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“MUMMY WOULDN’T DO THAT”

The perception and construction of the female child sex abuser

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“MUMMY WOULDN’T DO THAT”

THE PERCEPTION AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMALE CHILD SEX ABUSER

INTRODUCTION

IF I SAY “SEXUAL PREDATOR” WHAT DO YOu think of? A man in a dirty raincoat? A slavering monster masturbating over pictures of naked children? A man peering into a playground and exposing himself? A father beating and abusing his children?

A nurse ?
A teacher ?
A mother ?

Despite their evolving role in society, the perception of women is still subject to various levels of stereotyping, and the view of the female offender is no exception (Herzog & Oreg, 2008). Female offenders are seen as either victims of crime and oppression themselves, or as evil diversions from “normal” womanly behaviour. This is also true of female sex offenders, women or girls accused and convicted of child sex abuse are more likely to be seen as victims, either of abuse in their own backgrounds, or as suffering abuse at the hands of those they themselves have abused.
Women’s perceived natural role is as the caregivers, the nurturers in society, and women who step outside of these persona are viewed with either suspicion, distaste or ignorance (see Yoder, 2003). In addition, a sex offender, particularly an abuser of children, who is also female, is regarded with disbelief, coupled with a range of conflicting assessments of her character and behaviour. A worrying outcome of this perception is that many sex crimes committed by women may remain unreported, due to society’s view of such women and their victims. The image that is brought to mind by the term “sexual predator” is predominantly male. Even more specifically, the term “child sex offender” will probably lead to a representation of a perpetrator who is an older stranger, with uncontrollable sexual urges, innately evil, and male, with predominantly female victims (Gavin, 2005). People who abuse children sexually are often familiar to the child, in a position of trust and/or authority, and this is no different for female abusers. However, the victim, once he or she is able to discuss what has happened, will often not be believed, or, for teenage boys, told that they are lucky to be sexually initiated this way. Society, particularly male society, still perceives underage sex between an underage boy and an older woman as an accomplishment. Consider the scenario in which a 30-year-old male teacher flirts with and seduces a 14-year-old girl. Examine the views that you hold on that scenario, and then reverse the sexes of the protagonists. A male teacher who has sex with an underage girl is much more likely, not only to be charged with a serious crime, but also to be viewed in a criminal way, and to be thought of as perverted and deviant. Examining the media literature concerning female sex offenders gives the impression that they are celebrities, not criminals.
Shoop (1997) suggests that female sex offenders are more likely to receive suspended sentences, whereas male offenders receive long custodial sentences. He suggests that it is difficult for people to accept that sentences should be the same for both sexes, even though the destructive nature of the behaviour may be the same. However, Vandiver & Walker (2002) suggest that the research on male sex offenders may not be totally pertinent to female offenders, as little research exists. They go further to suggest that there may need to be a slightly modified typology developed. Nevertheless, this still does not explain the differentially

imposed sentencing and the implicit distinction between male and female child sex offenders in either the mind of the public or the judiciary. However, Shakeshaft (2004) contends that no such distinction exists. She suggests that this idea stems from a small number of high profile cases in which women receive non-custodial sentences, and whose cases attract prominence, but that this does not imply that all female offenders are getting off lightly.

CONTRASTING MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE & MALE SEX OFFENDERS.

Mary Kay LaTourneau pleaded guilty in 1997 to two counts of second-degree statutory rape (sex with an individual not of a legal age to consent) of a then 13 year old male pupil. She was given a suspended jail sentence and ordered to attend a 3-year sex offender treatment programme. She failed to complete the programme, and returned to jail in 1998, but for violating the court order not to have any contact with the boy. The couple had two children before the boy came of age, and, when he reached 21, they married, in the full glare of publicity afforded by a contract with Entertainment Tonight, which paid for the ceremony (Ruggles Gere, 2004). Contrast this with the case of Peter Brown, an art teacher in Hampshire, who was jailed for a consensual sexual relationship with a 15-year-old female pupil, banned from ever working with children, and ordered to sign on the sex offenders' register for 10 years. The sentence was described by the judge and the victim's family as lenient. The court heard that Brown and the girl had a relationship between June 2001, and August 2002. They engaged in sex, although not full intercourse. (Newsquest Media Group, 2004). The two cases are very similar in detail, and the sentences are not very dissimilar, but the resulting celebrity attached to the defendants is in marked contrast.

