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Original Citation

Woodiwiss, Jo (2010) Childhood sexual abuse: a contemporary story. In: BSA Annual Conference 2010 - Inequalities & Social Justice, 7th-9th April 2010, Glasgow Caledonian University, UK. (Unpublished)

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The background of the slide is a spiral-bound notebook with a brown cover and a light beige, textured paper. The spiral binding is on the left side. The title is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

Childhood sexual abuse: a contemporary story

**Dr Jo Woodiwiss
University of Huddersfield**

Guardian article discussion!

To question the validity of recovered memories is to subject oneself to accusations of defending paedophiles. Peter Saunders does exactly what he accuses abusers of doing. They silence their [...] victims with cunning, intimidation and threats (mostly a combination of all three). They disguise their righteous Witch-Hunt as Science and seek to silence inquiry with the intimidation of false accusations (comment on P Saunders comment on guardian article)



Presentation outline

- Introduction
- The recovered memory wars
- The research
- Constructing stories / making sense

Recovered memories

- Traumatic memories - such as those relating to sexual abuse –
- Are not encoded & stored in the same way as normal memories.
- Stored in unconscious minds & bodies of victims - or
- Held by an inner child who 'split' at the time of the abuse
- These memories are seen as unmediated versions of truth.
- Their emergence is seen as both spontaneous and ultimately inevitable.

False memories

- Those on the other side of the debate:
- Reject understanding of traumatic memories
- Suggest:
- False memories of CSA are implanted in the minds of weak & vulnerable victims.
- By misguided or malicious therapists

Redefining memory

- Texts don't necessarily help victims uncover memories of sexual abuse (false or otherwise),
- Redefine what is understood by memory - to include a range of experiences most of us would not consider to be memories.
- For many women the memories they recover are:
 - Not concrete memories - but
 - Rather aspects of their lives
 - Identified as 'symptoms' &
 - Redefined as 'alternative memories'



Symptoms as memories

- Do you feel powerless like a victim?
- Do you feel unable to protect yourself in dangerous situations?
- Have you ever experienced repeated victimization (rape assault, battery) as an adult?
- Can you accomplish things you set out to achieve?
- Do you feel you have to be perfect?
- Do you have a hard time loving and accepting you body? Do you feel at home in it?
- Do you often feel taken advantage of?
- Do you find your relationships just don't work out?

Recovering memories

- Talk of recovered memories – not necessarily a concrete memory of being sexually abused.
- Often about identifying symptoms
- As part of an ongoing process of making sense of & giving meaning to their lives
- By drawing on currently circulating narrative frameworks –
- One of those narrative frameworks is the 'Harm story'
- Encourages women to:
- Identify themselves as victims of childhood sexual abuse - &
- Re/construct themselves as damaged.

The research

- Based on research which explored women's engagement with sexual abuse narratives
- Women with 'continuous', 'recovered' or 'false' memories of childhood sexual abuse
- 16 women
- In-depth semi structured interviews
- Written accounts
- Analysed thematically

Constructing stories

- Women could only tell stories they did because of:
- Construction of child—sexually innocent / ignorant
- Construction of sexually abused child as inevitably damaged
- View of CSA worse than other forms of child abuse
- View of the powerful, healthy adult woman
- Fails to recognise external conditions of women's lives
- Encourages women to look further back / to childhood past for cause / solution to unhappiness.

