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THE MEASUREMENT OF THE PERCEIVED SERIOUSNESS OF
CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

by

Philip Randall Kropp

B.A.(Hons.), University of British Columbia, 1984

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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of
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APPROVAL

Name: P. Randall Kropp

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Title of thesis: THE MEASUREMENT OF THE PERCEIVED SERIOUSNESS OF
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Examining Committee:

Chairman: Dr. A. Roger Blackman

Dr. Ronald Roesch
Senior Supervisor

Dr. David Cox

Dr. George Tien
Research Psychologist
B.C. Forensic Commission

Dr. Raymond Corrado
External Examiner
Department of Criminology
Simon Fraser University

Date Approved: August 7, 1987

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ABSTRACT

While much research has been conducted in recent years on various aspects of child sexual abuse, little attempt has been made to define the concept itself. One way to approach this problem is to determine how the public views the seriousness of various sexual abuse incidents. The primary goal of this study was to determine if perceived differences in the seriousness of such incidents can be measured empirically. The study also investigated factors influencing the perceptions. Five variables - age of victim, relationship of perpetrator, nature of act, victim objection, and sex of respondent - were included in the 5-way design. The influence of subject age and experience of sexual abuse on perceived seriousness was also examined. It was hypothesized that individuals would perceive events involving younger victims, fathers, intercourse, and the use of force as most serious. It was also predicted that females would give higher seriousness ratings than males.

Subjects were 365 male and 421 female undergraduate students at Simon Fraser University. Each subject was required to read one of 36 vignettes constructed by combining four abuse variables. Participants were then asked to attach a seriousness rating to the vignette by comparing it to a standard with a pre-assigned score of 1.

The ratings were transformed logarithmically before analysis. It was found that perceived differences in seriousness

can be measured empirically. Support for four of five hypotheses was provided. Vignettes involving 3 year old victims were rated higher than those involving 13 year old victims, but this effect was only present with acts involving intercourse. Intercourse was considered more serious than fondling and exposure. Acts involving victim objection received higher ratings than those without. Finally, incidents involving fathers and teachers were generally rated as more serious than those involving strangers. Sex and age of respondent had no effect on ratings of seriousness. A substantial number of subjects, both male and female, reported having been abused as children. This factor, however, also did not influence ratings.

The implications and limitations of the study were discussed, including the need for a more comprehensive follow-up study. It was suggested that information from such a study could provide valuable feedback to the mental health and criminal justice systems.

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of child sexual abuse has received considerable attention in recent years both from the public and the scientific community. An abundance of research has resulted, focussing on prevalence rates (Finkelhor & Hotaling, 1984; Painter, 1986; Russel, 1983), epidemiological issues (De Jong, Hervada, & Emmett, 1983; Shah, Holloway, & Valkil, 1982), victim and offender characteristics (Pettis & Hughes, 1985; Wolfe, 1985), and the short- and long-term effects of abuse on its victims (Alter-Reid, Gibbs, Lachenmeyer, Sigal, & Massoth, 1986; Briere & Runtz, 1987; Browne & Finkelhor, 1986). Prevalence figures ranging from 6 to 62 percent, and outcome studies suggesting that victimized children experience more subsequent psychological disturbance than non-victims, have led to a general acceptance that child sexual abuse is a widespread and potentially harmful phenomenon. However, an important issue that has not been given adequate attention is the public's perception of the severity of child sexual abuse events. This topic is the focus of the present study, and has implications for sexual abuse research, mental health professions, and the criminal justice system.

Much of the research dealing with child sexual abuse has lacked a clear definition of the concept (Finklehor, 1986). This situation reflects a neglect of the importance of operationalization in the social sciences. Referring to the more

general topic of child abuse and neglect, Martin (cited in Giovannoni and Beccara, 1979) suggested that:

The issue of defining abuse and neglect is one of central importance and logically precedes any discussion of incidence, etiology, or treatment. The vagueness and ambiguities that surround the definition of this particular social problem touch every aspect of the field - reporting system, treatment program, research and policy planning. (p. 1)

Martin's comments can be applied easily to the more specific area of sexual abuse. Her view illustrates that definitional issues surrounding child sexual abuse are not something that merely should be researched more thoroughly but rather, as Giovannoni and Beccara (1979) point out, "they must be, before we can adequately deal with the problem" (p. 5).

A clear definition of what is being investigated is necessary to allow effective communication among researchers and between researchers and health care workers. The lack of agreement on a definition has been a problem in the past, as varying definitions of child sexual abuse have made the comparison of different studies difficult (Finklehor, 1986). Moreover, many studies have not even attempted to operationalize the term (e.g., Fritz, Stoll & Wagner, 1981; Landis, 1956; Walters, 1975). This latter situation is due in part, as Reppucci (1987) has pointed out, to an untested assumption that there is general agreement among laypersons, social scientists, and health care workers about what constitutes sexual abuse. One purpose of this study is to contribute to the testing of this premature assumption: Is there uniform agreement in the public

on what types of sexual acts involving children are abusive? For example, do all individuals feel that exhibitionism is a serious act? Is this more or less serious when it involves a father as compared to a school teacher? By investigating what the public perceives as serious, and what factors (e.g., victim age, use of force) influence its decisions, a definition of child sexual abuse could be constructed.

In addition to facilitating communication, an index of public opinion can assist researchers by providing a quantitative measure of sexual abuse in outcome studies. In the past, outcome studies have tended to group types of abuse together and have differentiated between acts only on the basis of type (i.e. fondling, intercourse, etc.. See Browne & Finkelhor, 1986, for a review). With knowledge of what is considered more and less serious, victims could be differentiated on the dimension of abuse seriousness. The influence of seriousness on short- and long-term psychological effects could then be evaluated. It seems possible, for example, that more serious types of offenses have a more profound effect on future coping or general functioning. Study of such a dimension would not only aid researchers; if outcome studies showed differential effects between victims grouped on this basis, mental health resources could be more efficiently allocated.

Public perception of seriousness also has implications for the criminal justice system:

An accurate measure of the seriousness with which society views a broad range of criminal events would be helpful to lawmakers and policymakers. It could, for example, provide a measure of the appropriateness of sentencing practices and assist in the allocation of scarce criminal justice resources. (Bureau of Justice Statistics, cited in Hoffman & Hardyman, 1986, p. 1)

Despite such recognition of the importance of public input, little work has been done by criminologists and/or forensic psychologists on perceptions of child sexual abuse. Nonetheless, it is conceivable that a public index of perceived seriousness could eventually provide valuable information about a specific subgroup of offenses. The applications might include court dispositions and treatment considerations for offenders. A less obvious implication might be to help explain reporting rates for various offenses. Finklehor (1984) has noted that public perception might reflect how people react to events. It is possible therefore, that certain acts considered to be illegal (e.g., indecent exposure) may be under-reported if they are considered less serious. Again, this point is not only relevant to the criminal justice system; report rates are of interest to all who are concerned about the prevalence of sexual abuse. A greater understanding of factors influencing these rates (e.g., offense seriousness) may help to explain the considerable discrepancies between reported incidence figures in the literature (Finkelhor, 1986; Painter, 1986).

A study measuring public perceptions of the seriousness of child sexual abuse should be designed following a consideration of four general areas in the literature. These areas are (a)

studies addressing crime seriousness in general, (b) issues surrounding procedures for scaling social variables, (c) the question of defining seriousness, and (d) previous attempts to measure public opinion of child sexual abuse. Each will be dealt with in turn in the following review.

Crime Seriousness: A Model

There is an extensive literature on crime seriousness that has provided a precedent for scaling child sexual abuse. The following is a selective review of this area.

The study of public perceptions of crime seriousness was a reaction to inadequate criminal statistics in North America (Riedel, 1975). Statistical systems, such as the Uniform Crime Reports in the United States and the Canadian Uniform Reporting System were not designed to measure delinquency - an essentially qualitative phenomenon - in quantitative terms. These systems were dependent upon legal descriptions of criminal offenses and recorded crimes only in terms of number and type (Akman & Normandeau, 1967).

Sellin & Wolfgang (1964) made the first comprehensive effort to improve the state of criminal statistics with their well-known work, The Measurement of Delinquency. The authors attempted to develop an empirical measure of crime seriousness which could assist criminologists in assessing changes in criminal behavior over time. They proposed that the data for

constructing a measurement instrument must come from the public:

The criteria for determining degrees of seriousness must ultimately be determined by someone's or some group's subjective interpretation. If weights were assigned by a few criminologists engaged in the task of constructing a mathematical model, we should regard this as an arbitrary model. But if judgments were elicited from theoretically meaningful and large social groups, consensus might produce a series of weighted values that ... would have validity (p.237).

The authors' stratified sample consisted of 251 students from two Philadelphia universities, 286 police officers, and 38 juvenile court judges. A total of 141 criminal event descriptions, ranging from property to violent offenses, were presented. Subjects were required to attach a rating of seriousness to each event.

The researchers used two types of procedures to record subjects' ratings. The first was an 11-point category scale commonly used to measure attitudes (Stevens, 1975), that ranged from "least" to "most" serious. The second was a ratio-scaling technique adopted from traditional psychophysics (Stevens & Galanter, 1957) that required individuals to compare a crime vignette to another standard vignette with a pre-assigned score. This procedure then asks the subject to attach a score to the first event based on its seriousness relative to the standard. The authors reported considerable agreement between these two measures and therefore chose only the ratio, or magnitude, scores for subsequent analysis. A detailed discussion of these two procedures, and the rationale for choosing one over the other, is provided later in this review.

Sellin and Wolfgang found that respondents were able to make ratings quickly and easily. As well, they noted considerable agreement between subgroups (i.e., police, judges, students) both about the relative ordering of offenses, and about the scores attached to them. Thus, Sellin and Wolfgang were able to construct an index of criminality based on the perceived seriousness ratings of the subjects. The authors' success at empirically measuring public consensus, and at demonstrating the applicability of a seriousness index to the criminal justice system, led to a large number of replication attempts (Bridges & Lisagor, 1975; Wellford & Wiatrowski, 1975).

