

When the Stepfather Crosses the Line: The Unheard Voices of Abused Stepchildren

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Received : August 18, 2025

Revised : September 4, 2025

Accepted : January 2, 2026

Online : February 6, 2026

Abstract

This qualitative study examines the lived experiences of stepchildren who have experienced sexual harassment perpetrated by their stepfather. Sexual harassment is defined as any unwelcome sexual behavior—verbal, nonverbal, or physical—that can cause severe emotional and psychological harm, particularly when it occurs within the family context. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), five (5) participants aged 18 years old and above were selected through purposive sampling. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather detailed personal narratives. The study revealed five (5) emergent themes: Abuse Consequences, which refer to the emotional, psychological, and relational effects resulting from abuse; Trauma Impact, which describes the enduring psychological distress and disruption in daily functioning caused by traumatic experiences; Trauma-Driven Fear, which reflects persistent fear, hypervigilance, and mistrust rooted in betrayal by a caregiver; Maladaptive Coping Strategies, which involve unhealthy or ineffective ways of coping such as avoidance, emotional withdrawal, and self-blame; and Impact and Identity, which captures how the experience shaped participants' self-concept, self-worth, and identity development. These findings are supported by Trauma Theory and Betrayal Trauma Theory, which explain how trauma develops and how individuals respond to traumatic events, particularly when the perpetrator is a trusted family member. Overall, this study highlights the profound emotional and psychological impact of familial sexual harassment, the coping mechanisms adopted by survivors, and the insights they provide for future readers and researchers. The study emphasizes the importance of understanding familial sexual harassment, increasing awareness, and supporting self-development and healing among survivors.

Keywords: *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Stepfather, Sexual Harassment, Stepchildren, Maladaptive Coping Strategies, Self-Blame, Trauma Theory, Betrayal Trauma Theory*

INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment within the domestic sphere represents a profound violation of trust that disrupts the fundamental sense of safety within the home. Although safety at home is a basic expectation, the home often becomes a site of “hidden” violence where perpetrators use their dominant role to control and exploit vulnerable family members. However, the dynamic between a stepfather and a stepchild presents a unique vulnerability. The lack of a biological bond may reduce protective instincts, potentially increasing the risk of physical and sexual aggression compared to a biological father-child relationship (Cui, Li & Nyman, 2024). Moreover, stepchildren who experience sexual harassment from a stepfather not only experience trauma but also a deep sense of betrayal from someone they trusted. As a consequence, this can lead to conflict between the child and the stepfather. It can affect how they understand themselves and the world around them, creating feelings of mistrust, fear, and betrayal.

Sexual harassment includes any form of sexual attention without consent, whether verbal, physical, or technology-based, that creates a hostile, intimidating, or offensive environment.

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Including unwanted touching, kissing, hugging from behind, exposing genital organs, and using derogatory, abusive, or sexually explicit language. To understand the depth of this trauma, this study utilizes Trauma Theory, indicating that trauma results in decreasing emotional, physical, cognitive, and psychological well-being in individuals. According to this study, Trauma refers to events that are overwhelming and threatening to an individual's sense of security and create feelings of helplessness. Also, extending to a great depth on individuals is the recognition of resilience and healing to cope and adjust themselves to a sudden change in their lives. Additionally, to gain further insight, this study uses Betrayal Trauma Theory, which suggests that trauma is intensified when the perpetrator is someone very close to the victim and relies on the abuser for basic needs and safety. Also, it shows the betrayal blindness for the witness, like the mother, to maintain family relationships, the witness becomes in denial because of the relationship to the perpetrator, which can be a secondary trauma for the victim. Furthermore, it can cause severe psychological and emotional harm to the victim because it occurs within a family, including anxiety, distrust, fear, emotional numbness, and long-term psychological impact ([Freyd Dynamics Lab, 2023](#)).

