

article

Memorable life events and disclosure of child sexual abuse: Possibilities and challenges across diverse contexts

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This article examines the relationship between memorable life events (MLEs) and disclosure of sexual abuse in childhood. The findings derive from a larger thematic and phenomenological analysis of MLEs across the life course of 12 adults with self-reported histories of child sexual abuse (CSA). Participants were recruited from the UK, but represent a diverse group in terms of age, gender, country of origin, sexuality and disability. In-depth interviews and Life History Calendars (LHCs) were used to collect a range of contextual and event-based data. Varied and unique MLEs were found to promote disclosure of sexual abuse in childhood, although this was highly contingent on context. A conceptual framework is offered as a way of navigating this relationship and contexts that can inhibit, alter or reverse decisions to disclose abuse. This research is the first known in-depth analysis of MLEs and CSA, and therefore makes an original contribution to the field.

key words child sexual abuse • disclosure • life events • life course

Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a largely silent and witness-free crime. Given these characteristics, disclosure of CSA is seen by many researchers and practitioners as a key site for intervention (Hershkowitz et al, 2007). In response, 'disclosure' has become an established sub-field of the CSA international literature. For victims of CSA, disclosure of or telling about their abuse has been found to be important in stopping it, seeking emotional support, protecting other children and seeking justice for themselves and others (Allnock and Miller, 2013). Professionals are concerned with official disclosures because, during investigations, there is often a lack of corroborating physical and medical evidence and witness statements are often missing (Roberts and Powell, 2001). While disclosures may be seen by professionals to be crucial to their work in keeping children safe, the experiences of individuals in disclosing abuse is not always a positive one (Ullman and Filipas, 2005). This study examines a previously neglected perspective on disclosure and telling, examining the ways in which memorable life events (MLEs) may influence this process.

Investigating change across the life course

Within the social sciences, and more specifically within life course research, there is a relatively large field of study that investigates life events. A life event is defined as a significant occurrence involving a relatively abrupt change with the potential to produce serious and long-lasting effects (Hutchinson, 2010). Researchers have conceptually imagined the 'life event' in terms of its consequences for change across the life course. Giddens (1991: 112–13), for example, proposed the theoretical construct of 'fateful moments' which are 'those when individuals are called on to take decisions that are particularly consequential for their ambitions, or more generally for their future lives. These are times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands, as it were, at a crossroads in his existence.' Giddens identifies fateful moments as those that constitute non-routinised moments that are consequential to the life course. Turning points are also conceptually applied in a range of disciplines to examine change across the life course. They are defined as alterations to or deflections from a long-term pathway or life trajectory and – importantly – they are understood to have been initiated at an earlier point in time (Sampson and Laub, 2005). Turning points have been particularly useful in criminological studies for investigating experiences of and changes in offending (see Carlsson, 2012; Ladlow and Neale, 2016). Change is not always conceived of as 'big'. Changes can be small, incremental and may accumulate over time, via incremental 'nudges', 'eddies' or 'drifts' (Carlsson, 2012; Ladlow and Neale, 2016). Concepts such as turning points and fateful moments can usefully be identified in personal biographical narratives using 'critical moments' as a technique for analysis (Thomson et al, 2002: 339).

Life events have also been of interest in the field of psychology. Pillemer (1998, 2001) was interested in the *rare* and unique moments in everyday life that are punctuated by distinctive, emotional and highly influential episodes (Pillemer, 1998, 2001). Pillemer was interested in the way that such events – which he viewed through the lens of *personal event memories* – function in storytelling. He defined a personal event memory as an individual's memory of an event from a certain moment in time. The defining characteristics of a personal event memory are that (1) they usually include vivid multi-sensory elements; (2) they are usually recalled in detail; and (3) they are usually believed by the individual to be an accurate representation of the event. Pillemer argues that they serve important psychological functions by influencing, inspiring and directing actions and beliefs long after the event itself.

The third characteristic of a personal event memory, as noted above, is critical in understanding individuals' memories from childhood. Current knowledge about memory deriving from behavioural and neurobiological studies demonstrates that adult memories of childhood are *reconstructions* based on current motivations and world knowledge (Howe, 2013; Conway et al, 2014). Modern views of memory suggest that memories are prone to error and falsity, and are not full recollections of an experience. As Pillemer notes, they may have alternate functions such as driving social interactions and generating meaning in human lives (see also Conway et al, 2014).

