

Research Paper

The Role of Disclosure and Personal History in The Psychological Wellbeing and Empathy of Aspiring Psychologists

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ABSTRACT

Each individual has been touched or sometimes configured by the interventions of the universe. The frustrations and disparity that comes with facing the uncertainty that life throws at us are known to us all. But when the same is faced by a scholar in the psychology field, does that make them 'not normal,' or does that give them a unique understanding of human emotions? The question arises: should the psychology students be encouraged to process their own traumas before entering the field? A 'therapist for a therapist' is not merely a suggestion but a much-needed thing to understand that all individuals, especially psychology students and practitioners, need a safe space. The research aims to address how Childhood or Adolescent Sexual Abuse (CASA) in psychology students affects their self-acceptance, personal growth, and overall empathy. A target population consisting of psychology students currently enrolled in Bachelors' and Masters', programs was studied using the tools: Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ) and Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being (RWB). Comparing the 54 participants with a history of CASA to 42 participants without the history, and the subset of participants with a history of CASA, comparing participants with disclosed trauma to participants with undisclosed trauma, the data resulted in higher empathy in participants with the history of CASA and lower well-being, self-acceptance, and personal growth in the subset of participants with undisclosed trauma. The research appears to make a case for role of trauma in more empathy and psychological relief and personal development that can stem from disclosing hidden traumas.

Keywords: *Empathy, Psychology, Student, Trauma, Sexual Abuse*

This life is not merely about happiness and ravishing bounty but is also characterized by suffering and pain. The distress and life adversities are experienced by many if not all, which brings about a curiosity in us to understand the implications of these experiences and the need to help others overcome the same. Likewise, many students and practicing professionals entering the field of psychology are seen having a natural curiosity to understand human behavior and emotions and the complexities of it and to help others in emotional distress, but a push of motivation also comes from the need to understand and process their own past emotional experiences. Therefore, the interest in the field of psychology is often seen as driven by personal motivations, and the decision to pursue a

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career in the same forms a much more complex web of personal as well as professional motivations. The practitioners with past life adversities and triumphs have a unique sense of empathy for others with various traumas, and that has significantly been seen impacting their therapeutic approaches and interventions. One of the most profound adversities faced by an individual is a history of Childhood or Adolescent Sexual Abuse (CASA) prior to age 18. The history of CASA for individuals in the field of psychology not only influences their understanding of others with a similar trauma but also their autonomy, emotional resonance and approach to therapy. If the trauma remains undisclosed its impact on the overall psychological well-being could be seen. Some important questions regarding the psychological landscape of these future practitioners should be raised when interaction between such personal history and professional development in the mental health field is seen.

This study aims to investigate these dynamics by simply examining two critical psychological constructs: psychological well-being (RWB), which encompasses facets such as personal growth, self-acceptance, and autonomy, and empathy, measured through emotional resonance and concern for others.

Significance/Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is primarily to explore how a history of CASA in an individual, including the act of disclosing this trauma to immediate family (parents or siblings) prior to entering the psychology field, could impact student's empathy and overall psychological well-being. By understanding the association between adverse childhood experiences and the decision to enter the mental health profession, educational institutions could provide better support to their students by focusing on the students' healing journey first and foremost. A significant value is held by this research for the academic and clinical training of psychology professionals as it highlights the potential and necessity for current psychology curriculums to not only on the academic and clinical skills but also on student welfare. Furthermore, it also underscores the immense psychological relief and personal development that can be achieved from the disclosure of hidden trauma.

Statement of the Problem

The hidden burdens carried out by psychology students are often overlooked by traditional curriculum. While psychological resilience and empathy are foundational traits for effective therapists, but when they themselves have undisclosed traumas, it affects their individual growth as well as make them more susceptible to the sufferings of others. Students who have survived CASA may enter the profession to understand their trauma and to address mental health stigma or systemic violence but carrying this trauma can complicate and hinder their developmental trajectory especially when undisclosed. This study aims to address the main problem of the underlying implications of how when the childhood traumas (CASA) are disclosed or undisclosed in psychology students it could influence their internal well-being and empathetic capacities. It seeks to look at the facets of psychological well-being like self-acceptance and personal growth being hampered by keeping the trauma hidden and the trauma acting as a catalyst for elevated empathy.

