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Beyond a single story – the importance of separating 'harm' from 'wrongfulness' and 'sexual innocence' from 'childhood' in contemporary narratives of childhood sexual abuse.

Abstract

This paper draws on research exploring adult women's engagement with narratives of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and identifies implications for both child and adult victims. As this research showed, any single story cannot accommodate all experiences. When that single story becomes dominant those whose experiences are not acknowledged are at risk of being silenced and left without a narrative framework to make sense of their experiences, which in turn risk being unrecognised as abuse by others.

The paper looks at contemporary understandings of CSA and argues for the need to move beyond a single damage narrative in which victims are constructed as sexually innocent, weak and passive and seen to be inevitably damaged by their experiences. The paper argues for the need to separate wrongfulness from harm and (sexual) innocence from childhood. This would enable us to recognise sexual abuse in all sexually abused children, including those who do not conform to sexual innocence, and to recognise that CSA is wrong irrespective of psychological damage. In doing, it is argued, so we would all be better equipped to recognise sexual abuse and victims would be better able to tell their own stories which may, but may not, include psychological damage.

Key words: Childhood sexual abuse, narratives, harm, innocence

Beyond a single story – the importance of separating ‘harm’ from ‘wrongfulness’ and ‘sexual innocence’ from ‘childhood’ in contemporary narratives of childhood sexual abuse.

Introduction: Telling stories and making sense

As Plummer argued in his influential work ‘everywhere we go, we are charged with telling stories and making meaning – giving sense to ourselves and the world around us’ (Plummer 1995:20). However, the stories we tell do not only help us make sense of our and others’ lives, they also help us plan for the future. In telling our stories we do not simply slot ourselves into readymade narratives but we do draw on stories or narrative frameworks that are currently circulating and these are both culturally and historically specific (author 2009, Bauman 2001, Jackson 1998, Lawler 2002, Plummer 1995, 2001). Therefore, in telling our (and others’) life stories we are not free to tell any story (author 2009, Bauman 2001, Gergen 1994, Plummer 1995, 2001) but must confine ourselves ‘to toing and froing among the options on offer’ (Bauman 2001:7). The stories we can tell now are not the same as the stories we could tell in the past, which is not to suggest that past stories were untrue or less true and contemporary stories (more) true, but to argue that all stories are informed and limited by the circumstances or contexts of their telling. When it comes to telling stories of childhood sexual abuse (CSA), one story has come to dominate and, as I argue in this paper, this delimits the possibilities for telling of sexual abuse and leaves those whose experiences do not fit neatly into this narrative framework without a story to tell. That these stories are not simply used to make sense of the past and the present but, as guides to living, also help us shape or plan for the future, gives added weight to the limited stories currently in circulation.

In the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries the stories we can tell are increasingly informed by a therapeutic culture (author 2009, Furedi 2004) which encourages us to identify personal problems in our lives and look inward for the causes of and solutions to those problems, and to focus on individualising solutions at the expense of addressing external factors (author 2009, Showalter 1997). This can be seen in our contemporary telling of CSA which promotes an understanding of victims as inevitably and overwhelmingly damaged, but can also be used to identify all those who are unhappy or dissatisfied with their lives as victims of such abuse. There is a danger in these contemporary stories but the danger lies, not in potential ‘untruths’ (if we can even talk about such things) but in the all encompassing nature of these stories which risk silencing the voices of those whose experiences do not fit and direct us all to conform to their particular guide for living. As feminists who challenged the dominance of white, middle class, heterosexual women in feminist theorising showed to great effect – one of the dangers of a single theory or a singular story is that it cannot encompass the lives of everyone: some (and

quite possibly very many) will not only be unable to recognise their own lives in mega theories or single stories but the narrative frameworks that accompany such theorising or storytelling serve to silence many (women) and deny them a narrative framework within which to make sense of their experiences at the same time as they claim to give them a voice. Whilst some may find a voice through hegemonic narratives, as I argue in this paper, we need to challenge the dominance of any singular story and in doing so create a space and a framework in which those who are silenced by dominant narratives are able to tell different stories and draw on different narrative frameworks to make sense of their lives.

