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# Meet the Duggars: The Reproduction of Gender Privilege in the Popular Construction of Sibling Sexual Abuse

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# Meet the Duggars: The Reproduction of Gender Privilege in the Popular Construction of Sibling Sexual Abuse

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# ABSTRACT

Sibling sexual abuse a nefarious harm that researchers suspect occurs for often than any other form of child sexual abuse, and is very rarely reported to authorities. On May 19th 2015, allegations of sexual abuse by Joshua Duggar against four of his younger sisters and a female babysitter during 2002 and 2003, were made public knowledge by the tabloid *InTouch*. In response to the public outcry, parents Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar sat for an interview on June 3rd 2015, in their family home with Fox News moderator Megyn Kelly. Statements made by The Duggars about sibling sexual abuse are optimal data to examine, as they are in the public domain and available to analyze systematically. Their hyper-visibility makes their constructions of the abusive behavior and their reactions to the abuse, tools of interpretation that others can rely upon in the event that their family is experiencing this type of abuse.

Using a multimodal approach to critical discourse analysis (Machin and Mayr 2012), this thesis analyzes both the linguistic as well as the visual features of interviews with The Duggars, explicating the ways in which the stories they tell signify broader discourses about gender, power and sibling sexual abuse. Informed by criminological theories on harm and the continuation of harm, my findings support the notion that The Duggar interviews do in fact have the potential to perpetuate the myth that sibling sexual abuse is benign, and even more, excuse sibling sexual abuse as normative and exploratory, reinforcing those gender ideologies.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# CHAPTER ONE
# INTRODUCTION

On May 19th 2015, allegations of sexual abuse by Joshua Duggar against four of his younger sisters and a female babysitter during 2002 and 2003, were made public knowledge by the tabloid *InTouch*. A few days later, the same tabloid released the actual police report - dated December 7th 2006 - with names and ages of the victims redacted for preservation of privacy. The Duggar family are stars of an American reality TV show, *19 Kids and* Counting, that aired from 2008 until 2015. The police report, obtained legally through a freedom of information act request, shows that Jim Bob and Michelle waited until they were made aware of at least seven separate incidences before they sought help for Joshua, and before they notified authorities. At the time of the incidences of sexual abuse, Joshua was 14 and 15 years old.

The Duggar family holds some interest not only in the US media, but also in Ireland, Australia, Canada, and many others. Search data over five years (2013-2018) using Google Trends, shows that the search terms "Duggar," "Duggar Family," and "Joshua Duggar" significantly increased between May 19th and May 23rd, with another spike between the 16th and 2nd of August[1], showing how the interest in the scandal was available to a wide audience. All major news sources

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[1] The second spike correlates with the allegations published by news sources that Joshua used websites such as Ashley Madison and OKCupid to be unfaithful to his wife.

in the US and in Canada reported on the incident, and the internet erupted in heated discussion. Hashtags were created both in defense and in protest of Joshua, The Duggar family, and their TV show. In response to the public outcry, parents Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar sat for an interview on June 3rd 2015, in their family home with Fox News moderator Megyn Kelly. After the interview, Jill and Jessa Duggar came forward as victims. They interviewed with Kelly to "set the record straight" about the nature of the abuse and to defend their brother. That interview aired on June 5th 2015. Yet another exposé was aired June 4th 2015 on *The Kelly File,* in which Kelly reviewed more footage from the interviews with The Duggars and addressed media concerns.

 This thesis will analyze the discourses issued by The Duggars as well as the visual communications conveyed through those interviews. This study contributes to inquiry into the legitimation of sexual abuse generally, and sibling sexual abuse in particular. The questions guiding this research concern the construction of meaning. Specifically, how did The Duggars depict themselves and the abuse? What meaning is being conveyed through visual communication, and is that supported by the verbal communication? How do their discourses contribute to and perpetuate the ideologies that permit gendered violence such as sibling sexual abuse?

With these questions in mind, I will explore the ideological grounds of male violence through a multimodal critical discourse analysis of those publicized responses to sibling sexual abuse (referred to henceforth as SSA) in the Duggar

2

family.  I will rely upon feminist frameworks of gender such as those concerning hegemonic masculinity and the accomplishment of gender, as well as research that underscores the role of discourse in reproducing patterns of inequality and harmful action, including research on rape myths and neutralizations.

Language naturalizes particular views of the world, thereby supporting hierarchies and ideologies that perpetuate the marginalization of and harm toward others. Language shapes and is shaped by society (Machin & Mayr 2012). Butler (2009) posits that the way that social phenomena are framed directly affects the recognizability of the issues being framed: "some way of organizing and presenting a deed leads to an interpretive conclusion about the deed itself" (p. 8).

Critical discourse analysis is a theoretical and methodological framework to "reveal more precisely how speakers and authors use language and grammatical features to create meaning, to persuade people to think about certain events in a particular way" (Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 1). Specifically, the interrelationship between language, power and ideology. I will draw upon the multimodal approach to critical discourse analysis that Machin and Mayr (2012) take, or MCDA. The multimodal approach, which incorporates the visual construction of meaning as well as the linguistic, is necessary to my research because the interviews are videos. Imagery "can be used to say things that we cannot say in language" (Machin and Mayr 2012; p. 9), as well as support that which is being conveyed through spoken language. By analyzing both the

linguistic as well as the visual features of interviews with The Duggars, I will explicate the ways in which these visual and verbal choices signify broader discourses about gender, power and SSA.  I will examine various lexical choices and more manifest neutralizations, as well as the visual features, that – collectively – produce a discursive order that upholds patriarchal structures and reinforces marginalization.

## The Duggars, Celebrity, and Idealizations

The Duggar family is a conservative Christian family from Arkansas. Father, Jim Bob, held a seat in the 6th district of the Arkansas House of Representatives from 1999-2002. During his time with the house, he served as vice-chair of the judiciary committee and vice-chair of the house courts and civil law committee. The Duggars are perhaps most famous for their TV show, *19 Kids and Counting.*

There is no question of the Duggar family show's popularity, which was broadcast on the air for 15 seasons with an estimated 4.41 million viewers tuning in to watch the wedding of Jill Duggar, one member of the family of 19 (Kenneally 2014). I assert that the family's hyper-visibility in popular culture as reality television stars as well as their status as a model for conservative evangelical way of life privileges their opinions; their voices are made available to a worldwide audience. Subsequently, their mass-mediated reactions to public discovery of instances of SSA within their family are privileged as well. Roughly

4

3.1 million viewers watched Megyn Kelly interview The Duggars on her show, *The Kelly File* (Kissell 2015). Their responses were and still are available to a wide audience.

The celebrity of The Duggars position on television is what makes the stories they tell *so important.* Research has proven the influence celebrities have over society, including branding and advertising. Recent research shows celebrity influence goes even further. Choi and Berger (2010) track the progression from celebrity status to global influencers to show how some celebrities are using their status to become international diplomats. Researchers have written about the impact of celebrity influence on topics from health and life choices (Kosenko, Binder and Hurley 2016), to body modification choices (Maltby and Day 2011), to research showing how celebrities influence political opinions (Jackson and Darrow 2005). Thus, how The Duggars frame SSA likely affects public perceptions of such abuse.

## Gendered Violence and Sibling Sexual Abuse

Previous literature written about SSA exposes many issues that aid in the lack of knowledge about this harm. In forthcoming chapters, I will address the dearth of research on SSA as well as definitional issues. I set out my own definition in an attempt to provide a more comprehensive definition. Prior research is scant and spans over at least 38 years, meaning definitions have varied quite a bit. Through explication, the gendered nature of SSA becomes

5

evident and becomes a link between this form of sexual abuse and other more commonly research topics like rape and the ideologies that legitimize such harms.

## Legitimating Discourses

There are certain ways of thinking ideologically that influence how harm like SSA is perceived and understood. Even more, those ideological backdrops are activated through social interactions. The interviews with the Duggar family act as an opportunity to confirm those ideologies, or debunk them. Research on how discourse can neutralize and legitimate behaviors is presented, tying SSA to the larger umbrella of sexual assault in general.

