

Prevalence and Patterns of Child Sexual Abuse and Victim–Perpetrator Relationship Among Secondary School Students in the Northern Province (South Africa)

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An investigation into the prevalence and characteristics of child sexual abuse in the Northern Province (South Africa) was conducted. A total of 414 secondary school students in standard 9 and 10 in three representative secondary schools completed a retrospective self-rating questionnaire in a classroom setting. The questionnaire asked about childhood sexual abuse and the victim–perpetrator relationship. Results shows an overall (N = 414) child sexual abuse prevalence rate of 54.2%, 60% for males (N = 193), 53.2% for females (N = 216). Among them, 86.7% were kissed sexually, 60.9% were touched sexually, 28.9% were victims of oral/anal/vaginal intercourse. “Friend” was the highest indicated perpetrator in all patterns of sexual abuse. Many victims (86.7%) perceived themselves as not sexually abused as a child, and many (50.2%) rated their childhood as “very happy.” A call is made for more research, publicity, and campaigns in the area of child sexual abuse in the Province.

KEY WORDS: child sexual abuse; prevalence; pattern; victim–perpetrator relationship; South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of and problems associated with child sexual abuses have not been exhaustively researched in many parts of the world. Finkelhor and Browne (1986, pp. 143–179), after reviewing many publications formulated a model, a conceptual framework for the (initial and long-term) effects of childhood sexual abuse. They pointed at the effects to be the conjunction of the following

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trauma-causing factors: Traumatic Sexualization, Stigmatisation, Betrayal, and Powerlessness.

Child sexual abuse is one of the social problems that calls for urgent attention in South Africa (Collings, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1997; Magwaza, 1994; Sonderling, 1993; Haffeejee, 1991; Levett, 1989a,b). The prevalence among a sample of university female students of contact forms of sexual abuse (i.e. actual or attempted intercourse, oral or manual genital contact, sexual kissing, hugging, or touching) has been reported to be 30.9% (Levett, 1989a,b) and 34.8% (Collings, 1997). For both contact and noncontact forms of abuse (i.e. contact abuse plus exhibitionism, voyeurism, sexual threats or invitations), the prevalence has been reported to be 43.6% in female university students in South Africa (Levett, 1989a,b). For male university students, Collings (1991) reported a rate of 28.9% for contact and noncontact forms.

The Child Protection Units of the South African Police Services identified during the first 6 months in 1996, a total of 19,805 cases of crimes against children less than 18 years of age, of which child sexual abuse were 7968 (40%) (rape: 7363, sodomy: 480, and incest: 125) (Piennar, 1996). Although the patterns of sexual abuse (i.e. sexual kisses, touches, oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse; and whether physical force was involved or not) and some characteristics, such as victim–perpetrator relationships, were considered, it has been established that they can vary from region to region (Fromuth and Burkhart, 1987; Peters *et al.*, 1986; Finkelhor, 1979; Leth, 1994). Thus the present study in the Northern Province of South Africa.

Bayley and Kings (1990) explained child sexual abuse to be when an adult or person significantly older or in a position of power interacts with a child in a sexual way for the gratification of the older person. This study limits itself to any contact form of sexual abuse (among the secondary school students) which took place before the age of 17 years. The perpetrator must be an adult or a person at least 5 years older than the child or a person in a position of power.

The Northern Province has a population of 5.4 million inhabitants. Among them, 97.1% are blacks, 0.1% are coloured, 0.1% are Indians/Asians, and 2.7% are whites. Males comprise 45.7% and females 54.3%. Many inhabitants live in poor economic and medical conditions (Republic of South Africa, 1996; Health Systems Trust and Department of Health, 1997). In South Africa, if a child indicates that he or she has been sexually touched by an adult—where the adult is known—it is required by law that the information be revealed to the police, or to a Commissioner of Child Welfare or a social worker (Du Plessis, 1996).

