Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: The Case of Pacific Islanders

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To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2015.1022294

Published online: 10 Jun 2015.

Article views: 71

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DISCLOSURE OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE
BY ADULT SURVIVORS

Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: The Case
of Pacific Islanders

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A number of factors influence the disclosure of child sexual abuse by survivors. While the influence of race and ethnicity on disclosure patterns is getting more attention, little has been written on abused children of Pacific Islanders, due in part to both lack of relevant data and a relatively small Pacific Islander population in the United States. Drawing on interviews with Pacific Islander women who were sexually abused in childhood and who delayed revealing their victimization, we explore the reasons for delayed disclosure. Findings suggest that cultural norms and family dynamics affect disclosure decisions. Concerns for the family and self-blame were the most common reasons for delay and lack of disclosure. We discuss implications of the findings and make policy recommendations.

KEYWORDS children, sex victimization, self-disclosure, race, ethnicity, cultural norms, family

While research on child sexual abuse in the past two decades has significantly raised public awareness of this largely silent and hidden crime, lack of disclosure of victimization continues to hinder our understanding of the

Received 27 May 2014; revised 13 November 2014; accepted 8 January 2015.
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nature and extent of the problem. Acknowledging and reporting sexual abuse experiences is crucial because it may help mitigate negative effects related to offenses and facilitate the healing process. Yet the self-disclosure rate of child sexual abuse is low, and many children keep experiences of abuse secret into adulthood (Pipe, Lamb, Orbach, & Cederborg, 2007). Data from various retrospective surveys of adults with child sexual abuse histories suggest that between 30%–67% of the respondents reported that they did not disclose the abuse during childhood (Hanson et al., 2003; London, Bruck, Ceci, & Shuman, 2005; Vogeltanz et al., 1999). Among commonly cited reasons for delayed disclosure are feelings of confusion, disbelief, guilt, shame, and self-blame (Alaggia, 2010; Paine & Hansen, 2002).

Ample evidence suggests that disclosure is also affected by such factors as the child’s age, perceived lack of support, relationship with the perpetrator, and family dynamics (Arata, 1998; Arias & Johnson, 2013; Hanson et al., 2003; Paine & Hansen, 2002). However, no clear picture has been reported on the relationship between race or ethnicity and child abuse disclosure. While perceptions on what constitutes child sexual abuse may not vary by racial background (Lowe, Pavkov, Casanova, & Wetchler, 2005), cultural beliefs are found to affect disclosure behavior (Fontes, 2005; Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Katerndahl, Burge, Kellogg, & Parra, 2005; Pipe et al., 2007). In particular, reporting and disclosure of child sexual abuse among Asian Americans is lower than those for other racial groups (Rao, DiClemente, & Ponton, 1992; Shenoy et al., 2010), indicating the effect of culture on the prevalence and disclosure of sexual victimization. Moreover, research on child sexual abuse in the Pacific Islander community is almost nonexistent. Drawing on interviews with Pacific Islander women with a history of child sexual abuse, this article aims to explore the factors that influence disclosure and highlight the impact of culture on the disposition of sexual abuse survivors. As decisions to disclose occur in social and cultural contexts, it is critical to consider the values and norms of individuals when we seek to understand their barriers to disclosure of child sexual abuse.

**SEXUAL ABUSE DISCLOSURE**

It is estimated that between 15%–32% of American women are sexual abuse survivors (Black et al., 2011). Such a range reflects the lack of consensus among researchers and service providers for the definition of child sexual abuse. One widely used term, “unwanted early sexual experiences,” however, broadly encompasses any form of unwanted sexual advances, including fondling, molestation, and rape. For the purpose of this article, the terms “unwanted early sexual experiences” and “child sexual abuse” are used interchangeably.

Disclosure is an essential part of the help-seeking process and can help alleviate the emotional and physical pain following sexual abuse.
The conscious acknowledgment of such abuse, whether through formal counseling or informal support, contributes to the well-being of individuals with child sexual abuse experiences (Wright, Fopma-Loy, & Fischer, 2005). Specifically, successful resolution of child sexual abuse can be obtained through cognitively confronting and reflecting on one’s experience with a supportive other (Arias & Johnson, 2013; Banyard & Williams, 2007). Furthermore, social support positively contributes to the well-being of victims by mediating the effects of child sexual abuse, even among individuals with severe abuse characteristics (Fassler, Amodeo, Griffin, Clay, & Ellis, 2005; Spaccarelli & Kim, 1995; Wright et al., 2005). In fact, social reactions may have an even greater influence on long-term outcomes than actual abuse characteristics (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; McClure, Chavez, Agars, Peacock, & Matosian, 2008; Ullman & Long, 2008). However, delay or lack of disclosure of child sexual abuse is common among abuse survivors. Children frequently remain silent about their abuse, deny it, or if they do disclose, do so belatedly and incompletely (Arias & Johnson, 2013; Hanson et al., 2003).

