

Experience of Childhood Abuse and Marital Relationships: A Qualitative Perspective of Victims and Professionals from Pakistan

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Abstract

Early childhood experience imprints itself significantly on individual's life. Pleasant experiences help in a healthy development, whereas traumatic events in one's life cause physical, psychological and emotional lacunas in one's personality. The present study aims at exploring such traumatic experiences of early childhood abuse along with its forms such as emotional, physical, sexual, and neglect from victim and professional perspective. It probes into the perception of these stakeholders to learn how childhood abuse experience affects the later life course. Methodologically, the study involves focus group discussions and interviews with the survivors, mental health professionals, and social activists working in the relevant domain. It analyses the collected data through Interpretative Phenomenological approach. Results revealed that childhood abuse experience is linked with adult pattern of intimate relationships and experiences. The experiences reported by the individuals show that they had fallen victim to more than one form of childhood abuse at a time in their early years. Moreover, in current years of life they face difficulties in interpersonal communication and understanding emotional cues. They also experience numbness, fear of losing partner on disclosure, and use of force in intimate situations. Some reported insecurity, disclosure difficulty, and acceptance of sexual abuse.

Keywords: Childhood abuse, marital relationships, adult survivors, professional psychologists.

Introduction

Childhood abuse is a complicated psycho-social issue with its prevalence rate increasing day by day. Childhood interactions and developmental patterns are considered to be the channelizing agents that affect the adult personality and as a result shape interpersonal relationship pertaining to various life decisions (Rostami, Abdi, & Heidari, 2014). Many recent cases from Pakistan including those of Zainab and Manahil have brought the issue into the limelight again.

World stat shows that 8% of the world's children are being affected by physical abuse, 2% by sexual abuse, 37% by emotional abuse, and 4.4% by neglect of either their parents or caregivers (Scutti, 2015). Pakistan also faces a significantly high rate of child abuse. Even most of the statistical data at government level is old, though non-government organizations such as SAHIL foundation (2019; only non-government organization working on child abuse issue) are reporting the increasing numbers of childhood abuse cases in Pakistan. Still, this data is number-based and, therefore, remains inadequate for in-depth qualitative studies of the psycho-social impacts of childhood abuse experiences on adult personality and relationships.

Child abuse is an umbrella term that encompasses various forms such as neglect, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. According to Giovannoni (1971), abuse is an act of commission and omission that results in harm and has negative effects respectively. It is an exploitation of the rights by the parents/caregivers to control, discipline and punish their children. Cultural context is considered to be vital in defining these experiences that may include any form of abuse. In many countries, physical punishment is considered to be a disciplinary practice (Kolko & Feiring, 2002; Lipovsky & Hanson, 2007). Even in Pakistan, physical punishment at home or in schools is vital in child rearing and for the child to be disciplined (Malik, 2010). According to World Health Organization (2006), physical abuse includes any physical act in which a person intends to harm another person or *'any non-accidental physical act inflicted upon a child by a person having the care of a child'* and most likely to be accompanied by either emotional abuse or neglect. Emotional abuse encompasses act of Omission, not doing what needs to be done; and acts of Commission, doing what should not be done (Hart, Brassard, Binggeli, & Davidson, 2002).

Neglect includes any serious act or omission by a person undertaking the care of a child that, within the bounds of cultural tradition, constitutes a failure to provide conditions that are essential for the healthy physical and emotional development of that child (Lipovsky & Hanson, 2007). Lastly, sexual abuse implies the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he/she does not fully comprehend, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that act/practice violates the laws or social taboos of society (WHO, 1999).

Researchers have concluded that not only overt patterns such as physical and verbal abuse have a detrimental effect on a child, but covert patterns such as emotional abuse and neglect can also be equally devastating or even worse. Short term consequences include the immediate overt

effects such as mild bruise, bone fracture (Hoskote, Martin, Hormbrey, & Burns, 2003), physical health problems (Hart et al., 2002), while covert effects contain interpersonal difficulties (Hart et al., 2002), anxiety, withdrawal (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Twaite & Rodriquez-Srednicki, 2004), aggression, difficulty of social adaptability (Taylor, Borkowski, & Whitman, 2006), sleep disturbance, depression, and suicidal ideation (Crosson-Tower, 2015). In contrast, long-term impact includes more damaging and long-lasting effect not only on the victim but on significant others as well, who are involved in any kind of relationship at any point in life. These include trust issues and low self-esteem (Unger & De Luca, 2014), non-compliance, dependent personality, high impulsivity, lack of enthusiasm (Erickson & Egeland, 2002), anxiety, internalization of aggression, depression (Crosson-Tower, 2015), interpersonal difficulty, paranoid personality (Crosson-Tower, 2005; Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002), and insecure adult romantic relationships (Muller, Sicoli, & Lemieux, 2000; Whiffen & MacIntosh, 2005). Moreover, these long term effects are more prone to substance abuse (Thompson, Kingree, & Desai, 2004).

