

Perceived Parental Love and Care and Child Sexual, Physical and Emotional Abuse: A Study Among a Sample of University Students in South Africa

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ABSTRACT This is an investigation into the perceived parental love and care as related to child sexual, physical and emotional abuse among a sample of university students in South Africa. 722 undergraduate students of psychology at the University of the North, South Africa, filled in a retrospective self-rating questionnaire in a classroom setting. The questionnaire asked questions about perceived parental love and care, and childhood sexual, physical and emotional abuse. Logistic Regression Analysis shows that among all the participants, "perceived lack of paternal love and care before the age of 8 years," "perceived lack of maternal love and care from age 8 through 16 years" and "perceived lack of paternal love and care from age 8 through 16 years" predict child sexual, physical and emotional abuse respectively. Mental health and social workers, educators and law enforcement agencies dealing with prevention and protection against child abuse in the province should take note of the above as part of important factors to be considered and looked into while designing programmes for the eradication of child physical and emotional abuse.

INTRODUCTION

Child abuse is one of the major problems that demand urgent attention in South Africa. The Child Protection Units of the South African Police Services identified during the first six months in 1996 19805 cases of crimes against children less than 18 years; of which child sexual abuses were 7968 (40%) (rape: 7363, sodomy: 480 and incest: 125) (Piennar, 1996).

To define child abuse (especially in an African) context is very difficult and controversial, since, as Lachman, (1996) explained that cultural attitudes towards child abuse vary a great deal, the distinction between (for example, child physical) abuse and discipline is blurred, and the perception of child abuse as 'private' still prevails among many families (see also Kaplan, 1996; Kelley, 1996; King and Yorker, 1996; Putman, 1991) and emotional abuse is also often considered inherent in other types of abuse (Glaser and Prior, 1997).

The African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) defines child abuse as: "The intentional, unintentional or well intentional acts that endanger the physical, health, emotional, moral and the educational welfare of the child. These acts are those morally unacceptable to the community that may endanger the well being of the child, although the child may or may not perceive these acts as abuse. Child neglect is the denial of the basic rights and needs of the child by parents, school, peers, governments and cultural community, occurring as acts of omission and/or commission" (Ebigbo, 1989: 404).

Practices viewed as acceptable by one culture can be viewed as abusive or neglectful in other culture. However, while cultures vary in their definitions of child abuse and neglect, each group nevertheless has criteria for identifying behaviours that are outside the realm of acceptable child training. The significance of the sociocultural components in studying child maltreatment was emphasized in ecologically oriented models (Garbarino, 1992, 1995). These models highlight the interrelationships among the individual, familial, social, and cultural components. Three primary theoretical models have been presented to explain child abuse: psychopathological, sociological and ecological (Roscoe et al., 1985). The latter researchers found among adolescents that they were aligned with the psychopathological model, followed by the ecological model, and societal factors were seen as relatively unimportant. Zuravin (1989) found that strong predictors of child abuse and neglect are families with poverty indicators and that the pattern covariation between economic stress indicators and inadequate social support indicators is consistent with the ecological hypothesis. Gillham et al. (1998) found that among registered cases of child abuse and neglect in Scotland that male unemployment rate alone accounted for two-

thirds of the variance in total abuse and neglect rates. This literature (see also Garbarino and Sherman, 1980; Reynold, 1997; Scheper-Hughes, 1989) seems to suggest that local social factors play a role in the child abuse situation in different societal contexts.

Mejiuni (1991) addresses child abuse in Nigeria and the way that abuse seems to have escalated there. He argues that, although particular political and economic factors are implicated in the physical and sexual abuse of children in Africa, these find a fertile base in ideological facets of African patriarchal traditions of family life which facilitate the sexual abuse of women and girls. Levett (1994), however, states that one needs to be cautious in putting forward arguments about "cultural differences" in the southern African context, such as particular forms of patriarchal power.

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 (i.e., actual or attempted intercourse, oral or manual genital contact, sexual kissing, hugging, or touching) form of sexual abuse (among the university students) which took place before the completion of the age of 17 years. The perpetrator must be an adult or a person at least five years older than the child or a person in a position of power.

