Meaning and Interpretations of Child Abuse by Abuser Parents: A Qualitative Study

Nahid Heidari [a], Hossein Afrasiabi [a*] iD, Seyed Reza Javadian[a] iD

[a] Department of Social Sciences, Yazd University, Yazd, Iran.

A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Background: Child abuse has destructive consequences for the abused and the abuser which can launch a cycle of inter-generational violence. Our aim was to understand the constructions of child abuse by adult parents.

Methods: The research was carried with generic (basic) qualitative research method. Participants included 12 adults who abused their children during the recent year (2020) at Yazd City. The adult participants were selected by snowball-purposeful sampling. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed with grounded theory analysis method.

Results: After analyzing transcribes, 6 main categories were constructed: abuse transmission, suffered self, normative violence, relationship problems, institutional inefficiency and pressured family. Life world of harassment emerged as the core category.

Conclusion: The findings presented the cycle of abuse created through learning and transmitting.

Key words: Child abuse, Child neglect, Family, Violence, Parent.

Introduction

Each year, millions of referrals for child abuse and neglect are received around the world involving millions of children neglected or abused physically, emotionally or sexually. One in every 4 children is the victim of violence around the world (WHO, 2017). According to the definition of the World Health Organization (WHO), child abuse is the harm or threat to the physical and mental health or well-being of a child at the hands of the parents or those responsible for them. (Aghabiglouiet al., 2001). Maltreatment in childhood can lead to more aggressive behavior in adulthood. There's no precise statistic about child abuse. Child abuse cases aren't reported for different reasons including lack of appropriate statistics system, weakness of child abused protection rules, the probability of family problems due to revealing the secret, fear of abuser and re-victimization (Naghavi al., 2012). Actually some cases of child abuse were considered normative. Usually children who are abused hide their problems due to the fear of repeated maltreatment by the abusers (Behbudi, 2006).

Child abuse and neglect is well established as an important societal concern with significant ramifications for the affected children, their families, and society at large. Childhood abuse and neglect have profound and often lasting impacts on psychological and physical health, neurobiological development, relational skills, and risk behaviors. Child abuse and neglect is not just a social problem. It is also a serious public health issue (IOM & NRC, 2013). Researchers have found that child abuse and neglect affects not only childhood but also the adulthood (IOM & NRC, 2013). Its effects cascade throughout the life course, with costly consequences for individuals, families, and society. These effects are seen in all aspects of human functioning, including physical and mental health, as well as important areas such as education, work, and social relationships (Ibid).

Although there has been a lot of discussion in the Iranian media about child abuse, limited scientific studies have been conducted. Researches about child abuse and neglect in Iran (Shokrniaal., 2017, Arab Golet al., 2016, Vaezi, 2016, Mohammad Naslet al., 2015, Asadollahiet al., 2015) focused on violence in the family, normative attitude toward child abuse (Shokret al., 2017) importance of parenting skills(Arab Golet al., 2016)parental depression and mental disorders (Vaezi,2016),abused parents in childhood (Mohammad Naslet al., 2015), abnormal personality and accepting of the child abuse as a way to train a child and low levels of education and poverty(Asadollahiet al., 2015).

Theoretical models of child abuse have become more developed during recent decades (Belsky, 1993; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Cicchetti & Toth, 1998; Cicchetti & Valentino, 2006), and the number of studies on child abuse has increased. Child abuse and neglect risk factors can be organized into individual-, family-, and contextual-level factors. Contextual factors represent the broader social systems that influence parental functioning, including macro system factors which represent the social or cultural forces contributing to and sustaining abuse or neglect (IOM & ORC, 2013).Individual-level risk factors for child abuse and neglect include a history of child abuse and neglect, or inter-generational transmission, early childbearing, and parental psychopathology. Family-level risk factors include family structure, poor parenting, intimate partner violence, and social isolation. From a macro point of view, the social context within which the family lives may influence the likelihood of child neglect or abuse. Several studies have examined the extent to which aspects of the broader social system (e.g., neighborhood characteristics, poverty, unemployment, and low socioeconomic status) are related to a parent's risk for becoming abusive or neglectful. Social attitudes, such as attitudes toward violence, or beliefs about discipline and corporal punishment, have been examined as risk factors for child abuse and neglect (Bower-

Russaet al., 2001). One of the assumptions of ecological perspective on child abuse and neglect is that society's willingness to accept elevated levels of violence establishes precedence for family violence, such as physical child abuse (Belsky, 1980; Gelles, 1997). Norms within an individual's peer group and community can contribute to the likelihood that violence will be viewed as an acceptable solution to difficulties within the family (Straus et al.., 1980).

