

Attitudes toward Sexual Abuse: Sex Differences and Construct Validity

JOHN BRIERE

University of Southern California School of Medicine

AND

DIANE HENSCHER AND KATHY SMILJANICH

California State University, Dominguez Hills

An "Attitudes toward Sexual Abuse" scale is introduced, and its reliability and validity in a study of university students is described. Attitudes supportive of sexual contact with children were associated with variables previously linked to sexual interest in children: male gender, use of pornography, greater numbers of sex partners, and greater endorsement of a scale measuring acceptance of sexual aggression against women. Such beliefs predicted both male and female university students' self-reported interest in having sex with a child, given the absence of detection or punishment, suggesting the potential importance of socially transmitted attitudes in the etiology of sexually abusive behavior. © 1992 Academic Press, Inc.

Despite a growing information base on the incidence and impacts of sexual abuse, considerably less is known about the perpetrators of such acts. Research available on this topic has generally focused on incarcerated sex offenders; individuals who, as noted by Finkelhor (1986), are "a small fraction of all offenders, and probably those who were most flagrant and repetitive in their offending, [and] most socially disadvantaged" (p. 120).

Far less investigated are the potential social underpinnings of sexual abuse perpetration in the general population. This oversight is noteworthy, especially since various writers have described the propensity for North American culture to in some ways support sexual aggression against

A version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, August, 1990, Boston, MA. Reprint requests may be sent to John Briere, Ph.D., Department of Psychiatry and the Behavioral Sciences, USC School of Medicine, 1934 Hospital Place, Los Angeles, CA 90033.

women and children (e.g., Butler, 1978; Herman, 1981; Russell, 1984). Malamuth and Briere (1986), for example, suggest that pornography and other media depictions of sexual exploitation or aggression can, under certain circumstances, interact with and reinforce cultural acceptance of sexual aggression, ultimately supporting sexual violence against women and children. This hypothesis is supported by research linking actual or potential sexual assaults against adults to pornography use (e.g., Demaré, Briere, & Lips, 1988; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981) and culturally prevalent rape-supportive attitudes (e.g., Burt, 1980; Malamuth, 1981, 1986).

The potential link between social phenomena and sexual abuse of children, per se, is suggested by two bodies of evidence. First, current estimates of sexual abuse incidence in our society are sufficiently high (i.e., 20–30% of all girls and 10–16% of all boys) to implicate broad social forces in the etiology of such acts (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1989; Russell, 1983; Wyatt, 1985). Second, recent research indicates that significant numbers of males in our culture describe some sexual attraction to children and that such interest is associated with certain socially accepted phenomena. Briere and Runtz (1989), for example, used a variety of measures to examine male college students' self-reported sexual interest in children. The authors reported that 5 to 21% (depending on the measure) of university males endorsed some level of sexual response to children and that these sexual interests were associated with increased use of pornography, greater numbers of sex partners, higher scores on Burt's (1980) Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence scale (a measure of attitudes supporting sexual aggression against women), and more frequent negative sexual experiences as children or adolescents. These data support and extend earlier findings regarding sexual abusers' use of pornography (Carter, Prentky, Knight, Vanderveer, & Boucher, 1987), involvement in a variety of sexual contacts (Abel, Becker, Cunningham-Rathner, Mittleman, & Rouleau, 1988), tendency to discount the wrongfulness and adverse psychological effects of sexual abuse on children (Abel, Gore, Holland, Camp, Becker, & Rathner, 1989), and their own childhood histories of sexual victimization (Groth & Burgess, 1979; Rokous, Carter, & Prentky, 1988).

As was noted by Briere and Runtz (1989), however, the relative unavailability of an attitude measure specifically tapping childhood sexual abuse limits investigators' ability to directly examine social supports for child molestation in the genesis of "pedophilic" behaviors. The closest approximation of such an instrument, Abel and Becker's "Cognitions Scale" (Abel et al., 1989), was designed to assess the cognitive distortions of child molesters, where such distortions are defined as "the products of conflict between external reinforcements and internal self-condemna-

tion" (p. 138). Such cognitions are thought to be invoked by the abuser as an attempt to rationalize his or her involvement in potentially injurious behavior by excusing his or her actions or by denying the negative impacts of sexual contact on children. As a result, the Cognitions Scale does not include certain phenomena of interest to a social causation hypothesis, such as beliefs that discount the incidence of sexual abuse, deny that abusers should be punished, or question the honesty of victims' abuse reports.