## Layout of the Thesis

The thesis is organized as follows.  In Chapter 2, I will review research on SSA and specifically its harmful consequences. In Chapter 3, I will outline relevant theoretical frameworks, including neutralization theory (Sykes and Matza 1957) and *Why We Harm* theory (Presser 2013).  In Chapter 4, I will lay out my research methods.  Finally, in Chapter 5, I will present my findings and offer concluding observations about the stories The Duggars tell and show how they support popular conceptions of SSA.

# CHAPTER TWO
# THE NATURE, EXTENT AND HARMS OF SIBLING SEXUAL ABUSE: A REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Research on SSA is limited in both theoretical and methodological scope. Studies mainly come from psychology and social work. They generally emphasize victim experiences and/or family dynamics, with far less attention to offenders. Samples are small and designs are mostly retrospective, as most survivors do not confront the abuse until they become adults and seek therapeutic services. Although researchers suggest that SSA occurs across all socioeconomic strata (Wiehe 1997, Finkelhor 1980, Carlson et al. 2006) the available studies are largely derived from therapeutic or university sources (Finkelhor 1980, Wiehe 1997, Caffaro 2014). As such, we may have a picture of abuse in middle-class families for the most part. In addition, widespread underreporting is suspected, as victims are less likely to disclose to officials and SSA is unevenly reported to police by child services (Caffaro 2014, p. 55).

Survivors opt not to disclose the abuse for reasons such as feeling complicit in the abuse, fears of not being believed, or due to threats from their sibling abuser, among others. Weihe (1997) conducted research on SSA, including self-report questionnaires, finding that survivors reported experiences such as 'He hit me and put his pocket knife to my throat and sexually abused me (p.66)', 'If you tell anyone, I will kill you (p. 67)', 'he showed me the butcher block we kept in the cellar with the ax and the blood. He said he'd kill me there if I told

(p.67).' Rowntree (2007) found that upon disclosure the responses could be as harmful as the abuse including reactions such as,

> 'If it's true she can go to the hospital right now and have tests to prove it…If you've done things like that you are a f. . . ing slut. Get out of my house,' and I was kicked out that day. (p. 354)

Caffaro's (2014) research shows similar findings, with reports of reactions such as 'it takes two to tango, you know (p. 57)'. Reactions such as these coupled with the taboo on incest that keeps experiences such as these secretive, it is no wonder that the prevalence rates are also undeterminable.

Despite these difficulties in reporting, we know some things about SSA and it is the purpose of this chapter to review what we know, with an emphasis on the harmful consequences of the abuse.  In addition to data on the nature of the abuse, the chapter considers how researchers have *defined* and how they have *theorized* SSA.

## Defining Sibling Sexual Abuse

To begin, we should ask what sibling sexual abuse *is*. Of course, like all other social phenomena, its meaning is a matter of social construction – and not fixed or essential.  It is a common misconception that interactions between siblings are exploratory in nature, adding to the difficulties with definition. To

account for exploratory interactions and uncover the prevalence of SSA, DeJong (1988) defines abusive sexual encounters between siblings as consisting of an age gap of at least 5 years and/or if there is use of force, threat, or deceit (p. 273). Definitions such as DeJong's (1988) can be problematized through retrospective qualitative studies that reveal that often victims did not feel as though the sexual encounters were abusive in nature at the time, but as they aged and matured they felt differently (Caffaro 2014, Wiehe 1997).

There are no legal definitions of SSA, leading some scholars orient to data that relies on national legal definitions of sexually abusive behavior in general, such as those used by Kreinert and Walsh (2011) extracted from the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS). For example, forcible fondling is defined by NIBRS as "the touching of the private body parts of another person for the purpose of sexual gratification, forcibly and/or against that person's will or not forcibly or against the person's will in instances where the victim is incapable of giving consent because of his/her youth or because of his/her temporary or permanent mental or physical incapacity (NIBRS 2012, p. 5-6)";  forcible rape (excepting statutory rape) is defined by NIBRS as "The carnal knowledge of a person, forcibly and/or against that person's will or not forcibly or against the person's will in instances where the victim is incapable of giving consent because of his/her temporary or permanent mental or physical incapacity" (NIBRS 2012, p. 5-6)". These definitions focus on the action itself, and fail to incorporate the exacerbation of effects caused by the sibling being the offender which some

researchers stress makes the abuse more harmful (Caffaro 2014). NIBRS also relies upon reports from local and state authorities to collect their data. Also at issue with this sort of data collection is that legal definitions vary by state and like all sex crimes, discretion is given to local authorities as to what charge to apply to sibling specific violence.

Some researchers consider sexual interactions between siblings as abusive where an age gap of more than 5 years exists (Finkelhor 1980). Caffaro (2014) defines SSA as "sexual behavior between siblings for which the victim is not developmentally prepared, which is not transitory, and which does not reflect age-appropriate curiosity," noting that it may or may not include force or coercion (pg. 12). Wiehe (1997) defines it as "inappropriate sexual contact such as unwanted touching, fondling, indecent exposure, attempted penetration, intercourse, rape, or sodomy between siblings," which excludes physical force and age differences as criteria (p. 59).

For the purposes of this research, I combine many of the definitions above and underscore the power imbalance. I define SSA as any unwanted sexual contact (fondling, attempted or completed vaginal or anal penetration either with body parts or other objects, oral sex) and/or sexual behavior (non-contact such as indecent exposure, exposure to pornographic material, exposure to sexual intercourse between others and/or masturbation) between siblings in which an imbalance of power exists, whether real or perceived and can include threats of or use of force and/or any coercion techniques whether positive or negative. An

10

imbalance of power can occur from physical characteristics such as strength and size, age differences, favoritism, and/or cognitive and developmental delays.

My definition of SSA, emphasizing power imbalance, has a precedent in official definitions of both quid pro quo type sexual harassment and bullying. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission underscores the use of the sexually harrassive behavior and the victims participation in it (whether willing or unwilling) as the leverage for the behavior to continue – creating a power imbalance (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 1990). Similarly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines bullying as "any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths, who are not siblings or current dating partners, involving an observed or perceived power imbalance. These behaviors are repeated multiple times or are highly likely to be repeated" (2018). In terms of SSA, victims report their continued participation out of fear that they will be blamed, much like with quid pro quo sexual harassment and also other forms of child sexual abuse. The bullying behavior often reported by victims of SSA underscores the power the offending sibling holds and continues to hold over the victimized sibling and how that power often keeps the victim silent and feeling responsible. Importantly, the power the offending sibling has over the victims does not have to be actual or physical, it can be *perceived*.

## Extent of SSA

In part due to the challenge of defining the phenomenon, the exact occurrence of SSA is unknown, however, comparative and other studies illuminate that it is common. In a sample of 796 undergraduate students, 13 percent reported having been victims of SSA (Finkelhor 1980). In a study comparing juvenile sex offenders' victim choice, 41 percent of the juvenile offenders, who had offended against children and were referred for court services to the Queensland Department of Families in Australia, offended against their siblings (Rayment-McHugh & Nisbet 2003). Smith and Israel (1987) examined data from the Boulder County Department of social services incest task force and found that of all the cases of incest reported in 1985, 15 percent were sibling offenders, a two percent increase from the previous year (p.102). In a study conducted by obtaining anonymous self-report information, 40 of a total of 59 incest survivors reported that their abuser was a brother – a total of three percent of the total population of those whom completed the survey. Similarly, 4.2 percent of incest cases reported to a hospital in Pennsylvania were cases of SSA (De Jong 1989). A bulletin issued by the U.S. Department of Justice found that one in three juveniles commit sex offenses against other juveniles, 25 percent of whom are family members and 69 percent of which occur in the home (Finkelhor, Ormrod & Chaffin 2009). Although, USDOJ numbers do not provide an exact snapshot of the prevalence of SSA, the outlined characteristics illuminate the likelihood of victims as siblings.  Over the span of eight years,

12

13,013 cases of SSA were reported to law enforcement in 27 states in the U.S., averaging out to approximately 1,627 known cases per year (Kreinert & Walsh p. 361).  It's obvious that prevalence is a major issue holding SSA research back.