Most researches have examined abused children. Mainly, knowing the abusive adults reveals a new insight into this phenomenon. Wherever child abuse occurs, there is also an abuser. Child abuse is mostly performed by adults. Likewise, it is necessary to understand child abuse and neglect from the viewpoint of abuser adults to fully comprehend both this phenomenon and the abusers' grasp of the matter. Therefore, these questions were proposed: What is the meaning of child abuse for adults? How do they understand the maltreatments by child? And what do they think about contributing to child abuse?

Methods

This qualitative study was conducted using basic (generic) qualitative research method. Qualitative researchers who conduct basic qualitative study are interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016: 24). The study purpose was to understand how adults interpret their experience of child abuse and maltreatment. The questions included: Describe your experience from your childhood? How can

someone who hurts a child be corrected? Name the authorities involved in child abuse and how do you get help from them? What do you think about punishing children?

We used semi-structured interviews for data collection. Some questions of the interview were made during the interview process. However, the main framework of the interview included questions about 'experiences and beliefs, emotions and feelings regarding child abuse. The interviews were conducted in the institutes by the psychologist and his assistant who found the cases and interviewed the parents with a history of child abuse. The interview with each of the participants was conducted individually during 45 to 70 minutes, with the consent of participants and in assistant room in both institutes. The sampling process was continued until data saturation was reached. Totally, the study included 12 adults who had experienced child abuse. Actually, other criteria for participating in this study were individual's willingness to interview and collaborate on this study and also having a file at the counseling clinic for child abuse.

Participants in the evaluation were 12 adult parents who abused their child. Interviews were conducted in person. Samples were acquired by referring to "Work and Street Children" institute and "Peyvand" clinics in Yazd. Participants were 12 peopleincluding8 women and4men who were selected by purposeful sampling methods. They were 26-47 years old. Their level of education ranged from elementary to Master's. Most of the women were housewives. The men were worker, teacher, tailor and freelancer. Informed consent was obtained before the interview.

Table1. Participant Characteristics							
Number	Gender	Age	Job	Number	Gender	Age	Job
1	Female	35	Housewife	7	Female	27	Housewife
2	Female	29	Housewife	8	Female	38	Housewife
3	Female	26	Housewife	9	Female	39	Housewife
4	Male	33	Worker	10	Female	40	Housewife
5	Female	45	Housewife	11	Male	42	Freelancer
6	Male	28	Teacher	12	Male	47	Tailor

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed with grounded theory coding (Charmaz, 2006)process. Through the process, the transcribed interviews were conceptualized and reintegrated into main categories. In coding, data were divided into concepts and categories. After several reviews, initial codes, were categorized based on similarities.

Dealing with the data for a long time ensures the credibility of the data. Increment in quality and quantity of data was possible through continuous mental engagement with data. Furthermore, the supervisory review process was used.

Master's thesis in social work, department of social sciences at Yazd University, code 1232.

Results

During coding, 250initial concepts were constructed which merged into 6 main categories. Finally, The life-world of harassment emerged as the core category.

Table 2.The constructed concepts and categories	
Categories	Abused in childhood, mutual maltreatment, abuser father, abuser mother, Abuser sister and brothers
Abuse Transmission	Mental disorders, stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, accusation
Suffered Self	Right for punishment, violence acceptance, learning from relative adults
Normative Violence	Loss of communication skills, social exclusion
Relationship Problems	Unsupportive laws, social carelessness, lack of social support
Institutional inefficiency	Poverty of the family, divorce in family, violence between parents, addicted Parents, living in margin neighbors
Pressured Family	Abused in childhood, mutual maltreatment, abuser father, abuser mother, Abuser sisters and brothers

Abuse Transmission

Abuse Transmission means that violence and abuse has become a cycle among participants and their families. Children have learned it from adults and repeated it in their own adulthood. This cycle has created inter-generational violence. However, this concept has another dimension which can be called the horizontal cycle of harassment. In this way, the father is angry with the mother at home, so the mother transmits the emotions and negative pressures of marital problems to her children with harassment, abuse and punishment. Consequently, the children have become aggressive towards their siblings and peers. In fact, this process continues until the abused, becomes an abuser. In other words, the person transmits the violence complexes to the weaker members of the family like virus. In general, abusive caregivers cultivate subconsciously the violent and abusive morality in their children. Anger in the family is like a chain which leads each member to the decline of emotions.

Participant No. 1had modeled and reproduced child abuse in this way:

"I remember my childhood with my sister at home. We played together. Gradually I started abusing her. I put a hot spoon on her hands for messing up the house, the same as what my parents did to me."

Participant No. 9 with an abusive mother says:

"My children beat each other. I object to them. They tell me: "We do the same as you did. when we were children, You beat us a lot." Unfortunately, I can't control them because they learned it from me."

Therefore, controlling the violence cycle is difficult if it runs in a family or society. Actually, it is transmitted from one person and also one generation to another. In fact, child abuse spreads among family members like virus.

Suffered Self

The experience of violence is largely the consequence of the suffered self's abused and neglected personality. In other words, the abuser avoids his own negative and unpleasant experience

more than anyone. The adults, who abuse children, don't have a positive self-image. In fact, the abusers were treated improperly. They experienced ignorance, indifference, humiliation and blame by caregivers and the people around them. As a result, they felt insecure and worthless due to neglectful and abusive behaviors. There were cases of suicide attempts among the participants' families because of low self-esteem.

Participant No. 8 describes her distressing condition:

"I 'mentally weak, depressed, sad and aimless. I try to keep myself happy but it's not possible. If someone praises me, I can't believe it. My family especially my mother always belittles and ignores me so I can't be satisfied with myself for my successes. In my opinion, these are the effects of punishment during my childhood."

Participant No. 5 describes her feelings among her family during her childhood:

"All the members of my family abused me in childhood, especially my brothers. I felt anxious among them. For example, when I bought a dress, they made fun of my taste. If I spoke, I would be beaten. Even now, they don't let me express my opinion though I am an adult. I feel inferior!"

Normative Violence

Participants consider beating and child abusing as a major upbringing tool and increase or decrease its extent based on their own taste! The point to consider is that participants don't take into account the amount and number of child punishment. One of the fathers believes that punishment is permissible to the extent that his child obeys him. The role of beliefs has been considered because some punishments have been taken shaped during the upbringing of the children. In fact, the participants acquitted themselves of their duty with lame justifications. They believe child beating and punishment is the inseparable part of upbringing. They think children are forgetful and overlook the harassments in their childhood. Sometimes, participants denied their child abuse.

Participant No. 12 has a daughter. He believes:

"The children have been beaten from ancient times and they grew up. I was beaten in childhood and I'm still alive. Now I'm a father and beat my daughter. Actually she doesn't die by a slap and kick. I beat her, then I make up with her and buy her a present. So she forgets. Furthermore, my daughter perceives the advantage of beating in future."

Participant No. 3expresses her sorrow at her violence against her children:

"When I beat my children, I feel awful. I cry while they sleep and reproach myself. Regret is useless; my children slept while they were angry with me. I joke with them, buy them junk foods for them to forget and forgive me. I wish I could control myself."

Relationship Problems

Family members sometimes ignore and pay no attention to each other. For example, a father who limits social relations with his family and doesn't allow interaction with others, ignores the needs of his family for social relation. The child suffers the most from the family neglect. The family is identified by constant attention among members. The family may face various challenges due to neglect over coming these challenges is a difficult task for everyone. Children are the first victims of neglect and limited communication who may face problems such as sexual assault and fear of expressing their problems to caregivers. Neglect in the family endanger all the family members and easily destroys their lives.

