

Child Abuse, Gender and Society

Jackie Turton

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1 Introduction

The word 'paedophile' conjures up a picture of a suspicious looking man in a dirty mack lurking around the school gate. Few would expect it to be used to describe a woman . . . but how else would you depict a woman who fondles children, has intercourse or oral sex with them, or penetrates them with objects? It makes uncomfortable reading, which is precisely why the issues of female sexual abusers continue to be swept under the carpet and disbelieved. A society that now accepts the existence of male paedophiles finds the concept of female abuse too repugnant to accept—particularly when the abuser is the mother. (Valios 2000, 28)

The sexual abuse of children has traditionally been perceived as a male crime, and statistics would appear to confirm this to be the case. In the main, it is men who sexually abuse children, and in the main those children are female. However, a significant minority of children are abused by female perpetrators, and it is the behaviour of these women that is the focus of this book.

There has been very little research concerning women who sexually abuse children and, apart from a handful of books (Bunting 2005; Denov 2004; Mendel 1995; Elliott 1993), much of the work that has been published has been either psychologically focussed analyses or victim accounts. Not that this work should be undervalued in any way, since a full understanding of child abuse relies on a multi-disciplinary approach to both theory and practice. However, this book attempts to place female perpetrators into social context by considering a sociological view of the abusive behaviour and the response of the individual actors concerned. There is not one view on this matter, nor indeed one way of seeing and analysing such deviant behaviour, but it is useful to develop a pathway through some of the complexities of sexually abusive adult-child relationships to enable an understanding of the social processes involved.

UNDERSTANDING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

To recognise the significance of child sexual abuse, it needs to be placed in social context alongside all abusive behaviours towards children. The media attention awarded to sexual abuse would suggest it has obtained a high ranking in the profile of victimisation, and this is despite the fact that physical abuse and neglect are by far the most risky for the young child. Criminal statistics show that child homicides run at an average of seventy-seven per year in the United Kingdom, and most commonly the adult offenders are those who 'care' for the victims (Coleman et al. 2006). Creighton and Tisser (2003) in their analysis found that the criminal statistics for 2000/2001 identified parents as the principle suspects in seventy-eight percent of child homicide cases. Infants under the age of one are at most risk, and this group has consistently presented as the most vulnerable to fatal abusive attacks (Saraga 2001). By contrast, while all child abuse has the potential to cause long-term emotional and physical injury (Driver and Droisen 1989), it is the exception rather than the rule to find that sexual abuse offers any immediate or life-threatening risk to the child (La Fountaine 1990). Yet it can, on occasion, provoke an instant public response and considerable professional concern (Jenkins 1998), and it is useful to consider why this might be the case.

The Seductive Child

Child sexual abuse has been on the public agenda since the 1980s when the stories from adult survivors were given a discursive space (Plummer 1995). However, these early revelations did little to enhance the plight of some children since explanations of the stories were based around common assumptions and popular myths about the abuse. For instance, the legacy of Freud and the fantasy of sexual abuse lived on within the public, and some professional belief systems despite empirical evidence to the contrary (Finkelhor 1984). The denial of child sexual abuse was encouraged by the belief that the sensual seductiveness of young children—especially girls, rather than grooming, initiated adult-child sexual relationships (Finkelhor 1984), a belief that even extended to some of those within the judiciary (Smart 1989). The suggestion here is not necessarily a denial of the act but a belief that children not only consented to the sexual behaviour but also encouraged and seduced the adult abusers.

Alongside the undercurrent of denial and scepticism lay the notion that where sexual abusive behaviour did exist, there was no need for concern as it caused little harm to the child, as indicated by reports from some incest trials.

In the case of attempted incest on a daughter aged eight and indecent assault on another daughter aged six, the court observed: 'he did not do

any permanent, serious harm to these girls. They have for example each of them retained their virginity.' A probation order was substituted for a four-year sentence of imprisonment. (Mitra 1987, in Smart 1989)

Such a ruling continued to emphasise the patriarchal obsession with female purity by downgrading any abuse that left the female child intact. But where sexual intercourse occurred the child was in danger of being made culpable for her own victimhood.

