BSc in Psychology

Family characteristics as predictors for sexual violence among adolescents in Iceland

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Foreword

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the BSc Psychology degree, Reykjavik University, this thesis is presented in the style of an article for submission to a peer-reviewed journal.

Abstract

Sexual violence is any kind of sexual act by any person regardless of their relation to the victim. Previous studies have shown that the most common risk factors for child sexual abuse are in the child's immediate surroundings. These include weak parenting and struggles in the parent-child relationship. The aim of this study was to assess if certain family characteristics (domestic violence, parental control, parental support and family status) can predict sexual violence among adolescents. The data was obtained from the Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis (ICSRA) 2016. The sample included 2042 adolescents aged 16-20 years old. A binary logistic regression analysis showed that less parental support, being a witness or a victim of domestic violence and not living with a parent increases the probabilities of adolescents being sexually violated. Furthermore, when the results were split by gender the results were different, there were different variables that predicted sexual violence among boys and girls. Among boys, being a witness or a victim of domestic violence increased the probabilities of being sexually violated while parental support, parental control and being a victim of domestic violence among girls increased the probabilities of being sexually violated.

Key words: sexual violence, parental support, parental control, domestic violence, family characteristics

Kynferðisofbeldi er kynferðisleg athöfn sem beinist að einstaklingi gegn vilja hans, framin af einhverjum án tillits til tengsla við fórnarlambið. Fyrri rannsóknir sýna að helstu áhættuþættir kynferðisofbeldis gegn börnum eru þættir úr þeirra nánasta umhverfi. Þessir þættir fela í sér til dæmis lélegar uppeldisaðferðir og slæmt samband forendra og barns. Helsta markmið þessarar rannsóknar var að meta það hvort tilteknir fjölskyldueiginleikar (heimilisofbeldi, eftirlit og stuðningur foreldra, og fjölskylduaðstæður) geti spáð fyrir um að ungmenni verði fyrir kynferðisofbeldi. Rannsóknir og greining útveguðu gögn rannsóknarinnar frá könnuninni Ungt folk sem lögð var fyrir í framhaldsskólum landsins árið 2016. Úrtakið samanstóð af 2042 ungmennum á aldrinum 16-20 ára. Binary logistic fylgnigreining sýndi að ungmenni sem greindu frá litlum stuðningi foreldra, urðu vitni eða fórnarlamb heimilisofbeldis eða bjuggu ekki með foreldri, voru líklegri til þess að greina frá því að hafa orðið fyrir kynferðisofbeldi. Niðurstöðunum var síðan skipt eftir kyni og þá voru það voru ekki sömu þættir sem virtust spá fyrir um kynferðisofbeldi hjá strákum og stelpum. Meðal stráka voru það þættirnir að verða vitni eða fórnarlamb heimilisofbeldis en meðal stúlkna var stuðningur og eftirlit foreldra og að verða fórnarlamb heimilisofbeldis sem jók líkurnar á því að ungmennin greindu frá því að hafa orðið fyrir kynferðisofbeldi.

Lykilorð: kynferðisofbeldi, foreldrastuðningur, eftirlit foreldra, heimilisofbeldi, fjölskyldueinkenni

Family characteristics as predictors for sexual violence among adolescents in Iceland

Sexual violence is a serious crime occurring worldwide (Mason & Lodrick, 2013; Jewkes, Sen & Garcia-Moreno, 2002). Sexual violence is any kind of coerced sexual act by any person regardless of their relation to the victim (Jewkes, Sen & Garcia-Moreno, 2002). Research shows that the prevalence of sexual violence ranges from 6% to 62% for women and from 3% to 16% for men worldwide (Garnefski & Arends, 1998). Black et.al (2011) show that the recent numbers in the United States show that 11.4% to 29.2% of women are raped sometime in their life. From 28.9 to 58% women are sexually violated in other ways than rape. For men, it is estimated that 10.8 to 33.7% are sexually violated, but not raped and that 17.4% to 41.2% are raped, physically violated and/or stalked by a companion (Black et al., 2011). More than half of men who are raped, or 52.4%, report the sexual offender being someone they know (Black et al., 2011). These numbers are very high, but sexual violence is not always reported (Black et al., 2011; Dhaliwal, Gauzas, Antonowicz & Ross, 1996), especially among male victims (Jewkes, Sen & Garcia-Moreno, 2002).

