Breaking the silence: The stories of men who are survivors of childhood sexual abuse

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ABSTRACT
In this article, the focus falls on the personal stories surrounding men who were sexually abused in childhood. Questions are raised regarding the reasons behind the reluctance of male survivors to disclose their childhood sexual abuse. Research, programmes and information to assist men who were sexually abused are limited due to the predominant focus on female sexual abuse victims. The aim is to shed light on the experiences of such men and attempt to lift the veil of secrecy and stigma attached to male childhood sexual abuse in South Africa. The results of the qualitative study on which this article reports, suggest the prominence of society’s naivety and ignorance of issues pertaining to sexually abused men. Both differences and similarities, in relation to the experiences of the participants, are evident. The differing experiences within the stories of the participants are suicidal ideation, low self-esteem, flashbacks, fear of men in general, and mind-body separation. Similar experiences that are evident are their initial desire for secrecy, fear of what society may think of them, their desperate attempts to cope with and escape from the memories of their past, long-lasting effects such as a lack of trust and an absence of intimacy, and determination to move forward and prevail.

Keywords: childhood; coping strategies; hermeneutics; men; molestation; qualitative; secrecy; sexual abuse; silence; social constructionism; taboos

In today’s society, childhood sexual abuse is recognised as a disturbing phenomenon, yet the focus tends to fall on young females victims; and while boys are not entirely forgotten, “the focus on girls misleadingly implies that the occurrence of sexual
abuse among boys is rare” (Gartner, 1999, p. 19). Hence, a somewhat unexplored and minimally researched area of sexual abuse among young boys emerges.

Due to the predominant focus on female sexual abuse victims, research, programmes, and information are limited when assisting men who were sexually abused in childhood. It is therefore assumed that experiences of little boys and girls are similar and that their treatment should also be similar (Gartner, 1999). Consequently, “principles appropriate to female victimisation are inappropriately applied to males where they may do more harm than good” (Sepler, as cited in Mendel, 1995, p. 91). Accordingly, health professionals may fail to question abused males in a “male sensitive” manner. This potentially poses a problem, as explained by Drauker (2000) that disregarding the perceptions of males and their experiences pertaining to their sexual abuse, and by working solely from a female-based model, counsellors may increase the male survivor’s feelings of isolation and alienation.

Defining male sexual abuse also creates difficulties when researching men who were sexually abused in childhood, as definitions tend to vary across differing cultures, and over time (Davidson, 2008). Ultimately, this leads to confusion when defining sexual abuse, particularly within the South African context where multiculturalism is prominent. Until recently, where the new definition of rape includes all individuals and not only women (National Assembly, 2003), the prior definition within the (South African) National Policy Guidelines for Victims of Sexual Offences explains rape as: “Intentional, unlawful sexual intercourse with a woman without her consent” (South African Police Service, 1998, p. 2). This earlier definition completely rules out that men can be raped, or sexually assaulted or abused. Such a notion causes great concern, because, although laws and definitions have now changed, the changes are still new, and stigmas and beliefs take time to dissipate.

According to Sturt (2006), current research indicates that male survivors form the smallest percentage of individuals who disclose abuse. It has been found that “by analysing the average latency timing between the commitment of sexual abuse and its disclosure or request for help, boys are more likely to delay doing so than girls” would (Sturt, 2006, p. 126). This raises a few questions: Why do males not disclose their abuse; which factors contribute to their silence; and if and when they do come forward with their stories, why do they take so long to do so?

Towards addressing some of these questions, this article portrays the personal stories surrounding three men who were sexually abused in childhood, bringing a
human face to the issue of male sexual abuse (Mendel, 1995), as well as by lifting the veil of secrecy and shedding light on their experiences.

**THE SILENCING OF MALE CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE**

An in-depth look into the literature pertaining to the sexual abuse of males has brought to light different explanations as to why so little is known about male sexual abuse and the silence related to this phenomenon.

