

Alexithymia Among Victims of Incest

MELLAL KHADIDJA¹, MEHERZI MALIKA², MADOURI OUARDA³

^{1,3} Research Laboratory of Psychology and Educational Sciences. University of Oran 2, Mohamed Ben Ahmed. Algeria.

² Means of investigation and therapeutic techniques for behavioral disorders Laboratory. University of Oran 2, Mohamed Ben Ahmed. Algeria.

E-mail corresponding: Mellal.khadidja@univ-oran2.dz

Received: 20/11/2023 ; Accepted: 01/03/2024 ; Published: 10/03/2024

Abstract:

The study aimed to investigate the presence of Alexithymia in victims of incest. A clinical study was conducted on two female victims of incest, utilizing the following tools: clinical observation, semi-structured interview, and the -20TAS Alexithymia scale. The findings revealed a high level of Alexithymia among victims of incest following the sexual assault.

Keywords: Alexithymia, victims, incest, Scale (TAS-20).

1- Problem Statement:

Human life is often exposed to a range of dangers, which can be minor at times and life-threatening at other times. Over time, individuals become aware of these threats and realize that their chances of survival are greater than the possibilities of their demise. They observe that most serious events affect others but not them. This notion gives rise to the concept of deferred death, as individuals believe they are capable of overcoming various dangers and threats, perceiving them as distant until they are unexpectedly confronted by them. Consequently, they may compromise their lives, psychological equilibrium, and suffer from profound psychological effects that impact both themselves and their surroundings.

Among these prevalent phenomena is "incest," which is defined as a sexual relationship between individuals from the same family, such as a father and daughter, siblings, or any person with a parental lineage to the child, including stepmothers, stepfathers. It involves physical contact or sexual penetration (vaginal, anal, oral) through sexual organs, fingers, or any other object. Incest is an ancient phenomenon, but in our Arab world, numerous barriers are erected to treat it as a mere incidental occurrence rather than a complex issue. In Algeria, for example, statistics have shed light on the prevalence of this phenomenon. Mrs. Massoudane Khaira, the head of the National Bureau for Child Protection and Juvenile Offenses at the Police Directorate, revealed that there were 42 reported cases of incest in 2005, with 29 cases involving female victims and 13 cases involving male child victims. Furthermore, the National Gendarmerie recorded over 113 cases of incest between the years 2000 and 2005, primarily involving fathers assaulting their daughters or engaging in sexual activities between siblings and other relatives.

Between the years 2005 and 2006, the prevalence of this phenomenon escalated, evident from the available figures, as the number of implicated individuals arrested reached 285, including fathers, siblings, in-laws, and mothers.

In the year 2007, according to statistics provided by the Communication Cell of the National Gendarmerie Command, there were 12 cases of incest. Additionally, during the first quarter of 2008, precisely from January 1st to March 28th, there were three cases of incest recorded by the National Gendarmerie. Furthermore, there were 1,370 cases of sexual assault reported between January and August 2009. Captain Karoud Abdelhamid, the responsible officer of the Communication Cell under the National Gendarmerie Command in Sharaka, revealed that incest accounted for 18% of the victims of these assaults. Moreover, Mrs. Farida Nabash disclosed that there were 1,370 cases of sexual and physical abuse against minors nationwide (Ibriham, 2018).

Nevertheless, these numbers and statistics remain relative and do not truly reflect the reality that has long been shrouded in silence and secrecy due to the stigma and disgrace associated with it. They are not mere figures or statistics but rather a warning of the spread of the most heinous crime committed against society and humanity.

Sexual assaults targeting family members, regardless of age, social status, or educational level of the victims, have profound effects on the victim's psychological, physical, social, and professional aspects. The family and the community, in turn, are indirectly affected by these crimes. The significant harm caused by sexual assault against females is evident, with variations in its severity and intensity depending on the type and duration of the assault. The detrimental factors and underlying causes, combined with the diverse patterns of assault, make it difficult to control and contain them, particularly concerning incest. It becomes challenging to detect and reach the victims, provide them with psychological and social support, and mitigate the severity of the consequences they endure.

The phenomenon of incest has resulted in various psychological repercussions, notably the loss of affectivity known as alexithymia, defined as a personality trait characterized by difficulty in expressing emotions, feelings, social attachment, and interpersonal relationships. Additionally, individuals with alexithymia struggle to differentiate and appreciate the emotions of others, not because they are emotionally callous, but rather the opposite. Those affected by this condition are known for their sensitivity, but they experience suppression, meaning they do not express their emotions. Currently, this is known as emotional expression dysregulation and emotional blunting, where there is a lack of connection between emotions and the thoughts that are generally associated with each other (Fares, 2016, p.12).

According to this perspective, the following question is raised:

- What is the level of alexithymia among individuals who have experienced incestuous relationships?