It has been shown that sexual violence can have a major impact on the victim (Mangilio, 2009; Jewkes, Sen & Garcia-Moreno, 2002). Both men and women show signs of long term psychological problems following sexual violence, for example anxiety, depression and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) (Mason & Lodrick, 2013; Jewkes, Sen & Garcia-Moreno, 2002) as well as anger and guilt (Jewkes, Sen & Garcia-Moreno, 2002). According to Jewkes, Sen & Garcia-Moreno (2002) show that adolescents who are sexually abused have shown signs of violent behaviour, thievery, substance misuse and absence from school as consequences of sexual violence (Jewkes, Sen & Garcia-Moreno, 2002).

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is much more common than people might think (Finkelhor, 1984). CSA is when a child is forced or persuaded to take part in a sexual activity by someone older or when the offender has authority or a care-taking relationship with the child

(Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis & Smith, 1990). Previous studies show that the prevalence of CSA is about 11.8% overall. Ólafsdóttir (2011) conducted a research in Iceland in 2000 and 2001 with a 1500-person random sample from 18-60 years old. The results revealed that 17% of these 1500 participants had reported of being sexually abused as children and 60% did not report the violence at the time it occurred. CSA seems to be much more common among girls (18% to 19.7%) than boys (7.6% to 7.9%) (Stoltenborgh, Van Ijzendoorn, Euser, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2011), but then boys are less likely to report sexual violence. About 60-65% of boys and 52% of girls who become victims of sexual violence do not report it (Ólafsdóttir, 2011; Fergusson & Mullen, 1999). Children aged 7-13 are most vulnerable for sexual abuse and girls seem to be younger than boys when the abuse starts (Ferguson & Mullen, 1999; Finkelhor, 1984). Research on CSA can be very a complicated and complex subject, mainly because there are so many and different factors that can influence the results (Ólafsdóttir, 2011)

Most CSA offenders are males, or around 90%. About 10% to 20% of boys who are sexually abused, are abused by a family member. (Finkelhor, 1984). It is however much more common for girls rather than boys to be abused by a family member (Finkelhor, 1984). The psychological harm of CSA can vary greatly from child to child. If the abuse occurs over a long time and by an acquaintance the harm is significant (Tremblay, Hébert & Piché, 1999). Not to mention, if the child is forced, persuaded or if the sexual abuse involves penetration the child is more likely to suffer from more severe psychological harm (Tremblay, Hébert & Piché, 1999). Children who have been sexually abused are also at an increased risk of abusing alcohol and suffering from major depressive disorders (Clark, Bellis, Lynch, Cornelius, & Martin, 2003).

It has been shown that there are many social and family background factors that seem to be associated with sexual violence being reported by adults. Factors like living apart from

their mother while at a young age, if their parents are dealing with some kind of disability or

illness and being socially isolated form peers (Fleming, Mullen, & Bammer, 1997). The most

common risk factors for child sexual abuse are in the child´s immediate surroundings like

weak parenting and struggles in the parent-child relationship (Finkelhor, 1984). Children

whose parents have divorced or separated, or children who do not live with both of their

biological parents, have lived for a long time with one parent or step-parents or are in

unhappy families are at a greater risk of being sexually abused. Children who receive poor

sex education also seem to be at a greater risk of being sexually abused (Vogeltanz et al.,

1999). Children who grow up in bad conditions, with parents who frequently drink alcohol or

live among drug abusing or unstable parents are also at more risk of sexual abuse (Finkelhor,

1984). Parents who drink and are rejecting to their children are putting them at risk of being

sexually violated in the future, but there is a significant relationship between children wo are

rejected and grow up with parents who drink frequently and being sexually abused (Vogeltanz

et al., 1999). Children who grow up in a home where boundaries and rules are unclear seem to

be more vulnerable to become victims of sexual abuse, this mainly applies to incest

(Ólafsdóttir, 2011). Those who are dealing with a mental or physical disability like blindness

are also at greater risk than others (Finkelhor, 1984).

   The purpose of this study was to examine if these specific risk factors (parental support,

parental control, being a victim or a witness of domestic violence and living with a parent or

not) could predict sexual violence among adolescents in Iceland. There were four hypotheses

proposed in this study. The first hypothesis assumes that those who report having good

parental control and good parental support are less likely to report sexual violence. The

second hypothesis expects adolescents who do not live with a parent to be more likely to

report sexual violence. The third hypothesis assumes that there is a positive and significant

relationship between being a victim or a witness of domestic violence and reporting of sexual

violence. Finally, the fourth and last hypothesis assumes that by dividing the participants by gender, there are not the same factors that predict sexual violence among boys and girls.

