

## Child Sexual Abuse on Adolescent Females' Sense of Self-Worth: A South African Study

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**ABSTRACT** This study reports on fifteen adolescent females aged between 15 and 19 years old, from Alice, Eastern Cape, South Africa, who experienced child sexual abuse. Guided by Antonovsky's work of sense of coherence which entails how people manage stress, literature documented that adolescent females who experienced child sexual abuse perform poorly academically and have multiple sexual partners owing to low self-esteem. The aim of the study being to determine their challenges, snowball technique was employed to recruit the participants to share their experiences in a qualitative study which lasted for approximately one hour. The parents and school principal were approached for ethical purposes while the adolescent females agreed to participate voluntarily. Findings revealed that participants experienced some form of impaired self-worth, intimate partner violence, emotional and psychological effects. Given the results, collaborative approach amongst social workers, educators and community is vital to curb sexual abuse.

### INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of child sexual abuse (CSA) in South Africa (Meinck et al. 2017) is higher than those measured in developed countries such as the United States with a prevalence of 26.8 percent (Finkelhor et al. 2014) and the United Kingdom with 18.6 percent (Radford et al. 2013). Optimus Study (2016) found that approximately fifty-three percent of adolescent females have been sexually abused. CSA refers to any sexual activity which involves a minor (an individual below age 18) irrespective that they have been given a consent. It usually entails pornography, fondling, kissing, vaginal or anal penetration and/or forcing a minor to touch genitals, in most cases, of an individual who has power or influence over them (Kloppen et al. 2016; Wekerle and Black 2017). Child sexual abuse being endemic (Letourneau et al. 2017), majority of victims prefer not to disclose for fear of being threatened by the perpetrators and embarrassment that they might not be believed by significant others (McElvaney et al. 2014). During sexual abuse, Hodes (2016) found that majority of adolescent females become pregnant and are left with no choice but to perform abortions for fear of being discriminated against by peers or community members. Comparatively, termination of

pregnancy seemed to provide short term goal because in African cultures, virginity (that is, non-penile penetration of a vagina prior marriage) is regarded as the pride of a woman (Kang'ethe 2014). Once adolescent females found that their hymen is no longer intact during traditional ceremonies by virginity test "experts" (usually, old women), evidence showed that Swazi and Zulu – speaking females in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa and Swaziland, face social rejection, dishonor to the family and likelihood of low bride wealth, which could be translated into low sense of self-esteem. Self-esteem can be understood as the positive or negative evaluations that one holds towards oneself (Marshall et al. 2014). Tatlow-Golden and Guerin (2017) argued that during adolescence, it is therefore important that parents should foster a balanced self-concept or self-esteem among girls in order for them to find meaning and perform better in many areas of their lives. However, research indicates that deficiency in attachment, parental support, warmth, affection and communication between adolescent females and their caregivers contribute towards impaired self-esteem and may leave majority adolescent females susceptible to early sexual debut, having multiple sexual partners and engaging in intergenerational relationships (Kemp et al. 2013; Kreppner and Lerner 2013; Trickett et al. 2011).

### Reports of CSA and Law Enforcing Agencies

Existing research has focused on sexual abuse and relied on recollection of abuse from criminal reports to show the severity of child sexual abuse (CSA) (Makoe et al. 2008; South African Police Service 2012). The Medical Research Council on reported rape cases in South Africa, found that one out of ten child rape cases reported to the police was incestuous (South African Police Service 2012). Such violence violates the children's rights to be protected from abuse as enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 and in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Mathews and Benvenuti 2014). However, there is dearth of phenomenological studies on CSA in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Hence, this study intends to examine the adolescent females' sense of self-worth who experienced CSA in the Eastern Cape, South Africa and determine the effects thereof, using focus group interviews.