Participant No. 7 talks about imprisonment at home by her husband:

"Imprisonment at home makes me angry and bad-tempered. My husband doesn't let us go out on Fridays. I'm depressed. I miss my mother. Even he doesn't allow us to visit our relatives on holidays. My children cry. He forces us to be at home and not communicate with anyone. "

Participant No. 9 describes her memories and limitations in childhood:

"I treat my children the way my mother did in my childhood. I remember my mother imprisoned

me and my sister at home and went shopping. We couldn't go to the bathroom in the yard. My mother and brothers went to the parties but we were imprisoned. We were locked in a room when we had guests. My brothers didn't want us to accompany them."

Institutional inefficiency

Participants believe that child protection laws aren't observed efficiently in society. Participants told different stories about parents' violence which was easily resolved. They have seen terrible violence against children around themselves. Though they informed social emergency services, no special care has been taken. In addition, participants' ignorance of child protection laws has prevented them from taking appropriate actions. Some participants believe that there are different definitions of child abuse; but there is no effective mechanism for dealing with this subject.

Participant No. 2's opinion about children's right:

"I have no information about laws which can protect children against parents at home. If there is a law, they should inform us. Actually I don't think and even hear anything about child protection laws. My husband believes that child belongs to his/her parents and their actions train the child not harasses him/her. Families consider themselves as the owners of the children due to the lack of child protection law in the society."

Participant No. 11 an abusive father who was known to be responsible for his daughter's suicide, comments on child protection laws:

"I'm a father; I know better than my child. I don't think one day someone will tell me that my behavior towards my child was wrong. Of course, I'm her/his father and it's better than any law. Maybe, he/she doesn't understand the advantage of beating now; but when he/she grows older, he/she appreciates me for being such a good father, and preventing him/her from choose wrong. Nobody can train him/her as well as I do."

Pressured Family

Unemployment, addiction and poverty are mentioned by our participants as the most important factors for pressure on family. Parents, who experienced living with an addict, were involved in a tumultuous condition; the roles were changed inevitably. For example, as the father became addicted, the family's income decreased gradually. The father couldn't work, so the mother or the children had to work for a living. all the participants with addicted families have touching stories which indicated families collapse.

Participant No. 1 tells about her addicted husband and her problems:

"We don't have money. My children become miserable because of us. My husband is addicted and unemployed. I do my housework; take care of my children, work in the hotel and our financial situation isn't good."

Participant No. 10 expresses his husband's addiction problems:

"My husband is always at home. If he works, he buys drugs for himself. They kicked us out of the house and we rented a room. He beats me a lot. I wanted a divorce but my family didn't support me.I suffered a lot in my life. When I had children, my family didn't let me get a divorce. They said I must keep on living for my children even if he kills me. I have nowhere to go, no money to live, and no family to support."

Discussion

The results showed that, a world full of harassment will be created in which family members become either violent or victims of violence. During the interviews with the abuser adults, we have found that they themselves have been victims of bullying in their childhood, and their treatments with their own children are rooted in their own upbringing and experience of childhood. This indicated the cycle and transmission of harassment throughout the people's lives. Of course, some problems have been caused unintentionally following the issues such as cultural poverty, Lack of knowledge necessary for

parenting and addiction which makes the participants to involuntarily put their children in the midst of these problems; ignore their basic needs and even force them to work to maintain the foundation of the family while they are unaware of the harmful effects of their actions on the future of the child, the family and even the society. As explained by ecological perspective, social acceptance of violence establishes precedence for family violence, such as physical child abuse (Belsky, 1980; Gelles, 1997).

The life-world of harassment; as a final category, reflects the adults' experience and understanding of child abuse. It refers to a world in which people are forced to become either violent or victims of violence. It shows that it is their life in a world that has forced them to be caught in a chain of harassment. It can be said that the people of this world have subconsciously chosen their defense mechanism from the world of chaos which is full of anger and resentment. In fact, the learned violence accompanied with a mentality of the same violence, has not only been erased, but also is the reason for a sense of revenge from childhood, loneliness and defenselessness against the harms and unkindness which made them become an avenger. The participants, either being violent or victim of violence are imprisoned in a world which has trapped them. Norms within an individual's community can contribute to the likelihood of violence being viewed as an acceptable solution to difficulties within the family (Straus et al.., 1980).Along with Khanjariet al.. (2017), we have explained the communication neglect and various problems caused by it in our research. Likewise, the results from the study by Mohammad Naslet al. (2015) are in line with the main category of our research; transmission of harassment, as well as the beliefs regarding the child abuse, which was an excuse to justify violence. The result from the study by Asadollahiet al. (2015) also agrees with the current study in terms of ignorance, poverty and the weakness of parenting.

