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# The Impact Of Transgenerational Child Sexual Abuse And Victim-Perpetrator Relationship In A Case Of Child Sexual Abuse

Carolyn Ann Uhl

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THE IMPACT OF TRANSGENERATIONAL CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AND  
VICTIM-PERPETRATOR RELATIONSHIP IN A CASE OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

by

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Bachelor of Science, University of Wisconsin—Green Bay, 2008

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

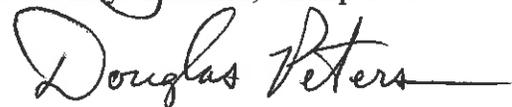
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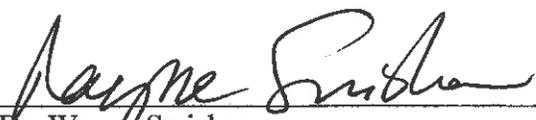
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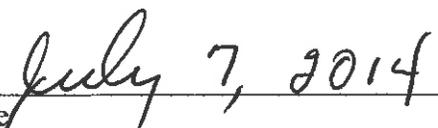
  
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## ABSTRACT

Research findings suggest that children born to mothers who were sexually abused as a child are at an increased risk of becoming a victim of childhood sexual abuse. Due to the correlational nature of this research, causal links establishing maternal blame are tenuous. Despite this, many of the theories attempting to explain this phenomenon place blame upon the mother. To this end, the current study examined the impact of mother's personal history of child sexual abuse had on the amount of blame she received upon her daughter's disclosure of abuse, while also varying the victim-perpetrator relationship. Participants read one of six scenarios that varied the mother's history of child sexual abuse (present vs. absent) and the victim-perpetrator relationship (father vs. family friend vs. stranger) and indicated the degree to which various actors are to blame for the occurrence of the abuse. While the mother's personal history had no impact on perceived culpability, participants generally agreed that a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse should make her vigilant. Overall, nonoffending parents were not viewed as criminally responsible for the sexual abuse of their child. Consistent with previous research, results indicate that child sexual abuse perpetrated by a father is perceived to be more severe. Implications are discussed.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is no doubt that childhood sexual abuse is a serious societal problem. A report conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect*, states that 135,300 children were sexually abused by a parent or care-taker alone (Sedlak et al., 2010). It is difficult to estimate the exact numbers of child sexual abuse (Bolen & Scannapieco, 1999; Douglas & Finkelhor, 2005; Sedlak et al., 2010). Methodological differences and varying definitions of what constitutes child sexual abuse create problems with calculating accurate prevalence rates (Bolen & Scannapieco, 1999; Douglas & Finkelhor, 2005). Depending on the definition of child sexual abuse, not all cases of abuse may be considered. For example, some definitions of child sexual abuse do not include children over the age of 12. Others may not include cases of child sexual assault when the offender is close in age with the victim. Likewise, depending on the report, different estimates may be used (Douglas & Finkelhor, 2005). For example, some estimates of abuse report unique instances, meaning that each child is only counted once, regardless of the number of instances of abuse that may have been reported. Others use a duplicate approach, meaning that each report is counted as an instance of abuse, regardless of whether or not a report had already been made for that child. Also, many instances of abuse go unreported, meaning actual rates of abuse are likely to be much higher than reported instances. Using a

national sample of U.S. women, Vogeltanz et al. (1999) reported differing prevalence rates of child sexual abuse, depending upon the definition used. When using a more inclusive definition of child sexual abuse, Vogeltanz and her colleagues (1999) found that prevalence rates ranged from 21-32%. However, when using a less encompassing definition of child sexual abuse, they found prevalence rates that ranged from 15-26%.

A recent study conducted by Gelles and Perlman (2012) estimates both the direct and indirect total cost of child abuse and neglect for the year 2012 at an astonishing \$80.26 billion. Direct costs include costs incurred by the child welfare system, law enforcement, and judicial system, as well as hospitalization, chronic health problems, and mental health costs (Gelles & Perlman, 2012). Indirect costs relate to those costs not directly resulting from abuse or neglect, such as special education costs, lost work productivity, juvenile delinquency, etc. (Gelles & Perlman, 2012). A widely cited meta-analysis conducted by Pereda, Guilera, Forns and Goemz-Bentio (2009) found that 7.9% of men and 19.7% of women had been victims of childhood sexual abuse prior to the age of eighteen. Child sexual abuse is associated with a number of negative consequences. These negative consequences include affecting physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development, which can lead to long-term problems such as low self-esteem, substance abuse, high risk health behaviors, and mental health issues (Beitchman, et al., 1992; Briere & Elliott, 1994; Noll, Trickett, Harris, & Putnam, 2009; Pereda et al., 2009; Zinzow, Seth, Jackson, Niehaus, & Fitzgerald, 2010).

There has been much empirical support for the role the nonoffending mother may play in her child's recovery from the abuse (Adams-Tucker, 1982; Elliott & Carnes, 2001; Everson, Hunter, Runyon, Edelson, & Coulter, 1989; Hiebert-Murphy, 1998;

Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993; Wyatt & Mickey, 1987). However, the nonoffending mother may be hindered in her ability to support her child after the disclosure of abuse if she is assigned blame as the nonoffending parent (Croghan & Miell, 1995; Kim, Noll, Putnam, & Trickett, 2007; Kim, Trickett, & Putnam, 2010; Leifer, Kilbane, Jacobsen, & Grossman, 2004; Leifer, Kilbane, & Kalick, 2004; Sen & Daniluk, 1995). After learning of her child's abuse, mothers often report a variety of symptoms including distress, anxiety, depression (Deblinger, Hathaway, Lippmann, & Steer, 1993; Kelley, 1990a; Macias, 2004). Although Deblinger et al. (1993) did not find any significant differences between mothers with a history of childhood sexual abuse and those without; others have found that a mother's history of child sexual abuse puts her at risk to report greater distress upon learning of her child's abuse (Hiebert-Murphy, 1998; Kelley, 1990a). It is important to look at a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse in relation to the risk it places to her child.

### **Failure to Protect**

Policy makers and child welfare investigators are faced with the difficult task of protecting children in these situations, and as such, they have developed statutes to not only bring criminal sanctions against the abuse, but to also charge nonoffending caregivers either civilly or criminally, with "failing to protect" their children (Terrance, Plumm, & Little, 2008; Trepiccione, 2001). The idea behind failure to protect laws is relatively simple; failure to protect is a crime of omission, where caregivers can be held criminally or civilly liable for a failure to act in a protective manner (Coohey, 2006; Fugate, 2001; Trepiccione, 2001).

In some cases, mothers of children who have been victims of childhood sexual abuse may face criminal charges for a “failure to protect” her child from sexual abuse.

Typically, to be charged with a failure to protect:

“(1) the defendant had a legal duty to protect the child, (2) the defendant had actual or constructive notice of the foreseeability of abuse, (3) the child was exposed to such abuse, and (4) the defendant failed to prevent such abuse” (Fugate, 2001, p. 279).

In cases such as these, the basic assumption appears to be that mothers either should have known or should have been able to recognize the signs of abuse prior to its occurrence. Fueling this belief, mothers are often depicted as knowing “everything” taking place within her family and this belief is still pervasive in today’s society.

Breckenridge and Baldry (1997) discussed how society views the “good mother” being responsible for the well-being of her entire family. She must be aware of her children’s whereabouts at all times, be able to provide for their every need, and act selflessly (Fugate, 2001; Hays, 1996). Mothers are expected to give everything they have for their children, including protecting them at all costs (Fugate, 2001). Supporters of this stereotype expect that the mother find a way to protect her children at all costs.

Furthermore, society tends to portray a “good mother” as knowing all that goes on within her family (Breckenridge & Baldry, 1997; Fugate, 2001; Hays, 1996). “Good mothers” should be completely devoted to their children, immediately know when things are wrong, all while maintaining to be completely unselfish (Fugate, 2001; Hays, 1996; Hays, 1998). These mothers should have a maternal instinct that allows them to be aware of their children’s whereabouts, activities, and safety at all times (Breckenridge & Baldry,

1997; Fugate, 2001). Fugate (2001) points out that these mothers must be able to decipher when an abuser may be lying to her and be able to protect her children at all costs. “Good mothers” must be able to meet all of their children’s physical, moral, social, emotional, and intellectual needs. This requires them to be highly devoted to their families and to be omnipresent in the daily happenings of her family.