An initial thought is that the male victims are children. Children tend to fall prey to sexual predators because of the fact that they are children – helpless, defenceless, vulnerable, and weak. Boys may be seen as more of an “accomplishment” to many child sexual abusers, as males are meant to be tougher than females – innate within a patriarchal society that focuses on a culture of masculinity (Davidson, 2008). Thus, an innocent young boy unable to stand up and fight for himself, may become the target of a power-hungry sexual predator who has the desire to dominate and control.

Socio-cultural factors, such as cultural beliefs and poverty, may be further reasons for why so little is known about male sexual abuse. Respect and obedience to ‘elders’ within one’s family and environment are attributes that many South African cultures appear to emphasise through cultural socialisation, as a “commonality that cuts across the diverse ethnic groups that constitute ‘South Africans’ is patriarchy and acceptance of gendered social divisions” (Richter, Dawes, & Higson-Smith, 2004, p. 102). Boys are taught from a very early age the importance of “being a man” and providing for one’s family. To expose his abuser or abusers may subsequently result in a lifetime of silent despair and shame for the family as a whole.

Furthermore, McKendrick and Hoffman (as cited in Richter et al., 2004, p. 250) suggest that childhood sexual abuse is “interwoven with the pressures and deprivations of poverty”. Within South Africa, many male children are sent out to find work instead of going to school, consequently being left unsupervised all day and thus increasing their vulnerability of being sexually abused (Richter & Dawes, 2008).

Power tends to be directly linked to the silence surrounding male sexual abuse. Adults appear to gain their power and authority over children when they use their “child-adult authority scripts” (Richter et al., 2004, p. 104) dictated by means of socialisation and patriarchal ideology. In most societies, children “are brought up to trust unquestioningly and obey their parents and other adult authority figures such as teachers and clergy” (Richter et al., 2004, p. 65), thus rendering them vulnerable to those in power. For boys, living within a patriarchal society further pressurises them, as not only are they taught to trust adults, but also to look up to and emulate or identify with them – especially those who are in positions of power. These powerful individuals are regarded as “heroes” and are well respected within their communities. However, if these role models are the same people who abuse their
power and influence to sexually abuse these boys, what effect does this have on the boys?

Religion is further linked with the notion of power, and may thus be another contributing factor as to why so many victimised males have been silenced. Kurkjian (as cited in Richter et al., 2004) pointed out that the combination of religious hierarchy, male power, and a lack of child power, has created a situation that has become a high-risk for child abuse. A boy who has been abused by a priest or religious figure, may believe that he is betraying God and the high morals of the church, which may lead him to experience a crisis of faith (Frawley-O’Dea & Goldner, 2007) and feelings of shame and guilt, thus silencing him indefinitely.

A further factor is the taboo dimension that appears to be related to victimised boys (Sturt, 2006). This is especially prominent in most African societies, where the sexual abuse of male children is considered taboo and therefore rarely reported (Shumba, 2004). Boys appear to be extremely aware of the taboos and scandal associated with male childhood sexual abuse (Dorais, 2002) such as male vulnerability; erections equalling pleasure; and same-sex sexuality. Durham (2003, p. 30) believes that two central false beliefs reinforce male silence: “first, that boys who have been sexually abused will sexually abuse others and, second, that boys who have been sexually abused are or will become gay”. The idea that society may believe that sexually abused boys will become abusers could be such a terrifying and shameful thought that it could lead to secrecy and denial in an attempt to avoid being labelled.

Feelings of responsibility may cause a boy or man to not come forward with their experiences, as they may feel guilty about what has happened to them (Sturt, 2006). These males might believe that if they were to confide in someone about their abuse, they would be at fault. This may link directly to the taboos regarding males who have been sexually abused, namely: Because they experienced an erection, they wanted the abuse to happen – they allowed it to happen. Responsibility, guilt, fear, shame, and embarrassment therefore all appear to perpetuate the cycle of silence brought about by sexual abuse.

