MENTAL HEALTH OF CHILDREN LIVING IN PROTECTIVE HOMES

(ABSTRACT)

A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

PSYCHOLOGY

BY

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ABSTRACT

“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.”

-Nelson Mandela

Every child has four basic rights. These are right to survival, right to development, right to participation and right to protection. Ironically, despite these rights, there are millions of children who are struggling for their survival and development. Even the basic needs of these children remain unfulfilled. These children are referred to as the “children in difficult circumstances” whose needs for care and protection are most obvious.

Children from different backgrounds and different needs come under the umbrella of children in difficult circumstances. Many of these children are found living on streets, railway platforms, in orphanages, slums, destitute homes, day-care centers, shelter homes, prisons, protective homes etc. These children either do not have their families or have minimal contacts with them. As a result they have no one to look after them. From the perspective of object relations, the very basic need of these children, that is, the relationship needs remain unfulfilled.

Many experience abuse, neglect, and rejection in the family. Sometimes the trauma becomes so unbearable that in order to avoid it they run away from their families. Many become victim of sexual exploitation and a number of them get engaged in risky and harmful occupations. Some even become alcoholic and addict to drugs. These children not only face neglect and rejection from their own families but also from the society.

The trauma of going through such negative experiences early in childhood adversely affects the overall development of these children, traces of which can even be found in adulthood.

The sad state of these children is a cause of concern. These children are not only prone to health problems but also are at the risk of developing various mental health problems. For the present study the sample comprised of children living in Protective Homes.
PURPOSE

To explore the mental health, self image and self- other relatedness of children living in Protective Homes.

DESIGN

An Expost- facto research design with an exploratory orientation.

ASSUMPTIONS

Due to the paucity of empirical researches on the present sample, especially with reference to the variables taken in the research, certain assumptions were drawn-

1. It was assumed that the mental health of children living in Protective Homes would be poor.
2. In comparison to boys, girls living in Protective Homes would show poor mental health.
3. Self image of children living in Protective Homes would be inadequate.
4. Self image of girls living in Protective Homes would be more inadequate than their counterparts.
5. Self –other relatedness of children living in Protective Homes would be conflictual.
6. Self- other relatedness would be more conflictual in girls living in Protective Homes than boys.

VARIABLES

Gender was the major variable in the present research and gender differences were studied across the variables of –

1. Mental health.
2. Self Image.
SAMPLE

After the initial survey of Protective Homes in Lucknow city and on the basis of the inclusion criterion two Protective Homes were picked up. Sample comprised of 102 children, out of which 52 boys were taken from Rajkiya Bal Greh (Balak), Mohan Road, Lucknow and 50 girls were taken from Rajkiya Bal Greh (Balika), Moti nagar, Lucknow.

MEASURES USED

1. Mental Health

   Mental health was assessed at two levels-
   a) For felt states and perceptions, interview schedule (developed by the researcher) was used.
   b) For assessing intellectual functioning Standard Progressive Matrices (Raven, 1988) was used.

2. Self Image

   Self image was assessed through House-Tree-Person Test (Buck, 1948). Besides Circle Technique (Thrower, Bruce and Walton, 1982) was used as a corroborative measure.

3. Self – other relatedness

   Circle Technique (Thrower, Bruce and Walton, 1982) was used to assess self – other relatedness. Besides, House-Tree-Person Test (Buck, 1948) was used as supportive test.

PROCEDURE

   After establishing rapport with the children, each child was individually contacted. Interview schedule, Standard Progressive Matrices, House-Tree-Person Test, and Circle Technique was individually administered on each child and the responses given were recorded verbatim.
RESULTS

In accordance with the purpose of the research the results obtained are given in the following three sections-

SECTION ONE- MENTAL HEALTH

1. Felt States and Perceptions-
   Section- I -Life at one’s own home
   Section- II -Life at Protective Home
   Section- III- Mental health

2. Intellectual Functioning

SECTION TWO- SELF IMAGE

SECTION THREE- SELF – OTHER RELATEDNESS

Major findings pertaining to the variables of Mental health, Self image and Self – other relatedness are being discussed here one by one-

SECTION ONE- MENTAL HEALTH

1. Felt States and Perceptions-
   Findings related to felt states and perceptions are divided into three sections. These are as follows-

   Section – I - Life at one’s own home

   Major observations on this dimension are as follows-

   • Children largely had experienced both mother and father. Most of the children like their parents. Further parents of most of the children were at home and father’s were mostly semi skilled labourers or were employed in farms.
Predominantly children perceived their home environment to be good. Girls predominantly perceived their home environment to be good whereas boys predominantly perceived it as bad. Further, more boys than girls reported their home environment to be bad. Interestingly more boys reported that they do not know about their home environment than their counterparts.

