The effects of childhood sexual abuse on children’s psychology and employment

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Abstract

This paper presents the effects of childhood sexual abuse of children (male and female) on their lives. The effects of childhood sexual abuse are many; however, this paper particularly looks at the relationship between two effects e.g., psychological and work. The psychological effect is considered as an emotional problems e.g., depression, nightmares, suicidal attempts, fear of men and many more simultaneously the effects on work are inability to look for work, change of job and loss of employment. Moreover, the main objective is to explain the following psychological effects of childhood sexual abuse, which are more likely to impact on their lives comparing to the work (employment). Finally the comparison between level of psychological and employment effects has been tested by the chi-square and Cramer’s V statistical tools. The result shows that there is a strong relationship between high level of psychological effects and employment effects (67%). This paper uses data which has been collected from the secondary sources.

Keywords: Childhood, sexual abuse, psychology, work.

1. Introduction

Childhood sexual abuse is considered to be a central issue of mental and physical problems which may carry on up to adult life of men and women. The mental and physical problems that can occur due to childhood sexual abuse are “depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, behavioral problems, social problems, drug use and impaired relationships and a range of sexual relationships” (Blanksby & Barber, 2006, p. 177). Children are considered as sexually abused when older, bigger or more powerful people make them involved in sexual activity (Action Aid, 2005). This is a kind of unequal power relation between the children and the perpetrator, and exploitation or betrayal of child’s trust and innocence by the later. Therefore, sexual abuse includes a wide range of acts and behaviors. For examples, “exposing one’s genitals to a child, fondling a child’s genitals, forcing a child to touch an adult’s genitals or to engage in self-masturbation, exposing children to prostitution or pornography, involving a child in vaginal, oral or anal oral sexual activity, anal or oral penetration of a child with a penis, finger, or other object and involving a child in sexual behavior with an animal” (Briggs 1986, p. 8).

These kinds of abusive behavior towards children may have immense influence on their mental, social and psychological development. In addition, experience of being sexually abused in childhood can also become a main barrier against maintaining a balance in children’s future life considering their adjustment and relationship with
broader communities. It can have such a long term effect that sexual abuse during childhood can hamper their working attitude and capabilities in the adulthood.

Research shows that a significant number of children are sexually abused by the family members, relatives, and strangers; however, ratio of abuse by family members is significantly higher. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 1990-91) reported that in Australia, about 54 per cent of children were sexually abused by their parents and only 8 per cent by their friends and neighbors. In UK, about 38 per cent of children were sexually abused by brothers or stepbrothers, 23 per cent by fathers and only 4 per cent by mothers (Cawson et al. 2000). As a reason of sexual abuse within family, Porter (1984) mainly mentions characteristics and generation of the family. Wolf (1987) agrees with Porter and says that a variety of sexual attitudes within the family transfer to another family by marriage or de facto relationship. Under those circumstances, if children are abused by their family members, the chance remains higher for those children to act as perpetrator in adult stage of their life. This is a kind of revenge on the members of the family. Porter (1984) also states that the sexually abused children do not want to disclose their experiences of being sexually abused to the members of their family. Therefore, these children are more likely to experience isolation, abnormal behavior, and fear in daily life. Moreover, the children, following experiences of childhood sexual abuse can hardly forget these experiences in their life time and ultimately they may experience difficulties to adjust with the members of the family (Hall & Lloyd 1993). Hall and Lloyd (1993) also identified some particular expression in the behavior of sexually abused children. This expression includes lack of interest towards sex, behavior problem in future, sadness, always feel something wrong with their body and feel something wrong with their life, unusual aggressiveness, suicidal behavior, mental disorder, isolation and alienation.

