PROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: COMPARISON OF ARABIC, INDIAN AND WESTERN CULTURES

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Abstract: **This study examined differences in professionals' perceptions of the identification of child abuse according to Collectivist (Arabic and Indian) and Individualist (from several different Western countries) culture.**

A specially designed vignette concerning either a male or a female child that incorporated aspects from the current accepted definitions of abuse was follows by a specially designed 28 item questionnaire was completed by 201 participants (104 Arabic, 57 Indian and 40 Western).

Supporting the hypothesis, abuse was rated higher across all groups when the child was female. Although there was no overall difference for culture in identifying the sexual abuse, partially supporting the hypothesis, there was a significant interaction between culture and the gender of the respondent, with females in the collectivist cultures identifying the abuse more than did the males. Also concerning the gender of the respondent, in the collectivist culture, females rated more highly than the males regarding the unacceptability of fondling behaviour by both the mother and the father. No similar differences were found in the Western culture, with respondents reporting the unacceptability of fondling behaviour.

The results provide a better understanding of issues surrounding child sexual abuse among different cultures. This will guide future strategies aimed at increasing access and effective management to meet perceived needs.

Keyword: **Child Sexual Abuse, Professionals' Perceptions, Collectivist Cultures, Western Cultures.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Child abuse has become a serious public and major health problem and has become the subject of great attention in recent years [13]. The real number of children abused is unknown [7], however, the United States of America's third national incidence study of child abuse and neglect revealed that the number of maltreated children doubled from 1.4 million in 1986 to 2.8 million in 1993 (Youssef & Atta, 1998). The real prevalence of child abuse is probably much greater than the figures that are presently available, because in many cases child abuse is either unreported or if it reported, it is frequently not recorded as such. Therefore, for some cases of child abuse there is no contact established with services [10].

Professionals' perceptions about child sexual abuse are important because they can affect the reporting of sexual abuse, the prosecution of perpetrators, and the provision of clinical services [20]. Research has demonstrated that professionals from different cultures have different perceptions about child sexual abuse. Although there are an increasing number of studies appearing in literature that focus on the culture and child sexual abuse, the knowledge regarding different culture is still limited. Even more limited is the knowledge about Arabic and Indian cultures compared to western culture.

1.1 Definition of Child Abuse

The limited accuracy and reliability of child abuse statistics could be due to several different reasons. First, they may be in part, attributable to the lack of a commonly accepted and applied definition of child abuse [26]. In addition, variability in the criteria for classification of child abuse as an intention for child rearing and education [26], personal bias, incomplete information, cultural resistance and pressure of the family and community probably contribute to a marked under-reporting of child abuse [11]. Further, the concept of child abuse is also difficult to study, because the social and cultural

factors are very important in determining whether corrective punishment will or will not tend towards maltreatment and physical or psychological abuse [5]. Therefore, child abuse can be difficult to identify. Yet the importance of identification is essential, given its immediate and long term effects on children [31].

1.2 Child Abuse and Cultural Difference

However, McIntryre and Silva (1992) conjectured that differences in social, cultural, religious, and moral values result in variations in what is considered proper childrearing. The manner in which some cultural groups define and perceive maltreatment plays a key role in assessing the abuse and providing services to families. Giovannoni and Becerra (1979) and Rose and Meezan (1995) found that the criteria that parents and the lay adult community apply to and define as abuse, as compared to child discipline or other child-rearing practices, do vary with socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and occupational status. There may also be cultural differences in the prevalence and severity of different types of child abuse [11]. Loh (1990) stated that families from different cultures use disciplinary strategies that are acceptable in their society, but which may appear to individuals from different culture as strange, backward, or mean. Such differences are often due to varying cultural methods for providing sustenance, supervision, discipline, and mental stimulation to their children. The clash in cultures is obvious with certain types of child abuse [17]. For example, Western cultures display a low tolerance of physical punishment [17]. Korbin (1981) compared forms of punishment in non-western cultures to those in western cultures. Forms in non-western cultures include isolation for several days, food deprivation, and cutting the flesh of a child with a sharp object. These behaviours are judged as harsh and cruel by western standards. However, some western practices, such as corrective teeth braces for children and the isolation of children every night in their own rooms are seen as harsh and cruel by non-western observers [27]. For the majority of parents in the western society; the normative sleeping arrangement is for children to have their own beds and probably even their own bedrooms. Yet, in many other cultures, it would be considered abusive if a parent put an infant into a bed and then let the child sleep in a dark, in a separate room. In non-western society; children are expected to share beds with family members. Sharing of beds demonstrates family closeness [6].

