

A Gale Force Wind: Meaning Making by Male Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

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This in-depth qualitative study explores how 16 resilient male survivors of serious childhood sexual abuse, representing a range of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, made meaning from their abuse experiences. Three main types of meaning making styles were identified in the narratives: meaning making through action, using cognitive strategies, and engaging spirituality. Meaning making through action included helping others and using creative expression to describe and process the abuse. Reasoning systems that helped survivors to understand why the abuse happened included developing a psychological framework for understanding the abuser or the role of the self in the abuse, using a sociocultural explanation, or developing a philosophical view. A few men made meaning through their spirituality. Meaning making styles seem to be related to experiences with therapy; the more experience these men had had with specialized trauma therapy, the more likely they were to make meaning by attempting to understand their perpetrators. In this study, men of color, regardless of socioeconomic class, were less likely than Caucasian men to have received specialized trauma therapy.

Keywords: male survivors, childhood sexual abuse, resiliency, meaning making, narratives

“To live is to suffer. To survive is to find meaning in suffering.”
(Pipher, 2002, p. 61)

In the past several decades, clinicians and researchers have become increasingly aware of the prevalence of serious childhood sexual abuse (CSA) among males (Hunter, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c; Holmes & Slap, 1998). In their large national survey, Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, and Smith (1990) found that 16% of the men responded affirmatively to questions ranging from experiences of unwanted touching to unwanted intercourse before the age of 18. In a review of all English-language research findings on CSA published since 1989 reported in Medline and PsycINFO, Putnam (2003) determined that the officially substantiated prevalence rate of CSA for men was at least 7.9%. The potential for these kinds of experiences to have devastating consequences is well documented (e.g., Dhaliwal, Gauzas, Antonowicz, & Ross, 1996). Although many questions about the specific nature of the aftereffects of abuse for men remain unanswered, numerous studies have found severe symptomatology in male survivors (e.g., Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1996; Garnefski & Diekstra, 1997; Little & Hamby, 1999). However, in spite of the negative impact of abuse, some survivors do find ways to live rich and fulfilling lives, often after

years of working toward recovery (Hunter, 1990c; Lyons, 1989; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

One approach to understanding how some individuals are able to recover from severe adversity has been to focus on resiliency. Investigators (e.g., Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Rutter, 1987) have conceptualized resiliency as an attribute of an individual who is doing better than expected on some quantitative measures of functioning (such as adequate school performance, no mental illness, or absence of problems with the law), in spite of the existence of a number of risk factors in their lives. Recently, with the popular focus on positive adaptation (Poorman, 2002), more researchers have begun to focus on resiliency as it specifically relates to CSA survivors (e.g., Fergusson & Lynskey, 1996; Gilgun, 1990; Himelein & McElrath, 1996; McGloin & Widom, 2001).

One crucial dimension of survivors' recovery is finding a way to “make sense” of what happened to them in the past, and to make some kind of meaning of the place the abuse has in their current lives. A gradually more sophisticated and accurate understanding of our world is a necessary part of adaptation (Harvey, Orbuch, & Weber, 1990). Resilient survivors of CSA almost always find a way to “make sense” of what happened to them, to make some kind of meaning of the place the abuse has in their lives (Grossman, Cook, Kepkep, & Koenen, 1999; Haddock, 2001; Lev-Wiesel, 1999; Lyons, 1989). Nevertheless, in spite of being known as a “marker” for resilience, researchers have not yet refined our understanding of the ways and kinds of “sense” victims make of their experiences. Moreover, having these delineations would help to identify the ways meaning making pathways might relate to recovery and ultimately, inform treatment approaches.

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Thus far, the literature on populations who have experienced extreme stress or trauma has not yet developed a consistent definition for the act of meaning making. Some researchers have defined it as the process of finding a way to make some kind of sense of what happened and to bring that understanding into the rest of one's life, integrating past and present (e.g., Cohler, 1991; Lyons, 1989). Beardslee (1989) emphasizes the role of self-understanding as a necessary component of meaning making in a number of resilient populations including survivors of childhood cancer, parents of adolescents with severe affective disorders, and adults who participated in the civil rights movement in the South. Bar-On (1995), in his study of three generations of German and Israeli Holocaust survivors, does not use the specific term "meaning making" but describes the importance of the process of being able to place knowledge in a "meaningful human, historical, social, or moral frame of reference" (p. 18) for successful recovery.

Cognitively, generating meaning involves using various frameworks of understanding—religious, psychological, philosophical, or other—to (try to) make sense of events and experiences. A number of researchers and clinicians have emphasized the importance of trauma survivors developing a verbal account or narrative. For example, Harvey, Orbuch, and Weber (1990) refer to this process as "account making," and Pipher (2002) writes of "healing stories." Although the accuracy of these frameworks is not necessarily related to how successful they are for individual survivors, there is some suggestion that the completeness of the account (Harvey, Orbuch, and Weber, 1990) and the extent to which it feels satisfactory to the survivor (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983) may be variables relating to how well they work for the individual. It is important to note, however, that disclosure and narrative, particularly for men, often come many years after their abuse (Sorsoli, Kia-Keating, & Grossman, 2006).

A more action-oriented style of meaning making may include helping others, which is one important way that survivors of traumatic experiences describe giving meaning to their abuse histories (Gartner, 2005; Kishon-Berash, Midlarasky, & Johnson, 1999; Kleinman, 1989; Lew, 2004). Creative expressions of aspects of the traumatic experience have been viewed as meaning making, particularly in the context of expressive art therapies (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Survivors also describe what appear to be early versions or precursors of explicit meaning making, such as helping others who have experienced trauma, but not explicitly or even consciously linking it to their own abuse histories (Grossman et al., 1999).

