Author's response to reviews

Title: Patterns of Child Sexual Abuse in Religiously-affiliated and Non-religiously-affiliated Institutions: Results of the Liaison Office of the Independent Commissioner for Victims in Germany

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Cover letter (March 2014)

Child Sexual Abuse in Religiously Affiliated and Secular Institutions: A Retrospective Descriptive Analysis of Data Provided By Victims in a Government-Sponsored Reappraisal Program in Germany

Answer to reviewer 2: Kate Walsh

We really appreciate your effort and patience in reviewing our manuscript. We have addressed your concerns in this revision of the manuscript, as follows:

1. “The last paragraph of the introduction suggests that abuse in religiously affiliated institutions might be associated with worse outcomes. However, the only statements in the introduction that potentially support this hypotheses refer to studies of physical abuse (e.g., “A U.S study [27], found that extreme religiosity was found to raise the risk for child maltreatment, but there has not been enough research to be able to determine the extent of this factor”). Risk factors for physical and sexual abuse can be quite different. Are there any studies showing increased risk for sexual abuse in religiously affiliated institutions?”

There are two different aspects in your comment: First, you refer to the outcomes of sexual abuse. We have added more literature (see background, p. 8) to support the hypotheses that sexual abuse in a religiously affiliated institutions could be associated with worse outcomes.
Second, you are asking for studies that show an increased risk for sexual abuse (and not for child maltreatment) in religiously-affiliated institutions. To our knowledge, there are no studies so far that show a systematic increased risk for child sexual abuse in religiously-affiliated institutions compared to non-religiously-affiliated institutions. Our study is the first that compares child sexual abuse in religiously-affiliated and religiously non-affiliated institutions, our results show “that sexual abuse is not a problem specific to Roman Catholic settings or to religiously affiliated settings in general, but rather that the risk to children is increased in any institution, regardless of affiliation” (see p. 20). Of course we are although discussing the quality of our data and the need for further studies to test this hypothesis (“the method of data collection used in this study has provided valuable exploratory data that can serve as a starting point for building hypotheses.” (see p. 20)).

To address your comment we have cancelled the statement on p. 7 you refer to, because this could be misleading. Moreover, we have added the statement: “Although prevalence estimates of child sexual abuse in religiously-affiliated and religiously non-affiliated institutions are unknown, (…)” to introduce the explanation (p. 7) why special attention in Germany was paid to institutions that were religiously affiliated.

2. “On page 17, I would caution against using the term “representative” in the phrase “representative number of victims of institutional abuse” as the current study cannot be considered truly representative due to methodology (i.e., victims could call in to a hotline; this sample is only representative of individuals who were aware of and chose to call the hotline, etc.).”

We totally agree that we have to clarify that our sample is self-selected and not representative. This limitation is mentioned several times in our manuscript:
See p. 3/4 (abstract): “In 2010, the German government established a hotline that victims could contact anonymously to describe their experiences of sexual abuse.”; “The exploratory data arising from this study may serve as a starting point for building hypotheses, (…)”.

See p. 9/10 (methods): Explanation of collection of data

See p. 19: “Several important limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, as the individuals who provided data were self-selected, the sample may not have been representative of the overall population. Victims who made use of the reporting system may have been particularly motivated to do so, and it is possible that our data represent a sub-sample of severely traumatized individuals. Thus, we cannot definitively conclude from our data that the patterns of abuse we were told about did in fact commonly occur. (…) Second, apart from demographic data, information was not collected in any standardized way; rather, victims could simply share whatever was relevant to them. It is important to keep this aspect in mind when analyzing and interpreting the findings, because different amounts of information were obtained for different categories of data. (…) Third, there was no independent validation of the information provided.”

See p. 20: “Any hypothesis would need to be tested via representative sampling using standardized interviews or questionnaires.”

The phrase you commented on says that “many studies on child sexual abuse have failed to include a representative number of victims of institutional abuse”, but we do not say that we have a representative number of victims, we just say that our study represents “the largest sample of victims of child sexual abuse in institutions ever studied in Germany (see p. 17). To reduce risk of any misunderstanding, we have changed the term “representative” to
“appropriate”.