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THE IMPACT OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE ON MORAL DEVELOPMENT:  
AN APPLICATION OF MORAL FOUNDATIONS THEORY

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the effects of childhood sexual abuse on moral development using data from 9,113 Icelandic students between the ages of 16 and 19. While controlling for age, gender, and parent's education, this thesis compares students who were sexually abused prior to age 16 to those who were not on all five of the moral foundations, as described in Jonathan Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory: Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity. Results show that Loyalty, Authority, and Purity, the binding foundations, are all negatively affected by sexual abuse as a child, whereas Care and Fairness, the individualizing foundations, are not affected. Specifically, victims of sexual abuse exhibit lower scores on all three binding foundations, which may adversely affect their social cohesion in groups and reintegration into society in the aftermath of the trauma of sexual abuse.

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## Chapter 1

### Literature Review

Child sexual abuse has many negative psychological effects on victims, which makes it an especially important area for social science research. Previous research indicates that childhood sexual abuse can lead to increased suicide rates (Mullen et al. 1996), and increased likelihood of psychopathy, depression, anxiety, and fear (Beitchman et al. 1992). Additionally, “adverse childhood events,” which includes sexual abuse, are linked to measurable deficiencies in adolescent development and overall wellbeing in adulthood (Newcomb-Anjo, Barker, and Howard 2017). Victims of abuse are often clingy with peers and partners, but have difficulty building trust in relationships (Finkelhor and Browne 1985). Sexual abuse in childhood is also a risk factor for runaway tendencies and homelessness in adolescence (Whitbeck, Hoyt, and Ackley 1997). Other consequences include a higher likelihood of promiscuity and revictimization (Beitchman et al. 1991).

In Iceland, which is the focus of this study, child sexual abuse has proven to be a prevalent issue. Iceland has the most reported sexual crimes out of any Nordic country, and 27% of children in Iceland will be sexually abused by their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Additionally, more children in Iceland have witnessed sexual violence by the time they reach 16 years of age than in any other Nordic country (Hilden et al. 2004). Yet despite these alarming statistics, currently, no studies have examined the effect of victimization on the victim’s moral development. Further, there are few studies that examine the consequences of sexual abuse among those who reside in or grew up in Iceland (for an exception, see Gault-Sherman, Silver, and Sigfusdottir 2009). It is especially fitting to conduct this study among the Icelandic given the high rates of child sexual abuse in the population.

The purpose of this study is to assess whether moral development, as measured by the moral foundations featured in Jonathan Haidt’s Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt 2007; Haidt 2012), is affected by sexual abuse as a child. The sample consists of survey participants in the 2016 National Survey of Icelandic Youth, which is administered every 3 years to all youths age 16-19 in Iceland. In 2016, data were collected from 9,113 adolescents. Additionally, the 2016 survey instrument was amended to include measures of the moral foundations. The study will attempt to answer two research questions: (1) Are the moral foundation scores of 16-19 year olds who have been sexually abused as children different than those who were not abused? (2) If so, which specific moral foundations are affected by sexual abuse victimization?

Moral Foundations Theory is relatively new to the field of psychology and has received almost no attention from criminologists (but see Silver and Abell 2016; Silver and Silver 2017), so there is very limited criminological research available on this subject. From a criminological perspective, understanding the consequences of crime for victims is an important part of the overall study of crime. Indeed, to the best of my knowledge, this study is the first to explore the effects of sexual abuse on victims’ moral development using the moral foundations approach. This study, therefore, will add to the body of research on Moral Foundations Theory, as well as

to scientific understanding of the moral-psychological effects of child sexual abuse and its criminological implications for victims.

Before Jonathan Haidt introduced Moral Foundations Theory, the prevailing theory on moral development was Kohlberg's three stages of moral development (Haidt 2012). The first stage is the Preconventional stage, where the child knows cultural rules regarding good and bad but interprets them only in terms of punishments and rewards. Between ages 9 and 13, the child reaches the second stage, or Conventional stage, where the child recognizes his own family's expectations and attempts to conform to the social order using those expectations as a guide. The final stage is the Postconventional stage, reached around age 16, where the adolescent can differentiate between the moral values and principles that they hold as an individual and the morals and values of society as a whole (Kohlberg 1971; Selman 1971; Kohlberg and Hersh 1977). Kohlberg does not elaborate on moral development beyond adolescence, as his theories were developed to explain the initial development of morality, which typically proceeds through adolescence. Kohlberg did, however, state that the final stage of moral development does not necessarily end at adolescence and may continue into adulthood, but he did not make empirical studies of adult morality. Additionally, Kohlberg's theory emphasizes stages in a child's or adolescent's capacity for moral reasoning, but beyond basic notions of care and justice, does not elaborate on the different kinds of morals that people can develop; nor does it consider the possibility that moral cognitions may operate intuitively, that is, below the level of consciousness, rather than solely via conscious reasoning (Haidt 2012).

Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory fills this gap in the study of morality by identifying a universal set of five moral intuitions (called moral foundations) that cut across cultures, and that people may acquire in different intensities and combinations. These include: Care/Harm, Purity/Sanctity, Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Subversion, and Fairness/Reciprocity. Haidt used these foundations to explain why people in the U.S. hold different political views. He found that those who identify as politically conservative place equal emphasis on all five Moral Foundations, whereas those who identify as politically liberal tend to place more emphasis on the Care/Harm and Fairness/Reciprocity foundations. These moral foundations are believed to shape people's worldviews, and to inform their political views and ideologies (Haidt, Graham, and Joseph 2009). Beyond political views, the moral foundations also have been found to affect an individual's stance on climate change, environmental habits (Vainio and Mäkinen 2016), and punitive criminal justice sanctions (Silver and Silver 2017). Additionally, moral foundations have been shown to influence an individual's choices in video games (Joeckle, Bowman, and Dogruel 2012) and choices regarding donating to charity (Nilsson, Erlandsson, and Västfjäll 2016). However, there is currently no research that connects Moral Foundations Theory to sexual abuse victimization.