Furthermore, family-based studies on sexual harassment in the Philippines remain limited, and most studies have focused on incidents occurring outside the home, such as in transportation, the workplace, and online platforms. Consequently, there is a lack of research on the experiences of step-children subjected to sexual harassment by a stepfather figure within the household. According to reports from the Philippine Plan of Action to End Violence Against Children (PPAEVAC), sexual abuse within families is often committed by relatives, such as stepfathers; however, the specific experiences of step-children in such incidents remain under-explored. In particular, this study seeks to understand the impact of such experiences on victims, explore the coping mechanisms they use, provide knowledge and raise awareness, and highlight the realities of abuse to help end stigma and victim-blaming. This study aims to fill that gap by using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to examine the impact of such harassment, explore their coping mechanism, and provide the knowledge necessary to raise awareness and highlight these hidden domestic realities. Although previous studies have examined sexual abuse within families, there is currently a lack of studies on the lived experiences of stepchildren who have been sexually harassed by their stepfather, particularly in the Philippines. Many existing studies provide common explanations of intrafamilial abuse, making it difficult to comprehend how survivors perceive, interpret, and cope with such situations. This study aims to fill this gap by using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to investigate the personal meanings that stepchildren attach to their experiences. The study aims to contribute to Trauma Theory and Betrayal Trauma Theory by providing insights that may guide trauma-informed and survivor-centered care in practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological and Long-term Impacts on Victims

Trauma Theory and Betrayal Trauma Theory offer one lens through which to view the severe psychological and relational scars that survivors of sexual harassment, especially child sexual abuse, sometimes experience. The trauma theory, abuse interferes with normal development and can cause medical conditions like PTSD, anxiety, depression, and sex problems. ([Polat & Memisoglu, 2024](#)). This is expanded upon by Betrayal Trauma Theory, which describes how abuse from reliable sources, such as family members feeling shame and silence to maintain relationships, which causes dissociation and unresolved trauma that lasts into adulthood. For example, victim-blaming reactions amplify feelings of isolation, as survivors fear judgment or retaliation, in line with the focus on damaged trust in Betrayal Trauma Theory. Long-term problems

like maladaptive schemas that impact relationships and self-perception are made worse by this silence, which is exacerbated by family avoidance of conversations (Polat & Memisoglu, 2024; Brockstedt et al., 2025).

Resilience and Coping mechanism

Resilience among survivors appears as a dynamic process when trauma theory and betrayal trauma theory combine to describe coping as adaptive responses to trauma that has been exacerbated by betrayal. Betrayal trauma theory sees coping mechanisms as adaptive responses to trauma that is exacerbated by betrayal, while trauma theory focuses on how abuse impairs functioning. Nevertheless, coping strategies promote healing by mobilizing thoughts and behaviors to manage stress (Algorani & Gupta, 2023). In theory, coping behaviors are adaptive reactions to trauma that has been triggered by betrayal. According to trauma theory, abuse hinders functioning, while coping strategies support healing by mobilizing ideas and actions to control stress. Additional nuance is provided by Betrayal Trauma Theory, which predicts that while silence from trusted individuals impedes direct problem-solving, relational breakdowns require tactics like social support to overcome isolation. Van der Walt and Mawila-Chauke's (2025) demonstrate this synergy, showing how supportive networks, friends, caregivers, and teachers alleviate emotional isolation and foster stability, in line with the idea that external ties play a part in mending relational traumas in Betrayal Trauma Theory. Coping into approach-oriented (e.g., problem-solving), avoidance (e.g., minimizing stress), social support reliance, and helpless strategies, with Aquit et al. (2024) emphasizing encouragement and activities like speaking out or engaging in studies. These approaches collectively mitigate trauma by promoting agency, opposing defenseless reactions that sustain separation brought on by betrayal.

When taken as a whole, these sources show trends: approach tactics enable survivors to deal with the emotional disruptions of Trauma Theory, while social support counteracts the silence predicted by Betrayal Trauma Theory. This helps us understand participants' coping as relational reconstruction and predicts resilience through cooperative support that counteracts the isolating consequences of betrayal.

Legal Framework on Sexual Harassment and Child Protection

Legal barriers provide a framework for responding to sexual abuse, and frameworks for mitigating betrayal-compounded trauma are guided by trauma theory and betrayal trauma theory. The extensive psychological effects of abuse, including both immediate and long-term repercussions for women and girls, are highlighted by trauma theory (World Health Organization, 2024). According to Betrayal Trauma Theory, regulations that promote disclosure and enforce accountability are necessary in familial contexts where relational bonds' silence prevents reporting.

