

# **The Convergence of Social Science & Popular Culture in the Construction and Reaction to Sibling Sexual Abuse**

Jessica West  
Sociology  
University of North Carolina at Asheville  
One University Heights  
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisor: Keith Bramlett

## **Abstract**

Violence is perpetuated through the silencing of the victim; when the perpetrator is the older sibling and society has constructed a belief that the behavior is normative, the victim becomes invisible. As a result of their vulnerable position in society children are especially susceptible to multiple forms of violence, including sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse is forced or coerced sexual behavior that is imposed on a child where there is a substantial age difference between the perpetrator and the victim, and the victim is defined as being unable to give informed consent, by way of virtue, ability or understanding. The median legal age for consent is 16 years of age. In the eyes of society, including the judicial system, perpetrators of child sexual abuse cases are typically adults. Overtime the knowledge surrounding child sexual abuse has evolved, and for nearly three decades, research has continued to show that the hegemonic ideologies surrounding child sexual abuse are no longer valid. Studies of the lifetime prevalence of child sexual assault indicate that one in four girls and one in twenty boys will be abused by a juvenile. This paper provides a critical theoretical analysis of prior research surrounding sibling sexual abuse, while examining the hegemonic ideologies projected by popular culture and the bureaucratic responses to this form of abuse. Specifically, how have these intersecting themes influenced the conceptualization and construction of sibling sexual abuse? This research also addresses the question: what factors explain the theoretical and practical trivialization of this form of abuse?

## **1. Introduction**

Violence is perpetuated through the silencing of the victim; when the perpetrator is the older sibling and society has constructed a belief that the behavior is normative, the victim becomes invisible. Violence comes in all forms, and often the most long-term traumatizing forms of violence are at the hands of family members. As a result of their vulnerable position in society children are especially susceptible to multiple forms of violence, including sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse is forced or coerced sexual behavior that is imposed on a child where there is a substantial age difference between the perpetrator and the victim, and the victim is defined as being unable to give informed consent, by way of virtue, ability or understanding. The median legal age for consent is 16 years of age.<sup>[12,22]</sup> In the eyes of society, including the judicial system, perpetrators of child sexual abuse cases are typically adults. As a nation, the United States has strong awareness of child sexual abuse. There are websites dedicated to pinpointing the residences of registered sex offenders to make people aware when they are residing nearby. There are educational programs implemented in most schools across the country to teach children all the dangers that a “stranger” poses to their safety and to make them aware of the differences between “good touch” and “bad touch” and how to protect themselves from the latter. Overtime the knowledge surrounding child sexual abuse has evolved, and for nearly three decades, research has continued to show that the hegemonic ideologies surrounding child sexual abuse are no longer valid. This paper serves as a theoretical analysis of prior research surrounding sibling sexual abuse, while

examining the hegemonic ideologies projected by popular culture and the bureaucratic responses to this form of abuse. How have these intersecting themes influenced the conceptualization and construction of sibling sexual abuse? This research also begs the question, what factors explain the theoretical and practical trivialization of this form of abuse?

## 1.1 A History of Child Sexual Abuse

The current state of child sexual abuse began with official government intervention making child abuse illegal. In 1974 the Child Abuse Neglect Prevention and Treatment Act became a law that made it criminal offense to maltreat children. This included neglect, physical, and sexual abuse. With the enactment of this law, federal funding was provided to combat child abuse, which grassroots organizations along with medical professionals had been struggling to combat without governmental acknowledgement. Focus was placed mainly on physical abuse, as this type of abuse was easier to prove than sexual or emotional. Violations were deemed as criminal in nature and many parents and caretakers were convicted of abusing children in their care. This criminal culture would create the mold for how all perpetrators would be brought to justice. Though sexual abuse didn't really become a spotlight issue until the 1980's, milestones had been crossed in the protection of children. As time has progressed and more focus has been given to preventing child sexual abuse, a substantial amount of research has proven that children are not only vulnerable in the hands of adults but juveniles as well. One-third of all perpetrators of child sexual abuse are juveniles.<sup>[14,18]</sup> Dr. John Caffaro, psychologist and an expert on sibling violence, stated, "Most family system explorations of child abuse trauma still focus on father-daughter incest, despite recognition that sibling sexual abuse occurs more frequently."<sup>[5]</sup> This failure to recognize sibling sexual abuse as a separate form of abuse prevalent enough to be worthy of its own category is seen as a major setback in the advancement of prevention and ultimate treatment of this form of abuse.<sup>[28,39,41]</sup>

## 2. Dominant Discourse Surrounding Child Sexual Abuse

Who we are and how we identify ourselves results from our exposure to our own families and the greater society around us. We teach children to be honest, work hard and respect others. We individually teach boys to be strong, tough, aggressive, independent, providers and protectors showing no emotions other than anger. Girls are seen as calm, neat, proper and submissive. Men are raised to be breadwinners, women are raised to be wives and mothers; this is hegemonic masculinity. Often times we hear parents excuse the behaviors their children demonstrate based on gender. However, behaviors that children express in play settings are most often learned behaviors. Boys are encouraged to play with swords, guns, dinosaurs, trucks, and get dirty; girls are given dolls, kitchen play sets, princess stories and dress-up clothes to pretend to be fairies or princesses. Society has constructed these gendered roles for children, which begin before the child is even born. When a child uses violence to solve a problem it is often a learned behavior, or the parent has failed to teach the child effective problem-solving skills. Sibling rivalry is often the excuse for physical violence that occurs among siblings, and in part it is true that siblings won't always agree or get along. However, when the disputes become violent and that violence is dismissed as normative behavior, is when violence becomes learned as an acceptable behavior. This typically lends itself to a dominant-submissive role assignment among siblings. This imbalance of power dynamics lends itself to the possibilities of sexual abuse. Dr. John Caffaro states that "standard definitions" of child-on child sexual abuse are "difficult to delineate and are used variously throughout the research literature".<sup>[5]</sup> He refers to ever changing definitions as including "children with sexual behavior problems and child victims. Child-on-child sexual abuse may involve children of similar or different ages; may involve aggression, coercion, or force; may involve harm or potential harm; may occur frequently or infrequently; and may include minor or advanced sexual behaviors."<sup>[5]</sup> This abuse occurs across various socioeconomic statuses but with a common correlative theme of family dysfunction.<sup>[7,19,41]</sup> Dysfunction can occur in various ways, but is not limited to divorce, death in family, drug/alcohol abuse by parents, domestic violence, extra-marital affairs, distant or absent parents, emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse.<sup>[5,29,41]</sup> Caution should be used not to determine any one form of dysfunction as a cause of sexually deviant behavior, Wiehe warns, as "there isn't a single cause for the problem"<sup>[41]</sup> but an intersection of situations and preconditions that foster an environment conducive to an abusive sibling relationship.<sup>[41]</sup> Often for various reasons the perpetrator feels powerless and out of control of certain aspects of their life. For example, the younger sibling could attract more attention, get better grades, or the perpetrating sibling could be required to fulfill a responsibility role. This is to say that the older sibling has to act as caretaker and sometimes disciplinarian of the younger sibling while the parent(s)

are at work or away from home. Whether by gender performance, low self esteem, too much responsibility or by outright dismissal, the power dynamic is definitely shifted toward the perpetrator having more power and control than the victim in all cases of sibling sexual abuse. Survivors of child-on-child sexual abuse often report that upon disclosure that they are being abused, the adult whom they confide in responds with a blame laden statement such as one father stating to his daughter "how could you do that to us? [the family]", or this statement provided by a survivor "I was the scum of the earth...was a whore and a tramp and a slut,"<sup>[29]</sup> or "my mother once walked in on us and beat me up. She told me I was a slut, that I deserved it."<sup>[41]</sup> Those were just a few of the responses of the very few that actually disclose. Wiehe says that the very few families that do believe their children and stop the abuse "are not involved in present research."<sup>[41]</sup> He attributes this to the fact that those parents provided the proper nurturing environment for their children to deal with and overcome the abuse they had suffered and were given a safe stable environment in which they wouldn't be abused again. The typical response from parents to victims and perpetrators found within the context of the majority of research on sibling sexual abuse occurs in other not so nurturing ways, including re-victimization of the child victim by placing blame or shame upon them for not protecting themselves.

Dominant discourse surrounding child on child sexual abuse is that it is not as harmful as adult on child sexual abuse, and that the victim was a willing participant, and is often discounted as "exploration". Empirical evidence shows that juvenile perpetrators of child sexual assault actually use more force than adult perpetrators,<sup>[10,34]</sup> the abuse continues for a longer duration and intercourse is more often completed, and the perpetrators more often offend in groups and often have multiple victims.<sup>[26,18]</sup> In fact 41% of children in the study conducted by Carlson, Maciol and Schneider reported that they were involved with sex play with their peers. This is much different than the typical case of adult perpetrated child sexual abuse, in which one victim is generally methodically chosen and "groomed", meaning slowly convinced that they want to be an active participant, or that the abuse is something that the victim and abuser share that is special, by supplying gifts and candy in return for the child's sexual favors. Since generally more force and threats are used in the context of sibling sexual abuse and it generally occurs in conjunction with other forms of abuse,<sup>[5,41]</sup> it is no wonder that in a comparative study of survivors of child perpetrated sexual abuse and adult perpetrated sexual abuse, survivors of child perpetrated sexual abuse tended to have a higher percentage of social problems, attention problems, and delinquent behavior.<sup>[36]</sup> The effects of sibling sexual abuse vary dependent upon the mediators that children have available to them such as supportive parents and therapeutic services. These effects consist of shame, guilt, blame, withdrawn behavior, poor self-esteem, difficulty with relationships, over-sensitivity, sexual dysfunction, anger, depression, alcoholism, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide and even cases of multiple personality disorder.<sup>[41]</sup> Trust issues, impulse control, sexualized behavior, anxiety, aggression and health problems are a few more.<sup>[5,27]</sup>

## 2.1 Bureaucratic Approaches

One possible reason for this failure to acknowledge juveniles as a separate category of possible sexual perpetrators is because the mainstream definition for what constitutes sexual abuse of children does not neatly fit in most of these cases. This paper will specifically focus on juvenile siblings as perpetrators, to which an even more subjective definition is applied. The typical age range of perpetrators and victims varies. The Juvenile Justice Bulletin published in 2009 written by David Finkelhor, Richard Ormrod, and Mark Chaffin note that the peak age for offending, based on a sample of 13,471 offenders and their victims, is between ages 13 and 14 with their victims being under the age of 12.<sup>[18]</sup>