One of the long-term consequences of child maltreatment is the increased risk of generational violence. In other words, violence is a learned behavior which passes on to children through parents. Almost all participants considered their violent personality in adulthood, as a result of experiencing such abusive behaviors in their own childhood, and believed that it was the period of loneliness and harm which made them look like the violent people around them. As a result, they have become creatures without tolerance or understanding in times of anger who have found it difficult to control themselves.

As other studies confirm, the harmful effects of child abuse are not limited to the childhood but, the violence in the childhood entails multiple social and emotional problems in adulthood (Zaerilotf, 2009). Those who are punished, not only become more aggressive in their adulthood, but also use beating as a tool for parenting. Children who are abused hide their problems or refuse from expressing them due to the fear of repeated harassment by the abusers (Behbudi, 2006). According to the results (Ghomashchi, 2006: 9), it can be said that unemployment, poverty, addiction, failed marriages and divorce are among the main reasons of child abuse and the phenomenon is more common among the poor families. In order to evaluate cultural issues and their impact on child abuse, one can refer to the findings about the impact of cultural issues on parenting methods and also definitions of child abuse provided by Ferrari (2002). During his study, Ferrari has found that the history of child abuse could be the predictor of physical and verbal abuse of mothers, but not fathers. He has also denoted that, ethnicity, as a demographic variable, continues to be an important predictor of all parental behaviors and attitudes, and also controller of cultural factors.

Conclusion

In order to prevent child abuse, we must firstly identify the harmful cycles of abuse within the family and lead the society towards taking the responsibility for their actions through training and awareness towards recognition of violent behavior's justifications and its denial by adults.

There were some limitations during data collection and interviews. Parents hardly accepted to talk about their situation and beliefs on the subject under study. It was not easy for them to talk easily about their abused and abusive experiences.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest for data and no funding was received.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to all parents who accepted and participated in the interviews.

Authors' Contribution

Methodology (H.A. & N. H.& R.J), Data gathering (N.H), writing original draft (N.H.), analysis (H.A. & N.H.& R.J), supervision (H.A).

References

Aghabakhshi, H., Harirchi, M. &Jangravi, F. (2005). A survey on mothers knowledge Attitude and practice about child abuse, Journal of Social work, 5(3): (76-85).

Arabgol, F.,Derakhshanpour, F.,Gonahi, L. (2016)."The effect of parenting skills training on the general health of child Abuser mothers." Scientific Journal of Gorgan Medical Sciences University, 18 (1): 51-71.

AsadAlahi, A., Baratvand, M. (2005). STUDY OF RELATION BETWEEN CHILD ABUSE BY PARENTS AND WICKEDNESS OF THEIR CHILD and the Criminal Model of wickedness in Abused Children (Case Study: wicked Criminals in Khuzestan Province Prisons)", *Social Welfare Quarterly*, 5(19), 225-252

Behbudi, H. (2006). "Child Abuse", *Exceptional Education Journal*. 6:1-4.

Belsky, J. (1980). Child maltreatment: An ecological integration. *American Psychologist* 35(4):320-335.

Belsky, J. (1993). Etiology of child maltreatment: A developmental-ecological analysis. *Psychological Bulletin* 114(3):413-434.

Bower-Russa, M. E., Knutson, J. F. &Winebarger, A.(2001). Disciplinary history, adult disciplinary attitudes, and risk for abusive parenting. *Journal of Community Psychology* 29(3):219-240.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis, S*age.

Cicchetti, D., Valentino, K.(2006). An ecological transactional perspective on child maltreatment: Failure of the average expectable environment and its influence upon child development. In *Developmental psychopathology: Risk, disorder, and adaptation*. 2nd ed. Vol. 3, edited by D. Cicchetti and D. J. Cohen. New York, NY: Wiley. Pp. 129-201.

