

Subjectivity of Child Abuse as Perceived by Nursing Students

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Abstract

Child abuse is a serious social problem that not only threatens the health and well-being of children and adolescents, but also brings about the death of children through inadequate and improper management. The objectives of this study are to understand the subjectivity of child abuse perceived by nursing students, to describe the characteristics of each factor, and to understand the categorization of child abuse, by applying the Q-methodology. 14 nursing students who agreed to respond were asked to classify 44 statements about child abuse. The collected data was analyzed through the principal component factor analysis by the QUANL PC Program. In the results of this study, the nursing students' perception of child abuse was classified into two factors. The factors of the subjectivity of child abuse were 'Factor of solving causes for child abuse' and 'Factor of seeking for the support measures for abused children'. There were two factors, which explained 40.38% of total variance. The factor 1 was 28.34% while the factor 2 was 12.04%. As the factor 1 had 28.34% explanatory power, it could be viewed as the factor explaining child abuse the most. Among 14 research subjects, 11 people belonged to factor 1 and three people belonged to factor 2. The people belonging to each factor mean the group of people showing similar responses to child abuse. This study provided the basic data for understanding and educating the clinical nursing students' perception of child abuse. This study also presented the necessity to establish the strategies for improving the perception of child abuse.

Keywords: Child abuse, Nursing students, Subjectivity, Q-methodology, Nurses.

1. Introduction

Child abuse is a serious social problem that not only threatens the health and well-being of children and adolescents, but also brings about the death of children through inadequate and improper management. To solve this problem, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child(UNCRC) is emphasizing the necessity of the rights to get special protection and help in childhood targeting every child especially abused children. However, the health professionals do not perceive it as the most serious problem[1].

Compared to the Western cultural area, in the past, the corporal punishment by parents was perceived as a form of proper discipline of children in Korea. However, committing violence cannot be justified no matter what, and every child should be protected from physical punishment, psychological abuse, or negligence.[2].

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Child abuse has effects on overall internalizing or externalizing behavior problems such as low self-esteem, depression & anxiety, aggression, and delinquency of children, which could be led to school maladjustment[3]. As such problems influence abused children not only in the period of getting abused, but also in the overall lifetime, they could be also revealed in adulthood[4], which could be a cause for crime, spousal violence, and another child abuse[5]. Like this, child abuse could not only have negative effects on physical/psychological development of individual children, but also be handed down within the family formed by victimized children afterwards, as a complex social problem[6].

Child abuse or neglectful parenting behavior works as a factor that causes problematic behaviors in children and inhibits the development of sociality, and the children who experienced abuse or negligence showed significantly lower reading and abstract thinking abilities compared to children without such experiences[7]. It also had significant relationships with the school record, formation of interpersonal relationship, and development of sociality of adolescents, which could also have effects on internal/external problematic behaviors such as formation of peer relationship, expulsion from school, drug abuse, premarital pregnancy, and depression of adolescents afterwards[8]. Like this, as the abuse that has negative effects on child growth is continuously increasing, there should be the fundamental solution measures for eradicating child abuse. To quickly discover and report abused children, it would be very important to establish the correct perception of child abuse[3].

As the people who encounter with children and their families first in various sites including medical facilities, nurses can collect important data about child-parent interaction, and also provide support and information about child rearing to parents who find it difficult to form attachment with their children, or pregnant women in the risk of child abuse in the preventive aspect, so they are in the most ideal and important position for discovering, reporting, intervening in, and preventing the cases of child abuse[9]. Despite the continuous increase in the report rate of child abuse by the persons bound in duty to report child abuse such as government officials and facility workers like teachers, medical personnel, and childcare workers, it does not even reach 1/3 of the whole report rate each year, and the report rate by medical personnel is reported as extremely low as 2~3%[10,11]. Among them, the report rate by nurses is very low, which is caused by the low level of the perception of child abuse, knowledge, relevant preparation, how to report, and how to utilize available resources[12]. The improvement of the perception of child abuse through education as an important factor of nurses' report of child abuse, has been reported as increasing the report rate of suspected cases of child abuse afterwards[13]. After graduation, nursing students closely face children in various environments such as hospital, school, or health center, and perform their roles of quickly selecting abused children and providing care to them. Thus, it is necessary to provide the systematic education for increasing the perception and interest in child abuse of nursing students who would work as nurses in the future, which would be helpful for improving the report rate by nurses.