In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 9262 (Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act) and Republic Act No. 7610 (Special Protection of Children Against Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination) offer protections against harassment and violence, including from women, with data showing high VAWC and child abuse cases. These laws promote justice and dignity, supporting the theory of betrayal trauma by establishing safe spaces where victims can speak up without worrying about the consequences for their relationships. By viewing legal awareness as a tool for empowerment that breaks cycles of trauma caused by betrayal, the frameworks address the global violations of Trauma Theory while combating the barriers to trust of Betrayal Trauma Theory.

Social Support and Healing Process

In line with the Trauma Theory and Betrayal Trauma Theory, social support plays a crucial role in reestablishing psychological and relational agency. According to trauma theory, resilience

in the face of adversity requires assistance. Trauma Theory views support as essential for resilience in the face of hardship, whereas Betrayal Trauma Theory predicts that betrayal weakens relationships (Haaland, 2025). Supportive networks are therefore essential for processing disconnected experiences and rebuilding trust.

Haaland (2025) and Thanvi and Kumar (2025) describe support as fostering value, safety, and guidance, enhancing psychosocial resilience through coping mechanisms. Febrianto et al. (2022) emphasize healing via meaningful activities for physical and psychological recovery. These elements collectively counteract Betrayal Trauma Theory's isolation, as seen in Van der Walt and Mawila-Chauke's (2025) findings on collaborative support softening emotional burdens. Synergistically, social support connects the relational deficiencies of Betrayal Trauma Theory with the recovery demands of Trauma Theory, anticipating that participants' healing requires external validation to overcome the long-term trust issues of betrayal and encourage adaptive coping.

Empowerment and Advocacy among Survivors of Abuse

According to trauma research, experiences of abuse can significantly undermine an individual's sense of self-worth, safety, and agency, while recovery is facilitated through empowerment, social support, and the restoration of personal control (Matheson & Anisman, 2020). Trauma-informed care frameworks further emphasize empowerment, trustworthiness, collaboration, and choice as core principles that enable survivors to rebuild resilience, regulate emotions, and engage meaningfully in healing processes (Berring, 2024).

From the perspective of Betrayal Trauma Theory, healing from relational betrayal requires not only individual therapeutic support but also collective and relational responses that restore trust and validate survivors' experiences. Empowerment-oriented approaches that strengthen social networks and encourage survivor voice have been shown to promote adaptive coping, resilience, and long-term psychological recovery, particularly in contexts where silence and dependency have compounded trauma (Recognizing Resilience in Children: A Review, 2025; Matheson & Anisman, 2020). These findings align with Betrayal Trauma Theory's emphasis on relational restoration and the necessity of supportive systems that counteract betrayal-based silencing.

Theory's focus on relational restoration.

Based on Betrayal Trauma Theory's emphasis on collective voice against betrayal, these sources come together to show empowerment as a way out of Trauma Theory's disruptions. This defines participant advocacy in our study as resilience-building, forecasting how shared experiences break the silence and promote dignity. This review concludes by synthesizing a variety of findings under the theories of trauma and betrayal trauma, showing how betrayal increases the effects of trauma while promoting resilience through advocacy, support, and coping. The consequences for child protection and healing are highlighted by patterns found throughout the parts, such as silence as a betrayal response and support as a counterforce. Our interpretation of the experiences of the participants is guided by this combined theoretical linkage, which anticipates avenues to recovery through relational reconstruction and compounding trauma in familial abuse.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study explores the lived experiences of stepchildren who experienced sexual harassment from a stepfather. The study used a qualitative research design guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The IPA approach was specifically chosen to deeply examine how participants make sense of their personal struggles, emotional responses, and coping mechanisms related to their experiences. According to Creswell and Creswell (2022), IPA is

used to examine the lived experiences of step-child who experienced sexual harassment from their stepfather. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is a qualitative approach that focuses on how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences.

The study was conducted in Batangas Province, Philippines. The setting was selected due to its accessibility to the researchers and the availability of potential respondents. The participants were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) They must be step-children who experienced sexual harassment from a stepfather; (2) They were willing to voluntarily participate and share their lived experiences; and (3) They were within the age range of 18 years old and above as identified by the researchers. Data saturation was determined through a series of iterative interviews. The researchers continued recruitment until no new themes appeared, which confirmed that the sample offered sufficient depth to support IPA's idiographic focus (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Data collection involved semi-structured interviews using interview guide questions that were validated by a subject matter expert (SME). Interviews were conducted through face-to-face sessions, Google Meet, and Zoom, depending on participants' availability and comfort. The interview data were transcribed verbatim and subjected to a rigorous Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This process encompassed idiographic analysis, wherein each participant's account was examined in detail; the application of a double hermeneutic, involving the interpretation of participants' own interpretations of their lived experiences; and cross-case synthesis, which identified shared thematic patterns while preserving individual nuances (Smith, 2021). Collectively, these procedures ensured fidelity to IPA's emphasis on lived meaning-making and its commitment to phenomenological depth. This is fundamental to ensuring that the investigation is conducted ethically and efficiently.

