaborated through quantitative methods or additional qualitative studies (Rossman & Wilson, 1985).

Qualitative investigations have been used to understand many aspects of sexual abuse, including the process of victimization (Berliner & Conte, 1990; Conte, Wolf, & Smith, 1989), parental perceptions of risk (Collins, 1996), unrecallable memories (Corwin & Olafson, 1997), barriers to disclosure (Fontes, 1993b), and the functioning of treatment teams (Gilgun, 1992). As a way to collect qualitative data, interviews are particularly well suited for exploring cultural issues because participants have opportunities to elaborate on the meanings behind their cultural practices, establish their own categories, express their own agendas, and place emphases where they wish (Fontes & Piercy, 2000). The authors chose to use focus group interviews because they are an efficient way to gather opinions from groups of people over a short period of time, and because participants often find them less threatening than individual interviews for addressing sensitive topics (Renzetti & Lee, 1993). Focus groups assessing community members’ wishes and views are consistent with the philosophy of health education and can be key for planning prevention programs that will be efficacious, accepted, and successfully implemented and maintained (Basch, 1987).

The authors designed the study to begin to address the following questions:

1. How do Latino and African American participants define and describe child sexual abuse?
2. What do Latino and African American participants see as signs that someone may be abusing a child sexually?
3. Do African American and Latino participants believe that sexual child abuse is a problem in their communities?
4. Do men and women, Latinos and African Americans, appear to hold differing views of sexual child abuse that might call for differing prevention interventions?

In each focus group interview, several questions were asked to help address the above-mentioned broader issues. These included, How do you define child sexual abuse? and How could you tell if a child was being abused sexually? Following standard focus group procedure, the interviewers loosely followed an interview guide, which they modified and interspersed with probes according to the flow of conversation in each group to help group members express diverse viewpoints (Krueger, 1994).

Participants and Procedures

STOP IT NOW! is a child sexual abuse prevention program that uses the tools of public health to encourage adults—rather than children—to learn about, confront, and stop sexual child abuse. In preparation for a pilot program in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, STOP IT NOW! worked with local organizations to develop focus groups within two of the city’s larger cultural communities. The focus groups were designed to provide some of the information needed to develop a public information campaign appropriate for a city as culturally diverse as Philadelphia.

The participants in this study included 34 men and 24 women (see Table 1) divided into a total of eight groups. The focus groups were divided by gender into all-male and all-female groups to facilitate the possible emergence of distinct men’s and women’s views and to make it easier to discuss sensitive issues related to sexuality. Latinos and African Americans were grouped separately to facilitate discussion of cultural norms. To ensure adequate sampling of Latinos who prefer speaking Spanish and English, focus groups were set up for each gender in each language. Separate focus groups were held with African American men and women older than and younger than age 35. In the end, the participants were divided into eight separate focus groups for older and younger African American women, older and younger African American men, Latino English-speaking men, Latina English-speaking women, Latino Spanish-speaking men, and Latina Spanish-speaking women.

Participants ranged in age from 20 to 60 and all resided in Philadelphia. Information from the interviews and the recruiters indicate that most of the participants are working class or poor, and have generally low levels of academic education. Unfortunately, more exact demographic data was not obtained. Each focus group contained from 4 to 11 participants.

Motivational Educational Entertainment (MEE) Productions is a communications firm that for the past decade has developed socially responsible research-based communication strategies targeting African Americans, urban populations, and low-income youth. Experienced male and female facilitators from MEE staff led the focus groups with African Americans on their agency premises, recruited the African American participants by contacting community-based agencies, and videotaped all the focus groups. All who sought to participate and who met the demographic criteria (men/women older than 18) were accepted into the focus groups.

The Latino participants were recruited from among patients and their companions at Philadelphia Health...
TABLE 1: Focus Group Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African Americans</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino English</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino Spanish</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino total</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals of both cultures</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Services, a multiservice agency addressing the mental and physical health needs of the Hispanic community. The Latino focus groups were held in a meeting room at Philadelphia Health Services. All who volunteered to participate and who met the demographic criteria (men/women older than 18, Spanish/English speaking) were selected. Reflecting the Philadelphia Latino population, the Latino participants were mostly Puerto Rican with a few people from other Caribbean and Central American countries. The second author, a Puerto Rican who is experienced running discussion and therapy groups on sexual abuse, facilitated the Latino focus groups in English and Spanish.

Each focus group discussion lasted from 45 to 90 minutes and was videotaped in its entirety. Participants received full information about the nature of the study, signed informed consent forms, and were paid $25 for their participation. In a typical group, the participants sat around a table or in a horseshoe and responded to questions posed by the group facilitator.

Data Analysis

The authors independently viewed the videotapes in their entirety several times (Tabachnick did not watch the videotapes conducted in Spanish). The first author transcribed the videotapes. The three authors took detailed notes on themes, memorable quotes, and patterns that appeared to emerge. The three authors then discussed differences and similarities in their perceptions. When the three did not agree on their interpretations, the section of videotape in question was viewed again to check for accuracy and help the authors clarify their views. Some of the themes emerged in direct response to specific questions (e.g., information about "prevention strategies" often emerged in response to the question, How could child sexual abuse be prevented in your community?). Other themes were generated by group members (e.g., although no question was asked about statutory rape, groups discussed this issue spontaneously). The first author grouped the quotes according to themes. The authors then organized the quotes and described the themes. This is an impressionistic process in which the authors are not attempting to assert the truth about African American and Latino views of sexual child abuse but rather are attempting to convey our perspective on the same, based on our careful study of the data and knowledge of the field (Patton, 1990).