The earliest replication of Sellin and Wolfgang's work was a study by Normandeau (1966) based on a Montreal sample. In this study, 232 French Canadian students scaled fifteen of Sellin and Wolfgang's original 141 offenses. Normandeau's goal was to help establish the reliability of Sellin and Wolfgang's index in a different cultural setting. General agreement was found between the ratings in the Canadian and American samples.

Normandeau's 1966 study served as a pilot for a more comprehensive project by Akman and Normandeau (1967). These researchers study used a sample consisting of 3 groups of French Canadian, and 10 groups of English Canadian university students. Akman and Normandeau used a magnitude scaling procedure identical to the one described in Normandeau's study. Only 14 offenses were presented. The data showed a very similar distribution to that of the same 14 events in Sellin and

Wolfgang's study; correlations between scores from the two studies were all above .90. As well, when the scores of the two studies were plotted against one another, the slopes of the lines all clustered around 1. The authors concluded that the Sellin and Wolfgang index was highly reliable in a Canadian context. This study was also noteworthy for the care that was taken to select a diverse sample representing all Canadian provinces.

Velez-Diaz and Megargee (1971) conducted a replication in Puerto-Rico. This study compared the perceptions of delinquent youths to those of a group of youths enrolled in a job training program. The researchers administered all 141 of the Sellin and Wolfgang vignettes. Rather than using the magnitude scaling procedure, however, the authors chose to record category scale scores. Of the 141 offenses, only 10 showed significant differences between the mean ratings of the two groups. The correlation between the groups for all of the offenses was .84. The authors also reported considerable concordance between scores of the Puerto Rican youths and the Philadelphia sample. The researchers concluded that their study provided support for Sellin and Wolfgang's prediction that there would be considerable agreement across subgroups and cultures on the perceived seriousness of crime.

A study in Taiwan by Hsu (1973) provided further support for the reliability of Sellin and Wolfgang's index. The author used a slightly modified list of offenses adjusted for language,

economic and legal differences between the Chinese and American cultures. Hsu presented a list of 14 offenses suggested for use in replication studies by Sellin and Wolfgang. The offenses were rated by groups of male and female students, police officers, and judges. In total, there were 547 raters. Hsu reported a correlation of .95 between the Chinese and American scores on the offenses. However, a comparison of the slopes of the two samples was a ratio of only .60, indicating that while there was agreement about the ordering of offenses, a cultural difference may have existed in the rate of seriousness increase across offenses. It was noted by Hsu that the Canadian group in the Normandeau and Akman study did not show this difference. As well, moderate differences between sexes were reported. Considerable agreement was found between other subgroups, however, adding further support to Sellin and Wolfgang's prediction.

Rossi, Waite, Bose, and Berk (1974) investigated the degree of consensus between blacks, whites, males, females, high school graduates and high school non-graduates. They used a stratified sample of 200 adults in Baltimore, Maryland. The stratification was designed to ensure that a representative sample was chosen with respect to race and income. Each subject was required to sort 80 of 140 cards describing crimes and place them into 9 slots labelled from "least serious to "most serious". Correlations between all of the subgroups ranged from .61 to .94. Unfortunately, the offense descriptions in this study were

not the same as in the Sellin and Wolfgang study, so direct comparison of the two could not be made. Nonetheless, the authors reported that their findings "indicate that norms concerning crime seriousness are widely diffused throughout subgroups of our society" (p. 1).

There have been a number of other cross-cultural surveys (e.g., Evans & Scott, 1984; Newman, 1976), and studies investigating subgroup differences (Boydell & Grindstaff, 1974; Thomas, Cage & Foster, 1976). In sum, strong support is found in the literature for the notion that perception of crime seriousness is a concept generalizable across culture, race, and socio-economic status. The Hsu study indicated that there may be sex differences in ratings, but this difference was not found in North American studies (Sellin & Wolfgang, 1964; Rossi, et al., 1974). Moreover, the replications of Sellin and Wolfgang's work clearly demonstrate that the procedures used by those investigators are extremely reliable in a variety of settings. These conclusions are important in two ways. First, it is clear that public consensus of crime seriousness can be systematically measured. Second, the procedures used by Sellin and Wolfgang could be useful for the study of public perceptions of the seriousness of child sexual abuse; the Sellin and Wolfgang model is simple, reliable, and ideally suited to the topic of seriousness.

By using Sellin and Wolfgang's methodology, a study on perceptions of sexual abuse could contribute information about a

specific subgroup of offenses to an already extensive literature base on crime seriousness. Rossi and Henry (1980) have noted that a much neglected area of research is that addressing seriousness ratings on offenses presumably close together in severity. They point out that most of the studies to date have examined wide ranges of offenses (e.g., property offenses vs. murder); subgroups of offenses, such as the sexual abuse of children, have not been investigated.

Scaling Techniques

The science of sensory psychophysics has provided a number of techniques that can be applied to the scaling of offense seriousness. The principle objective of psychophysics is to elucidate relationships between physical stimuli and human perceptions of those stimuli. A number of laws have been established during the past century that have added much to our knowledge about the relationship between physical and psychological continua. The well-known Weber and Fechner laws are two examples of contributions from this field.

The documentation of consistent psychophysical relationships incited a number of efforts to apply the principles of psychophysics to social variables. Finnie and Luce (cited in Stevens, 1975) with their scaling of attitudes, and Ekman (1956, 1959) with his attempts to scale a variety of social variables, were among the pioneers of this research. Stevens (1975) noted

that these efforts proved fruitful even though many asserted that sensory psychophysics enjoys a large advantage over its social counterpart because physical stimuli can be measured metrically. Social variables, on the other hand, are generally non-metric, or qualitative. Sellin and Wolfgang's verbal descriptions of crime events are an example. Stevens maintained, however, that stimuli need not be inherently metric for psychophysical techniques to be applied. He suggested that as long as there exists a way of discriminating one stimulus from another, such that the requirements of a nominal scale are met, one can proceed to scale whatever perceived stimulus attribute he wishes. In this way, Stevens (1975) concluded that "ratio scales of opinion require for their creation no underlying stimulus metric. A social psychophysics can therefore be made a reality" (p.228). The scaling of crime seriousness is an example of this social psychophysics.

Three basic techniques, all of which have appeared in the crime seriousness literature, have been used to scale perception of both metric and non-metric stimuli (c.f. Bridges & Lisagor, 1975; Galanter & Messick, 1961; Stevens & Galanter, 1957; Tien, 1983). The first and most popular technique developed, category scaling, requires the observer to assign to a stimulus a category such as strong, medium, or weak. These scales have often been a continuum of numbers, such as the scale from 1 to 11 used in the Sellin and Wolfgang study.

The second type of measure is essentially derived from the category technique. It involves marking off steps of equal variability, or confusion, along a category scale. This technique has been variously termed a "poikilitic" scale (Stevens, 1975) or, more simply, a "processed category scale" (Galanter & Messick, 1961). The procedure ignores the mean category ratings of stimuli and instead processes the confusions or overlap around the category judgements; that is, the measure reflects the variability of the ratings around an item. The scale values, therefore, are adjusted such that homogeneity of variance around the values exists.

Magnitude estimation is the third type of scaling method. This technique directly measures the subjective magnitude of perceived differences between stimuli. The magnitude, or ratio procedure requires the subject to attach a number to one stimulus after comparing it to another stimulus or a series of stimuli. The procedure was used alongside the category scaling technique in the Sellin and Wolfgang study.

Any of the three techniques can be used to scale attitudes, and therefore any would be suitable for the scaling of perceptions of child sexual abuse seriousness. In fact, the choice of scale is in some ways the privilege of the experimenter, for the scales have consistently been shown to be related to each other (Bridges & Lisagor, 1975; Sellin & Wolfgang, 1964; Stevens & Galanter, 1957). The relationship between the category and poikilitic measures has already been

described; the latter is simply derived from the former. The relationship between the category and magnitude scales (when magnitude scores are converted logarithmically) is concave upward. Finally, there is a linear relationship between processed category scores and the logarithms of magnitude scores (Stevens, 1975).

If any scale will do, how should a measure of child sexual abuse perceptions be chosen? The literature points to the magnitude scaling procedure for a number of reasons. First, Galanter and Messick (1961) and Luce and Galanter (1963) have argued that mean category scores do not constitute an acceptable scale. They pointed out that the numbers used to make ratings are quite arbitrary; any numbers, or letters, could be chosen in their place. There is no reason, therefore, to assume, as the category technique does, equal spacing between categories. Second, while Sellin and Wolfgang have pointed out that the processed category values are a better indicator of the subjects' perceptions, this technique is procedurally and conceptually more complicated than direct magnitude scaling. Third, magnitude scores, unlike category values, are the product of the rater, not the experimenter. This returns to the point made by Galanter and Messick concerning the arbitrariness of category values. It seems logical that if one wishes the public to define a measure such as offense seriousness, one should allow the public to determine the boundaries of the ratings. Finally, magnitude techniques do not have a restricted range

problem. Subjects are free to attach any number they wish. This assures that there is no ceiling effect, a problem with the few studies that have attempted to scale child abuse and neglect seriousness (see later sub-section). With magnitude techniques, the maximum amount of information about raters' perceptions is recorded. These arguments suggest that a convenient and appropriate method for scaling perceived seriousness of child sexual abuse would be the magnitude-, or ratio-scaling technique.

Defining Seriousness

There has been some controversy in the literature over how people interpret the term seriousness in a criminal context. Since virtually all of the studies in crime seriousness have not defined the term, it is extremely difficult to determine how decisions about ratings are made. For example, have individuals reported their own opinion, or have they reported what they perceived to be societal or legal norms? As well, there could be a number of other cognitive processes involved: Do individuals make judgements on the basis of perceived intent on behalf of the offender, moral indignation, or on perceptions of harm to the victim? All of these considerations likely represent components in the process of decision making about seriousness. The important question is what effect these factors have on individual and group ratings.

