

## **Factors in the Cycle of Violence: Gender Rigidity and Emotional Constriction**

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*A sample of 595 men were administered self-report assessments of childhood sexual and physical abuse, perpetration history, gender rigidity and emotional constriction. Including noncontact forms of sexual abuse, 11% of the men reported sexual abuse alone, 17% reported physical abuse alone, and 17% reported both sexual and physical abuse. Of the 257 men in the sample who reported some form of childhood abuse, 38% reported some form of perpetration themselves, either sexual or physical; of the 126 perpetrators, 70% reported having been abused in childhood. Thus, most perpetrators were abused, but most abused men did not perpetrate. Both sexually and physically abused men who perpetrated manifested significantly more gender rigidity and emotional constriction than abused nonperpetrators. Men who reported abuse but not perpetration demonstrated significantly less gender rigidity, less homophobia and less emotional constriction than nonabused men.*

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**KEY WORDS:** childhood abuse; perpetration; gender socialization.

The pervasiveness and negative psychological impact of interpersonal violence has underscored the urgent need to understand the causes of such violence. Identifying these causes has been hampered by heterogeneity in both forms of interpersonal violence, and types of perpetrators. Nevertheless, several models have been proposed which seek to explain and predict perpetration behavior. Most of these have focused on sexual aggression.

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For example, Prentky, Cohen, and Seghorn (1985) developed a taxonomy of adult sexual aggression which classified rapists into eight subtypes according to the specific nature of their aggressive and sexual motivations, and their level of impulsivity. Another taxonomic model was proposed by Hall and Hirschman (1991), based on the relative motivational preponderance of four factors: physiological sexual arousal, cognitions that justify sexual aggression, affective dyscontrol, and personality problems. Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, and Tanaka (1991) tested a model which implicated parental violence, child abuse, delinquency, sexual promiscuity, "hostile masculinity," and violence-supportive attitudes in the genesis of sexual violence against women. There is general agreement that multifactorial models are needed both to explain the heterogeneity among perpetrators of sexual aggression, and to achieve predictive power (e.g., Prentky & Knight, 1991).

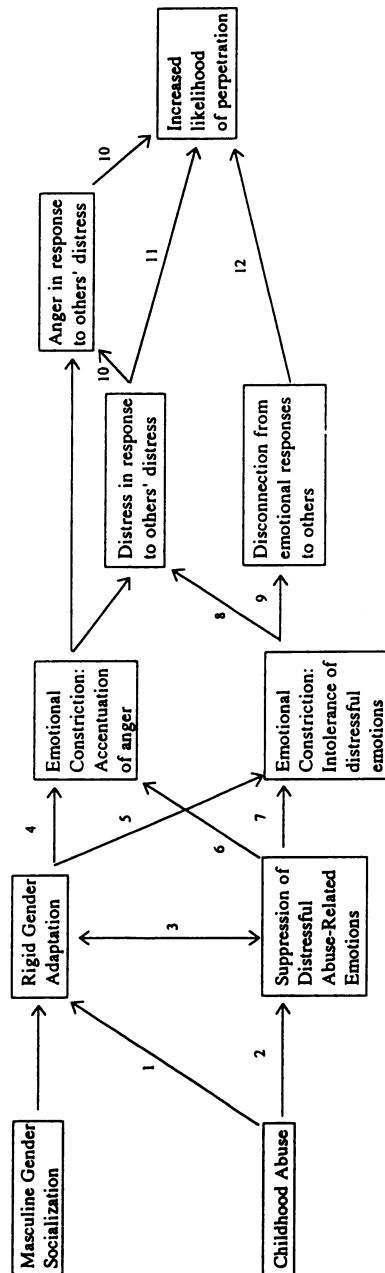
In the search for the causes of interpersonal violence, a consistent finding is a history of child abuse in its perpetrators. The "cycle of violence" hypothesis posits that a history of child abuse is an important predisposing factor in many who perpetrate abuse against others (Watkins & Bentovim, 1992; Widom, 1989). While often cited, the evidence supporting this relationship is fraught with methodological problems; thus conclusions are cautionary (Widom, 1989).

One methodological strategy which may actually cause an underestimation of the relationship between abuse and perpetration is the way many researchers have operationalized perpetration. In most studies, researchers have examined particular forms of interpersonal violence, for example, sexual aggression or child abuse. In using such narrowly defined outcome measures, researchers risk erroneously categorizing many perpetrators of interpersonal violence as nonperpetrators. To fully evaluate the "cycle of violence" hypothesis, more broadly defined outcome measures, ones that encompass various forms of interpersonal violence, are necessary.

Even researchers who have used more inclusive definitions of perpetration, however, have concluded that the relationship between abuse and perpetration is moderated by other factors. Among those who have specifically examined childhood abuse as an antecedent factor in perpetration, very few researchers have incorporated mediating or moderating variables. One notable exception was a study reported by Dodge, Bates, and Petit (1990), which tested the mediating effects of social information processing variables in a sample of abused children. Compared to non-abused children, abused children were less able to attend to relevant social cues, tended to attribute hostile intent to others, and were less able to generate competent solutions to social problems, and committed more acts of interpersonal aggression.