The participants of the study were five (5) female stepchildren aged 18 years old and above, all of whom are stepchildren who have experienced sexual harassment from a stepfather. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), Qualitative research typically involves a small number of participants to allow for an in-depth and meaningful exploration of their lived experiences, and they explain that a sample size of around five participants is often sufficient for qualitative studies. Selecting participants aged 18 years and above is important in studies exploring sensitive topics such as sexual harassment. According to this literature, adult participants produce more reliable data because they can analyze their own experiences; they can recall and process past events, thereby enhancing the quality and depth of qualitative research data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring they had firsthand knowledge relevant to the study's topic. Purposive sampling refers to a group of non-probability sampling methods in which units are selected because they have the characteristics the researcher needs in their sample. Additionally, this sampling technique is known as judgmental sampling since it depends on the researcher's judgment in determining and choosing the people, situations, or occurrences that can offer the most information to meet the goals of the study.

The researchers ensured that all ethical considerations were followed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the research objective, procedures, and potential risks as their participation was completely voluntary. Trauma-Informed Care and informed consent were provided before the interviews; all data will remain confidential and anonymous. Participants' personal information will not be disclosed, and all information shared during the interview will be treated as strictly confidential. The participants have the right to pause or withdraw at any time if they feel uncomfortable. The researcher also provided a standby psychologist for emotional support if needed. Throughout the investigation, the researchers thoroughly reviewed their work to verify the reliability of the results. Participants were asked to review the initial interpretations to verify that their experiences were properly portrayed. The research method was also thoroughly recorded, allowing each step of the analysis to be tracked. In addition, the researchers utilized

journaling to reflect on their own perspectives and potential biases, and they discussed the findings with a colleague who was knowledgeable about qualitative research. These techniques contributed to ensuring that the results were based on the participants' real experiences rather than personal assumptions (Nowell et al., 2020). Overall, the study follows the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and confidentiality. Also, ensuring that all procedures are consistent with accepted ethical research practices and prioritize the well-being of each participant.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The participants in this study were (5) female stepchildren aged 18 years old and above, who had experienced sexual harassment from a stepfather. The age range of 18 years old and above was chosen to ensure that participants could legally provide informed consent, reflect on their experiences with enough maturity, and describe their feelings and coping strategies in detail. At this developmental stage, individuals are capable of greater self-reflection, emotional processing, and meaning making, which are essential for providing enough and detail for giving in-depth descriptions of their emotions and coping mechanisms. This aligns with the objectives of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which emphasizes a deep exploration of lived experiences and the personal sense-making process of participants. According to Smith et al. (2021), IPA is a method based on phenomenology and interpretation that emphasizes the individual significance people give to their experiences. The approach entails closely analyzing transcripts, spotting significant trends, and creating themes that represent the inner lives of each participant.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

Participant	Age During Harassment	Current Age	Sex
PAX A	9-13	28	Female
PAX B	19	22	Female
PAX C	7-11	19	Female
PAX D	17	18	Female
PAX E	8	23	Female

The table presents the profiles of five participants who met the criteria established by the researchers. In compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173), all the personal and sensitive information has been handled with strict confidentiality to ensure the protection of the respondents' identities. The table shows that participants experienced sexual harassment at ages when they were highly vulnerable, with most of them being children. PAX A went through abuse from ages 9-13, indicating long-term exposure throughout her early childhood. PAX C and PAX E were also very young, experiencing harassment at ages 7-11 and 8, respectively, which are developmental stages where a child depends heavily on adults for safety. Meanwhile, PAX D at 17 and PAX B at 19 experienced harassment during late adolescence, a period still marked by emotional dependence and limited power within family systems. Overall, the ages reveal that the abuse happened during critical and formative years, highlighting both the power imbalance and the

lack of protection within the home.