Research Statements/Hypothesis

The study attempted to address the problem statement to understand the relationship between CASA history and family disclosure among female psychology students. The study tested and formulated the following hypotheses:

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- **H1:** Students with a history of CASA experience will demonstrate higher empathy than those without trauma.
- **H2:** Students with a history of CASA experience will demonstrate lower self-acceptance than those without trauma.
- **H3:** Within the CASA group, disclosing trauma to immediate family members predicts better overall psychological well-being.
- **H4:** Within the CASA group, Family disclosure specifically drives higher personal growth compared to keeping the trauma hidden.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of the Literature

The literature surrounding mental health professionals and students explores the complex motivations driving the individuals towards this field. The motivation could include both the desire to help others and their own need to process their past emotional experiences. Stressors like occupational and academic burden experienced by psychology trainees, and its relation to well-being is a significant area of focus. The research indicated that nearly 25% of trainees reported symptoms of anxiety that ranged from moderate to severe, and 20% reported moderate to severe symptoms of depression or suicidal intent during graduate school. The stressors interfering with the optimal functioning of graduate students is reported to be over 70%. These general stressors have been extensively documented by the existing body of knowledge, but it is essential to understand the effect of specific adverse childhood experiences, particularly Childhood or Adolescent Sexual Abuse (CASA), could further complicate the development of future therapists.

Theoretical Framework

To contextualize the findings of the study, the research is grounded in several overlapping psychological frameworks:

- **The “Wounded Healer” Archetype:** Carl Jung conceptualised “wounded healer” capturing the centrality of suffering to human restoration. Centralizing Jung’s idea, Henry Nouwen in 1972, in his studies talked about the person providing counselling and assistance using their own ‘wounds’ as a tool of empathy and compassion and help in the aspects of healing others. Martin (2011) conducted research exploring the lives of therapists and discussing the chance of a better relationship with clients when our own scarred selves are revealed. This provides a theoretical framework exploring how the individuals with a history of CASA could form empathy and their distress being an essential part of being available for others.
- **Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) Theory and Self Compassion:** Post traumatic growth (PTG) or positive psychological changes explains the significance of adversities on an individual bringing about a cluster of benefits resulting from the combination of cognitive, emotional, and social processes (Tedeschi and Blevins, 2015). Self-compassion can significantly and negatively predict stress symptoms and emotional regulation difficulties among psychology trainees.
- **Theories of Trauma Disclosing and Help-Seeking:** Disclosure of emotional experiences such a traumatic event is crucial in reducing chronic stress. It is critical for an individual to self-disclose emotional events otherwise; one may experience feelings of inferiority, interpersonal sensitivity, and self-deprecation (Bedard-Gilligan, et al. 2012). Studies have shown the importance of personal therapy for psychology students and practitioners.

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Review of the Empirical Studies

- **Empathy and Emotional Burdens:** While personal experiences may provide the individuals with heightened sense of empathy, therapists' experience of distress and emotional burdens in their personal lives could impact their professional lives, as well as undermine their own well-being. Nissen, et al. (2021) in their studies found that both personality-related and life circumstances both past and current, contributed to therapists' emotional burdens. This suggests that past trauma like CASA may fuel empathy, but it could also lead to emotional exhaustion.
- **Psychological Well-Being (RWB) and Trainee Stress:** Substantial research has found the vulnerabilities of psychology trainees. Kumary and Baker (2008) found high stress scores in UK counselling psychology trainees. Ayala et al. (2017) found that women in health services psychology programs reported substantively high stress and low overall quality of life as compared to the other population. This shows the necessity for a better management and support system for the trainee in psychology that would help improve their overall psychological well-being.
- **Disclosure, Coping, and Personal Growth:** Managing effective work-life balance in clinical training requires effective coping strategies. Navigating the pressures of clinical training while managing personal history requires effective coping mechanisms. In the study by El-Ghoroury et al. (2012) a common coping strategy of seeking support from friends and family was seen among the graduate students with high stressors. Though barriers like lack of time and money often prevented optimal wellness. Opening up about trauma is inherently linked to personal growth and mitigating these high baseline stress levels. This shows that disclosure of trauma in the case of CASA could help with personal growth and self-acceptance.
- **Marginalized Identities and Self-Acceptance:** The unique hurdles surrounding the impact of self-worth are found in many researches of specific subpopulations in the psychology training area. The study by Camp et al. (2020) shows low self-acceptance, distress, depression symptoms, and lower psychological well-being due lack of disclosure of the identities in LGBTQ+ individuals. Many ethnic minority trainees are also seen reporting more symptoms of depression and suicidal intent as compared to their peers. In this same way, the CASA survivors may face marginal struggles with self-acceptance due to lack of disclosure which could affect their overall well-being.

Critique of Literature

While there is extensive research on general trainee stress and coping, the literature has notable limitations. Much of the empirical data has focused on academic stressors and stress caused by financial restraints, rather than specific personal history of trauma. Lack of literature on trauma found in psychology trainees and the implications of it on the psychological well-being and empathy of individuals need to be studied more. Furthermore, the main focus of psychological well-being is on stress mitigation and is often treated like a single construct, therefore failing to differentiate nuanced facets like self-acceptance, personal growth, and autonomy in the aftermath of sexual trauma.

