

Shame Guilt and Self-Esteem of Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a physical act, but its negative ramifications are mostly psychological. As a result, it is a substantial risk factor for psychopathology development at various phases of life, including childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The present study aimed at studying the shame guilt and self-esteem of adult-child sexual abuse survivors. A sample of 100 (50 male & 50 female) participants with urban domicile was collected and was matched with the rest who had been victims of sexual abuse before age 18. The shame and guilt among the participants were assessed using the state shame and guilt scale and the self-esteem was assessed using Rosenberg's self-esteem scale. The result revealed that there was no significant difference among male and female adult child sexual abuse survivors on shame, guilt and self-esteem. While there was a significant positive correlation between shame and guilt and a moderate negative correlation between self-esteem shame and guilt.

Keywords: *Child sexual abuse, Shame, Guilt, Self-esteem.*

Sexual abuse of children and adolescents is a global challenge that affects all races, tribes, and genders, and current perceptions date back to the 1970s (Akin-Odanye 2018; Conte, 1994). It is considered to be the most common form of abuse recommended by Childline, in recent years and is most commonly reported by adults. It represents all forms of sexual harassment and assault on children and adolescents (Pereda, 2009), as a vulnerable group of society. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) as “*the involvement of a child in sexual activity he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent or that violates the laws or social taboos of society.*”

Different types of sexual offences are defined by the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 in India, which considers any sexual interaction with a child under the age of 18 to be illegal. (Ministry of Law and Justice; 2012) CSA encompasses a variety of sexual acts such as fondling, urging a kid to touch or be touched sexually, intercourse, exhibitionism, including a child in prostitution or pornography, or online child luring by cyber-predators. It is quite challenging to conduct research on this group of CSA victims because of how delicate and forbidden the subject is. It is influenced by sociocultural

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norms and frequently goes undetected due to a major culture of privacy, a fear of indignity, and a desire to avoid social embarrassment (Karande, Tyagi, 2021).

In India, child abuse is a widespread issue that frequently has an immediate harmful impact on children and carries the risk of many long-term issues (Deb 2006, 2009; Deb and Mukherjee 2009; Kacker and Kumar 2008; Priyabadini 2007). Child sexual abuse (CSA) has been linked to a variety of mental health disorders, including but not limited to anxiety, depression, anger, cognitive distortions, posttraumatic stress, dissociation, identity disturbance, affect dysregulation, interpersonal issues, substance abuse, self-mutilation, bulimia, unsafe or dysfunctional relationships (Cicchetti and Toth 2006; Foster 2011; Goodman et al. 2010 Briere and Lanktree 2008; Deb and Mukherjee 2009, 2011; Goodyear-Brown 2011). Hence, the experience of CSA can have a profound influence on a child's functioning (Deb and Mukherjee 2009; Goldfinch 2009; Tomlinson 2008; Priyabadini 2007). Guilt, humiliation, and self-blame are common feelings felt by survivors. Survivors of abuse have been demonstrated to bear personal responsibility for the abuse. When a trusted adult sexually abuses a child, it may be difficult for the child to see the perpetrator in a negative light, leaving them unable to see what happened as not their fault. Survivors frequently blame themselves and absorb unfavourable self-perceptions. Survivors are more likely to engage in self-destructive behaviour's and have suicidal thoughts than those who have not been abused.

Shame is a potentially debilitating CSA consequence that psychologists define as a severe and painful emotional experience arising from a judgment of oneself as defective or fundamentally faulty (DeYoung, 2015). An inherent part of shame is the need to hide or shield the 'bad self' from exposure, which is described as largely a 'wordless state' (Herman, 2011, p. 263). (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007, p. 349). Shame brought on by CSA has the potential to be immensely disempowering, upsetting emotionally, and possibly harmful to one's sense of identity and place in the social and relational world. Shame has been suggested as an internalized emotion that may be experienced in response to childhood sexual abuse and hence linked to adult revictimization. It is a feeling of self-disgust that leaves one feeling vulnerable and flawed. When one is in social situations, it is usually activated. Internalized shame causes people to become more socially isolated.