### Home and Parent- Child Communication as Protective/Risk Factors of CSA of Adolescent Females

Kamkar et al. (2012) found that parents, who are consistently available and responsive in times of turmoil in the lives of adolescent females with a history of child abuse, increase the adolescents' sense of autonomy and provide a secure base for attachment. In Mpumalanga Province, South Africa, adolescent females who were engaged regularly on sex education by their parents reported positive self-esteem, responsible or health sexual behaviours and lack of substance abuse and displayed readiness in terms of coping with developmental changes associated with puberty, peer pressure, sexual behaviour, decision making and relationships (Maliavusa 2015).

However, deficiencies in parent-child relationships, parental control and parent child communication, may present depressive symptoms and behavioural problems, leading youth to experiment alcohol and drugs and risky sexual behaviours (Oshodi et al. 2010). Drawing from Erikson's psychosocial development theory which provides a deeper understanding of how important development of self-esteem of adolescent females is, parental support is regarded as piv-

otal in helping an adolescent to answer the question "*who am I*" in relation to the self, moral-values, peers and school during identity versus confusion period (Schultz and Schultz 2013). Spies (2012) is concerned that if the situations in many families are debilitating, child abuse may erode self-esteem among adolescent females and push them to the periphery and predispose them to practice risky sexual behaviours (for example, transactional sex, drug-abuse) especially when parents are divorced, single and financially unstable. Literature confirmed that an exposure of adolescent females to dysfunctional environments not only results in negative self-esteem but heightened risk of revictimization (Da Costa 2017; Papalia et al. 2017) because the protective factors such as the parents/ caregivers, school and/or church that are meant to ameliorate the trauma suffered by such a vulnerable cohort, are inactive (Hébert et al. 2016). It is a fact that there is an inextricable link among CSA, fostered homes characterized by emotional abuse and incest (Vis et al. 2014). Incest refers to the unlawful and intentional sexual intercourse between individuals who are related within the forbidden degrees of affinity, consanguinity or adoptive relationship (Spies 2012). Because of negative self-esteem owing to lack of emotional support at home, they may have low self-efficacy, conform to peer influence and engage in risky sexual behaviours in order to gain access to a group and lack zeal to complete their studies (Oshodi et al. 2010). Self-efficacy is Bandura's (2001) concept related to one's sense of competence and confidence in performing behaviours to achieve a desired outcome. In contrast, Allnock and Miller (2013) found that girls who have advanced in terms of age and no longer coping with the abuse, report the ordeal to authority figures as a way to break the silence for many who are being sexually exploited by relatives, brothers, stepparents and /or biological parents.

### Gender Inequality

Silverman et al. (2011) found that the risk factors which these vulnerable group is often subjected to, force them to practice unprotected sex due to gender inequalities and poor communication with their male partners. For fear of reprisal, such adolescent females tend to become compliant, drink alcohol and use drugs (Schultz

and Schultz 2013). Richter et al. (2015) emphasized that the traditional gender roles such as male dominance in most African cultures, have socialized women to be submissive. As a result, in communities which still embrace cultural practices such as in Lusikisiki, Eastern Cape Province, adolescent females are forced to do illegal marriages (Kheswa and Hoho 2014) by parents to alleviate their poor socio-economic status (Davies 2013; Mushwana et al. 2015). Consequently, being powerless results in behaviour such as nightmare, somatic complaints, sleeping and eating disorder, confusion about sex and negative self-esteem because the demand for secrecy is high (Fouche and Yssel 2012). Their personality becomes what Hans Eysenck in his PEN model refers to as *melancholic* (Schultz and Schultz 2013). That is, socially, they would isolate themselves from social activities, have poor relationships with friends and peers and be swamped in bed because of depression (Weiten 2013). Furthermore, Schultz and Schultz (2013) noted that adolescent females with history of CSA tend to display unresolved past traumatic issues when their sexual partners show commitment and develop intimacy. Finally, they are more inclined to become suicidal and engage in self-destructive behaviours such as being at the night clubs and experiment with drugs and alcohol (Shilubane et al. 2013). Against this background, this study attempted the following questions: (i) How has child sexual abuse affected the self-esteem of adolescent females? (ii) What support systems are available for adolescent females with history of child sexual abuse?