In most cases of failure to protect, a nonoffending mother is the defendant. Nonoffending fathers are rarely charged with failure to protect, as the overwhelming majority of defendants charged and convicted of failure-to-protect is almost entirely female (Fugate, 2001). This is a glaring gender disparity; especially given that, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services—Children’s Bureau (2012), women have been identified to be the perpetrators of child abuse more often than men (53.6% vs. 45.1%). However, when evaluating 7,812 participants across four different studies, Bolen (2003) found that only 0.6% of parental abuse was perpetrated by a mother and only 0.01% of cases in the sample were sexually abused by a mother. In an attempt to try to interpret this inconsistency, Finkelhor and Hotaling (1984) found that mothers were being considered co-offenders when CPS investigators determined that the mother “should have known” or “allowed” the abuse to occur, even when she did not actually participate in the abuse.

Even adult survivors of child sexual abuse have been found to blame their mothers (Sen & Daniluk, 1995; Croghan & Miell, 1995). Sen and Daniluk (1995) interviewed five adult women who were victims of paternal child sexual abuse and found that all five women harbored feelings of anger and rage toward their mothers, as well as felt that there was a significant lack of trust in their relationships with their mothers. All

five of these women believed their mothers knew about the abuse, stating their mothers “turned a blind eye” to the abuse. One of the women even stated that she blamed her mother for all of the abuse she endured.

If nonoffending mothers are viewed as partially responsible for abuse that has occurred toward their child(ren), they may be less likely to report abuse that has occurred because of the fear their child(ren) will be taken from them. Mothers in situations such as this may even flee from their situations, risking kidnapping charges (Berkowitz, 1997). The present study not only will examine attributions of blame and criminal responsibility of nonoffending parents, but also considers how a mother’s personal history of sexual abuse influences the amount of blame she receives.

### **Prior Childhood Sexual Abuse in Mothers of Sexually Abused Children**

Research has shown that a mother’s history of childhood sexual abuse puts a child at an increased risk for being sexually abused (Leifer, Kilbane, & Jacobsen, et al., 2004; Macias, 2004; McCloskey & Bailey, 2000; Oates, Tebbutt, Swanston, Lynch, & O’Toole, 1998). By comparing maternal histories of mothers’ whose children were sexually abused to a control group of mothers’ whose children were not sexually abused, Oates et al. (1998) concluded that a mother’s history of childhood sexual abuse put her child at nearly three times the risk of being sexually abused (34% compared to 12% when a mother had a negative history of childhood sexual abuse). Likewise, McCloskey and Bailey (2000) interviewed mothers and daughters about the daughters’ sexual abuse experience to assess different risk factors for childhood sexual abuse and found that a mother’s history of childhood sexual abuse put her child at 3.6 times the risk of child sexual abuse, when compared to a mother without a history of childhood sexual abuse.

While conducting a case file review, Macias (2004) found even more alarming results. She found that 68% of mothers seeking help for the sexual abuse of their child also reported that they had a history of childhood abuse. Similarly, Deblinger et al. (1993) interviewed 99 nonoffending mothers of sexually abused children and found that 41 of them had a personal history of childhood sexual abuse.

A number of theories have sought to explain the co-occurrence of child sexual abuse among mothers and their children; most attempt to explain the relationship with some form of blaming the mother. Some theorists attempt to explain transgenerational child sexual abuse by positing that because they are survivors of child sexual abuse, they are drawn to offenders (Sgroi & Dana, 1982). Messman and Long (1996) proposed using the concept of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory to explain how a survivor of abuse may learn, via the perpetrator's modeling, inappropriate behaviors and maladaptive coping skills, leading them to be at an increased risk of revictimization. It does not seem much of a stretch for one to propose this increased risk could extend to a survivor's children. In their review of studies examining revictimization, Messman and Long (1996) obtained results indicating a large variation in revictimization, ranging between 16% and 72%. However, as they point out, one should interpret these results with caution as several of the studies reviewed utilized college students, who may still become revictimized at a later point in time.

Others point out that mothers with a history of childhood sexual abuse are often described as being from a low SES and/or having alcohol or drug problems, which are known risk factors for putting one's children at an increased risk of becoming victimized (Jorne, 1979; McCloskey & Bailey, 2000). It is these factors that led some researchers to

argue that this poor parenting can “set the stage” for child sexual abuse to occur (Zinzow et al., 2010). One aspect of poor parenting may be a lack of supervision. Parents who are unaware of their children’s activity may be viewed, by default, as allowing the abuse to have occurred. Noll et al. (2009) postulate that because mothers who were victimized as children are placed at an increased risk for psychiatric problems, including PTSD, in which one may suffer from dissociative experiences, as a consequence, these mothers cannot accurately assess situations that others may perceive as a threat. Thus, these mothers may be placing their children at an increased risk of becoming victimized.

It is interesting to note that most of the theories attempting to explain the transgenerational risk of childhood sexual abuse revolve around some form of blaming the mother. Whether laypeople will similarly blame the nonoffending mother on the basis of having herself experienced childhood sexual abuse remains equivocal. If in fact blame is placed on the nonoffending mother, particularly when she herself has experienced personal abuse, her social support networks may be undermined. This may result in the mother not receiving the help she needs to recover from her own trauma, which may cause her to be limited in the support she can offer to her own child, who is also coping with being a victim.

### **Factors Contributing to Victim-Blame and Parent Blame in the Child Abuse Situation**

A mother’s own history of abuse notwithstanding, nonoffending mothers are likely to be attributed at least partial blame for the sexual abuse of their child (Back & Lips, 1998; Davies, Patel, & Rogers, 2013; Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984). For instance, it has been proposed that the mother working outside the home creates an

environment for abuse to occur (Fugate, 2001; Sgrio & Dana, 1982). By working outside home and not being physically present, she is not physically or psychologically present. Courts have convicted mothers for a failure to protect for simply going to work because leaving their children with their spouse/boyfriend/companion sets up a situation allowing abuse to occur (Fugate, 2001). The same standard does not apply for men. For example, in *State v. Myers* (1996), Christopher Myers was not convicted for a failure to protect his girlfriend's children because the courts ruled that he merely played a financial role in the household.

Mothers are also blamed for not teaching their child how to prevent abuse (Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984). McMahon and Puett (1999) summarized recommendations of an expert panel called together by The Center for Disease Control and Prevention regarding childhood sexual abuse, in which they discuss prevention programs aimed at increasing awareness of childhood sexual abuse through primary prevention, which aim to teach children how to avoid becoming a victim by saying "no." They also discussed primary prevention programs targeting potential perpetrators, who have more social and cognitive skills than young children.

Another common reason that has been cited for attributing blame to nonoffending mothers for their children's abuse is that she was not satisfying their spouse (Cormier, Kennedy, & Sangowicz, 1962; Sarles, 1975; Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984). By not satisfying her husband, the mentality appears to be that had the mother done her "duty" and satisfied her husband, he would not have needed to sexually abuse her children. In fact, in a study assessing attribution of fault in a hypothetical child sexual abuse scenario Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984) found that 78.6% of participants that attributed

fault to the nonoffending mother when the father was the abuser cited “did not satisfy spouse” as their reason for attributing fault to her. When the mother was the abuser, the nonoffending father only received fault by 66.6% of the participants who attributed some fault to the nonoffending parent for the same reason. Using a vignette, depicting a scenario of child sexual abuse with varying conditions of the victim’s sex, victim’s age, and offender-victim relationship, Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984) found that observers placed more blame upon nonoffending mothers than nonoffending fathers. However, using a similar method, Back and Lips (1998) found that participants assigned blame to both parents at equal levels. Similar results of blaming nonoffending mothers were found in real life applications. Breckenridge and Baldry (1997) interviewed social workers who worked with children once abuse had been disclosed. They found that 76% of these intake social workers believed that these mothers at least “somewhat” knew about the abuse. Similarly, Kelley (1990b) found that CPS investigators attributed at least some responsibility to the nonoffending mother, even though she was not mentioned in the vignette. While Berkowitz (1997) does point out that these types of workers are on the “frontline” and must keep themselves open to all possibilities and therefore should not discount the fact that the mother may have known about the abuse, the duty of these workers is to document and assess the facts of the case. However, if intake workers are clearly assigning fault toward nonoffending parents, as Berkowitz (1997) points out, “Failure to prevent is, therefore, translated into failure to protect, which is only a step away from being a perpetrator” (p. 83), which may hinder a mother’s ability to help support her child.

Research has also shown that victims themselves receive some level of blame for their own abuse. Common rationalizations for blaming the victim in a child sexual abuse case typically include that the child should have resisted and that the child was old enough to know better (Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984). The underlying thought here is that parents are responsible for educating their children on ways to say “no” and how to avoid becoming a victim. Observers tend to attribute less fault toward younger victims, as they are viewed as innocent and unaware of the wrongness of the act, causing them to be perceived as more credible (e.g. Back & Lips, 1998; Davies & Rogers, 2009; Gabora, Spanos, & Joab, 1993; Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984). Also, when observers employ a “Just World Belief” worldview, they are more likely to blame the victim because they view the world as a “fair” place where no one is completely innocent (Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2001).