Understanding how memorable life events may interact with disclosure of child sexual abuse

Little in-depth attention has been given to the concepts of fateful moments, turning points or MLEs – as reflected in personal event memories – in the field of CSA and even less so in the consideration of these concepts as recalled by research participants relating to their childhood years. Some studies specific to disclosure of CSA have noted the important role that external events, precipitants or ‘stimuli’ play, although these are often ‘buried’ in the broader findings of research and not treated as the *key* focus of interest. Campis et al’s (1993) research, which examined medical records for reasons why children disclosed to professionals, is the earliest study identified which found that external events played a key role in ‘accidental’ disclosures by children. London et al’s (2005) review of disclosure found that simply being prompted to discuss abuse could provide the impetus for children to tell. Malloy, Brubacher and Lamb’s (2013) study of investigative interviews with 204 children and young people found that 54% of children who gave reasons for disclosing were motivated to tell following an external precipitant, such as watching a television programme in which sexual abuse was a theme. Qualitative studies such as Jensen et al’s (2005), Cossar et al’s (2013) and Allnock and Miller’s (2013) found that discussions, conversations and watching television programmes could provide important catalysts for recognition of abuse, usually as children were transitioning into adolescence and diversifying their social networks. Findings from studies on positive adaptation also identify the role of external precipitants as important in moving on from CSA (Bogar and Hulse-Killacky, 2006; Roller et al, 2009; Arias and Johnson, 2013). Roller et al (2009) considered how critical events could be considered negative in relation to sexuality, such as a sexual assault; others could be considered positive, such as a spiritual awakening; or some could be considered ‘developmental’, such as the birth of a child. Indeed, Banyard and Williams’ (2007) study on recovery with 21 women uncovered turning points such as the birth of a child as precipitating important life changes.

While the studies mentioned above provide some clues as to the importance of external precipitants in facilitating disclosure of abuse, few of these researchers actively conceptualised these as life events per se, and so it is not possible to know whether participants would have identified them, without prompting, as important to their life course more generally. No other studies could be identified in the field of CSA more generally, or within the field of disclosure more specifically, that have investigated, in-depth, the role of MLEs in the process of disclosure, making this study unique in its findings.

The study

This study makes an original contribution to the evidence base on disclosure of CSA by examining the ways in which MLEs – as viewed through the lens of personal event memories – influence disclosure in childhood. These findings derive from a larger study of MLEs and their impact on self-reported change across the life course of adults with histories of CSA. The findings presented here focus specifically on the accounts of childhood provided by the participants, where childhood was considered to constitute ages up to 12. While the full study sample was 12, the findings presented here are based on the accounts of nine adults. Two of the 12 participants did not recall

1 their abuse in childhood, only becoming aware of it in adolescence, and the third
2 participant's abuse did not begin until adolescence. Therefore these three participants
3 did not provide detailed accounts of their childhood period.

4 The underpinning theoretical framework of this research is the life course perspective.
5 A life course approach emphasises a temporal and social perspective, looking back
6 across an individual's or a cohort's life experiences or across generations for clues to
7 current patterns of health, development or wellbeing, while recognising that both
8 past and present experiences are shaped by the wider social, economic and cultural
9 context (Hutchinson, 2010). In this research, I adopted Holstein and Gubrium's (2000)
10 understanding of the life course as a socially constructed phenomenon. Holstein and
11 Gubrium argue that: 'Person's depictions of, and dealings with, their social worlds
12 create or constitute those social worlds as meaningful phenomena' (2000: 31). This is
13 not to suggest that the life course is 'ephemeral', without substance. Rather, what is
14 meaningful about the life course are individuals' experiences of it and the subsequent
15 meanings they attach to it. This is of interest in attempting to understand the ways in
16 which individuals construct personal event memories for clues to the way in which
17 meaningful change (in this particular article, disclosure) is accomplished following
18 CSA.

20 Methodology

22 In-depth interviews were undertaken by the author between January and August
23 2011, producing substantial narratives for each of the 12 participants. A semi-
24 structured interview guide was developed to capture the key elements of the life
25 course framework: (1) location in time and place; (2) linked lives; (3) human agency;
26 and (4) timing of lives (Giele and Elder, 1998). The tool provided the opportunity
27 to generate a wealth of rich and vibrant data yet also to support the generation of
28 comparable qualitative data.

