

Disclosure Experiences of Child Sexual Abuse Survivors

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ABSTRACT

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a pervasive global issue with long-lasting consequences. Over the decades, the impact of sexual abuse on mental health has garnered significant attention, prompting research for practical applications in counseling. Counseling for sexually abused children is crucial to address trauma and promote healing. This study explores the lived experiences of child sexual abuse survivors in the Philippines, focusing on the context of disclosure. Using a phenomenological research design, the study engaged four female participants from a public secondary school, identified by the Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office (MSWDO). Data were collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews and audio recordings, guided by a semi-structured interview format. Applying Lichtman's 3Cs method for data analysis, four major themes emerged: negative emotional responses, recurrence of trauma memories, coping mechanisms, and access to support systems. The findings reveal the profound emotional scars and recurring trauma memories experienced by participants while demonstrating resilience and hope through various coping mechanisms. The study emphasizes the potential for healing within a supportive network, despite survivors' ongoing challenges with mental health and well-being. The availability of a strong support system is a critical factor in their recovery process. The research calls for a societal shift to prioritize the protection and well-being of sexually abused children and recognizing their inherent dignity and worth. Furthermore, it recommends strengthening the support systems for survivors, and the school-based mental health services specifically counseling and referral and launching public awareness campaigns to reduce stigma.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse survivors, Disclosure Context, Female Survivors, Phenomenology, Philippine

Introduction

This study investigated the lived experiences of child sexual abuse (CSA) survivors in a public secondary school in the Division of Negros Occidental during the school year 2023-2024 on the process of disclosure. The study aimed to understand the complexities and challenges in disclosing abuse and the subsequent impact on their well-being. The significance of this study is multifaceted:

Social Welfare and Development Office: Support services for CSA survivors, ensuring accessibility and being culturally sensitive, and increasing availability of counseling, support groups, and crisis intervention programs.

School Administration: Insights from this study can help update child protection policies to align with the latest research, fostering a safer and more supportive school environment.

Guidance Counselors/Guidance Designates: The study offers valuable insights into disclosure patterns and their impact on mental health, guiding the development of programs focused on survivor empowerment and prevention.

Teachers: Use the findings to implement practices that create a safe and supportive classroom environment, facilitating trust and openness among students.

Parents: Empower them to establish open lines of communication and create a supportive atmosphere, reinforcing the importance of personal boundaries and safe touch both at home and school.

Sexual Abuse Survivors: Explores various approaches to recovery, highlighting resilience and the potential for positive change and empowerment after trauma.

Researchers: This provides practical applications of the findings, bridging the gap between academia and practice, ensuring evidence-based interventions and emphasizing the importance of trauma-informed principles in conducting ethical and empathetic research.

Future Researchers: Identifies knowledge gaps and areas for further research, offering a framework for comparative studies across different cultural and social contexts, and guiding future research endeavors on CSA disclosure patterns and barriers.

Literature Review

Globally, Child sexual abuse (CSA) remains one of the most underreported and misunderstood crimes which is a severe violation with profound and enduring consequences. Over the past decade, research on the mental health effects of CSA has intensified, highlighting its association with significant psychological and behavioral issues among adolescents (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 2020).

Despite its prevalence, CSA's full impact is often underestimated, affecting millions of children worldwide annually (World Health Organization, 2022). Research shows that CSA significantly harms mental health, contributing to various disorders (Alves et al., 2024). The WHO defines CSA as involving children in sexual activities they cannot fully understand or consent to, often perpetrated by trusted individuals, exacerbating the abuse's impact (Sravanti, 2023).

In Asia, CSA rates are alarmingly high among early adolescents, worsened by cultural taboos and stigma (Solvihati et al., 2021). The Philippines faces significant challenges in combating CSA due to difficulties in enforcing laws against sexual exploitation (Chi, 2023). Survivors often develop conditions such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Manukrishnan & Bhagabati, 2023), with common emotional responses including fear, shame, guilt, and mistrust (Schwannauer, 2019). Persistent depression can severely impair daily functioning for survivors (Kabahinda, 2019).