Previous literature suggests that a child's psychological and moral development is affected by sexual abuse. For example, research shows that children who were sexually abused struggle with low self-esteem, troubled peer relations, and increased aggression compared to non-victims (Downs 1993); and that children who were sexually abused by a priest report lower trust in God and religion (Rossetti 1995). Victims of abuse also are more likely to struggle with nightmares and exhibit lower levels of self-efficacy and below-average coping skills (Finkelhor and Browne 1985). Abuse victims also struggle with betrayal, which may correspond to the Loyalty foundation in Moral Foundations Theory; in the aftermath of the sexual abuse, children may come to realize that a person whom they trusted actually caused them harm (Finkelhor and Browne 1985).

Children who were sexually abused may also have difficulties with sexuality and sexual development. Victims sometimes engage in abnormal sexual activities as children, such as frequent masturbation and roleplaying games that involve sexual stimulation. In some cases, victims become sexually aggressive towards other children (Finkelhor and Browne 1985). As victims continue into adolescence and adulthood, they are often plagued by one of two extremes. They either seek out frequent sexual stimulation, even giving out sex in exchange for favors, gifts, or money. These victims continue to engage in unhealthy sexual behaviors, regardless of current abuse or unsafe circumstances. They view sex as something to be given in return for affection (Browne and Finkelhor 1986). Or, victims may choose to avoid sexual contact altogether, claiming that even in marriage, they do not want physical contact from a partner. They may also experience arousal and orgasm difficulties, and flashbacks to the abuse (Finkelhor and Browne 1985).

To add to our understanding of the consequences of childhood sexual abuse, this thesis will compare the moral foundations of individuals who were sexually abused as children to those of non-victims. The research will attempt to determine whether the moral foundations of sexual abuse victims are different than those who were not abused? And if so, which specific moral foundations are affected by sexual abuse victimization?

## Chapter 2

### Moral Foundations theory

Moral Foundations Theory was developed by Jonathan Haidt and colleagues to explain differences in political beliefs in society (Haidt 2012). The theory is based on the idea that people make moral judgements based on what they believe is “right” or “wrong,” and that their moral beliefs are usually formed subconsciously, rather than through systematic moral reasoning. These subconscious moral intuitions that form what individuals classify as “right” and “wrong” are categorized into five domains called moral foundations. These include Harm/Care, Fairness/Reciprocity, Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Subversion, and Purity/Degradation.

The Harm/Care foundation measures kindness, caring, and the desire to protect vulnerable groups. Violating this foundation includes harming another individual or group, or neglecting to care for an individual or group. The Fairness/Reciprocity foundation measures equality, justice, and trust. Violating this foundation includes unfair treatment of others, cheating, or taking advantage of another person. The Ingroup/Loyalty foundation measures the loyalty or bond an individual feels toward groups they belong to. These groups can include families, communities, or connections to nationalities and heritage. Violating this foundation includes betraying or leaving these groups, or pursuing selfish desires at the group’s expense. The Authority/Subversion foundation measures respect towards authority, whether formal (e.g., police) or informal (e.g., one’s parents). This foundation also measures commitment to traditions, social hierarchies, and societal norms. Violating this foundation involve disrespect or disobedience towards an established or informal societal authority. The Purity/Degradation foundation measures how an individual regards and upholds societal standards of purity, sanctity, and decency. Violating this foundation includes harming or altering the body, including tattoos or piercings, or practices considered impure by one’s social group.

Haidt and colleagues (2012) suggest that these foundations arose evolutionarily, as individuals attempted to balance the needs of their group with their own individual needs for survival. However, cultural norms came to dictate how individuals interpret each moral foundation within their social context. For example, a religious individual from the Midwestern United States might interpret the purity foundation differently than an atheist from the Northeastern United States. In this way, individuals develop their own scores on the moral foundation scale so that an individual might score higher (i.e., feel stronger about violating) some foundations and lower (i.e., feel less strong about violating) other foundations.

Haidt further analyzed the moral foundations by dividing them into two categories, which he called “individualizing” and “binding” (Haidt 2009). The “binding” foundations consist of Authority/Respect, Loyalty/Ingroup, and Purity/Sanctity, which together emphasize duty, dependence on society, and respect for cultural and religious traditions and practices. The “individualizing” foundations consist of Harm/Care and Fairness/Reciprocity, and together emphasize the protection and wellbeing of the individual. In general, individuals who score high on the binding foundations are more likely to take into account the needs and expectations of

society (or the social groups to which they belong) when making moral choices, whereas individuals who score high on the individualizing foundations are more likely to view the needs and desires of individuals as most important, even when those needs and desires conflict with what the society expects or demands.

While Moral Foundations theory was originally used to study political and religious preferences, it can also be used as a tool to study the moral development of individuals who differ in terms of key background characteristics, including sexual abuse. This is because the moral foundations measure people's current moral intuitions across a range of morally relevant domains. Therefore, treating the moral foundations as dependent variables in models that include childhood experiences enables an assessment of the effects of those childhood experiences on current moral intuitions. In other words, it enables an assessment of how a person's moral development was affected by having been sexually abused as a child.