With availability of data containing richer demographic information on study subjects, more recent literature began to address the importance of race/ethnicity in disclosure behavior of child sexual abuse survivors (Fontes, 1993, 2005; Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Pipe et al., 2007; Shenoy et al., 2010). Prevalence rates by racial groups are difficult to accurately discern due to varying definitions of race (Katernhahl et al., 2005; Kenny & McEachern, 2000). However, studies generally show that Asian/Pacific Islanders report a high rate of physical abuse but low levels of child sexual abuse (Rao et al., 1992; Zhai & Gao, 2009). While it is unclear whether low reported child sexual abuse cases are indicative of low prevalence or under reporting, cultural norms are noted to have an effect on decisions to report abuse (Kenny & McEachern, 2000). Disclosures among Asians are influenced by cultural beliefs about shame, honor, respect, and harmony in the family and community (Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Gilligan & Akhtar, 2006). When disclosures do occur, Asian parents are less likely to believe that the abuse occurred, unlikely to report the abuse, less likely to follow through with recommended services, and more likely to prematurely terminate services (Rao et al., 1992).

**ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDERS**

Little is known about the prevalence of child sexual abuse within the Pacific Islander population, because this group was historically aggregated with the Asian population by government classifications. It was not until a little over two decades ago that the diverse Asian/Pacific Islander category was separated into two distinct categories: Asian and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander in U.S. census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Yet many studies continue to use the term “Asian/Pacific Islander” to describe participants. Whether individuals with Pacific Islander backgrounds are actually included...
in the data is not always clear. In addition, applying the term so widely to individuals from over 40 different groups says little about each subgroup. As a relatively small population, composing less than 1% of the entire U.S. population (Harris & Jones, 2005), it is not surprising that such a group would receive little attention.

The four largest groups of Pacific Islanders in the United States are Hawaiians, Samoans, Guamanians, and Tongans. In total, about one million Americans are from Pacific Islander groups and reside mostly in Hawaii. Pacific Islander communities share some common characteristics; historically, group members are linked together by a communal socioeconomic base characterized by reciprocity and sharing. Their traditional culture is centered around the extended family and, in many cases, Christian churches (Sandhu, Kaur, & Tewari, 1999). As a population with a relatively lower socioeconomic status, Pacific Islanders believe that reliance on the extended family and community network is central to everyday life.

In cross-cultural research, Pacific Islanders, together with Asian Americans, tend to be categorized as having a culture rooted in collectivism, which values social harmony, family cohesion, and solidarity (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). Greater consideration is given to group goals and needs than those of the individual. They identify with in-groups to which they are deeply bound over time. Such a collectivistic orientation means Pacific Islanders tend to be willing to sacrifice their personal well-being when it is in conflict with group interests.

Another factor relevant to discourse of child sexual abuse is social inequality in Pacific Island communities. Historically, as in many traditional societies, social status and social ranking of Pacific Islanders was accorded with age and through contributing to supporting the extended family. At a young age and with a limited ability to contribute to the family economy, Pacific Islander children in general tended to have a low status. Obedience and respect to parents and elders were highly valued in child upbringing. They were taught to accept their fate and remain silent about unpleasant or bad things that happened to them (Griffen, 2006; Morton, 1996). This status inequality in socialization, combined with other factors, is likely to contribute to victims’ reluctance to disclose their abuse.

