

YOUNG MEN SURVIVING CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

Research Stories and Lessons for
Therapeutic Practice

Andrew Durham



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Research Stories and Lessons for
Therapeutic Practice

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Therapeutic Practice

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This book is dedicated to the courage and survival of the seven young men who shared their stories with me. The royalties from this book will, as far as possible, be shared with them.

FOREWORD

The enforcement of silence has been and remains the most potent weapon of abusers, both individually and collectively. Breaking the silence has likewise been seen as the most vital step towards bringing about change and a safer environment. (Nelson, 2000, p. 394)

The sexual offences against children that this book is about are not only among the most serious and potentially harmful experiences that children can have but the most hidden as well. They are surrounded by a wall of enforced secrecy and silence that generates shame for victims and compounds the abuse they have experienced. To be abused is bad enough; to feel unable safely to reveal this, or to try to do so and not be believed, causes unimaginable damage. This also leaves innumerable children and young people to find their own strategies for survival, without access to any help and support and with lifelong implications for them.

Despite incontrovertible knowledge about the scale and impact of child sexual abuse and its relationship with other forms of violence and abuse against women and children, it has proved difficult to breach the wall of silence. Recent evidence about Internet pornography reveals staggering levels of child sexual abuse, where very few victims are able to report offences and even fewer men who offend are successfully prosecuted.

Two interrelated dimensions are significant in maintaining the hidden nature of child sexual abuse. The first is that this is a major objective of men who perpetrate child sexual abuse and an inherent aspect of the ways in which they target and groom potential victims. High levels of planning and organisation are involved to abuse, and bribes, threats and coercion are used to ensure both compliance and secrecy from children, who are likely already to be socially disadvantaged. When they are apprehended, a characteristic aspect of the accounts of perpetrators is denial and minimisation in terms of the extent and the effects of their offending. The pressure on potential child witnesses is immense, and the evidential demands of the criminal justice system frequently leave them feeling even more disempowered.

The second, and inextricably connected to the first, is a broader social context that mirrors and reinforces the denial and minimisation of offences that challenge so much that is taken for granted about the nature of relationships between men, women, and children. Time and again the extent and scale of sexual offences, together with the apparent ordinariness of the men who perpetrate them,

reveals how all the social institutions that are supposed to protect children (the family, schools, hospitals, residential care, etc.) can be used by offenders to abuse them. It is an examination of this social context, rather than concentrating solely on the characteristics of individual perpetrators, that will enable us to account for why sexual offences against children, and for that matter against women, are not taken more seriously and why, despite legal and policy changes, it is still so unsafe for children.

The accounts of young men that lie at the heart of this book are important from a theoretical perspective. They build on what we know already and, while recognising from the outset the scale of abuse of girls and young women, they contribute to critical understandings of how the relationship between power, sexuality, masculinity and abuse is experienced by young male victims. Of equal importance, they contribute to eroding the silence and secrecy on which the power of offenders relies. No claim is made that these accounts are representative, and indeed they reflect great diversity of experiences and views, of strengths and the struggles involved in overcoming the impact of abuse. They may, however, be considered as given on behalf of all the thousands of young people who are the subject of sexual abuse and who are never able to find someone they trust sufficiently to talk about what has happened to them. Indeed, many of the participants were explicit about their hopes that their involvement would benefit other young people.

For those who work with young people, the accounts are also related to practice issues and the ways in which youth-centred therapeutic interventions can be promoted. Hearing the accounts of young men presented here will be painful, but critical if we are fully to understand not just the experiences they have had and their impact but what is helpful in the struggle for survival and recovery in the aftermath of abuse as well.

Christine Harrison
School of Health and Social Studies
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INTRODUCTION

This book analyses the experiences of seven young men, ranging from the age of 15 to 23, who have as children been sexually abused. A life-story method of data collection is used in order to capture as fully as possible a representation and analysis of the personal experience of each young man, exploring common and diverse factors and the unique integration of the impact of child sexual abuse into each individual life. There is little available knowledge of male-child sexual abuse of this detailed nature, particularly from a sample close to or during adolescence.

