

Personality Narrative of Victims of Child Abuse

W. Yasashree* & Anushka Suri**

*MA, Ambedkar University, Delhi,

**MA, Ambedkar University, Delhi

Abstract

The paper is an interdisciplinary approach towards understanding the personality structure of a victim of child abuse from the encounter with abuse until young adulthood when clinical-pathological manifestations start to occur. The hypothesis of this paper is constructed around the idea that the personality structure of a child abuse victim becomes way more important to understand while it is in the process of development in the here and now than just as a part of the patient's history after clinical manifestations. The movie, *Taare Zameen Par* is taken as an example. The author's viewpoint is shared to know about the physical and emotional abuse children face at home and school. The role of parents, teachers, and school administration is discussed along with the defenses that help in coping with the trauma/abuse. The paper also focuses on various preventive and support measures towards the end. The idea thus was to construct a personality structure by linking all the areas mentioned above. Contributions from the vast disciplines of early childhood education and psychotherapy would help in understanding this personality structure.

Keywords: *Child, Child Abuse, Personality, School, Parents*

Focus of the paper

The present paper focuses on the personality structure of child abuse victims. Following a traumatic event, it becomes very necessary that the victim of such an unfortunate experience be given the space necessary for the expression of the conflicting emotions. The period following the traumatic event is a very 'delicate' one. We say it is 'delicate' because these situations would shape the personality of the concerned child and would become the foundation of all future events; in adulthood.

In everyday life, we notice the varied attitudes towards cases of child abuse and the victims. The lack of space, attention, acknowledgment of the intense feelings the child is experiencing; may later lead to a manifestation of 'strange' symptoms in adulthood with the consequence of labelling all sorts of severe clinical psychopathology due to the 'repressed' event. It has been generally noticed that the aspect of child abuse is never openly discussed nor any attention towards the behaviour and personality structure of a child abuse victim is directed in the present phase of childhood. Therefore it is highly significant for us as part of the mental health field to highlight the importance and

consequences of abuse on the child who encountered it not just from a clinical psychopathology lens but rather most importantly study and understand the personality structure of this child in the home-school space before a clinical diagnosis might be arrived at. Combining the two disciplines of Early Childhood Care & Education and

Clinical Psychology, the present paper is dedicated towards understanding the vicissitudes of a child abuse victim.

The attempt is to put on paper, the experiences, attitudes, behaviour, personality formulation of the child, and the attitudes of significant adults at home as well as at school. For this purpose, we wish to focus on the two forms of child abuse namely physical abuse and emotional/psychological abuse. We believe that these two forms of child abuse are connected to each other and thus share an inter-dependent relationship. It is also the attempt of this paper to highlight the psycho-social aspects rather than to discuss the topic in the strict language of symptoms and pathology.

Introduction

From the time an infant can start absorbing the immediate environment, people, etc., until the later stages of childhood and adolescence, we can describe their personalities as constituting a curious element. They are intrinsically interested in everything noticeable such that they tend to ask loads of questions from adults. An infant can be observed putting various tangible objects in the mouth to know what they are. On the other hand, an adolescent can be observed to be curious about sexuality and various other aspects of life. In all these instances, we find a common link: Wanting to know the unknown. As a result, all our actions, attitudes, thought patterns, and behaviours are shaped around knowing this unknown. The purpose behind stating this curiosity is the fact that driven by this inquisitiveness, children are very attuned to the feelings, attitudes, behaviours, and facial expressions of significant elders especially the caregivers. Infants can intuitively differentiate 'safe' from 'unsafe' holdings, are sensitive to facial expressions and can sense any uncomfortable situation. Children are overly sensitive to these situations and thus can get easily affected. The same theory goes for the phase of adolescence wherein they are not just going through major physical transformations but these physical changes also have an effect on emotional and psychological levels. There are severe mood shifts, fantasies regarding their appearance and personality; in other words, there is huge consciousness about their body. In all these scenarios, it is the responsibility of the elders to be aware of the child, be tolerant of their outbursts, and most importantly face any difficult issues in the dyadic relation with care, love, sincerity, and positive strictness.

Child abuse, maltreatment, and neglect are known to be a global phenomenon. They are a violation of basic human rights that are granted to everyone to live a healthy life. If these rights are violated, they can have drastic effects on one's psychological and physical health. Child maltreatment is the 'abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age. It includes all types of physical, emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence, and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health'. According to the reports of UNICEF (2007), an average of 86% of children aged 2–14 years have experienced some form of violent disciplinary practice at home. A study was

conducted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India (2007), which reported that two out of every three children were physically abused, almost half emotionally abused and seven out of every ten girl child respondents faced neglect of one form or the other by family members.

There are four types of child abuse namely, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. In the present paper, we focus mainly on the physical and emotional forms of child abuse. The World Health Organization defines physical abuse of a child as an 'incident resulting in actual or potential physical harm from an interaction or lack of interaction, which is reasonably within the control of a parent or person in a position of responsibility, power, or trust.' It is the use of force to harm a child's health, development, and dignity. While, emotional abuse refers to a relationship between a child and a caregiver, which includes a consistent pattern of harmful interactions with a child, other than physical or sexual abuse. It is the failure to provide a supportive environment by threatening/scolding the child which leads to low self-esteem and/or emotional quotient. Most of the child abuse cases go unreported because of the stigma attached to it and to protect the name of the family. While many studies report the prevalence of child abuse in India, only a few have tried to explore the social factors that may have a role in predisposing children to the various forms of abuse.

The nature of abuse at home

In 2007, a movie called *Taare Zameen Par* was released. In the movie, the character and life trajectory of Ishaan (the main protagonist) can be observed as the perfect example of a variant of child abuse. The movie beautifully depicts the complex relationship between the dynamics being played out at home and school with child abuse at the center.

Ishaan lives in a nuclear family with his parents and elder brother. He is interested in extra-curricular activities such as painting, playing, crafting, and 'hates' studies. The reason behind his hate is a serious issue of learning difficulty termed 'Dyslexia' wherein the child has issues in differentiating letters with a similar form; for instance, the two letters b and d. At home, Ishaan's inability to focus on his studies owing to his learning difficulty is not attended to by his

parents, especially his mother who is responsible for teaching Ishaan and helping him with his homework. We see huge expectations being placed on him by his father, failing which he has to bear the brunt daily. When in trouble, his version is never listened to, and instead, the whole blame is inevitably thrown on him. Hence, he is subjected to physical beatings and scolding. He is even sent off to a boarding school since complaints against him were increasing day by day. Such an attitude towards him has a visible emotional/psychological effect in the sense that he loses complete interest in studies. Even in the neighbourhood, he has no friends and is constantly bullied and beaten up for his slowness. Ishaan is repeatedly threatened with abandonment by his father because of which he is always scared. The emotional turmoil starts getting reflected even in his paintings wherein he depicts his pain through paintings of distance and unhappiness. A significant point to consider is the fact that not once does Ishaan share his difficulties with his parents which also point towards major trust issues. The ultimate blow to his turmoil was his sending off to the boarding school by his father, the pain of which was indicated in giving up on his skill of painting altogether. At the boarding school, his problem of learning difficulty got worse, he no longer participated in creative activities, he became even more distanced and aloof from the happenings of the society, and upon repeated failures on part of his parents to meet him at the school, he got completely cut off from them too and stopped answering their phone calls. Even when his parents visit him with gifts and chocolates, he is least interested and does not wish them goodbye when they leave.

A child abuse victim is affected when inappropriate behaviours, instead of being addressed, are constantly addressed negatively or attempted to be repressed by others for reasons well known to them. The kind of parenting the child is subjected to, most prominently of the authoritarian kind, can hamper the child's growth and development. In the movie, the kind of parenting style exposed to Ishaan was of the authoritarian kind especially on part of the father who placed larger than life expectations onto his children and not once attempted to understand the hurt and pain Ishaan was going through. It is possible that as parents, they unintentionally harmed the child emotionally.

If one was to describe what a family refers to; a recurring and significant theme would be a sense of security, warmth, and openness to the expression of one's innermost feelings and thoughts. But what if one was to encounter a situation in the home space which threatens this very sense of belongingness and love? And this situation might be encountered not just once or twice but repeatedly; on an everyday basis. The early stages of life until adolescence, is a period of growth, development, and transformation when the child can be moulded into a healthy personality. A child is considered to be innocent, inquisitive, and energetic unlike in any other stage of development and it is therefore the responsibility of the significant elders to help channel this energy in various productive ways. But as is destined, not all families are happy ones. Reasons for such unhappiness in families can be both personal and social and in this tension, it is the child who very often becomes the easy target of all abuse.

The nature of the family structure is a crucial factor in cases of child abuse. Child abuse of almost all kinds can be prevalent in joint families wherein either due to the large numbers or raging tensions with certain family members; children might often become the easy target. It is possible that in situations wherein such an experience is shared, it is generally ignored or told to move on in fear of increased tensions in the family, continue the goodwill, and for the fear of judgement from society. In families wherein women are subjected to domestic abuse daily, child abuse especially of physical and emotional nature can again be observed. Threatening to harm the child to cause more emotional hurt to the mother is fairly common.

Child abuse can also be vicarious in the sense that noticing someone go through a traumatic event can make a lasting impression on the child unintentionally. In families with a history of mental illness, child abuse is likely. In all these cases what the child goes through on a physical and emotional level becomes very important to understand and take notice of. It was noticed from an internship in a hospital that the very small signs of difficulty on part of the child get often ignored for various logical, situational factors, and these building up through the years resurface brutally in adulthood in the form of serious clinical disorders which have its effects both on a mental and physical level.

The nature of abuse at school

School is another place where a child is physically and emotionally abused. Teachers play a crucial role in the detection and prevention of child abuse. However, many teachers knowingly or unknowingly abuse the child themselves. In India, a teacher is respected and considered as a powerful person. The power to inflict physical or emotional abuse is often validated by other adults as long as the teacher is moulding the child into a 'disciplined being'. For the longest time known, the school has been the sole place to teach children discipline and self-regulation. When children do not adhere to the rules of the school or fail to do their homework, they are beaten, slapped, asked to kneel, or stand outside the classroom. Parents are also tolerant of corporal punishment and believe that mild punishment is necessary for disciplining their children [Douglas, 2006]. An old Marathi proverb, "*Chhadi lage chham chham, vidya yeyi gham gham*" (the harder the stick beats, the faster the flow of knowledge), refers to how punishment is given to children to make them learn their lessons faster [Paik, 2009, p. 176]. For adults, a little beating and scolding is just a part and parcel of excellence in academics. Many children have psychologically adjusted and accepted their punishment at schools due to a lack of communication with parents and their support. They feel that teachers are more powerful than their parents; therefore, children hide the violence that happens in the schools from their parents [Ghosh, 2016]. This has further consequences on the emotional development of the child.

In a classroom where there are more than twenty children under the care of a single teacher, it becomes a struggle to look after the needs of every child. When a teacher neglects or scolds a child multiple times, it results in a poor or

unhealthy student-teacher relationship. Child abuse is also a major cause of high dropout rates and absenteeism as the victim of child abuse is not interested to attend school. They are often mocked, bullied, hit, and/or neglected by their peers. Emotional abuse can lead to lower motivation for school attendance, incompleteness of academic assignments, and negative student-teacher interactions [Hyman & Snook, 1999]. Thus, it becomes crucial to have a supportive environment for children. Many times, a teacher has differential treatment towards children from

diverse backgrounds, for instance, a child from a low socio-economic group. These children are scolded and beaten in front of the entire class. If the child is questioned and is unable to answer, they are called 'dumb'. The rest of the students also start to consider the child as 'dumb'. The children also complained more about them when they misbehaved and avoided sitting or playing with them. The known song, "Shame, shame, poppy shame, all the donkeys know your name" is often used in schools to humiliate or punish the child. While interning in a school in Delhi, I observed an interaction between the teacher and a child who was from a lower socio-economic group. The teacher left the child alone in the classroom when he could not solve a puzzle. He was crying and wanted the teacher to help him; however, the teacher did not help and took the rest of the class for assembly. The child was left on his own to figure out the puzzle. Instead of motivating or guiding the child, the teacher scolded him and left him to figure out the puzzle by himself.

Taking examples from *Taare Zameen Par*, when Ishaan couldn't read or write properly, the teachers kept punishing him and belittled him. His notebooks were filled with red marks and they would compare him to other children who were quick learners. He was often targeted and the whole class would mock him. He did not have many friends in school and none of the teachers took efforts to help him or to understand his situation. All of them believed that he was misbehaving and should be punished and was further sent out of the classroom. He had no support from teachers or his peers. Unable to get guidance from anyone, he internalized his incapacities and the fact that he was 'good-for-nothing'.

With such experiences, children avoid going to school and are afraid of being scolded by the

teacher. Emotional abuse can affect a child's self-worth and self-perception and can also lead to impairment in their social-emotional development. These multiple layers of disadvantages make it hard for some children to adjust to school and are further abused and demotivated. When the child does not have a growth-promoting environment, they tend to question themselves and have low self-esteem. Though there are many laws and acts like UNCRC (The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) and RTE (Right to

Education) Act, 2009 to protect children from physical and emotional abuse to children, however, the ground reality is completely different as most of these practices are common across homes and schools.

Defensive structure of a child abuse victim

Each person has a unique personality. Given the nature of child abuse we are currently discussing in the paper (physical abuse and emotional/psychological abuse), it is important that we understand the general personality structure of a child and gradually attempt to focus on the changes which might be brought upon after the traumatic event.

Defenses are an intricate part of any person's personality structure. Indeed they play a huge role in how an individual thinks and acts upon. Freud (1937) as part of the school of psychoanalysis first introduced the term Ego Defense Mechanisms. According to him, human behaviour mostly always attempts at dealing with anxiety. In this scenario, it is the ego (works by the reality principle) that uses certain ways in dealing with these life anxieties. Sigmund Freud defined defense mechanisms as ways of reducing anxiety through reality distortion. We all use certain defense mechanisms from time to time to deal with and adapt to the challenges of reality. All forms of defensive formations occur as a healthy, adaptive use in adjusting to reality. Things take a serious turn only when people use these defense mechanisms to such an extent that they start living completely in a distorted reality not visible to the naked eye.

Defense mechanisms tend to work at two levels: primitive and secondary. The primitive processes are said to exist mostly in a preverbal stage of development; yet continue all our life. These forms of defenses are healthy in the sense that they make no major transformation to an individual's functionality and are responsible for actually helping this individual to deal with the everyday issues. The secondary processes of defense mechanisms are more mature, higher-order processes that have a significant effect on an individual's thought and functionality. When used excessively, it can push the person towards living in a distorted reality.

Notwithstanding the age at which a child may face abuse at the hands of significant elders, a very common way of facing a traumatic event is by the defense of 'denial'. The defense of denial

is used consciously or unconsciously by all age groups, in that, an individual refuses the present occurring reality. From the viewpoint of a child who has faced abuse either by physical beatings or vicarious physical abuse (maybe of his/her mother), he/she becomes very scared, totally confused at the violent situation. There might come a point wherein the child ignores the negativity of the situation, reaches out to the abuser, and tries to pacify him/her by talking sweetly, agreeing to be a good child in a bid to lessen the abuse. Denial can be seen working unconsciously in the sense that the child might refuse to believe the situation he was placed in by continuing to be in awe of/ supporting the abuser till the time the child can see a pattern of uncomfortable behaviour. Having a supportive environment with at least one responsible person becomes of utmost importance in cases wherein the child is too small to understand anything and not in a state to even share the dilemma.

Parenting and the entire family structure in Indian soil has a collective identity. More than an individual's relation with self, it is the relation between the individual and society which is given much value. All human behaviour, thoughts, values, beliefs are thus driven by the invisible society present in one's mind. Trust is an important factor in any relationship and the trust between a child and his/her parent is very significant. If a child is discouraged to speak openly on the event or discuss it on a negative note, it can break the link of trust with the consequence of the child distancing oneself from the parents. The child might start withdrawing from all activities, and begin to keep secrets. In later years, the same child might constantly live in a state of fear and anxiety over being found out. Repeated exposure to abuse might lead the child to slowly disconnect from reality and live in a parallel world of bliss and happiness. If the child's pain is neglected, they may slowly adopt a personality of rebellion in which the child faces more abuse and humiliation in order to feel real. Dissociation thus is not only present in relation to others but also with oneself. An extremely strong personality feature is that of intense rage towards significant elders for no reason in particular. There might be sudden outbursts in emotions. With children, who won't be able to express their intense feelings through words, often show it through play. It is through play that various tumultuous experiences of life

either concerning self or others are explored and thus the dynamics get highlighted in significant clarity. Playing, for children, is a medium through which reality is explored and processed and through play, they might want to come out of the space of feeling vulnerable [Winnicott, 1971].

Role of parents and elders

The parents are expected to exude warmth, love, a sense of safety and belongingness, and according to Erik Erikson, the first stage of psycho-social development between an infant and mother is Trust vs Mistrust. In accordance with this, it is important that parents as well as significant elders at home give the child space, attention, and love for him/her to feel secure. This sense of security helps in sharing the deepest problems of life and gives confidence for children to not judge oneself or self-doubt. This security is a token of the non-judgemental attitude parents have towards the child.

As mentioned earlier, there are significant changes, small yet significant which starts occurring in a trauma faced child. The child might show sudden rage over often unrelated things or cry at often the most unexpected times. Parents in their capacity might start spending some amount of time with their child; careful not to dislocate their space. Often silence helps in the sense that the parent might sit beside and not necessarily talk. Active listening is the most promising key to any conflict and much needed in today's times. Parents need to understand the need of the child to speak and express openly their conflicting thoughts without fear of judgement and punishment. Observing the child's nature of play also becomes essential. A very effective way of entering a child's inner world is to interact through play. The object relations school of psychoanalysis has time and again emphasized on the importance of role-playing in a child's life and described in detail how thoughts and feelings get reflected. It is most often the case that a child after facing a traumatic situation may unconsciously start encountering thoughts of suicide and these thoughts are nowhere better reflected than in the play. In various cases described and discussed by the psychologists belonging to object relations school; there have been mentions of children speaking of killing, attacking, destroying someone (the toy) which upon later analysis emerges to be a crucial part of themselves

[Winnicott, 1971]. In cases where the abuser is the parent of the child, the role of significant others becomes most important such as a caring relative or a teacher who can bring up the issue before concerned authorities. In the case of an adolescent, parents can lend a patient ear to the outbursts and authoritatively discuss the conflicting parts of adolescent life.

Role of teachers/ school

As children spend most of the time in school after home, the role of teachers and other school staff is equally important in raising strong children. The teachers are often expected to have warm and caring relationships with the students. It also becomes crucial for them to detect or report any signs of abuse the child might be facing. The major indicators are changes in academics and the child's social-emotional behaviour. The child who was good in academics before might not be interested in classroom activities and stay distracted. There is a possibility that the child might fight with other children or get socially withdrawn from peers. Also to include, these indicators could be present due to various other factors like divorce, financial issues, and loss of a family member. If teachers detect any signs of abuse, she should inform the higher authorities to further protect and support the child. For instance, in Taare Zameen Par, when a new teacher enters the scenario, he detects that Ishaan is a very quiet child and does not mingle with his classmates. He talks to school authorities, his peers, and his family to know more about him. He looks at his notebooks and his artwork to understand him better. The teacher does not look at Ishaan's weakness rather pushes him to engage in what he likes and enjoys doing. Ishaan is motivated for his art, for which he is even awarded a prize. With the empathy, patience, and support of the teacher, Ishaan also learned to read, write, and solve basic mathematical calculations. This shows how positive, trusting, and warm relationships with the child can act as a motivator to overcome the abusive experiences and heal from it.

The victims of abuse often have issues with recognizing and expressing feelings as well as taking decisions. The abused child can be provided with various opportunities to make new friends and increase contact with them. The teacher, during circle time, can ask the children

to share their feelings and express what they feel. They can also include expression/mood signs. For older children, a thought and reflection journal can be used to express their feelings and talk about it to those they trust. In most schools, a counsellor is present for children and their wellbeing. The information shared during the sessions is also kept confidential. Problem-solving can be made as a part of the curriculum. The teachers can provide children with various hypothetical situations where the children are asked to come up with creative solutions. The school can conduct awareness workshops where children can learn about various types of abuse, how to report them, and have an open discussion about it in the classrooms. Other than that, major life-skills are being taught in schools these days, for example, socialization skills, coping skills, and self-protecting training. As all children cannot express themselves verbally, expressive therapies like art therapy and play therapy can be beneficial to assist the abused child.

If the abuser is from the school, strict action should be taken against them rather than taking the abuse lightly. There should also be instructional workshops for teachers as to how to detect and report possible child abuse. Along with the teachers, the staff should be trained to approach children with empathy and positivity and avoid any indifferent treatment or bias towards slow learners or those from different backgrounds. The school staff should treat

everyone equally and respectfully. Teachers and parents can attend anger management workshops to learn how to calm themselves and talk to the child peacefully. The school can also support and guide the parents of the abused with the skills and strategies that can be used at home. The

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parents can be given access to counselling programs to help their abused children. Parents, teachers and the community can all work together to provide support to the child and help them become resilient.

Conclusion

Both childhood and adolescence are perhaps the most precarious stages in any person's development. There are major personality changes and shifts in mood. Childhood is that phase of life that serves as the foundation of all later events in life. And therefore we must place special attention to care, attention, and love for children. Children have a lot of curiosity inbuilt in them as a result of which their observation capacities are par excellence. They are attuned to the smallest of the small happenings around them which when due to serious circumstances are repressed; create havoc in adulthood and relationships with others. With new child protection policies and stronger awareness about child abuse, it is now easier to report cases of child abuse. Emotional and physical maltreatment of children has also been outlawed in all the schools. It has become mandatory to hire a counsellor in every school who can look at the problem behaviour of the children. Parents on their part can allow open expression of emotions and spend mandatory time with children. Child abuse is an extremely sensitive issue that has serious consequences in a child's personal and social life. With timely intervention, one can access the origin of such abuse and help the child in re-engaging with life. In present times, we have come across cases that call out such practices but the authors believe that an active discussion on the psycho-social factors is the need of the hour.

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