

Self-Esteem and Psychological Distress among Sexually Abused and Sexually Non-Abused Adolescents

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Abstract: *The study was intended to assess self-esteem and psychological distress of sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents. The objectives of the study were to determine the significance of the relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress of sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents; and to assess significant differences in self-esteem and psychological distress. The tools used comprised of the Personal data sheet, Self-esteem scale, and the Brief Symptom Inventory which were administered on a sample of 80 adolescents from Goa – 40 of whom who had experienced some form of sexual abuse and 40 of whom who had never experienced any form of sexual abuse. Karl Pearson's Product Moment Correlation and t-test were used for analysis. Results indicated a significant and negative correlation between self-esteem and psychological distress of sexually abused adolescents, a negative correlation between self-esteem and psychological distress of sexually non-abused adolescents, self-esteem differed significantly with sexually abused having a lower self-esteem than sexually non-abused adolescents, psychological distress differed significantly with sexually abused having higher levels of psychological distress than sexually non-abused adolescents.*

Keywords: Adolescents, Sexually Abused Adolescents, Sexually Non-abused Adolescents Self-Esteem, Psychological Distress

1. Introduction

Children and adolescents throughout much history have been treated with cruelty and received little protection from such treatment. The sexual abuse of children and adolescents is a significant worldwide problem (De Mause, 1991), the scale of which was largely unrecognised until the late 1970s (Finkelhor, 1994). Sexual abuse is any sexual interaction including all forms of intercourse, attempted intercourse, genital contact, kissing, touching of breasts, exposure to and participation in pornography between two people without consent, or between a child and an adult with or without the child's consent, and where there was force, coercion or threat, for sexual gratification or benefit of the abuser, which can potentially have negative short or long-term impact on the victim.

Psychological Distress: Psychological distress is a general term used to describe unpleasant feelings or emotions that impact a persons' level of functioning. Psychological distress can result in negative views of the environment, others, and the self and can interfere with work performance. Traumatic experiences, the death of a loved one, sexual abuse, and divorce are causes of psychological distress. Sadness, anxiety, distraction, and symptoms of mental illness are manifestations of psychological distress.

Self-Esteem: Self-esteem is the evaluative aspect of the self-concept that corresponds to an overall view of the self as worthy or unworthy (Baumeister, 1998). Experiences in a person's life are a major source of self-esteem development. The positive or negative life experiences one has, creates attitudes toward the self which can be favourable and develop positive feelings of self-worth, or can be unfavourable and develop negative feelings of self-worth.

2. Literature Review

Diekstra, (1997); Harrison, Hoffman, and Edwall, (1989); Kendall-Tackett, Williams, and Finkelhor, (1993); Luster and Small, (1997) have consistently found that adolescent survivors of child sexual abuse report greater depression and general psychological distress, more conduct problems and aggression, lower self-esteem, and more substance abuse problems.

Research studies by Browne (1986); Beitchman et al. (1991); Cotgrove and Kolvin (1996); Tyler (2002), etc. have revealed that the common effects of sexual abuse are aggressive or disturbed behaviour, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, guilt, fear, eating disorders, self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide, substance misuse and relationship problems.

3. Problem Definition

To study the relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress among sexually abused and non-abused adolescents and to assess significant differences in self-esteem and psychological distress among sexually abused and non-abused adolescents.

4. Hypotheses of the Study

Ha₁: Self-esteem of sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents is significantly and negatively related to their psychological distress.

Ha₂: Sexually abused adolescents have significantly lower self-esteem than sexually non-abused adolescents.

Ha₃: Sexually abused adolescents have significantly higher psychological distress as compared to sexually non-abused adolescents.

5. Participants

To include subjects for the study, purposive sampling method was used. The population of the study comprised of sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents in the age group of 11 to 18 years. Sexually abused adolescents included those adolescents who have been victims of any form of sexual abuse. Sexually non-abused adolescents included those adolescents who have never witnessed sexual abuse in any form.

6. Tools Used

Self-esteem Scale (1965) – The Self-Esteem Scale is a brief and unidimensional measure of global self-esteem which was developed by Dr. Morris Rosenberg. It consists of 10 items that measures global self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self. All items are answered using a 4-point Likert scale format ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The Cronbach-Alpha reliability for the scale was computed to be 0.746 and the Guttman’s Split half reliability was found to be 0.766.

Brief Symptom Inventory (1975) - The Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) developed by Derogatis, L. was used to assess Psychological Distress. The scale consists of 53 items covering nine symptom dimensions: Somatization, Obsession-Compulsion, Interpersonal Sensitivity, Depression, Anxiety, Hostility, Phobic anxiety, Paranoid ideation and Psychoticism; and three global indices of distress: Global Severity Index, Positive Symptom Distress Index, and Positive Symptom Total. Respondents rank each feeling item on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (extremely). Rankings characterize the intensity of distress during the past seven days. The Cronbach-Alpha reliability for the scale was computed to be 0.866 and the Guttman’s Split half reliability was found to be 0.908.

7. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Mean, standard deviation scores, and correlation coefficient for Self-esteem and psychological distress.

