Original Article

Experiences: How it is defined and understood by children and adolescents in India

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Abstract

Background: The construct of experience has very little understanding especially from the perspective of children and adolescents. This is despite the fact that the word 'experience' is widely used in research and clinical practice. The aim of the study was to understand how children and adolescents conceptualize the term experience, the various types of experiences of significance to them and how these experiences are processed.

Method: For this purpose, focus group discussions and semi structured interviews were carried out. The sample of the study comprised of 110 school going children and adolescents from Bangalore city using purposive sampling method. There was equal representation in terms of gender, age and socio-economic backgrounds.

Results: The findings of the focus group discussions in the study contribute to defining 'experiences' from how the participants of the study understand it. It also identifies the core themes of experiences under the broad domains of positive and negative experiences. The core themes of experiences were experiences in family context, experiences with peer relations, school related experiences and experiences of abuse.

Conclusions: The semi structured interviews contribute to a deeper understanding of how an experience is processed and what are the important themes related to processing of an experience. The clinical and research implications of these findings have been discussed.

Keywords: experiences of children, experiences of adolescents, focus group discussions with children and adolescents

Introduction

Studying experiences is of immense value as the ability to organize and understand our experiences are a basic part of how we make sense of our world. The word 'experience' is perhaps the most commonly used word in behavioural research with children and adolescents. Ironically, the term 'experience' as well as 'various types of experiences' of children and adolescents are largely conceptualised by adults. Furthermore, 'experience' is most often defined either from the perspective of philosophy [1-3].

Children's early experiences and relationships build a foundation for their subsequent learning and social interactions. In order to explore early experiences of children, researchers have established that developmentally, experiences of a child are accessible from 3 years of age. Events experienced before the age of about 18 months do not seem to be verbally accessible; events experienced between about 18 months and 2.5–3 years are reported in fragmentary fashion and seem to be prone to increasing error over time. From about age 3 years on, children can give reasonably coherent accounts of their past experiences and can retain these memories over long durations [4].

These memories are often of typical experiences that children go through in their day to day life yet of utmost significance. These typical yet significant experiences are of immense value in research that aims to understand children in context to their experiences. Green and Hogan (2005) have aptly highlighted the same in their book 'Researching Children's Experiences'.

'...The researcher who values children's perspective and wishes to understand their lived experiences will be motivated to find out more about how children understand and interpret, negotiate and feel about their daily lives. If we accept a view of children as persons, the nature of children's experiential life becomes of central interest' [5].

Understanding the differences in how children remember positive and negative experiences has also been an important area of research. Findings of various researches reveal that the kind of memory and details of positive and negative experiences are very different. Children were able to recall positive experiences with more descriptive details. However, in case of negative traumatic experiences the memories tend to have lesser sensory detail (Eg -visual details, vividness, sketchiness, smell, sound) and coherence, yet more meaning and impact than did memories for positive experiences. Memories of stressful events also included more information about thoughts and emotions [5-6].

The impact of negative traumatic experiences causes deep psychological wounds and require a lot of resilience to work through them. The processes of psycho social recovery of working through traumatic experiences have mostly been understood from the adult trauma recovery models [7-10].

Applicability of these theories with children is questionable as they undergo qualitatively different recovery processes. A child's cognitive and emotional skills are still developing and premature to handle complex emotions. This makes the frame of reference for children less clearly defined [11]. Therefore, conceptualizing a model based on research with children and adolescents is the need of the hour rather than a mere downward extension of adult recovery from traumatic experiences model.

The present study aims to address this lacuna by investigating how children and adolescents conceptualize experiences, significant experiences and how these experiences are processed.

Methods

Sample

The present study is a part of the larger study titled 'Development of a scale to assess experiences in children and adolescents', that was carried out as a part of the doctoral work of the first author under the guidance of second and third authors. The study was carried out

across three years (May 2013 to April 2016) in the Department of Clinical Psychology, National Institute of Mental health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS), Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. The process of construction of an experiences scale was carried out across various phases and had many steps. The universe of the study was children and adolescents studying in school (from 3rd standard to 10th standard) in Bangalore city. Efforts were taken to cover various socio-economic backgrounds by including both government and private schools. A multi stage convenient sampling was used, as data was collected at different stages from different samples.

The present study is the first phase of the larger study and it aimed at better understanding of the construct of 'experience'. For this purpose, 110 school going children and adolescents were recruited. Equal number of boys and girls participated and he age range of the participants was between 8 to 16 years.