Disclosure is crucial for accessing help and protection (Alaggia et al., 2019; Landberg et al., 2023). However, many survivors are unaware of available support services or how to access them. Most research on CSA disclosure has focused on barriers, leaving a gap in understanding the facilitators that enable survivors to come forward (Brennan & McElvaney, 2020). Relatively, counseling services are crucial for addressing trauma and facilitating recovery in sexually abused children (Viliardos et al., 2022), with immediate access being essential for prompt psychological and social recovery (Agordzo et al., 2021).

Materials and Methods:

The researcher utilized the descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of CSA survivors during and after disclosure. Phenomenology involves interpreting the participants' feelings, perceptions, and beliefs to clarify the phenomenon's essence under investigation. Investigating the experience of individuals is a highly complex phenomenon (Jarvis, 1987), Giorgi (1985), Van Manen (1990), Moustakas (1994), and other phenomenologists stated that interviewing individuals is the foundation that phenomenological investigation relies on to understand the phenomenon. Thus, using this research design comprehensively access and

explain the thoughts, feelings, and essence of their experiences and not the meaning that the researcher brings to the study.

This study's conversation partners are four (4) female learners from a public secondary school enrolled in the school year 2023-2024. A purposive sampling technique was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of child sexual abuse survivors. The inclusion criteria include (a) aged 12-17 years, (b) having experienced sexual abuse, (c) being presently enrolled in a public secondary school and (d) have been reported to the MSWDO as sexually abused.

The study utilized a semi-structured interview guide to gather data through in-depth face-to-face interviews and audio recordings with the CSA survivors. The questionnaire consists of several key questions that helped define the areas to be explored and allowed the researcher and the CSA survivors to diverge to understand the lived experiences better. The interview lasted for 60 – 90 minutes.

This study employed thematic analysis using Lichtman's (2017) three Cs of data analysis - coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing – to explore the lived experiences of CSA survivors from a public secondary school during and after disclosure.

Coding. The interview transcripts were carefully read individually in the coding phase while the initial codes were created. The transcripts were re-read, and different codes were added and nonverbal expressions of the conversation partners were also noted. The preliminary list of the initial codes was revisited by re-reading the transcripts.

Categorizing. After the codes were re-read and modified, a list of categories and central ideas was developed and the iterative process continued. The less significant categories were changed after re-reading and the list was modified. The categories and subcategories were revisited, redundancies were removed, and essential elements were then determined.

Conceptualizing. After revisiting and modifying the categories and subcategories, key concepts were identified, reflecting the meaning of the data collected. After rereading, some concepts appeared more prosperous and compelling than others and the conversation partners' significant statements were clustered into themes and sub-themes. The final themes were selected for discussion based on their relevance and significance in the study.

Results

After interviewing the four participants and transcribing their verbatim, Lichtman's 3Cs method was employed. The description contextualized the experiences of child sexual abuse survivors during and after disclosure were grouped into four (4) themes and six (6) sub-themes as follows:

Table 1: General Cluster of Relevant Meaning

Cluster	Initial Cluster	General Cluster	Central Ideas/
Grouping	Themes	Of Meaning	Themes
I	Afraid of the consequences of disclosure Afraid of repeated abuse Afraid of escalation Afraid of embarrassment Expressing revenge and anger	Fear Shame Anger	Negative Emotional Response
II	Sensitivity to touch Always on the look-out Remembering the experience	Anxiety (Hypervigilance and Intrusive thoughts)	Recurrence of Trauma Memories
III	Crying-out to feel relieved Sharing the burden to others Expressing future plans	Help-seeking Acceptance and Hope	Coping Mechanisms
IV	Belief and support of family members Legal procedures	Emotional Support of the family Assistance of Authorities	Access to Support System

Theme 1. Negative Emotional Response

This theme shows the range of adverse emotional reactions of the conversation partners when they revealed their experiences during and after disclosure. The sub-themes are fear, shame, and anger.

The fear the conversation partners feel stems from the consequences of disclosure, the tendency that the abuse will be repeated and escalated.

