

Student Perceptions of Potential Child Abuse

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the acts that college students classify as *child abuse* and assess their perceptions of mental health counseling (MHC) services to determine if they feel that such services would be beneficial to both victims and witnesses of abuse. Previous research has been conducted on perceptions of child abuse and MHC services but has not investigated both concepts together to assess the relationship between them. In the current study, participants were presented with a set of scenarios that describe acts about physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, witnessing abuse, and acts that are not technically abuse. Participants rated each scenario on a scale from 1 (no abuse at all) to 10 (the most extreme abuse). Then, participants' perceptions of how beneficial they felt MHC

services would be for the victims in the scenarios were also assessed. I hypothesized that the majority of participants would view MHC services as beneficial for victims of abuse, but not for witnesses of abuse. This hypothesis was supported. Due to the lack of literature regarding what types of acts college students consider or classify as *abuse*, there was no specific hypothesis, and the data analysis was exploratory in nature. The witnessing- abuse scenarios were rated significantly lower than the physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect scenarios. The non-abuse scenarios were not rated significantly lower than witnessing abuse. The results from this study can be utilized when examining the gap in education for understanding child abuse and the benefits of MHC services.

Perceptions of Child Abuse and the Usefulness of Mental Health Services

Child abuse is maltreatment in any form of a child by another individual, and it occurs more often than many realize (Friedman, 1990). Individuals often do not fully grasp the effects that abuse can have on a child; furthermore, many do not realize that implementing mental health services could help minimize those negative effects. For example, research has shown that the abuse that children experience in their life can affect their functioning later in life, due to the trauma (Wamser-Nanney et al., 2018), and that others assess the severity of the abuse based on the relationship between the child and the abuser (Reynolds & Birkimer, 2002). Those findings from previous research acknowledge the impact that child abuse can have in a child's life, and it also highlights the different interpretations of severity, depending on the relationship the perpetrator has to the victim child. In addition, research conducted on perceptions and usage of mental health services has shown that many individuals believe that these services were put into place for women specifically, which explains the low usage of mental health services among men (Vogel et al., 2007). Although this biased perception of mental health services exists, school counselors can help set the tone for how individuals view mental health professionals, so school counselors could erase those negative perceptions of mental health services,

especially for men (Wantz & Firmin, 2011). The purpose of the current study is to investigate what actions individuals view as *abuse* and their perceptions of the benefits of mental health services for the abuse victim, while controlling for the gender, age, and the relationship between the child and abuser. This research will give a better understanding of the perceptions that individuals have of child abuse and the perceptions of mental health services regarding how beneficial they may be. A better understanding of the perceptions of child abuse and perceptions of how beneficial mental health services are will help examine the gap in education for understanding child abuse and the purpose of mental health counseling services.

Child Abuse Overview

Abuse is any negative behavior that has a result of damage and neglect accompanied with adverse results (Kalsoom et al., 2019). *Child abuse* specifically can be acts that are neglectful to a child, acts that are sexual in any way towards a child, any type of physical abuse, and an aspect that is often forgotten, a child's having witnessed abuse. Witnessing abuse can be just as traumatic as receiving abuse directly, but not much research has been conducted on this aspect of abuse (Luster et al, 2002). Although there have been efforts to better protect children from abuse, there is still a significant amount of child abuse occurring (Gil & Noble,

1969). According to the National Children's Alliance (2019)¹, there are about 700,000 reports of child abuse per year in the United States. Although this is a staggering amount, there are still innumerable additional children who are being abused, whose cases unfortunately never get reported (National Children's Alliance, 2019). These statistics are extremely heartbreaking, but the most disappointing part of it all is the realization that due to underreporting, we truly have no idea how many children experience or witness abuse.

Research has focused on the problem of child abuse for years, going all the way back to 1962, when the amazing work of Henry Kempe and his colleagues helped bring attention to the topic of child abuse. This was the starting point for many child protective services that are still utilized today (Levine & Levine, 2012). Previous research has highlighted some of the negative effects that abuse can have on a child's daily functioning and well-being, both at the time of abuse and later in the individual's life (Price et al., 2001).