With the judiciary acknowledgement came the increased establishment of juvenile sex offender treatment programs, with the intention of rehabilitating juveniles to prevent future sexual offenses. It is known that the younger the age of intervention the lower the recidivism rate.<sup>[18]</sup> The problem is that the treatment programs are based on therapeutic systems, and are mandated by the criminal system. Criminal pathology and therapeutic frameworks do not necessarily fit neatly together to create a team effort. In a study comparing the interagency perspectives of child sexual abuse perpetrated by juveniles, the researchers discovered in a questionnaire that juvenile justice workers and police agreed that juvenile abusers should be seen as offenders not as victims, whereas child protection specialists felt the opposite.<sup>[35]</sup> This is important because as mentioned, the sex offender treatment programs are largely therapeutic and focus on the power imbalances and environment that the perpetrator was raised in, in conjunction with addressing the choices the perpetrator chooses to make. This is to say that there is still a criminal perspective, but it is not the main focus of these programs to demonize the offenders. While sex offender treatment programs are typically viewed as adult spaces for people with sexual fetish issues surrounding children, this is not the case for juvenile sex offender treatment programs. One should use caution not to associate the term

pedophile with juveniles, as generally juveniles do not offend with the intent of gaining sexual satisfaction, though this is possible. Juveniles who sexually abuse children tend to fit into two categories that are often not mutually exclusive: those who have been prior victims of sexual abuse and those who have a history of family dysfunction. As previously mentioned family dysfunction can present in various ways. Single parent families, domestic violence, lack of emotional support, illness, drug/alcohol abuse, and multiple studies show that specifically pertaining to brother-sister sexual abuse the father was absent or not consistently present.<sup>[34]</sup> Not all children who have been sexually abused will abuse other children, or grow up to become sexual offenders themselves. Similarly, not all juveniles who sexually offend have been victims of sexual abuse themselves. It is unknown why exactly some offend while others do not; the diversity of perpetrators, victims and actual offenses makes it difficult to explicitly define child on child sexual abuse. What is known and constant across all studies, is that victims are disproportionately female, and perpetrators disproportionately male,<sup>[18,34,43,29,36,7,28]</sup> a finding that is synonymous with adult sexual assault. The small populations of juvenile females that do sexually offend, approximately seven percent of all juvenile sex offenders, do so at much younger ages than male juvenile offenders.<sup>[18]</sup> Though acknowledgement of juvenile perpetrated child sexual abuse on the national level really began in the 1980's, hesitancy to acknowledge sibling sexual abuse as actual abuse is a battle that is still ongoing but within families rather than the judicial system. The notion that children are naturally predisposed to explore their bodies and the bodies of other children is a common one, and contains truth. In American culture children are socialized to keep their genitals or "private parts" covered, and often are not educated about all of the functions of their genitals. Some argue that this is because adults don't want to spoil the innocence of their children, or fear the repercussions of providing them with too much information. Covering is mainly an attempt to teach children early on to protect those parts of their bodies, without educating them about the purpose of those body parts. This has a counterproductive consequence, in that so much secrecy increases curiosity especially in the eyes of children. So when children explore those "secret" parts of themselves with their peers or siblings, it is seen as natural and dismissed. Empirical research published in 1994 found that women were at higher risk for child sexual abuse "if they received an inadequate sex education"<sup>[17]</sup>, and considering what has been learned about the age of onset, this education must begin earlier in life. If parents wait for the puberty talks (which speak nothing of abuse), the chances that their child has been sexually abused increase exponentially. According to the survivor accounts, the mean age of onset of abuse was age 5.<sup>[41]</sup>

Many parents find it uncomfortable to talk about anything sexual with their children, even sexual abuse. There is something to be said about teaching the youngest and most vulnerable members of society about the potential dangers that they may encounter. Education is a great mediator in preventing abuse, however, these programs are deficient. Since research shows that children who become victims of child sexual abuse most often name someone they know and trust as the perpetrator, and one in three of them are juveniles<sup>[18]</sup>, the rhetoric that surrounds child sexual abuse fails to make that connection to juvenile perpetrators. This can cause those educational programs to fail to protect children by presenting an inadequate representation of the reality of the issue of child sexual abuse. This is problematic because when children are confronted with a situation that doesn't look like the one they were taught to avoid, they become more vulnerable to coercion. From the perspective of survivors, reports that they went along with the abuse for a multitude of reasons including an attempt to appease their sibling, they liked the attention he/she was giving them, they were physically assaulted and threatened with further physical assault if they didn't comply.<sup>[41]</sup> Reasons for not disclosing the abuse afterward included threats with further violence for the victim, or their favorite pet, they were convinced that because they went along with the abuse their parents would blame them and thus cause themselves more harm or more problems.<sup>[41,34,29]</sup>

The Department of Children and Families was created to protect children and the context in which it was created is an adult perpetrator centered model. When sexual abuse became a criminal offense in the 1980's, the adult as perpetrator model of discovery and treatment was created and has been used since. Though there has been a dramatic increase in the number of juvenile sex offender treatment programs, from the judicial standpoint, the investigation model utilized by the Department of Children and Families hasn't changed to incorporate the knowledge that juveniles account for a large population of sexual offenders. Since this form of abuse occurs in the context of dysfunctional families, if DCF were notified of suspected abuse, their main suspect would be parents or other adult family members and the environment in which that child lives, often never taking into account the sibling relationships at all.<sup>[42]</sup>

