

Research Paper

Psychosocial Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Needs and Extent of Conflict Among Family Members Undergoing Legal Processes

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ABSTRACT

Child sexual abuse is very prevalent and especially in a country where it often goes unreported. In the part of the population that does report it and proceed legally there are many complications that lead to psychological distress. The sample size chosen for the study was 80 participants and they were assessed on parental emotional reactions, needs and strengths and extent of conflict. The analysis was done using correlation, T test and One way Anova. The difference in means between the psychological variables and demographic factors such as years of legal proceedings and birth order were assessed. Results showed a significant relationship between Psychosocial impact – Parental Emotional reactions and conflict behaviours. There was also a high level of negative reactions among those families where there was abuse among siblings of second birth order, and higher level of perceived unmet needs among families where the legal proceedings were taking place for 2-3 years. The study implications are that it can be used for creating an evidence based therapeutic model.

Keywords: *child sexual abuse, legal proceedings, conflict, needs*

Childhood sexual abuse is a prevalent problem. The American Medical Association (2003) defines childhood sexual abuse as engagement of a child in sexual activities for which the child is unprepared developmentally and cannot give consent. For both men and women, a history of childhood sexual abuse is associated with a variety of psychological, social and behaviour related disturbances (Center for disease control and prevention 2007). Usually forms of sexual abuse include exposure to pornography, fondling, masturbation, penetration or attempted penetration. Perpetrators are most likely to be from within the social circle of the parents. (Tricket, 2011).

Involvement with legal system and lack of support especially from mothers has been found to have a detrimental effect on the functioning. Studies have found high levels of distress, PTSD and depression in caregivers of sexually abused children. Hospitalisations due to suicide attempts in mothers of the children (De Jong 1988 and Goodwin 1981). The high level of distress in caregivers lead to difficulties in giving the adequate support to the victims and interventions are starting to aim less at difficulties faced by caregivers. (Corcoran 2004). Caregivers feel huge amount of distress in initial stages following

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disclosure including guilt about their parenting and concerns about procedures for legal processes.

Many caregivers lose support networks, may be economical difficulties especially if their partner is the perpetrator of the abuse. (Carter 1999). Some parents may have been victims of child sexual abuse and face troubles with their own past (Davies et al 2001). Reducing secondary traumatic stress in families can help them focus on the emotional reaction of their children.

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Literature shows that there is a lot of difference between family dynamics of abused and non-abused people. The family dynamics involves lot of hostility, moral and religious differences and differences in emotional expressions and parental patterns. Cohesion in the family is lesser in families of survivors. (Felser, 2014).

In families of intrafamilial abuse there was low levels of cohesion, low levels of interest in personal growth of the family members and involvement in other activities. If there are issues in dynamics of the family it could be preceding factor for abuse. Compared to extra familial abuse there was low level of cohesion in those with intrafamilial abuse. (Tener, 2021).

Family members usually must decide whom to support. The gender of the victim is also important when considering perceived support from the family. If the father is the abuser but also the primary wage earner reporting him could be seen as dangerous. If the victim is related to the abuser the support is not given and family denying the abuse may make it more difficult for the child. (Felser, 2014).

Literature also shows there is a great level of distress to the sibling of the abuse as they are also at risk, they should shift schools and residences as well. There is also distress among the siblings of the abused child. The siblings felt that the dynamics had changed between the sibling and them sometimes them becoming a caregiver. There was relationship strain and intense emotional reactions from the non-abused sibling. (Warrington, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Sample

We collected a sample of 80 family members of children who had undergone sexual abuse including parents, siblings and grandparents were chosen from Institute of Mental Health and Hibiscus Foundation for social welfare. The study included a sample of families whose children were sexually abused and families of children within ages of 10 years to 17 years

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11 months. In the study we excluded family members with severe psychiatric illnesses and children with intellectual and pervasive developmental disorders.

In the sample we included family members who were between 15 and 70 years. There were 7 members who were between 15 and 34 years (10%), 65 participants (81%) were between ages 35 and 54 and 8 participants were above age 55 (8%).

We chose families who were undergoing legal processes were chosen where 39 (49%) were going through legal processes below 2 years duration and those who were going through legal processes for 2 years 33 participants 43 % and remaining 7% were going through the process for 3 years. The sample was chosen using a convenient sampling technique.

Instrument

The tools we used were questionnaires and 4 questionnaires were used to measure the psychological variables pertaining to the study. The **Conflict Behaviour Questionnaire** was designed to measure the difference between distressed and non-distressed families. Higher scores indicate negative perceptions which are indicative of higher rates of conflicts. The CBQ has a concurrent validity of 0.96. **Family Needs and Strengths scale** measures the strengths and needs of the family's undergoing trauma and it is administered to the caregivers. It gives a profile of the needs and strengths and cut offs. It has a reliability of 0.78. **Parental Emotional Reaction Questionnaire** is designed to assess stressful parental emotional reactions to the sexual abuse of their children. There are 15 items and the test has adequate test-rest reliability of 0.82. There was also adequate discriminant validity of 0.8.