Literature has identified that success and failure of marriage depends upon the number of factors where childhood experience of abuse was found to be the strongest determinant (Ullman & Filipas, 2005; Vaillancourt-Morelet et al., 2016). Rostami and colleagues investigated various types of maltreatments faced in early years of life and adult mental health among married individuals of Tehran. They concluded that those who have faced less maltreatment developed more healthy relationships and less mental health issues than the ones who have faced most intense abuse (Rostami, et al., 2014).

Sometimes choose to stay in unsatisfying relationships only because they feel scared to leave such relationships as the cost of leaving is high. Rusbult (1980) links this tendency with underlying decision making in relationships. According to him, people use a comparison level in the form of reward and compare it with the level of available alternatives. If the level of reward in a given relationship seems higher, the person will feel satisfied in existing relationship. On the other hand, if this level seems lower, he/she will feel discontented. According to Rodrigues and Lopes (2012), romantic relationships are based on the experience of positive effect and sexual desire that facilitate individuals to fulfill their other related desires of affiliation and affection, and reduces the fear of ending up alone.

Research evidence has suggested that early year emotional maltreatment predicts the insecure and avoidant pattern of behavior as adult (Riggs & Kaminski, 2010), and linked it with the parental characteristics such as alcoholism; mental illness; poor parental role models (Crosson-Tower, 2015). Children who faced emotional abuse are subject to face problems in adulthood which includes depression (Clemmons, Walsh, Dilillo, & Messman-Moore, 2007), interpersonal sensitivity (Morimoto & Sharma, 2004), and relationship difficulties (Carbone, 2010). Adults, who have reported their experience of childhood emotional abuse and neglect, also face problems in their married life. These problems largely include emotional distance, difficulty in asserting oneself, and difficulty in clearly expressing one's needs (Reyome, 2010; Paradis & Boucher, 2010).

The childhood sexual abuse survivors feel anxious and concerned about the intimacy and closeness. Moreover, they feel depressed and stressed as to give their best. There is empirical consensus that child sexual abuse has long-term effects on the victims and later hinders their marital functioning as an adult (Godbout, Sabourin, & Lussier, 2009; McCarthy & Sypeck, 2003) as they have negative perceptions of self that includes low self-esteem, negative body image, and have little control in interpersonal relationships, greater chances of revictimization and dissatisfaction with partner (Arata & Lindman, 2002; Kalichman, Gore-Felton, Benotsch, Cage, & Rompa, 2004). According to Meston, Rellini, and Heiman (2006), female survivors are more likely to see themselves as less passionate in intimate relationships as they relate it with their childhood experience of sexual abuse.

Owing to inadequate researches in this domain in the context of Pakistan where disclosure of any form of abuse either considered tabooed (Malik, 2010) or violation of social norms, the present study aims at investigating different forms of childhood abuse's long-term impact on adult romantic or intimate relationships. The researcher seeks to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of childhood abuse survivors who are currently married and working as professionals in the same field.

Materials and Method

The present study is exploratory in nature and follows the phenomenological approach for the investigation of the proposed phenomenon.

Participants of the Study

The study selected its participants through purposive convenient and snowball sampling technique. To achieve its objectives, it selected those participants who are married and have experienced at least one of the forms of abuse before the age of 18 years by their caregivers. Participants belonged to different socio economic and educational level. Furthermore, counselors/therapists, as well as other professionals directly involved with childhood abuse victims and in relationship/couple counseling/therapy were contacted for the investigation of childhood abuse, along with its forms and intensity, and its effect on romantic relationships.

The study conducted three Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and eight Interviews with childhood abuse survivors and three interviews with professionals (Psychologists, Counselors/Therapists, Doctors, Social Worker). Detailed demographic characteristics of participants were mentioned in table 1 to 3.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of FGDs' Participants (N=16).

