

Definltions and Symptom Conceptualization of Child Abuse Among Parents from a Guatemalan Community

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Abstract

The Guatemala City Dump has 10,000 people who reside in and around the dump community. High rates of child abuse have been reported by NGO staff who serve children and families in the dump community. The 1999 World Health Organization's Report of the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention indicates that child abuse predominantly occurs by a primary caregiver or family member. Thus, it is critical that parental conceptualizations of child abuse are researched in order to inform the development of abuse prevention programs for the families living in the dump community. At the invitation from an NGO, two focus groups consisting of 43 parent participants were led by a Spanish-speaking moderator at the NGO. The focus group questions focused on parental definitions and conceptualization of symptoms resulting from child abuse. From the 41 comments regarding definitions of child abuse, the two most frequently discussed themes were physical abuse (39%) and child labor (29%). Rape and exposure to sexual activity each consisted of 31% of the 16 comments regarding definitions of child sexual abuse. Finally, fearful avoidance and sleep disturbance comprised 32% and 20% of the 25 comments regarding symptomatology. Program development issues for work in similar high-risk communities are discussed.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to give a voice to parents in Guatemala City in order to develop interventions to equip them to recognize and address trauma symptoms in abused children. Efforts to develop prevention initiatives and treatments must educate and inform local leaders, aid workers, and mental health practitioners. Before developing a model of treatment, however, researchers must understand how the parents in the Guatemalan dump define CA and CSA and what symptoms they believe manifest when a child has been abused.

Method

Procedure

- Participants were recruited through an NGO that serves the population living and working in the Guatemala City dump (N = 43).
- Two focus group discussions were conducted in Spanish by trained moderators.
- Focus groups were audio-recorded.
- Audiotapes were transcribed and translated into English and back-translated into Spanish by bilingual speaker familiar with Guatemalan dialect.
- Analysis of transcripts was based on Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An independent team of coders examined the transcripts for various themes and significant topics. These themes and topics were compared, cross-referenced, and reconciled with the project research team's coding in order to arrive at final categories.
- Categories were analyzed for frequency (frequency = number of times a theme was mentioned in the transcripts) and extensiveness (extensiveness = number of people who mentioned the theme).

Measure

- Two focus group discussions were conducted, and were based on a structured interview consisting of the following six questions:
 - What does it mean for you to have a good childhood?
 - In your own words, what would you say is child abuse?
 - In your own words, what would you say is sexual abuse?
 - How can you tell that a boy or girl has been sexually abused? How does a child act when he or she has been abused?
 - What type of situations bring about sexual abuse within the community of the garbage dump? Why is a boy or girl abused here in the dump?
 - What topics would you like to cover in future classes for fathers and mothers here at the NGO?

Participants

- Parent participants were native Guatemalans living and working in the dump community in Guatemala City.
- 40 females (93%) and 3 males (7%)
- 28 (65%) Ladino, 12 (28%) Indigena, and 3 (7%) did not specify ethnicity
- Number of years participants had lived in the dump community ranged from 3-45 years, with 42% of participants indicating that they had lived in the dump their whole lives.

Discussion

Implications:

- Child abuse and child sexual abuse are recognized as significant problems in the Guatemalan dump community.
- Both parental definitions and symptom conceptualization of child abuse and child sexual abuse are similar to those found in the literature from developed countries. However, the Guatemalan parents' definitions were less nuanced than those found in literature from developed nations. The parent participant conceptualizations of CSA symptoms focused more on behavioral outcomes.
- Education is needed to increase parental awareness of the nuanced signs of CA and CSA symptomatology.
- This study has social implications as to the effects of poverty on the prevalence of child abuse and child sexual abuse. The frequency with which child labor was mentioned is indicative of the stress of an impoverished community.
- This research informs the NGO and other humanitarian aid organizations how to specifically reach out to the educational and mental health needs of the parents in the dump community.

Recommendations and follow up:

- Develop programs to educate parents on how to identify and respond to abuse.
- Develop programs to equip parents to better cope with environmental stressors.
- Provide educational opportunities to increase parents' awareness of the range of symptoms and effects of CA and CSA.
- Additional research is needed to understand the prevalence of child abuse in Guatemala.

Limitations to the current study:

- The large number of people in each focus group may have inhibited some people from speaking, resulting in a smaller percentage of people who actually made comments regarding CA and CSA definitions and symptomatology.
- The individuals who coded the transcripts were familiar with psychological concepts. Thus, their previous knowledge of CA and CSA in the United States may have affected the way they read the transcripts.
- Although the transcripts were reviewed by several different translators for accuracy, as in all cross-cultural research, the translation of the documents may not have accurately reflected the precise attitudes and opinions of the parents who participated in the research.

References

- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- World Health Organization. (1999). *Report of the consultation on child abuse prevention*. Geneva, Switzerland: Author.

Results

Most frequently mentioned coded Themes:

- Child Abuse Definitions:**
 - Physical Abuse was mentioned 16 times by 5 participants.
 - Child Labor was mentioned by 12 times by 7 participants.
- Child Sexual Abuse Definitions:**
 - Rape was mentioned 5 times by 5 participants.
 - Exposure to Pornography or Parental Intercourse was mentioned 5 times by 3 participants.
- Child Sexual Abuse Symptoms:**
 - Behavioral Symptoms was mentioned 12 times by 6 participants.
 - Emotional Symptoms was mentioned 10 times by 5 participants.

Least frequently mentioned coded Themes:

- Child Abuse Definitions:**
 - Child Neglect was mentioned 9 times by 6 participants.
 - Verbal Abuse was mentioned 4 times by 3 participants.
- Child Sexual Abuse Definitions:**
 - Molestation was mentioned 3 times by 2 participants.
 - Sexual Harassment was mentioned 3 times by 2 participants.
- Child Sexual Abuse Symptoms:**
 - Physical Symptoms was mentioned 3 times by 1 participant.

