



Beyond Survival: an Autoethnographic Understanding of Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

Diyanah Nisa Halimatussa'diah

Universitas Gadjah Mada

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.53697/iso.v5i2.2186>

*Correspondence: Diyanah Nisa

Halimatussa'diah

Email:

diyanahnisahalimatussadiyah@mail.ugm.ac.id

Received: 23-10-2025

Accepted: 23-11-2025

Published: 23-12-2025



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract: This article explores the complex and multifaceted journey of adult survivors of child sexual abuse using an ethnographic methods to provide an alternate and intimate perspective regarding sexual abuse and tells about emotional, psychological, and cultural implications of the abuse. The research combined personal narratives and academic analysis of the author's experience and other respondents with shared experience. The study reflects on the long-term effects of trauma, including the process of healing, journey to meaning making and finding closure. The research highlights the importance of self-reflection, storytelling, and examines the societal challenges and stigmas that survivors face. The research aimed to highlight the significant difference in disclosing personal trauma experiences as a form of healing. The method uses autoethnography through archive analysis written by adult survivors of child sexual abuse as means for collective healing and peer support. By offering an autoethnographic lens, the study aim to fosters deeper understanding of how adult survivors of child sexual abuse navigate their lives beyond survival, ultimately seeking to reclaim their identities and reframe their narratives which used to be dominated by men's perspectives. The result shows that the people involved in this collective ethnography have increased their self-acceptance through having disclosure of their experiences.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Child Sexual Abuse, Adult Survivors, Story Telling, Healing

Introduction

Sexual Abuse rate in Indonesia is particularly high. According to *Catatan Tahunan Komnas Perempuan* in 2023, there are 401.975 reported case about sexual abuse (Perempuan, 2024). For as long as I walk on this world, I always met people and how they, at one point, shared their story of experiencing sexual abuse in their early day or in their adulting phases. It is like, every woman and people who were assigned female at birth I know are victims. We carried the experience of abuse into adulthood (Tenner & Murphy, 2015). We were walking witnesses, who were not able to voice the experience loudly in public as we felt ashamed, fearful, guilty, and unable to hug our own selves in this male-centered society. Some of us have not found closure of the heartbreaking experience that damages our livelihood and how we view our future.

I resonated with Robin M. Bylorn views on 'Being at Home with Myself', she stated that being home is being *comfortable in my skin, proud of where I come from, easy with the way/s I am when I navigate back and forth from home* (Bylorn, 2016). Us, adult victim of child sexual

abuse are hard to be at home, feel at home with our own selves. One of my interviewee said that she felt disgusted by how her own body reacted to the sexual abuse and how she felt isolated from her own body after that. We, as a child, had not known that 'that' was a normal body reaction and was differ from how we truly felt, thus, we felt foreign with our own body and needed years to finally 'feel comfortable in our skin'.

Regarding this bodily experiences, Altmaier in her book *Push Back The Dark: Accompanying Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* stated that one of the struggle for adult survivors of child sexual abuse is meaning making after the trauma as they need to rebuild meaning of their selves. Altmaier stated that people need to encourage the victim to use narrative discourse for reconstructing meaning. The tools may come awry as the victims might face several dilemmas whether to continue or to change and these people also experience sameness or differences between each experience (Altmaier, 2017, 84).

The stigma around victim of sexual abuse is one of the biggest reason we can not voice out our problem, as we might get blamed and also experiencing second abuse. Victims of sexual abuse in Indonesia considered a tainted woman, unable to maintain the dignity of women and their families (Rukman et al., 2023, 447). Moreover, child victims did not know that the experiences they encountered were sexual abuse. It is proven as the mainstreaming and socializing of forms of sexual abuse started at late 1998 where Komnas Perempuan first established and it have not evenly distributed. From my own experience where I live in a rather small town, never have I ever gotten sexual education and information about sexual and reproductive rights in that town.

There is no definitive theory about survival, yet, Miriam Webster translated the word survive as to remain alive or in existence : live on or to continue to function or prosper (*SURVIVE Definition & Meaning*, 2025). Thus, in this essay, I am going to deeper my analysis of the ways survivors trying to *stay alive and existing* within their history of child sexual abuse. The project is held to state their personal stories which include specific anonymized examples from their writing to deepen the analysis and make it more relatable and underscore the emotional toll of these experiences. This project emphasizes several authors' experiences and brought up the understanding of *collective healing* and finding home within themselves. The difference of the author's background also being highlighted in order to contribute the high rates of child sexual abuse and the silence surrounding adult survivor of child sexual abuse.