Measures

Focus Group Discussion Guidelines [12]

The purpose of the focus group discussions was to understand how children and adolescents conceptualize experiences and to elicit various experiences and events of importance and significance. For the purpose of developing a focus group discussion guide, various focus group discussion guides that have been used previously in researches were reviewed and inputs and suggestions were taken in from experts and research guide.

Keeping in mind that the study aimed to understand experiences from the 'child's perspective', it was decided to have minimal leads and probes for the focus group discussions. The discussion focused on three major questions pertaining to what experiences are, what are positive experiences and what are negative experiences. The opening question, leads and probes are simplistic lay descriptions of positive and negative experiences. This was done so that the discussion is less intimidating ensuring free flow of thought. Apart from

this a lot of summarizing and paraphrasing was used to convey reassurance and validation. Therefore, the Focus Group Discussion Guide was prepared in a way that it enabled a non-directive, open discussion and maximum involvement from the participants.

Semi Structured Interview Guidelines [12]

The aim of individual interviews was to understand the participants' experiences in greater detail and to enable the researcher to gain deeper understanding of these experiences. Individual interaction provided the participants with a safe platform to discuss their experiences without much inhibition. The semi structured interview is an off shoot of the focus group discussion and the essence of the questions to guide the interaction is quite similar too. However, the primary difference being that each child was individually interviewed about their own personal experiences. Once the significant experiences are established, the probe questions are used to dwell deeper and gain better understanding about the phenomenological aspects of an experience.

Procedure

The study was initiated after the ethical clearance of the study was obtained from the institute ethics committee in NIMHANS. The focus group discussions and semi structured interview was conducted by the researcher (first author) under the guidance of the second and third authors. All sessions were audiotaped and jointly reviewed by the guide and researcher soon after the session. The researcher is a clinical psychologist with an interest in working with children and adolescents.

Four schools were contacted at this stage and all the four schools consented to participate in the study. Initially it was planned to gather background information pertaining to socio economic status, religion and family structure from the parents. However, the schools put forward restrictions in asking these questions as they felt it was sensitive in nature. Respecting the schools' requests, it was decided to gather details about background

information like income groups from the school authorities itself. Two of the schools catered to families from privileged backgrounds and two schools catered to the lesser privileged backgrounds.

Three classes were finalized in each school, these classes were representative of the three age ranges (8-10 years, 11-13 years and 14-16 years). Two focus group discussions for each age range (One male group and another female group). The age ranges ensured homogeneity within the groups. Since boys and girls were in separate groups, it ensured that there was lesser inhibition and optimum comfort in the discussion. Fifteen students were randomly selected from these classes based on their roll numbers. A total of 180 students were contacted and parental informed consent form was distributed to them. Of these 110 students brought back signed consent forms for participating in the study. Thereby having a participation percentage of 61.1%.

The focus group discussions were conducted in three sessions. These three sessions were held during school hours. The school authorities gave permission to use the library and games hour which are twice a week for the purpose of focus group discussions. In the first session the participants were given the parental consent forms and explained the rationale of the study and orientation to the concept of focus group discussions and the need for audio recording the discussions. In the session they were explained about the contents in the informed consent form. This was done so that the participants would be able to explain the same to the parents in case of any difficulty in understanding the contents of the form.

The participants who would return the signed consent form, would be called for the second session. They would be either asked to read the assent form or the assent form would be read out to them, depending on the age levels. Some basic rules of confidentiality were explained in this session. An icebreaker game was introduced to increase levels of comfort and rapport among group participants and the researcher. The main focus group discussion was then

conducted in the third session. In this session, the participants view on 'experiences' was gathered. The FGDs had to be spread across three sessions as the sessions could be done only in free classes. Since each class is of 40 minutes, the researcher would get only 25-30 minutes with the participants due to factors like settling in the session, delay to starting the session if the previous class teacher leaves late. The total numbers of participants ranged from 7 to 12 owing to reasons like absenteeism on day of the FGD, not bringing the consent form on the day of the FGD and not consenting to participate in the study.

Following the FGDs, participants were given a sheet of paper and asked to write down their name if they were willing to discuss their own experiences on a one on one basis. The participants who would put in their name would be contacted on the very same day and given the parental consent form. Attempts would be made to contact the student at the earliest for the semi structured interview to maintain the flow. A total of 34 parental consent forms were distributed, of which 24 were returned with consent for participation. The participation percentage at this stage was 70.5%. From the participants who would return the signed consent form, one was randomly chosen for the interview.

The Semi Structured Interview was spread across two sessions. The first session would be to establish rapport by covering generic topics. Apart from this, the assent form would be filled in after reading it out with the participant. The child would also be prepared for the forth coming session which would consist of the interview and confidentiality would be assured.

Following which the semi structured interview was held in the second session. Follow up sessions were held with a few participants as they discussed significant issues that was distressing them. Supportive Work was done with the students across 1-2 sessions depending on the need. A total of 12 focus group discussions and semi structured interviews were conducted across 5 months. These discussions were then audio taped, transcribed, coded and content analyzed.

Analysis of Data

The focus group data once transcribed was analyzed using the Kreuger's manual on 'Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results' [13]. The statements were interpreted based on frequency, intensity and consensus among the participants about the experience. The experiences were analyzed across the age ranges, gender and socio-economic status in order to pick up the core common experiences. The significant experiences were categorized based themes and broader domains to which the themes belong.

Similarly, the individual interviews once transcribed were analyzed following the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis [14]. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative method for gaining an insight into how an individual perceives a phenomenon. The technique involved in IPA is similar to the grounded theory where data collection is initiated with a sense of openness rather than at a confirmatory or assumptive level with a hypothesis already present in the researcher's mind. The data was analyzed and interpreted in order to extract themes that are relevant to the research question.

Initial comments were noted on the printed transcript, following which comments were transformed to themes which were color coded. Following which broader themes were identified and organized as categories or super ordinate themes which were further analyzed to understand underlying connections. The material was manually analyzed and organized on large chart papers for the researchers to get an overview.

Results

The participant responses on focus group discussions and semi structured interviews are presented under the following headings: (1) Defining Experience (2) Significant positive experiences (3) Significant negative experiences (4) Processing an experience

Defining Experience

Participants across all the age ranges were able to understand, conceptualize and define the word 'experience' in their own words. A total of 110 definitions of the word experience was generated as the FGD begun with each participant defining the term experience. Of these 15 definitions were dropped as they were categorised as unclear, abstract, original but not relevant or defining the word 'work experience'. A total of 34 lay original definitions of 'experience' were compiled after collapsing similar definitions which appeared to be repetitive. The definitions differed across age ranges with respect to simplicity, depth, complexity and practical applicability. Following categorization of the definitions based on broad themes was done.

Table-1: Themes and Frequency under which the Lay Definitions were categorized

Lessons Learnt and Gaining Expertise (N =12)	*Emotional Component of Experiences (N =7)*	*Cognitive Component of Experiences (N = 4)*	*Experiences as personal events (N = 8)*	*Continuous Uncontrollable Process (N = 3)*
Experience is like taking one step at a time to learn.	*Experience is having our feelings with us when we do things.*	*Experiences are what our feelings and memories are made up of.*	*Something that has happened before to us is an experience.*	*We can't control our experiences. It is what should happen and what should not happen to us.*
Experience teaches us.	*Experience is what we feel.*	*Any memory of an incident that has made a strong impact.*	*It is things we go through.*	*It is good and bad things that happen to us.*
Experience is what we go through and learn from.	*Experience is nothing but the feelings that a person has undergone while something happened.*	*The incidents that keep coming to our mind is experience.*	*Experiences are personal and only we know our experiences well.*	*Experience is each and everything happening to us, like right now is an experience.*
Experience makes us stronger.	*Feeling happy or sad is an experience.*		*What we face in real life.* *Circumstance*	

			that we face in our daily life.	
Learning something and knowing about life. *We can advise only when we have experience.*				

The various lay definitions given by the participants were categorized based on broad themes. The most frequently occurring theme was found to be 'Lessons Learnt and Gaining Expertise' (N= 12), followed by experience as 'something personal' (N =8) and 'emotional component of experience' (N =7). These themes were taken into consideration while formulating an operational definition of 'experience' from a child's perspective.

Significant Positive Experiences

The total of four main domains of positive experiences was reported by participants. A total of 19 sub themes under the 4 domains of significant positive experiences was extracted.

Table-2: Main Domains of Positive Experiences Reported by Participants

Si No	Main Themes of Positive Experiences	Percentage of Reporting
1.	Experiences with Family	42%
2.	Experiences in School	26%
3.	Experiences in Peer Relationships	16%
4.	Personal Positive Experiences	16%

Table-3: Two Sub- Themes under each broad theme in the domain of Positive Experiences with highest frequencies

Experiences with Family	Experiences School	Experiences in Peer Relationships	Personal Positive Experiences
Trust and Support	Recognition	Belongingness	Hobbies
Bonding with Sibling	Success – extracurricular activities	Support System	Heterosexual attractions

Significant Negative Experiences

The total of six main domains of negative experiences was reported by participants. A total of

30 sub themes under the 6 domains of significant negative experiences was extracted.

Table-4: Main Domains of Negative Experiences Reported by Participants

Si No	Main Themes of Negative Experiences	Percentage of Reporting
1.	Experiences with Family	32%
2.	Personal Negative Experiences	17%
3.	Abusive Experiences	15%
4.	Experiences in School	15%
5.	Experiences in Peer Relationships	12%
6.	Negative Experiences in Society	9%

Table-5: Two Sub- Themes under each broad theme in the domain of Negative Experiences with highest frequencies

Experiences with Family	Personal Negative Experiences	Experiences in School	Abusive Experiences	Peer Experiences	Society
Fights/ Violence	Changes in body with puberty	Being picked on	Verbal Abuse	Being left out	Safety
Comparison	Guilt over attraction	Bullying	Sexual Abuse	Difficulty to make friends	Frequent Accidents

Processing an Experience

Six broad themes were identified after a thorough analysis of 12 Semi Structured Interviews.

The themes explain the various components of an experience and how it gets processed.

Table-6: Themes in Processing an Experience

Themes	Understanding about the Theme	Example
Event/ incident/ situation	*Events are the first step in processing an experience.* *The beginning of every experience starts with an event.*	*Doing well in an exam, Getting scolded for not completing homework,*
Prior understanding/knowledge about the event	*Information and Knowledge about events is based on media, peer opinions, feedback given by elders, books, magazines, social media etc.* *It's a preexisting schema that every child or adolescent has about an experience*	*It is good to do well in exam;* *It is bad to get punished;* *It's nice to have a friend.*

Frequency and Recency of an event	*How often an event has taken place plays an important role.* *If an event occurs very often it will clearly have a more lasting impact.* *Similarly, the recency of an event is just as important. The closer it is to the present, the more likely it would be on a child's mind.*	*If a child has recently and often done badly in exams it is most likely to be on the child's mind.* *Similarly, if a child goes to his/her grandmother's home every summer vacation, it gets stored as a stable positive experience.*
After Event Processing	*After an event takes place, the reactions/ discussion that follows it plays a crucial role in consolidating the experience.* *If an after-event processing is smooth even a negative experience could be more peacefully integrated.*	*Being comforted and not scolded by a parent for poor performance,* *Sharing a hurtful incident with a friend who fails to empathize.*
Emotional Processing	*Events and processing it brings forward a lot of emotions which are also getting processed parallelly at every stage from the occurrence of the event to after event processing.* *Emotions and its shades may differ at every stage.*	*Feeling delighted with great marks* *Feeling sad when punished* *Feeling angry and sad at a friend who lets one down.*
Appraisal of the Event leading to an Experience	• *The interplay between events, knowledge about events, after event processing, the frequency and recency of an event along with emotional processing of an event, leads to the how an event gets evaluated and consolidated for an individual.* • *A positive experience triggers positive emotions which leaves an individual feeling like experiencing it more often; thereby increasing one's exposure to these events.* • *Similarly, a negative experience leaves an individual feeling uncomfortable and hoping that it never repeats itself. Thereby, making one cautious about coming in contact with these events.*	

The themes highlight's various components of processing an experience, the beginning of which starts with an event, which one has prior understanding and knowledge about, the frequency and recency of the event makes an impact on an individual.

Discussion

The present study is one of the few studies that have aimed at understanding the construct of 'experience' based on the responses by children and adolescents.

The study worked on formulating an operational definition of the construct 'experience' incorporating the various themes as elaborated in Table-1. *'Experiences are what we personally go through and learn from. Experiences are made up of our memories & feelings*

and are often beyond our control'. The proposed operational definition is based on the responses of the participants from different age ranges, socio economic background and gender. Efforts were made to incorporate most simple definitions yet capturing the essence of the construct. Thereby, making it applicable to children and adolescents from various backgrounds.

The term 'Experience' has so far been defined either on the basis of philosophical and phenomenological viewpoints [1-3] or as explained in the dictionaries. Therefore, highlighting need for an age relevant operational definition. An appropriate operational definition is important as an operational definition is definition of concept (variable) in terms of the techniques (operations) used to measure same. In other words, it is a translation of an abstract concept (variable) into concrete and measurable terms. Operational definitions provide valid representations of constructs [15].