### 3. Popular Culture

Socialization is the continual process in which humans learn to become functioning members of society. Socialization is largely influenced by popular culture and the ideals that the majority of people within one's society hold to be true. In the terms of sibling sexual abuse, it is no surprise that this form of abuse is not often acknowledged and when it is, it is with a deeply shameful context. The idea of performing gender and conforming to those socially constructed gender roles is enforced not only through parenting and real world socialization, but also reinforced through popular culture. Popular culture in the conceptualization of sibling sexual abuse is effective in teaching children their gender assigned roles. It is important to understand these roles completely in order to understand how they perpetuate this cycle of violence.

Reviewing the role of popular culture within the context of sibling sexual abuse is necessary to gain insights into the perpetuation of this type of abuse and to the reaction to it, both on an individual level and a societal level. Before delving into the specifics of sibling sexual abuse in popular culture, it is important to first observe children in the context of pop culture to understand the effects that mainstream ideologies have on children. Popular culture socializes children via various methods such as, toys, games, television shows, music, children's literature, and the Internet and is reinforced by other children in their peer groups. It should be noted that the ways in which children are socialized is typically dependent upon gender. The overarching theme of hegemonic masculinity can be found in every niche of childhood, even before birth. Sociologists Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt define hegemonic masculinity as "the pattern of practices (i.e. things done, not just a set role of expectations or an identity) that allow men's dominance over women to continue...It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men."<sup>[8]</sup> This is to say that the focus on the normative role of men set the bar for the placement of other men and women in the gender hierarchy, with the "alpha males" on top, the women on the bottom, and all other men finding some space in between. This dominance includes the fact that men are generally paid more, have more rights as far as their bodies are concerned, that women are raised as children to be the caretakers and the men to be the breadwinners, among other "gendered behaviors" that are socially constructed to perpetuate this ideology. Broadly speaking, parents raise their children to perform the gender expression associated with their reproductive organs. This gender expression is socially constructed to consist of boys being tough, aggressive, competitive, dirty, emotionally distant, oft times violent, and associated with the colors blue and green. Girls are taught to be docile, delicate, emotionally attentive, caring and supportive and associated with the colors pink and purple. Entire sections of stores are segregated based on perceived gender and children are discouraged from playing with toys that are for the opposite gender, baby dolls are in the pink section and are for girls, trucks are in the blue section and are for boys. Clothing is segregated in much the same way and marketed to children and their parents; boys, a sea of blue and green, and girls an expansive array of all things pink and purple. The dominance of boys over girls is instilled very early on and is perpetuated through adolescence and into adulthood.

Viewing the imagery found in the media marketed as appropriate for children, this notion of hegemonic masculinity can be observed. Since disproportionately girls are at a much higher risk of sexual abuse, this research will focus on the theme of female subordination found in popular culture, however this cannot stand alone without acknowledging that male dominance is required for female subordination, where there is one, there is the other. With increasing technology girls have at their disposal greater access to sexualized materials. Clothing marketed to children generally is a reflection of the clothing that popular figureheads in T.V. shows, music star's wardrobes, and adults or models wear. For girls many shirts are transparent or composed of tightly fitting material in conjunction with shorts/skirts that are extremely short, a direct reflection of the sexy clothing that can be found in favorite television shows, music videos, internet advertisements etc. The dolls marketed to girls most often reflect the hegemonic ideology of beauty in American culture. Make-up, unrealistic body image and clothing that is minimal such as halter dresses that are very short combined with stiletto heels. Some of the most popular television shows depict images of adolescent girls in form fitting mini dresses and provocative costumes. Shows depicting these highly sexual images are considered by television ratings as suitable for children as young as seven, such as the show *Victorious*. Similarly music videos have become overly sexualized. While all children may not have access to music videos, pop music plays everywhere in stores, restaurants, on the radio in the car, or at home. This exposure to sexual imagery depicted through lyrics is easily accessible to children. Songs with lyrics such as "Boys like a little more booty to hold at night" by pop singer Megan Trainor, and "you've got a very big shhhh, mouth but don't say a thing." by singers Jessie J, Nikki Minaj and Ariana Grande, or "I'mma say that I prefer them no clothes I'm into that, I love women exposed She threw it back at me, I gave her more Cash ain't a problem, I know where it goes" By Flo-

Rida and T-Pain are played on the radio. These songs, among many others contain sexualized material, all of which are about women being appealing to or for the entertainment of men. Perhaps the most important thing to point out is the sexualization of ads, which are available to children most easily via commercials, billboards, posters, magazines, and on the Internet. It is easy to recognize the reinforcement of the social construction of beauty through advertisement and girls specifically are socialized to be very aware of their appearance. This is in part by observing female role models in their own lives but reinforced through the projection of the female image within pop culture media. In a report by the APA observing the sexualization of girls, researchers concluded that “portrayals of adult women provide girls with role models that they can use to fashion their own behaviors, self concepts and identities.”<sup>[1]</sup>

The sexualization of girls in popular culture may seem insignificant in relation to sibling sexual abuse, however this paper argues that this sexualization of girls in the media strongly relates to the perceptions girls have of themselves in a sense of autonomy and agency. When they are shown images of and taught to model images of sexualization, objectification and taught to be subordinate caretakers they are more susceptible to victimization.