According to Mendel (1995, p. 3), a “significant proportion of responsibility for the underreporting of male sexual abuse must be placed on the doorsteps of professionals”. Sarrell and Masters (as cited in Mendel, 1995, p. 8) state that the “failure of the health care professions to recognize the possibility that a man can be sexually assaulted has influenced research on the subject; there has been none”. Thus, due to a lack of awareness, knowledge and research by health professionals, many boys and men may be “forced” into a lifetime of turmoil and silence.

Numerous factors appear to play an integral role in the secrecy and silence related to male childhood sexual abuse; why it appears to be so difficult for the survivors to disclose; and why society struggles to recognise its existence. These factors
have led to the desire to explore the “secrets” of male childhood sexual abuse. The methodology and research approach of this study now become the focus.

METHOD

Postmodernism fits in well with the intended purpose of this described study, which utilised conversation as the context in which expression was understood. Thus, the participants’ words, values and beliefs were the “wells of knowledge” from which this research has drawn its findings. The chosen epistemology was that of social constructionism, as this study was one of both co-construction and reflection, within the social context from which each individual comes; as well as the social context that was formed during data collection.

According to Berg (as cited in Mudaly & Goddard, 2006), qualitative research allows participants to “tell their own stories in their own voices, promotes new realities to be discovered by interactive dialogue between researchers and participants, and prevents the need to find simple answers to complex life issues” (p. 66). The participants were given the space and opportunity to express each of their realities. The participants were therefore viewed as co-researchers, which was imperative for this study, owing to the personal experiences that were drawn upon in order to gain insight and knowledge about male childhood sexual abuse.

Sampling

In determining the method of sampling it was primarily important to note that each participant needed to be an adult male, over the age of eighteen years old, who had been sexually abused, which must have occurred during childhood (before the age of eighteen years old). Additionally, as the focus of this article falls on South African men, each participant needed to be a South African citizen. Finally, due to budget constraints and the purposes of convenience, only men who reside within the province of Gauteng were considered for participation.

Purposive sampling was used in order to obtain suitable candidates for this study, meaning that the participants were “selected non-randomly but for some particular reason” (McBurney, 2001, p. 246). A shortcoming of purposive sampling is that it becomes difficult to know whether the participants who were selected represent the greater population (Neuman, 1997); however, in this case it was viewed to be the most suitable method for acquiring the needed sample, as the desired sample may be considered a “difficult-to-reach, specialized population” (Neuman, 1997, p. 206).

Due to the sensitive nature of this investigation, several collection methods were incorporated so as to obtain the required participants. Health professionals in psychological practices and clinics were approached, and other media such as newspapers and internet advertising were incorporated into the study in order to
maximise access to potential participants. Three participants were identified and selected according to the aforementioned criteria.

**Data Collection**

In-depth, semi-structured interviewing was employed as it presented a more conversational data collection method than formal interviews and focussed more on the participants’ self-perceptions, self-expression, and life experiences in a flexible and natural flow. In addition, such interview formats are considered to be useful in relation to researching both the experiences and events surrounding child abuse (Mudaly & Goddard, 2006).

A life story or narrative approach was also utilised. This approach “seeks equality and closeness and gives primacy to human action and lived experiences” (Durham, 2003, p. 33), emphasising the exclusivity of each life story. Thus, the narrative that each participant reveals is a uniquely rich and personal source of information. Lastly, this method is also appropriate due to the sensitive nature of this study, as it allows the researcher to engage with the lives of the participants on a more personal level (Durham, 2003).

**Data Analysis**

Hermeneutic analysis was used to explore the gathered data. Hermeneutics is an integrative research analysis approach, which fits well within qualitative research, postmodernism and social constructionism, due to its focus on “understanding” (Sarantakos, 2005). Hermeneutics aims to make sense of different forms of communication, by giving meaning to the “immediate context, social structures, personal histories, shared practices, and language” (Addison, 1992, p. 112).