In this paper I explore the dangers of the singular story that has come to dominate contemporary understandings of CSA and, as I argue here, has also become available to a host of (largely) women who feel they are living unhappy, unsuccessful or unsatisfactory lives. In doing so I look at the contemporary literature on CSA and draw on a research project which explored women's engagement with narratives of CSA. The contemporary sexual abuse narrative allows for all adult difficulties to be correlated with CSA and constructs all victims as passive and sexually innocent at the time of their abuse and as inevitably and overwhelmingly damaged by that abuse. It thereby enables evidence of CSA to be identified in the lives of unhappy or dissatisfied adults, even if they have no memories of such abuse (author 2009, 2010, Tavis 1992). Having entered the contemporary 'symptom pool' (Showalter 1997) CSA has become a causal narrative, readily available and attractive to those who seek to make meaning of their lives, whether they have knowledge or memories of having been sexually abused or are simply unhappy or dissatisfied with their lives (author 2009, Hacking 1995, Pendergrast 1997, 1999, Showalter 1997, Tavis 1992). It is a story in which all the ills experienced by women can be explained, not with reference to the external world, but through an examination of the internal world of their perceived damaged, and not yet healed, psychologies. As I argue in this paper, the dominance of such a narrative can serve not only to silence those victims of CSA whose experiences do not conform to this particular story but, as this story has been extended to include those who are unhappy or dissatisfied with their lives, its dangers extend far beyond the telling of childhood sexual abuse. The research on which this paper is based relates to adult victims of CSA but this is a narrative not limited to the lives of adults but, as I argue here, it is also applied to the lives of children. Furthermore, the stories that adults tell not only serve to reinforce currently circulating narrative frameworks but in doing so they also limit the stories that children (and their carers) can tell of their experiences – of sex and of sexual abuse. They also reinforce the perceived powerlessness of those victims who might have other stories to tell but who lack the power to assert their own stories. As I argue in this paper, we need to separate 'childhood' from 'sexual innocence' and 'harm' from 'wrongfulness' in order to acknowledge the wrongfulness of CSA without necessarily constructing victims as sexually innocent, passive and/or inevitably and overwhelmingly

damaged by experiences of abuse. In doing so we need to revitalise the debate begun by earlier feminists such as Kelly (1988) and thereby reclaim the repertoires of strength and resilience which have become subsumed within an individualising therapeutic industry.

Contemporary stories and the emergence of 'harm' as a causal narrative

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the genre of storytelling that has taken centre stage derives from a therapeutic culture which, in competition with rival cultural claims, 'provides a script through which individuals develop a distinct understanding of their selves and of their relationship with others' (Furedi 2004:23). It is a culture which is seen to have an authoritarian and coercive dimension (Furedi 2004, Lasch 1979, Sennett 1993) but also one in which we are 'educated in a therapeutic discourse of the emotions' which we can use 'to turn our own "cases" into stories, and become the authors of our own plot' (Rose 1989:257), which in turn can act as 'guides for living'. We can, however, be imprisoned as well as liberated by the stories we come to tell (Tavris 1992), making it all the more important to challenge the dominance of a singular narrative.

The history of CSA and the aetiology of the harm story of CSA show the extent to which our understanding of both the experience and consequences have changed over time, in part informed by our changing understandings of childhood and childhood innocence. As a society we have gone from believing CSA to have little real effect on its victims, to measuring its wrongfulness purely in terms of the damaging effect it is thought to have on its victims. Towards the end of the nineteenth century feminists, social purity campaigners, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the Salvation Army were raising concerns over the sexual abuse and prostitution of young working class girls. Following publication of a series of infamous articles in the Pall Mall Gazette this concern culminated in mass demonstrations in Hyde Park, London, and resulted in the raising of the age of consent from 13 to 16. Public debate on the issue resurfaced in the early twentieth century culminating in the 1908 Punishment of Incest Act. However, the focus of these debates was not so much on the psychological harm caused to victims but on issues of immorality, social purity and eugenic concerns around 'in-breeding' amongst overcrowded working class populations (Kitzinger 2004, Smart 1989), and it is notable that step-daughters were excluded from the 1908 act. Egan and Hawkes (2009) also identify concerns around social purity and dysgenics in relation to childhood sexuality in early twentieth century Australia. Whilst the sexual abuse of children did not disappear following the Punishment of Incest Act it did remain a 'well kept secret' throughout the first half of the twentieth century (Kitzinger 2004).

Debates around the sexual abuse of children did resurface during the 1950s and 1960s but it was largely seen as 'non harmful'. Some psychiatric studies from this period did identify potential effects of CSA but these were largely related to concerns around sexuality and

whether victims would be put off sex with men, and identified ‘ “penis envy”, “castrating impulses” and a “morbid fear of heterosexuality’ ” (Kitzinger 1993:220). The consensus during this time and up until the 1970s within psychology and popular understanding was that child sexual abuse had few if any long-term negative effects (Kitzinger 1993, Jenkins 2004). In the feminist moment of the 1970s and 1980s a new story emerged in which CSA was constructed as a social problem in need of a social and political solution (Armstrong 1978, 1994, Kelly 1988, Rush, 1980, Ward 1984). It was also a story which, whilst acknowledging the effects of CSA, also showed ‘the other side of being a victim’ (Kelly 1988), and recognised that male violence was not just about male power but also women’s and children’s resistance (Kelly 1988, Kirkwood 1993, Maguire 1992). Drawing on this feminist narrative framework, gave victims greater freedom to tell their own stories in which they did not have to construct themselves as passive and powerless but which allowed for the possibility that ‘the process of coping with negative effects may, in the long term, have positive outcomes’ (Kelly 1988:159). However, it was a narrative framework that remained in circulation for a relatively short period.

