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SHORT PAPER

Psychosocial Impact of Sexual Abuse:
A Phenomenological Analysis

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ABSTRACT

　Background: Phenomenology is concerned with lived experience as a medium to understand the underlying reality of the problem that is undergone. It stresses the body as a vehicle of our being. Sexual abuse is one of the major causes for psychological trauma among individuals. Especially childhood trauma results in after effects like anxiety, depression, PTSD etc. Inability of the victims to seek help results in psychological fear. In India, people are very much hesitant to talk about child sexual abuse and most of the time parents are unaware of the incidents This study attempts to explore the lived experiences of sexual abuse during COVID-19, with a special interest in understanding the contemporary problems faced by them. The study also attempted to uncover the thoughts, feelings and actions of the individuals using the lens of existentialism. Method: The Qualitative method (phenomenological study) was used in the present study. A questionnaire was distributed to 400 respondents through online in which the questions related to sexual abuse they had undergone during COVID-19. 8 respondents were selected from 400 randomly based on consent. These 8 participants were interviewed using structured interview schedule to understand the kind of abuse they had undergone and psychosocial issues they had faced. All interviews were audio recorded. Results: Thematic analysis of the data was done. Themes such as curiosity, helplessness, loneliness, trauma and preventive measures emerged. The results indicated that the victims never sought help from anyone. Conclusion: The study implied that logo therapy can be used to help victims. To sum up, this study implied the need to create awareness among school children.

Keywords: Sexual Abuse, Phenomenology, Lived Experiences, Pandemic, Covid 19.

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1. Introduction - Child Sexual Abuse (CSA)

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) comprises a wide range of sexual victimization experiences that children may endure, including actions such as sexual harassment, commercial exploitation, sexual assault, both penetrative and non-penetrative activities, and the creation or distribution of explicit material[1].

It also includes engaging children in prostitution, pornography, or online luring by cyber-predators. There are several distinct types of child sexual abuse, each characterized by specific actions and circumstances. Non-Contact Abuse includes activities that do not involve physical contact between the perpetrator and the child, such as exhibitionism, exposing the child to sexually explicit materials, or coercing the child to engage in sexual activities in the presence of the abuser.

1.1. Psychological Consequences

Survivors of CSA are at an increased risk of experiencing a wide range of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation[1]. Child sexual abuse (CSA) has profound psychological consequences for survivors, with both short-term and long-term effects. In the short term, victims often experience immediate trauma, emotional distress, and shock[2]. They may grapple with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including flashbacks and nightmares. Depression and anxiety are common, interfering with daily functioning[3]. Many survivors also experience a decline in self-esteem and engage in self-blame[4]. Long-term consequences typically include the development of PTSD, leading to continued distress and affecting the overall quality of life. Sexual dysfunction is prevalent, impacting survivors' ability to form healthy, intimate relationships[5]. Coping mechanisms such as substance abuse and self-harm may emerge[6], and survivors often struggle with trust issues and have difficulty forming and maintaining relationships[5]. The psychological consequences of CSA extend beyond emotional turmoil. They affect various aspects of victims' lives, including educational attainment, employment, and overall well-being.

1.2 Influential Factors

The experience of child sexual abuse (CSA) is a multifaceted issue influenced by factors such as the duration, frequency, and intrusiveness of the acts, as well as the relationship between the child and the perpetrator[7]. The duration and frequency of the abuse are dynamic elements that can vary widely, shaped by the dynamics of the abusive relationship. Some instances involve single abusive incidents, while others persist over an extended period. Long-term, frequent abuse tends to exacerbate the psychological trauma experienced by victims, resulting in more severe and lasting consequences[5]. Stress, both in the family environment and in the life of the perpetrator, can contribute to the occurrence of CSA, where some perpetrators may use abusive behaviors as a maladaptive coping mechanism for their own stress or unresolved traumas. Need for the study:

In India, most of the time parents are hesitant to talk to their child about sexual abuse and vice versa. In some cases, parents were not aware of the abuse. The Childline India Foundation reported a 50% increase in the phone calls than usual days during lockdown. Out of the total calls received during the period, 30% were related to protection from abuse[8]. During lockdown, CSA can be devastating as the isolation has further limited support networks, making it even more difficult for the victims to seek help or escape. When the data reveals that 93% of perpetrators are relatives or known individuals[8], this also exposes the possible magnitude of the associated helplessness and mental health consequences in the victims. This is the case of reported but there are many cases not reported[9]. According to the existentialists, humans

when confronted with pain and sufferings, end up with anxiety. Their behaviour stems from the way they think and feel about the social interaction in which culture plays an important role. Hence the present study is conducted as a part of creating awareness to the parents by throwing light on the CSA during COVID-19 and make them to be more vigilant on the activities of their child especially when they use social media.

2. Methods:
2.1. Design
In the present study, descriptive phenomenological method as suggested by Colaizzi's (1978) has been adopted for data analysis. This approach was used to discover the meaning of the phenomenon through analyses of participants' "lived experience." This enabled a rich and in-depth understanding of the victims of sexual abuse "lived experience."

2.2. Participants and sample selection
Researchers prepared a questionnaire to understand the kind of sexual abuse and the same was circulated online. 400 individuals responded to the questionnaire. Participants (n=8) were selected based on the following inclusion and exclusion criteria

1. Age less than 18 years
2. Undergone any instance of sexual assault, or molestation during lockdown period.
3. Undergone abuse at least for a period of one month during lockdown

Exclusion Criteria:

Rape victims were not included

The study included both boys and girls. The participants confirmed that they had been sexually assaulted or harassed by either known individuals or online friends. Informed consent was obtained before the interview.

2.3. Operational definition
In the present study, sexual abuse refers to any form of sexual assault or molestation, including the online sexual harassment. This does not include rape.

Out of 8 participants, 7 were girls and 1 was a boy. Their age ranged from 15 to 17 years during COVID-19. They were studying in either 11th or 12th grade during pandemic through online mode of education. Except one participant, others were living in a nuclear family.

Table 1. The Demographics

Demographics	Gender	Grade	Type of Family
	Girls - 7	11th Grade - 6	Nuclear Family - 7
	Boy(s) - 1	12th Grade - 2	Joint Family - 1

2.4. Data collection and analysis
A semi structured interview schedule was prepared by the researchers to understand the lived experience of the participants. Participants narrated their experience on how they felt, thought and behaved during the incident. The

information obtained was recorded with their permission and then analyzed. Data was analyzed after listening. By listening the statements given by the participants, the researchers were able to understand the lived experience of the participants. Significant statement or phrases were extracted related to the phenomenon. Formulated meaning were arranged into clusters and then into themes. In order to understand them, verbatim of the participants were given in the discussion. The phenomenological experiences of the participants were discussed under the lens of existentialism.

2.5. Ethical Consideration

Initially a google form was circulated among 400 participants where demographics like age, sex, family type and questions related to understand the kind of sexual abuse they have undergone during COVID -19 pandemic were asked. In the Google form, those who have given their consent to share their experiences, were called. The details of the study, research purpose, voluntary participation and withdraw from study at any time if they feel uncomfortable in answering were explained to them. No details regarding their identification were asked and the interview was conducted face-0-face. It was audio recorded. In order to protect the confidentiality, the participants were coded as participants A-H in the transcript.

3. Results

Table 2. Cluster, Theme and Description

Cluster(s)	Theme	Description
a. Joining the social media b. Accepting the request c. Replying and chatting	Curiosity	Initial online classes made them very curious to use the social media platform
No contact with friends directly	Loneliness	During online classes, they couldn't talk to friends directly.
a. Fear of sharing the problem b. Fear of blame from significant others c. Whether other will believe d. Self-blame e. Thinking of family reputation f. Couldn't understand it as abuse	Helplessness	Did not want to share with anyone including the parents or to seek professional help.
a. Fear to sleep alone b. Hesitant to talk even now c. Disconnect from all social media	Trauma	Even after three years of the incident, the very thought of the incident makes them feel anxious and want to avoid conversation related to that.
a. Sex education b. Careful while using social media c. Educate on good touch and bad touch	Preventive measures	In order to help others, they wanted the school children to be taught on good touch and bad touch. They want to create awareness.

3.1. Theme: Curiosity

During the interview it was observed that the participants were curious to have an account in the social media as COVID-19 was the period where the students were exposed to the usage of online classes WhatsApp group for class information etc. which made them to open account in other social media apps.

"Though whatapp only was used for study purpose I joined in instagram, snapchat, and face book" (participant A)

"Accepted the request as I thought it must be school friend" (participant G)

"*..was chatting with them thinking it is a school friend until getting unwanted posts/images/videos"* (participant A,G)

During the conversation, the above participant made it clear that though there was no need to join other social media except for WhatsApp (which is used for communication from teachers), they were curious to know about what is happening in social media and wanted to stay connected.

3.2. Theme: Loneliness

Participants report a feeling of loneliness as they were at home during lockdown and were able to talk with friends only through online mode. Hence, whenever they get friends' request in social media they accept without careful consideration.

"...missing my friends…." (participant B)

Due to lock down and immobility from house, most of the participants felt they were missing the connection which made them to feel loneliness. The feeling of loneliness and curiosity made them to start using the media apps.

3.3. Theme: Helplessness

Most of the participants did not seek help from anyone to overcome the situation. They felt helpless as they felt that their parents will not understand them or blame them or family reputation will get spoiled.

"Since I was abused by my close relative my parents will not believe me…." (particpant B)

"Being from a reputed family I didn't want to spoil the family name" (participant C)

"Since it is my cousin brother…." (participant D)

"….and we were dependent on them due to our financial crisis" (participant E)

"… it took time for me to understand" (participant H)

"I was not aware that inappropriate clothing during online session is also a form of abuse" (participant H)

From the above statements, it is clear that they did not seek any help from anyone as they felt helpless. It is also noted that culture plays an important role in disclosing this kind of information with family or friends. Being a collectivistic society, we think more on what others would think and react.

3.4. Theme: Trauma

Many participants reported that they still feel the trauma they underwent.

"I could feel the trauma even now….." (participant A)

"I deleted all my social media account as I didn't want to experience the same again…" (participant A)

"I felt very much insecure…..unable to look myself in the mirror" (participant B)

"Even now I cannot sleep alone in my room" (participant C)

"I feel very anxious even now…..whenever I hear any incident like this" (participant D)

"I am scared to talk to any male even now…." (participant F)

While conducting the interview, the researcher is able to identify the trauma they had undergone with the voice modulation and the tremor even after years. Thus, it is concluded that they had trauma and even now, a few feel the trauma.

3.5. Theme: Preventive measures

Every participant felt the importance of educating the adolescents about sexual abuse which should include good touch/ bad touch, verbal and non-verbal communication. They also insisted on giving training on assertiveness.

"Students should be taught to say No…A No is a No…" (participant D)

"Sex education is important" (participant E)

"Teach how to handle social media platform" (participant G)

"School children should be educated on good touch/bad touch…. Various form of abuse" (participant A-H).

All participants were very firm and clear on the thought of preventive measures to be taken to avoid such incidents. They did not want anyone else to suffer like them. They suggested that martial arts should be taught to all school children irrespective of their gender to protect themselves.

4. Discussion

It is seen that irrespective of the gender, race, religion, community and socio-economic status, sexual abuse happens in all communities. The circumstances in which sexual abuse takes place may be the reflection of the cultural difference and the family environment. Certain family characteristics like, family type, parental bonding, parenting style is associated with sexual abuse. With an authoritative parenting style, child finds it difficult to disclose the information. Insecure attachment with parents and lack of parental care is highly related to sexual abuse. In the present study, the researchers have found from the phenomenological world of the victims that they lack parental supervision while they attend the online classes. Also, with one participant it was found that the child was away from father, and mother was financially dependent on relatives. This resulted in the inability of the child to express the circumstance to her mother. Beth Gerhard-Burnham et al., (2016) found in their phenomenological study that the wrong perception of the environment, parental care plays a role in sexual abuse[10].

For many participants, it was difficult to come out of the past trauma as they were trying to repress the memories due to the reason that they did not vent it out to anyone immediately. This is similar to the previous studies done by Peter Dale and John Allen (1988) in which it was found that children who had the memories of abuse had problem in their adult life in connection to the trauma they had undergone[11]. They did not know how to choose an emotional outlet. They were scared to take help from elders. The very thought of blame, shame and guilt prevented them from taking action against abuse. These traumatic memories later may lead to emotional problems in them. They have the feeling of disengagement wherein they find it difficult to understand themselves and their world. Everyone tries to understand their experience from their phenomenological world. Due to which, they believe this experience is unique to me and no one else is experiencing the same. Probably, this could be one of the reasons why they were hesitant to seek help.

But the process of recovery, made them to find a way to help individuals in prevention from sexual abuse. They found a way which makes sense of what happened to them in the past and prevent such incidents in future. In order to make sense of their past, they were suggesting that school children should be taught about good touch and bad touch. They realize that their environment is constantly changing that they should somehow live in that changing world. But at the same time, they also feel themselves too inflexible for the change. This could be the reason that many participants avoid using social media app as they had a bad experience. They fail to understand the importance of adapting to the changing environment. They are not looking the positive side of technology.

Alaggia, and Millington (2008) in their study on the lived experience of male, who had undergone sexual abuse in their boyhood, found that the participants exhibited sexual related problems[12]. The participants were helped therapeutically to disclose their sexual abuse and counselling was given. From the lived experience of the participants, the researchers understand that they are not the victims of the circumstances rather they choose to live with that. Though there were opportunities to escape, they had fear of freedom. They choose not to take any action when they have been victimized. They constantly felt loneliness, isolation and guilt. They felt themselves as the prisoners of the decision they made (adding account in social media). Here, role of culture played a vital role (family reputation, uncle, cousin, value of family system). They were unable to discard the old system and choose a new way of living which would give them freedom. Their neurotic anxiety made them to be a victim of the circumstances. Hence a proper psychotherapy or counselling can help them to come out of their fear and trauma so as to make them to seek help in future. Kerry Fater and Jo Ann Mullaney (2009) in their study stated that preventive measure and enhanced empathy will help in improving the healing relationship of the individuals who had undergone childhood sexual abuse[13]. Browne and Finkelhor (1986) in their systematic review of literature had found that victims of sexual abuse exhibit fear, anxiety, anger and hostility[14].

Individuals always think that their home is the safest place in the world. With the victims of sexual abuse, their lived experience made them to think that the place where they live in is very much insecure as they were abused not by strangers but by closed ones. The Researchers could infer how home, which once they thought is very safe and secure is now no safer. Despite parents are nearby, (during COVID, everyone was at home) they could not safe guard themselves. So, they maintained silence regarding the abuse due to the fear of repercussions. In a study conducted by Jonzon and LindBlad (2004), they have found that social support is a crucial protective factor for the victims of child sexual abuse for adverse outcome[15]. It also depends on the disclosure of abuse at the time of disclosure. Hence, it is the responsibility of the parents to make the child to feel secure to disclose such incidents.

From the statement of few participants, it was found that they developed problem with the body image. This could be the resultant of the sexual abuse. The way an individual experiences the social world is based on the interaction with the society. They were constantly responding to the demands of the society and cultural norms. As adolescents, they were unprotected by certain adults and abused by certain others. From the lived experience of the participants, it is very clear that parental involvement during adolescence is imperative. Especially, child should be monitored when they use social media. Age is strongly correlated with social media usage[16]. Vannucci et al., (2020) had found that there is potential risk behaviours involved when adolescents use social media apps[17]. It was also found in the research that risky social media behaviour results in romantic victimization[18]. Hence, it is important for the parents to keep an eye while their adolescent kids use social media.

5. Conclusions

From the present study, themes such as curiosity, helplessness, loneliness, trauma and preventive measures emerged. The study implied that logo therapy can be used to help the clients, who were the victims of sexual abuse. The study implied that school children should be taught sex education in order to prevent them from sexual abuse. Also, assertiveness training should be made mandatory in every school. The study also implied the role of parenting in preventing the child from sexual abuse. Awareness on sexual abuse is the need of the hour. Parental involvement while the child using the social media is also important.

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