## Chapter 3

### Hypothesis

Sexual abuse as a child is a traumatizing experience, often having many dramatic psychological consequences for victims (Finkelhor, 1984; Gault-Sherman, Silver, and Sigfusdottir 2009). And because abused children are still developing emotionally and psychologically (Golding, Pembrey, and Jones 2001), abuse can become a factor in their moral development, just as their upbringing, familial values, or peers might also influence their moral development. Some children are unable to understand that their sexual abuse was wrong at the time it occurs (Finkelhor 1979), which may lead them to develop a different set of values than children who were not abused. Because of this, I hypothesize that sexual abuse as a child will affect the victim's moral intuitions and beliefs. There is virtually no prior research focusing on the topic of moral development and its relation to childhood sexual abuse. Therefore, my hypotheses must be derived logically, using prior research on related topics as a guide when available.

With respect to the moral foundations introduced above, I believe sexual abuse will influence the Loyalty/Betrayal foundation, because sexual abusers are most often family members (Finkelhor and Browne 1985). Children tend to develop their sensitivity to this foundation first through family loyalties (Haidt and Joseph 2007). If the abuser, someone to whom the child feels an intense bond of loyalty, is also engaging in intimate, personal, sexual acts with the child, then it would logically follow that the child may develop a warped view of loyalty. However, based on previous literature, children who are sexually abused often end up feeling betrayed by their abuser, once they realize that the adult who they trusted actually caused them harm (Finkelhor and Browne 1985). Since this data set asks young adults age 16-19 if they were sexually abused before age 16, the respondents presumably understand (at the time of the survey) that they were abused. Thus, I hypothesize that this subsequent feeling of betrayal should lead to a lower score on the Loyalty/Betrayal foundation

Building on the likelihood that there is a feeling of betrayal towards the abuser, I also hypothesize that respondents who were sexually abused will score lower on the Authority/Subversion foundation. Victims who were abused and feel betrayed by their abuser may feel that authority is not worthy of respect. They may see their abuser as an authority figure who abused his or her power and position, and therefore develop a negative view of authority figures. Therefore, I hypothesize that victims of sexual abuse will score lower on the Authority/Subversion foundation.

Additionally, I believe the abuse will influence the Sanctity/Degradation foundation. This foundation, also referred to as the Purity foundation, is often associated with sexual behaviors. Haidt (2009) found that conservatives tend to score higher on this scale, which he suggested was related to their religious beliefs about sex. A child who is forced to engage in sexual acts at a young age may feel that sex is not a "big deal," or they may develop an aversion toward sexual intimacy in relationships as an adult (Browne and Finkelhor 1986). Either way, the child's idea

of what is pure and what is disgusting is likely to be altered. In addition, because some children who have been sexually abused become promiscuous (Beitchman 1992), I hypothesize that victims will score lower on the Purity/Degradation Foundation.

Furthermore, I hypothesize that childhood sexual abuse will influence the Care/Harm foundation, because children are vulnerable and require care as they develop into adults. Children obviously need a higher level of care, and if an abuser is using sex as a way to show they “love” or “care” for the child, then the abused child will have a different understanding of what it means to be loved and cared for than a non-abused child. In addition, the effect on this foundation may also depend on how the abuser presented the abuse. If the abuse was seen as a way to show love, or as a punishment for misbehavior, then it would stand to reason that this will affect the way a child experiences the moral foundation of Care/Harm. Thus, my hypothesis is that children who were sexually abused will be more attuned to issues of harm and victimization, and will thus score higher on the Care/Harm foundation.

Lastly, I hypothesize that childhood sexual abuse will also affect the Fairness/Reciprocity foundation. This foundation emphasizes justice and trust. Since victims had a traumatic experience early on in life, inflicted on them by another person, it stands to reason that they may have difficulty trusting people. A person they trusted, at a vulnerable stage in their life, violated that trust, which can lead to ambivalence about trusting other people in the future. Furthermore, they may view justice as an idealistic yet unrealistic concept. Because of this, I hypothesize that victims will score lower on the Fairness/Reciprocity foundation.

## Chapter 4

### Data and Methods

#### Sample

This study uses data from the 2016 National Survey of Icelandic Youth. The sampling frame is all full-time students in all 30 junior colleges in Iceland. The Icelandic school system is somewhat different from the US school system in that compulsory education ends in 10th grade and thereafter students chose to 1) work or look for work, 2) study a craft or trade (e.g. carpentry, masonry, plumbing, hairdressing, etc.), or 3) prepare for college and take student degree exams. The survey was conducted with all accessible and full-time students of both groups 2 and 3 in all 30 junior colleges in the country. The number of respondents was 10,779 and the final response rate was 70.6%. The final sample size for this study, after deleting cases with missing data, was 9,113. The survey was conducted in October and November 2016 by the Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis. This study was submitted for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at Penn State; however, the IRB determined that because the data were gathered elsewhere and do not contain identifying information, approval was not needed.

#### Measures

##### *Moral Foundations*

I used the 30-item moral foundations questionnaire shown in Appendix A to measure the moral foundations, which are the dependent variable in this study. For each moral foundation, respondents answered 6 questions. Three questions were answered on a scale of 1 through 6 (1=not at all relevant to 6=extremely relevant) and three questions were answered on a scale of 1 through 6 (1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree).