Latino and African American social service providers and social scientists, and specialists in the sexual abuse of children, received drafts of the manuscript for their comments and critiques. Several changes suggested by these individuals were incorporated into the manuscript.

A Note on Language

Some of the quotes have been changed into standard English to ease understanding and because we consider this the most respectful way to document respondents' statements. The original statements were sometimes given in Ebonics ("Black English"), in nonnative English, or in Spanish (and then translated by the first author). The accuracy of the translations from Spanish were confirmed by two native speakers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Group Process and Conversational Styles

Intergroup differences emerged in the processes of the groups, in addition to the content of their discussions. For instance, prior to the groups, the African American facilitators expressed to the authors their worry that participants would remain tense throughout a discussion of sexual abuse. In fact, although there was a period of discomfort in the beginning of each session, by the end of the first 10 minutes or so, most of the participants looked more relaxed and seemed to speak more freely about sexual abuse. The group of Spanish-speaking Latina women was a notable exception: Most of these participants appeared guarded in their responses and physically tense during the entire discussion, clutching their purses in their laps throughout the hour. There are a number of possible explanations. First, as recent and less acculturated immigrant women, these participants may have been most constrained by cultural taboos against talking about sexual abuse (Fontes, 1993b). Second, this group was facilitated by a Latino man. These respondents might have opened up more readily with a woman facilitator. Third, it is also possible that—as less acculturated immigrants—these women were less familiar with the topic of sexual

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Universal Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding child sexual abuse</td>
<td>Familiar with term and described the power differential between victim and abuser. Seen recent reports in the media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevalence of child sexual abuse</td>
<td>All groups said it occurs in their community and is NOT more common than in other communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who abuses whom</td>
<td>All groups refer most frequently to men abusing young girls and boys. Rarely mention women as abusers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishment of sex offenders</td>
<td>Most advocate for severe punishment of sex offenders, with greater leniency for adolescents, especially those abused as children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of sex offenders</td>
<td>Two kinds of offenders: monsters who know what they are doing and someone with a mental health problem.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

abuse, which is not discussed frequently in their cultures of origin. If there were victims in the group, this discussion may have been the first time they had broached the subject in public. Fourth and finally, they may have been least comfortable with both the idea of research and with the microphone and video camera (Fontes, 1997a). As a result of this apparent inhibition, the Spanish-speaking women tended to answer in shorter utterances and were less forthcoming with opinions, stories, and information.

Other differences in conversational styles emerged among the groups. Throughout the women’s groups, participants rarely contradicted one another. For instance, in the group of older African American women, a conversational style quickly developed wherein women would build on each other’s answers, usually agreeing and chiming in with an additional piece, as if to stir an additional ingredient into a common pot of stew:

Facilitator (Fac): Please tell me explicitly what child sexual abuse means.
Participant (Par) 1: Him putting his penis in her vagina.
Par 2: Some do it in the rectum. A little kid’s rectum.
They do that kind of stuff.
Par 3: They do.
Par 4: They really sick people. They el sickos. Molest a child—that’s sick.

In contrast, in the men’s groups it was not at all unusual for one participant to disagree openly with another. The disagreements were uniformly respectful and never angry, as the following excerpt from the group of older African American men illustrates:

Par 1: Every time you turn around there’s a little kid sitting on his lap. He says, “I’ll take him to the store” when—damn! The corner store’s right there, you know. They be gone for hours.
Par 2: I disagree with that. Taking a little kid to a store isn’t no sexual abuse.
Par 1: No, the point is, it don’t take no 2 or 3 hours to go to no store with a little child. You know exactly what

I’m talking about, man. Clean your ears out, brother [offers handkerchief and everyone laughs].

After the group sessions, members of all the groups expressed a desire to continue learning more about sexual abuse and to participate in further discussions on the topic.

In the Latino men’s and women’s groups, participants occasionally spoke about sexual abuse within their own families and community, including stories where the victim or offender was in the participant’s immediate family. The other participants usually acknowledged that a personal story had been shared through verbal and nonverbal expressions of empathy for the storyteller. In addition, these personal disclosures caused a shift in the general tone of the group to greater warmth and solidarity. The more passionate the storytelling, the more acknowledgment was given by the group.

In contrast, within the various African American groups, almost no stories of abuse within the family were shared. The African American participants appeared most comfortable talking about child sexual abuse happening to strangers whom they heard about in the media. In the rare instances where African American men and women revealed their own abuse or abuse in their family, these disclosures were virtually ignored by the group. In passing, several African American men and women mentioned that they would not say anything to family members of a victim or offender because they would not want to upset the person by raising such a painful and sensitive topic. Perhaps this explains their propensity for ignoring personal disclosures.

