



Child Abuse and its Consequences on Personality Development. A Critical Review In Nigerian Context

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Abstract

The study interrogated Child Abuse and how it impacts Personality Development in Nigerian society. The Psychoanalytical theory of Sigmund Freud serves as the theoretical framework for this research. In this study, the secondary source of data was utilized to gather relevant information. Data were extracted from Journals, News Papers, Magazines and other online materials. The study identified; physical, mental, psychological, sexual, and emotional as some of the forms/patterns of child abuse in Nigeria. Based on comprehensive literature reviewed, the study concludes that there was prevalence of emotional, physical, psychological abuse on children with attendant consequences on the child's personality development in Nigerian social milieu. The study concludes that experience of sexual abuse among children in Nigeria, had enormous negative effects on the personality development of the child in our society. The study further stressed that physical abuse and childhood neglect had adverse effects on the personality development of the child during the period of review. The study recommends; that there should be early intervention that aid the training of community members and health care providers to identified early signs of abuse. Children should be removed from an unsafe environment to a more nurturing and safe home. Parents/caregivers should be train on healthy parenting practice to help reduced the incidence of child abuse.

Key words; child abuse, personality, personality development, emotional abuse, physical abuse.

Introduction

Child abuse has severe short- and long- term psychological, physical, sexual, emotional, and mental health consequences. The consequences of child abuse can manifest in various forms in our society, such as emotional, psychological, and behavioural malfunction that can persist from childhood to adulthood. Adverse childhood experiences are linked to numerous types of harmful consequences. A child who is abused is more likely to abuse others as an adult hence, violence is pass down from one generation to another (WHO, 2026). Personality development

is a complex process influenced by a combination of genetic, environmental, social, and psychological factors. It involves the growth and maturation of an individual's distinct traits, behaviours, and patterns of thinking and feeling over time. Personality development, in the worlds of Vivekananda (2009), refers to a person's deeper levels and includes a wider spectrum of individual distinctions in reasoning, feeling, and acting.

The abuse of a child can alter healthy psychological and emotional development, potentially leading to long-term effects on personality. Common impacts may include difficulties with trust, relationships, self-esteem, emotional regulation, and mental health. Abuse in childhood is associated with higher rates of personality disorders and other mental health conditions in adulthood. The specific effects can vary based on factors like the type and severity of abuse, age when abuse occurred, and presence of protective factors. With proper support and treatment, many individuals are able to heal and develop healthy personalities despite experiencing abuse. Therefore, prevention of child abuse and early intervention are crucial for supporting healthy personality development. Preventing child abuse before it starts is very possible, some of the preventive approaches includes; supporting parents, teaching and practicing positive parenting skills and strengthen laws that prohibits harsh punishment on the child (WHO, 2026).

Child abuse as a social menace is a pervasive issue that can have profound and lasting effects on an individual's personality development. The term "child abuse" encompasses various forms of maltreatment, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect. Each type of abuse can lead to distinct patterns of psychological and emotional disturbances that may persist into adulthood. The possible consequences may include low self-esteem and negative self-image, chronic anxiety or depression, difficulty in expressing emotions, perfectionism or feelings of worthlessness. According to Wilson *et al.* (2011) child abuse may take the form of neglect which manifest as failure to provide for a child's basic need to protect the child from dangers. Abuse can affect personality development by leading to insecure attachment styles, challenges with self-reliance and independence, difficulty forming and maintaining relationships and poor self-care practices. The effects of abuse on personality development can be understood through several psychological mechanisms and processes. Abuse can disrupt the formation social bond and attachments, which are crucial for healthy emotional development. Children who experience abuse may develop insecure, anxious, or disorganized attachment styles, affecting their ability to form stable relationships throughout life (Donnellan & Lucas, 2008). Abuse can alter a child's core beliefs about themselves, others, and the world. These cognitive schemas may include beliefs that the world is dangerous, that they are unworthy of love, or that others cannot be trusted. These beliefs can become deeply ingrained and thus influence personality traits and behaviours. Chronic stress and trauma from abuse can alter mental structure and function, particularly in areas related to emotional regulation, memory, and stress response. These changes can contribute to personality traits such as hypervigilance, emotional reactivity, or dissociation. Children who experience abuse often develop poor coping mechanisms to survive in their environment.