The moral foundation, "Harm," is constructed from six items. Examples of items are whether or not someone suffered emotionally, and whether or not it mattered that someone cared for the weak and vulnerable. (A complete list of items for each moral foundation scale is shown in Appendix A.) The alpha reliability score for Harm was .812.<sup>1</sup>

The moral foundation, "Fairness," is constructed from six items. Examples of items are whether or not it matters that one person is treated differently than another person, and whether or not it matters if someone acts unfairly. The alpha reliability score for Fairness was .805.

The moral foundation, "Loyalty," is constructed from six items. Example of items are whether or not it matters that someone acted out of love for his or her country, and whether or not it matters if someone betrayed their group. The alpha reliability score for Loyalty was .785.

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<sup>1</sup> Alpha reliability is a measure of the extent to which items "hang together" as a scale. Scores above 0.7 are considered good.

The moral foundation, “Authority,” is constructed from six items. Examples of items are whether or not someone failed to respect authority, and whether or not it matters if someone conformed to the traditions of society. The alpha reliability score for Authority was .716.

The moral foundation, “Purity,” is constructed from six items. Examples of items are whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency, and whether or not someone did something disgusting. The alpha reliability score for Purity was .746.

### *Childhood Sexual Abuse*

Childhood sexual abuse was measured by coding the respondent as “1” if he or she answered yes to any of the following questions: Has someone ever revealed or uncovered themselves to you in an improper way? Has someone ever kissed your genitals in an improper way? Has someone ever kissed you anywhere besides your genitals in an improper way? Has someone ever convinced you or forced you to touch their genitals? Has someone ever convinced you or forced you to have sexual intercourse? Respondents who answered no to all questions were coded as “0” (0=not sexually abused); otherwise they were coded as “1”. Childhood sexual abuse is the main independent variable of interest in this study.

### *Control Variables*

Age was coded as 1=born in 2002 through 8=born in 1995. Sex was coded as 1=male and 0=female. Parental education was calculated by combining the mean of mother and father education. Mother and Father education was coded as 1=parent completed less than junior college, 2=parent completed junior college, and 3=parent completed a university degree.

## Chapter 5

### Results

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Mean (S.E.)	Range
<b>Age</b>	4.38 <sup>a</sup>	1 - 8
<b>Sex</b>		
<b>Male</b>	49.8%	--
<b>Female</b>	50.2%	--
<b>Parental Education</b>		
<b>No Degree</b>	25.9%	--
<b>Junior College Degree</b>	41.9%	--
<b>College Degree</b>	32.2%	--
<b>Moral Foundations</b>		
<b>Care/Harm</b>	4.27	1 - 6
<b>Authority/Subversion</b>	3.37	1 - 6
<b>Loyalty/Betrayal</b>	4.09	1 - 6
<b>Purity/Degradation</b>	3.80	1 - 6
<b>Fairness/Reciprocity</b>	4.23	1 - 6
<b>Sexual Abuse Before Age 16</b>		
<b>Sexually Abused</b>	11.9%	--
<b>Not Sexually Abused</b>	88.1%	--

<sup>a</sup> 4.38 is representative of being between 18 and 19 years old.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the sample. The valid sample size for this study was n=9,331. Respondent ages ranged from 16 to 24, with the mean falling at 4.38, which is representative of the respondent being between 18 and 19 years old. Sex of the respondent was fairly equally distributed, with 49.8% of the population identifying as male and 50.2% identifying as female. The average parental education was 2.21, which is representative of (on average) at least one parent having completed a junior college degree. The mean moral foundation scores were at or above the scale midpoint (of 3), indicating that on average respondents rated themselves as “more moral” on the moral foundation items. Table 1 also

shows that 11.9% of respondents experienced some form of sexual abuse as a child, while 88.1% of respondents indicated that they were never sexually abused as children.

**Table 2: t-Tests**

	Sexually Abused	Not Sexually Abused	t-Test p-value
Care/Harm	4.41	4.25	.000
Authority/Subversion	3.24	3.39	.000
Loyalty/Betrayal	4.07	4.10	.374
Purity/Degradation	3.83	3.80	.348
Fairness/Reciprocity	3.39	4.21	.000

Table 2 shows a series of independent samples t-tests, comparing the means of each moral foundation for respondents who were sexually abused as children and those who were not. The results show a significant difference on the moral foundations of Harm ( $p=.000$ ), Authority ( $p=.000$ ), and Fairness ( $p=.000$ ) between those who have and have not been abused. Those who were sexually abused scored significantly lower on each of these moral foundations scales at the bivariate level. For the Loyalty and Purity foundations, there was not a significant difference in means between the two groups. While the bivariate associations shown in Table 2 are interesting, it's important to examine whether these associations hold after controlling for variables that could be related to either (or both) the independent variable (child sexual abuse) and the dependent variables (the moral foundations). For that we need to run a multivariate analysis, which is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Regression Model**

	<b>Model 1: Care/Harm</b>		<b>Model 2: Fairness/ Reciprocity</b>		<b>Model 3: Loyalty/Betrayal</b>		<b>Model 4: Authority/ Subversion</b>		<b>Model 5: Purity/ Degradation</b>	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
<b>Sexually Abused</b>	-.048	.033	.026	.032	-.125***	.032	-.176***	.032	-.096**	.032
<b>Age</b>	.069***	.008	.057***	.008	-.025***	.008	-.017*	.008	.024**	.008
<b>Male</b>	-.59***	.022	-.502***	.021	-.302***	.021	.012	.021	-.312***	.021
<b>Parental Education</b>	.149***	.015	.153***	.015	.08***	.015	-.038**	.014	.062***	.015
<b>Constant</b>	3.959***	.053	3.911***	.051	4.0***	.050	3.559***	.050	3.75***	.051

