

BEYOND THE SCAR: EXPLORING THE COMPLEX EFFECTS OF CSA ON PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT, INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

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Abstract

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a detrimental exploitation of children. In other words, CSA is the engagement of a child in sexual activities that they are unable to comprehend properly or consent to due to developmental immaturity or legal incapacity (WHO). This violation of a child's rights and well-being can take various forms, including physical and non-physical acts. Specifically, CSA encompasses contact acts, which involve direct physical contact, and non-physical contact acts, which include exposure to pornography, exhibitionism, sexual communication through phone or online and voyeurism. (Darkness2Light, cited in Dove & Miller, 2007). The purpose of this review study is to delve deeper into the plethora of long-term affects CSA has on an individual's life, including but not limited to, personality development, interpersonal relationships, sexual orientation.

Key words: Childhood Sexual Abuse (CSA), personality development, interpersonal relationships, sexual orientation.

Introduction

Even in this day and age of sex education, abuse awareness cases of sexual abuse is on the rise. Especially children, irrespective of gender, are still subjected to these adversities.

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) can be defined as any interaction or connection between minors and adults (or other minors) that is intended to satisfy the perpetrator's sexual desires, including acts of observation (NCTSN, 2023).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) takes place when a child is involved in a sexual activity that is beyond their capacity for informed consent or are developmentally prepared for. This may also involve violations of societal norms or laws. The WHO's definition recognizes the power imbalance and exploitation inherent in CSA, emphasizing the need for protection and support for vulnerable children. Even with strict laws, some distorted individuals somehow find a way to abuse a child. Child abuse and maltreatment encompass various forms of harm that compromise a child's wellbeing, development, dignity and survival, especially in contexts where liability, trust, or power are exploited, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO). This harm can take multiple forms, including physical and emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Child abuse is mainly divided into four primary types: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Alarming, statistical analysis from the Statistics Institute of Turkey reveals that sexual and physical abuse are the most frequently occurring forms of child abuse, with rates continuously increasing (Asuma & Imdat, 2018). Even though a significant proportion of SA cases involves women victims and male abusers, studies have shown abuse can occur across all gender identities (CDC, 2019). The majority of male sexual abuse is not recorded due various social stigma associated with men. Men who conform to these social norms of dominance, wining, stoicism and many more thinks it is un-masculine or un-male-like to be the victim. And being abused by another man can heighten this feeling of shame, identity confusion, and worthlessness in men. And if the violator is a female (approximately 6-15%) issues can be seen with identity confusion, and shame. (Hillman, O'Mara, Taylor-Robinson, & Harris, 1990; Isely & Gehrenbeck-Shim, 1997; Stermac, Del Bove, & Addison, 2004). Male sexual abuse is often overlooked and marginalized in mainstream culture, perpetuating harmful myths and stereotypes that contribute

to its exclusion (Kassing, Beesley, & Frey, 2005; Rando, Rogers, & Brittan-Powell, 1998). These misconceptions, are nothing but, stereotyped and prejudicial false beliefs about sexual assault, the survivors, and perpetrators (Burt, 1980, p. 217), further compound the issue.

In this review we will direct our focus on sexual abuse and its diverse effects, which still, to this day, is a subject of taboo. Therefore, other forms of abuse will not be considered in this paper. We will mainly focus on how history of CSA affects the personality of an individual, how far it damages their trusting ability and interpersonal relations and does CSA really affects one's sexual orientation.

CSA and Personality Development

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA), often hidden in the society, is a profoundly damaging form of abuse that have lasting impacts on an individual's personality development. Research suggests that CSA affects personality development through various factors, including the perpetrator's relationship with the child, severity and duration of abuse, child's age and developmental stage, perpetrator's age and gender, and child's pre-abuse psychological development (Putnam, 2003; Runyan et al., 2002; Rowan, 2006). As a result of traumatic exposure, CSA survivors are more vulnerable to the experiences of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, maladaptive coping mechanisms, and impaired personality development (Schachter et al., 2018; Bewick et al., 2017).