Taken together, it is easy to understand why some parents, as well as victims, would be hesitant to disclose childhood sexual abuse. In addition to the fear and distress already caused by the situation itself, parents, especially nonoffending mothers, may also fear being held legally responsible for the abuse perpetrated against their children. This is especially true when the perpetrator is someone known to family, particularly within the family.

### **Victim-Perpetrator Relationship and Victim-Blame and Credibility**

The relationship the victim has with the perpetrator also impacts blame attribution, as well as the victim’s credibility. When the offender is a stranger to the victim, the victim is viewed more positively and more credible than when an offender is someone the victim knows (Davies & Rogers, 2009). This is the case, even though in

most instances of reported sexual abuse the perpetrator is someone already known by the victim (Douglas & Finkelhor, 2005; Macias, 2004; Deblinger et al, 1993). In fact, in a sample of 99 child sexual abuse cases, Deblinger and her colleagues (1993) found that 31.3% of the alleged perpetrators were fathers or stepfathers, 53% of those suspected were perceived to be trusted adults, and 15.2% of the cases were reportedly older siblings and/or older peers. In their review, Douglas and Finkelhor (2005) found that strangers constitute the smallest proportion of perpetrators and cite figures ranging from 7-25%. In a community sample of parents seeking assistance once their child had disclosed abuse, Macias (2004) found that only 5% were sexually abused by a stranger. Both reports also found that family members and acquaintances constitute for most of the child sexual abuse perpetrators. Despite this, individuals still view victims abused by a known perpetrator and less positive and less credible.

Davies and Rogers (2009) utilized a vignette varying the victim-perpetrator relationship between a father, a friend, or a stranger, found that observers tend to view victims of strangers as more credible and less at fault than when the perpetrator was someone previously known to them. Likewise, Fuselier, Durham, and Wurtele (2002) conducted a study comparing undergraduate student and professional opinions of “typical” child sexual abuse perpetrators. They reported that students were more likely to believe that perpetrators were strangers and authority figures. This lends further support to Davies and Rogers’ (2009) findings. However, the victim-perpetrator relationship may not always be a significant predictor of the amount of blame a victim receives. For example, although Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984) utilized a vignette varying the victim-perpetrator relationship between a parent, an acquaintance, or a stranger, they

found no significant differences in the amount of blame a victim received, regardless of the victim-offender relationship.

### **Observer Characteristics and Blame Attributions**

Another factor that can impact blame attribution are the characteristics of the observer, as it is known that people default to using their own biases and past experiences in their decision making. Past studies have demonstrated that observer characteristics also influence blame attribution in child sexual abuse scenarios. Back and Lips (1998), as well as Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984) have found that male participants assigned more responsibility to victims, as well viewing parents and victims as causing the abuse at higher rates than female participants. Similar results were obtained by Graham, Rogers, and Davies (2007) and Davies and Rogers (2009) in their research assessing blame in cases of child sexual abuse. One theory to attempt to explain this discrepancy is that female observers may identify more with the victim (Back & Lips, 1998; Harding, Zinzow, Burns, & Jackson, 2010).

Several researchers have found that participants who disclosed a history of sexual abuse had lower rates of blaming the victim (Harding et al., 2010; Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984) and higher rates of blaming offenders (Kelley, 1990b; Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984). Croghan and Miell (1995) obtained similar results, finding that adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse attributed more blame toward mothers. Theoretically, this is likely because these participants viewed themselves as more similar to the victim in the scenario (Back & Lips, 1998; Harding et al., 2010). However, other researchers have found no significant differences between participants with a history of childhood sexual abuse and those without a history of childhood sexual abuse (Graham et

al., 2007; Rogers & Davies, 2007; Rogers, Josey, & Davies, 2007). Graham and colleagues (2007) found that participants who had children of their own held the perpetrator more responsible for abuse than participants without children.

### **Current Study**

One of the goals of this study was to determine the impact of a mother's personal history of childhood sexual abuse on attributions of maternal blame, following her young daughter's sexual abuse. Because research has been able to consistently show that a mother's personal history of childhood sexual abuse puts her child at a higher risk of being abused, it was hypothesized that a mother would be held more responsible if she has a history of childhood sexual abuse.

Research is conflicting in terms of the impact of the victim-perpetrator relationship on attribution of blame and responsibility of nonoffending parents. However, despite a lack of significance between the victim-perpetrator relationship and blame attribution found by Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984), it was predicted that culpability of the mother would be attributed in descending order to the father, the family friend, and the stranger. This was predicted to be especially true when she had a personal history of childhood sexual abuse because participants may believe that the mother "should have seen the signs" of potential abuse, especially since she herself was a victim. This is also supported by previous research theories stating that because a mother was abused as a child, she finds herself "attracted" to offenders (Sgroi & Dana, 1982).

Consistent with previous research, it was believed that male observers would show higher rates of blaming the victim and the parents of the victim. It was also

predicted that the mother, especially when she has a personal history of childhood sexual abuse, would be viewed more at fault and more responsible than the nonoffending father.

## CHAPTER II

### METHOD

#### Participants<sup>1</sup>

A total of 221 participants (95 men and 126 women) were included in analyses. Participants ranged in age from 18-65 years ( $M = 24.70$ ,  $SD = 9.53$ ). Ethnicity was primarily White/Caucasian ( $n = 179$ ), with other categories including Black/African American ( $n = 9$ ), Asian or Pacific Islander ( $n = 18$ ), American Indian/Alaska Native ( $n = 6$ ), Caribbean Islander ( $n = 1$ ), Mexican/Mexican American ( $n = 3$ ), Multi-ethnic ( $n = 3$ ), and “other” ( $n = 1$ ), ( $n = 1$  “prefer not to respond”). The majority of participants were students ( $n = 163$ ) and reported that they had no children ( $n = 167$ ). A small number of participants reported a personal history of child sexual abuse ( $n = 19$ ). The majority of participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses, who participated in exchange for course credit, or via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, who were financially compensated (\$.25).

#### Materials

**Vignette.** This study employed a 2 (maternal history of childhood abuse: present vs. absent) X 3 (victim-perpetrator relationship: father vs. family friend vs. stranger) between-subjects factorial design. An adaptation of a vignette depicting a case of child sexual abuse developed by Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984) was used

<sup>1</sup> Two hundred thirty-three participants participated, however, 12 failed the manipulation check and were not included in analyses.

The vignette illustrated a case of child sexual abuse by an adult male, with an 8-year-old female child victim. A female victim was chosen, as females have higher reported rates of child sexual abuse than male children. The NIS-4 report alone showed an increased risk of five times for girls than for boys (Sedlak et al., 2010). In a retrospective study, Deblinger et al. (1993) interviewed non-offending mothers of sexually abused children and found that 79.8% of the victims were female children. An 8-year-old child was chosen so that it would be clear to participants that this was in fact child sexual abuse, as some definitions only include children under age 12 or 14 (Douglas & Finkelhor, 2005). Also, in a sample that included 138 victims of child sexual abuse, Cantón-Cortés and Cantón (2010) found that the mean age of onset for abuse was 8.15 years. The perpetrator was kept a male in all scenarios to limit any confounding bias due to a perceived homosexual relationship. Also, the NIS-4 found that males account for 87% of sexual abuse perpetrators (Sedlak et al., 2010).

The vignette (see Appendix B) was identical across conditions, except for variations for the relationship of the perpetrator and whether or not the mother of the child had a history of childhood sexual abuse. The vignette described a mother and father cleaning up after lunch, while their 8-year-old daughter is playing in the den, where the little girl is sexually assaulted by her father, a close family friend, or a stranger. The next day, the young girl reports the abuse to her teacher, who makes a report to CPS. Within victim-perpetrator relationship conditions, the presence or absence of the mother's own history of child sexual abuse was also varied, for a total of six vignettes.

## Questionnaires and Measures

**Demographics.** Participants completed a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B) that asked for participants' age, race, ethnicity, gender, occupational status, level of education, occupation/major in school, marital status, and political affiliation. Participants were also asked if they have a history of child sexual assault, and if so, what their relationship was to the perpetrator. Participants were asked whether or not they have children.

**Dependent Measures.** All dependent measures (see Appendix C) used a 7-point Likert scale, with endpoints worded by the item (e.g., not at all serious – serious) or degree of agreement (e.g.; completely disagree – completely agree). Questions were derived from similar studies (e.g. Back & Lips, 1998; Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984) and for the purposes of this study.

**Manipulation check.** Participants were asked to indicate the victim-perpetrator relationship. A second item asked them to indicate whether or not the mother had a personal history of child sexual abuse. Only participants that successfully passed manipulation checks were included in the analyses.

**Severity.** Participants completed 2 items assessing the level of severity of the situation that occurred in the vignette. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they perceived the situation as (a) serious and (b) severe. These items were collapsed to create a mean that assessed the perceived severity of the abuse,  $r = 0.73$ . Higher scores reflect that the situation was perceived as more severe.