Faced with feminist discourses around male violence and the sexual abuse of children psychology reassessed its understanding and consolidated its ‘monopoly of defining both the “problem” of and the “solution” to sexual violence’ (Kitzinger, J 1993:234). It thereby maintained public awareness of the issue whilst at the same time removing victims from the political arena. Feminists and traditional therapists sought to diagnose the effects of sexual abuse, to warn victims and society and to provide treatment programmes to facilitate women’s and children’s recovery. This next story, which emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s, portrayed CSA as a ‘profoundly deforming experience’ (Contratto and Gutfreund 1996) whose victims were ‘not well adapted to adult life’ (Herman 1992:110). In this way the measure of the wrongfulness of sexual violence came to be judged solely in terms of the damage it was seen to cause, rather than the wrongful act itself. This new story was a singular story of psychological damage, the ‘harm story’ (O’Dell 2003) or ‘survivor discourse’ (Worrell 2003) in which child sexual abuse was said to be so (inevitably) damaging that the effects, or ‘symptoms’, could be identified in the lives of adult women. This identification of symptoms was particularly significant because it located the cause of a variety of (often unrelated) problems or difficulties within the damaged psychologies of victims and it enabled women with no memories or knowledge of sexual abuse in childhood to recognise themselves in the CSA narrative and to rewrite their own personal stories to include such a history. As Browne and Finkelhor argued, there is:

An unfortunate tendency in interpreting the effects of sexual abuse...to overemphasize long-term impact as the ultimate criterion...child sexual abuse needs to be recognised as a serious problem of childhood, if only for the immediate pain, confusion and upset (Browne and Finkelhor (1986) cited in Hacking 1995:64-5).

Located within a therapeutic framework the recovery literature relies on such overemphasis to encourage women to make connections between negative experiences in adulthood and perceived childhood trauma. Depending on whether or not they have memories, the sexual abuse recovery literature encourages readers to identify symptoms of sexual abuse in their adult lives or to reinterpret their lives and attribute symptoms to the sexual abuse they experienced in childhood (author 2009, 2010, Showalter 1997, Tavis 1992). But, as Hacking (1995) points out, it is our construction of abuse that is central to the emergence of the contemporary abuse narrative as an explanation for many of society's ills:

If we had been content to intervene in child abuse just because it is bad, we would not have our present set of beliefs about the consequences of child abuse (Hacking 1995:66).

So firmly established has the harm story become that it is increasingly difficult for those who identify themselves as victims to tell different stories, or construct different identities. However, it is not only adult victims who draw on this story to make sense of their own lives. The 'culturally approved victim' (Lamb 1999:117) and the story in which she features is also used by 'others' to understand or make sense of the lives of those, both adults and children, who they believe to be victims of CSA. Whilst sometimes done with the intention of help and support, it might also serve to construct as damaged, those who do not identify themselves as such and, as Lamb (1999) argues, particularly within the criminal justice system this might force victims to present a more damaged or fragile self or risk being seen as an unconvincing victim. Child victims of CSA are also confronted with a framework within which to make sense of their experiences that not only directs them to see themselves as helpless, passive and sexually innocent in order to avoid the risk of being held, or holding themselves, responsible for their abuse, but also tells them of ruined childhoods and lost innocence. Not only might this influence how child victims make sense of their experiences but also if or who they tell of their experiences. As Staller and Nelson-Gardell (2005) argue: "Disclosure is not a oneway process. Children receive, process, evaluate, and react to information based on how adults respond to them" (Staller and Nelson-Gardell 2005 cited in McElvaney et al 2011). For those victims still under the care of others, the self they see reflected back to them is likely to be one constructed within a framework of harm and psychological damage, where internalised negative messages 'could become a self fulfilling prophecy' (Plummer and Eastin 2007:1068). It is also a story that is used by those, often in positions of authority, to make judgements about young people's experiences and whether they should be understood as sexual abuse. As we have seen recently (2012) in the case of child sexual exploitation in Rochdale, UK this story can be used to deny an abusive element to a 'sexual relationship' where a young person might be sexually knowledgeable and/or active and therefore does not conform to the dominant construction of a 'child' or a victim of CSA.

In the remainder of this paper I will explore the dangers of this singular story of CSA. I will do so by drawing on data from a research project which explored adult women's engagement with narratives of childhood sexual abuse. As I demonstrate, much that can be learnt from their stories can also be applied to child victims, not least the limiting effects of promoting a single story of sexual abuse, victimhood and survival. These adult stories form the textual context in which children, and their carers, make sense of children and young peoples' experiences.

The research: methods and participants

This paper draws on the findings from a qualitative research project exploring women's engagement with CSA recovery literature. Sixteen women participated in the research of whom the majority had no recall memories or concrete knowledge of having been sexually abused. Five identified themselves as having continuous, concrete memories of CSA, six believed they had recovered memories of CSA (with all but one of these based entirely on 'alternative memories' – or perceived 'symptoms' redefined as 'memories'), and five believed they had recovered false memories of CSA and were victims of false memory syndrome (FMS). Of the five who believed they had recovered false memories, three did not reject entirely the idea that they had been sexually abused in childhood, only that the perpetrators were their fathers. However, the research was not concerned with establishing the 'truth' or 'falsity' of women's claims but took as its starting point that women's memories and the narratives they told were 'true' to them, whilst recognising that, like all of us, they are constrained by the stories that can be told (author 2008, 2009, Bauman 2001, Gergen 1994, Plummer 1995, 2001).