Most of the domestic preceding researches related to child abuse targeting nursing students are about the perception, knowledge, and experience of child abuse[14-16], and there are researches on the relation between child abuse experience and perception of child abuse targeting the students from the nursing department and general departments[17]. The research by Cho & Chung [12] on the factors affecting nursing students' perception of child abuse, regarded general variables such as the perception of subareas of child abuse, and gender, age, and interest in abuse of subjects as influence factors.

The subjectivity of the perception when handling patients in nursing site has lots of effects on their nursing. Thus, it is important to understand the perception of nursing students and preservice nursing students. Q-methodology is a methodology that could

understand the characteristics of each factor according to the subjectivity structure of human, originated from the perspective of actor instead of researcher's hypothesis[18]. Because nursing students' perception of child abuse is subjective and unique experience of subjects, the Q-methodology considering the subjectivity of subjects is a proper research method for verifying the factors of the perception of child abuse in nursing students.

Therefore, this study aims to provide the basic data necessary for developing differentiated education programs according to the characteristics of each factor of the perception of child abuse as preservice nursing students before working in nursing sites where child abuse is successfully performed, by understanding the subjectivity structure of child abuse in the perspective of nursing students.

The objectives of this study are to provide the basic data for presenting the strategies for educating nursing students, and also to provide information about nursing students' perception of child abuse by examining the factors of nursing students' subjective perception of child abuse by applying the Q-methodology. The concrete objectives of this study for this are as follows.

- 1) This study categorizes nursing students' subjective perception of child abuse.
- 2) This study analyzes and describes the characteristics of each factor of nursing students' perception of child abuse.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study applied the Q-methodology for verifying the subjectivity of the perception factors of child abuse perceived by nursing students.

2.2 Selection of Q-Population and Q-Sample

To extract the comprehensive statements related to child abuse, this study composed Q-population of about 200 samples through the preceding researches, newspaper articles, and internet press release related to child abuse, and in-depth interviews with three family members with child abuse. For the selection of Q-sample, the researcher repetitively read the collected Q-population several times, and then deleted or integrated the statements by considering the repetition of meaning and representativeness. When deciding the size of Q-sample, it could be changed depending on the characteristics of each research. Under the premise in which 0~100 or 40~60 samples would be universal, the researcher excluded personal expressions by repetitively checking to find the clear meanings of the extracted sentences[18], and extracted the content belonging to the same theme as the most representative sentence. After that, to verify the category drawn together with the theme and validity, three members of families composed of grandparents and children, and two nursing professors equipped with the sufficient understanding of the Q-methodology were asked for reviewing the content and providing opinions about appropriateness. The incongruous parts were readjusted through the coordination of opinions. Moreover after selecting 44 items with the highest discrimination and validity from the composed statements, a preliminary survey was conducted targeting nursing students. After modifying words or vocabulary hard to be understood, 44 Q-samples were finally selected.

2.3 Selection Method of P-Sample

As a qualitative survey research that emphasizes individuals' inertia focusing on differences in intraindividual meaning or importance, rather than interindividual differences, the Q-methodology is based on the small sample doctrine in which once the P-sample gets bigger, many people are concentrated in a single factor, so the

characteristics are not clearly revealed[17]. Regarding the P-sample, this study selected 14 nursing students who agreed to participate in this study after fully explaining the research objectives to them. To recruit the subjects, the written explanation of research participation was posted on the online community for nursing students. The nursing students who voluntarily agreed to participate in this study were selected through the convenience sampling method.