As a therapeutic practitioner, wanting to take an interest in some of the wider theoretical issues, I became aware that broader social brush strokes were having a particular impact on the manner in which children and young people survived and lived through experiences of child sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse has a long social and political history of discovery–burial–rediscovery–disbelief–burial–rediscovery–denial–rediscovery, in an almost wave-like motion (Herman, 1992; Gilligan, 1997; Oakley, 1997). These public experiences are paralleled by the experiences of the individual child trying to tell and escape from child sexual abuse, an experience where private personal experiences and social constructions collide, leaving the child in an invidious position. Denial and burial by adults who abuse, by other family members and children, can become functional to the preservation of current circumstances. This may be the preservation of a family, an avoidance of further violence and other feared consequences, or the preservation of an individual child's identity, where the abused child fears the negative perceptions of others, through being instilled with an intense feeling of responsibility, every attempt having been made by the person who abused to ensure that others are held to feel responsible. If there is an open social acceptance of the widespread existence of child sexual abuse in a manner that holds the people who abuse accountable for their actions, then it is more likely that children will feel that their experiences will be believed when they tell. If there is a social denial, individual children will be more likely to keep their experiences to themselves.

Theories of child sexual abuse often focus on 'how' child sexual abuse takes place, avoiding the crucial question of 'why' we have child sexual abuse in our society (Macleod and Saraga, 1991). Such theories often ignore social and cultural contexts and concentrate on the psychology of individual behaviour (Kelly, 1996). With the best intentions, professional responses to children who have been sexually abused become defined in terms of 'treatment' or 'therapy'. Such clinical and potentially pathologising responses may unwittingly compound a child's instilled sense of responsibility. A more adequate theory of why child sexual abuse takes

place has first to account for the fact that over 90% of child sexual abuse is committed by males (Morrison et al., 1994; Home Office, 1997). Second, why does the abuse have to be sexual? Third, why are burial and denial so prominent in its history? Fourth, why for many years have complacent professional responses been dominated by an individualising medical framework that fails to address wider social factors and therefore potentially colludes with the abuser's denial of responsibility? More recently, social work achievements in challenging the dominance of the medical framework have been confounded by a restrictive and highly procedural legal framework, based on a distrust of children's testimonies (Spencer and Flin, 1990; Durham, 1997a). Such testimonies are only finally believed within the legal system after the child has been subjected to a range of difficult and frightening procedures and, quite often, a highly traumatic court appearance.

Asymmetrical power relationships are shown to be characteristic of child sexual abuse. This study identifies the importance of understanding the diverse and changeable experiences involved in the impact and aftermath of child sexual abuse with elements that are both unique and common. The study identifies some of the survival strategies employed by the young men in attempting to resist and subsequently survive the abuse.

The study identifies and confirms previous findings relating to the particular experiences of males who have been sexually abused. However, the study emphasises the significance of these experiences taking place in a social context of patriarchal relations. This context creates circumstances that allow sexual abuse to happen and hinders the recovery of its survivors. The study shows how a context of patriarchal relations, characterised by compulsory heterosexism and homophobia, has shaped and exacerbated the young men's experiences. This is through internalised oppression and power relationships, which have caused them to respond in a manner that affirms and perpetuates social constructions of hegemonic masculinities. The study recognises that sexuality is a particularly significant constituent of personal identity during adolescence, particularly in a society where heterosexuality is oppressively policed as a vehicle of social control. The study shows processes of patriarchal gender construction, particularly in relation to contested masculinities. These have become more threatening as a result of the young men seeing themselves as being placed on the margin in terms of their masculinities and as a result of their experiences of child sexual abuse.

This book in no way weakens feminist arguments or detracts from the fact that the majority of sexual abuse is committed by males against females (Finkelhor et al., 1986; Morrison et al., 1994; Home Office, 1997). There have been fewer studies of male-child sexual abuse than female-child sexual abuse. The study will attempt to contribute to feminist (and pro-feminist) research and practice by showing how an analysis of gender, power and sexuality can be applied to the experiences of young men. The study advances an analytical practice framework that allows the experiences of children and young people who have been sexually abused to be considered in a context of continuing widespread social oppression and suggests fresh non-pathologising approaches to therapeutic practice.

From my own practice experience, and prior and current knowledge of the

literature, there is an assumption that the experience of child sexual abuse is traumatic and has potentially harmful short- and long-term consequences. Also that children and young people who have been sexually abused may require help and support in coming to terms with the experience. Additionally, the extent and success of the recovery is dependent not only on that help and support but also on how a child or young person's other experiences and circumstances, including oppression(s), may interact with the experience of child sexual abuse to produce differing impacts. This means that there may be both common and diverse consequences between different children and young people.