### 3.1 Sibling Sexual Abuse in Popular Culture

While there is little recognition of sibling sexual abuse as legitimate abuse with long-term consequences of the victim, it is not uncommon to see scenes of this abuse referenced in popular culture. Television shows such as *Game of Thrones*, which is also a book series, when two of the main characters that are twins are involved in a lifelong incestuous relationship, create a negative image of the two characters because they are engaging in this “disgusting” act. To deconstruct this relationship dynamic, in terms of causality, the children come from an obviously dysfunctional family, including the death of their mother when they were young, and the subsequent preoccupation of their father with conquering the countryside and maintaining his image as a war hero. The children were given free reign because they were essentially royalty (extremely wealthy) and left in the care of nurses and maids. Perhaps the most relevant part of this is the public image of incestuous relationships as horrendous and references made quite often to the disgusting nature of their relationship. Nearly every episode makes some sort of reference to the abhorrent nature of their relationship.

The number of people mutually participating in or believing in a meme enforces popular culture. In this instance the message concerning sibling incest portrayed both outwardly and more subtly is that it is an abomination and deserves punishment. This is also evident in other forms of popular culture such as the book “*The Other Boleyn Girl*” (based on) the life of Queen Anne, in which the girl (not yet queen) is involved in an incestuous relationship with her brother and ultimately births a deformed fetus which the story makes readers believe is the result of incest. Her relationship with her brother is later discovered and they are both tried and executed.

Though the dynamic is different, the reaction to the sibling incest is the same. It is received in a negative and inconceivable light. In part this is because of the media's desire to shock the viewers and/or readers to keep them interested, however the choice to use topics such as sibling incest could come from a more biological perspective. The images portrayed in the media serve as a projection of the ideologies held by the majority. That is how popular culture works. In a study published in 2004 by Daniel Fessler and C. David Navarrete, pertaining to third party reactions to sibling incest and the Westermarck hypothesis (first presented in a separate study in 1891), the researchers showed some evidences of the reaction of sibling incest as possibly biological. To be clear, the Westermarck effect is an idea presented by Edvard Westermarck in which the ideals of Charles Darwin and the survival of the fittest are applied through a psychosocial lens to attempt to explain why, biologically speaking humans are repulsed by the notion of reproducing with their siblings or those living in proximity close enough to be considered siblings.

In this study Fessler and Navarrete observe third-party reactions to a hypothetical consensual sibling incest scenario by collecting survey response data from UCLA students who volunteered to be a part of the study. Special attention was paid to male vs. female reaction and reactions of those who had been co-socialized vs. those who had not. The researchers concluded that co-socialized women have the strongest aversion to sibling incest and that on the whole, co-socialized participants have stronger aversions to sibling incest than non co-socialized participants, a finding consistent with Westermarck’s Hypothesis.<sup>[15]</sup> Taking it a step further, the researchers state that explaining sibling incest taboos with biology alone is problematic. Socialization is a form social control wherein, hegemonic ideologies are perpetuated, and could be seen in turn as a way of natural selection. Those who cannot abide by socio-normative behaviors are ostracized. Thus Fessler and Navarrete show that the responses to incest are not merely biological but also of moral reasoning: “The specific contours of incest taboos in any given culture may reflect either self-interested strategies employed by the arbiters of culture, cultural evolution favoring group-

beneficial norms, accidents of history or all of these.” (291). From a biological standpoint it would make sense that incest avoidance mechanisms would naturally occur to prevent genetic saturation and potential extinction, however, this biological component couldn’t alone account for the intensely negative reactions people have when hearing about incest others have committed, which Fessler and Navarrete attribute to socialization.<sup>[15]</sup>

#### 4. Methodological Approach

Understanding the social implications of being an unwilling participant or a perpetrator of this form of abuse, or a parent trying to navigate this issue with their children requires observing this issue through a methodological lens. This research evokes the methodologies such as the theory of stigma from sociologist Erving Goffman and double bind theory from anthropologist Gregory Bateson. Observing this form of abuse and its prevalence one must question how this continues to be unrecognized and perpetual. Analyzing the identities of survivors and perpetrators of sibling sexual abuse with the help of Goffman's framework of stigma, one could begin to understand why this is most often kept a secret even when parents do become aware. When popular culture perpetuates incest as disgusting, heinous, sinful, aberrant, and stigmatizes both survivors and perpetrators, the willingness to seek help and intentionally assume that stigmatized identity is slim.