The long-term attendant consequences of child abuse on personality can manifest in various ways. Research (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017) has shown a strong correlation between childhood abuse and the development of personality disorders in adulthood. For example, many survivors of chronic childhood abuse develop symptoms that go beyond traditional PTSD, including difficulties with emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, and sense of identity. Abuse can lead to insecure attachment styles that persist into adulthood, affecting romantic relationships, friendships, and even workplace interactions. Abuse can lead to challenges in managing emotions, such as anger, anxiety, or sadness, can become core personality traits for survivors of abusive situation. Abuse can largely impact how individuals see themselves, often leading to a disorganized sense of identity or chronic feelings of shame and worthlessness. Again, the impact of child abuse on personality

development is complex and can have far-reaching consequences. Understanding these effects is crucial for developing effective prevention strategies, interventions, and treatments. With appropriate support and resources, individuals who have experienced childhood abuse can work towards healing, developing healthier personality traits, and improving their overall quality of life. It is against this background that this study seeks to review the menace of child abuse and its associated consequences on personality development in Nigerian context.

Literature Review

The Concept of Personality

Personality can be seen as the organization of an individual's distinguishing characteristics, traits, or habits which include individual's unique way of thinking, feelings and behaving the distinguished him from others. The earlier definition on personality by Allport (1937) mirrored personality as the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his unique adjustment to his environment. Similarly, Mischel (1976), referred personality to mean the distinctive patterns of behaviour including thoughts and emotions, that characterize each individual's adaptation to the situations of his/her life. Meanwhile, Salvador Maddi (1989) defined personality as a constant set of intrapsychic or internal characteristics and predispositions that directly determine psychological behaviour.

Basically, personality was defined as the way of an individual behaves, thinks, feels, and how he or she acts based on the commandments of her or his mind (Vivekananda, 2009). Apart from that, personality also can be described as an individual trait, characteristic, pattern of taught, react and interact with each other (Widom, 2000). Similarly, personality also as a dynamic of the person's psychological systems that measure his unique adjustment or adaption to the situation and the environment surrounding (Gaussen, 2001).

Personality stability is a highly debated subject as researchers are constantly trying to understand how it works and to which extent personality stability can be expected. When adding in another factor such as physical abuse the equation suddenly becomes even more complex. Physical abuse is known for bringing about detrimental consequences for its victims but very little is known about its effects on personality specifically. Previous research has indicated that trauma impacts personality stability negatively in the sense that positive traits decrease and negative traits increase (e.g., Sudbrack, Manfro, Kuhn, Carvalho, & Lara, 2015). However, the negative effects on personality have not been examined beyond the labels of the increases and decreases of negative and positive traits. This study aims to interrogate and analyse the effects of child abuse as it affects the child's personality development in the Nigerian social milieu.

Child Abuse, Consequences and Personality Development

Child abuse, as a global issue, significantly influences personality development. The term "child abuse" includes physical, emotional, sexual abuse, and neglect. Research shows that such adverse experiences during early childhood have lasting impacts on personality traits, emotional regulation, and interpersonal relationships (Anda *et al.*, 2006).

The consequences of child abuse include impaired lifelong physical and mental health, thus, the social and occupational results can slows down a country's economic and social growth (WHO, 2026). Children who experience abuse often develop maladaptive coping mechanisms. Emotionally abused children tend to display higher levels of anxiety, depression, and aggression (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010). Longitudinal studies reveal that chronic stress from abuse disrupts normal emotional regulation, leading to difficulties in managing emotions later in life (Jaffee & Gallop, 2007). Early childhood abuse often leads to insecure attachment styles, which affect personality formation. Children exposed to abuse may develop either avoidant or anxious attachment styles, leading to difficulty in forming stable, trusting relationships (McLaughlin & Sheridan, 2016). Insecure attachment is frequently linked to

maladaptive personality traits such as dependency or social withdrawal (Raby *et al.*, 2015). Adult who experienced abused during childhood, are at high risk for behavioural, physical and mental health problems such as indulging or being a victim of violence, depression, unplanned pregnancy, smoking, and alcohol and drug misuse (Unicef, 2024).

A substantial body of research supports the link between child abuse and the development of personality disorders. Children exposed to severe or prolonged abuse are at a higher risk of developing borderline personality disorder, characterized by instability in mood, self-image, and interpersonal relationships (Battle *et al.*, 2004). Additionally, antisocial and narcissistic personality traits have been correlated with childhood neglect or physical abuse (Widom, 1999).

