



Understanding Psychological Theories and Etiology of Child Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT

Child sexual abuse can be literally addressed as the most inhumane act of shattering innocence by an adult. It can be broadly defined as an act of establishing sexual relationship with a child by an adult. The growing number of child sexual abuse cases, both at the global and national level has reiterated the need to effectively combat this menace. Researches have elaborately explained child sexual abuse from its divergent perspectives.

In the present paper, the author has summarized a few major psychological theories of child sexual abuse that explains the etiology of sexually deviant behaviour in human beings. The discussion is attempted for an accurate understanding of the psychological basis of sexually deviant behaviour. This in turn would facilitate to implement appropriate stringent measures to alleviate the crime and also aid in the rehabilitation of the sexual perpetrators for preventing further propagation.

KEYWORDS

Biological theory, Psychodynamic theory, Behavioural theory, Attachment theory, Cognitive-behavioral theory, Integrated theory.

Introduction- Background

Alarming revelations of a survey report by Ministry of Women and Child Development in association with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and a few Indian NGOs working for Child's rights found that more than 53% of children in India are subjected to sexual abuse. Additionally, most cases of child sexual abuse remained unreported. The survey was conducted in 2007 and covered 13 states across the country with a sample size of 12,447. The key findings also indicated that more than 50% of the participants were sexually abused in ways that ranged from severe forms such as rape or fondling to milder forms such as molestation, forcible kissing etc. In 50% of such cases, the abusers were known to the child or were holding a position of trust and responsibility. Most victims were forced to remain silent and hence the abuse remained unreported.

The above mentioned survey reports have again kindled the minds and hearts of millions of people to raise and stand up for this sensitive, growing and inhumane truth of the progressive modern society. Parents, teachers, social workers, media, policy makers and the community at large are working towards alleviating this gruesome crime of bruising childhood. Relevance and inclusion of sex education in schools is emerging as a crucial topic among the academic community. Social awareness is at full pace through online networks. The growing number of child sexual abuse has initiated amendments at the policy level with the recently amended Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) passed by the Indian Parliament in June 2012. The Act envisages a variety of offences under which an accused can be punished.

One of the prime issue in the war against the butchers of innocence is to sensitize the target group viz. the children to be aware, understand, defend and speak up against the injustice done to them. Parents and school has a critical role in empowering the kids against sexual abuse. The present paper is an attempt to highlight a few theories and etiology of sexual abuse. The author is trying to focus on the psychological basis of child sexual abuse and highlight the need to understand this psychological knowledge.

Why to understand?

Basically, the theories and etiology of child sexual abuse offers psychological explanations built on empirically tested psychological principles to the act of sexually abusing a child by an individual. These explanations and facts serve as a reference for the policy makers to innovate and implement appropriate

and stringent policy measures to curb the crime. Understanding the various theories and reasons of why an adult maintains a sexual relationship with a child is nevertheless never a justification or relief for the victim or the immediate ones of the victims. In spite of its heterogeneous nature and the inherent complexity of the deviant behaviour, the individual trauma and pain remains crucially significant. Hence, understanding the why of child sexual abuse possess a significantly higher social/ administrative perspective. Also, these explanations has a therapeutic value in the rehabilitation of the offenders to curtail further propagation of the crime.

In the section to follow, the author has summarized the biological, psychological and sociological theories of the sexually deviant behaviour. The major theories mentioned below are biological theory, psychodynamic theory, behavioural theory, attachment theory, cognitive- behavioural theory and integrated theory. Each theory is summarized with its key characteristics that explain the etiology of sexually deviant behaviour. However, owing to the heterogeneity of the perpetrators of such abuse and the complex nature of this behavior, no one theory adequately explains: (a) the motivating factors that lead an adult male to have sexual relations with a child and (b) the sustaining factors that contribute to the continuance of such relations (Bickley & Beech, 2001).

Biological Theory

Biological theory focused on organic explanations of human behavior. The theory emphasized the role of physiological factors, such as hormone levels and chromosomal makeup on the behavior (Berlin, 1983; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990). Androgen, which are male sex hormones, promote sexual arousal, orgasm and ejaculation as well as regulate sexuality, aggression, cognition, emotion and personality (Rösler & Witzum, 2000; Marques et al., 2002). The theory asserted the role of androgen and androgen-releasing hormones, which are known to be related to physical changes in the male. From a chromosomal perspective, Berlin (1983) discussed the possibility of a biological condition, such as Klinefelter's Syndrome predisposing a male towards sexually abusive behavior. A review of the literature suggested the prevalence of sexual deviation among individuals who are diagnosed with Klinefelter's Syndrome.