This study sought to explore the sensitive and complex realities faced by stepchildren who have experienced sexual harassment from a stepfather. To guide the inquiry, the researcher was directed by the central question, that is: What are the lived experiences of stepchildren who have experienced sexual harassment from a stepfather?. Consequently, the researcher was guided by the corollary questions.

Corollary Question: How do the participants describe the feeling of being harassed by their stepfather?

Interview Guide Questions 1: What feelings or emotions did you experience during and after the Incident?

When participants were asked about their feelings and emotions during and after the incident, both PAX A and PAX D described experiencing intense and overwhelming emotional distress. This included fear, anxiety, disgust, shame, anger, and internalized blame. Both participants demonstrated negative emotional impacts resulting from sexual harassment. For instance, PAX D expressed a profound fear of powerlessness. This is also showing how the threat posed by the abuser heightened her emotional distress and limited her ability to seek help.

"Shame, disgust, fear, anxiety, guilt, anger, hatred toward him and myself." PAX A

"I feel disgusted with myself; I don't know what to do. I want to report it, but I keep thinking that if I do, he might hurt us because he is abusive." PAX D

Stepfather maintains his position in the home; he ensures that his authority is not being taken by the biological father. The stepfather used his position to threaten the children. They have to deal with loyalty issues with the children (Lane, 2023). The long-term effects of sexual violence, including childhood sexual harassment, can be profound, including many emotional, psychological, and physical conditions.

Interview Guide Question 2: In what ways did harassment affect your daily life, relationship with others, and your mental well-being?

The narratives shared by PAX A and PAX C regarding the effects of harassment on daily life, relationships, and mental well-being reveal the significant impact of sexual harassment on stepchildren, including trauma, fear, emotional instability, and disrupted interpersonal relationships. Moreover, anxiety and depression may make it harder for them to trust others, feel comfortable in social situations, or form healthy relationships. Clearly, this experience affected their daily lives, relationships with others, and mental well-being. She demonstrates the impact of sexual harassment at a young age. What emerges from this is that her experience caused emotional distress and trauma that affected her mental health. Meanwhile, PAX C reveals the severe long-term psychological consequences of sexual harassment experienced during childhood, and her daily life was really affected.

"It gave me anxiety and depression at an early age. I thought about death from a very young age." PAX A

"My daily life was also badly affected. I stopped going to school because of my depression, struggling with self-harm, and feeling disgusted by myself. These experiences resulted in my

hospitalization in mental health facilities more than four times.” PAX C

After experiencing this kind of sexual trauma, survivors’ relationship with their body feels different. They often experience the feeling of dissociation, hypervigilance, anxiety, and symptoms of trauma like flashbacks, nightmares, or panic attacks (Lanning, 2025). Therefore, sexual harassment can have serious and long-term effects on victims’ mental health, as well as their overall well-being. Victims can develop post-traumatic stress disorder, which involves anxiety, despair, and memory flashbacks.

Interview Guide Question 3: How do the incidents affect how you see your family or your sense of safety at home?

Both PAX A and PAX E demonstrate how the incidents affected their perspectives toward their family and their sense of safety at home. The researcher formulates that PAX A has difficulty in forming relationships due to the experience that she cannot even trust her own biological father after experiencing sexual harassment from her stepfather. She also felt unsafe around her family, that builds a wall between herself and her family. The researcher observed that PAX E is showing signs of emotional distress but is still trying to engage in conversation.

“It made me fear that my biological father would start abusing me as well. Gave me a fear of all men.” PAX A

“I see them as my enemy, I don’t feel home is a safe space. Whenever I’m at home, I feel like someone is always watching me.” PAX E

Psychological distress is widely defined as emotional suffering, such as feeling tense and anxiety (Belay et al., 2021). Stepchildren who experienced sexual harassment since childhood have negative effects on emotional trust and forming relationships originated by trauma (Brockstedt et al., 2025)

Interview Guide Question 4: What coping strategies have you used to cope with your experience?

In the midst of the interview, PAX A and PAX B share their strategies to cope after experiencing sexual harassment. However, the coping strategies they used were unhealthy, and they can cause harm to their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. PAX confessed that she knows that the coping strategies she uses can disrupt her health, and she had thoughts of hurting herself. It is also the same for PAX B; she committed to isolation to protect herself from everyone and became a person who prefers not to talk to anyone at that time. This highlights that their coping mechanisms are maladaptive and self-destructive coping strategies, which are unhealthy habits that include self-isolation, suicide, self-harm, and aggressive emotions.