	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Experience of Childhood Abuse
	Male	33	Masters	Corporate Sector	Physical and Sexual Abuse
FGD-1 (n = 5)	Male	35	Masters	Corporate Sector	Physical and Sexual Abuse

	Female	25	BS Honors	Academic Sector	Emotional Abuse and Neglect
	Female	28	M. Phil	Corporate Sector	Emotional Abuse
	Female	32	M. Phil	Academic Sector	Emotional and Physical Abuse
	Female	38	Bachelors	Housewife	Neglect
FGD-2 (n = 5)	Female	35	Bachelors	Housewife	Emotional Abuse
	Female	33	Bachelors	Housewife	Emotional Abuse
	Female	30	Bachelors	Housewife	Physical and Emotional Abuse
	Female	31	Masters	Housewife	Neglect and Sexual Abuse
	Female	25	Primary	Midwife	Physical, Emotional Abuse, and Neglect
FGD-3 (n = 6)	Female	18	Primary	Housemaid	Physical and Sexual Abuse
	Female	19	Religious Teaching	Housemaid	Sexual Abuse
	Female	20	Home Schooling	Housemaid	Physical Abuse and Neglect
	Female	20	Primary	School Cleaning Staff	Physical Abuse and Neglect
	Female	18	Matric	School Cleaning Staff	Physical and Emotional Abuse

Table 2

Demographic characteristics of Interview Participants, Professionals dealing with Childhood Abuse Victims/Survivors (N=3)

Sr. No.	Gender	Education	Occupation
1	Male	PhD Clinical Psychology	Counselor/Therapist (Personal Counseling Center)
2	Female	PhD Clinical Psychology	Assistant Professor and Counselor (University Wellness Center)
3	Female	PhD Special Education	Social Worker /Activist Executive Director Sahil

Table 3*Demographic characteristics of Interview Participants, Victims of Childhood Abuse (N=8)*

Sr. No.	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Experience of Childhood Abuse	No. of Siblings	Duration of Marriage (Months or Years)
1	Female	20	Matriculation	Housewife	Physical and Sexual Abuse (Incest)	1	3 Months
2	Female	23	Intermediate	Housewife	Emotional and Physical Abuse	4	1 year
3	Female	35	Intermediate	Housewife	Emotional and Physical Abuse	4	10 years
4	Female	30	Bachelors	School Teacher	Physical Abuse	7	7 years
5	Female	34	Masters	University Teacher	Neglect	6	4 years
6	Female	33	Masters	University Teacher	Minor Sexual Abuse, and Neglect	4	4 years
7	Male	28	Intermediate	Office Staff	Neglect and Physical Abuse	6	5 years
8	Male	18	Primary	Labourer	Sexual and Physical Abuse	5	1 Month

Procedure

The study followed qualitative approach to achieve its objectives. First, it formulated interview and FGD guidelines in the light of its objectives, relevant literature and cultural observations. Experts from field of psychology were contacted to evaluate both of the guides. After incorporation of recommended changes, finalized guidelines were used for the conduction of semi structured interviews and FGDs. Initially, Participants were briefed about the nature of research and importance of their participation. Their consent was taken after ensuring the anonymity, confidentiality of provided information, and their right to withdraw. In addition, the researcher ensured that the research ethics would be adhered during the process of the research. Moreover, risks associated with participation were also discussed.

Conducting Interviews and FGDs

The study strictly followed all the protocols of semi structured interviews and FGDs where moderator/researcher introduced herself and briefed about the nature of study and audio recording of session. Participants introduced themselves. They were asked open-ended questions. Every participant was given equal chance to express their views. During the sessions, the moderator recorded the non-verbal responses of participants.

Method of Analysis

The obtained audio recorded data was transcribed and analyzed by following Interpretative phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as proposed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009).

Results

After transcribing and analyzing the data using Interpretative phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study obtained the following themes and narratives:

Perception of Childhood Abuse as Punishment

Majority of the participants in this study did not consider punishment as physical and emotional abuse. They asserted that the term punishment is more suitable to describe such behaviors. The findings of the study indicate that people are only aware of physical and sexual abuse due to growing attention of media towards such topics and increasing number of incidents. However, professionals working in the field of counseling and psychotherapy recommend that all these aspects are included in childhood abuse.

Most of the participants viewed that emotional abuse and neglect are Western concepts and do not relate to the Pakistani society and culture. For example, a male participant opined that *'since parents take responsibility of the brought up of their child and spend resources on them, it is their right to physically punish their child for their improvement'*. Another female stated that *'physical punishment can be aimed for the safety of the child, for example to keep them away from harmful things such as electric appliances'*. In addition, different forms of childhood abuse were found to be coexisting in the participants. The following combinations were found more common: physical and sexual abuse, physical and emotional abuse, and emotional abuse and neglect.

