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The complex experience of child pornography survivors

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the complex experiences of survivors of child pornography production. The study was conducted among a convenience sample of child pornography adult survivors (N = 133), using an online survey which included a series of open-ended questions. Nearly half of respondents reported that they felt the production of sexual images caused specific problems that were different from the problems caused by other aspects of the abuse. Nearly half of the sample worried all the time that people would think they were willing participants or that people would recognize them, one-third refused to talk about the images and 22% denied there were images. The qualitative analysis identified three major themes which emerged from the survivor's perspective as adults: *Guilt and shame*, their *ongoing vulnerability* and *an empowerment dimension the images sometimes brought*. Recommendations for further research and additional implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Child pornography (CP), also known as child sexual abuse images,[1] has become a serious problem in the United States and worldwide, fostered by the development of online and digital technologies (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2011; Wolak, Liberatore, & Levine, 2014). According to the Federal statutes, CP is the *visual depiction … of sexually explicit conduct* (18 USCS 2256) involving persons under age 18. Sexually explicit conduct includes acts such as intercourse, bestiality and masturbation, as well as *lascivious exhibition of the genitals or pubic area*. Because the federal statute defines child to include 16 and 17-year-old teenagers, youth under 18 who can legally consent to sexual intercourse (age 16 and older in most states) cannot consent to being photographed in sexually explicit poses. Further, adults who persuade or induce minors to create sexually explicit images are generally considered CP producers. Many states mirror federal law, although there is some variation in the definition of child and the content that is proscribed.

Arrests for crimes involving CP production more than quadrupled between 2000 and 2009. The growth is largely attributable to cases of "youth-produced sexual images" solicited from minors by adult offenders and, despite the increase in youth-produced sexual images, most CP producers arrested in 2009 were adults (Wolak, Finkelhor, & Mitchell, 2012). Youth-produced sexual images (often called sexting) add to the challenges of legislative systems which deal with child pornography prosecutions and arrests. Leukfeldt, Jansen, and Stol (2014) analyzed 159 Dutch police files related to images of abuse and exploitation child pornography and found that almost a quarter of the suspects were under 24 years of age. Of that group, 35% were younger than 18 years.

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[1] We recognize that many professionals and researchers in the field prefer to use the term child sexual abuse images due to concerns that the term "child pornography" may imply victim compliance or understate the harm to the victims. We use the term child pornography in this manuscript because it is used and defined in federal and state statutes and because it encompasses both images involving child sexual abuse and images that do not depict abuse but are child pornography under U.S. law.

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Although a large body of research has examined the effects of child sexual abuse, empirical information about the effects of being photographed or filmed in CP is scarce. In addition, the majority of studies examining CP have focused either on the legislative aspects (e.g. Baker, 2007; Hessick, 2011; Ost, 2002), the perpetrators (e.g. Bourke & Hernandez, 2009; Seto, Cantor, & Blanchard, 2006; Webb, Craissati, & Keen, 2007), or the consumers (e.g. Seto et al., 2015). Limited studies have been conducted among CP survivors themselves, their reaction to the films or images and how it impacted them over their lives (Hunt & Braid, 1990; Silbert, 1989; Svedin & Back, 2003). The present study sought to understand the complex experience of CP survivors, using a mixed methods analysis.

1.1. Child pornography

The vast majority of children who appear in CP have not been abducted or physically forced, but rather manipulated to cooperate (Tyler & Stone, 1985). Quayle and Jones (2003) assessed the characteristics of the children exploited in CP and found the odds of the victims being female versus male were about 4 to 1, and the odds of the images being of White children versus non-White children about 10 to 1. In most cases, victims know the producer, who manipulates them into producing films or photos (Tyler & Stone, 1985). Nevertheless, to be the subject of CP can have serious physical, social, and psychological effects on children (Martin, 2015).

In the late 1980s, Silbert reported on her clinical experiences with 100 survivors of CP who were interviewed about the effects of their exploitation—at the time it occurred and in later years. Referring to when the abuse was taking place, CP survivors described the physical pain (e.g., around the genitals), accompanying somatic symptoms (such as headaches, loss of appetite, and sleeplessness), and feelings of psychological distress (emotional isolation, anxiety, and fear). However, most also felt a pressure to cooperate and did not disclose or report either the crime or the perpetrator (Silbert, 1989). In later years, the CP survivors reported that initial feelings of shame and anxiety did not fade but intensified to feelings of deep despair, worthlessness, and hopelessness (Silbert, 1989). Other studies have observed the sense of shame exhibited by victims. In a 1990 study of 10 young child victims of sex rings that involved pornography, researchers noted that being photographed exacerbated victims' experience of shame and humiliation (Hunt & Braid, 1990). In a review of interviews of victims identified in several CP cases in Sweden, all of the children described how a sense of shame and guilt dominated their feelings at the time of disclosure of the abuse (Svedin & Back, 2003).