Notions of the seductive child and the innocuous nature of sexual abuse have been robustly challenged by academic feminist inquiry (Walklate 1989; Smart 1989; Rush 1980; Miller 1987; Armstrong 1978, 1990) alongside such practical innovations as the Rape Crisis Federation¹ and ChildLine², which offer us a less expurgated view of the child's world. Not surprisingly, there has been some backlash within the revelations of so-called 'false memory' (Walklate 1989). However, there is now little dissent from the idea that child sexual abuse exists and that some adults—usually male—are predatory towards children. What remains more difficult to believe or accept is that a considerable number of these predatory adults are family members and, even more difficult, that a minority are female.

The Innocent Child

While on the one hand there exists the notion of the seductive, sexually and socially aware child, on the other we have created childhood as separate and different from the rest of society. We have reinforced this otherness with structures and systems that encourage and emphasise the distinctions rather than the similarities between children and adults. Children have been studied and analysed as different, allowing us to group them as 'specialisms' (Weeks 1989), rather than considering them, alongside adults, as part of the social whole. Children are observed, categorised, and counted but not asked, listened to, and included (Butler and Williamson 1994). They are researched, but their lived experiences are at best undervalued and at worst totally excluded.

We have developed fields of expertise in terms of psychological and physical development dictating time scales and achievements to highlight ideal types of progress and ideal types of children. It is not only a process that constructs the ideal child but also one that dictates how we should parent. While there have been some challenges to this linear developmental approach (Morss 1996), it remains the dominant view of children and childhood in the Western world.

We can link the development of professional expertise with the changes within families during the last century. In the United Kingdom we now have fewer children within families, some couples choose not to have children at all, and for other couples unable to conceive modern technology may be exploited to the full, through infertility treatments, in vitro fertilization

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(IVF), and surrogate motherhood. So, whether through controlling or stimulating fertility, the child has become overly precious, in need of constant observation, care, and protection. While recognising the real dangers that do beset children we ought to be aware that keeping them dependent and fearful does not help the goal of child protection (Scott, et al. 1998). Weeks (1989) explains how the desire to protect children is interlinked with the way in which we have created them as specialisms.

A conceptualisation of the separateness of children went hand in hand with the socially felt need to protect their purity and innocence. They became a form of property to be admired and cuddled, to be cared for and above all protected. (Weeks 1989, 48)

It is not just an emotional bond that has caused a protective response. The ever-increasing number of situations identified and labelled as risky means that parents have to be more cautious, protective, and controlling of their children, as much to avoid public disapproval and the social police as to ensure the safety of the child (Pain 2006). Furthermore, the separation between adult and child not only offers a sense of identity through difference, but also ensures a long-term, intimate relationship, which may be important when considering familial abuse.

Collectively and individually, we look to 'the Child' to give meaning and coherence to our lives, to tell us who we are and what we hold dear, to provide a bulwark against the encroaching tides of change, and to reassure us that at least some of our social connections are fixed, indissoluble and beyond contract. But children only provide us such assurance so long as we can be certain of their fundamental difference from ourselves. Thus we insist upon the innocence, dependency, helplessness and asexuality of 'the child' and dread the 'paedophiles' . . . who would defile it. (O'Connell Davidson 2005, 10)

The result is that children are invariably excluded from even the decision making that directly affects their lives. Adults, often parents, decide 'what is best' based on expert opinion and their own past experiences and memory, without considering the child's point of view. Thus we have an ambiguous situation in which many children are legitimately kept ignorant and powerless, leaving them vulnerable and poorly equipped to protect themselves. As Jenkins suggests,

to protect is also to assert control, and to declare that young people are children is to state that they are and should be limited in their proper scope of individual action . . . by definition it is to deny such a person the full rights of choice appropriate for an adult.

(Jenkins 1998, 225)

Childhood innocence and vulnerability feeds into the grooming process³ becoming part of the victim's identity (Warner 2001), creating further opportunity for abuse by acting as a 'source of titillation for abusers' (Kitzinger 1997, 168). Given this observation, the question arises whether the maintenance of an 'innocent' child is in fact 'largely created, maintained and defined by adults for their own reasons' (Gittens 1998, 151).

