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PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS, FAMILY DYSFUNCTION, MALTREATMENT DURING CHILDHOOD OF STUDENTS AT A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY, BOGOTA COLOMBIA

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ABSTRACT: This article is an exploratory, correlational, descriptive and retrospective research aimed to study the potential relationship between maltreatment during childhood and the use of psychoactive drugs among university students. Self-reported child maltreatment was assessed through the Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire, and to evaluate family dysfunction and distress factors the Kessler Scale (K10) was applied to 302 students. The main indicators of childhood maltreatment were; negligence 18.2%, emotional abuse 17.9%, physical abuse 13.6%, sexual abuse 2.0%. Other relevant indicators were: mother/caregiver assaulted 9.3%, mother/caregiver repeatedly assaulted for at least a few minutes 5.3% and mother/caregiver wounded by knife or gunshot 3.6%. We conclude that there is a significant relationship between “emotional abuse” and “physical abuse”; and between “emotional abuse” and “family dysfunction”; and the detection of gender violence in families by socio-economic statuses.

DESCRIPTORS: Child abuse. Students. Family relations. Domestic violence.

DISTRESS PSICOLÓGICO, DISFUNÇÃO FAMILIAR, MAUS-TRATOS NA INFÂNCIA DE ESTUDANTES DE UMA UNIVERSIDADE PRIVADA, BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA

RESUMO: Este é um estudo exploratório-descritivo, retrospectivo, com o objetivo de avaliar a potencial relação entre maus-tratos na infância e o uso de substâncias psicoativas entre os estudantes universitários. Os maus-tratos na infância foram avaliados por meio do questionário “Experiências Adversas na Infância”, e para avaliar a disfunção familiar e os fatores de sofrimento psíquico foi aplicado a Scale Kessler (K10) a 302 estudantes. Os principais indicadores de maus-tratos na infância foram: negligência =18,2%; abuso emocional =17,9%, abuso físico =13,6%; abuso sexual =2,0%. Outros indicadores relevantes foram: abuso à mãe/cuidador (9,3%), a mãe/cuidador repetidamente espancado por pelo menos alguns minutos (5,3%) e mãe/cuidador ferido por arma branca ou arma de fogo (3,6%). Conclui-se que há relação significativa entre maus-tratos físico e emocional e entre maus-tratos emocional e “disfunção familiar”, bem como, a detecção de violência de gênero nas famílias de acordo com os estratos socioeconômicos.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Maus-tratos na infância. Estudantes. Relações familiares. Violência doméstica.

MALESTAR PSICOLÓGICO, DISFUNCIÓN FAMILIAR, MALTRATO DE ESTUDIANTES DURANTE LA NIÑEZ EN UNA UNIVERSIDAD PRIVADA DE BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA

RESUMEN: Estudio derivado de una investigación exploratoria, correlacional-descriptiva, que estudió retrospectivamente el maltrato durante la infancia y su posible relación con el uso de sustancias psicoactivantes entre estudiantes universitarios. El maltrato infantil auto-reportado se evaluó mediante el Cuestionario de Experiencias Adversas Durante la Niñez, y para evaluar la disfunción familiar y el malestar psicológico (*distress*) se aplicó la Escala de Kessler (K10) a 302 estudiantes. Los principales indicadores de maltrato infantil fueron: negligencia =18,2%; maltrato emocional =17,9%; maltrato físico =13,6%; abuso sexual =2,0%. Otros indicadores relevantes fueron: madre/cuidadora agredida, 9,3%; madre/cuidadora golpeada repetidamente por al menos algunos minutos, 5,3%; y madre/cuidadora herida con arma blanca o de fuego, 3,6%. Se concluye que existe relación entre el “abuso emocional y el “abuso físico”, y entre el “abuso emocional” y la “disfunción familiar” así como la detección de violencia de género en familias según estrato socioeconómico.

DESCRIPTORIOS: Maltrato a los niños. Estudiantes. Relaciones familiares. Violencia doméstica.

INTRODUCTION

This article is an exploratory, correlational, and descriptive research study aimed to examine, retrospectively, the potential relationship between maltreatment during childhood and the use of psychoactive drugs (PADs) among students at a private university in Bogotá, Colombia. The original study did not find any significant differences between child maltreatment and the use of PADs among referred students. From an analysis of the same database, the present study found other factors that are significantly associated with and relevant to prevention and intervention in psychosocial risks, such as emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, psychological distress, and family dysfunction. This investigation explored the relationship between emotional abuse and physical abuse, and between emotional abuse and family dysfunction, among students at a private university in Bogotá.

Some reports showed that, in 2009 in Latin America and the Caribbean there were 40 million children under 15 suffering from violence, abuse, and family abandonment. Latin American society has defined its culture as "macho," attributing a significant weight to coercion and authoritarianism in the upbringing and education of children. Children are often seen as inferior beings, considered to be the property of adults and not as holders of human rights. Some estimates suggest that in Latin America more than 50% of adults consider abusing minors as a normal means of education, discipline, and punishment.¹

Some researchers have suggested that the psychosocial risks among the university population are correlated or associated with the causes of interpersonal problems, low education level,² impulsiveness,³⁻⁵ emotional suffering,⁶ physiological and genetic predispositions,⁷ and the influence of PADs.

It can be said that there have been more reliable figures about child maltreatment in Colombia since 2004. These figures show that girls are more often victims of abuse than boys, although the difference is not significant (52.9% of girls against 47% of boys). Between 2004 and 2008, 27,537 girls were victims of different forms of abuse. The age range in which most abuses occur is between 10 and 14 years old (9,008 cases). However, between zero and four year old, there were 4,093 cases. Forceful mechanical blows are the most used (19,431),

as well as sharp objects (2,798); 224 children were burned with hot objects and 48 were burned by direct contact with fire.⁸ The child maltreatment rate in Colombia is estimated at 69 children per 100 thousand inhabitants. In 2009, there were 14,094 reports of child abuse, with a difference of 175 cases compared to 2008.⁸

Se puede afirmar que el maltrato físico y psicológico. We can say that physical and psychological abuse have become very common in many families, and this is part of the family dynamic regardless of their impact on mental health. Abuse is associated with cultural aspects such as male chauvinism, abuse of authority, abuse of alcohol (which are manifested in inadequate interpersonal relationships), low self-esteem, low tolerance for frustration, and high need for social approval. The use of drugs and alcohol is considered one of the most important risk factors, and contributes most to cases of social and family violence, maltreatment, and child abuse in Colombia.

Between 2002 and 2010, Colombia set the target of "protecting all children from all forms of maltreatment, abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence" (Plan of Action approved by the United Nations General Assembly about children and adolescents of 2002).

The Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF) reported that the figures for child abuse have increased alarmingly in recent years. The summary presented in the report published by the ICBF lists 104,392 complaints between January and November 2011, as opposed to 99,577 complaints in 2010.⁹ The ICBF report lists 11,025 cases of sexual abuse in 2011 and 9,000 in 2010 (taking prostitution, pornography, and sex tourism into consideration). This figure has doubled over the last six years.⁹

The number of complaints of psychological and physical abuse was no less worrying, as these are only complaints and not the actual or complete picture of child maltreatment among the Colombian population as a whole; 39,506 minors suffered this kind of maltreatment. During the period of study, the ICBF reported that 44,473 children were abandoned, missing, exploited, or left as beggars: "4,600 minors have been abandoned because of the use of psychoactive drugs and 1,352 have suffered the effects of Colombian issues, such as forced displacement." Here are some figures from official reports from 2013 concerning abused children (child maltreatment): 54,380 in 2006; 74,717 in 2007; 77,290 in 2008; 92,976 in 2009; 99,577 in

2010; and 104,592 in 2011. It was estimated that another two thousand minors would be abused by the end of 2011.⁹

METHOD

This is a cross-sectional study, with retrospective data collection from a student population. The proportion of students who experienced maltreatment, family dysfunction, and psychological distress during childhood was estimated and analyzed. The possible existence of a statistically significant relationship between variables was also assessed.

The selection of the 302 individuals surveyed was made randomly, tiered by 18 faculties and a cross-section of the university general population; it was not possible to tier it by semester due to difficulties in accessing information from academic records. Men and women, all aged over 18, participated in the study on a voluntary basis. A sampling error of 5% was accepted for the calculation of the sample size.

In order to build the database, the Adverse Childhood Experience questionnaire (ACE)¹⁰ was applied, as well as the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10).¹¹ Questionnaires were translated into Spanish and the ecological validity of the findings was proven in a private university in Bogotá in order to ensure cultural validity and to facilitate the application of the findings.

The ACE questionnaire measures psychological/emotional abuse, which includes three subtypes (confinement, verbal and emotional threat, and all other forms of emotional abuse).¹² It also measures physical abuse or actions that result in provable injuries, or their combination with any other type of abuse or neglect that results in a provable risk of moderate injury to the child. For this study, physical abuse refers to any physical action such as pushing or hitting the child. Sexual abuse is defined by three different forms of abusive behavior: penetration; offensive touching; and other nonspecific acts of sexual abuse. Penetration includes "oral, anal or other types of penetration (sexual contact)."¹² In this study, sexual penetration is considered as a severe form of sexual abuse. The measurement of physical neglect or caregivers' inability to meet children's basic physical needs for food, a home, safety, supervision, and health.¹³ The measurement of emotional neglect is assessed by the inability of caregivers to meet children's needs for love, encouragement, a sense

of belonging, and support.¹³ Family dysfunction is defined by the disintegration of the family as the result of disagreement between parents, the presence of a mentally ill person in the household, substance abuse in the household, confinement of a family member, and physical abuse from a caregiver.