Control and Practices by Parents

The participant reported different responses by their parents to their mistakes. According to them, their parents generally ignored their mistakes in front of guests. But after guest had left, they treated them completely in a different manner. One of the female participants reported that *'I was so scared when I broke one of the plates in front of guests. After the guest had left, I hid myself in store cupboard, and I was 7 or 8 years old at that time'*. A participant viewed that in a joint family, especially with grandparents, parents felt pressurized to discipline their

children properly. In such situation, mother feels even a greater burden. Another participant added that in a joint family system, parents feel even confused as whether they are doing right practices to discipline their children: *'bay ja laad pyar say bigar to nahin rahay'* (Too much love can spoil the child).

Parental Attachment

All the participants, both male and female, reported that they were more attached with their mother than their father. They also added that that one always calls one's mother when in trouble. The interviews with the professionals also agreed that most of their female clients found themselves to be closer to their mothers than their fathers. They told that *'they have never shared their actual feelings with fathers'*. Even those male participants who felt attached to their fathers told that they had never shared their emotions concerning any mishaps with fathers. In interviews with the victims, the male participants reported that they did not feel attached to any of their parents. On being probed into further, they said that their mother did some time take care of them. However, they told that she was, most of the time, busy in home chores and facilitating their younger siblings. Even those participants who were closer to their parents could never disclose any sexual abuse incident to them.

Parents' Characteristics

The participants reported that certain parental characteristics influence their behavior of abusing their child. These characteristics include parents' personal experiences of physical abuse by their parents, parental and marital discord, insecure nature, pressure of in-laws, and financial instability. The participant also shared that frequent fights between their parents also generally resulted in the physical abuse of the children. One of the male participants reported that *'whenever my father's mood is bad because of not getting enough wage for his work, he fights with my mother. In such situation, he starts besting me or any of my siblings if we have mistakenly crossed his way. Being an elder boy, I could usually escape the situation, but my younger siblings always fell a victim to my father's rage'*.

The professionals reported that they have found that their clients have generally psychological issues with parents. According to them, the major issues include depression, stress, anxiety, low family income, huge family, lack of education, and instable physical health. According to them, generally when a mother is not physically healthy, the father does his catharsis on the children. Another important factor is parental and marital discord as told by one of the participants: *'In Pakistani society, marriages are mainly arranged by families. As a result, in most of the cases, the couple don't like each other. But they still want to continue their marriage. Such compromises result in frequent fights, generally on small issues. Consequently, their children have to face torture. These children follow the same practice in their married life. Another important factor of parents' abusing and neglecting their children is their constant sense of guilt and insecurity.*

Childs' Characteristics

Many participants believed that children's personal characteristics are the main cause of their abuse. For example, strong headed, stubborn, cranky, ugly, dim witted children are more likely to be beaten. Children with Ugly look and dark complexion are either emotionally abused or neglected by their parents. A female participant stated *'one of my cousins was pretty and loved most in the family. That made all other female kids including me jealous. Her family took more care for her and always felt concerned whenever she had to outside. But none of us thought about our safety that much. That was really heart breaking for us all, but now we are fine. At least, it taught us not to treat our own kids the same way'*. Another participant also agreed: *'I guess that kind of cousin is there in every family. That's why as a child I felt more connected to people other than my family'*.

Educational and Economic Factors

Other factors causing and intensifying the child abuse include low education and economic struggle, low family income that compels children to work on daily wages, increase in educational expenses, demands from educational institutes, complexity about living standards, and lack of resources. The professionals stated that usually people from low education and socio-economic status blame their own child for bringing such shame on him/herself.

Social Factors

According to the participants, important factors behind the child abuse were: conflict with in-laws, marital dissatisfaction, hindrances in professional growth and career advancement, inability to achieve one's life dream, family pressure to discipline, comparison with same age cousins in childhood as well as throughout life, family's demands, and parents' involvement in drugs addiction. A participant said *'life is challenging especially for working women as she is expected to be perfect and her house to be spotless. On the other hand, we see there are many non-working women who have their houses and family as a complete mess'*.

Perception about Marriage

Mainly participants believed that marriage is a social and familial obligation and that a woman cannot survive without a man. They think that protection in form of spouse is necessary for her. A participant shared *'this is part of our society and belief system that women need to be married at certain age and it's mother's responsibility to take care of children and home'*. Another added *'If something bad has happened it is considered to be mother's negligence'*. Another participant said *'Ghar to aurat banati hai'* (home is made by women).