Paradoxically, the sexually aware child, the child who has lost innocence, may also lose her right to protection because her seductive nature and understanding renders any sexual acts perpetrated on her body less abusive and somewhat 'less of a crime' (Walklate 1989; Kitzinger 1997).

The discourses of parental protection and childhood innocence maintain the home and the family as the haven from a harmful outside world and dangerous strangers. It is in this environment that public images of the sexual predator emerge.

The Fear of Stranger Danger

'The real horror is the fact that child abuse, like murder, is largely a domestic crime' (Young 1993, 108). Despite this fact, in the current climate of the risk society (Beck 1992), public blame is fixated on the psychopathic stranger (Jenkins 1998). It is this 'stranger danger' description that has political benefits, which do not just reinforce the family structure (Jenkins 1998) but reinforce a heterosexual, male-dominated environment. The misconception is that this ideal type of family social structure protects children through the incest taboo (Bell 1993), thus creating a world of perpetrators who are other and reconfirming the power and control of parents. It is of course, very comforting to rationalise child sexual abuse as an event that occurs outside of the family setting; it becomes more acceptable, understandable, and believable and therefore easier to manage.

Dangerous outsiders have attracted a vastly disproportionate share of official attention, precisely because they represent the easiest targets for anyone wishing, however sincerely, to protect children. (Jenkins 1998, 238)

In the late modern world, when much of the emotional labour of families (Gittens 1998) is based around the protection of children from psychological and physical harm, the horror of child abuse offers ideal opportunities for media hype and moral panic⁴ (Thomas 2000; Cohen 2002). Much of our common knowledge is developed from a combination of research theory, everyday conversation, and media reports, and these determine how we make sense of child abuse (Warner 2000). Furthermore, it can be the media interest itself that accentuates public concern when the abuse is sexual because it removes the moral innocence that is considered so precious for children, even

though it may be this very innocence, this lack of knowledge, that renders the child vulnerable to exploitation (Gittens 1998). Perhaps more importantly, media tales tend to overreport and overemphasise stranger abuse, encouraging the mythical public perception of safe families and dangerous streets (Saraga 2001)⁵. Furthermore, the current demographic displacement of a rising elderly population also results in raised anxieties about child protection and the nature of risk concerning child abuse (Jenkins 1998).

So, recognising that most sexual abuse occurs within the home remains a difficulty for the public and media alike. Although the academic literature has moved sexual abuse from the danger of strangers to the intimacy of incest, relocating child sexual abuse from 'public drama to private drama' (McIntosh 1988), it is still much easier to perceive perpetrators as something other and not like us! The continuing vilification of the few known paedophiles, encouraged by the media, confirms that this myth continues within our late modern technological society and can lead to what Showalter labels *hystories*.

The cultural narratives of hysteria, which I call *hystories*, multiply rapidly and uncontrollably in the era of mass media, telecommunications, and email. (Showalter 1997, 5)

One of the reasons child sexual abuse is such a high profile moral panic is that the risk to children of stranger attack is perceived as very high, despite the low probability rating (Cohen 2002). As we will see later, this factor is intrinsically linked to blame.

The perception and acceptance of risk is intimately tied to the question of who is perceived to be responsible for causing the hazard or damage to whom. (Cohen 2002, xxvi)

As long as paedophiles who are strangers dominate the agenda, there will be a constant demand for more public surveillance and tighter laws; but acts of incest are more common and are more sociologically important. They are produced and reproduced within the normal social order of the family structure and could therefore help to provide 'a key to a sociological understanding of social structure and culture' (Bell 1993, 3).

Child Protection Discourse

The public and professional responses to child sexual abuse are constructed within particular discourses concerning the family, the innocent child, and the unknown abuser, and they are reinforced by a set of cultural norms that offer us specific ways of seeing the world (Reavey and Warner 2003). Social and cultural meanings are allocated to experiences and contexts that invariably position the social actors involved in

familiar ways (Gavey 1999). Warner (2001) suggests that the reality of child sexual abuse itself is regulated not just by the act(s) but also by the intervention of agencies, societal reaction, and the way in which abusive experiences become naturalised, creating normative assumptions that function as social facts. Where child sexual abuse exists, the dominant discourse is of heterosexuality, incest taboo, and the assumption of male stranger perpetrators, leaving alternative possibilities outside of the box (Jenks, 1996). Thus, perceptions of the sexual offender and child sexual abuse become heavily weighted with meaning and expectation, taking for granted a universalism that renders difference such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or culture as invisible (O'Dell 2003) and falling back on the normalcy of the dominant sexually aggressive male within the heterosexual family order.

