

An Explanation of the Psycho-Social Factors Driving Child Sexual Perpetrators Towards Sexual Abuse in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstract

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a severe global child rights issue. This native research finding is the first of its kind and will explore the persuading factors and pave the way for future research exploration. The study explores the psychosocial factors driving perpetrators to commit child sexual abuse. The integrated theory of sexual offending by Ward and Beech 2002 guided the research. This study used a phenomenological qualitative methodology and purposive sampling to select participants. Twenty-five child sexual perpetrators were interviewed in a private room at central jail, Peshawar, after receiving formal approval from jail authorities and verbal consent from the participants. They were allowed to withdraw from the interview at any time. Data collection involved 60 to 80-minute in-depth interviews guided by a structured protocol. Ethical standards, including verbal informed consent and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. NVIVO software was used for thematic analysis. The analysis revealed a myriad of psychosocial factors influencing perpetrators, such as childhood victimization, substance abuse, cognitive distortions, notions of masculinity, delayed marriage, sexual gratification, social isolation, and exposure to pornography. Perpetrators are often familiar faces within the child's and family's proximity, typically with no prior convictions and mostly first-time offenders. The study highlights the complex interplay of psychosocial factors that drive perpetrators to child sexual abuse.

Keywords: Child Sexual Perpetrator, Child Sexual Offender, Shame and Guilt, Qualitative Research, Central Jail Peshawar.

Introduction

Research has shown that individuals who commit child sexual abuse (CSA) represent a varied demographic (Farmer et al., 2016). They may be male or female, affluent or economically disadvantaged, religious or non-religious, adults or minors, educated or illiterate, employed or unemployed, and married or single individuals (Sanderson, 2006). Victimization can happen in a variety of ways. Some criminals resort to threats, but many others use grooming, which is a non-violent method of securing cooperation. As indicated by Kuhl et al. (2014), grooming denotes the systematic process by which an individual prepares a child, along with significant individuals in their life and the surrounding environment, for the perpetration of child abuse. An individual convicted of perpetrating a sexual offense against a minor is categorized as a child sex offender (CSO) (Browne et al., 2018). According to earlier research, most of the offenders appear to be male (Dube et al., 2005; Snyder, 2000), and the majority of them

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committed their first CSA case before the age of thirty to thirty-five (Douglas & Finkelhor, 2005; Snyder, 2000). Scholars argue that there is a significant underreporting and under-detection of female-perpetrated sexual abuse, with actual rates exceeding those reported in official statistics (Darling et al., 2018). Estimations regarding the occurrence of female offenders in cases of child sexual abuse indicate that 15-20% of occurrences involve female perpetrators (McLeod, 2015).

Male offenders' samples have dominated the literature on sexual offending and the policies that follow. It could also result from the stereotype that male offenders sexually abuse women or children in sexual crime portrayals (Vandiver & Walker, 2002).

Pakistan also attributes child labor, poverty, poor levels of education, and a weak rule of law, considering the widespread occurrence of child sexual abuse (Frederick, 2010). The domain of protecting children is a recent development in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (Pulla et al., 2018). The escalating prevalence of sexual exploitation in Pakistan is a matter of concern. Two particularly notable and extensively scrutinized cases of sexual abuse on a global scale within the country include the Layyah gang rape incident of 2014 and the Zainab Ansari rape case of 2018 raised concerns about sexual exploitation and its growing prevalence in Pakistan.

The constitution ensures children's rights, yet the issue persists due to stigma, a lack of knowledge, infrastructure for human development, and the sensitive developmental stage of children (Granich et al., 2023). According to the most recent edition of the annual report "cruel numbers 2023" released by 'Sahil' a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), with the assistance of the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), there were 11 cases of child abuse daily throughout the year 2023. The perpetrators predominantly comprised familiarity and relatives, perpetrating these atrocious acts (Shahid, 2024). Furthermore, a total of 51 children fell victim to sexual abuse by neighbors, 17 by teachers, 15 by religious instructors, eight by store owners, two by drivers, and one by a school security guard (Sahil, 2023).

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology is justified to deeply explore the complex, subjective experiences and psychosocial factors driving child sexual abuse perpetrators in Pakistan. It offers rich, nuanced data through interviews, uncovering motivations and behaviors that quantitative methods may overlook. This approach is essential for understanding the underlying dynamics in a culturally specific context like Pakistan.

Research Design and Process

This exploratory qualitative study utilized in-depth, semi-structured interviews with child sexual offenders, employing a phenomenological approach to understand their experiences and the factors influencing their criminal behavior. This method prioritized natural meanings over predefined definitions (Berg & Lune, 2017; Wertz, 2005).

Semi-structured interviews, a widely used qualitative research technique (Willig, 2013), were chosen to ensure data consistency (Babbie, 2020). Face-to-face interviews were conducted to evaluate and generate rich qualitative data (Bryman, 2007).

Study Setting and Population

The research was conducted in Peshawar's central jail, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, with permission from the Inspector General of prisons to interview 25 convicted child sexual offenders. The semi-structured protocol explored psychosocial dimensions, childhood backgrounds, and factors leading to abuse. The study's objectives and participants' rights, including the right to withdraw at any time, were explained. Privacy and confidentiality were assured, and verbal consent was obtained. Interviews took place in a private room provided by the jail. Participants expressed concern about the interview's impact on their cases but were reassured that the study

was exploratory and would not affect their legal situation. They were encouraged to respond honestly and seek clarification if needed.

Interview Guide and Preparation: An interview protocol with open-ended questions was developed following Smith and Osborn's standards (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Probes such as "when," "who else," "where," and "what" were used to deepen responses and clarify language (Klenke, 2016). The interviewer maintained impartiality, using nodding and showing interest to encourage detailed responses (Turner III & Hagstrom-Schmidt, 2022).

Interviewing Child Sexual Perpetrator: Interviewing child sexual perpetrators requires a unique approach. Open-ended questions were designed to elicit detailed responses (Lodico et al., 2010).

Purposive Sampling: The researcher used purposive sampling, selecting participants likely to provide insightful data (Oliver, 2010). This method was deemed suitable for the exploratory nature of the study.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the integrated theory of sexual offending (ITSO) by Ward and Beech 2002.

Background Characteristics of the Study Participants (Child Sexual Perpetrators - CSP)

This paragraph provides a detailed overview of the background characteristics of 25 male child sexual perpetrators (CSPs) involved in the study. Participants' ages range from 18 to 37 years, ranging from young to middle-aged adults. Educational levels vary significantly, from primary education to graduation, reflecting diverse cognitive and social backgrounds.

Occupationally, the CSPs are engaged in various forms of employment, including shopkeepers, laborers, farmers, drivers, and private job holders. Some work in specific local businesses like ringtone shops and mechanic shops. This diversity suggests a range of socioeconomic statuses, offering insight into the economic conditions potentially intersecting with criminal behaviors. Marital status also varies; while many are unmarried, a significant number are married, indicating that marital status does not necessarily correlate with the propensity to commit such crimes.

The relationship between perpetrators and victims includes neighbors, relatives, village members, and outsiders, highlighting that abuse often occurs within pre-existing relationships. Notably, none of the participants have prior convictions, emphasizing the difficulty in identifying potential perpetrators before they offend.

Results Presentation

Persuading Psychosocial Factors

The findings suggest that the criminal personalities of sexual offenders are influenced by the psychosocial conditions and life experiences they have had. The content analysis of the testimonies of child sexual offenders in this study produced different groups of answers to questions about motive. These groups broadly corresponded with response classifications found by earlier researchers. Notably, the conclusion that the principal motivation for child sexual perpetrators was often sexual fulfillment is consistent with the findings of (Ward et al., 1993; Phelan, 1995).

Various situations and environmental factors contribute to pathways leading to CSA offending, as social and institutional cultures impact child protection levels and the likelihood of CSA incidents (Smallbone et al., 2008). For instance, in contrast to other categories of offenses, there seem to be two distinct phases linked to an increased vulnerability to child sexual abuse: adolescence and the mid-to-late 30s (Hanson, 2002). According to this study findings CSP 02/07/11/13/14/17/20/21/23/25 have mentioned "gratification of sexual urges was one of the

common reason. We have a trend towards late marriages on one side, added with poverty double the challenges. Children are the easiest target”.

Similarly, this study validates that a familiar face is one of the common reason. Furthermore, the study findings explored that a higher proportion of child perpetrators stated that they committed their crimes in an effort to relieve themselves of uncomfortable emotions like tension or worry.

Numerous individuals convicted of CSA disclose that they committed their initial offenses amid episodes of depression, anxiety, and stress (Williams et al., 2019). Prior studies of (Hartley 2000; Ward et al., 1993), demonstrates that familiarity is a one of the common reason in cases of child sexual abuse.

This study finding are in align with the above notions, as stated by CSP-21 discoursed;

We have a local friends gathering point where drugs use, cards, movies, cooking, mobile pornographic materials were the common environment. We discussed young children colour complexion and fantasize the pornographic visuals. My friend paid some cash to the nearby young child and bring him to our gathering spot. All the group members go individually and sexually abuse a child. We have a friend's circle, a bondage and unity.

According to meta-analysis by Hanson and Morton-Bourgon (2004), several risk factors significantly correlate with sexual recidivism. These include sexual preoccupation, deviant sexual proclivities, impulsivity, hostility, emotional affinity with children, and a deficit in adult intimacy. The findings elaborate that one of the common cause to target children because of the late marriage, socio cultural influences towards sexual needs unmet, challenges in female relations or legal marriage option.

Another social-psychological phenomenon frequently linked to perpetrator involvement in multiple-perpetrator sexual assault is deindividuation (Harkins & Dixon, 2010). This tendency is heightened in situations where individuals feel less accountable, experience anonymity or are influenced by substances like drugs or alcohol (Fiske, 2018).

According to a previous study Carvalho and Nobre (2019), sexual offenders exhibit higher levels of neuroticism than nonsexual offenders. Aggression, mood swings, and social anxiety are considered risk factors for sexual offenses (Kanters et al., 2016).

CSP 08 described “I turn into 27 years with multifarious challenges such as isolation, stress, anxiety and social fears. To cope with, I always do masturbation to relieve the stressors and excessive practice divert towards practical course of action”.

Similarly, another rationale presented was disarray and lack of structure within their household environments. According to the findings of researcher and available literature are consistent with the findings of this study “the majority of the participants suffered different levels of neglect, domestic violence, and emotional, physical, or sexual maltreatment. These factors are the dominant features in the emergence of sexual maladaptive behaviors”, already proved by international research findings of (Creeden, 2013; Hunter et al., 2010; Netland & Miner, 2012; Prichard et al., 2013; Worling, 1995).

Individual Versus Group Association

One of the subordinate theme emerges during the study findings, in the viewpoint of a child sexual offender 11:

I always received rejection and denied from the self-ownership, by joining a group gives me identity, desire for approval and belongingness that I am looking for. The idea that I can get what I need by associating to a violent group of people.

According to Coid et al. (2020), sex offenders associate with these groups in order to feel comforted in their lives and to know that they are not alone. According to Da Silva et al. (2018),

gang or multiple attacker rape suggests social conformity and in-group conduct that is influenced by the dynamics of the group.

Types of Child Sexual Perpetrators

The prevailing perception regarding child sexual perpetrators predominantly implicates males as the primary culprits. Variations in personality traits, attitudes, family background, socialization, motivations, and characteristics exist among these individuals. This study clarifies that perpetrators come from diverse family settings, and a subset of them may possess education, employment, alternative sources of income, and active social lives, thus not conforming to the stereotypical image of perpetrator as an individual's facing mental health challenges. The global phenomenon and research study explored that child sexual perpetrators consist of three types.

Fixed or Persistent Perpetrator

There were individuals who fall under the category of fixed or persistent perpetrators who show a persistent sexual attraction towards children or adolescents, and carried out multiple sexual offences against different children's. This group are more inclined towards a paedophilic concentration and less prospective to engage in age-appropriate sexual relationships, contrary to prevailing stereotypes.

The findings also testify this concept, a sample of child sexual perpetrators discussed their tendency and interest towards children and adolescents. CSP 02//07/13/19/21 elaborated "we always fascinated towards children and adolescent for sexual gratification. Our interest got boosted with timespan and never diverted or attracted towards another group."

Opportunistic Perpetrator

This group prefers other criminal activities, is less fixated on child abuse, and opportunistically abuses without grooming or premeditation. During the research interviews, the opportunistic perpetrators were found and expressed that our sexual preference always got change and the process of grooming were not considered that much.

The study also discovered that participants' impulsive and sensation-seeking behaviours were reflected in cases of opportunistic perpetrator. Despite their struggles to maintain positive relationships or good friendships, they have a history of being associated with violent gangs or socially unacceptable persons.

Situational Perpetrator

This category lacks a specific sexual preference for children or adolescents, showing arousal patterns similar to non-offenders. Their actions often arise from social isolation, lack of positive adult relationships, or low self-esteem. Risk factors include adverse childhood experiences like abuse and neglect, interpersonal difficulties, distorted beliefs about harm, and external influences such as stress, substance abuse, and mental health issues.

Aligned with this categorization, the research findings support with the profile of situational perpetrators, revealing that a major share of child sexual perpetrators have endured harsh backgrounds characterized by experiences of physical and sexual abuse, social isolation, and a lack of positive familial and social connections. Additionally, the incidence of substance abuses and mental health concerns is evident in the backgrounds of situational perpetrators.

Power and Masculinity

One of the reasons for sexual exploitation is the desire for power. The harmful ideas of masculinity in society are fostered by the assertion of male dominance in the community for

any child who approaches them. The terms "id," "ego," and "superego" have been defined by Freud.

The moral principle is superego, the thinking principle is ego, and the id seeks pleasure. In the context of Pakistani community in general and in particular to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, male are considered as the head of the family and a masculine person to protect the family and lead the income stream. Similarly, CSP 12 explained that:

The prevailing concept of patriarchy exerts dominance over societal norms, emphasizing the preservation of supreme status and the display of masculinity through power, control, decision-making, sexuality, and reproduction. Moreover, the discussion extended to encompass the concept of child sexual abuse. To prove the masculinity, we have to qualify many stages such as physical power, reproduction, influencing and dominating a child, earning money.

The recurrent lack of self-control and hostility based on gender is explained by subordinate themes of sensation seeking and mothers' general relocation of wrath towards women (Efrati et al., 2019). Sex crime is mostly thought to be caused by poor impulse control; in addition to hormonal imbalance, this can also be the result of impulsive pleasure seeking. As demonstrated by the outcomes of the study, child sex offender's views children are weak and defenceless.

The Impact of Premature Encounters with Pornography and Sexuality

Exhibiting a spectrum of sexual behaviours, including cases of incest, one participant articulated that he was influenced by a paternal figure, engaged with pornography, eventually resorting to downloading pornographic content onto his mobile device. The explanation of CSP- 17 affirms with the above statements;

My exposure to pornographic materials was started at very early ages, I got addicted to its regular use and the categories of porn videos fascinate me, which drive me to at least try it and this started the hunt for a child.

Adolescents who encounter exposure to pornography, as well as experiences of abuse and neglect, are at an elevated risk of developing dysfunctional sexual behaviours (Hunter et al., 2010; Prichard et al., 2013).

In line with discussion, most of the perpetrator shared that sexual fantasies persuade our sexual urges. We have limited opportunities available to meet our sexual needs and to fulfil this basic needs, there is easy availability of pornography videos. According to the excerpt from CSP 21;

The easy availability of pornographic videos in the local ring tone shops on merely 50 and 100 rupees for memory card. While watching such stuff, our sexual urges got so excited and glamorize that I am in search of any human to sexually abuse them to satisfy sex needs.

Exploring Childhood Victimization

The scholarly analysis confirmation indicating a link between childhood abuse and subsequent adversities in adulthood. According the studies demonstration by (Tyler, 2002; Widom, 2001), these difficulties encompass the ability to navigate adult interpersonal relationships, substance abuse, depression, suicidal tendencies, and diverse expressions of violent conduct. Studies have unveiled a notable prevalence of childhood abuse among adults who perpetrate sexual assaults (Simons et al., 2002).

The findings explored that childhood adverse experiences have immense impact on the adult sexual perpetrators in later stage of life. Majority of child sexual perpetrators revealed that in early years of their schooling, a classmate attachment and physical touch leads towards sexual contact. These acts were going for months.

The theory of victim-to-perpetrator transformation that individuals exposed to sexual abuse during childhood may subsequently re-enact that traumatic experience as adults, perpetrating similar acts on others (Hanson & Slater, 1988; Simons et al., 2002). Studies comprising surveys and interviews conducted among incarcerated men, charged with diverse forms of sexual assault, have unveiled a notable proportion ranging from 25 to 70 percent self-disclosing experiences of childhood abuse (Simons et al., 2002).

CSP 05 extract “I never thought to be inside the bar, I was sexually abused in the age of schooling and that event change my life. The anger and revenge dominated my emotions and looking to take a revenge from another child”.

In a particular study, it was discovered that solely experiencing childhood sexual abuse did not emerge as a predictive factor for perpetrating assault against adult victims. Instead, offenders who reported both childhood sexual abuse and early exposure to pornography displayed lower levels of empathy towards child victims. Moreover, they reported perpetrating sexual abuse against a greater number of child victims (Simons et al., 2002).

The Manipulative Process and Perpetrator-Victim Relation

The literature and empirical findings disclosed that child sexual perpetrators falls under two categories:

1. Familiar face
2. Outsider face

The mainstream of child sexual abuse offenders were familiar with the victim, either in the capacity of family members or as associates and neighbours of the victim (David et al., 2018; Ullman, 2007). The more alarming truth stated that the offenders are frequently from the closest environment, which might be a child's family, school, or neighbourhood (Noviana, 2015).

CSP Excerpt 01/04/08/09/12/16/22;

We are acquainted with the families of victims through our neighbouring community. The local lifestyle fosters ongoing connections through various events such as weddings, funerals, caregiving, provision of household groceries, schooling, and gatherings at the hujra, ensuring a continuous flow of meetings and communication.

Intra-familial perpetrator have been associated with more severe CSA than that committed by friends or outsiders, and they are also associated with more interaction familiarities, an former start, an extended time, and greater health effects (Mohler-Kuo et al., 2014; MR & Cantón-Cortés, 2011). In this context, excerpt verbatim from CSP 10 shared:

The victim child is my cousin, we have a routine meetup, visiting each other abode, playing games. My sexual urges looking for sexual stuff which is not available in any shape. The instinct drive to involved with cousin, which started with sex topics discussion, gently change into body touching and genital exposure.

Similarly, there are few young perpetrators who have no familiarity with victim child and family. They applied the process of outsider rapport building, greetings and gifting chocolates to gain the trust. In the next step, they take a child in outside skirts like under construction spot. Criminal tends to occur in environments where the threat of getting caught is least and the struggle required is minimum. Pragmatic research indicates that, similar to individuals engaging in other types of criminal behaviour, adult offenders of CSA engage in logical decision-making throughout the commission of the offense (Harris et al., 2009; Lussier & Healey, 2009).

Shame and Guilt in Child Sexual Perpetrator

Shame is a self-centred, egotistical, and self-involved emotion. When someone is experiencing shame, they are considerably more worried about how their violation will affect them personally than it is about other people (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). It has been suggested that sex offenders experience elevated levels of shame, primarily stemming from the perceived societal condemnation of sexual offenses by the majority (Scheff & Retzinger, 1997).