The theory of stigma refers to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, and surrounds the maintenance of social identity. According to Goffman there are three different types of social stigma: abominations of the body, blemishes of individual character, and tribal stigma. The stigma associated with sibling sexual abuse for survivors, perpetrators, and parents alike fall into the second category, that of “blemishes of individual character.”<sup>[23]</sup> For survivors of sibling sexual abuse, the stigma surrounding the abuse can often affix labels such as “sex delinquents, participating victims”<sup>[9]</sup> among others. These labels can for obvious reasons evoke feelings of guilt, shame and self-blame. Of these stigmatized identities Erving Goffman says that those who are stigmatized may be unsure of where they will be placed by their social connections within the realm of the construction of social identities. “This uncertainty arises not merely from the stigmatized individual's not knowing which of several categories he will be placed in, but also, where the placement is favorable, from his knowing that in their hearts the others may be defining him in terms of his stigma”.<sup>[23]</sup> Goffman goes on further to describe how this sense of not knowing one's place or how others are defining them causes the individual with a stigmatized identity to be in a constant state of impression management perpetually “self-conscious and calculating about the impression he is making.”<sup>[23]</sup> This is to say then that victims of sibling sexual abuse are considering how people are perceiving them, if they are thought of as willing participants, shameful, or weak for not saying no or fighting back. Evidence for this was found in a study conducted by Karen Staller and Debra Nelson-Gardell in which 34 girls were interviewed about their abuse and disclosure. Girls said things like, “God I didn't say no so inside I must've been saying yes,” and “well when people find out it's really upsetting because sometimes they'll make fun of you. Sometimes they'll like, they'll make fun of you and they'll spread rumors.”<sup>[43]</sup> For perpetrators, the stigma of being labeled sexually deviant in conjunction with the adult-associated child sexual abuse stigma can lock them into the perpetrator role. Stigmas placed on individuals by the popular ideologies surrounding sibling sexual abuse also cause parents to be subject to the management of stigmatized identities. Goffman refers to this as “courtesy stigma”. This is stigma associated or inherited by someone who is merely a close connection to the stigmatized individual or individuals. Goffman says of courtesy stigma, “The person with a courtesy stigma can in fact make both the stigmatized and the normal uncomfortable by always being ready to carry a burden that is not ‘really’ theirs. They can confront everyone else with too much morality...”<sup>[23]</sup> Applying the theory of stigma to the issue of sibling sexual abuse in conjunction with the criminal response from the judicial system, the reluctance of parents to seek help from police and other bureaucracies is unsurprising. To seek help would be to accept the stigmatized identities that are attached to the labels that are tied to the category of this form of deviant behavior.

Simultaneously victims are placed in what Gregory Bateson names the double-bind. In this context it refers to the paradoxical position of victims involved in sibling incest. The victim does not wish to have the abuse continue, however disclosure can further disadvantage them because of the fear that they won't be believed or will be abused more violently by the sibling, or worse a parent. This is a paradoxical position referred to as the consequences phase of disclosure by Staller and Nelson-Gardell who summed it all up with one statement from a survivor: “They deny you, then they start to discredit you, and turn your whole family against you”.<sup>[43]</sup> Wiehe refers to the paradoxical position of being a child sexual abuse victim within the context of a judicial trial as potentially “psychologically devastating”, a result of the fact that sexual abuse/assault is the only crime that the burden of proof that a crime did occur is on the victim, even when that victim is a child.<sup>[41]</sup> Wiehe states that the fact that children often don't

explicitly say no, which is often a result of extreme power differentials between the abuser and victim, they can be “attacked by attorneys and discredited by juries” during the judicial process.<sup>[41]</sup> Thus this illuminates the double bind: If victims attempt to disclose in an effort to stop the abuse, they are subject to being ostracized or blamed for being involved, shamed and made guilty for not reacting to the abuse in an appropriate way, and simultaneously forced to defend their actions all the while trying to navigate through the effects of this often forceful and very traumatic form of abuse. Much like the situation of adult victims of sexual assault, this process is very alienating and the survivor may be left to navigate the trauma of the abuse alone.

The effects are serious for children who have been victims of sexual abuse, and the lack of treatment increases the likelihood that those effects will be long lasting. Simultaneously, it is commonly known that juvenile perpetrators of child sexual abuse in treatment have a very low recidivism rate.<sup>[18]</sup> Studies also show that victims of sibling sexual abuse respond best to therapeutic treatment in conjunction with a strong support system, and often times can exhibit little or no long term effects if this form of abuse is disclosed and handled effectively and swiftly, but not always.<sup>[41]</sup> “The unique circumstances of sibling abuse treatment frequently require a modification of the traditional systemic approaches. In treating victims or perpetrators of sibling violence, safety and accountability are front and center issues for the clinician”.<sup>[6]</sup> The aforementioned environmental circumstances that may be present within the home and correlates with the possibility of abuse must be addressed. For most families this is difficult, and blame should not be placed on the families. When Caffaro speaks of accountability, he is talking about the offenders acceptance that the choices they made have the potential to have lasting negative effects on their sibling, and that regardless of the home environment, sexual abuse of their sibling was still a choice. It may be extremely difficult to have a juvenile realize this while having them undergo treatment at home, as they are still within that environment, and it may not be best for the victim, as the perpetrator will still be there everyday. This can lead a victim to feel unsafe, and potentially provide opportunities of re-victimization in other ways such as victim-blaming, emotional abuse, physical abuse. This should mean the placement of the perpetrating sibling in a juvenile sex offender treatment program, and contingent on the severity of the abuse, a therapeutic foster home for the duration of treatment. Typically, these programs are only accessible through the judicial system and most require that the perpetrator be placed in a therapeutic foster home for the duration of treatment until reunification with the victim is possible, if it is possible. Simultaneously the parent must provide a nurturing stable environment for the victim at home. The key determinant of whether or not out of home placement for treatment is recommended is based upon the severity of the abuse (i.e. penetration).<sup>[5]</sup>