In short, experience of being sexually abused in childhood can make a person distressed, isolated, sad, sexually uncontrolled. These characteristics may prevail throughout their whole life and not only influence on their personal life but also their carrier life or employment. Melean and Gallop (2003) say a child who has been experienced with long term abuse may develop low self-esteem, worthless feeling, irregular or uncontrolled view of sex. Children also become reserved and suspicious of adults, and can become distressed in their regular life. They can not pay attention fully to their work and other tasks. Thus their working life may seriously be hampered.

Thus many of the existing literature reveal the effects of childhood sexual abuse in person’s life both in childhood and adulthood. However, apart from overall understanding of this issue, it is important to know the extent and difference of impact of childhood sexual abuse on male and female child separately. This may help us to understand whether same kind of experience (sexual abuse) may lead to different effects for male and female children.

This study endeavors to see the gender difference in terms of psychological impact of experience of being sexually abused in childhood. This study also explores this psychological impact on work in adult life. Most of the people may assume that the impacts of childhood sexual abuse are more intense on female child than male child and the assumption has been tested using different statistical tools.

2. Method

The paper uses secondary sources of data. The Centers against Sexual Assault (CASA) in Australia organized and facilitated to collect data from the primary source in 1998. In primary research, a total of 347 respondents, among whose 280 (42 males and 238 female) who were found sexually abused under the age of 18 years have been asked structured questionnaire over phone. Among them, only 89 (2 males and 87 females) respondents reported that they had been sexually abused over the age of 18 years therefore; they were excluded from the final respondents. Considering above situation, this paper considers only 188 respondents (39 males and 149 females) who were sexually abused under the age of 18. In addition, the study has shown the impact of sexual abuse considering three variables for examples, gender, psychological and work which has chosen from the primary data. The reasons of choosing only three variables are to examine the pre-assumed idea which is- impacts of childhood sexual abuse of female children on their lives are more significant than male children. Secondly, the psychological and work effects are more immediate effects of children’s life. The psychological effects of following childhood sexual abuse are divided into three levels; low, medium and high (table 01) considering the number of impacts have been determined by the respondents.
Table 1: Classification of the level of effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Psychological effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-7</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-13</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-19</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the CASA survey levels were determined considering total of 19 different psychological effects e.g., low self esteem, confusion, sense of vulnerability, guilt, anger and rage, sadness and grief depression etc. This means the 19 different psychological effects were available for respondents to choose from and to identify their own effects in terms of sexual abuse. The respondents who fell in the range of 0 to 7 were considered as low level of psychological effects, 8 to 13 were considered as medium level of psychological effects and 14 to 19 were considered as higher level of psychological effects. It means in medium and higher levels of psychological effects have been identified the numbers of effects the respondents had chosen from the 19 different psychological effects.

The data used in this paper has been tested by the chi-square ($\chi^2$). In addition, the Cramer’s V has been used to find out the strength of relationships among variables. The reason of choosing these statistical tests is to identify the relationships among the variable are significant or not.

3. Findings

Of the 188 respondents 149 (79.3 %) were female and 39 (20.7) were male child. Table 2 represents the relationship between experience of being sexually abused in childhood and level of psychological effect of the experience in work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact of Psychological effect of childhood sexual abuse on work</th>
<th>Level of psychological effects of childhood sexual abuse in work</th>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>Cramer’s V</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low (0)</td>
<td>41 (69.5%)</td>
<td>41 (62.1%)</td>
<td>21 (33.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some (1)</td>
<td>18 (30.5%)</td>
<td>25 (37.9%)</td>
<td>42 (66.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59 (100%)</td>
<td>62 (100%)</td>
<td>67 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: data analysis

In terms of experience, table 2 shows, there is statistically significant relationship between work and psychological effects. Seventy percent respondents with no work effects reported that they had low level of psychological effects compared with 33 percent respondents with high psychological effects. However, 62 percent respondents with no work effects reported they had medium level of psychological effects. On the other hand, 31 percent respondents with work effects reported low level of psychological effects compared to 67 percent respondents with high level of psychological effects. However, only 38 percent respondents with work effects reported they had medium level of psychological effects. There appears to be a strong relationship between work effects and high level of psychological effects as the highest number of respondents of 67 per cent have both work effects and high level of psychological effects ($\chi^2=18.30,df=2, p<0.001, \text{Cramer’s V}=0.31$).