29 Alongside the interviews, the author and participants jointly completed a Life
30 History Calendar (LHC). A LHC (also referred to as a Life Grid) is a chart that details
31 experiences year by year, blending key moments in the life course – key personal
32 trajectories/transitions as well as external historical events – with specific research
33 questions designed to gain a holistic picture of a participant's life course over time
34 (Del Bianco, 2015). Historically the purpose of using Life Grids/LHCs has been to
35 minimise error in recall by enhancing memory retrieval through autobiographical
36 memory processes (Morselli et al, 2016). For example, it is argued that using this
37 method can assist individuals to engage 'flashbulb' memories (Berney and Blane, 1997)
38 to help them remember details about particular days or events in their past. These
39 tools are also recognised as a useful way to facilitate flexible interaction between
40 the participant and researcher who can clarify intended meanings in reconstructing
41 the past (Belli, 1988). Importantly, this study takes a social constructionist approach
42 that recognises that individuals create meaning from the life course. As such, precise
43 accuracy in the detail of events was not the end goal. Rather, the LHC was used as
44 a tool to jog memory about specific events, but in a way that supported participants
45 to reflect on the meaning of those events. It also allowed the collection of a broad
46 and complex range of contextual data, and enabled focused comparison across the
47 different age groups of the sample.

1 The tool that was chosen for adaptation and use in this study was an expanded
2 LHC initially developed by Freedman et al (1988) and adapted to include broader age
3 ranges and a technique for incorporating 'landmark events' as identified by participants
4 (Loftus and Marburger, 1983; Axinn et al, 1999).

5 6 **Procedures and ethics**

7
8 The participants were recruited using a purposive sampling technique, without the
9 use of incentives, through advertisements posted on the National Society for the
10 Prevention of Cruelty to Children's (NSPCC) website, and distributed via a select
11 number of therapeutic services and conferences on CSA. The advertisement contained
12 the project title, and specified the characteristics/experiences sought for the study, thus
13 all participants' self-reported experiences of CSA. Potential candidates were asked to
14 email the author to indicate their interest, following which the author responded with
15 a more detailed information sheet and requested a telephone call with them to explain
16 the study in more detail. A total of 20 potential candidates contacted the author, of
17 which 18 agreed to a telephone call. Of these, 12 agreed to participate. Interviews
18 occurred primarily in participants' homes, with three participants interviewed on the
19 premises of a national charity. The interviews lasted between 90 and 180 minutes, and
20 one participant was interviewed over the course of three meetings.

21 Ethical approval for this research was sought and provided by the NSPCC Research
22 Ethics Committee and the University of Bristol, School for Policy Studies Ethics
23 Committee. All participant names have been changed to protect anonymity.

24 25 **Data analysis**

26
27 Grounded in a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology (Denzin
28 and Lincoln, 2005), the main methodological approach to analysis drew on
29 phenomenological reduction in which descriptive and interpretive analyses were
30 conducted. Phenomenological reduction (or epoché), popularised in philosophy by
31 Edward Husserl, is a process whereby the phenomenologist overtly seeks to block
32 biases and assumptions in order to explain a phenomenon in terms of its own inherent
33 system of meaning. One actual technique is known as 'bracketing'. This involves
34 systematic steps to 'set aside' various assumptions and beliefs about a phenomenon in
35 order to examine how the phenomenon presents itself in the world of the participant
36 (Christiansen and Blumfield, 2010).

37 Using QSR NVivo 10 qualitative research software, thematic analysis was initially
38 used to identify memorable life events and life changes. Analysis of *experience* drew
39 on the phenomenological methods of analysis. Four steps were taken, borrowing
40 from Giorgi's (2009) analytic procedures: (1) reading for a sense of the whole; (2)
41 differentiating and clustering description into meaningful units; (3) psychological
42 reflection; and (4) structural understanding and description.

43 LHCs were used individually and comparatively during the analysis. They
44 provided grounding for individual analysis of events, used alongside development
45 of and reflection on emerging units of meaning. They assisted in locating individual
46 experiences in time and place by drawing attention to the changing social and political
47 awareness of sexual abuse, and to potential differences in experience for participants

1 whose abuse took place in other countries. Comparatively, they assisted in analysing
2 differences and similarities of experience across all nine participants.

3 4 **Findings**

5
6 Seven women and five men took part in the full study. At the time of interview, the
7 participants were aged between 30 and 59, with an average age of 39. One-quarter of
8 the participants were born in and experienced abuse in the 1960s, one-quarter in the
9 1970s and one-quarter in the 1980s, which allowed for comparison of experiences
10 over the course of significant social change and recognition of CSA. Three-quarters
11 of the sample were White British, with the remaining quarter born in diverse parts of
12 the world: two in two different North American countries, one in a Middle Eastern
13 country and one in Southern Europe. Seven participants identified as heterosexual and
14 three as gay or lesbian, one was uncertain about his sexuality and one described her
15 sexuality as 'flexible'. Eight participants reported no disability. Eleven of the participants
16 had some experience of higher education, and seven were working full-time. Four
17 participants reported being in relatively stable marital or co-habiting relationships
18 at the time of interview, with the remaining participants single, divorced or 'dating'.