The current paper introduces a measure specifically designed to address this gap in sexual abuse research. An Attitudes toward Sexual Abuse (ATSA) scale was developed, and its association with various social and personal measures was investigated. It was hypothesized that, as suggested by Briere and Runtz's (1989) findings regarding sexual interest in children and by research on sexual aggression against adult women (Burt, 1980; Briere & Malamuth, 1983; Malamuth, 1981; 1986), attitudes supporting the sexual exploitation of children would be associated with male gender, pornography use, and frequent sex partners, and would predict subjects' self-reported willingness to engage in child molestation. Additionally, given research linking sexually abusive behaviors to men's personal histories of having been molested as children, it was hypothesized that ATSA scores would be higher for those subjects reporting a childhood history of sexual victimization. Finally, the current study utilized both men and women as subjects, in order to examine potential sex differences in this area.

METHOD

A total of 318 university students (106 males and 212 females) completed a questionnaire examining, among other variables:

- (a) demographics (sex, age, marital status, race, family income);
- (b) history of childhood sexual abuse, operationally defined as subjects' self-reports of sexual contact on or before 16 years with someone five or more years older (as per Briere & Runtz, 1988, and others);
- (c) number of sex partners in the last year, rated on a seven-point scale ranging from "none" to "12 or more";
- (d) frequency of having "read or looked at pornography in the last 12 months," rated on a five-point scale ranging from "never" to "often";
- (e) self-reported hypothetical likelihood of sexually abusing a child, adapted from Malamuth's (1981) "likelihood of raping" (LR) measure. Subjects indicated on a five-point scale how likely they would be to have "sex with a child" if they could be assured that no one would know and that they would in no way be punished. Because this item was likely to be negatively skewed, it was dichotomized as 0 (no likelihood) or 1 (some

likelihood), as per Briere and Runtz (1989) and as initially suggested by Malamuth (1981) for scoring LR.

(f) Burt's (1980) Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence (AIV) scale, which measures attitudes supportive of sexual dominance and aggression and which has been shown to predict men's actual and potential violence against women (Briere, 1987; Briere & Malamuth, 1983; Malamuth, 1981, 1986) and sexual attraction to children (Briere & Runtz, 1989).

Finally, an ATSA scale was created. Items were developed on a rational-intuitive basis, modeled after similar scales used to measure attitudes supportive of violence toward women (e.g., Burt's, 1980, AIV scale, and Briere's, 1987, Attitudes toward Wife Abuse scale), and reflecting the first author's clinical experience with sexual abusers. From an initial pool of 25 items, 15 were ultimately selected based on their face validity and the desire for optimal criterion coverage and content domain (Anastasi, 1988). Of these final 15 items, 8 were worded in the positive (abuse supportive) direction, and 7 were worded in the negative (abuse nonsupportive) direction to control for response set bias.

RESULTS

The mean age of subjects in the present study was 23.4 years ($SD = 7.9$ years), 80.4% were single, and 13.6% were married or living together. The modal race was Caucasian (34.3%), followed by Black (21.7%), Hispanic (20.8%), and Asian (16.9%). The median family income of this sample was \$36,000 or more. Fourteen subjects (4.4%: 4.7% of males and 4.2% of females) reported some hypothetical likelihood of having sex with a child were no one to know and given an absence of punishment. A childhood history of sexual abuse was reported by 69 subjects (21.7%: 20.8% of males and 22.2% of females).

The Attitudes toward Sexual Abuse (ATSA) scale had a mean of 27.15 and a standard deviation of 7.8. Kurtosis and skew were, respectively, -0.14 and 0.62 , suggesting a relatively normal distribution. Reliability analysis of this scale indicated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .72$).