## Nature and Impacts of SSA

Despite definitional and prevalence issues, the harms of SSA are significant and well-known. Research finds that what appears to begin with curiosity and consent, SSA then persists and becomes abusive (Carlson, Maciol & Schneider 2006, Wiehe 1997, Caffaro 2014).  Indeed, SSA may be more serious than other forms of child sexual abuse. In a study comparing the experience of brother-, stepfather- and father-perpetrated abuse of 82 victims referred to CPS in Québec for reports of child sexual abuse, Cyr et al. (2002) found that 70 percent of brother-perpetrated cases involved penetration versus 34.8 percent of father and 27.3 percent of stepfather cases. SSA is more often ongoing rather than a one-time event (Wiehe 1997, Laviola 1992). SSA typically involves threats, coercion or physical force, whereas adult perpetrated abuse involves methods that make children feel special (Wiehe 1997, Laviola 1992). Carlson and colleagues (2006) found that 43.9 percent of their sample of 41 survivors of SSA reported use of threats and 22 percent reported use of force in sexual acts. Rudd and Herzberger (1999) determined that while the threat of force was higher in father-daughter incest cases than in brother-sister incest

cases (64% vs. 46%), the actual *use* of force was significantly higher for brother-sister incest (64% vs. 53%). Laviola (1992) found that 29.4 percent of a sample of SSA survivors reported use of force to attempt or achieve intercourse, 5.8 percent reported coercion, and 11.7 percent reported both.

In addition, sexual abuse seems to occur in conjunction with other forms of sibling abuse. In a convenience sample of 130 survivors of sibling violence including emotional, physical and/or sexual violence, 67 percent of the respondents indicated they were sexually abused by a sibling, and 71 percent of those respondents indicated they were physically and emotionally abused as well (Wiehe 1997). Laviola (1992) found that victim's relationships with their offending siblings were either abusive or non-existent, except during the sexual abuse. Caffaro & Conn-Caffaro (2005) found that 25 percent of their sample were victims of both SSA and sibling assault. Thus, the harms of SSA may be worse than those of other types of child abuse.

Not surprisingly, research shows that SSA produces serious and long-lasting deleterious effects. Victims report sexual dysfunction, low self-esteem, and self-blame (Laviola 1992). Reported effects also include depression, eating disorders, suicidal feelings, flashbacks and/or nightmares (Rudd & Herzberger 1999). In a study comparing victims of brother-sister abuse to other forms of intrafamilial abuse, research showed that brother perpetrated abuse is just as harmful and sometimes more psychologically harmful than father or step-father perpetrated sexual abuse; (Cyr et al 2002) finding that victims of SSA have a

14

higher rate of dissociation and that 91.7 percent of victims of SSA suffer from

higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. Other known

effects of SSA include internalized shame, guilt and blame, withdrawn behavior,

poor self-esteem, difficulty with relationships, over-sensitivity, sexual dysfunction,

anger, alcoholism, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, dissociative identity

disorder, trust issues, impulse control, hyper-sexualized behavior, anxiety,

aggression and health problems (Wiehe 1997, Caffaro 2014). Nearly all of these

issues manifest later on in life because SSA tends to occur in chaotic or unstable

family environments making disclosure difficult (Caffaro & Conn-Caffarro 2005).

Researchers emphasize the fear that is instilled in the victim by the chaotic family

situation and their necessary hyper-vigilance as a result (Rudd and Herzberger

1999).  Caffaro (2014) highlights the unbalanced sibling relationship, which

increases the likelihood of maladaptive relationships in the future.


## SSA and Gender

Sibling sexual abuse is clearly gendered violence.  Like all other forms of

sexual violence, victims of sibling sexual abuse are predominantly female and

abusers are predominantly male (Welfare 2008, Wiehe 1997, Caffaro 2014,

Finkelhor 1980, Finkelhor et al. 2009, Krienert & Walsh 2011, Cyr et al, 2002,

Adler & Schutz 1995, Rowntree 2007). Brother's abuse of sisters is most

common, with the next most common being brother-brother abuse (Krienert &

Walsh 2011).  Research shows that of 41 adult survivors of SSA, none of the

female survivors initiated the sexual contact (Carlson, Maciol & Schneider 2006). A study of 62 incest survivors attending incest survivor support groups in the United States found that 23 percent of the survivors were sexually abused by their sibling, specifically a brother, rather than step-siblings or a sister (Rudd & Herzberger 1999). In a study of 25 families, 80 percent of the perpetrators were male and 89 percent of the victims were female (Smith & Israel 1987). Hence, girls do sometimes perpetrate SSA, however, more research is needed to compare dynamics between sister perpetrated abuse and brother perpetrated abuse as some researchers suggest that when sisters sexually abuse their siblings it is because they are generally replicating abuse they have themselves endured (Caffaro 2014).

Laviola (1992) found that families within which SSA occurs tend to uphold patriarchal ideologies, where men and fathers are seen as "superior, controlling and dominant over women and children" (p. 415). Rowntree (2007) also quotes a survivor referring to rigid gender ideologies as her reason to remain silent about her abuse:

My background is South American, so my father is a very traditional machismo Latin male – so there's no – the way he would think about certain situations and what his response would be, I know for a fact that I'll never be able to tell my father. I think I might want to be safe and protect myself and just not tell him (p. 358).

16

Caffaro (2014) had similar findings, stating "separate and unequal rules based on power imbalances lead to uneven application of consequences for behavior"; quoting a survivor about her experience in one such family:

My brother was the hero of the family. He was the firstborn, and there was a great deal of importance placed on him being a male…If he ever messed up or did something wrong, my parents would soon forgive him. When I finally confronted them about Shawn molesting me as a teenager, at first they didn't believe me. Later, they suggested that I just get over it (pg 62).

Rudd & Herzberger arrived at similar findings, reporting the role of female victims as that of the "lynchpin in keeping the family together" (p. 919).

According to survivor reports after disclosing the SSA to their families, the responses often reinforced those gender ideologies (Rowntree 2007). Including responses such as "But boys do that kind of thing, he's just experimenting," and "That's okay, 'sometimes boys do that' and that was the end of the conversation because apparently that's all it was (p. 352)". Another survivor's view of the perception of SSA,

I think that there is a tolerance in our society that boys will be boys and

some of the stuff they do is okay because of it…It's all power games and

it's all somehow accepted within families (p. 352)

Caffaro also highlights the gendered nature of SSA, connecting the gendered

aspects of SSA to the larger umbrella of gender and power, stating "Power in

today's society often appears to be gender related. Men are more frequently

socialized to be in control and to continue to hold authority in the family

hierarchy…The abuse of a younger, more vulnerable sibling gives an older

brother a sense (although false) of power and control" (p. 117).  It is obvious

through previous research and survivor stories that the backdrop of gender

ideologies has some effect on the persistence of SSA, but alone cannot be used

to determine etiology.

## Theorizing SSA

As there is little research on SSA, the understanding of dynamics and

nature of SSA is still very hypothetical.  There is no clear predictor or determinant

of SSA, though many researchers have somewhat similar hypotheses.  What has

been determined is that this form of abuse occurs across all socioeconomic

strata as well as racial/ethnic backgrounds (Adler & Schutz 1995, Cyr et al.