2- Defining Study Concepts:

a. Incest: Stkel defines incest as repressed sexual desires towards family members, such as a father towards his daughter, a mother towards her son, a brother towards his sister, or vice versa, which govern and direct their actions. This condition can lead to complex symptoms, fears, and coercive behaviors that hinder the fulfillment of these desires. Often, it results in shame in males or sexual frigidity in females, along with other psychopathic phenomena (Al-Hanafi, 2004, p. 273). Incest refers to engaging in sexual activity between individuals of the same blood relationship and kinship,

which is forbidden by law and religion. This deviance has its roots in the concept of the Oedipus complex and is considered a symptom of mental disorders and psychoses (Al-Issaoui, 2007, p. 393).

b. Operationally, incest is defined as engaging in sexual relations between individuals within the same family, whether it is within the immediate or extended family (father and daughter, brother and sister, uncle and niece, or paternal uncle and daughter of his sister). In this study, incest occurred between a father and his daughter and between an uncle and the daughter of his brother.

2. Secondly, Alexithymia: R. Fish (1989) defines alexithymia as a condition that reflects the ability to distinguish and express emotions, affective states, and feelings. In individuals with alexithymia, the capacity for imagination and dreaming is reduced, while there is an increased tendency to think in operational and non-symbolic ways. Consequently, there is an inability to differentiate between emotional states and bodily sensations (Al-Dawash, 2011, p. 6). The diagnostic criterion for alexithymia is the limited expression of emotions, feelings, and affective experiences (Mariage, Cuyenet, & Godord, 2008).

Operationally, it is defined as the degree obtained by victims of incestuous relationships on the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20).

3- Methodological Procedures:

1. Research Method: The clinical method was adopted as it is suitable for understanding and discussing the results through an in-depth study of cases.

2. Research Tools: The research tools consisted of the following:

a. Clinical Interviews: It is a "professional dynamic social relationship face-to-face between the clinical specialist and the patient in a safe atmosphere characterized by mutual trust between both parties. Its purpose is to understand the case, gain the patient's trust, identify their problems and suffering. It takes place in a suitable location for a specific duration, typically around 45 minutes to an hour. The duration of the interview may vary depending on the outlined objectives and the case" (Zahrane, 2005, p. 235).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the cases (victims of incestuous relationships) to understand their psychological and social history and the psychological, social, and emotional effects of incestuous relationships.

b. Clinical Observation: It is a fundamental and important tool for assessing an individual's level of distress or motivation. It focuses on observing the examinee's behavior during the interview, such as mood, appearance, and any signs of mental distraction during the conversation, among others (Ghanem, 2006, p. 137). In this study, free observation was relied upon to identify indicators of alexithymia in victims of incestuous relationships.

TAS-20 Alexithymia Scale: It is a scale developed by Bagby, Taylor, Ryan, and others in 1994. It consists of 20 items distributed across three important dimensions (Vassi, 2016), as follows:

- "DDF" or "Difficulty Describing Feelings": This dimension refers to the difficulty in describing emotions and consists of five items with the following numbers: 2, 4, 7, 12, and 17.

- "DIF" or "Difficulty Identifying Feelings": This dimension relates to the difficulty in identifying emotions or affective states. It comprises seven items with the following numbers: 1, 3, 6, 9, 11, 13, and 14.

- "EOT" or "Externally Oriented Thinking": This dimension refers to thinking that is externally focused. It consists of eight items with the following numbers: 5, 8, 10, 15, 16, 18, 19, and 20.

3.3. Study Sample: The study sample consisted of two female cases who were victims of incestuous relationships. Their ages ranged from 17 to 20 years old, and they experienced sexual abuse by their uncle and father at ages 14 and 18, respectively.

4- Presentation and Discussion of Results:

The first case (K), aged 17, experienced sexual assault at the age of 14. She exhibits feelings of sadness, fear, and astonishment, and she struggles to identify her emotions. Sadness predominates in her demeanor. Additionally, she cannot recognize what angers her, and most of the time, she feels constricted without knowing the reason. She is unable to describe her feelings or what bothers her.

As for the second case (W), who is 20 years old, she was sexually assaulted by her uncle at the age of 17. She appears anxious because she finds it difficult to express her emotions. Some sadness is evident due to what she has experienced. The case often experiences significant sadness and suffocation when discussing her past.

Through these two cases, it becomes evident that victims of incestuous relationships suffer from a high level of alexithymia as a result of experiencing sexual assault.

Furthermore, the first case exhibits a high level of difficulty in describing emotions and identifying them, as indicated by the results of the alexithymia scale (score of 64). She struggles to express her emotions and often experiences bodily sensations that doctors cannot comprehend. She lacks clarity in describing and understanding her inner experiences, indicating limited emotional life and an inability to recognize and articulate emotions to others.

Moreover, she displays a suppression of positive aspects and frequently expresses feelings of sadness and anxiety. Her responses were characterized by negativity, as confirmed by Olivier Lumind, who emphasized that higher levels of alexithymia correspond to a decreased ability to recognize pain and pleasure due to a lack of introspection. Consequently, alexithymia emerged as a psychosomatic regulatory activity in both cases.

As for the second case, she also demonstrates a high level of difficulty in describing and identifying emotions after experiencing sexual assault, as confirmed during interviews and through the scale (score of 60). This can be attributed to her inability to express her feelings following the sexual assault. She also exhibits limited emotional engagement, hindering the understanding of her motivations and desires by others. Consequently, most of her personal relationships tend to be stereotypical.

This is corroborated by a study conducted by Lecours and Robert (2009), which suggests that the impairment in recognizing and defining emotions and feelings arises from the inability to mentally organize emotions. The inability to identify emotions often leads to an incapacity to describe them to others or communicate through them.

According to Maurice Corcou (2011), individuals with alexithymia perceive their bodies as detached from their minds. This hinders processes and pathways from establishing connections and categorizing states of sadness, anger, or joy. Consequently, energy remains unprocessed and is distributed throughout the body, resulting in intense states of thinking and bodily tension. When discussing personal matters, individuals with alexithymia frequently provide extensive descriptions

related to physical ailments. This can be attributed to the difficulty in clearly distinguishing between bodily sensations and emotional feelings, thereby indicating an attempt to express emotions.

Rolerth and Lecours (2009) emphasized the necessity of understanding the psychopathological basis of alexithymia before evaluating it scientifically. Despite this, the clinical descriptive aspect, as highlighted by Nemail and Sifneos, focuses on the limited emotional life and the inability to recognize and describe emotions to others.

The current study aligns with a study by Fantini and Pedinelli, titled "Alexithymia and Emotional Constriction: Two Different Poles of the Same Level." This study aimed to answer questions regarding whether alexithymia serves as a predisposing factor for psychosomatic disorders, relates to a defensive position or reaction to stress or emotional constriction, or acts as a coping strategy.

In his study on the relationship between physical and sexual abuse of children and certain demographic variables related to the family, Khalafi (1990) explained that the age group from 11 to 16 years is the most vulnerable to incestuous rape. Sexual assaults against females, regardless of age, location, social status, or educational level of the victim, have severe effects on the victim's physical, social, professional, and, most importantly, psychological aspects. The detrimental impact of sexual assault on females is evident, with varying degrees and intensity depending on the type and duration of the assault. Such assaults leave profound psychological effects that the victim finds difficult to overcome, including difficulties in recognizing and describing emotions, a sense of loss in love, affection, and security, feelings of fear, confusion, and anxiety, loss of self-awareness of pain or pleasure towards oneself and others, and create isolation and an inability to establish relationships with others.

This phenomenon has had very negative consequences on the victims and has caused severe psychological crises, as confirmed by a study conducted by Fatima Al-Mouqit (2003). In fact, intrafamilial sexual abuse has become a global phenomenon, as evidenced by the presented statistics, various studies, and court records. The study also highlighted that sexual abuse leads to various effects due to the traumatic experience of being exposed to such abuse, especially in the absence of security and protection measures for the victim, whether from the perpetrator or society.

On the other hand, a study by Al-Osaimi (2010) emphasized that sexual instinct is the reason behind such abuse, and God has permitted its fulfillment only through marriage. The study affirmed that preventing incest requires instilling pure beliefs and providing accurate awareness of the provisions of Sharia law (Al-Osaimi, 2010, p.17). Incest is a significant factor affecting the victim, causing traumas that disrupt the individual's balance and result in psychological, social, emotional, physical, and familial harm, some of which are:

Feelings of fear, confusion, and anxiety, self-loathing, disgust, and shame, depression and a tendency towards isolation, lack of trust in others, absence of self-esteem, inability to build relationships with others, deviance and inclination, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, sexual disorders, feelings of loneliness and guilt, frustration, social isolation, shaking the foundations that constitute healthy human consciousness and form proper emotional awareness.

Also, difficulty in establishing healthy emotional or sexual relationships persists, as memories of unhealthy relationships (such as sexual assault) and their effects remain impactful on emotional and sexual stimuli perception. The victim may harbor negative or conflicting feelings towards emotional and sexual subjects, making establishing a relationship with someone outside the taboo circle challenging. This phenomenon leads to maladjustment, where the image of the relationship between

individuals becomes distorted, straying away from the relationship between a brother and sister or between a father and daughter and being replaced with relationships characterized by inconsistency and fluctuation, leaving deep wounds in the psyche (Al-Majdoub, 2003, p.170).

A study by Samira on "Psychological Trauma in Victims of Incest and Its Effects" concluded the existence of specific characteristics in the psychological organization of incest victims, albeit with some variation in their intensity. Most of the observed effects on the victims' psychological organization were primarily linked to the negative psychosocial consequences resulting from the disclosure and revelation of incest, which adversely impacted their social and psychological development. Consequently, a distinct personality organization emerged, characterized by the following: identity disturbance, difficulties in embodying the maternal image due to perceiving the mother as lacking a defensive and secure role despite her presence within the family, unhealthy investment in external relationships, ability to establish non-healthy emotional relationships, weak narcissistic formation of the personality, anxiety, aggression, conflict avoidance, inability to differentiate between good and bad, dominance of deceit, and the prominence of antisocial personality traits (Tawfiq, 2019).

Additionally, in her study titled "Diagnosis of Psychopathological Manifestations in Victims of Incest through Projective Testing," she found manifestations related to the course of psychosexual development and certain atypical characteristics that provided a predisposing background for individuals to become victims of incestuous acts. This background was rooted in primitive narcissistic problems within parent-child dyadic relationships, Oedipal conflict, formation of a distinctive personality with specific traits such as depressive tendencies, anxiety, homosexuality, obsessive thoughts, and antisocial behaviors. Identifying these psychopathological manifestations in incest victims allows for predicting the risk of incestuous acts and subsequently facilitates prevention through awareness and the significance of healthy individual growth, particularly during early childhood. Moreover, it calls for the implementation of appropriate interventions to confront and mitigate the spread of these forbidden and destructive acts on individuals, families, and society as a whole (Tawfiq, 2020).

The study conducted by Hafsi and Ashouri on "Psychological Well-being of Adolescent Victims of Incest" demonstrated the psychological suffering experienced by the victims, collectively known as psychological well-being. This well-being is primarily manifested through two distinct disorders: Acute Stress Disorder following the trauma and Depressive Disorder, characterized by feelings of sadness, loss of interest in life, and a sense of hopelessness (Ashouri, Hafsi, 2019).

The present study aimed to investigate the topic of alexithymia among victims of incest. Through a clinical field study involving two cases of sexual abuse by family members, it was found that incest victims exhibit a high level of alexithymia following the sexual assault. This was evident through difficulties in describing emotions in the first case and difficulties in recognizing emotions in the second case. Based on these findings, it is essential to establish programs and institutions dedicated to providing psychological and social support for victims of incest. The objective is to care for and protect them by enhancing their trust and helping them adapt to society.

REFERENCES

- Ibrahim, Samia. (2018). "Sexual Deviations in Algerian Society (Incest Phenomenon as a Model)". *Sociology Journal for Studies and Social Research*, pp. 149-151.

- Tawfiq, Sameera. (2020). "Diagnosis of Some Psychopathological Manifestations Among Victims of Incest through Projective Testing (Field Study of Cases)". *Maghreb Journal for Historical and Social Studies*, pp. 27-34.
- Tawfiq, Sameera. (2019). "Psychological Shock Among Victims of Incest and Its Impact on Personality Organization". *Psychologies and Anima Journal*, pp. 24-34.
- Hafsi, Suad, & Ashouri, Sonia. (2019). "Psychological Well-being of Adolescent Victims of Incest (Clinical Study)". *Yearbook Journal*, pp. 541-555.
- Al-Hanafi, Abdul Mun'im. (2004). "Sexual Psychological Encyclopedia", 4th ed., Cairo: Madbouli Library.
- Zahrani, Hamed Abdul Salam. (2005). "Mental Health and Psychological Therapy", 4th ed., Cairo: Alam Al-Kutub for Publishing and Distribution.
- Al-Osaimi, Mohammed bin Marzouq. (2010). "Combatting Incest (A Comparative Theoretical Study)", Naif Arab University, Riyadh.
- Al-Ayissi, Abdul Rahman. (2007). "Poverty and Sex", 1st ed., Beirut: Dar Al-Nahda Al-Arabiyya.
- Ghanem, Mohammed Hassan. (2006). "Introduction to Abnormal Psychology", 1st ed., Egypt: Egyptian Library.
- Fares, Zain Al-Abidin. (2016). "Difficulty in Recognizing Emotions (Alexithymia)". *University Journal for Psychological and Educational Studies*, Mohamed Boudiaf University, M'sila, Algeria, pp. 12-36.
- Fassi, Amal. (2016). "Primary Depression and Alexithymia in Cancer Patients as a Distinct Mental Activity" [Unpublished doctoral thesis], Psychology, University of Setif, Algeria.
- Al-Majdoub, Ahmed Ali. (2003). "Incest", Cairo: Madbouli Library.
- Mariage, A., Cuynet, P., & Godard, B. (2008). "Obesity and Alexithymia in the Rorschach Test". *Psychiatric Evolution*, 73, 377-397.