2.4 Q-Classification and Data Analysis Method

The data was collected from July 2022 to September 2022. The collected data was analyzed by using the QUANL PC Program. In the Q-factor analysis, the Principal Component Factor Analysis(varimax) was used. In the classification of factors, they were selected by considering total explained variance and results produced by variously inputting the number of factors based on the Eigen value 1.0 or up. The scaled score(1-10) given to each one focusing on the forcedly-distributed cards on the Q-sample distribution table was scored. After coding the given scaled score in the order of Q-sample number, it was processed through the Principal Component Factor Analysis by the QUANL PC Program. Among them, this study selected three factors that were judged as conceptually meaningful and discriminantal in the results of comparing three factors and four factors. Especially, this study comparatively analyzed factor value and standard score focusing on the items showing strong affirmation and strong negation in each factor among 38 statements. The attributes of each factor were interpreted by reflecting the sociodemographic data of P-sample in three factors, and the characteristics of respondents in each factor.

2.5 Ethical Consideration of Research Subjects

After explaining the objectives of this study, the anonymity and confidentiality were pledged to the research subjects. It was also explained in advance that they did not have to respond to the survey if they were reluctant to expose their personal information. Moreover the contact information was provided to them, so they could contact anytime if they would not want to participate in the study even after completing the questionnaire. By sincerely responding to questions even unrelated to this study, the ethical aspect of research participants was considered as much as possible.

After getting a voluntary consent from whole subjects, the subjects were explained that they could stop participating in it anytime in the middle. To respect the subjects' rights and to guarantee their privacy and confidentiality, all the data collected through this study was anonymously processed in the whole process of data analysis, and then Q-sorted through encoding. The subjects were also explained that all the data collected for this study would be safely discarded.

3. Results

To analyze the nursing students' subjectivity of child abuse in each factor, first of all, the characteristics of each factor were described focusing on the statements belonging to each factor. By classifying the Q-response of P-sample(research participants) into upper-items and sub-items, two factors were extracted. In the Q-methodology, among the people belonging to each factor, the person with higher factor weight means the typical or ideal person that represents the factor.

To analyze the characteristics of child abuse in each factor, this study interpreted the statements with standard score(z-score) for ± 1.00 or up among the items of classified statements, by giving meanings to them. In this study, Factor 1 and Factor 2 included 11 and 3 people with factor weight 1.0 or up respectively.

In the results of analyzing the subjectivity of child abuse by using the PC QUANL program, there were two factors, which explained 40.38% of total variance. The factor 1

was 28.34% while the factor 2 was 12.04%. As the factor 1 had 28.34% explanatory power, it could be viewed as the factor explaining child abuse the most[Table 1]. Among 14 research subjects, 11 people belonged to factor 1 and three people belonged to factor 2. The people belonging to each factor mean the group of people showing similar responses to child abuse.

[Table 1] Eigen Value, Variance, and Cumulative Percentage

	Factor I	Factor II
Eigen Value	3.9680	1.6849
Variance(%)	.2834	.1204
Cumulative(%)	.2834	.4038

The factors of the subjectivity of child abuse produced by this factor analysis method could be presented as follows.

- Factor of Solving Causes for Child Abuse: 11 subjects belonged to Factor 1. The subjects of Factor 1 showed strong affirmation to the statements such as ‘The level of punishment of abusers should be raised.(Z=2.48)’, ‘Child abuse can hinder the normal development of children.(Z=1.84)’, and ‘Child abuse is highly possible to reoccur.(Z=1.54)’[Table 5]. The subject with the highest factor weight in Factor 1 was No.9(2.1563), and the statements agreed the most were No.14 & No.6. The subjects of Factor 1 showed strong negation to the statements such as ‘When children have delayed language development or disabilities, the frequency of child abuse increases.(Z=-1.93)’, ‘When parents are young or did not get proper education, the frequency of child abuse increases. (Z=-1.90)’, and ‘Among the families with child abuse, the single-parent family shows the highest percentage.(Z=-1.67)’[Table 5]. The subject with the lowest factor weight in Factor 1 was No.13(0.2800), and the statements disagreed the most were No.11 & No.8.

In the characteristics of Factor 1, they thought that the occurrence probability of child abuse would be reduced by understanding the causes for child abuse and solving the causes. They said that the occurrence of child abuse was continuously increasing because the recurrence of child abuse was high and the level of punishment was low. They thought that the frequency of child abuse would be increased according to the tendency of parents, the No.1 abuser. However, they did not agree that the degree of child development, social status of parents, or external elements could be the causes for the occurrence of child abuse. Thus, Factor 1 was named ‘Factor of solving causes for child abuse’.

- Factor of Seeking for the Support Measures for Abused Children: Three subjects belonged to Factor 2. The subjects of Factor 2 showed strong affirmation to the statements such as ‘When the emotional abuse gets severe, the physical influence is greatly shown. (Z=1.86)’, ‘Abuse is a vicious circle continued throughout generations.(Z=1.78)’, and ‘As the national perception was increased through the broadcasting media, the problem of child abuse was raised.(Z=1.73)’[Table 5]. The subject with the highest factor weight in Factor 2 was No.3(6.0012), and the statements agreed the most were No.44 & No.10. The subjects of Factor 2 showed strong negation to the statements such as ‘When children have delayed language development or disabilities, the frequency of child abuse increases.(Z=-2.18)’, ‘In case of remarried families, the frequency of child abuse is high. (Z=-1.76)’, and ‘Among the families with child abuse, the single-parent family shows the highest percentage.(Z=-1.43)’[Table 5]. The subject with the lowest factor weight in Factor 2 was No.14(0.6477), and the statements disagreed the most were No.11 & No.12.

In the characteristics of Factor 2, they think focusing on abused children. They said that it would be important to pay attention to the influences the child abuse victims would go

through in their growth process, and to help them to be able to grow into healthy members of society. They thought that the child abuse victims who got physically and emotionally damaged could be involved in crimes without adjusting themselves to society even after growing into adults. However, they said that the external factors or causes for the factors related to child abuse would not increase the frequency of child abuse or expand the increase range. Thus, they did not agree that the state of children and factors of family would increase the frequency of child abuse. Thus, Factor 2 was named 'Factor of seeking for the support measures for abused children'.

[Table 2] Representative Items and Z-score of the Disabled

Representative items of type					
Factor	Type	No	Representative items	Mean(SD)	Z-score
Factor1 (N=8)	Type1	14	The level of punishment of abusers should be raised.	10.36(2.580)	2.48
		6	Child abuse can hinder the normal development of children.	9.45(2.067)	1.84
		22	Child abuse is highly possible to reoccur.	9.00(1.095)	1.54
		4	As the national perception was increased through the broadcasting media, the problem of child abuse was raised.	8.55(2.505)	1.46
		15	The parents with drug addiction are highly possible to abuse their children.	8.55(2.734)	1.27
	Type2	11	When children have delayed language development or disabilities, the frequency of child abuse increases.	3.18(1.537)	-1.93
		8	When parents are young or did not get proper education, the frequency of child abuse increases.	3.64(1.963)	-1.90
		31	Among the families with child abuse, the single-parent family shows the highest percentage.	4.45(3.328)	-1.67
		29	The trend of nuclear family and individualistic values increases the frequency of child abuse.	3.36(0.809)	-1.67
		10	Abuse is a vicious circle continued throughout generations.	4.27(3.552)	-1.43
Factor2 (N=6)	Type3	44	When the emotional abuse gets severe, the physical influence is greatly shown.	10.67(1.155)	1.86
		10	Abuse is a vicious circle continued throughout generations.	10.67(0.577)	1.78
		4	As the national perception was increased through the broadcasting media, the problem of child abuse was raised.	10.00(1.732)	1.73

		1	The parents who rationalize child abuse regard their children as their possessions.	9.00(3.606)	1.57
		36	The victimized children of child abuse are highly possible to commit juvenile delinquency.	9.00(1.732)	1.33
	Type4	11	When children have delayed language development or disabilities, the frequency of child abuse increases.	1.33(0.577)	-2.18
		12	In case of remarried families, the frequency of child abuse is high.	2.67(1.155)	-1.76
		31	Among the families with child abuse, the single-parent family shows the highest percentage.	2.67(0.577)	-1.43
		37	The legal basis of emergency measures in the site of child abuse should be established.	3.00(0.000)	-1.40
		29	The trend of nuclear family and individualistic values increases the frequency of child abuse.	2.67(2.082)	-1.39

4. Discussions

As the recent reports on child abuse cases through the mass media implanted the severity of child abuse and inspired the consciousness of report, 29,674 cases were reported as child abuse to 59 child protection institutions in the whole nation in 2016, and there were 25,878 suspected cases among them, which increased more than four times than 6,796 cases in 2013[20].