1.3 Child Abuse and Professionals' Perceptions

To better understand the factors which affect actions taken in allegations of child sexual abuse, previous research has examined the variables which affect people's perceptions of child sexual abuse and attributions of blame and responsibility for such incidents [20]. Finkelhor and Redfield (1984) and Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984) examined the effects of the age of the child on attributions of blame in hypothetical child sexual abuse scenarios. They found that the child's age effected attributions of blame. For example, when an adolescent was depicted, the interaction was rated as less abusive, with adolescents being blamed more, than when younger child was depicted. Moreover, professionals develop images of other cultures from incomplete and biased sources [23]. This is dangerous for professionals working in child welfare since their decisions have life-impacting results. Segal (1992), in a replication of Giovannoni and Becerra's study, sought to examine the perceptions of child abuse by Indian nationals. Both Segal (1992) and Finkelhor and Korbin (1988) concluded that child abuse, as defined and identified in the west, is not necessarily applicable across cultures.

1.4 Child Abuse and Gender Difference

The age and sex of the child and the sex of the adult influence people's perceptions regarding the abusiveness of adult-child sexual interactions and the attributions of blame they make in such incidents [20]. A child' gender may influence professionals' perceptions of whether child abuse has been committed. Broussard and Wagner (1988) found that, although there was no main effect for the child's gender on people's perception of child sexual abuse, the gender of the child interacted with respondent gender. Male respondents placed significantly less responsibility on the adult when the child was male than when the child was female, whereas female respondents saw adults as similarly responsible regardless of the gender of the child [8]. Finkelhor and Redfield (1984) suggested that the sex of the adult was an important variable in decisions and attributions about sexual abuse. Understanding the influence of the adult's gender as well as the child's gender may help explain varying reactions to child sexual abuse [20]. There is a paucity of research in which the gender of the respondent has been investigated independently. For example, although Waterman and Foss-Goodman (1984) examined the sex of the adult, they used only opposite-sex interactions and they did not directly consider possible outcomes of the gender of the adult on attributions of blame in child abuse scenarios.

Effects of the adults' gender were interpreted based only on the effect of the child's sex [20]. Even when the respondent's gender was included as a variable (Broussard & Wagner, 1988) the authors did not report whether the respondents' gender

interacted significantly with the children's gender on attributions of blame. Mixed results have been found concerning the respondents' perceptions of sexual abuse according to their gender [20]. Some report there to be no difference in responsibility attributed to the child or adult according to the gender of the respondent [8]. Whilst others have found the respondents' gender to influence perceptions of child sexual abuse, typically through an interaction with child's gender [20]. Overall, results of these studies tend to correspond to cultural stereotypes. Sex of the respondent has also been examined in relation to judgments concerning child sexual abuse. In general, female respondents are more likely to view adult-child interactions as representative of child sexual abuse and blame the child less, whereas men tend to rate adult-child sexual interactions as less abusive and attribute more blame to the child [8].

1.5 Research Hypothesis

1. Professionals from a Western culture will be more likely than those from a collectivist culture to identify abuse in the vignette.
2. Predict a significant difference in identifying the abuse according to the gender of the child.
3. Female participants from the collectivist culture will be more likely than males to identify the abuse.
4. Professionals from a collectivist culture will be significantly more likely to view fondling by parents as acceptable.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

The study employed survey research method. This method is believed to be able to provide the required data as it requires the data to be collected in a real setting, thus, the data presented is accurate. The survey method is designed to scientifically describe phenomena and their relationships in the actual environment at a given time to represent the larger population of interest [15]. This research is entirely based on sample survey for which internet questionnaire was the tool of data collection. And this method was employed to accomplish the aim of this study.

2.2 Research Sitting

The questionnaires were distributed via email to many governmental authorities, governmental schools, and private educational & business sectors in Dubai-United Arab Emirates. Also, the questionnaires were emailed to many friends, colleagues and relatives in Dubai.

