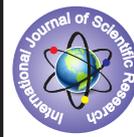


Coping among Sexually Abused and Sexually Non-abused Adolescents.



Psychology

KEYWORDS: Adolescents, Sexual Abuse, Sexual Non-abuse

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ABSTRACT

The present study was intended to assess coping of sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents. The objective of the study was to examine coping between sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents. The personal data sheet and Adolescent Coping Scale (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993) were administered on 392 adolescents from Goa – 192 of whom had experienced some form of sexual abuse and 200 of whom had never experienced any form of sexual abuse. The obtained raw scores were analyzed using t-test. Results indicated significant differences in the dimensions of coping between sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents. The sexually abused adolescents were found to have significantly higher non-productive coping and significantly lower coping by solving the problem as compared to sexually non-abused. However, there was no significant difference in the reference to others coping between the sexually abused and non-abused adolescents.

Introduction

Adolescence for most people is a wonderful time of life, filled with new feelings, a higher level of self-awareness, and a sense of almost unlimited horizons to explore. It is also a very challenging time where every adolescent undergoes various changes and also has to face a lot of conflicts within themselves and the people around. In addition to all this, unfortunately, many adolescents are further challenged by being victims of abuse and more so, sexual abuse.

Sexual abuse, a significant worldwide problem, involves the forcing of undesired sexual behaviour by one person upon another. It affects numerous children and adolescents but however, the effects and incidence of adolescent abuse are overlooked as adolescents are seen as better able to fight back or remove themselves from the situation. Also, abuse in adolescence is thought to be harder to identify as there is often confusion between some of the tell-tale, acting-out behaviours that are present in child victims and the normal developmental changes that are present in many adolescents (Blythe et al., 1990).

Coping

Coping is an individual's constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources (Lazarus, 1966). Coping strategies utilized to deal with the effects of a trauma can be broadly categorized as cognitive or behavioral, as well as effective or ineffective in reducing distress (Resick, 2001).

Research conducted over the past decade indicate that a wide range of psychological and interpersonal problems are prevalent among those who have been sexually abused both in the short term and in later adult functioning (Briere & Elliott, 1994) and thus victims need to cope to deal with these. Researches have suggested that sexual abuse leads to distortions that undermine the survivor's critical motivational, coping, and interpersonal factors, and that these in turn influence adult sexual behaviour and choices (Catania et al., 2008).

Following traumatic events, people develop a fear network in which traumatic reminders and strong fear responses occur frequently (Foa & Kozak, 1986). To decrease the intensity and frequency of these intrusive reminders, the person copes through avoidance of these stimuli, which ultimately leads to failure to process the fear responses effectively. Benight and Bandura (2004), suggest that resource loss after experiencing trauma leads to a loss of perceived self-efficacy and avoidant coping. Similar findings were reported by Bal et al., (2003) and Coffey et al., (1996).

Though various people who have been victims of sexual abuse have

been subject to researches, in comparison to the west, India and specifically in Goa, limited scientific research has been carried out in the area of sexual abuse. Studies with regard to sexual abuse and coping are bare minimum. This is what intrigued the researcher to carry out this investigation.

Hypotheses

1. Sexually abused adolescents have significantly higher non-productive coping as compared to sexually non-abused adolescents.
2. Sexually abused adolescents have significantly lower problem solving and reference to others coping as compared to sexually non-abused adolescents.

Participants

Purposive sampling method was used and sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents in the age group of 11 to 18 years were selected. Sexually abused adolescents included those adolescents who have been victims of any form of sexual abuse. Sexually non-abused adolescents included those adolescents who never witnessed sexual abuse in any form. The sample was selected from educational institutions and Non-Governmental Organizations in Goa. The total sample used in the study was 392 (192 – Sexually abused adolescents and 200 – Sexually non-abused adolescents).