Overall, very little data exist on how men make meaning of childhood sexual abuse. In spite of the paucity of data, there is strong reason to believe that gender socialization influences how males construct meaning from their abuse (Gartner, 1999, 2005; Kia-Keating, Grossman, Sorsoli, & Epstein, 2005; Lisak, Hopper, & Song, 1996). As scientific literature and the popular media make clear, men in American culture are socialized to be emotionally stoic and invulnerable, forceful and aggressive, preoccupied with sex and sexuality, economic providers, and protectors of home and family (Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2003; Rasheed & Rasheed, 1999). As Kia-Keating et al. (2005) delineate and others have described (e.g., Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Lew, 2004), these pressures make it much harder for them to acknowledge their victimization, gain support for themselves, enter therapy for assistance, or develop a framework of meaning around their abuse.

If little is known about what male abuse survivors say about how they make meaning of their abuse experiences, even less is known specifically about the experiences of abused men of color. Studies explicitly focused on the meanings men of color have made from experiences of CSA have yet to appear in the literature. This study on meaning making in a mixed ethnic group of men with histories of serious CSA is part of a larger interview project in which 16 resilient male survivors were interviewed about many aspects of their experience of CSA, their perception of its effects in their lives, and the ways in which they survived and in some ways thrived. The goal of the present study was to analyze these in-depth interviews for the ways these survivors made meaning of their histories of abuse and to provide greater understanding for psychotherapists providing treatment for this population. The findings illustrate the range of meanings present even among a group of resilient men's narratives, as well as the ways certain aspects of these meanings were related to demographic characteristics and previous experiences with psychotherapy.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through letters written to clinicians in the community and by posted flyers seeking resilient men with histories of childhood sexual abuse. About half were referred by their therapists, half responded to flyers, and one was referred by a friend. Brief telephone screenings were conducted to ascertain whether participants had a history of childhood sexual abuse that met the criteria of being perpetrated by a member of the immediate or extended family or someone in a position of responsibility or power over the participants (such as abuse by a babysitter or teacher), and that the abuse included oral, anal, or genital intercourse or attempted intercourse. These criteria are similar to those used by others (Dhaliwal et al., 1996; Violato & Genuis, 1993) who have included nuclear and extended family members, as well as other individuals in positions of power over the victim, in the range of perpetrators who, because of their ongoing relationship with and power over the victims, have a tendency to be especially harmful as perpetrators (as compared to similar acts perpetrated by strangers). Participants were also screened for resiliency; specifically, they were considered resilient if they had never been sexually abusive to anyone and were functioning well in at least one area of their lives (e.g., they were employed or had at least one stable relationship).

The resulting sample consisted of 16 men, 10 Caucasian, 2 African American, 3 Latino, and 1 part Native American. One had a ninth grade education, one had graduated from high school, three had some college, three had college degrees, and eight had advanced degrees. The men ranged in age from 24 to 61 years. Of the 16 participants, nine identified themselves as heterosexuals: three of these were married, one engaged, and the rest were single. Seven participants identified themselves as gay or bisexual; four of these men were in long-term relationships with male partners.

These participants reported a range of traumatic experiences in childhood and many described growing up in violent and/or disorganized surroundings. All of the participants reported childhood sexual abuse that included actual or attempted rape. As is shown in Table 1, eight reported being sexually abused by members of their immediate family, four by members of their extended family, and seven by people outside of the family. A majority of the participants were sexually abused by more than one perpetrator. In all but one instance, the sexual abuse had gone on for many years. All but two of these men reported physical abuse as children, mostly perpetrated by their fathers but also by mothers, older siblings, and extended family; most had also witnessed physical abuse of mothers and/or siblings. All were emotionally abused and seriously neglected in one way or another.

Table 1
Reported Perpetrators and Approximate Age Range Over Which Sexual Abuse Occurred

Participant	Approximate age range	Perpetrators
Earl	7–13	uncle, male friend of father's
Brad	4–12	older sister, female babysitter, male stranger
Ron	4–10	grandfather, older brother
Morgan	2–11	mother, older brother
Will	2–13	stepfather, older sister, other men and women in group
Paul	4–6	grandfather
Martin	7–8	school principal and wife
Uhan	5–7	female babysitter, male neighbor
Malcolm	7	sister
Burt	2–13	father, mother, male church camp director, other men
Web	2–14	father, mother
Bill	2–17	mother, older sister, older foster sister, male border, female babysitter
Amhad	11–12	Big brother
Christos	3–15	uncle, male and female cousins, older neighborhood boy, older male and female children of friends of mother
Tomas	7–10	adult male cousin
Alejandro	4–15	two uncles

Data Coding and Analysis

Each participant completed an in-depth semistructured interview, lasting about five hours. The interview gathered information about family history, past and current adaptation in major areas of functioning, past and current symptoms, lifetime abuse experiences, their assessments of their strengths and vulnerabilities in their childhood and current environments, experiences with psychotherapy and other activities intended to foster recovery, and their perceptions of their own resiliency. These interviews were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy.