Perceptions of whether an act is or is not seen as abuse and if so, how severe the abuse is perceived to be, are all impacted by the perceiver's age, gender, socioeconomic status, and whether or not the perceiver has children himself or herself (Price et al., 2001). It is important to understand the way that individuals perceive acts of child abuse so that knowledge can be utilized to help stop child abuse. For example, men and women view child abuse differently. A study conducted by Reynolds and Birkimer (2002) investigated how the relationship between the child and the abuser affected perceptions of the abuse. The relationship between the child and abuser did not impact females' perceptions of the abuse, but males viewed the scenarios differently. Specifically, when the abuser was the child's stepfather, the abuse was rated as significantly worse than when the abuser was the child's neighbor (Reynolds & Birkimer, 2002). Another factor that Reynolds and Birkimer (2002) pointed out as having a potential influence on an individual's perception of abuse is whether or not that person has children. However, since their study was conducted with undergraduate students and the majority did not have children of their own, the results from the study may be different when conducted with a group of individuals who are parents. Whether or not a child was viewed as a willing participant in the abuse was another interesting factor that stood out in Reynolds and Birkimer's (2002) research. Children who were viewed as unwilling participants in the abuse were perceived as suffering more than those who were seen as willing participants (Reynolds & Birkimer, 2002).

Effects of Child Abuse

A factor that can be overlooked is the psychological impact that abuse can have on a child, whether that child is the actual victim or even a witness of abuse. Research has shown that as compared to other types of trauma, violent and sexual traumas are related to higher levels of traumatic symptoms (Wamser-Nanney et al., 2018). This demonstrates the need for some type of professional help after the child has experienced abuse because the emotions that were associated with the abuse do not just go away, and many times, emotions may evolve after the abuse has taken place. In a study conducted by Young and Widom (2014), individuals who had a history of child abuse or neglect were more likely to recognize negative emotions than positive emotions, which could be a result of their abuse and of having perceived fewer positive emotions throughout their life. This suggests that an emphasis on mental health services, specifically counseling, needs to be put into place so that children who experience or witness abuse are not left with a cognitive bias towards negative emotions.

Perceptions of Mental Health Services

Individuals tend to view counseling as something that caters to women but not men, which often causes men to not consider counseling as an option for themselves (Vogel et al., 2007). This leads to a gap regarding gender and the use of mental health services. There has often been a negative stigma attached to males seeking help. In most Western societies, males are stereotypically viewed as self-reliant, physically tough, and able to control their emotions, which explains further why they choose to not seek help (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). With males being stereotyped in this way, they are often overlooked when it comes to being a victim of abuse. To understand the influence of males' not seeking help, Addis and Mahalik (2003) gave an example, saying that in sports, those who do not complain and who continue to play are the ones who are cheered for. That discourages males from taking care of themselves because they are looking to show others that they are tough. Toughness and lack of emotions are characteristics that are praised among males because if males display their emotions, then they are viewed as weak. Females, on the other hand, are more likely to seek help because they have more positive attitudes towards counseling than males do (Vogel et al., 2007). It is easier for a female to get help from a counselor than it is for males because society has fostered the idea of counseling being intended only for females. One factor that has been shown to increase males' willingness to attend counseling is their knowing someone else who has dealt with the same or similar problems (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). This is because the more

¹ An organization that promotes the investigation of child victims of abuse by providing Children's Advocacy Centers and multi-disciplinary teams throughout the U.S.

males view a problem as normal, the greater the chance of their seeking help for that problem (Addis & Mahalik, 2003).

Mental health services, specifically counseling, can be associated with some levels of anxiety, due to the stigma that is associated with counseling. A study conducted by Blau and colleagues (2015) showed that individuals who referred themselves to counseling had significantly lower anxiety levels than individuals who were referred to counseling by someone else. This suggests that the negative reactions are lowered when individuals make the choice themselves to attend counseling, which could help inform approaches to dealing with victims of child abuse. However, a study completed by Wantz and Firmin (2011) showed that out of all the individuals who were surveyed who have used human service professionals, only 3% had a negative view of professional counselors. Thus, once individuals get into counseling, their negative view of it seems to dissipate. Even though some research has shown that those who are aware of mental health services may not view it negatively, the attitude that is associated with seeking help is still a major hurdle that needs to be cleared (Vogel et al., 2007).

Benefits of Utilizing Mental Health Services to Cope with Child Abuse

More individuals need to become educated on child abuse in general (Price et al., 2001). Many individuals may view an act as abuse, while others do not view that same act as abuse, which shows the variety in understandings of what *abuse* is (Price et al., 2001). Mental health services are beneficial to those who have experienced trauma, and certain emotions are linked with traumatic experiences, such as child abuse. (“What is Trauma-Focused Therapy?,” 2020). While researchers have investigated child abuse and its effects, there is minimal information regarding the benefits of mental health counseling, specifically with children who have been victims or witnesses of abuse. The use of mental health counseling after a child has disclosed either witnessing or being abused is often an essential component of the child’s healing process. In a study conducted by Amstadter and Vernon (2008), there were different responses regarding the overall emotional intensity after the trauma and the patterns of emotions that followed. After trauma, there were high levels of sadness, shame, fear, and anger reported, but sexual assault victims experienced higher levels of guilt afterwards, due to the negative feelings of themselves internally (Amstadter & Vernon, 2008). These results help to shed light on the need for mental health counseling after abuse, since research has repeatedly shown an increase in negative emotionality after abuse has occurred.

Though research has been conducted on perceptions of child abuse and perceptions of mental health counseling, research has yet to examine the intersection of these two areas. The current study will address this gap by examining child abuse and mental health counseling together in order to

better grasp the perceptions of the two individually, as well as to understand the perceptions of how others feel that mental health counseling can be impactful to child abuse victims. This will be achieved by asking how beneficial college students feel mental health counseling services will be for a child who has been a victim or witness of abuse and what types of acts college students consider or classify as *abuse*. The hypothesis is that college students will find mental health counseling services to be helpful for victims of abuse, but not for witnesses of abuse, regardless of abuse type. Due to the lack of literature regarding what types of acts college students consider or classify as *abuse*, there is no specific hypothesis, and the data analysis will be exploratory in nature.

Methods

Participants

A total of 44 undergraduate students participated in this study. Of these, 25 were female, 17 were male, 1 was non-binary, and 1 was “other.” Ages ranged from 18 years to 33 years old ($M = 20.18$). Regarding class status, 15 were first-year students, 8 were second-year students, 11 were third-year students, 9 were fourth-year students, and 1 was a fifth-year student. Regarding race, there were 9 African American or Black students, 2 Asian students, 30 European American or White students, 2 Black and White students, and 1 other.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through the LaGrange College Research and Experiment Participation System (REPS), which includes all “Introduction to Psychology” courses as well several courses from other disciplines.

All participants were notified that the purpose of the study was to investigate what acts college students would classify as *abuse* and their perceptions on mental health counseling services. Participants were also notified that it was their choice to participate, since the acts described in some of the scenarios had the potential of re-traumatizing individuals who may have been abused themselves. Participants either indicated their agreement to participate and began the rest of the questionnaire or declined to participate and were immediately exited from the study.

Once participants began the study, they were asked to read a series of scenarios and rate the act that was described in each on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being “not at all abuse” and 10 being “the most extreme abuse.” While some of the scenarios described acts that were abuse, there were also scenarios that did not meet the criteria of abuse. The scenarios given described acts of child physical abuse, child sexual abuse, child neglect, and a child having to witness abuse. For each type of abuse, there were three different scenarios, which were classified as a neutral scenario (technically not abuse), a less extreme scenario of abuse, and a more extreme scenario of abuse. In total, participants read 12 different

scenarios, 4 of which were not technically abuse (see Appendix A for all scenarios). To eliminate order effect, these scenarios were presented in a randomized order for each participant.

After participants finished the scenarios, they moved on to the mental health counseling survey questions and demographic questions. The survey questions investigated if participants felt that mental health counseling services would be useful for the scenarios given, and if so, which scenarios they felt would benefit from it most. Participants were able to select as many scenarios as they felt would benefit from the services. Some of the other questions assessed the participants' personal experience with mental health counseling services. Finally, participants answered basic demographic questions.

Once the participant finished all sections of the survey, all participants were fully debriefed and were given contact information for the Counseling Center on campus and for the researcher, just in case they had any questions or concerns after completing the study.

