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CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE AS A PRECURSOR TO PROSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

The child as a victim of sexual abuse has recently received deliberated attention within the South African context. In the study undertaken, the immediate as well as long term effects of such abuse was investigated with the pertinent intent of identifying a link between child sexual abuse and the involvement in prostitution. Utilising a qualitative approach, 20 prostitutes were interviewed and their experiences and opinions with respect to the circumstances surrounding their childhood abuse as well as the effects thereof documented. With reasons such as fear of the perpetrator, feelings of helplessness and a fear of causing a break up of the family, disclosure of the abuse was not apparent in any of the respondents. Thus the extent of the effects of child sexual abuse could be described as being directly associated with, and causative of the individual's later adaptation in life. Emotional effects, the most frequently reported effect of sexual abuse, physical injuries, which all respondents reported having experienced and social withdrawal on both micro and macro levels were evident. In the light of these far-reaching and detrimental effects associated with child sexual abuse, as related to the choice to become involved in prostitution, the need for South Africa to address this issue is highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

With newspaper headlines such as those that report "Baby Tshepang raped by only one person" (SAPA, 2001:1) and "Priest up for sodomy" (Kotlolo, 2002:10) we are made aware of the prevalence of child sexual abuse as a form of violence in South African society. The sexual abuse of children, however, is not a new phenomenon; the earliest records date back as far as 2000 BC in the Mesopotamian River Valley. Here priests engaged in sexual practices with whomever they chose to under the auspices of promoting fertility within the community. During Greek and Roman times sexual activities involving both girls and boys were seen as an accepted form of amusement. Child marriages where the bride could be as young as eight years of age were also a frequent occurrence, as was the use of boy slaves for homosexual practices. With the rise of the Calvinist era in the 1500s children still had no social standing and were treated as possessions. Furthermore, Van der Mey and Neff (1986:19) explain that children were viewed as "imps of the darkness" and any display of power over them was considered acceptable.

Against this background of a history of secrecy and misunderstanding surrounding child sexual abuse, Freud's theories of childhood sexuality provided new insights into the subject. Prior to this it was believed that child sexual abuse was a serious but rare form of family pathology occurring primarily in socially isolated families. The change in perception and rise in public awareness was reflected by the distinctive increase in the reporting of crimes committed against children (Straus, 1990:83-84). Given these changes in awareness and an increase in cases of crimes against children being reported, the South African Police Services (SAPS) formed the Child Protection Unit (CPU). This Unit commenced its activities in 1988, after its members received special training with respect to interviewing techniques, investigative skills, court procedures and psychological aspects regarding the developmental stages of children

(Meek, 1998:12). The Unit's primary aim was to initiate a greater awareness of crimes committed against children in South Africa and offer an accessible route for reporting them (Robertson, 1989:1). In newspaper headlines such as "Lenient treatment for child abuse offenders" (Altenroxel, 1997:7), the media reflect that cases of child sexual abuse still persist and may steadily be increasing; this requires further investigation and identification of the contribution that the social sciences can make in preventing such abuse.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was undertaken in interviewing 20 prostitutes to ascertain the degree of their victimisation, specifically with respect to child sexual abuse. Bailey (1994:45) is of the opinion that a qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for studies that are explanatory in nature as the emphasis is placed on the acquisition of insight and an improvement in the understanding of the relevant phenomenon. The interviewing procedure adopted here made provision for a tactful approach with respect to the sensitive nature of the questioning. Spontaneous reactions and non-verbal behaviour could also be observed and described, thus contributing to the overall reliability and validity of the study (Huysamen, 1993:15).

A pilot study was undertaken in which interviews were conducted with three street-walker prostitutes, who were identified using snowball sampling and who constituted 15 percent of the final sample. These respondents were included in the final sampling and an interview schedule was used in order to obtain research information about all the respondents' opinions, perceptions and beliefs. Interviews were conducted personally by the researcher in a predetermined, fully equipped office area that offered security, whilst the environment ensured confidentiality in that a quiet, private workspace was provided. In-depth questioning of all 20 respondents produced data which could be described as valuable and contributed towards an understanding of each individual's personal experiences of child sexual abuse and the possible (immediate and longer-term) effects on the respondent.

FINDINGS

Biographical information

The respondents, comprising only women, consisted of a group representative of a broad spectrum of ages ranging from 17 years to older than 30 years. The majority of respondents (60 percent) fell within the 20-29 years of age category, with the average age of the respondents being 22 years of age. The respondents were also representative of a diversity of cultures. Of the respondents 11 were Black (55% of the sample), while seven were White (35%), one (5%) was Coloured, and one (5%) was Asian. As the researcher wished to establish a correlation between child sexual abuse and the role that it plays in the involvement in prostitution, it was important to determine whether those currently involved in prostitution had been sexually abused. Of the 20 respondents interviewed, 12 (60%) reported having been sexually abused whilst still a child, and one (5%) reported abuse after having reached the age of 18. The remaining seven respondents, however, reported no unwanted sexual activity ever having occurred.