“Typically, self-destructive coping mechanisms. I am a binge eater and struggle with self-harm urges and suicidal thoughts.” PAX A

“I always isolated myself, not wanting to talk to anyone back then.” PAX B

Unhealthy coping mechanisms provide short-term relief. This coping mechanism involves avoidance and negative talk. Many studies confirm that maladaptive coping strategies are common for someone who experiences sexual harassment that causes trauma to the survivors of sexual harassment. Additionally, maladaptive coping mechanisms are avoidance, denial, and substance

abuse as the victim's coping mechanisms; this can cause high anxiety.

Interview Guide Question 5: Did you feel a sense of self-blame related to the incident?

In the midst of the interview, both PAX A and PAX D illustrate their experiences of self-blame after the incident; this reflects deep internalization of self-blame and internalized guilt, which is common among survivors of sexual harassment. PAX felt self-blame and guilt because of how her body responded to the abuse; she felt in a way that she was asking for it due to the feelings she felt. It is not good, and it reflects confusion because of involuntary bodily responses. However, PAX D said that she blames herself for wearing liberated clothes, and it shows that the participant also struggles with societal and cultural pressures that can cause self-blame. Overall, the participants' reflections underscore how self-blame is a psychological impact of sexual abuse.

"Yes. Very much so. Unfortunately, my abuser would not stop the abuse until I climaxed, and I felt that, in a way, I was "asking for it" due to it feeling "good." PAX A

"I blame myself for how I dressed, and I think maybe they saw me as flirtatious." PAX D

Self-blame is a cause of negative mental health symptoms and can serve as an early sign for post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and vice versa. Self-blame has been described as an internalized and cognitive feeling of responsibility. This is categorized into two terms, including the behavioral and characterological self-blame. Behavioral self-blame is when the survivors believe the sexual harassment is their fault because of their behavior they can control, while characterological self-blame is the opposite; this is the behavior they cannot control. (Willan et al., 2024; [Andrion, 2025](#))

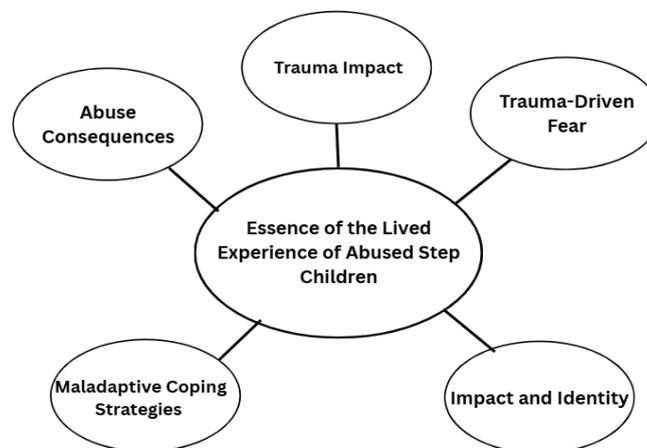


Figure 1. Themes of the Lived Experience of Abused Step Children

Corollary Question: What themes emerged from the responses of stepchildren who experienced sexual harassment from a stepfather?

Based on the narratives shared by stepchildren who experienced sexual harassment from a stepfather, the researchers identified five (5) themes. These include: (1) Abuse Consequences, (2) Trauma Impact, (3) Trauma-Driven Fear, (4) Maladaptive Coping Strategies, and (5) Impact and Identity.

Abuse Consequences

The data gathered for the first question revealed the theme Abuse Consequences, which illustrates the impact of sexual harassment on the mental, physical, and emotional well-being of participants. The theme emphasizes how childhood abuse can manifest “toxic stress, “ including internalized negative emotions, self-loading, and fear.

“Shame, disgust, fear, anxiety, guilt, anger, hatred toward him and myself.” PAX A “

“I am disgusted with myself. I don’t know what to do. I want to report it, but I’m thinking that if I do, he might hurt us because he is an abusive person.” PAX D

In a comparative analysis with recent empirical studies, these findings align with Ring (2022), who stated that sexual harassment has long-term emotional effects, including anger, shame, embarrassment, and a sense of powerlessness. Sexual violence has a significant effect on survivors’ mental health due to its deeply personal and traumatic nature. To further contextualize these results, another study found that early exposure to abuse often causes individuals to grow up dependent on harm, and it can cause difficulty in trusting and socializing.

