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A Literature Review on the Lack of Research of Emotional Abuse and the Repercussions

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Abstract

This paper addresses different types of abuse and ways of defining them, and it then focuses on emotional abuse. The paper acknowledges the more commonly known types of abuse such as physical, domestic, or sexual abuse. This paper also presents types of abuse that are less heard of such as spiritual, financial, and emotional abuse. Just because these forms of abuse often go unsaid, they occur frequently and are important to consider. This paper takes a stand that these forms of abuse are arguably as or more important because they don't get the mass coverage that other types of abuse do. Furthermore, this paper examines how emotional abuse is overlooked but common. When emotional abuse gets downplayed or swept under the rug by people in power, friends, or family, then there can be significant damage to the victim. This paper provides a review of the literature and notes that there are many limitations both when looking for research on this topic and conducting research on this topic. There needs to be more education on what emotional abuse is, yet definitions vary greatly from source to source.

Keywords: Emotional abuse, abuse, definitions of abuse, unspoken abuse

A Literature Review on the Lack of Research of Emotional Abuse and the Repercussions

There are many different types of abuse and many different ways of defining them but the one that goes unnoticed and unreported in both the scientific community and in society is emotional abuse. There are the more commonly known types such as physical, domestic, or sexual abuse that some might often hear through social media, news sites, and even government sites. And then there are the types that are not heard of such as spiritual, financial, and emotional abuse. Just because they go often unreported does not make them any less frequent or important. It actually makes them arguably as or more important because they don't get the mass coverage that other types of abuse do. Not only is emotional abuse overlooked, but it is more common than you might think. Emotional abuse isn't physical like other types of abuse; while physical wounds can heal, mental wounds take time, effort, therapy, and much more. When emotional abuse gets downplayed or swept under the rug by people in power, friends, or family, then there can be significant damage to the victim. According to the California Child Welfare Indicators Project (CCWIP) from April 2022 to March 2023, out of 442,179 allegations 51,709 were from emotional abuse which is a significant amount. It is also important to note that there are many limitations both when looking for research on this topic and conducting research on this topic. This is because society is not educated on what emotional abuse is, but it can't be properly taught when the definitions of emotional abuse, child maltreatment, and abuse vary greatly from source to source.

When dealing with any kind of abuse it may go underreported. University of Southern California (USC) researchers found that "A lack of understanding about what constitutes emotional abuse often causes the problem to go unidentified in children referred to child

protective agencies” (Dory, 2019). In a study they reviewed 303 cases and found almost 50% of the samples included emotional abuse but that contrasted with the 9 percent that the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) listed (Dory, 2019). This can be due to many factors such as victims' apprehension to report their abusers, the lack of attention to emotional abuse, and lack of clarity about emotional abuse, definitions and classifications of what constitutes emotional abuse. Because emotional abuse is not commonly known, people are unaware that they are experiencing emotional abuse. The lack of seriousness surrounding emotional abuse may cause long-term consequences one example possibly being worse retention rates and lower academic scores in children.

Emotional abuse is important to understand, especially because of its comorbidity and overlap with other disorders and other types of abuse that often follow the start of or during emotional abuse. This means that emotional abuse may be a factor or a precursor to other disorders or types of abuse. This is shown in the academic article, “Does The Mandate Make a Difference? Reporting Decisions in Emotional Abuse” by Russell Carleton he states “Evidence has also shown that emotional abuse may be a factor in the development of eating disorders (Rorty et al., 1994), low self-esteem and suicide attempts (Mullen et al., 1995), as well as stunted physical development and self-mutilating behavior (Iwaniec, 1996). Kent and Waller (1998) found that being emotionally abused was a better predictor of depression and anxiety disorders in adulthood than was being physically abused” (Carleton, 2006). Emotional abuse being a factor in all these negative behaviors is extremely concerning, especially due to the fact that the general public is left unaware.

Emotional abuse should be properly researched so both researchers and the public can be more educated on this topic. Because all these behaviors can coincide with emotional abuse and it is perceived improperly this causes emotional abuse to be responded to inadequately. While researching this issue the data was extremely limited. There was a lot of research on similar topics such as domestic abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. Many of these articles listed emotional abuse briefly but never went in-depth into the issue. Because emotional abuse can have emotional development, behavior, and mental health problems it must be further researched so that it can help researchers and the general public understand this complex issue.

This review was conducted using the search terms; Emotional abuse, Academic Achievement, Adverse Childhood Experience, Causes of Emotional Abuse, Child, Child Maltreatment, Academic Success, Graduation Rates, Test Scores, Reporting Abuse, and Reporting Emotional Abuse.

Definitions

There are many different definitions of emotional abuse, but the definitions of abuse are vastly different in terms of the criteria that encompass abuse. For example, the California Department of Education's (CDE) (2023) presents the following definition of emotional abuse:

Child Abuse and/or Child Neglect Can Be Any of the Following: A physical injury inflicted on a child by another person other than by accidental means. / The sexual abuse, assault, or exploitation of a child. / The negligent treatment or maltreatment of a child by a person responsible for the child's welfare under circumstances indicating harm or threatened harm to the child's health or welfare. This is whether the harm or threatened harm is from acts or omissions on the part of the responsible person. / The willful

harming or endangerment of the person or health of a child, any cruel or inhumane corporal punishment or any injury resulting in a traumatic condition. (California Department of Education, 2023).

Comparatively, Child Protective Services (CPS) (2023) states that their services are:

Available to children and their families when children are victims of, or at risk of, abuse, neglect, exploitation, or parental absence. California law defines child abuse as any of the following: A child is physically injured by other than accidental means. / A child is subjected to willful cruelty or unjustifiable punishment. / A child is abused or exploited sexually. / A child is neglected by a parent or caretaker who fails to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care or supervision" (Department of Social Services, 2023).

The two definitions are the same in how they include and cover physical abuse, sexual abuse, and physical neglect, but where the two definitions stray from one another is in the way they cover emotional abuse. The CDE says that indicating or threatening harm and also cruel inhumane punishment is considered abuse whereas CPS only lists a child being “subjected to willful cruelty or unjustifiable punishment” (Department of Social Services, 2023). Severe punishments could be constructed or construed as physical, but they could also be emotional. These definitions do not significantly encompass emotional abuse.

The CPS’s criteria may or may not include emotional abuse to the point where they can give children the help they deserve and get out of an abusive household. CPS states that they are “the major system of intervention of child abuse and neglect in California. Existing law provides for services to abused and neglected children and their families. The Child Protective Services

goal is to keep the child in his/her own home when it is safe, and when the child is at risk, to develop an alternate plan as quickly as possible” (Department of Social Services, 2023). The definition given by governmental sites should include a definition to help victims of all types of abuse. Based on all the harmful factors that coincide with emotional abuse, the topic needs to be more researched so the government can create a concise definition that fully encompasses the issue in its entirety.

The federal definition provides a minimum set of acts or behaviors that define child abuse and neglect in order to give the states guidance in their own definition. The federal government defines child abuse in the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) as found in *The Child Welfare Information Gateway* which is produced and sponsored by U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, and Children’s Bureau and they state the federal definition of child abuse and neglect is, “Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation”; or ‘An act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm’” (*Definitions of Child Abuse & Neglect*, 2023). On the same government website, they state:

While CAPTA provides definitions for sexual abuse and the special cases of neglect related to withholding or failing to provide medically indicated treatment, it does not provide specific definitions for other types of maltreatment such as physical abuse, neglect, or emotional abuse. While Federal legislation sets minimum standards for States that accept CAPTA funding, each State provides its own definitions of maltreatment within civil and criminal statutes” (*Definitions of Child Abuse & Neglect*, 2023).

Both of these quotes demonstrate how broad the federal definition is, which is then given to the states in order for them to interpret and adjust in the way they see fit.

Misrepresented in data

Because the United States federal government gives such a broad definition of what abuse and emotional abuse is, this means that each state has a different way that they define abuse. Because each state has a different definition this can in turn affect the rates of reporting. This is shown through Sara Oon's article titled, "Emotional Abuse is Inadequately Defined and Measured" when she states, "While all states provide specific definitions for physical and sexual abuse, only 33 states currently define emotional abuse or mental injury. Many of these definitions include language such as 'injury to psychological capacity' and 'impairment in the child's ability to function.' However, actual definitions vary widely across states" (Oon, 2015). Oon states that, "Researchers believe the disparity in rates can be attributed to a difference in how emotional abuse is defined and measured instead of a difference in actual incidence rates" (2015). This difference can affect the reporting/incidence rates and make them look much higher or lower than they actually are. In the article they cite that in 2013 Michigan reported that 46 percent of child abuse victims experience emotional abuse whereas in Illinois they only reported 1 percent (Oon, 2015). It raises a level of concern that both of these states took from the same federal definition and their numbers are so conflicting. Despite this data disparity states definitions are still lacking, Definitions still remain too broad, or just are not provided at all. In order for the state government to issue a concise and accurate definition that covers all bases of what emotional abuse is and all the consequences that come with it there needs to be research to investigate what it is and how to combat it.

The way that child maltreatment allegations are displayed in the California Child Welfare Indicators Project is specific. The California Child Welfare Indicators Project data includes the following:

Sexual Abuse, General Neglect, Caretaker Absence/Incapacity, Missing, Physical Abuse, Exploitation, At Risk/Sibling Abused, Severe Neglect, Emotional Abuse, and Substantial Risk. From April 2022 to March 2023 the highest 5 allegations were General Neglect with 198,505 cases, Physical Abuse with 79,610 cases, Emotional Abuse with 51,709 cases, At Risk/Sibling Abused with 51,126 cases, and Sexual Abuse with 50,275 cases. Emotional abuse is the third highest allegation and is still unrepresented in research and in the government. In the description of their data, they state that “These reports count each child with a child maltreatment allegation once for each analysis year. If a child has more than one allegation in a specific year, they are counted one time in the category of the most severe occurrence” (California Child Welfare Indicators Project, 2023).

All types of child maltreatment have their own consequences and are just as valid as others. Emotional abuse can be just as damaging to the victim as physical, sexual, and neglect. By not counting all types of abuse or maltreatment that occur, this can skew data and make it look like one has which can affect what the data looks like. This means that allegations that are considered “less severe” are misrepresented with lower numbers than the reality and on the other hand allegations that are considered “more severe” are shown with larger comparative numbers. This can cause people to create false views on which allegations are most prevalent. This means that research focuses are shifted and are improperly veered towards other issues because of the misrepresented data.

When researching this topic, it was clear that there are many different terms that are used to discuss abuse. One of the terms that kept reappearing was child maltreatment. One definition is from the article “Neuropsychological Findings in Pediatric Maltreatment: Relationship of PTSD, Dissociative Symptoms, and Abuse/Neglect Indices to Neurocognitive Outcomes” by Micheal De Bellis, Donald Woolley, and Stephen Hooper, they define child maltreatment as, “witnessing domestic violence (which was state defined as neglect by omission or commission and/or emotional abuse), physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and/or neglect” (De Bellis et al., 2013). The use of the word child maltreatment was extremely prevalent in articles about abuse. While the definition of child maltreatment lists emotional abuse, articles that studied issues of child maltreatment consistently disregarded emotional abuse and it often went completely unmentioned in articles, this is shown in a meta-analysis about maltreatment of children was conducted in 2018.

This meta-analysis is titled “A Multilevel Meta-analysis on Academic Achievement Among Maltreated Youth” by Austin McGuire and Yo Jackson, they analyzed 72 studies on child maltreatment. They took 32 of those 72 studies and analyzed them. From those studies they found that “there were no studies with only emotionally abused youth” (McGuire & Jackson, 2018). This shows a significant need for more studies on emotional abuse. It is crucial that we investigate this area further in order to understand how emotional abuse can affect all types of areas in someone's life. This leads to the question of why emotional abuse is being excluded from research on child maltreatment when it is clearly stated in the definition. Carlton suggests that “This statistical discrepancy may be due to the fact that emotional abuse is often perceived as the least serious and reportable form of child abuse (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Newberger, 1983; Pierce and Bozalek, 2004). Further, it is generally accepted that only a small minority of cases of

child abuse, in any form, ever come to the attention of the proper authorities” (Carleton, 2006). Doing more research on emotional abuse can help in determining how large the number of cases go underreported which in turn will lead to a better understanding of the issue and work towards getting a more accurate account of the problem.

Academic Achievement

Because emotional abuse is missing from the majority of studies this can cause the effects and consequences connected to emotional abuse to go uninvestigated, unrecorded, and unreported. One possible consequence of emotional abuse in childhood is a negative relationship with academic achievement. As emotional abuse rises in a child’s life, academic achievement decreases. There are many studies on child maltreatment and its effects on academic achievement. Nevertheless, there is a substantial lack of research on emotional abuse and its possible connection to academic achievement in children.

The relationship between child maltreatment and academic achievement is shown through the meta-analysis by Austin McGuire and Yo Jackson that took the following results:

Results from the current meta-analysis, reviewing the findings of 72 studies, suggest that maltreated youth tend to score lower on measures of academic achievement as compared to non-maltreated youth. This was evidenced by an overall negative effect in the medium range. Youth with experiences of maltreatment performed over one-half of a standard deviation on average below those youth with no experiences of maltreatment. When considering the size of this effect with regard to a commonly used standardized measure of academic, such as the WIAT or WJ-IV, with a typical standard deviation of 15 points, this suggests that maltreated youth may score approximately 10 points lower on average.

This might also indicate that youth with experiences of maltreatment receive on average greater than one letter grade below non-maltreated peers” (McGuire & Jackson, 2018).

One letter grade below other academic peers is comparatively a large setback. Child maltreatment includes emotional abuse in its definition so it should be considered as a possible factor or correlation in the relationship with academic achievement. While this does not solely address the relationship between emotional abuse and academic achievement it is important to mention that Austin McGuire and Yo Jackson also stated the following:

Furthermore, there is also a need for more research on the specific academic functioning of youth with experiences of emotional abuse. Overall, there is a considerable lack of research examining the influence of emotional abuse and no research available on the academic functioning of emotionally abused youth in particular" (Maguire et al. 2015). This is concerning given that emotional abuse can have significant negative consequences on emotional, behavioral, and social functioning, all of which are areas of functioning that can contribute to how youth perform in school” (McGuire & Jackson, 2018).

There is a considerable need for research on emotional abuse to understand the consequences it may have on children including how it can affect them academically. While there is a lack of research on the connection between emotional abuse and academic achievement there has been research on the connection between trauma exposure and academic achievement. One example is from the researchers Micheal De Bellis, Donald Woolley, and Stephen Hooper, their study on maltreatment and post-traumatic stress disorder’s (PTSD) effect on academic achievement showed that, “Experiencing a greater number of maltreatment types was negatively

associated with the academic achievement domain, suggesting cumulative effects of trauma unrelated to PTSD” (De Bellis et al., 2013). This suggests that the more child maltreatment occurs is correlated with an academic achievement decrease. Because emotional abuse is a form of maltreatment it should be properly investigated and researched to fully understand the repercussions of this abuse.

Another example of correlation between trauma exposure and academic achievement is from the article “Interpersonal Trauma Exposure and Cognitive Development in Children to age 8 years: A Longitudinal Study” by Michelle Bosquet Enlow et al., their study found that “Childhood exposure to traumatic events has significant effects on long-term cognitive development, as evidenced by negative associations with intelligence quotient (IQ) scores, language development, and academic achievement” (Bosquet Enlow et al., 2012). Because child maltreatment, PTSD, and exposure to trauma in childhood show a decrease in academic achievement, this shows that the data should not be ignored. This is the reason that emotional abuse should also be given the same attention and made a priority to get children out of all abusive situations including emotional abuse. In order to understand how emotional abuse can affect children's lives more research needs to be completed on both what emotional abuse is but also the correlations that come with emotional abuse.

Adverse Consequences

Emotional abuse is broad not only because of its definition but because there is a lack of research. This means that the depth of the consequences that come along with emotional abuse are unknown. It is important to note that there are many different settings of emotional abuse other than child abuse, which has been the focus of this literature review. Such possible examples

are spousal abuse, elder abuse, and workplace violations. With all these different settings where abuse can occur, there are both short term and long-term consequences that can follow.

Courtney Telloian lists both short term and long-term effects in the article, “*What are the Effects of Emotional Abuse?*”, stating that Short-term effects of emotional abuse include, “isolation and loneliness, self-doubt, shame, confusion, low self-esteem, fear when interacting with others, avoidance of activities related to the incident, and feelings of powerlessness” and long-term effects of emotional abuse include, “mental health conditions, neuroticism, or the tendency toward low mood and negative emotions like anger, chronic stress, physical health challenges like body aches and heart palpitations, attachment challenges, and emotional disconnect or apathy” (Telloian & Litner, 2022). These are all very serious consequences and many of these consequences may cause habits or patterns that develop into significant health problems both mentally and/or physically like listed above. Both long term and short-term consequences can influence children, the brain, relationships, self-image, overall mental health, and physical wellbeing of a person.

Not only do these problems occur in different parts of a victim’s life but they often intersect with one another. This can cause even more damage. This can be best described as comorbidity, this can be explained by Arlin Cuncic in the article *Comorbidities in Mental Health*, where she states that, “Comorbidities are more than one disorder in the same person. For example, if a person is diagnosed with both social anxiety disorder (SAD) and major depressive disorder (MDD), they are said to have comorbid (meaning co-existing) anxiety and depressive disorders” (Cuncic, 2021). Cuncic goes on to explain that it is common for people to be diagnosed with two disorders at the same time whether it be a medical diagnosis and then a mental diagnosis or one mental

diagnosis and then another mental diagnosis (Cuncic, 2021). Comorbidities make it more difficult to treat a patient because you run the risk of medications interfering with each other. (Cuncic, 2021). This can cause damage to the patient but can also make it difficult to research and understand emotional abuse in particular because it is known to be comorbid with other disorders.

There are however some specific disorders that are connected more strongly to emotional abuse than others. This is shown in the article *Understanding the Link Between Emotional Abuse and Addiction* written by Cassidy Webb, she states the following:

Since emotional abuse, mental health, and trauma are the at the root of many addictions, victims are sometimes quick to turn to mood and mind-altering substances to cope with the emotional pain, stress, and anxiety that comes as a result from emotional abuse.

While drugs may provide a victim with temporary relief from feelings of hopelessness and despair by restoring their sense of control, repeated drug abuse can rapidly turn into an addiction” (Webb, 2019).

Drug abuse and addiction may also put victims of abuse into more difficult and dangerous situations, Two possible examples could be losing money due to buying drugs and having to live on the streets or being put in threatening situations in the act of buying drugs. Because research on different types of abuse, more specifically emotional abuse, is lacking there is limited data and research on comorbid mental disorders that are connected with emotional abuse. However, there is research on mental disorders as a whole. Webb states that, “mental health conditions that arise from emotional abuse are strongly linked to drug addiction as approximately half of the individuals who struggle with mental health conditions also suffer

from substance abuse” (Webb, 2019). While this shows that drug addictions are linked to emotional abuse it cannot be known how many individuals suffer from substance abuse due to mental health issues that are caused by emotional abuse or if they are due to different causes. This leaves room for confusion and needs to be further researched.

Conclusion

There are many possible reasons as to why emotional abuse is not researched. Some reasons may be that the stigma of emotional abuse may stop it from being researched properly. Some possible stigma being that emotional abuse is not severe, just in the victim's head, or that it is not common or as common as other types of abuse. The lack of definitions makes emotional abuse hard to place importance on and also hard to criminalize. Another possible reason as to why emotional abuse is not researched could be that it is not viewed as a priority in the eyes of government and society. Some do not view emotional abuse as an immediate risk to the safety of the child. And because the signs of emotional abuse are subtle and not physical, it creates a difficult way to prove that the victim is being hurt or abused.

In order to fully understand and be able to quantify how much emotional abuse occurs and affects both children and society as a whole there needs to be more research in all areas. This includes what emotional abuse is and what it entails and well as the consequences that are correlated with it. In order to do this future research must have valid and reliable ways to measure emotional abuse and also take into account that emotional abuse is highly comorbid with other types of abuse and maltreatment of children. There needs to be more research on emotional abuse to discover a proper and direct definition that fully encompasses the issue.

Based off all of this information it is clear that emotional abuse is a significant issue and both lacks proper definitions and is misrepresented in data about abuse. This means that the ramifications of emotional abuse go uninvestigated and are not included in research. Leaving the consequences to grow unchecked and ignored in society and government. Because this issue is so important there needs to be more research to understand all the effects of emotional abuse.

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