One broad domain of mediating factors which has already been linked to perpetration by males is related to gender socialization. That gender socialization is implicated in the perpetration of interpersonal violence by males is supported by at least two large bodies of evidence. First, based on epidemiological data, it is clear that men are responsible for the vast majority of interpersonal violence. Second, research has implicated certain behavioral and attitudinal legacies of the masculine gender socialization process as part of the motivational substructure of violence against women — both sexual violence and battery within intimate relationships — and also of sexual violence against children (Crossman, Stith, & Bender, 1990; Fromuth, Burkhart, & Jones, 1991; Gold, Fultz, Burke, Prisco, & Willett, 1992; Lisak & Ivan, 1995; Lisak & Roth, 1988; Lisak & Roth, 1990; Malamuth, Sockloskie, Koss, & Tanaka, 1991; Mosher & Anderson, 1986; Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984; Stith & Farley, 1993).

These sources of evidence indicate that male gender socialization, like childhood abuse, is implicated in the genesis of interpersonal violence. This evidence also suggests the need for greater understanding of how the socialization of males' emotional experience, in interaction with childhood abuse, can increase the likelihood of interpersonal violence. The study reported here tests several components of an hypothesized sequence of relationships linking childhood abuse, particular aspects of male gender socialization, and empathy deficits (see Figure 1). The sequence depicted in Figure 1 is not intended either as an alternative model explaining the development of interpersonal violence, or as a unitary explanation of the role of male gender socialization. The sequence is intended to depict how one frequent consequence of this socialization — emotional constriction — can, when combined with early trauma, result in the kind of empathy deficits which have been long associated with interpersonal aggression (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). As such, this hypothesized sequence may be embedded within the relationships posited in many of the models, noted above, which are currently being developed and tested. For example, the taxonomic and etiological models of sexual aggression proposed by Prentky et al. (1985), Hall and Hirschman (1991), and Malamuth et al. (1991), each include, directly or indirectly, masculine socialization factors. The sequence depicted in Figure 1 proposes a vehicle by which this socialization may, in interaction with the emotional legacy of abuse, inhibit some men's capacity to respond empathically, and thereby increase their likelihood of committing aggressive acts. Such a view is consistent with a recently reported finding that deviant sexual responding among child molesters, as measured phallometrically, was correlated with lower questionnaire empathy scores (Chaplin, Rice, & Harris, 1995).



**Figure 1.** Gender rigidity, emotional constriction and empathy deficits as intervening variables between childhood abuse and perpetration: Empirical and theoretical support. 1. Bolton, Morris, & MacEachron, 1989; Dimock, 1988; Lisak, 1994; Rogers & Terry, 1984. 2. Bolton, Morris, & MacEachron, 1989; Lisak, 1994; Freeman-Longo, 1986; Friedman, Berliner, Urquiza & Biele, 1988; Schacht, Kerlinsky & Carlson, 1990. 3. Lisak, 1994; Moshier & Tomkins, 1988. 4. Gold, Fultz, Burke, Prisco & Willett, 1992; Moshier & Tomkins, 1988. 5. Brody, 1985; Fuchs & Thelen, 1988; Grossman & Wood, 1993; Levant, 1994; Levant, 1992; Moshier & Tomkins, 1988; Saurer & Eisler, 1990. 6. Freeman-Longo, 1986; Friedrich et al., 1988. 7. Freeman-Longo, 1986; Friedrich et al., 1988; Lisak, 1994; Rogers & Terry, 1984. 8. Barnett & McCoy, 1989; Bryant, 1987; Eisenberg, Fabes, Schaller, Carlo & Miller, 1991; Lenrow, 1965. 9. Burgess, Hartman, McCausland & Powers, 1984; Freeman-Longo, 1986; Hunter & Kilsstrom, 1979. 10. Gold et al., 1992; Main & George, 1985; Klimes-Dougan & Kistner, 1990. 11. Frodi & Lamb, 1980; Zeskind & Schlinger, 1991. 12. Feshbach, 1989; Lisak & Ivan, in press; Miller & Eisenberg, 1988.

In a review of the research on gender differences in emotional development, Brody (1985) noted the consistent finding that boys learn to “neutralize” the expression of most emotions over the course of development. By early childhood and then consistently into adulthood, males are found to be less emotionally expressive than females (Eisenberg, Fabes, Schaller, & Miller, 1989). This socialized “neutralization” of emotional expression can generate an intense conflict when it interacts with the experience of abuse. At the nucleus of almost every episode of abuse are intense feelings of fear and helplessness. Thus, at the precise developmental epoch when the male child is learning that to be considered appropriately masculine he must suppress “nonmasculine” emotional states, he is overwhelmed by emotional states that are culturally defined as “nonmasculine.”

Faced with such an intense conflict between the emotional legacy of abuse and the emotionally constricting dictates of their gender socialization, male victims must find some pathway to a resolution. One pathway entails the rigid adherence to masculine gender norms, a resolution which requires the forceful suppression and repression of abuse-related emotions (Lisak, 1995). Such a rigid conformity to gender norms may result in an accentuated constriction of emotional experience that is particularly focused on “vulnerable” emotions — the helplessness, shame and powerlessness associated with the abuse experience (Bolton, Morris, & MacEachron, 1989; Lisak, 1994a, 1995). Thus, the male abuse victim who adopts this resolution to the conflict would manifest an intolerance of his own distressful emotions.

Simultaneously, such a rigid gender adaptation would likely lead to an accentuated reliance on anger, the emotion which is most sanctioned by male gender norms (Moshier & Tomkins, 1988). Indeed, these authors, among others, have argued that men who rigidly adhere to gender norms for emotional expression are likely to convert a variety of emotional states, such as fear and helplessness, into anger. Thus, gender rigidity increases the likelihood that abuse-generated emotions will be suppressed and converted into anger, a dynamic that is likely to increase the propensity for aggressive action.

Such gender rigidity, with its resultant constriction in emotional experience, is also likely to interfere with the individual's capacity to constructively integrate his traumatic experiences. As described by Horowitz (1986) and Roth and Cohen (1986), such an integration typically requires periods of avoidance of traumatic information and affect, as well as periods of approach. The gender-rigid, emotionally constricted individual is less likely to be able to tolerate approaching the negative emotional states evoked by trauma, and more likely to avoid them, either by using psychological defenses, or by converting them to aggressive action.

This adaptation is also likely to have a significant, negative impact on the individual's capacity to respond empathically to others, which in turn increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). This impact may be felt in several ways. The need to deny and suppress "vulnerable" emotional states is likely to render them highly threatening when they appear externally, in the form of another person's distress, because of their power to evoke similar feelings in the perceiver. In effect, the individual is threatened with emotional overarousal — an intensity of "vulnerable" emotions which conflict with his rigid adherence to gender norms, and which he cannot regulate. Or, the individual may actually become emotionally overaroused. In either case, he is likely to seek ways to terminate either the threat or the actual experience of the aversive emotional state. He may do so "internally" by using psychological defenses which disconnect him from his emotional experience, or he may do so "externally" through aggressive action aimed at the perceived source of his discomfort. This is consistent with the finding that abused children sometimes respond aggressively to peers who express distress (Klimes-Dougan & Kistner, 1990; Main & George, 1985).

This hypothesized interaction between the emotional legacies of abuse and of male gender socialization is consistent with current research and theory on empathy (e.g., Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987; Eisenberg et al., 1994; Straver, 1993), which posits two divergent forms of vicarious emotional responding. In one, associated with decreases in heart rate, the individual focuses on the emotional experience of the other, experiences sympathy, and is likely to act prosocially. In the other, associated with heart rate increases, the individual experiences emotional overarousal and distress, and is likely to act to terminate the aversive state, possibly by aggressive action.

The hypothesized relationships linking abuse, gender rigidity, empathy deficits and perpetration are not expected to apply equally to all perpetrators of interpersonal violence. To the extent that it helps to explain the abuse-perpetration link, it is unlikely to apply, for example, to the subtype of pedophile who has been described as passive and developmentally arrested (Finkelhor & Araji, 1986).

The goal of the present study was to examine two relationships posited in Figure 1: that between abuse (physical and sexual), gender rigidity and perpetration; and that between abuse, emotional constriction and perpetration. The model predicts that abused men who perpetrate will score higher than abused men who do not perpetrate on measures of gender rigidity and emotional constriction.

## Method

### *Subjects*

Subjects were 595 male students attending an urban campus of a northeastern university. This sample represented 14% of the university's male students, and closely matched the university's ethnic composition. The mean age of the sample was 25.5 years ( $SD = 7.1$ ). The ethnic composition of the sample was 74% White, 9% African American, 6% Asian American and Pacific Islander, 3% mixed race, 3% Hispanic, 2% Native American, .5% Cape Verdean and 3% "other." There were no significant differences in SES status among the ethnic groups.

### *Procedures*

Data were collected over a 3-day period via anonymous, self-report questionnaires. Distribution tables were set up at main pedestrian traffic points on campus, and male students were offered \$3 to complete the Personal History Questionnaire. Subjects were asked to read a standard research consent form prior to participating. Consultation services were available to any subject who experienced distress as a result of participating. Almost every subject who approached the tables over the three day period chose to participate.

### *Materials*

The following nine questionnaires were contained within a single packet. The three questionnaires assessing sexual abuse, physical abuse and perpetration histories were developed as part of an ongoing series of studies on male survivors of childhood abuse (Lisak, 1994; Lisak & Luster, 1994). The items for these questionnaires were drawn from interviews with male survivors, and from other published sources. They are behaviorally specific in their wording and designed to cover the range of the most common forms of abuse and perpetration reported by subjects. These three questionnaires were designed in response to several methodological lessons which have emerged from research on the assessment of childhood abuse. The word "abuse" is never used, to minimize potential resistance in the subject about labelling himself as "abused." Rather, the subject is asked to read through the list of experiences and to indicate whether any had happened to him. Multiple types of incidents are described, as many as possible without overly fatiguing subjects, because experience indicates that many

subjects will not respond to items which are not extremely close to the types of incidents they experienced (e.g., Stein & Lewis, 1992). Results of a recently completed validity study of the questionnaires which assess abuse and perpetration were promising. A subsample of subjects who had completed the questionnaires were administered face-to-face interviews to render independent abuse and perpetration assessments. Of 24 questionnaire-based, sexual abuse classifications, only 1 was "declassified" by the interview. Of 20 physical abuse classifications, none were de-classified, and of 18 perpetrator classifications, 3 were de-classified (Lisak, Conklin, & Miller, 1995).

*Sexual Experiences History (SEH).* This instrument asks about 17 specific sexual incidents that the subject may have experienced prior to age 16 (Lisak & Luster, 1994). First, to aid his recall the subject is asked to read a list of 17 types of people with whom the sexual incident may have occurred, such as "uncle," "aunt," "babysitter," etc. Examples of the experiences described are: "Someone fondled you (i.e., touched your genitals or other parts of your body) in a sexual way;" "Someone performed anal intercourse on you." If a subject responded "yes" to any item, he was asked to respond to eight questions about the incident. These questions covered the identity of the other person involved, that person's sex and age, the subject's age at the time, the number of times the incident occurred, how the subject now feels about the incident, and a checklist of the type of coercion used, ranging from "voluntary" to "physical force."

*Physical Punishment and Assault Experiences (PPAE).* This instrument asks about 10 specific forms of physical abuse the subject may have experienced before the age of 16, although again, the word "abuse" is never used. Examples of the items are: "Someone burned or scalded you;" "Someone held a knife or a gun to your body;" "Someone threw you against a wall, or against furniture, or down stairs." If a subject responded "yes" to any item he was asked to respond to seven questions about the incident. These questions covered the identity of the person who did it, their age and sex, the age of the subject at the time, the number of times it happened, and a checklist covering the extent of injury the subject experienced, ranging from "no measurably physical injury" to "extensive bruises or cuts," "broken bones, teeth or injury requiring hospital care," and "were told you were going to be killed."

*Perpetration History (PH).* This questionnaire, untitled in the packet, contains four sections, one each to assess sexual abuse of children (eight questions), physical abuse of children (six questions), sexual assault of adults (five questions) and physical battery of adult intimate partners (four questions). Examples include: "Have you ever exposed your genitals to a child in order to feel sexually aroused?" "Have you ever performed oral

sex on a child, or they on you, or both?" "Have you ever pushed or thrown a child against a wall, furniture, or down stairs?" "Have you ever had sexual intercourse with an adult when they didn't want to because you *used or threatened to use* physical force (twisting their arm; holding them down, etc.) if they didn't cooperate?" "Have you ever punched, kicked or repeatedly slapped an adult who you were in some kind of intimate relationship with?" If a subject responded "yes" to any item he was asked to respond to questions about the incident which covered his age at the time, the age of the other person, the number of times it happened and whether it also happened with another person.

*Home Experiences History (HEH).* This 16-item checklist was designed for this study, to tap experiences associated with childhood neglect. It asks subjects to respond "yes" or "no" to a series of home conditions and events that may have applied to the subject before the age of 16. Items included: "A caretaker of yours abused alcohol;" "You were often left home alone or without caretakers overnight." Each subject received a total score which was the sum of the home characteristics he reported applied to him.

*Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI).* This widely-used, 60-item questionnaire (Bem, 1974) consists of self-descriptive adjectives designed to provide each subject with independent scores on "masculinity" and "femininity." The BSRI has a high degree of internal consistency, with alpha coefficients ranging from .78 to .87 (Bem, 1981).

*Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale (MGRS).* This 40-item questionnaire was developed to assess the degree to which male subjects find a variety of gender-salient situations stressful (Eisler and Skidmore, 1987). In contrast to the BSRI, the concept of masculine gender role stress does not refer to characteristics seen as socially desirable for men. The MGRS consists of five subscales each covering a separate domain of situations, including Emotional Inexpressiveness, Physical Inadequacy, Subordination to Women, Intellectual Inferiority and Performance Failure. Eisler, Skidmore, and Ward (1988) reported excellent internal consistency, as well as initial validity. MGRS scores predicted anger, anxiety and poor health habits.

*Gender Based Emotional Constriction (GBEC).* This 20-item questionnaire was designed for this study to assess the degree to which a subject endorses beliefs about masculinity which serve to constrict his emotional experience and expressiveness. A sample item is, "Emotional sensitivity is not attractive in a man." The GBEC demonstrated high internal consistency in this sample, with an alpha coefficient of .93. Sixteen of the 20 items loaded .38 or higher on a single factor. As initial evidence of validity, the GBEC scale correlated significantly with the MGRS ( $r = .34$ ), a subscale of the Toronto Alexithymia Scale ( $r = .24$ ), and the Attitudes Toward Gay Males Scale ( $r = .40$ ), all of which are theoretically consistent.

*Attitudes Toward Gay Males (ATGM).* This 10-item subscale of the Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men scale, developed by Herek (1988), was included to assess homophobia. The ATGM has an alpha coefficient of .89 (Herek, 1988). Homophobia has often been described as, in part, a symptom of an insecure and/or rigid and highly conventional gender identity adjustment (Herek, 1988).

*Courtauld Emotional Control Scale (CECS).* This questionnaire (Watson & Greer, 1983) contains three subscales, anger, anxiety and unhappiness, each consisting of seven items. Subjects are asked to rate how often they have a variety of responses to these feelings. Responses include both emotionally controlling and emotionally expressive examples. The CECS has demonstrated both high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and excellent test-retest reliability (Watson & Greer, 1983).

*Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS).* Nine items from this originally 26-item questionnaire (Taylor & Bagby, 1988) were used to assess the degree to which subjects were unable to discern or describe their own emotional experience. The nine questions chosen dealt most specifically with this aspect of alexithymia. In previous research (Taylor and Bagby, 1988) the full TAS demonstrated internal consistency ( $\alpha = .79$ ) and good test-retest reliability.

#### *Criteria for Classification of Abuse and Perpetration*

*Sexual abuse.* Subjects were categorized as having been sexually abused or not based on their responses to the SEH and according to criteria consolidated by Lisak and Luster (1994) and based on those described by Wyatt (1985) and Finkelhor (1979). If the subject was age 13 or younger when the incident occurred and the perpetrator was at least 5 years older, the incident was classified as sexually abusive. If the perpetrator was less than 5 years older, two criteria had to be met for the incident to be classified as abusive: the subject reported feeling "negative" about it now and reported some degree of coercion was used by the perpetrator. Similar principles applied to incidents occurring when the subject was age 14–15. The incident was classified as abusive if the perpetrator was at least 10 years older; if the perpetrator was less than 10 years older, the same criteria had to be met.

*Physical abuse.* Subjects were categorized as having been physically abused or not on the basis of their responses to the PPAH. One of two minimum criteria had to be met. The first was that the subject received extensive cuts or bruises in at least one experience or was told he would be killed by the perpetrator or he thought he would die during the experience.

If these criteria were not met, the second of the minimum criteria was applied: If the subject suffered no visible injury and threats or fear of death were not present, then abusive experiences must have occurred more than 10 times and over a period of more than 1 year.

*Perpetration.* Subjects were categorized as perpetrators or not on the basis of their responses to the PH. The criteria for being classified as having sexually perpetrated against children were similar to those used to categorize sexual abuse. If the victim was age 13 or younger when the incident occurred and the subject was at least 5 years older than the victim, the incident was classified as perpetration. If the victim was age 13 or younger and the subject was less than 5 years older, the subject had to report using some level of coercion against the victim for the incident to be classified as perpetration. For incidents involving victims age 14–15, the perpetrating subject had to be at least 10 years older. If the age gap was less than 10 years, some level of coercion had to be reported.

Subjects were classified as perpetrators of physical abuse against children if they checked "yes" to one of the items and the victim was less than age 16 and the subject was at least 5 years older at the time. Sexual perpetration against adults and battery of adult intimate partners were classified solely on the basis of endorsement of at least one of the items.

## **Results**

### *Prevalence of Sexual and Physical Abuse*

Nearly half of the men in the sample — 250 subjects (45%) — reported being sexually and/or physically abused before the age of 16 ( $n = 551$ ) (see Table 1). Including noncontact forms of sexual abuse, 28% of all subjects were sexually abused. Including only contact forms of sexual abuse, the figure was 18%. A third of the subjects, 34%, were physically abused. Abused subjects had a mean age of 27.1 years ( $SD = 7.9$ ) and were 2.8 years older than nonabused subjects, who had a mean age of 24.3 ( $SD = 6.3$ ) ( $t[496.3] = -4.54, p < .001$ ). There was no difference in SES between abused and nonabused subjects.

The average age of the earliest sexual abuse was 10.1 years ( $SD = 3.1$ ). In 36% of the incidents, force, intimidation or threats were used against the victim. Among the contact forms of sexual abuse, the most common type was fondling — either by or of the perpetrator (24%). Other common types included oral sex (12%), and anal and vaginal intercourse (7%).

**Table 1.** Sample Frequencies of Different Types of Childhood Abuse ( $n = 551$ )

Abuse Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Nonabused	301	55
Only sexually abused <sup>a</sup>	61	11
Only physically abused	96	17
Both sexually and physically abused <sup>a</sup>	93	17

<sup>a</sup>Includes noncontact forms of sexual abuse.

Consistent with previous findings for male victims of sexual abuse, the vast majority of cases (79%) involved extrafamilial perpetrators. Almost two thirds of the sexually abused subjects (61%) were abused only by a male perpetrator, while 28% were abused only by a female and 11% were abused by both male and female perpetrators.

The average age of the earliest physical abuse was 7.3 ( $SD = 2.7$ ) years. In contrast to sexual abuse, 70% of the physical abuse and assaults was perpetrated by intrafamilial abusers. In 58% of the cases the abuse was perpetrated only by a male, in 11% only by a female, and in 31% by both a male and female. The most common form of physical abuse involved the victim being "punched," "kicked," or "struck with an object," causing "mild bruises or scratches." However, more than 10% of the men were attacked with a gun or knife or strangled by their abusers, and 22% received "extensive cuts or bruises," "broken bones or teeth," or "required hospital care."

#### *Prevalence and Characteristics of Perpetration*

Almost one quarter of the men in the sample, 23%, acknowledged having committed some form of perpetration. There was substantial overlap in the types of perpetration committed. Of the 70 men who perpetrated sexually against others, 34% also perpetrated physically. Of the 76 men who perpetrated physically, 32% also perpetrated sexually. Of the 56 men who sexually and/or physically abused children, 45% also perpetrated against adults in some way; and 25% of the men who perpetrated sexually and/or physically against adults also abused children in one or both ways.

The mean youngest age of perpetration of any kind was 19.0 ( $SD = 5.8$ ). For sexual perpetration, the mean youngest age was 17.0 ( $SD = 4.0$ ), and for physical perpetration it was 21.6 ( $SD = 6.3$ ). The mean age of perpetrators in the sample was 27.4 years ( $SD = 8.7$ ), which was 2.3 years older than that of nonperpetrators, who had a mean age of 25.1 years ( $SD = 6.5$ ) ( $t$  [177.7] = 2.88;  $N = 573$ ). There was no SES difference between perpetrators and nonperpetrators.

**Table 2.** Frequency of Perpetration Among Different Abuse Groups

Abuse Classification	$N$	Percent Who Perpetrate	$\chi^2$ ( $df = 1$ )
Any form of perpetration			
Nonabused	316	11	—
Only sexually abused <sup>a</sup>	34	32	14.8 <sup>b</sup>
Only physically abused	126	37	78.6 <sup>b</sup>
Both sexually and physically abused <sup>a</sup>	61	44	65.2 <sup>b</sup>
Perpetration against children			
Nonabused	317	4	—
Only sexually abused <sup>a</sup>	34	18	20.2 <sup>b</sup>
Only physically abused	125	17	65.5 <sup>b</sup>
Both sexually and physically abused <sup>a</sup>	61	23	68.3 <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Includes only contact forms of sexual abuse.

<sup>b</sup>Significantly different from nonabused group.

#### *Relationship Between Abuse and Perpetration*

Of the 120 perpetrators, 88 (70%) were either sexually or physically abused. Conversely, of the 221 abused men, 84 (38%) were perpetrators. Table 2 shows the frequency of perpetration among the different abuse groups, and also depicts the relationship between childhood abuse and the perpetration of abuse against children. Among perpetrators of physical or sexual child abuse, 79% (41 of 52) were themselves abused as children. Reversing the comparison, of those subjects abused as children, 19% (41 of 220) had later abused children.

To assess the relationship between abuse and perpetration severity, three new variables were computed: the total number of types of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and perpetration experiences. Correlations among these variables (see Table 3) yielded the expected correspondent relationships between forms of abuse and type of perpetration.

In terms of the relationship between abuse characteristics and perpetration, neither the age at which the abuse occurred, nor whether it was intrafamilial or extrafamilial, nor whether or not force was used (if the abuse was sexual) related significantly to perpetration outcome. Finally, the measure of negative home experiences (parental violence, alcoholism and neglect) did not discriminate between abused men who perpetrated and those who did not.

**Table 3.** Correlations Depicting Relationship Between Abuse and Perpetration Severity

	Severity of Sexual Perpetration	Severity of Physical Perpetration	Severity of Total Perpetration
Severity of sexual abuse <sup>a</sup>	.26 <sup>b</sup>	.07	.22 <sup>b</sup>
Severity of physical abuse	.06	.26 <sup>b</sup>	.19 <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Contact abuse only.<sup>b</sup>  $p < .05$ *Relationship Between Abuse, Gender Adjustment, and Perpetration*

For the multivariate analyses, the abuse classifications were simplified to reduce the number of comparisons and to maintain consistency with theoretical predictions. Those subjects who were both sexually and physically abused were classified as sexually abused because sexual abuse is theorized to have a greater impact on gender development than physical abuse.

To test the hypothesized relationship among abuse history, gender rigidity, emotional constriction and perpetration, two multivariate analyses were used, multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) and logistic regression. Separate MANOVA's were performed on sexual and physical abuse, followed by univariate comparisons.

A MANOVA with three levels of the independent variable — non-abused men, sexually abused men who did not perpetrate, and sexually abused men who perpetrated — and seven dependent variables (see Table 4 for variable list) yielded significant results (Wilk's Lambda = .83,  $F(14, 512) = 3.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Univariate comparisons (see Table 4) indicated that the sexually abused perpetrators scored significantly higher than the sexually abused nonperpetrators on one of the measures of gender rigidity (MGRS) and on one of the measures of emotional constriction (TAS). Their higher mean score on a second measure of emotional constriction (CECS [ $p = .11$ ]) was marginally significant.

A second MANOVA, using the same dependent variables and a three-level independent variable consisting of nonabused men, and physically abused perpetrators and nonperpetrators, also yielded significant results (Wilk's Lambda = .90,  $F(14, 478) = 1.84$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Univariate comparisons (see Table 4) indicated that physically abused perpetrators scored significantly higher than the physically abused nonperpetrators on the MGRS and the CECS, and significantly lower on the BSRI femininity subscale. The perpetrators' higher scores on the two other measures of emotional constriction were marginally significant (GBEC [ $p = .06$ ] and TAS [ $p = .08$ ]).

**Table 4.** Sexually and Physically Abused Perpetrators vs. Nonperpetrators (Means and Standard Deviations)<sup>a</sup>

Variable	Nonperpetrators		Perpetrators		<i>p</i> Value
Sexually abused men <sup>b</sup>					
BSRI-Masc <sup>c</sup>	52.11	(12.03)	51.81	(10.64)	ns
BSRI-Fem	47.90	(10.49)	45.83	(12.66)	ns
MGRS-Total <sup>d</sup>	76.18	(29.74)	91.35	(30.38)	<i>p</i> < .01
GBEC <sup>e</sup>	44.26	(15.73)	47.04	(20.27)	ns
ATGM <sup>f</sup>	24.61	(11.06)	24.43	(12.37)	ns
CECS <sup>g</sup>	31.67	(7.51)	33.90	(8.40)	ns ( <i>p</i> = .11)
TAS-Sub <sup>h</sup>	15.32	(3.93)	17.25	(5.15)	<i>p</i> < .05
Physically abused men					
BSRI-Masc	52.55	(11.80)	53.37	(9.37)	ns
BSRI-Fem	47.32	(11.29)	40.56	(9.93)	<i>p</i> < .001
MGRS-Total	79.97	(27.66)	93.20	(26.29)	<i>p</i> < .01
GBEC	47.39	(15.95)	53.37	(19.99)	ns ( <i>p</i> = .06)
ATGM	27.78	(11.62)	29.78	(11.17)	ns
CECS	31.69	(7.17)	34.77	(8.14)	<i>p</i> < .05
TAS-Sub	14.27	(5.70)	16.48	(5.76)	ns ( <i>p</i> = .08)

<sup>a</sup>  $n = 95$  to  $150$ , depending on analysis, due to missing values.<sup>b</sup> Includes only contact forms of sexual abuse.<sup>c</sup> BSRI = Bem Sex Role Inventory: Subscales: Masculinity and Femininity.<sup>d</sup> MGRS = Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale.<sup>e</sup> GBEC = Gender Based Emotional Constriction Scale.<sup>f</sup> ATGM = Attitudes Toward Gay Males Scale.<sup>g</sup> CECS = Courtauld Emotional Control Scale.<sup>h</sup> TAS-Sub = Toronto Alexithymia Scale, nine-item subscale.

Further univariate analyses were performed, comparing nonperpetrating abused men and nonabused men, to help clarify the relationship between abuse and the gender and emotion variables (see Table 5). Non-perpetrating sexually abused men scored significantly lower than nonabused men on measures of gender rigidity (MGRS), emotional constriction (GBEC), and homophobia (ATGM). Their higher mean score on BSRI-femininity ( $p = .08$ ) was marginally significant. Nonperpetrating physically abused men scored significantly lower than nonabused men on the MGRS and ATGM, and their lower TAS score was marginally significant ( $p = .07$ ).



**Table 5.** Nonperpetrating Abused Men vs. Nonabused Men (Means and Standard Deviations)<sup>a</sup>

Variable	Nonperpetrating Sexually Abused <sup>b</sup>		Nonperpetrating Nonabused		<i>p</i> Value
Sexually abused vs. sexually nonabused					
BSRI-Masc <sup>c</sup>	52.11	(12.03)	51.55	(12.94)	ns
BSRI-Fem	47.90	(10.49)	45.51	(11.81)	ns ( <i>p</i> = .08)
MGRS-Total <sup>d</sup>	76.18	(29.74)	87.99	(32.67)	<i>p</i> < .001
GBEC <sup>e</sup>	44.26	(15.73)	49.96	(18.29)	<i>p</i> < .01
ATGM <sup>f</sup>	24.61	(11.06)	30.56	(10.36)	<i>p</i> < .0001
CECS <sup>g</sup>	31.67	(7.52)	32.43	(7.46)	ns
TAS-Sub <sup>h</sup>	15.32	(3.93)	15.76	(5.21)	ns
Physically abused vs. physically nonabused					
Variable	Nonperpetrating Physically Abused		Nonperpetrating Nonabused		<i>p</i> Value
BSRI-Masc	52.55	(11.80)	51.15	(12.94)	ns
BSRI-Fem	47.32	(11.29)	45.51	(11.81)	ns
MGRS-Total	79.97	(27.66)	87.99	(32.67)	<i>p</i> < .05
GBEC	47.39	(15.95)	49.96	(18.29)	ns
ATGM	27.78	(11.62)	30.56	(10.36)	<i>p</i> < .05
CECS	31.69	(7.17)	32.43	(7.46)	ns
TAS-Sub	14.27	(5.70)	15.76	(5.21)	ns ( <i>p</i> = .07)

<sup>a</sup>N = 263 to 394 depending on the analysis, due to missing values.

<sup>b</sup>Includes only contact forms of sexual abuse.

<sup>c</sup>BSRI = Bem Sex Role Inventory: Subscales: Masculinity and Femininity.

<sup>d</sup>MGRS = Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale.

<sup>e</sup>GBEC = Gender Based Emotional Constriction Scale.

<sup>f</sup>ATGM = Attitudes Toward Gay Males Scale.

<sup>g</sup>CECS = Courtauld Emotional Control Scale.

<sup>h</sup>TAS-Sub = Toronto Alexithymia Scale, nine item subscale.

Logistic regression (see Table 6) was used to test whether the gender and emotional rigidity variables explained variance in perpetration independently of abuse status. For this analysis, abuse status and perpetration were dichotomous (yes/no) variables. Variables which significantly differentiated abused perpetrators from nonperpetrators were simultaneously entered in the analysis. The results of this analysis ( $\chi^2(6, N = 300) = 53.73, p < .0001$ ) indicated that perpetrators were differentiated from nonperpetrators by abuse status and gender rigidity (MGRS), and that emotional constriction (TAS) was marginally significant ( $p = .06$ ).

**Table 6.** Results of Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Perpetration

Variable	r	b	Odds Ratio	p Value
Physical abuse <sup>a</sup>	.28	0.84	2.31	< .001
Sexual abuse	.12	0.56	1.75	< .01
MGRS <sup>b</sup>	.08	0.01	1.01	< .05
TAS <sup>c</sup>	.07	0.06	1.06	< .06
BSRI-fem <sup>d</sup>	.00	0.01	0.99	ns
CECS <sup>e</sup>	.00	0.01	1.01	ns

<sup>a</sup>Physical and sexual abuse status dichotomous, yes/no.

<sup>b</sup>MGRS = Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale.

<sup>c</sup>TAS = Toronto Alexithymia Scale, nine-item subscale.

<sup>d</sup>BSRI-fem = Bem Sex Role Inventory: Femininity subscale.

<sup>e</sup>CECS = Courtauld Emotional Control Scale.

## Discussion

The findings from this study of nearly 600 men were derived from a retrospective, self-report assessment and thus our conclusions must be interpreted with caution. However, the data are largely consistent with those from other sources. They indicate high rates of childhood abuse, a clear link between being abused and perpetrating against others, and a complex relationship between abuse, gender rigidity and perpetration. However, these findings also suggest that the vast majority of abused men do not perpetrate abuse against others.

The rate of sexual abuse found in this sample of older college men is considerably higher than that reported by studies of community samples (e.g. Finkelhor, Hotelling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990), although fairly consistent with methodologically similar studies of college samples (Fromuth & Burkhardt, 1987; Lisak & Luster, 1994). The rate of physical abuse found in this sample is also higher than the few published estimates based on similar samples (Briere, 1992).