2002). In a retrospective study of medical record chart reviews and clinical intake

reports of middle and upper middle-class offenders from intact families, Adler and

Schutz (1995) discovered that 92 percent of sibling sex offenders (all male) had been physically abused, but only 8 percent were sexually abused, undermining the previously conceived notion that children who perpetrate are generally victims themselves (Worling 1995), but supporting the author's speculation that a pattern of abuse is present nonetheless. Adler & Schutz (1995) also found that perceived risk factors such as physical absence of a parent were not relevant for their sample, as the majority of the families were intact. Adler & Schutz (1995) also discovered that risk factors for their sample included "family stress due to financial distress in a middle to upper middle class family, parental illness/disability, marital conflict and pervasive family patterns of abuse" (p. 816). Research conducted by Rudd & Herzberger (1999) supports the same, finding that their sample also includes mostly intact family systems in which SSA occurs. A finding which detours from other research that underscores family dynamics such as distant/inaccessible parents, sexual climate in home and extramarital affairs (Smith & Israel 1987). Comparing families of SSA, father-perpetrated child sexual abuse and step-father perpetrated child sexual abuse, Cyr et al. (2002) found that in the SSA group, the number of siblings was higher and the dysfunction associated with alcohol abuse by parents was much more intense. In a comparative study of sibling versus non-sibling adolescent sex offenders, Worling (1995) points to the family systems hypothesis that sibling offenders are possibly acting out the negative aspects of their family relationships, such as

violence, rejection and poor communication and have access to younger

children.

It is the job of the next chapter to consider cultural logics that support

SSA.  Without negating the efficacy of explanations at the family level, my

inclination is to think more broadly about the elements of culture that sustain this

harm.

# CHAPTER THREE

# THEORIZING SIBLING SEXUAL ABUSE AS CULTURAL: MYTHS, NEUTRALIZATIONS AND NARRATIVES

The last chapter examined research on the effects of SSA. Against the logic that sexual abuse perpetrated by siblings is non-abusive, the research underscores the detrimental and long-lasting consequences of SSA for the victim and families (Welfare 2008, Laviola 1992). This chapter discusses the legitimating logics themselves. I visit theories of harm's legitimation by perpetrators as well as bystanders. First, I will examine perspectives on rape myths (Burt 1980) – legitimizations specific to sexual violence. SSA is a form of sexual violence to which a particular myth tends to pertain – that agency is mutual in the interest of exploration. Second, I will review neutralization theory (Sykes and Matza 1957) and Presser's (2013) general theory of harm. Lastly, I will examine research that explores cultural and ideological logics that legitimize sexual violence. The chapter establishes a framework for my inquiry into SSA in the Duggar family.

## Rape Myths

Male dominated violence such as SSA is made possible – thinkable, excusable – due to structured ideologies that create the frames by which it is justified. So-called rape myths are perhaps the best known of justifications for gendered harms such as sexual violence.

Burt (1980) identifies rape myths as a constellation of ideologies that excuse or justify rape positing that "rape is the logical and psychological extension of a dominant-submissive, competitive, sex-role stereotyped culture" (p. 229). Such myths underscore that victims invite or deserve their victimization. Specifically, In a sample of 598 adults randomly selected based on household contact and interviewed over a two month period, Burt (1980) discovered that a significant proportion of persons surveyed on their "attitudes and feelings about the behavior of men and women toward each other in their everyday lives, and also their romantic and sexual behavior" (pp. 220-221) agreed with statements such as, "Any healthy woman can successfully resist a rapist if she wants to," "A woman who is stuck-up and thinks she is too good to talk to guys on the street deserves to be taught a lesson," "When women go around braless or wearing short skirts and tight tops, they are just asking for trouble," "A women who goes to the home or apartment of a man on the first date implies she is willing to have sex," "In the majority of rapes, the victim was promiscuous or had a bad reputation," and found that a significant proportion believed that over 50% of all rapes reported were reported simply because a woman was trying to deal with an illegitimate pregnancy or was seeking revenge against the man she claimed raped her (pp. 223, 229). Since Burt's (1980) study, several meta-analyses of rape myths have turned up significant relationships between adherence to rape myths, masculine ideology and sexual aggression (Murnen, Wright & Kaluzny 2002, p. 370, Suarez & Gadalla 2010,

22

Allen, D'Alessio & Brezgel 1995). For example, one study determined that men were significantly more likely than women to adhere to rape myth acceptance, concluding that "gender inequality supports rape myths, a male dominated society would probably justify rape and blame the victim" (Suarez & Gadalla 2010, p. 2025). These conceptualizations of sexual violence and perceptions of victims of sexual violence create ideological grounds upon which male dominance is perpetuated which has led to research that examines how male dominance is accomplished materially. I argue that structurally the male position is elevated through ideology (i.e. men are inherently sexual beings, etc.), that gendered discourses such as those I am extracting from the Duggar interviews are a product of and perpetuate male dominated harms like SSA and underscore how that in turn supports theories that correlate sexual aggression and male violence. Simply, male dominated violence such as SSA manifests due to structural ideologies that create the frames by which it is justified.

Cultural logics, as Presser demonstrates, are *necessary preconditions* to the creation of licenses to harm, as they relate to SSA are present in the form of gendered ways of thinking and behaving. Gender ideology specifically refers to the ways we think about gender and informs our expectations of those we deem to belong to a certain gender. Gender ideology, encompasses the so called 'roles' essential to a person based on sex which underscores certain ways to "be a man" and certain ways to "be a woman". West and Zimmerman (1987) stress that socially constructed gender roles are not inherent, rather they are

23

constructed and performed. That is, the way one acts and looks actually determines their gender. Lorber (1994) outlines gender in contemporary western society as a socially constructed institution that follows a binary just like biological sex that underscores the differences between men and women, placing men as the preferred gender. Lorber (1994) also underscores the history of gender is based on differentiation, that the anatomy of the female body has been represented as a deviation from the norm (the male body) and that as such, the male body is normative - the standard - the most important; "men's social bodies are a measure of what is human" (p. 53). As such, the female body has historically been and continues to be subordinated to that of the male body, including the behaviors associated with female gender. Men are strong, aggressive and overpowering and inherently possess a sexual drive that is essential to their being. Women are passive and weak. Housework is conceptualized as woman's work, just like men are known as the strong income generators. Research shows that socialization of young boys by the many agents of socialization (i.e. family, peers, media etc.) reinforces gender ideology and often includes expectations to have sex to fit the mold of masculinity (Messerschmidt 2000). These are all ideologies – stories that we tell ourselves and have been told about how women and men should be. There is nothing inherent about a woman's body that makes her incapable of manual labor, and nothing inherent in a man's body that makes him incapable of cleaning a house or caring for children. While Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) support the

24

notion that historically and at present in contemporary Western society, men are privileged through socially constructed "patterns of practice that allow men's dominance over women" (p. 832), they also acknowledge the aforementioned ideologies and their potential to change over time. Following along with West and Zimmerman (1987), Connell and Messerschmidt underscore that the socially constructed patterns of practice are not essential to being a man or woman, that "doing" gender creates and reinforces the patterns of practice that are considered masculine and feminine. Differing however, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) emphasize that there exists a socially constructed hierarchy of masculinities that positions hegemonically masculine men at the top. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the "most honored" and thus normative and idealized way of being a man, which "ideologically legitimate[s] the subordination of women to men" (p. 832) as well as the subordination of some males by other males.

These gender ideologies are socially constructed ways of thinking and acting that create the conditions for gender inequality. This concept provides a macro-level perspective that illuminates the ideology of male privilege, though alone this cannot explain male dominated violence such as sexual violence. These ways of thinking, culturally, create the basis upon which Presser's theory applies specifically to SSA and other forms of gendered violence.

## Neutralization Theory

Sykes and Matza (1957) theorized that juveniles commit delinquent acts insofar as they "neutralize" their behaviors. Neutralizations refer to the justification that one makes to diminish the moral inhibitions associated with the deviant behaviors they are committing. Sykes and Matza (1957) identified five techniques of neutralization: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners and appeal to higher loyalties. To provide a better understanding of how this theory applies, I will briefly outline each of these techniques of neutralization.