2.3 Research Sample

Two hundred and one participants responded. The male version of the questionnaire had 102 and the female version of the questionnaire had 99 participants. This is a response rate of 300. The Arabic culture had 104 participants, the Indian culture had 57 participants and the Western culture had 40 participants. Participants were consecutively recruited upon their reply via the email. There was no restriction on accepting any questionnaires but three exclusion criteria were applied in selecting the sample, namely participants who requested a translation from English to Arabic, participants who send the questionnaires incompletely and participants who did not fit into the three groups (Arabic, Indian and Western). This criterion applied in order to avoid biases and to prevent preconception. Finally, participation to the study was entirely voluntary.

2.4 Research Instrument

A self-report semi-structured questionnaire using the internet questionnaire comprising two parts was developed for the study. The first part included demographic characteristics of the participants. The second part obtained data on symptoms and causes of abuse according to the culture, gender of the child, and gender of the participant. In part two, the participants asked to read the case vignette (which was developed according to the definition of child sexual abuse) then to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement, some of which related to the vignette. A 5-point Likert scale has employed, where 1=strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree. The 28-statements on child abuse survey that has been used based on a review of the literature. The questionnaire takes approximately ten to fifteen minutes to complete.

2.5 Research Procedure

Questionnaire administration was employed to collect the required data. The researcher first sought ethical approval of the study by the appropriate NHS Trust Committee for purpose of the study. After the permission from the ethical committee was granted; the researcher contacted the manager or the in charge of that particular organization either by telephone or by e-mail. The aim of the study and any procedures were discussed and permission for carrying out the study in these places was requested.

2.6 Statistical Analysis

The collected data were organized, tabulated and statistically analysed using software statistical computer package-the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) -Windows, version 18. For comparison between more than two means, the F value of analysis of variance one way ANOVA was calculated, where (Tukey Post Hoc test) was performed to compare between each two means if the F value was significant.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Western Culture Verses Collectivist Culture in Identifying the Abuse

Partially supporting the hypothesis a One Way Anova calculation revealed that there was no difference for the two cultures in identifying the case as abuse, the Arabic culture (mean=3.82, sd=0.97), Indian culture (mean=3.50, sd=1.13) and Western culture (mean=4.01, sd=0.93), $f_{200,1}=1.754$, p>0.05, ns. However, there was an interaction for culture and the gender of the professional, $f_{200,1}=4.411$, p<0.05, partial eta squared=0.045, nearing a medium effect size.
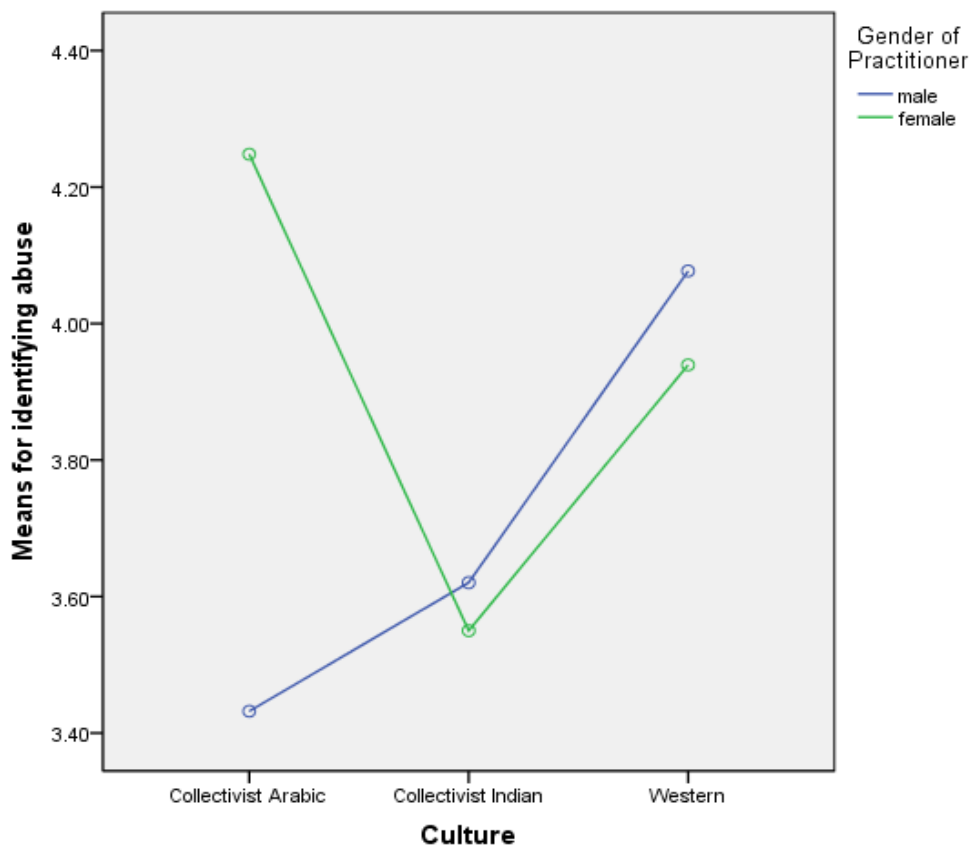This finding is described in Figure One.

