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Social Factors that Contribute to Child Abuse in Informal Settlements: A case study of Ivory Park

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will give a brief overview of child abuse as a global phenomenon and the fact that it is not a new phenomenon. The chapter will also look at how child abuse was recently recognised as a social problem that required systematic enquiry and research not only in South Africa, however in the world as a whole. The chapter will also look at the rationale for the study, so as to try and understand why child abuse continues to exist. This chapter will further look at the aims of the study, the anticipated value of findings, the research design and methodology that will be utilized in the study. Finally, the chapter will give a detailed outline of the limitations of the study and the ethical issues that will be taken into consideration in this study.

The concern about the problem of child abuse is not new. Since the early 1960s, this issue has been discussed and debated in Europe and North America (Cicchetti, 1989: 38). However, its systematic study is a relatively recent phenomenon. Throughout history, children worldwide have been subjected to domination, murder, abandonment, incarceration, mutilation, beatings and forced labour (Zigler, 1980: 35). It is important to understand and acknowledge the historical context of this phenomenon, and recognise that things that seem to be brutal and senseless today were previously considered normal and acceptable practices in different parts of the world. Indeed infanticide has been used as a population control measure in some cultures (Zigler, 1980: 36).

Past research and work done by different professions shows that child abuse is not a new problem. Present understanding of the pervasiveness of this social

problem has been the result of systematic enquiry and research. However, until recently society has refused to recognise the scope and the seriousness of child abuse. Many sectors of society including medical personnel failed to acknowledge the extent of the existence of child abuse. In the early 1990s the magnitude of the problem of child abuse became more visible as a result of the increasing number of children with non-accidental injuries being admitted to hospitals (McKendrick, 1990: 36). In the past in South Africa, child labour was common especially on farms. Children were taken out of school to go and work so as to help in providing for their families. Many children in the past were denied access to education for reasons such as not being in possession of birth certificates or parents not having money for school fees. Also, children used to be punished at school in the form of corporal punishment.

1.2 Rationale for the Study

The reason for the choice of the present topic stems from the researcher's interest in violence against children. The researcher has been involved in working with children and community members in informal settlements on issues of child abuse. A further motivation for conducting this study is the high incidence of child abuse not only in informal settlements, but also in South Africa as a whole. The lack of a central official database on violence against children makes it difficult to know exactly how prevalent child abuse is in this country (SAHRC, 2002: 7). This can be partly due to the fact that there are many cases of child abuse that are not reported. In the cases that are reported some will be dismissed due to lack of evidence or children not being considered reliable witnesses in the court. In other cases the Investigating Officer would not have gathered enough evidence for the Public Prosecutor to decide that the case must go to court.

There are shocking statistics estimating that one in every three girls and one in every five boys will be sexually abused before the age of eighteen in South Africa (Childline Report, 2001:3). In addition, children are vulnerable to abuse because they are dependent, and need protection from their parents or caregivers. Unfortunately, it is these trusted parents and adults who often abuse children and it is in the family and homes where most children are abused.

A further motivation for the study is to try and understand why child abuse continues to exist when there is a legislation that aims to protect children. It could be that poverty and impoverished living conditions contribute to the neglect and abuse of children. Childhood poverty is a major challenge in this country, and puts children in a very vulnerable position. It is estimated that between 57% and 75% of children in South Africa are living in poverty (UCT's Children's Institute Report, 2003: 5). A final motivation for the study is the need to understand the underlying causes of the violation of children's basic rights.

1.3 Aims of the Study

The aim of this study is to identify specific social factors in a informal settlement, i.e. Ivory Park, North of Johannesburg, which appear to contribute to child abuse in that community. The central aim is to try and understand why some children are abused and some are not while living in equally impoverished conditions, i.e. to identify the resilience and coping patterns of families so that social workers can place more emphasis on interventions, which build on strengths.

The sub aims of the study are the following:

(i) Identify different forms of child abuse, which occur in Ivory Park.

(ii) Identify and describe the social factors, which make children vulnerable to child abuse in Ivory Park.

(iii) Develop an understanding of the family structure, family history and family functioning in which child abuse takes place in Ivory Park.

(iv) Identify the difference in the functioning and coping between families where child abuse occurs and where it does not occur.

(v) Identify coping mechanisms and strengths of individuals and families where child abuse occurs and in those where it does not occur.

(vi) Explore the perceptions of members of the Ivory Park community, about child abuse.

(vii) Explore the knowledge and awareness of the community on children's rights, especially the rights of children to be protected from all forms of violence

1.4 Anticipated Value of Findings

The anticipated values of findings in this study are as follows:

- To increase the understanding of helping professionals about the complexity of child abuse in an informal settlement.
- To generate more knowledge in the social work literature, with regard to the factors which make children vulnerable to abuse in an informal settlement.
- To develop ways in which social workers can intervene and effectively address the issues of child abuse in an informal settlement.
- To make recommendations that will inform future interventions in the field of child abuse.

1.5 Research Design and Methodology

The present study utilised a subtype of the quantitative research design, i.e. an explorative-descriptive design. Exploratory research is useful where the problem is relatively new and studies where little is known (Rubin, 2001:74). This type of research design is used in situations where the researcher wants to develop initial ideas and a more focused research question. It has the specific purpose of exploring and gathering new facts. The descriptive research design aims to facilitate the description and the exploration of new issues and to explain why

something happens (Neuman, 1997: 22). This type of study attempts to describe one factor within a problem area, and ways in which this factor is related to other factors (Grinnell, 1997: 64). The descriptive study presents a picture of the details of a situation or a social setting in which the research is being conducted. The research question in the study is descriptive and aims to find out more about child abuse in informal settlements. The question being asked is what are the social factors that contribute to child abuse in an informal settlement?

Ivory Park Informal Settlement was used as a case study. In a case study the researcher examined features, people or units at a particular time, in order to measure and describe these and to identify common features. The researcher examined the cases in depth. These cases were individuals, groups and organisations (Neuman, 1997: 32). Case studies help the researcher to connect the micro level or the actions of the individual people to the macro level or larger social structures. In this instance the micro level was the family and the macro level was the community. The logic of case studies is to demonstrate causal argument about how general social factors shape and produce results in a particular setting (Neuman, 1997: 32). The units in the present study are a group of women who are Early Childhood Development practitioners, church members from Holy Rosary Catholic Church, a group of young people from project 2005, and a group of men from the area.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study are as follows:

- The study focused on child abuse in one informal settlement, therefore its findings cannot be representative of all informal settlements in South Africa.
- The literature that is available on theories of child abuse originates from abroad.

- The study's sub-samples were bias since they comprised of those willing to participate in the study as opposed to being truly representative of the total population of Ivory Park Informal Settlement.
- Due to fear of disclosure especially relating to further abuse, participants might have avoided sharing sensitive information, which could be valuable for the purpose of the study.
- Due to the extent of poor education and impoverished living condition, participants might have viewed the researcher as an outsider and might have been reluctant to respond frankly to questions asked.
- Some of the families that were interviewed in this study, were actually mandated by law to have contact with the social workers. So, since the researcher accessed them through the social workers, they might have felt obligated to participate in the study, and provide the "right" answers to the questions asked. Therefore the results may be skewed accordingly.

1.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical concerns are of a great importance in social work research. Social workers should abide by clearly defined ethical principles in both practice and research activities (Grinnell, 1998:11). This is because social workers focus on actual people, and their day to day experiences. Also, social workers are often privy to a great deal of personal and private information of the potential research participants (Schinken 1985, cited in Grinnell, 1998:13). Therefore, the researcher had a particular responsibility to ensure that the study is conducted in such a manner to meet accepted ethical standards.

1.6.1 Participants Confidentiality

Confidentiality issues were taken into account throughout the study. The topic of child abuse is sensitive and emotional. The information obtained from participants was treated confidentially and their identities were protected.

However the issue of confidentiality was clarified right in the beginning and legal issues were taken into account. For instance, if a participant disclosed that he/she was abusing a child in any form. The researcher was obligated by law to report the case. There is no identifiable information about the participants that is published in this final report.

1.6.2 Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study was voluntary and no one was forced in anyway to take part in the study. Through the help of social workers and project co-ordinators, participants were informed and invited to take part in the study. Those who were willing to take part were requested to give permission and sign consent forms for their participation. Even though the researcher explained in details what the study was all about and tried to acquaint the participants about every aspect of the study. It was difficult for most participants to agree to sign a consent form. Most of them preferred to take part in the study without signing any paper. They were concerned about agreeing into signing and thought they will get into trouble later. All participants were alerted to their rights to withdraw from the study at any point should they wish to do so.

1.6.3 Protection from Harm

Protection of participants from physical and mental harm was ensured as far as possible. The researcher ensured that the questions asked during the interviews were respectful and not evasive. At the end of the interviews participants were asked if they would like to talk to someone. Prior arrangements were made with the social worker for participants to receive any debriefing if the need arises. This was discussed with participants at the end of the interview.

1.6.4 Protection of Identity

All data gathered for the study was destroyed once the study has been analysed. No names of participants, family members or other identifiable information were included in the final dissertation.

1.7 Summary

In summary, the chapter has briefly outlined the importance of understanding the historical context of child abuse. Also, how child abuse is not a problem only unique to South Africa and how it has been given attention as a social problem over time. The chapter also focused on five different aspect of any study, which are the rationale and aims of the study, the anticipated value of findings, the research design and methodology and the limitations of the study. Lastly and most importantly the study outlined the ethical consideration of the study.