To study these men's experiences, the transcripts of the 16 interviews were analyzed for content (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994; Riessman, 1993) using a set of codes that were based on previous research with women's narratives (Grossman et al., 1999), but revised to reflect the literature on men's specific responses to trauma, clinical experiences of those working with traumatized men, and information from the first several interviews with these men (see Boyatzis, 1998, or Miles & Huberman, 1994 for more information on code development processes). Although the entire set of interviews was coded for 40 variables, including, for example, codes reflecting talk about masculinity, self-care, and memory; for this analysis, only the content coded as meaning making and therapy were used.

Sections of transcript were coded as meaning making when participants revealed any kind of understanding of why these experiences had happened to them, how they had understood the experiences as children, and what the sexual abuse experiences had come to mean over time. For example, the men often tried to make sense of their hurtful or abusive experiences by positioning those experiences in a larger framework, such as with the use of sociology, psychology, or philosophy; such sections were coded as meaning making regardless of whether the process was conscious or unconscious, and whether it seemed accurate or inaccurate. Sections were also coded as meaning making when participants talked about engaging in activities that were closely related to or described as direct responses to the abuse experiences. Sections of transcript were coded as therapy when participants described any encounters with healers, such as mental health clinicians, and religious leaders, and included any other processes intended to be healing. Overall, the transcripts were read as openly as possible in order to allow unanticipated ways of making meaning to emerge from the data.

To establish reliability, all members of the research team first coded the same interview transcript, which was then reviewed in detail to identify and resolve discrepancies. Following this initial meticulous phase of establish-

ing reliability, all other interview transcripts were coded by two members of the research team who separately coded each transcript and then reviewed and reconciled any differences. The contents coded as meaning making and therapy were then carefully reread and categorized thematically. To deepen the understandings offered by this important data, the contents in each final category were both tabulated to generate frequencies of appearance within and across the interviews (Boyatzis, 1998; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) and also were used descriptively to "formulate a picture of the content universe" (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, p. 114) of meaning making for resilient men surviving childhood sexual abuse. The validity of these findings was supported by memos and biographical reviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Biographical reviews also included information to categorize the participants' childhood socioeconomic status, based on their description of indicators including their parents' education, parents' employment, the neighborhood they lived in, and the resources they had available to them as children.

Results

The analysis revealed three main types of meaning making: (1) meaning making in actions; (2) meaning making through thought and reason, and (3) meaning making by developing or calling on a sense of spirituality (see Table 2). Resilient ways of meaning making through actions included the survivor helping others or indicating a strong wish to help others, with or without a conscious awareness of how their engagement in altruistic activities might relate to their childhood abuse; and using creativity to express and metabolize the abuse, even if not consciously stated as such.

Cognitive strategies for meaning making included: (1) speculating about the psychology of the abuser, for example, "My mom has a major mental illness and that's why she did those things to me"; (2) thinking about the role of self, for example, "I believed I was bad and that made my Dad do what he did to me"; (3) using a sociocultural framework, for example, "My parents were so poor and had too many children and couldn't possibly manage everything"; or (4) holding a philosophical view such as "Humans derived from animals and animals behave incestuously, so it's natural." The third type of meaning making was turning to spirituality or faith, such as "Ultimately there is meaning in everything, even if we can't understand what that purpose might be now."

Table 2
Categories of Meaning Making

Type of meaning making	Narrative example
Meaning making through actions	
Altruistic behaviors	“Certain kids when I was in school, I’d defend them if I could. Like, if they were kind of outcast, I was like, ‘I know how that feels.’ So I would try to help them out.”
Creative expressions	“Create characters. Fantasize. That was the safe space.”
Meaning making by developing cognitive frameworks	
Finding ways to understand the abuser’s psychology	“He was gang-raped when he was about 6 years old. When he would abuse me, it was a replication of what had happened to him.”
Finding ways to understand the role of the self	“I blamed my neediness for what got me into the situation.”
Using a socio-cultural framework	“Many women of that generation had none of their needs met. . . . There she is in the suburbs; she’s supposed to be a housewife. The women were forced to be like that at that time. It was a horrible mess.”
Developing a philosophical view	“When I was 4 or 5, I was convinced that there was another world below where we were [where] things would be much better for me.”
Meaning making through spirituality	“I’ve been forgiven for a lot of things that I’ve done in my life. And because of that, there is really nothing that anyone does to me that I shouldn’t be able to forgive. So whatever my sister has done, whatever anyone has done to me, it all pales in comparison to what I’ve done to God, from a religious viewpoint.”

Scoring the coded portions of the interviews so that the results could be presented numerically (Boyatzis, 1998) revealed that the most common forms of meaning making expressed by the participants fell into the cognitive categories. Fifty-one percent of all of the coded meaning making excerpts fell into these groups. Thirty percent of the men’s coded meaning making involved helping others. Spirituality was coded in 6% of the excerpts and creativity in 4%. Examining the relationship between demographic variables and meaning making revealed that childhood socioeconomic status did not appear to be a factor in either the absolute number of coded meaning-making excerpts within an interview or how many different types they utilized.