Sykes and Matza (1957) coined *denial of responsibility* as the ability to overcome restraint from deviant actions by defining themselves as lacking responsibility and thus avoiding disapproval from oneself or others. This is not to say that the deviant action is simply minimized to an accident, but that the deviant person is "helplessly propelled into new situations" (p. 667). The next technique, *denial of injury*, refers to neutralizing the actual harm done to a victim. Instances such as auto theft and truancy among others are enveloped in this technique. *Denial of the victim* is notably different. This neutralization technique refers to those actions that are considered retaliations or a form of justified punishment toward the recipient of the action. This technique then underscores the past harms the victim has done and the deservingness of any action taken by the deviant. *Condemnation of the condemners* refers to the attempt to deflect focus from oneself to those who disapprove of the deviant acts themselves. This

26

is done so in an attempt to underscore that the actions/reactions of those who are condemning the deviant behaviors are likely due to ulterior motivations. Through the fifth and final technique of neutralization, *appeal to higher loyalty,* the deviant behavior is acknowledged by the deviant individual, however the deviant is able to overcome the social controls of dominant society. As an example, the individual can acknowledge that the action is harmful, but the friend group, family etc. is more important than is abiding by the law.

With these neutralization techniques, Sykes and Matza point to the ways in which the moral taboo can be diminished or deflected *enough* so as to enable the deviant individual to commit harmful acts. This does not mean, Sykes and Matza stress, that the individual is completely absolved of guilt or shame associated with the intended action, merely that the moral taboo has been neutralized enough to enable the actions to become a possibility.

Since its inception as a theory of juvenile delinquency in 1957, Sykes and Matza's theory of neutralizations has been applied to many criminal behaviors and social harms. Expanding from its birth of and application to the study of juvenile delinquency, this theory has been used to explore justifications for shoplifting (Cromwell & Thurman 2003), online consumer misbehavior (Harris & Dumas 2009), and even business ethics (Heath 2008). Especially relevant to the present project, DeYoung (1998) applied a modified version of this theory to the examination of legitimizing rhetorics of members of the pedophile organization North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA), which justify and

27

advocate for adult sexual relationships with male children; focusing on four of the five, denial of injury, condemnation of the condemners, appeal to higher loyalties and denial of the victim. Through *denial of injury*, DeYoung underscores the ways in which the justifications for adult-child sex place responsibility for any harm that may come to children as a result of said relationships on the public for the responses to the behavior. By not acknowledging any harm that may occur during the acts themselves and placing emphasis on the reactions causing harm, they are displacing blame and neutralizing their actions and redefining adult-child sex as positive. Through *condemnation of the condemners*, DeYoung shows the ways in which those in NAMBLA deflect the focus from their actions and themselves to those who are calling attention to their behavior. DeYoung characterizes the *appeal to higher loyalties* as a way that those in NAMBLA are justifying their behaviors in an attempt to help the children. Finally observing the *denial of the victim*, DeYoung illuminates how NAMBLA members claim there is no victim because the boys are willing participants.

As reflected in the following chapter, my observations of the Duggar response to SSA reflect many of the aforementioned justifications and neutralizations, however I focus on and forefront gender where DeYoung did not. She placed no emphasis on the fact that NAMBLA is a gendered organization that supports male domination. Research on SSA explicates the fact that of all reported incidents of SSA (both officially and also through disclosure in therapeutic settings), sibling sex offenders are predominantly male. This is

consistent with research on sexual assault in general, suggesting the necessity

to forefront the gendered nature of this harm. My emphasis on the gendered

nature of SSA is also informed by observations from Maruna & Copes' (2005)

(re)examination of neutralization theory. Maruna and Copes (2005) outline the

steadfast importance of neutralization theory but call for an "evolution" of the

theory that focuses on the nuanced cognition—if it is to remain relevant to

criminology. Specifically, the authors point to various ways in which deviants

persist in harmful behavior by pointing to stable and global ideological bounds

such as "that's just the way the world works" and "that's just the way I am" (p. 4).

These ideological bounds present in neutralizations of SSA are similar if not

matched to those of other forms of sexual violence, which I will examine further in

the findings section of this thesis.

Maruna & Copes (2005) critically examined not only the theory, but also

applications of neutralizations theory over the last five decades. The authors

interrogated the fact that Sykes and Matza originally created the theory in an

attempt to explain the etiology of crime, and problematized this, stating;

> This makes little sense (how can one neutralize something before they
>
> have even done it?) and makes the theory difficult to test. Neutralization
>
> should instead be seen as a persistence in or desistence from criminal
>
> behavior (p. 1).

This distinctive call to shift from etiology to persistence is important as

SSA researchers point to the discovery that SSA is more often prolonged rather

than a one-time occurrence, and often more harmful (Wiehe 1997, Laviola 1992,

Caffaro 2014). Neutralization theory serves as a lens through which to

understand the persistence of this harm. Similarly, the authors remark that

deviants will desist from crime by separating themselves from the harmful

behavior ("e.g. 'It was a complete accident'). By shifting the focus from etiology of

crime as was Sykes and Matza's intent, to what makes people continue criminal

behavior (or not) Maruna and Copes (2005), highlight how the perception of the

harm doer by others (and that which the harm doers have of themselves).

Maruna and Copes (2005) introduce psychological research on what are called

"thinking errors" in psychology, but are called neutralizations here. By re-

conceptualizing neutralizations as thinking errors rather than justifications, the

perception of harm doers as incapable of rehabilitation is diminished.

It may seem as if the perception of harm doers is irrelevant, however, as

Sykes and Matza (1957) and Maruna and Copes (2005) point out, perception is

very relevant. Here, Maruna and Copes (2005) push for an incorporation of

personal narratives into understanding how deviant behavior comes to be. As

criminological theories such as labeling theory (Becker 1960) have shown,

perception has the ability to encourage the persistence and/or desistence in

criminal activity. Furthermore, Maruna and Copes underscore the fact that

neutralizations highlight how deviants actually adhere to the moral bounds of

wider society, even though their behaviors are in opposition to such morality. This illuminates the possibilities for rehabilitation, or change. By examining the narratives—the stories told by those who have done harm and by cooperating others —one can really get at the justifications and neutralizations. This is to say that it is necessary to go beyond the "why did you do it" question and look instead to the cognition the harm doer has around the deviant behavior, as well as their perception of themselves and society as a whole.

In a sense, by re-examining neutralizations theory to incorporate a narrative approach, a bridge between individual neutralizations (i.e. the justifications that the harm doer tells themselves) and ideological discourses (i.e. what we are socialized to believe more generally about our lives and our agency in the world) is created. The result is cultural logics such as Presser (2013) names as structures that conduce to harm.

## Presser's (2013) General Theory of Harm

Presser (2013) presents a general theory of harm based on "the logical systems that permit" all harmful behaviors (*ix*) including intimate partner violence, genocide, meat-eating, and penal harm.  Where Sykes and Matza conceptualize those logical systems as self-*statements*, Presser sees them as story-like, situating the harming self in a fuller expression of who one is in the world. Discursive engines of harm are "cultural logics, typically in the form of stories,

31

that reduce the target of harm and conjure ourselves as both authorized to harm and powerless not to" (p. 109); she calls the latter a power paradox. Presser emphasizes that gendered harms such as intimate partner violence are possible due to the "dominant cultural discourses that set out gendered positions" (p.74). By emphasizing the paradoxical narrative of harm doers, Presser demonstrates the ideological justifications that materialize in harm. Applied to the broader topic of juvenile sexual violence, adolescent males are expected to have sex: consider the common trope that "boys will be boys." Since men and boys are considered inherently sexual, it is no surprise that SSA is evidently perpetrated predominantly by males.  SSA is often conceptualized as simply exploration, or responses include "he was just curious about girls." Society has constructed ideological grounds upon which adolescents are in a power paradox. They are ideologically empowered with the expectation to be sexually explorative and powerless to stop themselves due to this essential part of their being. Presser (2013) refers to how the internalized justifications for violence are manifested when the individual mentally accepts the cultural logics and internally creates a license to harm. This license to harm is not an actual permission to harm, it is in fact an interpretation of the cultural logics that create the conditions conducive to harm.

