Abstract

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is one of the traumatic experiences whose effects are carried into the adulthood. One of the severest impacts of CSA on the survivors is distortion in their emotional experience and expression (Banyard et. al, 2001; Luterek et. al, 2005). This difficulty in dealing with emotions is reflected in the way they experience and express their painful emotions and the coping strategies they develop to deal with the day to day emotion loaded situations. The aspect of personality that deals with emotional experience and expression is called as “Emotional Intelligence” (Mayer and Salovey, 1990). The literature emphasizes the context of the group as a better choice in dealing with the survivors of CSA (Saxe et.al 2005) and in training EI of the individuals (Druskat & Wolff 2001). The groups that emphasize emotional experiences and expressions during the group process are encounter groups (Rogers 1970; Egan 1970). At the same time there is dearth of empirical information regarding the influence of encounter group process on emotional intelligence of the women survivors of CSA. Hence this study aimed at understanding “The influence of Encounter Group Process on the Emotional Intelligence of the Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse.”

The group process, for the purpose of this study was conceptualized with 5 phenomena namely: experiencing and expression of intense emotions, self disclosure, feedback, dealing with the conflict and group structures. Garvin’s (1987) conceptualization of group structures i.e. communication structure, role structure; leadership structure, power structure and sociometric structure were considered for

this study. The changes that occurred in these phenomena and the resultant EI of the survivors of CSA were observed across the three phases of group development namely: initial phase, middle phase and termination phase. These changes in EI were also visualized through the coping strategies of the women.

The nature of this study emphasizes subjective understanding and meaning making in experiencing and expression of emotions. To study the complexity and the subjectivity involved in understanding one’s emotional world, this study employed qualitative methodology in its scientific enquiry. One of the characteristics of qualitative research accentuates employing a naturalistic approach to reach the reality/field situation as close as possible. The study considered the group as a social microcosm (Egan, 1970; Yalom, 1995\(^9\); Solomon and Berzon, 1972\(^10\); Konopka, 1972\(^11\); Brown 1993\(^12\)), which formed the natural setting where, over a period of time the members interact with each other as in their daily life situations.

For the purpose of the study, 11 women who had experienced CSA were selected through an NGO in Tenali, Andhra Pradesh. They were in the age range of 19 to 21 years, had completed intermediate (XII std.) and were undergoing vocational training such as embroidery, lab technician course etc. in the NGO.

The researcher remained as non participant observer collecting the data. 38 group sessions were held with the group. Each session was audio taped and field notes of the researcher formed the main sources of data. Detailed session narratives were prepared using the data. The themes were developed from the session narratives using the theoretical coding procedure. The emerging themes were classified as per the theoretical concepts namely: self awareness, managing emotions in self, motivating self, managing emotions in others, social skills (5 domains of EI) and group

phenomenon, coping strategies (emotion focused, appraisal focused and problem focused) using qualitative content analysis.

The findings revealed that the women in the group were affected emotionally, cognitively and physically due to the experience of CSA. They shared struggling with feelings like anger, fear and hatredness towards men, sadness and depression, shame and guilt. Their management of these emotions was by avoiding, impulsive outbursts and swallowing. They developed self punishing tendencies and low self esteem. They found themselves becoming more and more withdrawn and unable to share about them even when the situations demanded.

The changes in group phenomenon across the different stages of group development indicated increasing depth, trust, freedom and cohesion in the group. Women’s ability to experience and express intense emotions changed from monosyllabic expression to free and spontaneous experience and expression of emotions in and out side of the group context. Self disclosure transformed from monosyllabic hesitant sharing to narrating the stories of the past and finally sharing deeper issues of self. Deeper sharing about self began with the process of sharing the struggles around the issue of CSA. The process of receiving and giving the feedback during the group process initiated important discussions in the group. As the sessions proceeded members expressed feeling more comfortable to give negative feedback in the group due to the supportive presence of others.

The study findings showed that the frequency of the conflict arousal decreased as the group developed through different phases. The number of conflicts reduced from the initial to the middle phase; and no major conflicts were seen during the termination phase indicating growing understanding and empathy among the group members. It was also seen that, with the enhancement of EI, women survivors of CSA were able to deal with the conflicts more efficiently.

The changes in the group structures suggested that over a period of time the women felt confident, comfortable and free to share their emotions in the group. Communication structure changed from inhibited, non directional communication to comcon communication reflecting spontaneous and free interactions. By the time of
termination the role structure showed increased number of organizing and relational roles. All the women felt comfortable to take the leadership role by the time of termination of the group. The pattern of relationships reflected everyone feeling comfortable and free with one another. The women moved from dependence to interdependence through independence in terms of power structure.

The study findings revealed that women’s awareness of overt and covert behaviours in the here and now context was deepened. They expressed feeling confident on realizing their growing abilities. Women were able to understand and manage emotions in self and in others. They showed increased ability to process cognitively and brought desirable changes in their behaviours especially in experiencing and expressing feelings like anger, fear of men, jealousy etc. with which they struggled most. They were seen feeling socially competent by being able to initiate and maintain conversations and relationships. They also reported feeling confident about managing emotions with which they were struggling and in solving their day to day problems. This growing confidence indicated enhancement of EI of the survivors as the group processes progressed from initial to termination phase. The processes of changes in the EI during the group process suggest that the development of the five domains of EI is sequential and simultaneous.

During the group process women revealed that they used emotion focused coping strategies to solve their problems. By the time of the termination of the group, women were seen investing more energy in problem solving strategies and using an integrated approach comprising of three strategies namely: emotion focused, appraisal focused and problem focused coping strategies when needed.

In conclusion, in addition to confirming the findings related to the group phenomena (Rogers 1970; Egan 1970; Garvin 1987) and EI (Mayer and Salovey 1990; Goleman 1995) in the existing literature, this study proposes a group work model constituting five phenomena namely: experiencing and expressing intense emotions, self disclosure, feedback, dealing with conflict and group structures in working with survivors of CSA. In addition, based on the processes observed in the context of changing EI of the survivors of CSA, this study proposes a training module for enhancing EI of the survivors of CSA.
As the study findings indicate that the impact of the experience of CSA is culturally toned, specially experiencing and expression of feelings like anger; it recommends for the exploration of impact of CSA on the survivors from the perspective of cultural notions in the Indian context. Another finding of the study reveals that the enhancement of the five domains of EI is sequential and simultaneous; this study also recommends for the further exploration of the relationship of the five domains of EI in the process of its enhancement.