If the content of child socialization is based on the salient cultural values of society, the previous discussion, then, suggests that underreporting is likely a main reason for low incidences of child sexual abuse among the Pacific Islander population. Existing studies show that disclosure is influenced by such factors as age, gender, relationship to the perpetrator, family dynamics, social constraints, and cultural beliefs (Alaggia & Kirshenbaum, 2005; Fontes, 1993; Gilligan & Akhter, 2005; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1999; Shenoy et al., 2010; Washington, 2001). Yet less is understood about how these factors affect disclosure behaviors among Pacific Islanders. The current study is interested in exploring the disclosure experiences of female survivors.
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in this community and aims to fill gaps in knowledge about influences that inhibit or encourage disclosure. Specifically the study looks into three issues relating to disclosure: (a) primary reasons for disclosure or lack of disclosure, (b) receiver(s) of disclosure, and (c) reactions to disclosure. To our knowledge, this is the first study focusing on child sexual abuse and subsequent disclosure among Pacific Islanders.

METHODS

We used purposeful sampling to recruit participants for the study. Targeted participants were adult women of Pacific Island heritage who were sexually abused, molested, or encountered an unwanted sexual experience before the age of 18. Recruitment of participants occurred through networking with two community agencies and two university campuses in the northwest region. They were asked to distribute the recruitment flyer to female Pacific Islander clients. The two local community service agencies were selected primarily because they serve Asian Pacific Islander residents in the region and are conveniently located for distributing recruitment flyers widely. Partnership with the two universities in our participant recruitment was through connections with student organizations, which assisted the research team with publicizing and distributing recruitment information to targeted participants on the campuses. Both universities have a noticeable presence of Pacific Islanders in the student population. E-mail and telephone contacts of the researchers and word of mouth were also used to get more study subjects. In total, 19 women met the criteria for the study. We managed to engage in successful interviews with 8 women.

Data for the study was collected through the semistructured in-depth interview method, a qualitative methodology used widely to uncover and describe narratives of people’s complex lives. The flexibility embedded in such a method allowed the respondents to deviate from the structured interview questions and elaborate on specific experiences. Through this semistructured format, the interviewer was also able to insert probes and clarify doubts immediately. Interviews with each woman ranged on average from one to two and half hours and were conducted between June and August of 2008. An in-depth interview guide was developed, aiming to address the research questions. The interview guide consisted of questions and probes on sexual abuse onset, type, frequency, perpetrator(s); reasons for disclosure decision, feelings connected with disclosure; receiver(s) and outcomes of disclosure; individual and family history, and family dynamics. All participants were asked about the first time they told someone about the experience. They were also asked to draw connections, if any, between their culture and the influence it may have had on any of their disclosure experiences and/or the reactions they received.
TABLE 1 Participants’ Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Current age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Alofa</td>
<td>Samoan</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ane</td>
<td>Tongan</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Anissa</td>
<td>Chamorro/Irish</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Maile</td>
<td>Hawaiian/Filipino</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Chamorro</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Noelani</td>
<td>Hawaiian/Portugese/Mixed European</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Tasi</td>
<td>Chamorro/Filipino</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

The eight participants were from the four largest groups of Pacific Islanders in the United States. Half of them reported one ethnicity only while the rest reported mixed ethnicities. The ethnic groups represented by the participants included Chamorro, Filipino, Hawaiian, Samoan, and Tongan. They ranged from 18 to 54 years of age. During the interview period, six of the women either completed or were in the process of pursuing college degrees. The participants’ characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants.

RESULTS

All eight interviews were transcribed. The development of a coding scheme was guided by a focus on five themes related to disclosure reasons and outcomes. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the narrative data. We report our findings in the following sections.

Child Sexual Abuse

There is a lack of consensus on how to define child sexual abuse. As noted, the term “unwanted early sexual experiences” broadly encompasses many forms of unwanted sexual advances, including unwanted touching, kissing, fondling, and penetration. We use these two terms interchangeably in our discussion. Five participants encountered these experiences with one perpetrator while two participants encountered separate unwanted sexual experiences with two different perpetrators. One participant had two of the same perpetrators for all three of her unwanted sexual experiences. All of the perpetrators were known to the participants. Six of the unwanted sexual experiences were committed by acquaintances or friends, and four were committed by family members, two by fathers and two by uncles. All of the perpetrators were male. The ages of participants during these encounters
TABLE 2 Characteristics of the Unwanted Sexual Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Age during USE (years)</th>
<th>Relationship to perpetrator</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>12, 16</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Fondling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>Rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Uncle</td>
<td>Rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>a) 5; b) 15</td>
<td>a) Neighbor ; b) Acquaintance</td>
<td>a) Kissing ; b) Kissing and touching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Acquaintances</td>
<td>Rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Fondling and attempted rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Acquaintance</td>
<td>Rape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>a) 7; b) 18</td>
<td>a) Uncle ; b) Friend</td>
<td>a) Fondling ; a) Rape</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ranged from 5 to 17 years old. These characteristics are summarized also in Table 2.