Also for the purpose of this study, child physical abuse is here to be understood as purposeful nonverbal parental or adult care-taker's behaviour towards a child, which are typically associated with physical pain and/or fear of physical injury to the child (see also Briere and Runtz, 1988; Ross, 1996). These may be in form of hitting, punching, cutting, pushing, which may result in bruises, scratches, broken bones or teeth, bleeding, or hurting that demanded medical attention (Briere, 1993).

Lachman (1996) explains child emotional abuse to be an injury to a child's psychological self; its intent and effects are punitive and it is generally experienced as parental or adult care-taker's hostility or rejection, such as verbal criticism, harassment or criticism of a child's failure to meet unrealistic expectations or standard for his or her performance. For this study, child emotional abuse is to be seen as those parental or adult care-taker's behaviours which primarily involve physical actions or threat of physical harm, directly or indirectly to a child (Briere, 1993).

It is important to find out the relationship between parental love and care and child sexual, physical and emotional abuse, because, in many societies, many people are not always willing to report all forms of child abuse to the appropriate law enforcement agencies. For example, research has shown that child sexual abuse has very adverse effects on the victims, and the effect can be on long-term or short-term basis (Bergner, 1990; Collings, 1993, 1995, 1997; Finkelhor and Browne, 1986). In spite of that, child sexual abuse is still often associated with shame, threat, fear or taboo by many families and societies. Thus many of the cases are not reported to the mental health workers, social workers, or to the law enforcement agencies (Bagley and Ramsey, 1985; Goodwin, 1988; Gutheil, 1991; Steele, 1991; Kraemer, 1988; Wolf, 1995). With the above attitude, the perpetrator continues to go about unreported, and all the possible psychological, social, and psychiatric short-term and long-term effects of such childhood abuses (as indicated by Briere and Runtz, 1988; Frommuth and Burkhart, 1987; Kluft, 1985; Leavitt, 1994; Sanders and Giolas, 1991; Terr, 1992) continue to perpetuate themselves. The above situation poses a problem for the mental health workers, social workers and the law enforcement agencies.

In many parts of the world, some authors have tried to find out the risk factors for child sexual abuse in the society (for example, in Australia: Fleming et al., 1997; in Malaysia: Kassim and Kasim, 1995; in North America: Bergners et al., 1994; Finkelhor, 1979, 1980, 1993, 1994; Finkelhor and Baron, 1986; Finkelhor et al., 1990), but most of their findings are not unanimous with each other. For instance, in North America, out of the 8 risk factors found by Finkelhor 1979 (parental occupation, income, and education; religion; ethnicity; presence or absence of the father at home; presence of a stepparent; degree of violence at home; and the quality of parental marital home), only one factor (family income less than \$10,000) was confirmed by Bergner et al. (1994). In South Africa, Collings (1991) found punitive or emotional rejecting parents and separation from the natural father as significant factors.

Some researchers looked at child physical abuse from the point of view of parental factors and identified perceived lack of parental love and care (Herman et al., 1997), history of abuse (Christmas et al., 1996; Hlady and Gunter, 1990), psychiatric illness (Christmas et al., 1996), low self-esteem (Christmas et al., 1996; McCurdy, 1995; Jason and Andereck, 1983), social isola-