Table 3 shows the results of five regression models, each comparing the moral foundations of those who were sexually abused to those who were not sexually abused, while controlling for age, sex of the respondent, and parental education. Model 1 shows that while the Harm foundation was not affected by childhood sexual abuse, it was influenced by all of the control variables. That is, being older and having parents with a higher level of education were associated with higher scores on the harm foundation, meaning the respondent was more sensitive to the Harm foundation. Being male, conversely, was associated with lower scores on the Harm foundation. Similarly, in Model 2, the Fairness foundation was not affected by childhood sexual abuse, although it was influenced by all of the control variables. Being older and having parents with more education were associated with higher scores on the Harm foundation, while being male was associated with lower scores.

In Model 3, we see that the Loyalty foundation was strongly affected by childhood sexual abuse, meaning that the significant differences cannot be attributed to any of the control variables, with a beta of  $-.125$ . Respondents who were sexually abused as children scored lower on the Loyalty foundation. However, it should be noted that the control variables also had significant effects on the Loyalty foundation. Younger respondents and male respondents scored lower on the Loyalty foundation, while having a parent with a higher level of education was associated with higher scores. In Model 4, we see that the Authority foundation is affected most strongly by childhood sexual abuse, with a beta of  $-.176$ , almost double that of the Purity foundation. Authority was also influenced by age and parental education; being younger and having less parental education were associated with lower scores on the Authority foundation. Finally, in Model 5, we see that respondents who were sexually abused as children scored lower on the Purity foundation. We also see that being older and having a parent with a higher level of education were associated with higher scores on the Purity foundation, while being male was associated with lower scores.

Together, these results show that Authority, Loyalty, and Purity all have statistically significant associations with childhood sexual abuse. Respondents who were sexually abused scored lower on all three foundations, which is consistent with my hypotheses. Authority was the most strongly affected by sexual abuse, with a beta score of  $-.176$ , which was almost twice that of Purity. Loyalty was the second most strongly affected, with a beta score of  $-.125$ . Purity was the least affected, with a beta score of  $-.096$ . These results correspond to sexual abuse victims scoring lower on (i.e. exhibiting less sensitivity to) the binding moral foundations than those respondents who were not sexually abused.

It is important to note that the foundations that showed statistically significant associations in the bivariate analysis in Table 2 differ from the foundations that showed statistically significant associations in the multivariate regression in Table 3. In Table 2, the Harm, Authority, and Fairness foundations were significantly affected by childhood sexual abuse. Based on the results of the linear regression in Table 3, however, it can be seen that the significant relationships in the t-tests were spurious. When controlling for age, sex of the respondent, and parental education level, only the Loyalty, Authority, and Purity foundations are affected, which are the three binding foundations. These differences can best be understood by examining the correlation matrix provided in Appendix B. For example, even though Harm and Sexual Abuse had a correlation of  $.047$ , which was significant, they were also both significantly related to male sex and parent education, so that when respondent sex and parental education were controlled the association between sexual abuse and Harm was reduced and rendered non-significant. While Table 2 shows Fairness and Sexual Abuse were significantly related, the

Correlation Matrix shows that Fairness and Parental Education had a significant correlation of .086, and Sexual Abuse and Parental Education had a significant correlation of -.056. Thus, when respondent sex and parental education were controlled the association between sexual abuse and Fairness was reduced and rendered non-significant. In short, the bivariate correlations between the control variables and the independent and dependent variables caused the t-tests to have significant results that were spurious. With the control variables in the model, the data shows that the binding foundations (Loyalty, Authority, and Purity) are most affected, whereas the individualizing foundations (Harm and Fairness) are not. Overall, these results indicate the importance of including the control variables. Findings from this research will be elaborated on in the discussion section below.

## Chapter 6

### Discussion

The goal of this study was to determine whether there was a difference in moral development between adolescents who were sexually abused as children compared to those who were not sexually abused. This is important because Moral Foundations Theory is a relatively new theory in psychological research, and its implications regarding sexual abuse are unknown. Additionally, this study focuses on Iceland, which is important since Iceland has the highest rate of sexual abuse among all the Nordic countries (Hilden et al. 2004). Furthermore, findings from this study suggest important implications for treatment of sexual abuse survivors that may better help such individuals integrate back into society after a traumatic experience.

As there is very little prior literature about moral development using the Moral Foundations framework and no studies focusing on the effects of sexual abuse, the findings from this study yield a number of important contributions. The first, and perhaps the most relevant for future research, is that childhood sexual abuse does impact moral development. Results revealed that, even when controlling for other relationships between variables, there is a statistically significant relationship between the Loyalty, Authority, and Purity moral foundations and sexual abuse before age 16. Victims of sexual abuse scored lower than non-victims on all three of these (binding) moral foundations.

The hypothesis of this study was that sexual abuse as a child would affect the respondents' moral foundations, and that victims would score lower on four foundations (Purity, Loyalty, Fairness, and Authority), when compared to non-victims. I also hypothesized that victims would be more sensitive to the Care/Harm foundation, and thus score higher than non-victims. Based upon the findings, my hypotheses were partially supported, in that sexual abuse does affect moral development, as victims scored lower than non-victims on three of the five foundations. However, this research did not support my hypothesis that all foundations would be affected, as the Care/Harm and Fairness/Reciprocity foundations did not show any significant difference in the regression models.