Researchers point out that confusion about sexual orientation is a frequently reported and major negative effect of sexual abuse of boys (Gartner, 1997, 2005; Gilgun, 1991; Gilgun & Reiser, 1990). Compounding their experiences of sexual abuse, gay/bisexual participants related experiences of harassment and harsh discipline as a result of their sexual orientation, the worst of which was often perpetrated by their fathers (and sometimes older brothers) who they interpreted as particularly invested in raising a masculine and “tough” son (Kia-Keating et al., 2005). Some of the gay and bisexual men in the sample were harassed around their sexual interests and some felt they were abused because their perpetrator—in these cases, always their fathers—sensed or believed they were gay even when quite young; a few wondered if being abused by a male pushed them to become gay. Most did not feel their sexual orientation was influenced by their abuse or the gender of their perpetrator, even though almost all felt their sexuality had been impacted in a variety of ways. These struggles exacerbated the normative dilemmas boys have in their development toward manhood and made the integration of their sexuality into their adult lives all the more difficult and complex. And yet, in these data, we found no connections between whether the men identified themselves as homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual and the type or description of their experiences of meaning making.

However, some apparent ethnic differences emerged when comparing Caucasian men and men of color. In particular, the men of color in this sample reported less of an emphasis on understanding the abuser than did the Caucasian men. When considering the

proportion of times these Caucasian men referred to understanding the abuser among all potential types of meaning making, the percentage was quite high (73%); for men of color, however, the proportion of this type of meaning making was much lower in comparison (43%). A closer examination of ethnic differences also revealed that, regardless of class, these Caucasian men made more frequent references to the ways they had made meaning of their experiences and employed a greater variety of strategies.

Meaning Making Through Actions

Meaning making through altruism. Most of the men described themselves as having been committed to helping others, particularly others who they perceived as vulnerable or underdogs in some ways. This sense of allegiance to the unprotected was most often developed early, during childhood. The participants described safeguarding and defending siblings, friends, and sometimes just acquaintances. Malcolm, a 24-year-old African American man who had never had therapy and described himself as a born-again Christian, was asked if he ever tried to take care of people to make himself feel better. He said, “I wouldn’t say ‘take care of people,’ but I will always try to help people out. I used to do that all the time when I was little.” The interviewer asked if there had been particular people he felt protective toward when he was a child. “Yeah,” he answered. “Certain kids when I was in school, I’d defend them if I could. Like, if they were kind of outcast, I was like, ‘I know how that feels.’ So I would try to help them out.”

Similar to Malcolm, Brad, a 34-year-old conflict management consultant, described an early interest in helping the “underdog.” Despite growing up in a chaotic and violent household within which he was sexually abused by his older sister and at one point, abducted and sexually tortured, he explained, “Even when I was a kid, like my adolescence, I was always for the underdog, and I would help kids out. [Like if] they were smaller or a minority.” Working in the area of conflict management as an adult, Brad continued to pursue his interest in seeking equitable resolutions between people.

In fact, all but one of the participants described examples of trying to help others in adulthood. Many had made it their life's work. In particular, a number of participants were in mental health professions. Alejandro, for example, a 38 year-old gay man of Mexican descent and culture, had been sexually abused for years by two uncles, and physically and emotionally abused by his father for many years. He described himself as "the problem solver." He said that he always liked to volunteer, and that sometimes he would even volunteer "too much." He helped a variety of people, including "people that were disabled. . . people I met on the street, volunteers, other agencies, people that were HIV positive, meals on wheels, whatever I could do basically to help."

In the interviews, few of the participants explicitly linked their motivation to help others with their early abuse histories (although it is suspected that some might have described the connection if they had been asked directly). Those who did described a way of deriving something from the experience of being abused by finding a way to make it have positive effects in the world. Earl, who was part Native American and grew up in a "swamp family" in the Southern United States, said poignantly: "I've done so much good and so much helpful for others. Even though I wish it [the abuse] didn't happen, I'm sort of glad because I've been able to help so many other people now." He was quite sure that his life had more meaning than it would have had were he not abused.

Meaning making through creative expression. Among the 16 men in the study, two were serious musicians, one was a published writer, and another one was a painter who had exhibited his work. Nevertheless, few of the participants explicitly reflected upon the use of creativity to make meaning of the traumas they had experienced. Morgan was an exception, and he described writing constantly, and deemed these creative acts as crucial to his survival. He said that he would write both fiction and nonfiction, suggesting, "I just could sit down and think of things faster than my fingers would go." As a child, he said he would "go inside" and "be characters. Create characters. Fantasize. That was the safe space."

Building a Cognitive Framework to Understand the Traumatic Past

Psychological analyses of the abuser. Many of the coded meaning making excerpts reflected an effort to find a way of understanding the psychology of the perpetrator and the perpetrator's actions. All of the men who had extensive psychological explanations about the perpetrator were describing one or both of their parents, and all had had years of therapy. Web, a psychologist, said of his father who sexually abused him: "He was gang-raped when he was about 6 years old, and when he would abuse me, it was a replication of what had happened to him." Alejandro detailed how he came to understand his father's actions, saying, "When my parents split up. . . I was living at his mom's house and [my father] didn't really have anyone to help him cause he has this huge house [and was] living by himself. So he would visit his mom more often and what he did is shift his anger and hatred to me." Using a very sophisticated framework he appeared to have acquired from psychotherapy, Bill explained that he was in his thirties when he learned that it was not evil of him to take care of his own needs. He had realized, he said, "The evil consequences of my mother's behavior came from her failure to meet her own needs. I mean, if she were meeting her own needs, then her kids

wouldn't have to be building their whole lives around trying to meet them for her."

Bill, Alejandro, and Web were able to use their understanding of the motivation of the perpetrator to make sense of their abusive experiences and also reduce their sense of self-blame. Ron, a married 43-year-old Jewish man, went through years of psychotherapy, some of which had targeted his abuse. He explicitly used a cognitive framework to help stop blaming himself. He remembered seeing a movie, *Heaven Can Wait*, in which there were two cousins, one of which the grandfather adored and the other he couldn't stand. Using this example, he explained, "I was like, 'That's it!' There is just something about me [my father] doesn't like. And I may not be bad. There may not be something wrong with me. But for whatever reason my father doesn't like me. And I had it figured out. So that gave me tremendous comfort."

Understandings of the self. Meaning-making sections of transcript were categorized as "Understanding the Self" when a participant conceptualized the abuse with reference to their own characteristics or behavior. Almost all of the participants blamed themselves as children. In response to a question about what he thought about the abuse when it occurred, Christos, an African-West Indian American shared, "My grandmother was very religious. I just thought [the abuse] was this massive evil and that I was cursed for being part of it." Malcolm, who at age 7 was coerced by his 14-year old sister into attempted intercourse, said "Afterward I felt bad because I was like, man, I can't believe I did that. . . Because I thought it was my fault. I was like, man, I knew I shouldn't have. I should have kept saying no." Brad said more simply, "I blamed my neediness for what got me into the situation." Bill's mentally ill mother obtained her understanding of life from a fundamentalist Christian religion and constantly conveyed to him and his siblings that they were evil and responsible for the torture she meted out. Bill elaborated:

I believed that [these experiences] were my fault because that's what I was taught from day one. Someone would hurt me, I would hurt, and they would say that that was my original sin. Or if I became angry, that was because I was a bad person. If I developed a rash or something, the stock explanation for that in my household was, 'Oh, that's just your meanness coming out.'

In adulthood, and certainly by the time of the interviews, most of the participants had reworked that original formulation at least intellectually, although a number indicated that they still struggled emotionally. For example, near the end of his interview, Bill said, "Of all the work that I've done, and I'm sitting here talking so freely about my background, I still fundamentally at the really deepest level believe that it's all my fault."

Sociocultural ways of understanding. On average, the men in this study used sociocultural frameworks quite infrequently. Web, a psychologist, not surprisingly used such explanations to explain his mother's severe abuse of him. In the discussion, he was talking about how little his mother got from her life. He said he did not think she had had any of her needs met and that his abuse, therefore, was an outcome of that social phenomenon:

I think, very much in the kind of Sylvia Plath sense, many women of that generation had none of their needs met. I mean this woman who could have gone to college, and could have done something with herself, that would have given her some sense of intellectual pleasure. It wasn't considered important enough to have done that. There she is

in the suburbs; she's supposed to be a housewife. The women were forced to be like that at that time. It was a horrible mess.

Christos, who heavily relied on cultural and philosophical ways of understanding, suggested that "the concept of sexual abuse [was] culturally colored." In his country (in the West Indies), he said, sexual abuse is "considered very different from how it is in the United States." He suggested that the United States is "very oriented toward protecting the individual," whereas in his country, "large families lived together and contact that might be considered inappropriate from a Western prospective is almost expected on the islands."

Understanding through philosophy. Using philosophical understanding to contain a trauma history is similar in some ways to using psychological, social, or cultural explanations in that it tends to require exposure to philosophy and an intellectual bent; five participants (two of color and three Caucasian men) had no scores in this category. Ron described what seemed to be a very adaptive philosophical framework that he had developed as a child. He said, "When I was four or five, I was convinced that there was another world—glass castles, I remember—and below where we were that things would be much better for me." That fantasy/belief allowed him to be hopeful in a very painful and difficult life situation.

In adulthood, as the participants revealed, they had developed some incredibly rich philosophical frameworks to give meaning to their lives. Despite growing up in a drug-infested inner city neighborhood, Amhad drew together a sense of this larger meaning. He explained that he overwhelmingly felt like there was a "goal" and something for him to do "out there." He recognized that a lot of people who grew up in housing projects thought their backyard was only "that little square patch of grass by the side of the stairs," but that in contrast, "I look at it like my back yard. . . is the world. I inhabit this place. That's my backyard."

Brad had a different, but very powerful way of explicating what he had gained from his abusive history. He described the way he had first "shuttered everything down" in his life, but then chose to "make a new life" and to always "try to get better than I am yesterday, today." He added, "I think I would have had that regardless, but it's just so much—It's like a kite needs the wind to fly high, right?" When the interviewer asked, "So what was your wind?" he answered, "Well, this [trauma history] is a wind. And it's the kind of gale force wind that either rips me to shreds or I've got to develop myself and find how to be extremely strong."

Meaning Making by Turning Toward or Developing a Sense of Spirituality

Only a few men turned to traditional religion and only one of them was a man of color. Several, however, had developed their spirituality in unique ways and found it healing. Although only two of the men were actively involved in a religious community, about half of them developed or found spiritual beliefs that seemed to significantly aid in enriching their lives and facilitate their recovery. Malcolm described his family as Christian fundamentalists. He was not very interested in this religion as a child, although he was forced to go to church regularly and learn scripture. However, early in his college experience, he became a born-again Christian and whole-heartedly embraced religiosity. He said,

Basically I only can be held accountable for things that I do. And everyone has to be held accountable for everything that they do, but

there is also forgiveness. I've been forgiven for a lot of things that I've done in my life. And because of that, there is really nothing that anyone does to me that I shouldn't be able to forgive. So whatever my sister has done, whatever anyone has done to me, it all pales in comparison to what I've done to God, from a religious viewpoint.