Method

Participants   Participants for the current study were collected by the Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis (ISCRA). The total sample included 10.717 participants and the response rate was 71%. For this particular research 2045 random participants were retrieved from the original sample. The participants age ranged from 16 to 20 years old. There were 1003 (49.1%) male participants and 1005 (49.2%) female and 34 (1.7%) did not specify their gender (see Table 1).

Table 1

Distribution of age and gender in the sample

Age	Boys n (%)	Girls n (%)	Total n (%)
20 or older	60 (5.9)	24 (2.4)	84 (4.2)
19	146 (14.6)	142 (14.1)	288 (14.3)
18	206 (20.5)	233 (23.2)	439 (21.9)
17	250 (24.9)	247 (24.6)	497 (23.9)
16 or younger	295 (29.4)	298 (29.3)	593 (29.5)
Other	15 (1.5)	12 (1.2)	27 (1.3)
Total	972 (96.9)	966 (96.1)	1938 (96.5)

There was a questionnaire placed for all high school students who showed up that particular day in October and each had a choice if they wanted to participate or not.

Measures

A questionnaire was constructed by ISCRA. The questionnaire contained 85 questions on 32

pages regarding education, culture, hobbies, sports, health behavior, wellbeing and future

among adolescents in Iceland. Most questions were based on ordinal scales. The questions

were shaped by professional people working in social sciences with very strict requirements

and lead to valid and reliable results (Guðmundsdóttir et.al.., 20016). In this study the

researcher used seven questions, regarding gender, age, sexual violence, parental support,

parental control and about who the participants lived with (both parents, one parent or other

arrangements).

      Sexual violence. Participants answered following questions to measure if they had been

a victim of sexual violence: "Have you ever been sexually abused by someone who is not an

adult?", "Have you ever been sexually abused by an adult?", "Has someone exposed

themselves towards you in an improper way", "Has someone touched you elsewhere than

your genitals in an improper way?", "Has someone touched your genitals without consent?",

"Has someone convinced, or forced you to touch their genitals? ", "Has someone convinced,

or forced you to have sexual intercourse?". The questions were given the value 0 if the answer

was "no", and 1 if the answer was "yes".

      Parental support. This variable was defined by asking the following questions: "How

easy or how hard it is to get the following from your parents?": "Comfort and warmth",

"Personal discussion", "Advice regarding education", "Advice regarding other tasks" and

"Assistance with various tasks". The question was on a 4 point Likert scale from 1 to 4, one

being "very hard" and 4 meaning "very easy".

      Parental control. The following question was used to measure parental control: "How

well do following statements apply to you?" on a 4 point Likert scale from „does not apply to

me at all" (1) to „really applies to me" (4): "My parents keep track on who I spend my time

with in the evening", "My parents keep track on where I am in the evening", "My parents know my friends" and "My parents know my friend's parents". The questions were given the value 0 if the answer was "no", and 1 if the answer was "yes".

Victim or a witness of domestic violence. This variable was very simple including the following question: "Has any of the following happened to you?": "You witnessed physical abuse in your home where an adult had an issue in the matter" and "You been a victim of physical abuse in your home where an adult had an issue in the matter". The questions were given the value 0 if the answer was "no", and 1 if the answer was "yes".

Living with at least one parent or no parent. This variable was assessed by asking the following question "Who of the following lives in your home?": "Both of my parents", "I live alternatively with my mother and father", "My mother but not my father", "My father but not my mother", "My mother and her partner", "My father and his partner", " I live alone", "I live with a friend/acquaintance", "I live with other family member" or "Other arrangements". These questions were split into two groups, those who lived with at least other parent, and those who did not live with neither one of their parent.

Procedure

In October 2016 the survey that was described above was conducted. It was sent to every high school in Iceland where teachers had clear instructions about observing the students and to assist them if something was unclear. With every questionnaire came an envelope for the participants to put the questionnaire once they had finished answering the questions. It was emphasized that the survey was anonymous and no one was obligated to answer all of the questions. The students who had not reached 18 years had to get their parents approval to participate in this particular survey after receiving an explanation about the content and purpose of the research. ISCRA has submitted this questionnaire regularly for

all elementary schools and high schools in Iceland since 1997 (Guðmundsdóttir et.al..,

20016).

Data analysis

The data in this research was analyzed using the statistical program SPSS. Descriptive

statistics were conducted for all variables, dependent and independent. Then a binary logistic

regression was performed to test the proposed theories. Chi-square test of independence was

calculated to examine the relationship between reporting sexual violence and gender. The data

were then divided by gender to see if the same factors predicted sexual violence among boys

and girls.

Results

Table 2 shows the number of boys and girls who had been sexually violated.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for sexual violence

Gender	Never been sexually violated n (%)	Had been sexually violated n (%)	Total
Boy	797 (79.5)	205 (20.5)	1002
Girl	637 (63.5)	366 (36.5)	1003
Total	1434 (71.5)	571 (28.5)	2005

Overall, 28.5% reported having experienced sexual violence. Girls were more likely to report

having been sexually violated than boys $(\chi^2(1, N = 2005) = 63.25, p < .001)$.

Table 3 shows means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values for parental

support and parental control. The results showed that the mean for parental support was 3.50

and for parental control the mean was 3.09 $(SD = 0.71)$.

Table 3

Minimum and maximum values, means and standard deviations for Parental Support and Parental Control

Variables	*Min*	*Max*	*M*	*SD*
Parental support	1	4	3.50	0.64
Parental control	1	4	3.09	0.71

Table 4 shows the number of participants who reported having been a witness or a victim of domestic violence as well as living with at least one parent or none.

Table 4

Numbers of participants who reported having been a witness of domestic violence, victim of domestic violence and participants living with a parent

Variables		*n*	(%)
Witness of domestic violence	No	1858	(91.0)
	Yes	184	(9.0)
Victim of domestic violence	No	1884	(92.3)
	Yes	158	(7.7)
Lives with at least one parent	No	148	(7.4)
	Yes	1861	(92.6)

Results showed that 91% of participants reported never having been a witness to domestic violence at home, and 9% of participants reported that they had been a witness of domestic violence at home. Similarly, 92.3% reported that they had never been a victim of domestic violence, but 7.7% reported having been domestically violated. Furthermore, 92.6% of participants lived with at least one parent and 7.4% did not live with their parents, but lived with other family members or had other arrangements.

A logistic regression analysis was conducted to see if family characteristics parental support, parental control, domestic violence and family status predicted adolescents being a victim of sexual violence.

Table 5 shows the results revealed that those who had more parental support were less likely to report being sexually violated (B = -0.283, p = .001). A positive and significant relationship was found between being a victim (B = 1.433, p < .001) or a witness (B = .732, p = .004) of domestic violence and being sexually violated. The odds ratio for being sexually

Table 5

Binary logistic regression predicting sexual violence

	B	SE	df	p	Exp(B)
Parental support	-.283	.088	1	.001*	.754
Parental control	-.137	.081	1	.089	.872
Witness of domestic violence	.732	.256	1	.004*	2.078
Victim of domestic violence	1.433	.292	1	.000*	4.190
Lives with at least one parent	-.028	.124	1	.820	.972
Does not live with a parent	.527	.222	1	.018*	1.694
(Constant)	.233	.345	1	.500	1.262

* p < 0.05

violated increased by 2.10 units if a person has been a witness of domestic violence and by 4.20 units if a person has been a victim of domestic violence. There was not a significant relationship between parental control and being sexually violated. There was not a relationship between living with at least one parent (mom, dad or both parents) and reporting sexual violence. But there was a positive relationship between not living with a parent and being a victim of sexual violence (B = .527, p = .018). The explanatory power (see table 6)

Table 6

Prediction success

	Never been sexually violated (predicted)	Had been sexually violated (predicted)	Prediction success
Never been sexually violated (observed)	1371	34	97,6%
Had been sexually violated (observed)	438	78	15,1%
Total	1809	112	75,4%

was 10.1% (Nagelkerke R^2 = .101). Prediction success overall was 75.4% (97.6% for not been

sexually violated and 15.1% for those who have been sexually violated).

Two binary logistic regression analysis were performed, one for boys only and another for

girls only and the results are presented in table 7. For girls, there was a negative and effect of

parental support (B = -.217, p = .001), parental control (B = .-.393, p = .000) and being a

victim of domestic violence (B = .1.970, p = .006) on having been sexually violated. For boys

there were two variables significant; a positive effect of being a victim (B = .1.730, p = .000)

and being a witness of domestic violence (B = 1.010, p = .025) on reporting having been

sexually violated.