19 The participants all reported having experienced CSA, but importantly, many of
20 them also reported experiencing a range of other maltreatment experiences including
21 witnessing domestic violence, physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Nine of
22 the 12 noted additional adversities in childhood such as parental relationship/marital
23 breakdown, death of a sibling, parental mental health and/or substance abuse issues
24 and frequent moves. Eight participants experienced penetrative contact sexual abuse
25 for lengthy periods of time, all accompanied by physical or emotional coercion. The
26 remaining four participants experienced non-penetrative contact sexual abuse.

27 Two participants were abused by multiple male perpetrators in relation to a single
28 period of abuse. Five participants were abused by a single perpetrator for the duration
29 of their experiences. These involved an uncle, grandfather, babysitter, family friend and
30 teacher. The remaining five participants had multiple and separate periods of abuse
31 carried out by different perpetrators, including uncles, a stepgrandfather, a father, a
32 neighbour, family friends and a stepbrother.

33 Memorable life events (MLEs) reported by participants to have prompted disclosure
34 in childhood were identified across six participant accounts. They were largely
35 interpersonal and relational, although in a few cases the events reflected things that
36 occurred to other family members or happened in the local community. Significant
37 meanings were attached to all of the MLEs identified, and it was these meanings
38 that fundamentally drove participants to enact their human agency by seeking help
39 or protecting themselves. The remaining three participants did not identify MLEs
40 in childhood that provided an impetus for disclosure; however, their circumstances
41 appeared to prevent any potential influences that may have served to protect them
42 at an earlier stage.

43 The relationship between MLEs and disclosure of abuse was not a straightforward
44 one. Instead, contextual factors, relationships or events functioned to (a) moderate
45 disclosure – or in other words, alter the strength or nature of the disclosure; (b)
46 deteriorate disclosure – in other words, reverse any positive outcome that resulted
47 from disclosure; or (c) mediate disclosure – in other words, inhibit disclosure. The
48 influences in childhood that mediate, moderate or deteriorate disclosure are made

up of similar risks and barriers. The difference *between* these three types of influence is that they had an impact on participants' disclosures differently. Thus, while they are distinct concepts in terms of the way they function to influence disclosure, the contexts that underpin these concepts derive from similar sources of risk. The remainder of the findings presented here describe these influences, with detailed examples provided to illustrate the complexity of the theme.

Moderating influences

Four participants across all of the age ranges recalled MLEs that they viewed as important motivators for disclosing their abuse, representing a self-identified shift from a previous position of *inaction*. However, their accounts revealed that they made decisions to adjust their actions in different ways in response to particular challenges they faced – in other words, their disclosures were moderated by a range of circumstances, contexts, relationships and other events. MLEs identified included: a coming of age-related event – no longer needing to go to the babysitter's house after school (Sid); two abuse-related events, both comprised of increasing violence and coercion (Jena and Aisha); and a peer-related event – a sleepover at a friend's house (Samantha). Moderated disclosures appeared in the form of the minimisation of abuse – *withholding the full story* – (Sid); and *choosing self-reliance as a strategy* – for example, avoidance of the perpetrator (Jena) and resistance of perpetrators (Aisha and Samantha).

Samantha was abused from infancy by her father and grandfather. Samantha's MLE was a peer-related event (a sleepover at a friend's house) at the age of eight. Her friend's father came into their room to say goodnight. Samantha recalled confusion about why he did not do 'special goodnights', like her father. This was a particularly vivid event and held important meaning for Samantha, who had previously not understood her experiences were abusive. Through comparison of her own experience with that of her friend's, she began to contextualise her experience differently – as one that did not happen to all children.

'At that age I thought it [sexual abuse] was, it was normal. I didn't like it, but I didn't know it wasn't what happened to, to everybody. I think I was about eight before I realised that it didn't happen to all little girls. I had a very sheltered life. I didn't have that much contact with other kids. But when I was eight, I had my first sleep over at someone else's house and I waited for her dad to come in and do special good nights. And it didn't happen. You know, he came in, he said goodnight, and he went.... I didn't say anything, but it set something off in me that made me think, "Your dad's weird!"... But it was about her dad being weird, not my dad ... yeah, but I really did think it was normal, and then that experience at my friend's got me thinking. I was still reluctant to broach the subject with my friend or anyone else though because of what happened earlier.'