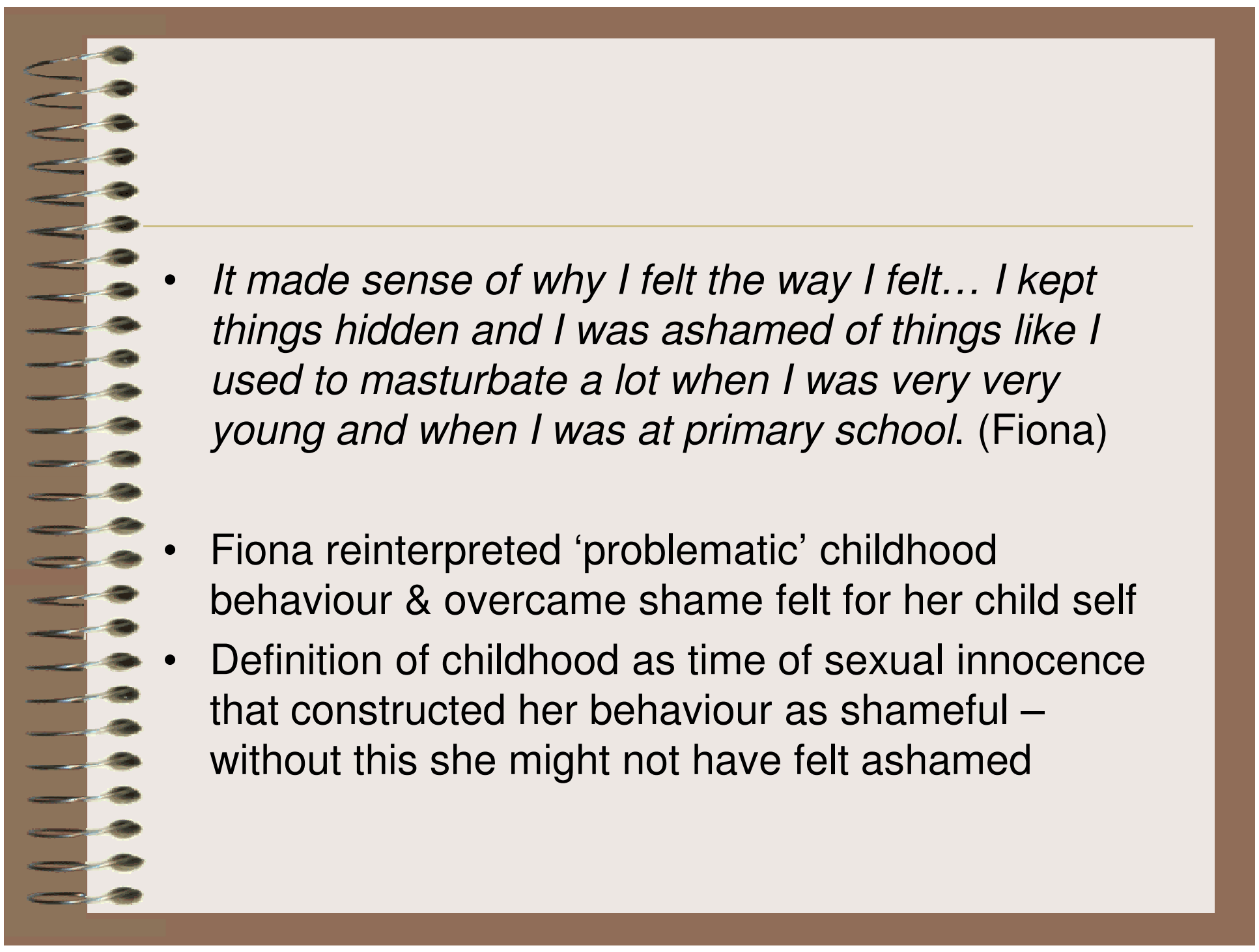
Connections

- *To actually identify that a lot of the things that were happening I could attribute to the abuse. ...Even things like having trouble with bonding to children erm... down to low self-esteem... loads of things have happened that I could pick up. Being able to know about it was a big step and being able to make the connection was a big step.
(Angela)*

Connections

When I read it I still didn't have any memories then but I went yes, I mean if that's what happened that would explain it so much. That would really completely make sense but I still didn't have any memories then.

(Beccy talking of Secret Survivors, Blume 1990)

- 
- A graphic of a spiral-bound notebook with a brown cover and a light beige page. The spiral binding is on the left side. A horizontal gold line is drawn across the page, just above the first bullet point.
- *It made sense of why I felt the way I felt... I kept things hidden and 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 reinterpreted 'problematic' childhood behaviour & overcame shame felt for her child self
 - Definition of childhood as time of sexual innocence that constructed her behaviour as shameful – without this she might not have felt ashamed

Anne's story

- One brother die as a child,
- Brother make number of suicide attempts as a teenager, spend time in a psychiatric hospital & eventually kill himself -
- Mother, who also suffered from depression, spend time in a psychiatric hospital.
- Sent away to boarding school.
- *a multiple problem middle class family ...one brother died as a child...my other brother killed himself... he'd attempted suicide often as a teenager...he'd spent a year in a mental hospital...so it was clear to me that this family was a complete mess. (Anne)*

Anne's story

- Continuous memories, although traumatic, were not enough to make sense of adult difficulties & unhappiness
- Nor did they offer Anne a way to improve her situation.
- May have been influenced by construction of sexual abuse in childhood as more traumatic & damaging than other forms of abuse or trauma.