Several of the men talked about the development of their spirituality through their involvement with AA or other 12-step programs. Paul, who grew up in a half-Catholic, half-Jewish middle class family, was in a doctoral program in pastoral counseling. At the time of the interview, he described his spirituality as very important to him. He said that he learned about acceptance in AA, continuing:

To me, once you reach the point where you accept any number of things about one's life, including alcoholism, the way one's mother is, etcetera, that's when life gets better. So there are no accidents, no mistakes, in God's world in that sense. Everything happens the way it happens.

Discussion

Meaning Making Options

Each man participating in this study used more than one type of meaning making in his efforts to make sense of his traumatic experiences. Although the men were different from each other in the kinds of meaning making that seemed helpful to them, helping others and cognitive ways of understanding were particularly central to the way these men made meaning in their lives. Some participants saw the ways they helped others as being related to their histories; other participants did not describe connections between their histories and the ways they helped others or their commitment to altruistic activities. Regardless of whether they expressed an awareness of their choices as having a connection to their pasts, helping others was important to virtually all of the men in the study. The interviews are consistent with the views of Herman (1992) and others (e.g., Lew, 2004; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998; Wolin & Wolin, 1993) who contend that a crucial aspect of healing for many survivors of childhood abuse is engaging in what Herman terms the "survivor mission," which involves finding ways to use the very hard learning from abuse and, by way of serving others, find the path to recovery. It may not be a coincidence that men choosing such a decidedly nonnarcissistic pathway toward recovery were also able to avoid perpetration (Gilgun, 1988). Along with other forms of action-oriented meaning making which include creative and expressive endeavors, engaging in altruistic activities reflects the enacting of human agency, which some suggest has a major role in resilience (e.g., Gilgun, 1991).

As found with the resilient women survivors (Grossman et al., 1999) and as therapists have long known (e.g., Herman, 1992; McCann & Pearlman, 1990), cognitive ways of reframing the traumatic experiences and managing the disruptive emotions are crucial to most good trauma therapy. Most of the men in this study had struggled over long periods of time to understand why the traumatic events in their lives had occurred. Using psychological, social, and cultural perspectives to help clients understand their abuse history in larger contexts is a major therapeutic tool in trauma treatment (e.g., Grossman et al., 1999; Herman, 1992; Lev-Wiesel, 1999; McCann & Pearlman, 1990) and this approach to making meaning appeared to be very valuable to many of our

participants, although it is clear that it can also be harmful. One of the men, Christos, appeared to be using a framework of ideas defensively, to justify having no close relationships and not planning ever to have them. He also used similar ideas to justify his having no therapy to help him process his trauma history. When the interviewer asked him about the possibility of therapy, he said he would never do that, especially since he had never told anyone about his history of sexual abuse. She pointed out gently that he had just told her, and he, with some surprise, acknowledged that he had. He went on to say that because of the interviews, he was for the first time considering the possibility that he was not responsible for what had happened.

When childhood histories of harsh or distorted religious practice are connected to abusive experiences, involvement in traditional religious practice is often difficult or impossible for many men (Lew, 2004); these difficulties could be observed in this small sample of men as well. A few were able to find sustenance in some version of the religions of their childhoods. A few others created their own spiritual beliefs. In this sample, however, their use of spirituality was mentioned less frequently than most other forms of meaning making.

Overall, the variety of different ways these men made meaning of their histories is impressive. The intricate patterns of styles and emphasis across these men's narratives make it clear that there is not a "one size fits all" solution to making meaning of these very difficult experiences. The depth and richness of meaning these participants had developed, sometimes in childhood and sometimes as adults, sometimes with therapeutic assistance and sometimes alone, was striking; it allowed them to make some peace with what had happened and also become more thoughtful, deeper human beings.

Early Meaning Making and Self-blame

Participants' recollections of childhood revealed that early beliefs about the abuse often took the form of self-blame. Although these notions shifted over time into more sophisticated ways of making meaning of these difficult events (such as understanding the abuser or developing a philosophical stance), the later frameworks still suggested the existence of early self-blame. Many psychologists (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 1992; McCann & Pearlman, 1990) have struggled with the question of the usefulness of self-blame for abuse survivors. On one hand, it provides some sense of restoring the order of the world and a sense of control as in, for example, the belief: "If I had not done this, I would not have been hurt, so if I avoid doing that in the future, I will be safe." However, the understanding of the order of the world conveyed is almost always erroneous, and the sense of control fallacious. Furthermore, it burdens the individual with an unfair and ultimately harmful sense of shame and blame; and an understanding of the self as responsible for the experience of abuse. Thus, while self-blame for a period in childhood may be helpful, or even inevitable, given how the human mind is constructed, it does not appear to be helpful in adulthood (Feinauer & Stuart, 1996; Lev-Wiesel, 1999; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Further research might clarify whether, in fact, there is an early period for children coping with abuse alone when self-blame provides a helpful organizing framework for them.

Many of the men described years of work in therapy learning not to blame themselves. Two of the men who had not yet sought

formal help to rework their stories, Amhad and Christos, were both amazingly resilient in finding ways to manage their guilt. Amhad was able for many years to push the issue into the back of his mind, and Christos developed very elegant theories about human behavior. For the men who had been in trauma therapy, they described it as very helpful to them when their therapists challenged their self-blame. As McCann and Pearlman (1990), among others, suggest this issue has to be broached gently, with respect for the role that it may have played in their coping, and with the awareness that a variety of meanings may have been made from the abuse experience that may reflect a survivor's original feelings of inadequacy and lack of self-worth.