**Probability.** Three items assessed the probability of the scenario. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they perceived the scenario as (a)

probable, (b) believable, and (c) common. These items were collapsed to create a mean that assessed the believability of the situation ( $\alpha = 0.61$ ). Higher scores indicate that participants were more likely to believe the situation and its probability of occurring.

*Nonoffending parent blame.* In conditions where the father was the perpetrator, only maternal blame was measured. In order to more directly compare nonoffending parent blame assigned to the nonoffending mother and father, it was necessary to do so when the father himself was not the offender. As such, father blame is considered only when he was not the perpetrator. Furthermore, separate analyses were conducted for maternal blame, one including two levels of victim-perpetrator relationship (family friend vs. stranger), and one including all three levels of victim-perpetrator relationship (father vs. family friend vs. stranger).

*Paternal blame: Nonoffending father.* Participants responded to 2 items that assessed their agreement that the nonoffending father was (a) responsible for, and, (b) to blame for the abuse. Items were collapsed and a composite score assessing father blame was derived,  $r = 0.83$ . Higher scores indicate higher levels of blame.

*Maternal blame: Father as an offender excluded.* A composite score based on the ratings of responsibility and blame was also derived for the nonoffending mother. A composite score for maternal blame at two levels of victim-perpetrator relationship was derived,  $r = 0.79$ . Higher scores indicate higher levels of blame.

*Maternal blame: Father as an offender included.* A composite score based on the ratings of responsibility and blame was also derived for the nonoffending mother at all three levels of the victim-perpetrator relationship (father vs. family friend vs. stranger). A composite score for maternal blame for analyses with all three levels of victim-

perpetrator relationship was derived,  $r = 0.78$ . Higher scores indicate higher levels of blame.

*Nonoffending parent criminal responsibility.* As was the case for nonoffending parent blame, in conditions where the father was the perpetrator, only the nonoffending mother's criminal responsibility was measured. In order to more directly compare nonoffending parent criminal responsibility assigned to the nonoffending mother and father, it was necessary to do so when the father himself was not the offender. As such, the nonoffending father criminal responsibility is considered only when he was not the perpetrator. Furthermore, separate analyses were conducted for the nonoffending mother's criminal responsibility, one including two levels of victim-perpetrator relationship (family friend vs. stranger), and one including all three levels of victim-perpetrator relationship (father vs. family friend vs. stranger). Items centered on the idea of failure to protect statutes.

*Criminal responsibility of nonoffending father.* In conditions where the father was not the perpetrator, participants responded to 4 items about the nonoffending father's criminal responsibility. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements: (a) The father should face criminal charges for a failure to protect his child; (b) To what extent should the father have been aware as to the potential for harm to his child?; (c) The father failed to protect his child; (d) To what extent do you believe that the father should be more vigilant?

Items assessing the criminal responsibility of the nonoffending father at 2 levels of victim-perpetrator relationship, excluding those in conditions where the father was the

abuser, were averaged and a composite measure derived ( $\alpha = .84$ ). Higher scores reflect increased perceptions of the nonoffending father's criminal responsibility.

*Criminal responsibility of nonoffending mother: Father as an offender excluded.*

Participants were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements: (a) The mother should face criminal charges for a failure to protect her child; (b) To what extent should the mother have been aware as to the potential for harm to her child?; (c) The mother failed to protect her child; (d) To what extent do you believe that the mother should be more vigilant? When assessing the criminal responsibility of the nonoffending mother at two levels of victim-perpetrator relationship, excluding conditions where the father was the abuser, the four items were averaged and a composite score derived ( $\alpha = .84$ ). Higher scores indicate a greater criminal responsibility.

*Criminal responsibility of nonoffending mother: Father as an offender included.*

The same four items were averaged for the nonoffending mother at three levels of victim-perpetrator relationship, including conditions where the father was the abuser and a composite score derived ( $\alpha = .84$ ). Cronbach's alpha was identical when items were collapsed including and excluding conditions where the father was the perpetrator. Higher scores indicate a greater criminal responsibility.

***Child blame.*** Participants completed 2 items that assessed their perceptions of the level of culpability assigned to the child. Specifically, participants were asked to what extent they agreed the child was (a) responsible for, and, (b) to blame for the abuse. These items were averaged and a composite measure derived ( $r = .79$ ). Higher scores indicate greater perceived levels of blame toward the child.

***Perpetrator blame.*** Participants completed 2 items that assessed their perceptions of the level of culpability assigned to the perpetrator. Specifically, participants were asked to what extent they agreed that the perpetrator was (a) responsible for, and, (b) to blame for the abuse. These items were averaged and a composite measure derived ( $r = .62$ ). Higher scores reflect higher attributions of blame.

***Maternal vigilance.*** Participants were asked a single item that assessed to what extent they agreed with the following statement: To what extent do you believe that a mother's own history of childhood sexual abuse should make her more vigilant? Higher scores indicate greater agreement with the statement.

### **Procedure**

The study utilized an online data collection software company called Qualtrics Research Suite. Participants completed an electronic consent form, which provided them with information about the purpose of the study and contact information (see Appendix A). After granting informed consent, participants completed a demographic questionnaire. Participants were then be randomly assigned to read one of six possible combinations of vignettes, varying the victim-perpetrator relationship and the mother's personal history of abuse. Following the scenario, participants completed a questionnaire designed to assess their perceptions of the scenario they just finished reading. Upon completion of the survey, participants were debriefed and offered information regarding resources they could utilize if they have suffered from child sexual abuse.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

#### Severity

Perceptions of abuse severity were assessed using a 2 (mother's personal child sexual abuse history: present vs. absent) x 3 (victim-perpetrator relationship: father vs. family friend vs. stranger) x 2 (participant gender) analysis of variance (ANOVA). The level of perceived severity of the abuse failed to differ with regard to the presence or absence of a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse,  $F < 1$ . There was a main effect for the victim-perpetrator relationship,  $F(2, 209) = 6.44, p = .002, \eta^2 = .06$ . Post-hoc tests using Tukey's test indicated that the sexual abuse was perceived as more severe when the perpetrator was the child's father ( $M = 6.71, SD = 0.56$ ) as opposed to when the abuser was a family friend ( $M = 6.31, SD = 0.89$ ) or a stranger ( $M = 6.14, SD = 1.18$ ), which did not differ from one another. There was also a main effect for participant gender  $F(1, 208) = 3.93, p = .049, \eta^2 = .02$ , indicating that women ( $M = 6.52, SD = 0.73$ ) viewed the abuse as more severe than men ( $M = 6.21, SD = 1.15$ ).

A one-sample t-test evaluating severity of the situation against the midpoint yielded significance,  $t(220) = 37.48, p < .001$ , such that participants generally viewed the situation as severe ( $M = 6.39, SD = 0.95$ ).

## **Probability**

The probability of the abuse that occurred in the vignette was assessed using a 2 (mother's personal child sexual abuse history: present vs. absent) x 3 (victim-perpetrator relationship: father vs. family friend vs. stranger) x 2 (gender of participant) ANOVA. Perceptions of the probability of the abuse did not differ with regard to the presence or absence of a mother's personal history of childhood sexual abuse,  $F(1, 209) = 2.20, ns$ . There was a main effect for the victim-perpetrator relationship,  $F(2, 209) = 3.48, p = .033, \eta^2 = .03$ . Post-hoc tests using Tukey's test indicated that the sexual abuse was perceived more probable when the perpetrator was a family friend ( $M = 6.07, SD = 1.10$ ) than when the abuser was a stranger ( $M = 5.56, SD = 1.30$ ). No differences were found when comparing the father ( $M = 5.89, SD = 1.08$ ) to either the stranger or the family friend. There was also a main effect for participant gender  $F(1, 209) = 5.04, p = .026, \eta^2 = .02$ , such that women ( $M = 5.97, SD = 1.08$ ) viewed the scenario as more probable than men ( $M = 5.63, SD = 1.29$ ).

Additionally, a one-sample t-test evaluating the probability of the situation against the midpoint yielded significance,  $t(220) = 22.87, p < .001$ , meaning that participants generally believed the situation was a probable occurrence ( $M = 5.82, SD = 1.18$ ).

## **Nonoffending Parent Blame**

In conditions where the father was the perpetrator, only maternal blame was measured. As such, paternal blame is only assessed when the father was not included as the perpetrator. Furthermore, separate analyses were conducted for maternal blame, one including two levels of victim-perpetrator relationship (family friend vs. stranger), and

one including all three levels of victim-perpetrator relationship (father vs. family friend vs. stranger).