Design

The design is a quantitative study which is cross sectional in nature aiming to study the psychosocial impact of child sexual abuse on needs and extent of conflict among families of survivors undergoing legal processes. The study objectives are to assess level of psychological and social stress in the family following the incident, to study the needs and strengths, level of conflict among families, exploring the relationship between the needs and strengths of family with psychological and social stress and assessing the impact of various demographic variables such as years of legal proceedings, birth order on psychosocial impact, needs and extent of conflict. We gave the participants the questionnaires and their responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and one way analysis of variance.

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RESULTS

Table 1

Socio Demographic details of the participants

| | n | % |
|----------------------------------|----|------|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 41 | 51.3 |
| Male | 39 | 48.8 |
| Age in Years | | |
| 15-34 years | 8 | 10.0 |
| 35- 54 years | 65 | 81.3 |
| Above 55 years | 7 | 8.8 |
| Education | | |
| School level | 42 | 52.5 |
| College Level | 36 | 45.0 |
| Professional level | 2 | 2.5 |
| Birth Order | | |
| Single Child | 21 | 26.3 |
| First Child | 37 | 46.3 |
| Second Child | 22 | 27.5 |
| Employment Status | | |
| Employed | 50 | 62.5 |
| Unemployed | 30 | 37.5 |
| Socio Economic | | |
| Low | 61 | 76.3 |
| Middle | 19 | 23.8 |
| Years of legal proceeding | | |
| 1 year | 33 | 41.3 |
| 1.5 years | 4 | 5.0 |
| 1.75 years | 2 | 2.5 |
| 2 years | 33 | 41.3 |
| 2.5 years | 2 | 2.5 |
| 3 years | 6 | 7.5 |

Note. N=80

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Table 1 describes the demographic variables of the study and its frequency of occurrence. The percentage of males in the study is 51% and females 48%. In this sample out of 51% males 1% were brothers and out of the females 2% were grandmothers. Majority of the population is of school education at 52% and, college level is 45% and professional level is at 2%. In the birth order majority of the survivors are first born followed by second children then single children, Majority of the family members fall between the age range of 35-54 years. 76% of the population falls in the low socio-economic status. 47% which is majority have undergone 1-2 years of legal proceedings.

Table 2

Correlation between psychosocial impact, needs and extent of conflict

| | r | p |
|---------------|-------|--------|
| PERQ AND FANS | 0.052 | 0.610 |
| PERQ AND CBQ | 0.206 | 0.040* |

*Note. p < .05. **

The above table on correlation shows there is no significant correlation between psychosocial impact of child sexual abuse and the needs with $r=0.052$ and $p>0.05$. Spearman rho was used to analyse the same.

The correlation between Psychosocial impact and extent of conflict was significant with $r=0.206$ and $p<0.05$. The analysis shows greater the Psychosocial impact greater the associated extent of conflict. There is a statistically significant positive relationship between the two variables.

Table 3

Comparison of Psychosocial impact -parental emotional reactions, needs and extent of conflict based on years of legal proceedings

| | Years of legal proceedings | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | t value | p value |
|------|----------------------------|----|---------|----------------|---------|---------|
| PERQ | <2 years | 39 | 68.051 | 5.296 | 3.141* | 0.002 |
| | 2 to 3 years | 41 | 70.854 | 2.092 | | |
| FANS | <2 years | 39 | 225.872 | 7.968 | 2.232* | 0.023 |
| | 2 to 3 years | 41 | 221.537 | 9.312 | | |
| CBQ | <2 years | 39 | 17.718 | 1.376 | 0.034 | 0.973 |
| | 2 to 3 years | 41 | 17.732 | 2.168 | | |

**p < .05*

A paired sample t test was used to find the significant differences between different years of legal proceedings and the psychological variables. We found that the psychosocial impact of

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child sexual abuse was significantly greater in the 2 to 3 years group with a p value of 0.023 significant at $p < 0.05$. This indicates that the parental emotional reactions and psychosocial impact was greater in the group that was undergoing legal proceedings for 2-3 years.

Table 4

Comparison of Psychosocial Impact, Needs and extent of conflict among different birth orders of the survivors

| | | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | F value | p value |
|------|------|----|----------|----------------|---------|---------|
| PERQ | .00 | 21 | 68.4762 | 4.71825 | 1.194 | 0.309 |
| | 1.00 | 37 | 69.4865 | 3.87027 | | |
| | 2.00 | 22 | 70.4545 | 4.20575 | | |
| FANS | .00 | 21 | 220.6190 | 7.15176 | 3.984 | 0.023* |
| | 1.00 | 37 | 222.9189 | 9.60144 | | |
| | 2.00 | 22 | 227.7727 | 7.95183 | | |
| CBQ | .00 | 21 | 17.9524 | 2.72903 | 0.512 | 0.602 |
| | 1.00 | 37 | 17.7838 | 1.43634 | | |
| | 2.00 | 22 | 17.4091 | 1.25960 | | |

Note. * $p < .05$.