There are other difficulties hidden within the language used in child protection discourse.

The simple phrase *child protection* is multilayered with complex rhetorical implications for family control and individual responsibility. (Jenkins 1998, 225; italics added)

Child sexual abuse has taken a generic meaning that covers a vast range of activities from the minor to the pathologically violent. This line of continuum may be a useful way of considering sexual offences, especially if applying an escalation theory. However, some academics would suggest that there is little evidence that sex crimes are linked in a logical chain (Jenkins 1998).

Even with academic projects there is very little consistency, and many literature reviews of child sexual abuse agree that there are wide variations within definitions (Bullock et al. 1995; Ghate and Spencer 1995), especially where female perpetrators are concerned (Hislop, 2001; Fromuth and Burkhart, 1987), making any useful comparative study or cumulative knowledge base at best complicated and at worst impossible.

So, in reality, sexual abuse is regulated through the child protection discourse that tends to 'naturalise' the experience and create normative assumptions about the identity and roles of men, women, children, and abusive practices.

The ways in which laws are conceived, crime is reported and stories are constructed are not neutral, but rely on unacknowledged assumptions regarding issues such as sexuality, gender, race, ability and in respect of child abuse, childhood. These unacknowledged assumptions reinforce normative categories of identity regarding . . . the proper roles of men women and children and . . . structure the ways in which we can understand both sexual abuse and domestic violence.

(Warner 2001, 5)

The Legacy of Gender Issues

'Until as late as 1990, it was taken as fact that all child sexual abusers were male' (Young 1993, 109). Add this assumption to the discursive restrictions and for many it is just too difficult to contemplate the female abuser. Apart from the social identification of women with the nurturing and mothering roles, the foundation of our current deconstruction of child sexual abuse has been based upon the presumption of the male perpetrator. It was in the 1980s that the modern 'discovery' of child sexual abuse and incest was publicly recognised. The political debate was initiated, almost simultaneously, by the child protection lobby and the women's movement and encouraged by the public acceptance of the sexual stories of victims (Plummer 1995). While both of these groups acted on the premise that child sexual abusers were male, their focus displayed some significant differences (Jenks 1996). For instance, the child protection lobby identified incest as family dysfunction and encouraged resolution by family therapy. The main emphasis in this approach is to preserve the existing family order, though there was no attempt to consider any concerns of imbalance of power within the family unit. As a consequence, this stance has been inclined to disperse the blame for abusive behaviour away from the perpetrator and distribute it within the family, often at the feet of the mother, although this perspective has lost favour in recent years.

The women's movement has, regardless of the considerable variety of feminist standpoints, attributed incest to the socialisation of men in terms of masculinity, power, and aggression. They challenged the notion of family dysfunction and mother blaming by the suggestion that abusive behaviour occurred because of the asymmetry of power in terms of age and gender.

Thus, both the feminists and the child protectionists excluded most female abusers. The child protectionists blamed the mother when incest occurred, not because she had committed an abusive act but because she failed to protect the victim. The feminists claimed sexual abuse as a gender issue concerned with ideas of socialisation, male roles, and masculinity. The importance of these two approaches, as we will see within this book, is that they form the backdrop upon which much of current child protection practice is based, and they legitimise social stereotypes of masculinity and femininity that can become a stumbling block to understanding female perpetrators. As a result of these converging views, there has been considerable opposition to any research or discourse concerning the sexual abuse of children by women⁶. Even amongst survivors there is an understanding that the dominant view of heterosexuality, femininity, and masculinity forms stumbling blocks to the acceptance of familial female perpetrators and especially sexual acts between mothers and daughters.