Results

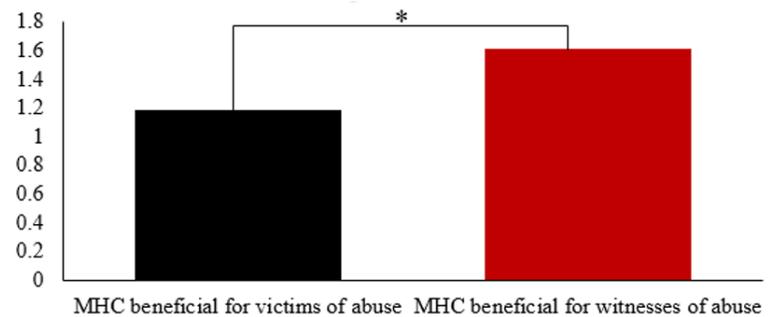
Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis was that the majority of participants would view mental health counseling services as beneficial for victims of abuse, but not for witnesses of abuse. I conducted a paired samples t-test to assess this hypothesis. For each scenario, participants indicated whether or not they believed that the individual would benefit from receiving mental health counseling services. If the participant believed that the individual would benefit, then they received a 1 for that response; if they did not believe that the individual would benefit, then they received a 0 for that response. Averages were calculated separately for the scenarios regarding victims and witnesses of abuse, and the neutral scenarios were not included in the calculations. Participants were significantly more likely to indicate that victims of abuse would benefit from mental health counseling ($M = .866$) as compared to

witnesses of abuse ($M = .727$), $t(43) = -3.462$, $p = .001$ (see Figure 1).

In addition, participants were explicitly asked about their beliefs regarding the use of mental health counseling services in general for both victims and witnesses of abuse. Participants were significantly more likely to indicate that victims of abuse would benefit from mental health counseling services ($M = 1.182$) as compared to witnesses of abuse ($M = 1.614$), $t(43) = -3.50$, $p = .001$, (see Figure 2)².

Figure 2
 Average Rating of Agreement That Mental Health Counseling Is Beneficial



Correlations were then calculated between agreement that mental health counseling is useful in general, agreement that mental health counseling is useful for victims of abuse, agreement that mental health counseling is useful for witnesses of abuse, and agreement that mental health counseling was useful for themselves if they had experienced it (see Table 1). There was a significant positive correlation found between general mental health counseling usefulness and mental health counseling usefulness for victims of abuse, $r(42) = .45$, $p = .002$, suggesting that the more useful one sees counseling overall, the more likely they are to agree that counseling would be beneficial for victims of abuse. However, this relationship was not found for the variable related to witnesses of abuse. There were no other significant correlations between the variables.

Figure 1
 Average Rating of Mental Health Counseling Being Beneficial

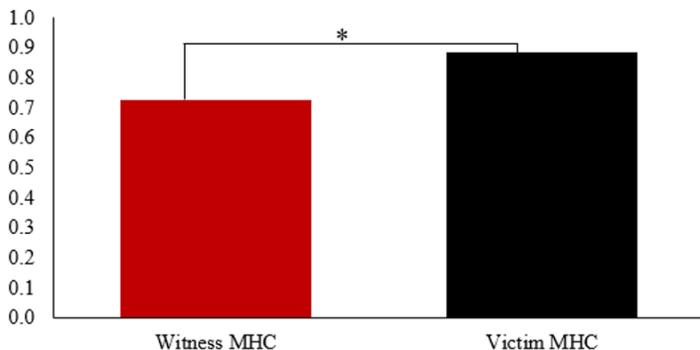


Table 1
 Correlations between Perceptions of Usefulness of MHC for Different Individuals

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. General MHC Usefulness	—			
2. MHC Victims of Abuse	0.448**	—		
3. MHC Witnesses of Abuse	0.233	0.290	—	
4. MHC Beneficial for Me	0.262	0.237	0.162	—

