

Disclosure Experiences of Child Sexual Abuse Survivors in the Philippines

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Abstract:

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a pervasive global issue with long-lasting consequences on survivors' mental health and well-being. This study explores the lived experiences of CSA survivors in a public secondary school in Negros Occidental, focusing on their disclosure processes. A descriptive phenomenological research design was utilized to capture the essence of the survivors' experiences, making it particularly suitable for understanding the deeply personal and complex emotions, thoughts, and behaviors associated with CSA disclosure. Four female participants aged 12 to 17 years, identified through purposive sampling and records from the Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office (MSWDO), shared their narratives through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Lichtman's 3Cs method of analysis revealed four major themes: negative emotional responses (fear, shame, and anger), recurrence of trauma memories (anxiety), coping mechanisms (help-seeking and acceptance), and access to support systems (family and institutional support). Ethical safeguards, including informed consent, parental involvement, confidentiality, and the presence of social workers and counselors, ensured a safe and nonjudgmental environment for participants to share their experiences. The findings underscore the profound emotional scars CSA survivors endure, the importance of supportive networks in their recovery, and the critical role of ethical, trauma-informed interventions in encouraging disclosure and fostering healing. This study provides valuable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in designing effective support systems that empower survivors and promote their long-term well-being.

Keywords: Child Sexual Abuse Survivors, Disclosure Context, Female Survivors, Phenomenology, Philippines

Introduction:

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a grave violation of children's rights, carrying devastating and long-lasting consequences. Despite its prevalence, CSA remains one of the most underreported and misunderstood crimes globally. In recent years, the psychological and behavioral impacts of sexual abuse have garnered significant public and academic attention, prompting extensive research into effective counseling practices. Numerous studies confirm that CSA leads to heightened psychological and behavioral symptoms among adolescents and is strongly associated with interpersonal and mental health challenges (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 2020). Counseling services play a pivotal role in addressing the trauma caused by CSA, facilitating recovery, and fostering healing (Viliardos et al., 2022). Immediate access to these services is critical for promoting the psychological and social recovery of survivors (Agordzo et al., 2021).

While CSA affects individuals across the globe, its full scope is often underestimated. The World Health Organization (2024) reports that millions of children experience various forms of sexual abuse annually. Research by Alves, Leitão, Sani, and Moreira (2024) highlights CSA as one of the most detrimental forms of trauma, significantly impacting survivors' mental health and contributing to various disorders. The WHO further defines CSA as the involvement of a child in sexual activities they cannot fully understand, consent to, or are developmentally unprepared for, often perpetrated by individuals in positions of trust or authority, which exacerbates the abuse's harmful effects (Sravanti, 2023).

In Asia, CSA prevalence remains alarmingly high, particularly among early adolescents. Cultural taboos and stigma surrounding CSA exacerbate its underreporting (Solvihati et al., 2021). In the Philippines, despite laws protecting children against sexual exploitation, enforcement remains a challenge, leading to a significant number of CSA cases (Chi, 2023). Survivors are often left to cope with severe mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Manukrishnan & Bhagabati, 2023). Narang et al. (2019) identified several common emotional responses among CSA survivors, including fear, shame, mistrust, relational difficulties, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. Kabahinda (2019) emphasized that persistent depression significantly impairs survivors' ability to function in daily life.

Disclosure is a critical step in addressing CSA, as it enables survivors to access help, protection, and rehabilitation (Alaggia et al., 2019; Landberg Svedin & Jonsson, 2022). Reporting abuse is essential for safeguarding survivors, prosecuting perpetrators, and fostering recovery for affected families (Landberg et al., 2023). However, disclosure

remains fraught with challenges, as many survivors lack awareness of available support services or face barriers in accessing them (Shuman, 2022).

Existing research has primarily focused on the barriers to CSA disclosure, leaving a significant gap in understanding the facilitators that enable survivors to come forward (Brennan & McElvaney, 2020; Landberg et al., 2023). Furthermore, the personal experiences of survivors, particularly from public schools, remain underexplored. This study addresses this gap by investigating the lived experiences of CSA survivors in the Philippines, particularly in the context of their disclosure processes.