In every group, the participants indicated that they were familiar with the term child sexual abuse and had heard about it through the mass media and—less frequently—through stories told in their families and among people they knew. Members of each group agreed that child sexual abuse was a problem in their

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TABLE 3: Focus Group Emphasis by Gender and Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Latino</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General knowledge of sexual abuse cases</td>
<td>Euphemistic and vague</td>
<td>Detailed and explicit</td>
<td>Describe cases in community</td>
<td>Discuss cases in family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptions of child sexual abuse</td>
<td>Identify victim’s behavioral symptoms</td>
<td>Identify offender’s behavioral warning signs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicators of child sexual abuse</td>
<td>Leads with compassion toward the child involved</td>
<td>Leads with violence toward the offender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to hearing a specific story</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons given for risk to children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex offenders discussed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversational style</td>
<td>Sought consensus, rarely expressed disagreement</td>
<td>Good-natured disagreements, frequent interruptions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

community but did not believe it was more widespread than among other ethnic groups. In describing the cases they knew about, participants tended to first describe stories from the media—often involving victims and offenders from other ethnic groups—before referring to cases in their communities and, finally, their families.

In the following sections, quotes from the participants will be identified by their group participation by ethnic culture (A for African American, L for Latino/a), gender (M for man, W for woman) and—in the case of Latinos—language dominance (S for Spanish, E for English).

Defining and Describing Child Sexual Abuse

When first asked to define child sexual abuse, the participants spoke in general, euphemistic terms, such as

Your mom’s boyfriend touches you in a way you’re not supposed to be touched. (AM)

Taking away a child’s innocence (AW & LM).

Tricking a child (LEW).

Touching their parts (LSM).

Frequently, participants would season their definitions with comments about their rejection of the abusive behaviors:

Touching a kid in an inappropriate manner. Groping him. You got a lot of predators out here. That’s a really ill situation. (AM)

Often, one person’s definition would build on another’s, such as the following exchange that occurred in the group of older African American women:

Par 1: Invading a child’s privacy parts. Invade a little kid’s innocence. Taking their life away from him without asking. The kid’s totally helpless.

Par 2: Without asking. The kid says, “No,” they do it anyway.

Par 3: Explain to me, how can you possibly get satisfaction from a 6 or 7 year-old child?

The male participants tended to be more detailed in their descriptions of child sexual abuse, whereas the female participants were more hesitant to name specific sexual acts. Through their willingness to be specific, the men’s groups tended to describe a wider range of acts. For instance, in the Latino English-speaking men’s group the examples included talking dirty, intercourse, touching intimate body parts, kissing, spying on someone in the shower, playing with a child’s genitals in the bathtub, drying a child who is old enough to dry him or herself, showing a child pornography, encouraging a child to masturbate in front of the offender, and “looking at someone funny.”

In contrast, the women’s reliance on euphemisms meant that their answers tended to remain incomplete and vague. For instance, in the older African American women’s group the acts described included having sex with a child, fondling a child, abusing a child’s innocence, touching a child’s body parts, sexualizing a child’s body parts, “having him touch you,” and showing the child adult films improperly. It is not clear whether women’s apparent hesitancy to speak explicitly about sexual acts in this context reflects a reluctance that manifests in other contexts. If so, this
might affect women’s ability to speak with professionals and their own children about sexual abuse. One Spanish-speaking Latina explained the hesitancy in her group by commenting that “good girls don’t talk dirty.” Similarly, when asked by the facilitator to be more explicit in their definition and description of sexual abuse, one older African American woman replied, “It’s sensitive.”

In three of the Latino groups, but in none of the African American groups, the participants described exposure to adult’s sexual activities as a form of abuse. Here is an exchange from the English-speaking Latina group:

Par 1: My mother died when I was 13 yrs. old and I stayed in the home with the family. . . . I remember when my brother was in the house and he got a wife. His bed was next to mine. I remember we had a little bit of space when they started to make love. I heard all that noise you know and I was 13 years old. I remember that.

Fac: Do you think that that is abuse, exposing someone that young to such a scene?
Par 2: Without a doubt.
Par 1: Because that stimulated me, you know.

Literature on recent Latino immigrants describes a tendency toward great physical and psychological intimacy in families, including the common practice of extended families living under one roof, sometimes sharing their rooms and even their beds, especially during periods of transition. Certainly, it would be incorrect to view all instances of such intimacy as abusive. However, these responses indicate that although the intentions of the sleeping arrangements may be innocent, they can still feel problematic to some children.

Dynamics of Sexual Abuse

In the definitions of sexual abuse, all the participants seemed well aware of the power differential inherent in a sexual encounter between an adult or adolescent and a younger child. Most groups referred to a child’s inability to give consent:

[Sexual abuse is] an act that isn’t in the form or the time or the way it should be, by an adult with a child when the child isn’t able to give consent. It is something forced, that the child is being obligated to do at the wrong age. (LEW)

It’s similar to taking advantage of a handicapped person because the child doesn’t know what’s going on. (AM).

It involves power: one person forcing himself on another who doesn’t have control because he’s small. (LEW)

In several groups, the participants emphasized that sexual activities between a child and an adult or older adolescent is abuse even if the child agrees to it because the child may be threatened or brainwashed or simply may not understand what is going on.