Research Gap

There is an abundance of literature surrounding student stress and help-seeking behaviors, yet the research concerning the specific population of psychology students and practicing professionals in India is seen lacking. It still remains unclear how the act of disclosing trauma to immediate family members could help resolve complications arising from trauma

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history and help domains of psychological well-being like personal growth and total self-acceptance specifically within the group. This study bridges that gap by directly comparing psychology students with and without a history of CASA and isolating the variable of family disclosure to determine its precise impact on their psychological profile.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In the present study, ex post facto design in a 2 (Trauma History: CASA vs No Trauma) x 2 (Family Disclosure: Disclosed vs. Undisclosed) nested factorial setting used to investigate the hypotheses. The second factor (Family Disclosure) is nested exclusively within the CASA category. Thus, two primary dependent variables (Empathy, Psychological Well-being) and two independent variables (Trauma History, Family Disclose) were used. Specific sub dimensions of well-being, namely self-acceptance and personal growth also analyzed as dependent measures for specific hypotheses. The research design was structured to address the hypotheses in two distinct phases. Phase 1: Main Effect of Trauma, A Single-Factor ex post facto comparison between the CASA group and the No trauma group. Phase 2: Nested Effect of Disclosure, A Single-Factor ex post facto comparison analyzes the nested variable of disclosure within the CASA group.

Participants

The study employed purposive and convenience sampling techniques to acquire data from participants from the School of Liberal Arts at Uttaranchal University, Dehradun. Out of 126 participants, a final sample of 96 female students was drawn. This sample was categorized into three groups: 54 participants with a history of CASA and 42 participants with no such history and 14 participants who preferred not to disclose the information of a history of CASA within the age range of 18-26 years. With the group history of CASA, the present study compares 16 participants who had disclosed trauma to their immediate family to 30 participants with undisclosed trauma.

Instruments/Tools

- **Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ):** Developed by Spreng al. (2009), this 16-item scale assesses empathy as a primary emotional process. It measures empathy on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = Never, and 4=Always). The scale's has internal consistency (Cronbach's α ranging from 0.85 to 0.87) and shows high test-retest reliability ($r = 0.81$). In previous validation studies (Spreng et al.,2009).
- **Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff PWB-18):** Developed by Ryff & Keyes. (1995), this 18-item scale assesses psychological well-being in individuals. It consists of six theoretical dimensions of psychological well-being subscales (Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive relation with others, Purpose of Life, and Self-acceptance). It measures empathy on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Agree, and 7=Strongly Disagree).

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher was granted permission by the institution to conduct the research in the psychology department and questionnaires were distributed to the students. Strict ethical guidelines were followed because of the high sensitivity of the content. Participants gave informed consent and were assured that all information would be treated with strict confidence. A standardized questionnaire was created containing instructions, consent form, Demographic Data, Career Motivations, Personal History, Toronto Empathy Questionnaire

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(TEQ) and Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff PWB-18) questionnaire. Data was collected and stored for data analysis.

Procedure

Using Statistical software, the raw scores were subjected to the Shapiro-Wilk test to analyze the data distribution for each group following a normal probability curve. The Independent T-test was employed for raw scores of groups following normal distribution ($p > 0.05$). The Non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was employed for raw scores of groups following normal distribution ($p < 0.05$).

RESULTS

Result and Interpretation

Hypothesis H1: Students with a history of CASA experience will demonstrate higher empathy than those without trauma.

Table No. 1. Difference in the mean score of empathy among students with history of CASA experience compared to those without trauma.

Group	N	Mean	Median	Std	t-value	p-value
CASA History (Yes)	54	38.04	39.00	8.49	1.25	0.215
CASA History (No)	42	35.93	36.50	7.98		

Interpretation: The above table shows that even though the mean empathy score for the CASA history (Yes) group ($M=38.04$) was higher than the CASA history (No) group ($M=35.93$), the difference was not statistically significant computed $t = 1.25$, $p = 0.215$. This indicates that prior CASA experience of students does not lead to a measurably different level of empathy compared to students without that trauma history.

Hypothesis H2: Students with a history of CASA experience will demonstrate lower self-acceptance than those without trauma.

Table 2. Difference in the mean score of total self-acceptance among students with a history of CASA experience compared to those without trauma.

