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Childhood sexual abuse: a contemporary story

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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 your 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.
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)
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.
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)