This macro level theoretical lens points to the cultural messages that are being delivered through socialization and how those apply to SSA. This is important for the purposes of this research as internal justifications and

neutralizations alone are not enough to understand SSA in terms of criminology. Presser's theory requires that those cultural logics are interrogated which better create the foundation for understanding SSA in terms of other forms of sexual violence. This is to say that through the use of general theories such as Presser's (2013), SSA cannot be dismissed as simply an individual action, but must be tied to larger themes of male dominance and gendered harms. I argue that those cultural logics that Presser (2013) identifies are absolutely important to understanding SSA, have been explored in depth in research on sexual violence such as rape-myths and gender such as hegemonic masculinity

# CHAPTER FOUR
# RESEARCH METHODS

Language conveys meaning. This thesis seeks to understand the meaning potential and messaging conveyed through The Duggar interviews. My study uses thematic and (critical) discourse analysis (CDA). *Critical* discourse analysis refers to the study of the language used in discursive interactions, in an effort to "expose strategies that appear normal or neutral on the surface but which may in fact be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events and persons for particular ends" (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 5). A critical approach emphasizes the ways that language is used as a tool to communicate ideological work and specifically power, in nuanced and subtle ways. Researchers have used critical discourse analysis to examine the discursive logics of nuclear defense planning (Cohn 1987), meat-eating (Adams 1994; Presser 2013), and multinational corporate misconduct (Vaara and Tienar 2008) among other phenomena.

The multimodal approach to critical discourse analysis, or MCDA, refers to the examination of not only verbal but also visual communication, and how the visual and verbal either support or retract from one another. The multimodal approach has been used to examine the discursive and semiotic logics of female genital cosmetic surgeries (Moran and Lee 2013), pharmaceutical hair loss treatment (Harvey 2013), the representation of women on Australian breast cancer websites (Gibson, Lee & Crabb 2016), and to examine reports issued

regarding the Iran nuclear program (Behnam & Mahmoudy 2013), among others. Using this approach, I examine not only the words The Duggars use, but also the meaning conveyed about Joshua, the abuse and their role as parents through the visual. Imagery "can be used to say things that we cannot say in language" (Machin and Mayr 2012; p. 9), as well as support that which is being conveyed through spoken language.

## Why The Duggars?

Very rarely, if ever, has a family come forward to publicly discuss SSA to a worldwide audience. This thesis grew from voluntary research I started in my undergraduate program, in which I sought to research and understand SSA. When I presented my research and members of my classroom cohort assessed my work, I received so many responses that confided that they too had been victims of or knew a survivor of SSA. This prompted me to continue research on SSA, questioning: If this is as common as it seems based on this small sample of disclosure, why is it unheard of and minimally researched? When the story broke one year later on The Duggar family, I followed the story closely, analyzing the stories The Duggar family told. After being introduced to MCDA, I knew this method would help me to explicate that which is being said and conveyed through the interviews. The Duggars present as the perfect case study to understand what it means to be labeled as a family in which SSA occurs.

## Data

In mid-2015, Fox news moderator Megyn Kelly interviewed Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar along with two of their daughters, SSA victims Jessa and Jill, for her show, *The Kelly File.* The interviews aired originally on June 3rd, 4th, and 5th in 2015. Four video recordings, totaling one hour and 44 minutes of the interviews were made publicly available on youtube.com, which I had professionally transcribed. I analyzed the transcriptions as well as the visual semiotics of the interviews; I found that words used told a story of male dominance and female submission that is underscored and reified through the visual.

## Analytical Procedures

I examined the data for various lexical choices that speak to constructions of SSA and power relations, keeping an eye on the meaning potential of the interviews to determine how the visual compares to the lexical. Meaning potential is important, Machin and Mayr quote, because "it suggests not something fixed, but a possibility, and it encourages us to consider specifically how any visual element or feature is connected to and used with other visual" and lexical choices that have to ability to support or change the meaning. That is, what The Duggars are trying to tell us, both explicitly and implicitly. There are so many procedures used in MCDA to discover the meaning, both lexical and semiotic. Many lexical choices having that effect pertain to modality, metaphors, verb processes, overlexicalization, nominalization, presupposition and structural oppositions. A

quick overview is required to understand why these are the best procedures to understand more fully that which The Duggars present. Modality refers to how committed one constructs oneself or another as being in a given situation (Machin and Mayr 2010, p. 186). Rhetorical tropes, such as metaphors, are tools used to align oneself, a person or something with the meaning and symbolic nature of the subject of the metaphor (Machin and Mayr 2010). Transitivity is used to understand how actions are represented, and refers to an analysis of the actions, actors and the recipients of action (Machin and Mayr 2010). For this research, visual transitivity (how The Duggars are represented physically) was examined and compared to transitivity in the linguistic discourses. Describing linguistic transitivity, Halliday et al (2014) refer to six verb processes as functional in constructing who does what and to whom, and the relevance of the verb processes chosen in creating meaning. Those processes are *material* (referring to action and pointing to those that bring action), *mental* (related to cognition or emotion), *behavioral* (representations of physical or psychological behavior, verbal (constructing how things are said), *relational* (how things relate) and *existential* (how things are to come to be). Overlexicalization refers to the use of excessive text to persuade (Machin and Mayr 2012). Nominalization is a linguistic tool that works to cover responsibility for actions or events, by replacing verb processes with noun construction, effectively removing the agent of harm (Machin and Mayr 2012). Presupposition refers to ways that ideological thoughts are presented as stable and understanding is implied through the assumption of

37

a shared meaning.  (Machin and Mayr 2012). Finally, structural oppositions refer to comparisons made between two actions/things/people, underscoring the gravity of the "other" action/thing/person (Machin and Mayr 2012).

Much like analysis of linguistic discourses, the images of The Duggars say much about the construction of the story they are telling. I analyzed visual modality by coding, in distinct phases, (1) the setting and background of the interviews, (2) the position of the actors, and (3) the color scheme. Visual transitivity incorporates the same six processes associated with Halliday et. al's (2014) linguistic transitivity analysis, observing how actors are represented – that is – who is doing what and how are they doing it? I observed the setting of the interviews, and coded the meaning of this location. Location and setting is an important feature as the more natural, articulated and deep the setting and background, the more natural and symbolic of emotions and feelings, and solidified in time and space (Machin and Mayr 2010). The position of The Duggars visually is also important, as pose is representative of broader ideologies and values, and specifically the metaphorical direction of up or down is symbolic of power (Machin and Mayr, 2010; pp. 70-75). Essentially, everything about the interviews conveys meaning – from the flowers in the vase on the counter, to the actual words being spoken.

# CHAPTER FIVE
# ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

At first glance, the story The Duggars present to the public is one of a family who did the best they could to deal with the devastating realization that their teenage son, Josh, sexually abused girls. They present themselves as victims of tabloid agendas, and as being a good wholesome Christian family who did the right thing and still became victims of media slander. They present the abuse as not a big deal; the victims didn't know about or understand the abuse. While not excusing his actions, they stress the insignificance of the behaviors as mere exploration and curiosity. They present Joshua as the picture of remorse, and rehabilitation. This is the story they are telling through the lay meaning of the words they are using to present this story. The visual also conveys meaning.

When Jim Bob and Michelle greet Kelly and welcome her into their home, their children are sitting at a table playing a game of Settlers of Catan while countless photographs of the family line the walls. An analog clock is centered directly over the entry way. Multiple vases of flowers rest in various spaces on the counters. Images of their 19 children are all the same size and perfectly organized on the refrigerator, from oldest to youngest. As the interview begins, the children are no longer sitting at the table which now appears to be perfectly set, as if ready for dinner. The meaning conveyed through this is that of a family, a good family, who really has it together.