Nathanson (2001) proposed that shame emerges early in childhood as a result of parental failures. As a result, early childhood experiences of incest and sexual abuse may result in the formation of an internalized shame state. Playter's (2003) study backed up this theory, finding that women who had experienced moderate to severe degrees of sexual abuse had high levels of internalized shame. This strong sense of stigmatization, according to Finkelhor and Browne, may lead survivors to engage in actions that reinforce their low self-worth.

Guilt is felt psychologically when there is a gap between what a person believes is proper, such as the ethically correct thing to do, and their following behaviors if they fall short of the former. Individuals who have been subjected to sexual abuse frequently develop the conviction that they are to blame for the assault, leading to feelings of guilt as well as acceptance of blame. When children experience sexual abuse, they often blame themselves for their abuse. This is especially common when the sexual predator was loved and trusted by the child such as family members clergy, and teachers. The child finds it difficult to see their abusers in a negative light because they held them in such high regard. As a result, the youngster believes they deserved and enabled the abuse, and they hold these feelings for years. On top of self-blame, this causes feelings of guilt and humiliation.

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Self-esteem is one of mankind's most fundamental needs, and it is one of the most important factors in achieving one's goals in life. In line with APA, the extent to which one's self-attributes concepts and characteristics are seen favourably is known as self-esteem. Building self-esteem and self-worth remain a crucial task during a child's development years guilt and shame of child abuse don't build self-esteem or self-worth. It causes damage especially later in life. Adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse struggle with setting healthy boundaries in their friendship and relationships, making them more prone to be involved with an abusive or controlling partner. Because of their low self-image and self-worth as a result of sexual assault, they persist in these harmful relationships.

Self-esteem is a key psychological factor for bringing wholeness, not only to the individual but also to those around him or her, according to studies (Henriques & Shivakumara, 2015; Nigussie, 2014). This means that teenage sexual abuse may hurt their self-esteem and, as a result, their ability to function in other areas of life. This is backed by studies that reveal that sexually attacked kids have significantly lower self-esteem than their classmates who have not been molested (Foster & Hagedorn, 2014; Lamoureux et al., 2012; Stern et al., 1995). Some researchers have linked this to cognitive distortions in adolescents' self-perceptions, such as those mentioned earlier, e.g. self-guilt, self-blame, and so on (Reese-Weber & Smith, 2011).

Research and the conditions around the globe have pointed out that Child Sexual Abuse is not a rare phenomenon but there are very few studies which discuss the psychological issues and see it as a long-term and not a short-term issue. The literature on child sexual abuse has a major focus on female victims than victims. However, in past few years, various researchers focused on male victims too. But yet there is a dearth of research on the male and female victims of sexual abuse experience internal and external psychological and behavioral factors. Almost all CSA cases have some psychological problems with depression, and low self-esteem, being the most common. So here in this study, we will try to study shame, guilt and self-esteem among adult child sexual abuse survivors (both male and female).

METHODOLOGY

Aim:

To study shame guilt and self-esteem among adult survivors of child sexual abuse.

Objectives:

- To assess the shame guilt and self-esteem of adult survivors of child sexual abuse.
- To study the relationship between shame-guilt and self-esteem of adult survivors of child sexual abuse.
- To assess gender differences in Shame-guilt and self-esteem of adult-child sexual abuse survivors.

Hypothesis

- There will not be a significant relationship between shame guilt and self-esteem among adult survivors of child sexual abuse.
- There will not be a significant difference in Shame-Guilt among the adult male and female survivors of child sexual abuse.
- There will not be a significant difference in self-esteem among adult male and female survivors of child sexual abuse.

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Sample

The sample size of the study was 100 participants (50 males and 50 females), between the ages of 18 to 30 years, with urban domicile and at least been through one childhood sexual abuse experience before 18 years of age.