This contrast extends to the most heinous of crimes, and can be see when we examine couples who have committed crimes together.

Female child sexual murderers

Myra Hindley & Ian Brady, known as the Moors Murderers abducted, sexually assaulted, tortured and murdered five children between July 1963 and October 1965. This set of crimes resonates very significantly with me, as the children, if they had lived, would be little older than me, and I now live on the edge of the Moor where they were buried, and where some still lie hidden. During the time of the police investigation as well as her subsequent trial, Hindley's demeanour was reportedly one of resolute arrogance and defiance. The police detectives, court officials, newspaper reporters and other observers all noted that Hindley remained steadfastly loyal to Brady. A police secretary later said that she distinctly remembered Hindley and her mother Nellie, leaning against the wall of the courthouse and eating a cream cake. While her mother appeared to be in obvious distress, Hindley seemed to be almost indifferent to her situation. The evidence given at the trial proved to be sensational. A police officer searching the house where the two lived had spotted a luggage claim ticket hidden in the spine of Hindley's prayer book. In the locker were two suitcases containing sadistic pornography. These included nine photographs of 10-year-old Lesley Ann Downey, showing her naked, bound and gagged in Myra Hindley's bedroom. A tape recording was also found. On it, the voice of a young girl could be heard screaming, crying, and begging for her life. Two other voices, one male and one female, could be heard threatening the child. Police identified the adult voices as belonging to Brady and Hindley. When asked later why he had kept such an incriminating tape, Brady responded only that he had done so

because "it was unusual.". Both were sentenced to life imprisonment, Brady later being declared insane and sent to a high security psychiatric hospital. Hindley died 15 November 2002 after a heart attack. She had spent 37 years in custody, becoming Britain's longest-detained female prisoner, and one of just two women receive whole life tariffs. Those who had campaigned for her release said that she should not have ended her life behind bars, saying that there was no question that Hindley's crimes had been terrible but felt the real issue was that she had been treated differently from any other life-sentence prisoner. Many still feel that Hindley was simply under Brady's spell during the time of the murders, and if she had never met him, she would never have killed, or been involved in child sex abuse. Mention of her name still provokes very strong views, particularly in the Pennine region of Saddleworth Moor.

The other female prisoner to receive a whole-life tariff was Rosemary West. Rosemary and her husband Fred West, were accused of raping and murdering 10 women and young girls over a 20-year period. They lured vulnerable runaways with offers of rides, lodging or jobs as nannies. Once inside their home, the girls were stripped, bound with tape, raped, tortured, killed, dismembered, and buried either in the garden or under the house at 25 Cromwell Street, Gloucester. It also transpired that at least one of their children had met the same fate. In 1994, their remaining children were taken into care after accusations of sexual abuse. Police, armed with a search warrant, dug up the remains of their 16-year-old daughter, Heather, who vanished in 1987. Further excavations under the house and in garden produced eight more female bodies. More bodies were found under the kitchen of a former home at 25 Midland Road, Gloucester, including Rosemary's stepdaughter, Charmaine.
Fred hanged himself in Winston Green prison in Birmingham, on New Year's Day in 1995. Rosemary still maintains her innocence. However, on 22nd November 1995, she was convicted of 10 murders and sentenced to life imprisonment. The Lord Chief Justice later decided that West should spend at least 25 years in prison, but in July in 1997 Home Secretary Jack Straw subjected West to a whole life tariff. The media is fascinated by West, and again, she provokes strong feelings.

ARE WOMEN OFFENDERS DIFFERENT?