In turn, K10 measures psychological distress by assessing the possible emotional/psychological difficulties that might be associated with psychological disorders defined by the ICD-10 or the DSM-IV.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 15 was used to design the database. A descriptive statistical analysis was carried out; absolute and relative frequencies and measures of central tendency (mean, median) were found; and dispersion (standard deviation) was calculated for numeric variables. Contingency tables and a chi-squared test were completed in order to assess the association between variables, and a binomial test was applied to determine the accuracy of opinions.

Before carrying out the study, we obtained the approval of the Research Ethics Board of the Center for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH REB, n 141-2010) and of the Ethics Committee of the participating university. These approvals were granted because the study was in compliance with the scientific research standards of Canada and the United States, with the requirements of the concerned educational establishment, and with Colombian law regarding ethical practices of human scientific research.

RESULTS

The highest percentage of participants was found for the female gender, with 59.6%, as opposed to 40.4% of men. Regarding the socioeconomic status of participants, they were between middle and upper class. The highest percentages for the level of education were found in the category "higher education," for both fathers and mothers, with 84.8% and 79.5% respectively. As for the place where participants spent their childhood, 93.4% were from urban areas and 6.6% from rural areas. Although the degree of importance of religious beliefs and practices was distributed almost uniformly over the answer options, the highest percentage was for the option "of little importance" followed by "important."

Of all university students surveyed, 94.3%

reported that they were loved very often (75.8%) or often (18.5%). Only 14 people (4.6%) stated that they had felt being loved only once, two people (0.7%) rarely, and one person stated that they were never loved (0.3%). Also, 90.7% of the sample stated they had experienced mutual family care very often (68.5%) or often (22.2%). The values "sometimes", "rarely," and "never" were 7.9%, 1.0%, and 0.3% respectively. Also, 95.4% of the sample stated that they were cared for by relatives very often (76.5%) or often (18.9%). The values "sometimes", "rarely," and "never" were 2.6%, 1.0%, and 1.0% respectively.

Despite the figures above reflecting adequate to high levels of care and affection in family relationships, the feeling or perception of proximity between family members was reported by 47.7% as "very often" and by 35.1% as "often." If we exclude or rule out the percentages of "sometimes", "rarely," and "never," which represented only 17.2% of the sample, analysis of relative percentages of the first two values of the variable allows us to conclude that more than 50% of students have not experienced a feeling of proximity to family members, whether rarely, sometimes, or never.

Among the female students interviewed, 87.7% stated that their family was supportive during childhood. The others responded "sometimes", "rarely," or "never." Only 11 people (3.7%)

stated they had not been taken to the doctor when they needed to. The options "very often" and "often" accounted for 96.3% of the answers.

Interviewees' perceptions of abuse suffered at home was below 84.8%. The highest percentage of students who stated they had been abused during childhood was 15.2% (fear of being physically assaulted), followed by 13.0% (who had suffered blows, scars, or wounds as the result of maltreatment), 11.3% (was often assaulted physically), 9.3% (mother/caregiver was assaulted with blows, pushed, or had objects thrown at), 5.3% (mother/caregiver repeatedly assaulted for at least a few minutes), 3.6% (mother/caregiver wounded by knife or gunshot). The answers "was touched in a sexual way", "was victim of an attempt at sexual intercourse", "was forced to touch in a sexual way," and "had sexual intercourse with them" accounted for 8.3% More than one-third of all students at the university reported their parents being in a situation of divorce or separation.

The main variables of the study, namely emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional/psychological neglect, physical neglect, family dysfunction, and psychological distress, were assessed and classified both quantitatively and qualitatively. Tables 1 and 2 present the measures of central tendency for each variable

Table 1 - Measures of central tendency of variables. Bogotá, Colombia, 2011

Statistics	Emotional abuse	Physical abuse	Sexual abuse	Emotional/psychological neglect	Physical neglect	Family dysfunction	Psychological distress
n	302	302	302	302	302	302	302
Mean	.28	.24	.08	7.57	6.20	1.25	16.82
Std. error of mean	.037	.031	.027	.178	.142	.086	.340
Median	.00	.00	.00	7.00	5.00	1.00	15.00
Mode	0	0	0	5	5	0	13
Std. deviation	.646	.539	.472	3.091	2.475	1.503	5.911
Variance	.417	.290	.222	9.554	6.124	2.259	34.938
Skewness	2.035	2.169	6.577	1.826	3.200	1.621	.975
Std. error of skewness	.140	.140	.140	.140	.140	.140	.140
Kurtosis	2.513	3.703	3.703	45.359	4.306	10.984	.682
Std. error of kurtosis	.280	.280	.280	.280	.280	.280	.280
Range	2	2	4	20	15	7	31
Minimum	0	0	0	5	4	0	9
Maximum	2	2	4	25	19	7	40

