

Social, Cultural and Family Practices as Determinants of Narratives and the Self-Image of 11 Women with Histories of Child Sexual Abuse

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Abstract

The research comes from a postmodern perspective that harmonizes with the qualitative investigation, this study summarizes the importance of language as a determinant of the reality, the problem, and the solution to itself. The purpose of the study was to analyze the narratives of 11 women with child sexual abuse histories in order to know the image that the participants have of themselves. They were identified dominant oppressive narratives loaded with negative descriptions of themselves and some from the family culture. It is discussed the determinant influence of language, family and culture in the construction of these images and it is concluded the importance of thinking about their origin, as well as constructing alternative realities that may result more functional for them.

Keywords

Child Sexual Abuse, Family, Self-Image, Narratives

1. Introduction

The study is based on the social constructionist approach, which emphasizes the intersubjective influence of language, family and culture on the social construction of reality [1] [2]. This approach takes over the importance of language for creating realities [3], in this sense, there is only what can be named [4]; in addition, language is immersed in a society, thus reality construction is socially determined.

White and Epston pointed out that people give meaning to their experience through narratives, that is, to understand their experience the person must relate

it [5]. Epston, White & Murray argue that the narratives impose beginnings and endings, and that those impositions are arbitrary to memory because they emphasize or disesteem some aspects [6]; on the other hand, whatever is emphasized or omitted has real effects on the lives of people [7], in this sense the language not only creating realities, but also to determine destinies; thus is precisely the fact of relating which determines the meaning that is going to be attributed to experience, at the same time, the meaning that the members attribute to the facts will decree their behavior.

The narrative metaphor, contrary to the idea that the stories reflect life, suggests that the stories shape the life of the people [8], so, from this approach, life is seen as a theatrical representation of texts [6]; authors like White point out that the most powerful force to modify our lives are the stories that we constantly tell to ourselves and others [3]; also, although the experience of life is so rich, people only focus on something that can become problematic, it is these stories what we call dominant oppressive narratives [3] [5]; these stories are constitutive, because they shape our lives and relationships [5]. White and Epston point out that when a narrative is structured a selection process is used that leaves aside the facts that do not fit into the dominant narratives [5].

On the other hand, these narratives are constructed inside communities of people and social institutions [8]; in such a way that the context of interaction of people, their family and their culture create meanings that can be more or less negative or positive, useless or functional for the person, this means that individual narratives derive from cultural narratives, and even more, said in own words: “individual narratives reflect, and at the same time, project and reproduce cultural narratives immersed in a time and context determined”.

The narratives of some women with child sexual abuse experiences reflect socially constructed beliefs and are loaded of negative images of themselves; according to Kamsler many of these women have a negative and self-destructive concept of themselves which began to form as girls, when derived from the child sexual abuse experience they were considered bad or dirty [9]. These beliefs are transmitted to girls through the family and according to Ginzburg *et al.* these beliefs about sexual abuse are an important factor in the subsequent adjustment of the adult who experienced child sexual abuse [10]; in this sense, Esler and Waldegrave mention that every family holds certain assumptions and beliefs about how things are [11]; both Esler and Waldegrave and Durrant and Kowlaski take back White’s concept of “restrictions” to argue how beliefs and ideas make hard that people who have sexual abuse experienced notice facts and aspects of their experience that do not adjust with the saturated version of problems that they have elaborated of themselves and their life [11] [12].

Furthermore, around child sexual abuse there have been built a great amount of myths. The myths are part of the belief system and some of them may become dysfunctional. Accordingly it is important to identify and think over these myths, question their validity and promote alternative realities more functional about their own sexual abuse. Deconstruction is proposed, which involves subverting

realities and familiar practices that are taken as true [8], this involves making conscious the way in which certain forms of thought shape our lives or existences.

Concerning to social, cultural and familiar beliefs and practices; according to Baird in the dominant narratives of child sexual abuse survivors, can be identified some beliefs from the family culture, such as that children must respect the elders and love their relatives, as well as that children must be seen and not heard; some others coming from the romantic culture as if you love someone you have to do anything for him and that if you really love him, you have not only satisfy him but to feel good for it; some more from gender culture, such as girls have to be sweet and pretty, take care of others and not to have sexual activity, while men are biologically sexual and it is women's responsibility to say no to their attempts [13]. All of these beliefs and early experiences are transmitted through the family and lay the foundation for the construction of narratives and the identity of women.