The relationship between the abuser and victim significantly influences personality development. For instance, stranger perpetrators can lead to trust issues with strangers and excessive self-dependence, while family member or relative perpetrators can lead to paranoia and difficulty trusting close acquaintances. CSA survivors often develop feelings of powerlessness and despair, insecure attachment styles, relational difficulties, people-pleasing or co-dependency, perfectionism, self-criticism, aggressive or passive-aggressive behaviors, and self-destructive tendencies (Cook et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2019).

Studies have linked CSA to negative self-perceptions, low self-esteem, identity confusion, personality disorders such as borderline personality disorder, and substance abuse (Easton et al., 2016; Craig et al., 2018; O'Mahen et al., 2019). Furthermore, CSA survivors may exhibit hypervigilance, a need for control, low body self-esteem, impulsivity, aggression, emotional regulation difficulties, isolation in interpersonal relationships, and insecure attachment styles. Overall, CSA can profoundly impact an individual's personality development, leading to maladaptive traits and relational challenges.

CSA and Interpersonal Relationship

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is a catastrophic occurrence with a enduring effects on emotional, behavioural, and psychological health (Bagley & King, 1990). One significant consequence of CSA is the difficulty in disclosing the abuse, often due to threats or lack of awareness (Crisma et al., 2004; Richardson & Bacon, 2003). Cultural norms, such as gender roles and religious beliefs, also influence the experience of maltreatment (Fontes, 2005). As a result, CSA survivors frequently develop maladaptive social interactions and impaired relationships.

The trauma of CSA irreparably damages a child's ability to trust, leading to feelings of betrayal and worthlessness (Finkelhor, 1986; Kendall-Tacket, Finkelhor & Williams, 1993). When the abuser is a stranger, the child may experience anger towards parents or caregivers for not providing protection. However, abuse from attachment figures or relatives causes more complicated and lingering problems (Ross, 1997). These feelings often persist throughout life, fostering distrust and paranoia towards others' intentions (Finkelhor, Hotaling, et al., 1990; Richardson & Bacon, 2003).

Research indicates that CSA survivors struggle with prosocial and social behaviours, leading to low-quality interpersonal relationships and conflictual friendships (Howe & Parke, 2001; Roberts et al., 2004). They also face challenges in developing balanced intimacy and trusting themselves (Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Shaver et al., 1996). Studies on sexually abused women reveal poorer social interactions, less satisfaction in intimate

relationships, and more controlling behaviours (DiLillo et al., 2001; Nielsen, Wind, et al, 2018; Colman & Widom, 2004; Mickelson et al., 1997).

CSA also severely impacts intimacy, defined as feelings of belongingness and trust towards significant others (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Survivors often experience fear of intimacy, resulting in sexual dysfunction and dissatisfaction (Colman & Widom, 2004). Moreover, male survivors of CSA face difficulties in forming and maintaining healthy relationships, including increased risk of intimate partner violence, emotional dysregulation, and attachment issues (Kia-Keating et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2014).

In conclusion, CSA experiences significantly affect trusting ability, interpersonal relationships, and intimacy with significant others.

CSA and Sexual orientation

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) has abundant and lingering impacts on an individual's life, including sexual orientation. Researches have shown that CSA survivors are more susceptible to experience fluidity in their sexual orientation, with enhanced rates of non-heterosexual identification and same-sex attraction (Tome et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2018). Studies have revealed that 23.4% to 28.5% of CSA survivors identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ), compared to 10.4% to 14.5% of non-abused individuals (Liu et al., 2019; Gold et al., 2014). The correlation between CSA and sexual orientation is quite a layered and multifaceted one, with multiple elements contributing to this association. Research implies that CSA disrupts usual sexual orientation development, leading to increased fluidity and exploration (Corliss et al., 2013). Additionally, CSA survivors may experience psychological stress, social isolation, and stigma, which can influence their sexual identity formation (Vaughan et al., 2018). Longitudinal studies have found that CSA predicts non-heterosexual orientation in adolescents and adults, even after controlling for other adverse childhood experiences (Charlton et al., 2020). Moreover, CSA has been linked to increased same-sex attraction and behavior,