Psychodynamic theory

Psychodynamic theory is built on Freud's four states of childhood development viz. oral, anal, phallic and genital. The theory explained sexual deviance as an expression of the un-

resolved conflicts experienced during the stages of development. These unresolved problems brought about fixations or hindrances during stages of development, with consequent distortion of a sexual object or a sexual aim (Schwartz, 1995). Psychodynamic theory also asserted the structure of human psyche as composed of three primary elements: the id, the ego and the superego. Freudian theory portrayed the human psyche as being in a constant struggle to fulfill the primal desires of the id and the moral authority of the superego. According to this theory, sexual aggressors were lacking in a strong superego and have become overwhelmed by their primal id. The theory lacked empirical evidences and hence less accepted by contemporary psychologists.

Behavioral Theory

Behavioural theory explained deviant sexual behavior as a learned condition. Laws and Marshall (1990) presented a theoretical model of sexually deviant behavior that described how sexually deviant interests may be learned through the same mechanisms by which conventional sexuality is learned. The model is divided into two parts: the acquisition processes and the maintenance processes. There are six basic conditioning principles (Pavlovian Conditioning, Operant Conditioning, Extinction, Punishment, Differential Consequences and the Chaining of Behavior); two social learning influences (General Social Learning Influences and Self-Labeling Influences); and three maintenance processes (Specific Influences, Specific Social Learning Influences and Intermittent Reinforcement). The model adopted the position that maladaptive behavior can result from quantitative and qualitative combinations of processes that were intrinsically orderly, strictly determined and normal in origin. Thus, deviant sexual preferences and cognition were acquired by the same mechanisms by which other individuals learned more conventionally accepted modes of sexual expression.

Attachment Theory

According to attachment theory, humans have an innate tendency to establish strong emotional bonds with others, and when individuals have some loss or emotional distress, they act out as result of their loneliness and isolation. The theory asserted the belief that adequate parenting style fostered appropriate social skills in children and facilitated balanced development. Research indicated that poor quality of attachment and sexual offending were related. Marshall (1989) found that men who sexually abused children often had not developed the social skills and self confidence necessary for them to form effective intimate relations with peers. This failure caused frustration in these men that may cause them to continue to seek intimacy with underaged partners.

Seidman et al. (1994) conducted two studies aimed at examining intimacy problems and the experience of loneliness among sex offenders. According to these studies, sex offenders had deficiencies in social skills (i.e., problems in accurately perceiving social cues, problems in deciding on appropriate behavior and deficiencies in the skills essential to enact effective behavior) that seriously restricted the possibility of attaining intimacy. The evidence suggested that deficiencies in intimacy were a distinctive and important feature of sex offenders. The rapists and non-familial child molesters in the sample appeared to be the most deficient in intimacy. Loneliness was also a significantly distinguishable variable in differentiating the sex offenders from controls and wife batterers.

Mulloy and Marshall (1999) proposed the concept of attachment style in influencing sexual behaviour. Marshall and Marshall (2002) cited Ward et al.'s (1995) proposition that sexual offenders who have a preoccupied insecure attachment style will characteristically "court" the child and treats him or her as a lover.

Cognitive -Behavioral Theory

The theory addressed the way in which offenders' thoughts affected their behavior; focused on the way in which sex offenders diminished their feelings of guilt and shame by ration-

alizing it through excuses and justifications. The theory postulated cognitive distortions (CDs), or distorted thinking patterns that allowed the offenders to remove from themselves any responsibility, shame or guilt for their actions (Abel et al., 1984). These rationalizations protected the offenders from self-blame and allowed them to validate their behavior through cognitive defenses. Cognitive-behaviorists explored how offenders' thoughts affected their behavior. The nature of these cognitive distortions is not clear. Some researchers suggested that CDs were self-serving, and thus, the offender consciously distorted thoughts initially (Abel et al., 1984). Regardless, CDs were considered crucial to the maintenance of offending behavior for both rapists and child molesters because they served the needs of the offenders to continue their behavior without feeling guilt for their actions. Researchers also labeled sexual entitlement as a specific cognitive distortion, resulting from the narcissistic attitudes of offenders who sought only to fulfill their own desires (Hanson, Gizzarelli and Scott, 1998, p. 197). However broadly or specifically the cognitive distortions were defined, these distorted thoughts were conducive towards the maintenance of deviant sexual practices.