All the groups referred to the coerced nature of the child’s participation. They commonly referred to situations where neighbors, friends of the family, and extended family members coerced children into engaging in sexual acts and keeping silent about them through bribes and small gifts of candy, money, makeup, clothes, and toys. The following comments are typical:

They lure a kid. Bait him into doing whatever he wants to do to him. (AM)

There are people who call adult friends “uncle” and the child comes to love the adult like an uncle. He takes him out, gives him money, and the parents are used to it and don’t ask what happened. (LSM)

It can start with kind of a game. And the child doesn’t know what’s going on. That’s a kind of harm. The abuser says, “It’s a game that you can’t tell your mother about.” And when the kid realizes what’s going on, it’s too late. (LSM)

In the English-speaking Latino group, participants suggested that some offenders gain access to children by buying small presents for their victims’ mothers. In this same group, participants mentioned that some men would take advantage of their position as teachers, bosses, coaches, guards, and stepfathers to gain access to children.

Although some of the groups mentioned in passing the possibility that women could have a sexual encounter with young adolescent boys, this was usually described as a seduction rather than a molestation, and this arrangement was not explored in depth by any group. The possibility of a woman sexually abusing a girl was never mentioned by any group. Cases of men and boys abusing boys and girls were discussed more commonly and in greater depth.

In only one group, the Spanish-speaking group of Latino men, did the participants refer to specific instances of a woman abusing a boy. They referred to two situations, the first involving an older female with her younger male cousin and the second involving a female babysitter and her charge:

The babysitter (niñera) can do it with a boy, too. The parents can have a babysitter who abuses a child physically and sexually. Even rapes him. And he’s not going to tell because he doesn’t want a spanking. And if he dares to tell his parents and his parents confront
the babysitter who denies it—"But how can you say something like that!"—and they say that it’s a lie.

Statutory Rape

Although they were not queried directly about statutory rape, in a number of groups, the participants referred to cases of adult men being sexually active with underage teenage girls as a form of sexual abuse. Although they generally condemned such activity, they described it as having a different dynamic than the sexual abuse of younger children. They described adult men as winning sexual favors from adolescent girls through their “sweet talk” in addition to manipulating them through gifts, money, and rides in their car. However, they also appeared to attribute more volition and responsibility to the adolescents than they did to the young children. In the English-speaking Latina group, participants suggested that girls go along with men’s sexual overtures, accept bribes, and “get carried away” and that “guys take advantage of the situation.”

In the men’s groups, the participants tried to define an exact age at which sex with a willing adolescent can be considered consensual rather than exploitative. One man said, “When an adolescent girl is 19 or 20, and agrees to do it, it’s not considered an attack” (LSM).

Although clearly disapproving of men who are involved with adolescent girls, a younger African American man distinguished between sexual activities with an adolescent and with a child:

People that age [in high school] are more evolved, like someone our age. . . . Not saying it’s right. Some people prey on young people because they do not secure with themself. They don’t have the conversation, they don’t have the poise to deal with a woman their own age. (AM)

A number of groups identified girls’ precocious sexual development or physical maturity as a factor contributing to their exploitation. “Some of them grow up too fast,” one younger African American woman said. An English-speaking Latina said, “When men see girls who are developed, they assume they are old enough to be sexual, which may not be true.”

In the English-speaking group of Latino men, one participant broke the group consensus that sex with an underage girl was wrong, saying, “A lot of us don’t think it’s bad, to tell you the truth. We see a girl who’s 14 and she looks like she’s 22. We start grabbing her and kissing her and stuff.”

Attitudes toward statutory rape may be particularly important due to evidence that Latina and African American girls may be particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse in their teens, whereas White non-Latinas may be more vulnerable in their early childhood (Bolen, 1998).

Explanations for Sexual Abuse

Participants explained the occurrence of sexual abuse in a variety of ways. Generally, they referred to family risk factors; risky institutions; changes in cultures, families, and society; and offender propensities that expose children to risk. In some cases, respondents from the various groups emphasized different factors. The only child-based factor mentioned is that of girls’ precocious development, noted above.

Family Risk Factors

Much more than the African Americans, Latino participants emphasized family factors as increasing children’s risk of sexual abuse. In several groups, participants identified stepfathers, mother’s boyfriends, and other unrelated men who have access to young children as posing a greater risk than biological fathers:

It comes from couples that separate. You got to watch out for those stepfathers! They do bad things. (LSM)

You just don’t just have someone move in and leave your children with a stranger. (LEW)

It’s from too many men in the house. (LEW)

One Spanish-speaking Latino man suggested that sexual abuse emerges naturally when men and women are not getting their needs met in their marriage:

Everything starts in the home. The masculine side looks for support from the feminine side, from his wife. And if he doesn’t find it, he’s going to look for it in the first person who appears—his son or his daughter, his niece. On the feminine side, there are times that women say that men don’t give them enough attention, and they look for a game with their son. Sometimes it’s not out of malice, rather out of necessity. Latin people don’t have information about what sexual abuse is. (LSM)

A number of Latino and African American men identified poor family communication, authoritarian parenting, and corporal punishment as making children vulnerable to sexual abuse. They recognized that offenders could gain children’s compliance and silence by evoking fear:

A lot of times we as parents holler at our kids for the least little thing. “Shut up, sit down, you don’t know what you’re talking about.” (AM)
It's a problem in this country because as Latinos we're poorly educated. Many children are afraid of their parents because, "I'm going to get it!" Children are ashamed of what others might say. It's a family cycle. (LSM)

In the English-speaking Latina group, the participants described social and economic pressure to keep a man around the house as exposing children to risky situations. There was widespread agreement and laughter when one participant suggested mockingly that a mother would not want to believe a daughter’s report of sexual abuse by a father or stepfather because the mother is "in love." They also described how economic dependence on a husband can make it hard for a mother to leave her abusive partner.

In the African American groups, participants referred to drug use and abuse as contributing to both parents' abuse of their own children and parents' lack of vigilance over their children, which might make them more vulnerable to abuse by others.

Families and Society in Transition

Only Latinos, both men and women, described changes in the family, culture, and community as factors contributing to sexual child abuse. One English-speaking Latino man suggested that people who dress their daughters in overly sexy clothes are setting them up for sexual abuse. Several Latinos and Latinas referred with a certain nostalgia to a past time when they believed children were better cared for, people knew their boundaries, and sexual abuse was less likely to occur. A Spanish-speaking man spoke longingly of a time when girls could not go to dances without a chaperone:

Before, there wasn’t that kind of freedom. Nowadays girls go to dances alone, without anyone knowing what could happen or where they’re going.

Some Latinos and Latinas suggested that immigration caused a breakdown in cultural taboos, as in the following example given by a Puerto Rican man:

It used to be that you don’t touch no one in your family. That’s my cousin, that’s my second cousin—you don’t touch no one in your family. Now, "She looks good and I want a piece of the action." We’re not a knit family anymore. We’re just broken up since we came from the island.

In the same vein, another Spanish-speaking Latino participant spoke of the current lack of shame (vergüenza) as a problem. He described couples having sex in front of their children, or getting their children high so they would fall asleep and the parents could have wild parties.

Several Latino men described the loss of family connections as a contributing factor. One Latino man (Spanish) blamed sexual abuse on "the family and society":

Family values have gotten lost. Before, parents took the time in the family to speak with their children—not directly about sex, but they explained it in different ways. These days, it's very serious because people are focusing so much on material things that they are forgetting their children. They forget about their job as parents. They are turning over that part of their children’s education to the government.

Several immigrant male Latino participants expressed feelings of vulnerability in their new environment, asserting that sexual abuse was more of a problem in the United States than in their countries of origin:

Here you have to keep a closer eye on your children.
It’s a big problem here. (LSM)

Risky Institutions

Latinos and African Americans expressed their concern that children were especially vulnerable in institutional settings where strangers might have access to them. For instance, one Spanish-speaking Latino described with pride how he warns his girlfriend not to leave their child in a day care center with strangers. Similarly, an older African American woman mentioned that she cares for all five of her grandchildren and tells her children not to allow anyone else to take care of them. One African American man described the lack of security in recreation facilities as a risk factor for children:

You got people walking in and out all day. He [an abuser] just walks into a recreation facility and picks him right out of the clack, which one he wants. Ain’t no security or nothing. Day care, another situation like that, no security. (AM)

One English-speaking Latino participant described knowing of a boy in a correctional institution where he was detained as a teenager who was sexually assaulted by a guard. With his voice cracking with emotion, he described how vulnerable the young boys were to the whims of both the guards and the older detainees.

Offender Propensities

Some participants from both ethnic groups conveyed their sense that there were at least two categories of offenders: one consisting of men who are truly perverted and are aware of what they are doing and the other consisting of adolescent boys and men who have acquired a bad habit or who have a treatable
mental health problem but for whom sexual offending was not part of their “nature.” The older African American women made this distinction in response to the question of what should happen to a sexual offender:

Par 1: Give him a taste of his own medicine
Par 2: Dig it.
Par 3: Get him locked up.
Par 4: Or get him help. If it’s a mental problem, get him help. But if the person is fully aware of what they’re doing, then he should be locked up.
Fac: How can you tell the difference between someone who’s doing it because he’s mentally ill or another kind of abuser?
Par 4: Hard.
Par 5: If a person’s mentally ill, you see signs of it.
Par 4: A lot of people don’t appear to be mentally ill but there’s something wrong with them. They don’t show it, really. Sometimes. But for someone to do something like that, they’re crazy or sick or mentally ill.
Par 2: I would rather them be locked up.

The following statement by a younger African American man illustrates a similar struggle with questions of responsibility, mental health, and intention:

Where people doing those things, you got to check their background or their pedigree. They might have been sexually molested and they picked up a habit and they don’t know why they’re doing it. It’s a habit that’s not really in their nature. . . . A lot of times people do things out of reaction, not because they’re thinking that’s what they want to do.

