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TRAUMA FROM SEXUAL ABUSE: THE UNTOLD STORY OF MALE VICTIMS IN HONG KONG

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Abstract:

Keywords:

Research Background

In our society, the sexual abuse experiences of male victims are rarely discussed. The term “sexual abuse” usually refers to any unwanted physical contact normally arising from the sexual desire or motivation of an aggressor. Sexual abuse often comes in different forms, such as rape, sexual harassment, seductive behavior, sexual bribery and coercion, and sexual assault (Finkelhor, 1991). According to the Hong Kong Social Welfare Department (2009), child sexual abuse cases increased from 28.6% in 2007 to 32.9% in 2009. There were 237 sexual abuse cases from January to June 2009 alone, and 99% of the victims were females and 1% were males. Most studies and services on sexual abuse have mostly focused on females because they comprise the majority of victims. Male victims are often neglected.

The existence of many studies on sexual abuse in women (Briere, 1992; Walker *et al.*, 1999; Bergen *et al.*, 2003; Donhauser, 2007) has led to the proliferation of social services and institutions designed mainly for women. For instance, a shelter called “The Garden of Hope in Taiwan” was established to cater mainly to the needs of sexually abused women. Meanwhile, “RainLily” and “Caritas Project for Adult Survivors of Childhood Trauma” in Hong Kong assist abused females by offering emergency services, therapeutic group meetings, medical and counseling services, and other similar forms of assistance.

Although males are considered the stronger gender, their sexual abuse experiences are not any better than those of their female counterparts. Regardless

of gender, victims experience the same physical and psychological traumas. Unfortunately, little attention is given to the needs of male sexual abuse survivors.

The neglect of male sexual abuse survivors may be related to gender stereotyping and masculinity. Gender, to some extent, is a social concept that often leads to biases against and restrictions to people, particularly when it comes to their feelings and thoughts. For instance, many tenaciously cling to the notion that males are supposed to be breadwinners and providers of comfort to their wives and children. The ideology of masculinity is universal; hence, males are socialized as tough, rational, and competent. They are seldom expected to express frailties even to their parents because they must keep their masculine identity intact. The concept of masculinity therefore restrains men, and those who reveal “delicateness” are often looked down upon. Male victims of sexual abuse experience more pressure because they fear “disruptions” to their masculine image (Pleck, *et al.*, 1993).

Males endure hardships caused by gender roles and notions of masculinity. For instance, the public views men as violent, habitual gamblers, and sexual offenders (Eisler and Skidmore, 1987). With these complexities, along with the reality that there are more female victims, welfare institutions and NGOs offer more services to female sexual abuse victims. Furthermore, services for male victims — when available — are often unsatisfactory.

Gore-Felton *et al.* (2006) found that male sexual abuse survivors who had sex with men have higher risks of HIV infection. A research (Bouvier, 2003) on male victims of child sexual abuse showed that 11.6% of them become perpetrators in their later lives. The data also significantly indicate that male survivors struggle with traumatic experiences, and many of them develop antisocial personality disorders. Their interpersonal relationships are also negatively affected.

Masten *et al.* (2007) held a group therapy session for male sexual abuse survivors infected with HIV/AIDS. A participant reported that his past abuse experience may have made him addicted to compulsive sexual activities. Some participants suspected that sexual abuse experiences lead to or are associated with homosexuality. Many research findings also show that sexual abuse survivors develop negative emotions because of their traumatic experiences. Ironically, some victims admitted being aroused by their traumatic experiences or during their actual experience of sexual abuse (Romano and De Luca, 2006).

It is then important to conduct more research and pay more attention to male sexual abuse survivors to develop and manage relevant and effective intervention programs.

Research Objectives

The study aims to identify the effects of the notion of masculinity to survivors of traumatic childhood experiences, particularly sexual abuse. The researchers aim to observe both the negative and positive roles that masculinity plays in such traumatic experiences through the observation of participants in treatment groups, focus group discussions, and in-depth individual interviews. The study specifically aims to (1) understand the traumas and struggles of male sexual abuse survivors, and (2) determine and understand the needs of male sexual abuse survivors.

Methodology

The research is divided into three phases.

First, the researchers joined six therapeutic groups of male sexual abuse survivors to gain more accurate insights on the feelings of male survivors.

Second, ten male sexual abuse survivors, divided into three focus groups, were asked to respond to researcher-developed questionnaires. They were asked to share their actual abuse experiences. The impacts of their experiences, as well as their help-seeking processes and the assistance they were receiving, were discussed.

Third, we conducted in-depth individual interviews with ten victims (started in June 2009). Two registered social workers, one male and one female, participated in the focus group discussions and individual interviews.

The data was analyzed by the researcher, who had gone through the three phases. With N-vivo 8 as the tool, the researcher captured the key phrases from the focus groups and in-depth individual interviews and several themes were conceptualized.

Background of Interviewees

Twelve male survivors under the Caritas Project for Adult Survivor of Childhood Trauma were invited to participate in the study. All of them were physically and sexually abused. The age at the time of abuse varied from 3 to 31 years. The number of abusive incidents ranged from 1 to 60 times, and the duration of each abusive incident varied from 5 minutes to 3 hours. The duration history lasted from 5 minutes to 10 years. Six of them were abused by family members, whereas the other six by peers or strangers.

Table 1. Background of the interviewees.

Survivor	Age	Marital status	Kinds of abuse	Age at the time of abuse	Number of abusive incidents	Duration of the incident of abuse	Relationship with the perpetrator	Feelings toward the abusive incidents
1	33	Single	Sexual	31	1	1 night	Male friend	Ridicule
2	30	Single	Sexual	11-12	>1	1 year	Peer	Bullied
3	26	Single	Sexual and physical	3-23	Forgotten	20 years	Family members and stranger	Trauma, pain
4	29	Single	Sexual	10-11	>5	1 year	Beguiler	Pain
5	40	Married	Sexual	5	4	Forgotten	Father	No feeling at that moment
6	52	Single	Sexual	3-4	1	1-2 hours	Stranger	Fright, discomfort
7	40	Single	Sexual and physical	4-14	Unaccounted/ Hard to count	10 years	Father (sexual), mother (physical)	Chaos
8	31	Single	Sexual and physical	12	1	2-3 hours	Male stranger	Chaos
9	41	Married	Sexual	11	10	Half a year	Male senior	Disgust
10	27	Single	Sexual	8	60	2 years	Male neighbor	Guilt, unhappiness, worry, hatred
11	32	Married	Sexual	7-8	>30	3-4 years	Uncle and mother	Shame, helplessness
12	34	Married	Sexual	6-7	2-3	Forgotten	Female cousin	Excitement

Research Results and Discussion

A different “me”

- 1) Male survivors are often unwilling to leave the experience of sexual abuse, and they somehow like to repeat the experience. In many instances, they even become the abusers themselves. Some of them intentionally create opportunities to “relive” the old experiences, and some even repeat such experiences in their fantasies and even in actual sexual relationships. Their previous experiences negatively affect their social lives, making it difficult for them to get along with friends of both sexes.
- 2) Most of the male survivors admitted feeling satisfied and excited during the actual experience of sexual abuse. They remember the feeling of wanting to get out of the situation but, on one hand, they also think that they somehow physically “cooperated” with their abusers. The situation creates ambivalent feelings of guilt and excitement.
- 3) Sexual abuse incidents have negative impacts to the self-esteem and self-worth of male survivors. They feel “controlled” by social and traditional notions of men and sex. Being abused gives them feelings of shame for not being able to protect themselves, especially because they are men (who are supposed to be stronger). They also have the tendency to reject others and refuse opportunities to become closer with family and friends.
- 4) Male survivors try their best to break away from authority and control in their attempts to find themselves. They always try to prove that they are no longer helpless and weak.
- 5) Male survivors develop deep interest in sex following their abuse. Most of the interviewees were abused at puberty. They experienced sex ahead of love, making it difficult for them to differentiate love and sex, and they often mistakenly seek love through sexual intercourse. They often want to engage in sexual activities, and this want sometimes leads to sexual obsession. They also become suspicious of their own sexual orientation and think about the possibility of being homosexual.

Meaning of my life

- 1) Male survivors, when they look back to the past wounds, feel certain fears in understanding their emotions. Our society does not allow men to express their weaknesses; hence, it is harder for them to go through life again. Building relationships with others becomes difficult for them. However, after experiencing a dispirited life for a while, they do start to try living new lives.

They gradually open their minds and hearts and eventually become more willing to share their stories to people with similar experiences. They begin to realize that it is better to share than to live in endless self-accusation and anger.

- 2) Sexual abuse incidents are often regarded as indelible stains in the minds of survivors. However, eventually, male victims try to understand and accept themselves and their experiences. They see the need to learn to let go of the past and to take control of their present and future.

Love and being loved

- 1) Some of the male survivors do not experience filial love and have poor relationships with their families. This raises the possibility of a correlation between poor family relationship and sexual abuse. This can be a worthy topic for further research.
- 2) Sexual abuse incidents significantly influence the ability of victims to build and maintain better relationships with people. They strongly resist the possibility of having real relationships and do not allow themselves to trust others again. They do not want to build intimate relationships with other people because they do not want to be hurt again.

What are my needs?

- 1) Men, not only women, are being oppressed in a society that has many gender notions and biases (e.g., that men are the abusers). Actually, men and women can both become perpetrators in sexual abuse cases. We need to be reminded that sexual abuse survivors are very sensitive to sexuality. Therefore, gender sensitivity should be an important dimension in any therapeutic program. This can be ensured by, among others, allowing both male and female social workers to work with male survivors. Social workers should also genuinely adhere to the principles of gender equity. They must also be compassionate and free from gender biases. These are important considerations in the therapeutic process.
- 2) Male survivors think that their participation in therapeutic group sessions has positive effects. Their participation gives them the chance to find friends who have similar experiences, making them feel less lonely, more secure, and more capable of accepting themselves.

This research is a good starting point in understanding the situations of male sexual abuse survivors in Hong Kong. This gives the public information on the

pressures and adversities that male survivors face. It is hoped that a higher level of public awareness will lead to better programs and interventions, which should also lead to better and happier lives for male survivors.

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