

Case analysis of child abuse and neglect in Trinidad

E. J. Johnson (corresponding author)¹,

C. J. P. Worme-Charles²

Invited Original Articles

¹ Lecturer in Social Work Department of Behavioral Sciences
Faculty of Social Sciences The University of the West Indies
St. Augustine Campus Trinidad

² The University of the West Indies
St Augustine Campus Trinidad

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Reviewers:

V. Kozon

Allgemeines Krankenhaus – Medizinischer Universitätscampus, Vienna, Austria

J. M. Muli

Catholic university of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

Child abuse is a major public health problem. This article exposes the health risk faced by a sexually abused child who was a school dropout facing challenges in her life with her own family. This case study critically analyzed the struggle of a female child, whose unfortunate experience was compounded by many gaps within the country's social support systems. On the other hand, the case explored her resilience and will to be successful against all odds. The authors identified a resilient approach which examines and guides the review of the risk; protective factors and resilience in the client's life; the impact of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy that helps her to identify her distorted thinking were discussed.

Introduction

Whether child abuse is defined socially, legally or clinically reflects poor parenting skills on the part of the parent/caregiver to protect the child. For the purpose of this paper a child is defined as "any person under the age of 18". Child sexual abuse "is a form of child abuse in which immature children are exploited through non-violent or violent molestation, pornography, prostitution and/or incest. Non-violent molestation involves adult non-violent sexual contact with a child

and may include kissing or touching, voyeurism, exhibitionism, genital fondling and urogenital contact. Violent molestation includes rape, which is defined as attempted or successful penetration of the vagina or labia with the use of force or threat or force. Oral and anal intercourse or vaginal abuse may be violent or non-violent. The use of children as pornographic photography and/or prostitution also constitutes child sexual abuse" (Ellerstein 1981 as cited by Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, 132).

Indicators and Impacts of Child Abuse on Health

Child abuse can lead to negative externalizing and/or internalizing behavior on the child's health. The impacts of which, if not dealt with appropriately, can lead to maladaptive behaviors (Gelles 1976, Sharpe 2012, UNICEF 2006 and Bell 2005). There are many indicators of child maltreatment some include, regressive communication patterns (e.g. speaking childishly); hostility toward authority figures; lack of trust in others amongst others; can lead to insomnia, depression, fear; will affect the growth of the child.

Interaction of Risk Factors Protective Factors and Resiliency in Outcomes

Current literature underscores the interplay of risk factors, protective factors and resiliency with the characteristics of the child, parents and contexts, as major influences in the outcome for child maltreatment and neglect (Stagner and Lansing 2009, and Durlak 1998). Some examples of risk factors are but not limited to frustration tolerance; trauma; difficulty learning and understanding; poor ability to problem solve; family violence; high family conflict; low family bonding. Protective factors act as buffers to the effects of risk factors some examples are hopefulness; physical health; high monitoring and supervision; stable housing; positive role models; parental involvement (Durlak 1998, Paxson and Haskins 2009, Daro 1998, Kugler 1988).

Theoretical Framework

An integrative combined approach of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Ecological Theories were used as the resources of choice. Research indicates that "...treatment strategies involving multi-faceted approaches may be more useful than the narrow approaches that have characterized the field in

the past" (Lutzer 1984, Lutzer, Mcginsey, Mc Rae, Campbell 1983 as cited by Morris and Braukmann 1987, 291). Child Maltreatment is considered to be multi-faceted with many environmental textures, treatments which warrant a multi-faceted approach (Moursund and Kenny 2002, Coulshed and Orme 2012, Zastrow 2003 and Hamilton 1967).

Methods

Protecting the rights of clients is a critical element in Social Case Work as such; ethical considerations guided the process for this case (York 2009). In research and case studies, it is important to protect the client; start where the client is; and principles of positive self-regard and self-determination observed (Kadushin and Kadushin 1997, York 2009 and Padgett 2008).

Use of Open Ended Questions Guided by Empirical Research Theory

The questions asked in the interview were guided by Eco-behavioral Theoretical Frameworks. The series of questions transitioned from the easiest to more complex. The questions were open ended and were mainly qualitative. Padgett (2008) encouraged case worker/researchers to capture elements of resilience in aspects of their research; hence, questions also explored how the client persevered from her experience.

The stages of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy as highlighted by Coulshed and Orme (2012)

were utilized. The stages were: engagement; problem focus; problem assessment; teaching client a cognitive principle; challenging the assumptions of the client; encouraging client's self-disputing; setting behavioral homework; completion.

Case Analysis

The client is a fifteen year old female survivor of child abuse, neglect and

a witness to parental abuse. To date, she has lived in eight different communities. At the age of 10, she was raped by an adult male family friend who is currently serving an eight year prison term for this crime. She stated that she received no counseling, psychological support or intervention from any Human Services Agency after the abuse. In 2012, two years after the rape, she was detained in the country's lone prison for allegedly causing the death of a 17 year old male school mate (herein after referred to as 'the incident') on the school's compound. While in prison, she stated that she saw the man who raped her. According to her this left her feeling emotionally drained. She feels frustrated, depressed and angry. She regrets committing the incident and stated that it was not intentional. Notwithstanding, she is hopeful that her situation can help someone who may be encountering similar feelings or experiences. She openly expresses feelings of sadness, frustration and anxiety towards this situation and doesn't understand the reason the Ministry of Education cannot place her in any formal public or private educational setting. She is willing to go to different schools to speak out on violence and looks forward to resuming her education. Presently, she is out of prison, assigned to a probation officer, doing community service, on a curfew and serving a bond.

Discussion

Social/Emotional Functioning

Notably, her pattern of responses is a cause for concern. The relationship with her parents seems to be deteriorating. Her overall pattern of responses demonstrates that her emotional functioning is impaired. Data suggests that adjudicated delinquent female adolescents who experienced particularly high rates or exposure to sexual

and other forms of abuse tend to be very aggressive and have self-regulatory issues (Bell 2005). On examining Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory (1979) one can further gain insight into the clients present behavior. The Ecological model postulated that an individual's growth and development is based on contextual factors. A young person's development is affected by the interaction of five types of environmental systems.

The first Micro-system which examines her immediate environment: for instance the relationship she has with her mother and their communication patterns.

The second, Meso-system, looks at her interaction with peers, school and immediate persons around her. However, in the present situation, interactions in her Meso-system seemed curtailed. She is still out of school; breaks the bond; stays out late; spends most of her time with anti-social young adults; enters into communities with high incidences of crime. This raises concerns for this stage in her developmental pathway: exposure to positive attributes from school; pro-social peers; clear rules and consequences are all encouraged because they can help reinforce positive behavior. Interestingly, although she interacts with persons who presumably have negative behaviors, this has not affected her determination to re-enter the school system and succeed, she holds firm to what she wants.

The third, Exo-system, consists of structures that may not be directly in her path but affect her immediate setting. She expressed anger towards her mother's unemployment status. She thinks her mother is lazy, nags her too much and should find a job. She doesn't like to remain home whenever her mother is there.

The fourth, Macro-system examines concrete structures in the society: for example, the cultural beliefs of the society. It examines the cultural expectations of young women in the Trinidad culture and their implications. Her father complains about her dress code protesting that it is too revealing for a 'young lady'. Talking to her about her dress code yielded no result; she does not believe that she has to dress to please people; the way she dresses is her identity. This view may be consistent with Erik Erikson's (1993) developmental stage of identity versus role confusion.

The fifth, Chrono-system examines her behavioral consistency over time; the environment in which she lives; the impact of the incident on her psychological functioning; the effects of her parent's divorce. The literature stated that girls like this are at risk for the development of aggression and delinquency come mainly from disadvantaged circumstances such as parental stress (parent's tumultuous relationship) and disrupted parenting. Additionally, parent-child conflict relates to aggression and delinquency in girls. Further, internalizing and externalizing problems such as her withdrawal and aggression towards her mother indicate that she is at risk. Disengagement or exclusion from school may well precipitate offending by young women. Bell (2005) noted that absenteeism/expulsion from school is known to have an indirect pathway to crime.

Risk and resilience

To examine and guide the review of the risk, protective factors and resilience in her life, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory and risk protective framework were utilized. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) multi-system approach was used to understand environmental and individual factors that influenced her. The framework

posited that behavior and possible outcomes of persons along their developmental pathway are shaped by the interaction of multiply risk and protective factors.

Durlak (1998) defined protective factors as influences or variables that buffer the effect or reduce the probability of a maladaptive outcome stemming from risk factors. Examples of protective factors may include: individual's good problem solving skills; access to support networks; parents who are supportive and attentive; school climate that fosters positive growth and development. In contrast, Durlak (1998) stated that risk factors are factors that increase the possibility of negative undesirable outcomes for a child. Examples of risk and protective factors include: elements such as characteristics or qualities of individuals; experiences; relationships; contexts; institutions.

Resilience offers a framework to gain insight on the various ways in which a child does well in an adversarial situation. A resilient child is one who develops normally despite of difficult circumstances in the past and/or present (Luthar S. 2000). Resilience is also characterized and influenced by the interactions and outcomes derived from familial and environmental factors (Schoon 2006). Resilience examines how the child process respond in the onset of the adversity (Rutter 2007). Other researchers concluded that resilience in girls can be measured along six or eight domains of functioning criteria of: employment; homelessness; education; social activity; psychiatric disorder; substance abuse (Bell 2005). Bell *et al.* (2005) stated that 22% of abuse and neglected children followed into adulthood met the criteria for resilience.

The client also expressed her frustration with the system: she gets bored easily and resents being inside for long bouts of time based on the conditions of the bond. She is becoming restless, her father claimed that

she doesn't attend counseling anymore and the counselor was in the process of terminating their sessions. In the presenting case, her risk factors include: poor parental supervision; being exposed to family relationship conflict and parental abuse; prohibition from school; lack of adequate social support networks, community violence and crime; exposure to adult criminals in prison. Enduring risk factors may include social isolation; aggressive behavior; mother's failing health; underlying all of this is the family's new economic status having used up savings for her legal fees. Other underlying risk factors: caregiver childhood adversity and violence in the neighborhood.

Protective Factors: enduring protective factors: father and mother constantly support her although the relationship is strained with her mother; the mother still continues to pledge her support for her daughter; father continuously supports her financially and emotionally; her siblings constantly support her; give her lessons; speak to her; has bonded with her infant sister who gives her a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Spiritually, she believes that God is going to make a way for her through all of the adversity.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive Behavior Therapy assumes that most people can become conscious of their own thoughts and behaviors and then make positive changes to them. Behavior Therapy assumes that all behaviors occur as a result of internal and/or external stimuli (Zastrow 2003). Further the client can benefit from what the Therapy has to offer. Within the Therapy, she can move towards overcoming the difficulties by changing her problematic behavior and the emotions experienced over the incident. This therapy will also allow her to change unhelpful thinking and confront her feelings, reframe and restructure some of her thoughts, especially about the abuse. It should also help

her to identify her distorted thinking; relate better with her mother; in the long restore her back to proper emotional functioning.

Social Work Intervention

“A culturally specific definition of child abuse and neglect in the Caribbean is needed to avoid inappropriate intervention, infringements of parents rights and inconsistencies in interpretation of who is the at-risk child and who is the abused child (Ministry of Social Development and Family Services 1989 p 34).”

Long term commitment is needed to help the client through this tumultuous time; she needs consistent and committed workers helping her along. This will bring some level of stability to her life as she tries to successfully complete her developmental milestone. She can benefit from weekly counseling sessions with an emphasis on a Cognitive Behavioral Therapeutic approach. Intervention in the home is critical.

Strengths Based Approach

The focus of the helping process is on consumer's strengths interests and abilities, not upon weaknesses, deficit or pathologies. (Coulshed and Orme 2012, 163).

Against this background interventions for the client should focus on empowerment, resilience and the Social Work value of individualization. It is also suggested that an intervention surrounding positive activities that she loves should be encouraged. Asset-enhancing activities like playing pan and interacting with people can be used as an opportunity for her to develop pro-social skills and a channel through which the Case Worker can develop trust and build rapport. The client though experience issues has resources within her that have not been utilized. A multi-sectorial approach can also be

used as an intervention strategy to capitalize on what each social partner can contribute to her holistic development. It is clear that there are major gaps within the systems in which she interacts. As such, interventions should focus on strengthening protective factors within the family such as the skill set of her parents. This should have a positive impact should improve the family's overall interactions.

Gaps Within the Social Service Delivery

Notably, child abuse is a complex problem that requires a continuum of culturally and gender relevant assessment and intervention to secure prevention of child maltreatment and neglect. For the purposes and issues arising out of this study, the gaps in three human service providers: Child Protection Authority (CPA), Law Enforcement and Child Care Homes will be reviewed in the country of Trinidad. There are many gaps within the service delivery that contribute to the prevailing risk factors for victims of abuse.

Child protection authority

The Child Protection Authority is the agency for child protection in Trinidad. Though its vital role cannot be understated, its fragmented approach in dealing with child abuse has left many gaps. Although the Child Protection Authority was designed to prevent child abuse, the response to accomplishing this feat seems to be difficult. The multi-sectorial approach as proposed has not entirely lived up to expectations. The roles and responsibilities of various sectors and agencies are not clearly defined, as such, duplication and negligence of duties may be forthcoming issues. Public trust and confidence in the Authority has been a major challenge in some instances it even may be termed as jeopardized. This mistrust

may be a result of a pattern of inefficiency and unreliability in responses when clients reach out for help. Sensitization: lack

of public awareness of the rights of the child and the access to social support agencies continue to be a gap that leaves the victims of abuse isolated from protective services that should buffer the effects from the inclement risks. Preventative strategies, more reactive than preventative, take on a medical model, more on intervention focuses on victims and their family not on strengthening the support units and gaining support from the wider community. Lack of physical, human and financial support are issues that compromise the quality of services the agency can provide. Though the Authority has made strides to remedy this problem, it is still concurrent. There isn't training and capacity building to fulfil the child protection mandate.

Law Enforcement Agency

A significant aspect of the roles of Law Agency Workers in the Caribbean lies with the protection of human rights. Included in their mandate is the protection of children against maltreatment and abuse (Ministry of Social Development and Family Services 1989). Delay in initial responses and lack of trained officers in the area of child abuse investigations broadens the gap to effective management of this crime. Widening the gap even further is the issue of a cohesive response towards abuse. Grenada is cash strapped and as a result may not have the resources to invest in many human and physical resources. As such, the need for coordinated multi-sectorial approaches between the police and other child protection agencies heightens. Although significant strides were made along the years, the problems still persist, officers are not always readily available to respond to the victims of abuse.

Conclusion

Every child has a right to a harm free life. As a professional working directly with children, it is very disheartening to encounter victims of abuse. Policies and Laws are there to protect, but until the gaps are bridged, children will forever be vulnerable. The case of Xalima Hood is one in many. The focus on the on child abuse in the past has now changed to encompass a resilient approach. An approach that focuses on the strength of the child to withstand the perils of unfortunate circumstances is an excellent one to undertake in Grenada. Children are resilient they are strong and they have the capacity to survive.

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Corresponding author

Dr. Emmanuel Janagan Johnson

Lecturer in Social Work Department of Behavioral Sciences

Faculty of Social Sciences The University of the West Indies

St. Augustine Campus Trinidad

Tel. No: +1 868 662-2002 Ext 85277

Fax No: +1 868 663-4948

Email: Emmanuel.JanaganJohnson@sta.uwi.edu

Chrissie Jamie Paula Worme-Charles

The University of the West Indies

St Augustine Campus Trinidad

Tel. No: +1 868 662-2002 Ext 85277

Fax No: +1 868 663-4948

Email: chrisie.worme@my.uwi.edu