Tools used

The State Shame and Guilt Scale (SSGS)

It was developed by Marschall, Sanftner, & Tangney in 1994. The scale has a 10-item measure assessing state shame and guilt—that is, the feeling of shame and guilt that someone is experiencing while completing the measure. Items are responded to on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not feeling this way at all) to 5 (feeling this way very strongly). Five items each measure shame, guilt, and pride, with higher scores indicating more experience of that effect. The SSGS has shown good psychometric properties.

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSS):

The RSS is the most frequently used instrument to measure self-esteem. It consists of 10 items with a total score ranging from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 40. Items respond on a Likert scale by checking one of the four options: “*strongly disagree*,” “*disagree*,” “*agree*,” and “*strongly agree*.”

Research design

The present study was quantitative, with a non-experimental research design.

Procedure

For this study, the sample was collected from various university students through forms after taking their consent for the study. The sample was around 100 including 50 males and 50 females. First, the basic demographic details were collected from the sample. After this, the sample was screened and was given another questionnaire to be filled which assessed their level of self-esteem shame and guilt regarding their abuse.

Statistical Analysis

Data were entered in an excel spreadsheet and double-checked for errors. Statistical analysis was done through SPSS 16, a t-test was used for analyzing the gender difference, and the correlation for analyzing the relationship between shame-guilt and self-esteem.

Ethical Consideration

Informed consent was obtained from all the participants before the study. It was ensured that no harm was caused by any questions/items that were provided to the participants. Confidentiality was maintained for all the participants in the study. All participants were provided with a right to withdraw from the study at any given point in time.

RESULTS

The data was examined using SPSS20.0(Statistical Package for Social Sciences). State shame and guilt scale and Rosenberg self-esteem scale were compared for the two sexes using an independent sample t-test. Partial correlation was utilized to examine the relationship between the variables. $P < 0.05$ were regarded as statistically significant for all statistical tests.

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Table:1 Shame, Guilt and Self-esteem among Male and Female adults

	MALE (N=50)		FEMALE (N=50)		t	P-value
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation		
Shame	17.82	2.238	17.30	3.005	0.981	0.329
Guilt	18.82	2.464	17.62	3.142	2.125	0.036*
Self-esteem	9.66	3.280	10.48	3.196	-1.266	0.208

P value is significant at the 0.05 level(2-tailed)

An independent t-test was conducted to determine if a difference existed between shame, guilt and self-esteem test scores of males and females. Results indicate that there was no statistically significant difference in the mean shame score of males (N=50, M=17.82, SD=2.238) and females (N=50, M=17.30, SD=3.005) $t(98)=0.981$, $p=0.329$ and in the mean self-esteem scores of males (N=50, M=9.66, SD=3.280) and females (N=50, M=10.48, SD=3.196) $t(98)=-1.26$, $p=0.208$. But there was a statistically significant difference in the mean guilt scores of males (N=50, M=18.82, SD=2.464) and females (N=50, M=17.62, SD=3.142) $t(98) =2.125$, $p=0.036$ Inferring that the null hypothesis cannot be ruled out.

Table 2: Relationship between Shame, Guilt, and Self-esteem of the total participants (N=100)

	SHAME	GUILT	SELF-ESTEEM
SHAME	-	0.858*	-0.496*
GUILT	0.858*	-	-0.413*
SELF-ESTEEM	-0.496*	-0.413*	-

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level(2-tailed)

Table 2 shows a partial correlation as used to evaluate the relationship between shame, guilt and self-esteem among the adult-child sexual abuse survivors while controlling the gender(N=100). There was significant evidence to reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there was a positive strong correlation between shame (M=17.56, SD=2.64) and guilt(M=18.22, SD=2.873)while controlling the gender (M=1.50, SD=0.50), $r(97)=0.858$, $p<0.05$. And there was a moderate negative relation between self-esteem (M=10.07, SD=3.24) and shame $r(97)=-0.496$, $p<0.05$ and self-esteem and guilt $r(97)=-0.413$, $p<0.05$. The results of zero-order correlation yielded that there was a strong negative correlation between self-esteem and shame $r(98)=-0.502$, $p<0.05$ and self-esteem and guilt $r(98)=-0.427$, $p<0.05$. And there was a strong positive correlation between shame and guilt $r(98) =0.856$, $p <0.05$. Thus; indicating that the controlling gender for shame, guilt and self-esteem had little influence on the strength of the relationship between the three variables.