Regarding this, Miller, Parra & Hardin point out that there is a tendency from perpetrators of blaming their victims of child sexual abuse for their provocative behavior [14], which reflects and promotes social beliefs that justify the perpetrator, beliefs as, victims wanted it or enjoyed it and that the men does not have sexual control, so that the woman is responsible of the sexual control of the man, these beliefs contribute to forming the identity of the women; in addition, the lack of trust on children or the unbelief of relatives will have important effects on the identity in formation; in relation to this, White mentions that dominant speeches are constructed based on the belief that the arguments of the children are invalid or trustworthy and that children lie, while adults tell the truth [15]; in addition, child sexual abuse can lay the foundations for the construction of an identity permeated by incapacity of control and autonomy; so, according to this Magnabosco explains that in the sexual abuse situation the victim is treated as an object and their decision and autonomy are not respected, which can contribute to the formation of an identity where they are seen themselves with a lack of control [7].

It is important to point out that although there are researches that have identified the narratives and identity of women with experiences of child sexual abuse in different cultural and family contexts, it is important to understand cultural differences and similarities between countries.

Based on the understanding of how these narratives determine a reality, a problem and the solution of it, this study set the problem of describing which oppressive dominant narratives in relation to the self-image of the women in the study reflect the social, cultural and familiar practices. In this way, the study aimed to analyze the dominant narratives of 11 women with experiences of child sexual abuse, it is intended that the analysis is to contribute with important elements that are set to the design of future interventions.

2. Method

A qualitative approach was taken from a theory-based approach, a semi-

structured interview was designed for the purposes of this research.

2.1. Participants

Interviews were conducted to 11 Mexican women over 18 years old, who reported having experienced child sexual abuse and who attended, during the period from May to November 2011, in search of treatment in any of the four centers of psychological services at the university where the interviewers, professionals of the psychology studied its postgraduate degree. Interviewers had no previous relationship with the participants; a questionnaire with sociodemographic data was used to identify participants with experiences of child sexual abuse. Once identified, the participants were offered to enter an intervention program to address some effects derived from the sexual abuse situation, they lived and their authorization was requested to be part of a study whose purpose was to know the characteristics of their experience of child sexual abuse, they, also, were informed that they would be interviewed and it would be audio taped. Participants were assured that their participation will be managed in an anonymous, confidential and voluntary manner. The participants who agreed to participate in the study signed an informed consent and were individually arranged for an appointment for a semi-structured interview conducted into an office within the facility where the women went to request services (Table 1).

2.2. Data Collection Technique

A semi structured interview was designed and applied for purposes of this research, the interview had the main goal of knowing about the experience on sexual abuse of the participants. The interview started with the next instruction: "Even though it could be hard to talk about the experience of child sexual abuse, it's necessary to know some aspects related with this experience, anything you

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the research participants.

	Age	Civil Status	Occupation	Studies degree
1	34	Married	Seamstress	Nurse technician
2	36	In Union	Quartermaster	Elementary school
3	33	Married	Quartermaster	Junior high school
4	29	Single	Seamstress	Junior high school
5	58	Separated	Housewife	Nurse technician
6	37	Single	Housewife	Bachelor's degree
7	56	Married	Housewife/ Saleswoman	Junior high school
8	36	Married	Housewife	Technical secretary
9	36	Married	Housewife	High school
10	59	Widow	Saleswoman	Elementary school
11	51	In Union	Office employee	High school

can narrate right now will be useful to help other women that suffered a similar situation.”

It was important to let them tell the experience in their own way, with the order and sequence they wanted to give it, listening carefully every piece of information they provided and showing an empathic and sensitive attitude; the needed support and containment were given. Finally they were asked specifically on the missing information to fill the following data: age when it began, duration, frequency, relationship with the aggressor, age when abuse was revealed, circumstances in which it was discovered, reaction of the first person who knew of the aggression and perception of the family support granted by the family members who knew the situation of child sexual abuse.

Subsequently, five areas were explored: 1. Consequences that the participants attribute to this experience, 2. Imagen of the aggressor, 3. Explanations around the aggression 4. Self-image and 5. Expectations for the future. For the present study are presented and analyzed the responses to the corresponding área of the self-image.

2.3. Analytical Strategy

An analysis thematic by categories was carried out. For that reason, recorded audio interviews were textually transcribed, then a first reading was made to carry out an initial analysis and to establish the categories, which after subsequent readings generated other subcategories of analysis, allowing the information analysis to be more precise. The system of categories was reviewed by a external researcher to the original study. To protect the anonymities and privacy of the participants, folios were assigned to the interviews and fragments of them were reported by codes so it is possible to recognize the participants.

3. Results

The analysis of interviews revealed that the dominant narratives shared by the 11 women in the study included negative descriptions of themselves as devaluation, indignity and impurity images. Some parts of interviews show the categories found.

“...I felt like -Why do he look for me?- (She refers her husband), I mean I’m chubby and he is younger than me, so I didn’t deserve it, ‘cause he was single and he might find a woman of his age... I don’t know... I didn’t deserve all these things, ahm, how could I tell you? I wasn’t worthy to have someone like him. I don’t know... I had low self-esteem.”

Another participant identified herself like “trash”, it means that she felt dirty and worthless, as well as like a nuisance. Feeling dirty were described in the narratives of three other participants.

“I felt like trash, I though, actually nowadays, I think that I am not worthy to like a man.”

“I felt dirty, I mean, it was a sin that I felt all these things, like I liked he

touching me...”

“I’d be 28 years when I started to practice sex. I didn’t like it. It hurt me a lot. I felt dirty again (cries)... at first, I felt dirty, I always have been low self-esteem.”

“I felt clean anymore; I felt like...How could I tell you? ...”

The participants who lived these experiences in their childhood could learn that they had to complain other people and leave their likes or needs aside, and it continued in their adulthood.

“... I bought them too much things that I stopped to buying for myself, because I felt no right to spend that money on myself, because I didn’t deserve all the thing that I felt, I think that they deserve or need more. All my life was that, all the time I worked for others, I bought things to others, and, and I couldn’t buy me anything because simply... I don’t know... I couldn’t do it.”

Magnabosco points out that the identity of the affected women by the child sexual abuse begins with the sense that they give to the event [7].

Participants of the study reflected a negative identity which they considered themselves like “trashy”, “dirty” and “unworthy”, emphasizing the sensation of dirtiness because it was the most reported.

In a similar way, Jackson, Newall & Backett-Milburn analysed the narratives of 2986 children and teenagers who had experiences of child sexual abuse, finding a low self-esteem feeling and sensation of dirtiness [16].

Furthermore, two participants with positive image of themselves were found, though the positive image didn’t exist in their childhood, when the abuse occurred.

“...I am a person that changed too much compare with the person that I was, with a reliability that I hadn’t, a self-esteem that I haven’t in the past.”

However in one of these two participants, the image of her was inconstant and ambivalent; so, she fluctuated between positive image and negative image of herself.

“...sometimes I feel a strong woman, other times I feel that I am weak, fragile, and I can’t do something, but it’s only that, things that I am aware that I could do or said, but I can’t do it.”

Many participants could learn to identify themselves as weak, especially if the tries to stop the aggression were unsuccessful. They learned that they have not the strength to do it and their stories were not credible.

In accordance with Gergen, the narratives constructed within the social life are not possessions of the individual but of the relationships [17]. According to this, Karl Tomm points out that identity is constituted by what each person knows about himself and that is related with cultural practices of labeling, description, classification, evaluation, segregation, exclusion, etc. [5] those practices are transmitted through the family.

The narratives of the 11 women in this study include lack of family support and, in the majority of them, were observed disbelief by part of their relatives.

“I felt that they saw me as a liar... ‘cause they told me—if you don’t tell me the truth, I’m going to hit you”

“I told my father and he didn’t believe me. He said—no, how could it happened?, if B. was sir engineer, the respectable man and, and it happened.”

“My mom knew all but she didn’t believe me, actually she hit me, she did that because she thought that I was inventing all, and it couldn’t be true, also they were her brothers, right? So my mother didn’t believe me and I shut up.”

“And I told my mother, I was so young, and I told her what happened and she never paid me attention, she didn’t listen to me, and she told me—you’re a little liar, an ugly girl—and I told her my dad touched me at nights, and she told me—no, you’re a liar!-She didn’t believe me, she ignored me.”

The study of Jackson, Newall & Backett-Milburn was identified in one-third of the 2986 children in the study, unbelief of relatives to the narratives of children [16].

According to Kamsler the lack of support and the disbelief of the experience could affect even more the experience itself, in accordance with the author, this type of family beliefs and practices contribute to the significance that they give to the event and to the formation of its identity [9].

The lack of family support also was identified like minimization of aggression, which could contribute to the identity formation, where the participants did not recognise themselves like a valuable persons and worthy of respect, care and attention.

“...and she only claimed the aggressor, but she didn’t do anymore at the moment”

“My mom said that I was wrong and he didn’t do anything to me. First, she said that I invented all ‘cause they wouldn’t let me have boyfriend but then I started crying and I told her that it wasn’t a lie, and I had a witness who was my friend, so my mother said—ok, it was true but he didn’t rape me, he just tried to do it and he used to touch me, but he never raped me.”

“I told to my father and he didn’t believe me, he said—no, how could it be? If B. is the mister architect, the respectable man.”

In addition, ineffective attempts to stop the situation, when ask for support from their relatives without obtaining it, can contribute to generate a sense of lack of control that will have effects that derive into feelings of self-ineffectiveness, lack of strength and incompetence.

The narratives of the women in this study showed that the need to be heard was never reached, in several of them, disqualification and disbelief was observed in their need for help, and a feeling of impotence was identified in several

of the narratives.

The narratives allowed to identify some facts from the familiar culture, for example, children must not be heard [13]. That refers to the importance of identifying some aspects that avoid the revelation and therefore detention of child sexual abuse, which from a social and contextual perspective are based on family and power dynamics, labels and the taboo of sexuality [18]. According to Kamsler, the disbelief of his narratives, denied to them the right to be storytellers [6].

The narrations of the participants about the response of their relatives when they know the situation of aggression that they live also reflect some social beliefs derived from the culture of gender [13], ideas such as that the woman incites to the aggressor, the man does not have sexual control, therefore it is the woman the responsible for the sexual control of men [19].

“My mother hit me too hard and told me why I did it again if I’d lived that before. She always told me that I was very, very precocious, and that I liked that, and unfortunate I was like someone of her family, and how could I live that if I’d live already (sighs).”

“Then I remember... I don’t know if one of my aunts noticed and told my mom, so when I told her—it wasn’t me-, I remember I told her—it wasn’t me—then she started to hit me, I mean, she hit me in front of all.”

In the narrative of one of the participants identified that she was blamed by her mother for the aggression that her little brother lived later.

“Nowadays, she says to me why didn’t we told her, that she didn’t, that she, that what happened to me and my sister, and we were guilty for what occurred to my brother (strong attempt to contain the sob), it was our fault, because she wasn’t guilty (crying).”

The allocation of responsibility for child sexual abuse rests in the girls and can also be transmitted by the aggressor as a mechanism of control towards the girl for to keep the aggression in silence.

According to Kamsler, generally the perpetrator transmit to the child the message that the sexual abuse is their fault [6]; Baird points out that the perpetrator can convince the girl that she is responsible for what is happening, it entails that the girl has a negative self-evaluation, which inhibits her from having the confidence to approach other people and ask for help and gives her a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness [13].

Strategies used by the aggressor to keep child sexual abuse in secret were identified in some participants.

“...and began the threats, if I told something, my mom wouldn’t love me anymore, so I grew in silence, with fear about he told me.”

This narrative shows that the aggressor did the girl feel responsible for the aggression and he threatened with the reject that she could have of her mother.

The narratives of participants identified the use of threats and control mecha-

nisms by the aggressor which contribute to labelling and formation of the images of the participants.

“He started to threaten me, that I was crazy, and all that I said wasn’t true, that I should tell the truth and, and that I imagined all.”

Simone de Beauvoir has described how the use of the “crazy” label has been used as an historical and social mechanism of control to the women [20].

In this sense, Kamsler mentions that the first interactions between the girl and the aggressor take place before the girl forms an opinion of herself, so it establishes the conditions for the development of a dominant image of themselves permeated by shame and self-contempt [9]. She points out that since the childhood the victims can begin to be considered bad or dirty, thoughts that are sometimes encouraged by the aggressor with the purpose of separate her from the other members of the family and assures their silence, or those thoughts are inspired by the family when they deny, doubt or not believe.

4. Discussion

This study presents narratives that show an image where the participants identify themselves as dirty, devalued or unworthy and narratives that describe a lack of family support.

In the 11 women in this study, were appreciated a negative identity of themselves; thus, the participants considered themselves with negatives description, like “trashy”, “dirty” and “unworthy”.

Those narratives are similar from those found by Jackson, Newall and Backett-Milburn, whom find a low self-esteem feeling and sensation of dirtiness [16]; their study was at an early age, with children and adolescents. In this point Kamsler mentions that the women who experienced child sexual abuse began early to form a negative and self-destructive concept of themselves derived from the experience of being considered as bad or dirty girls by the aggressor or the persons closest to the child [9], that is the family.

In addition, the narratives of participants showed the influence of the family in the formation of the identity and self-image of these women; for example, the 11 women in this study identified a lack of support from some of their relatives; mainly in the sense of discrediting their stories, which automatically tagged them as liars, even in two stories are openly called like that and even more are called “ugly” and “liars”

Similarly, Jackson, Newall and Backett-Milburn found narratives of lack of family support, in their study with 2986 children and teenagers in aged 5-18 years, approximately one-third of those were not believed after disclosed the sexual abuse [16].

In some women, the lack of family support was identified in the form of minimization of aggression, in one of them arguing that there was no penetration, in another woman simply asking her not to go to the abuser’s house.

Other women were blamed for the occurrence of child sexual abuse, in one

case, even of the sexual abuse that his brother later suffered; another two women were beaten by their mothers when they said it.

One woman identified the mechanisms used by their aggressor to keep the abuse in secret, such as tell her that his mother would not love her anymore; this is part of the tendency of the aggressor to blame the victim [14].

Feelings of incrimination or self-incrimination and other social factors, such as labels, the taboo of sexuality and beliefs, are factors that contribute to maintaining sexual abuse in silence [18], also, according to Jackson, Newall and Backett-Milburn self-blame emerged in a number of narratives and this self-blame is a barrier to disclosure of child sexual abuse [16].

The girl who experienced child sexual abuse is not only not guilty of it but at that moment could not do anything to avoid it; however she recognizes herself as guilty.

On the other hand, there is a feeling of lack of control for not being able to avoid the abuse or to stop it; which can remain until adulthood; this was reflected in a woman in the study who identified herself as weak and fragile.

This feeling of lack of control that remains in adulthood is explained by Magnabosco as follows, during child sexual abuse the victim is treated as a partial object or even as an inanimate object, so that the person is not respected in his decision and autonomy [7]; in this sense Baird points out the need of the survivors of child sexual abuse to regain control of their lives [13]. According to this idea Sahin & McVicker point out the importance of survivors deconstructing a dominant narrative where they see themselves as victims of any situation in their lives [21]. Eliminating the identity of victims will be the first step to gain control over their lives.

In addition, the women whom lived child sexual abuse need to structure a pattern of meaning that allows them to have a more positive narrative of their life and of the personal and social identity [7]. According to White it is necessary for women to challenge the way in which some dominant ideologies and knowledge operate, to detach themselves from the labels, which will give them the opportunity to depart from their pathological image of themselves [8]. Contributions made by others through their interaction with her in the construction of this image of herself. It's necessary for women to describe aspects of themselves left behind by the dominant image, retaking through their narrations the extraordinary events which will help in the elaboration of an alternative image. According to Magnabosco it is necessary to look for the possibility of modelling descriptions of themselves, mainly seeking to deconstruct the justifying grounds for abusive behaviours [7].

By last, the narratives found in the women in this study, are similar from those found in other cultural contexts different than the participants of the study, like study of Jackson, Newall and Backett-Milburn in UK [16], which may reveal the relative universality of oppressive social, cultural and family practices.

5. Conclusions

The attribution of responsibility that the girl made of child sexual abuse and the feeling of impotence and lack of control were found framing inside social, cultural and familiar practices that gave meaning to the experiences of women and created the narrative they made of your own identity, plagued of dominant oppressive narratives.

The importance of identifying the narratives of women who lived child sexual abuse allows the recognition of oppressive cultural, social and familiar beliefs and practices, which are related to the negative self-image and identity. The recognition of these practices makes possible the construction of an alternative narrative.

It is necessary to deconstruct the justificatory motives for abusive behaviour, especially the socially constructed idea that the women are the responsible for the abuse, because they allowed it, or not avoided it, or even provoked it. It is important to question social, cultural and familiar practices, principally, patriarchal power practices that justify to the perpetrator, for seeing him as unable of controlling his sexual instincts, placing responsibility on women.

Finally, it is necessary to promote an image of herself based on the idea of identifying herself as valuable person, deserving of unconditional love, with the purpose of regain confidence in others and self-confidence, giving them ability to control their lives, understanding that at the time of abuse women could not do nothing to prevent it, however, it is important that they identify the resources and strengths they now have and that will give them control over their lives.

In summary, it is necessary for women to recognize themselves as valuable and worthy of respect and appreciation, firstly to identify that they are not responsible for the aggression they experienced and that despite they did not have control at that time in their lives, now they have the ability to make decisions to change the course of their lives.

Conflict of Interests

There is no conflict of interests.

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