The findings of this study aim to contribute to the understanding of factors that motivate CSA survivors to disclose abuse, improve individualized counseling approaches, and strengthen support systems. By shedding light on survivors' experiences, this research seeks to inform policies, enhance interventions, and foster a more supportive environment for CSA survivors.

Methodology:

This section details the research methodology, including the research design, locale, conversation partners, sampling criteria, gatekeepers, research instruments, data collection and analysis procedures, and ethical considerations. It also highlights the study's limitations regarding generalizability and participant selection.

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of child sexual abuse (CSA) survivors during and after disclosure. Phenomenology is particularly suited to this research focus as it captures the depth of participants' emotions, perceptions, and beliefs, revealing the essence of their unique experiences (Giorgi, 1985; Van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994). This approach allows the voices of survivors to be heard authentically, providing a nuanced understanding of their struggles, resilience, and recovery journeys.

The research was conducted in a public secondary school in the Division of Negros Occidental, Philippines. The conversation partners were four female students, aged 12 to 17 years, enrolled in the 2023–2024 academic year. They were identified through purposive sampling with the assistance of the Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office (MSWDO). The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows: (a) they must have experienced sexual abuse; (b) they must be enrolled in a public secondary school; and (c) they must have been reported to the MSWDO as CSA survivors. The small sample size ($n=4$) is consistent with the aims of phenomenological research, which prioritizes depth and richness of individual narratives over breadth. However, it is acknowledged that the limited number of participants restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Instead, the study aims to provide insight into the unique lived experiences of the participants, which may inform interventions for similar contexts. The study focused exclusively on female participants, as the majority of CSA cases reported to the MSWDO during the study period involved female survivors. This decision reflects the demographics of the available cases rather than a disregard for the experiences of male or non-binary survivors. It is important to note that CSA affects individuals of all genders, and future studies should include diverse perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Gatekeepers were essential in facilitating access to the participants and ensuring the ethical conduct of the study. These included the school principal, guidance counselors, and a registered social worker from the MSWDO. Their involvement ensured that the participants met the inclusion criteria and were in a position to provide informed consent. Clear communication and trust-building with these gatekeepers were critical in safeguarding the participants' well-being.

The study employed a semi-structured interview guide to collect data through face-to-face interviews, lasting 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted in a private, safe space and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Open-ended questions allowed participants to share their experiences freely, while probing questions facilitated deeper exploration of their thoughts and feelings. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, where no new themes emerged.

To ensure rigor, Lichtman's (2017) Three Cs method—coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing—was used to analyze the data. Interview transcripts were carefully coded to identify initial clusters of meaning, which were then organized into categories. These categories were refined iteratively, and key themes were conceptualized to represent the essence of the participants' experiences.

Ethical safeguards were paramount in this study. Informed consent was obtained from participants and their parents, with the purpose and procedures of the study explained in Hiligaynon, the participants' native language, to ensure full understanding. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participants' identities and securely handling all data in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were provided emotional support throughout the research process. A social worker and a guidance counselor were present

during and after the interviews to address any distress. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

While this study offers valuable insights into the disclosure experiences of CSA survivors, its limitations must be acknowledged. The small, gender-specific sample restricts the applicability of findings to a broader population. Additionally, focusing solely on female survivors leaves out the voices of male and non-binary individuals, whose experiences may differ significantly. Future research should aim to include participants of all genders and expand the sample size to explore the diversity of experiences and enhance the generalizability of findings. Despite these limitations, the study provides a meaningful contribution by shedding light on the lived experiences of a vulnerable population and highlighting the importance of trauma-informed support systems.

Results and Discussion:

Participants’ Vignettes

The conversation partners provided unique and deeply personal accounts of their lived experiences. Myra, a 15-year-old Grade 10 student, lived with her stepmother while her father worked as a company bus driver. She expressed feelings of vulnerability and anxiety due to being frequently left alone, which placed her at risk of abuse. Desperately seeking relief, Myra confided in her father, driven by the hope of ending her ordeal. However, her hesitation to share openly highlighted her fear of judgment and embarrassment.

Mercia, another 15-year-old Grade 10 student, lived in an isolated home surrounded by rice fields. Sensitive and emotionally intense, Mercia struggled with the trauma of abuse, often resorting to tears and displaying trust issues. Yet, her resilience and determination to seek help stood out, as she found solace in her mother’s unwavering support and love.

Mhara, also 15, came from a household where her mother worked as a nail care provider in school while her father was unemployed. Carrying the burden of trauma in silence, Mhara initially hesitated to disclose her experience due to fear of judgment and retaliation. However, her strong desire for justice motivated her to confide in her mother and teachers, demonstrating her resilience and determination to hold her perpetrator accountable.

Lastly, Merryl, an 18-year-old Grade 12 learner, faced abuse by a tricycle driver. Profoundly vulnerable and traumatized, Merryl exhibited physical symptoms of distress, such as shaking and difficulty breathing, while recounting her experience. Despite her deep-seated fear, Merryl displayed resourcefulness by seeking support from her family, classmates, and police. Her honesty and determination underscored her courage in navigating the challenging path of disclosure.

General Clustering of Relevant Meaning

The table below provides an organized representation of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the narratives of the child sexual abuse survivors, using Lichtman’s 3Cs method of data analysis. It outlines the initial clusters identified from the participants’ experiences, the corresponding themes, and the general clusters of meaning derived from these themes. These clusters encapsulate the central ideas, reflecting the survivors’ emotional responses, coping mechanisms, and the role of support systems in their disclosure journeys. This structured approach highlights the interconnectedness of their experiences and provides a foundation for understanding the complex dynamics of their healing processes.

Cluster Grouping	Initial Cluster Themes	General Clusters of Meaning	Central Ideas/ Themes
I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Always on the look-out Remembering the experience 	Anxiety (Hypervigilance and Intrusive thoughts)	Recurrence of Trauma Memories

III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crying-out to feel relieved • Sharing the burden to others • Expressing future plans • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help-seeking Acceptance and Hope 	Coping Mechanisms
IV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belief and support of family members • • Legal procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emotional Support of the family Assistance of Authorities 	Access to Support System

Theme 1: Negative Emotional Responses

The survivors' emotional responses during and after disclosure were marked by fear, shame, and anger. Fear stemmed from the possible consequences of disclosure, such as retaliation, repeated abuse, and public embarrassment. Myra shared her apprehension about revealing her experience, emphasizing her desperation to stop the abuse despite her fears. Similarly, Mercia disclosed her fear of the perpetrator repeating the abuse, while Mhara expressed anxiety about potential harm if she did not confide in someone. Merryl recounted her overwhelming fear, which manifested in physical symptoms during disclosure.

Shame, another significant emotional response, was evident in feelings of self-blame, embarrassment, and stigma. Myra felt ashamed to face her community, fearing judgment and the perception of guilt. Mercia similarly avoided wearing revealing clothing and became self-conscious, illustrating how shame affected her self-image and behavior. Research supports these findings, highlighting the debilitating effects of shame on survivors, including its role in self-blame, stigma, and avoidance behaviors (McElvaney et al., 2021).

Anger was a recurring emotion among the survivors, often directed toward their perpetrators. Myra expressed her desire to file a case, fueled by her frustration and determination to seek justice. Mercia and Mhara described their fantasies of retaliation, reflecting their unresolved anger and desire for accountability. This aligns with findings by Goldner, Lev-Wiesel, and Simon (2019), which identified feelings of injustice and revenge as common among trauma survivors.

Theme 2: Recurrence of Trauma Memories

The survivors frequently experienced intrusive memories and heightened anxiety, often triggered by specific stimuli or situations. Myra described recurring nightmares about her perpetrator, while Mercia became hypervigilant and uncomfortable with physical touch, even from trusted individuals like her mother. Mhara shared her emotional turmoil when encountering her perpetrator, resulting in physical symptoms such as trembling. Merryl became cautious about riding tricycles, constantly monitoring her surroundings to avoid potential danger.

These findings align with research on PTSD, which identifies hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, and anxiety as common symptoms among trauma survivors (Hembree et al., 2003). Studies have also shown that unresolved trauma memories can impair emotional regulation, further complicating recovery (Koch et al., 2020).

Theme 3: Coping Mechanisms

The survivors employed various coping mechanisms to manage their trauma, including help-seeking behaviors and fostering feelings of acceptance and hope. Help-seeking was a prominent strategy, with participants confiding in trusted individuals such as parents, friends, and authorities. Myra emphasized the relief she felt after crying and sharing her burden with her father. Similarly, Mhara found solace in her mother's support, while Mercia prayed and sought guidance to ease her distress.

Acceptance and hope also emerged as crucial coping mechanisms. Myra, despite her pregnancy resulting from abuse, expressed her intention to continue her education and rebuild her life. Mercia aimed to pursue a career in criminology, motivated by her desire to serve others and seek justice. Mhara demonstrated personal growth and resilience, acknowledging her challenges as opportunities for growth. Merryl planned to enroll in a caregiver program, emphasizing her determination to move forward.

These findings highlight the importance of fostering acceptance and hope as forward-focused coping strategies, which have been shown to enhance resilience and promote positive mental health outcomes (Jordan et al., 2021).

Theme 4: Access to Support Systems

The survivors' recovery was significantly influenced by the availability and quality of emotional and practical support from family members and authorities. Family support, particularly from mothers, played a pivotal role in the survivors' ability to disclose their experiences and begin the healing process. Myra, Mercia, Mhara, and Merryl all described their mothers as their strongest advocates, providing unwavering support and guidance. This aligns with research emphasizing the critical role of maternal support in facilitating disclosure and recovery (Elliott & Carnes, 2018).

The involvement of authorities, including the DSWD, police, and teachers, further reinforced the survivors' sense of safety and validation. For instance, Myra and Mercia received immediate assistance from social workers and medical professionals, while Mhara and Merryl appreciated the empathetic and professional responses of police officers and school personnel. These findings underscore the importance of a coordinated, multidisciplinary approach to addressing CSA, as emphasized by Shuman (2022).

Conclusion:

This study explored the lived experiences of child sexual abuse (CSA) survivors in a public school during and after their disclosure, revealing four major themes: negative emotional responses, recurrence of trauma memories, coping mechanisms, and access to support systems. These findings underscore the complex emotional and psychological challenges faced by survivors and highlight the importance of comprehensive support systems in facilitating their recovery.

The experiences of CSA survivors demonstrate the profound impact of abuse and disclosure on their mental health and well-being. Survivors endure a spectrum of emotions—fear, shame, anger, and anxiety—while navigating the challenges of sharing their stories. Despite these adversities, many survivors exhibit resilience and hope, driven by their determination to seek help and supported by trusted individuals such as family members, educators, and professionals. Emotional support, therapeutic interventions, and the pursuit of justice through disclosure and legal action are pivotal in rebuilding their self-esteem and fostering healing.

Ethical considerations, such as maintaining confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, and providing a safe and nonjudgmental environment, are critical in encouraging disclosure. Building trusting relationships with survivors and offering tailored, compassionate approaches play a crucial role in their willingness to come forward. The presence of supportive figures—parents, peers, educators, counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals—significantly influences the recovery process. Additionally, law enforcement trained in child-friendly and empathetic approaches can strengthen survivors' confidence in seeking justice and ensure a trauma-informed response.

This research offers practical insights for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. For practitioners, the findings emphasize the need to adapt interventions to survivors' unique circumstances while fostering supportive relationships that encourage disclosure. Training for law enforcement and professionals in empathetic and trauma-informed approaches is crucial for enabling survivors to share their experiences safely. Policymakers are encouraged to implement sensitive and survivor-centered approaches across sectors, ensuring coordinated and comprehensive support for CSA survivors. Educational programs and public awareness campaigns can further reduce stigma and promote a culture of compassion and understanding.

Finally, future research should delve deeper into disclosure patterns, the effectiveness of various support systems, and the role of community-based interventions in the recovery process. By integrating these findings into practice, policy, and education, this study provides a holistic framework for enhancing support systems for CSA survivors, empowering them to heal and rebuild their lives with dignity and hope.

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