Regarding survival, Ernest Sosa from Brown University (Ernest, 1990, 297-298) stated that Survival constitutes:

1. One is not a soul, one's existence does not consist in the existence of any soul, and one's perdurance does not consist in the perdurance of any soul
2. One is not any body or collection of particles, one's existence does not consist in the existence of any body or collection of particles, and one's perdurance does not consist in the perdurance of any body or collection of particles.

This theory highlighted the difference of people experiences in order to *exist*, even when they have shared similar experiences such as child sexual abuse.

My research will focus on awareness-building about adult victims of child sexual of child sexual abuse, including those who are revictimized or labeled as perpetrators. later labeled as perpetrators, with the end result of building a peer support group for them. support groups for them. This is important, in order to regulate trauma so as to prevent future sexual violence, whether due to revictimization or desire to harm others with sexual violence. to harm others with sexual violence.

Methodology

The methods used in this research is autoethnography, a research that combines autobiography and ethnography. Ethnography root from Ancient Greek word *Ethnos* means people, folk, or nation, and *Graphia* means to write, record or represent. The word ethnography itself is a term to refer to *describing or reporting the ways human beings live* (Hackett et al, 2016). Ethnography is a multimethod research which includes observation, participation, archival analysis, interviewing and et cetera (Wax, 1971). In terms of researching women and women's experiences, ethnography has a special role in rebuilding the social sciences and producing new concepts concerning women which were previously dominated by men's perspectives (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992).

Combined with autobiography, this method uses the experience of the researcher as the primary source through archive analysis (diaries, notes, and more), and self history. Autoethnography as a method that aims to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experiences (Ellis, 2004) (Stacy, 2005) (Ellis et al, 2011). Using this method, I researched my own story of experiencing sexual abuse in early days by archive analyzing originated from my own notes, writings, and discussion with mental health professionals. From the archive analyzing, I analyze my experience in understanding my cultural experiences. In order to support the analysis, I then performed interviews and asked people assigned as female at birth with shared experiences (child sexual abuse) to write their stories and analyzed their story respective to their cultural experience as comparison.

Result and Discussion

There are many challenges in writing about the trauma we experienced as a child, thus, i asked a collaboration from kompaKS, an organization that focuses on eliminating sexual abuse and helping victims and survivors of sexual abuse, to help us 'get through' within this projects. Talking about the process, one of the participants quoted "*setelah pasang surut hidup dan kesehatan mentalku, aku akhirnya bisa menyelesaikan ini*", which, i thought sums up our writing progress as we need to remember the haunting experiences. Most of us seeked help from a psychologist affiliated with kompaKS throughout the journey, which is confidential.

The writing itself came in many forms, one wrote in a storytelling style, a child-like writing which we usually read in children's books. One of them, writing it by reflecting

through the laws and cultural conditions in their life. The most interesting one is the one that was written in a third-person narrative in which they embodied themselves Greek Goddesses, addressing the similarities between then-her as Circe and the now-her as Eris. The transformation from Circe to Eris was highlighted in the story, telling about her being stronger and stronger in fighting against, which she quoted, as Helios and Perse and the patriarchal culture itself. One of them firstly wrote it in English because they felt that writing in the mother tongue felt more emotional and then translating it to Indonesian language with the help of their partner.

Though there are differences in sexual abuse we experienced, we were getting to bond as we navigate through this writing journey together, started at the beginning of March with no limitations ending. We asked each other about our progress -healing through writing- the difficulties, the flowing, the urge to write more and more about our experiences and closure from sexual abuse, extending deadlines because of the breakdown we felt halfway until we compiled the experiences in the compilation story last September.

As for the different forms of experiences, the coping mechanism also varies. The experience led many of us to be, for some, a very different person from the child-us. As coping mechanisms, one of them getting more masculine with a buzz-cut and masculine clothing, one tattooed the word 'survivor' on their body, one of them getting the most horrible thing out of us -got erased from the 'holy-grail' *Kartu Keluarga*- started to behave bolder and thrive alone in different island then they born. For me, myself, I became, a bit like the other person, naming myself with masculine one, got an undercut, wearing masculine clothing yet still loving make ups.

With that many 'shifting' in our lives, we tried to make a safe space by telling our people, the adult survivors of child sexual abuse, which might still be in closet and haven't found closure, through this compilation story, that there are no 'standard to survive and find closure' and that we have different surviving story that deserved to be told or kept untold as long as we found that closure.