There has been very little research addressing concerns about varying definitions of seriousness. The studies that have been conducted, however, indicate that when definitions of the term are manipulated, the various conditions have little impact on ratings. For example, Reidel (1975) argued that more detailed knowledge of offense circumstances would alter subject perceptions of intent on behalf of the offender. Reidel varied such factors as "threat to the offender", "victim precipitation", and "hostile attitude of the perpetrator" (p. 205). He concluded that while subjects had little trouble inferring varying degrees of intent, these inferences did not reflect seriousness scores. The findings suggested that even if individuals vary in the degree to which they use intent to determine seriousness, this should not produce largely different scores.

A study by Travis, Cullen, Link, and Wozniak (1986) contributed indirectly to the understanding of this problem. These researchers manipulated instruction conditions such that items were variously referred to as "crimes, deviant behaviors, or behaviors" (p. 433). It is possible that these different conditions could produce different interpretations of the concept of seriousness. Travis et al. reported, however, that instructional bias had no effect on respondent scale scores.

Needleman (cited in Rossi & Henry, 1980) made an attempt to directly manipulate the definition of seriousness. He asked half his subjects to indicate a score of seriousness, and half to

give ratings according to the more specific criteria of wrongfulness. It was concluded that this manipulation did not significantly affect ratings, as correlations between .8 and .9 were found between wrongfulness and seriousness on all the items.

Another useful finding with respect to this issue is the consistent relationship in the literature between subgroups' ratings of offenses (e.g., Rossi et al., 1974; Sellin & Wolfgang, 1964). If demographic and cultural differences contribute to different definitions of seriousness, it is clear that these differences do not significantly affect seriousness ratings. Researchers should nonetheless remain cautious. Much more work needs to be done to elucidate the cognitive factors contributing to individual definitions of seriousness. Studies evaluating public perceptions of seriousness should attempt therefore to use random selection procedures, and should provide instructions that reduce the ambiguity of the term seriousness.

Attempts to Scale Child Sexual Abuse

It was mentioned that research on perceptions of seriousness in subgroups of crimes has been sparse. Only three studies were found that included any investigation of child sexual abuse. Two of these studies examined perceptions of child sexual abuse within the more general context of child abuse and neglect (Garrett & Rossi, 1978; Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979). The third

study was a comprehensive investigation of how the public defines the specific concept of child sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 1984).

The primary objective of the Garrett and Rossi (1978) study was to clarify the types of acts involving children that the public considered abusive. As well, they attempted to determine the effects that certain features of events (e.g. victim characteristics) have on seriousness ratings. To do this, the authors presented vignettes that varied according to type of act, consequences of the act, child characteristics, and guardian characteristics. The researchers also examined the effect of respondent variables on ratings. Only four of 64 vignettes could be construed as involving sexual abuse. Subjects were a stratified sample of 301 adults selected from Los Angeles households. The results indicated that (a) acts involving physical harm were considered more serious, (b) sex of child made no difference in ratings; (c) acts involving younger victims were given higher scores, (d) females generally rated offenses more seriously than did males, and (e) education levels were negatively correlated with seriousness ratings. Analyses on subgroups of vignettes were not conducted, and therefore it was difficult to determine the effect that sexual abuse had on ratings. Garrett and Rossi only commented that; in general, acts involving sexual contact were considered very serious. Given that the average rating was 6.7 on a 9-point category scale, however, it can be assumed that sexual abuse vignettes were

scored quite highly. For example, the authors mentioned that the mean score for a vignette involving sexual intercourse between parent and child was 8.6.

A similar study was conducted by Giovannoni and Becerra (1979). These researchers modelled their survey on the work of Sellin and Wolfgang. They developed a set of 78 vignettes depicting all types of child abuse and neglect. Included were 8 vignettes describing incestuous sexual abuse. These ranged from penetration to showing pornographic photographs to a child. The sample consisted of 1,065 Los Angeles citizens, 71 lawyers, 113 social workers, 79 pediatricians and 50 police officers. The ratings were made on a 9-point scale. Results showed that knowledge of consequences, and descriptions of younger children were related to higher seriousness scores. In general, public ratings were higher than those of the professionals. The sexual abuse vignettes had a mean rating of 6.95; the ratings ranged from 5.1 (fondling genitals) to 8.33 (sexual intercourse). There was general agreement between all subgroups about the relative seriousness rankings of the sexual abuse offenses, but police officers and social workers tended to rate sex abuse events higher than the doctors and lawyers. Female ratings were notably higher than those of the males on 28 of the 78 vignettes. Only two of these vignettes - sexual intercourse and suggestions to have sexual relationships - involved sexual abuse.

The Garrett and Rossi and Giovannoni and Becerra studies were the first attempts to measure how the public views the

seriousness of child abuse events. However, because these studies were focussed on the more general topic of child abuse and neglect, detailed analysis of child sexual abuse seriousness were not made. The only comprehensive effort to specifically address child sexual abuse seriousness was a study by Finkelhor (1984).

Finkelhor's sample consisted of 521 parents of children aged 6 to 14 in the Boston metropolitan area. Female respondents outnumbered males by approximately two to one. Finkelhor constructed abuse vignettes by manipulating 9 variables: age of victim, age of perpetrator, relationship between victim and perpetrator, sex of victim, sex of perpetrator, sexual act, consent, consequence, and sex of respondent. There were a total of 9,839 vignettes. Each subject received a booklet of twenty. Rather than using the more common procedure that asks subjects to give a seriousness rating (c.f., Sellin and Wolfgang, 1964), Finkelhor required subjects to indicate on a ten-point category scale whether they saw each vignette as "definitely sexual abuse", "definitely not sexual abuse", or something in between. Sixty percent of all responses ranged from 8 to 10 on the scale. The mean score for all vignettes was 7.5, with a modal score of 10. On average, female respondents rated offenses higher than men. Their respective mean ratings were 7.55 and 7.29. A regression on the 9 independent variables indicated that the two variables accounting for the most variance in the ratings were age of perpetrator and type of act; it was found that acts

involving teenage perpetrators and acts involving physical contact, such as intercourse and fondling received higher ratings. Four other variables - consent, victim age, relationship between victim and offender, and consequence were statistically significant, but did not explain a practically useful amount of variance in the regression equation.

The Finkelhor study remains a significant contribution because of its uniqueness in focussing specifically on public perceptions of child sexual abuse, and because of its attempt to isolate the effects of several variables on subjects' ratings. There were, though, some problems that resulted from the procedures used by Finkelhor. First, the biased sample used in the study limited the generalizability of the findings; a group of parents of children aged 6 to 14 is not representative of the public. Second, the category scaling technique used in the study produced what Finkelhor himself termed a ceiling effect on the ratings (i.e. a mean rating of 7.5). The skewed distribution of the data placed a restriction on the analyses that could be made. It should be noted that this effect also seemed to be present in the Garrett and Rossi and the Giovannoni and Becerra studies; the sexual abuse vignettes in these surveys were also rated very high. These results illustrate the restriction of range problems resulting from the use of category scaling techniques. The problem suggests that future studies of public opinion of child sexual abuse should use more flexible rating procedures, such as the magnitude scaling technique.

The ceiling effect in Finkelhor's study was likely exacerbated by the wording of the instructions. The approach of asking subjects to indicate whether or not an act was definitely sexual abuse could have created a dichotomous choice for the respondent. This might explain the modal score of 10 in Finkelhor's study as subjects tended to see many acts as definitely abuse, and not as points on a continuum. If the study had instead asked for a seriousness rating, a more normal distribution might have resulted and it may have been easier to differentiate events on the basis of public perception. This issue points again to the potential usefulness of the Sellin and Wolfgang procedures for measuring perceptions of the seriousness of child sexual abuse.

The Present Study

Based on the review of the literature, the present study was designed as follows:

1. The basic procedures used in this study are modelled after the work of Sellin and Wolfgang (1964). Their technique of scaling crime seriousness, which involves the presentation of a series of offense vignettes, has proven to be reliable in a wide range of settings. The procedures can also be logically extended to the measurement of perceptions of child sexual abuse.
2. The magnitude scaling technique was chosen for use in this

study because it avoids the problems of restricted range in seriousness ratings. As well, scores resulting from this procedure can be considered the product of the subject, not the experimenter.

3. To reduce the ambiguity of the term seriousness, instructions were modified to indicate that raters should base their scores on their own impression of the abuse acts and not according to perceived legal or societal norms.
4. The vignettes presented to raters were adopted from the Finkelhor (1984) study. The study provided clear and precise definitions that were conveniently suited for this investigation. Four of the Finkelhor vignette variables were chosen for manipulation in the design: victim objection (a more appropriate label for Finkelhor's variable, "consent"), nature of act, the identity of the perpetrator, and victim age. As well, it was decided to investigate the effect of the subject variable, sex of respondent, on seriousness ratings. These variables, along with four others used by Finkelhor, were originally chosen because of their appearance in debates about norms surrounding child sexual abuse (Finkelhor, 1984). The number of variables was reduced from nine to five primarily for economic reasons; the number of subjects needed, and time required for a more comprehensive study were not available. A review of the literature, however, was also helpful for deciding which variables might be of interest in the context of seriousness ratings. For example, child sexual abuse outcome studies

suggest that the types of abuse that are most damaging to victims involve force, genital contact, and father figures (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Groth, 1978; MacFarlane, 1978). As well, age of victim has been a significant factor in some outcome studies (Courtois, 1979; Meiselman, 1978) and turned out to affect seriousness ratings in in both the Giovannoni and Becerra and Garrett and Rossi studies. Sex of respondent has also been seen to affect ratings in a number of studies (e.g., Hsu, 1973; Garrett & Rossi, 1978; Finkelhor, 1984). All of the variables chosen were statistically significant in the Finkelhor (1984) study.

Hypotheses

The principle aim of this study was to investigate whether or not perceived seriousness of child sexual abuse could be measured. As well, the following hypotheses were made about the effects that certain vignette and subject factors would have on seriousness ratings.