Circumstances surrounding the abuse

The impact that child sexual abuse may have on the victim is influenced by different factors and circumstances present during the abuse. Curran and Renzetti (1994:104) are of the opinion that the trauma experienced during youth can manifest itself as a problem in adulthood. Thus

these conflicts that occur in early childhood are of the greatest importance, as one's personality is manifested by the age of six and undergoes little change later. With respect to the situation surrounding the abuse, of the 13 respondents who had experienced child sexual abuse, two (15%) had been abused on only one occasion. Likewise a further two (15%) had been abused on two occasions, while the remaining nine respondents, constituting 70 percent of the sample, had been abused more than three times. Of these nine respondents, 60 percent reported victimisation as a regular occurrence. In conjunction with the number of times the abuse occurred, the relationship between the victim and offender could be inferred. In 78 percent of the cases the assailant was known to the victim, while 62 percent of assailants were family members. The victim's home was a primary area for the abuse to occur in, thus representing 77 percent of the abuse episodes, while the only other areas identified as problematic were the abusers' home, referred to as such if the abuser did not reside with the victim (20%) or if the areas were unknown (1%).

In order to ascertain a link between child sexual abuse and involvement in prostitution, the researcher postulated that a viewpoint incorporating two theories would better explain this phenomenon. Freud postulated that abuse during any one of the four psychosexual developmental stages of a child, ranging from birth to adolescence, could result in deviant behaviour. Thus, if the course of each psychosexual developmental phase does not proceed as expected, then normative sexual behaviour is hampered. Of particular interest to the researcher was the Phallic stage of development, as current research is gender biased. The Electra complex within this phase, which relates to a girl's sexual development, will thus be of interest. Should abuse occur within this phase, the girl will become aware of the penis and furthermore realise her lack of this organ (Curran & Renzetti, 1994:100-101). However, normative to this stage all girls would become aware of this deprivation and develop penis envy, yet this will not be characterised by fear as will be the case with a victim of sexual abuse.

The researcher is of the opinion, however, that sexual abuse not only culminates the envy, as the girl would clearly realise that she does not have a penis, but it also leads to fear and a feeling of submission as the penis is seen as an instrument which exerts power over her. The abused person feels powerless against the penis and this inadequacy can be vented through the granting of sexual favours for monetary gain. Thus money will serve as an element of control for the victim over the penis as money is associated with power. The entrance into prostitution, whereby sexual favours are exchanged for monetary gain, will not be viewed as immoral because the process of normalising the act as wrong was hampered during a psychosexual developmental phase through abuse.

Not all sexually abused girls, however, enter into prostitution. This can be better explained through Hirschi's Social Bond theory. Hirschi postulates that all individuals are deviant in nature and we need to explain why people do not turn to criminal behaviour (Eitzen & Timmer, 1985:26). Hirschi proposes that the answer to this lies in the individual's social bonds: those ties that the individual possesses to parents, peers and important social institutions (Conklin, 1981:218). In 97 percent of the respondents' cases the perpetrator was either a family member or an acquaintance. Victims also expressed a strong reluctance to report the abuse; thus institutions and professionals such as social workers, psychologists and teachers could not offer any help. This in turn aggravates the effects of child sexual abuse.

Those respondents who had not been sexually abused were asked a specific question relating to the contributory factors behind their choice to become involved in prostitution. Of the seven respondents who had never been sexually abused yet had entered into prostitution, five attributed their involvement to family members (mothers and/or sisters) who were actively

involved in prostitution. The other two respondents advanced economic problems and lack of work and money as the main reasons for their involvement, thereby identifying an avenue where future research could be focused.

The effects of child sexual abuse

In order to determine the extent of the effects of child sexual abuse, both initial effects as well as effects experienced one year after the abuse were established. According to Guggenbühl-Craig (1995:63), any kind of sexual experience between an adult and a child can be viewed as being damaging. The physical, emotional, sexual and social impairment experienced due to this abuse can be directly associated with the individual's later adaptation in life. These effects include:

- Emotional effects

According to Finkelhor, Williams and Burns (1988:154), child sexual abuse can impair the normal emotional growth and spiritual development of a child. The fact that in 98 percent of cases the abuser is known to the victim could also account for the diversity and depth of emotions experienced (www.caag.org.za). The most frequently reported effects of child sexual abuse are of an emotional nature (De Young, 1982:52). The child may therefore be hampered in his or her emotional growth and thus not be able to follow a natural developmental path. Victims of sexual abuse thus often experience emotions of degradation and humiliation, leading to low self-esteem. A victim of sexual abuse generally follows two diverse reaction patterns, namely a feeling of detachment, where the victim feels that the betrayal experienced cannot be shared with anyone (Finkelhor *et al.*, 1988:156), which in turn may lead to emotional detachment and alienation and isolation. Alternatively, anger and hostility may be internalised and exhibited in various forms of anti-social behaviour (Walker, Bonner & Kaufman, 1988:114). All 13 respondents who reported having been sexually abused recorded having initially experienced fear, a general feeling of helplessness, hostility and vulnerability. Ten respondents (77%) endured feelings of detachment and developed problems associated with low self-esteem. A feeling of having been betrayed was also a prominent emotional response, experienced by 12 (92%) of the respondents.

- Physical effects

According to Morgan (1992:51), the most evident effects of child sexual abuse are its physical manifestations. Robertson (1989:41) postulates that, amongst these effects, injury to the genitalia would be most prominent. Physical effects were on the whole less reported amongst the respondents; however, 100 percent of the respondents experienced injury to their genitalia that in their opinion required medical treatment, but this was not attended to. Falling pregnant due to the abuse, catching a sexually transmitted disease and developing an eating disorder were reported as being among the initial effects as experienced by two (15%) of the victims; according to Walker *et al.* (1988:85), these responses could serve as corroboratory elements in the verification of sexual abuse. Physical symptoms for which no medical cause could be found were also evident amongst respondents. Such reports included recurrent stomach aches, difficulty in swallowing (because of oral abuse) and sleeping disorders. Self-mutilation, where the victim harms her body in order to make it less attractive or as a form of exercising control over the pain she experiences, was reported by two (15%) respondents.

- Sexual effects

According to Robertson (1989:41), inappropriate sexual behaviour can impair age-appropriate sexual development. Hollin and Howells (1992:62) attribute this inappropriate sexual

knowledge to sexualisation, which refers to the exposure of a child to premature sexual experiences. The child may receive a reward for these practices and thereby regard sex as a tool for manipulation. Promiscuity, which refers to young people who have less well defined sexual boundaries than their peers and who may therefore engage in consenting intercourse with a frequent change in partners, can also hinder sexually appropriate development. Of the 13 respondents who reported having been sexually abused, 100 percent described themselves as being promiscuous. In the long term sexual abuse may even manifest itself in a fear of closeness or emotional intimacy and thus become an obstacle to future long- as well as short-term relationships.

- Social effects

According to Naudè (1991:43), sexually abused children often reflect their needs in their behaviour. Mood disturbances are among the most prominent indicators and include any behavioural changes related to the individual's personality. This may have a cyclic effect; for example, low self-esteem may lead to personal identity problems, which may result in the individual not realising her self-worth and where she fits into the social structure. Social difficulties may then in turn lead to withdrawal from micro- as well macro-societal situations and complete isolation and a feeling of loneliness may prevail (Beirne & Messerschmidt, 1991:23). Twelve respondents (92%) experienced mood disturbances, while ten (77%) withdrew from social contact and functioning completely. This emotional withdrawal was attributed to a feeling of social discomfort and a belief that they had been stigmatised. As a long-term effect the combined feelings of intense fear and low self-worth may lead to the victim experiencing a high level of social discomfort attributed to limited capabilities with regards to their communicative and assertiveness skills.

Pertinent to the effects of child sexual abuse on the victim involved was the evident lack of disclosure of the events to others. Of the 13 respondents who experienced sexual abuse, only one (8%) reported the abuse to someone. The reasons behind the choice not to disclose the abuse could include the following:

- Secrecy stemming from fear of the perpetrator could ensure that the child does not divulge what is going on. During the initial stages of sexual abuse, it is quite common for the victim to be bribed with items such as sweets, or alternatively direct threats involving injury to the child herself or a loved one may be expressed (Russell, 1991:65). Of the 12 respondents who reported a failure to disclose the abuse or seek any help, all 12 (100 percent) attributed this directly to their fear of the perpetrator. Fear of retribution, physical harm and fear of being killed were also stated by the respondents as "other" reasons for keeping their secret and thus for non-disclosure.
- Helplessness was an emotion experienced by the victims as they felt unable to prevent the abuse from occurring (Lazenby, 1996:22). This emotion carries detrimental effects for the child, as children naturally internalise the norms and values conferred upon them by adults. It can thus lead to confusion and difficulty for the child in differentiating between appropriate adult behaviour and what is right or wrong.
- The idea of being the cause of breaking up a family may prevent incest victims from reporting the abuse. Often indications of sexual abuse are ignored by outsiders, who may also fear the break-up of the family (Robertson, 1989:24). Eight respondents (67%) disclosed that a fear of family disintegration contributed to their not disclosing the abuse.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from this study that child sexual abuse and the consequences for the victims are far-reaching. The role that can be played by the relevant institutions and caring professionals must not be underestimated. Should more avenues be made available for the general understanding of, reporting on and care for victims of sexual abuse, then the appearance of this phenomenon within our society can be better combated. A need for interventionist action in order to counteract the detrimental effects of child sexual abuse for the victim was highlighted by the respondents. According to the Child Care Act, 74 of 1983, particular professionals are compelled to report suspicions of child sexual abuse to the Regional Director of Health Services and Welfare. Teachers, however, are excluded in terms of this act, but as more than a third of a child's life is spent within the education system, the importance of these individuals in the detection of abuse is underestimated. Treatment of the abused may prevent their becoming future offenders. Voluntary organisations and social services play an important role in the prevention of the formation of future transgressors. Addressing child sexual abuse as a problem directly relevant to South African society, accompanied by the necessary and appropriate actions, could contribute towards reducing not only its incidence but also the incidence of future transgressions.

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