Sample Group	Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation Coefficient
Sexually Abused	Self-esteem	80	15.83	6.17	-0.39**
	Psychological Distress	80	2.37	1.05	
Sexually Non-Abused	Self-esteem	80	30.39	3.24	-0.28
	Psychological Distress	80	1.17	0.51	

** Significant at the 0.01 level.

Karl Pearson’s product moment correlation for self-esteem and psychological skill usage of sexually abused adolescents was computed to be -0.39 which was significant at 0.01 level. Karl Pearson’s product moment correlation for self-esteem and psychological skill usage of sexually non-abused adolescents was computed to be -0.28 which was insignificant. The above analysis indicates that since the

correlation between self-esteem and psychological skill usage is negative, an increase in the levels of psychological distress of adolescents who have experienced some form of sexual abuse will lead to a decline in their level of self-esteem and vice versa and low levels of psychological distress or no psychological distress will lead to a better self-esteem and vice versa in adolescents who never experienced any form of sexual abuse. The above finding is obtained probably because sexual abuse is a social problem that has devastating effects on the victims and the effect is much worse for adolescents who are in a phase of life that is very challenging. The positive or negative life experiences one has, creates attitudes toward the self which can be favourable and develop positive feelings of self-worth, or can be unfavourable and develop negative feelings of self-worth. Besides, traumatic experiences like sexual abuse is a cause of psychological distress and as mentioned earlier, experiences in a person’s life are a major source of self-esteem development, these negative life experiences can have a negative impact on the self-esteem of these ill-fated adolescents who experienced/are currently experiencing sexual abuse in their lives. Supporting this finding is a study by Palmer, Brown, Rae-Grant, & Loughin (2001) which found that survivors of child abuse tended to be depressed, have low-self-esteem, and to have problems with family functioning.

Psychological distress, just like any mental illness, impacts one’s functioning and interferes with a person’s everyday activities and which can result in negative views of the environment, others, and the self and hence, low levels of psychological distress in adolescents who never experienced any form of sexual abuse will lead to better feelings of self-worth.

Table 2: Mean, standard deviation scores, and t-value for self-esteem.

Variables	Sample Groups	Mean	Standard Deviation	t value
Self-esteem	Sexually Abused	16.88	6.59	8.37**
	Sexually Non-abused	30.39	3.24	

** Significant at 0.01 level

As seen in table 2, the mean scores for self-esteem of sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents were found to be 16.88 and 30.39 with corresponding standard deviations of 6.59 and 3.24 respectively. The t value was computed to be 8.37 which was statistically significant at 0.01 level. This indicates that there exists significant differences in the level of self-esteem with regard to sexual abuse. An analysis of the mean scores indicates that adolescents who experienced some form of sexual abuse have lower self-esteem as compared to adolescents who never experienced any form of sexual abuse. This could be probably because sexual abuse has deleterious effects on the victims and the impact is worse more so because the phase of life that these victims are in at the moment is in itself a very challenging phase in which the individual experiences a number of changes and challenges that occur both within and outside the individual. Since, the experiences of a person’s life are a major source of his/her self-esteem, negative life experiences like being sexually abused can

have devastating effects on the personal judgment of the worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes that the individual holds towards himself.

The above finding is supported by numerous researches which reveal that the long-term effects of sexual abuse include depression, guilt, poor self-esteem, and feelings of inferiority (Brickman & Briere, 1984; Briere & Runtz, 1985; Herman, 1981; Jehu, Gazan, & Klassen, 1985; Meiselman, 1978; Peters, 1984; Tsai & Wagner, 1978). Further, a number of studies have implicated child sexual abuse in lowering self-esteem in adults (Beitchman et al. 1992), but the most sophisticated examination of the issue to date is that of Romans et al. (1996) which showed a clear relationship between poor self-esteem in adulthood and a history of child sexual abuse in those who reported more intrusive forms of abuse involving penetration.

Table 3: Mean, standard deviation scores, and t-value for psychological distress.

Variables	Sexually Abused/Sexually Non-abused	Mean	Standard Deviation	t value
Psychological Distress	Sexually Abused	2.26	1.03	5.02**
	Sexually Non-abused	0.98	0.49	

** Significant at 0.01 level

An observation of table 3 reveals that the mean scores for psychological distress of sexually abused and sexually non-abused adolescents were computed to be 2.26 and 0.98 with corresponding standard deviations of 1.03 and 0.49 respectively. The t value was computed to be 5.02 which was statistically significant at 0.01 level. This indicates that there exists significant differences in the level of psychological distress with regard to sexual abuse. An analysis of the mean scores indicates that adolescents who experienced some form of sexual abuse have higher levels of psychological distress as compared to adolescents who never experienced any form of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse creates some of the most severe emotional and traumatic reactions. It invokes intense fear, helplessness, or horror and a range of symptoms, such as reoccurring recollections or dreams of the event, persistent avoidance of all things associated with the trauma, numbing and lack of responsiveness, and increased alertness to perceived threats. This traumatic event can thus have devastating effects on the victim thereby increasing their levels of psychological distress which in turn interferes with a person's everyday activities and can result in negative views of the environment, others, and the self.

Further supporting the above finding is a longitudinal investigation by Fergusson et al., (1996) which indicated that child sexual abuse increases the likelihood that an adolescent will experience depression as well as other psychiatric disorders. Also, research studies conducted by Garnefski and Arends, (1998); Garnefski and Diekstra, (1997); etc. have consistently found that adolescent survivors of child sexual abuse report greater depression and general psychological distress, more conduct problems and

aggression, lower self-esteem, and more substance abuse problems.

8. Conclusion

As hypothesized in the present study, the self-esteem of sexually abused adolescents was found to be significantly and negatively related to their psychological distress, while the self-esteem of sexually non-abused adolescents is negatively but not significantly related to their psychological distress. Significantly lower self-esteem was observed in sexually abused adolescents than sexually non-abused adolescents. Sexually abused adolescents were found to have significantly higher psychological distress than compared to sexually non-abused adolescents.

9. Future Scope

In the future, using the current findings as a basis, the following suggested researches could be conducted:

- Other factors like emotional competence, social competence, achievement motivation, etc. could be studied.
- Socio-demographic variables like age, gender, socio-economic status, etc. could be included.
- Differences in various aspects could be studied as a result of the nature of abuse, relation with the perpetrator, frequency of abuse, etc.
- Coping of sexually abused could be studied.

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