Table 3: Relationship between level of psychological effects and sex difference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact of psychological effect of childhood sexual abuse on gender</th>
<th>Level of psychological effects of childhood sexual abuse on gender</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

In terms of experience, table 2 shows, there is statistically significant relationship between work and psychological effects. Seventy percent respondents with no work effects reported that they had low level of psychological effects compared with 33 percent respondents with high psychological effects. However, 62 percent respondents with no work effects reported they had medium level of psychological effects. On the other hand, 31 percent respondents with work effects reported low level of psychological effects compared to 67 percent respondents with high level of psychological effects. However, only 38 percent respondents with work effects reported they had medium level of psychological effects. There appears to be a strong relationship between work effects and high level of psychological effects as the highest number of respondents of 67 per cent have both work effects and high level of psychological effects ($\chi^2=18.30,df=2, p<0.001, \text{Cramer’s V}=0.31$).
In terms of sex difference and psychological effects, there is no significant relationship between them. Twenty-nine percent of male reported they had low level of psychological effects compared to 19 percent with high level of psychological effects. However, 71 percent female reported that they had low level of psychological effects, as compared to 81 percent of those who were highly affected by psychological factors. Table 1 also presents that the largest proportion of female (85 percent) reported that they had medium level of psychological effects. So, no significant relationships have been noticed between gender and psychological effects ($\chi^2= 3.70$, $df=2$, $p> 0.05$, Cramer’s $V=0.14$).

The table shows that more than double number of respondents with no work effects has low level of psychological effects; however more than double number of respondents with work effects have higher level of psychological effects.

4. Discussion

4.1. Relationship between work effects and psychological effects

The findings of this paper present two arguments. First, the low level of psychological effects relates no work effects. Second, the high level of psychological effects relates some work effects. However, there is no relationship between sex difference gender and psychological effects of experience of being sexually abused in childhood.

The method of this paper has mentioned different emotional factors which are included as psychological effects of childhood sexual abuse. Those effects are confusion, sense of vulnerability, anger, rage, sadness, grief, helplessness, depressions, anxiety, panic attract, nightmares and suicidal attempts. It is proved that the above effects influence work effects for the children who have been sexually abused. The discussion of this paper will show how the psychological effects influence to work effects.

Weiler & Widom (1996) say confusion is one of the barriers for people to continue performances in action. Individuals with confusion have a great chance to decrease performances in work. This is a process of developing children’s inability to work and showing bad performances. This tendency influences a significant number of children with inability to look for work and changes of career (Mclean & Gillop 2003 p. 369). In either case, confusion is usually associated with some degree of loss of ability to focus attention, but the association is not invariable, especially for lesser degrees of impairment such as disability and acquired brain injury.

The sense of vulnerability is another psychological effect that influences performance of individual in workplaces or in personal life. This also has an impact on individual ability, motivation and way of thinking (Martha & Rhoda 1981, p. 513). Using these effects, the findings of this paper predicted that children would be the targets of active efforts to encourage a sense of sexual vulnerability, and that the effects of these efforts would be revealed most strongly in their life.

Depression, anxiety and other psychological effects also influence on people’s ability to work. Many people find their lives becoming increasingly restricted by panic and anxiety; they may develop depression in reaction to their anxiety disorder. This adds to feelings of helplessness and confusion, because no matter how hard they try, it appears that they cannot recover (Martha & Rhoda 1981, p. 515). The symptoms of depression can be similar to those of panic and anxiety; many people can not concentrate on their attention to their every day’s life. The finding suggests, study conducted by Maclean & Gillop in 2003, that the level of depression is also controlled by the ability of the person to be involved with performances (Mclean & Gillop 2003 p. 371).

However, many people with childhood sexual abuse suffer a long term anxiety disorder, depression and panic disorder. Some people can begin to develop suicidal thoughts as a consequence of their anxiety disorder and/or

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low (28.8%)</th>
<th>Medium (15.2%)</th>
<th>High (19.0%)</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>$df$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>Cramer’s $V$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex Male(child)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17 (28.8%)</td>
<td>10 (15.2%)</td>
<td>12 (19.0%)</td>
<td>3.703</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.157</td>
<td>0.140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female(child)</td>
<td>42 (71.2%)</td>
<td>56 (84.8%)</td>
<td>51 (81.0%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59 (100%)</td>
<td>66 (100%)</td>
<td>63 (100%)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: data analysis
depression. Many people feel ashamed or embarrassed to tell anyone about these thoughts (Watkins & Bentovim, 1992, p.29).

4.1.1. Psychological effects and sex difference

The finding of this paper has argued that there are no significant relationship between sex difference and psychological effects following childhood sexual abuse. However, Kingery (1985) argued that the female are more likely to have psychological effects than men are. Kingery (1985) in his study used an untreated sample of husbands and wives to investigate the psychological effect of a wife's employment status with depression. Data demonstrate that the women with sexual abuse were identified as a significant indicator of depression for unemployed females (Kingery 1985, p. 633). This argument states that the limitation of the research may influence the relationship between psychological effects and gender with the situation of sexual abuse.

On the other hand, the research indicates that the depression is significantly more likely to be in sexually abused females related to their non-abused female counterparts. However, childhood depression is not exclusive to female and even the higher prevalence of this depression can be found in males (4.2 % female and 7.4 % male). The males and females with the experience of childhood sexual abuse were both significantly have had contact with psychological effects. When, however, rates of contact were compared between males and females who had been abused, the females were significantly more likely to have had contact to psychological effects. This runs counter to the assumption often made in the literature that female victims of child sexual abuse are more likely than males to disclose their sexually abusive experiences and subsequently seek treatment (Watkins & Bentovim, 1992, p.200).

5. Limitations

This paper has limitations. Those who have participated in the survey, from which data has been taken, have not seen by the interviewer as this survey was conducted over telephone. There were chances of misleading or misinterpreting data. It means the researcher does not know the person whom she/he is speaking over phone, whether she/he is the right person or not. Information provided by people may not be correct as the interviewer cannot see respondents face to face. In a face to face interview researcher may guess by their facial expression whether they are giving correct information or not.

The limitation of the survey also lies in the language that has been used as the medium of communication. English was the only communicating language between the interviewer and the respondents. So the people who do not know English had been excluded from the survey. As a result a great range of people had been excluded prior to start the survey. Moreover, people who do not feel comfortable to talk over phone had also been excluded. The inclusion of those people might have given a different result.

The unreliability of early childhood memories is another area where limitation can be made. It means that the respondents’ reports of being abused must be treated with caution. It is well-established that sometimes their memories become destroyed overtime. In this case, they try to alter events, or imagine events, that did not occur, especially if encouraged by worker to recall memories of childhood abuse.

6. Conclusion

There are many effects e.g., relationship crisis with partner, eating and sleeping disorder, remained between work and psychological effects on childhood sexual abuse. However, psychological effects are very crucial for the children who have been sexually abused. Psychological effects can impact on their life adversely and those can lead to work effects and even other effects e.g. injury, harm and risk. This problem affects both the victims and rest of the members of the family and even in communities. However, this paper identified the possible effects on childhood sexual abuse regarding their psychological and their employment situation and tried to find out the future impact of those effects. So, being a aware person in this community we need to understand the nature of contact between adult and children in our society. So, it would lead our responses to such encounters reflects more the needs and interests of the children, whether they may be, rather than our projection onto the child of the sexual abuse children can get access to appropriate services.
References