The Loyalty foundation may have specifically been affected because, based on prior research, it is likely the abuser was an adult whom the child knew well (Summit 1983). While originally it may appear that the loyalty foundation is affected directly because of the attacker/abuser relationship, previous literature points to the fact that children may experience a "crisis of loyalty" when they must tell one trusted adult about another adult who is abusing them. The adult they tell may question or doubt the child, creating an environment where the child must defend their traumatic experience to an adult. The child may be viewed as attacking the credibility of the accused adult, and as a result, their ties with other adults whom they trusted may be weakened (Summit 1983).

The Authority foundation may have been affected for similar reasons to that of the Loyalty foundation. Oftentimes the offender is in a position of authority over the child (Finkelhor 1994), and thus the child may come to view the adult as misusing their authority

(Finkelhor 1990). These factors could lead to the child to have a skeptical view of authority, or to lose respect for authority figures because they experienced the misuse of adult authority as a child.

Lastly, the Purity foundation may be affected because sexual contact is an intimate act that young children are not mature enough to process. Additionally, prior research has shown that many sexual abuse victims are at a higher risk of promiscuity in adolescence and adulthood. Victims often describe themselves as promiscuous and sometimes engage in promiscuous acts in exchange for affection or attention (Browne and Finkelhor 1986). Additionally, boys tend to exhibit more homosexual behaviors, which often carries a stigma among peers (Finkelhor 1990). Research also shows that sexual values or guidelines established in childhood and early adolescence predict how adults will make decisions about sexual acts (Victor, Miles, and Vaisey 2015). If, as a result of sexual abuse, adolescents feel desensitized to sex, or the abuse affected their values regarding bodily sanctity, it may affect how they make sexual decisions later in life. These differences would likely correspond to a lower score on the Purity foundation, as found in this research.

It is worth noting that the three moral foundations affected by childhood sexual abuse, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity, are together categorized as binding foundations. Haidt (2012) describes the binding functions as what bonds individuals to groups, helps them function in society, and develop a sense of responsibility towards the group as a whole. Without strong development in the binding foundations, victims may live most of their adult lives feeling isolated from or mistrustful of the groups they belong to, which can include peers, family, and society as a whole. This feeling of isolation can lead to a decrease in quality of life and well-being, a higher rate of mortality (Steptoe et al. 2013), and an increased likelihood of adolescent obesity (Goodman and Whitaker 2002) and poor mental health (Thoits 1983). Additionally, weak social ties with a group or family increases the likelihood of violent victimization (Schreck, Wright, and Miller 2002; Halpern 2001). Sexual abuse, and the subsequent loss of social bonds, may also lead to runaway tendencies and higher chances of homelessness in adolescence (Whitbeck et al. 1997).

Furthermore, the findings that child sexual abuse victims may have difficulties connecting to groups could have important implications for treatment of victims. Currently, most treatment for victims of child sexual abuse focuses on housing and medical care. It is common for the child to be removed from their living situation, as the abuser is most likely someone close to the child, and put into foster care, a group home, or a psychiatric institution. Additionally, there will usually be financial compensation for any medical attention the victim needs (Dubowitz 2017). As far as mental health care, it is common for victims to undergo therapy or treatment aimed at preventing PTSD and depression (Murphy et al. 2017). Research has shown that the most effective treatment is attending cognitive behavioral therapy (Putnam 2003). While cognitive behavioral therapy is effective in helping a victim develop personal coping strategies, it may not be the best way to help a victim reintegrate into a group or society.

Based on the finding reported here that childhood sexual abuse is inversely associated with the binding foundations, perhaps treatments should be expanded to include group therapy sessions, or treatments that focus on rebuilding trust in society, or even the victim's sense of belonging, at a time when they may feel they do not belong anywhere. It is rare that therapy or treatment for child sexual abuse includes any sort of inclusion or exercises to examine trust in groups, or even attempt to mend bonds with society, family, peers, or other groups that may have been broken as a result of the abuse. Exercises, therapy, and interactions that allow a victim to

work with larger groups and feel as though they are part of a group or society will possibly allow them to repair the bonds they feel are broken to society and heal from their traumatic abuse.

The goal of this study was to expand upon Moral Foundations theory and determine whether child sexual abuse affects moral development. The results of this study indicate that this is a valuable approach to studying sexual abuse and may have implications for treatment of victims. Furthermore, there are several factors identified in this study that will need further research. First, future research should attempt to replicate this study using non-Icelandic samples. Researchers could also focus on the effect of childhood sexual abuse in adults' moral foundations in addition to those of adolescents. A broader topic sparked by the results of this study includes the application of Moral Foundations Theory to other facets of crime and victimization, not just childhood sexual abuse. Researchers could focus on sexual assault, violent crimes, or drug crimes by comparing the moral foundation scores of offenders and non-offenders. While this study added to our understanding of a relatively understudied topic, our understanding is far from complete and would benefit from continued research.