## 5. Rape culture

The process by which the society at large, bureaucracies, and families navigate juvenile perpetrated sexual abuse alarmingly resembles the way in which adult court systems and social circles navigate sexual assault/rape. This is problematic for many reasons, but from a sociological perspective the projection of rape culture onto child victims of sexual abuse by other juveniles is an alarming notion that may perpetuate those rape myths throughout life. As an example, in adult-adult sexual assault the common assumption is that there is a right way to respond to sexual assault, to fight back. If a victim of sexual assault doesn't fight back, then they are accused of letting it happen, or worse, enjoying it. This is the same for child victims in the trial phase of prosecution, often stating that children should've fought back rather than pretend to be asleep in an effort to sway their perpetrators from continuing.<sup>[41]</sup> Another adult rape myth is that women make false reports of rape, a myth that is all too common among child victims as well.<sup>[41]</sup> The myth of sexual assault as being perpetrated by strangers is also common in the context of child sexual assault. In the context of child-on child sexual assault, this is also a myth. A study of the lifetime prevalence of child sexual assault reveals that one in four girls and one in twenty boys will be abused by a juvenile, many of which are acquaintance peers.<sup>[44]</sup> Lastly, the belief that sexual assault survivors should forget about the assault is projected upon child survivors. The notion that suppressing it and moving on is the best way to get over it is seen in the responses received by children upon disclosure. The problem with this is that it in no way validates the feelings of the survivor and in turn tells them that any lingering feelings surrounding the trauma should be ignored, as is the proper way to “get over it”. When in fact the effects of child sexual abuse are often encompassing. These myths are a part of a grand culture surrounding sexual assault that perpetuates this cycle of violence. Rape culture consists of the hegemonic ideologies and actions of society at large. To take that same cultural mold and compare it with the set of normative reactions and ideologies surrounding sibling sexual abuse it would be hard to deny the overlap of themes present in both cycles of violence.



## 6. Conclusion

While advances have been made in the awareness of sibling sexual abuse, there is still much to be done to raise awareness and foster an understanding and supportive environment for the survivors. The bureaucratic services that are in place to deter child abusers from recidivism into adulthood must align with the therapeutic needs of juvenile perpetrators, as this paper has illuminated is a real need. Education surrounding child sexual abuse directed at children needs to be reflective of the reality of the situation and needs to begin earlier. The overarching theme of hegemonic masculinity is found in every aspect of popular culture and readily available to children. This is seen in the socialization of the normative gender roles that are ever present in the lives of Americans, which in turn perpetuates the subordination of women and girls thus making them more susceptible to sexual abuse. Especially in terms of the oversexualization and objectivation of women and girls in the media, women are glamorized for appearing very young meanwhile girls are encouraged to dress like the stars on their favorite media shows. The way that parents and social groups handle the disclosure of sibling sexual abuse tends to be negative and marginalizing, and often times further victimizes the survivor by blaming them for being sexually deviant or willing and attributing, which is one of the many rape myths that are found within the systemic trivialization of this form of abuse. Though the exact number cases of sibling sexual abuse are unknown because of hesitancy to disclose or seek bureaucratic assistance, it is known that juveniles are one-third of the total offenders of child sexual abuse, a population of offenders too large to continue to dismiss. The gravity of this form of abuse is so large and so harmful to the survivors that it is deserving of its own category apart from adult perpetrated sexual abuse. More thorough and holistic empirical research is needed to provide the groundwork for educational and therapeutic programs that should be readily accessible to parents without being required to unnecessarily involve the judicial system and potentially causing their children further marginalization and stigma.

## 7. Acknowledgements

First and foremost, the author would like to express deep gratitude to Professor Keith Bramlett for continued encouragement, direction, understanding and intellectual insight during the processes that produced this research. Thank you to Dr. Karin Peterson for providing insight and helping me to find a space conducive to producing this research. Most of all thank you to my support system, Eli, Autumn and Nellie. Thank you all for understanding the importance of this and fueling my drive along the way.

## 8. References

1. American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2010). Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>
2. Allardyce, S., & Yates, P. (2013). Assessing Risk of Victim Crossover with Children and Young People who display Harmful Sexual Behaviours. *Child Abuse Review*, 22, 255-267.
3. Beitchman, J., Zucker, K., Hood, J., DaCosta, G., & Akman, D. (1991). A Review Of The Short-term Effects Of Child Sexual Abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 15, 537-556.
4. Beitchman, J., Zucker, K., Hood, J., Dacosta, G., Akman, D., & Cassavia, E. (1992). A review of the long-term effects of child sexual abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 16, 101-118.
5. Caffaro, J., & Caffaro, A. (2014). *Sibling abuse trauma: Assessment and intervention strategies for children, families, and adults* (2nd ed., p. 362). New York: Routledge.
6. Caffaro, J., & Conncaffaro, A. (2005). Treating Sibling Abuse Families. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 10, 604-623.
7. Carlson, B., Maciol, K., & Schneider, J. (2006). Sibling Incest: Reports From Forty-One Survivors. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 15(4), 19-34.
8. Connell, R. (2005). Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking The Concept. *Gender & Society*, 19, 829-859.
9. Conte, J. (1994). Child Sexual Abuse: Awareness and Backlash. *The Future of Children*, 2(2), 224-232.
10. Cyr, M., Wright, J., McDuff, P., & Perron, A. (2002). Intrafamilial sexual abuse: Brother-sister incest does not differ from father-daughter and stepfather-stepdaughter incest. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 26, 957-973.