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

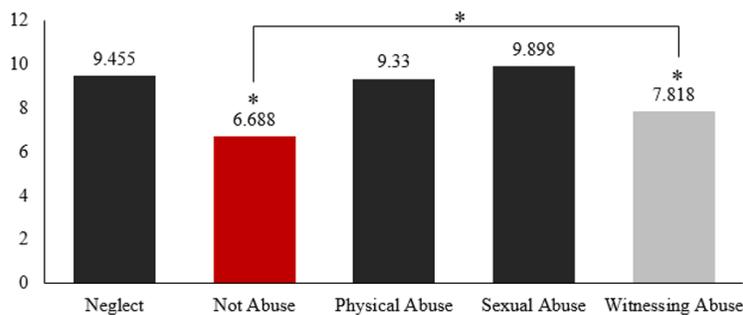
Hypothesis 2

Although there was no specific hypothesis for the classifications of abuse, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to investigate if any types of scenarios were rated significantly differently. The scenarios were grouped into five

² A lower value means more agreement.

categories: physical abuse, sexual abuse, witnessing abuse, neglect, and not abuse. The overall ANOVA was significant: $F(4, 43) = 80.260, p < .001, \eta^2 = .651$, which showed that at least one group's mean was significantly different. Thus, a post-hoc test was conducted to investigate further (see Figure 3). The non-abuse scenarios were rated significantly lower than the physical abuse: $t(42) = 12.468, p < .001$, sexual abuse, $t(42) = 15.149, p < .001$, neglect scenarios, $t(42) = 13.057, p < .001$, and the witnessing abuse scenarios, $t(42) = 5.336, p < .001$. The witnessing abuse scenarios were rated as significantly lower than the physical abuse scenarios: $t(42) = 7.132, p < .001$, sexual abuse scenarios, $t(42) = 9.813, p < .001$, and the neglect scenarios, $t(42) = 7.722, p < .001$.

Figure 3
 Average Abuse Ratings by Category



Note. Different colored bars are significantly different from each other. Bars that are the same color are not significantly different.

Discussion

My hypothesis that the majority of participants would view mental health counseling services as beneficial for victims of abuse, but not for witnesses of abuse, was supported. For the classifications of *abuse*, scenarios that were not technically abuse were still rated highly. The scenarios for witnessing abuse were not rated higher than the scenarios that were not technically abuse. These findings suggest that witnesses of abuse are not viewed the same as direct victims of abuse.

The results from this study help to identify where more education is needed so individuals will be able to correctly identify acts that are abuse. Also, with little research being conducted on witnesses of abuse, the results show that there is a need for more research to identify what is the cause of individuals nor rating the witnessing-abuse scenarios as highly as the victims-of-abuse scenarios. This additional research on the impact of witnessing abuse could allow individuals to treat witnesses the same way as victims. There is a lot of research conducted on victims of abuse and the impact that abuse has on the victim throughout their life, but there is not the same in-depth research being done for witnesses of abuse.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to the study. For example, social desirability may have been an issue. Specifically, participants may have been hesitant to say to a psychologist that mental health counseling services are not beneficial. In addition, due to the wording of some questions, demand characteristics may have also been an issue. Specifically, most questions were worded in such a way as to indicate that mental health counseling is beneficial. For example, questions such as “I believe that, in general, mental health counseling services are useful” and “I believe that mental health counseling will be beneficial for a victim of abuse” could have made participants feel forced to agree, even if they truly did not. Finally, there was a small sample size, and the participants were from a small private religiously-affiliated college in Georgia. Thus, the results may not be generalizable.

Future Research

Future research should examine more deeply why witnesses of abuse are not viewed the same as victims of abuse. This would help practitioners to understand what types of services should be offered for witnesses of abuse. It can also lead to further education to allow witnesses of abuse to be treated more similarly to (and ideally the same as) victims of abuse. Witnesses of abuse are often forgotten about, since the abuse was not directly aimed at them, but the impact of seeing abuse needs to be acknowledged.

In addition, research should examine why abuse scenarios that were not technically abuse and scenarios for witnessing abuse were rated similarly. Witnesses of abuse should not be taken lightly or treated the same as individuals who have not been abused. Researching why abuse scenarios that are not technically abuse and scenarios that involve witnessing abuse are viewed similarly will help to discover the lack of understanding of the trauma that witnesses experience. There is a lot of research still to be done around witnesses of abuse because their experience and interpretation of abuse that occur in front of them can be just as traumatic as being the actual victim.

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