METHOD

Participants

Participants for this study were all standard nine and ten secondary (high) school students in three schools in the Northern Province. One school is situated

in a village (Graskop), one in a semiurban area (Mahwelereng), while the other is in an urban area (Pietersburg). Schools were randomly chosen and the representative character of each of them was confirmed by the Department of Education of the Province. Standard nine and ten secondary school students were chosen because the authors believe that they are mature enough to have the courage to report their sexually abusive experiences, and at the same time their ages are expected not to be too far above our operational maximum age for child sexual abuse (16 years). This would give them the maximum opportunity to remember what happened before they were 17. The total number of participants was 414: 193 (46.6%) males, 216 (52.2%) females, and 5 (1.2%) did not indicate their gender. Mean age was 18.5 years ($SD = 2.18$) and range 14–30 years; 15 (3.6%) did not indicate their age; 336 (81.1%) were blacks; 51 (12.3%) were whites; 10 (2.4%) were coloured; 11 (2.7%) were “other,” who decided to describe their skin colour in other ways, for example, “olive”; and 6 (1.4%) did not indicate their skin colour. A total of 207 (50%) live in villages, 107 (25.8%) in semiurban areas/towns, 94 (22.7%) in an urban area, and 6 (1.4%) did not indicate where they live.

Instrument

The instrument used is an anonymous, retrospective, self-rating child maltreatment questionnaire, an abbreviated and modified form of the Child Maltreatment Interview Schedule (Briere, 1993), which has the following components:

1. Questions on the demographic variables of the participants (gender, age, skin colour, and place of residence).
2. Questions on the (physical) contact forms of sexually abusive experiences of participants before the age of 17 years, with an adult or person at least 5 years older or a person in a position of power; who the perpetrator(s) was (were); and whether physical force was used. The patterns of contact sexual abuse considered were sexual kisses or touches, and oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse.
3. Questions on whether the participant perceives himself/herself as sexually abused as a child (i.e. before the age of 17 years) or not, and the overall rating of his or her childhood.

The questionnaire includes both open-ended and close-ended questions, and in some closed-ended questions, multiple choice is possible.

The second and third components of the questionnaire have been used by Raborifi (1997) in South Africa as part of a questionnaire for a study on the history of childhood abuse among female university students. Before use, we administered it to a group of 20 standard nine students in another school (not used for this study) to ensure that the students would understand the questions and that it would be

easy to administer. They were found to have no problem in understanding and answering the questions.

Procedure

The authors obtained approval from the University of the North ethics committee. Furthermore, permission for the research was taken both from the Department of Education in the province and from the principals of the schools. Principals of the schools took the ethical responsibility of informing and obtaining permission from the parents of the participants before hand, where necessary, and from the participants themselves. On the agreed dates with the schools, with the cooperation of the teachers, a research assistant distributed the questionnaire to all the school children in standard nine and ten in their classrooms. The children were first of all explained the purpose of the research, were allowed to ask questions about the research, and then asked to fill-in the questionnaires to the best of their knowledge. It was also made clear to them beforehand that those who did not want to participate should feel free to decline. A total of four (0.96%) students did not fill-in their questionnaires. Questionnaires were collected the same day they were distributed. The language of the questionnaire was English, which was also the language of its administration. All participants completed the questionnaires within 30 min even though 1 h was allocated for the exercise. In view of the fact that the questionnaire may have aroused some emotions, especially among the sexually victimised subjects, students were told to feel free to contact the researchers (through the telephone numbers and in the addresses provided to the students) in case of questions, counselling and/or psychotherapy. Alternatively, any clinical psychologist, psychotherapist, or counsellor available could be consulted. Moreover, it was agreed with the Department of Education that the result of the research shall be made available to them for use in planning preventive health care services in the province.

The administration of the whole questionnaire was completed within 3 weeks in March 1998.

RESULT

Prevalence

Of the total number of respondents ($N = 414$), the number who indicated any form of (physical) contact sexual abuse is 225. This is a prevalence rate of 54.2%. The number of male victims is 108, while that of female victims is 115. This is a prevalence rate of 60% for males and 53.2% for females. Two participants (0.9%) did not indicate their gender.

The number of black victims are 172 (76.4%), that of whites is 39 (17.3% of the victims), that of coloured is 9 (4.0%), that of "others" who decided to describe

their skin colour in other ways, for example, "olive," is 4 (1.8%), and 1 person (0.4%) did not indicate skin colour. This is a prevalence rate of 51.2% for blacks, 76.5% for whites, 90% for coloured, and 36.4% for others.

The number of the victims living in villages is 110 (48.9%), in suburban areas 53 (23.6%), in urban areas 59 (26.2%); 3 (1.3%) did not indicate where they live. This is a prevalence rate of 53.1% for those living in villages, 49.5% for those in semiurban areas, and 62.8% for those in urban areas.

Patterns of (Physical) Contact Child Abuse

A total of 195 participants (86.7%) indicated that they were kissed in a sexual way; 30 (13.3%) indicated that the (sexual) kiss was done by force.

A total of 137 participants (60.9%) indicated that someone touched their bodies in a sexual way or made them touch his/her sexual parts; 23 subjects (10.2%) indicated that the perpetrator used force.

A total of 65 participants (28.9%) indicated that someone has ever had oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with them or has placed their fingers or objects in the participant's anus or vagina; 16 subjects (7.1%) indicated that the sexual intercourse was done by force.

The Perpetrators

Table I shows the frequency distribution of the perpetrator(s) who were indicated to have kissed the child in a sexual way.

Table I shows that 63 subjects (32.3%) did not indicate the perpetrator; "friend" has the highest frequency, 87 (44.6%); followed by "mother," 10 (5.1%); then by "stranger" with 9 (4.6%).

Further Chi-square analysis to determine whether there is any significant difference in gender of those victimized (sexual kisses) by "friend" shows no significant difference: males = 44 and females = 42 (1 missing variable), $\chi^2 = 0.046$, $df = 1$, $p = ns$.

Table II shows the frequency distribution of the perpetrator(s) who were indicated to have touched the body of the participant in a sexual way before he or she was 17 years old, or who made the participant touch the perpetrator's sexual parts.

Table II shows that 7 (5.1%) did not indicate the perpetrator; "friend" was highest, 84 (61.3%); followed by "combination of professional and friend/extended family member/stranger/nanny," 9 (6.6%); and then "stranger" and "combination of family member and friend/extended family member/stranger/nanny," 6 (4.4%).

Further Chi-square analysis to determine if there is any significant difference in gender of those victimized (sexual touches) by "friend" shows that there is no significant difference: males = 45 and females = 39 (1 missing variable), $\chi^2 = 0.428$, $df = 1$, $p = ns$.

Table I. Frequency Distribution of the Perpetrator(s) Who Were Indicated to Have Kissed the Participants in a Sexual Way Before the Age of 17

Perpetrator	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Father	1	0.5	0.8	0.8
Mother	10	5.1	7.6	8.3
Brother	1	0.5	0.8	9.1
Sister	2	1.0	1.5	10.6
Uncle	4	2.1	3.0	13.6
Aunt	2	1.0	1.5	15.2
Friend	87	44.6	65.9	81.1
Stranger	9	4.6	6.8	87.9
Other professional	1	0.5	0.8	90.9
Doctor	3	1.5	2.3	90.2
Combination of family members	1	0.5	0.8	91.7
Combination of family members & professional	2	1.0	1.5	93.2
Combination of family members & friends/extended family/strangers/nanny	2	1.0	1.5	94.7
Combination of family members & professionals & friends/extended family/strangers/nanny	.4	2.1	3.0	100.0
Combination of professionals & friends/extended family/strangers/nanny	3	1.5	2.3	97.0
Total	195	100.0	100.0	

Table III shows the frequency distribution of the perpetrators indicated to have had oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with the participants or to have placed their fingers or objects in the participant's anus or vagina.

Table III shows that 7 subjects (10.8%) did not indicate the perpetrator; "friend" has the highest frequency, 40 (61.5%); followed by "stranger," 5 (7.7%); and by "other professional," 4 (6.2%).

Further Chi-square analysis to find out whether there is any significant difference in gender of those victimised (oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse) by "friend" shows no significant difference: males = 15 and females = 25 (1 missing variable), $\chi^2 = 2.5$, $df = 1$, $p = ns$.

Other Questions

Among those who answered the first question, 21 (9.3%) indicated that they perceived themselves as sexually abused as a child while 195 (90.7%) did not. Among those who perceived themselves as sexually abused as a child, 7 were males (i.e., 6.5% of the male victims) and 13 were females (i.e., 11.3% of the female victims). Among those who did not perceive themselves as sexually abused as a child, 99 were males (i.e., 91.7% of the male victims) and 97 were females (i.e., 84.4% of the female victims).

Table II. Frequency Distribution of the Perpetrator(s) Who Were Indicated to Have Touched the Body of the Participant in a Sexual Way Before He/She Was 17 Years Old, or Who Made the Subject Touch the Perpetrator's Sexual Parts

Perpetrator	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Sister	3	2.2	2.3	2.3
Uncle	3	2.2	2.3	4.6
Aunt	1	0.7	0.8	5.4
Friend	84	61.3	64.6	70.0
Stranger	6	4.4	4.6	74.6
Babysitter/nanny	1	0.7	0.8	75.4
Teacher	1	0.7	0.8	76.2
Other professional	6	4.4	4.6	84.6
Doctor	5	3.6	3.8	80.0
Combination of friends/extended family members/strangers/nanny	1	0.7	0.8	85.4
Combination of family members & professional	1	0.7	0.8	86.2
Combination of family members & friends/extended family/strangers/nanny	6	4.4	4.6	90.8
Combination of family members & professionals & friends/extended family/strangers/nanny	3	2.2	2.3	100
Combination of professionals & friends/extended family/strangers/nanny	9	6.6	6.9	97.7
Total	137	100.0	100.0	

Table III. Frequency Distribution of the Perpetrators Indicated to Have Had Oral, Anal, or Vaginal Intercourse With the Participants or Who Have Placed Their Fingers or Objects in the Participant's Anus or Vagina

Perpetrator	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Father	2	3.1	3.4	3.4
Sister	1	1.5	1.7	5.2
Uncle	2	3.1	3.4	8.6
Aunt	1	1.5	1.7	10.3
Friend	40	61.5	69.0	79.3
Stranger	5	7.7	8.6	87.9
Other professional	4	6.2	6.9	96.6
Doctor	1	1.5	1.7	89.7
Combination of friends/extended family members/strangers/nanny	1	1.5	1.7	98.3
Combination of family members & professionals & friends/extended family/strangers/nanny	1	1.5	1.7	100
Total	65	100.0	100.0	

A total of 39 (17.3%) rated their childhood as "very unhappy," 63 (28%) rated it as "average," 113 (50.2%) rated it as "very happy," and 10 (4.4%) did not indicate their rating. Among those who perceived themselves as very unhappy during childhood, 15 were males (i.e., 13.9% of the male victims) and 24 were females (i.e., 20.9% of the female victims). Among those who perceived themselves as average during childhood, 33 were males (i.e., 30.6% of the male victims) and 30 were females (i.e., 26.1% of the female victims). Among those who perceived themselves as very happy during childhood, 56 were males (i.e., 51.9% of the male victims) and 56 were females (i.e., 48.7% of the female victims).

DISCUSSION

The prevalence rates for contact forms of child sexual abuse among our participants (54.3% for all, 60% for males, 53.2% for females) are high. Looking at this result from the conceptual framework of Finkelhor and Browne (1986), it implies that many of these victims of child sexual abuse are likely to suffer psychological and behavioral problems as a result of traumatic sexualisation, stigmatisation, betrayal, and powerlessness. This view is confirmed by a review of the literature made by Beitchman *et al.* (1991) which shows that many adolescents with a history of childhood sexual abuse reported short-term sequelae such as sexual dissatisfaction, promiscuity, homosexuality, an increased risk for revictimisation, depression, and suicidal ideation or behavior. The prevalence rate among our female participants is higher than that reported by those of Levett (1989a,b, 30.9%) and those of Collings (1997, 34.8%). Two things may explain the difference in the rates obtained by Levett and Collings on the one hand, and that obtained by us. The area of our study is different (Northern Province). In this province, many parents work as migrant laborers—either in other provinces or at places far away from their homes. As a result, many children are left either alone at home during the weekdays after school or with nannies and grandparents, who may not give them proper care. Thus, they are vulnerable to sexual abuse from opportunistic perpetrators. The prevalence rate among our male participants (60%) is much higher than that reported by Collings, 1991, (28.9%). The prevalence rate among our male subjects (60%) is higher than that of our female subjects (53.2%). This is contrary to popular expectation and to other reported findings (Pilkington and Kremer, 1995), and for example, when the findings of Collings 1991 (28.9% for males) is compared with the findings of Collings 1997 (34.8% for females). Lodico *et al.* (1996) in their study among school-based adolescents found females were four times more likely to report sexual abuse than males. It may mean that our male participants felt freer or were more open in reporting their childhood sexual experiences than the females. Furthermore, it could also be that absence of the adult male (who is working as a migrant laborer) in many families and the frequent single parenthood in the society contribute to adult females abusing boys.

The above findings show higher prevalence rates than that in major studies of child sexual abuse in North America, where one-fifth to one-third of all women reported some sort of childhood sexual encounters with an adult male (Pilkington and Kremer, 1995) and a 20-countries study by Finkelhor (1994) who found a history of child sexual abuse in 7% to 36% for women and 3% to 29% for men.

It is worth noting that the rates for blacks (51.2%), whites (76.5%), and coloured (90%) differ greatly. This gives room for speculation in the social and family lifestyles of the different groups. The social and familial tie among blacks, which is known to be strong and which therefore serves as a check for social misconduct, may account for the lower rate. The same social tie may have, as a control factor, also accounted for the lower rate of child sexual abuse among village dwellers (53.1%) when compared to that of urban-area dwellers (62.8%). Moreover, factor of residence has not been considered by other researchers in this field in South Africa.

Prevalence rates for the different patterns of sexual abuse show that the actual genital intercourse (28.9%) is much lower than that which may be considered as "milder" forms of contact sexual abuse (sexual kisses, 86.7%, and touches, 60.9%). The rate at which force is being used by the perpetrators (13.3% for sexual kisses, 10.2% for sexual touches, and 7.1% for oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse) calls for attention and more in-depth study of rape among children in the province. Sexual abuse involving penetration, force or violence, and a close relationship to the perpetrator have been indicated to be the most harmful in terms of long-term effects on the child (Beitchman *et al.*, 1991).

In all three forms of sexual abuse considered in this study, "friend" was highest in the rank of perpetrators as compared to relatives (in parentheses): 44.4% (12.7%) for sexual kisses, 61.3% (9.5%) for sexual touches, 61.5% (10.2%) for oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse. Collings (1997) reported the victim-perpetrator relationship to be highest among "acquaintances" (40.4%). In agreement with our findings, we presume that "friend" would form the majority of what Collings called "acquaintance." One may also speculate that many participants who indicated "friend" as the perpetrator may have decided to ignore our age criterion for perpetrators and indicated all forms of childhood sexual relationship with a friend or some of the participants may have written the word "friend" to mean an "acquaintance" (as some people in the area colloquially use it). This would raise not only the percentage of indication of "friend" as perpetrator but also the overall prevalence rate of child sexual abuse observed in the province. The high rate of "friends" as perpetrators is different from other studies wherein the highest rate of perpetrators was found among relatives, for example, among Mexican Americans, 43% were relatives and 37% acquaintances (Huston *et al.*, 1995).

This study has its limitations. Only standard nine and ten secondary school students were used as participants. This would limit the external validity of our findings. Moreover, noncontact forms of sexual abuse were not considered. There

are also other aspects of child sexual abuse that needs further investigation, for example, the exact age(s) of victims and perpetrator(s) at the time of victimization, and the gender of perpetrators. Knowledge of the gender of perpetrators would have made it possible for one to statistically match the gender of victims against that of perpetrators. Since some participants were victimized by both members and nonmembers of the family (at the same time or at different times), the authors did not investigate the number of those victimized by members and those by nonmembers of the family. Also the duration of victimization and secondary victimization (the psychological and behavioral effects of the victimization on the victims) were not investigated. The very high prevalence rates, especially among males, and the small percentage who felt abused, may be because of inclusion of many trivial incidents. This should be guarded against in future studies.

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