tion (Christmas et al., 1996; McCurdy, 1995; Whipple and Wilson, 1996), teenage parenthood (Christmas et al., 1996; Jason and Andereck, 1983; Wekerle and Wolfe, 1993), low economic status (Hlady and Gunter, 1990; Jason and Andereck, 1983; McCurdy, 1995), maternal hypothyroidism (Brethier and Oriot, 1994), family violence (Hotaling et al., 1998; Milner, 1994; Whipple and Richey, 1997), residential instability (Brent et al., 1994), step-parenthood (Wekerle and Wolfe, 1993) male perpetrators (Jason and Andereck, 1983), black perpetrators (Jason and Andereck, 1983) as correlates. Some looked at the correlates from the point of view of social demographic variables of physically abused children and identified the following as correlates: not growing up with both biological parents (Brent et al., 1994), presence of a stepparent during childhood (Brent et al., 1994), low family income (Hotaling et al., 1998; Nevid et al., 1997; Whipple and Richey, 1997), poor rural white family and poor urban black family (Jason and Andereck, 1983), and parental stress and alcohol or substance abuse (Miami et al., 1996; Nevid et al., 1997). Knutson and Sullivan (1993) identified children's communication disorders (e.g. hearing, speech or language impairment) and enrollment in residential (school) programmes as correlates for child emotional abuse. Belt (1998), Daly and Wilson (1998), Fontana (1968), Gentilewarrior (1998), Herman et al. (1997), and Jurmann (1999) also emphasised the importance of parental love and care in the development of a child.

Can perceived lack of parental love and care before the age of 8 years be an indication for child sexual, physical or emotional abuse? Can perceived lack of parental love and care from age of 8 through 16 years be an indication for child sexual, physical or emotional abuse? These are questions about perceived parental love and care and child abuse that would interest psychologists, educators, social and other mental health workers who are confronted with the problems of child abuse for proper planning of preventive and therapeutic strategies. Thus, there is the need to study the relationship between parental love and care and child sexual, physical and emotional abuse. These variables are especially understudied in relation to child abuse in South Africa.

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; 45.7% of them are males and 54.3% are females; and many of the inhabitants live under poor economic and medi-

cal conditions (Health Systems Trust and Department of Health, 1997; Statistics South Africa, 2000). No study has been carried out to find out whether parental love and care would predict child sexual, physical and emotional abuse among university students in the Northern Province, South Africa.

METHOD

Participants: The participants for this study were all the undergraduate students at the University of the North in the Northern Province (South Africa) who registered for psychology in 1999. The university had an undergraduate student enrolment of about 7000 in 1999. The total number of participants composed 244 (33.8%) males and 465 (64.4%) females, with 13 (1.8%) who failed to indicate their gender. The collective mean age was 23.8 years ($SD=5.14$) and the age range was 15-47 years. Twenty-six (3.6%) did not indicate their ages. Six hundred and eighty-nine (95.4%) were black, 5 (0.7%) were white, 7 (1.0%) were coloured, with another 21 (2.9%) who did not indicate their skin colour. (Skin colour is here to be understood as a demographic marker only.)

Instrument: The instruments used for this study are part of an anonymous, retrospective, and self-rating Child Maltreatment Questionnaire (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. The following questions on parental love and care which are to be answered with "Not at all", "A bit" or "Very much":
 - On average, before the age of 8 years, how much did the participant feel that his or her father/step-father/foster father loved and cared about him or her.
 - On average, before the age of 8 years, how much did the participant feel that his or her mother/step-mother/foster mother loved and cared about him or her.
 - On average, from the age of 8 years through the age of 16 years, how much did the participant feel that his or her father/step-father/foster father loved and cared about him or her.
 - On average, from the age of 8 years through the age of 16 years, how much did the participant feel that his or her mother/step-mother/foster mother loved and cared about him or her.

3. The following questions on the (physical) contact forms of sexual abusive experiences of participants: Before the participant was age 17 years, whether anyone 5 or more years older than he or she was, or in a position of power
 - Ever kissed him or her in a sexual way
 - Ever touched his or her body in a sexual way or made him or her touch the adult's sexual part
 - Ever had oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with him or her, or placed his or her finger or object in the participant's anus or vagina? The respondents were asked to answer by ticking "yes" or "no".
4. Questions on child physical abuse asked the respondents to indicate (by ticking "yes" or "no") whether a parent/stepparent/foster-parent/other adult in charge of him or her as a child (i.e., before the age of 17 years) ever did something on purpose to him or her (e.g., hitting, punching, cutting or pushing him or her down) that gave him or her bruises or scratches, broke bones or teeth, or made him or her bleed; and whether in any of the above cases the respondent was so badly hurt that he or she had to see a doctor or go to a hospital.
5. Questions on child emotional abuse asked the respondent to indicate (by ticking "yes" or "no") whether a parent/stepparent/foster-parent/other adult in charge of him or her as a child (i.e., before the age of 17 years) ever locked him or her in a room or closet or small space; ever tied him or her up or chained him or her to something; ever threatened to hurt or kill him or her; ever threatened to hurt or kill someone he or she cared about; ever threatened to leave him or her somewhere that frightened him or her or where he or she would not be able to get back home; ever threatened to leave and never to come back.