Child sexual abuse is often characterised by secrecy, isolation and the silencing of its victims. This in itself has implications for how such a phenomenon should be researched, particularly when young people, close in years to the experience, are involved. A fear of the consequences of telling may still be present; the messages that may have been implanted by the abuser, in order to maintain the child's silence, may still be influencing the child or young person's ability to tell or discuss the experience in any detail, beyond revealing the fact that it happened. Approaching the study with practice knowledge, and theoretical assumptions that this may be the case, leads to an awareness that the methodology has to take these factors into account not only in order to have access to the information but also to be aware of the potential trauma the participant may have in sharing that information and to be aware that it may not be possible to share such information in a formal manner, nor to be able to verbalise the extent or nature of the experience.

This book will show that it is an absolute prerequisite for a researcher to be mindful of these factors and to be aware that the experience of being a research participant may in itself potentially become an experience of oppression. It will be shown that approaching the research in this sensitive manner has captured and represented the young men's experiences, exploring personal identities, ways of being and their relationships as friends, partners, and fathers. The young men have shared their hopes and fears about their past, current and future lives. The study has closely involved itself with these experiences and has provided important information to a knowledge base for more appropriate and non-pathologising ways of helping young men and others who have been sexually abused.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into three parts: Part I (Chapters 1–3), The Theoretical Context; Part II (Chapters 4–9), The Young Men's Stories; and Part III (Chapters 10–12), Implications for Practice.

Chapter 1 analyses patriarchal relations, hegemony, and contested masculinities, which underpin the dominance of men and the subordination of women and children through historically constructed power relationships. It is argued that political structures of domination are maintained through the preservation of patriarchal power relationships that are represented in both public and private spheres: individual and institutional relationships of hierarchy, domination, subordination, oppression, and control. Power and control in this context are often eroticised through being associated with hegemonic masculinities that are

characterised by compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia. It is argued that these processes create, support, encourage, and hide the sexual abuse of women and children, and other forms of violence. Additionally, they exacerbate and deepen the impact of child sexual abuse on its survivors.

Chapter 2 critically reviews the existing literature on male-child sexual abuse, beginning with a discussion of prevalence and definitions, and the methodological problems involved, recognising that there is likely to be a significant degree of under-reporting. Major theories relating to the impact of child sexual abuse are critically discussed. The interacting impact of child sexual abuse and social oppression, most notably racism and disability, is examined. The specific impact of child sexual abuse on boys and young men is explored. This includes research that examines the link between the experience of sexual abuse and the subsequent sexual abuse of others, and research that examines the impact on sexual identity. Drawing on issues identified in the previous chapter, an interacting mythology based on homophobic fears and fears of abusing others is identified as significantly contributing to the harmful impact of the sexual abuse. The chapter raises epistemological questions about the dominance of particular forms of knowledge. It concludes that in explaining causation or impact of sexual abuse, much of the literature focuses on psychological factors in a potentially pathologising manner and fails to adequately centralise the influence of sociocultural factors.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology of the study. A theoretical relationship is established between ethnography (particularly a life-story approach), feminist praxis, anti-oppressive research, and practitioner research. Researching experiences of child sexual abuse is stressful for all concerned and requires a methodology that establishes a safe environment, facilitates an expression and discussion of painful and fearful feelings and experiences, and provides appropriate ongoing support. In setting up this environment and providing support before, during, and after the data collection phase, the value and importance of practitioner research was established. The potential influence of this on the nature of data collected is acknowledged both as a potential cost, in terms of objectivity, and as a benefit in creating a climate for the production of sensitive knowledge. It concludes that a life-story practitioner research approach, incorporating the principles of anti-oppressive research practice, is an appropriate methodology for the study of the experience and impact of child sexual abuse.

Chapter 4 analyses the research contact and the interviewing of the seven young men who took part in the study and presents vignettes. Their pseudonyms and ages are as follows: Justin (22), Paul (23), Colin (18), Liam (22), Sean (21), David (15), and Ryan (15).

Chapter 5 analyses the circumstances of the young men before they were abused and identifies how the men who abused them took advantage of their circumstances in constructing abusive relationships. It explores the power relationships involved during the sexual abuse, examines the young men's strategies of resistance and considers their feelings and memories of the experience.

Chapter 6 explores the difficult, fearful and complicated circumstances the young men had to face in deciding to tell about their abuse and is critical of the socio-legal framework that has been constructed as a professional response to manage the telling in the sanitised context of a single 'disclosure' event.

Chapter 7 analyses the young men's comments about peer relations. Processes of internalised oppression, in the context of compulsory heterosexism and homophobia, are identified. Some of the young men revealed substantial fears of feeling and being perceived by their peers as being gay. Additionally, there were fears of abusing others, again primarily based on the perceptions of others.

Chapter 8 considers the individual private trauma faced by the young men in terms of memories, nightmares, and flashbacks. Some of the young men turned to the use of alcohol, drugs, gas, and solvents to try and manage their feelings. The research identifies the depth and turmoil of the sadness some of the young men experienced, which was sometimes represented by their behaviour and at other times was expressed in private.

Chapter 9 considers the young men's feelings about taking part in the research, concluding that they were very positive and welcoming of the support they received, and that they may have benefited. However, it is important to be cautious about using terms like empowerment, as the young men's lives continue in some ways to be difficult and disadvantaged, and not helped by experiences of child sexual abuse. The research may have helped the young men reframe and come to terms with some of their thoughts and feelings about being abused, allowing them to reflect on how they have managed so far, but it will not have significantly changed the material circumstances of their lives and it will not have taken their memories away.

Chapter 10 discusses the implications of the research for therapeutic practice and presents a new analytical practice framework. It criticises the current legalism of the childcare system and argues that young people would benefit from services that are more flexible and less bureaucratic. It also argues that it is important to take an approach to helping that emphasises the impact of social factors and the potency of ongoing social oppression, in a manner that externalises many of the factors contributing to the impact of sexual abuse. By centralising the voice of the young person in the context of everyday experience, paying careful attention to the language used and the experiences explained, assistance can be provided in a non-pathologising manner.

Chapter 11 presents a plan for therapeutic work with children and young people who have been sexually abused. The plan places a strong emphasis on flexibility, transparency, and the importance of allowing the child or young person to maintain control. The chapter finally presents a range of practice materials and suggestions of techniques to be used within the therapeutic plan.

Chapter 12 draws together final conclusive comments from the study, in terms of what has been established and achieved, and its overall implications for future practice.

INTRODUCING THE PARTICIPANTS

Justin (22) went to a special-needs boarding school at the age of 14, following difficulties at home and mainstream school. Between the ages of 14 and 16 he was physically and sexually abused many times by the headmaster. He was aware that many other boys were also being abused by the same man and other older

boys at the school. He reported the abuse and attended two court trials, alongside many other boys. His abuser was convicted and given 14 years' imprisonment.

Paul (23) lived with his mother and stepfather. His stepfather emotionally and physically abused him severely. From around the age of six or seven, Paul was sexually abused by a man who lived in his neighbourhood. Both the sexual and physical abuse continued until Paul was nine, when he moved into foster care. Prior to this research, he has never talked about the sexual abuse.

Colin (18) lived in foster care from the age of 4, until he left care at 18. At the age of 13, he absconded from foster care and was sexually abused by a man previously unknown to him. The abuse took place over a four-day period; within days of returning to foster care he formally disclosed the abuse, but there was insufficient evidence for a prosecution.

Liam (22) went to a boarding school at the age of 14, following difficulties at home and school. He developed a closeness to a young male teacher at the school, who subsequently sexually abused him at the age of 16. Liam was confused about this 'relationship', as he believes he fully consented. He volunteered to take part in the research, disclosing his experiences for the first time. Following this, he reported his experiences to the police. There was insufficient evidence for a prosecution.

Sean (21) was in public care from the age of 9. At the age of 12 he went to a special-needs boarding school. Around the ages of 14 and 15, he was sexually abused on many occasions by the head of care at the school. He was not aware that other boys were also being sexually abused by the same man. When one of the other boys reported being abused, Sean was questioned by the police and reported his abuse. The abuser absconded the country during the investigation and did not face trial.

David (15) lived at home with his parents. When David was nine, his family was approached by a man named Harry, who had set up a local computer club for boys in the area. David attended the club and was 'befriended' by Harry, who further approached David's parents offering weekend respites at his home. Subsequently, in the confines of his own home, Harry sexually abused David on a regular basis, over a two-year period. David was not aware that other boys were also being sexually abused by Harry. At the age of 12, David was questioned about his time with Harry and reported being sexually abused. He attended a court trial, alongside other boys, and Harry was convicted and sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment.

Ryan (15) lived with his mother and was invited to attend a local computer club run by a man named Harry. This was the same club that David attended. A few weeks later he was playing in a local park where he was approached by Harry, who drove him to his house and sexually abused him. Ryan has little recall of these events, but remembers going to Harry's house on two occasions, where on both occasions he was sexually abused by him. Although Ryan reported his abuse to the police, he did not attend the court trial. He is aware that Harry was convicted for sexually abusing other boys and served a prison sentence.

Part I

THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT

