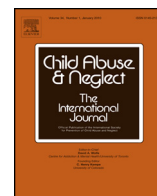




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Research article

What prevents Chinese parents from reporting possible cases of child sexual abuse to authority? A holistic-interactionistic approach



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ABSTRACT

The reporting of suspected CSA cases to authorities in a timely manner is important in preventing continued abuse and protecting abused children at early ages. The current study seeks to explore parents' intentions of reporting their own children's CSA experiences to authorities as well as their reporting willingness when they become aware of possible CSA cases happening to children in other families. Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted among a sample of 26 parents in Beijing; these parents were purposefully selected so as to be diverse in terms of gender, age, and socioeconomic status. The data were analyzed thematically. The findings showed that the reporting of suspected CSA to authorities was a choice made by only a few Chinese parents; it was often even a last resort. By using a holistic-interactionistic approach, the interaction between Chinese parents' intentions of reporting CSA and the Chinese socio-cultural context was analyzed as a dynamic and continuously ongoing process. The impacts of the definition and perceptions of CSA on reporting, the balance of children's rights and parents' power, and the double effect of informal social control are discussed. The implications, both locally and globally, are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) has been associated with significant negative physical, emotional, and behavioral problems, posing a serious threat to the development of child victims as they transition into adulthood (Briere & Elliott, 1994; Lin, Li, Fan, & Fang, 2011). The ways that people around an abused child respond to a CSA case really matter. Social support to child victims has been recognized as a buffer against the adverse effects of CSA (Marivate, 2007; Sperry & Widom, 2013). Social support regarding CSA, which consists of responses such as believing the victim's disclosure and taking positive and supportive actions, is usually offered by the victim's family, neighbors, peers, and teachers (Aydin, Akbas, Turla, & Dundar, 2016). As a form of social support to abused children, the reporting of suspected CSA cases in a timely manner is a virtual

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necessity for preventing continued abuse and protecting abused children at early ages. Moreover, reporting the abuse and letting it become public may result in certain social reactions to the problem of CSA (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1999). The current study aimed to explore Chinese parents' intentions of reporting their own children's CSA experiences to the authorities as well as their willingness to report their knowledge of possible CSA cases involving children from other families.

1.1. Reporting and underreporting of CSA

In order to protect children by better identifying those who are experiencing or are at risk for abuse, most developed countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Canada have enacted mandatory reporting laws stipulating that professionals report suspected child abuse. Indeed, professionals play an important role in this process. Professionals in schools, law-enforcement services, child health fields, social services, mental health fields, and child daycare services were the source of nearly 60% of the child abuse reports made to the Child Protective Services agency in the United States in 2006 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008).

However, evidence has proven that the underreporting of child abuse still remains a significant problem even in these high-income countries that have enacted mandatory reporting laws (Gilbert et al., 2009; Webster, O'Toole, O'Toole, & Lucal, 2005). The widening gap between the occurrence of CSA and rate at which cases are being reported to authorities means that a large number of children suspected of being sexually abused have not gained the chance to receive protective services. Although many scholars have suggested the importance of improving how professionals report CSA (e.g., Talsma, Boström, & Östberg, 2015), it is also worthwhile to consider whether or not other sources, such as parents and neighbors, are reliable and effective when it comes to reporting CSA cases.

Given the adverse and long-lasting effects of CSA on child victims, a wide variety of efforts that aim to prevent CSA before its occurrence have been developed and implemented around the world (Butchart, Harvey, Mian, & Färniss, 2006). Understanding the interactions between various factors at the individual, relationship, community, and society levels has become critically important in addressing the problem of child abuse (World Health Organization, 2006). More and more scholars have suggested the investment of a broad scope of efforts to prevent CSA via the involvement of professionals, parents, neighbors, and entire communities (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002; Wurtele, 2009). The practice of reporting child abuse cases have been identified as one of the pathways by which neighborhoods can impact child abuse (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007). In order to develop and implement effective prevention programs at the community and society levels, therefore, it is important to explore the reporting intentions and reporting willingness of parents, neighbors, and other ordinary citizens living in neighborhoods with children.

1.2. Parents' role in reporting CSA

Parents are vital when it comes to reporting and preventing CSA. For example, parents are usually the first to observe the potential symptoms of sexual abuse in their children (Pullins & Jones, 2006) due to the intimate relationship between those parents and children and to their close interactions in daily life. Also, it is very common for children to disclose CSA experiences to their parents, as children usually prefer to discuss sensitive personal issues with a trusted person in a natural and private context (Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Mossige, Reichelt, & Tjersland, 2005). How parents respond to CSA cases after their children's disclosure has been proven to have a significant impact on the psychological well-being and later adjustment of CSA survivors (Godbout, Briere, Sabourin, & Lussier, 2014). Even in intra-familial CSA cases, non-offending parents may be the most likely potential observers and important resources for their children (Elliott & Carnes, 2001). Therefore, it is critical to recognize that parents are a potential source of reports of possible CSA cases and to understand how they decide whether or not to report such cases.

It may be harder and more complicated for parents to make a decision about whether or not to report suspected CSA cases that involve their own children than it is for professionals or other people unrelated to those children. First of all, parents may lack adequate knowledge for defining CSA (Mathoma, Maripe-Perera, Khumalo, Mbayi, & Seloilwe, 2006) or recognizing CSA symptoms (Pullins & Jones, 2006). Also, parents often experience significant trauma or depression following the disclosure or discovery of the sexual abuse of their children (Elliott & Carnes, 2001). Moreover, as a result of the disclosure of their children's CSA, non-offending parents may experience "reporting costs", including relational, financial, vocational, and residential changes and losses (Massat & Lundy, 1998). Due to these emotional adjustment problems and "reporting costs", parents of abused children may face more barriers in reporting suspected cases of CSA.

1.3. Previous studies

The current knowledge regarding parental intentions of reporting CSA is very limited. Some scholars have attempted to investigate the reliability of parents' reports and found that parents may significantly underestimate the severity of the situation when reporting on the maltreatment of their children (Kolko, Kazdin, & Day, 1996). By using parent-child matched samples, Chan compared both parents' and children's reports of child maltreatment in Hong Kong (2012) and of child victimization in six Chinese cities (2015). His studies revealed low to moderate levels of parent-child agreement when it came to reporting. Chan (2015) suggested that social desirability and violence approval were the common predictors of

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