## Appendix A

### Moral Foundations Questionnaire

For each MF, Part 1 items (1-3) measured with response categories 1=does not matter to 6=All important and Part 2 items (4-6) measured with response categories 1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree

- MF Harm: (alpha .812)
  - Average score of six items. Ranges 1-6.
    - EMOTIONAL - Whether or not someone suffered emotionally
    - WEAK - Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable
    - CRUEL - Whether or not someone was cruel
    - COMPASSION - Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.
    - ANIMAL - One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal.
    - MURDER - It can never be right to kill a human being.
- MF Fairness: (alpha .805)
  - Average score of six items. Ranges 1-6.
    - TREATED DIFFERENTLY- Whether or not some people were treated differently than others
    - TREATED UNFAIRLY - Whether or not someone acted unfairly
    - RIGHTS - Whether or not someone was denied his or her rights
    - FAIR GOVERNMENT - When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly.
    - JUSTICE – Justice is the most important requirement for a society.
    - INHERITANCE - I think it's morally wrong that rich children inherit a lot of money while poor children inherit nothing.
- MF Ingroup: (alpha .785)
  - Average score of six items. Ranges 1-6.
    - LOVECOUNTRY - Whether or not someone's action showed love for his or her country
    - BETRAY - Whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group
    - LOYALTY - Whether or not someone showed a lack of loyalty
    - HISTORY - I am proud of my country's history.
    - FAMILY - People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong.
    - TEAM - It is more important to be a team player than to express oneself.
- MF Authority: (alpha .716)
  - Average score of six items. Ranges 1-6.
    - RESPECT - Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority
    - TRADITION - Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society

- CHAOS - Whether or not an action caused chaos or disorder
- CHILDREN'S RESPECT - Respect for authority is something all children need to learn.
- GENDER ROLES - Men and women each have different roles to play in society.
- SOLDIER OBEDIENCE - If I were a soldier and disagreed with my commanding officer's orders, I would obey anyway because that is my duty.
- MF Purity: (alpha .746)
  - Average score of six items. Ranges 1-6.
    - DECENCY - Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency
    - DISGUST - Whether or not someone did something disgusting
    - GOD - Whether or not someone acted in a way that God would approve of
    - DISGUSTING BUT UNHARMED - People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed.
    - UNNATURAL - I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural.
    - CHASTITY - Chastity is an important and valuable virtue.
- MF Individualizing (alpha .901)
  - Average of MFQ\_HARM\_AVG and MFQ\_FAIRNESS
- MF Binding (alpha .901)
  - Average of MFQ\_INGROUP\_AVG, MFQ\_AUTHORITY\_AVG, and MFQ\_PURITY\_AVG
- Punitiveness (alpha .812)
  - Average of 10 items. Ranges 1-10
    - "On a scale of 0-10, where 0 is strong objections and 10 are highly correlated, the degree of unwillingness or favor are the following proposals?"
      - Punishments are too weak
      - Those who kill should go to life imprisonment
      - Captors should do physical labor
      - Prisoners should not have access to television and computers.
      - It should be tough for the breakers.
      - Those who commit crimes should receive punishment regardless of age
- Self-Control (alpha .762)
  - Average score for participants that had at least 10 valid responses of the 13 items. Ranges 1-5
    - "Please mark your answer in the categories below, where 1 = applies to me very well and 5 = does not apply to me at all." Items with an asterisk (\*) were reverse coded.
      - I am good at resisting temptations\*
      - I find it hard to let go of bad habits
      - I am lazy
      - I say inappropriate things

- I do things that are bad for me if they are fun
- I reject things that are bad for me\*
- I wish I had more self-control
- People say I possess iron discipline
- Enjoyment and fun sometimes keep me away from completing tasks
- I find it hard to concentrate
- I can work systematically on long-term goals\*
- Sometimes I can't stop myself in doing something, even though I know it is wrong
- I often make decisions without weighing all pros and cons
- Delinquency (alpha .758)
  - Average score of 6 items. Ranges 1-7
    - “How often (if ever) you have done the following in the past 12 months?” (1=never 2=1 time 3=2-3 times 4=6-9 times 5=10-13 times 6=14-17 times 7=18 times or more)
      - Stolen something that was worth less than 5000 [about \$50].
        - [Most of the offenses were minor theft]
      - Stolen something that was worth more than 5000[about \$50].
      - Use violence to rob
      - Break into buildings or cars to steal something
      - Damaged or destroyed items that do not belong to you
      - Other offenses
- Depression (alpha .916)
  - Average of 10 items. Ranges 1-4
    - “How often did you experience the following discomfort or discomfort last week? Mark ONE box in each section” (1=never 2=rarely 3=sometimes 4=often)
      - You were sad or had little interest in doing things
      - You had little appetite
      - You felt lonely
      - You cried easily or wanted to cry
      - You have difficulty sleeping or staying asleep
      - You were depressed or sad
      - You were not excited to do any thing
      - You thought you were slow or have little energy
      - You felt the future seemed hopeless
      - You thought about suicide
- Anger (alpha .829)
  - Average of 5 items. Ranges 1-4.
    - How often did you experience the following discomfort or discomfort during the past 30 days? (1=never 2=rarely 3=sometime 4=often)
      - It was easy to annoy you or irritate
      - You got outbursts of anger you could not control
      - You wanted to break or smash things
      - You encountered an argument