The research was conducted, in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association, in the United Kingdom where all the participants were living at the time. The women were contacted through an article describing the research and calling for participants which appeared in the newsletter of two organisations: one supporting self identified victims of CSA, and one supporting those who identified as victims of false memory syndrome. The latter resulted in few responses and the organisation sent an additional letter to female members on my behalf. All the names in this paper are pseudonyms. The women's experiences, whether of 'healing' and 'recovery' or recovering false memories, occurred in Britain but the women were not all British. Ten were white British, two were British Asian, two were white European, one was non European of mixed heritage, and one identified as 'other'. The majority were in their thirties (seven) or forties (six) with one women in her late fifties and two in their early sixties. Eleven identified themselves as heterosexual, two as heterosexual with some bisexuality, one as bisexual, one as a lesbian and one as 'gone off men'. When asked about their educational qualifications, four had O levels, one had A levels or equivalent, one had NVQs, one was a mature student, one had a professional qualification, and seven had a first degree or higher.

The aim of this research was to explore women's engagement with the CSA recovery literature in the process of making sense of their lives, (re)constructing their life stories, and planning for what they hoped would be a brighter future. The research was conducted within a feminist social constructionist framework. The intention was not to focus on women's experiences or memories of CSA (and indeed the majority of the women had no concrete memories of abuse). I therefore chose a two-stage approach with a questionnaire followed by either an interview or written account. The questionnaire was designed to establish some background information including, if known, women's age, sexuality, the time and place they believed the abuse took place, who had abused them, and what self-help and recovery literature they had engaged with. This enabled women's abuse histories to be taken as given, leaving the second stage to focus on women's engagement with the process of 'healing' and 'recovery'. In this stage participants were given the choice of being interviewed (11) or providing a written account (5) (based on the same semi structured interview questions).

The interviews lasted between two and six hours (of which one went over two sessions) with the majority conducted in participants' own homes but with one conducted at a University office. They were all conducted by the author, tape-recorded, and later transcribed. The written accounts were conducted at a time and place of the participants choosing and posted to the researcher. Once the interview transcripts and written accounts were collected they were subjected to thematic analysis. All the transcripts and written accounts were read multiple times to identify principle themes. A further re-reading and revision of the themes resulted in a number of the themes being subsumed into larger themes or categories. This reflexive process allowed me to develop themes by immersing myself in the data through reading and re-reading the material rather than by indexing the text with coding software. This produced three overarching categories or mega themes: 'Narratives' which included the sub themes 'making sense', 'symptoms', 'discourses and understandings of CSA'; 'Knowledge and the inner child' which included the sub themes 'the inner child', 'multiple and split personalities' and 'alternative memories'; 'Healing and the self' which included the sub themes 'identity', 'the self' and 'healing and moving on'. It is that material relating to the construction and use of narratives of CSA that is drawn on in the writing of this paper.

Telling stories

Of the women who participated in this research not all entered adulthood with continuous memories of childhood sexual abuse. Of those entering adulthood without memories, not all recovered what might commonly be understood as concrete or recall memories of such abuse. All but one of the women who did not have continuous memories of abuse recovered what I have called elsewhere 'alternative memories' (author 2010) – which is a correlation of symptoms (redefined as 'memories') with presumed past abuse. They were able to do so

because our contemporary story of CSA constructs its victims as so inevitably and overwhelmingly psychologically damaged that, it is thought, evidence of such abuse can be seen in the adult lives of victims – whether or not they have memories of such abuse. However, all the participants did draw on a contemporary narrative framework of childhood sexual abuse in the process of making sense of their lives and constructing their own life stories, even if some (such as self-identified victims of FMS) later rejected such a story. In doing so, they did not adopt readymade scripts but made use of a narrative framework in which they were able to draw on different sub plots or story lines depending on their experiences, their memories, and what they were trying to make sense of in the past and/or the present. Some were trying to make sense of remembered childhood abuse (including sexual abuse), others to make sense of sexual feelings in childhood, and others to make sense of adult experiences or unhappiness.

Agency, blame and 'sexual innocence'

A central premise of our contemporary CSA narrative is the construction of healthy childhood as a time of innocence, particularly sexual innocence, and this is especially significant when it comes to identifying particular 'symptoms' of CSA in childhood (author 2008, 2009, 2010, Kitzinger 1997,). In contrast to the healthy adult woman, the healthy (non abused) child is constructed as sexually innocent (Kitzinger 1997, Lamb 1999,), and it is this innocence that is in need of protection (Robinson 2012). This construction allows for the idea that sexual thoughts or activities, identified as inappropriate in children, must have come from outside the child as 'childhood sexuality is conceptualized as the result of an outside or deviant stimulus' (Egan and Hawkes 2009: 391). This prohibits both acknowledgement and discussion of children's and young people's sexuality, and denies them access to sexual education and knowledge, which in turn might help them resist inappropriate or unwanted behaviour (Robinson 2008), because such knowledge can itself be seen to be a corrupting influence (Robinson 2012, Smart 1989). The sexually knowing child is therefore problematic – not only does she challenge the artificial boundaries between childhood and adulthood, but this knowledge both marks her as potentially damaged and constructs her as potentially corrupting, both to other children and, like Lolita, to adult men. As childhood is a time of innocence, disruption of this state is seen as abuse and evidence of disruption as evidence of such abuse, but 'this policing of child sexuality and misconceptions about child asexuality have also resulted in abused or 'sexual' children being seen as 'damaged goods' and as no longer children' (Green 2006:83). It allows for the idea that the sexually knowledgeable or sexually active child, constructed as non-innocent and corrupted, (Robinson 2012), is no longer deserving of the protective cloak of 'childhood' and therefore sex with such a child can be seen as not abusive. The dangers of such an understanding, together with the problems of constructing children as passive and lacking agency, can be seen in the story told by Jay, an adult victim of CSA. Jay was a victim of years of abuse, much of it sexual,

perpetrated by a number of men. When she revisited the period of her abuse she did not believe she was returning to a time of innocence or even to a time of childhood:

I was a woman in my granda's bed from three years old and I got swapped for being my stepfathers' mistress and my stepbrother's mistress and then the other rapes and abuse went on around it. (Jay)

Jay had not felt like a child when she was abused and found the idea of childhood innocence unhelpful, but it did nonetheless form the background against which she (and others) interpreted her childhood experiences. Her understanding of childhood and childhood sexual innocence contributed to Jay's inability to identify herself as a (sexually innocent) child. She not only exercised a degree of agency, but was also both sexually knowledgeable and sexually active, albeit not through choice, and this prevented her from seeing her experiences as (child) sexual abuse:

I didn't feel I was a child and I think that's part of why I couldn't accept it as abuse. (Jay)

Jay was not the only one who failed to see her experiences of childhood sex as abusive and it may be that her removal from a state of sexual innocence, and therefore childhood, contributed to that failure by others and contributed to her being subjected to other forms of abuse, including additional sexual abuse by both strangers and adults she knew:

It wasn't until then that I twigged that everybody knew about it and I'd been keeping this secret and it wasn't any secret, because everybody knew and that's when I started becoming angry. Because trying to keep a secret it led to other abuse. (Jay)

In her own words, Jay had become 'a woman in my granda's bed from three years old'. Current orthodoxy on child abuse constructs sexual abuse as the most damaging (Hacking 1991, 1995) but as Jay's account shows, it is not always sexual abuse, or the sexual acts of an abusive childhood, which are themselves intricately linked with other aspects of abuse, that is experienced as most damaging or difficult to deal with by children themselves:

I found I couldn't take the psychological abuse at all No. I could cope better with the physical and sexual abuse than I could the psychological. That's why I walked out of hers' and straight back into the abuse, knowing it would be the same, hoping it wouldn't be but knowing it would be. (Jay)

Jay found the psychological abuse so much harder to deal with that she 'chose' to return to the house where she believed she would probably be sexually abused. Whilst this could be compared to Stockholm Syndrome whereby victims become attached emotionally to their captors (Graham 1994, Jülich 2005), Jay was clear that her decision was based on an assessment of the situation in which she chose the childhood she felt best able to cope with.

Her story is not one that fits easily within our contemporary telling of childhood sexual abuse, a telling that contradicts her own experiences, and denies her claim to the status of passive and therefore innocent victim because she had exercised some (albeit limited) power and agency and chosen to return. Jay had been silenced and left without a story (of sexual abuse) to tell. From the vantage point of the present and with a new narrative framework that rejected the contemporary harm story of CSA, Jay was able to challenge this view of her childhood experiences. She came to recognise that she had been sexually abused as a child, by numerous men. However, she also recognised that there were times when she played an active part in those sexual relationships – not because she was responsible or to blame or enjoyed being abused, but because as a child she did what was in her power to do to mediate (the effects of) all her childhood experiences, not just those that were sexually abusive. There is a courage exhibited in Jay's telling of her story but not simply because she told of surviving an extremely abusive childhood but because in telling her particular story she risked (and still risks) being blamed for the abuse perpetrated against her. But it is a risk she should not have (had) to take.

Children or young people in the middle of such experiences are still confronted with 'the harm story', and if they too exercise a degree of agency either in an attempt to mediate the experience or because they are not passive and lacking agency, they risk being removed from the categories of 'child' and/or 'victim' and therefore having their experiences, or at least the abusive element of those experiences, dismissed. We can see this in the story told by Jay, but also in the experiences in those young women in Rochdale whose sexual exploitation by groups of men was not recognised as such, and who were therefore left unprotected for many years.

Constructing victims as damaged

Despite research documenting the 'lack of negative outcomes for many children involved in cross-generational sex' (Angelides 2008:364-5) there is not only an expectation that victims will develop symptoms but, for them to be seen as 'real' or genuine, their 'suffering must be long and severe' (Lamb 1999:113). Clearly childhood sexual abuse can be a traumatic and devastating experience which can have negative long term effects. However, we should not use such effects as a measure of the wrongfulness of sexual abuse nor should we assume such effects when dealing with victims. Instead we need to separate 'harm' from 'wrongfulness' and recognise that CSA is wrong, even if or when it does not cause long term psychological damage. To do otherwise is to further silence those victims who do not fit our contemporary storyline. The harm story is one that is not only told by victims but also told about victims and can thereby serve to dismiss experiences that might be more relevant to understanding their adult lives. Directing adult women to engage with this story forces them to revisit childhood experiences and reconstruct themselves as damaged, and in need of healing. One woman who

found that her adult experiences were interpreted by others within a framework of CSA and the harm story was Emma. Emma had been sexually abused as a child at which time she went to counselling, which she found helpful. However, as an adult, and following a miscarriage, Emma was referred to counselling again. Whilst she had found the first period of counselling helpful, Emma resented the second period which she did not choose and which she found unnecessary:

It was not my decision. I had just had a miscarriage and was very upset/emotional and a locum G.P. said that my emotional state was due to the abuse, so he sent me to counselling. (Emma)

Not only did others use of this story direct her to reconstruct her identity as damaged and in need of healing, it also directed her away from the very real difficulties she was experiencing at the time:

I just didn't think it was necessary for me to have counselling, so I resented it slightly. I think it was because I had real problems (i.e. I had just had a miscarriage) and I was understandably upset but I don't feel it had any relation to the abuse. So I found the fact that this woman kept wanting me to talk about the abuse, as if it was still a problem difficult to deal with, because I had other things going on that I needed to come to terms with. (Emma)

Although Emma believed that the sexual abuse she had experienced as a child did have an effect on her adult life she did not accept it as a causal factor or explanation for how she felt in all aspects of her adulthood. Nor did she dismiss other external factors which contributed to her feelings of (un)happiness or (dis)satisfaction as an adult. For Emma the harm story provided others with a way to explain her unhappiness and distress and construct her as someone in need of therapeutic help in a way that did not fit with her own understanding of her situation. As such it was a story used, not by her, but against her, in which her own voice was silenced. Children and young people experiencing sexual abuse today are also presented with a story that sees their childhoods destroyed and their lives ruined - a diagnosis or story that, in suggesting the kind of difficulties they are likely to experience, may, as a guide for living, risk causing as much if not more harm than being sexually abused.

Beyond sexual abuse

Constructing CSA as the most serious form of abuse with the most damaging consequences can also serve to direct attention away from other childhood experiences, which themselves might have a greater impact and/or which might have been experienced as more significant. Angela had concrete knowledge of having been sexually abused as a child and whilst she was able to access support to help her deal with the consequences of this abuse, witnessing

violence (both physical and verbal) between her parents was, she believed, more significant than the sexual abuse she experienced at the hands of her elder brother, both in childhood and later:

The violence in the house...I suppose had the biggest effect on me in normal day-to-day life, in being able to make friends. (Angela)

Limiting the narrative framework within which children, and adults, can make sense of their (and others') experiences also serves to limit their ability to do so. Not only might other aspects of a victim's childhood be as significant but the context within which all events occur is significant to how those events are experienced and understood. It is this (perhaps) more than the event itself that may influence whether or not there is long term psychological damage – which was recognised by participants in this research:

I think that for most people the crisis doesn't come necessarily from being abused it's everything else that's going on in life. (Angela)

However, to use consequences as measure of wrongfulness is problematic on a number of levels. It might result in an action only considered wrong if the child is 'unable' for some reason to deal with it. This in turn could lead to a focus on what the child is doing 'right' or 'wrong', and ultimately a form of victim blaming in which the child who cannot 'deal with abuse' is held responsible for any damage caused by that abuse – which already occurs in the recovery literature aimed at adult victims of CSA (author 2009). It may also lead to women (still seen as the guardians of the family and protectors of children/childhood) being held responsible if their children/the children in their care are sexually abused – not because they played an active role in the abuse but because they can be held responsible for the context in which that abuse occurred (a view not dissimilar to that promoted in the 1970s whereby women were held responsible for not protecting their children). It also fails to acknowledge that the (limited) possibilities or narrative frameworks we provide victims (in childhood or adulthood) for understanding and dealing with abuse will themselves significantly influence the degree and nature of any long term damage.