The foregoing observations are made at the surface level; ideologically there is so much more going on. I argue that, collectively, the discourses paint an image of the physical expression of adolescent male sexual curiosity as normative, of men being hierarchically elevated above women and also construct sibling sexual abuse as benign.

## Findings

Importantly, I discovered during my analysis the patterned nature of how committed The Duggars are to the stories they tell and how that is reflected through modality. So how committed are The Duggars to the story they tell, from a MCDA perspective? I found that modalities, or representations of being committed to whatever is being said, are patterned. When The Duggars refer to their family, they are very committed to the information they are conveying: they express high modality. This is done through using concrete language (underlined), reflected in statements such as this one by Jim Bob:

> You know what, <u>as parents you're not</u> mandatory reporters, <u>you are</u> – the law allows for parents <u>to do that they think is best for their child</u>. And so <u>we got him out</u> of the home and <u>sent him down</u> to this place, that was probably <u>the best decision we made</u> throughout this whole process because it was at that place, this is the first time Josh had ever been out of the home.

Statements such as these show that The Duggars are committed to their family and to the choices they made in response to the abusive behavior. Visual modality analysis underscores this finding as the interview is set in the kitchen of the Duggar home, often conceptualized as the heart of the home. Images of all 19 children are pasted on the refrigerator in the backdrop, as well as views of a completely set table and cut flowers in the background. This family is a good wholesome family and they are committed to that image both visually and linguistically.

In contrast, The Duggars responses to the actual abusive behavior committed by Josh, reflect low modality (underlined) such as this statement by Jim Bob:

And so, um, there was a couple more times that he came and told us what he had done and we were just devastated. You know, all these – again, this was not rape, uh, or anything like that, this was like touching somebody over their clothes, there were a couple instances where he touched them under their clothes but it was like a few seconds, and then he came to us and was crying and told us what happened.

Low modality insinuates that they are not very committed to the story they are telling about the sexual abuse, and is reflected throughout the interviews, by all four members of the family whom were interviewed. This lack of commitment to

41

the abusive behavior insinuates that due to the reports of the abuse to tabloids, an admission that sexual abuse is warranted, however, only in so much as they need to minimize the collateral damage that could (and actually did) come to their television empire and their carefully constructed wholesome family image. The low modality also supports the mythic notions that SSA is largely non-abusive in nature; supporting the patriarchal ideologies that boys are sexually curious and naturally prone to exploration of the female body, even if that female is a (much) younger sister.

During my analysis, I identified four main overlapping themes, channeled by all speakers – that is, both parents and both victims: harm and responsibility, offenders and victims, knowledge, and patriarchal power. In what follows I will present findings that support those themes.

### *Knowledge*

Expertise within the discourse is patterned – who is knowledgeable and what they are knowledgeable about remains consistent. Jim Bob is constructed as the "knower," the expert, at making decisions, he has the knowledge regarding the right things to do – he makes assertive statements and represents himself as taking action. Michelle is constructed as knowing the emotional aspects associated with her family and conveys that knowledge throughout. Jessa and Jill are knowledgeable in that they are victims and they know the behavior was not a big deal. Josh is constructed as the supreme "knower" through this discourse. He is the owner of the secret of the abuse.

Michelle: …I think we had one ray of hope in that Josh had a tender

conscience and he was the one that came and shared on his own, even

though the others didn't know anything of his wrongdoing.

Jim Bob: ...we wouldn't have known any of these things if Josh hadn't told

us.

Jill and Jessa explicitly state their purpose in sitting for the interviews is to *share*

their knowledge as victims, in regard to the moral outrage sparked by the public

surfacing of the abuse.

Jill:…as we have been seeing these things that people have been saying

about our family, we feel like as victims, we have to come out and speak.

Jessa: …I was one of the victims, so I can speak out and I can say this

and, and set the record straight here.

They also position themselves as the voices for all of Joshua's victims. They

state that they cannot speak for the victims, yet they directly speak for all of them

about forgiveness and moving on, even the babysitter:

Jessa:  Oh, everybody's forgiven.  We've all forgiven him.

Jill:  Yes.

Jessa:  We've all moved on as a family.

Jill:  That was long ago and back...

Jessa:  Yeah.

Kelly:  And what about the babysitter?

Jill:  ...back then...

Kelly:  Her, too?

Jill:  Do what?

Jessa:  Yeah.

Kelly:  The babysitter as well?

Jessa:  Definitely.

Jill:  Yeah.

Jill and Jessa know that the abuse is behind them, that this is something they have all moved on from. Their construction as knowers is limited, however. They are not constructed as "knowers" regarding the abusive behavior or their bodies. When Jill and Jessa are discussed as victims of sexual abuse, they are referred to as being oblivious and not privy to the facts of their own abuse. Jessa even abstracts herself from the abuse:

Jim Bob: They – they didn't – they didn't really know. And, actually what happened was we asked them first if anything happened, and then it was after some other things happened that we actually shared with them.

Jessa: …he was very sly, like the girls didn't catch on, you know.  It was like, okay, if he catches a girl sleeping, you know, like a quick feel or

whatever and -- or like, you know, if <u>you're just not really aware</u>, you

know?  In the situations it happened when the girls were awake, it was

like, <u>they weren't aware of what was happening</u>.  It was very, it was very

subtle, and so I think that for us, it's like okay, we realize this is serious but

at the same time, it wasn't like a horror story…

The identified patterns of knowledge reflect the existing societal patterns of

gender ideology. Men are assertive, aggressive, knowledgeable and ruled by

their bodies; women are passive, emotional and detached from their bodies.

Regarding the construction of gender The Duggars are creating, the men and

boys are privileged with the information associated with action and doing things.

The women and girls are constructed as the knowers of emotion and recipients

of action.

Jim Bob is also constructed as the knower of the law and legal responses.

He also knows someone who worked in a juvenile sex offender treatment facility,

and "felt like our son's heart had gone astray" so he opted not to seek help the

first time Josh abused a sibling and opted not to seek sex offender specific help

at all even after  at least 7 separate incidences. He knows someone who mentors

troubled youth, and with that knowledge:

Jim Bob: …we felt like that, uh, going from a perspective of – of

really reaching his heart first would be important, and so that's the reason

we sent him down to Little Rock to work with this man.

45

Jim Bob knows what the legal definition for pedophilia is, "…actually a pedophile is an adult that preys on children," and he knows that their son doesn't fit that mold; "the legal definition is 16 and up for preying on a child, so he was a child preying on a child." There is much that Jim Bob knows, and he is committed to that knowledge. He presents high modality by using material verb processes that emphasize action such as, "actually," "are," "the truth is," etc. He uses collectivization when he speaks his opinion as "we," he constructs himself as the voice of the group.

Michelle does speak, but her knowledge contributions pertain to the realm of emotion. She is the presenter of emotions and mental processes such as being "devastated," "weeping," "shocked," and reaffirming rhetorical tropes such as metaphor of the good shepherd, that uphold the gender order. Using material processes, Jim Bob and Josh are constructed as the "doers," they act, and whether abusive or not – it is action – reflecting the ideological grounds that construct men as action takers. While Michelle, Jill and Jessa (along with the other three unnamed victims) are constructed as "feelers" using mental processes; reflecting the ideological grounds that construct women as passive and weak. Jim Bob does most of the talking, Michelle does most of the agreeing. To Michelle, Jim Bob blatantly states "go ahead, I'll let you say it. Start over, start over, sure". Michelle seems to only have power in that she is given it by Jim Bob. She is affirming his statements.

Visually, knowledge is also reaffirmed. The bright and richly saturated colors The Duggars chose to wear are also symbolic, according to Machin and Mayr (2012), of representing truth and transparency and evoking emotion.