particularly among men (Roberts et al., 2017). The influence of CSA on sexual orientation varies depending on factors such as age of abuse onset, duration, and severity (Katz et al., 2016). Research also suggests that CSA may interact with genetic predispositions and environmental factors to shape sexual orientation (Balsam et al., 2012). Despite these findings, it's essential to note that CSA does not predetermine sexual orientation. Many CSA survivors identify as heterosexual, and many LGBTQ individuals do not experience CSA. However, the association between CSA and sexual orientation highlights the need for sensitive and informed research studies. Some studies have found that specific features of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) can heighten the risk of sexual dysfunction. Research indicates that abuse characterized by repetition, multiple perpetrators, prolonged duration, coercion, and paternal involvement is linked to increased rates of sexual difficulties. However, findings on the role of penetration or attempted penetration in sexual dysfunction risk are inconclusive. While some studies suggest that penetrative CSA elevates this risk, others found equal or even greater associations between non-penetrative CSA and sexual dysfunction. Hypersexuality is observed in CSA survivors as well at a very high rate compared to normal population (4-8% men and 1-4% women; kafka, 2010). With 25-50% of women and 20-40% of men (kafka, 2010) with hypersexuality report history of childhood sexual abuse.

In summary, CSA involving threat, force, chronicity, and abuse by multiple perpetrators or fathers increases the likelihood of long-term sexual concerns. Further research is necessary to clarify the impact of penetration on sexual dysfunction risk. Researchers propose that CSA can lead to negative body associations, perpetuating harmful self-perceptions and impairing sexual function in adulthood. In conclusion, the effects of childhood sexual abuse on sexual orientation are multifaceted and significant. Further research is needed to objectively draw any correlation between two.

Discussion

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) has profound and lasting impacts on individuals' personality development,

interpersonal relationships, and sexual orientation. Research consistently shows that CSA survivors experience increased anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, leading to difficulties in emotional regulation and impulse control. This trauma can also shape personality development, fostering low self-esteem, self-blame, and shame. Interpersonally, CSA survivors often struggle with trust, intimacy, and emotional vulnerability, increasing the risk of re-victimization and conflictual relationships. Additionally, CSA can influence sexual orientation, leading to confusion, questioning, or exploration of sexual identity.

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is a pervasive issue globally with 18% girls and 8% boys (WHO, 2016) globally reporting CSA, but it is a bigger issue in India, affecting approximately 50-60% of children, with 53.22% of girls and 46.71% of boys experiencing some form of sexual abuse (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2007; National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, 2018). More focused and rigorous researches are needed to understand the underlying factors causing this huge difference of abuse report between the world and India.

Men are particularly susceptible to CSA due to societal norms around masculinity, limited emotional expression, power dynamics, and cultural stigma. However, they often remain silent due to shame, fear of not being believed, masculinity concerns, social stigma, lack of trust in authorities, and fear of retaliation.

In short, more studies are needed to clear these social stigmas around sexual abuse, and provide adequate interventions and support for the survivors.

Conclusion

It is fairly apparent from the above discussion how immensely childhood sexual abuse can do irreparable damage to a person. The trauma experienced during the incident can shape an individual's worldview, self-concept, and relationships, influencing their overall well-being. Survivors often struggle with anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, low self-esteem, leading to maladaptive

personality development, difficulty forming and maintaining healthy relationships, intimacy avoidance, and trust issues. CSA can also influence sexual orientation, contributing to confusion or exploration, and increase the rates of same-sex or bisexual experiences. It can also cause various sexual disorders such as sexual dysfunction, sexual dissatisfaction, avoidance and fear of sexual intimacy, hypersexuality etc. It is also noteworthy that even though the society, media and the overall culture have always painted men as the aggressor and women as victims; abuse can be conducted by or against members from any gender. Due to cultural stereotypes, men do not report their abuse as frequently as women do. More researches and awareness are needed to rephrase this societal prejudice. And provide adequate support for members from all gender.

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