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Child sexual abuse: a psychoanalytic perspective on trauma in adult life

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE

To discuss the manifestations and consequences of trauma in adults who suffered sexual abuse in childhood.

METHOD

Psychoanalytic perspective of Freud (1920/1996) and Ferenczi (1992). For this, a qualitative documentary research was carried out on the film *Stolen Innocence* (2018), an adaptation of the show *Les Chatouilles*, a French production by directors Andréa Bescond and Éric Métayer.

RESULTS

Child sexual abuse is a violence that affects children from different parts of the world and represents a risk factor for human development, which can leave permanent marks on the victim's life, producing devastation in the psychic structure and causing great damage to the individual.

CONCLUSION

Psychotherapy played an important role in the process of reframing trauma, since it enabled the individual to have a real perception of what was experienced.

KEYWORDS

Child sexual abuse; Trauma; Consequences; Psychoanalysis.

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INTRODUCTION

Child sexual abuse represents a serious form of violence and violation of human rights¹, and is considered a global public health problem.²

In the Statute of the Child and Adolescent (ECA)³, created on July 13, 1990, by Law No. 8,069, with the purpose of ensuring the Federal Constitution of 1988, it was declared that:

It is the duty of the family, society and the State to ensure children and adolescents, with absolute priority, the right to life, health, food, education, leisure, professionalization, culture, dignity, respect, freedom and family and community life, in addition to safeguarding them from all forms of negligence, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty and oppression. (p. 1)

In this scenario, the child has become a subject with rights. However, all forms of child sexual violence, such as sexual abuse, rape, sexual harassment, child pornography, sexual exploitation, pedophilia, among others, violate what is provided for in the ECA. On the Dial 100 channel, created to denounce any violation of human rights, sexual violence ranked fourth as the most reported violation of rights against children and adolescents in the country.⁴

In relation to child sexual abuse, it could be defined as criminal behavior, such as caressing private parts, masturbation, watching or performing sexual acts in front of children and adolescents. In addition, inviting minors to situations involving sexual activities, to which they cannot understand, consent, with or without the use of physical violence is also considered sexual abuse.⁵

Thus, sexual abuse in children can occur in two contexts, being characterized as intrafamilial and extrafamilial. In intra-family life, it occurs between people who live in the same residence or have some degree of kinship, such as parents, grandparents, or uncles. In the extra-family sphere, sexual abuse involves people outside the family circle, such as neighbors or close friends.⁶

However, the consequences of child sexual abuse become harmful and subjective for each child, depending on how the abuse was experienced, at what age it occurred, the frequency of violence and how the trauma was elaborated, which may manifest itself in some serious psychopathology or suicide attempts.⁷

This study used the film *Stolen Innocence* (2018) for discussion and reflection on the topic in question. In this plot, it can be observed that the main character suffered extra-family sexual abuse from a close friend of the family, who had free access to the residence. Thus, the objective of the present study was to discuss the manifestations and consequences of trauma in adults who suffered sexual abuse in childhood.

METHODOLOGY

This article was developed through a qualitative documentary research of the film *Stolen Innocence* (2018). According to Henriques and Medeiros⁸, this methodology is close to the bibliographic review, but differs in that it uses other types of primary documents, such as public or private archives, reports, films etc.

This research focused on the in-depth understanding of human phenomena, searching for documents that used methods such as interviews, focus groups and content analysis. It aims to search for *insights* into the subjective experience of the subject and the meanings attributed to events.

The film *Stolen Innocence* (2018) was an adaptation of the show *Les Chatouilles*, a French production by directors Andréa Bescond and Éric Métayer, which portrayed the story of a victim of sexual abuse in childhood. Screenwriter and director Andréa Bescond suffered abuse and turned to this film to explore the subject through dramaturgy. The first moment consisted of understanding the film in its entirety and then, some scenes were examined as a category of analysis, in particular the report about the abuse and the victim's adult life, which demonstrated the impact of the trauma and the possible consequences over the years.

Regarding the elucidation of the topic in question, a bibliographic survey was carried out on the *Scielo*, *Lilacs*, *PubMed* and *EBSCOhost* platforms for scientific articles with denomi-

nations such as "child sexual abuse", "consequences of child sexual abuse in the adult phase/life" and "trauma in psychoanalysis", from 2014 to 2024.

In addition, theses, monographs and books in Portuguese and English were searched, in the period of 10 years, also from 2014 to 2024. Other sources of data were also analyzed, such as laws, epidemiological bulletins from the Ministry of Health, decrees and norms that regulate child protection, as well as educational materials, such as booklets for the prevention of child sexual abuse, and websites related to the theme.

In the inclusion criterion, the documents that were within the theme addressed were observed, as well as the period and objectives defined to analyze the concept of child sexual abuse and the scenes of the film.

However, psychoanalytic authors who addressed the theme were used, proposing an interdisciplinary analysis between theory and plot. Freud (1920-1996) and Ferenczi (1992), who discussed the subject in their theories, became indispensable authors for the preparation of this article.

Finally, the completed readings were recorded. For Medeiros⁹, "it is the transcription of data on forms, for later consultation and reference. The essential elements of the work are noted".

In this research, significant challenges were faced in the search for relevant information on the subject, within the stipulated period and on the definition of child sexual abuse. Another point was the scarcity of documents with recent epidemiological data, which highlighted the need for more research on the subject.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Child sexual abuse

The definition of child sexual abuse is complex for several authors. It is a type of violence that affects individuals under 14 years of age, who are considered vulnerable due to their stage of psychic development and limited capacity for judgment.¹⁰

According to the Childhood¹¹ website, child sexual abuse is a way for adults to obtain satisfaction through children and adolescents, with or without physical contact or manipulation/seduction. With physical contact, this includes touching the genitals, attempting sexual intercourse, masturbation, oral sex or penetration, as well as forcing kisses and touches on other parts of the body. Without physical contact, it would be sexual harassment, verbal sexual abuse, exhibitionism, voyeurism and the exhibition of pornographic material.

In relation to abusers, "Most of the time, the abuser has some bond with the victim (father, mother, stepfather, neighbor, nanny, uncles, older brothers, family friends, teachers)." (p. 4).¹⁰

Therefore, in the intrafamily context, incest was found, which referred to sexual relations between people from the same family, consanguineous or considered part of it, such as stepfathers or stepmothers. This practice was considered transgressive both before the law and by society. Sexual abuse, whether incestuous or not, could cause great consequences at the child's psychic level.⁶ In this way, feelings of guilt, shame, low self-esteem, anguish and fear could arise. The trauma experienced in childhood often resurfaced in adulthood, triggered by some stimulus, such as flashbacks of sexual abuse. The scenes were not stored in the memory with a beginning, middle and end, the memories appeared as fragments of physical sensations, isolated images and sounds.¹²

In the context of the cinematographic work, in one scene, the main character, Odette, reported to the psychologist her memories, as if she were reliving the episodes of sexual abuse and rape suffered in childhood. By accessing these memories with the help of the psychologist, it was possible to elaborate and understand the trauma she had faced.

According to Article 213 of the Brazilian Penal Code¹³, rape is the act of forcing someone, through violence or serious threat, to have sexual relations or to practice, or allow to be practiced, another libidinous act. In other words, it is forced penetration without the consent of the other party.

Regarding victims, it is important to highlight that any child can suffer sexual abuse, regardless of socioeconomic issues,

age, gender, religion or race. However, the majority of reported cases of sexual violence, including all forms, are female, accounting for 76.8% of the cases.¹⁴ In general, including males and females, children aged 0 to 9 years accounted for 83.3% of the reported cases, and the most common place for these episodes was the home itself, representing 70.9% of the reported cases.¹⁴

In Brazil, May 18 was considered the National Day to Combat Sexual Abuse and Exploitation against Children and Adolescents, constituted by Law No. 9,970. The date was created in memory of Araceli Cabrera Sánchez Crespo, a child who was kidnapped, suffered various violence and was murdered. This date represents an attempt to raise awareness among the population about this violation of children's and adolescents' rights.¹⁵

