

UNDERSTANDING SEX OFFENDER BEHAVIOUR :TRAUMA & EXPERIENCE IN EARLY LIVES, DENIAL & BLAME ATTRIBUTION

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Kear- Colwell(1996)

‘ most sex offenders come from seriously maladaptive social and family backgrounds and are significantly damaged individuals’(p262,1996)

Research: Sex Offenders Early Family Relationships

- Very little research addressing the family histories of child sexual abusers
- Some have described the negative influence of living with a dysfunctional family(Graves et al, 1996: Smallbone and Dadds, 1998).
- Others have described the negative effect of frequent, inconsistent and severe punishment on the part of parents ,as contributing to the development of emotionally immature individuals , who may sexually abuse children(Rada,1978)
- Smallbone and Dadds (1998) study of adolescent sex offenders early attachment to parental figures, have stated tentatively that '*early insecure attachment experiences may place some men at risk of later (sexual) offending*'(p571)

Research :Relationships with Mother

- Hazelwood & Warren (1989) 31% of child sex offenders described their mothers as cold, distant, uncaring, indifferent, hostile, and aggressive (Hazelwood & Warren, 1989).
- Tingle et al. (1986) a quarter of child sex offenders these described their mother as someone to whom they could turn to with a problem .
- Suggested that the relationship between child sex offenders and their mothers is best described as dependent rather than reciprocal in nature.

Research: Physical Childhood Abuse

- Reported at high rates in the histories of sexual offenders in some studies (e.g., Ryan & Lane, 1991).
- This abuse is most often carried out by biological fathers (44%) and stepfathers (20%) (Kahn & Chambers, 1991).
- Physical abuse tends to be more predictive of nonsexual aggression than sexual offenses (Prentky et al., 1989).
- Beech et al (2004)- Vast majority of participants reported having been physically abused in childhood (rapists: 82%, sexual murderers: 68%). The most frequent form of this was being hit with an object, for example, a belt or a stick.

Physical Abuse & Attachment



‘Reasonable to conclude that the experience of physical violence is likely to result in the development of insecure attachment and the associated beliefs that relationships are inherently dangerous and other people unreliable’

(McCormack, Hudson & Ward, 2002).

Offender Research(Davidson, 2006)

Aims:

1. Evaluate cognitive behavioural treatment programme for men convicted of sexual offences against children and subject to probation (community treatment group)
2. Explore early life history of respondent group to test treatment theoretical concepts and explore cognitive distortions e.g. Denial, victim empathy, blame attribution
3. Funded by National Probation Service

Davidson, J(2006) 'Victim's Speak: Comparing Child Sexual Abusers And Child Victims Accounts, Perceptions and Interpretations Of Sexual Abuse ' Intl Jnl of Victims and Offenders, Vol 1.

Methods

- Depth one to one interviewing and psychometric testing
- 98 interviews were undertaken with convicted male offenders(180 hours of interview).
- Documentary analysis of their victim statements was also undertaken - compared to offender accounts of offence circumstance.
- Offender survey- demographic data N =119
- The first part of the interview explored offenders early lives and relationship experience.
- Thematic analysis and qualitative counts
- Detailed accounts of childhood experience given during the research over 4 year period.
- Few inconsistencies over time in the accounts provided by offenders.

Davidson (2005) Key Interview Findings: Family Relationships

At interview one and later interviews accounts of early childhood revealed a significant amount of emotional a physical abuse and neglect on the part of parents and carers:

Q. Did you feel wanted as a child?

' don't know that's what I'm trying to find out. Mother said I was her favorite but I was always the one who got hit. Me Father wasn't around much but he remembers me being hit. It was only ever one slap, but she was very strong and athletic, so there was quite a lot of force. But you know just bang and finished with. I use to be puzzled why I got it, I think because I was too slow doing things. Q you weren't fast enough for her?. No. You know doing household chores. Q How often did she hit you? It's difficult to say really--- probably most days. It was always round the face, that still rankles with me, I feel really angry when I see that' (Respondent G1.1)

Family Relationships

How did you feel as a child?

‘ I don’t know (long pause), unhappy I suppose. **Q. What made you unhappy?** If anyone walked into a classroom I knew that they would blame me, I knew that they would blame me for something. If anyone spoke to me I would blush. I was shy, my mother said that if a smaller kid shit on me I would stand there and take it’. **Q. Do you think that’s true?** ‘ yes, that’s the kind of kid I was.’ (G1.1)

Early Experience



1. Difficult, unhappy childhoods, describing relations with both parents as often characterised by abusive behaviour
2. Where fathers were present in the respondent's young lives they tended to be either emotionally or physically detached (sometimes for long periods of time) from the family unit. Fathers were violent, uninterested or both.
3. Poor attachment with mothers- . Relations with mothers were often strained, leaving respondents feeling unloved.
4. A minority of respondents had experienced quite severe, systematic physical abuse on the part of their mothers

School & Peer Relationships



- Possible that insecure attachments extended to school and peer relationships
- 60% of sample had experienced bullying and isolation at school
- Tingle et al(1986) 86% of adult rapists and 74% of child molesters in their sample had few or no friends when young.