Two methodological and/or sample characteristics of this study may help to explain these higher rates. First, the self-report, anonymous nature of the data gathering may actually increase disclosure in male samples, in contrast to the prevailing understanding for female samples, in which face-to-face interviews have tended to yield the highest prevalence rates. Second, the abuse assessment instruments used in this study were highly detailed, included a relatively large number of questions, avoided any use of "gate questions," and did not rely on subjects' self-labeling as "abused," all factors which have been associated with obtaining higher prevalence rates (Peters, Wyatt, & Finkelhor, 1986).

There was considerable overlap between sexual and physical abuse in this sample. Of the 154 men who reported sexual abuse, almost two thirds (60%) also reported physical abuse. Since the majority of physical abuse was intrafamilial, and the majority of sexual abuse extrafamilial, one explanation for the overlap might be that abuse within the home constitutes a risk factor for subsequent victimization by extrafamilial perpetrators. To the extent that this overlap is generalizable, it points to the difficulty of tracing isolated long term effects to a particular form of abuse. Indeed, a limitation of this study is its failure to assess other forms of familial violence and neglect as thoroughly as sexual and physical abuse, thereby preventing a thorough analysis of the contribution of these factors to the outcome variables under study.

The findings from this study on the prevalence of perpetration are difficult to compare to others since, to the best of our knowledge, virtually no similar study has been published. However, the rate of sexual perpetration against adults found in this sample, 9%, was similar to that found in other studies using similar assessments (Koss & Oros, 1982; Lisak & Roth, 1988; Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984).

There was considerable overlap between forms of perpetration: large percentages of men who were sexually violent were also physically abusive; and many of those who were violent toward adults were also abusive to children. These findings have important implications for the assessment of perpetration in studies of the "cycle of violence" hypothesis. Only by broadly defining and assessing perpetration can the true magnitude of the relationship between childhood abuse and later violence be measured. Of course, the need to assess all forms of perpetration virtually necessitates a reliance on retrospective self-reports from the perpetrators themselves, because the low rate of reporting and prosecution of interpersonal crimes means that a large proportion of such violence leaves no archival trace (e.g., arrest records, etc.). While self-report techniques are clearly vulnerable to response bias and the frailties of memory, there is substantial evidence of their general reliability (see e.g., Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993).

The findings from this study strongly underscore the link between early abuse and perpetration: 70% of all perpetrators reported some form of childhood abuse, as did nearly four fifths of child abusers. While the simple relationship between abuse and perpetration is the strongest finding, there was also evidence of a relationship between severity of abuse and severity of perpetration. We must caution that the index of severity used in this study, the total number of types of abuse and/or perpetration experiences, was relatively crude. Nevertheless, our findings underscore a clear correspondent relationship between the form and severity of abuse

suffered and the type and severity of perpetration committed: the more severe the sexual abuse, the more sexual perpetration committed; the more severe the physical abuse, the more physical perpetration committed. Surprisingly, other indices of severity which have been identified as likely to mediate the abuse-perpetration link, such as age of onset of abuse, abuse within the family, degree of force used, did not differentiate perpetrators from nonperpetrators.

The primary hypothesis tested in this study — that abused perpetrators would score higher than abused nonperpetrators on measures of gender rigidity and emotional constriction — was partially supported. Sexually abused men scored higher on one measure each of gender rigidity and emotional constriction. The results for physically abused men were more clear. Three measures of gender rigidity and emotional constriction differentiated perpetrators from nonperpetrators at a level of statistical significance, and two measures were marginally significant. While this pattern of results is supportive of the hypothesized relationships, they must be regarded with some caution. The relatively large number of univariate tests performed increases the chances of Type I error. However, we believe the relatively large number of significant findings suggests the presence of legitimate between groups differences, and that these findings would be inappropriately obscured (Type II error) by the application of stringent corrections for multiple analyses.

The contribution of gender rigidity and emotional constriction to perpetration outcome was further emphasized by the results of the logistic regression analysis. These results provide support for several of the relationships posited in the sequence outlined in Figure 1, which links abuse, gender rigidity, emotional constriction, empathy deficits, and perpetration.

One startling finding was revealed in comparisons of nonperpetrating abused men and nonabused men. Abused men, particularly those who were sexually abused, actually appeared to be better adjusted than nonabused men on measures of gender stress, emotional constriction and homophobia. The composite picture from these results is of a group of men who, despite or perhaps because of their sexual abuse histories, are less rigid and less stereotyped in their gender identity and also more able to fully experience and express themselves emotionally.

One way to understand these findings is to conceptualize two developmental pathways diverging from a history of childhood abuse. In one path, the male abuse victim may appear conflicted and preoccupied by gender identity issues, but this preoccupation may indicate a lack of conformity to gender norms necessitated by his coping with the legacy of his abuse. In the other path, the male abuse victim strives to be stereotypically masculine, and must therefore suppress the high magnitude emotional states

that are the legacy of his abuse. The suppression required to hold at bay the emotional legacy of abuse may also suppress his capacity to empathize with others. Having sealed himself off from his own pain, the perpetrator may well seal off his capacity to feel the pain of others, and thereby diminish a crucial inhibition against interpersonal violence. Simultaneously, his rigid gender conformity may accentuate his reliance on anger as a culturally acceptable outlet for his emotions, again increasing his propensity for aggressive interpersonal behavior.

### Acknowledgments

The research reported in this articles was supported in part by a Faculty Development Grant from the University of Massachusetts-Boston. The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the anonymous editors, and the statistical advice of Robert Aseltine.

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