

## **Effect of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) on Attachment Styles in Future Relationships**

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### **Abstract**

The present study was designed to investigate the effect of Sexual Abuse on Attachment Styles in future relationships of women. It was hypothesized that: (i) "Sexually abused women will have more attachment related anxiety as compared to the non-abused women." (ii) "Sexually abused women will have more attachment related avoidance as compared to the non-abused women." An adaption of the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R: Fraley, Waller & Brennan, 2000) was administered on a sample of 100 young women (50 abused women and 50 non-abused women), with ages ranging from 16-21 years, to measure

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attachment related anxiety and attachment related avoidance. The unrelated t-test was applied for the analyses. The results indicated a significant difference ( $t(98) = 9.917, p < .01, d = 1.983$ ) on the attachment related anxiety between the two groups, but no significant difference was found ( $t(98) = 1.366, p > .05, d = 0.273$ ) on the attachment related avoidance.

Sexual abuse has been associated with a number of long-term and short-term psychological and interpersonal impacts. The American Academy of Pediatrics (1994) defines sexual abuse as "engaging of a child in sexual activities that the child cannot comprehend, for which the child is developmentally unprepared and cannot give informed consent, and/or that violate the social and legal taboos of society" (p. 254). A study conducted by Wyatt and Newcomb (1990) indicated that between 15% and 45% of women have experienced at least one incident of sexual abuse prior to the age of 18.

It is found that children who have been sexually abused have difficulty relating to others especially on sexual terms. Some sexually abused children become perpetrators or prostitutes themselves, or have other serious problems when they reach adulthood (The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2012). While survivors of child sexual abuse are considerably more likely to experience a wide range of initial and long-term affects when compared to non-abused individuals. Not all victims of child sexual abuse suffer ill effects as a consequence of the abuse. In fact, some survivors of child sexual abuse do not show any evidence of dysfunction, psychological or otherwise (Finkelhor, 1990).

The effects of abuse result not only from the abuse itself, but from family's response to the situation and from the stigmatization that accompanies abuse. In many cultures, sexual

behavior is associated with shame, especially sexual behavior that violates social taboos (Lewis, 1992). The secretive context in which sexual abuse takes place, condemnation of the victim by the perpetrator, and explicit threats to keep silent promote feelings of shame. Concerns about the stigmatizing nature of abuse and fears about how others may respond impede many youth from disclosing their traumatic experiences and seeking help (Bonanno et al., 2002). These suppressed feelings result in a lot of long-term ill consequences too.

A research by Feiring, Taska and Lewis (1999) indicated that victims, who were adolescents by the time the abuse was discovered, generally reported higher level of depression, anxiety, negative reactions by significant others, and lower levels of self-esteem, sexual anxiety and social support. Additionally, adolescent girls reported higher levels of intrusive thoughts, hyper-arousal, personal vulnerability and perceiving the world as a dangerous place than adolescent boys. Whereas, adolescent boys reported higher level of eroticism (e.g., being in a state of sexual arousal).

“Attachment has been defined as the strong emotional bond an infant forms with its primary care giver” (Franzoi, 2003).

Bowlby (1973) has defined attachment style as the degree of security an individual feels in interpersonal relationships. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) described four adult attachment styles. (i) Secure attachment in adults; is associated to a positive model of the self (i.e. high self-esteem or an internalized sense of self-worth) and others (i.e. supportiveness etc.). (ii) Anxious/Ambivalent attachment in adults; is associated with a negative model of the self (i.e. low self-esteem, dependence on others for validation) but a positive model of others. (iii) Avoidant attachment in adults: is linked with a positive view of the self and a negative view of others.

(iv) Fearful attachment in adults; is associated of negative view of self and others.

According to Bowlby (1969), attachment theory is the experience of an individual in close relationships that can profoundly influence the perceptions of the social world. In particular, different attachment styles have individual differences to the extent to which attachment related information is attended and processed. Avoidant individuals, who are uncomfortable with closeness and intimacy, are theorized to limit the processing of potentially distressing information, with the goal of preventing activation of the attachment system. Whereas anxious individuals, are preoccupied with relationship partners and attachment-related concerns and are hypervigilant to information. Researchers have found insecure attachment (anxious, avoidant, and disorganized) to predominate in children who have been victims of physical abuse or neglect (Alexander, 1992).

The purpose of the present study is to take up a serious social issue like sexual abuse. This topic is considered to be a taboo in our society. Individuals, especially women, who have been abused, especially in their early life do not disclose this with the fear of shame and getting the blame of it. Hence, the feelings are not removed, which in turn result in long-term negative consequence. One of the serious consequences is their future relationships. The present study is designed to look into the attachment styles of these women in their future relationships. The hypotheses developed are:

- Sexually abused women will have more attachment related anxiety as compared to the non-abused women.
- Sexually abused women will have more attachment related avoidance as compared to the non-abused women.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

A sample of 100 young unmarried women was taken for the present study. It consisted of 50 women with the history of being sexually abused, whereas 50 women without the history of sexual abuse served as controls. Using PURPOSE SAMPLING technique, the sample was collected from different schools, colleges and universities of Karachi city. Participants' age ranged from 16-21 years.

### **Materials**

#### **The Demographic Information**

Through a semi-structured interview the demographic details, regarding age, educational qualification and social-economic status, were taken. Further they were asked the few questions to establish their history of sexual abuse; like whether they had been sexually abused at any time in their past, their age at that time, did they know their abuser, etc.

#### **Experience in Close Relationships- Revised (ECR-R)**

The Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) an adaption of the Fraley, Waller & Brennan (2000) questionnaire is a revised version of Brennan, Clark, and Shaver's (1998) Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR) questionnaire. The items on the ECR-R were selected using techniques based on Item Response Theory, but were selected from the same item pool as those from the ECR. Both the ECR and the ECR-R are designed to assess individual differences with respect to attachment-related anxiety (i.e., the extent to which people are insecure vs. secure about the extent to which their partner's availability and responsiveness) and attachment-related avoidance (i.e., the extent

to which people are uncomfortable being close to others vs. secure depending on others).

### **Procedure**

At the beginning of the study permission letters were taken by the researchers to the relevant authorities of different schools and colleges in Karachi. The researchers individually approached the participants and explained them the purpose of the study, after the permissions were granted. The ethical concerns regarding the study were explained. The confidentiality issues were discussed in detail, along-with their right to withdraw from the study. The verbal consent was taken from the participants. After rapport was built, the participants were asked about their history of sexual abuse in an informal interview. After this, the Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) was given to the participants to fill. After the sample of women with history of sexual abuse was completed, a sample of control group was selected by convenience sampling technique. These participants were also informed about the ethical concerns of the study. Later all the participants were thanked for their time and contribution. The participants who were interested in knowing their results were given the researchers e-mail address for further correspondence.

### **Results**

The data was treated statistically by using SPSS version 16.0 for calculating unrelated test. For measuring the effect size, Cohen's d was calculated with the help of Statistical Calculator version 3.0 Beta.

*Effect of Child Sexual Abuse (Csa) on Attachment Styles in Future Relationships*

**Table 1**

*Showing the mean difference between sexually abused women on the attachment related anxiety as compared to sexually non-abused women*

Variable (GROUP)	n	M	SD	SEM	df	t	p	$\bar{d}$
Attachment Anxiety abused	50	71.80	19.913	2.816	98	9.917	0.000*	1.9834*
Non- abused	50	40.18	10.573	1.495				

\* (t (98) = 9.917, p<.01, d=1.9834) indicate significant difference of sexually abused women on the attachment related anxiety as compared to sexually non-abused women. Large effect size was found.

**Table 2**

*Showing the mean difference between sexually abused women on the attachment related avoidance as compared to sexually non-abused women*

Variable (GROUP)	N	M	SD	SEM	df	t	p	$\bar{d}$
Attachment Avoidance abused	50	75.78	18.338	2.593	98	1.366	0.175	0.2733
Non- abused	50	71.04	16.292	2.304				

Result ( $t(98) = 1.366, p > .05, d = 0.2733$ ) indicate nonsignificant difference of sexually abused women on the attachment related avoidance as compared to sexually non-abused women. Small effect size was found.

### Discussion

Results have revealed significant difference ( $t(98) = 9.917, p < .01, d = 1.9834$ ) between the two groups on attachment related anxiety, but nonsignificant difference ( $t(98) = 1.366, p > .05, d = 0.2733$ ) on the attachment related avoidance.

One of the most important and life changing effects of CSA is that the victim develops difficulty with intimacy, and survivors tend to hide their real self, destroying any chance of becoming emotionally tied with another person. Alexander (1993) found that 87% of incestuously abused women recruited from the community had insecure attachment styles (58% of the cases had fearful attachment and 13% had anxious attachment style). A study by Bagley and Ramsey (1986), reported that 19 % of child abuse survivors were anxious, compared to only 9% of the non-abused participants.

Sexual victimization can affect many areas of a person's life; interpersonal, professional, physical, mental, and spiritual. Research by Bogorad (1998) indicates the effect of sexual abuse on adulthood, affecting relation, work, family, and life in general. Individual symptomatology tends to fall into four areas; damaged goods (e.g, low self esteem, guilt, shame, etc), betrayal (e.g., rage, grief, etc), helplessness (e.g., anxiety, fear, etc) and isolation (e.g., lack of support, etc).

Results of the second hypothesis have not revealed a significant difference between the two groups. As far as the insignificant results of second hypothesis are concerned, reasons can be many. First of all the principal culprit has low self-esteem. Pakistan is a male-dominating society where females are expected



to be more insecure and less assertive than men. So, they usually lack confidence and have low self-esteem (Mansoor, 2012). Low self-esteem may lead to insecure-avoidant attachment style generally (as this typical style is characterized by low self-esteem). Thus, for a woman whether abused or not, may have fearful - avoidant attachment style. According to Adam (2005), relationships are not context free expression of human nature; rather, they reflect the constructions of reality provided to us by our culture.

Overall, the results of the study showed a significant trend towards sexually abused women, showing that they will have attachment related, but not the attachment related avoidance, as compared to the control group. However, the present study faced many challenges. First challenge was to take up such a taboo issue in a society where females can't even take or make decisions about what kind of food they want to take. Hence, data collection, if not impossible can be a difficult task to achieve. Secondly, the variation in sample due to socio-economic backgrounds, family structure and its maturity in relationships was proved to be quite challenging which was difficult to be managed by the researchers. Generally, victims of abuse are not easy to access and especially, in country like Pakistan, where it is considered to be a sin to even talk about it.

Also, understanding the seriousness of the problem by the sample was found to be quite challenging. As women here with a low self esteem, take them as down trodden and accept the incident as their fate.

Another important fact is about the instrument applied. As it is a very sensitive topic, thus a questionnaire cannot serve enough purpose. Need is there for an in-depth interview and more details to be taken about the demographics with special reference to family structure and maturity because family's attitude towards such a victim can make or mar the personality.

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*Effect of Child Sexual Abuse (Csa) on Attachment Styles in Future Relationships*

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*Ali, Iqbal.*

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