Tools

- **Personal Data Sheet** – included questions pertaining to personal and socio-demographic information and sexual experiences.
- **Adolescent Coping Scale** – Second Edition (Specific – Short Form) - by Frydenberg and Lewis (1993). It is an 18-item self-report inventory that includes three coping styles (solving the problem, reference to others, and non-productive coping) which have been found, through factor analysis, to underlie the 18 coping strategies that are present in the long form of the scale. Every statement, has five possible responses: Does not apply, Used very little, Used sometimes, Used often, and Used a great deal. The various internal consistency reliability measure estimates varied from .62 to .79.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from various educational institutions and Non-Governmental Organizations within the state of Goa. The adolescents were approached individually and informed consent was obtained. Subsequently, the data collection tools were administered after assuring confidentiality. The responses of the participants were scored and then subjected to statistical analysis.

Statistical Techniques

The mean and the standard deviation scores were calculated for the

sub-groups separately. An independent 't' analysis was carried out to determine the significance level of difference between the sample groups.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Mean, standard deviation, and t-value of non-productive coping dimension of the sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents.

| Coping Dimension | Sample Groups | Mean | Standard Deviation | t value |
|-----------------------|---------------------|-------|--------------------|---------|
| Non-Productive Coping | Sexually Abused | 56.38 | 11.04 | 5.14*** |
| | Sexually Non-abused | 46.36 | 7.24 | |

*** P<0.001

An observation of table 01 reveals that the mean scores for non-productive coping dimension of coping of sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents were found to be to be 56.38 (SD 11.04) and 46.36 (SD 7.24) respectively, t= 5.14, p<0.001. This indicates that there exists significant difference in non-productive coping among sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents with the mean scores indicating that adolescents who experienced some form of sexual abuse use more non-productive coping than adolescents who never experienced any form of sexual abuse.

Non-productive coping designates strategies that hinder coping. These include worrying, engaging in wishful thinking, doing nothing about the problem or giving up leading to physical and/or psychological symptoms, ignoring the problem, attempting to feel better by engaging in negative behaviours such as substance abuse, withdrawing from others, blaming oneself, etc. Getting through life is quite a task but getting through adolescence is a task by itself. While every age has its problems, those of adolescence are often especially difficult to cope with for two reasons according to Hurlock (1981): one being that many adolescents are inexperienced in coping with problems as throughout childhood, problems are met and solved, by parents and teachers; and the other reason being that because adolescents want to feel that they are independent, they demand the right of coping with their own problems. Many failures, often with tragic consequences, are due not to the individual's incapacity, but merely to the fact that such demands are made on him at a time in life when all his energies are engaged in trying to solve the major problem created for him by normal sexual growth and development (Freud, 1969). Victims of sexual abuse are reportedly more prone than non-victims to psychological problems such as depression, suicide attempts, and substance disorders (Ex. Brown & Anderson, 1991; Finkelhor, 1986, etc.). Taking into consideration the incapability of adolescents to solve their own problems and the devastating effect the heinous crime of sexual abuse has on these adolescent victims which results in intense physical and emotional reactions, would affect their ability to cope. The heightened sensitivity to the vicissitudes of interpersonal relationships and fears of interpersonal rejection among victims of sexual abuse may result in the development of unhealthy coping patterns such as emotional suppression, denial, and other emotionally avoidant strategies (Polusny & Follette, 1995). Futa, et al. (2003) found that all child abuse victims evidenced a greater tendency to use distancing and self-blame to cope, whereas child sexual abuse victims engaged in self-isolation to a greater degree than did victims of physical abuse and non-victims. In addition, child sexual abuse victims were found to be low in social support seeking, tension reduction, problem-focused coping, and wishful thinking. Avoidance and denial coping strategies appear to be commonly used among sexually abused (Brand & Alexander, 2003; Johnson & Kenkel, 1991; etc) which further leads to increased depressive symptoms. (Sigmon, et al.,1996)

Table 2: Mean, standard deviation, and t-value of problem solving and reference to others coping of the sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents.