This notion has been validated in the findings;

Excerpt from majority of perpetrators unveiled that in fact during the preparatory stage of commencing this act, an element of fear added with shame and guilt dominate the feelings. After committing the sexual abuse, we were heavily loaded with feeling of shame and guilt for ourselves and the family left at home.

The study conceded intriguing findings of relevance has been cited as corroborating evidence for escalated levels of shame among sex offenders (Gudjonsson, 2006). Furthermore, CSP 15 illustrated “After perpetrating the child, I felled so guilty and shameful. Even my sleep, communication, feelings and watching my face in the mirror reflect back shame to me”.

In continuation, extract from CSP 12/19/23 statements;

The nature of our offense renders us symbols of shame within custody, making it difficult for us to confront other inmates. The stigmatizing remarks, segregated confinement, and avoidance of interaction by others exacerbate the feelings of shame and guilt. Moreover, if we encounter such circumstances within the confines of prison, one can only imagine the conditions awaiting us outside, within our homes, local community, and the broader societal perception of us.

Sexual Reoffending Versus First Time Perpetrator

The topic under discussion in Pakistani dynamics that conviction will resolve the matter of child sexual abuse and stop the sexual reoffending from the same perpetrator. A widespread certainty that adults convicted of sexual perpetration against child encounter a persistent threat of sexual reoffending. However, studies on reoffending suggest that the majority convicted sexual offenders do not reoffend sexually. For example, A case study of England and Wales, where between 2002 and 2012, merely 7.5% of individuals discharged from incarceration had been convicted of another sexual offense by October 2015 (Mews et al., 2017).

However, in the aboriginal settings, it is crucial to highlight, that most happenings of CSA even not come to the table of concern authorities. In fact, there is no exclusive study available to reflect or compare with this notion. The research findings explore that majority of the child sexual perpetrator are a first-time offender. They had no previous convictions history.

CSP 03 conversed “I pledge to refrain from engaging in any form of criminal activity in my future life. Grant me the opportunity for transformation, and I assure you, I will be a law-abiding citizen and a productive member of the community”.

Similarly; excerpt from CSP14 stated “In fact, I acknowledge feeling a sense of guilt at this juncture. However, if acquitted, I am fully committed to abstaining from any similar actions in the future”.

However, there is some indication suggesting that individuals convicted of child sexual exploitation offenses demonstrate a higher propensity to engage solely in sexual offenses subsequently, as opposed to those convicted of sexual offenses against adults (Harris et al., 2009).

Extensive international longitudinal studies demonstrate that the majority of adult males convicted of sexual offenses no longer exhibit a substantial risk of sexual reoffending after a decade, exhibiting a risk profile akin to individuals with histories of other criminal activities.

Furthermore, only a minority remain at risk beyond the fifteen-year mark (Hanson, 2018). This trend is consistent across all levels of risk; even within the highest risk category, four-fifths of individuals in a longitudinal study spanning 20 years were never reconvicted for another sexual offense (Hanson et al., 2014).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study reveals that various psychosocial factors significantly drive perpetrators to commit child sexual abuse in Pakistan. Key factors include adverse childhood experiences, lack of adult intimacy, emotional instability, deviant sexual tendencies, and impulsivity. These elements create a complex interplay of motivations and behaviours, indicating that child sexual abuse is deeply rooted in both individual and environmental contexts. Understanding these factors is crucial for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Comprehensive rehabilitation programs in prisons should address psychosocial factors by offering childhood trauma therapy, emotional regulation strategies, and support for developing healthy adult relationships. Early intervention programs targeting at-risk youth are crucial for addressing adverse childhood experiences and improving emotional well-being. Community awareness campaigns should educate the public on recognizing child sexual abuse signs and addressing psychosocial issues, aiding early detection and prevention. Strengthening family support systems through counselling and resources can mitigate risk factors associated with abuse. Advocacy for policies integrating mental health services and strict enforcement of child protection laws is essential. Continuous research and evaluation will improve prevention strategies and enhance child protection.

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