Theoretically, the abuse consequences are interpreted through Trauma Theory and Betrayal Trauma Theory. However, Trauma Theory explained that participants’ social avoidance is a functional behavioral adaptation intended to protect themselves from more visible threats. Meanwhile, Betrayal Trauma Theory offers a deeper explanation for self-loathing because it suggests that when the perpetrator is a well-known figure, the victim internalizes shame to resolve the cognitive dissonance of being betrayed by someone in their social sphere. These two theories combined to disclose, in summary, the theme of abuse consequences to provide crucial information about this study.

Trauma Impact

The second question revealed the theme of Trauma Impact, which shows how traumatic experiences affected participants’ overall well-being, such as emotions and thoughts. The trauma affects how individuals interpret the world, how they adapt, and how they respond after the trauma. It shows that sexual harassment affects how the participants live, how they see themselves, and how it affects their relationships with other people. The data highlights that trauma have chronic effect on emotional regulation, self-perception, and interpersonal safety.

“...These are still things that got me sent into the mental hospitals over 4 times...” PAX C

“I avoid everything...” PAX E

In a comparative analysis with recent empirical literature. That harassment can have a long-lasting impact and difficulties with trust and emotional control into adulthood. Similarly, [Polat and Memisoglu \(2024\)](#) argue that childhood sexual abuse can lead to maladaptive schemas, it affecting self-perception and relationships throughout life. To further contextualize the dire clinical need mentioned by Pax C, a study by [Servot et al. \(2023\)](#) stated that survivors of trauma are at a higher risk for psychiatric crises and need hospitalizations compared to those who experience single-incident trauma like car accident. These studies confirm that trauma impact is consistent with clinical patterns.

Theoretically, the Trauma Impact is interpreted through Trauma Theory and Betrayal Trauma Theory. The trauma theory describes that avoidance is a common coping mechanism that

helps individuals stay away from the trauma reminders, like places, people, and situations that remind them of the emotions they felt during those trauma experiences. This includes isolation to protect themselves from harm. However, this also aligns with betrayal trauma theory, where individuals have been betrayed by their trusted authority and think that relationships are unsafe for them, which results in isolation. Therefore, it limits social support in making new relationships. By summarizing these theories with recent empirical data, this theme provides a comprehensive answer to how trauma fundamentally reorganizes a survivor's social and emotional reality.

Trauma-Driven Fear

The third question uncovered the topic of trauma-driven fear, demonstrating that the participant's dread is a result of terrible events in the past. The body and mind respond to certain triggers as though there is danger, which reflects the trauma's lingering impact. These answers make sense in light of the participant's past. The assertion made by PAX A:

"It made me fear that my biological father would start abusing me as well. Gave me a fear of all men." PAX A

This study finds variations in safety perceptions in transit situations. We investigate possible connections between students' anxieties and sexual assault and conclude that sexual harassment has an impact on their conduct and mobility. Avoidance tactics that led certain transit users to travel at specific times, on routes and locations that are thought to be particularly dangerous, or even to completely avoid using transport, had an impact on student mobility. The results emphasize how crucial city-country environments are to transit safety. These studies are supported by [Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris \(2021\)](#). By Pax A, experiencing or witnessing abuse caused them to generalize their fear, leading them to distrust and fear all men, including their biological father. One stigmatized type of trauma is sexual violence (SV). Greater symptoms of anxiety, sadness, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have been linked to SV stigma, although these relationships have not been investigated over an extended period of time. Moreover, no mechanisms explaining this link have been found.

According to this viewpoint, fear-driven trauma is the body's natural reaction to stressful situations. According to trauma theory, situations that endanger a person's safety not only impair emotional control but also interfere with physiological functions, causing reactions including increased fear, chest constriction, and physical freeze. According to the betrayal trauma theory, fear serves as an internal alarm system that alerts people to potential danger. However, this alarm becomes conflicting when the source of danger is a dependable or trusted person, like a close family member. The person is perceived by the individual as both a source of harm and a source of protection.