This crucial event provided Samantha with a 'reference point' by which she could compare her father's actions with the actions of her friend's father. However, an early experience of attempted disclosure to a teacher – who accused her of lying – shaped her actions following her increasing recognition. Instead of choosing a strategy to

1 stop the abuse that involved seeking help from adults, Samantha relied on her own
 2 resources for self-protection, which involved direct conflict with and resistance to
 3 the perpetrator(s):

4
 5 'Just, in the early few years, probably until I was about 12, I just wouldn't
 6 cooperate with them, um, I wouldn't get undressed, I wouldn't be where
 7 they wanted me to be, I wouldn't do what they wanted me to do. Um, and
 8 that's when they started making me do it, that's when it got a bit more
 9 aggressive I guess. From being about 13, I got a bit more subtle as well. Um,
 10 left tampons around the place, um, I hadn't actually started my period at that
 11 point, but um, it worked a little bit.'

12
 13 This passage offers a fascinating insight into the creative and novel methods children
 14 may adopt to resist their abuse. Initially her strategy to directly resist the perpetrators
 15 was quite dangerous, and she experienced increased violence and aggression, although
 16 with time, she modified her approach to utilise more subtle strategies. Unfortunately
 17 for Samantha, her abuse did not diminish.

18 19 *Deteriorating influences*

20
 21 Two participants clustered under this theme. They described MLEs that prompted
 22 them to seek help, although their familial contexts prevented positive resolution and
 23 worsened their circumstances well into adolescence and adulthood. MLEs identified
 24 included: a local child abuse case at a nursery (Shelly), and social work intervention
 25 in the family (Whitney). Although disclosures in both cases were heard, acted upon
 26 and progressed to the criminal justice system, their post-disclosure experiences were
 27 poor, lacking in practical and emotional support and trusted relationships. Moreover,
 28 their familial circumstances were chaotic and isolated, characterised by a range of
 29 other adversities such as parental substance misuse, marital breakdown and other
 30 victimisation and abuse.

31 By way of example, Whitney's MLE was a social care intervention in her family at
 32 the age of seven. She had been abused from infancy to age seven by a neighbour and
 33 her uncle, but had not told anyone about it. When social care professionals visited
 34 the home over concerns over her mother's mental health and subsequent neglect,
 35 her mother disclosed her own abuse over many years by her father and brothers.
 36 This was a significant event because in one moment, Whitney came to understand
 37 her mother's struggles, and this led to her own disclosure.

38
 39 'When I was seven we had a social worker. Um, probably because, um my
 40 mum, my mum wasn't very well, aaaand, nobody knew why, aand, when I
 41 was seven, we were called down, me and my sister. And, um, and uh, my mum
 42 and dad said, Tracey [name of sister changed], what did [social worker] say to
 43 you? And um, she said "Does Ralph [name of perpetrator changed] do you
 44 know, funny things with you?" Well of course I knew that he did, you know?
 45 Um, and, and, my mum said "And?" And [T] said "No." And, I said, "Well,
 46 he does [to] me." Right, and then it was like, um a blinding light, like a great
 47 big focus on me. And, then [T] had to admit, yes, the same. But she didn't
 48

1 react in the same way, she's not as strong as me, or certainly wasn't when I
2 was a child. I was incredibly strong, because I had to go through so much.'

3
4 Despite her disclosure and the positive benefits she experienced as a result, things
5 deteriorated because of her ongoing family circumstances and relationships that
6 resulted in Whitney taking on primary responsibility around the household for her
7 whole family. Whitney particularly cited her 'loss of childhood' as the start of her
8 lifelong mental health problems that have meant that she has never been able to work
9 or have a family of her own.

10 Shelly was abused by a family friend when she was six and then again by her
11 grandfather at the age of seven until she disclosed the abuse at the age of 11. She
12 remained silent about her abuse until that point, not recognising the abuse as wrong.
13 She became aware of a child sexual abuse case at a local nursery school in the mid-
14 1980s, where it emerged that a nursery worker had abused a considerable number
15 of children:

16
17 'This place over in [M] called [N-House], and it was a play school, lots of
18 children were being abused by the/by the owner, and the/don't know what
19 you call them, not teachers as such but nursery worker! They were being
20 abused, and it all come to light, there was 26 children involved, and me
21 being the age, I was listening and thinking, that's when I'd worked out that
22 everything that was happening was wrong. My mum going through this with
23 [C, her sister] which is why we then came forward to say what happened.
24 But I think if that hadn't happened with [C], maybe I would have carried
25 it to my grave.' **[[why is some text underlined?]]**

26
27 Shelly's narrative also highlighted a further memorable event that *reinforced* her newly
28 formed cognitions of abuse. It was in the same period that the local abuse case emerged
29 that her abuser was making plans to take Shelly, alone, on a world cruise. The abuse
30 was further escalating, becoming more aggressive and violent:

31
32 'Yeah. With my grandfather, he booked for me to go on a cruise, on a world
33 cruise to the Amazon, just trying to remember '87 I was due to go. Um, he
34 was the one who was abusing me for years, and he lived in [B] and took
35 me down to my auntie's and took me to his flat first. And some really really
36 awful things happened there. It was then that I knew, I really knew what
37 was, I'd worked it out by then that it was really really wrong.... I went to
38 my teachers in school, my mum, everybody was called in. Um, and I got
39 taken to a police safe house, been examined, been questioned, all because I
40 was scared of what was gonna happen to me on this cruise ship in a room
41 with him on my own for two months. I was absolutely petrified. And I didn't
42 quite realise the implications, what he'd done. But I knew I wasn't the only
43 one, and that something was wrong, and I feared for myself if I had gone
44 there.' **[[why is some text underlined?]]**

45
46 Shelly's memorable event – her grandfather's escalating behaviours – as distressing
47 as they were, acted as positive reinforcement in this case to her already growing
48 awareness that her experiences were not normal. Shelly disclosed, but had a mixed

1 experience. Her teachers and her mother believed her disclosure, her grandfather
 2 was arrested, the abuse stopped and an investigation ensued. She felt positive that
 3 the outcome would be good, because of what she had observed at the local nursery
 4 school (for example, police involvement, arrests). However, the result of this chain of
 5 events *mitigated* her emerging life change (seeking help from adults; disclosure) and,
 6 in fact, reversed it for a very long time. This passage articulates the disappointment
 7 at Shelly's lack of justice:

8
 9 'He/he was arrested, he was questioned, but because he was old and he was
 10 frail, they weren't going to proceed it any further because they said he would
 11 be dead soon. And he did actually die within a year or two. But that was just
 12 devastating, because I wanted my justice, not justice for HIM. I wondered
 13 why I had even told anyone! The hardest thing of my life to do, and nothing
 14 came of it. Not even a counsellor. Where was the counselling, where was
 15 anything. Where were they? It was/with my mum it's always, "keep quiet,
 16 don't tell people", don't bring shame, you know, and then all our family
 17 were, 'coz I've got big life story where I used to do drugs, my life went bad.
 18 And you sort of get, "help me", just help. Listen to me and help me.' **[[why**
 19 **is some text underlined?]]**

20
 21 The only person in her life whom she trusted was her stepfather:

22
 23 'Then coming back to my mum and who I now call my dad – he's actually
 24 my stepdad but he took us on from a very young age and he's been great to
 25 me all my life, even now that they're divorced. He's the only one I trusted at
 26 all during that horrible time, because my mum tried to forget I was abused.'

27
 28 Mitigating her emergent change even further, then, was the breakdown of her parents'
 29 marriage that occurred around the same period, just around the time she was 12. This
 30 key life event was experienced as a loss of a trusted adult and ultimately catalysed
 31 what Shelly called as the point when her life 'went bad':

32
 33 'Um, the day my dad left really, is – I turned to, started smoking weed/well
 34 cannabis at the time, started smoking that. Acid was very big in/in my era.
 35 Just didn't care, just wanted to blot out everything um. Very promiscuous
 36 from a young age, I'd say roughly about 13, coming on to 14 when I become
 37 sexually active, um.' **[[why is some text underlined?]]**

38 39 *Mediating influences*

40
 41 Three participants clustered under this final relationship between MLEs and disclosure.
 42 These participants made no reference to MLEs in their childhood that were associated
 43 with decisions to tell someone about their abuse. None, in fact, identified what they
 44 considered to be any sort of life change associated with their CSA experiences in
 45 their childhood period. The contextual circumstances of their lives, however, provide
 46 a possible explanation for the absence of self-identified MLEs. All three of these
 47 participants were living in family circumstances that were isolating, closed, chaotic
 48 or where other adversities and abuse were taking place.

1 Paula's circumstances provide a good example of the way in which shame can
2 overshadow the potential for help-seeking following CSA. Paula, born in a Southern
3 European nation that is also where her abuse took place, was abused by her uncle.
4 Paula's narrative of childhood is heavy with reference to shame (a text search in
5 NVivo identified over 11 references to shame in Paula's account in comparison to
6 five in another, and three or fewer in the remainder of the interviews). Her narrative
7 stood out among all the others in this respect. When asked how she made sense of
8 her abuse experiences, she said: "I don't know, but I know there was a lot of shame
9 around sexual and sexual feelings."

10 Later in the interview, Paula described the way in which her shame prevented her
11 from talking to her mother. She attributed her shame to her physical reaction to the
12 abuse, in spite of knowing that her uncle's actions did not feel right:

13
14 'I think it's because my body reacted to the um whatever my uncle was doing
15 to me, that I felt shame around that and hence, couldn't tell my mother. It
16 wasn't like we lived in a family where we could talk about sexuality. I mean,
17 my mother said, "I thought they taught that stuff in school."'