Myra expressed her fears about her situation because she could not handle the abuse by herself anymore.

That time, I needed to tell my father because I was so scared of what he was doing. I couldn't handle it by myself anymore. So, I decided to just tell my father what happened. Yes, I was really scared, so I immediately called my dad and told him what happened. Yes, I wanted it to stop instead of continuing because I couldn't handle it anymore. So, I told my father to put an end to it immediately

Mercia also mentioned that her fear is coming from the thoughts that the abuse will be repeated. She said:

What pushed me to think that I should confide, because he might do it again, you know. That's why I confided, even though I was scared. Even if I am scared, I should tell. So that it won't continue.

Likewise, Mhara expressed that she fears that something bad might happen to her if she does not disclose.

The reason I told the truth is that I feared something might happen to me. That's why I confided to my best friend to seek advice. I never thought it would happen again.

Merryl expressed the same sentiments towards disclosing the abuse. She said:

So, I chatted my classmates that I had something to tell them. We walked around the canteen, and I said I had something to share with them. They asked, "What is it?" I said something happened to me. Then my tears almost fell, but I held them back, ma'am. My chest hurt so much, ma'am, I needed to let it out. Even though I was scared of what might happen next, I had to tell it.

Shame

The conversation partners shared that they experienced shame manifested in various ways, such as feelings of guilt, self-blame, and embarrassment, which lead to a sense of self-stigma and shame about the abuse itself, one's own body, and personal identity.

Myra said that she feels embarrassed about going out because of what other people in their community might think of her. She shared the following narratives:

I was scared about what happened because he would expose what had happened. That's why I didn't hesitate and just told the truth. I feel

ashamed to go outside because of the embarrassment from the people here. It's like I'm the one to blame in their eyes. At first, I found it hard to tell because I was scared. I was afraid of being shamed. I was shamed because he exposed what happened to us.

Mercia too said that she was ashamed to disclose because of the reactions and thoughts of the people surrounding them. Mercia's feeling of shame was noticed in her actions of covering body with a jacket and not wearing short shorts to change her image from the eyes of other people. She said:

I was worried about what people would say because of what he did to me. And then, after that, I no longer wore shorts and sleeveless, I went out wearing my jacket. At first, I was thinking about what people would say, here in school if I tell, maybe I'll be ashamed. But in the first place, ma'am, I know myself, I'm not at fault, I'm the victim here.

Anger

The conversation partners experienced a strong feeling of anger against their perpetrators. This anger is fueled by their feelings of revenge, frustration, and powerlessness.

Myra's feeling of anger was expressed in her desire to file a case against the perpetrator. She strongly said:

We will file a case. I am really determined. To apprehend him. It's really good that I have exposed what happened because I am really mad at him! I want him to face charges so that he will be apprehended

Mercia expressed her anger as if she wanted to kill the perpetrator even though she felt scared of him.

I'm so angry at him. I wanted to retaliate, to seek revenge, to be like my brother who swore to kill him. I felt such pain and hurt, struggling with fear because of what he did.

Mhara was also angry, wants revenge since she would not be at peace if the perpetrator never realizes the pain he inflicted on her. She further said that forgiveness is easier said than done.

That's why recently, I decided I wanted to file a case because I don't want to stay quiet. I really wanted to get back at him, for him to realize what he did was wrong. It's like I wanted him to feel the pain he caused. I

don't care anymore, ma'am, if I get ashamed, as long as I can get my revenge. They say even God forgives, maybe humans too. Yes, they say it boldly because you're not the one who was wronged. Because I don't know where to start, I don't know where it should end either. I feel lost about myself, perhaps.

Theme 2: Recurrence of Trauma Memories

This theme shows the re-experiencing of distressing and vivid memories of abuse when CSA survivors talk about or disclose the abuse, which can significantly affect the child's emotional and psychological state. Anxiety came forth as a sub-theme.

Trauma memories can be a pervasive and debilitating experience for many individuals, often leading to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Research has shown that trauma memories can recur in various forms, including flashbacks, nightmares, and intrusive thoughts (Hembree et al., 2019). The recurrence of trauma memories can be triggered by various stimuli, such as sights, sounds, or smells reminiscent of the traumatic event (Brewin et al., 2019).

Anxiety

The conversation partners shared that they experienced intense fear, worry, and apprehension during and after disclosure. Their experience of sexual abuse was profoundly distressing and traumatic, leading to a sense of perpetual uncertainty and fear. It manifests in various ways, such as sleep disturbances, excessive crying, or avoidance of certain situations or people.

Myra was anxious because the perpetrator appears in her dreams. She shared:

In my mind, sometimes I think that he might do it again. I had a dream recently that he would repeat it.

Mercia keeps on remembering the abuse and feels anxious every time someone touches her.

That's why sometimes, ma'am, when I remember what he did to me, I become sensitive if someone touches me, even if it's my mom. I don't feel comfortable when someone touches me

Mhara also expressed that every time she sees the perpetrator, even if she's okay, her emotions suddenly shifts and her body starts shaking.

(If I see him in the room, ma'am, I get angry and start trembling. I remember what he did to me. Instead of feeling okay, *I start* shaking again, because it feels like there's a tightness in my chest when I see him.

Merryl was now more careful about riding a tricycle, was cautious and checks who the driver was because he might be the perpetrator she never identified. She expressed:

Because of what happened to me, I am now very careful about the tricycle I ride. I watch the driver closely. If I don't know him or I don't feel comfortable, I get scared. Then if the road we are taking seems different, I quickly say, "To, this isn't the way to the pantalan (pier)." Sometimes my mind races when I'm in a tricycle. I get really scared, because I've been through that before, ma'am.

Theme 3: Coping Mechanisms

In order to manage the emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical stress resulting from their traumatic experiences, the conversation partners realized that they needed to regulate their emotions and prevent overwhelming feelings from taking over. Similar statements were organized into two sub-themes: help-seeking and feelings of acceptance and hope.

Help-seeking

The conversation partners seek help as a coping mechanism in order to stop the abuse. Help-seeking behavior includes crying out and sharing the burden with close friends, immediate family members, and authorities.

Myra said that in order to let out the heaviness she feels, she cried it out and find other things to do to forget what happened to her. She expressed her sentiments:

Yes, I always cried before I told anyone. I would cry alone. When I told my dad, I cried a lot too. I kept crying and talking. What can you do? This is what happened. I have accepted that I am pregnant. I just cry when I'm sad to feel better. Sometimes I distract myself. I try not to think too deeply about it.

Mhara's mother never thought that the actions of her child like cutting her long hair and wearing jackets and long sleeves are signs that she is seeking help. Mhara explained in her narratives:

After that, I stopped wearing shorts and sleeveless tops because I feel like people are staring at me. When I go out, I wear a jacket. My mom asked me five times if I was sure about cutting my hair. She said that I looked like her husband, so for a change, I decided to change my hair. I started cutting it little by little by myself. When things got really bad, that's when I had a seventh cut haircut style. When I have problems, I sometimes talk

to my mom regarding my academics, about my low scores they aren't really failures. Sometimes I struggle and cry to my mom, but she always stays positive.

Mercia also expressed always crying out whenever she remembers what has been done to her. She said she's trying her best to eat even a little and praying to God eases her pain.

I cry when I remember what he did. Even though I have no appetite, I force myself to eat. I just enter the house to avoid seeing him. I also pray, hoping that He (God) will help me get rid of my negative thoughts).

Feelings of Acceptance and Hope

For them to cope with the prolonged experience of abuse and its aftermath, the conversation partners tried to accept their situation and expressed their hopes of living a normal life someday as they shared their future.

Myra said she wants to continue her studies after giving birth, she has nothing more to do with her situation, and she would rather accept what happened to her.

So, what else can I do? I have accepted that I am pregnant. Yes, I am not yet ready to be a mother but it's okay, Papa and Mama are here. I wasn't abandoned; they accepted and supported me wholeheartedly. They made me feel that even with this happening, I have their support. My plan after giving birth is to take a rest and then continue my education.