In every group some participants said that—as a rule—sexual offenders deserve to be attacked, raped, and/or murdered. However, they generally advocated for mental health treatment coupled with criminal punishment for adolescents who had abused a child, and for adults whose offending stemmed from their own history of abuse. They seemed to believe there is a group of boys or men who have picked up the habit or vicio of sexual offending, but who do not intend to abuse children, and these abusers deserve greater empathy.

Participants in all groups asserted that experiences of sexual abuse could lead someone to abuse children sexually. They spoke frequently of abused children turning into abusers. For example, a Spanish-speaking Latino man said, “They grow up with this sickness. They are touched and then they start touching others. The same that was done to them—to get rid of it they do it with others.”

In the women’s groups, some participants described a general distrust of men. One English-speaking Latina said that sexual abuse occurs because “men are sick.” An African American woman described keeping all men away from her daughters, including their father. She said she never let anyone else change their diapers. One younger African American woman suggested that men come in two types: “the ones you got to watch and the ones you trust.” Perhaps these blanket categorizations of men contribute to the women participants’ tendencies to overlook the possibility of sexually abusive women.

**Indicators of Sexual Abuse**

When asked to describe signs that an adult might be sexually abusing a child, the women in both ethnic groups tended to limit themselves to describing changes in the child after abuse had occurred. The women appeared to be more tuned in to children’s symptomatic behavior and more confident that they would be able to detect a child’s signs of sexual abuse: “One way or another, the kid would let you know,” an African American woman said. In contrast, the men described characteristics of the possible abuser, or suspicious activity in the relationship between the possible abuser and a child.

**Offender Indicators**

The men in all the groups expressed particular suspicion of men—especially strangers and neighbors—who gave children gifts and spent time with them without any clear motive:

Someone who wants to take your kids or all the kids on the block to the movies or the zoo. They look alright, like everybody in there, but you don’t know what’s going on in his mind. (AM)

I got a kid who’s 6 and I’m going to be around a lot of other kids who’s 6. Everyone knows if I be going to the store and my son got two or three ponies with him, I’m gonna take them all. It’s because he’s playing with them, not because, you know. If a person don’t have a child, he don’t have no kind of reason to be around kids that age. (AM)

In the Latino and African American groups, the men discussed whether an abuser would reveal himself through his general behavior. One English-speaking Latino suggested that you could detect a sexual abuser because he’d always be drooling and want to hang around the boys not the girls. A younger African American man recommended the following procedure for determining if someone is an abuser:

See how he interacts with the children at a park or Chucky Cheese. You really observe a person just by sitting back and watching to see if he’s that pedophile thing.

In a similar vein, a younger African American man asserted his ability to detect sexual offenders from highly visible external signs:
When I was 14, there was this Indian guy living up the street. He was weird... I used to have a little sister. He'd go up to my sister, "Can I have a kiss?" I couldn't beat this guy cause I was a little skinny guy... I never really trusted that man... The way he walked, his body language. You can tell, like, homosexuals, their body language, they feminine. I can tell, you know, the way they walk, the way they talk. If I was to walk up the street with my son, I tell him, "Don't talk to any strangers." But if I saw that man, I'd tell him, "You stay away from that man. Don't take anything from that man. If he tries to talk to you, you tell me." (AM)

A participant in the same group disagreed:

You can't judge nobody from the way they look, the way they walk, that they may be a child molester. You got to build suspicion.

An English-speaking Latino described the factors that would raise his level of suspicion:

Why would the adult want to spend so much time around children? Why would the adult always be buying presents for the child and seeking time alone with the child? Why would the person be fondling the child's arms and knees and bottom so much? Why would the adult be kissing the child so much, or kissing the child on the lips?

An African American man remembered that when he was in jail, his religious teacher (Muslim) pointed out a fellow inmate and said he was a child molester. The participant said he looked normal and "didn't look like a child molester." The assumption seemed to be that some child molesters looked the part, whereas others looked like everyone else.

In the men's groups, participants expressed suspicion of gay men and of men who do not spend time with women. One Spanish-speaking Latino male suggested that you have to talk to boys and men who give each other kisses and find out what's going on. A younger African American male said he would be suspicious of a guy who was "never seen with a girl. Always around little kids. Never with the opposite sex." One African American man suggested that you could tell a child molester by the way he walks, "Just like a homosexual."

One Spanish-speaking Latino man suggested that he would suspect sexual abuse if a man was frequently seen holding a child in his lap, buying the child presents, and rubbing the child's knees and arms. A member of the same group urged caution in overgeneralizing affectionate behavior:

There's affection. You have to be careful, too, because it's not necessarily a factor to be affectionate with a child, to bring presents. These people—satyrs, do lewd things (cosas impúdicas). It's how they touch not necessarily the touching. It's without respect.

In a number of groups, the participants admitted to confusion about the true indicators of sexual abuse: "We adults don't know what to look for... Something looks innocent but you don't really know what's going on in someone's mind." (AM)

Child Indicators

In the Spanish-speaking Latina group, participants asserted that as a result of sexual abuse, children would become fearful, timid, spacey, ashamed, exaggeratedly shy, lack confidence, be humiliated, and "feel like nothing." They said that a victim of sexual abuse would be affected physically and mentally and might suffer from nightmares. One English-speaking Latina suggested that a girl who is being abused sexually might carry herself differently, shifting from leg to leg when she is standing. Another suggested that the child might act like she was keeping a secret and "act too quiet." The Latinas spoke most frequently of girl victims, exclusively described externalizing symptoms, and failed to mention the possibility of externalizing symptoms (e.g., aggression, delinquency, acting out sexually). These externalizing symptoms, would be seen as cultural anomalies in a young Latina and might be more likely to be viewed as signs that a girl is "bad" than as signs of victimization (Zimmerman, 1991).

A younger African American woman suggested that a child would show signs of being withdrawn and would not play with others, acting differently from other children of the same age. More than the Latinas, the African American women seemed aware of the possibility of externalizing symptoms in a child, such as "sleeping with every boy who came in her face," initiating sexual play at an early age, and "getting extremely violent and angry." A younger African American woman also mentioned that a person who has been abused sexually might become suicidal. Another suggested that bruises and marks, "in personal areas of their bodies," could indicate sexual abuse. Finally, an older African American woman participant suggested that when a child knows too much about sex—more than he could learn on the street—that would be "a clue that someone is trying something on them, experimenting on them."

The primary child indicator of sexual abuse, mentioned by all the groups, is that a child would show fear of the abuser and move away from him. The following comment is typical: "A child is afraid to go around with a person. Could be a cousin, uncle John, or whatever. That would make you wonder" (AW). Only one
participant mentioned the possibility that a child could be closely bonded to someone who had abused the child sexually. This African American woman described a child victim she had seen: “She didn’t want to be around nobody but him [the abuser], even though what he was doing was wrong.”

**Limitations**

The findings reported here are the results of only eight focus groups conducted in one Northeastern city. The participants were selected purposively to represent a certain diversity of Latinos and African Americans, in terms of gender, age, and acculturation as indicated by language preference (for Latinos). However, the sample was not random and should not be seen as representing all Latinos and African Americans. Interviews with people from these ethnic groups who live in different geographic areas or who have higher levels of income and academic education might yield different results. The lack of concrete demographic information about the group participants (e.g., ages, socioeconomic status, and country of origin) and the lack of knowledge of participants’ own experiences in regard to sexual abuse (e.g., victims, offenders) makes it impossible to render any absolute conclusions about these diverse groups of people. This research is entirely based on self-reports and concerns participants’ **views** of sexual abuse, not factors related to the **actual occurrence** of sexual abuse among Latinos and African Americans. Additionally, as in most qualitative studies, the researchers can report on the range of opinions presented but have no data on whether these opinions are typical or unusual for the groups of people who expressed them.

Another limitation concerns the length of the sessions. With each session lasting only 45 to 90 minutes, depending on the number of participants and their vulnerability, there was limited time to collect data after establishing mutual trust and comfort with this sensitive subject. We expect that holding repeated sessions with the same individuals would have yielded more stories and greater understanding of the participants’ perspectives.

**CONCLUSIONS**

**Summary of Findings**

The participants were indeed knowledgeable about child sexual abuse and knew of its existence in the larger world and within their communities. They considered it a significant problem deserving attention. They demonstrated awareness of the power differential between an adult or adolescent offender and a child and described a variety of ways an offender could gain a child’s compliance. They included references to sex between an adult man and a young adolescent girl (statutory rape) as a problem with a unique dynamic, but one that still falls into the category of sexual abuse. They expressed less concern about situations involving women abusers and male victims, and no group mentioned the possibility of women abusing girls. Men named many more explicit behaviors as constituting sexual abuse, whereas women tended to speak more through euphemisms.

When asked to describe the warning signs or indicators of sexual abuse, men participants tended to offer examples referring to an abuser’s behavior with a single child or with children in general. In answer to the same question, women participants tended to focus on how a single child might look after abuse has occurred. All groups referred to similar factors as placing children at risk, including unrelated men having access to children, risky institutions, and the offender’s tendencies. Latino respondents were more likely to refer to family risk factors, including changes in the culture and family resulting from immigration. Additionally, some women referred generally to all men as potentially dangerous. Latino participants appeared more comfortable than African American participants in telling personal stories of abuse. Group differences in conversational style emerged.

The findings of this study lend support to the ecosystemic notion that identity groups defined by culture and gender influence people’s views of sexual child abuse (Fontes, 1993a; Fontes, 1995). Rather than being a unitary phenomenon defined solely by the behaviors that take place, it would appear that experiences of child abuse in general, and child sexual abuse in particular, are colored by the perceptions and values of the victim, the offender, and the cultural communities in which they are nested. This would seem to have clear implications for sexual abuse prevention, intervention, and research.

**Implications**

The authors have made every attempt to provide a fair, balanced, and accurate report of this study, including a frank discussion of its limitations. We present this section on implications tentatively and humbly, in the hope that it will prove useful as part of the incremental process of obtaining information for future prevention, intervention, and research.

**Implications for Prevention**

This study implies universal and group-specific suggestions for prevention programs aimed at educat-
ing adults in Latino and African American communities. For instance, all groups recognized the existence of sexual abuse in general and in their communities. However, the participants uniformly emphasized the occurrence of sexual abuse by unrelated men and deemphasized the possibility of sexual abuse occurring in a family relationship other than through stepfathers. Also, the participants rarely spontaneously mentioned the possibility of adolescent abusers. These findings would suggest that education programs should not limit themselves to trying to convince the public that sexual abuse is a problem but may need to redirect some concern from the adult stranger drooling at the corner to adolescents and family members.

Similarly, all groups recognized that some sexual abuse victims become offenders. However, no group mentioned that not all (indeed not most!) sexual abuse victims become offenders. An education campaign that describes the many ways victims learn to cope (e.g., through seeking counseling, through becoming professional helpers and protecting other children) might help to ease some of the stigma associated with victimization, thereby encouraging victims, potential offenders, families, and communities to discuss sexual abuse more openly.

This research also points to the need for group-specific prevention programs. These programs should be tailored to the strengths and weaknesses of the groups they are meant to reach. For instance, a program aimed at helping adult women recognize and report sexual abuse might focus on the ways children may manifest their victimization because women appear to concentrate on child symptoms resulting from abuse. At the same time, Latina women may need to learn more about externalizing behaviors as a potential sign of sexual abuse. Programs directed at adult women should also alert them to signs of grooming behavior and other irregularities in the abuser/victim relationship.

Prevention programs for male caretakers should teach men how to focus in on child indicators of abuse. Additionally, to avoid endangering people who discover abuse and suspected abusers, prevention programs should probably alert men in general and Latinos in particular to the efficacy of using official channels to address issues of child abuse. One Latino mentioned that a friend had been sentenced to 50 years in jail for killing a man who he suspected had molested his daughter. Many of the other Latino men and some African American men indicated that they, too, would assault a known sexual abuser, and particularly, one who had abused a member of the respondent’s family. It would be sad, indeed, if a public information campaign alerting people to signs of sexual abuse inadvertently influenced loving caretakers to assault suspected child molesters.

Sex with minor girls (statutory rape) concerned the participants, but there was a great deal of confusion about the age of consent and the relationship between a girl’s physical maturity and her ability to consent to sexual activity. Disseminating clear information about legal and community standards might be helpful here.

Participants in several groups seemed to confound homosexuality and sexual abuse. A prevention campaign that raises awareness of sexual abuse in these communities might have the unwarranted side effect of stimulating homophobic fear, discrimination, and attacks. It would seem to be important, then, to break the perceived but erroneous link between homosexuality and child sexual abuse for members of these communities and alert them to the fact that the male partners of female relatives pose a greater risk to children than homosexuals (Jenny, Roesler, & Poyer, 1994).

The groups (and particularly the Latino men and women) frequently defined terms and expressed their opinions through stories about people. An effective prevention campaign might include radio, television, and newspaper advertisements that use personal vignettes to alert people to categories of abuse that they may not otherwise consider (e.g., abuse by relatives, adolescents, or women) and clear up misinformation (e.g., that offenders look different from other people).

Implications for Intervention and Training

This study suggests that effective interventions for sexual child abuse will be tailored to the beliefs and circumstances of the clients to whom they are directed. A one-size-fits-all approach to therapeutic, criminal justice, legal, medical, and child protection intervention in sexual abuse may fail if the services provided run counter to the cultural beliefs and practices of the clients. To design and implement interventions that take into account the culture and circumstances of the clients, professionals in a variety of contexts and at a variety of levels—from senior administrators to frontline outreach workers—will need to be trained in cultural competency (Abney, 1996). To gain greater trust within Latino and African American communities, professionals who intervene in cases of sexual abuse will need to demonstrate that they are effective and nondiscriminatory (Gould, 1991). Only then will word spread in African American and Latino...
communities that benefit can be derived from detecting and reporting sexual child abuse.

Implications for Research

This exploratory investigation suggests many avenues for further research. In finding that ethnic culture and gender seem to affect opinions about and knowledge of child sexual abuse, it suggests that further research with the groups discussed here, as well as other groups, may also yield fruitful results. It also implies that current child sexual abuse prevention programs (e.g., in the schools) may have differential impact on different cultural groups, an idea that is inadequately explored in extant literature (Finkelhor et al., 1993). If culture-specific child sexual abuse prevention programs are instituted, as suggested above, it would be wise to investigate their impact and effectiveness. This study adds to extant research on views of sexual abuse obtained through survey data (e.g., Thompson & Smith, 1993). Further research is indicated using these and other methods, such as individual interviews, structured observations, and role plays.

Finally, the differences in conversational style found among the groups seems to be an area worthy of further exploration. For instance, it may be that focus group instructions or facilitator behaviors need to vary for different groups. For example, perhaps women should be encouraged to disagree with each other, or facilitators working with women need to ask individual participants for their opinions to more adequately assess the range of opinions in the room. Or it may be that less acculturated immigrants need a more thorough introduction to the purposes and mechanics of focus groups to help them gain comfort in the setting so they can speak freely.

The information presented in this article indicates that Latinos and African Americans view sexual child abuse as a significant problem. It also documents variations in perceptions of sexual child abuse by gender and ethnicity for Latinos and African Americans. Additional studies with larger samples are recommended to obtain a wider range of responses.

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