Discussion

In this article, I will emphasize the meaning of surviving a writing journey, journey to self discovery and finding closure to move on from the experience. I use writing stories of me and fellow friends that have shared experiences as me and signify the experience of the assigned female at birth as means to find meaning and the closure we needed. As stated by Tara DaPra, searching for meaning in specific stories allows us access to the bigger, universal search for shared meaning (DaPra, 2013). Not only did writing improve emotional and physical health, it was also a way for people to voice out their own story, not through any interruptions as the dictions, way of writing may differ if it was written by someone else, as a form of empowerment. I emphasize the story as a journey to find meaning-making. Writing as tools to discover our own self-worth and telling a story using first person perspectives. I intentionally did not force the writers to follow certain plotting and only ignite their creatives by asking questions. The metaphors, dictions and more were left as it

is to show the distinct experiences that these people went through to find their own meaning after the abuse.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through reading survivor's writing, we are able to reinforce that the only one who is able to write about minority experiences best is the one who experienced it themselves, a minority experience written by others would feel like an appropriation. It is also to show that each abuse had various effects in the life of the survivors. The most extreme experience was the one who was removed from the family certificate and banned from using the family surname. They were forced to move to different islands and hustled alone since their beginning of adulthood. Ann Harris quoting Winterson said, *I had nothing and I was nothing. And I thought that if I understood myself as a story I might do better, because if I am the story I can change the story* (Harris, 2017, 24). The statement showed us the power of writing our own story, to express that *history* can be *herstory* and is not only written by the winner, yet, by the real author of the story.

References

- Altmaier, E. M. (2017). *Push Back the Dark: Companioning Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*. Cascade Books. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26372178>
- Alyce, S. (2025). Trust, entrusting and the role of trustworthiness for adult survivors of child sexual abuse. *Journal of Mental Health*, 34(3), 263-272, ISSN 0963-8237, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2024.2390366>
- Bylorn, R. M. (2016). On Being at Home With Myself. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 9(1), 44-58. 10.1525/irqr.2016.9.1.44
- DaPra, T. (2013, Spring). Writing Memoir and Writing for Therapy: An Inquiry on the Functions of Reflection. *Creative Nonfiction Foundation*, 48, 60-64. https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.ugm.ac.id/stable/26374668?searchText=&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dstory%2Btelling%2Bas%2Ba%2Bform%2Bof%2Bhealing%26so%3Drel&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&searchKey=&refreqid=fastly-default%3A4bc
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. AltaMira Press.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, 36(4), 273-290.
- Ernest, S. (1990). Surviving Matters. *Noûs*, 24(2), 297-332. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.ugm.ac.id/10.2307/2215530>
- Guter, M. (2025). The Meaning-Making of Adult Sexual Assault Among Men: An Exploratory Qualitative Study of the Perspectives of Survivors and Therapists. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, ISSN 0886-2605, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605251320999>
- Hackett, P. M. W., Schwarzenbach, J. B., & Jurgens, U. M. (2016). *Ethnography* (1st ed.). verlag barbara burdich.

- Harris, A. (2017, Spring). An Adoptee Autoethnographic Femifesta. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 10(1), 24-28.
- Lev-Wiesel, R. (2024). Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse Draw and Describe Their Experiences of Dissociation. *Violence Against Women*, 30(10), 2655-2673, ISSN 1077-8012, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012231155172>
- Perempuan, K. (2024, March 7). LEMBAR FAKTA Catatan Tahunan Komnas Perempuan Tahun 2023 "Momentum Perubahan: Peluang Penguatan Sistem Penyikapan di Tengah Pe. Komnas Perempuan. Retrieved September 26, 2024, from <https://komnasperempuan.go.id/download-file/1085>
- Reinharz, S., & Davidman, L. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. Oxford University Press.
- Rukman, Huriani, Y., & Shamsu, L. S. b. H. (2023, September). Stigma terhadap Perempuan Korban Kekerasan Seksua. *Jurnal Iman dan Spiritualitas*, 3(3), 447-454.
- Schwartz, L.F. (2024). Adverse Childhood Experiences, Resilience, and Cardiovascular Disease in Adult Survivors of Childhood Cancer: A Report from the Childhood Cancer Survivor Study. *Cancer Epidemiology Biomarkers and Prevention*, 33(8), 1132-1136, ISSN 1055-9965, <https://doi.org/10.1158/1055-9965.EPI-24-0249>
- Stacy, J. H. (2005). Autoethnography: Making the personal. In *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 763-791). Sage.
- SURVIVE Definition & Meaning*. (2025, July 31). Merriam-Webster. Retrieved August 9, 2025, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/survive>
- Tenner, D., & Murphy, S. B. (2015). Adult Disclosure of Child Sexual Abuse: A Literature Review. *TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, & ABUSE*, 16(4), 391-400. 0.1177/1524838014537906
- Wax, R. (1971). *Doing Fieldwork: Warnings and Advice*. Chicago University Press.