Hermeneutic analysis follows five main steps in order to explore the gathered data. The steps are: 1) *Familiarisation and Immersion*, whereby the researcher is immersed within the text; 2) *Thematising*, where the themes within the data are found; 3) *Coding*, where similar occurrences are grouped into the same themes; 4) *Elaboration*, where the themes are focused upon more closely in order to gain deeper meaning; and 5) *Interpretation and Checking*, whereby the researcher checks upon the entire process (adapted from Addison, Terre Blanche & Kelly, and Wilson & Hutchinson, as cited in Rapmund, 2005).

**Ethical Considerations**

The Ethical Code of Professional Conduct (HPCSA, 2003), which governs all health care professionals within South Africa, constituted an integral part of this investigation. This was adopted to ensure that each participant was treated in a respectful manner, and did not at any point feel humiliated or exploited.
Confidentiality was ensured and each participant was provided with the option of using a pseudonym so as to protect their identity. The participants were informed of the possible advantages and disadvantages relating to their participation within this study in order to obtain informed consent. Furthermore, due to the delicate nature of this study, each participant was provided with a registered psychologist’s contact number for possible future therapy should they experience an emotional breakdown as a result of their participation within this study.

In focusing on these dynamics, the aforementioned methodology fits well within this enquiry. In following the described methodology, the participants’ interviews and stories become the focal point within the results and discussion.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In order to place the reader within the context of understanding these results, each participant is briefly discussed prior to the analysis of the results. Of the three participants, two insisted and consented to their true identities being used, these being Ronnie and Ashley. The third participant chose the pseudonym of George so as to ensure his anonymity and promote confidentiality.

Ronnie is a 36-year-old man who lives in the east of Johannesburg, Gauteng. Ronnie’s first language is Afrikaans. He is the youngest of five children, and has two older brothers, and two older sisters. Ronnie is currently employed as a Chaplain. He is also in a committed same-sex relationship. Ronnie was accessed through a counselling psychologist. He disclosed that he had been sexually abused for several years, from around the age of six, by several of his father’s male work colleagues. Furthermore, he had been sexually abused for three years from the age of 10 years old, by his one older brother, who was 15 years old at the time. It would appear from Ronnie’s story that on some occasions his abuse would be initiated more subtly (in a befriending way), and on other occasions in a more hostile manner.

Ashley is a 22-year-old man who lives in the east of Johannesburg. Ashley’s first language is English. He is the eldest of three children, and has a younger brother and younger sister. Currently, Ashley is unemployed. He is in a long-term heterosexual relationship. Ashley was accessed through a counselling psychologist. He disclosed that he had been sexually abused for several months by his male choir teacher, who was 16 years older than Ashley, when he was approximately 13 or 14 years old. He revealed that his abuser did not attack him, but rather, through the use of alcohol, was able to sexually abuse him when Ashley was in a drunken state. Upon further discussion, Ashley disclosed that his abuser was later arrested on molestation charges that were brought about by several of Ashley’s peers. Ashley stated that he had never disclosed his history of abuse to any authorities.

George is a 21-year-old man who lives in Pretoria, Gauteng. George’s first language is Afrikaans. He has one younger sister, is a full time student, and is...
currently single. George was accessed through a psychotherapy clinic in Pretoria. He disclosed that two different males had sexually abused him at different times in his life. The first incident occurred when George was eight years old. His abuser was a friend of his who was approximately 13 or 14 at the time (five to six years older than him). At the age of 16, George was once again sexually abused. His abuser was a music teacher within the church that George attended. In addition, his abuser was also a close friend of George’s family. His abuser was 16 years older than him (32 at the time). George made no reference to any of his abusive encounters being violent in nature.

**Similarities**

Within this study, several dominant and similar themes became evident within the participants’ stories. These themes are as follows: Secrecy; Ambivalence and Ambiguity; Coping Mechanisms; Long-Lasting Effects; Similar Abusers; Generations of Abuse; and ‘Know Who I Am’. These themes are further discussed below.

**Secrecy**

The notion of secrecy appears strongly embedded within each of the participants’ stories.

Related to this theme of secrecy, two sub-themes emerged which appear to be directly linked to why Ronnie, Ashley and George remained silent about the sexual abuse. These sub-themes are fear and rewards for silence.