A sexually abused female participant reported that her stepfather abused her and that her mother, knowing this, forced her to be married as soon as possible. She stated *'that's the only way out for me. My mother cannot afford living on her own'*.

Marital Relationship

The professionals reported that people generally do not seek counseling for the cases related to abuse. According to them, most of the people relate their problems to depression, crying episodes, not taking care of themselves, home and or children. Their family members also believe in and emphasize on such causes. Secondly, professional psychologists are also not their first choice. First, the victims and their family members consult practitioners like religious quacks. Only when the case goes deplorably worse, they will think to seek guidance from psychologists. Both the professionals and participants believed that women sacrifice more in any relationship as they cannot afford to lose the supposedly only shelter they have. Some victims of childhood sexual abuse continue to be victimized as an adult, but they fear to share their experiences with their partners or family members who can also exploit their position.

The participants, both male and female, with a history of sexual abuse shared that they had difficulty in initial physical contact with their partner. They reported that even a slightest touch reminded them of the childhood experiences. Moreover, they said that felt their partner was not happy with them and that if they continued with this feeling and behaviour, they would lose their spouse. The male participant with a history of sexual and physical abuse reported that he would never share this experience to anyone: *'people will make fun of me, and it will affect my family, wife, and work. And this can ruin the lives of my children as well.*

The participants with a history of emotional abuse and neglect reported emotional numbness, lack of appropriate response at the time of need, and feeling of detachment from partner. One of the members said, *'I don't even know what to say and how to comfort her as I never know how to respond to such situation. Never seen anyone around me and in my family doing so'.* Another male participant added, *'I don't think it's the case, if we are providing every financial support and physical needs what else the partner needs'.*

The professionals reported that their parents with a history of childhood neglect and emotional abuse continuously feel strained and guilty.

Social and Physical (Marital) Needs

Most of the participants reported that all of their social and physical needs are being met. Only the interviewees with a history of sexual abuse faced problems in maintaining physical contact with partner. Moreover, when they are able overcome this problem, they still feel uncertain. They felt their partner might leave them if they disclosed to them their abuse-related experiences.

The professional counselors reported that in many cases involving marital counseling, either of the partners had faced childhood sexual abuse from minor to severe intensity which caused significant difficulty for them in developing intimate relationship. Moreover, according to them, those individuals are not aware of this reason. Additionally, since the abuse took place at a early age and has become a part of their unconsciousness now, it is very difficult to make

them understand. The counselors came to know about such experiences of their clients by probing the parents or other family members who visit with the clients.

Marital Discord

The analysis revealed that main reason behind marital problems and discord is the societal pressure. In cases, a victimized woman is compelled to marry her abuser and live in a toxic relationship for the entire life. People usually show physical reaction to their verbal discords because of which their children suffer mainly. If the wife appears to be more dominant, the husband has to compromise for the sake of their children. Sometimes, both, husband and wife face issues in their marital relationship, but they prefer to save their relationship by remain silent.

Experience of Specific Childhood Abuse and Marital Relationship

The participants with a history of emotional abuse and neglect reported emotional numbness, avoidance, and lack of appropriate repose in intimate relationships. One of the participants reported '*I was almost unable to talk to my father. I could only utter Salam. Sometimes, I felt that I couldn't talk to men generally. Now, I feel I cannot share appropriately my feelings with my husband as well. I felt that men don't listen*'. Those participants with a history of physical abuse appeared to be in favor of using physical force with partner and disciplining children. They avoid communication with their partners.

The participants with a history sexual abuse also reported other forms of abuse, along with it, such as physical, emotional abuse, and neglect. They reported emotional distancing and avoiding the situations of physical contact and emotional disclosure just because of their anxiety and fear.

Psychological Problems of Adults with a History of Childhood Abuse

The professional counselors told that individuals mainly with a history of any form of childhood abuse report psychological difficulties in social and interpersonal relationships. Moreover, according to them, they are unable to communicate properly. They added that such individuals often feel self-blame, sense of guilt, low self-esteem, sweating and fidgeting when they are in physical contact with their partner, stiffness of body, guilt of being bad, deceptive feelings, lack of trust, depression, and anxiety. Additionally, they told that these people often want to end their life and that some of them have attempted suicide as well. Moreover, there are also few cases of personality disorders, specially of split personality.