Vignette Factors

1. Vignettes describing victim objection will be rated as more serious than those without such a description. This variable was also significant in the Finkelhor (1984) study.
2. Acts involving intercourse will be rated higher than those involving fondling of genitals. Both of these categories will be seen as more serious than exposure. This effect was

also described in the Finkelhor's (1984) results.

3. Based on literature discussing the existence of the incest taboo (e.g. Courtois, 1980; Henderson, 1983; Lindberg & Distad, 1985), it was predicted that offenses involving the child's natural father will be viewed as more serious than abuse with other perpetrators.
4. Incidents involving younger victims will be rated as more serious than incidents involving older victims (cf., Finkelhor, 1984; Garrett & Rossi, 1978).

Subject Factors

5. Female respondents will rate offenses higher than male respondents. This prediction is consistent with the Hsu (1973), Giovannoni & Becarra (1979), Garrett and Rossi (1978), and Finkelhor (1984) studies.

It was decided that information about the respondents' age and experience with child sexual abuse should be collected to determine if these factors influence seriousness ratings. These variables are not discussed in the literature, however, so no specific hypotheses were made about their effects.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 365 male and 421 female undergraduate students in the Faculty of Arts at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C.. Ages ranged from 16 to 68 years, with a mean of 24 years. A total of 801 questionnaires were distributed but 15 recipients (6 male, 9 female) either did not complete or did not return their questionnaires.

Questionnaires and Design

Vignettes

Each subject was given one of 36 questionnaires, each containing two vignettes depicting child sexual abuse events. The first vignette was a standard that appeared on all the questionnaires. It described a 35 year old male taking nude pictures of his 13 year old daughter. The second vignette varied according to combinations of four independent variables. These variables were victim objection (objected, did not object), nature of act (intercourse, fondling, exposure), identity of perpetrator (father, teacher, stranger), and age of victim (3 years old, 13 years old). The combination of these factors yielded 36 different vignettes (see Appendix A).

Subject Information

In order to differentiate between male and female respondents, two colors of questionnaires (yellow and white) were used. With this factor included, the overall between-groups design was $2 \times 3 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2$ (72 cells).

Each subject was also asked to provide his or her birthdate, and three questions addressing the participants' personal experiences with child sexual abuse were presented. Subjects were asked to indicate whether or not (a) they had been abused, (b) a family member had been abused, and (c) a friend or acquaintance had been abused. The British Columbia Ministry of Human Resource's definition of child sexual abuse was included (Ministry of Human Resources, 1985). A sample questionnaire is presented in Appendix B.

Procedure

The students were addressed at the end of course lectures and tutorials. They were told that the study was an evaluation of public perceptions of the seriousness of child sexual abuse. The nature of the questionnaire was also described and all were informed that participation was strictly voluntary and anonymous. Questionnaires were then distributed to those wishing to take part. Individuals not participating were permitted to leave the room.

The following instructions appeared on all the questionnaires:

This page describes two sexual abuse violations. The first violation has been given a score of 1. Use this violation as a standard to judge how serious you think the second act is. For example, if the second violation seems twice as bad as the first, write down a score of 2. If it is 10 times as serious write a score of 10. If it is only half as serious write a score of 1/2. You may use any number in your rating as long as it is greater than 0. Remember, your task is to show how serious you think the violation is, not what the law says or what you think society in general would say.

The questionnaires were distributed randomly. The collection of data was complete when at least 10 males and 10 females had responded to each of the 36 vignettes. This was achieved with maximum efficiency by distributing the questionnaires in sets of 36. All questionnaires in a set were administered before the next set was circulated. As well, any questionnaires that were spoiled or not returned were replaced.

The female students in the classes outnumbered the male students. Thus the required number of female respondents was reached before that of the males. At this point, it was decided to continue administering questionnaires to females while completing the data collection for male subjects. This affected the design by placing approximately 12 females in each cell as compared to (no less than) 10 males. The eleventh and twelfth questionnaires for both sexes were marked, however, so that the first 10 subjects in each cell could be identified.

The subjects were asked to fold the questionnaires in half upon completion and return them to the experimenter. As the subjects were leaving, information about community resources dealing with child sexual abuse was made available. This was done because of the sensitive nature of the questionnaire material, and the possibility that it could provoke discomfort or unpleasant memories for the participants. The students were also given the name and office number of the experimenter.

RESULTS

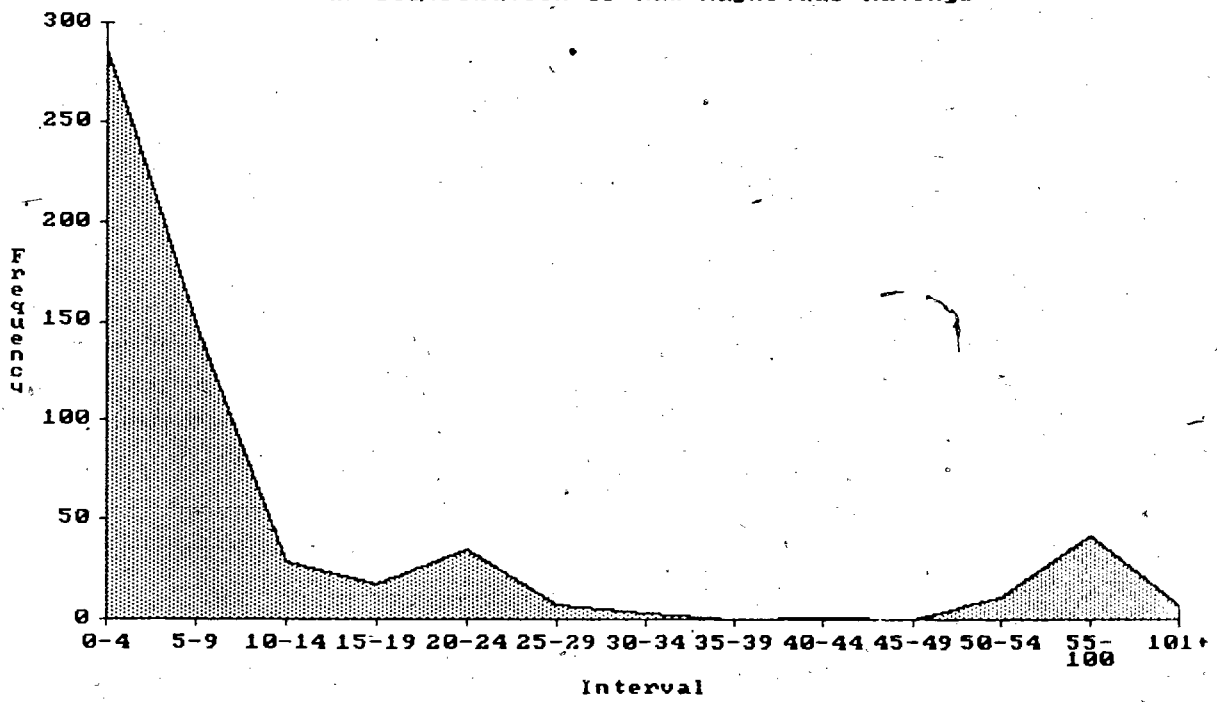
The magnitude seriousness ratings ranged from .10 to 1 billion. However, most of the scores (98%) were between 1 and 1000. The seven ratings that exceeded 1000 were designated as outliers and excluded from data analysis because of the disproportionate effect that they would have on group mean scores. The remaining 779 ratings were transformed logarithmically (base e) to normalize the distribution of scores and to homogenize the group variances. The distributions of raw magnitude scores and transformed scores are displayed in Figure 1. The mean log score was 1.72 with a standard deviation of 1.22. The scores ranged from -3.91 to 4.61. The transformed score for the standard vignette was 0.

Vignette Ratings

The mean ratings for the 36 vignettes are presented in Table 1. Table 2 lists the vignettes in order of mean perceived seriousness. The lowest mean rating ($M = 0.35$) was given to the description of a stranger exposing himself to a 13 year-old girl with no victim objection; the highest mean score was given to the vignette describing intercourse with an objecting 3 year-old ($M = 3.20$). In general, vignettes involving intercourse were considered most serious and acts involving exposure received the lowest ratings. The mean scores for the vignettes were distributed normally.

Figure 1. Distributions of Raw and Transformed Ratings

(a) Distribution of Raw Magnitude Ratings



(b) Distribution of Transformed (ln) Ratings

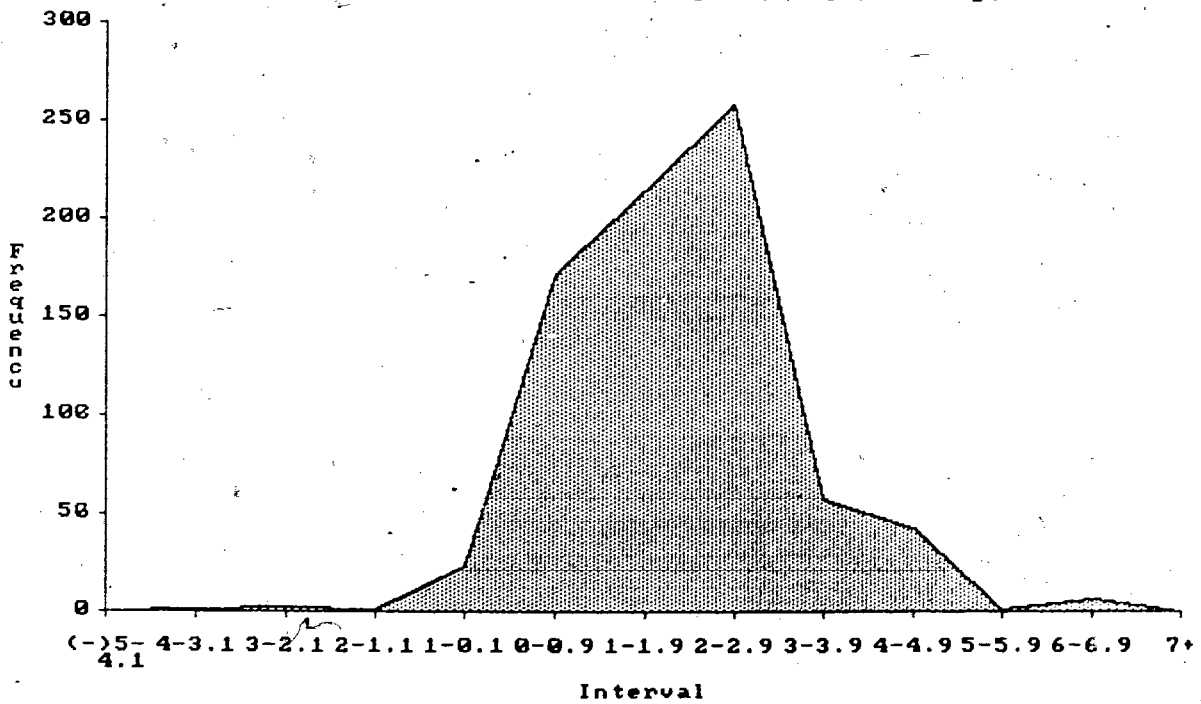


Table 1

Mean Ratings (ln) for Vignette Combinations

	Perpetrator	Act	Objection	Victim Age	Rating
0.	Father	Nude Pictures	No	13 years	ln(1)=0
1.	Father	Intercourse	Yes	3 years	3.20
2.	Father	Intercourse	Yes	13 years	2.57
3.	Father	Intercourse	No	3 years	2.67
4.	Father	Intercourse	No	13 years	2.66
5.	Father	Fondling	Yes	3 years	1.59
6.	Father	Fondling	Yes	13 years	1.51
7.	Father	Fondling	No	3 years	1.32
8.	Father	Fondling	No	13 years	1.39
9.	Father	Exposure	Yes	3 years	1.69
10.	Father	Exposure	Yes	13 years	1.81
11.	Father	Exposure	No	3 years	.76
12.	Father	Exposure	No	13 years	1.18
13.	Teacher	Intercourse	Yes	3 years	2.84
14.	Teacher	Intercourse	Yes	13 years	2.42
15.	Teacher	Intercourse	No	3 years	2.55
16.	Teacher	Intercourse	No	13 years	1.49
17.	Teacher	Fondling	Yes	3 years	2.10
18.	Teacher	Fondling	Yes	13 years	1.66
19.	Teacher	Fondling	No	3 years	1.63
20.	Teacher	Fondling	No	13 years	1.66
21.	Teacher	Exposure	Yes	3 years	1.67
22.	Teacher	Exposure	Yes	13 years	1.35
23.	Teacher	Exposure	No	3 years	1.24
24.	Teacher	Exposure	No	13 years	1.08
25.	Stranger	Intercourse	Yes	3 years	2.78
26.	Stranger	Intercourse	Yes	13 years	2.49
27.	Stranger	Intercourse	No	3 years	2.63
28.	Stranger	Intercourse	No	13 years	1.88
29.	Stranger	Fondling	Yes	3 years	1.60
30.	Stranger	Fondling	Yes	13 years	1.74
31.	Stranger	Fondling	No	3 years	1.45
32.	Stranger	Fondling	No	13 years	1.41
33.	Stranger	Exposure	Yes	3 years	1.12
34.	Stranger	Exposure	Yes	13 years	.86
35.	Stranger	Exposure	No	3 years	.89
36.	Stranger	Exposure	No	13 years	.35

Table 2

Ordered Ratings (ln) for Vignette Combinations

	Perpetrator	Act.	Objection	Victim Age	Rating
36.	Stranger	Exposure	No	13 years	.35
11.	Father	Exposure	No	3 years	.76
34.	Stranger	Exposure	Yes	13 years	.86
35.	Stranger	Exposure	No	3 years	.89
24.	Teacher	Exposure	No	13 years	1.08
33.	Stranger	Exposure	Yes	3 years	1.12
12.	Father	Exposure	No	13 years	1.18
23.	Teacher	Exposure	No	3 years	1.24
7.	Father	Fondling	No	3 years	1.32
22.	Teacher	Exposure	Yes	13 years	1.35
8.	Father	Fondling	No	13 years	1.39
32.	Stranger	Fondling	No	13 years	1.41
31.	Stranger	Fondling	No	3 years	1.45
16.	Teacher	Intercourse	No	13 years	1.49
6.	Father	Fondling	Yes	13 years	1.51
5.	Father	Fondling	Yes	3 years	1.59
29.	Stranger	Fondling	Yes	3 years	1.60
19.	Teacher	Fondling	No	3 years	1.63
18.	Teacher	Fondling	Yes	13 years	1.66
20.	Teacher	Fondling	No	13 years	1.66
21.	Teacher	Exposure	Yes	3 years	1.67
9.	Father	Exposure	Yes	3 years	1.69
30.	Stranger	Fondling	Yes	13 years	1.74
10.	Father	Exposure	Yes	13 years	1.81
28.	Stranger	Intercourse	No	13 years	1.88
17.	Teacher	Fondling	Yes	3 years	2.10
14.	Teacher	Intercourse	Yes	13 years	2.42
26.	Stranger	Intercourse	Yes	13 years	2.49
15.	Teacher	Intercourse	No	3 years	2.55
2.	Father	Intercourse	Yes	13 years	2.57
27.	Stranger	Intercourse	No	3 years	2.63
4.	Father	Intercourse	No	13 years	2.66
3.	Father	Intercourse	No	3 years	2.67
25.	Stranger	Intercourse	Yes	3 years	2.78
13.	Teacher	Intercourse	Yes	3 years	2.84
1.	Father	Intercourse	Yes	3 years	3.20

Vignette Factors Influencing Ratings

A 5-way analysis of variance was performed to determine the effects of the following factors on seriousness ratings: victim objection, nature of act, perpetrator identity, victim age, and sex of respondent. The ANOVA summary statistics are given in Table 3. The effect of sex of respondent is discussed in the sub-section entitled "Subject Factors Influencing Ratings". Table 4 includes the mean ratings for the levels of all 5 variables.

Victim Objection

As hypothesized, vignettes involving victim objection ($\bar{M} = 1.96$) were rated as more serious than those without ($\bar{M} = 1.57$), $F(1,707) = 21.43, p < .001$.

Nature of Act

The predicted effect of nature of act was observed. Although this variable was involved in two interactions described later in this section, the main effect was not obscured. The mean ratings for acts involving intercourse, fondling, and exposure were 2.52, 1.59, and 1.17 respectively. This relationship was highly significant statistically, $F(2,707) = 95.44, p < .001$.

Table 3

Summary of Analysis of Variance

SOURCE OF VARIATION	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIGNIF OF F
MAIN EFFECTS	300.832	7	42.976	33.004	0.000 *
SEX	1.438	1	1.438	1.104	0.294
PERP	9.829	2	4.915	3.774	0.023 *
ACT	248.561	2	124.280	95.444	0.000 *
OBJECT	27.899	1	27.899	21.426	0.000 *
VICTAGE	10.684	1	10.684	8.205	0.004 *
2-WAY INTERACTIONS	40.103	19	2.111	1.621	0.046 *
SEX PERP	1.055	2	0.527	0.405	0.667
SEX ACT	0.500	2	0.250	0.192	0.825
SEX OBJECT	1.340	1	1.340	1.029	0.311
SEX VICTAGE	0.176	1	0.176	0.135	0.713
PERP ACT	20.738	4	5.184	3.981	0.003 *
PERP OBJECT	0.203	2	0.101	0.078	0.925
PERP VICTAGE	4.928	2	2.464	1.892	0.151
ACT OBJECT	2.621	2	1.310	1.006	0.366
ACT VICTAGE	8.753	2	4.376	3.361	0.035 *
OBJECT VICTAGE	0.021	1	0.021	0.016	0.899
3-WAY INTERACTIONS	26.744	25	1.070	0.822	0.716
4-WAY INTERACTIONS	22.917	16	1.432	1.100	0.351
5-WAY INTERACTIONS	5.590	4	1.398	1.073	0.369
EXPLAINED	396.186	71	5.580	4.285	0.0
RESIDUAL	920.604	707	1.302		
TOTAL	1316.791	778	1.693		