There is a very clear contrast between the prurient interest shown in Hindley and Rosemary West, and that of their make partners, who are dismissed as evil and mad. The victims of these two couples had the same things inflicted upon them by the man & the woman, but it is the women who fascinate and repel us.
Victims, in coming to terms with what has happened to them, do not suffer any more or less if their abuser is male or female, or do they? What is clear is that damage is inflicted on victims no matter what sex the perpetrator, in some cases it may even be worse in the cases of female offenders/male victims, as the victims are less likely to be believed. As psychologists, or others who work with victims of sexual assault, we become aware that the system fails the victims in many ways, and they are often raped twice, the second time by those meant to protect them. Male victims of female abusers also suffer twice, once at the hands of the abuser, and once at the hands of those they tell, but who do not believe them (Shoop, 2007). There are severe consequences of either non-reporting, or reporting and not being believed. The damage done by abusers is compounded by the accusation of lying or other inappropriate reactions. Resulting effects on

the victim include self-blame, low self-esteem, problems of sexual functioning (avoidance of sex or sexual compulsivity) and substance abuse (Denov, 2003).

Statistics on sex offenders show that the pattern of female offending in this area is not dissimilar to that of male offenders. According to Rudin, Zalewski & Bodmer-Turner (1995) 25% of offenders were baby-sitters or day-care workers, with a large proportion of the rest being teachers. Up to 24% of offences against male victims are carried out by women, up to 17% of female victim cases (Snyder, 2000). However, more than half of the cases studied were instances of co-abusing with a male partner, usually coerced by the male, hence the classification of Male-Coerced offender. Rudin et al. also suggest this is the most common type of offender, but classify further into Predisposed-Intergenerational (a lone female perpetrator with a history of incest with more than one person), Experimental/Exploiter (lone teen perpetrator who targets young male children within a baby-sitting context), and Teacher/Lover (lone perpetrator who falls in love with an adolescent male). However, in their review of literature in this topic, Johansson-Love & Fremouw (2006) discovered a contradictory result across several studies, which also included juvenile offender populations, unlike others. In this set of findings, most female sex offenders acted on their own. They go on to say that substance abuse, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder do not necessary occur more frequently in the female sex offender population.

According to Vandiver, (2006) there is a possible typology of female sex offenders, that describes solo and co-offenders. Such groups of women are unlikely to differ demographically, or in term of time and location of offence, but co-offenders were more likely than solo offenders to have more than one victim, to have both male and female victims, to be related to the victim, and to have a nonsexual offence in addition to the sexual offence listed. Robertiello & Terry (2007) and Gannon & Rose (2008) also suggest that there is a specific profile for female offenders too, in that they tend to be of low self-esteem, have history of severe emotional and verbal abuse There is typically an absence of parent during childhood, she may have been subjected to sexual (especially incest) victimization as a girl. She may have suffered a loss of her spouse. She holds the responsibility for supporting family, and so suffers feelings of isolation and alienation. Couple this to typical histories of indiscriminate or compulsive sexual activity and drug or alcohol abuse, it is clear why such perpetrators can be viewed as victims.

It appears that, whether or not male and female offenders are being treated differently, there is a public perception of difference in act and in punishment. The recognition of female perpetrators of child sex abuse is impeded by the perception of women as incapable of such acts. Why is such perception persistent in the face of information to the contrary? One explanation may come from social constructivist theory.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Social constructivism considers how social phenomena develop in particular contexts. A social construct is a phenomenon – a concept or practice - that may appear to be a natural consequence of the social world, but is in fact an artefact of a particular culture or society. A major perspective within social constructivism is to examine the ways in which people create their social reality, i.e. how social constructs are created, internalised and transformed into perceived truth. Wilson

(2005) suggests that this reality, and the knowledge from which it derives, is maintained by social interactions, hence it will evolve. One such construct, which is socially derived and contingent upon social and traditional processes, is gender. This means that "gender", and all its attendant construction, is not an outcome of biology (this would be "sex"), but of social beliefs about its nature. Hence the idea of and beliefs about child sexual abuse and the gender of the protagonists in each case are products of social constructions, attitudes and interactions.

Our knowledge and perception of child sexual abuse, in whichever century, country or context it is examined, is socially constructed, and, consequently, so is that of the child sex abuser. Historically abuse has been treated ambiguously, both condemning the act and punishing the victim. Abuse challenges the concept of family, church, and school as safe havens, and is therefore a source of confusion in social construction of our world.