**Fear.** The majority of sexually abused boys and men do not disclose their abuse out of fear of negative consequences (Spiegel, 2003). The notion of fear appears to be prominently evident within each of the participants’ recollections. Fear tends to be integrated into many diverse areas of the participants’ lives, with a general emphasis being placed on society and the fear that is evoked from societal norms. Societal fear seems to play a predominant role in the silencing of these participants, which links to Durham’s (2003) statement regarding how society has an influence on the personal experiences of those who have survived the impact of sexual abuse.

For Ronnie, his silence appeared to be the result of his fear of his actual abusers, who towered over and dominated him in an authoritarian manner; his fear of being physically reprimanded by his father, if he were to have found out; the fear of not being believed after confiding in someone; and the fear of being judged and blamed by everyone around him.

Ashley’s fear appeared to be precipitated by the respect and awe that he held for his abuser, as his abuser held the privileged position of being Ashley’s mentor. Ashley also commented that he feared that if he were to tell anyone of his abuse, his abuser would take away everything that he had given him. Furthermore, Ashley also
feared, and continues to fear, that those around him would judge and subsequently blame and condemn him.

George’s fear appeared to be a result of the trusting relationships that he held with his abusers. He feared betraying his respective friendships with each of them. In addition, George fears how others would react if they were to find out that he had been sexually abused.

Thus, fear and society’s influence, power and rules appear to be governing factors as to why Ronnie, Ashley, and George have remained silent about their sexual abuse for so many years.

Rewards for Silence. Within the participants’ stories, the theme of having their silence exchanged for “rewards” was blatantly evident. Ronnie stated:

The child abusers always give you something in exchange to keep your mouth shut . . . Nobody had to know . . .

Thus, in order for their abusers to ensure that Ronnie, Ashley, and George would not disclose their “secret”, each exchanged some form of reward with the participants. The “exchange” for silence is pertinent within this research study, and suggests that with some bargaining, abusers are almost always able to ensure the silence of their victims.

Ambivalence and Ambiguity

Within each participant’s story, there were strong themes of ambivalence and ambiguity, which appeared to be present in two different ways: Firstly, ambivalence was present through contradicting statements made within each of the participant’s stories; and secondly, through the notion of self-blame, where on several occasions blame was directed towards themselves, and then often denied when confronted about it. According to Allender (1995), the greatest difficulty regarding ambivalence is that it is capable of potentially producing immense amounts of shame and even contempt in those who have been sexually abused.

Coping Mechanisms

Finding a way of attempting to cope with the memories and physicality of being sexually abused as a child is found within each participant’s story. These coping strategies appear to become ways of protecting each participant from pain – physical, emotional, and psychological. The manner in which coping mechanisms were primarily evident within this study, were through escapism, mental blocking, and religion.

Escapism. The term “escape” arose on many occasions within the interviews conducted with Ronnie, Ashley, and George. Each participant attempted to find a way in which they could escape from reality – if not long term, then at least momentarily.
Ronnie appeared to find different ways of trying to escape his reality through art, drama, drugs, and partying, as tools in his attempt to flee from his past experiences. Ashley too had the desire to escape from his reality through the use of alcohol and drugs, and similarly, George used alcohol, nicotine and prescription drugs. The desire to flee from their abuse appeared central within the recollections of these participants, where escaping from their ordeals was a necessity for their survival.

**Mental Blocking.** According to Allender (1995), it is “as if the body is warring against the soul by blocking the memories or dreams that would unleash a torrent of anguish” (p. 167). In seeking to cope with their sexual abuse experiences, it became apparent that endeavouring to “block” their thoughts and memories of their abuse became a well established technique, especially for Ashley and George. In particular, Ashley made mention of how blocking negative memories has become an automatic coping mechanism for him, which he believes is the “easy way out”, to avoid worrying about his past experiences.

**Religion.** Ronnie and George both mentioned how they sought refuge and support in God and religion in an attempt to cope and move on. For George, a major reason for “coping” with his abuse is because God has given him the strength to do so. Additionally, Ronnie made mention of how he has “conversations with God”, both in prayer and through poetry, in order to help himself deal with his past. Thus, for these two participants in particular, their faith and belief in God appears to have been a way of coping with their past.

**Long-Lasting Effects**

The effects that Ronnie, Ashley, and George have experienced as a result of their sexual abuse have had long-lasting consequences for each of them. The major effects that appear relevant to most, if not all of the participants, are: A lack of trust; an absence of intimacy; sexuality questioning; and unresolved emotions.

**A Lack of Trust.** The inability to trust others appears to be a central theme within each of the participants’ stories. Each of the three participants made it clear that they have immense difficulty when it comes to trust, on any level. The participants understood the difficulties in trusting those around them as related to the betrayal that each of them experienced through their misplaced trust of their abusers, prior to and during their abuse.

**The Absence of Intimacy.** The desire for intimacy is lacking within the participants’ lives, especially for Ashley and George. Ashley mentioned that most of the time he is unable to be physically intimate with his girlfriend. This is because Ashley believes that he is “programmed” that way due to his abuse. Ashley stated that he also struggles to be intimately supportive, not because he does not want to, but because he just cannot do so. George appears to echo Ashley’s belief in a way, in that George spoke of how he is unable to be physically intimate. He differentiates
to some extent when he states that he believes that he is able to be psychologically intimate.

**Sexuality Questioning.** According to Mendel (1995), the long-term effect of sexual abuse on men appears to have a considerable influence on these men and leads them to question their sexual orientation. This was apparent within George and Ronnie’s stories in particular. In George’s case, his sexual abuse made him question whether or not he might be homosexual. Although these doubts had entered George’s mind, he currently believes that he is, and has always been, heterosexual. The opposite appeared evident in Ronnie’s story. He too questioned his sexuality, but he believed that he was, and currently is, homosexual. Ronnie believes that the incidents of being sexually abused led him to question whether or not he might be heterosexual. Ronnie believes that he has always been attracted to males, and as his abusers were male, he questioned if it would be better for him to be attracted to females, who were not associated with his abuse and pain.

**Unresolved Emotions.** Each of the participants appeared to have unresolved emotions in relation to their abuse. For Ashley and Ronnie though, their unresolved emotional issues appeared to spill over into other domains, at times causing them to experience emotional outbursts. What is striking in this respect is that both of them appeared to be ambivalent when they discussed their emotions. Ashley spoke of being unemotional, but then referred to his anger and volatility. Ronnie, on the other hand, spoke of how much anger he carries within himself, yet when questioned about his anger, he mentioned how he is no longer angry as he has “learnt to recover”.

**Similar Abusers**

Although the sexual abuse that Ronnie, Ashley, and George experienced, were all different, the profiles of their abusers appear somewhat similar in certain aspects. Each of their respective abusers was primarily an individual whom the participants trusted and knew. Each abuser was also seen to be in a position of power over the participants, either in relation to authority, dominance, size, or age. In addition, all of their abusers were male. In relation to Ashley and George specifically, each of them were sexually abused by their respective music teachers in a religious context – one being a choir teacher at a Christian school, and the other being the pianist for the church choir. Thus, the notion of religion and authority figures may have led to Ashley and George inextricably trusting these men, who ultimately betrayed them by sexually abusing them.

**Generations of Abuse**

An interesting aspect that emerged in the stories of Ashley and George is that both of their mothers had also been sexually abused in childhood. Although Ronnie never made it explicitly clear if any other family members were victims of sexual abuse, he
did mention how he and his siblings had been physically abused. This may link the
notion of “generations of abuse” present in these men’s lives – particularly, sexual
abuse in the cases of Ashley and George.