The Chronbach Alpha and the Split-half reliability for the instrument among all the respondents in this study were .8 and .7, respectively.

Procedure: A research assistant obtained permission from three lecturers teaching 100, 200 and 300 level psychology students to administer the questionnaire during their class periods. On the agreed dates and time with the lecturers, the research assistant went to administer the questionnaire to the students in their classrooms. The research assistant, first of all, explained the purpose of the research to the students. It was also made clear to them before hand that any of them

who do not want to participate in the study should feel free to decline. They were then allowed to ask questions about the research, before filling-in the questionnaires to the best of their knowledge. A total number of 8(1.1%) students did not complete their questionnaires. The questionnaires were collected the same day they were distributed to the participants. English, was the language of the questionnaire and also the language of its administration. All the participants completed the questionnaires within 30 minutes even though 1 hour was allocated for the whole exercise.

Because of ethical reasons, the participants were told to feel free to contact one of the researcher or his assistant (physically or telephonically using their numbers and addresses written out for the students on the black board in front of them) in case of questions, counselling and/or psychotherapy. They were also told that, alternatively, any clinical psychologist, psychotherapist or counsellor available (e.g., at the Students Counselling Centre of the university) could be consulted. This is in view of the fact that the questionnaire may have aroused some emotions especially among sexually victimised participants. Moreover, it was also agreed with the Directors of the Provincial Department of Health and the Students Counselling Centre of the university, that the result of the research shall be made available to them for use in planning preventive health care services.

The administration of the whole questionnaire was completed within three weeks in March 1999.

Data Analysis: For the questions of parental love and care, the responses of the participants were coded as follows: "Not at all" = 1, "A bit" = 2, and "Very much" = 3. For sexual, physical and emotional abuse, the positive responses of the participants were coded as 1, while their negative responses were coded as 0.

The data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

RESULT

Frequencies: 87(12.0%) respondents indicated that on the average, before the age of 8 years, his or her father/step-father/foster father did not love and care about him or her at all; 106(14.7%) indicated that he loved and cared a bit; 502(49.5%) indicated that he loved and cared very much and 27(3.7%) did not answer the question.

42(5.8%) respondents indicated that on aver-

age, before the age of 8 years, his or her mother/step-mother/foster mother did not love and care about him or her at all; 48(6.6%) indicated that she loved and cared a bit; 619(85.7%) indicated that she loved and cared very much and 13(1.8%) did not answer the question.

88 (12.2%) respondents indicated that on average, from the age of 8 years through the age of 16 years, his or her father/step-father/foster father did not love and care about him or her at all; 125(17.3%) indicated that he loved and cared a bit; 462 (64.0%) indicated that he loved and cared very much, and 47(6.5%) did not answer the question.

46 (6.4%) respondents indicated that on average, from the age of 8 years through the age of 16 years, his or her mother/step-mother/foster mother did not love and care about him or her at all; 56(7.8%) indicated that she loved and cared a bit; 590(81.7%) indicated that she loved and cared very much and 30(4.2%) did not answer the question.

The valid number of respondents who indicated any form of (physical) contact sexual abuse is 166 (25.6%). The number of male victims is 53 (21.7%), while that of the female victims were 110 (23.7%). 125 (18.2%) participants indicated that they were kissed in a sexual way. Among them are 39 (16.5%) males, 84 (19.1%) females. 93 (13.6%) participants indicated that they were touched in a sexual way or that they were made to touch another's sexual parts. Among them are 29 (12.6%) males and 62 (14.1%) females. 56 (8.7%) participants 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. Among them are 14 (6.5%) males, 40 (9.5%) females.