**Paternal blame: Nonoffending father.** Paternal blame was assessed using a 2 (mother's personal child sexual abuse history: present vs. absent) x 2 (victim-perpetrator relationship: family friend vs. stranger) x 2 (gender of participant) ANOVA. Paternal blame did not differ with regard to the presence or absence of a mother's past history of child sexual abuse,  $F < 1$ , or with the victim-perpetrator relationship,  $F < 1$ . However, there was a main effect for gender,  $F(1, 136) = 6.14, p = .014, \eta^2 = .04$ , with men attributing significantly more blame toward the nonoffending father ( $M = 2.89, SD = 1.70$ ) than women ( $M = 2.16, SD = 1.56$ ). (See Table 1.)

A one-sample t-test evaluating the level of paternal blame against the midpoint yielded significance,  $t(143) = -10.90, p < .001$ , such that participants generally viewed the nonoffending father as not at fault ( $M = 2.49, SD = 1.66$ ).

**Maternal blame: Father as an offender excluded.** When the father was not a perpetrator, maternal blame was also assessed using a 2 (mother's personal child sexual abuse history: present vs. absent) x 2 (victim-perpetrator relationship: family friend vs. stranger) x 2 (gender of participant) analysis of variance. Maternal blame did not differ with regard to the presence or absence of a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse,  $F < 1$ , or with the victim-perpetrator relationship,  $F < 1$ . However, there was a main effect for gender,  $F(1, 136) = 9.17, p = .003, \eta^2 = .06$ , with men attributing significantly more blame toward the nonoffending mother ( $M = 2.95, SD = 1.71$ ) than women ( $M = 2.10, SD = 1.46$ ). (See Table 1.)

A one-sample t-test evaluating the level of maternal blame against the midpoint yielded significance,  $t(143) = -11.09, p < .001$ , such that participants generally viewed the nonoffending mother as not at fault ( $M = 2.49, SD = 1.63$ ).

**Maternal blame: Father as an offender included.** Maternal blame was assessed across all levels using a 2 (mother's personal child sexual abuse history: present vs. absent) x 3 (victim-perpetrator relationship: father vs. family friend vs. stranger) x 2 (gender of participant) ANOVA. Maternal blame did not differ with regard to the presence or absence of a mother's personal history of childhood sexual abuse,  $F < 1$ . There was a main effect for the victim-perpetrator relationship,  $F(2, 208) = 4.90, p = .008, \eta^2 = .05$ . There was also a main effect for participant gender  $F(1, 208) = 4.71, p = .031, \eta^2 = .02$ . However, these main effects were qualified by their interaction,  $F(2, 208) = 3.40, p = .035, \eta^2 = .03$ .

Simple effect analysis of victim-perpetrator relationship at each level of gender yielded significance only for men,  $F(2, 208) = 6.53, p = .002$ . Post-hoc tests conducted using Tukey's test were conducted to evaluate differences among the means for men. Results show that men attributed significantly less blame to the mother when the abuser was the child's father ( $M = 1.71, SD = 0.94$ ) than when the abuser was a family friend ( $M = 2.98, SD = 1.65$ ). When the perpetrator was a stranger, ( $M = 2.93, SD = 1.78$ ) blame attributions for the nonoffending mother did not differ from when the abuser was a family friend or the father. (See Table 1.)

A one-sample t-test evaluating the level of maternal blame against the midpoint yielded significance,  $t(220) = -16.45, p < .001$ , such that participants generally viewed the nonoffending mother as not at fault ( $M = 2.28, SD = 1.55$ ).

## **Nonoffending Parent Criminal Responsibility**

In conditions where the father was the perpetrator, only the criminal responsibility of the nonoffending mother was measured. As such, paternal criminal responsibility is only assessed when the father was not included as the perpetrator. Furthermore, separate analyses were conducted for nonparticipating maternal criminal responsibility, one including two levels of victim-perpetrator relationship (family friend vs. stranger), and one including all three levels of victim-perpetrator relationship (father vs. family friend vs. stranger).

**Criminal responsibility of the nonoffending father.** The criminal responsibility of the nonoffending father was assessed across all levels using a 2 (mother's personal child sexual abuse history: present vs. absent) x 2 (victim-perpetrator relationship: family friend vs. stranger) x 2 (gender of participant) ANOVA. The criminal responsibility of the nonoffending father did not differ with regard to the presence or absence of a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse,  $F < 1$ , the victim-perpetrator relationship,  $F < 1$ , or participant gender,  $F(1, 137) = 2.27, ns$ . (See Table 1.)

A one-sample t-test evaluating the nonoffending father's criminal responsibility against the midpoint of the scale failed to reach significance,  $t(144) = -1.68, ns$ , meaning participants were neutral about holding the nonoffending father criminally responsible for the events of the vignette ( $M = 3.78, SD = 1.55$ ).

**Criminal responsibility of the nonoffending mother: Father as an offender excluded.** The criminal responsibility of the nonoffending mother was assessed across all levels using a 2 (mother's personal child sexual abuse history: present vs. absent) x 2 (victim-perpetrator relationship: family friend vs. stranger) x 2 (gender of participant)

ANOVA. The criminal responsibility of the nonoffending mother did not differ with regard to the presence or absence of a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse,  $F < 1$ , the victim-perpetrator relationship,  $F < 1$ , or participant gender,  $F(1, 137) = 2.18, ns$ . (See Table 1.)

A one-sample t-test evaluating the nonoffending mother's criminal responsibility against the midpoint of the scale yielded significance,  $t(144) = -2.21, p = .028$ , such that participants generally viewed the nonoffending mother as not criminally responsible for the events of the vignette ( $M = 3.73, SD = 1.49$ ).

**Criminal responsibility of the nonoffending mother: Father as an offender included.** The criminal responsibility of the nonoffending mother was assessed across all levels using a 2 (mother's personal child sexual abuse history: present vs. absent) x 3 (victim-perpetrator relationship: father vs. family friend vs. stranger) x 2 (gender of participant) ANOVA. The criminal responsibility of the nonoffending mother did not differ with regard to the presence or absence of a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse,  $F(1, 209) = 2.48, ns$ . There was a main effect for the victim-perpetrator relationship,  $F(2, 209) = 3.07, p = .048, \eta^2 = .03$ . However, post-hoc tests using Tukey's test indicated no significant differences. Men ( $M = 3.70, SD = 1.44$ ) and women ( $M = 3.48, SD = 1.64$ ) did not differ with regard to the level of criminal responsibility assigned to the nonoffending mother,  $F(1, 209) = 1.04, ns$ . (See Table 1.)

A one-sample t-test evaluating the nonoffending mother's criminal responsibility against the midpoint of the scale yielded significance,  $t(220) = -4.02, p < .001$ , such that participants generally viewed the nonoffending mother as not criminally responsible for the events of the vignette ( $M = 3.58, SD = 1.56$ ).

### **Child Blame**

Child blame was assessed using a 2 (mother's personal child sexual abuse history: present vs. absent) x 3 (perpetrator: father vs. family friend vs. stranger) x 2 (gender of participant) ANOVA. Child blame did not differ with regard to the presence or absence of a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse,  $F < 1$ . ANOVA results were significant for the victim-perpetrator relationship,  $F(2, 209) = 3.22, p = .042, \eta^2 = .03$ . Post-hoc tests using Tukey's test indicated that participants significantly blamed the child more when the abuser was a stranger ( $M = 1.59, SD = 1.38$ ) than when the abuser was the father ( $M = 1.13, SD = 0.54$ ). Blame attributions for the child when the abuser was a family friend ( $M = 1.44, SD = 1.04$ ) did not differ when the abuser was a stranger or the father. There was also a main effect for gender  $F(1, 209) = 6.09, p = .014, \eta^2 = .03$ . Men ( $M = 1.62, SD = 1.24$ ) blamed the child significantly more than women ( $M = 1.21, SD = 0.88$ ). The interaction of gender and victim-perpetrator relationship was not significant,  $F(2, 209) = 1.55, ns$ . (See Table 1.)

A one-sample t-test evaluating child blame against the midpoint of the scale yielded significance,  $t(220) = -36.39, p < .001$ , such that participants generally viewed the child as not responsible for the events of the vignette ( $M = 1.39, SD = 1.07$ ).

### **Perpetrator Blame**

Perpetrator blame was assessed levels using a 2 (mother's personal child sexual abuse history: present vs. absent) x 3 (victim-perpetrator relationship: father vs. family friend vs. stranger) x 2 (gender of participant) ANOVA. Perpetrator blame did not differ with regard to the presence or absence of a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse,  $F < 1$ . There was a main effect for the victim-perpetrator relationship,  $F(2, 209) =$

5.47,  $p = .005$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ . Post-hoc tests using Tukey's test indicated that participants blamed the father perpetrator ( $M = 6.92$ ,  $SD = 0.33$ ) significantly more than the family friend perpetrator ( $M = 6.47$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) and the stranger perpetrator ( $M = 6.56$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ), which did not differ from one another. There was also a main effect for participant gender  $F(1, 209) = 12.44$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ , indicating that women ( $M = 6.85$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ) blamed the perpetrator significantly more than men ( $M = 6.40$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ).