Jackson (2000) suggests that the pervasive image of the male perpetrator/female victim persists as there are societal norms (social constructs) that lead us to judge women and girls in terms of sexual reputation and behaviour, which are not applied the same way to boys and men. Soothill & Walby's (1991) research would suggest even more specific construction that this, and say that media accounts of female offenders describe them as 'sex mad' or 'temptresses', but rarely as evil. The adjective 'evil' is reserved for the male child sex offender only.

So, exploring the social construction of child sex offenders might lead us to be able to comment on the reasons why there may exist distinctions in perception between male and female perpetrators and subsequently to a change in view in order to protect existing and potential victims. The current research aims to examine the social construct of the female child sex abuse offender in order to expose the perceptions to scrutiny and to try to determine the answer to why we think mummy wouldn't do that.

METHOD

The protocols and material for the research were submitted for University ethics panel scrutiny. All procedures complied with BPS guidance for research ethics in terms of confidentiality, anonymity and participant and researcher safety.

In order to allow participants to talk about their perceptions, but to also keep them focussed on the topic, a standardised open-ended interview technique (Gavin, 2008) was used. This technique uses a prepared set of open-ended questions carefully worded and arranged so that there is minimal variation in the way questions are posed to the interviewee. This method is also called a semi-structured interview, and the set of questions or topics is known as an interview schedule, but the questions are open-ended and the interviewees are free to answer how they wish. There is also flexibility in the order in which the questions are covered, and the interviewer can "probe" if necessary. Hence, the interviewer needs familiarity with the topic and high level of knowledge about it, together with sensitivity, empathy, and openness to respond to interviewee and flexible enough to change direction is necessary. However, s/he also needs to be focussed enough to steer the interview towards its objectives, be able to deal with inconsistencies in replies. One of the key techniques in good interviewing is the use of probes, which might include detail-oriented probes (naturally occurring follow-ups), elaboration probes (used to encourage the interviewee to reveal more), and clarification probes.

The interview schedule was drawn from previous research (Gavin, 2005) that

explored the narratives formed about child sex offenders. In the previous research, a set of topics about sex offenders were generated and then underwent a process of validation. Various items were rejected from the pool, and from those remaining, several were selected. However, there was still a pool of items from which to draw, and these were deemed an appropriate basis for questions in an open-ended format. The interview schedule was drawn up and checked by two judges.

Procedure

Participants were selected from the general public, all were familiar to the researcher, but none were students or co-workers, nor had they any professional experience of working with sex offenders. Interviewees were all between the ages of 25 and 40, and there were 10 women and 8 men, all in long-term heterosexual relationships. All participants were parents, but there were no couples within the participant group.
Each participant was interviewed individually, the interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder then downloaded to computer for input to voice recognition software. The transcription was then checked for audio errors.

Analysis

Thematic analysis is a process of making explicit the structures and meanings that the participant or reader embodies in a text. Here, text is defined as the transcript of interviews. The text represents information about people's thoughts and feelings on the topic allowing examination to identify patterns that occur across all the data, or ideas that a peculiar to one person. Thematic analysis focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or behaviour. Each thematic analysis will develop in its own way, each one led by the needs of the research and the input of the researcher, but there are consistent stages:

* Examine the data for the emergent themes
* Identify all data that relates to these themes
* Combine related patterns into sub-themes, units derived from patterns that can be brought together
* Check that the sub-themes are truly representative, by referring back to the data and/or the participants or checking with a co-researcher.
* Identify the argument for choosing the themes, possibly by relating to the literature. In this way, the reader can identify the process by which the researcher has developed the themes.

The interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis by two readers who highlighted text and noted regularly occurring and/or atypical themes.

FINDINGS

Emergent themes were classified into "the view of women in society" "views of female child sex offenders" "beliefs about female sex offenders and their offences".

Views of women in society

Various conceptions of women were evident, but there was a difference in the themes that were discussed by male and female interviewees. Female interviewees perceived women as Mothers, Passive & Caring, but in response to questions about the worst thing a woman can do, suggested the roles of Child Murderer, Prostitute, or Unfaithful Partner. Men, on the other hand,

conceptualised women as Nurturers or Equal Partners (roles in a sexual relationship) and thought the worst thing a woman could do is harm children. This last however, did not emerge as a role, but as a set of actions. This apparent disparity might not reflect opposing views of women, simply differences in the way men and women verbalise them, and how the analysts interpreted them.