In January 2001, Korea clearly prescribed the definition of child abuse and banned factors in the Child Welfare Act, and also improved/complemented the previous insufficient regulations related to child abuse such as separation of abused children from their parents, opening of emergency call(1391), and the report duty system of child abuse. However, the occurrence of child abuse tends to be continuously increasing every year[20]. The places where child abuse happen are reported as children’s home, institution, school, and community. According to the World Health Organization(WHO) in 2001, 40 million children fall victim to child abuse each year in the whole world[21].

In the results of this study, the factors of the subjectivity of child abuse perceived by nursing students were Factor 1-‘Factor of solving causes for child abuse’ and Factor 2-‘Factor of seeking for the support measures for abused children’. Moreover this study aims to discuss the characteristics of each factor.

Factor 1 shown in this study was ‘Factor of solving causes for child abuse’. As child abuse is rising as an issue, they think focusing on the solution by reducing the causes or frequency of child abuse. They think that the occurrence rate of child abuse would be decreasing in the future according to the characteristics of parents or child in the families with child abuse, and the measures after occurrence. Thus, they said it would be necessary to conduct policy-level researches for understanding the characteristics of such family members, and also to seek for the measures for preventing child abuse based on it.

Contrary to the social perception of child abuse regarded as family affairs, now, it is perceived as a serious social problem. Even though the government enforced the 'Act on Special Cases Concerning Child Abuse' in 2014, the occurrence rate of child abuse has not been decreased yet. In 2016, the most victims of child abuse were children in 13~15, mostly composed of school-age children like the upper grades of elementary school and middle school students. From 2001 to 2014 in Korea, more than 80% of child abusers were their own parents, so it is possible to infer that most of the abusers were parents in their 30s-40s with school-age children. In the characteristics of the parents who abused their children, the lacking in parenting attitude & method took up the highest percentage(35.6%) of the whole. Even though the negative parenting behavior or abuse experience in childhood was the experiences in the past, it had negative effects even after a considerable amount of time passed, and it was also highly possible for them to abuse children after becoming adults[22].

Among the factors of child abuse, the perception of negligence was shown as the lowest in preceding researches including this study, and among the number of each factor of child abuse cases reported to 59 child protection institutions in the whole nation in 2016, the emotional abuse(19.2%) and negligence(15.6%) were reported the most[23,24]. This means that the perception of the severity of negligence is lower than the perception of serious acts regarded as something clearly harmful to children. As the negligence could have much worse effects than the combination of other factors of child abuse[25], it would be necessary to strengthen the education about concrete cases & methods of quickly perceiving and identifying the behavioral patterns of children shown in case of physical damage, emotional abuse, or negligence.

Considering that there are differences in the perception of child abuse according to parenting attitude, the parenting attitude has effects on children's perception of child abuse in the future. Among various variables affecting the perception of child abuse, the parenting attitude generalizes the internal/external attitudes or behaviors generally shown when parents rear children[26]. When measuring the parenting attitude, it would be more advisable to measure the parenting attitude experienced by children, rather than the parents' self-report[27]. In the results of examining the parenting attitude experienced by the subjects in this study, it was shown higher than the results of the researches by Kim [28] and Oh [29]. However, the existing preceding researches targeted the parents of preschoolers[28] or adolescents[29], which is different from this study. To realize the perception of child abuse into correct parenting attitude & behavior after acquiring the relevant knowledge, it would be necessary to develop the systematic parent education programs that could implant the importance of parents' receptive attitude and get equipped with benevolent and affectionate attitude.

Factor 2 was 'Factor of seeking for the support measures for abused children'. They think that it is urgent to establish the policy or measures for helping child abuse victims in the future focusing on the results shown in them. They said the support system for helping children who experienced child abuse should be established, which could be the measures for continuously-increasing child abuse.

Many researches have reported that child abuse can bring about negative results such as psycho-emotional problem, physical problem, social problem, and cognitive problem[30]. What is remarkably shown as emotional problem is depression. Contrary to depression in adulthood, the depression in childhood is hidden(masked depression), so the problem is more serious. The depression influenced by parents could be led to the result of various maladjustments throughout the whole lifetime[31]. Golm et al.,[32] reported that when the difficulty experienced in childhood was bigger, it would bring about chronic and severe depression and anxiety symptoms in adulthood, which would be related to problems with social and occupational functions.