Table 2 - Spearman's Rank Correlation Coefficient (rho). Bogotá, Colombia, 2011

		Emotional abuse	Physical abuse	Sexual abuse	Emotional/psychological neglect	Physical neglect	Family dysfunction	Psychological distress
Emotional abuse	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.513*	.231*	.377*	.284*	.436*	.332*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

Physical abuse	Correlation Coefficient	.513*	1.000	.142†	.355*	.275*	.225*	.201*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.013	.000	.000	.000	.000
Sexual abuse	Correlation Coefficient	.231*	.142†	1.000	.184*	.167*	.185*	.142†
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.013	.	.001	.004	.001	.013
Emotional/psychological neglect	Correlation Coefficient	.377*	.335*	.184*	1.000	.509*	.333*	.412*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.001	.	.000	.000	.000
Physical neglect	Correlation Coefficient	.284*	.275*	.167*	.509*	1.000	.313*	.267*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.004	.000	.	.000	.000
Family dysfunction	Correlation Coefficient	.436*	.225*	.185*	.333*		1.000	.342*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.001	.000	.000	.	.000
Psychological distress	Correlation Coefficient	.332*	.201*	.142†	.412*	.267*	.342*	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.013	.000	.000	.000	.
	N	302	302	302	302	302	302	302

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); †Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed).

Based on the two tables above, we conclude that there are strong and significant correlations between physical and emotional abuse, as well as between emotional abuse and family dysfunction.

Table 3 - Chi-square emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Bogotá, Colombia, 2011

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Emotional abuse	.421 ^a	1	.516
Physical abuse	.373 ^a	2	.830
Sexual abuse	2.283 ^a	4	.684

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

There were significant reports of experiences of abuse (neglect =18.2%; emotional abuse =17.9%; physical abuse =13.6%; sexual abuse =2.0%).

The options "was touched in a sexual way", "was victim of an attempt at sexual intercourse", "was forced to touch in a sexual way," and "had sexual intercourse with them" accounted for 8.3% of answers (partial values can be found in Table 2). These figures are related to psychological distress, family dysfunction, and other perceptions of care of health and life. It is worrying that any kind of sexual abuse is present in more than 8% of families who belong to a social class that is medium-high to very high, where over 80% of parents have a higher education as well as religious background and practices for the most part. We call upon relevant

bodies to draw attention to these alarming results. More than one-third of students at the University of Bogotá have parents in a situation of divorce or separation. Furthermore, high and significant statistical correlations are found between physical abuse and emotional abuse, as well as between emotional abuse and family dysfunction.

Although there are figures that reflect adequate to high levels of "care and affection in family relationships," the feeling or perception of "proximity between family members" was reported by 47.7% as "very often" and by 35.1% as "often." If we exclude or rule out the percentages of "sometimes", "rarely," and "never," which represented only 17.2% of the sample, an analysis of relative percentages of the first two values of the variable allows us to conclude that more than 50% of students have experienced a feeling of proximity to family members either never, rarely, or sometimes. This can be a warning sign regarding the solitude of young people from a big city (Note that Bogotá is one of the biggest cities in the world, with a total of 10 million people including general and floating populations) who are surrounded by relatives and caregivers, but who feel little emotional proximity or connection.

Interviewees' perceptions of abuse suffered at home was below 84.8%. The highest percentage of students who stated that they had been abused during childhood was 15.2% (fear of being physically assaulted), followed by 13.0% (who had suffered blows, scars, or wounds as the result of

maltreatment), 11.3% (was often assaulted physically), 9.3% (mother/caregiver was assaulted with blows, pushed, or had objects thrown at her), 5.3% (mother/caregiver repeatedly assaulted for at least a few minutes), 3.6% (mother/caregiver wounded by knife or gunshot). Previous figures reflect the worrying situation in Colombia regarding gender violence, especially against women. The fact that medium to high and high social classes, with good socioeconomic and cultural conditions, present such figures of violence and abuse against women is paradoxical. It is recommended that universities, researchers, private and public organizations, as well as society as a whole, draw their attention to these reports in order to guide prevention policies, health care, and social, family and academic welfare

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* A term that, in the social and human sciences, denotes an emotional state of the loneliness of a person despite being surrounded by people, friends, relatives, and family.

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