Views of child sex offenders

When interviewees were asked about female child sex offenders, there were certain categories being discussed. These categories were viewed as indicative of several of the typologies appearing in the research and clinical literature, namely Male-Coerced, Teacher/Lover, and Predisposed. Although the interviewees did not use these category names, the comments are indicative of these being themes.

Women viewed the male coerced category with some level of sympathy, assuming she is a passive, weak person dominated and bullied by a dominant partner. An interesting viewpoint, as Saradjian (1996) describes women who seek out male paedophiles to work with. An alternative viewpoint appearing from women was of a betrayal of womanhood, that even coercion was no excuse for stepping outside of the nurturing role. This view was expanded exponentially to include infamous cases of the male coerced offender such Rosemary West and Myra Hindley, thus incorporating the Child Murderer role, the worst thing women thought another woman could be.

Views of the teacher/lover offenders by the female interviewees centred around taking advantage of a child, given that “teacher” (or similar roles) is a position of trust and literally in place of the parent (in loco parentis). However, there was less outrage expressed at a teacher seducer than with other categories. The participants in this study were all from the UK, and were perhaps less familiar with the more publicised cases of female teachers’ abuse that aired on the US media. This may be a reason for less focus in this category.

The third category to emerge as a theme within female interviewees’ responses was the Predisposed abuser. Women constructed this as an evil woman, who targeted the most vulnerable victims, without coercion.

Male interviewees also viewed the male-coerced perpetrator as passive, but a further description was as obsessed with the male partner, or blinded by love. Consequently, men thought the male abuser would be treated as more culpable and more punitively that the female perpetrator. This supports the idea of the female as the submissive partner, even though men conceptualised women as equal in society and in relationships. Also, men constructed an offender in the predisposed category as “emotional”, “confused”, or “insecure”, claiming they were subject to anger, anguish, and distorted thinking.

A most interesting response from male interviewees was to the idea of a teacher abuser. This category arose spontaneously from the women, whereas it was prompted in the male interviews. None of the men took this seriously, viewing such women as non-offenders, and with sympathy. Men viewed the male victim in these cases as “lucky” and envied him, one man declaring he had had sex at 15 (but with a 15 year old female partner it transpired later), implying that this is a justification for young men to have sex with older women. The teacher/lover was viewed as a woman of sexual power initiating boys into the mysterious world of female sexuality.

Beliefs about female sex offenders

The thematic analysis appears to show there is a gendered view of female sex offenders, and that this is reflective of a societal view of women, even if individuals do not explicitly espouse it. There is also a low level of belief, some infamous cases, sensationalised in the press, of the more horrific abuses women perpetrate, including sexualised murder, being cited as examples. Other than these, no interviewee spontaneously cited examples, although the women seemed able to imagine various circumstances in which the offence may take place. One interpretation of this might be that women, as mothers, take responsibility for caring for their children and their safety more than men do, and can therefore imagine scenarios to be avoided. Female responses tended to be punitive, male responses one of disbelief or sexual curiosity.

DISCUSSION

Overall, interviews revealed some beliefs and constructs about female sex offenders that are at odds with the research and statistical patterns found in criminal justice systems. However, the themes arising could be indicative of societal views of women in general. If society still holds women as nurturing, massive, submissive, even in "equal" sexual relationships, then little wonder that the idea of a woman outside that
guise is viewed with either disbelief, or outright horror. It is clear that more education
about female sexual aggression is needed.

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Interview schedule

* What, in your view, is the role of women in society?
  . Probe How do you think women should behave?
* What, in your view, is a woman's role in a sexual relationship?
  . Probe What would you think of someone who behaved differently?
* What do you think is the worst thing a woman could do?
  . Probe Can you think of examples?
* Have you heard of female sex offenders before this interview?
  . Probe What do you think a female child sex is?
* What is your view of women who sexually abuse children?
  . Probe Categories/typologies