- You screamed or threw things
- Child sexual abuse
  - 1=Answered that any of the following happened, against your will, before age 16.
    - Someone uncovered himself to you in improper way?
    - Someone kissed at you elsewhere than on genitals, in an improper manner?
    - Did anyone kiss on your genitals?
    - Someone convinced you, forced or forced to touch their genitals?
    - Someone convinced you, forced or forced to have intercourse or sexual intercourse?
  - 0= did not experience sexual abuse before age 16
- Suicide
  - 1=no thoughts/attempt
  - 2=ever seriously considered committing suicide or told anyone that was considering suicide
  - 3=ever attempted suicide
- Self-harm
  - 1=no thoughts/attempts
  - 2=ever considered harming oneself
  - 3=ever injured yourself
- Mother and father education
  - Average of both parents education
    - 1=completed primary education or less
    - 2=Started upper secondary education; High school, high school or industrial school
    - 3=Upper secondary school; High school, high school or industrial school
    - 4=Completed university studies but did not end
    - 5=Completed a university degree
- Family income- “How well financially do you think your family is compared to other families in Iceland?”
  - 1=much worse
  - 2=a lot worse
  - 3=slightly worse
  - 4=equal
  - 5=slightly better
  - 6=a lot better
  - 7=much better
- Family structure (series of dummy variables)
  - 1=lives with both parent
  - 2=lives with single parent
  - 3=lives with step-parent
  - 4=lives on own, with friends, with relatives, or other
- Importance of education- “How important do you think school education is?”
  - 1=not at all important
  - 2= not particularly important
  - 3=rather important

- 4=very important
- Mental health- “How good is your mental health?”
  - 1=bad
  - 2=fair
  - 3=good
  - 4=very good
- Physical health- “How good is your physical health?”
  - 1=bad
  - 2=fair
  - 3=good
  - 4=very good
- Delinquent peers (alpha .817)
  - Average of two items. Ranges 1-5
    - How often did the following happen during the last 12 months? 1=never 2=one time 3=two times 4=3-4 times 5=5 or more times
    - You had a group to hurt a person
    - You were in a group that originated the attack on another group
- Peer attachment (alpha .898)
  - Average of 5 items. Ranges 1-4
    - “How easy or difficult would you like to get the following from your friends” where 1=very difficult 2=rather difficult 3=rather easy 4=very easy
      - Caring and warmth
      - Discuss personal matters
      - Recommendations regarding the course
      - Recommendations regarding other work
      - Assistance in various works
- Parental attachment (alpha .897)
  - Average of 5 items. Ranges 1-4
    - “How easy or difficult would you like to get the following from your parents” where 1=very difficult 2=rather difficult 3=rather easy 4=very easy
      - Caring and warmth
      - Discuss personal matters
      - Recommendations regarding the course
      - Recommendations regarding other work
      - Assistance in various works
- Parental monitoring (alpha .758)
  - Average of 4 items where 4 = applies to me very well and 1 = does not apply to me at all
    - My parents follow whom I am with during the evenings
    - My parents keep track of where I am in the evening
    - My parents know my friends/friends
    - My parents know my friends/my friend's parents

- Negative Life Events
  - Count of 21 items that happened in last year. Ranges 0-21
    - You were in a serious accident
    - You have serious illnesses
    - Your parents divorce or leave cohabitation
    - You seriously argued with your parents
    - You witness the serious argument of your parents
    - You witness physical abuse in the home where the adult was involved
    - You suffer from physical violence in the home where the adult was involved
    - Your parents or siblings died
    - Your friend died
    - You stopped with your boyfriend/girlfriend
    - You have been rejected by friends or friends
    - You made a divorce with your friend or friend
    - You received an exceptionally bad grade
    - Your father or mother lost his job
    - A father or mother had to be in jail for a break
    - You have been dismissed from the classroom or sent to the principal
    - You have been taken out of school
    - You moved to another district/neighborhood
    - You moved to another municipality
    - You suffer from sexual abuse/abuse on the part an individual who is not an adult
    - You suffer from sexual abuse/abuse on the part adult person

**Appendix B**  
**Correlation Matrix**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Sexual Abuse	--								
2. Harm	.047***	--							
3. Fairness	.056***	.856***	--						
4. Loyalty	-.009	.78***	.772***	--					
5. Authority	.05***	.548***	.545***	.707***	--				
6. Purity	.009	.742***	.715***	.767***	.740***	--			
7. Male	-.209***	-.281***	-.250***	-.155***	-.002	-.165***	--		
8. Age	-.006	.072***	.065***	.030**	-.013	.029**	.037***	--	
9. Parental Education	-.056***	.076***	.086***	.049***	-.024*	.034**	.046***	-.050***	--

p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

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- Designing research surveys looking at crime and morality with Dr. Eric Silver, PhD

### **LEADERSHIP**

**Cadet Captain, Army ROTC Nittany Lion Battalion** *Aug 2014 - Present*

- Plan and execute battalion level military training as a Battalion Assistant S3
- Execute Military Drill, Ceremony, and Tactics for 10 hours per week, including a month in Fort Knox, KY
- Received Secret Level Security Clearance in June 2016

**President and PR Executive, Penn State Justice Association** *Oct 2014 - Present*

- Planned and executed club trips Hershey State Police Academy & SCI-Benner
- Coordinated over 20 events and speakers, including speakers from the FBI and NCIS
- Organize logistics with Penn State Office of Student Affairs and Office of Risk Management

**Presidential Leadership Academy, Penn State** *March 2015 - Present*

- Selected with 30 other students from Penn State to complete class with Penn State President Eric Barron
- Worked with 5 students to complete a 60-page policy paper on the CEO Wage Gap
- Attended 3 trips with Academy instructors and students at locations across the United States

### **INVOLVEMENT**

- Communications Executive, A-7 Organization, Penn State Dance Marathon  
*Aug 2014 - Present*
- Liberal Arts Envoy, Liaison for the College of the Liberal Arts *November 2016 – Present*
- Volunteer at Centre Peace, rehabilitative program for Centre County Inmates *September 2016 – Present*
- Volunteer at Centre County PAWS  
*January 2017 – Present*