DISCUSSION

Sexual abuse is considered to be the most common form of abuse in recent years. It is very important to understand that internalized feelings of shame, guilt and self-blame mediate the relationship between the severity of the abusive event and current psychological distress in adult childhood. The present study aimed to assess the shame, guilt and self-esteem among adult survivors of child sexual abuse and also study the relationship among them.

Shame Guilt and Self-esteem in males and females

The data suggest that there was no significant difference found among the males and the females in shame and self-esteem. But there was a statistically significant difference found

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among the males and females on guilt. Thus indicating a failure to reject the null hypothesis i.e. there will not be any significant difference in shame guilt and self-esteem among the male and female adult survivors of child sexual abuse. Our findings are consistent with the study in the literature (Andrea-Fong, Sara Jaffee,2010). Andrea and Sara reported that there were not any differences in the internalizing and externalizing or trauma symptoms showcased by both male and female survivors of child sexual abuse. Although the various other studies do contradict our findings. They have shown that males and females respond differently to sexual abuse (Bauserman & Rind, 1997; Friedrich et al,1986), many of their studies identified sex differences in specific symptoms like nightmares and somatic complaints (Darves-Bornoz et al.,1998), whereas the present study examined the internalized factors such as shame, guilt and self-esteem experienced by the male and female survivors of child sexual abuse. Thus, there may be sex differences in the association between sexual abuse and specific psychopathology symptoms but there are not many differences among the internalized factors on the global level among the gender. The methodological difference may also be the reason that might account for some discrepant findings. There were various case studies, where male victims of sexual abuse were found to have low self-esteem as opposed to non-victims (Myers, 1989, Hunter,1990). The girls too tend to display more damaged self-esteem and self-blame, not only because they tend to ruminate but also because in many cases, they are often held responsible for the abuse by suggesting that girls seduced and encouraged the preparators (Kohn 1987) with shame and guilt feelings as a consequence.

Relationship between shame guilt and self-esteem

There was a significant relationship between shame, guilt and self-esteem among male and female adult child sexual abuse survivors. Our findings on partial correlation revealed that there was a strong positive correlation between shame and guilt and a moderate negative correlation between self-esteem shame and guilt. This indicates that if the shame increases then the self-esteem decreases and similarly when guilt increases self-esteem decreases. Our findings are consistent with the other studies in this area (Dorahy&Clearwater,2012; Jonas et al.2011). Dorahy & Clearwater;2012 in their study in Africa found that low self-esteem is the cause of the feelings of guilt and shame among sexually abused children as the preparators manipulated the children to believe that it was their fault for the abuse. A study by Oslen in 2008 discovered that sexually abused children made assumptions about themselves and their environment during their childhood based on experiences importantly indicating the connection between physical and psychological consequences and outcomes respectively (Young;2011). In addition to the above study, there was a study conducted by Ford&Courtois in 2009 which suggested that children been through a series of sexual abuse during their childhood had showcased a variety of victimization which placed the child and the adolescent at a higher risk of developing various internalizing issues like low self-esteem, shame, self-blame, guilt and externalizing issues faced in interpersonal relationships, attention, cognition, emotional regulation.

CONCLUSION

The overall findings reveal that shame, guilt and self-esteem do have their effects among the adult survivors of child sexual in the long run and are experienced at some stage of their life after the incident, with many other additional issues like anxiety, depression, stress, expressing of their emotions, stigma on reveling the incident and a lot more.

Limitations of the study

Like any other study, this study is also not devoid of some limitations. These are:

- 1) The sample size was limited; hence generalization of the result is difficult.

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- 2) The sample was restricted to young adults, and thus cannot be generalized to other age groups.
- 3) The sample was taken from educated adults from the urban area, therefore, the results cannot be generalized to those who are from less educated and rural areas.

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Conflict of Interest

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