Disclosure Experience

Out of the 10 separate unwanted sexual experiences, initial disclosures were to family members (2 participants), a school official (1 participant), and friends (4 participants). Two had never fully disclosed the event until being interviewed for this study. Similarly varied, delay in disclosure ranged from a few days to 14 years. Three individuals told within a few days of the last incident. See Table 3 for characteristics of disclosures. Alofa, a 34-year-old Samoan woman, was 16 years old at the time and was experiencing problems at school. She described her initial disclosure as “cracking under pressure.” She “was dealing with too much and after being interrogated by the school official” she gave in. However, while Alofa anticipated receiving psychological help to deal with her situation individually, she was referred to child protective services instead who told her that she cannot go back home. She recalls the event as culturally insensitive and unnecessary:

Okay so the woman comes in like the movies. Like she’s a social agent and she’s supposed to follow these rules. And I’ve poured out my heart and soul on four pages of paper. You know I’m a scared high school girl. My parents are both away and I’m revealing this thing that will change our lives forever. And she knows this. She knows my family name. I don’t know her. But she knows. She’s got everything on paper. So she’s coming in to play her role that she thinks is the way she’s supposed to do it according to American culture. So sort of insensitive to the repercussions as a Samoan girl.

Alofa’s initial disclosure was the only one to a mandated reporter and was also the only one to lead to some sort of legal action. Her father was banned
TABLE 3 Characteristics of the Disclosures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Age (first full disclosure)</th>
<th>To whom</th>
<th>Subsequent disclosures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>School official</td>
<td>Child protective services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sisters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Best friend/cousin</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sisters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Best friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Boyfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>a) 18</td>
<td>a) Me</td>
<td>a) n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) 15</td>
<td>b) Friends</td>
<td>b) Boyfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>Sisters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Aunts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>a) 16</td>
<td>a) Boyfriend</td>
<td>a) School counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) 18</td>
<td>b) Friend</td>
<td>Therapist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b) Friends</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

from returning to the island and she did not see him again until later in life when he was on his deathbed. She later explains the importance of waiting for her mother to return before removing her from her home while her parents were away. One concern was that more people ended up finding out, such as an uncle whom she was sent to stay with.

Two other women disclosed their experience immediately as well. Anissa, an-18-year old Chamorro woman, told her mother the next morning but received a response of denial. She explained that her mother would not acknowledge the rape and was influenced by drugs and alcohol during that time. As a result, she developed a strained relationship with her mother who continues to dismiss her experience. She is the only participant in this study who was sent to counseling. She participated in therapy sessions for five years against her wishes and learned to get through them as she describes, “I went through so many different doctors. I learned that if you give them just a little dramatic event to signify a break through, they’ll leave you alone. Like you’re cured or something. As if I had a disease.” Note that both Alofa and Anissa were the only women in this study to have to participate in outside interventions intended to help them. Alofa was referred to child protection services and Anissa to therapy. Both, however, did not feel that it helped at all.

Subsequent disclosures included friends and people met along the way that have had similar experiences. For most of the women, disclosures are intended to build connections with other women and share their story, which
Disclosure by Pacific Islanders

simultaneously helps them to deal with the experience. For example, Alofa describes the circumstances in which she will talk about her molestation:

Since I’ve gotten older it’s usually when someone talks to me about something that triggers my memory. So those experiences. So usually, friends that are women or if since I’ve been older, younger girls that have signs. You know just had signs that are screaming to me about some issues at home. I don’t tell them in detail but just try to create some connection and understanding and encourage them through whatever it is they’re dealing with.

Both Anissa and Tasi (a 20-year-old Chamorro woman) reported similar disclosure experiences that intended to build connections. Anissa’s best friend at the time disclosed her unwanted sexual experience first, which prompted Anissa to reveal her story. Tasi told her high school boyfriend after he described an unwanted sexual experience that happened with one of his cousins.

Reasons for Not Disclosing

Although all the participants have disclosed their experiences, two events were not disclosed until talking to the interviewer and six other events were not initially disclosed until over two years after the abuse. Participants had numerous reasons for not telling anyone about their unwanted sexual experiences, but the following themes were shared by over half of them.