110 (15.2%) respondents indicated that they have ever been physically abused by parent/stepparent/foster-parent/other adult in charge of the respondent as a child. 105 (14.5%) of the respondents indicated that they were purposely hit or punched or injured, and 36 (5.0%) needed medical attention thereafter.

194 (26.9%) respondents indicated that they have ever been emotional abuse as a child by parent/stepparent/foster-parent/other adult in charge of them. The emotional abuse with the highest frequency was 'threatening to leave the child and never to come back' (N=70, 9.7%), followed by 'threatening to leave the child somewhere frightening' and 'threatening to hurt/kill the child' (N=59, 8.2% respectively), 'threatening to hurt/kill someone the child cared about' (N=56, 7.8%), 'locking the child in a room/closet/small space' (N=52, 7.2%), threatening to hurt/kill the child's pet (N=42, 5.8%), and tying up/chaining the child to something (N=25, 3.5%).

Predictors: Table 1 shows Multiple Logistic Regression Analysis (Forward: Wald) for the relationship between perceived parental love and care and child sexual, physical and emotional abuse among all the participants.

The Table shows the following: When sexual abuse is the dependent variable, the significant aspect of parental love and care (independent variable) that is added in the final equation is 'On average, before the age of 8 years, the participant felt that his or her father/step-father/foster father loved and cared about him or her'. This factor, however, has an inverse relationship with child sexual abuse ($B = -0.3490$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the less the participant felt loved and cared for by the father before the age of 8 years, the more likelihood of the presence of child physi-

Table 1: Multiple Logistic Regression Analysis (Forward) showing the relationship between parental love and care, and child sexual, physical, and emotional abuse.

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables in the Equation								
	Forms of parental love and care	B	S. E.	Wald	df	Sig	R	Exp (B)	Overall % predicted
Sexual abuse (n = 116, 25.6%)	E1	-0.349	0.126	7.651	1	0	-0.1	0.7	74
Physical abuse (n = 110, 15.2%)	E4	-0.3784	0.168	5.093	1	0	-0.1	0.7	82.8
Emotional abuse (n=194, 26.9%)	E3	-0.3514	0.118	8.809	1	0	-0.1	0.7	71

E1 = "Perceived lack of paternal love and care before the age of 8 years"

E3 = "Perceived lack of paternal love and care from age 8 through 16 years"

E4 = "Perceived maternal love and care from age 8 through 16 years"

cal abuse, and vice versa. The R value shows that this factor accounts for 9% of the variance in sexual abuse. The overall prediction is 74.03% correct.

When physical abuse is the dependent variable, the significant aspect of parental love and care (independent variable) that is added in the final equation is 'On average, from the age of 8 years through the age of 16 years, the participant felt that his or her mother/step-mother/foster mother loved and cared about him or her'. This factor, however, has an inverse relationship with child physical abuse ($B = -0.3784$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the less the participant felt loved and cared for by the mother at the age range of 8-16 years, the more the likelihood of the presence of child physical abuse, and vice versa. The R value shows that this factor accounts for 7% of the variance in physical abuse. The overall prediction is 82.80% correct.

When emotional abuse is the dependent variable, the significant aspect of parental love and care (independent variable) that is added in the final equation is "On average, from the age of 8 years through the age of 16 years, the participant felt that his or her father/step-father/foster father loved and cared about him or her". This factor, however, has also an inverse relationship with child physical abuse ($B = -0.3514$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the less the participant felt loved and cared for by the father at the age range of 8-16 years, the more the likelihood of the presence of child emotional abuse, and vice versa. The R value shows that this factor accounts for 10% of the variance in emotional abuse. The overall prediction is 70.95% correct.