11. Double bind theory Psychology. (2002). Dictionary of Theories, 158.
12. Durham, A. (2006). *Young men who have sexually abused: a case study guide*. Chichester, England: Wiley.
13. Erooga, M. (1999). *Children and young people who sexually abuse others challenges and responses*. London: Routledge.
14. Erooga, M. (2006). *Children and young people who sexually abuse others current developments and practice responses* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
15. Fessler, D., & Navarrete, C. (2004). Third-party Attitudes Toward Sibling Incest: Evidence for Westermarck's Hypothesis. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 25, 277-294
16. Fineman, M. (1994). *The public nature of private violence: The discovery of domestic abuse*. New York: Routledge.
17. Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G., Lewis, I., & Smith, C. (1990). Sexual Abuse In A National Survey Of Adult Men And Women: Prevalence, Characteristics, And Risk Factors. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 14, 19-28.
18. Finkelhor, D., Ormrod, R., & Chaffin, M. (2009, December 1). Juveniles Who Commit Sex Offenses Against Minors. Retrieved September 6, 2014, from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/227763.pdf>
19. Finkelhor, D., Ormrod, R., Turner, H., & Holt, M. (2009). Pathways to Poly-Victimization. *Child Maltreatment*, 14(4), 316-329.
20. Game of Thrones. (n.d.). Retrieved September 6, 2014.
21. Gelles, R., & Cornell, C. (1985). *Intimate violence in families* (1st ed.). Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
22. Gibson, C., & Vandiver, D. M. (2008). *Juvenile sex offenders what the public needs to know*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.
23. Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma; notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
24. Grooren, J. (2011). Deciphering The Ambiguous Menace of Sexuality for the innocence of Childhood. 19.
25. Grosz, C., Kempe, R., & Kelly, M. (2000). Extrafamilial sexual abuse: Treatment for child victims and their families. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 24(1), 9-23.
26. Jong, A. (1989). Sexual interactions among siblings and cousins: Experimentation or exploitation? *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 13, 271-279.
27. Kendall-Tackett, K., & Marshall, R. (1998). Sexual Victimization of Children: Incest and Child Sexual Abuse. In R. Kennedy Bergen (Ed.), *Issues in Intimate Violence* (p. 328). Sage Publications.
28. Krienert, J., & Walsh, J. (2011). Characteristics and Perceptions of Child Sexual Abuse: Sibling Sexual Abuse: An Empirical Analysis of Offender, Victim, and Even Characteristics in National Incident-based Reporting system. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 20, 353-372.
29. Laviola, M. (1992). Effects of older brother-younger sister incest: A study of the dynamics of 17 cases. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 16, 409-421.
30. Loseke, D., Gelles, R., & Cavanaugh, M. (Eds.). (2005). *Current controversies on family violence* (2nd ed., p. 376). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
31. Lowenstein, L. (2006). Aspects of young sex abusers—a review of the literature concerning young sex abusers (1996–2004). *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 13, 47-55.
32. Olafson, E., Corwin, D., & Summit, R. (1993). Modern history of child sexual abuse awareness: Cycles of discovery and suppression. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 17(1), 7-24.
33. Ovenden, G. (2012). Young women's management of victim and survivor identities. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 14(8), 941-954.
34. Rudd, J., & Herzberger, S. (1999). Brother-sister incest—father-daughter incest: A comparison of characteristics and consequences. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 23(9), 915-928.
35. Sanders, R., & Ladwa-Thomas, U. (1997). Interagency Perspectives on Child Sexual Abuse Perpetrated by Juveniles. *Child Maltreatment*, 2(3), 264-271.
36. Shaw, J., Lewis, J., Loeb, A., Rosado, J., & Rodriguez, R. (2000). Child On Child Sexual Abuse: Psychological Perspectives. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 24(12), 1591-1600.
37. Smith, H., & Israel, E. (1987). Sibling incest: A study of the dynamics of 25 cases. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 11, 101-108.
38. Victorious. (n.d.). Retrieved September 6, 2014.
39. Vizard, E. (2013). Practitioner Review: The victims and juvenile perpetrators of child sexual abuse - assessment and intervention. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 54(5), 503-515.
40. Whittier, N. (2009). *The politics of child sexual abuse: Emotion, social movements, and the state*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
41. Wiehe, V. (1997). *Sibling abuse: Hidden physical, emotional, and sexual trauma* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

42. Ballantine, M., & Soine, L. (2012, December 1). Sibling Sexual Abuse - Uncovering the Secret. Retrieved October 6, 2014.
43. Staller, K., & Nelson-Gardell, D. (2005). "A Burden In Your Heart": Lessons Of Disclosure From Female Preadolescent And Adolescent Survivors Of Sexual Abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 29, 1415-1432.
44. Finkelhor, D., Shattuck, A., Turner, H., & Hamby, S. (2014). The Lifetime Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse and Sexual Assault Assessed in Late Adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 55, 329-333.