* p < .05

Table 4

Mean Ratings for Levels of ANOVA Variables

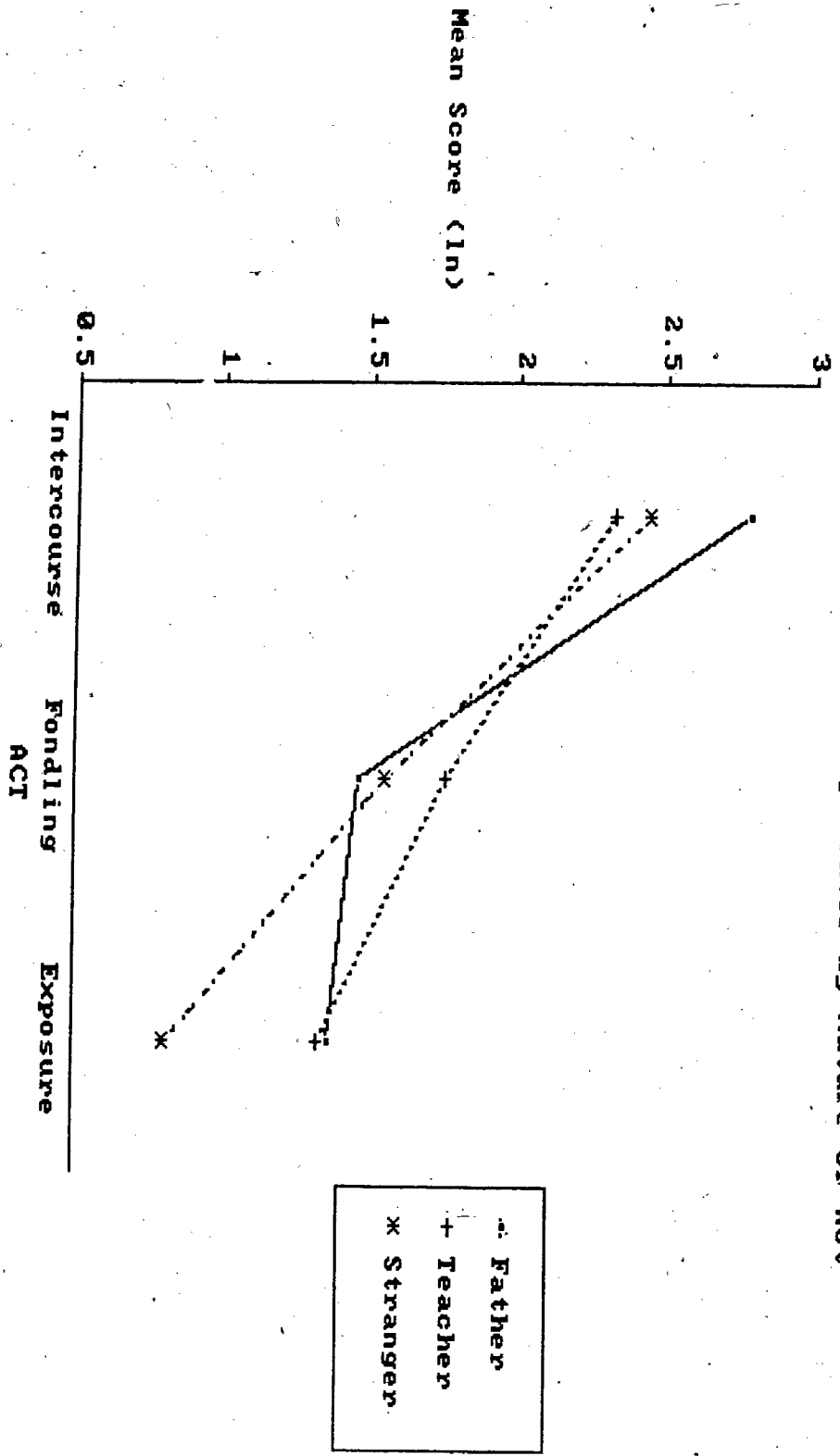
Variable	Levels		
Victim objection	Objected 1.96	Did not object 1.57	
Nature of act	Intercourse 2.52	Fondling 1.59	Exposure 1.17
Identity of Perpetrator	Father 1.88	Teacher 1.81	Stranger 1.61
Victim Age	3 years 1.89	13 years 1.64	
Sex of respondent	Male 1.81	Female 1.72	

Identity of Perpetrator

There was a significant interaction between identity of perpetrator and nature of act, $F(4,707) = 3.98$, $p < .003$. This relationship is presented in Figure 2. Analysis of simple main effects, controlling for levels of nature of act, indicated that the identity of perpetrator influence was only significant with vignettes involving intercourse, $F(2,707) = 3.85$, $p < .025$, and exposure, $F(2,707) = 6.04$, $p .01$. The effect was not present with acts involving fondling.

At the levels where simple main effects were found to be significant, simple contrasts were conducted between individual means. Thus, two sets of orthogonal contrasts were made: each set was evaluated using a corrected alpha level .016 for individual contrasts. At the intercourse level of nature of act, contrasts indicated that the only significant difference was between acts involving fathers ($M = 2.78$) and acts involving teachers ($M = 2.32$), $F(1,707) = 7.12$, $p < .01$. The second set of contrasts, performed at the exposure level, showed significant differences between father ($M = 1.36$) and stranger ($M = .806$), $F(1,707) = 10.26$, $p < .01$, and between teacher ($M = 1.33$) and stranger, $F(1,707) = 8.95$, $p < .01$. Thus, this interaction indicated that while intercourse involving the father was considered more serious than intercourse involving the teacher or stranger, acts involving exposure are perceived as equally serious if perpetrated by fathers and teachers, but not as serious if the perpetrator is a stranger (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Identity of Perpetrator by Nature of Act



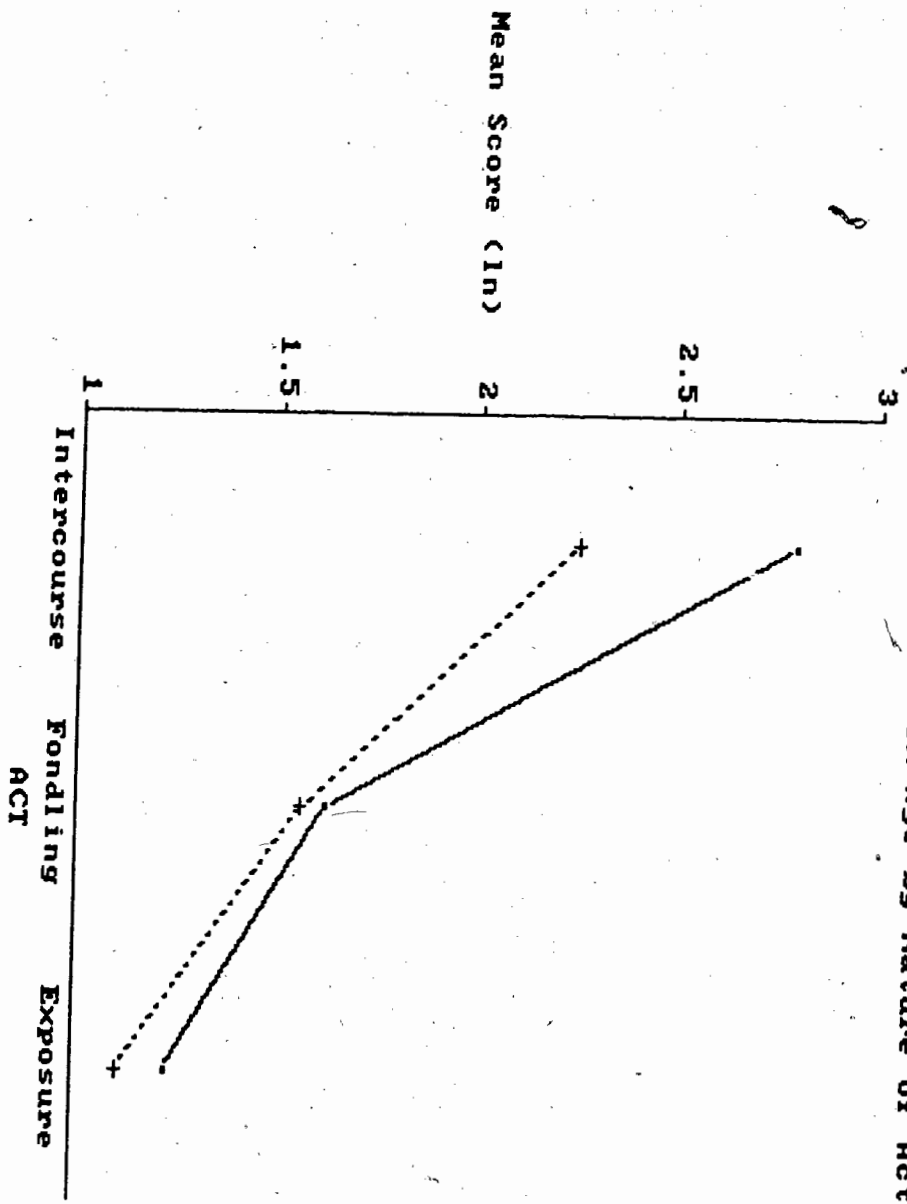
.. Father
 + Teacher
 * Stranger

Therefore, the hypothesized effect that acts involving the father would always be considered most serious, was only observed for vignettes depicting intercourse.

Victim Age

A significant interaction was found between victim age and nature of act, $F(2,707) = 3.36, p < .035$. This relationship is shown in Figure 3. Analysis of simple main effects indicated that one level of nature of act, intercourse, was entirely responsible for this interaction. At this level, incidents involving 3 year-old victims received a mean rating of 2.79; the mean rating for intercourse with 13 year-old victims was 2.25, $F(1,707) = 14.53, p < .001$. There were virtually no differences between groups of victim age at the other two levels of nature of act. Therefore, the predicted effect that acts involving younger victims would be viewed as more serious than those involving older children only occurred with vignettes describing intercourse.

Figure 3. Victim Age by Nature of Act



-- Three Years
+ Thirteen years

Subject Factors Influencing Ratings

Sex of Respondent

It was predicted that females would rate vignettes higher, in general, than males. However, the difference between the mean score of the females (1.72) and the mean score of the males (1.81) was not statistically significant.

Age of Respondent

Age of respondent was not related to seriousness ratings. The correlation between these variables was only .003.