The abused children have problems like low self-esteem, emotionally-anxious internalization, and externalization of aggression and violence[33]. The internalization of abuse experience such as depression and anxiety hinders interactions with peers[34]. When they are excluded from relationships because they could not properly respond to the formation of peer relation or relationships in school, it is led to problematic behaviors such as aggression, violence, and delinquency, and the decline of sociality that hinders their adjustment to society[35, 36]. Kim [36] said that the abused children could easily show problems related to sociality and the core of the problems with sociality would be the extensive emotional vulnerability by negative parenting experience. Yoon [37] reported that in the meta-analysis on the variables related to socio-psychological maladjustment of abused children, the depression, anxiety, withering, aggression, and delinquency were highly related. Considering such results, it would be urgent to establish the measures for depression, anxiety, self-esteem, problematic behavior, and sociality shown as the most important factors for mental health of abused children.

Despite the serious influence of child abuse in Korea, the response to child abuse is concentrated on building up the system for discovering child abuse and punishing abusers, so the measures for negative influences on abused children are relatively insufficient[38]. As a social crime, the child abuse could be a serious future disaster in our society by causing negative effects on the whole lifetime of children. For this reason, the early discovery/intervention of them is absolutely needed, and there should be continuous improvement of the response system such as follow-up management.

This study explored the nursing students' subjective perception of child abuse, and conducted the analysis by classifying it into two factors. In the characteristics of each factor, they were classified into 'Factor of solving causes for child abuse' focusing on understanding the causes for child abuse and reducing the frequency by solving it, and 'Factor of seeking for the support measures for abused children' arguing the necessity of social responsibility by seeking for the measures for supporting abused children in their perspective.

In relation to child abuse, it is essentially needed to reduce the gradually-increasing child abuse cases by understanding the causes, and also to support abused children after the occurrence of child abuse. It would be necessary to continuously verify the effective & multi-disciplinary convergence intervention in abused children, and also to distribute and systematically execute the intervention by settling down the education/training system for field workers such as social workers, counseling teachers, and health teachers in schools, child protection institutions, or child welfare facilities, so they could practically intervene in abused children through this intervention program. Still, the domestic researches on the intervention in abused children are insufficient. Despite the importance of researches on variables of child abuse or intervention researches for the prevention of abuse and recurrence, we should put more efforts and attention to see the influence of child abuse on abused children and also to develop the methods of intervention. Moreover, in order for abused children to be able to happily live as a healthy member of our society, the nursing world should also actively perform researches for participating in intervention programs for children and verifying the effects.

Considering the roles of nursing students cultivated as nurses in the future, this study would be helpful for changing the perception of child abuse in our society. In addition, this study could be utilized as the basic data for the development of differentiated education programs by presenting the subjective structure related to nursing students' perception of child abuse and the characteristics of each factor.

However, the research was performed through the convenience sampling method, and the factors affecting the perception of child abuse were not considered for the selection of subjects, so it would be limited to generalize the results of this study. Thus, it would be

necessary to additionally verify the factors by composing the Q-sample with various backgrounds in follow-up researches.

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to establish the basic data necessary for presenting the direction of changing the nursing students' perception of child abuse through the subjective data analyzed by exploring the nursing students' subjective perception of child abuse, by applying the Q-methodology. In the results of this study, it was classified into two factors. The factors of child abuse perceived by nursing students were shown as 'Factor of solving causes for child abuse' and 'Factor of seeking for the support measures for abused children'.

This study provided the basic data for establishing the measures for improving the perception and attitude toward families with child abuse in the future, by categorizing the subjectivity of child abuse in nursing students. As this study analyzed the factors of nursing students' perception of child abuse and verified the characteristics, it is expecting to see the development of education programs considering the characteristics of each factor. This study also suggests an additional research on the analysis of factors by selecting samples considering various factors, and a qualitative research for verifying various factors affecting the care of subject families with child abuse.

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