DISCUSSION

"Perceived lack of paternal love and care before the age of 8 years" predicted child sexual abuse among the participants. This has not been identified in any other study in South Africa. Marshall and Herman (1998) identified contextual conditions for child sexual abuse in South Africa as follows: (1) the legacy of apartheid (e.g., labour system forced families apart, family and community support systems broke down); (2) institutionalized patriarchy (e.g., boys are socialized to have more power, male perpetrators are protected by state and families); and (3) the notion of children as property with a culture of domination and power denies children recognition and rights (e.g., child abuse becomes normalized, laws and court procedures discriminate against chil-

dren). Magwaza (1997) identifies the following external disinhibitors that could promote child sexual abuse: Lack of bonding with parent or parents, as in the case of the South African migrant labour system, which fragments family life and makes it difficult for fathers to bond with their children; absence of the mother from the family and lack of supervision, common in Black families due to domestic work away from the family and poor childcare facilities; unemployment, which is highest among Blacks; and overcrowded household conditions (such as family members sleeping in one room) common among squatter and township families. Garbarino (1992, 1995), Garbarino and Sherman (1980), Gillham et al. (1998), Reynold (1997), Roscoe et al. (1985), Scheper-Hughes (1989), and Zuravin (1989), agree that social and environmental factors play a role in child abuse situations in different societal contexts.

"Perceived maternal love and care from age 8 through 16 years" is identified as a predictor for child physical abuse. Herman et al. (1997) also identified lack of a parental care as a risk factor for homelessness and child physical abuse. Hotaling et al. (1998), Milner (1994), and Whipple and Richey (1997) identified family violence as a risk factor for child physical abuse. Parental alcohol or substance abuse was identified by Miam et al. (1996), and Nevid et al. (1997) as risk factors for child abuse.

"Perceived lack of paternal love and care from age 8 through 16 years" is identified as a predictor for emotional abuse. Belt (1998), Daly and Wilson (1998), Fontana (1968), Gentilewarrior (1998), Jurmann (1999), and Herman et al. (1997) also emphasised the importance of parental love and care in the development of a child.

The perception of child abuse as 'private' still prevails among many African families (Kaplan, 1996; Kelley, 1996; King and Yorker, 1996; Putman, 1991). With due caution as sounded by Levett (1994), the ideological facets of many African patriarchal traditions of family life have been identified as facilitating child abuse (Mejiuni, 1991). These perceptions and traditions need to be challenged. The African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) and also the Child Protection Unit of the South African Police Service have this challenge as one of their objectives (see Ebigbo, 1989; and Piennar, 1996, respectively). Also 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). This law, however, needs to be properly and widely implemented.

The above information is relevant to psychologists, educators, social workers and other mental health workers who are confronted with problems of child abuse. While planning preventive and therapeutic strategies for a victim of child sexual, physical or emotional abuse, they should take the above factors as part of a range of factors to be looked into. This would help in preventing or minimizing the short-term and long-term health problems associated with childhood abuse (as indicated by Berger, 1990; Bieri, 1988; Collings, 1993, 1995, 1997; Finkelhor and Browne, 1986; Frommuth and Burkart, 1987; Kluft, 1985; Leavitt, 1994; Sanders and Giolas, 1991; Terr, 1992). The percentage of variances in abuse accounted for by the identified variables are low, thus suggesting that one should not rely solely on them as predictors for child abuse. The study is basically a correlational study, thereby suggesting that the direction of the relationship between the identified variables and child abuse can go either way. On the one hand, the variables can serve as part of the indicators for child abuse, but on the other hand, children who are abused can, as a result, see their parents as low-caring or low-loving.

This study has some limitations. Only the undergraduate psychology students were used as participants for this study. This would limit the external validity of the findings. Focus groups or selected interviews with the sample would have helped to check the validity, or, to throw more light on the results got from the quantitative study. Non-contact forms of sexual abuse were not considered in this study. The study did not consider the identity of the perpetrator, relationship of parent to the child, and whether the abuse was reported and whether the child received any support or counselling. The study also relies on retrospective reports from participants, thereby relying much on their ability and exactness in recalling past memories. The above limitations should be guarded against by future researchers interested in the topic.

CONCLUSION

The mental health and social workers, educators and law enforcement agencies dealing with prevention and protection against child abuse in the province should take note of the above iden-

tified predictors (parental love and care) as part of a range of factors to be considered while designing programmes for the eradication of child sexual, physical and emotional abuse.

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