Effect of Sexual Abuse

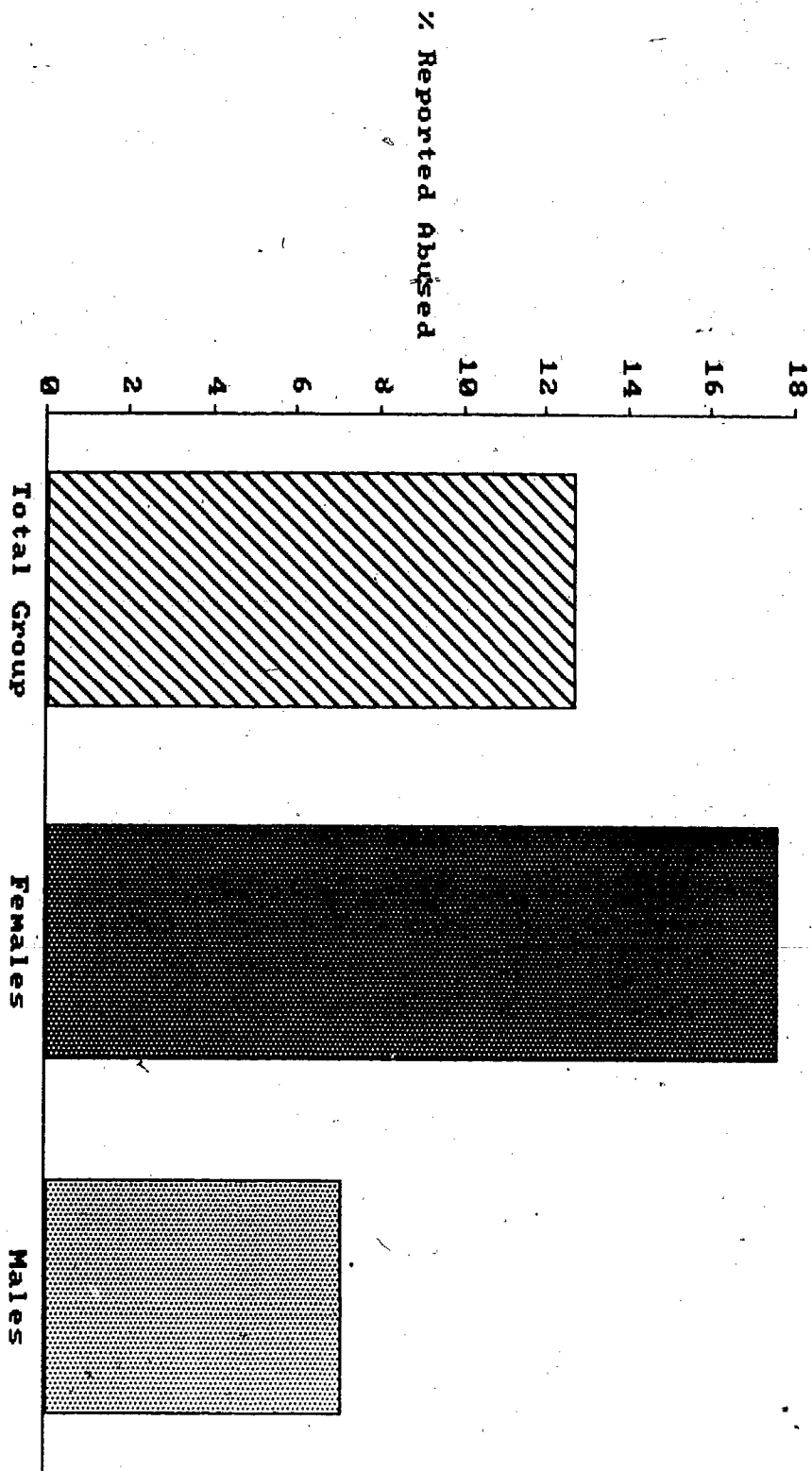
Respondents were asked to indicate if (a) they had been abused as a child, (b) a family member had been abused, and (c) a friend or acquaintance had been abused. All 786 respondents were used in analysis of this information and the percentages of respondents reporting experience with abuse are given in the next section. To evaluate the effect of these variables on seriousness ratings, three t-tests were conducted using the sexual abuse categories (yes, no) to group subjects. All of the results were statistically insignificant, indicating that experience with child sexual abuse does not systematically influence ratings.

Sexual Abuse Statistics

A large number of subjects indicated that they had had some experience with child sexual abuse. As well, there were some differences between the numbers of males and females reporting such experiences. The figures are as follows:

1. A total of 100 respondents, or 12.7% of the sample, reported having been sexually abused as a child. Most of these participants were female, however, as 17.6% of the females and 7.1% of the males reported having been victims. This difference was also statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 786) = 18.31, p < .001$. The percentages of reported abuse are presented in Figure 4.
2. Eight percent of the respondents (n=63) indicated that a family member had been sexually abused as a child. The percentage of males and females that reported this were 9% (n=33) and 7.1% (n=30) respectively. The chi-square for this relationship was not statistically significant.
3. Thirty-six percent (n=284) of the respondents reported that a friend or acquaintance had been the victim of child sexual abuse. There was a statistically significant difference between sexes, as 32.1% of the males (n=117) and 39.7% of the females (n=167) indicated that abuse had occurred, $\chi^2(1, N = 786) = 4.85, p < .03$.

Figure 4. Self-reported Sexual Abuse



DISCUSSION

The Measurement of Child Sexual Abuse

Few would argue that differences in seriousness do not exist between various types of child sexual abuse. However, by grouping all sexual abuse acts together, current definitions of child sexual abuse do not account for these differences. This is due in part to the lack of a procedure in the past for reliably measuring perceived differences in seriousness. The primary objective of this study was to determine whether or not such differences can be measured using procedures adopted from traditional crime seriousness research. The range of mean seriousness scores shown in Tables 1 and 2, and the significant effects of a number of vignette variables on ratings, suggest that perceived seriousness of child sexual abuse can be measured. It is clear that all acts are not considered equally serious, and that differences in scores make a good deal of logical and intuitive sense.

An important limitation to this study is that wide categories of variables (e.g. intercourse, fondling, exposure) were chosen to construct the vignettes. Thus, while it is demonstrated that perceived differences can be measured between these wide categories, the study was not designed to determine whether or not more subtle differences can be detected. It could be argued, for example, that the measurement procedure used

would be less effective at distinguishing between an act involving a ten year old victim, and an act involving an eleven year old victim. An issue in psychiatric diagnosis provides an analogy to this problem: It is far easier, for example, to distinguish reliably between a diagnosis of schizophrenia and panic disorder, than to distinguish between schizophrenia and schizotypal personality. Sensitivity of measurement is extremely important if the "fine line" between what is and is not considered abusive is to be determined. Therefore, more research, using finer variable category gradations, needs to be conducted to address this issue adequately.

Although this study did not directly address the sensitivity of measurement issue, the results give some suggestion that subtleties between different types of abuse can be detected. For example, it can be seen in Table 2 that all acts involving intercourse received scores in the top third of the vignette rankings, with the exception of an event involving a teacher and a 13 year old student who did not object to the act. It can be speculated that participants were attributing some responsibility to the victim because of her age and "consent". This subtle distinction may have produced the mean seriousness ranking that was somewhat below that of many less intrusive offenses involving fondling and exposure. Another example of the apparent sensitivity of measurement is the relatively high rating given to an act involving a father exposing himself to his 13 year daughter. This rating was considerably above other

acts involving fondling, and could perhaps reflect a reaction to the violation of trust on behalf of the father. These examples give some indication that future research will be able to demonstrate that the Sellin and Wolfgang (1964) procedure is sensitive to subtle distinctions in perceived seriousness of child sexual abuse.

The Sellin and Wolfgang procedure appears to have other advantages over those used in previous studies measuring perceptions of child abuse. As discussed in the Introduction, the category measurement technique created a restriction of range problem in the Finkelhor (1984), Garrett and Rossi (1978), and Giovannoni and Beccara (1979) studies. This result, particularly in the Finkelhor study, reduced the opportunity to make meaningful comparisons between offenses. This is an unfortunate consequence for a study designed to measure differences in public perceptions. As well, the restriction of range presented problems for statistical analyses. The present study avoided this situation by making use of the magnitude rating technique. As shown in Figure 1, the result is a normal distribution of the transformed scores that allows relatively straightforward comparisons of offenses. As well, it was possible to evaluate specific hypotheses about the effects of vignette and subject factors using analysis of variance techniques that assume underlying normality of scores.

Vignette Factors

All of the hypotheses about the effects of the vignette variables are at least partially supported. Some explanations for these effects are offered, though it is likely that there are a number of equally plausible alternative interpretations.

First, the effect of victim objection is very strong, and this variable does not interact with any of the other factors. This suggests that regardless of the age of the victim, the nature of the act, and the identity of the perpetrator, an event is perceived as being less serious if the victim does not object. An interesting finding is the lack of interaction between this variable and victim age. It might have been predicted that individuals would consider the objection factor less important at the 3 year old level. For example, it is presumably more difficult to attribute responsibility to a 3 year old than to a 13 year old victim, and less difficult to place responsibility on the offender when the victim is younger. However, this apparently was not the case, as a large difference between the levels of victim objection is still present with acts involving 3 year old victims. Nonetheless, the large main effect of victim objection indicates that this is a very important factor in determining seriousness.

The hypothesis about the effect of nature of act - that is, that intercourse would be considered the most serious, followed by fondling and exposure - is also strongly supported. This

variable accounts for by far the most variance in the seriousness scores (see Mean Square column of Table 3) and therefore can be considered the most influential variable affecting seriousness ratings. Thus, while the other variables in this study have some effect on ratings, they are relatively less important compared to the overwhelming contribution of nature of act. This effect likely involved a number of factors such as proximity to victim, intrusion on the victims' rights, violence and physical harm inflicted, and the potential psychological consequences. An interesting observation is that the mean score for acts involving exposure was relatively low. It can be surmised that exposure approaches the lower bound of what the public defines as abusive.

The hypothesis that vignettes including father perpetrators would be rated higher than those with teacher and stranger perpetrators is only partially supported. For example, events involving the father are only considered most serious for acts involving intercourse. There are no differences between levels of perpetrator for acts involving fondling, and acts involving father and teacher perpetrators are considered equally serious at the exposure level. It seems, therefore, that the incest taboo is present only with acts involving intercourse. In other words, incest seems to be considered less serious when it involves less intrusive and serious offenses.

Finally, victim age influenced ratings, but again only at the intercourse level. It is apparent that the appalling act of

intercourse with a three year old produced extremely high scores; in fact, most of the outlier scores were attached to this offense. It is interesting, however, that this effect was not found at the other levels of nature of act. It is possible that a combination of factors is responsible for the result. It seems plausible, for example, that fondling and exposure were seen as not particularly serious with a 3 year old due to the lack of awareness on behalf of the child and therefore the unlikelihood of negative psychological consequences. On the other hand, while more responsibility might be placed on a 13 year old victim, this factor might be offset by the potentially harmful psychological effects at that sensitive age.

