

Professionals' Perceptions of Child Sexual Abuse: Legal Reporting in Different Cultures

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Abstract: The objective was to look at differences in professionals' perceptions of suggested reporting of child abuse according to Collectivist (Arabic and Indian) and Individualist (from several different Western countries) culture. A survey of 201 professionals was conducted. They were given a questionnaire that included demographic information and specially designed vignette concerning either a male or a female child. A significant differences was found in the Western culture, with respondents rating higher of reporting the unacceptability of fondling behaviour to the authorities. Also supporting the hypothesis, Collectivist cultures were significantly more likely than the Western respondents to report the consistent use of pornography to the authorities. Given the high prevalence of child abuse and low reporting rate; there is a need to scrutinize the current educational offerings, and produce strategies to increase reporting.

Keywords: Professionals' Perceptions, Child Sexual Abuse, Reporting.

1. INTRODUCTION

Professional's perception of potential child abuse continue to be a major interest in the mass media and professional literature [25]. Underreporting has been stressed in which abused children fail to receive protection and treatment because professionals overlook signs of abuse or fail to report abuse they recognize to authorities. Over-reporting has also been targeted in which the falsely accused suffer the trauma of false labeling, punishment, or the removal of their child from the home. Bias in reporting due to the poor professional's knowledge, culture differences, ethnic groups or by gender has been a persistent concern [25]. However, in the research on professional responses to child abuse, collectivist cultures have been relatively neglected compared to western cultures. This is surprising because child abuse is an international problem and it is not a modern marvel. Identification and reporting of suspected child abuse are crucial precursors to prevailing with child abusing families [11].

On the other hand, child abuse has different meaning for different cultures [12]; [23]. Cultural values influence what is thought to be an optimal childrearing and what is viewed as child abuse [11]. Therefore, there are many reasons for a lack reporting of child abuse cases in collectivist culture. For example, in the Arab world, the data on child abuse are either vague or not taken seriously [10]; [27]; and there is cultural reluctance to report and discuss child abuse topics [4]. However, In Arab world, reporting of child abuse and neglect started emerging in the late 1980s [3]. However, no legal action was taken [4]. This lack of reporting might be due to professionals' lack of knowledge concerning the legal obligation to report such cases. Indeed, Al-Moosa et al. (2003), stated that more than 80% professionals did not know about this legal obligation to report suspected abuse, or to which legal authorities' reports of suspected cases should be made. Garrusi, Safizadah, and Bahramnejad (2007) found that although the majority (65%) of physicians had seen abuse cases in their practice; few (4.5%) had ever reported a case to authorities. Finlayson, Louise, Koocher, and Gerald (1991) noted that women more than men suspect and report child abuse at all levels of symptom specificity. Interestingly, specialized training and experience in sexual abuse did not influence participants' beliefs about whether or not they would report abuse cases [13].

Professionals in child health, primary care, mental health, schools, social services, and law-enforcement services all contribute to the recognition of and response to child abuse. In all sectors, children suspected of being abused are under-reported to child-protection agencies. Lack of awareness of the signs of child maltreatment and processes for reporting to child-protection agencies, and a perception that reporting might do more harm than good, are among the reasons for not reporting. Policies to improve recognition and reporting, mainly used in emergency department, paediatric practice, and psychiatric unit, include training, use of questionnaires for asking children and parents about abuse, evidence-based guidelines for who should be assessed by child-protection specialists [17] and provide clear reporting guidelines.

Research Hypothesis

The hypotheses were to examine the difference in culture and gender of the participant regarding the informed child protection agencies of unacceptable behaviour of parents' touching children and consistent use of pornography.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The sample consisted of 201 professionals from Dubai in United Arab Emirates. The sample was culturally diverse with 104 Arabic, 57 Indian and 40 Western. All participants received informed consent; the study was reviewed and approved by the ethical committee of the appropriate NHS Trust Committee. The return of the completed questionnaires served as the participant's consent to participate. And because this study is continuations of the preceding study [1]; two statements from 28-statements on child abuse survey that dealt with legal reporting were used. Items were scored from strongly disagree=1 to strongly agree=5. The survey data were scientifically analysed using software statistical computer package- the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) -Windows, version 18. One way ANOVA analysis of variance was used. And the statistical significance was set at p-values of < 0.05.

3. RESULTS

The participants' responders regarding the legal reporting of parents touching the genitalia and the consistent use of pornography in Arabic, Indian and Western cultures are showing in Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3 respectively.