Figure 1. Interaction of culture and gender of participants in identifying abuse

Figure 1 shows that male and female practitioners for both Western, males (mean=4.04, sd=0.10), females (mean=3.97, sd=0.86) and Indian cultures, males (mean=3.50, sd=1.15), females (mean=3.50, sd=1.12) provided similar ratings, although the Indian culture reported lower ratings concerning identifying abuse (and the Tukey Post Hoc test was significant between these two groups, p<0.05). However, both the lowest mean score and the highest mean score were from the Arabic participants, with males (mean=3.35, sd=1.05) rating the abuse as much lower than did females

(mean=4.26, sd=0.63). Additionally, participants rated the abuse as significantly higher when the child was female (mean=4.06, sd=0.79) compared to male (mean=3.49, sd=1.15), f200,1=4.805, p<0.05, Partial Eta Sqaure=0.025, a small effect size.

3.2 Western Culture Verses Collectivist Culture and Acceptability of Fondling Behaviours by Parents

Failing to support the hypothesis, a One Way Anova calculations revealed no significant difference according to culture regarding father's fondling behaviour, f200,1=0.519, p>1.05, ns or the mother's fondling behaviour f200,1=0.499, p>0.05, ns. Mean ratings for all groups were fairly high, (mean=3.73, sd=0.15; mean=3.13, sd=0.21; mean=4.01, sd=0.26), for Arabic, Indian and Western, respectively. However, there was a significant difference according to gender of the practitioner concerning both the father's fondling behaviour, f200,1=9.224, p<0.01 and mother's fondling behaviour f200,1=9.850, p<0.01 with female practitioners (mean=3.89, sd=0.13) rating this as significantly less acceptable than male practitioners (mean= 3.64, sd=0.10), f200,1= 9.224, p<0.01.

The participants' responders regarding the fondling behaviour by the parents in Arabic, Indian and Western cultures are showing in Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3 respectively.

Table 1: Differences on View of Fondling Behaviours in Arabic Culture (N=104)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
It is fine for a father to fondle his daughter's/son's genitalia	61.5%	20.2%	09.6%	05.8%	02.9%
It is fine for a mother to fondle his daughter's/son's genitalia	50.0%	21.2%	21.2%	06.7%	01.0%

Table 2: Differences on View of Fondling Behaviours in Indian Culture (N=57)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
It is fine for a father to fondle his daughter's/son's genitalia	57.9%	19.3%	12.3%	05.3%	05.3%
It is fine for a mother to fondle his daughter's/son's genitalia	52.6%	19.3%	17.5%	03.5%	07.0%

Table 3: Differences on View of Fondling Behaviours in Western Culture (N=40)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
It is fine for a father to fondle his daughter's/son's genitalia	55.0%	20.0%	07.5%	07.5%	10.0%
It is fine for a mother to fondle his daughter's/son's genitalia	45.0%	17.5%	20.0%	07.5%	10.0%

4. DISCUSSION

Child abuse is not a new phenomenon in a collectivist culture. Recently, there have been few reports from this culture addressing child abuse [1]. The fact that child abuse data from the West are more available and the issue is extensively studied does not mean that the problem is less pervasive in the East. It probably reflects the fact that there is more awareness and published research about child abuse and neglect in the West than in the East [3]. However, this study

attempts to reduce this information gap by investigating the professionals' perception of child abuse in two different cultures (Western and collectivist).

4.1 Western Culture Verses Collectivist Culture in Identifying the Abuse

Results of the present investigation demonstrate that the two cultures held fairly similar perceptions regarding the identification the case as abuse in the vignette. And this finding is surprising, because there is little research about understanding of child abuse in collectivist culture example in Arabic and Indian worlds [2]; [24]. The Indian culture views the child as parental property and the rough treatment of children in India is not seen as harmful to the child as in Western countries [24].

This result may be because in Dubai (Arabic culture), professionals' perceptions regarding identifying cases as "abuse" has been raised as a result of initiating of the Victim Support Program by General Department of Criminal Investigations by his Excellency the Commander in Chief of Dubai Police. Victim Support Program is a social and humanitarian based program initiated by Dubai Police. This program defined victim as any individual who was exposed to harm by others and filed a report with the police or for any other illegal activity. And the aims of victim support program are, to ensure good relations with the community, to provide the best quality services for the victims of all types of incidents, to provide moral support for the victims throughout the follow up of their cases, to guide the victims throughout all the process steps and to ensure comprehensive safety and humanitarian care for all victims.

4.2 Western Culture Verses Collectivist Culture and the Gender of the Participants

On the other hand, the significant interaction between the culture and the gender of the participants in the current studies is in consistent with other studies [4]; [16]. Moreover, Garrusi, Safizadeh, and Bahramnejad (2007) studied the relationship between knowledge levels of the participant on the one hand and age and sex of the child on the other. However, they did not detect any relationship. In contrast, other studies have shown higher rates of identifying the abuse situation by young female participants as opposed to male ones [4]; [25]. The generally higher attitude scores for female participants may be explained by the fact that women are generally more involved with children and thus have a better understanding of their problems [13]. On the other hand, the lower rates of identifying the abuse situation by males' participants can be explained because males tend to overestimate the proportion of false allegations made by children, tend to underestimate the prevalence of father-daughter incest and tend to not act when children appeared to retract their allegation of sexual abuse.

Further, men are less leaning to regard the sexual abuse of children as widespread or as serious event than are women, men are more likely to see punishment and justice as an effective prevention to the sexual abuse of children than are women, and men are more likely than women to see perpetrators as individuals who stood out in some way from the general population [29]. Concern should be expressed about the implications of gender differences with respect to the legal process and the administration of the law in sexual abuse cases. Thus, for any interdisciplinary of the major service providers in situations of child sexual abuse, care must be taken to control for gender effects [29].

4.3 Western Culture Verses Collectivist Culture and the Gender of the Child

Also, the intent of current study was to find out the different in the professionals' perception of child abuse according to the child' gender. Participants in the present study, rated the abuse as significantly higher when the child was female compared to male. This finding was in complete opposition to Broussard and Wagner (1988) and Tirosh, Shechter, Cohen, and Jaffe (2003)'s findings. Where they reported that gender of the child does not have any significant effect on the participants' attitude to child abuse, although gender discrimination is quite common as far as parental behaviour is concerned. However, regardless of the age of the child, the gender of the child, and the gender of the adult, respondents generally perceived the interaction between child and the adult to be an instance of child sexual abuse and the adult was seen as being responsible and to blame for his or her actions with the child [20].

4.4 Western Culture Verses Collectivist Culture and Acceptability of Fondling Behaviours by Parents

In term of culture and acceptability of fondling behaviours by parents, there was no significant difference according to culture regarding father's fondling behaviour, or the mother's fondling behaviour. This is an interesting finding because it is in opposing to the expectation. In Arabic collectivist culture; boys' genitalia are traditionally often touched by well-meaning parents or adult relatives, keen to re-assure themselves that the goods are there [4]. The current result was consistent with those Al-Moosa, et al. (2003) and Youssef and Atta (1998) results. Though, in Al-Moosa, et al. (2003)

study; the degree of unacceptable behaviour is lower for mother's touching children's genitalia than for father and that because mothers being the prominent care-takers are allowed a greater degree of intimacy with their children's bodies than fathers. But, the present study showed that female practitioners rated parental' fondling behaviours as significantly less acceptable than male practitioners. This again indicated the better awareness of females than males regarding the child abuse. And the reasons for that it might be due to the large involvement of women in daily family interaction with small children compared to men, at least in the traditional Arab and Indian cultures.

5. CONCLUSION

Professionals find that one of the main challenges is to integrate and apply knowledge accumulated in western countries in to different sociocultural context. This study is one of the first to explore the difference in perceptions of child sexual abuse between three cultures (Arabic, Indian and Western). It is one of the few studies that have examined the cultural difference in perceptions of child sexual abuse in a sample that was not purely clinical. And because there is dearth of knowledge about problem of child sexual abuse in Collectivist culture; future research is encouraged to further investigate the perceptions of child sexual abuse in different collectivist culture. The inclusion of information regarding child sexual abuse and cultural difference, in a gender specific and sensitive manner, would help to create a more complete treatment plan.

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