### Research Objectives

The research objectives of this study are formulated as follows;

- (i) To determine how child sexual abuse has affected the self-esteem of adolescent females.
- (ii) To investigate the support systems that are available for adolescent females with history of child sexual abuse.

### Theoretical Framework

Grounded in the early work by Aaron Antonovsky (1979) as a theoretical framework, sense of coherence (SOC) it is a concept which is described as a factor in determining how well

adolescents manage stressful situations and stay healthy when faced with life-challenges (Moksnes and Espnes 2012). Antonovsky's theory is supported by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) propositions that adolescent females who cope under stressful situation are most likely to access social support, improve their level of motivation and have plan of action against external or internal demands. Van der Walt et al. (2014) found that adolescent females demonstrating high levels of self-regard, cognitive functioning, self-perception, locus of control, social competence, sense of optimism and adaptive coping styles, have reported manageability and meaningfulness in their lives. Borrowing from the classical work by Viktor Frankl (1976) on logotherapy, individuals who thrive subsequent to traumatic experiences tend to find meaning and purpose in their life's journey. Overcoming adversity such as rape is a sign of post-traumatic growth and sense of coherence as Kheswa and Shwempe (2016) found the same results in qualitative study among adolescent females in Eastern Cape, South Africa.

### METHODOLOGY

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design since it provides an in-depth knowledge of the social world of research participants from phenomenological perspective (Creswell 2013). Phenomenological research seeks to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Welman et al. 2012). The snowball sampling was opted considering the culture and the sensitivity of the topic. The sample represented the population from Alice, Nkonkobe Municipality in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. A population is referred to as a group or number of people that occupy a geographical area (Kothari 2011). Although it was time-consuming to get the key informants (sharing the same characteristics, in this case CSA), the researcher recruited 15 isiXhosa-speaking adolescent females, aged 15 to 18 years, from one secondary school in Alice, Nkonkobe Municipality in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. For data collection, a focus group interview which lasted for 1 hour was conducted, for it offered the participants an opportunity to express their experiences in a natural setting (Welman et al. 2012). De Vos et al. (2011) stated that a focus group interview (FGI) is a social

relationship designed to exchange information among the participants and the researcher. The advantage of FGI was that the researcher got large amounts of data quickly and it was easy for the participants to describe their experiences in depth since they shared the same characteristics (gender, history of sexual abuse).

### **Ethical Considerations**

To adhere to the ethical guidelines in conducting research, the University of Fort Hare granted the ethical clearance while the school principal agreed in writing that the research study could be carried out within the school premises. Prior conducting the focus group interview, the purpose of the research was explained to the participants and told that they may withdraw should they wish to do so, as suggested by De Vos et al. (2011). None of the participants withdrew from the study. The participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity as they were not asked to mention their names during the interview. They also gave their informed consent to be tape-recorded during the interview. It should be noted that owing to the sensitivity of the topic, the participants were debriefed by the researcher upon completion of the focus group interview to ensure that they are not left emotionally wounded. To achieve this, the researcher encouraged the respondents to mention the areas in their lives which required empowerment. Upon identifying anger and self-hatred as attitudes which derail the participants, the researcher proposed self-help steps to be followed and encouraged them to participate in extramural activities.

### **Trustworthiness**

According to Lincoln and Guba (2000) the following criteria are important in reflecting the assumptions of the qualitative paradigm more accurately. The researcher ensured credibility in the study by being involved during the interview sessions as the participants responded to the open-ended questions. Shenton (2004) stated that transferability is concerned with the extent to which findings of one study can be applied to another situation. In this regard, the researcher ensured transferability during the interview by drawing the findings from the respondents who shared the same characteristics such

as culture, values gender and beliefs with the population. Dependability looks into whether the research process is logical, well-documented and audited (Creswell 2013). In this study the researcher ensured dependability by taking down the participants responses to ensure accuracy in the responses. Conformability refers to the degree to which others can confirm the results (De Vos et al. 2011). The researcher ensured conformability by taking down the responses from the participants and recording the details of what happened throughout the data collection procedure.

## **RESULTS**

The analysis resulted in the development and identification of seven key themes, namely; abduction, abortion, impaired self-worth, academic performance, intimate partner violence, emotional and psychological effects, and psychological services.

### **Abduction**

With respect to the question “*May you describe how did child sexual abuse come about?*” The respondents explained that CSA was caused by abduction because parents were poor. Evident to this are responses cited by adolescent females, who cried.

*“My parents were financially poor and they could not even afford to pay for us the school fees and buy us clothes. I saw some male adults visiting home, the next thing I heard from my father was that I should know that form that day, I was married. I managed to escape after I stayed with a widower of 49 years old for 7 months. And I did not go back home to Egcawa, since I am this side now”* [Aged 17, Grade 9].

*“I was on my way to the shop when 2 middle-aged stopped their car, grabbed and threatened me to beat me if I did not enter the car they have been driving. Upon arriving to a nearby village, I found my uncle negotiating my marriage. I am still with the husband and he is 25 years old”* [Age 18, Grade 10].

### **Abortion**

Three of the respondents expressed that while staying with their extended families (aunt,

uncle and relatives) they were sexually abused and forced to terminate the pregnancies since that would stigmatize the whole family.

*"My child should be 2 years now if had not been for the rape. My sister's husband impregnated me and I had to abort because I did not want to cause conflict between the families"* [Age 17, Grade 10].

*"While staying with my aunt in her home in Johannesburg, I had a relationship with one of her customer, since she was selling alcohol. My aunt knew but she never supported me when I went to the hospital to terminate pregnancy"* [Age 19, Grade 10].

*"To lose parents while young contributed to being pregnant but I terminate the baby because I was financially poor and I was involved with multiple partners while staying with my unemployed aunt"* [Age 18, Grade 11].

### Impaired Self-worth

Most of the respondents indicated that owing to the abuse they had encountered in their lives, they showed low levels of self-worth. For example, they cited the following;

*"It has affected me by not knowing myself anymore and always thinking that I am a loser. I even struggle to concentrate during classes especially when the discussion is around teenage pregnancy and the dangers of being involved with many boyfriends"* [Age 15, Grade 9].

*"It has affected my self-esteem a lot as I thought I am not a person because she left me at a difficult time in my life. He had promised to take care of me and help me with school fees, clothes and food"* [Age 19, Grade 11].

### Academic Performance

This theme emerged after the adolescent females with a history of child abuse explained that they do not see the need to continue with education because their performance is poor and the reason for it is due lack of family support and educators.

*"I struggle to cope at school and I forget easily. I'm in my second year now repeating the grade"* [Age 16, Grade 9].

*"My aunt never gave me emotional support after being raped and during lessons I get distracted. I feel like dropping school"* [Age 18, Grade 11].

### Intimate Partner Violence

As a result of the child sexual abuse, majority of the respondents cited that their boyfriends are abusive and they are afraid of discontinuing the relationships. One respondent, aged 19, in Grade 11 mentioned that her 30 year old does not like to find her not being home when he gets back from work. Her words were: *"I even miss afternoon classes and study groups because he beats and kicks me when I have arrived late. He thinks that I lie when I tell him that I was doing projects with other learners at school."* The Grade 12, 18 year-old respondent reported that her boyfriend would beat her when she refuses to practice anal sex against her will. Furthermore, while drunk, he would accuse her of cheating on him. However, an 18 year old who is still married although by abduction, expressed that her husband does not beat her. Instead she mentioned that her in-laws provide them with support by looking after their 2 year-old daughter.

### Emotional and Psychological Effects

Most of the respondents reported negative emotions (for example, guilt, always crying, insecure attachment, anger and hatred). For example, regarding the question *"What are the effects of negative self-esteem on your sexual behaviour?"* The responses below relate to the feelings of emotional detachment as they are experienced by adolescent females owing to negative self-esteem.

*"I don't last with my boyfriends because when I am worried, I drink alcohol excessively"* [Age 18, Grade 12].

*"I sometimes think that my boyfriend is with other girls when he has not come to see. Also, everytime when we are together, I would insist on checking his phone"* [Age 16, Grade 10].

*"After being raped, I was depressed and felt like my childhood was taken away from me. I no longer enjoy sexual intercourse with guys my age. I need older people because I feel protected"* [Age 19, Grade 10].

### Psychological Services

The narratives cited below indicate that the psychological services for adolescent females with history of CSA are inaccessible. Regarding the question: *"What support systems are avail-*

able for adolescent females experiencing violence?" The respondents stated that only time they received counseling it was when the statement of their ordeal was being taken by the police and there was no confidentiality and privacy.

*"I was asked degrading questions by the male police officers when I reported that my boyfriend has raped and beaten me. Thereafter, I was asked to explain the incidence step-by-step in an open charge-office, although I was in a cubicle with a victim supporter"* [Age 18, Grade 11].

*"I would say, I got counseling from social work students who come to help us with Life-skills during holidays. But I was surprised when one of my female educators told me that I should be strong"* [Age 17, Grade 9].

*"I remember when I went to the hospital after I got beaten by my 3<sup>rd</sup> boyfriend, there was a room that I had to go to, but the queue was long and you are being seen by other people although they were also abused. I did not go"* [Age 19, Grade 10].

## DISCUSSION

It is clear that in communities embracing culture, women remain subservient towards patriarchal attitudes demonstrated by men especially in families characterized by poverty. In this regard, the human rights of adolescent females to education, health and freedom of association were violated because parents forced their daughters to be married without their knowledge. This finding is in line with the alleged abduction and rape of a 15 year-old adolescent female by a 43 year old traditional healer in Butterworth, Eastern Cape. According to the police-spokesperson, the alleged suspect had paid the dowry "lobola" of two cows and three goats to the family of the victim (Feni 2015). It is plausible that the abducted female youth may experience trauma, self-hate and contract sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS because the health status of the husbands are not known as in communities which are culturally embedded, married women should not use contraceptives.

Also, this study found that a lack of parental support contribute towards negative self-esteem among adolescent females with history of CSA. In contrast, Tanaka et al. (2017) found secure emotional connectedness between Japanese

parents and adolescent females with history of CSA results in resilience and positive self-esteem among traumatized youth who experienced rape. Vermeulen and Greeff (2015) found ninety-four percent of the youth aged between 14 and 21 years among lower socio-economic groups in the Western Cape had good emotional functioning and exemplified characteristics of leadership, social competence and mental health despite their adverse situations, and that enabled them to cope with the abuse they encountered.

However, adolescent females who have negative self-esteem and sense of self-worth, struggle to make independent decisions and lack purpose in life (Hébert et al. 2016). For example, they ruminate about their situations despite being physically and emotionally abused by their sexual partners. Theoretically, an assertive individual usually seeks professional help or copes by applying the five stages of stress change model (SCM), namely; pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance stage as suggested by Antonovsky and Kats (1967) and Lazarus and Cohen (1977). In the case of adolescent females experiencing intimate partner violence and subsequent negative self-esteem, literature documented that they are bound to be alexithymic and neurotic instead of reporting sexual abuse. They lack meaning and manageability, the core components of SOC. Alexithymia refers to emotional dysregulation and it is marked by suspicion, disbelief and difficulties in controlling the affective, cognitive as well as interpersonal and physiological functioning (Sharma 2014) while being neurotic means to be desperate for love and affection (Lin et al. 2017).

Understanding how the family dynamics encourage harmony, this study found that abduction in cultural discourse should be viewed as acceptable because one respondent cited how her in-laws support her and show affinity towards her 2 year-old daughter. In this study, it could thus be said that female adolescents are sexually active and at a heightened risk to further abuse because some are in cohabitation and substance abuse. Furthermore, by being involved with older men, this finding is supported by Horney's theory which theorized that the repressed hostility of childhood tend to generate intrapsychic conflicts and may take a form of idealized self-image or self-hatred (Lin et al. 2017). Hence, they see nothing morally wrong in being involved with multiple sexual partners. It

is also evident that the adolescent females feel inferior when they start to evaluate and compare themselves to their non-abused counterparts because they do not cope at school. They cited that they encounter difficulty in concentration and lack the desire to continue schooling. These findings are in agreement with the research conducted in Kenya by Kabiru et al. (2017) and Uganda by Swahn et al. (2017) that child abuse and poor school performance are inextricably linked, and child abuse may be a result of a lack of support from home, disruptive behaviour at school, negative self-esteem and low self-efficacy, which consequently affect the adolescent females' academic performance (Siddiqui 2017). These findings are similar to those reported in international studies, such as in Ireland, where Brady et al. (2016) found that the influential power of economic instability and familial conflict further place adolescent females' well-being at risk of teenage pregnancy. Given the socio-economic status of many households in the Eastern Cape, the perpetrators might be taking advantage of the vulnerable girls, whom, when they have been given money after having sex, they do not see the need to report the incidents. Drawing from social exchange theory, Emmerson (1976) posited that adolescent females who get financial rewards in exchange for sex, they are likely to compromise their well-being. As purported by Berg et al. (2017) it is important to identify children with history of CSA early, to avoid a situation which might lead to drug abuse as a form of coping with the ordeal in adulthood. For example, in the Western Cape, South Africa, Berg et al. (2017) found that nearly thirty-three percent of participants with history of CSA exceeded the threshold of drug abuse and reported depression than their counterparts without history of CSA.

Finally, this study found that some participants performed abortion as a result of incest. Although Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1996 was legalized in South Africa (Macleod et al. 2014), Lince-Deroche et al. (2017) found that in KwaZulu-Natal, pregnant teenagers who performed abortion experienced deleterious physical effects such as perforation and hemorrhage (that is, heavy flow of bleeding). In this study, for ethical reasons, the participants were never asked to explain the complications and challenges associated with the TOP. However, in their

responses and tone of voices when they mentioned abortion, it could be speculated that they have emotional scars, thus, they cover them with multiple sexual partners and drugs for comfort.

## CONCLUSION

This study attempted to address the challenges faced by adolescent females with history of CSA and how it impacts on the self-esteem. The findings showed that sexual abuse has detrimental effects on the social, psychological and emotional well-being of adolescent females. Majority of the victims of CSA, repeat grades and perform poorly, academically. Although the research questions have been answered, this study has its own limitations as the sample might not be a true representative of the adolescents with history of CSA. Firstly, this study was qualitative in nature and conducted at one school in the rural areas in the Eastern Cape. Moreover, in urban areas, there are centres and organizations which specifically offer trauma counselling as compared to rural areas, where this study was conducted.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the empirical findings, it is clear that adolescent females who experienced sexual abuse are mired in trauma and as a result their sense of self-worth is impaired. The recommendations are that communities, schools, police and social workers should work collaboratively against all forms of sexual abuse and ensure that the perpetrators of the abuse are prosecuted. The government should assign educational psychologists to schools for learners to receive psychological support to deal with the posttraumatic stress disorders. Finally, comprehensive guides should be offered to adolescents to keep abreast of health issues without being discriminated, by the Health Ministries.

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