Research also illustrates that CP may exacerbate the abuse and trauma (Martin, 2015). The lack of control over the ongoing sharing of their abuse images and the public accessibility of those abuse images can be one of the most difficult aspects of the abuse to overcome (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017). For children in these images, trauma symptoms do not occur in the aftermath of abuse: the abuse is ongoing with no definable end (Martin, 2015). In two case studies of victims depicted in CP that was distributed online, victims were continually traumatized when they thought about who might be viewing the images online (Leonard, 2010). Similarly, clinicians who worked with 245 CP survivors believe the permanence of the images placed a burden on victims in trying to cope with the abuse and find closure (Von Weiler, Haardt-Becker, & Schulte, 2010). However, information about CP survivors' own experiences regarding the crime and how it affected them at the time it occurred and in later years, is limited.

1.2. The current study

The purpose of this paper was to 1) examine characteristics of the CP crime, such as age when images were first created, the relationship to the perpetrator, whether CP victims were also sexually molested, the length of time the creation of the images lasted, whether images were shared with others and whether the crime was reported; 2) examine whether there are sex differences and characteristics of the CP crime; 3) investigate the impact and reactions to the images shortly after the CP was created; and 4) explore respondents' reflections as adults about being depicted in CP.

2. Method

2.1. Design

This study was conducted as a mixed-methods design, utilizing an online questionnaire that included a series of fixed response questions about the characteristics of the crime as well as a series of open-ended questions about the experience of being photographed or filmed and their reactions to it.

2.2. Procedure

We conducted an online survey of a convenience sample of adult survivors of CP production as part of a larger research project to improve responses to victims depicted in CP. Several victim service organizations and support groups for adult survivors of child sexual abuse agreed to send email invitations with links to the survey to listserv members or to post invitations on their websites. The survey was accessible through Qualtrics, a secure web-based survey data collection system. The survey took 15 min to complete, on average and was open from January 9, 2013 to September 30, 2013. The survey was anonymous, and no data were collected that linked participants to recruitment sources. The University of New Hampshire Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved all procedures and instruments.

Clicking on the link to the survey brought potential respondents to a page that provided information about the purpose of the study, the nature of the questions, and consent (e.g., the survey was voluntary; respondents could skip any questions or quit at any

time; responses would be anonymous). The first page also offered online resources, a telephone hotline for survivors of child abuse, and researcher contact information. Participants could skip any question by leaving it blank or selecting a "Skip question" option. We did not offer incentives for completion.

A total of 339 participants entered the survey site. Only 190 indicated they were eligible by answering yes to the initial question, which asked, "Just to confirm, are you an adult (age 18 or older) who was pictured in child pornography? CP refers to images (pictures or videos) of minors age 17 or younger that depict explicit sexual acts, focus on genitals or show nudity in a sexual context. The perpetrator may have created the images or may have convinced the child to create them." Of those, only 133 completed the survey.

2.3. Measures

Measures were developed and piloted with input from the projects' Advisory Committee, a panel of 19 experts who had experience working with CP victims. These included practitioners, law enforcement, FBI professionals, attorneys, victim advocates, as well as an adult survivor. Members of the panel participated in conference calls to discuss the goals and structure of the survey and they reviewed, commented on and pretested drafts of the survey. The survey was divided into several sections:

2.3.1. Personal characteristics

Survey questions asked about personal characteristics at the time of the survey (e.g., sex, age, race and ethnicity, marital status, and education level).

2.3.2. Characteristics of the incident

Questions included, for example, age at the time of the crime, relationship to the perpetrator, whether respondent was sexually molested during the crime, duration of the crime, how much time has passed since the crime ended, whether images were illegally shared or given to other people, whether the crime was reported to the police or a child welfare agency, whether the police or a child welfare agency knew or found out about the images, and whether the perpetrator was convicted.

2.3.3. Impact of the crime

Using a 4-point scale ranging from "never" to "all the time," Survey questions asked participants how often they experienced certain reactions to the images after the crime (e.g., shame, feeling it was their fault the images were created, worrying about other people seeing the images).