| Coping Dimension | Sample Groups | Mean | Standard Deviation | t value |
|---------------------|-----------------|-------|--------------------|---------|
| Solving the Problem | Sexually Abused | 44.81 | 10.29 | 3.98*** |

| | | | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|-------|-------|------|
| | Sexually Non-abused | 52.96 | 8.59 | |
| References to Others | Sexually Abused | 50.61 | 8.82 | 0.43 |
| | Sexually Non-abused | 49.65 | 10.68 | |

***P<0.001

As seen in table 2, the mean scores for problem solving coping of sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents were found to be to be 44.81 (SD 10.29) and 52.96 (SD 8.59) respectively. The t value is computed to be 3.98, which is very highly significant at 0.001 level of confidence. This indicates that there exists a significant difference in the level of coping by solving the problem among sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents with mean scores indicating that adolescents who experienced some form of sexual abuse use the coping skill of solving the problem lesser than adolescents who never experienced any form of sexual abuse.

Coping refers to a range of diverse cognitions and behaviours used to manage the internal and external demands of a stressful or threatening situation (Lazarus & Folkman,1984). Problem-focused strategies are simply solution-oriented approaches to dealing with a situation that causes stress. The type of strategy a person utilises depends largely on perceived control (Spirito et al.,1991). Problem-focused strategies are used if a solution to the problem is considered within the individual's capabilities (Spirito et al.,1991). Coping by solving the problem by taking control of the stress, seeking information or assistance in handling the situation, and removing oneself from the stressful situation, could help deal with the problem, but unfortunately, with regard to victims of sexual abuse, they may be left feeling shocked, confused, and overwhelmed, unprepared to deal with the many thoughts and emotions that arise. Coping by solving the problem would involve disclosing the abuse and punishing the abuser, which many victims may often find difficult to do due to the stigma and self-blame attached to this crime and hence, victims of sexual abuse may ruminate on the distress caused by the abuse and resort to non-productive ways of coping. Bal, et al. (2004) reported more traumatic symptoms and more avoidant coping strategies among sexually abused adolescents and avoidant coping as a mediator between sexual abuse and the severity of symptoms.

With regard to the second dimension of coping that is reference to others, as seen in table 02, the mean scores for sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents were found to be to be 50.61 (SD 8.82) and 49.65 (SD 10.68) respectively. The t value was computed to be 0.43 which is not significant, indicating that significant differences do not exist in the level of coping by reference to others among sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents. Reference to others represents the coping strategies that people use when they turn for support to external resources, such as peers and professionals. Knowing how and when to get help from others and how to get along with others are skills that contribute to success in life. These include the following: seeking social support, investing in friendship, seeking to belong, seeking spiritual support, seeking professional help, joining others who have similar concerns, etc. Sexual assault can be a lonely and frightening experience, leaving the victim feeling shocked, confused, overwhelmed, and unprepared to deal with the situation. The victim may be petrified to do things that used to come naturally. Using the strategy of reference to others, would involve first of all involve overcoming the shock and acknowledging the fact that the crime has occurred and the abuse can no longer remain frozen in time, which can be followed by seeking support from others or joining others with similar concerns (Finkelhor,1986; Russell,1986). Many victims of sexual abuse are stunned by the abuse and hence never disclose or delay disclosing their abuse for years, attesting to the extreme difficulty of revealing the secret but with regard to the state of Goa where professional counselling services are available in almost every educational institution, and awareness is created on regularly basis on sexual abuse, the stigma attached to this monstrous crime is eliminated to an extent and hence, it has become a little easier for these ill-fated victims to disclose the abuse and seek help from professional

counsellors who are easily available in the educational institutions.

4. Conclusion

As hypothesized in the present study, sexually abused adolescents were found to have significantly higher non-productive coping and significantly lower coping by solving the problem as compared to sexually non-abused. However, there was no significant difference in the reference to others coping between the sexually abused and the sexually non-abused adolescents.

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