Subject Factors

None of the subject factors - sex of respondent, subject age, and sexual abuse experience - had any effect on seriousness ratings. The first of these findings, the effect of sex of respondent, is contrary to the hypothesis that females would rate vignettes higher than males. Thus, the pattern found in some of the crime seriousness literature, and most importantly Finkelhor's (1984) investigation, is not found in this study. It is difficult to explain this inconsistency, for Finkelhor did not offer an explanation for the sex differences in his study. It is worth noting, however, that the effect of sex in the Finkelhor study was not strong; in fact, a significance test was not reported. It is therefore possible that the slightly

different result in this project is simply due to methodological or sample differences. However, more research is needed to investigate more adequately the question of sex differences. For now, since there is no reason to suspect that there was any systematic confound between the sexes, it can be concluded that in this undergraduate sample, there are no differences between males and females in the perceived seriousness of child sexual abuse.

The result of age of subject is difficult to interpret because of the skewed distribution of age in the university sample. The subjects were primarily in their early twenties creating a restriction of range problem on the age variable. This likely created a deceptively low correlation coefficient. Nonetheless, because there was some range in age (see method section) and the Pearson correlation coefficient was so low ($r=.003$), it is unlikely that a more normally distributed sample would show a significant effect for age on seriousness ratings.

While the incidence of reported abuse is consistent with estimates in the literature (see Finkelhor, 1984, 1986), the nature of the between-groups design in this study limits the interpretation of the effect of sexual abuse experience on seriousness ratings. For example, the number of subjects in each cell that had been abused (or knew someone who had been abused) was so low, that this variable could not be included effectively as a between-groups factor. A more powerful way of evaluating the effect of this factor would be to include it in a

within-subjects design. Nonetheless, the number of subjects in the abuse experience groups were sufficient to evaluate these variables' overall effect on the ratings. Again, the effect is virtually nil. The experience of sexual abuse, either directly or indirectly (friends, relatives), does not appear to influence seriousness ratings.

In sum, the seriousness ratings in this study are not influenced by the individual differences recorded. This finding is consistent with the crime seriousness literature indicating few subgroup and cultural differences (cf. Rossi, et. al., 1974; Sellin & Wolfgang, 1964). The result is encouraging, for in the construction of seriousness norms it is useful to know that individual differences are not affecting scores systematically, especially when considering studies that cannot control for these factors. To a small degree, this apparent lack of subject influence argues for the external validity of the present study, which has the confound of using an exclusively student population; perhaps such subject variables as education level and student status are insignificant as well. Obviously, this factor needs to be more closely evaluated, but the insignificance of the other subject variables in this study is reassuring.

Future Research

The present study can be conceptualized as a pilot study. The objectives were largely exploratory, particularly the primary goal of determining whether or not sexual abuse seriousness can be measured. The study shows that seriousness can be measured effectively by asking the public to rate perceived seriousness. It was also demonstrated that several vignette variables, representing features of sexual abuse events, significantly and predictably influence ratings. Moreover, individual differences do not affect ratings. Thus, the groundwork has been laid for a more extensive study that can comprehensively evaluate the public's perception of child sexual abuse seriousness.

Future research must address the following four issues: (a) The effect of using a large number of variables with narrower category gradations, (b) the differences in ratings between various subgroups, (c) the definition of seriousness, and (d) the question of additivity of seriousness scores. The first area has already been discussed; future studies must use vignettes depicting abuse acts more similar in type. As well, research should evaluate the effect of a number of other variables on seriousness ratings such as age of perpetrator, sex of perpetrator, and sex of victim. More levels of each variable should also be included to evaluate the more subtle differences between types of abuse. Of course, there would be a

corresponding need for more subjects with an increase in the number of variables.

Second, wider sampling would be required to more accurately reflect the public perception of seriousness. It would be useful to compare subgroups of subjects such as mental health professionals, law enforcement officers, various ethnic groups, and sexual abuse perpetrators and victims. If this was accomplished the question of individual differences could perhaps be addressed more adequately. If such a study was attempted a within-subjects design would be more effective for evaluating the subject factors.

Third, the term seriousness is unquestionably ambiguous. Future research should vary definitions of seriousness to determine whether or not such manipulation has an effect on ratings. Of particular interest might be to separate the components of harm to the victim and offender culpability to examine their relative effects on seriousness scores. As well, it might be desirable to have participants provide a written rationale for their choice of score. This would allow various interpretations of seriousness to be identified.

Finally, the issue of additivity within the context of child sexual abuse must be addressed. Additivity refers to the question of whether or not seriousness scores of offenses can be added such that the cumulative score reflects the seriousness of the total of the offenses. For example, if the fondling of a 3

year old is given a score of 1, should 10 such incidents be given a score of 10? This issue has been discussed at length in the crime seriousness literature, and a major criticism of the Sellin and Wolfgang scale is that seriousness scores cannot simply be added to reflect the severity of multiple offenses (Pease, Ireson, & Thorpe, 1974; Rose, 1966). The assumption of additivity was not formally tested by Sellin and Wolfgang, but some support for the notion has been found subsequently (Tien, 1983; Wellford & Wiatrowski, 1975). However, the additivity debate is far from settled. As well, the question has never been addressed as it applies specifically to child sexual abuse. Future research, therefore, should test the additivity assumption by asking participants to score vignettes that involve more than one incident.

The larger study justified by the present project could produce data with which a reasonable definition of child sexual abuse could be constructed. As well, an index similar to the one described by Sellin and Wolfgang could be developed. Thus, abuse seriousness scores could be given to abuse acts and more meaningful and empirically based outcome studies could be conducted. Moreover, legal norms could be constructed based upon societal norms. This is not an unreasonable prospect; for example, crime seriousness ratings have provided input to the U.S. Parole Commission's release guidelines (Hoffman & Hardyman, 1986).

In conclusion, the present study has verified that a reliable crime seriousness scaling method is applicable and practical for measuring child sexual abuse seriousness. Objective measurement of child sexual abuse seriousness appears to be possible. The importance of this objectivity cannot be underestimated in defining and quantifying the seriousness of the emotionally laden topic of child sexual abuse.

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APPENDIX A: CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE VIGNETTES

1. A 35 year old male had intercourse with his 3 year old daughter. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
2. A 35 year old male had intercourse with his 13 year old daughter. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
3. A 35 year old male had intercourse with his 3 year old daughter. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
4. A 35 year old male had intercourse with his 13 year old daughter. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
5. A 35 year old male fondled the sex organs of his 3 year old daughter. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
6. A 35 year old male fondled the sex organs of his 13 year old daughter. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
7. A 35 year old male fondled the sex organs of his 3 year old daughter. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
8. A 35 year old male fondled the sex organs of his 13 year old daughter. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
9. A 35 year old male deliberately showed his sex organs to his 3 year old daughter. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
10. A 35 year old male deliberately showed his sex organs to his 13 year old daughter. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
11. A 35 year old male deliberately showed his sex organs to his 3 year old daughter. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
12. A 35 year old male deliberately showed his sex organs to his 13 year old daughter. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
13. A 35 year old male preschool teacher had intercourse with a 3 year old female student. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.

Appendix A (cont.)

14. A 35 year old male school teacher had intercourse with a 13 year old female student. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
15. A 35 year old male preschool teacher had intercourse with a 3 year old female student. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
16. A 35 year old male school teacher had intercourse with a 13 year old female student. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
17. A 35 year old male preschool teacher fondled the sex organs of a 3 year old female student. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
18. A 35 year old male school teacher fondled the sex organs of a 13 year old female student. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
19. A 35 year old male preschool teacher fondled the sex organs of a 3 year old female student. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
20. A 35 year old male school teacher fondled the sex organs of a 13 year old female student. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
21. A 35 year old male preschool teacher deliberately showed his sex organs to a 3 year old female student. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
22. A 35 year old male school teacher deliberately showed his sex organs to a 13 year old female student. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
23. A 35 year old male preschool teacher deliberately showed his sex organs to a 3 year old female student. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
24. A 35 year old male school teacher deliberately showed his sex organs to a 13 year old female student. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
25. A 35 year old male stranger had intercourse with a 3 year old girl. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.

Appendix A (cont.)

26. A 35 year old male stranger had intercourse with a 13 year old girl. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
27. A 35 year old male stranger had intercourse with a 3 year old girl. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
28. A 35 year old male stranger had intercourse with a 13 year old girl. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
29. A 35 year old male stranger fondled the sex organs of a 3 year old girl. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
30. A 35 year old male stranger fondled the sex organs of a 13 year old girl. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
31. A 35 year old male stranger fondled the sex organs of a 3 year old girl. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
32. A 35 year old male stranger fondled the sex organs of a 13 year girl. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
33. A 35 year old male stranger deliberately showed his sex organs to a 3 year old girl. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously,
34. A 35 year old male stranger deliberately showed his sex organs to a 13 year old girl. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.
35. A 35 year old male stranger deliberately showed his sex organs to a 3 year old girl. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.
36. A 35 year old male stranger deliberately showed his sex organs to a 13 year old girl. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE

#18

Severity of Sexual Abuse Questionnaire

Birthdate: Y/Y ___ M/M ___ D/D ___

Sex: _____

This page describes two sexual abuse violations. The first violation has been given a score of 1. Use this violation as a standard to judge how serious you think the second act is. For example, if the second violation seems twice as bad as the first, write down a score of 2. If it is 10 times as serious write a score of 10. If it is only half as serious write a score of 1/2. You may use any number in your rating as long as it is greater than 0. Remember, your task is to show how serious you think the violation is, not what the law says or what you think society in general would say.

1. A 35 year old male took nude pictures of his 13 year old daughter. The girl was uncomfortable, but did not object.

Score= 1

2. A 35 year old male school teacher fondled the sex organs of a 13 year old female student. He did it even though the girl objected strenuously.

Score= _____

The B.C. Ministry of Human Resources defines sexual abuse as "any sexual touching, sexual intercourse or sexual exploitation of a child and may include any sexual behaviour directed toward a child". According to this definition, do you believe that: (check any of the statements that apply to you)

- 1) You have been the victim of child sexual abuse? _____
- 2) A member of your family has been a victim? _____
- 3) A friend or acquaintance has been a victim? _____

Please fold this questionnaire in half and return it to the investigator. Thank you very much.