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The effects of extra-familial child sexual abuse on the victim's primary care givers

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

South Africa is in shock over a surge in the rape of children and babies. A child is reportedly raped every five minutes and one in every four children suffers some form of abuse (Mutimbe, 1999). According to Van Niekerk, the National Director of Childline, sexual violence against children has increased by 400 percent (cited in Mail & Guardian, 2004). This staggering situation has influenced the age range of both the victims and the perpetrators. A report by Van Niekerk (cited in Mail & Guardian, 2004) indicates that the age of the victims has dropped from twelve to seven years, whereas that of the perpetrator had dropped to under 18. Even babies as young as a month are raped.

A report issued by the South African Police Services indicates that children are the victims of 42 percent of all rapes and attempted rapes reported in South Africa (LoBaido, 2001). Although this trend is getting worse, it is difficult to establish the incidence of this "pandemic", largely because of underreporting. A lack of confidence in the police, a fear of future reprisals and the difficulty in obtaining convictions were reported as some of the contributing factors to underreporting (Vogelman & Eagle, 1991).

This sexual violence against children appears to be common in all socio-economic classes, at all educational levels, and among all different racial, cultural and religious groups (Brownmiller, 1975). Township living conditions, such as those found in Soweto where unemployment and poverty are rife, and people have minimum basic resources, such as poor lighting, may increase the likelihood of rape (Vogelman & Eagle, 1991). Although

sexual violence against children is on the increase in South Africa, during the past decade this problem did not receive enough publicity on television, radio and in the newspapers (Sandler & Sepel, 1990). However, today there seems to be a significant increase in its exposure through programs that highlight the extent of this problem. Both boys and girls appear to be victims of sexual abuse, although sexual abuse of boys is grossly underreported and underrepresented in the sexual abuse literature (McCourt, Peel and O'Carrol, 1998).

They present with the same PTSD features that include poor self-esteem, sleep difficulties and distractibility. Bolton, Morris and MacEachron (1989) suggested that victims of rape also tend to respond to their victimization by presenting with "internalizing behaviours" that include regressive behaviour such as bedwetting and thumb sucking, withdrawal and anxiety symptoms, and development of headaches, stomach aches and eating disorders. They also manifest "externalizing behaviours" such as aggressive tendencies, self-destructive behaviour, alcohol and drug abuse. Also common are fearful feelings that are compounded by the possibility that no one will believe them when they disclose the rape, or the possibility that they will either be rejected or punished by their parents (Grosz, Kempe & Kelly, 2000).

According to Bagley and King (1990), child rape as compared to other forms of child abuse is more intrusive in the lives of the victimized children and affects their normal emotional, psychological and sexual development (Bagley & King, 1990). Furthermore, it does not affect the child victims in isolation. Its disclosure affects the entire family system,

especially the child's mother, placing her at risk of experiencing psychological distress (Hiebert-Murphy, 1998; Finkelhor, 1979). The post-disclosure period may also exacerbate any pre-existing marital and socio-economic problems, and the potential for negative effects on parent-child relationships (Manion et al. 1996). It is therefore important to examine the psychological responses of non-offending mothers, and assess their perceptions on the nature of their relationship with their victimized children.

1.1. MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

Empirical literature on child sexual abuse has focused on the personality characteristics and pathology found in the perpetrators and child victims. As a result, little attention has been directed towards the mother of sexually abused victims (Davies, 1995), despite the fact that their support and adjustment are seen as significant determinants of the child's adjustment. In addition, theorists such as Bowlby (1970), Anastasiow (1982) and Winnicott (1965) have highlighted the significance of maternal support and availability in alleviating general distress experienced by children. However, if the parents struggle to come to terms with their child's victimization, they may fail to provide the child with the emotional support s/he needs, and thus exacerbate the negative consequences of the trauma (Van der Kolk, 1991). Understanding the psychological responses of mothers post-disclosure, and how the rape impacts on their children's healing process may assist in the management of sexually abused children and their parents.

Although the mother and the child victim depend on the father-figure for emotional and moral support, paternal responses will not be investigated in this study as fathers present

with emotional distress that remains below that of mothers (Manion et al. 1996). Researchers attribute the fathers' low level of distress to the difficulties that male figures often experience in expressing their thoughts and feelings, and that most of them are constantly concerned about the normal family routine and keeping things going adequately (Manion et al. 1996; Grosz et al. 2000). Some fathers do not want to acknowledge the extent of their emotional distress as they fear that it might lead to a more serious breakdown in coping for the family (Grosz et al. 2000). They also experience delayed emotional responses and deal with their feelings only after the mothers have made progress in recovery (Grosz et al. 2000).

1.2. FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

In this study, interview data were assessed qualitatively using thematic content analysis. The respondents were drawn from Zamokuhle and Nthabiseng clinics, based in Soweto. The study was confined to ten mothers whose children were raped during six months preceding the study, and who were aged below ten years. A semi-structured interview with open ended questions was used to explore maternal thoughts and feelings about their children's rapes.

1.3. STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter Two comprises a literature review pertaining to issues concerning extra-familial child sexual abuse. Literature exploring the psychological effects of child rape on both the child and the mother is explored, as well as that covering the construal of the rape by the mother. Chapter Three outlines the methodology of the study, and ethical considerations

are addresses in this chapter. The results and discussion of this study are presented in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five, a summary of the results is presented, including the limitations of the study, recommendations and suggestions for future research.