18
19 Sexuality, then, was a closed issue in her household as it was assumed that responsibility
20 for addressing and teaching sexuality lay elsewhere. The shame Paula felt following
21 the abuse was a powerful barrier to her agency during childhood, and is, in fact,
22 something that has lasted well into her adulthood.

23 24 Discussion

25
26 A key concept to emerge from the study is 'emergent change' – and for the purposes
27 of this article, the emergent change of interest is disclosure of sexual abuse. This is
28 central to the study, as the analysis hinged on the success or otherwise of life change
29 (disclosure) to emerge following an important life event. 'Emergent change', then,
30 can be defined as self-identified aspirational change (for example, the desire to tell
31 someone about the abuse from a previous position of silence about the abuse).
32 'Emergent change' might be better understood as positive change in its infancy, but
33 which is very fragile because of its tentative nature. It is also fragile because of the
34 complex, difficult and challenging circumstances surrounding it. Considering this
35 concept within the broader life course literature, this concept differs from turning
36 points that require, according to Sampson and Laub (2005), change following the
37 passage of some time. For the participants in this study, negative and unexpected change
38 occurred almost immediately in reaction to a memorable life event or convergence
39 of several life events. Emergent change in the form of disclosure is most similarly
40 aligned with concepts such as incremental nudges (in Samantha's case, where, over
41 time she began to contextualise her experiences in response to external precipitants)
42 or eddies/drifts (in Whitney or Shelly's cases, where their disclosures – which they
43 had anticipated would have a positive impact on their lives – went in unexpected,
44 and unpleasant, directions).

45 Although unique in type and content, the MLEs identified all shared characteristics
46 that meet the definition of Pillemer's (1998, 2001) concept of 'momentous' life events.
47 These characteristics were obvious in the participants' *telling* of the event. For example,
48 the events identified mostly represented a single event that occurred at a specific time

1 and place, and the descriptions often contained contextual details of the participants'
2 circumstances at the time. Descriptions often included details about the timeframe of
3 the event, the surroundings and who was present. Sometimes the accounts included
4 sensory imagery, such as sights and smells. In some cases, the participants used gestures
5 that helped me to visualise the scenarios (for example, one participant said "I was
6 sat here, he was sat there", pointing opposite to where I sat) and sometimes the
7 participants used the present tense as if the events were happening right then and there
8 (for example, a participant said "he has big fat fingers that he tickles and touches me
9 with"). In addition, participants' actual experience of *remembering* the events evoked
10 strong feelings such as anger, sadness and disappointment, but in some cases, positive
11 emotions such as pride in resisting the perpetrator were articulated.

12 Pillemer postulated that important meanings attached to these events could have
13 important impacts, guiding and directing action after the event. The particular MLEs
14 identified by participants reflected this process, resulting in aspirational decisions to
15 seek help and stop the abuse. The MLEs identified reflect a range of unique events
16 including abuse-related events (escalating abuse); a peer-related event (spending time
17 with a friend); a community-related event (a local child abuse case); a family-related
18 event (social care intervention); and a transitional event (entering adolescence). Some
19 of these have been captured in the findings of other research, despite not having been
20 conceptualised as such (Jensen et al, 2005; Author's own, 2013 **[[reference?]]**; Cossar
21 et al, 2013; Malloy et al, 2013).

22 MLEs are impossible to predict because they are unique and personal and will vary
23 considerably from one individual to the next. The importance of them, however, lies
24 in the meaning that individuals attach to them. This is responsible for driving human
25 agency in the form of disclosure. Park and Folkman's (1997) *meaning making model*
26 helps in making sense of how meaning operates. They propose that an individual's
27 perception of discrepancies between their appraised meaning of a particular event
28 (the situational meaning of the event) and their global meaning (their world view)
29 creates distress, which gives rise to efforts (coping strategies) to reduce the discrepancy
30 and resultant distress. In the case of Samantha, her global world view at age eight was
31 that all fathers act in sexual ways towards their daughters. This was at odds with her
32 experience during the sleepover at her friend's house, resulting in confusion about
33 her world view. Ultimately, this led to a cognitive shift in her world view, resulting
34 in her attempts to try and stop her abuse.

35 The findings, however, also show that the relationship between MLEs and disclosure
36 is not a direct one. Participants recalled that a range of circumstances conspired
37 against them, moderating or deteriorating their disclosures. Poor parental responses
38 to disclosures, for example, encouraged one participant to withhold the full extent
39 of his abuse, reflecting findings in Ullman and Filipas' (2005) research. Poor, or non-
40 existent, reactions also forced three participants to self-protect through avoidance of
41 the perpetrator or resistance, actions that have been documented in a range of studies
42 on disclosure and coping with abuse (Oaksford and Frude, 2004; LeClerc et al, 2010
43 **[[not in the References?]]**).

