

Social Work Perspectives on the Voices of Children of Child Abuse

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Abstract:

This study examined the consequences of child abuse on the life of children in Trinidad. Participants 12 female and 12 male who were victims of abuse. The impact of child abuse on the growth and living conditions of children in Trinidad were assessed by structured

interviews. Participants were randomly selected from the clientele of Trinidad and Tobago Police Service Victim and Witness Support Unit and the Community Police Unit. The research revealed that there was a negative impact on the growth and living conditions of children who experience child abuse, usually resulting in feelings of depression; suicidal ideations; feelings of hatred toward abusing parent. This study found that physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and psychological abuse were the most common types of abuse perpetrated against children in Trinidad. Whereas it pertains to the existence of abuse in Trinidad, the study found that parents expected children to overcome their negative experiences, and achieve success despite the presence of abuse. In the face of the abuse, the researchers found that 66% of abusers will still ensure that their child's basic needs were secured.

Conflict of interest:

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Standard:

All procedures performed involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent:

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Introduction

This Study brings to the attention the impact of child abuse in the growth and living conditions of children in Trinidad from the children's perspectives. It touches on the abysmal scale of all forms of violence suffered by children at the hands of adults namely a parent or guardian. The rate of child abuse is increasing day by day as child abuse continues to be a growing issue locally. This research focuses on and will analyses the impact of child abuse on the living conditions and growth of children below the age of 18 in Trinidad. Specifically, this study will explore the effects of child abuse on the growth and living conditions of children.

This study will also make recommendation to help combat the negative impact of child abuse on the growth and living conditions of children in Trinidad.

Statistics in Trinidad and Tobago

Child abuse ensues in every country in the world in an assortment of practices and situations. It is frequently profoundly entrenched in social practices, economic and cultural systems and for Trinidad no difference exists. The Trinidad and Tobago Child Protection Task Force in their March 2014 Report stated, "between the years 2007

to 2014 there were 4,760 reported crimes against minors.

These included 124 murders; 206 woundings; 1,983 sexual offences; 109 kidnappings; 1,983 robberies. It was reported that physical and psychological punishment was most prevalent in the two to four age group at 81%.”

Literature review

Consequences of child abuse on the life of Children

Although it is impossible to determine the exact impact of child abuse on the growth of children, as many incidences go unreported, the researchers saw it necessary to focus on the relationship of child mistreatment and a variety of difficulties in the emotional and behavioral functioning of men and women. The environment can impact positively or negatively on the development of a child (Brady *et. al.*, 2005a). Childhood mistreatment has been linked to a variety of changes in brain structure and function and stress-responsive neurobiological systems (Healy, 2004). Healy maintains that, “epidemiological studies have documented the impact of childhood mistreatment on health and emotional well-being.”

In Trinidad the effects of child abuse has been linked to many symptomatic behaviors including but not limited to post-traumatic stress disorder; anxiety; fear; innumerable externalizing and internalizing behavior problems such as inappropriate cutting and attempted suicide (Klonsky & Olino, 2008).

Perry (2002) has shown that child abuse is associated with the increased risk of psychological problems in adulthood. Healthy interactions between children and their parents promote constructive development and growth of children. Johnson & Worme-Charles (2016) argued that child abuse can

cause various mental illnesses such as anxiety; personality disorders; depression even into adulthood. Growth and development can be restrained as a result of hostile and disparaging interactions (Perry, 2000).

Heim *et al.* (2013a) posit that women who were emotionally abused as children tended to have deficits in the growth of certain areas of their brain. Heim *et al.* (2013b) maintain women who were sexually abused had less growth in the part of their brain associated with sensation, while those who experienced emotional abuse were affected in the parts of their brain responsible for self-awareness. They argued that “emotional abuse victims showed thinning in other parts of the brain, causing symptoms of depression, moodiness, and extreme or dulled emotional responsiveness.”

In a 2014 study by Solís, Kelly-Irving, Fantin, Darnaudery, Torrisani, Lang & Del-pierre, the researchers commenting on the association of childhood trauma and adult ill health said, “The role of early life experiences on health is of major concern...as chronic stress may get ‘under the skin’ to alter human developmental processes and impact later health.

Our findings suggest that early negative circumstances during childhood... could be associated with physiological wear-and-tear in midlife...”

LaBier (2013) notes that, “how we think, feel, relate, and behave are all part of an interconnected whole...the problem is that our life experiences often generate diminished self-worth, fragmentation, isolation, or retreat into ego attachments that disconnect us from ourselves, within; and from others, Emotional Impact of Trauma’ lead to the development of posttraumatic stress disorder as well as to a variety of other psychiatric disorders, including depression, generalized

anxiety disorder, panic attacks, borderline personality disorder, and substance abuse in adult survivors of trauma” (Lubit, Rovine, DeFrancisci, Eth, 2003a)”.

