

Psychological Well-Being of Women Reporting Sexual Abuse in Childhood

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A total of 150 college going female students studying in different colleges were given a Biographical Inventory prepared for the purpose of finding out the girls who were sexually abused in their childhood. Out of 150 students 57 reported incidents of sexual abuse in their childhood and 93 did not report any incident. Among sexually abused 24 reported one or the other or more than one kinds of severe sexual abuse and 33 reported moderate sexual abuse. Those who reported incidents of stroking or rubbing, hugging and kissing in sexual ways, flashing / exposing genitals by an adult male, performing or making the girl oral sex or having sexual intercourse, were put in the severely sexual abused category. Those who reported incidence of looking at in a sexual way, making kind or suggestive comments, showing pornographic materials by an adult male, were put in the moderately abused category. As per the willingness and availability of the participants for further research 20 from each of the two sexually abused categories were included in the final study. A third group of 20 girls as a control group was also taken on random basis from amongst 93 participants who did not report any childhood abuse. PGI Well-being Scale by Verma and Verma was administered. t-test showed nonsignificant difference between psychological well-being of moderately and severely sexually abused participants. However, both moderately and severely abused participants had significantly lower psychological well-being than normal participants.

Well-being has been defined as a dynamic state characterised by a reasonable amount of harmony between an individual's abilities, needs and expectations, and environmental demands and opportunities (Levi, 1987). It is connotative as a harmonious satisfaction of one's desire and goals (Checola, 1975). Well-being involves subjective satisfaction and individual pleasure depending upon psychological status of the individual and his environmental conditions. The primary feature of subjective well-being includes subjectivity, positive measure and global assessment of all aspects of a person's life. Liu (1976) has indicated two interdependent inputs of well-being, physical and psychological. The former has an objective measure, whereas the later provides a subjective differentiation. Psychological well-being is the subjective

feeling of contentment, happiness, satisfaction with life's experiences and of one's role in the world of work, sense of achievement, utility, belongingness, and no distress, dissatisfaction or worry, etc. It may be maintained in adverse circumstances and conversely may be lost in favourable situation. It is related to but not dependent upon the physical or psychological conditions. The psychological well-being has only one prominent sign and that is that it speaks of a mind that is peaceful and quiet (Krishnamurti, 1986). The two-factor theory of mental health advocates that absence of psychological ill-being or ill-health does not necessarily mean presence of psychological well-being. Hence, a person can have both conditions poor, both conditions good, and any one of them good, with all its accompanying results (Verma,

1988). Health not only provides freedom from all illness but also ensures that all physical, mental and social well-being pervade in that state.

When a child is sexually abused, she is likely to experience the demands imposed on her by her perpetrator as well as by any external demands as taxing or exceeding her resources for their management. The child's boundaries are violated and she loses any sense of control and gets the message that she is not valued. As a result, child's sense of reality, world and self are greatly distorted resulting in self-hate and poor self-esteem. The child may feel herself worthless and can draw negative conclusions about herself, people and environment in which the sexual abuse occurs. In a research review Browne and Finklehor (1986) concluded that approximately 40% of the sexually abused children suffer consequences serious enough to need therapy in adulthood.

Brayden, Ditrich, Ditrich and Sherrod. (1996) found that adult women who were sexually abused in childhood scored poor on mental health measures. Sexual abuse was not predictor of general self-concept scores, physical self-esteem was more negative for sexually abused women. Bohan (1997) reported that sexually abused women ranked personal values such as inner harmony, self-respect, wisdom and health as most important to them. The non-abused women ranked the outer values of equality, a world of peace, national security, and world of beauty as most important which may indicate greater psychological maturity. Mean scores for anxiety and conflicts in 15 women who reported childhood sexual abuse were significantly higher than those for 15 women who had experienced no abuse. The majority of the sexually abused women reported feeling only a moderate amount of well-being. Talbot, Duberstein, King, Cox and Grites (2000) found that women who were abused by parents had lower scores on openness to experience than women who were abused by someone else. Women whose abuse history included both parental abuse and intercourse had very low extraversion scores. Findings suggest that women who experienced intercourse by a parent may be more introverted and less open to experiences than women whose sexual abuse history does not include parental incest.

There seems a dearth of studies on adults abused as children in Indian socio-cultural conditions. This is important because Indian society

being more closed but collectivistic and less permissive apparently seems to give more importance to male child than female child. Albeit, in general the female child commands more respect than the male child by parents and by others. However, incidents of sexual abuse of female children are often reported. Such female children who have incidence of sexual abuse may carry over the effect to their adulthood precipitating in these adult women lower psychological well-being than the adult women who do not have history of childhood abuse. However, Kendall-Tackett, Williams and Finklehor (1993) concluded in their review that many people do not appear to suffer long-term consequences. As a matter of fact, perception and interpretation of the experience play important role in its consequences (Dale, 1999). Moreover Janoff-Bulman (1985, 1989) reported that people (and different cultures) experience and define the same events and contexts in different ways and ultimately make sense of their experience in different ways.

Against this backdrop the present study was conducted to measure and compare the psychological well-being of adult women with severe childhood sexual abuse report, moderate childhood sexual abuse report and no report of sexual abuse.

Method

Sample:

Participants A total of 60 adult women were included in the study. Among them 20 reported severe childhood sexual abuse, 20 reported moderate childhood sexual abuse and 20 reported no childhood sexual abuse.