Anne's story

- Anne invested heavily in a therapeutic solution
- Entered healing journey knowing of traumatic childhood
- Early in her journey adult Anne came to believe the trauma she remembered was not enough to explain her adult life & difficulties she was experiencing -
- Anne came to believe she was the victim of incest – for which she had no concrete memories.
- Initially helped her make sense of her life but after some years not identified sufficient improvements
- Possibly aware that others thought she should be 'doing better'

Anne's story

- We cannot say whether or not Anne was the victim of sexual or ritual abuse - but
- We can see a 'progression' from childhood trauma through incest to ritual abuse
- In which she appears no nearer her goal of a happy and fulfilled life.
- However, Anne did not simply follow a ready-made script.
- She drew on the explanations and narrative frameworks provided in the CSA recovery literature to construct a history which made sense to her – and promised a brighter / happier future.

False memory syndrome

FMS – Constructs:

- False memories as a form of abuse - &
- Therapists as the perpetrators of this abuse

It therefore:

- Provides a way to reject sexual abuse narratives
- Without having to take responsibility for their construction
- Whilst maintaining the identity of victim – for those who choose / need such an identity

Conclusion

- The stories that women and children are able to tell in the 21st century say:
- more about the world in which we live
- the pervasiveness of therapeutic culture
- the harm story & the healing discourse
- than they do about either 'recovered memories' or childhood sexual abuse.

A graphic of a spiral-bound notebook with a brown cover and a light beige page. The spiral binding is on the left side. The word "Context" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font at the top center of the page. A thin horizontal line is drawn below the title. The main text is in a black, italicized, sans-serif font. The attribution "(Angela)" is in a black, sans-serif font at the bottom right of the text block.

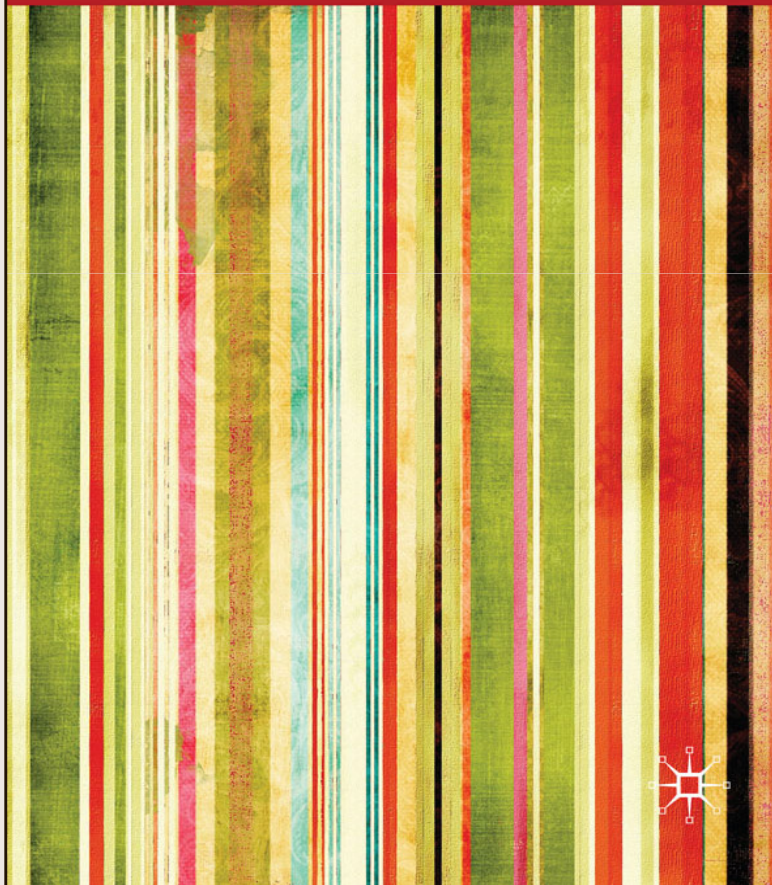
Context

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)

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CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE**

JO WOODIWISS



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**Contesting Stories of
Childhood Sexual Abuse**

ISBN 9780230574045

£52.00

£44.00 Conference price

Palgrave MacMillan