Table 7

Binary logistic regression predicting sexual violence divided by gender

		B	S.E.	df	p	Exp(B)
Boys	Parental support	-.217	.144	1	.132	.805
	Parental control	-.157	.133	1	.236	.845
	Witness of domestic violence	1.010	.451	1	.025*	2.744
	Victim of domestic violence	1.730	.495	1	.000*	5.642
	Lives with at least one parent	-.145	.214	1	.498	.865
	Does not live with a parent	.214	.392	1	.584	1.239
	(Constant)	-.518	.538	1	.336	.596
Girls	Parental support	-.391	.121	1	.001*	.677
	Parental control	-.393	.113	1	.000*	.675
	Witness of domestic violence	.464	.330	1	.160	1.590
	Victim of domestic violence	1.970	.385	1	.006*	2.915
	Lives with at least one parent	-.086	.162	1	.597	9.18
	Does not live with a parent	-.518	.538	1	.336	.596
	(Constant)	1.938	.299	1	.000	6.943

* $p < 0.05$

Discussion

The primary aim of the study was to examine if particular family characteristics, parental control, parental support, being a witness or a victim of domestic violence and living with a parent or not could predict being a victim of sexual violence among adolescents in Iceland. The first hypothesis was that more parental support and parental control makes the adolescents less vulnerable for sexual violence. The hypothesis was partly supported. The

results showed that those with more parental support were less likely to report having been a victim of sexual violence but parental control did not have a significant relationship with being a victim of sexual violence among the adolescents. This is consistent with previous studies that show that the most common risk factors for being a victim of sexual abuse among children are the children´s immediate surroundings, such as parenting styles and the relationship between a child and its parents (Finkelhor, 1984).

The results supported the second hypothesis. Those who did not live with a parent were more likely to report being a victim of sexual violence. Previous findings show that children who grow up with both parents are less likely to be sexually violated than those with divorced or separated parents (Vogeltanz et al., 1999). However, the current study approached family status differently and divided those two groups by those who grow up with at least one parent, which consisted of children living with both parents, a single parent or one parent and a step parent, and those who did not live with a parent, who in most cases with other family members

The findings also supported the third hypothesis, that there was a relationship between being a victim or a witness of domestic violence and reporting of sexual violence. Finkelhor (1984) showed that struggles in a child-parent relationship is a great risk factor and violence is clearly some kind of a struggle in the relationship.

The fourth and last hypothesis assumed that by dividing the participants by gender, there are not the same factors that predict sexual violence among boys and girls was also supported. After dividing the data the results changed, not living with a parent was neither significant with boys nor girls. Being a victim of domestic violence was significant with both genders and being witness to domestic violence was significant for boys. Parental support was only significant with girls and parental control as well, but there was not a significant relationship between parental control and reporting sexual violence before dividing the data.

The main strength of this study was the size of the sample. In addition, the response rate was good (71%) and the gender ratio was well balanced (1003 boys and 1005 girls). The questionnaire also had great validity and reliability (Guðmundsdóttir et.al., 2016). It is also a strength that the questionnaire was anonymous because some of the questions were considered very sensitive.

There are also limitations in this study. The explanatory power was about 10%, so there are so many other variables that could have an impact. The sexual violence also occurred at different time in their lives and the predictors might differ for a 12 year old victim of sexual violence and an 18 year old victim. The research was based on self-report measures only so it cannot be ruled out that there might be inaccuracy in the results. Previous research have also shown that about 60-64% of boys and 52% of girls keep it a secret if they become victims of sexually abused. Ólafsdóttir (2011) also came to the results that 60% of Icelandic adults who were sexually violated as children did not report of the violence at the time it happened. That might also indicate inaccuracy in the results.

Future research on this issue is very important, because learning about risk factors creates knowledge that can be used to organize actions that reduce the frequency of sexual abuse. The explanatory power of the binary logistic regression was 10%, so there are might by other important factors that predict sexual abuse that is important to find and study. It would also be very interesting to see what variables predict sexual violence among adolescents regarding to the age of the victim when the violence occurs. But it is a very delicate subject and hard to study for there are so many factors that might predict or increase probabilities of becoming a victim of sexual abuse and the numbers are extremely high today.

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