Discussion

The results from the present study highlighted the complex nature of childhood abuse. First, the study explained the term "childhood abuse" along with its various types. The findings reveal that in the Pakistani society emotional abuse and neglect is not considered as a form of childhood abuse. Most commonly parents call their child with such term with an intension to

discipline them. The study found that parents used the term punishment without considering it as an abuse. That thought that to associate such terms with abuse was a western concept. Many parents accepted even brutal beating to discipline and teach their child. Malik (2010) also reported that parents and caregivers' practice physical punishment at home, and even considered it to be vital in child rearing and for the child to be disciplined.

The present study validated the findings of the previous contributions made in other countries and cultures. The participants of this study, for example, reported anxiousness in their intimate relationships. This notion is supported by Riggs and Kaminski (2010) findings. They concluded that emotional abuse and neglect predict a high level of anxiety and avoidance respectively and that these lead to psychological aggression and victimization in adult relationships. According to Hildyard and Wolfe (2002), neglect assists in forming disorganized or disoriented attachment style where the victim feels that their partner will not be available or the partner might reject them or that he/she is unworthy of love because of their past. Unger and De Luca (2014) explained that neglected children do not expect anything to work out as they want, so they give up their role of striving for success in any relation. This withdrawn behavior and scarcity of communication results in either of the following two opposite patterns in personality: disorganized over-exploration of dangerous arenas or no exploration at all. Piazza (2013) supported this notion that childhood abuse can cause depression in mid-life that can later lead to marital dissatisfaction and long-lasting impact of discord and stress among couples. The participants of the present study reported such behaviors. For example, they reported emotional detachment, lack of response, stress, and anxiety while interacting with their partner.

Rusbult (1980) identified that people generally cherish an idea about what they deserve in a given relationship and then compare that perceived reward with what they are actually obtaining in their current relationship. It is a common observation that childhood abuse survivors have developed a low self-esteem and so accept whatever treatment they receive from their relationship. This happens largely with survivors of sexual abuse because they have already accepted maltreatment by their wrongdoers.

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse judge themselves negatively by having negative perceptions of self, which includes low self-esteem and a negative body image that cause these people to lose their control in their interpersonal relationships (Jackson, Calhoun, Amick, Maddever, & Habif, 1990). Researchers studied long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse and concluded that adult women with a history of childhood sexual abuse show a greater evidence of sexual disturbance or dysfunction, homosexual experiences, depression, anxiety, fear, and suicidal ideation, whereas male victims generally report disturbed adult sexual functioning. Moreover, women have greater chances of victimization and evaluate their partners negatively more than men do (Arata&Lindman, 2002; Kalichman, Gore-Felton, Benotsch, Cage, & Rompa, 2004). The present study validates these facts by analyzing data concerning both, professional counselors and survivors of sexual abuse.

Additionally, results of the interviews of professionals show that chances of developing psychological disorders are significantly high. The findings of the previous researches also reflected that survivors of childhood abuse showed psychotic symptoms, symptoms of paranoia, generalized anxiety, obsession, compulsions, and somatization (Harter & Taylor, 2000). These findings supported the notion of Rostami et al. (2014) that says that the experience of any form of childhood abuse leads to psychological problems in adult romantic relationships.

Moreover, the study also revealed that the victims of childhood abuse continue to feel insecure and so avoid disclosing their past experiences even in later stages of life. They cannot share their feelings even with their partner as well. Male generally fear sharing their experience of all the other forms of abuse except sexual abuse. On the other hand, women may share other forms of childhood abuse except sexual abuse. The study also explored general relevant perceptions, according to which, women are more stigmatized if they are sexually abused. Contrarily, men are more stigmatized if they report emotional abuse and neglect, and severe sexual abuse. So, disclosure is still a problem in case of sexual abuse. They avoid disclosing their experiences because of their fear of losing their partner, and the fear of embarrassment at family and in society. These findings support the previous studies (Berliner & Conte, 1995; Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, & Jones, 2003; Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001)

Limitations of the Study

The study has the following limitations. First, the researcher aimed only at the exploration of childhood experiences of abuse and its role in intimate relationships; therefore, the complex nature of childhood abuse and co-occurrence of its more than one type made it difficult to link the abuse with specific marital issue. Second, since the study applies Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the researcher relied only on the perceptions and understanding of the participants and their understanding. Third, because of its exploratory nature, the study did not touch to determine variability in childhood abuse experience. Finally, the study included samples only from either partner from every couple. Inclusion of samples from both of the partners would have broadened the scope of the study.

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