Cicchetti, D., Lynch, M.(1993).Towards an ecological/transactional model of community violence and child maltreatment: Consequences for children's development. *Psychiatry-Interpersonal and Biological Processes* 56(1): 96-118.

Cicchetti, D., Toth, S. L. (1998).Perspectives on research and practice in developmental psychopathology. In *Handbook of child psychology, 5th ed. Vol 4: Child psychology in practice*, edited by W. Damon, I. E. Sigel and K. A. Renninger. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Inc. Pp. 479-583.

Garosi, B., Safizadeh, H., TajDini, R. (2005). "Assessing the level of awareness of interns in Kerman University of Medical Sciences about child abuse", Center of Study and Development of Medical Education Journal (2)2, 109-115.

Gelles, R. J. (1997). *Intimate violence in families*. Third ed. Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications.

Ghomashchi, F. (2006)."Child abuse". Tehran: Social Affairs and Guidance of NAJA Publications.

IOM (Institute of Medicine) & NRC (National Research Council) (2013).*New Directions in child abuse and neglect research.*Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.www.iom. edu

Jangravi, F. (2005).*study the knowledge of attitude & behaviors of motherstowardss child abuse in kindergartens of Tehran in 2004* ", M.A thesis in Social Welfare in Rehabilitation Sciences University.

Kaplan, H,.Salouk, B. (2002). Psychiatry Summary, translated by Abbas Rafiei, Volume 2, Tehran: Arjmand Publications.

Khanjari, S., Modber, M., Rahmati, M. &Haqani, H. (2016)."The effect of sexual abuse prevention training program on the awareness, attitude and performance of parents of school-age children", *Iranian Nursing Journal*. 29(104): 17-27.

Mahdavi, M., & Moazami, S.(2009), "Children and Adolescents at Risk (A Case Study of Risk Factors for Delinquency in Adolescents in Tehran)" Faculty of Law and Political Science, Tehran University.

Merriam, S. & Tisdell, E. (2016).Qualitative Research. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mohammad Nasl, G,. Mohammad Nasl, Z. (2015)."Investigating the Causes of the Formation of the Child Abuse Cycle with Emphasis on Expert Opinion." Women's Police Studies Quarterly, 9 (22): 22-6.

Mousavi, A. S. (2009). Applied family therapy with systemic approach.*Tehran. Al-Zahra University Press, Women's Research Center*..

Naghavi, A., Fatehizadeh, M., A'bedi, M. (2006) "Study of the Consequences of Child Abuse on the Personality of Adolescent Girls", Women's Research. Volume 2, Number 3, (187-221).

Payne, M. (2012). New Theory of Social Work, translated by Talat Alahyari and Akbar BakhshiNia, Tehran: Danjeh Publications.

Sanaei, B. (1996). Introduction to Family and Family Therapy, Tehran: Safir Publications.

Schultz, S. A., & Schultz, D. (2015).Personality theories. Translated by Yahya Seyed Mohammadi. *Tehran: Editing Publications*, 90-105.Shabnam, S. M. (2018).*Review of the report of the World Health Organization on the prevalence of physical abuse of children in the world.*

Shokrnia, Z. (2017). Analyzing Economic Issues in Changing Women's Thinking Styles Towards Child Abuse, second *National Conference on Psychology and Counseling with Emphasis on Quality of Life*, Isfahan: 10-14.

Straus, M. A., Gelles, R. J., & Steinmetz, S. K. (1980). Behind closed doors: Violence in the American family. Garden City.*NY: Doubleday.*.

Talebi, L. (2014). A Study of Social Ways to Prevent Child Abuse by Parents and Relatives, Master's Thesis. Islamic Azad University, Alborz Science and Research Branch.

Vaezi, K. (2016) "Children Experience Which Lived about Domestic Violence", Journal of Counseling Research.58: 114-131.

ZaeriLotf, H. (2009). *Study of Factors Affecting Physical Child Abuse with Emphasis on Parents*, Master's Thesis in Social Work. Allameh Tabatabai University.