Meaning Making and Ethnicity

There was one noticeable difference in the kinds of meaning making our participants tended to use based on their ethnicity. The men of color in this sample spoke distinctly less about trying to understand their perpetrators psychologically than did the Caucasian men. Although this is a small qualitative study, when looking at the data in a more nuanced way, a very interesting picture emerged that might help explain this apparent ethnic difference. We considered the meaning making of men who had trauma-specific psychotherapy compared with men who had only had involvement in a 12-step program, generic psychotherapy that did not acknowledge or deal with their abuse, or trauma-focused therapy. Understanding the perpetrator is one of the helpful skills often taught in trauma therapy, as part of helping the survivor broaden their understanding of what happened to them and why (McCann & Pearlman, 1990) and, as McCann and Pearlman suggest, if the individual desires, helping them find a way to relate to their former perpetrator. Lev-Wiesel (1999) found that "potency" (feelings of confidence toward oneself and the social environment) is related to a decrease in negative feelings toward the abuser, a relationship she feels demonstrates the importance potency plays in a survivor's adjustment. She concludes that potency reflects a belief in "order and meaning in society. . . which may relieve one's hostility and revenge feelings" (p. 301). In another study (Lev-Wiesel, 2000), she reported that survivors who attribute the abuse to the offenders' characteristics rather than to themselves had a higher quality of life.

However, the men of color in this study had minimal exposure to trauma-focused therapy; given the differences in exposure to this type of treatment, it is not surprising that these Caucasian men attempted to understand their abusers much more often. As mentioned earlier, 11 of the participants had had therapy that focused on their traumatic experiences. All of the five who did not were men of color. None of the four men of color who grew up in poor families had any trauma therapy, although all had had some assistance from programs like AA or generic therapy. In comparison, all of the Caucasian men, including those from very poor families, had eventually found access to trauma treatment. Christos, an African-Cuban American, also had had no trauma-focused therapy, despite a number of attempts to find responsive psychotherapy when he was younger and despite growing up in an educated and affluent family. Although Christos did not attempt to seek treatment specific to his trauma history, he did make several attempts by way of other presenting problems such as a sugar addiction and body image issues, and the failure of his marriage. Each time, Christos felt that his concerns were trivialized by the

mental health professionals with whom he came in contact, describing their dismissive comments that he did not have a problem, in the case of the sugar addiction, or that he was the one at fault, in the case of the divorce. Alejandro, who was of Mexican American descent and from a middle class family, was the only man of color who had had extensive trauma therapy and he worked very hard for many years before he was able to obtain it.

One reason why the men of color were much less likely to get adequate treatment may be the extent to which therapy is often viewed as unhelpful or stigmatized in communities of color (Majors, Billson & Mancini, 1992; Morris, 2001). Thompson, Bazile, and Akbar (2004) explored African Americans perceptions of psychotherapy and psychotherapists by means of focus groups and found consensus that culturally, seeking therapy was associated with "weakness and diminished pride" (p. 22), and it is considered inappropriate to share personal feelings or vulnerabilities with strangers. Further, given their history of adversity and discrimination, African Americans emphasize portraying themselves as strong and able to cope without help, and hold a suspicion of health care and research. Seeking help carries the strong stigma associated with mental illness. They viewed psychologists as "older White males, who were unsympathetic, uncaring, and unreliable;" one of the men in the focus groups said, "It doesn't seem like they're truly concerned about you, what you could possibly be going through" (p. 23).

Second, Latino and African Americans tend to value and/or abide by norms associated with traditional masculinity even more than Caucasian men in the American culture (Levant et al., 2003; Rasheed & Rasheed, 1999), and these values, such as "being tough," serve to increase stigma and discourage these men from seeking any kind of help. Rasheed and Rasheed (1999) emphasize the effects of racism and poverty on interfering greatly with these men's meeting American masculine ideals. In response, many of these men adopt the "cool pose" to "express and embellish manhood" (p. 31), which makes acknowledging victimization and the associated behaviors of seeking help from friends or therapists, and ultimately finding ways to make meaning of their abuse experiences, much more difficult.

A third reason for lack of appropriate treatment may involve a lack of financial resources (e.g., Thompson, Bazile, & Akbar, 2004). This barrier to assistance relates to the interconnection between class and ethnic and racial identification in our sample, as in United States culture generally. Sixty-seven percent of the men of color compared with 30% of the Caucasian men were lower or working class in our sample. Having a stable place to live and consistent phone service is crucial for obtaining certain mental health services; most mental health facilities do not have the resources or the mode of operating that allows them to make the efforts required to bring effective services to some of these men. Because the Caucasian men from poor family backgrounds were able eventually to obtain good treatment, while the poor men of color in this sample were not, it seems likely that prejudice and discrimination could have created an added barrier to treatment. The African American community and to a lesser extent some of the Latino communities have generally not trusted mental health professionals, often believing that they will be treated in a discriminatory manner (Thompson, Basile, & Akbar, 2004) and evidence exists to support their fears (Clark, Anderson, Clark & Williams, 1999; Grier & Cobbs, 1968; Rasheed & Rasheed, 1999). Whether they are currently being treated in a discriminatory man-

ner, past experiences with prejudice may have made it very difficult for some of the men of color to come to the interviews; and both racial discrimination and their anticipation of being responded to in a racially biased manner often prohibits many men of color who are abuse survivors from pursuing help (Waters, 1999; Whaley, 2001).