Maladaptive Coping Strategies

The fourth question revealed the theme of maladaptive coping strategies to lessen the feeling of distress but affect the participants' functioning, overall seeking unhealthy solutions that affect daily lifestyle, like self-isolation, avoidance, picking up harmful habits, and uncontrollable emotions. This aligns with the statements of PAX A and PAX B:

"Typically, self-destructive coping mechanisms. I am a binge eater and struggle with self-harm urges and suicidal thoughts." - PAX A

"I always isolated myself, not wanting to talk to anyone back then." - PAX B

The participants want to heal themselves, but they do not know that their coping mechanism is destroying their bodies and preventing them from adapting to making new relationships by isolating themselves in their house. Maladaptive coping strategies are not entirely ineffective, but they really affect the participants' functions mentally, emotionally, and physically. Therefore, it can help individuals escape stressful situations that may lead to self-isolation. Furthermore, maladaptive coping is involved with poor mental outcomes and is more likely to be linked with health risk behavior like picking up unhealthy habits (Algorani & Gupta, 2023). Additionally, maladaptive coping is related to higher levels of psychopathology, and it highlights that maladaptive coping strategies might be the reason that makes an individual's health worsen, although they are intended to help relieve stress.

In connection with this, maladaptive coping mechanisms help participants escape reality for a short time, but they are not healthy habits. It affects participants' function when it comes to socializing, physical body, and psychological well-being. In trauma theory, coping mechanisms are what individuals use to handle stress and emotional pain. Participants used coping mechanisms, but not in a healthy way, and in betrayal trauma theory, betrayal trauma leads to maladaptive coping mechanisms, and participants avoid interaction outside the world because of their fears about being betrayed by their close acquaintances. The theories led to the coping mechanism that some of the coping strategies are not healthy, but they are not entirely useless.

Impact & Identity

The fifth question revealed the theme of Impact and Identity, which describes that psychological stress can influence how people see themselves, sometimes causing doubt or emotional strain, and the whole identity is affected by self-blame. Over time, emotional adaptation happens as they learn to understand their feelings and adjust to what they are going through, helping them regain balance.

"I blame myself for how I dressed, and I think maybe they saw me as flirtatious." PAX D

The participant questioned how she was perceived by others. Willan et al. (2024) explain that the way people respond to survivors after the abuse can slowly influence how survivors come to understand themselves. When they receive comments filled with shame or blame, those words tend to stay with them, and over time, these remarks can affect how they value themselves. Carrying heavy psychological stress can cause individuals to feel disconnected from their own emotions, which makes coping and adjusting more difficult. Furthermore, there is a type of self-blaming called characterological self-blame, which means blaming personal traits that survivors of sexual harassment experienced after that, and it is the shame that plays the mediating role of causing higher possibilities of developing anxiety and depression (Robinson et al., 2024).

In connection with the theories, according to trauma theory, behavioral self-blame is a response where an individual thinks they are at fault after the trauma, which means the participant thinks the same way toward themselves, and self-blame is a psychological strategy that makes trauma feel controlled. In betrayal trauma, there is shame and guilt that individuals internalize, thinking their behavior, appearance, or personality caused it.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the lived experiences of stepchildren who were sexually harassed by a stepfather and identified five key themes: Abuse Consequences, Trauma Impact, Trauma-Driven

Fear, Maladaptive Coping Strategies, and Impact and Identity. The findings show that abuse within the family has lasting effects that continue to shape survivors' emotions, sense of safety, relationships, and self-image. Through Trauma Theory, the study shows how repeated abuse at home can lead to long-term emotional distress and unhealthy ways of coping. It also reflects Betrayal Trauma Theory by showing that abuse by a stepfather leads to stronger fear, self-blame, and trust issues because the harm comes from someone who was expected to provide care and protection. Overall, the findings highlight the need for trauma-informed and survivor-centered support, especially for stepchildren in blended families, with a focus on emotional safety, validation, and rebuilding healthy coping and identity.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study included only five female participants from Tanauan City and Sto. Tomas City, Batangas, so the findings may not fully reflect the experiences of all survivors. The different interview settings, whether online or face-to-face, may have affected how comfortable participants felt in sharing their stories, especially since the topic is highly sensitive. The study also focused only on individuals who were abused by a stepfather, which means experiences involving other relatives or guardians were not covered. In addition, survivors who were not yet ready to speak because of fear, shame, or emotional difficulty were likely not reached.

Further research may involve a larger and more diverse group of participants, including male survivors, to better understand intrafamilial sexual harassment. Looking at a wider range of experiences could also help explore its impact and how survivors cope over time.

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