2.3.4. Open ended questions on the crime

Regarding the impact and reaction towards the images, participants answered five open-ended questions: 1) Have the images that were taken caused specific problems or difficulties that were different from the problems caused by the other things that may have happened to you during this crime? 2) Please describe your reaction to the images. 3) Please describe how your reactions to the images have changed over time. 4) Is there anything about the images that you particularly worry about? Please describe this. 5) Is there anything you changed or did on your own that you believe helped you to address the abuse and its effect on your life?

2.4. Data analysis

For the quantitative part, we produced basic frequencies, and cross-tabulations with chi-square tests to compare male and female experiences. For the qualitative part, a line-by-line, open-coding analysis was employed (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The analysis did not use preconceived codes, but allowed themes to emerge directly from the text (Creswell, 1998). The answers to the open-ended questions were analyzed thematically according to Braun and Clarke (2006) approach. The first two authors (AGM and WW) familiarized themselves with the data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas. Then, initial codes were generated across the entire data set and data relevant to each code was collated. Next, codes were discussed among the authors (AGM, WW, and DF) and were grouped into main themes to identify variations in responses. Defining and naming themes and the overall story the analysis tells was conducted by all three authors (AGM, WW, and DF). The reliability of analysis was enhanced by sharing and discussing the coding between authors.

2.5. Participants

In the final sample of 133 participants, 64% were female, 33% were male, and 2% were transgender or unspecified (Table 1). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 75, with most age 35 or older (63%) at the time of the survey (January 2013–September 2013). The majority of participants were Non-Hispanic White (87%). About half the sample was married or living with a partner (51%); one-third of participants were single, never married. Over half were college graduates (64%). Male respondents were more likely to have a post-college degree as compared to female respondents, $X^2(4, N = 129) = 9.646$, $p = .047$.

Table 1
Characteristics of Respondents (N = 133).

Personal characteristics	%
Gender	
Male	33
Female	64
Transgender or other	2
Skipped[a]	1
Age	
18–24	15
25–34	19
35–44	26
45–54	20
55 or older	17
Skipped	1
Race and Ethnicity	
Non-Hispanic White	87
Non-Hispanic Black	2
Asian	0
American Indian or Alaska	2
Native	4
Other	4
Marital status	
Married or living with a partner	51
Separated or divorced	13
Widowed	1
None of the above	33
Skipped	1
Education level	
Some high school or less	4
High school graduate or G.E.D.	5
Some college or technical school	29
College graduate	38
Post-college degree	26

[a] A "skip question" option was available for all survey questions.

3. Results

3.1. Child pornography characteristics

For most respondents, the CP images were part of a long-term sexual abuse, often beginning when they were quite young (Table 2). Eighty-three percent were age 12 or younger when they were first photographed; 52% were victimized by family members. Female respondents were more likely to be victimized by family members, and male respondents were more likely to be victimized by acquaintances, $X^2(1, N = 119) = 15.381, p < .001$. Most respondents (93%) suffered contact child sexual abuse in addition to being photographed. For 80% the CP occurred over a substantial period of time, 6 months or more. Most participants (83%) reported it happened more than 10 years ago. Close to half of respondents (48%) reported their images were illegally shared or given to other people, but almost as many reported they did not know whether images were illegally shared. Only about 1 in 4 incidents (23%) were reported to the police or a child welfare agency, and of the 31 respondents whose crime was reported, 71% of agencies (n = 22) knew or found out about the CP production. Of the 16 respondents who had a perpetrator arrested or charged, 88% (n = 14) of perpetrators were convicted.

3.2. Impacts of the child pornography during childhood

Survey questions asked respondents directly about certain reactions they may have had as children to being photographed or filmed for CP. Nearly half of respondents (47%) agreed that the images "caused specific problems or difficulties that were different from the problems caused by other aspects of the crime." About half or more of participants reported they had the following reactions all of the time: 74% felt ashamed, guilty, or humiliated all of the time, 54% always worried that people who saw the images would think they were a willing participant, 51% always felt it was their fault the images were created, 48% always worried about friends or other people they knew seeing the images, and 48% worried all the time that people who saw the images would recognize them (see Table 3). Approximately one-third of respondents reported that they always refused to talk to anyone or to the police and counselors about the images. About 1 in 5 respondents (22%) always denied the existence of the images. The only significant difference by sex was that male respondents were significantly more like to refuse to talk to anybody about the images as compared to female

Table 2
Characteristics of Crimes Involving Production of CP.