Intra-family and extra-family sexual abuse

In child sexual abuse characterized as intrafamily, the aggressor was linked to the victim by blood ties, legality or affinity. Examples of bullies include parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles, etc. Due to legal conditions and/or responsibility in cases of adoption, guardianship or obtaining custody, or by affinity, as in the case of stepmothers, stepfathers, brothers-in-law, among others.¹⁶

In general, in these cases, the aggressors can initiate the abuse in a subtle way, with gifts, extra attention, games, using the child's innocence and vulnerability to get closer and gain the victim's trust.¹⁷ In addition, seduction and few physical contacts are used, and physical contacts such as vaginal or anal penetration can be gradually inserted.¹⁸

These abusers were characterized as incestuous, evidencing a deep-rooted and complex power dynamic within the family context, representing a very significant threat to the child's development with risks to psychological and physical health, which can cause, in more severe cases, death.¹

According to the epidemiological bulletin released by the Ministry of Health¹⁹, cases involving children aged 0 to 9 years, including all forms of sexual violence, accounted for 38.9% of the cases in which a family member was the aggressor.

It is important to emphasize that this type of abuse is extremely difficult to stop due to the proximity between the victim and the aggressor, the fact that the child is often unaware that he or she is being abused or is denied.²⁰

With regard to extra-family child sexual abuse, it occurs outside the family environment, with the abuser being a person known or unknown to the victim. Examples of abusers are friends, neighbors, teachers, doctors, religious leaders, or unknown people. With regard to extra-family child sexual abuse, it occurs outside the family environment, with the abuser being a person known or unknown to the victim. Examples of abusers are friends, neighbors, teachers, doctors, religious leaders, or unknown people.

In this extra-family perspective, seduction and the use of the child's innocence can also occur, because regardless of the method, there was, in this relationship, an inequality of power, with the aggressor having an advantage over the victim, who is in the development phase.¹⁶ In this scenario, the registered notifications showed that friends or strangers were 25.4% of the cases, and strangers, 6.2% of the cases.¹⁹

In addition, this type of violence harms and causes catastrophic consequences for the victim, and may facilitate the development of some pathologies.²¹

Trauma in psychoanalysis

The term "trauma" can encompass several meanings, since each author has a conviction about this phenomenon. In medicine, for example, it refers to a physical injury caused to the body, such as a fall resulting in a fracture of a limb. In psychoanalysis, on the other hand, trauma can be interpreted as a profoundly threatening or disturbing experience that exceeded the capacity of psychic mechanisms to process it.²²

At the dawn of Freudian psychoanalysis, this theorist began his studies with hysteria, a symptomatic manifestation that was part of the neuroses and that did not have a clear organic cause, but which presented several symptoms that characterized it as a psychic trauma²³. It was believed that this phenomenon required two conditions to be conceived,

one of them sexual in nature and the other occurring before puberty. Thus, the theory of seduction emerged, which, in other words, would be the sexual abuse of children, perpetrated mainly by the father.²⁴ This theory was abandoned around 1897.²³

After the theory of seduction, it was realized that unconscious fantasies played a crucial role in neuroses, as well as the Oedipus complex. Unconscious fantasies are formed from repressed desires and internal conflicts, and can be activated by traumatic experiences.²⁵ According to Hall, Lindzey and Campbell²⁶:

The Oedipus complex consists of a sexual cathexis in the parent of the opposite sex and a hostile cathexis in the parent of the same sex. The boy wants to possess his mother and drive away his father; The girl wants to possess her father and push her mother away. These feelings are expressed in the child's fantasies during masturbation and in the alteration of acts of love and rebellion in relation to the parents. (p. 66).

While psychoanalysis deepened its knowledge of infantile sexuality, it was concluded that the Oedipus complex was fundamental, since the structuring of the subject's psychic life took place around it and the unconscious fantasies.²⁷ The Oedipus complex, with its conflicts and desires, replaced the theory of seduction with a more comprehensive interpretation for psychic development and neuroses. Another important discovery was the repression defense mechanism.²⁸

The defense mechanisms are generated by the ego unconsciously, to remove unpleasant contents from consciousness, without the individual having a choice. The objective was to defend the psychic apparatus.²⁷ The ego is the rational psychic instance of the personality, which composed the triad Id, ego and superego, which acts between instinct and morality.²⁹

The repression defense mechanism does not erase memories from memory, they are simply left in the unconscious. "Repressed memories are not deleted by the mind, they are only hidden".³⁰ That is, the trauma of sexual abuse may have remained dormant, until some triggering factor brings it to consciousness, as happened to the main character of the film, in a scene in which she was preparing for a dance performance and her classmates gave her a towel similar to the one she had received in childhood, and that the abuser used to clean himself up, causing some *flashbacks*.

The concept of trauma continued to evolve in psychoanalysis, but these early *insights* into Freudian theory provided the foundation for future investigations and understandings of the impact of trauma on the human psyche.

For Ferenczi³¹, another psychoanalytic theorist, there are two distinct languages used by children and adults, the language of tenderness and the language of passion. The child has tenderness as his language, because he has not yet advanced to the later stages of development. Adults, on the other hand, because they have more knowledge, use the language of passion, but are able to move between them, because they have already passed the previous stage of development and have reached the sexual stage of development.

Thus, an adult who had psychopathological tendencies would end up confusing children's games with those of a person who had already developed sexual maturity and would not be able to discern that the child, despite showing some desires in the game, was only experiencing play, and that there are no sexual desires involved. This lack of distinction ended up leading this adult to commit the sexual act (abuse), without thinking about the consequences.³¹

Therefore, trauma is a significant event in the individual's life that can cause psychological damage (emotional, cognitive and behavioral), in interpersonal relationships, in affective and sexual life. It is an event that stands out for the intensity and inability of the subject to react appropriately. In addition, it is characterized by an excess of excitations that exceeds the subject's capacity for tolerance and his ability to process these excitations in a psychic way.³²

Thus, the psychologist's work became relevant, as it provided reception and listening free of judgments, helping in the process of investigating unconscious contents, through free association, fluctuating attention, interpretation and transference.³³ As a result of the use of psychoanalytic techniques, the psychologist contributed to the process of elaboration

and resignification of trauma.

It was noted that the main character's analyst played an important role in the elaboration and resignification of the trauma, as she accompanied Odette in her memories about the sexual abuse and rape suffered in childhood, and helped her to name the type of violence and to make peace with her childish self through the symbolization of the apology for abandonment. "A person who suffered abuse in childhood will probably carry within himself a childish part that is frozen in time (p. 330)".¹²

Consequences of child sexual abuse in adult life

As an immediate consequence, the silence of the character Odette was observed. In one scene, when trying to tell her mother about the sexual abuse while washing her bloody underwear, the mother does not give her space to speak, enthusiastically believing that it was an early period and that her daughter was turning into a young girl. Ferenczi³¹ reports that there is a possible identification of the child with the abuser, and that she does not have the power to contest the adult, as she is confused and vulnerable due to the violence suffered. From this identification, the victim also feels guilty for what happened, and the anger she felt for her aggressor returns to her, resulting in submission.²³ According to Kolik¹²:

Children realize - even if they are not explicitly threatened - that if they tell their teachers that they are beaten or sexually abused, they will be punished. Thus, they focus their energies on not thinking about what has happened and on not feeling the residues of terror and panic in the body. Because they cannot bear the awareness of what has happened to them, they also have no way of understanding that the anger or terror they feel has to do with what happened. They are silent; act and deal with their sensations through anger, blockage or defiance. (p. 161).

In addition, she ended up acting mechanically to the adult's requests, since she was in conflict about her real and ideal self, because her personality was still developing. As a defense, his ego introjected the aggressor to his psyche, making contact with reality difficult to access and thus generating silence on the part of the abused child.

This silence was due to the fact that she attributed to her self (ego) the external elements (abuses), which led her to the fantasy that the abuses ceased to exist in their real form and began to be seen as a fantasy. In addition, Winnicott³⁴ discusses the importance of the environment in the development of the child's self, where the relevance of an environment that promotes welcoming, protection and security is evidenced so that there is a healthy development of their personality.

In the film, it was notorious that Odette did not have the necessary support from the family environment, especially her mother, to protect herself from threats. The mother did not realize that something was wrong with the child, leaving him vulnerable. She did not offer the necessary space or the proper welcome for Odette to express the abuse she was suffering from Gilbert.

Children are also programmed to be fundamentally loyal to their caregivers, even if they suffer abuse at their hands. Terror increases the need for attachment, even though the source of comfort is also the source of terror. (p. 161)¹²

From the observation of the traumatic phenomena of sexual abuse suffered in childhood by the character Odette, it was possible to identify that, as much as the egoic resources have tried to shift the abuse suffered to an intrapsychic sphere, as a form of protection, there are unconscious manifestations from destructive behaviors presented by the character, and her innocence was stolen. This suffering internalized since childhood affects the subject's emotional development, which worsens over time.²⁰

This type of trauma can develop pathologies such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, known as PTSD, which "is linked to unusual experiences of human existence that cause an emotionally severe impact on the individual, leaving consequences that affect physical and mental health" (p. 141).^{6,21} According to Dalgalarrondo³⁵, it is a psychological condition that arises after the occurrence of

a traumatic event, such as abuse, rape, kidnapping, among others. One of the characteristics is the memories that arise in the person's consciousness involuntarily, such as flashbacks.

Trauma affects individuals at the physical, emotional, and psychological levels, and its impact is permanent and wide-ranging.⁶ He is capable of destroying dreams and decision-making, often without the subject's awareness. The main character wanted to be a renowned dancer, but her adult trajectory was marked by financial difficulties, and her goal became increasingly distant.³⁶

These consequences made it difficult for the subject to have a healthy adult life. However, other possible consequences were observed, such as Odette's destructive behaviors in adulthood, excessive use of alcohol and other drugs, hypersexualization and difficulty in maintaining lasting relationships, which could or could not be related to the experience of sexual abuse in childhood.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The objective of this study was to examine what child sexual abuse is and to understand its particularities from the differentiation between the forms of abuse, which can be extra-familial or intra-familial. The psychoanalytic approach was used to understand the harmful effects that child sexual abuse may have caused in the adult lives of those who suffered this violence.

Child sexual abuse is a complex phenomenon that can cause great emotional damage to the victim and their families, since it is a serious violence, in which the strongest imposed their will on the vulnerable. In this sense, regardless of whether it was characterized as intrafamilial or extrafamilial, the impact on the victim is profound.

The adult, who was supposed to protect the child's innocence, ended up becoming the aggressor. The child, in turn, gave in to desires motivated by fear and the lack of maturity necessary to understand what was happening, because he was in the development phase. In this way, Ferenczi³¹ explains the confusion of languages to support this type of violence and the trauma it causes. The child, with his purity, uses tenderness, and the pathological adult confuses play with desire, because he uses the language of passion.

In the case of Odette, the protagonist of the film, who was a victim of extra-family child sexual abuse, in which the abuser close to the family took advantage of the child's innocence to satisfy his desires. Thus, in the helplessness mainly of the family, she silenced her emotions, introjecting and repressing feelings, which later, in her adult life, returned as symptoms of destructive behaviors, such as the use of alcohol and other drugs and hypersexualization.

Thus, it was possible to notice that the trauma suffered in childhood was often not perceived by the individual, as it was hidden in his unconscious, but manifested itself through symptoms that may have caused failures in personal and professional life and in interpersonal relationships, harming all spheres of the subject's life.

In addition, the relevance of the work of a psychology professional was perceived, which was important in the process of elaborating and understanding the abuse suffered in childhood, since, even as an adult, Odette could not name the violence she had suffered.

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