“Know who I am”

Endeavouring to maintain optimum ethical standards within this study, each
participant was afforded the opportunity to provide the researcher with a pseudonym,
so as to ensure anonymity, which enhances confidentiality. However, as previously
mentioned, of the three participants, both Ronnie and Ashley requested to have their
real names used. This appears incongruent with the nature of this study. It may be
deduced that a possible reason for Ronnie and Ashley wishing for their true identities
to be used, is that they no longer wish to keep their childhood sexual abuse a secret,
while they wish to possibly educate other men and boys who have endured similar
experiences.

Individual Distinctions

Individual distinctions also emerged amongst the participants’ stories. Each of these
apparent distinctions is further discussed, namely: Seeking Support; Suicidal Ideation;
Denial; Low Self-Esteem; Flashbacks; Fear of Men; and Mind-Body Separation.
These themes are discussed in relation to each of the participants. It is important to
note that there may be a possibility that each participant has experienced, or may
continue to experience, the themes that appear individually distinct from those of
other participants. However, only the themes that each participant discussed within
their individual interviews have been taken into consideration.

Ronnie

Seeking Support. Throughout Ronnie’s story, the notion of seeking support from
others as a way of attempting to cope with his abuse was evident. Even though
Ronnie desired to be alone as a child, especially during the period of his repetitive
abuse, he was able to seek support from a select few family members. He believes
that these individuals helped him to better cope with his ordeals. However, he made
no mention of any of these individuals knowing of his sexual abuse at the time.

Suicidal Ideation. Suicide is reported approximately five times more frequently
among male survivors of childhood sexual abuse than among female survivors
(Spiegel, 2003). The notion of suicide arose within Ronnie’s story and although
he currently believes that he would never kill himself, he spoke of how there were
many times in his life when he felt suicidal. He believed that the only way in which
he would be able to make the pain stop – both physically and psychologically – was
if he were dead.
Ashley

Denial. Denial may be regarded as a coping strategy that is commonly associated with males who have a history of sexual abuse; not wanting to talk about their abuse; or not wanting to be identified with the abuse in any way (Spiegel, 2003). For Ashley, his ambivalence regarding whether or not he wanted to even try and remember his abuse was a pertinent factor.

Low Self-Esteem. Ashley made mention of how he has both low self-esteem and low self-confidence. According to Allender (1995), low self-esteem appears to be a common characteristic in those who have been sexually abused. Ashley appears to link his being sexually abused to his current feelings of inadequacy, lack of self-worth, and poor self-image.

George

Flashbacks. An adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse often regresses back into his victimised role, when seemingly neutral stimuli trigger past memories (Frawley-O’Dea & Goldner, 2007). For George, his past memories of being abused are relived through vivid flashbacks of his sexual abusers, the physical acts of his abuse, and the places in which the abuse took place.

Fear of Men. George spoke of his fear of men. He stated that he struggles to make friends with, or trust, men, and believes that his “male-fear” is related to the fact that both his abusers were male. George further stated that although he currently believes that men are unable to hurt him anymore, as he is an adult, he still constantly struggles with his underlying fear of men, which appears to affect all of his past and present male-related relationships.

Mind-Body Separation. According to Adams-Tucker (as cited in Spiegel, 2003), peri-dissociation is often employed unconsciously as a coping strategy during and after abuse. This is a way of depersonalising and dissociating the physical act of being sexually abused from the thoughts and memories pertaining thereto. George found that he was better able to cope whilst being sexually abused by separating his thoughts and mind from the physical act of being sexually violated. George mentioned how, whilst being sexually abused, it “felt” as though it were happening to someone else, almost as if it were a dream. This depersonalised and dissociated George’s experiences, and placed them on a level whereby he believes it was, and is, “easier” to cope with.

RESEARCH STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This article reflects several strengths as well as limitations. An initial strength is the focus on breaking the silence of male sexual abuse, in order to allow not only those who were abused an opportunity to express their experiences, but also to
bring this awareness to society. A further strength of this study is that “benefit to the participants” is evident. Growth, insight, and change of the participants were never promised to them if they were to participate within this study. Yet, each participant appears to have found their inclusion within this study as one that has allowed them the freedom to express their repressed stories of abuse.

