

FAMILY STRUCTURE AS A RISK FACTOR OF CHILD ABUSE

Sajida Agha
Isra University
Hyderabad

Sarwat Malik
Institute of Clinical Psychology
Karachi University

And

Rabia Riaz
Institute of Clinical Psychology
Karachi University

ABSTRACT

During the past several decades progressive shifts from the classic family unit of two biological parents and their children to a variety of parental living arrangements have occurred that assumed to be associated with a greater likelihood of child abuse. The purpose of present research was to see the prevalence of child abuse in different family structures of Pakistan. A directional hypothesis was put forward to study the above mentioned problem. Family structure would be directly associated with the incidence of child abuse.

The research sample was comprised of two groups; 42 children from broken families and 38 children from intact families. The groups were matched on the child's age, family structure, school and socioeconomic background. Two interviews were conducted with parent and the child after getting their consent. The entire sample was collected from different English medium primary schools of Karachi. Frequencies and percentages of different variables were calculated.

BAHRIA JOURNAL OF PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

- Rossi, A., Jacobs, M., Monteleone, M., Olsen, R., Surber, R., Winkler, E. & Wommack, A. (1986). Characteristics of psychiatric patients who engage in assaultive behavior or other fear inducing behaviours. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 174, 154–160
- Svare, B. (1983). *Hormones and Aggressive Behavior*. New York, Plenum.
- Swanson, J. (1994). Mental disorder, substance abuse and community violence. *An Epidemiological approach*. In *Violence and Mental Disorder: Developments in Risk Assessment*, (pp. 101-136). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Swanson, J.W., Borum, R., Schwartz, M.S., *et al.*(1996). Psychotic symptoms and disorders and the risk of violent behavior in the community. *Criminal Behavior and Mental Health* 6,317-338. In E. D. McNiel, J.P. Eisner & R.L. Binder (2000). The Relationship Between Command Hallucinations and Violence. *American Psychiatric Association*, 51,1288-1292. Retrieved May 2008 from: <http://psychservices.psychiatryonline.org/cgi/content/full/51/10/1288>

BAHRIA JOURNAL OF PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

The Mean score (1.7) of incidence of child abuse was greater in broken families than the mean score (1.2) of intact family. Majority of the children from broken family had poor relationship with their parents as compared to children from intact families. Majority (47.62%) from broken families reported physical abuse while 52.63% children from intact families reported emotional abuse.

Introduction

Significant changes in family structure have been experienced in the countries around the world, particularly in developed countries (Clulow 1993). Official statistics show that Australia, the United States and most European countries have experienced higher rates of divorce, falling marriage rates and an increase in the number of couples living together outside of marriage (Edgar 1988 & Clulow 1993).

There has been considerable public concern about the changing shape of the family particularly the effects that changes in family structure may have on parenting and children's behavior. Edgar (1991) contended that the place of children in the family, and the meaning and roles of parenthood have become increasingly complex and problematic. These changes to family structure have taken place at a time where there are also increasing pressures on families. All of these combine to make society's expectations of adequate family functioning even more difficult to achieve (Tower 1989).

Child abuse can be in many forms: Mental Abuse, Emotional Abuse, Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Moral and Ethical Abuse and perhaps in its most important and subtle form i.e. Child Neglect (Iannelli, 2007). Child maltreatment occurs across all socio-economic, religious, cultural, racial, and ethnic groups. While no specific factor definitively has been identified that leads a parent or other caregiver to abuse or neglect a child. It must be emphasized, however, that certain factors often are present among families where abuse occurs. Sedlack and Broadhurst (1996) studied the risk factors associated with child abuse. He observed that children living with single parents are at high risk of abuse as compared to children living with both parents.

Ledoux et al. (2002) found the importance of family structure in preventing child abuse as broken families were more likely to result in child abuse. Research indicates that statistically children reared by single parents were more likely to be the

victims of child abuse as compared to children reared by both biological parents (Carlson et al 1995). Similarly Goldman et al (2003) observed that among single parent's, families risk of child abuse is statistically higher than in dual parent's home, because single parents are under stress of financial difficulties. Moreover, they do not have emotional support to meet the challenges.

The findings of the above mentioned studies clearly indicate that children are at greater risk of abuse when they are living with single parent, step families etc. One of the studies on finding out the causes of child abuse suggested that preschoolers-in step parents-natural parent homes were 40 times more likely to be the victim of child abuse than children living with both biological parents (Martin, 2009).

In Pakistan, very little has been written on the issue of family structure and child abuse. Society views child abuse as one of the most abhorrent of behaviors. Unfortunately, however, it often remains hidden until it is too late for society to save the child's life or repair the damage. Some recent high-profile cases of abused children have once again highlighted the very real problem of child abuse. Wherever a child is abused it is a tragedy. Unfortunately often the response by the governments is to address the symptoms instead of concentrating on the causes and dealing with prevention.

Keeping in view the importance of family the study was conducted to see the prevalence of child abuse in families. The result of this study may be helpful for predicting child abuse and the accumulated information may be used for intervention.

Methodology

The data collection process was carried out from January, 2009 to September,

2009 which assessed the experiences of a sample of 80 children, ages 6-12, living in broken families (N= 42) and in intact families (N=38). A total of 100 students were approached. They were recruited from different schools of metropolitan city of Karachi, Pakistan.

In the study, out of 100 only those children who had the history of abuse and were belonged to the middle socioeconomic structure were included. Family structure was determined on the basis of interview with their parents. Family structure was defined by the current composition of the household. Two groups were constructed: (a) two biological parent families consisted of respondents living with two biological or adoptive parents, and (b) single parent families comprised respondents living with one biological parent only (the majority of these were divorced parents).

First, a short interview was conducted with the adult caregiver (usually a parent) who indicated the family structure, child's daily routine and experiences and then the target respondent was interviewed. In the interview, questions regarding family problems, child maltreatment, and relationship with parents were asked. Consent was obtained from both the parents, school and the child before the interview. Interviewers recorded the responses and frequencies and then calculated the percentages of different variables.

RESULTS

This study was designed to obtain the prevalence of child abuse in broken and intact families. The analysis of data reveals that incidence of child abuse is greater in broken families as compared to the children from intact families, as shown in Table I. Tables II and IV suggest that the relationships of the children to their parents were important with those who were dissatisfied were more likely to be abused by their parents.

Table I:
(Prevalence of abuse in two living situations)

Living situation	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Intact family	1.2368	38	.43085
Broken family	1.7381	42	.44500
Total	1.5000	80	.50315

Table II:
(Relationship with parents)

Parameters	Broken Family		Intact Family	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
<i>Relationship with mother</i>				
Satisfied	13	30.95%	14	36.84%
Neutral	10	23.81%	11	28.95%
Not satisfied	19	45.24%	13	34.21%
<i>Relationship with father</i>				
Satisfied	09	21.43%	19	50%
Neutral	15	35.72%	09	23.68%
Not satisfied	18	42.86%	10	26.32%

Table III:

(Prevalence of Physical, Emotional and Sexual abuse according to family structure)

Form of abuse	Family Structure	
	Broken Family	Intact Family
Physical Abuse	20 (47.62%)	13 (34.21%)
Emotional Abuse	12 (28.57%)	20 (52.63%)
Sexual Abuse	10 (23.81%)	05 (13.16%)

Table IV: (Prevalence of child abuse (%))

Parameters	Broken Family						Intact Family					
	Physical abuse		Emotional Abuse		Sexual abuse		Physical abuse		Emotional Abuse		Sexual abuse	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Always	12	60%	10	83%	10	100%	07	54%	09	45%	04	80%
Quite often	05	25%	01	8%	0	0	01	8%	10	50%	01	20%
Sometimes	02	10%	01	8%	0	0	02	15%	0	0	0	0
Not usually	01	5%	0	0	0	0	03	23%	01	5%	0	0

DISCUSSION

This study provides evidence of child abuse in broken families. Results of this study confirms the findings of other studies conducted in this realm. Perhaps the greatest risk factor for child abuse is in the behavior of a child's parents. If a parent experienced abuse in their own childhood they are more prone to abuse their children. Bowlbs (2009) studied the risk factors associated with the incidence of child abuse and found parental factor on the tip of all other factors.

Holmes (2007) discovered a worrying relationship between being raised in a single parent household and the incidence of child abuse. His work further suggests that girls are at risk of sexual abuse if they live with their father. Additionally, it was found that incidence of child abuse prevailed more in low income single parent household as compared to financially strong single parent household. The study adjusted for socioeconomic status and still found that children of one-parent households were at an increased risk for childhood sexual abuse. Though all one-parent homes appeared to have imparted risk-for-abuse, risk-for-abuse in one-parent homes was higher in the lower income groups than it was in the higher income groups.

Children growing up in an abusive home are affected in various ways. Some adopting the violent behavior patterns of the father tending to be aggressive and difficult where as others reflecting the helpless situation of the mother. Their sense of self-esteem and confidence completely undermined becoming abnormally anxious and introverted (Robin 2001).

The effect of violence on children varies according to their age, gender, stage of development and temperament. All individuals suffer obvious adjustment problems that disrupt their emotional life and cognition. All individuals feel insecure and isolated of their families. They find it difficult to communicate as they internalize their frustrations and depression, or act out overtly often to seek attention (Agha & Khan, 1998).

This study reveals some slight differences between the relations of children with their parents from two families. Both broken and intact families children showed satisfied relationship with their mothers instead of fathers. This showed that family structure, parental relationship and home environment are more important for these children. In Pakistan, the impact and the social consequences of parental separation or divorce may be more pronounced and relationships with the absent parent (father in particular) may be almost non-existent. Further in Pakistan the overall personal interests of adults dominate their children's interests and welfare. Mental and emotional abuse is not even recognized or even if it is, it is not voiced by a society that is more bothered about other mundane problems of life. Sexual abuse is not projected because of the stigma, especially in a female who will be permanently rejected by the society. Moreover it has been projected as on the rise, from the few research reports published in Pakistan in this connection (Sahil Cruel Numbers Report 2003). One of the notable features surrounding family structure was the difficulty in understanding the relationship between the child and the care givers. The information about relationships was often conflicting.

Conclusion

The present study raises the evidence of the presence of child abuse in broken family structures. Clearly there has been a failure to date, to extensively investigate the role of parental characteristics and family structure. There is a need for further investigation in Pakistan to see the impact of family structure on child abuse in both intact and single parent families, so more researches in the area is recommended.

REFERENCES

- Agha, S & Khan, S. (1998). Impact of Marital Violence on Children. Published in SHE Magazine, Pakistan.
- Bowlds, H. (2009). Assessing child abuse risk factors. Retrieved from: <http://www.helium.com/items/481886>
- Carlson, V., Cicchetti, D., Barnett, D., & Braunwald, K. (1995). Finding order in disorganization: Lessons from research on maltreated infants' attachments to their caregivers. In Cicchetti, D. & Carlson, V. (Eds), *Child Maltreatment: Theory and research on the causes and consequences of child abuse and neglect* (pp. 135-157). NY: Cambridge University Press.)
- Clulow, C. (1993). New families? Changes in societies and family relationships, *Sexual and Marital Therapy*, vol.8, no.3, pp.269-273.
- Edgar, D. (1988). Family Change, in Najman, J.M. and Western, J.S. (Eds), *A Sociology of Australian Society: Introductory Readings*, Macmillan, Melbourne.
- Edgar, D. (1991). Families and the social reconstruction of marriage and parenthood in Australia, in Batten, R., Weeks, W. and Wilson, J. (Eds), *Issues Facing Australian Families: Human Services Respond*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne.
- Goldman, M.K. and et al, (2003). *A coordinated response to child abuse and neglect: The foundation for practice*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Holmes, W. C. (2007). One-parent Households Double Risk of Childhood Sexual Abuse, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. *Science Daily*. Retrieved from: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/03/070313114303.htm>

Agha, Malik & Riaz

- Iannelli, V. (2007). Child Abuse Statistics. Retrieved from: http://pediatrics.about.com/od/childabuse/a/05_abuse_stats.html.
- Ledoux, S., Miller P., Choquet, M., and Plant, M. (2002). Family structure, parent-child relationships, and alcohol and other drug use among teenagers in France and the United Kingdom. *Alcohol and Alcoholism* Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 52-60
- Martin, T. (2009). Children in Single-Mom Households "at Risk" What do we do about it?. Retrieved from: www.fathermag.com/701/Trev2/
- Robin, W. (2001). Children at Risk: the sexual exploitation of female children after divorce. *Cornell Law Review*, vol: 86 (i2): p251.
- Sahil Cruel Numbers Report (2003). An analysis of reported incidents of child sexual abuse during January 2002 to December 2003. Retrieved from: www.crin.org/docs/sahil_cruel_numbers.pdf
- Sedlak, A.J. & Broad Hurst, D.D. (1996). 3rd national incidence study of child abuse and neglect. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- Tower, C.C. (1989). *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston.