

Child Sexual Abuse and Continuous Influence of Cultural Practices: A Review

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To provide information on the possible influence of cultural practices in perpetuating child sexual abuse and to examine documented examples of these cultural influences.

Methods: A computer literature search was done of Medline, Science Direct, PSYCInfo, Embase and PubMed for keywords. There were also manual searches in the library of journals that are not accessible online. Keywords for searches included: sexual abuse, child abuse, psychopathology, name of countries (eg Jordan, China and Morocco), culture and cultural practices.

Results: There is documented evidence of cultural practices that continue to fuel the persistently high level of child sexual abuse across the globe. The definition has evolved to now include simple genital-genital and non-genital contact such as oral-genital contacts, exhibitionism and pornography.

Conclusions: Cultural practices are no longer restricted to one geographical collection of people due to migratory influence, as these practices may also spread to different groups who intermingle. There are few empirical studies of child sexual abuse in the Caribbean, but one factor that could be used as a proxy is age of first sexual activity. The World Bank reports that this age is youngest in the Caribbean and is likely to be significantly influenced by child sexual abuse.

Keywords: Child, culture, sexual abuse

El Abuso Sexual Infantil y la Influencia Continua De Prácticas Culturales: Una Revisión

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RESUMEN

Objetivo: Proporcionar información sobre la posible influencia de las prácticas culturales en la perpetuación del abuso sexual infantil, y examinar ejemplos documentados de estas influencias culturales.

Métodos: Se realizó una búsqueda de literatura electrónica en Medline, Science Direct, PSYCInfo, Embase y PubMed enfocada en palabras claves. También en bibliotecas hubo búsquedas manuales de revistas que no son accesibles online. Las palabras claves para las búsquedas incluyen: abuso sexual, abuso infantil, psicopatología, nombre de países (p.ej. Jordan, China y Marruecos), la cultura y las prácticas culturales.

Resultados: No hay evidencia documentada de las prácticas culturales que siguen alimentando los persistentemente altos niveles de abuso sexual infantil en todo el mundo. La definición ha evolucionado, incluyendo ahora simple contacto genital-genital, así como contactos no genitales, tales como contactos orogenitales, exhibicionismo y pornografía.

Conclusiones: Las prácticas culturales ya no están restringidas a un grupo geográfico de personas debido a la influencia migratoria, ya que estas prácticas también se pueden diseminar a grupos diferentes que se entremezclan. Existen pocos estudios empíricos acerca del abuso sexual infantil en el Caribe, pero un factor que podría ser utilizado a modo de aproximación es la edad de la primera actividad sexual. El Banco Mundial informa que esta edad es menor en el Caribe, y es probable que este significativamente influenciada por el abuso sexual infantil.

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Palabras claves: Niño, cultura, abuso sexual

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INTRODUCTION

Culture is non-static and continues to be influenced by other groups, historically in the Caribbean by European culture and tradition, especially British, Spanish and French, while incorporating elements of antecedent African and Indian culture, sometimes morphing into a creole culture loosely combining many of the influences. Cultural norms affect disclosure and reporting and are variously influenced by religion and global cultural trends (1). Child sexual abuse (CSA) may be intra-familial, extra-familial or transactional (2), which may explain the wide estimate of CSA of 11–32% for females and 4–14% for males (3). Reporting practices are influenced by sensitivity, fear, taboo, attitude, acceptable practices and prejudice; also, community passivity, legal system inadequacies and weaknesses, and the general perceptions and attitudes toward sexual offences against children contribute to a much muted response to CSA (4). In reference to the Caribbean, Jones and Trotman-Jemmott noted that confidentiality cannot be ensured and perpetrators may be in positions of power, and systems to report and investigate allegations of CSA are underdeveloped (2). This review attempts to examine some documented cultural factors that continue to influence the high prevalence of CSA.

Understanding of CSA and reporting practices

Understanding the concept of CSA continues to be a challenge in many cultures. In a review of sexual practices and offences in India, it was reported that during trials, alleged sexual offenders often say they were not aware that they committed an offence (5). In some cultures, there is strong belief that girls deserve to be abused because of the way they dress (6) and not adhering to traditional values (7). The level of openness is influenced by sensitivity attached to CSA and the overall effect on the family unit. In less open societies like China (8), victims may not volunteer information on abuse for cultural reasons (both altruistic and self-protection). Invasion of sexual privacy may be accepted where there is inadequate education, and information is often obtained with difficulty from reluctant informants who are scared of the cultural implication of their disclosure. Child abuse procedure in Jordan is reported to be initiated only when there is death or severe damage (9). This implies that the presence of effective laws against CSA hinges on the implementation.

In a review of a population based study from 19 countries, only about half of victims had disclosed their abuse to anyone (10). The role and attitude of family and community continue to be cited as important factors in sexual abuse reporting, as well as the relationship between perpetrator and victim (11). It is argued that the interaction between children and parents are often driven by customary practices and

personal belief which may be in conflict with current thinking (12). The orientation toward collectivity makes disclosure very difficult and may explain why children in traditional households do not talk about sexual matters (8) and are reluctant to report or support victims (12) in order to avoid shame and possible repercussion of disclosure.

In a review of medico-legal cases (13), 44.4% of victims said they will only confess to abuse if pressured by parents because of shame associated with reporting. When Asian families were compared to non-Asian families (14), it was reported that Asian primary caretakers were less likely to report abuse when compared to white, black and Hispanic caretakers. Similarly, a pattern of concealment is reported from Latin America (15), Philippines (16), Japan (17) and Greece (18). In the Arab countries, the fear of *fadiha* (19), “a scandal causing damage to the reputation of family members”, may explain why family members hide abuse cases in total disregard to the effect of the abusive process on the victim.

The influence of religion on CSA is not well defined, with overlap among different regions. In the Ryan report, children were said to be easily intimidated by the religious and physical authority of those in charge, viewing the religious personnel as God’s representative on earth (20); however, another author suggested that priests were no different psychologically from other child predators (21).

Children seen as properties of parents, and child keeping

Children are regarded as property of their parents in some cultures and this may explain the practice of “ethic of Xiao”, which prescribe that children should obey their parents without asking questions (22). This practice is common in many non-western cultures. Similarly, child keeping, a practice of temporarily shifting the residence of children to that of relatives during a period of stress and “shared parenting” practice (23), is common in African American communities (24). Community members take care of a child born to a teenage mother; these practices do have their advantages; however, there is a high correlation of child sexual abuse among females who domicile with non-biological parents (14). Separation and divorce of parents is a major factor in CSA, due to the absence of one parent (25).

Search for wealth and cure of diseases and arranged marriages

This is a controversial practice that is common in some parts of the world. In an anecdotal report, Tanzanian women alleged that traditional witch doctors advised men looking for wealth to have sexual intercourse with virgin girls (6). This same practice is extended to the “cure” of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), by having sex with virgins.

This was said to be responsible for the rape of about 60 children per day in South Africa according to unofficial reports (26). The way children are viewed make other practices such as arranged marriages common in south Asia (27), Africa, Middle East and southeast Asia (28), in which girls are given away in marriages without their consent by relatives. The consequences of this include honour killings in situation where the girls object to their parents' wishes. In Africa, Middle East and Asia, these practices are found among people of all socio-economic groups.

Female genital mutilations

The impact of female genital mutilation (FGM) is now felt in many countries due to migration and the victims often present to mental health facilities (29). In a review of 116 women at an African women's clinic in a southeast London specialist centre, acute and chronic complication was present in 86% of women with Type 3 genital mutilation (30). Female genital mutilations is practised in areas of East and West Africa extending across to the sub-Saharan region, from Sudan to Senegal along the Nile valley from Egypt down to East Africa, as well as Malaysia, Yemen, India and Indonesia. The reasons given for the continuation of this practice are religious rites, initiation rite to safeguard virginity, to attenuate sexual desire, aesthetic reasons and for cure of some ailments (31).

Ritual abuse is another example of organized abuse in which children and adolescents are abused in a ceremonial way (32). In contrast, the existence of ritual abuse has been robustly contested by sceptical journalists and academics who have argued that most, if not all, allegations of ritual abuse are the product of 'moral panic', 'false memories' and community 'hysteria' about sexual abuse (33). Ritual abuse has also been documented in African and European child trafficking networks (34). In a qualitative analysis of 16 ritual abuse victims, Kempadoo suggested that this serves as legitimizing practices within organized abuse and viewed the practice as a deviant form of religious practice (35).

Sex trade

Sex trade is not specific to any country or culture, but can be found in many sub-cultures around the world. Sexual behaviours that may encourage sexual abuse are prevalent in many of these countries, especially countries where tourism is a major income earner. In the Caribbean, it was suggested that there is a clear evidence of a growing market of child sexual tourism (2). Previously noted is that commercial sex has been an integral part of commercial tourism (35). The extent of this is influenced by many other factors including socio-economic status of the participant society. Children involved in this trade may argue that they are involved for economic survival, and in many situations to support family members. In some countries where prostitution is legal, participation of children and adolescents is often hidden under false identity.

Future direction

Children and adolescents are still subjected to abuse for reasons that include patriarchal ideology, made worse by age-related hierarchies in some societies like Africa and Asia which may explain under-reporting. The changing pattern of child sexual abuse may be due to migration as well as interracial marriages. Orientation toward a particular group, family structure, and conformity to norms and the issue of shame continue to play a major role in reporting practices. Although it is said that race and ethnicity do not appear to be risk factors in CSA, the presentation may vary. A concerted effort through education continues to be a strong approach to reducing or eliminating these forms of abuses, some of which are intergenerational. The documented evidence supports the facts that cultural and community practices continue to be potent forces in perpetuating sexual abuse. This is further compounded by the belief that the official numbers do not always reflect the true picture, making planning and prevention programme challenging.

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