There was a significant interaction between participant gender and the mother's personal history,  $F(1, 209) = 3.89$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .28$ . Simple effect analysis of gender at each level of mother's history yielded significance when the mother had a history of childhood sexual abuse,  $F(1, 209) = 15.11$ ,  $p < .001$ . Results indicate that women attributed significantly more blame to the perpetrator when the mother had a personal history of child sexual abuse ( $M = 6.92$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ) than did men ( $M = 6.24$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ). (See Table 1.)

A one-sample t-test evaluating perpetrator blame against the midpoint of the scale yielded significance,  $t(220) = 44.42$ ,  $p < .001$ , such that participants generally viewed the perpetrator as responsible for the events of the vignette ( $M = 6.66$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ).

### **Maternal Vigilance**

The impact of a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse was assessed using a 2 (mother's personal child sexual abuse history: present vs. absent) x 3 (victim-perpetrator relationship: father vs. family friend vs. stranger) x 2 (gender of participant) ANOVA. There was a main effect for the mother's personal history of child sexual abuse,  $F(1, 196) = 8.27$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ . Specifically, participants in conditions where the mother had a personal history of childhood sexual abuse were more likely to agree

that a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse should make her more vigilant ( $M = 5.25, SD = 1.53$ ) than when the mother did not have a personal history of child sexual abuse ( $M = 4.48, SD = 1.98$ ). There was no effect for the victim-perpetrator relationship,  $F(2, 196) = 1.27, ns$ . There was no effect for participant gender  $F(1, 196) = 1.55, ns$ .

A one-sample t-test was conducted against the midpoint in order to assess the extent to which participants believed that a mother's own personal history of childhood sexual abuse should make her vigilant. Results indicate that the participants believe that a mother's history of child sexual abuse should make her more vigilant,  $t(207) = 6.93, p < .001, (M = 4.87, SD = 1.80)$ . In fact, 62.50% ( $n = 130$ ) of the participants at least somewhat agreed that a mother's personal history of childhood sexual abuse should make her more vigilant. Only 18.75% ( $n = 39$ ) disagreed and another 18.75% ( $n = 39$ ) participants remained neutral.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DISCUSSION**

Prevalence rates of child sexual abuse have been estimated as high as 32% of the female population (Vogeltanz et al., 1999). Child sexual abuse has substantial costs, both direct and indirect, making child sexual abuse is a significant societal concern.

Perceptions of child sexual abuse cases may play an important role in understanding the amount of social support offered to both child victims and their families. If nonoffending parents are assigned blame, it may hinder the extent to which they receive social support.

Perceptions of blame are also important as they relate to criminal charges. This study aimed to evaluate the role of a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse, as well as the relationship between the victim and perpetrator, on the attributions of blame assigned to nonoffending parents.

#### **Maternal History**

Given the high concordance rates between a mother's own history of sexual abuse and that of her child (e.g. Leifer, Kilbane, & Jacobsen, et al., 2004; Macias, 2004; McCloskey & Bailey, 2000; Oates et al., 1998), one of the primary goals of this research was to determine the impact that mother's personal history of childhood sexual abuse has on attributions of maternal blame following her daughter's sexual abuse. A variety of reasons are given as potential explanations for such rates, including an abused mother being attracted to an abuser (Sgroi & Dana, 1982), or poor parenting that can "set the

stage” for sexual abuse to occur (Zinzow et al., 2010). Given that such theories remain speculative, it was anticipated that the nonoffending mother would receive higher levels of blame by virtue of having herself experienced a history of childhood sexual abuse.

The mother’s personal history did not have a significant effect on the perceived severity, probability, blame attributed to the nonoffending parents, perceived criminal responsibility attributed to the nonoffending parents, or blame attributed to the child victim. The fact that a mother’s personal history of child sexual abuse did not impact the perceived probability of the scenario depicted in the vignette is promising. Although research shows that children born to mothers with a personal history of child sexual abuse are at a higher risk for child sexual abuse, in the present study, a maternal history did not influence the perceived probability for a case of child sexual abuse. This may reflect a decreased belief that victims are perceived as forever “damaged.” This may have positive implications in that a mother’s social support network may not be undermined, just because she herself was a victim of child sexual abuse

Interestingly, among female participants, the level of perpetrator blame varied as function of the mother’s personal history of childhood sexual abuse. Specifically, when the mother had a history of childhood sexual abuse, women attributed more blame to the perpetrator than did men. Though it would be inconceivable to postulate that women believed the perpetrator should have been aware of the mother’s history of abuse, it may be the case that women endorse perceptions of victims being perpetually affected by their victimization. That is, though the mother may have never disclosed her history of abuse, women may believe that the presence of abuse can be, or should be, apparent to others. An assessment of beliefs associated with the presumed long-term consequences of child

sexual abuse may provide insight into this possibility. At the same time, it may simply be the case that women felt more sympathy for the mother, who herself experienced sexual abuse as a child, and thus increased the blame attributed to the perpetrator

Furthermore, while results indicated that overall participants believed a personal history of child sexual abuse should make a mother more vigilant, participants who read that a mother did in fact have a history of childhood sexual abuse were even more likely to agree that a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse should make her more vigilant. It appears that a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse has some impact on how she is perceived. Though the presence of a mother's personal history of abuse had no impact on culpability or blame, participants appear to still endorse perceptions of her as omnipotent when she herself was victimized. To date, research has demonstrated that children born to women with histories of child sexual abuse are in fact at a higher risk of becoming victimized (Leifer, Kilbane, & Jacobsen, et al., 2004; Macias, 2004; McCloskey & Bailey, 2000; Oates et. al., 1998). However, research has only been able to speculate as to why this is the case. The fact that participants endorsed a view that expects a hyper-vigilant mother when she has a history of child sexual abuse still reflects an accountability on the part of the mother. This increased expectation of accountability may impact not only the level of support she receives, but also the extent to which she may view herself as culpable in the event her child is abused.

### **Victim-Perpetrator Relationship**

Although the situation was generally perceived to be severe among all conditions, participants in this study viewed the abuse as more severe when the perpetrator was the

child's father. Research is conflicting with regard to the impact the victim-perpetrator relationship has on the severity of the abuse. Some research suggests that child sexual abuse perpetrated by a non-caregiver is associated with higher incidences of behavioral problems, posttraumatic stress, depression, and dissociation (Kiser et al., 2014; Lucenko, Gold, & Cott, 2000). Other research suggests that the closer the victim-perpetrator relationship is, the more severe the impact will be for the child (Beitchman, Zucker, Hood, DaCosta, & Akman, 1991; Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Goldsmith, Freyd, & DePrince, 2012; Kendall-Tackett et al., 1993; Ketring & Feinauer, 1999; Ullman, 2007). Still, other researchers using have found results that indicate that the victim-perpetrator relationship is not significantly related to the development of more severe symptoms (Lucenko et al., 2000; Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2001; Wolfe, Gentile, & Wolfe, 1989).

Although research is conflicted about the actual impact the victim-perpetrator relationship has on symptomology, it is less conflicted about the perceptions of those who have been victims of child sexual abuse. Much of this research has found that people perceive child sexual abuse perpetrated by a parent or stepparent to be more severe than abuse by an acquaintance or a stranger (Bornstein, Kaplan, & Perry, 2007; Davies & Rogers, 2009; Davies et al., 2013). Reynolds and Birkimer (2002) found that men perceived a hypothetical case of child sexual abuse to be more severe when the abuser was a stepfather, compared to a neighbor. It is likely that child sexual abuse is perceived to be more severe due to the taboo of incest and perceived ultimate betrayal of trust and damage done to the parent-child relationship (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Finkelhor & Browne, 1985). Parents are thought to love and protect their children at all costs.

Hurting them in some way goes against how parents should act. However, as Browne & Finkelhor (1986) point out, the exact nature of the relationship may not be predictive of the level of trauma experienced by victims. They explain:

Abuse by a trusted neighbor may be more devastating than abuse by a distant uncle or grandfather. Also, whereas abuse by a trusted person involves betrayal, abuse by a stranger or more distant person may involve more fear, and thus be rated more negatively. These factors may help explain why the relative-nonrelative distinction is not necessarily a consistent predictor of trauma. (p. 73). This explanation given by Browne and Finkelhor (1986) clarifies how the victim-perpetrator relationship can be damaging, regardless of the relationship.

Further, when the father was the perpetrator, the level of blame assigned to him was more than that assigned to the family friend or the stranger. When a father sexually abuses his child, it may be viewed as a bigger violation of trust and may indicate some planning. This would be in contrast to the stranger and the family friend, as their crime may have been viewed as more opportunistic. These results differ from previous research by Davies and Rogers (2009) who found that the father was blamed significantly less than a stranger who perpetrated a child.

It remains important to understand how child sexual abuse is perceived. For example, if abuse is perceived to be more severe, it could result in a clinician using a more intensive treatment (Bornstein et al., 2007). Future research should continue to address the importance of the victim-perpetrator relationship on the perceived severity of child sexual abuse.

The victim-perpetrator relationship also had a significant impact on the perceived probability of the scenario. While some studies have found that laypersons may endorse a “stranger danger,” view (e.g. Fuselier et al., 2002), most perpetrators of child sexual abuse are known to their victims (Douglas & Finkelhor, 2005; Macias, 2004; Deblinger et al, 1993; Vogeltanz et al., 1999). Participants in this study perceived the scenario as more probable when the abuse was perpetrated by a family friend, rather than a stranger. This is promising, as it may reflect a decreased belief in myths surrounding child sexual abuse. In fact, child sexual abuse prevention programs have even begun teaching young children that someone he or she “knows and likes may try to hurt them” (Martyniuk & Dworkin, 2011, p. 3). However, parents of young children still place a stronger emphasis on stranger danger (Tutty, 1997; Wurtele, Kvaternick, & Franklin, 1992).

In her evaluation of the child sexual abuse prevention program “Who Do You Tell,” Tutty (1997) found that less than half (46%) of the parents had talked with their children about the risk of sexual abuse by a known person, while almost all of them talked with the dangers of going with strangers (97.6%). While only 57% of parents reported explicitly discussing the possibility of sexual abuse by a stranger, it may be the case that parents had fears of a stranger sexually abusing their child, but were uncomfortable openly discussing this with their children. It is of an additional note that only 54% of parents with children who participated in the Who Do You Tell program evaluated by Tutty participated in the parent report portion of the study. As Tutty speculates, these parents may have a stronger motivation to educate their children about child sexual abuse, meaning that even fewer parents may actually discuss the possibility of sexual abuse by a known, or even unknown, perpetrator.

In terms of the level of blame and responsibility attributed to nonoffending parents, research is conflicted with regard to the way the victim-perpetrator relationship can influence these attributions toward nonoffending parents. For example, Davies et al. (2013) found that nonoffending mothers were perceived to be less culpable when the perpetrator was the child's biological father, compared to a stepfather. However, Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984) found that nonoffending parents were attributed the most fault when the offender was a stranger to the child.

It was predicted that culpability of the nonoffending mother would be attributed in descending order to the father, the family friend, and the stranger. This was predicted to be especially true when she had a previous history of childhood sexual abuse because participants might believe that the mother "should have seen the signs" of potential abuse, especially since she herself had been a victim. However, this was not confirmed.

Overall, participants did not attribute blame or criminal responsibility toward nonoffending parents, with the exception of participants being neutral about holding the nonoffending father criminally responsible for the events in the vignette. When the perpetrator was a stranger or a family friend, the victim-perpetrator relationship had no effect for either the criminal responsibility or the level of culpability assigned to either of the nonoffending parents. However, when the perpetrator was the father, men attributed significantly less blame and responsibility to the nonoffending mother, compared to when the perpetrator was a family friend. Again, this differs from results obtained by Davies and colleagues (2013) who found that women perceived the nonoffending mother to be more responsible when the perpetrator was the child's biological father. Ketring and Feinauer (1999) proposed that because the father traditionally is viewed as more powerful

within the family system, that there may be a stronger pressure on the mother to deny or ignore that the abuse occurred.

The victim-perpetrator relationship also had a significant impact on the level of blame assigned to the child. Regardless of the relationship, little fault was attributed to the child. However, when the perpetrator was a stranger to the child, participants attributed significantly more blame to the child than when the perpetrator was the father. Similar results were obtained by Waterman & Foss-Goodman (1984). This may reflect a partial endorsement in the “Stranger Danger” myth; research has demonstrated that the majority of parents discuss the dangers of strangers, but far fewer discuss the possibility of being hurt by a parent (Tutty, 1997; Wurtele et al., 1992). Even though most perpetrators are previously known to their victims, parents continue to teach their children the dangers of strangers. Because most parents talk with their children about the dangers of strangers, it is plausible that may be why participants assigned higher levels of blame to the child when the child was abused by a stranger

### **Observer Characteristics**

Participant gender had an impact on several aspects of this study. Consistent with previous research (e.g. Bornstein et al., 2007; Davies & Rogers, 2009; Rogers & Davies, 2007), women viewed the abuse as more severe and more probable (e.g. Bornstein et al., 2007; Reynolds & Birkimer, 2002) than did men. This may be because the child depicted in the vignette was a female. Several researchers (e.g. Back & Lips, 1998; Harding et al., 2010) have suggested that a perceived similarity between the observer and the victim may explain this trend.

In line with previous research, it was hypothesized that male observers would show higher rates of blaming the nonoffending parents of the victim. While participants generally viewed nonoffending parents as not responsible for the sexual abuse perpetrated against their child, in this study, male participants did attribute more blame toward nonoffending mothers and nonoffending fathers. Interestingly, there were no gender differences observed when evaluating the criminal responsibility of the nonoffending parents; both men and women viewed nonoffending mothers and fathers and not criminally responsible for the sexual abuse of their child. Despite differences in the levels of blame attributed toward nonoffending parents, both male and female participants were similar with regard to their perceptions of the level of criminal responsibility of nonoffending parents. This differs from previous research that has found that women have viewed mothers to be more culpable (Davies et al., 2013; Waterman & Foss-Goodman, 1984). In general, believing that holding nonoffending parents as criminally responsible for abuse perpetrated against their child limits their ability to support and aid in their child's healing. Thus, the fact that participants did not support this viewpoint is encouraging.

Significant gender differences were found for both victim and perpetrator blame.

Consistent with previous research, women assigned less blame to the child and more blame to the perpetrator. While the child was generally viewed as not responsible for the abuse, men did assign significantly higher levels of blame to the child than did women. This finding is consistent with previous research that has found while little actual blame is assigned to the child, women generally exhibit more pro-victim attitudes (Back & Lips, 1998; Broussard & Wagner, 1988; Davies et al., 2013; Davies & Rogers, 2004; 2009;

Graham et al., 2007; Maynard & Wiederman, 1997; Reynolds & Birkimer, 2002; Rogers & Davies, 2007; Rogers, et al., 2007; Rogers, Wczasek, & Davies, 2011). It is often speculated that perceived similarity may play a role in this (Back & Lips, 1998; Harding et al., 2010). Because women have higher rates of reported sexual victimization, women may be more empathetic and sympathetic toward victims. Women may be exhibiting empathy by imagining themselves as the victim in the scenario. If women are experiencing feelings of empathy toward the victim, research has demonstrated that they will find the victim less responsible (Sulzer & Burglass, 1968). Future research may wish to further examine this.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Results notwithstanding, there are some notable limitations to this study. First, a potential limitation of this study may be that the manipulation of the mother's personal history of child sexual abuse may not have been a strong enough manipulation. Although participants generally agreed that a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse should cause her to be more vigilant, the presence or absence of a maternal history of child sexual abuse had no impact on nonoffending parent blame or criminal responsibility. Alternatively, it could be that a mother's personal history is irrelevant with regard to decision making, even if participants generally agreed that a mother should be more vigilant. Future research may wish to include more information including the presumed effects of child sexual abuse on the mother. For example, stating that the mother suffered from increased anxiety or PTSD after the disclosure of her child's abuse, as it was reminiscent of her own sexual abuse as a child, may have made this manipulation more salient.

Some previous research utilizing vignettes depicting a child sexual abuse scenario have found differences among those who have been victims of child sexual abuse and those who have not. However, there were a limited number of participants who reported having a personal history of child sexual abuse to examine this avenue and as such, there was not enough power to conduct these analyses. Future research may wish to continue examine the impact of a maternal history of abuse while comparing child sexual abuse survivors and those who have not been victimized.

Data for this study was collected entirely online, which has both its strengths and limitations. Some researchers suggest that the increased sense of anonymity reduces social desirability effect, allowing for more honest responses (Coomber, 1997; Joinson, 1999). However, online data collection is no longer considered a novelty, as such, it may also cause participants to be less engaged and not provide thoughtful responses.

In all versions of the vignettes used in this study, the gender of both the child and the perpetrator remained constant. Even though the majority of child sexual abuse victims are female, since both boys and girls can become victims of child sexual abuse, future research may wish to consider varying the gender of child. Likewise, even though most perpetrators of child sexual abuse are males, future research may wish to examine the effect of female offenders.

Although it had little impact on the results of this study, future research may wish to examine how a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse may influence how social workers or child protection workers evaluate a case. Because the view of an intake worker can have a significant effect on the outcome of a case, if an intake worker views a

nonoffending mother as more responsible because of her personal history of child sexual abuse it could have a considerable effect on a specific case of alleged abuse.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

Even amidst these limitations, these results are still of value. This research is the first to examine perceptions of how a maternal history of childhood sexual abuse may impact the level of culpability nonoffending mothers are assigned upon the discovery of their daughter's sexual abuse. Overall, although a mother's personal history of child sexual abuse did not have an effect on blame or criminal responsibility, it did have an impact on the perceived vigilance. Moreover, this study lends additional support to research that has found that child sexual abuse perpetrated by a father is perceived to be more severe in nature. Future research may wish to continue to explore the impact of maternal history on child sexual abuse, as well as continue to assess the ways that lay perceptions of child sexual abuse can fluctuate given minor manipulations.

## APPENDICES

## **Appendix A: Informed Consent**

TITLE: Decision-making and parent-child relationships

PROJECT DIRECTOR: Cheryl Terrance, Ph.D.

PHONE #: 701-777-3921

DEPARTMENT: Psychology

A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

Approximately 300 people, students from the University of North Dakota, and various parts of the country will take part in this online study at UND. If you join this study, you will be asked to read a scenario depicting a case of child sexual abuse and respond to various questions regarding your perceptions of this scenario. The purpose of this research is to examine how people make judgments concerning child sexual abuse cases.

Your participation in the study will last approximately 60-75 minutes. You may experience frustration that is often experienced when completing surveys. The scenario you are reading, and some of the questions may be of a sensitive nature, and you may therefore become upset as a result. However, such risks are not viewed as being in excess of "minimal risk." If, however, you become upset by questions, you may stop at any time or choose not to answer a question. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings about this study, you are encouraged to contact UND's Student Counseling Center.

You may not benefit personally from being in this study. However, we hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study because results will provide a better understanding on how people make decisions in cases of child sexual abuse.

If you are a student at UND, you may receive extra credit for your time for the psychology course of your choice in which you are currently enrolled. For participants who are from UND, and participating in this study for extra credit, if you choose not to participate in this study you may earn extra credit in your course in other ways. Please ask your instructor, who will provide you with comparable assignments that you may choose to complete (e.g. writing assignments, participation in other research experiments, etc.).

You will not have any costs for being in this research study, nor will you receive monetary compensation. The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Study results will be presented in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified. Study data or results may be reviewed by people who audit IRB procedures. The only other people who will have access to the data are the research investigator (Carolyn Uhl) conducting the study, and the investigator's advisor, Dr. Cheryl Terrance.

No identifying information about participants will be reported or kept. Confidentiality will be maintained by storing your responses in a password protected file. Your name is not being collected.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

The researchers conducting this study are Carolyn Uhl and Dr. Cheryl Terrance. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact the research advisor, Cheryl Terrance at 701-777-3921, or the principal investigator, Carolyn Uhl at 701-777-3451, during the day. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, or if you have any concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone else.

If you click continue, this will indicate that this research study has been explained to you, that questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study.

## Appendix B: The Vignette

One day, a mother and father are home with their 8-year-old daughter. The mother and father are in the kitchen cleaning up after lunch, while their daughter is playing in the rec room, in the basement. [The father leaves the kitchen to go paint the rec room.] Their close family friend (vs. a painter) arrives to paint the rec room. Her father (vs. the family friend vs. a painter) told the girl that they were going to play new game and led her to the couch in the rec room. The girl protested, but her father (vs. the family friend vs. the painter) insisted, telling the girl it was okay. There was a tone to his voice the girl knew she dared not disobey. Her father (vs. the family friend vs. the painter) made her lie down on the couch and he began rubbing the girl's body with his hands while they were both dressed. The girl again protested and her father (vs. the family friend vs. the painter) became angry, telling the girl to lie down and be quiet—she would enjoy this game, it would feel good. He continued petting the girl's body and then pulled down her underwear. Her father (vs. the family friend vs. the painter) began fondling her and then her father (vs. the family friend vs. the painter) asked the girl to touch the front of his pants. The girl began to cry and her father (vs. the family friend vs. the painter) took her hand and put it on his crotch, telling the girl how good it would feel. Her father (vs. the family friend vs. the painter) continued under the girl's clothes, while she was told to touch his penis. Afterward, the girl's father (vs. the family friend vs. the painter) told her that this game was to remain their secret and stay just between them. The girl was playing quietly in her room when her mother went to get her for dinner. The girl did not mention anything about what had happened that afternoon. The next day, the girl

confides in her teacher, who reports the abuse to Child Protective Services. A social worker investigating the allegations inquired about a family history of abuse. The mother responded that she had (vs. had not) herself been a victim of child sexual abuse.

**Appendix C:  
Demographics**

1. Age \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Transgendered FTM
  - d. Transgendered MTF
  - e. Other
  - f. Prefer not to respond
3. What is your ethnicity? (check all that apply)
  - a. American Indian/Alaska Native
  - b. Asian or Pacific Islander
  - c. Black or African American
  - d. Caribbean Islander
  - e. White or Caucasian
  - f. Mexican or Mexican American
  - g. Multi-ethnic
  - h. Other Latina or Latin American
  - i. Other Race
4. Are you a U.S. Citizen?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
    - i. If you are not a U.S. Citizen, how long have you lived in the U.S.?
      1. \_\_\_\_\_ Years \_\_\_\_\_Months
5. What is your occupational status?
  - a. Employed Full-time
  - b. Employed Part-time
  - c. Unemployed
  - d. Unemployed, looking for work
  - e. Retired
6. What is your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Are you a student?
  - a. No
  - b. Yes
    - i. Year in school?
      1. Freshman
      2. Sophomore

- 3. Junior
- 4. Senior
- 5. Graduate/Professional Student

ii. Major in school? \_\_\_\_\_

8. What is your highest Level of School Completed?

- a. Less than high school
- b. High school
- c. Some college/Associate's Degree
- d. Bachelor's Degree
- e. Master's Degree
- f. Doctoral Degree

9. Marital Status

- a. Single
- b. Dating
- c. Engaged
- d. Cohabiting
- e. Married
- f. Divorced
- g. Separated
- h. Widowed
- i. Other (please describe): \_\_\_\_\_

10. What is the length of your current relationship?

\_\_\_\_\_ Years \_\_\_\_\_ Months

11. Politically you are:

- a. Strongly conservative
- b. Conservative, not strongly
- c. More conservative than liberal
- d. Middle of the road
- e. More liberal than conservative
- f. Liberal, not strongly
- g. Strongly liberal
- h. None

12. What political party do you identify with?

- a. Democrat
- b. Republican
- c. Independent
- d. Other

13. How religious are you?

- a. Not at all
- b. Slightly
- c. Moderately
- d. Very religious

14. What is your religious affiliation? \_\_\_\_\_

15. Do you have a history of childhood sexual assault?

- a. No
- b. Yes
  - i. What was your relationship to the perpetrator? (ex: father, uncle, stranger, etc.)

16. Are you a parent?

- a. No
- b. Yes
  - i. How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_







Table 1

*Level of blame attributions and criminal responsibility*

		Victim-Perpetrator Relationship		
		<u>Father</u>	<u>Family Friend</u>	<u>Stranger</u>
		<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Nonoffending Father Blame	Men	-	2.84 (1.71)	2.92 (1.72)
	Women	-	2.40 (1.67)	1.97 (1.45)
	Average	-	2.60 (1.69)	2.41 (1.65)
Nonoffending Father Criminal Responsibility	Men	-	3.79 (1.51)	4.16 (1.37)
	Women	-	3.68 (1.73)	3.52 (1.56)
	Average	-	3.73 (1.62)	3.82 (1.50)
Nonoffending Mother Blame	Men	1.71 (0.94)	2.98 (1.65)	2.93 (1.78)
	Women	1.99 (1.46)	2.31 (1.58)	1.93 (1.35)
	Average	1.89 (1.30)	2.61 (1.63)	2.40 (1.63)
Nonoffending Mother Criminal Responsibility	Men	3.15 (1.47)	3.75 (1.41)	4.07 (1.34)
	Women	3.38 (1.75)	3.63 (1.64)	3.48 (1.54)
	Average	3.30 (1.65)	3.69 (1.53)	3.76 (1.47)
Child Blame	Men	1.16 (0.39)	1.74 (1.25)	1.87 (1.55)
	Women	1.11 (0.61)	1.19 (0.77)	1.34 (1.17)
	Average	1.13 (0.54)	1.44 (1.04)	1.59 (1.38)
Perpetrator Blame	Men	6.88 (0.38)	6.12 (1.47)	6.26 (1.11)
	Women	6.95 (0.30)	6.76 (0.83)	6.81 (0.60)
	Average	6.92 (0.33)	6.47 (1.20)	6.56 (0.92)

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