One reason, described by five of the women, was that they wanted to protect their family from the hurt and shame such a disclosure would bring. Aspects such as the small size of the Pacific Islander community and the pressures to maintain a harmonious family affected disclosure decisions. This belief did not prevent disclosure altogether but rather impacted the participants’ feelings toward sharing their story with people in their extended family and wider community, especially adults. The idea of family respect and taboo of exposure is best articulated by Mary, a 54-year-old Chamorro woman:

Many other Pacific Islander cultures value the importance of family respect, especially to parents and elders. Thus going against an elder and exposing them is taboo. Particularly it is understood that we take care of our own. Unfortunately, I could never tell my mom because I think it would hurt her. I have tried to be close to my mom, but this secret still gets in the way. She is elderly now and I would never tarnish her memory of my dad. I have attempted several times to try to tell her and she would always get upset if I started bad-mouthing my dad. I always wondered if she knew.

This concept is included in the narratives of Alofa, Ane, Anissa, and Tasi as well, who mention issues such as “family name,” needing to “save
everybody,” and “family secrets.” Another representative statement is given by Anissa, describing why she cannot tell the older adults in her extended family. She says, “Well, like my grandparents. They feel they have to keep family secrets. That things like that bring pity and being pitied by others is shameful. At least that’s how my grandma seems to perceive things.”

Related to protecting family and maintaining harmony, staying silent about unpleasant issues is another factor that influenced the participants’ disclosure experiences. Five women recognized this silence occurring in Pacific Islander communities. Alofa explains that she came to realize that unwanted sexual experiences occur to many more people than she thought but that there is a “culture of not talking about unpleasant issues.” This is repeated in the other four narratives with women explaining that they know that it occurs, but it just isn’t discussed. Jordan, a 19-year-old Filipino woman, speaks about this issue on more general terms; she explains what happens in her family when something negative occurs:

I said my parents weren’t too fond of talking about the past right? So ok yah. They’re not really too fond about that because usually whenever something bad happens in the family and you bring it up later on in the future, they would never really talk. They’d never specifically say what went down. They’d be like you remember that incident and you know how it affected us all. My parents aren’t really too umm too I don’t know. They don’t really like talking about things that already happened. And right now I know that if I were to mention something like that that happened when I was like five, they would either not believe me. Actually they would probably not believe me.

Self-blame was a common theme as well. Six participants believed or questioned, at least at first, whether they invited the unwanted sexual experiences. Ane, for example, recalls thinking, “If I hadn’t drank so much,” “If I hadn’t went to his house,” “I put myself in that situation.” And she explains why she thinks she put blame on herself. She says

I know that my upbringing had definitely put those thoughts in my head because being the oldest girl, I was always responsible for everything! I would even get in trouble for things that my younger siblings would do. So I guess that’s how I came about those thoughts of blaming myself.

Noelani had similar thoughts, believing that she may have invited it because she had flirted with him before.

Two participants, Anissa and Maile, a 24-year-old Hawaiian/Filipina woman, mention their Catholic religion as a major factor in their self-blame. Maile for instance states, “To put it bluntly and in a non-PC way . . . it seems that in the [C]atholic religion, if something bad happens to you, it’s because
you did something to deserve it, and you’re being punished.” Anissa explains that she felt as if she were no longer a virgin and that this could make her worthless as a bride. She believed that she was “going to hell for sure.”

Dealing with the Unwanted Sexual Experience

All of the participants are similar in this respect, because all of these women have spent some time dealing with the unwanted sexual experience individually. Keeping the experience to themselves through the years, these women shared similar beliefs, which seemed to help them cope with the trauma.

One belief, expressed by four individuals, influenced their willingness to disclose but seemed to put the event into a perspective that made it a little easier to deal with. This belief, that things in life are temporary, included the idea that things in the past should stay in the past. For instance, Tasi explained that disclosing her rape would only drag more people into the situation and would make the experience last longer than necessary. She states that by dealing with it by herself, she is more in control and does not have to carry the past into her future. Alofa, Ane, and Anissa also shared this belief. Alofa’s articulation is a little different from Tasi’s:

Culture and healing. Oh, I want to address that. I didn’t address that. Culture has influenced healing because uh a lot of traditions and a lot of um families, like the way we deal with funerals, the way we deal with weddings. Everything is very momentary. This is it now, but it’s not gonna be this way forever. So like when we have a celebration it’s a celebration. When we have a funeral, it’s a funeral but you know nobody is gonna stay depressed for six months, because it’s just a part of life. There’s good things and bad things. In Samoan culture they’re very clear and you know there’s always people around you. And I mean I think that helps. Just like a group support system. You can find or make one always in your culture. And even if you know they don’t have all the right words or all the statistics, they’re still true. That this is not gonna be the way it is forever. So, you can cry, but you don’t need to cry for long.