In order to select the participants a Biographical Inventory was developed which contained questions that required the participants to indicate whether they had experienced sexual abuse in their childhood, who the perpetrator was, what was the mode used by the abuser (touching, stroking, rubbing, hugging and kissing in a sexual way, flashing or exposing genitals, performing or making one perform oral sex, having sexual intercourse)? It also included questions on age of onset, frequency of abuse and disclosure about the abusive experience.

A total of 150 college going female students studying in different colleges of Delhi were approached individually. The students were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and were requested to answer the questions truthfully. Out of

150 students 57 students reported sexual abuse of one or the other or more than one kinds and 93 students did not report any kind of sexual abuse. Among 57 students 24 were found to be severely abused and 33 were moderately abused.

Those who reported the incidents of touching, stroking or rubbing in sexual way; hugging and kissing in sexual way, flashing/exposing genitals by an adult male, performing or making the girl oral sex or having sexual intercourse, were put in the severely sexual abused category. Those who reported the incidents of looking at in a sexual way, making kind or suggestive comments, showing pornographic materials by an adult male were put in the moderately abused category.

As per the availability and willingness of the students for further research, 20 students for each category were taken. A third group of 20 female college students who reported no incidents of sexual abuse in their childhood was also included as a control group. This group was called normal group and the participants in this group were taken in a random way out of 93 participants who did not report any childhood sexual abuse.

Measure:

PGI General Well-Being Scale (Verma and Verma, 1989) was used to measure the psychological well-being of the participants. This is a 20 item scale and the subjects are required to tick (Ö) the items applicable to them as they feel 'these days and in the past one month'. The total number of items ticked by the participants make the total number of well-being score. Thus, the range of score on the scale is 0 to 20. The split-half reliability index by using Kudar-Richardson formula is reported to be 0.98 and test-retest reliability index is reported to be 0.91.

Procedure During the collection of initial information through Biological Inventory the participants were asked to give their phone number for future contact. The participants were met individually and the test was administered individually by the second author. One college was covered at a time.

Results

Mean well-being scores of the three groups were found out and t-test was used to find out significant difference between the mean well-being scores of the two comparing groups.

Table-1: Mean, SDs, SEDs and t-ratio between the mean psychological well-being scores of the groups (n=20).

Groups	Means	SD	t-Value
Severely Abused	10.90	2.77	0.159*
Moderately Abused	10.75	3.17	
Severely Abused	10.90	2.77	1.80*
Normal	12.75	3.66	
Moderately Abused	10.75	3.17	1.84*
Normal	12.75	3.66	

A perusal of table-1 shows that mean psychological well-being scores of severely abused and moderately abused participants were 10.90 and 10.75 and their SDs were 2.77 and 3.17 respectively, SED and t-ratio were calculated as 0.942 and 0.159 respectively. The t-ratio between the two means came to be 0.159 which was not significant at .05 level of confidence. The mean psychological well-being scores of severely abused and normal groups were 10.90 and 12.75, their SDs were 2.77 and 3.66 respectively. The SED was found to be 1.027. The t-ratio between the means came to be 1.80 which was significant at .05 level of significance. The mean psychological well-being scores of moderately abused and normal groups were 10.75 and 12.75, SDs were 3.17 and 3.66 respectively. SED was calculated as 1.085. The t-value between the two means was found to be 1.84 which was significant at .05 level of confidence.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed nonsignificant difference between psychological well-being of severely and moderately abused participants; significantly poorer psychological well-being for severely abused than for normal participants and significantly poorer psychological well-being for moderately abused than for normal participants.

The nonsignificant difference between psychological well-being of severely abused and moderately abused indicated that well-being of a sexual abused person is not affected by the severity of the act, that is, the psychological well-being may not depend on the way the act was done but on the fact that sexual abuse was experienced by the victim. It may indicate that, sexual abuse, what-

ever form it may take is intrusive, threatening, and acts as an environmental stressor which disturbs the harmony and balance between an individual and his/her environment affecting the overall psychological well-being of the sexually abused child. This is confirmed by the significantly lower psychological well-being of moderately and severely abused participants than non-abused participants.

The general well being defined as the subjective feeling of contentment, happiness, and satisfaction with one's life experiences and a person who experiences satisfaction in interpersonal relationships is likely to be happy and to enjoy a better quality of life. However, in the case of childhood sexual abuse, the relationships, rather than being satisfying are intrusive, involve maltreatment and/or pain, and betrayal of trust and innocence. Many abuse survivors experience difficulties in less visible social domains, such as their relationships with important others. Adults who were abused as children often have difficulties with intimacy, trust, and authority. Such problems can have long-term negative consequences for survivor's well being. The present results, however, suggest that psychological well-being is independent of the severity of abuse, though the presence of it definitely seems to affect one's well-being in negative ways.

A look at table-1 shows that severely abused subjects had significantly lower feelings of well-being as compared to that of normal subjects. We know psychological well-being refers to reasonable amount of harmony between an individual's abilities, needs, and expectations, and environmental demands and opportunities (Levi, 1987). When a child is sexually abused, she is likely to experience the demands imposed on her by her perpetrator and any internal demands as taxing or exceeding her resources for their management. Due to being in a constantly abusive environment, the child does not get much time to explore her interests, or know about herself in positive way. This results in confused feelings about one's potentials and inability to satisfactorily deal with the demands of the environment resulting in displeasure. Bohan (1997) found that majority of the sexually abused women reported feeling only a moderate amount of well-being and exhibited a higher incidence (87%) of psychological conditions. Parker and Lee (2002) found that history of abuse was one of the aspects of a woman's life that impacts on her general well-being. The sexually abused women and in par-

ticular, those abused more than once, reported a significantly lower level of sexual well-being than did non-abused women.

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