Lubit *et al.* (2003b) maintains that that early exposure to trauma and stress may be the foundation for “physical effects on neurodevelopment which may lead to changes in the individual’s long-term response to stress and vulnerability to psychiatric disorders.”

They argue that when children are exposed to trauma it negatively impacts on their ability to normalize, recognize, and express feelings and emotions, affecting the “individual’s core identity and ability to relate to others (Lubit *et al.* 2003c)”

Children in abusive environments are not taught appropriate or effective means for developing coping strategies. Consequently, these children who are victims of abuse are predominantly left susceptible to the negative effects of trauma exposure (Cloitre, Miranda, Stovall-McClough, & Han, 2005; De Young, Kenardy, & Cobham, 2011; van der Kolk, Roth, Pelcovitz, Sunday & Spinazzola, 2005).

One of the most consistent results across these studies is the finding that child abuse was associated with an increased risk for alcohol and drug use disorders (Enoch 2011). Schuck & Widom (2001) argue that individuals who have a “history of childhood abuse or neglect are vulnerable to using alcohol in order to cope with stressful situations, which in turn may lead to excessive alcohol use.”

Brady & Back (2012) postulate there is a relationship between childhood abuse and the development of substance use disorders. Miller, Downs & Testa (1993) suggest that victimization in childhood can cause low

self-esteem and abuse of alcohol in an effort to cope with the negative may lead to low self-esteem and the subsequent use of alcohol to deal with negative thoughts as a result of the abuse. Johnson & James (2016) highlight that “victims of childhood abuse feel that their experiences make them ‘different’ from other children and lead them to withdraw from healthier social circles toward fringe groups, where alcohol use is more accepted.”

Silverman, Reinherz & Giaconia, (1996) argued that there were high rates of comorbid psychiatric disorders in individuals who have experienced child abuse. Silverman *et al.* (1996) study revealed that “80% of men who have been abused physically, 58.3% of women who have been abused physically, and 70% of women who have been abused sexually met criteria for multiple DSM psychiatric disorders.”

Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans & Herbison (1996) submitted that “women who experience any kind of abuse were more likely than their non-abused counterparts to exhibit mental health, interpersonal, and sexual difficulties as adults. “

Silverman *et al.* (1996) further established that men and women who report experiencing either sexual or physical abuse as children or adolescents display significantly lower functioning across a variety of domains (i.e. withdrawal; somatic complaints; anxiety; depression; social problems; thought problems; attention problems; delinquent behavior; aggressive behavior; suicidal ideation) relative to their non-abused counterparts at both the ages of 15 and 21 years. Mullen *et al.* (1996) addressed the relationship between child abuse and suicidal ideation noting that women who have experienced childhood abuse are at higher risk of suicidal behavior than women in a non-abused control group. The

impact of child abuse is far reaching. What is clear to the researchers is that child abuse can adversely affect the Growth and Living Conditions of Children in Trinidad resulting in a variety of negative or unhealthy emotional and behavioral outcomes.

Method

The methodology employed for this research was of a qualitative nature as opposed to a traditional quantitative research approach. The specific characteristics of a qualitative research design as well as the reliability and validity with reference to this study will be discussed. This will be followed by a justification for choosing the qualitative research approach. Sampling and selection as well as the collection of the data will be outlined. A description of the hermeneutic method of data analysis and how it was applied in this research will be provided.

Recruitment and Eligibility

The participants for this study were randomly selected from both the clientele at the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service Victim and Witness Support Unit and Community Policing Unit. A total of 24 children were interviewed; 12 females and 12 males between the ages of 10-18 were selected from the various geographical locations in Trinidad and Tobago. These participants were given informed consent forms to sign, which outlined clearly the purpose of the study and ensured confidentiality of their identities.

Ethical Consideration

This research was approved by the Campus Ethics Committee. Each interview was to last for around one hour; participation in this research was voluntary. All the information was kept highly confidential. Before collecting data the participants read the

consent form and signed it. Those who are not willing to sign the consent form were excluded from the study.

Discussion

The researchers in their explorative study of the effects of Child Abuse in the Growth and Living Conditions of Children in Trinidad found that the ugly betrayal of child abuse had extended its tentacles into every aspect of a child's life. As noted above while not all victims of child abuse will display negative behavioral consequences, behavioral problems appear to be more likely among them, even at a young age. The immediate emotional effects of abuse are isolation as 67% of respondents noted that they usually stayed in their room and cried as a way of coping following the abuse; 75% of respondents noted that they felt feelings of fear; 79% noted that they were unable to mingle with peers; 54% noted that they were unable to sleep properly; 100% of female respondents noted that their sleep was impacted.