44 Circumstances can also conspire to moderate and deteriorate disclosures, but also
45 to prevent – or mediate – them entirely. The wider research on risk and adversity
46 is relevant here, with the experiences and circumstances of participants reflecting a
47 diversity of issues that can be understood within an ecological framework. Child-
48 level factors, such as an inability to recognise abuse and understand it as 'acceptable'

1 (Cossar et al, 2013), and emotional barriers such as shame that prevented help-seeking
2 (Browne and Finkelhor, 1986), were evident in some accounts. Familial-level contexts
3 including closed, uncommunicative and unemotional relationships, social isolation
4 and wider family violence and adversity have been associated with non-disclosure
5 (Alaggia, 2010), and were circumstances observed in the current study.

6 There are, inevitably, some limitations to this study. The sample is small, and therefore
7 generalisations to a wider population are not possible, but neither are generalisations
8 desirable in a qualitative study. The sample is, however, biased in a number of ways.
9 The majority of the sample are White British and, although there was some diversity
10 among the sample in terms of their country of origin, the small number of these
11 participants (and the variability between their countries of origin) mean that specific
12 patterns were not readily identifiable. This was a self-selected sample, which means that
13 those who chose to take part may be different in some way than those who did not.

14 The interpretation of participants' life course narratives in a cross-sectional,
15 retrospective study represents a further limitation – and an important message for
16 future research – to research undertaken within a constructivist ontological framework.
17 As Holland and Thomson (2009) found in their re-visitation and re-interpretation of
18 longitudinal qualitative data on turning points in youth studies, important changes in
19 interpretation were brought about by the accumulation of biographical data. Simply
20 put, participants in the longitudinal study identified important turning points at
21 one point in time, but at later data collection points, recollected different turning
22 points, failing to mention the ones that they deemed crucial in earlier interviews. It
23 is possible, therefore, that had this been carried out longitudinally and prospectively,
24 future interviews with the participants in this study might uncover different or new
25 information. The constructed nature of individual biography is ongoing throughout
26 the life course, as individuals change and re-shape their life histories.

27 28 **Conclusions and recommendations**

29
30 The research has illustrated that some events at the family and societal level have the
31 potential to inform and empower children and young people with the knowledge
32 that abuse is wrong. Policy implications include the possibility that media coverage of
33 sexual abuse may encourage contextualisation of experiences among some children.
34 It may have a positive impact on some children who are beginning to contextualise
35 their experiences within their peer or familial environments and, given the right
36 conditions, empower them to seek help.

37 With respect to professionals working with children and adults around the children,
38 the research has highlighted the importance of recognising signs and symptoms
39 of abuse, and ensuring a sensitive response to children and young people who
40 may be trying to disclose their experiences. While these are not new findings or
41 recommendations, they require continual reinforcement given the very recent cases
42 that have emerged that show how children's disclosures continue to go unnoticed
43 or ignored. Professionals working with children, young people and adult survivors
44 may find these findings on memorable events useful in therapeutic contexts, enabling
45 practitioners to understand, recognise and engage with situational meanings and their
46 relationship to change with a view to supporting and strengthening emergent change.

47 It is not possible to predict or control potentially influential memorable events
48 because of their uniqueness and variability. However, memorable events provide one

1 further avenue through which children, young people and adults may be empowered,
2 encouraging them to seek help where and when they need to. Messages from the
3 literature on disclosure are relevant here. Children and young people need to be
4 noticed, heard and believed following any disclosures. Disclosure does not mean that
5 problems end for children, and therefore ongoing emotional and practical support
6 is required to ensure children have the best chances of moving on from CSA. The
7 research findings, in context with the broader literature, seem to suggest that a debate
8 is required about the ways in which professionals or other supportive adults can
9 question children directly about abuse if it is suspected.

10 Future research should investigate the ways in which people alter their actions
11 in response to the resources available to them, as this is currently neglected in the
12 literature. More specifically, while the literature identifies the barriers children face to
13 disclosure that shut down their opportunities to seek help and literature on resistance
14 provides knowledge about the ways children fight back against their abusers, there
15 is no research that bridges these two areas to understand the choices children and
16 young people make to keep themselves safe when faced with limited or poor options.
17 Greater consideration should be given to the process by which children come to
18 contextualise their experiences as abusive or as wrong, and in particular, the role that
19 friendships and wider social networks play in this. Further qualitative research would
20 benefit from incorporating a more diverse sample to understand whether memorable
21 events or emergent changes are different within the lives of people in a variety of
22 cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

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