Multiple regression analysis, using the simultaneous entry procedure, revealed a relationship between ATSA scores and male gender, use of pornography, greater numbers of sex partners, and greater AIV. Not related to ATSA scores were subject age, family income, or history of having been sexually abused (see Table 1). Separate univariate ANOVAs also revealed no relationship between ATSA and race ($F(4, 306) = 1.38, ns$) or marital status ($F(2, 311) = 1.35, ns$).

In order to probe the relationship between attitude scores and males' versus females' self-reported likelihood of sexually abusing a child, two $2(\text{sex}) \times 2(\text{likelihood of sexual abuse})$ ANOVAs were performed, one

TABLE 1
MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS PREDICTING ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUAL
ABUSE (ATSA) SCORES

Variable	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> <	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>F</i> (7, 291)	<i>p</i> <
Age	-.04	-0.75	<i>ns</i>				
Family income	.01	0.26	<i>ns</i>				
Sex	-.18	-3.28	.001				
Sexual abuse	-.01	-0.27	<i>ns</i>				
Number of sex partners	.15	2.78	.006				
Use of pornography	.11	2.05	.041				
Acceptance of interpersonal violence	.32	5.99	.001	.47	.22	11.79	.0001

for ATSA and one, for comparison purposes, with AIV. No main effects of sex ($F(1, 308) = 1.06$, *ns*), nor likelihood of sexually abusing ($F(1, 308) = 3.52$, *ns*), nor a sex by likelihood interaction ($F(1, 308) = 0.64$, *ns*), were found for AIV scores. ATSA scores, however, differed according to sex ($F(1, 308) = 23.64$, $p < .0001$), as per the multiple regression results, as well as according to self-reported likelihood of sexually abusing a child ($F(1, 308) = 20.11$, $p < .0001$). There was, however, no interaction between sex and likelihood of sexual abuse ($F(1, 308) = 0.65$, *ns*). See Table 2 for ATSA means and standard deviations.

DISCUSSION

The current study introduces a new measure, the ATSA scale, and presents data supporting its psychometric reliability and validity in the

TABLE 2
ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUAL ABUSE (ATSA) SCORES ACCORDING TO SUBJECT SEX AND SELF-
REPORTED LIKELIHOOD OF SEXUALLY ABUSING A CHILD

	No likelihood	Some likelihood	Total
Male	<i>M</i> = 29.71 <i>SD</i> = 7.77 <i>n</i> = 101	<i>M</i> = 36.60 <i>SD</i> = 9.53 <i>n</i> = 5	<i>M</i> = 30.04 <i>SD</i> = 7.95 <i>n</i> = 106
Female	<i>M</i> = 25.27 <i>SD</i> = 7.10 <i>n</i> = 203	<i>M</i> = 35.56 <i>SD</i> = 6.82 <i>n</i> = 9	<i>M</i> = 25.70 <i>SD</i> = 7.40 <i>n</i> = 212
Total	<i>M</i> = 26.74 <i>SD</i> = 7.62 <i>n</i> = 304	<i>M</i> = 35.93 <i>SD</i> = 7.54 <i>n</i> = 14	<i>M</i> = 27.15 <i>SD</i> = 7.83 <i>n</i> = 318

study of self-reported willingness to sexually abuse children. As hypothesized, attitudes supporting sexual contact with minors were correlated with those variables previously associated with sexual interest in children: male gender, greater numbers of sex partners, use of pornography, and scores on the AIV scale. Significantly, ATSA scores were predictive of both male and female subjects' self-reported interest in having sex with a child were there to be no negative consequences. Sexual abuse history, however, was not related to ATSA scores, suggesting that the link between sexually abusive behavior and childhood sexual victimization may reflect less socially mediated (perhaps more "clinical") processes.

The failure of Burt's (1980) AIV scale to predict hypothetical willingness to molest contradicts Briere and Runtz's (1989) finding of a relationship between these variables. The current data indicate that sexually abusive behavior may be supported most directly by attitudes specifically related to acceptance of child molestation, as opposed to attitudes supporting sexual violence in general. The correlation between AIV and ATSA, however, suggests that attitudes supportive of sexual child abuse may exist within a broader social matrix—possibly one that condones sexual exploitation of those with lesser social power. Interestingly, although this social dynamic is thought to be more common among men, males and females in the present study were approximately equivalent in their self-reported interest in sexually abusing a child, and ATSA scores (although higher in men) were equally predictive of males' and females' proclivity in this area. It is not clear whether this lack of sex differences pertains to actual sexually abusive behavior, or whether, perhaps, males are more willing to act on their thoughts or impulses in this regard. In support of the latter, almost all research on sexual abuse perpetration indicates a predominance of male offenders (Finkelhor, 1986).

Given the relatively small number of subjects who endorsed potential likelihood of molesting a child in this study, we cannot ascertain at present whether the relationship between pornography use, level of sexual activity, and potential sexual abuse is equivalent for both sexes. Recent research on sexual abusiveness in adults molested as children (Briere & Conte, 1989), for example, found that those variables associated with male sexual aggression were not predictive of equivalent female behavior. Clearly, further research is indicated in the area of gender and sexual abuse perpetration.

In addition to data on attitudes toward sexual abuse, the current study provides further information on the prevalence of sexual abuse in university populations. Twenty one percent of males and 22% of females reported having had sexual contact with someone five or more years older than they were, on or before age 16. The prevalence finding for females is congruent with other research reporting sexual abuse rates of 15 to

20% for university women (e.g., Briere & Runtz, 1988; Finkelhor, 1979; Fromuth, 1983). The abuse rate for males, however, slightly exceeds that cited by other studies. Previous research on university males has reported incidence figures of 9 to 15% (e.g., Finkelhor, 1979; Fromuth & Burkhart, 1989), whereas Finkelhor et al., (1989) report a rate of 16% in a large, nationally representative sample of adult males.

If replicated, the current data indicate that (a) there exist in the general population attitudes supportive, to some extent, of sexual exploitation of children and (b) potential willingness to molest children may be influenced by or associated with such attitudes. More research is clearly indicated in this area, however, since the present study was conducted on a convenience sample of university students, as opposed to individuals in the general population (Briere, 1992), and used as its only criterion measure subjects' hypothetical interest in having sexual contact with a young person. Further, the relatively small number of subjects indicating a likelihood of sexual abuse in the present study may further limit the replicability and generalizability of the current findings to other populations. Additional research might examine ATSA scores among various groups, including known sex offenders and self-reported sexual abusers in the general population, and might attempt to utilize more naturalistic measures of molestation tendencies. Such research might examine interest or involvement in other forms of sexual aggression (e.g., rape of adult women) as well, in order to rule out the possibility that studies such as the current one tap a general tendency toward sexual exploitation, per se, rather than a specific sexual attraction to children. The present research supports the appropriateness of research in this area, and validates the potential importance of research paradigms that include social variables—along with more clinical ones—in the investigation of sexual child abuse.

APPENDIX

ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUAL ABUSE (ATSA) SCALE

	Mean response ^a
(1) An adult and a child should be allowed to have sex together if they both want to.	1.30
(2) Sex between a child and an adult is likely to hurt the child in major ways. (reverse)	1.67
(3) Most children who report sexual abuse are telling the truth. (reverse)	1.86
(4) Children sometimes try to seduce adults. (reverse)	2.04
(5) Sexual abuse of children is much less common than some people believe it is.	1.81

	Mean response ^a
(6) Having sex with a child prostitute is sexual abuse. (reverse)	2.03
(7) There is nothing wrong with teaching children about sex by touching their sexual parts.	1.43
(8) Even if a 14-year-old seems to want sex from an adult, the adult still has no right to be sexual with him or her. (reverse)	1.80
(9) Little children rarely have sexual fantasies about adults.	2.77
(10) Many children would like sex with an adult once they tried it.	1.75
(11) Some 13-year-olds are so mature that there is nothing wrong with their having sex with an adult.	1.52
(12) Child molesters should go to jail. (reverse)	1.43
(13) Children sometimes say they have been molested to get attention, or to get back at someone.	2.75
(14) Sex with children is relatively harmless.	1.26
(15) Sex between a 17-year-old and his or her step-parent should still be considered a crime. (reverse)	1.76

^a Items rated on a 1 (disagree) to 5 (agree) scale.

REFERENCES

- Abel, G. G., Gore, D. K., Holland, C. L., Camp, N., Becker, J. V., & Rathner, J. (1989). The measurement of the cognitive distortions of child molesters. *Annals of Sex Research*, *2*, 135-153.
- Abel, G., Becker, J., Cunningham-Rathner, Mittleman, M., & Rouleau, J. L. (1988). Multiple paraphiliac diagnoses among sex offenders. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, *16*, 153-168.
- Anastasi, A. (1988). *Psychological testing* (6th ed). New York: Macmillan.
- Briere, J. (1987). Predicting likelihood of battering: Attitudes and childhood experiences. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *21*, 61-69.
- Briere, J. (1989). *Therapy for adults molested as children: Beyond survival*. New York: Springer.
- Briere, J. (1992). Methodological issues in the study of sexual abuse effects. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *60*, 196-203.
- Briere, J., & Conte, J. (1989, October). *Variables associated with the victim-to-perpetrator transformation*. Paper presented at the Eighth National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Briere, J., & Malamuth, N. M. (1983). Self-reported likelihood of sexually aggressive behavior: Attitudinal versus sexual explanations. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *17*, 315-323.
- Briere, J., & Runtz, M. (1988). Symptomatology associated with childhood sexual victimization in a non-clinical sample. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *12*, 51-59.
- Briere, J., & Runtz, M. (1989). University males' sexual interest in children: Predicting potential indices of "pedophilia" in a nonforensic sample. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *13*, 65-75.
- Burt, M. R. (1980). Cultural myths and support for rape. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *38*, 217-230.

- Butler, S. (1978). *Conspiracy of silence: The trauma of incest*. San Francisco: Volcano Press.
- Carter, D. L., Prentky, R. A., Knight, R. A., Vanderveer, P. L., & Boucher, R. J. (1987). Use of pornography in the criminal and developmental histories of sexual offenders. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 2*, 196-211.
- Demaré, D., Briere, J., & Lips, H. (1988). Violent pornography and self-reported likelihood of sexual aggression. *Journal of Research in Personality, 22*, 140-153.
- Donnerstein, E., & Berkowitz, L. (1981). Victim reactions in aggressive-erotic films as a factor in violence against women. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 41*, 710-724.
- Finkelhor, D. (1979). *Sexually victimized children*. New York: Free Press.
- Finkelhor, D. (Ed.) (1986). *A sourcebook on child sexual abuse*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G. T., Lewis, I. A., & Smith, C. (1989). Sexual abuse and its relationship to later sexual satisfaction, marital status, religion, and attitudes. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 4*, 379-399.
- Groth, N. A., & Burgess, A. (1979). Sexual trauma in the life histories of rapists and child molesters. *Victimology, 4*, 10-16.
- Herman, J. L. (1981). *Father-daughter incest*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Malamuth, N. M. (1981). Rape proclivity among males. *Journal of Social Issues, 37*, 138-157.
- Malamuth, N. M. (1986). Predictors of naturalistic sexual aggression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50*, 953-962.
- Malamuth, N. M., & Briere, J. (1986). Sexual violence in the media: Indirect effects on aggression against women. *Journal of Social Issues, 42*, 75-92.
- Rokous, F., Carter, D., & Prentky, R. (1988, April). *Sexual and physical abuse in the developmental histories of child molesters*. Paper presented at the National Symposium on Child Abuse, Anaheim, CA.
- Russell, D. E. H. (1983). The incidence and prevalence of intrafamilial and extrafamilial sexual abuse of female children. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 7*, 133-146.
- Russell, D. E. H. (1984). *Sexual exploitation: Rape, child sexual abuse and workplace harassment*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Wyatt, G. E. (1985). The sexual abuse of Afro-American and White women in childhood. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 9*, 507-519.