Abuse often results in cognitive distortions and behavioural issues, further influencing personality development. Children who suffer from abuse may internalize feelings of worthlessness, affecting their self-esteem and identity formation (Lansford *et al.*, 2010). Studies highlight that these children may exhibit more aggressive or delinquent behaviour as a means of coping with emotional trauma (Thompson & Calkins, 2016). Abuse during critical periods of brain development can have long-term consequences on the brain's structure and function. Studies using neuroimaging techniques show that maltreated children often have reduced volume in the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and hippocampus areas crucial for emotional regulation and personality development (Teicher *et al.*, 2003). Such neurobiological changes can predispose individuals to emotional dysregulation and impulsive behaviors, which are commonly observed in personality disorders. Not all children exposed to abuse develop maladaptive personality traits. Research identifies factors such as social support, temperament, and access to mental health services as buffers against the negative impacts of abuse (Cicchetti, 2013). Children with a resilient disposition and strong external support systems are more likely to overcome adverse experiences and develop healthier personality traits.

Empirical evidence demonstrates a clear link between child abuse and the development of maladaptive personality traits. The severity and duration of abuse, alongside individual and environmental factors, shape the outcomes of personality development. Early interventions and support can mitigate some of the long-term effects of abuse, fostering healthier personality development.

Theoretical Review

Psychoanalytic Theory

Psychoanalytic theory, rooted in the work of Sigmund Freud, offers profound insights into the effects of early experiences on personality development. Child abuse, encompassing physical, emotional, and sexual maltreatment, profoundly impacts an individual's psychological makeup. This review explores how psychoanalytic concepts explain the influence of child abuse on personality development, drawing on empirical studies to illustrate these dynamics.

Freud's concept of the unconscious mind suggests that traumatic experiences, such as child abuse, are often repressed but continue to influence behaviour and mental health. This implies that repressed memories of abuse can lead to various psychological issues, including anxiety, depression, and dissociative disorders. Empirical studies support the existence of repressed memories and their impact. For example, studies on trauma survivors show that individuals may unconsciously block out painful memories, which later manifest as psychological symptoms (Williams, 1994).

Freud's structural model of personality, comprising the id, ego, and superego, provides a framework for understanding how child abuse can alter personality formation.

Id: Child abuse can result in an overactive id, where primitive instinct and desires dominate, leading to impulsive and aggressive behaviours.

Ego: The ego's ability to mediate reality and the id's demands can be compromised, causing difficulties in decision-making and reality testing.

Superego: An abused child might develop a harsh superego, internalizing the abuser's criticisms, leading to excessive guilt and low self-esteem. Studies have shown that abuse can result in maladaptive personality traits, such as heightened aggression (id), poor impulse control (ego), and self-critical tendencies (superego) (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2001).

Freud's theory posits that unresolved conflicts during psychosexual stages can result in fixations, affecting personality. Abuse during specific developmental stages can lead to fixations. For example, sexual abuse during the phallic stage might result in sexual dysfunction or inappropriate sexual behaviours. Research indicates that sexual abuse in childhood is linked to later sexual problems and risky sexual behaviour (Trickett *et al.*, 2011). Psychoanalytic theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the profound impact of child abuse on personality development. Through concepts such as the unconscious mind, defence mechanisms, and psychosexual development, psychoanalytic theory explains how early traumatic experiences shape an individual's psychological and behavioural patterns. Empirical evidence supports the theory's insights into the long-term effects of abuse and highlights the importance of early intervention and therapeutic support. Despite criticisms, psychoanalytic concepts continue to inform effective therapeutic approaches for survivors of child abuse, offering pathways to healing and recovery.

Empirical Review on the Consequences of Child Abuse

Tyrka *et al.* (2009) investigated the effects of abuse types on symptoms of personality disorders; they found out that each type of physical, sexual, and emotional abuses are resulted from neglect and they are related to three main symptoms of personality disorder. Abuse is especially related closely to main symptoms of some personality disorders like paranoid personality disorder, borderline, avoidant, dependent, and obsessive-compulsive personality disorder.

Harter and Taylor (2000) studied parents' alcohol dependence, child abuse and adaptability in adulthood; according to the results somatization, obsessive-compulsive and anxiety among victims of sexual and physical abuse, interpersonal sensitivity, pessimism, depression and psychosis among victims of emotional, sexual and physical abuse, and hostility and fear among victims of sexual abuse are significant. Children being abused in school show problems in their workplace and in relationships with others. Other results showed that abused children are more affected by alcohol.

. Horowitz (2001) examined the effect of child abuse and neglect on adulthood health. The findings showed that men who were victims of child abuse and neglect are depressed and have antisocial personality disorders in comparison with control group; however, they do not have alcohol problems. Women who were victims of child abuse are also depressed and have antisocial personality disorders in comparison with control group; however, in comparison with men, they have many alcohol problems.

Kim and Cicchetti (2010) conducted longitudinal studies and found that chronic exposure to emotional maltreatment during early childhood is strongly correlated with internalizing disorders such as anxiety and depression, and externalizing behaviours like aggression and conduct problems.

Further research by Jaffee and Gallop (2007) suggests that children who experience early abuse are less likely to develop adaptive emotional regulation strategies. Over time, this lack of emotional control manifests in maladaptive personality traits such as impulsivity and difficulty managing stress. These individuals often struggle to engage with their emotions constructively, leading to long-term challenges in emotional stability, a core component of personality.

Attachment theory posits that early relationships between children and caregivers serve as the foundation for personality development (Bowlby, 1988). When these early relationships are

abusive, children are more likely to develop insecure attachment styles. Empirical studies highlight the correlation between child abuse and avoidant or anxious attachment styles, which are associated with poor social functioning and the development of maladaptive personality traits in adulthood (McLaughlin & Sheridan, 2016).

A study by Raby *et al.* (2015) demonstrated that maltreated children often display avoidant attachment patterns, which can manifest as emotional withdrawal and difficulty trusting others. This lack of secure attachment impairs a child's ability to form healthy relationships later in life, contributing to interpersonal issues that are characteristic of certain personality disorders, including borderline and avoidant personality disorders. The association between child abuse and the development of personality disorders has been widely documented. Empirical evidence suggests that severe or prolonged abuse during childhood is a significant risk factor for the emergence of personality disorders, particularly borderline personality disorder (BPD), antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), and narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) (Battle *et al.*, 2004).

Children who endure physical and emotional abuse are more likely to exhibit traits associated with borderline personality disorder, such as emotional instability, identity disturbance, and fear of abandonment (Lansford *et al.*, 2010). A comprehensive study by Battle *et al.* (2004) found that individuals with histories of childhood maltreatment showed a significantly higher prevalence of BPD compared to those without such histories. Similarly, childhood neglect has been linked to antisocial personality traits, where individuals exhibit a disregard for others' rights and social norms.

Abuse not only affects emotional development but also cognitive and behavioral functioning, which in turn shapes personality traits. Cognitive distortions such as feelings of worthlessness and helplessness are commonly observed in children exposed to abuse. These children may internalize negative beliefs about themselves, which can become a core component of their personality. This internalized negativity often leads to low self-esteem, identity disturbances, and difficulties in social interactions (Lansford *et al.*, 2010).

Behaviourally, children who experience abuse are more likely to develop aggressive or oppositional traits as a way of coping with the emotional trauma inflicted by their caregivers. In a research conducted by Thompson and Calkins (2016), the duo posits that these behavioral tendencies of child abuse may be rooted in the child's attempt to gain control in an otherwise uncontrollable environment. Over time, these aggressive or oppositional behaviors can solidify into persistent personality traits, further affecting interpersonal relationships and social functioning.

Research indicates that factors such as genetic predisposition, social support, and access to mental health interventions can buffer the negative impacts of abuse and promote healthier personality outcomes (Cicchetti, 2013).

Methodology

The location of this study is the Nigeria state that have recorded increased rate of child abuse over the years. The study focused on child abused and its attendant consequences on personality development. This research utilized secondary source of data to provide the needed information. Some selected relevant literatures on child abused, consequences of child abuse, and personality development were reviewed to gain more insight on the topic. The data gathered were analysed and interpreted in line with the objectives of the research.

Conclusion

Based on comprehensive literature reviewed in this study, the study concludes that there was prevalence of emotional, physical, psychological abuse on children with attendant consequences on the child's personality development in Nigerian context.

The study concludes that experience of sexual abuse among Nigeria children had huge negative effects on the personality development of the child.

The study further stressed that physical abuse and childhood neglect had adverse effects on the personality development of the child during the period of review.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion, the study recommends as follows:

Early Intervention: Educators, healthcare providers, and community members should be trained to recognize signs of abuse, such as sudden behavioural changes, physical injuries, or withdrawal to help tackle the menace of child abuse in Nigeria.

Provision of Safe and Stable Environments: In cases where family environments are unsafe, placing the child in a stable, nurturing home can provide immediate relief. The government should collaborate with individual families to achieve this task in Nigeria.

Mental Health Support: The Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) should be administered to children by policy makers. This will help children reject negative thoughts and manage emotions that may arise from their previous abusive relationships.

Enlightenment and Advocacy: The government and non-governmental organisations should provide resources and workshops on healthy parenting practices to prevent abuse. And encourage communities to create supportive environments for children and families, as this will help avert the negative consequences of the social problem on children.

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