Crime characteristics	n = 133 %
Age when images were first created	
2 or younger	22
3–5	23
6–9	27
10–12	11
13–15	9
16 or 17	5
Don't Know	1
Skipped	1
Relationship to perpetrator	
Family member	52
Acquaintance	41
Met on Internet	1
Someone else	4
Don't know	2
Skipped	1
Respondent was sexually molested during the crime	
Yes	93
No	4
Don't know	3
How long the crime went on	
One day or less	7
More than a day to six months	5
More than six months to one year	6
More than one year	74
Don't know	5
Skipped	1
How long ago the crime happened	
Between one and five years ago	9
Between five and ten years ago	7
More than ten years ago	83
Don't know	1
Skipped	1
Images were illegally shared or given to other people	
Yes	48
No	6
Don't know	45
Skipped	1
Crime was reported to police or child welfare agency	
Yes	23
No	61
Skipped	1
Not applicable (no one else knows about the crime)	14

Table 3
Impact and Reactions to Being Sexually Abused Photographed or Filmed (N = 133).

	All the time %	Sometimes %	Rarely %	Never %	Skipped question %
Feeling ashamed, guilty, or humiliated	74	17	1	2	5
Worrying that people would think you were a willing participant	54	19	7	10	9
Feeling it was your fault the images were created	51	29	5	8	6
Worrying that people would recognize you in public	48	25	5	11	10
Worrying about friends or other people you knew seeing the images	48	26	5	11	9
Feeling embarrassed about police, social workers and others seeing the images	41	8	2	11	37
Refusing to talk to anyone about the images	36	31	9	15	9
Refusing to talk to police or counselors about the images	31	20	7	19	21
Refusing to be photographed or videoed by family or friends	29	41	8	13	9
Thinking the images were not a big deal compared to other things	22	45	9	17	7
Denying there were any images	22	27	11	33	7

respondents $X^2(1, N = 119) = 5.842, p = .016$.

3.3. Reactions to the child pornography as adults

Participants described additional specific problems or difficulties in answers to open-ended questions. Three major themes emerged. The first theme, *Guilt and shame*, concerns how CP survivors were prone to feel a great amount of guilt and shame. In their eyes, the images challenged their victim status because they could be interpreted as participating voluntarily in the crime. The second theme, *Ongoing vulnerability*, concerns the long-term effect the images have on the survivors and the psychological experience they have as ongoing abuse. The third theme, *the empowerment dimension of the images*, concerns redeeming features of the pictures as evidence, aside from their devastating impact. Over time, some survivors were able to view the images as facilitating convictions and validating their story.

3.4. Guilt and shame: "I feel guilty about it, all the time"

When participants described their feeling towards the crime, guilt and shame were the main and first emotions most survivors dealt with. Some of this guilt and shame related to their choosing to participate in the film taking or engaging in different behaviors during the filming. The CP component carried a particular potential for guilt for some because it was associated with the survivor's desire or dream for glory and fame: For many respondents, using video or a camera was presented at first as an adventure, imbued with the promise that the child would become a celebrity, movie star or actress. These promises made many survivors believe they were interested in filming or enjoying the photography sets, which added much guilt and shame later on in their lives.

"*I thought the images were a big deal in a positive way, because they were going to make me a movie star…I was good at what I was doing, so they said. I did not feel ashamed about the films at the time of the crime, because I was going to be a movie star…lots of people wanted to see me and I would be famous. I wanted to be recognized in public…".*

The images that were taken seemed to challenge survivors' victim status, as they presented more evidence for their voluntary participation. Feelings of guilt would arise when survivors viewed themselves in the photos and it looked as if they were cooperating or enthusiastic. Survivors repeatedly noted their worries about how they would be viewed in the images. They felt they wouldn't be believed or recognized as victims because the images were telling a different story.

"We feel terribly guilty even if we logically know we aren't. We are afraid that because we were involved in this, that other people will think we are just as bad as those who took the photos and set it all up…"

Although some survivors reported they wanted the filming to go on and dreamed of fame, others wrote that, even knowing they were being filmed, they did not understand the consequences.

"When I was young I did not realize it was bad, as an adult I understand that both photographs and the internet will last forever".

The images which presented the survivors as collaborators contributed to much guilt and shame. However, some respondents explained their cooperation as a survival strategy. They were aware of the cameras in the room yet were frightened or threatened.

"I was aware I was being photographed (age 6–8). In order to survive and reduce violence, I had to pretend to enjoy anal penetration while being photographed. This has caused a lot of problems with standard psychiatric and psychological assessments which all with varying degrees read, "appeared happy, expressive, no signs of depression." Just as in my "happy" child pornographic pictures, looks can be deceiving."

The term *child pornography* was introduced to some survivors only years later and improved their understanding of what happened in the crime. When properly labeled as CP, feelings of guilt and shamed could be processed and memories of the photographing could be reframed.

"As I became an adult and learned that child pornography exists and that that is what the camera*(s) had been used for, my sense of being victimized was compounded."*

When survivors processed the guilt, some of them were able to acknowledge that the images were not their fault. They felt less guilty about their participation as they developed the understanding they were manipulated. Some turned their guilt into anger and blamed the producers, or people who consumed or watched these films.

"I become ashamed, felt guilty and feared that I wanted the films to be made…and then I have moved on to a more healed place, realizing that I had nothing to do with the making of those films. That it was the adults who made those decisions, even though they made me feel as though they were doing what I wanted."

The guilt was handled differently by different survivors. For some, being told that the filming was not their fault was not helpful. If they seemed to collaborate with the filming or even enjoy it, they processed the guilt by becoming more accepting and sympathetic to the children they were. Some have processed the guilt by forgiving themselves for decisions made as children or have compassion for themselves as kids. Others demonstrated more understanding to their needs as kids. For example, one participant reported he learned to enjoy the abuse, because that was the only attention he received as a child. Others preferred feeling guilty rather than considering themselves as powerless.

"*Don't try to tell us our feelings of guilt are "cognitive distortions." I don't know about other situations, but I was one of many kids filmed and photographed, and one of my assigned roles was to comfort the new kids. I did it really well. Anyway, therapists seem to want to point out the irrationality of pre-teen kid feeling responsible for what he did. Finally, I told one therapist…and then she stopped harping on the "it wasn't your fault" thing. That was really important to me. It helped me get to the point where I could acknowledge that I'd rather feel guilty about things I did as a kid than recognize I was powerless…*"

3.5. Ongoing vulnerability: "haunts forever"

Survivors acknowledged the existence of the photos and the fact that they are *out there* and might never be fully destroyed. This fact was devastating to many survivors and described by some as if the images are haunting them. This led some survivors to deny the existence of the images over the years or live in constant fear about when, how and if they would surface.

"Even after more than 30 years I still worry the photos or films will someway return to haunt me or my family."

The fact that pictures could be circulating and could always resurface or be accessed not only planted fear and discomfort among the survivors but also made them feel as if they were re-victimized. Some survivors distinguished between unfilmed child sexual abuse, and child pornography. According to them, every abuse eventually ends, yet with child pornography, when images circulate, it feels as if the abuse is constant and continuing.

"The molesting or rape eventually stops. But images keep forever and maybe they'll never stop being circulated."

"I keep worrying how long these images remain, who has them, how they use them; feeling like this continues the victimization and I have no control over."

Some respondents noted they live in constant fear their images will surface and will be viewed by people they know, their family, or their children. Fears of the images and films circulating impacted their ability to continue with their lives or to let go of the past. Many survivors were triggered daily by the fear of being recognized or exposed.

"When a man approaches at a grocery store and tells me that he knows me from somewhere or that he recognizes me… I get so scared that he has seen my images. I don't know how to handle that."

Other participants actively search for their photos and try to destroy them or avoid leaving the house as much as they can. One participant wrote he often scans the internet for gay pornography to see if his pictures might come-up. A few survivors mentioned they try to buy as much as they can online to limit their exposure in public, and some considered the images when making decisions relating to their family or career.

"I can't run for public office or speak in public beyond a certain level for fear of my photo getting out there."

Survivors reported suffering from PTSD symptoms related to this specific crime. Many of them were triggered by things that were directly related to cameras and photo-taking, such as the sounds of x-ray machines or just cameras. Others had obsessive thoughts of the whereabouts of the images.

"Fear of cameras, movies, hating to have photos taken of me. My children have almost no pictures of me. I cannot watch any movies with sex or violence without freaking out."
"I still have a hard time letting anyone take a picture of me even a family portrait."

The unknown aspect of the images, if and when they will resurface or be accessed, was associated with powerlessness. The majority of survivors reported tremendous fear that the photos/films might be seen by other people and distributed. They reported high anxiety over being recognized or identified in the pictures. Survivors worried if the images are still circulating; who had viewed them; who will view them in the future; in what ways were they being used; will they be recognized; and how many copies were made and distributed.

"I have no idea what has happened to the pictures and it is very disturbing to imagine that those pictures are still out there and people still looking at them."
"I was terrified that the people taking the pictures would show them…being terrified that people in my life today would somehow see them."
"I am afraid that people have seen them. Thinking strangers recognize me from the images."

However, the level of constant fear throughout their life also varies among survivors. Although most survivors expressed a consistent fear and anxiety with little fading away, other survivors described being less and less anxious about being identified in the pictures as they aged.

3.6. The empowering dimension of the pictures: "It validated everything I had said"

Over the years, some of the survivors had recognized the existence of the photos or films as having an empowering dimension. Survivors discussed how the photos gave validation to their story. The images helped them to understand what happened to them and to regain the belief and trust of others. Some survivors also brought the pictures to their therapist and discussed them in therapy, using them as a tool in the process of healing. It seems the images can validate the story for some survivors. However, although the

films might give validation and therefore empower CP survivors to tell their story, their existence *forced* some survivors to talk about them in order to prepare family, friends, colleagues or others for when they surface.

"Over time I became more vocal about both the crimes committed against me, so that should the images surface, they will validate (to myself and others) my recollection of the crime."

The photos were used not only for the healing process, but also in assisting many survivors in getting a conviction of their abusers. It wasn't just their word against others, but the images provided them with proof that was undeniable. Survivors acknowledged the powerful dimension of the images in promoting arrests of child pornography networks and the prosecution of perpetrators. Survivors noted they could look through the archives of the police and gather further evidence to prosecute and convict their perpetrator.

(Q on how the reactions to the images changed over time): *"Acceptance and appreciation is what I feel now. All of the evidence provided led to a conviction, so I wouldn't change how the events unfolded."*
"I used to think they (the images) were less than other stuff. Now I think they are critically important. They make the abuse undeniable. They prove my experience."

The images also had an empowering effect on survivors, as some of them used them to protect or rescue themselves from the abuse, using them as a personal "insurance".

"Mostly, I wish I had kept better copies as my own evidence that these things actually happened. In some way, they are an insurance policy against my perps. I had let them know I had the pictures and they left me alone more easily than others I know."

4. Discussion

This research sought to explore the complex experiences of survivors of child pornography production. An important finding of the present study is that nearly half of respondents thought the images caused specific problems or difficulties that were different from the problems caused by other aspects of the crime. However, as most of the respondents suffered contact child sexual abuse in addition to being photographed, over a substantial period of time, it may be difficult to identify which reactions are specific to which different elements of the crime. Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis reveals some themes specific to the images such as guilt and shame about their participation, an ongoing vulnerability, and an empowerment dimension from the existence of the images.

4.1. The characteristics of the respondents, child pornography crime, and sex differences

Most respondents in the present study were female. This can reflect either higher rates of females suffering from child sexual abuse (Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gómez-Benito, 2009) or more likely to discuss it (Ullman & Filipas, 2005). In addition, the sample comprised mostly Non-Hispanic White, and highly educated respondents.

For most respondents, CP occurred over a substantial period of time (> six months) and the images created were part of a long-term sexual abuse, often beginning when they were quite young. This finding is consistent with a recent report indicating that for 87% of child pornography survivors, the abuse began before the age 11. (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017). Our study reports CP survivors were mostly 12 years-old or younger (83%) when they were first photographed. Female respondents were more likely to be victimized by family members and male respondents who were more likely to be victimized by acquaintances. This finding is consistent with previous studies on child sexual abuse (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Lewis, 1990; Gold, Elhai, Lucenko, Swingle, & Hughes, 1998). Close to half of respondents reported their images were illegally shared or given to other people, and almost as many reported they did not know whether images were illegally shared. Both scenarios were described as complicated experiences by CP survivors. When survivors knew their images were distributed they felt as if they were *stripped forever*, and others, were anxious and fearful of who may have seen the images, worried when would they surface and felt as if they were *haunted* by those doubts. These feeling were documented among 103 CP survivors in a recent report as well (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017). Finally, a small number of cases were reported to the police or to a child welfare agency and only a small number of these resulted in the perpetrators' arrest or conviction. It is possible that CP survivors are anxious regarding the disclosure process; how the images would be handled, who would view the images, and how would they be interpreted (e.g. whether the child looks like he was willingly participating in the image or film production). Disclosure is also complicated by the threats, blackmailing or physical abuse commonly used to silence victims and maintain their compliance (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2017; Martin, 2015). Finally, the process by which offenders select and groom their victims likely contributes to the ambivalent feelings victims often have for their perpetrators and may delay the disclosure (Paine & Hansen, 2002). These interpretations are speculative as this study did not attempt to explain the disclosure process. However, the fact that children are unlikely to disclose being photographed adds to the difficulties in understanding which children might be victimized by pornography and in what contexts (Quayle & Jones, 2003).