The theory postulated that all sex offenders had a tendency to misread social cues by others and are poor at identifying emotions such as anger or fear in their victims. Both rapists and child molesters often perceived their victims as initiating sexual contact, and see their victims' actions as sexually provocative. Child molesters misread cues from children in several ways, and the better they know the victim the more likely this was to happen. Children are naturally affectionate towards adults, particularly those whom they know well. Child molesters viewed these naturally affectionate actions – such as sitting on an adult's lap – as sexual in nature and perceived the children as initiating sexual contact. They also perceived any sexual curiosity displayed by the child as a desire to know about sex, and they wanted to "teach" the child through sexual experiences. These misperceptions reinforced the offenders' narcissistic beliefs and detract from the ability for an offender to feel any empathy for his victims.

Integrated theory

The theory focused on the presumption that there were pre-conditions to child sexual abuse, which integrated the various theories about why individuals begin to participate in sexually deviant behavior. Integrated theory addressed the motivation to offend and the rationalization of the deviant behavior. The focus is on the inhibitions of the offenders (internal barriers) and how these barriers are diminished during the act of sexual abuse. The theory postulated that distorted thoughts could lead to deviant actions. Finkelhor (1984) is one of the pioneer theorists of child sexual abuse. He formulated models and organizational framework consisting of underlying factors of child sexual abuse. The primary focus of Finkelhor's model was on the internal barriers, or "self talk," comments and observations of sex offenders about the world around them. This self talk allowed offenders to break through barriers which, until this time, had prevented them from acting out their feelings about perceptions of injustice, loneliness and other such stressors. Once these barriers were diminished, this mistaken thinking can lead to actions, which are the result of normal internal barriers being absent.

The process of internal barriers influencing deviant sexual behaviour was further explained by Finkelhor's (1984) organizational framework consisting of four separate underlying factors that explained not only why offenders abused, but also why the abuse continued. These factors included: (1) emotional congruence, (2) sexual arousal, (3) blockage and (4) disinhibition. Emotional congruence was a term used to convey the relationship between the adult abuser's emotional needs and the child's characteristics. Sexual arousal, the second component of Finkelhor's theory, evaluated the reasons why children would elicit sexual arousal in an adult. Blockage essentially dealt with the abuser's ability to have his sexual and emotional needs met in adult relationships. Disinhibition referred to the factors that helped a child molester overcome his inhibitions

so that he allowed himself to molest a child. The framework precisely described the high risk group of individuals who were more vulnerable to indulge in a sexual offence. According to this framework, a combination of coping problems and the stress exerted by these problems on the coping system of the individual contributed towards development of an attitude favourable to sexual abuse. This high risk or vulnerable nature in turn increased the probability that the individual often engaged in sexually deviant behaviour because his belief system has filtered out the normal inhibitions that prevent him to sexually offend a child.

Discussion

Psychological theories of child sexual abuse primarily offer divergent explanations or perspectives of the factors that carry an adult self to indulge in sexual relationship with a child. These factors range from abnormal genetic and physiological configuration to overactive id of human psyche, learned behaviour pattern, insecure attachment style, cognitive distortions to diminished internal barriers of human self. The theories indicate towards an etiology of child sexual abuse which is fundamentally an ill-organization of the human psyche, caused by various inherent and environmental factors. A critical analysis of these theories can serve towards innovating therapeutic measures for adequate rehabilitation of these sexual offenders. Nevertheless, a bigger challenge is to sensitize and empower the target group viz. children to accurately read the psychological and behavioural cues of offenders in advance to prevent the crime. Adequate and critical thoughts has to be laid on how to teach our children the common symptoms exhibited by offenders.

Conclusion

Child sexual abuse is a growing, but horrible inhumane menace of the modern world. Research evidences in social science, psychology and allied disciplines have emerged with findings that repeatedly rekindle the gravity of the sensitive issue of child sexual abuse. Growing incidents of children being sexually molested by the deviant adults have paved way for programmes and actions at the policy level, in schools and at home. The whys of such sexually deviant behaviour needs to be critically analyzed to formulate appropriate measures for such offenders. The present paper has attempted to highlight and summarize a few significant theories underlying the etiology of child sexual abuse. Every individual offender is different and many variables and thinking styles are attributed to the offenses made. Hence, understanding the theories could extend our scope of teaching our children to be safe and empower them to distinguish the lines between good and bad care.

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