Additionally, “benefit to the field of psychology” is also considered to be a strength as the intention of this article is to create awareness, both to the field of psychology and science, as well as to the general public and society, regarding the sexual abuse of men in childhood. This article has shed light upon and created awareness regarding several issues that sexually abused males experience. Furthermore, this investigation has brought about additional questions and avenues for future research, which may further expand the scope and knowledge pertaining to the field of psychology.

The limitations of this research study tend to focus on its qualitative nature. This is so because it becomes impossible to be able to generalise the findings reported here to a larger population. Furthermore, purposive sampling was used, which non-randomly selects participants who meet specific criteria. Therefore, it does not allow for all the probable participants to stand a chance of being selected. A further limitation may be that the participants of this research study were open and prepared to tell their stories. As this research focuses on “Breaking the Silence” of male childhood sexual abuse, the information obtained from these participants may be somewhat different from what might have been obtained from participants who are struggling to open up enough to tell their stories, and thus are still engrossed within their silence. Lastly, the subjective nature in which the results were viewed and interpreted may also be considered a limitation, as the first author was immersed within the study and thus became a part of the study.

CONCLUSION
Society’s naivety and unawareness of issues pertaining to sexually abused boys tends to be prominent. As a society, people appear to fight for humanitarian concerns such as sexual abuse – yet we continue to discriminate against those very individuals who have been mistreated. The first author has come to realise that both stereotypes and fear govern what we, as a society, choose to acknowledge or decide to ignore. The more difficult the problems that we as a society are faced with, such as male childhood sexual abuse, the more we pretend that we do not see it.

In keeping with the overarching theme of this article, each participant in the research was given the opportunity to express his voice in relation to why he believes that there is a need to further research the topic of male childhood sexual abuse.

According to Ronnie, this research study gave him a voice to express himself and his experiences. Ronnie mentioned how he believes that this research will aid others:

_Well, I think it’s gonna [going to] help . . . because guys don’t want to talk about it . . . maybe I can help you to be a voice . . ._
BREAKING THE SILENCE: THE STORIES OF MENS WHO ARE SURVIVORS OF CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

For Ashley, the incorporation of this research into society is of vital importance. This is so that it can create awareness; not only societal awareness, but in addition, awareness for those boys who have been sexually abused:

There are a lot of guys out there that have been molested badly that won't come forward because they kind of, they've got so much pride . . . pride and embarrassment . . . I think it's just the fact of being a man, you don't hear it, you don't ever hear it, you hear about women . . . for a man it's completely demoralising. I think that's why we keep it a secret and carry on with our lives . . .

George’s view on the necessity for this research were highlighted when he made the following comment:

I'm really hoping that it could help men, I think it's half discriminating towards men that there's only this women and child abuse.

In taking Ronnie, Ashley, and George’s comments into consideration, it becomes evident that more research is needed and the focus should fall on men who have been sexually abused in childhood.

After everything that sexually abused boys and men have experienced, and all the secrecy that they have had to endure, the determination of the human spirit appears to prevail, as it does for Ronnie, Ashley and George. These men’s stories of perseverance are incredible examples of how, no matter what situation one is placed in, for them giving up was not an option. By voicing their own stories, these participants have indeed broken the silence encapsulating their sexual abuse, and by doing so, they have begun to pave the way forward into a more conscious and acknowledging tomorrow.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Hayley C. Medurić completed her MA Clinical Psychology degree at Unisa. She is also registered as a Psychometrist. Her professional interests lie within the realms of family and couples therapy, individual and group therapy, as well as play therapy; with a special focus on the relationships and social constructions between individuals, groups, and cultures.
Juan A. Nel is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at Unisa. As a registered clinical and research psychologist, he has contributed to several publications on same-sex sexuality, hate crime and also victim empowerment. He regularly facilitates experiential workshops in, among others, the “Skill of Group Facilitation” and “Counteracting Heterosexism”. Juan is devoted to community work and has played a leadership role in several structures that lobby for equality and human rights.

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