I feel it is important for the general public to know that mother/daughter sexual abuse is not as easily identified as with a male perpetrator. The heterosexual view of sexuality limits the ability for people

to identify the abuse that a woman can perpetrate. (a survivor in Rosencrans 1997, 20)

Furthermore, encouraging the image of the male aggressor can fail to address difficulties for male victims, which are further complicated by the 'belief that sexual interactions between older females and juvenile males do not constitute abuse' (Mendel 1995, 30). While both male and female victims could benefit, a disengagement of heterosexualism and masculinity from sex crimes is a bit like 'imagining boats without water' (Rosencrans 1997, 19).

It is impossible to separate the social discourse developed around sexuality and childhood from the rationale of child sexual abuse. All of these factors enable us to disengage with the concept of the female perpetrator. I want now to highlight two myths that further colour our ideas about the existence of sexually abusive women.

MYTHS ABOUT FEMALE PERPETRATORS

The first myth is a question of denial: real women don't abuse, do they? It is perhaps easy to exclude and excuse women who can be categorised as masculinised or sick, but despite evidence to contrary, the abuse committed by women who fall outside of these groups is denied or minimised. As Welldon⁷ has found, women who sexually abuse children, even those who seek help, may not be taken seriously.

People simply do not want to know. . . . when as man admits to the group that he has committed incest, everyone is angry with him and shows hard feelings, a reflection of attitudes in society. When a woman says, always in a tentative manner, that she has funny feelings about her daughter, wants to touch her sexually very much and so on, everyone in the group says 'not to worry! It's just maternal instinct. It's perfectly natural.' (Welldon, cited in Search 1988, 83)

The importance of denial and the how, why, and where it occurs, forms the backbone of the analysis in this book and uncovers some important results.

In this introduction, however, I want to briefly consider what evidence we have for the actuality of female abusers. Using criminal statistics is clearly not sufficient, since many male abusers and most female do not reach the criminal justice system. Grubin (1998) identified that the official statistics show that women committed less than one percent of all sex offences, and in 2002/2003 women made up four percent of all arrests for sexual offences (Home Office 2003). These official figures are very low, and part of the reason is because until recently there has been a double gender standard.

whereby relationships between an adult woman and an underage boy have always been regarded as far less reprehensible than those in which gender roles are reversed. (Jenkins 1998, 14)

Any acts involving female adults and juvenile boys have been considered risky for authorities to pursue to prosecution, although the new Sexual Offences Act (2003)⁸ may change this situation.

Although female abusers are grossly underrepresented in research literature, a small number of studies conducted with abusers do offer some ideas of prevalence rates (Russell and Finkelhor 1984; Allen 1990; Elliott 1993; Saradjian 1996; Hislop 2001; Bunting 2005). Saradjian (1996) estimated that one percent of all children suffer serious sexual assault by an older female in childhood, and she suggested that this is probably an underestimate due to low disclosure rates. More conservative estimates have been proposed by Russell and Finkelhor (1984), who determined from their research that twenty percent of abused boys and five percent of abused girls suffer sexual abuse at the hands of a woman. Turner and Turner (1994), within their review of the literature, suggested that between six percent and fourteen percent of all substantiated cases of child sexual abuse in the United States of America involved female perpetrators. More recently, Bunting's (2005) analysis quotes 'current understanding suggests that females may account for up to five percent of all sexual offences against children' (p. 14).

These figures certainly indicate that this is a problem that we cannot ignore, but they raise questions for some who feel that the data regarding female perpetrators is biased by underrepresentation and under-reporting (Justice and Justice 1979; Plummer 1981; Banning 1989; Rowan et al. 1990) and the numerous methodological anomalies.

Difficulties in methodologies between studies that attempt to estimate the percentages of female among sex offender populations make them difficult to compare . . . though it is difficult to estimate the percentage of females in the child molester population, current studies indicate that, without question, the population of child molesters includes women. (Hislop 2001, 74)

It is not just inadequate methodologies and lack of appropriate questions that can lead to any underreporting. Apart from the sexual abuse of children being the antithesis of expected female behaviour, offenders are likely to be embedded with family systems, rendering their actions unobserved or not recognised as sexual or abusive (Rowan et al. 1990; Saradjian 1996).

Other researchers argue that the vast majority of child abusers are male; women are far less likely to sexually abuse children. The reasons offered are based on the differential socialisation of males and females within Western society. So Finkelhor (1984) suggests that women are in