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Woodiwiss, Jo

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Original Citation

Woodiwiss, Jo (2010) A story for our time: contemporary narratives of childhood sexual abuse. In: Research Festival School of Human and Health Sciences, 8th-18th March 2010, University of Huddersfield. (Unpublished)

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Dr Jo Woodiwiss

A story for our time:
Contemporary narratives
of
childhood sexual abuse

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Presentation outline

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

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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

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Recovered memories

- A central premise:
- Traumatic memories - such as those relating to sexual abuse –
- Are not encoded & stored in the same way as normal memories.
- Stored in the 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.

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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

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Symptoms as memories

from The Courage to Heal:

- 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 find yourself avoiding sex or going after sex you really don't want? Can you say no?
- Do you have sex because you want to, or because your partner wants it?
- Do you often feel taken advantage of?
- Do you find your relationships just don't work out?
- (Bass and Davis 1988:35-38).

6  **Recovering memories**

- When women talk about having recovered memories – not necessarily talking about a concrete memory of being sexually abused.
- Often talking 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.

7 

Constructing stories

- These women could only tell the stories they did because of:
- Construction of the child – as sexually innocent / ignorant
- Construction of the sexually abused child as inevitably damaged
- View that sexual abuse is so much worse than other forms of child abuse
- Combined with:
- View of the powerful, healthy adult woman
- Failure to recognise external conditions of women's lives
- A view which encourages women to look further and further back to a childhood past for the cause of and solution to such unhappiness.

8  **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)

9  **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

10  **Making sense of adult experiences**

- *Because I had no interest in sex and that to me was the reason why I was not interested in sex. (Hazel)*
- *a longing for love and attention got mixed up with sex and led me into repetitive short-term affairs that never developed into the relationship I craved. (Jenny)*
- *He feels as if it's a barrier and as if it's like a thing that's broken and it's unfortunate that that thing doesn't work properly. That our sexual intimacy, my sexuality is kind of damaged. It's not whole it's been damaged by what happened. It's quite hard because I don't really like feeling damaged I would like to feel have a sense of being whole. (Fiona)*

11  **Making sense of childhood experiences**

- *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 she felt for her child self
- Definition of childhood as a time of sexual innocence that constructed her behaviour as shameful – without this she might not have felt ashamed.

12  **Anne's story**

- One brother die as a child,
- Another brother make a number of suicide attempts as a teenager, spend time in a psychiatric hospital & eventually kill himself - &
- Her mother, who also suffered from depression, spend time in a psychiatric hospital.
- Shortly after witnessing the death of her brother Anne was 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)*

13  **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.

14  **Anne's story**

- Anne invested heavily in a therapeutic solution
- She entered her healing journey knowing of a traumatic childhood
- Early in her journey the adult Anne came to believe that the trauma she remembered was not enough to explain her adult life and the difficulties she was experiencing -

- Anne came to believe she was the victim of incest – for which she had no concrete memories.
- This initially helped her make sense of her life but after a number of years she had not identified sufficient improvements
- Possibly aware that others thought she should be 'doing better'
-

15  **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.
-

16  **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.
-

17  **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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19  **Jo Woodiwiss**

Contesting Stories of Childhood Sexual Abuse

ISBN 9780230574045

£52.00

£44.00 Conference price

Palgrave MacMillan