



Psychological Expertise of Sexually Abused Minors

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Sexual abuse is one of the most serious forms of victimization, with complex and long-lasting psychological effects. The resulting trauma affects cognitive, emotional, and relational functioning, as well as the individual's subsequent development, with increased vulnerability among children and adolescents. Forensic psychological assessment plays an essential role in documenting the impact of trauma and providing objective assessments of the veracity of the victim's accounts. The article addresses the specific characteristics of post-sexual abuse trauma, the main explanatory models and associated symptomatology, as well as the criteria and methods used in forensic expertise: clinical interviews, international protocols (NICHHD, SVA, RATAAC), validated psychological tests, and analysis of verbal and nonverbal behavior. At the same time, case studies are presented that illustrate the difficulties and particularities of the assessment process, demonstrating the importance of rigorously integrating clinical and forensic data to establish judicial truth and protect the best interests of the child.

Keywords: sexual abuse; psychological trauma; forensic psychological expertise; protocols; interviews; minor victims.

Психологічна експертиза неповнолітніх, потерпілих від сексуального насильства

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Сексуальне насильство — одна з найсерйозніших форм віктимізації, зі складними та тривалими психологічними наслідками. Отримана травма впливає на когнітивне, емоційне й міжособистісне функціонування, а також на подальший розвиток індивіда з підвищеною вразливістю в середовищі дітей і підлітків. Психологічна експертиза відіграє головну роль у документуванні наслідків психотравми й об'єктивному оцінюванні достовірності свідчень потерпілої особи. У роботі розглянуто особливості психотравматичного досвіду, отриманого внаслідок сексуального насильства, основні пояснювальні моделі та дотична до них симптоматика. Проаналізовано також критерії і методи, застосовувані у психологічній експертизі: клінічні інтерв'ю, міжнародні протоколи (NICHHD, SVA, RATAAC), валідизовані психодіагностичні тести, а також аналіз вербальної та невербальної поведінки. Водночас окрему увагу приділено аналізу прикладів, що ілюструють труднощі й особливості процесу оцінювання і підкреслюють важливість інтегрувати клінічні й судові дані для з'ясування істини в суді та захисту найкращих інтересів дитини.

Ключові слова: сексуальне насильство; психологічна травма; психологічна експертиза; протоколи; інтерв'ю; неповнолітні жертви.



Sexual abuse is one of the most devastating experiences a person can go through, and its effects are particularly complex and long-lasting. Beyond the obvious physical injuries, sexual abuse causes profound trauma that affects both the individual's cognitive structure and their emotional, social, and behavioral dimensions. Children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to such experiences, and trauma suffered in childhood can significantly affect subsequent psychological development [1].

In this context, forensic psychological expertise plays an essential role, as it provides the justice system with objective information about the effects of trauma on the victim and their ability to recount the facts coherently and truthfully. Psychological trauma is an emotional response caused by severe stressful events, such as physical injury, sexual violence, or other threats to the life of the subject or their loved ones.

Psychological trauma resulting from sexual abuse has distinct characteristics from other forms of trauma. First, sexual abuse is often a repetitive process in which the victim may be caught in a relationship of dependence on the abuser. Second, the act of sexual abuse involves a profound invasion of physical and emotional intimacy, leading to a loss of sense of security, self-confidence, and trust in others. According to Ben-Nun (2019), although sexual abuse is sometimes perceived as an isolated event, its impact can persist for years, manifesting itself in intense anxiety, depression, eating and relationship disorders, sexual dysfunction, and even dis-

sociative disorders. Studies show that a significant percentage of victims continue to show symptoms of PTSD months or even years after the abuse [1; 2].

Forensic psychological assessment is a complex procedure that involves rigorous investigation of the victim's mental state. The objective of the assessment is to clarify whether the victim has been exposed to a potentially traumatic event and whether their current mental state is consistent with such exposure [3; 4]. The process includes:

1. *Clinical interviews* with the victim, their family, and, in some cases, the perpetrator, adapted to their age, cognitive, and emotional development. These interviews aim to identify psychotraumatic symptoms and analyze the narrative content related to the alleged abuse. Along these lines, standardized protocols are used to support a structured, semi-structured and non-invasive exploration of traumatic experiences [5]:
 - The NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) protocol – provides a phased framework (introductory phase, instruction on recall, free narration, clarification questions), with an emphasis on openended questions and avoidance of suggestive ones.
 - The Statement Validity Assessment (SVA) protocol – used to analyze the credibility of children's statements,



especially in conjunction with the CriteriaBased Content Analysis (CBCA) method, which involves qualitative examination of narrative content in relation to certain psychological criteria of veracity.

- The RATAС (Rapport, Anatomy Identification, Touch Inquiry, Abuse Scenario, Closure) protocol – used mainly in international forensic contexts, provides a step-by-step framework for facilitating safe disclosure, especially in young children.
- 2. *Application of validated psychological tests* – MMPI-2, CAPS-5, DASS-21, CAT (for children), Rene Gille’s “Film Test”, family test, projective drawings.
- 3. *Behavioral observation* – monitoring verbal and nonverbal behavior, emotional reactivity, congruence between body language and verbal language, as well as the ability to recall presumed events.
- 4. Analysis of drawings, symbolic play, verbal and nonverbal expression.

Case studies provide a concrete perspective on how psychological trauma following sexual abuse manifests itself and is assessed in forensic expertise. They illustrate the diversity of symptoms, the difficulties encountered in the assessment process, and the relevance of the criteria applied, highlighting the link between theory and practice. A case study will be presented

below: The material presents a **12-year-old minor** who was sexually abused by his mother for approximately two years. This abuse manifested itself in the mother massaging the children’s genitals and engaging in acts of sexual self-gratification. During the interview, we learned that the father is deceased and that this behavior was directed not only at him but also at his older brothers (two of whom have a degree of disability, even though he did not want to mention this directly, being very ashamed of his experiences. Although they had experienced traumatic events in the past with their mother, the boy still felt sadness and longing for her. Subsequently, the last two boys (the subject of the case and his younger brother) were removed from the family and placed in a foster care center. However, when asked by the experts what he would choose between living with his mother and growing up in the center, the minor opted for the latter.

Some of the tests applied during the assessment were as follows:

- The Szondi test – suggests a complex personality, characterized by emotional sensitivity, introversion, and a desire for self-affirmation. There is a fragile balance between independence and the need for support, and emotional vulnerability can lead to difficulties in decision-making. A predisposition toward creativity and social activities suggests high potential, but requires careful management to avoid emotional instability.
- Projective anxiety test – The high anxiety score indicates a constant



level of emotional stress, generated by factors such as lack of maternal attention, absence of the father, and the need for premature maturation. Although the child perceives the family as a positive place, his experiences reflect feelings of isolation, insecurity, and difficulties in managing conflicts. However, maintaining a positive outlook on some aspects of life suggests internal resources that can be developed to better manage anxiety.

- The Children's Apperception Test (CAT) suggests that the minor has a number of significant emotional and relational concerns. There is a noticeable tendency to distance himself from his mother and seek support in relationships with siblings or friends. At the same time, the child shows feelings of insecurity, a desire to belong, and a possible fear of punishment, which indicates a rigid perception of parental authority. The mechanisms for avoiding danger and conflict situations suggest a need for protection, and certain responses may raise questions about possible trauma or previous negative experiences. An interesting aspect of this test was the story from the last image, in which the minor reported, "The adult dog punishes the little one for being disobedient and using bad words. The punishment is to show his private parts."
- "The "Tree Drawing" projective test – the drawing reflects the

need for stability and protection, but also the presence of possible trauma. A specific detail would be the presence of the hollow, which indicates trauma with a sexual connotation, certain early traumatic experiences. The animal inside the hollow represents the need for protection against those who are stronger, the desire to have a "home of one's own," and discomfort in the current home.

Conclusions

1. Sexual abuse leaves deep and lasting psychological scars, and recognizing them through forensic expertise is essential to validate the victim's experience and facilitate the recovery process.
2. Forensic psychological expertise plays a central role in providing objective data to the court, contributing to establishing the truth and protecting the best interests of the child.
3. The application of validated protocols and standardized tools allows for a rigorous assessment of the effects of post-abuse trauma, ensuring a balance between scientific rigor and sensitivity to the victim.
4. Case studies show that the psychological trauma resulting from sexual abuse is often complicated by emotional ambivalence towards the perpetrator, which necessitates a multidisciplinary approach tailored to each situation.



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