Table 1: Differences on View of Legal Reporting in Arabic Culture (N=104)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Parents who touch their children's genitalia as a form of play should be reported to the authorities	02.9%	11.5%	21.2%	40.4%	24.0%
Parents' consistent use of pornography should be reported to the authorities	01.9%	03.9%	19.2%	38.5%	36.5%

Table 2: Differences on View of Legal Reporting in Indian Culture (N=57)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Parents who touch their children's genitalia as a form of play should be reported to the authorities	01.8%	07.0%	14.0%	49.1%	28.1%
Parents' consistent use of pornography should be reported to the authorities	03.5%	03.5%	14.0%	43.9%	35.1%

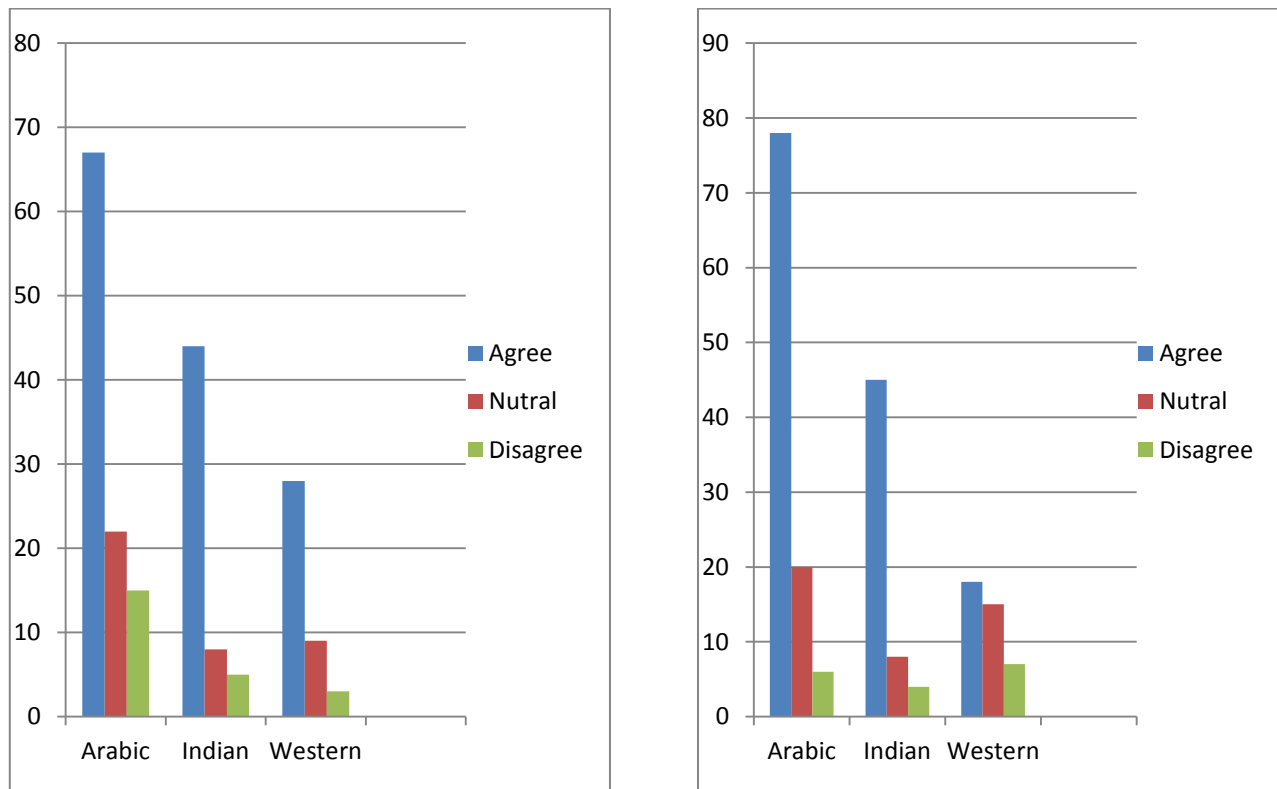
Table 3: Differences on View of Legal Reporting in Western Culture (N=40)

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Parents who touch their children's genitalia as a form of play should be reported to the authorities	02.5%	05.0%	22.5%	37.5%	32.5%
Parents' consistent use of pornography should be reported to the authorities	05.0%	12.5%	37.5%	20.0%	25.0%

For simple illustration, agree and strongly agree was combined into one category of agree, and disagree and strongly disagree was combined into one category of disagree. Neither agree nor disagree was labelled as Neutral in the graph below in the three cultures (Arabic, Indian, and Western).

Figure 1: Differences on view in Informing Child Protection Agencies of Patents Touching Children in Arabic, Indian, and Western Culture

Figure 2: Differences on view in Informing Child Protection Agencies of Patents Consistence Use of Pornography in Arabic, Indian, and Western Culture



3.1 Western Culture Verses Collectivist Culture in Informing Child Protection Agencies of Parents Touching Children

Supporting the hypothesis, a One Way Anova revealed that western culture compared to middle eastern culture was significantly more likely to report parental touching of genitalia to the authorities, $f_{200,1}=5.223$, $p<0.05$, 1 tailed. Tukey HSD revealed this difference to be significant ($p<0.05$) between the Western culture (mean=4.20, $sd=0.80$) and the Arabic culture (mean=3.71, $sd=1.05$) but no differences between the Indian (mean 3.98, $sd=0.94$) and either Western or Arabic cultures.