The study also found that feelings of fear and isolation can translate into lifelong consequences, including low self-esteem; depression; relationship difficulties; 83% of Respondents had feelings of depression; 81% felt lost; 81% had feelings of hatred towards their abuser. 100% of male Respondents noted that they felt lost as well as had feelings of hatred. 100% of Respondents experienced feelings of frustration and not being able to concentrate on studies.

The Impact of Child Abuse in the Growth and Living Conditions of Children in Trinidad

The study also found that for Trinidad child abuse had a negative impact on the growth of children. 87.5% of respondents noted that to them, their growth was

affected as a result of the abuse while 12.5% said they did not believe that their growth was affected in anyway. However, when asked how they would describe themselves 58% described themselves in a negative light; 4% had mixed emotions while 38% described themselves as positive.

The study found that (50%) of male respondents viewed themselves in a positive light unlike their female counterparts where only 12.5% described themselves in a positive manner. For those who described themselves in a positive manner, 60% noted that they had not successfully dealt with the difficulties they faces as a result of the abuse; 20% shared they had somewhat overcome them; 10% noted that they have successfully dealt with their difficulties.

Whereas pertaining to living conditions in particular 100% noted that the effect of abuse negatively impacted their living condition; 83% said that the difficulties they experience as a result of the abuse adversely affected their living condition. 17% said it did not adversely affect their living conditions, but that the abuse did impact their living condition in some way where they had no peace of mind, or were withdrawn and or uncomfortable at home.

When the researchers inquired about how the respondents felt about the incidence of abuse male participants collectively expressed varying emotions with, anger, frustration and feelings of sadness topping the charts; for female Respondents sadness, hurt and anger were at the top. When asked if they believed their basic needs were met 66% of Respondents said 'yes'; 29% said 'no'; 4% said somewhat. What this shows the researchers is that despite the abuse, 66% of abusers will still ensure that their child's basic needs were secured.

Some Startling Statistics

71% of Respondents were abused by a female relative who was the primary caregiver;

76% of the time where there was a female abuser, that female was the mother;

12% were grandmothers; 6% were step mothers; while the remain 6% were sisters. Additionally, the study revealed that for 15% of the time mothers were the abusers so to be the fathers; while 6% were uncles who sexually abused the victim. 29% of Respondents were abused by their father. While analyzing the data collected researchers found that in Trinidad discipline and abuse were usually interchangeably used. The study found that parents may 37.5% defer from giving reasons for punishment. The analysis suggested that punishment became a reason to inflict pain rather than being educational. To the authors when parents cross the line from discipline to abuse they deny children the opportunity for development thus negatively impacting the growth and living conditions of children in Trinidad.

Table 1: Reasons why respondents believed they were disciplined.

Being Disobedient	51%
Challenging Parents Authority	20.5%
Not Doing School Work	12.5%
Falling Grades	4%
Bullying Siblings	4%
Not to be like father.	4%
"Wickedness"	4%

Parent's Expectations of Children

Notwithstanding the presence of abuse the respondents believed their parents held great expectations for them.

35% of male respondents shared that their parents wanted them to be obedient;

25% stated they had high career expectations;

8% respect for self and women;
 8% to emulate parents;
 8% to be a noble citizen;
 8% to be a responsible male;
 8% did not know what their parents' expectations of them were.

For female respondents:

33% noted that their parents expected them to be a success,

33% shared that being obedient were what their parents expected;

18% noted academic achievement;

8% high career expectations;

8% were expected to be responsible for their siblings.

Both the male and female respondent shared that being obedient was the number one expectation of parents. Additionally, the study found that academic achievement was an expectation for parents of female children but not for those with male children. Moreover, females showed a greater understanding of what their parents expected from them as it counted for 100%, unlike their male counterparts where 8% were unaware of their parents' expectations. Whereas it pertains to the existence of abuse in Trinidad, the study found that parents expected children to overcome their negative experiences, and achieve success despite the presence of child abuse.

Conclusion

This Study brought to the attention the impact of child abuse in the growth and living conditions of children in Trinidad. It touched on the abysmal scale of all forms of violence suffered by children at the hands of adults namely a parent or guardian. This study found that physical abuse; verbal abuse; sexual abuse; emotional abuse; psychological abuse were the most common types of abuse perpetrated against children

in Trinidad. This research analyzed the impact of child abuse on the growth and living conditions of children below the age of eighteen (18) in Trinidad. Specifically, this study explored the effects of child abuse on the growth and living conditions of children.

The interconnectedness of the mirco, mezzo, and macro systems should not be forgotten as it plays a role in both the impact as well as in mitigating the effects of child abuse in Trinidad. Whereas it pertains to the existence of abuse in Trinidad, the study found that parents expected children to overcome their negative experiences, and achieve success despite the presence of abuse. Additionally, in the face of the abuse the researchers found that 66% of abusers will still ensure that their child's basic needs were secured. For the researchers therefore, although the police played an instrumental role in offering support for the respondents that role was sometimes not viewed as effective.

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