4.2. The impact and reactions to the images during childhood

Nearly half of respondents reported that the images caused specific problems or difficulties that were different from the problems caused by other aspects of the crime. During the crime, as children, the majority of CP survivors felt ashamed, guilty, or humiliated and were worried over who saw the pictures and if others would think that they were a willing participant. The constant fear is described in the literature as an on-going victimization (Cassell & Marsh, 2015), and may require special therapeutic attention.

Perhaps another way of coping with this constant fear for some was denying the images exist. Approximately one-third of respondents reported that they always refused to talk to anyone or to the police and counselors about the images and 22% denied the existence of the images for some time. This finding corresponds with a study where the evidence on the abuse was available on videotape and children still tended to deny or belittle their experiences, had difficulties remembering them, lacked adequate concepts to understand and describe their experience, or simply did not want to disclose their experiences (Sjöberg & Lindblad, 2002). Finally, the only significant difference by sex was that male respondents were significantly more like to refuse to talk to anybody about the images. Although sexual abuse has similar psychological effects on men and women, disclosure and responses from others may differ by gender (Ullman & Filipas, 2005).

4.3. Survivor's reflections as adults about being depicted in CP

The first theme emerging from the open-ended responses was the level of guilt CP survivors experienced after they were victimized. The guilt feelings arose especially as many participants reported they were willing participants in the production, manipulated by promises of fame and admiration and by making them feel special, or that they did not completely understand the situation. The guilt increased when survivors reported they actually enjoyed the filming, because they enjoyed the attention or thought they would become *celebrities*. The images or films provided 'proof' of survivors' voluntary participation and challenged their claim to victimization. In contrast to sexual abuse that does not include filming or images for which the story is defined by the victim's account, in CP, the evidence *tells* its own story, and survivors felt as if they needed to justify or explain their behavior in the images. This theme presents a complex picture in which sexual abuse is not always violent and coercive as it may usually be assumed. Sexual abuse, including CP, can involve a voluntary dimension for many reasons such as the desire to be famous, the desire for attention, or excitement over being a movie star or professional actress. This finding aligns with previous research on CP which describes that a typical child exploiter will befriend the potential victim and after establishing a trusting and "affectionate" relationship, will introduce the child to CP, in order to lower the inhibitions of the child and to arouse their curiosity about the activity depicted in the material and to entice the child into participating in similar activity or even identical poses (O'Brian, 1983; Tyler & Stone, 1985). Finally, our finding illustrates diversity in the way survivors chose to deal with their guilt. While many survivors found comfort by being told the crime was not their fault, others have found this response unhelpful and would rather face their cooperation, understand it and work towards forgiving themselves.

The second theme described the psychological feeling that CP was a continuing abuse. Experiencing CP seems to encompass two stages of victimization. One, from a legal point of view, when the abuse is perpetrated and recorded and one from a psychological point of view, implying the ongoing vulnerability of survivors and the unknown aspect regarding the circulation of the images. Participants discussed the life-long vulnerability as a result of the images. According to them, while the abuse *per se* ended, the images will forever be *out there,* and they felt as if they were *haunted by them.* Even years after the crime, survivors were worried that the images might be seen by other people or family members, that they would be recognized, or that the images would be used by sex offenders for masturbation or to entice other children into abusive situations. For many respondents, the images were a concrete reminder of their victimization that could reveal their past, or be used for criminal purposes without warning to them and outside of their control. These reactions correspond with a previous study reporting the experience of two CP survivors in which both interviewees were highly aware of the worldwide availability of the internet and therefore unable to think of the world as a safe place. They felt no matter where they might travel they could meet someone who is looking at the pictures of them (Leonard, 2010).

The third theme describes how some survivors expressed a dual perspective towards the images. While most of the time, the existence of the images was horrifying for survivors, they eventually also recognized an empowering effect. The images were used as evidence, which could lead to the perpetrators' arrest and conviction. The images validated their story and gave proof to what had happened to them. While in sexual abuse that does not include filming or images, victims have to rely on their own account which might be doubted, in contrast, the images helped the survivors to be believed. This finding corresponds with a study conducted among professionals who worked with CP production victims which found that the existence of the images made it impossible to deny or minimize the crime; in addition, it made it much easier for parents to believe their children and to prosecute the case; and mostly led to convictions and higher sentencing (Von Weiler et al., 2010). It is important to note that although images might increase the likelihood of prosecution and conviction, they might be accompanied by anxiety over their presentation in front of different people who are part of the investigation (e.g. in court, policemen etc.). The existence of the images and films may sometimes allow law enforcement or people close to the victim to judge the victim by seeing that they were smiling in the picture or seem to suggest that they let the abuse happen (Palmer, 2005; Von Weiler et al., 2010).

4.4. Implications and future research

Most of the current therapeutic interventions were designed to treat sexual abuse which did not include filming or images. Victims of CP may experience additional ongoing trauma because the recordings of their abuse have the potential to be endlessly viewed and shared by those with a sexual interest in children some of whom may be known to them (Martin, 2015). Being confronted with the permanence of the abusive images and the concerns regarding the production and distribution of the images and feelings of helplessness, all create a complex traumatization which may be challenging for therapists (Martin, 2014, 2016). Further research is needed to determine the unique challenges for therapists who treat CP survivors. However, our results indicate a large diversity among CP survivors' coping styles, needs, and desire. These should be taken into consideration by therapists and law enforcement dealing with CP survivors. Previous studies indicate practitioners do not feel adequately prepared to treat CP survivors (Martin, 2016)

in terms of their training and experience and were uncertain about whether CP survivors experience particular effects different from or over and above those caused by child sexual abuse which does not include images (Martin, 2014). Therefore, educating professionals on this issue is essential (Martin & Alaggia, 2013). In addition, the analysis challenges the myth that sexual abuse always includes coercion and revealed a complex picture about victims' feeling and coping strategies about guilt feelings for their voluntary participation. We recommend educating everyone to see abuse as not just a coercive process. Hopefully, this would minimize the degree to which CP survivors and other sexual abuse victims suffer from evidence of participation. Feelings of guilt and shame about participation should not be disregarded and should match the diversity of survivors' coping styles. While some survivors were comforted by being told it was not their fault, others have expressed the need to process these feeling and understand their source. Future research is required in order to explore this diversity and explore CP survivor's needs within different help procedures and therapeutic interventions.

Much of the CP production in these cases happened pre-Internet, yet, respondents still expressed concern that their images would be distributed. For some, these questions were a deep concern, and they were distressed by their inability to find out if CP depicting them was *out there*. Answering such questions is complex and not always possible, but these survivor concerns made important points that should be considered by law enforcement and other responders.

Further research is needed to understand the gender differences in the disclosure of child pornography, what predicts help-seeking among survivors, and what was perceived as helpful for them within therapy and the investigation process. Researchers and agencies working with victims should collaborate to better understand the special needs of victims, to develop effective treatment models, and to identify gaps in services.

4.5. Limitations

Some limitations of this study should be kept in mind when interpreting the data. First, respondents do not represent the experiences of all adult survivors who were depicted in CP as children, but rather a subgroup that used the Internet to access advocacy sites or seek support or communicate during the time the survey was conducted and who agreed to participate. More specifically, the recruitment might have biases in several directions. One may be people who overcame some elements of their trauma such as the shame and guilt which they were willing to discuss. Another may be people who went through therapy, and their point of view years after the crime accrued was shaped by advocates or therapists they worked with. In contrast, there may also be some survivors who were very impacted and traumatized by this crime and may have been drawn to answer the survey due to its topic. Survivors who are still dealing with severe shame or chose different coping styles such as avoiding this topic, may be missing from our sample. Second, much of the CP production in these cases happened before the advent of the internet and electronic communications. The experiences of respondents in pre-internet cases could differ from those who endured more recent victimizations. Similarly, therapeutic practices and social attitudes regarding CP production may have changed so that victims in more recent crimes may have different experiences. It should also be noted, most of the respondents were photographed as young children and endured long-term sexual abuse and their experiences may not represent the entire spectrum of victims depicted in CP. Finally, unlike quantitative research, qualitative research handles nonnumerical information and is analyzed with a phenomenological interpretation, which is inextricably tied to human senses and subjectivity. Therefore, other interpretation of the data might be applicable.

4.6. Conclusion

This research sought to explore the complex experiences of CP survivors, how they reacted to the films or images produced and how these images impacted them over their lives. The findings suggest that CP added a distinctive element to the trauma of sexual exploitation. This, of course, emphasizes the need to identify CP victims, to learn their needs and better understand their unique and complex experience in order to support them.

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