3.2 Western Culture Verses Collectivist Culture in Informing Child Protection Agencies of Parents' Consistence Use of Pornography

Supporting the hypothesis, a One Way Anova revealed that there was a significant difference according to culture for reporting parental consistent use of pornography to the authorities, $f_{200,1}=7.550$, $p<0.05$, partial eta square =0.074, a large effect size. Tukey HSD revealed the differences to be between both the Arabic ($p<0.05$) and the Indian ($p<0.05$) cultural groups compared with the Western cultural group but not between the two Collectivist groups. Figure Three describes this finding. Additionally, there was a significant difference according to gender of the practitioner concerning the reporting of the use of pornography to the authorities, $f_{200,1}=7.599$, $p<0.01$, partial eta squared=0.39, with females (mean=4.11, $sd=0.14$) being more likely than males (mean=3.63, $sd=0.10$) to make a report. There was no interaction for culture and gender of practitioner, $f_{200,1}=0.754$, $p>0.05$, ns. This finding is described in FigureThree.

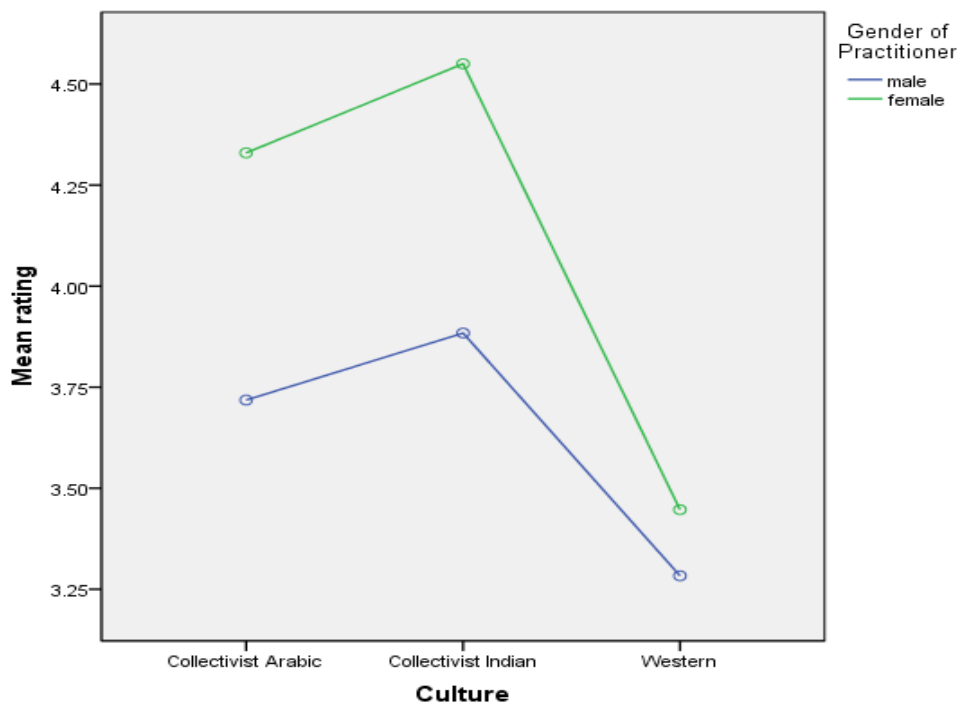


Figure 3: Comparisons of mean ratings for culture and gender of practitioner concerning reporting of use of pornography.

Figure three demonstrates that male and female practitioners for both Arabic, males (mean=3.78, sd=0.97), females (mean=4.28, sd=0.86) and Indian cultures, males (mean=3.91, sd=1.03), females (mean=4.55, sd=0.52) provided higher ratings than Western culture, males (mean=3.22, sd=1.24), females (mean=3.53, sd=1.12). However, in each culture the females rated higher.

4. DISCUSSION

Understanding perception of child abuse by professionals is vital in many respects, because perception has consequences for reporting the abuse, finding intervention needs of vulnerable children, formulating and applying policy, determining possible for abuse, and vulnerability for victimization of children [5]. The current study has some practical uses and implications for personal, professional, social services, policy, and research. Similar to other studies of perception of child abuse, the current results may be useful for working with parents to determine their corrective practices, their maltreatment values and beliefs, and their susceptibility to commission of abuse. It also may provide valuable information about the influence of parenting styles experienced during childhood on perception of abuse. Because perception of abusive behaviours is related to acceptance of abuse-related services, the results may be relevant to understanding or predicting professionals' responses to intervention and service [6].

4.1 Factors Related to Child Abuse Mandatory Reporting Behaviours

The tendency to report suspected abuse is influenced by at least three factors: legal issues, clinician characteristics, and situational factors. Legal factors consist of knowledge of the reporting law, the language of the law, and the specificity of legal requirements. The recognition and reporting of child abuse depends greatly on the mandatory reporters' knowledge of child abuse and the reporting law. Clinicians' characteristics include attitudes and experiences related to reporting abuse and training about child abuse. Situational factors include specific case characteristics, such as the type and/or the severity of abuse and the amount of evidence available [9]; [30]. Reporters' intention to report differed by type of abuse. Sexual abuse vignettes were most likely to be reported. Lack of clear evidence of abuse was a significant barrier against reporting [8]; [31]. Badger (1989) and Paavilainen, Stedt-Kurki, Paunonen-Ilmonen, and Laippala (2002) stated that professional groups have different levels of knowledge regarding child abuse and their legal obligation to report. However, Zellman (1990a) found that one of the strongest correlates of reporting child abuse was knowledge and

understanding of the reporting law. It is also worth to note that knowledge of child abuse and reporting laws is not sufficient to explain child abuse reporting behaviour. Reporters' attitudes toward reporting child abuse and discipline also play an important role in this decision-making process. Because many times professionals had failed to report child abuse despite of awareness of the reporting law [32]. Some mandatory reporters fear that reporting could cause possible harm to children and to ongoing therapy [18]; [19]; [20]. Other examples of professional-related attitudes regarding the reporting are the followings: (1) protection of anonymity, not wanting to get involved with courts/legal system, (2) and case-specific opinions (lack of sufficient evidence, reporting may harm the child or result in removal from the family) [22]. On the other hand, acceptability of child discipline was negatively correlated with the likelihood of reporting [5]; [24]. The likelihood of reporting was a joint function of the respondent's perception of the seriousness of an incident and the belief of the responder's culture [5].

4.2 Western Culture Verses Collectivist Culture in Informing Child Protection Agencies of Parents Touching Children

The present study demonstrated the significant finding between Western cultures in comparison to Arabic collectivist culture in reporting parental touching of genitalia to the authorities. This outcome can be explained by many factors, first; in Arab world, touching the genitalia as a form of child abuse is an issue up till now seldom examined [14]. Second, cultural and social reluctance may have led to downplay the appreciation of the magnitude of touching the genitalia [28]. Third, touching the genitalia as form of abuse is discussed very reluctantly [14]. Fourth, reporting or acknowledging this issue would mean a grave interruption into family purity and threat to the family's honour and reputation, which are the essential elements of Arabic culture [28]. Fifth, public disclosure of shameful or nasty behaviour may also perceive as an unacceptable violation to the society [4]. Sixth, being abused and losing one's virginity in a culture that pays a lot of emphasize on preserving the female virginity until marriage would be very stigmatising [15]. Seventh, fear of being labelled a homosexual in a male dominant culture; raising males as butch and masculine led to conceal abuse from the authorities [15]. Eighth, some abusive practices are still accepted today in various parts of Arab world within a context of good intentions [21].

4.3 Western Culture Verses Collectivist Culture in Informing Child Protection Agencies of Parents' Consistence Use of Pornography

It was of a particular interest to point out the difference according to culture for reporting parental consistent use of pornography to the authorities. In line with the expectation; both Arabic and Indian cultures provided higher ratings than Western culture and in each culture the female practitioners rated higher. Whitman (1983) stated that in nonwestern society, sex must be discussed and practiced in secret and according to societal rules and norms; because it is very shameful and embarrassing for a family to expose any type of sexual activities in public. Plus, especially in Arabic culture, pornography is prohibited by the religion and by the law. Therefore, they rated higher than the western culture which pornography somehow is acceptable socially.

Nevertheless, the current study identified the importance of culture on reporting behaviour. The effects of culture on the likelihood of reporting are obviously more than the shade of one's skin, or language, or location of one's birth [5].

5. CONCLUSION

The decision to report an incident of suspected abuse is eventually an individual act [2]. Child abuse cases usually are filtered through the lens of the professional's personal characteristics. However, the findings from this study indicate that attitudes and beliefs are predictors of behavioural intent. Approval of child abuse is just one attitude or belief that adds to the professional's perception of abuser behaviour and which ultimately contributes to the professional's response to such behaviour. On the other hand, to detect child abuse, professionals should have a standard point of orientation to differentiate between legal parental behaviour and illegal abuse. Professionals should be offered extensive training programs to provide a set of standards designed to enable them to detect and report child abuse regardless of their various personal beliefs and values about parenting and discipline [5]. Further research is needed to understand better the underlying factors within cultures that affect differences in reporting intent.

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