Under the domain of Positive Experiences; Experiences with family was found to be most often reported. One of the highest reported sub themes was experiences of trust and support in the family. One participant reported *'when a neighbour told my mother that I was coming from school with a boy, my mother told that I know about my daughter's whereabouts, don't worry…I felt very good'.* Similarly, another participant reports *'Once a teacher complained in parent teacher meeting about me copying, but my father told me that he trusts me no matter what'.* Experiences of Recognition in School is one the most frequently occurring sub theme. One participant report's *'whenever there is a program in school, the teacher asks me to sing for the inauguration, I feel very happy about it'.* In peer relations, experiences of belongingness were one of the most frequently occurring sub themes, where one participant reports *'I have a group of friends with whom I have lunch…we all look forward to lunch break time'.* Many participants reported that having a hobby that they were pursuing was a

positive experience. One participant reported *'I forget all the problems when I go for dance class'*.

Similarly, Experiences with Family was found to be the most reported theme in the domain of negative experiences. Fights and Violence was reported by many participants as a negative experience. One of the participants reported *'When my parents start arguing loudly I get so scared that they may start hitting each other….i try to stop them from arguing that time'*. One of the most frequently reported negative experience was discomfort with changes in body due to puberty. One participant reported *'Days during periods are not a very nice experience, esp. due to the pain and discomfort'*. Many participants reported being picked on as a negative experience in school: '*'I got caught once for mischief...ever since even what has actually been done by other boys was also blamed on me'*. Being verbally abused was one of the most frequently reported sub- theme. One of the participants reported *'When my mother scolds me she tells words that can make me feel very sad'*. Negative experiences of feeling left out in peer relations was reported by many participants: *'My friends don't call me out, they go out on their own and later tell me that they forgot, this really hurts'*. Many participants raised concerns about safety of travelling alone by young girls and negative experiences related to safety. One participant reported '*Some men may be even as old as my father, the way they look and stare is very uncomfortable'*.

It was interesting to observe how experiences in family constituted the largest percentage with respect to both significant positive and negative experiences, explaining the powerful role that family has for an individual in India.

The Semi Structured Interviews provided an insight into the manner in which children and adolescents process an experience. The experience was discussed in detail with regard to the feelings, emotions and working through the experience. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyze the experiences that were discussed in the semi structured

interviews. Very few studies have been reported in India as using IPA with young children so it was a pioneering attempt. However, it must be highlighted that IPA with children is quite different. The average time per interview is quite short 16.53 minutes, whereas adult IPA interviews can be over an hour. The ability to express and articulate experiences was found to be better in adolescents. Whereas with younger children, non-directive stance in interviewing was found to be a challenge. Interpretative phenomenological analysis can be either descriptive or interpretative. Descriptive analysis begins 'not in terms of what we already know or presume to know', but rather with what presents itself to the researcher, 'exactly as it presents itself' [16]. The present study uses more of a descriptive form of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

A comparison was attempted with the work of Alisic, Boeije, Jongmans & Kleber, 2011 [11] who attempted to understand the process of recovery in single incident trauma. The 'importance of social support' as highlighted in the study, can be also found in the proposed model in the component of 'after event processing'. Similarly, the study also highlights the 'importance of coping' in the recovery from the trauma. This can also be seen in the proposed model as 'Appraisal of the experience'. Similarly, the Appraisal theory [8] examines the process by which emotions are elicited as a result of an individual's subjective interpretation or evaluation of important events or situations can be also seen in the emotional processing stage.

The experience processing themes proposed in the present study highlights the importance of 'appraisal of an experience'; this component has a lot of implications for clinical practice as appraisal can be reworked in therapy. Similarly, the process of 'After Event Processing' is of relevance and importance in clinical setting. As the process of therapy itself facilitates 'after event processing'. Therefore, a validating experience with a therapist could lead to better integration of an experience irrespective of how negative it is. Therapy helps children

reconstruct their lived experiences creates a link with their symptoms and in turn facilitates insight. The process of reconstructing experiences in therapy happens across time and with adequate holding environment in therapy. It is also found that emotional problems are often identified during the process of therapy than in the beginning [17]. The integration and consolidation of an experience follows three major steps, not necessarily in a linear manner. The interplay between after event processing, emotional processing and appraisal of an event helps a child or adolescent to amalgamate an experience.

To conclude, the present study contributes to better understanding about the construct of 'experience'. It explored how children and adolescents conceptualise experiences and significant positive and negative experiences that they have been through. The themes of the lay definitions contributed to development of an operational definition. Important themes and subthemes categorised significant experiences that children and adolescents go through. The semi structured interview further analysed how an experience is processed and identified six broad themes. This can be considered as a humble yet pioneering effort at better understanding about 'experiences' purely from the perspective of children and adolescents.

Conflict of interest: None declared

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