The Importance of an Awareness of Prejudice and Discrimination in Psychotherapeutic Circles

During the interviews, participants spoke about the complex interactions between culture, discrimination, and financial hardship. Two of the three Latino men in the study were very aware of racial/ethnic prejudice in the United States; Christos said his experience of repeated daily prejudice since coming to the United States was more traumatic in his life than his childhood sexual abuse. Amhad, the older of the two African American men was in what would be considered a very early stage of Black identity development, as described by Cross and Strauss (1998) and Helms (1993), in which he largely denied the existence of oppression and its effects on his life. He did not describe feeling disadvantaged; nor did he say that treatment was unavailable to him, although he told us that when a sibling needed mental health care, he was sent to a state hospital known throughout the city as having a terrible reputation. Similarly, Malcolm, the 24-year-old African American participant talked about surviving prejudice as a "necessary evil" but did not focus on its role in his development or current life.

When asked about how he dealt with conflict, Christos, an African-Cuban American man from an upper-middle class background, said, "I think, growing up, that's a typical Cuban mode not to deal with emotions. And not to deal with conflict, not emotional conflict." Christos did not tell anyone about the sexual violations that were occurring when he was young. When asked how he made the decision not to talk, he said, "I think the decision had been made for me. It's very cultural. We just don't do it." The lack of support from his family confirmed these beliefs. For example, he was repeatedly sadistically sexually and physically abused by an uncle with whom he was living with for two years. At a family gathering, he disclosed what this uncle had done to him. The uncle's wife verbally attacked Christos and cursed him and the rest of the family and told him it was bad to lie about family members. His mother, his only parent, never spoke to him about it but did cut off ties with the rest of her family. He had not had any good therapy experience, despite a number of attempts to enter therapy when he was younger. His descriptions of how he had been treated (and mistreated) by these therapists were quite disturbing to hear.

Tomas, who grew up in a poor immigrant Puerto Rican family, said, "Puerto Rican culture, Spanish culture, that type of stuff [addictions, abuse] is like hush. Real hush-hush hush-hush." At another point he said, "Instead of getting help, you would just get hurt more. . . The best thing to just avoid all that is to hush." Later he talked about how destructive the silencing had been for him. He said, "I wouldn't say nothing to anyone. But it bothered me because I'm dealing with everything [and] I need to talk about this, get this shit off my chest because it's bothering me. You know this is really messing with my head." His "hush hush" style prevented him from getting help for many years, even though he desperately wanted to talk with someone about it. Amhad, when asked if he knew any other African American men who might want to be in the study, laughed: "See, that's the thing, we don't talk about it."

In contrast, a number of the Caucasian men had been sent to therapists as children by their parents. Morgan's mother, for example, had taken him to see someone when he was 11 or 12 and he had continued seeking help throughout his adult life. Although at least one of these men encountered a strong bias against believing that a man could have been sexually abused, none of the Caucasian men described a general cultural bias against getting help or concerns that they would not be accepted by therapists or others because of the color of their skin; their encounters with a cultural bias were based only on masculinity, not ethnicity. Although our data are exploratory, they suggest that for therapists to be responsive to men of color, and particularly men of color with histories of childhood sexual abuse, they need to work hard to remain aware of their own ignorance and prejudice about these populations, and to find ways to educate themselves and develop a deep sense of cultural sensitivity. Above all, it seems clear that clinicians need to be acutely aware that male survivors are violating cultural norms when they seek help from a psychotherapist and tell shameful stories about their childhoods, and how much shame, and the stronghold of cultural norms of masculinity, pervades their sense of needing help and their ability to express emotional pain.

Limitations

This project was an early exploration of how male survivors of CSA who have at least some resilient characteristics make meaning of their abusive experiences. The primary limitation of the study relates to the sample characteristics and size. It required persistent efforts to attain a reasonable sample of Caucasian men; men of color were even more difficult to recruit. At the same time, male survivors, and particularly men of color who do volunteer are likely very different from the men who do not. The men who participated may be quite unusual in their commitment to talk about their experiences and their willingness to risk a great deal to find people who might understand. However, our goal was not to generalize findings from these to all men, but rather to begin a conversation about the ways resilient men are making meaning of childhood sexual abuse.

Future Directions

It would be very helpful to explore in further research whether activities which emphasize helping others are important aspects of survivors' healing process and whether any altruistic behavior would suffice or if it would work better if it were more closely related to their abuse experiences. Another interesting question is whether or not it is important to survivors to be consciously aware of the link between their abusive histories and their altruism (Gartner, 2005). The literature suggests a further topic for research, which is that the intent to help may be just as, if not more important, than the act of helping itself. Kishon-Barash, Midlarsky, and Johnson (1999) studied altruism among Vietnam veterans and found that an altruistic intention to help, regardless of actual amount of helping activity, was related to empathy and a sense of connection with others.

Given the importance of creative endeavors to individuals' and cultures' healing (Bloom & Gullotta, 2001), our findings suggest the importance of research exploring the role of creative expression in trauma recovery further, particularly in the context of interventions for male survivors. Studies focusing particularly on

what processes allow survivors to engage with mental health professionals at all, and also to broaden their understanding of such cultural pressures and how these forces may have contributed both to the earlier abuse and then to their being silenced will be very helpful in developing more effective means of helping these populations. Only further research will tell if these men were representative in using many methods of meaning making and if meaning making itself is as important in all survivors' recovery as it appeared to be for these men.

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