School & Peer Relationships



'I was bullied at school, usually by younger kids. I never fought back' (G1.9)

'I didn't like school, I just wasn't a quick learner. Most people are good at something, I wasn't good at anything. I was picked on by the other kids too' (G2.1)

Q. How would you describe your childhood? *Unhappy, I think I was a very quiet child, not many friends really. Q. Did you have any close friends?* *No, no close friends. I didn't mind being on my own' (G1.5)*

School & Peer Relationships

Q. Did you have many friends? I knew lots of children **Q. Did you make friends easily?** long pause) No, no not really the other children didn't speak to me or play with me' (G1.1 4)

Q. How would you describe your schooldays? Hated every bit of it, don't know why, I just didn't want to be there. I found it difficult to talk in large groups. **Q. did you have friends?** No, I was always playing on my own and when I went home I used to play in the garden on my own (G1.2)

Denial & Blame Attribution



Denial (Finkelhor, 89: Gudjonsson, 91)

1. Admission of guilt but denial of responsibility
2. Blame attribution(internal & external):
Circumstances, victim, other

Victim Blame Attribution

- Respondent described the sexual abuse perpetrated against his 13 year old Grand daughter (who was 7 when the abuse commenced) as *'just one of those things that happens'* (G2.6)
- Respondent was asked if he felt that the victim chose to participate in the offending: *'Definitely, all she had to do was get up and go, I wouldn't have stopped her, she wasn't unhappy or resistant. So I suppose the blame is partly hers'* (G2.6)

Victim Blame Attribution



'Q.Why did it(the offence) happen? I don't know, if I knew that I would have stopped it.

Q.Are you saying it was beyond your control? Yes, completely. It was not my fault.

Q.Whose fault was it? Silence -----

Q.Who started it? Normally me,--although not always

Q. Did someone else start it? Yes the boys' (G2.10)

Blame Attribution: Circumstances & Victim Appearance

A respondent convicted of systematically abusing his stepdaughter stated that his daughter's physical maturity (she was 11 when the abuse commenced) provoked his behaviour:

'It started (the offending) from walking into the bathroom one day and being really surprised, because we never had a lock on the door, how developed she was and she wasn't disturbed when I walked in' (R2).

Blame Attribution: Circumstances & Internal

Q. *Why did it (abuse) start?*

Just seeing something on TV, in the papers, feeling bored and frustrated at the time.

Q- *Do you recall what you saw? No, not really '(G1.7).*

Use of Alcohol



- Used as a disinhibitor prior to offending(Warwick, 1991: Marshall et al, 1997)
- Davidson(2005) 44% (survey data) had used alcohol prior to offending

Use of Alcohol



'Well it was New Years Eve and I 'd had a lot to drink, it wasn't planned , I came home that day and the girl was there, I don't know what made me----- I mean the thoughts of doing what I done wasn't in my head----- Of course you know when you're doing wrong. When you're full of drink you think you can get away with murder' (G2.2)

Respondent convicted of indecent assault on 3 year old child
(neighbours)

Memory Loss?



- Offenders gave detailed accounts of childhood
- Many had difficulty recalling recent events around offending
- Accounts improved over time and closer to victims accounts of offence at end of the research
- Denial or real memory loss?
- Wyatt and Powell (1988) suggest that traumatic events can be blocked from short-term memory by perpetrators of sexual abuse, form of PTSD.

Memory Loss?

Q. Did you plan the abuse? *'I don't recall having fantasies or thinking about it. This is the problem I'm having--- the way it comes back to me-----my memory is bad-----um! well it seemed like a good idea at the time, so I went along with what was happening. My memory is so bad----*

Q. How long ago was it? *About a year. I cannot remember the feeling and it bugs me in a way that I've got no clear indication of why or what I've done.(G1.9).*

Summary: Implications for SO Assessment and Treatment?



- Evidence of problematic attachment with parents, particularly mothers, physical and emotional abuse.
- Evidence of bullying in early peer relationships
- Difficulty in maintaining adult relationships
- Evidence of denial and victim attribution-
- Memory loss and PTSD
- Assume that sex offenders are lying