One last theme includes the belief that there are worse situations that could have happened. This idea was articulated by Alofa, Jordan, Maile, and Tasi, who experienced varying severities of abuse. For instance, Jordan experienced unwanted touching and kissing at two points in her life by male peers. Tasi and Alofa were molested by family members, father and uncle, and Maile was penetrated by various objects by two male peers. Age during the experiences varied as well: 5, 8, 16, and 18 years. Maile states:

Also because I was embarrassed, that this was done to me not by full grown “men” but by kids not much older than me, although I know that shouldn’t really matter. I guess I thought that what happened, though it’s
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Disclosure of child sexual abuse is a difficult and complex process, closely linked to child characteristics, relations within the family, community dynamics, and cultural environment. Taken together, analyses of the complete narratives of the participants revealed five themes that influenced their disclosure experiences: protecting family, silence about unpleasant issues, self-blame, belief that things in life are temporary, and the belief that there are worse things in life that could happen. These findings align well with other studies, as noted, and do not seem to be specific to Pacific Islanders. For instance, accepting one’s situation and maintaining harmony in the family were reasons for nondisclosure among survivors generally across varied ethnicities (Fontes, 2005; Fontes & Plummer, 2010; Gilligan & Akhtar, 2006; Kenny & McEachern, 2000). Indeed, ideas such as shame and family reputation hold a central place in many cultures, and they shape our beliefs about the appropriateness of sharing unpleasant events. Within such an environment, even if these events are shared within the family, they are likely to stay there and will not be discussed again later. The emphasis on family harmony and family reputation can create great barriers to disclosure for victimization in these communities.

As women in this study often disclosed to friends and trusted loved ones, the consolation they received left them feeling more satisfied and supported than when they disclosed to their mothers. This apprehension to disclose such experiences to family members then impacts one’s willingness to speak with legal authorities or support services.

Dealing with the experiences alone was common among the participants. This has implications for service programs, especially those geared toward the Asian/Pacific Islander community, and may explain the under-utilization of services by Pacific Islanders. We need to develop policies and procedures that can respond to specific cultural contexts. Programs can be created to serve this population in a more private manner, and resources can be made available for them that can be used individually and privately. Culturally competent practice will effectively protect children and reach those who are in need of such service.

Caution should be taken in interpreting these findings, however. For one, participants in this study may not be fully representative of all Pacific Islander women with such experiences. These participants have all expressed feelings of peace about the situation and have learned to deal with and accept it. This characteristic may affect the themes that were found since the sample did not include individuals who felt that they were still struggling...
with coping. This limitation may be affected by the sampling procedure, which used hard copy and electronic modes of recruitment because of their convenience in reaching a large amount of people from various locations.

Another limitation in this study is that it included unwanted sexual experiences that fit different definitions of child sexual abuse. When comparing this to other findings, this discrepancy should be kept in mind. Other studies often have specific criteria in categorizing an event as child sexual abuse. A child is sometimes defined as someone under 16 years of age or under 18 years of age. In this study, the age limit was 18 years old, and the perpetrators included peers as well as adults. Other studies have clear definitions of child abuse, which usually include having a perpetrator who is more than 5 years older than the victim.

This study represents a qualitative analysis of disclosure experiences of Pacific Islander women who experienced unwanted sexual encounters at a young age. It is our hope that the results reported here can inform future studies that use larger samples for a more detailed analysis of the factors influencing sexual abuse disclosure among various Pacific Islander communities. Acknowledging and reporting child sexual abuse is not an individual decision. It is made in social contexts. Looking into the pluralistic nature of survivors’ experiences would offer valuable contributions to research on disclosure. Although the participants in this study were able to accept their experiences and become successful in life, it is our hope that their stories can help increase cultural awareness in service programs so that members of the community, both adults and children, receive effective protection and service.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge support from Central Washington University and Nanyang Technological University.

REFERENCES


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