Children reported ‘activities’ like roaming, playing in their comfort zone and ‘violence in families’ as their discomfort zone. Further, more girls reported ‘persons’ in their discomfort zone than boys.

On the issues related to physical supplies largely children approached their mothers. With reference to gender girls predominantly reach out to their mothers whereas boys were predominantly either unaware of whom they approached or they did not reach out (except in the situation when having the problem and for sleeping with).

With reference to the issues related to emotional supplies, children predominantly approach their mothers when unhappy and scared whereas when angry children predominantly approach no one. Interestingly majority of children approach others when happy. In terms of gender girls predominantly reach out to their mothers whereas boys predominantly reach out to no one.

Section- II -Life at Protective Home

Runaway and being lost were the major triggering events behind children’s entry into the Protective Home. It is important to note here that more girls were lost than boys and more boys ran from their homes than their counterparts.
Children were largely brought to the Protective Homes by the members of other rehabilitation units. However, more girls were brought to the protective home by police and other law officials.

At a cognitive level perception of people (people, elder people, and children) at Protective Home, at the face value was reported to be good. However, at the felt level children predominantly reported “feeling bad” at the Protective home. Fun activities like playing, dancing etc. were in their comfort zone at protective home and abuse in the discomfort zone. It is important to note here that life events and experiences of children have not changed much. In their own family ‘violence’ was their major discomfort zone and in Protective home also abuse emerges prominently in their discomfort zone.

Largely children reach out to other children or inmates for the satisfaction of physical needs in protective home. More boys approached the adult authorities than girls, whereas girls primarily showed a preference for reaching out to other children.

When faced with aroused negative emotions sample predominantly approach no one except when scared. When scared children reach out to other children. When unhappy and fearful girls predominantly approach other inmates whereas boys do not reach out. When angry both the groups approach no one.

Another issue of concern is that due to overcrowding majority of children reported sleeping with other children.

Majority of children reported missing their homes.
• Being left out and rejected by others were the reasons for feeling lonely. Though half of the sample denied feeling lonely in protective home.

Section- III- Mental health

• Most of the children are unaware of the semantics of happiness, sadness, fear and anger. This is more so in girls than boys.

• In home most of the sample used negative passive coping mechanisms when unhappy, when scared and at the time of conflict between elders but when angry they used negative active coping mechanisms. More girls than boys use negative passive copings when scared.

  When happy and sick children largely used positive coping mechanisms.

  In Protective Home, except when happy children largely use negative passive ways of coping when unhappy, scared and angry. More girls than boys reported negative passive coping when fearful and sad. When happy and sick children largely use positive active coping mechanisms.

• Children reported that they liked to stay with other children or inmates, as they received care and nurturance from them. This shows a strong need of love and care in these children.

• Most of the children were unaware of any happy event in their lives.

  Children largely reported abuse by others as a sad event and almost equal percentage of children lacked awareness of any such event. Similar picture emerged with reference to event related to fear also. More boys lacked awareness of events related sadness and fear than girls.
Further most of the children reported seeing violence as an event of anger. Girls predominantly reported personalized experiences of anger whereas boys reported seeing violence as an anger provoking event.

- Most of the children reported adequate hunger and good quality sleep. However more boys than girls reported good quality sleep. Further largely the content of dreams pertained to family and parents.

- Majority of children cried sometimes only. Boys predominantly cry sometimes and girls daily. Further children largely cry when abused and beaten. With reference to gender most of the boys cry when they have negative thoughts and miss home, but girls predominantly cry because of abuse, beatings and fights.

- Many children reported that they like to do positive active things in their leisure time viz. cleaning room, studying etc.

- Most of the children want to take rebirth in the same home and want to go in specific job and helping profession.

- Children predominantly have growth oriented wishes. Boys predominantly have family reunion and welfare wishes whereas girls predominantly have growth oriented wishes.

- Majority of children watch T.V. and like comedy and fun programmes. Further children largely like stories related to nature, values, patriotism and ambition.
2. **Intellectual functioning**

Major observations pertaining to intellectual functioning of children are as follows-

- Most of the children’s *intellectual functioning is impaired*. They fall in intellectually impaired category.

- Children largely **approached the problems** on Standard Progressive Matrices in the *sequential manner* and a *progressive increase in errors were noted with the increase in complexity* of the task.

Thus taking together both the parameter of Mental health, that is felt states and perceptions and intellectual functioning, the findings like abuse as a major discomfort zone both in home and in Protective Home, run away and being lost as major triggering events behind entry into Protective Home, reaching out to no one in the situation of aroused negative emotions, sleeping with other children due to lack of space, evident home sickness and loneliness, lack of awareness of the semantics of different emotions, use of negative passive coping mechanisms, lack of memories of emotionally tuned events, along with crying frequently and impaired intellectual functioning, all support the assumption that the “**Mental health of children living in Protective homes would be poor.**”

Further in terms of gender though both boys and girls have abuse in their present discomfort zone of protective home, more girls than boys fear abuse. In addition to this, fewer girls than boys reported good quality sleep. Crying spells are more frequent in girls than boys. Girls predominantly cry because of abuse, beatings and fights. Further, more girls use negative passive copings than boys. Cognitively boys seem to be ahead of girls with reference to semantics pertaining to different emotions. These findings partially support the assumption that “**In**
comparison to boys, girls living in Protective homes would show poor mental health.”

SECTION TWO - SELF IMAGE

Major observations pertaining to self image of children are as follows-

I - House

- Children largely feel emotions.
- Most of the children have moderate levels of energy.
- Excess use of fantasy and high anxiety were evident in most of the children. Girls in comparison to boys have more anxiety.
- Most of the children have ego strength in their personality. In terms of gender boys appear to have greater instability and disintegrating egos than girls.

- In terms of accessibility to the outside world, though children are largely accessible to the outside world, they do not want to mingle with others. With reference to gender boys do not want to make contact with the outside world whereas girls exercise control in their interaction.

- In terms of general perspective negative attitude towards parents, siblings and home situation was observed. In addition to this desertion and emptiness was also evident.
- Drawings also indicate passivity and lack of affection and warmth in the home life of children.

II - Tree

- Again just like the finding related to house, most of the children are capable of feeling emotions.
• Children have **moderate level of energy**. Further, more girls have moderate level of energy than boys.

• **Disproportionate trunk** made by most of the children suggest weak and inadequate self image.

• Children largely **do not want to reach out to others**.

• Predominant theme shows a **regressive yearning for intrauterine existence**.

III- **Person**

• Majority of the children made chromatic drawing of a person, which suggests that largely children **feel emotions intensely**.

• Most of the children have **low energy levels**.

• Though most of the children made complete figures but the **overall quality of the figure drawn was poor**. This suggests weak, inferior, and inadequate self image.

• Children largely made **person of the same gender**. In comparison to girls more boys made person of the same gender. In other words **fewer girls than boys identify with the same gender person**.

• Although most of the children are capable of feeling emotions but they **lack the expression of the same**.
- Children largely think about their own self. **Intellectual needs seem to dominate in the drawing of girls** but in the drawing of boys physical needs seem to dominate.

- Ability to control impulses is present in most of the children.

- **DAP Indicators of Maladjustment** show conflict, anxiety, withdrawal tendencies with reduced energy in most of the children.

  Thus the findings like poor overall quality of the figure drawn, low energy levels, along with conflict and anxiety, lack of expression of emotions despite feeling them intensely, provide support for the assumption that the **“Self image of children living in Protective Homes would be inadequate.”**

  Further in terms of gender, the differences that have emerged show that more boys identify with the person of the same gender than their counterparts. This suggests conflict with the primary attachment figure in girls. In addition to this more girls than boys have moderate energy level and experience high anxiety. These findings partially support the assumption that the **“Self image of girls living in Protective Homes would be more inadequate than their counterparts”**

  Findings obtained through Circle Technique corroborate these findings

**SECTION THREE- SELF OTHER RELATEDNESS**

Major observations pertaining to self – other relatedness are as follows-

- **Self is not developed in the life space of most of the children.** In terms of gender more boys have their self in their life space than their counterparts.
Those who have their self in their life space, among them most of the children made their self at periphery. In other words self does not occupy a central position in the life space of most of the children. This shows dominance of others in the lives of children.

Most of the children perceive their self as equal to others. It is important to note here that the perception of self is smaller to others in girls.

Self is emotionally divorced from significant others in the life space of majority of children.

6 to 10 people emerged in relational network of most of the children. Further children found themselves nearest to their siblings.

Thus the absence of self in the life space and self being depicted as a kind of cut off and emotionally divorced supports the assumption that the “Self – other relatedness of children living in Protective Homes would be conflictual”.

Further in terms of gender as greater number of girls do not have their self in their internally construed relational world, besides greater fusion of self -other relations among those in whom self has emerged, partially supports the assumption that the “Self- other relatedness would be more conflictual in girls living in Protective Homes than boys.”

Findings on the House- Tree- Person Test (particularly that of the House) corroborates the above findings.