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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Children's disclosure of sexual abuse during early forensic psychiatric evaluation in Southern Taiwan

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Background/Purpose: Many surveys of child sexual abuse (CSA) in Western countries focus on the victims' disclosures and their associated factors during forensic interviews, but similar data in Asian countries is scarce. We explored the disclosure rate of CSA allegations during forensic interviews in South Taiwan and the factors predicting such disclosure. We compared our findings with those of previous studies.

Methods: Data were collected from written forensic psychiatric reports of CSA victims who underwent early forensic psychiatric evaluation at two hospitals in Kaohsiung City from 2010 to 2015. All cases were divided into categories of full or nonfull disclosures. We identified the variables that distinguished between the two groups in bivariate analyses using the independent *t* test and the Chi-square test. Binary logistic regression analysis was done to determine whether those significant correlates in the bivariate analyses were independent predictors of full disclosure.

Results: Among the 55 cases, 32 (58%) were full disclosures. Older age at first interview (odds ratio = 1.39), no diagnosis of mental retardation (odds ratio = 0.04), and experiencing sexual abuse more than once (odds ratio = 5.90) were positive factors independently related to the full disclosure of CSA allegations.

Conclusion: The rate of disclosure under the program was comparable to that of prior studies. This may suggest a role for early forensic psychiatric evaluation of children to promote

Conflicts of interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest relevant to this article.

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disclosure of CSA allegations. We hope the findings may serve as a basis for future studies of CSA disclosure and associated factors in Taiwanese society.

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Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is considered an important societal concern in the world. A recent meta-analysis showed the overall estimated CSA prevalence was 127/1000 in self-reported studies and 4/1000 in informant-reported studies.¹ In addition, other comparative studies also pointed to a low CSA prevalence among Asians.² However, the current data may not reflect the actual incidence of CSA for two reasons. First, some children did not disclose abuse or report to agencies. Second, the diagnosis of CSA is often challenging because definitive medical or physical evidence is lacking or inconclusive in many cases.³ Given these limitations, children's testimonies are the most significant evidence by which fact-finders may evaluate the validity of the CSA allegation.⁴

Understanding why some victims tend to disclose their abuse during a forensic interview could help shed some light on the nature of disclosure and suggest new practice methods to facilitate disclosure. Much of the previous literature has focused on the identification of factors influencing children's disclosure during forensic interviews. A review of these studies indicated that being male, young, experiencing less severe abuse, having a close relationship with the perpetrator, and an unsupportive caregiver were risk factors for delaying disclosure of CSA.^{3–7} Recently, psychological variables related to disclosure have been identified such as being believed, feeling shame/self-blame, and fear of negative consequences.^{8,9} Moreover, researchers also examined whether disclosure varied according to race and ethnicity. For example, victims from Hispanic and Asian backgrounds have more difficulty disclosing abuse because of their cultural norms.^{10,11} Such findings remind professionals who interview children about CSA that they need to conduct their interviews in culturally competent ways.

Despite extensive research into children's disclosures of CSA and its predictors over the last three decades in Western societies, very few studies of CSA disclosure have been conducted in Asian societies. A study undertaken in Korea, focusing on psychosocial factors influencing the competency of children's testimonies, found that the competence of statements of CSA victims is significantly related to parental emotional states and support.¹² One review probing into low rates of CSA in China indicated a great reluctance to disclose among Chinese victims. However, possible indicators of disclosure reluctance could not be confirmed.² No research findings are yet available concerning children's disclosures of CSA in Taiwan.

This research analyzed data from the early forensic psychiatric evaluation (EFPE) of CSA allegations. The Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Prevention Center of

the Social Affairs Bureau of the Kaohsiung City Government began to execute the EFPE program in August 2010. This program aimed to improve the validity of the forensic interviews and to reduce the numbers of repetitive statements the victims needed to make for official purposes. When a child suspected of being sexually abused was reported to the judicial authority, the City would refer the case within 1 month to the designated hospital for a forensic interview and a psychiatric evaluation. The victims in this program had never made complete statements of sexual abuse during a formal investigation before referral to the EFPE program, which is different from the general forensic psychiatric evaluation in Taiwan. Thus, psychiatric evaluations certainly included a fact finding element to assess the validity of the children's testimonies.

The purpose of this study was to examine the disclosure rates in the program and the characteristics that predicted disclosure during forensic interviews for comparison to previously published studies. Moreover, we explored the effect of any psychopathology on the disclosure of CSA.

Methods

Participants

The current study utilized data obtained from written forensic psychiatric reports for each child in the EFPE program. Forensic CSA interviews were performed at two hospitals in Kaohsiung City between August 1, 2010 and February 28, 2015. The children who were interviewed (cases) were enrolled in the present study. The type of abuse experienced ranged from sexual fondling to vaginal or anal penetration. During the period of study, 57 cases of alleged CSA (child age, 2–16 years) were referred to the two designated hospitals for evaluation by the Kaohsiung District Prosecutors Office. Two cases were excluded due to marked inconsistencies in the victims' testimonies. The study sample finally comprised 55 cases for subsequent data analysis. To protect the confidentiality of the data, only one member of the research team (first author) engaged in data analysis. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the two program hospitals. Since this was a retrospective study with no identifiable participant information in any of the written reports, informed consent was not required for this study.

Each child was evaluated by a multidisciplinary team consisting of a child psychiatrist, a child psychologist, and a social worker. Although this program was performed at two different hospitals, the multidisciplinary professional team followed the standard step-by-step procedure to maintain the reliability and validity of the forensic evaluation. Each case was evaluated by the following procedure. Firstly, the

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