Upon analysis using One way Analysis of Variance, it was found that the level of perception of needs being unmet significantly differed among three types of birth orders and a post hoc analysis was done.

Table 5

Post hoc analysis of birth order

| Birth order | | Mean Difference (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig. | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|-------------|------|-----------------------|------------|------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| .00 | 1.00 | -2.29987 | 2.34441 | .989 | -8.0376 | 3.4378 |
| | 2.00 | -7.15368* | 2.61784 | .023 | -13.5606 | -.7468 |
| 1.00 | .00 | 2.29987 | 2.34441 | .989 | -3.4378 | 8.0376 |
| | 2.00 | -4.85381 | 2.31017 | .117 | -10.5077 | .8001 |

Post hoc analysis using Bonferroni shows that the level of needs being unmet was higher in the group whose second children were sexually abused.

DISCUSSION

The result in **Table 1** shows majority of the population had a negative reaction to the incident and it is in line with previous research. When the abuse was disclosed to the parents by the child, they reported feeling anxious, guilt about their capabilities as a parent and some reported feeling angry at their child as to why they did not report it earlier and was angry at the perpetrator. When the perpetrator was known to the family the parents reported feeling confused and refused to believe that it had happened to them. In families where the abusing parent was the sole earner of the family This is consistent with previous research that states that parents tend to show reactions such as anxiety depression and guilt (Olafson 2010).

Table 2 discuss the relationship between the variables and it was found upon analysis that there was a positive relationship between Psychosocial impact of child sexual abuse and extent of conflict. This is consistent with previous research where it was found that mother's life time experience of interpersonal violence was positively related to mother and adolescent conflict post disclosure of child sexual abuse (Jourilles, 2021).

Table 3 and 4 discusses the differences between years of legal proceedings and impact on the psychological variables and needs for birth orders and siblings. The results show that those with higher years of legal proceedings ranging from 2-3 years had a higher psychosocial impact.

The child sometimes show signs of psychiatric conditions and this makes the family wonder why they are not over the incident and why they keep thinking about it despite having the perpetrator out of their lives. This is consistent with previous research. They needed better resources to cope with the event. The needs identified were emotional and behavioural support. (Toledo., 2016). It is also being noted that two main needs identified were being believed and receiving emotional support from the family. (Stiller., 2016).

Table 5 discusses the post hoc analysis on the differences in needs being unmet in the birth order of the sibling that was abused. It shows that there is a significant higher perception of needs being unmet in families where the second child was abused. The reason stated by parents was that the second child being the youngest in the family was seen as smaller and more vulnerable to the world. Previous studies talk about sibling perspectives and family strain following disclosure of child sexual abuse and it was observed that many siblings felt that they had to take a caretaker role for their sibling and act as a balance between family members and some felt it had broken down the family unit. (Murray., 2020).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The event of sexual abuse to a child is a very traumatic to the family and when there is increased negative reactions, increased level of conflict and unmet needs for adaptive function increases impact on the members of the family. Legal proceedings and uncertainties cause strain and tension in the family. Previous research shows there is increase in conflict post the incident and there is a lot of stigmas around disclosure. The stressors of legal proceedings and possible re victimisation for the survivor. A study was done with 80 participants who were families of children who have undergone child sexual abuse and are currently undergoing legal processes. Questionnaires such as Family Assessment of needs and strengths, Conflict behaviour questionnaire and Parental emotional reaction questionnaire were administered. The demographic variables used for the analysis were birth order of the child and years of legal proceedings. Using these variables Pearson Correlation,

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Linear Regression analysis, T- test and One way Anova were completed. The findings show that, there is a significant positive correlation between psychosocial impact of child sexual abuse and conflict behaviours in the family and a regression analysis shows a causal relationship between them. Upon further analysis using the demographics it shows that the level of unmet needs is higher in families having undergone the process for 2-3 years. The needs being unmet was also perceived as higher when the second child was abused.

Implications

This study shows that child sexual abuse has a significant impact on the family and they perceived needs being unmet and needed more resources to cope with the situation in a better way. A detailed therapeutic plan and model can be created using common unmet needs as being specified in the study and an integrated trauma focused approach can be further used.

Limitations

- A cross-sectional study was done and longitudinal research to analyse long term impact could be carried out.
- The number of people in the sample who were from a professional background was relatively lesser and only people from low and middle social economic background could be assessed.

Future suggestions

- A study using upper socio-economic status can be carried out
- Comparison between groups of other types of trauma can be carried out to pin point specific needs and types of conflict pertaining to different trauma.

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Conflict of Interest

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