Whatever their experiences of CSA victims draw on currently circulating stories to make sense of those experiences but the relentlessly negative construction of abuse and its consequences promoted in many CSA recovery texts and self-help books is also one that pervades all aspects of everyday life and infuses a variety of popular cultural texts. As such it provides a limiting framework for understanding to both adults and child victims. More so than other forms of child abuse, the sexual abuse of children is said to disrupt, or alter, the normal, natural path of children's development into healthy responsible adulthood (Dinsmore 1991, Parks 1990). Sexual abuse is often referred to as an attack on childhood (Kitzinger 1997) within which incest

'robs children of their childhoods' (Dinsmore 1991:21) and victims are told 'they were damaged early. Something was broken at a core level' (Bass and Davis 1988:178). Women who were sexually abused in childhood may grow up to be 'guilt-ridden, self-sabotaging, sexually dysfunctioning, on-going victims' (Parks 1990:13) who are 'not well adapted to adult life' (Herman 1992:110). The adult victim of CSA is said to be at 'great risk of repeated victimization in adult life' as she 'finds it difficult to form conscious and accurate assessments of danger' (Herman 1992:111). In the words of Bass and Davis, 'Survivors were programmed to self destruct' (Bass and Davis 1988:179). Whilst it is some time since some of these texts were first published they have been reprinted many times and are still currently in circulation. Not only do these texts promote a narrative of CSA in which victims are constructed as inevitably damaged, but this in turn might also prevent those who were sexually abused from identifying themselves as victims to others. Ovenden (2012) for example, shows how some victims of CSA do not tell of their abuse because they want to distance themselves from the 'victim stereotype' - a damaged label that they fear others might apply to them.

Alternative narratives, such as that provided by Emma in her written account, provide a more positive framework within which to understand or make sense of sexual abuse without dismissing its wrongfulness:

I think that in a positive way, it has made me mindful of others, and the effect my actions could have on others.

- I consider myself to be a very strong, determined individual as a result, and a good mother (as I am aware that my actions now could be damaging to my child's future).

I work in a voluntary capacity, listening to women, when they need someone with which to share their problems. Again, I think I am able to empathize because of my own past troubles (Emma)

Emma had struggled to be able to tell her particular story but it is one that illustrates how coping with the abuse and its effects may ultimately have positive outcomes (Kelly 1988).

Shame and the reinterpretation of sexual knowledge/behaviour

As mentioned above, a central premise of the current orthodoxy on CSA constructs children as sexually innocent and therefore knowledge or behaviour which threatens this sexual innocence can be perceived as sexual abuse. However, our contemporary story of CSA has extended our understanding of sexual abuse beyond physical contact and penetrative sex to include acts and behaviours not previously thought of as sexual abuse (Glaser and Frosh 1993, Standing Committee on Sexually Abused Children (SCOSAC) 1984), but which can and are used to construct those who are exposed to such behaviours as damaged and in need of healing. As

Blume, the author of *Secret survivors* asks, 'Must incest involve intercourse? Must incest be overtly genital? Must it involve touch at all?' (Blume 1990:5). The answer she tells us is 'No'. Incest she claims 'can occur through words, sounds or even exposure of the child to sights or acts that are sexual but do not involve her' (Blume 1990:5). A woman might only have seen her parents naked or heard them having sex to be able to claim she was sexually abused as a child. She may not have experienced any of these, but might instead be a victim of 'emotional incest' (Love 1990) or 'covert incest' (Adams 1991) wherein she is the victim of an 'emotionally abusive parent' whose love is selfish, not nurturing or giving (Adams 1991, Love 1990). Levenkron (2008) even includes in his book on understanding and treating victims of CSA, a woman who was not sexually abused in a 'straightforward' sense but who, in an attempt by her doctor to treat a urinary condition, was catheterised on a monthly basis between the ages of seven and eleven, a procedure which she experienced, or interpreted, as a sexual assault. Within this, the focus is often on protecting sexual innocence and therefore the contexts within which these experiences might occur are rendered irrelevant. This has enabled those revisiting their childhoods from the vantage point of an unhappy adult life to construct an abuse narrative that might be true 'of' the past, even if it were not true, or not seen to be true, 'in' the past (Hacking 1995).

Reinterpreting such events as sexually abusive enables the construction of an abuse narrative and the creation of a victim/survivor identity. This also enables society to reinforce and maintain the idea of childhood innocence and construct all those with sexual knowledge as potential victims and/or beyond the realms of childhood and therefore no longer deserving of the protection of childhood. They might be constructed as victims if their possession of sexual knowledge needs to be explained (a sexually innocent child can only possess sexual knowledge through abuse), or even because the possession of sexual knowledge is itself seen as traumatic/abusive. Alternatively their victim status can be denied if their 'sexual innocence' is not seen to be in need of protection. Whereas Jay had drawn on an understanding of CSA that left her feeling undeserving of the protective cloak of childhood innocence, Fiona drew on the contemporary CSA story to revisit her childhood and reinterpret what she understood to be shameful childhood (sexual) knowledge and activity as evidence of sexual abuse:

I was ashamed of things like I used to masturbate a lot when I was very very young and when I was at primary school. (Fiona)

Fiona was able to interpret what she perceived to be problematic childhood behaviour within a CSA framework and overcome the shame she felt for her child self. However, it was the definition of childhood as a time of sexual innocence, together with the idea that a child's sexual activity or knowledge is the result of something done to the child (Egan and Hawkes 2009, Lamb 1999), that defined Fiona's behaviour as problematic and shameful. An alternative

construction of childhood, which accommodates children's sexuality and allows for the possibility of sexual activity, at least when viewed from an adult perspective (author 2008, Gagnon and Simon 1974, Jackson 1982), would not define such behaviour as problematic and in need of explanation. Within such a construction, sexual activity in children would not inevitably be seen as evidence of sexual abuse, but nor would it be seen as shameful and in need of explanation.