Group	N	Mean	Median	Std	t-value	p-value
CASA History (Yes)	54	15.67	16.00	2.96	1.70	0.093
CASA History (No)	42	16.67	17.00	2.78		

Interpretation: The above table shows that the computed mean score on the total self-acceptance sub scale of RWB-18 of CASA history (Yes) group ($M=15.67$) is lower than the CASA history (No) group ($M=16.67$) aligning the hypothesis, however, p value is 0.093, which did not meet the threshold for statistical significance.

Hypothesis H3: Within the CASA group, disclosing trauma to immediate family members predicts better overall psychological well-being.

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Table 3. Difference in the mean score of Overall Psychological Well-Being among students who disclosed trauma to immediate family members compared to those who undisclosed trauma.

Group	N	Mean	Median	Std	t-value	p-value
Disclosed Trauma	16	97.19	97.00	8.67	2.27	0.029
Undisclosed Trauma	30	90.63	90.50	10.43		

Interpretation: The result from the simple independent t-test shows that students who disclosed their trauma to family members reported a significantly higher mean overall psychological well-being score (M=97.19) compared to those who undisclosed their trauma (M=90.63) (t=2.27, p=0.029). The result reveals that a supportive familial environment, facilitated by disclosure, is a significant positive event in the psychological well-being of CASA survivors.

Hypothesis H4: Within the CASA group, Family disclosure specifically drives higher personal growth compared to keeping the trauma hidden.

Table 4. Difference in the mean score of Personal Growth among students where Family disclosure occurred compared to those who had undisclosed trauma.

Group	N	Mean	Median	Std	u-value	p-value
Disclosed Trauma	16	18.94	19.50	2.05	335.5	0.027
Undisclosed Trauma	30	17.37	17.00	2.20		

Interpretation: Shapiro-Wilk test revealed the data for the variables significantly deviated, the Mann-Whitney U test was used as a non-parametric scale for data analysis and the results showed the difference in personal growth mean scores between CASA disclosed group (M=18.94) and undisclosed group (M=17.37) was statistically significant (U=335.5, p=0.027). Further supporting the disclosure as a critical element in facilitating post-traumatic growth.

Implications of the Study

Critical implications regarding how educational institutions train future mental health professionals is found. As the act of disclosing hidden trauma may significantly improve psychological well-being and personal growth, the need for academic programs to foster environments where students would feel safe to explore and process their own histories arises. As suggested by the questionnaire prompt exploring on whether the curriculums should focus on the student's own healing journey, it is vital to incorporate personal therapy or structured reflection into clinical psychology programs. This ensures that the practitioners and students become not just academically prepared, but also become more psychologically grounded.

Limitations of the Study

- **Sample Size constraints:** The broader generalizability of the findings were limited as the sample for the sub-groups were relatively smaller compared to the overall sample which was adequate (only 16 participants disclosed their trauma to their family, as compared to 30 who did not).

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- **Self-Report Bias:** As the study relied on self-reported measures, due to the sensitivity of the topics (CASA history and empathetic behaviors), the participants may have unconsciously adjusted their responses considering the social desirability bias as a factor.
- **Nature of Disclosure:** The disclosure with the immediate family (parents/siblings) before choosing the psychology field was measured by the study, but what it lacked is to measure the reception of that disclosure and its quality, which could've heavily changed the outcomes.

Recommendations for Future Research

A much larger and diverse sample of psychology professionals, across different states or countries should be aimed for future studies to replicate these findings. Additionally, qualitative interviews should be incorporated alongside the quantitative surveys which could provide a much deeper context into how the disclosure process facilitates personal growth and self-acceptance. Tracking students from their undergraduate years through their clinical practice and applying longitudinal studies would also help in determining whether the marginal struggles with self-acceptance would diminish or completely vanish as the professional identity is solidified.

CONCLUSION

Understanding, accepting, and empathizing others are the qualities of a psychology student and practitioner, but when it comes to their own self a lack of acceptance and understanding is seen. The psychology trainees might have an understanding of complex human emotions and behaviors but that does not mean that they would have insight to their own emotions and behaviors. This understanding of complexity of the human mind makes the psychology students and practitioner feel that they could have understanding of their own emotions and be able to overcome it, but the truth is actually far from that. Helping others does not make the individual capable of helping themselves, hence comes the need for “A Therapist for A Therapist”. The individual may feel the desire to hide their faulty or scarred self, due to which superficiality can be seen and a more human connection with the client is lost. When we accept ourselves and our true identity is disclosed, then a better relationship with the client is formed. Our true identity could only be accepted when traumas and the residue of it gets revealed. This study illuminates the complex internal landscape of the future psychologists. The traumas like CASA could hinder personal growth and self-acceptance yet fundamentally improve the capacity of these individuals to accept others thus forming a unique sense of empathy and connection. The “wounded healer” is not merely an archetype but the reality of many which requires personal care and development alongside professional development.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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