Mercia wants to become a policewoman someday, despite her situation, she is doing well in her studies, she even received honors.

I did not neglect my studies. I am doing well in class. I was also able to achieve honors. I will take up Criminology in college. I am willing to wait for justice because I know there are still many processes).

Mhara had many realizations from what she experienced that it made her more mature as she faced life's challenges.

When that incident happened to me, I had many realizations. I convinced myself that I wouldn't grow unless I faced challenges. My mindset has shifted somewhat. But for now, I can't forgive him. Maybe in the future

Merryl also plans to enroll in Caregiver Program after giving birth as evidence of moving on and facing what lies ahead in the future.

After giving birth, my plan is to take a break from school for a year. I was concerned that my mother might struggle to send both me and my sibling to college at the same time. I decided to rest for a year and let my older sibling finish college first. I will study Caregiving in Kabankalan. When I kept what happened before, my mind was troubled. But when I finally revealed it, I felt relieved. Because someone is guiding me on what is the right thing to do

Theme 4: Access to Support System

Under this theme, CSA survivors shared the availability and quality of emotional, psychological, and practical assistance provided to them during the disclosure of the abuse. The two sub-themes are the belief and support of family members and the assistance of authorities.

Emotional Support of the Family

The conversation partners realized that being believed and supported by trusted adults, such as their parents and other close family members, made them feel comfortable coming forward and disclosing their experiences of abuse.

Myra disclosed to her father and though he was devastated by the plight of his child, he believed her and sought support from the DSWD office. Myra said:

I talked to my father about what happened to me, he went with me to Department of Social Worker and Development (DSWD) Office. Yes, my father got angry when I told him the whole story but he never abandoned me.

Mhara disclosed the abuse to her aunt first, then to her mother, who was very protective of her, making Mhara feel loved and supported. She narrated:

My mom confronted the perpetrator. She asked what was done to me, why I became like this. We went to the police because many are helping me to report the incident. There is my aunt and mother. Mama really loves me; she can't forsake me. She doesn't leave me; she really helps me.

Mhara too realized that her mother was her strong anchor and confidant.

I realized that despite what happened to me, my mother was there for me, the first and only person I trusted.

Merryl was very grateful of her mother's support right after she learned the abuse.

When my mom went into the police station, I started crying. I'm so grateful to her for helping me so much. Despite what happened to me, I felt her strong support. Her sacrifices for us were enormous. She never let me down. My mom's love for me is truly immense.

Assistance of Authorities

After disclosure, the conversation partners experienced the collaborative effort of several authorities from the local government unit to the DSWD, police, health care providers and their teachers causing them to feel like they were not alone in their journey.

Mhara expressed her relief after support from the DSWD and felt she was attended well because of the physician who examined her and the psychiatrist who assessed her mental state. She gladly said:

I went to the DSWD with my father. There I told everything that had happened to me, after the interview, I was brought to the doctor, got examined, and then to the psychiatrist, I was interviewed, and they explained what happened to me. They made me write something on a piece of paper, I answered questions. I got relieved when I reported to DSWD, they helped us to file a case against the suspect that is why he was stopped.

Moreover, Mercia felt the immediate response of their barangay captain when they asked for his assistance. The physician and DSWD also guided her on the next steps they will undertake.

The barangay captain's action was okay. When we went to DSWD, they assisted. The doctor treated us well. I haven't seen a psychiatrist yet because we are still waiting for financial assistance from the mayor.

Meanwhile, Mhara, stated how well school personnel like teachers, guidance designates, and the administrative staff handled her case.

The treatment I received from the DSWD was okay. The guidance process was also handled well. They immediately forwarded us to the administration. Then we met Sir and the grievance committee. We reported to the women's police station. Then I was diagnosed with major depressive disorder by the psychiatrist because when I was washing dishes, I felt spaced out. I even brought the dishes to the bathroom.

Merryl shared that police officers were very accommodating and even sympathized with her during the disclosure. This made her feel comfortable telling them the details of the abuse.

We went to the police station. We told the police. They gave us a form, you know ma'am. They took my statement about what happened to me. They asked me what the man was wearing. They had me describe him. Then the police called my mother. The police felt sympathy for me. They said, "Oh, you're so young. Why did this happen to you? They felt sorry for me because they also have daughters. One police officer even gave me water because they felt sorry for me.

Discussion

The experiences of child sexual abuse survivors in a public-school setting during and after disclosure highlight a complex range of emotions and coping strategies. Studies repeatedly manifest how devastating these experiences are to a child, making her a survivor indeed. Many survivors face profound fear, including concerns about the repercussions of disclosure, the potential for ongoing abuse, escalation, and the embarrassment that may follow. These fears often lead to deep feelings of shame and anger, sometimes manifesting as a desire for revenge. These negative emotions are exacerbated by recurring memories of the trauma, marked by hypervigilance, sensitivity to touch, and intrusive thoughts that keep the abuse vivid in their minds. To cope with these intense emotions, survivors often engage in various strategies such as crying to release emotional pain, sharing their experiences with others, and planning for the future to regain control and hope. Seeking support through therapy and support groups is also common. Crucially, the emotional backing of family members and the involvement of legal authorities are vital, offering survivors a sense of security, validation, and justice, which are essential for their healing journey.

These research findings have significant and far-reaching implications, benefiting healthcare, education, law enforcement, and both private and public therapeutic institutions. For practitioners, it includes providing actionable insights for tailoring approaches based on individual needs and recognizing the pivotal role of supportive figures and professionals in the disclosure process. It advocates for training law enforcement in empathetic approaches to facilitate survivor disclosures. In terms of policy, the study recommends implementing sensitive approaches across various sectors to empower survivors to disclose their experiences. This includes the necessity for educational programs and public awareness campaigns to foster supportive environments and ensure ethical disclosures of CSA. However, it is important to note that this study is limited to female CSA survivors, which may influence the generalizability of the findings. Future research should focus on exploring disclosure patterns and the roles of

different support systems more comprehensively, including male and non-binary survivors, to better understand the factors that influence disclosure and the effectiveness of current support mechanisms.

Conclusion

This research thematically explores the lived experiences of child sexual abuse (CSA) survivors in a public school during and after disclosing their abuse. Four major themes emerged: negative emotional responses, access to support systems, recurrence of trauma memories, and coping mechanisms. These findings highlight the complex emotional and psychological challenges faced by survivors and underscore the critical need for robust support systems to facilitate their journey toward healing and recovery.

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Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to general ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Ethical approval was obtained from the La Consolacion College Bacolod Ethics Board to ensure the study's ethical soundness.

Social Value: The research underscores the importance of counseling in the recovery of child sexual abuse survivors, promoting community support and a nurturing environment for emotional healing.

Informed Consent: Participants were provided with comprehensive informed consent documents, which included details about the research purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. The consent process was conducted in Hiligaynon to ensure full understanding.

Vulnerability of Participants: The study respected participants' rights to withdraw at any stage due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Only participants capable of providing informed consent were included. Support from a child psychologist or registered guidance counselor was available throughout the research.

Risks and Benefits: The study acknowledged the potential emotional risks and provided recovery periods during interviews. A registered social worker was present to provide debriefing and support in case of any emotional distress. Participants benefited by having a platform to share their experiences, which could contribute to broader discussions and drive change.

Privacy and Confidentiality: Participants' identities were protected through pseudonyms and strict confidentiality measures in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Personal information was securely handled and disposed of after analysis.

Transparency: The researcher disclosed that the study was an academic requirement and declared no conflicts of interest. No monetary benefits were received.

Qualifications of the Researcher: The researcher, holding a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and experience in handling sensitive child abuse cases, was well-qualified to conduct this study.

Justice: Participants were selected fairly and voluntarily. During the interview, they were provided with snacks and transportation. Respect was shown to all individuals regardless of their background.

Community Involvement: The researcher collaborated with the Department of Social Welfare and Development Office and local schools, contributing to the welfare of the education sector and enhancing support services.