Fiona entered adulthood with no concrete knowledge or memories of having been sexually abused. She has drawn on the narrative framework of CSA to revisit and make sense of her childhood and explain what she understands to be problematic behaviour, and to make sense of present unhappiness in the hope of building a happier more successful life. Whilst it is not possible to say whether or not Fiona had been sexually abused in childhood (and importantly this was not something Fiona herself could do with any certainty) the only 'evidence' she had to support her story was the 'shameful' activity of masturbating as a child and a general feeling of unhappiness and dissatisfaction as an adult.

Conclusion

As I have argued in this paper, with the promotion of a single story the voices of many (both adults and children) are silenced and they are denied access to a narrative framework that allows them to explore their own pasts and presents and construct their own guides for living. In the context of CSA it is a harm story or damage narrative that has come to dominate contemporary tellings. This is a story based on a particular view of childhood, sexual abuse and the perceived consequences of such abuse that constructs childhood as a time of sexual innocence, victims as weak, passive and lacking agency, and the consequences of CSA to be overwhelmingly psychologically damaging. Within this story the wrongfulness of CSA has not only come to be equated with damage but to be measured in terms of the extent of that damage on victims. However, those who do not conform to these constructions of 'childhood' and/or 'victim' risk being removed from both categories and their experiences not acknowledged or recognised as abuse.

This dominant story has implications for adults who were abused in childhood. It delimits their possibilities for telling and making sense of their experiences and directs them to construct themselves as damaged and identify this damage as both the cause of and solution to all their adult difficulties. However, as it serves as the framework for children to use to make sense of their own experiences, it also has implications for children and young people who are sexually abused: how they might experience sexual abuse, how they might make sense of it, the extent to which they may or may not blame themselves, and the consequences such abuse might have on their lives. In addition, as these stories also inform the views of adults, including those responsible for helping to care for and protect children and young people, this dominant story

may also hinder adults' ability to recognise sexual abuse in children and young people, particularly among those who do not conform to the dominant view of childhood as sexually innocent, passive and lacking agency, which, ironically, may include children who have been sexually abused.

Self identified victims who enter adulthood with concrete memories of CSA are encouraged to understand or interpret those memories in a particular way drawing on a particular narrative framework. When that narrative framework is used to describe past abuse, and in doing so construct the victim as passive, innocent and therefore without blame, it might seem to be an unquestionable story line. However, a closer look shows that within the contemporary harm story lack of blame is equated with passivity, (sexual) innocence and a lack of agency. It relies on a particular construction of the child as weak, passive and vulnerable, and childhood as a time of, particularly sexual, innocence. Those children or young people who do not fit this description are in danger of being excluded from the contemporary story of CSA. Constructing victims in this way denies the child who may have played some part in (mediating) their own experience of sexual abuse, or who may be sexually knowledgeable, access to the dominant sexual narrative – in which s/he can no longer recognise her/himself. As it is innocence and lack of agency that is equated with a lack of responsibility those who are not passive or who lack sexual innocence (possibly through previous sexual abuse) can be removed from this equation and therefore no longer seen to be without blame or responsibility.

We also need to separate wrongfulness from harm. Whilst sexual abuse in childhood might be a wholly traumatic and devastating experience that leaves its victims with severe psychological difficulties this is not inevitable. However, within the contemporary harm story it is difficult for those who do not experience CSA as psychologically devastating to identify their experiences as wrong, and therefore leaves them without a narrative framework within which to make sense of those experiences. When abuse is equated with wrongfulness but only measured according to the damage it causes, it is also difficult for parents or carers to identify sexual abuse in those children who do not show obvious signs of harm. Perhaps more importantly, it also tells those who have been abused that their childhoods have been destroyed and their lives ruined which, even if they do not currently feel damaged, is something they are likely to feel in the future.

Separating harm from wrongfulness and recognising children's sexuality and their, albeit limited, agency would help us (and victims) to recognise sexual abuse even amongst those who are not overwhelmingly damaged, those who attempt to mediate their abuse, and those who are sexually active and/or knowledgeable. We also owe it to all victims to challenge those currently circulating stories that equate wrongfulness with long term damage and acknowledge that whilst experiences of sexual abuse might be traumatic for victims, those experiences may not have 'destroyed their childhoods', 'stolen their innocence' or 'ruined their lives'. In doing so we need

to provide new narrative frameworks for making sense of traumatic and abusive experiences, which acknowledge the 'other side of being a victim' and do not delimit victims' future possibilities. If we are to be able to respond adequately to children and young people who are sexually abused and avoid another Rochdale then these new narrative frameworks must also allow for recognition that children and young people may not be passive or sexually innocent but maybe sexually knowledgeable and/or active and exercise a degree of agency. Having done so we do then need to listen to these new stories and, as narrative frameworks, make them available to future victims and those responsible for their care and protection.

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