### Harm and Responsibility

What is constructed as harm and who is responsible for it is also patterned. Collectively, The Duggars portrayed Joshua's actions as not very serious by comparing them to other more serious events committed by others. By trivializing the behaviors and by conflating abusiveness with length of time of comprehension they also remove Joshua from responsibility of harm. By using "the other," the pedophile, as a referent, The Duggars minimize the seriousness of Josh's behavior. Jim Bob even refers to legal definitions to support the distinction between his son's behavior and pedophilia: "and I think the legal definition is 16 and up for being an adult preying on a child...so, he was a child preying on a child." He was 14 and 15 years at the time of the abuse, a mere 1-2 years away from that legal threshold. Following Jewkes, Ugelvik (2015) underscores comparisons such as the one made by The Duggars as a way of constructing oneself as morally superior to the "other." In the case of The Duggars, this serves to downplay SSA as not that serious since pedophilia is abhorrent.  In addition, they construct an image of his abusive behavior as not that bad:

47

Jessa:          ...the extent of it was <u>mild</u>, inappropriate touching, um, <u>on</u>

                <u>fully clothed victims</u>, um, most of it, <u>while girls were sleeping</u>

Jim Bob:        ...again, <u>this was not rape or anything like that</u>, this was like

                touching somebody over their clothes. There were a *<u>couple</u>*

                *<u>of instances where he touched them under their clothes</u>, but*

                *<u>it was like a few seconds...</u>*

Jessa:          ...none of the victims were even aware.


By emphasizing the allegedly limited speed and time associated with Joshua's

actions, Jim Bob and Jessa are suggesting their triviality. Similarly, the emphasis

on the victims' lack of awareness supports triviality of the abuse.  One is not so

much a victim if not immediately aware of one's victimization. Also implied, is the

notion that one cannot be a victim if one is asleep. If one cannot be a victim, then

is there a harm?

Josh's actions are generally structurally placed at the end of a sentence or

statement which Machin & Mayr (2012) state create a distance between the

speaker and the event:


Jim Bob: Well, twelve years ago we went through one of the most darkest

times that our family's ever gone through. <u>And our son Josh</u> came to us on

his own and he was crying, and he had just turned 14 and he said that he

had actually <u>improperly touched some of our daughters</u>.

48

By distancing the actor from the actions, Josh is separated from the abuse, which

Machin and Mayr (2012) underscore is inherently a reduction in responsibility, a

common theme for The Duggars. Josh is also constructed as not responsible for

the sexual behaviors by his sister and victim, Jessa:


He was a boy, a young boy, in puberty, and a little too curious about girls.


This statement acts as a presupposition that assumes that adolescent males are

inherently going to attempt to explore the female body, any female body. Thus,

Josh is portrayed as powerless to stop himself from committing the acts and

ultimately not responsible for those actions.  This supports the cultural logics that

Presser (2013) underscores act as motivators that together with internalization of

ideological work licenses to harm. Gendered socialization creates this image of

boys being curious about girl's bodies and powerless to prevent themselves from

exploring that curiosity.


### *Offenders and Victims*

In their interview with Kelly, to "set the record straight" Jill and Jessa

identify themselves as victims of Joshua's abuse, and claim that label.


Jill: …we really feel like as we've been seeing these headlines, as we've

been seeing these things people are saying about are family, we feel like

as the victims, we have to come out and speak. This is something like we chose to do. Nobody asked us to do this.

They claim they do not *feel* like victims, but necessarily have to come forward to proclaim themselves as victims to they protect their family. They defend their parent's actions and absolve Josh of responsibility for his actions. This is not to say they blame themselves for what Joshua did, but that they have chosen to act as the collective voices of all the victims and to speak for Josh's growth. They have forgiven him, he is not an offender, not a pedophile. Just a boy who was too curious and has since been forgiven, moved on and grown up.

Interestingly, Jim Bob and Michelle construct themselves as victims as well. Though they were not victims of sexual abuse, they were victimized as a result of the abuse and construct themselves to the public as such. By aligning with the construction of victimhood, blame can be avoided, and empathy garnered. This is evident in statements such as the following:

Michelle: We were shocked. I mean, we were just devastated. Uh, I don't think any parent is prepared for trauma like that.
Michelle: I think as parents, we felt, uh, we're failures, you know. Here we tried to raise our kids to do – to do what's right, to know what's right, and yet one of our children made some really bad choices. And I think as a parent we were just – we were devastated.

The parents, Jim Bob and Michelle, also construct themselves as victims of the media. Not only are they vicarious victims of their son's abusive behavior, but when asked how they think the supposed sealed police report surfaced, Jim Bob and Michelle claim that there is an "agenda", a "bribe" or "some kind of profit." This simultaneously constructs the tabloid and the individuals associated with it, as "bad people." They, The Duggars, are good parents and good people and the people who have this agenda are "bad." This structural opposition acts as a deflection device to remove the focus on their family and the accounts of SSA and toward those who are out to get them.

### *Patriarchal[2] Power*

Linguistic manifestations of patriarchal power appear through the use of metaphor and other linguistic devices. Specifically, Jim Bob compares himself to Jesus and his struggles to the struggles of Jesus concerning his flock of sheep:

> I think Jesus shared a story about he had 100 sheep and one went astray and there he was, he took care of the 99 but he also went after the one that went astray. And so as parents, we still love Josh and we loved our other ones, but we are going to protect those that are in our hands, but we are also going to make sure Josh doesn't make any wrong choices.

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[2] I orient toward patriarchal power instead of gender power in general, because of the powerful father aspect of this family.

By comparing himself to Jesus Christ, Jim Bob positions himself at the top of the social hierarchy that is his family. Michelle reminds him that he is a "good shepherd." In his controlling her ability to speak, as previously mentioned, and her need to affirm his position as the shepherd of the family, she seems to only have power in that she is given it by Jim Bob.

To support some of the main observations made from the textual analysis associated with patriarchal power, Michelle's endearing gaze while he is talking reifies the structure of the conversation, the fact that she repeatedly holds this ideology. The setting also matters. The camera is angled so that the majority of the time, it is zoomed in on Jim Bob, signaling that he is the most important actor in the interview. Jim Bob and Michelle are positioned next to each other, yet his chair is elevated above hers, again raising his importance.

On analyzing the statements of Jill and Jessa, two of the victims, and Jim Bob and Michelle, the parents, I observed that they tend virtually the same story, the discourse appears to follow the same. Jim Bob dominated the interview with Kelly and the responses he gave were nearly identical to the answers Jill and Jessa gave in their interview that followed directly afterward.

## Discussion

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the meaning The Duggars constructed around the sexual abuse perpetrated by Joshua Duggar. I observed how the visual aspects of the interviews contributed to or took away from the

linguistic, and how the messages sent by The Duggars contribute to and perpetrate ideologies that perpetuate harms such as SSA. Informed by criminological theories on harm and the continuation of harm, my findings support the notion that The Duggar interviews do in fact have the potential to perpetuate the myth that SSA is benign, and even more, excuse SSA as normative and exploratory, reinforcing those gender ideologies.

Clearly, the Duggar family upholds the notion that boys will inherently desire to explore the female body as the part of adolescence and dismiss his behavior as just that and to neutralize his behaviors as not that harmful and just curiosity. Their belief frames how they and the audience they speak to see Joshua's behaviors. What is difficult, however, is how these beliefs acted as justifications and excuses that allowed to behavior to continue overtime. Although the police report was ordered to be destroyed, it still circulates the internet. Names and ages have been redacted, but it serves to outline the fact that Joshua's deviant sexual behaviors continued across the span of a year to a year and a half, and that there were seven reported incidences. Research shows that SSA is the most underreported and likely most common form of sexual violence, most victims do not come forward. Why would they when the messages being sent ideologically are that it is normative for adolescent boys to be curious and that any physical manifestation of such is only exploration?  Ideologically, Josh has been given a license to explore his sister's bodies because he is "just a boy" and "a little too curious about girls." He cannot stop himself because his behavior

is inherent and not his responsibility. He is depicted as remorseful, apologetic, crying and pleading for forgiveness, yet still his responsibility for his actions have been reduced and excused by those socially constructed ways of thinking about gender.  Throughout the interviews, The Duggars made every attempt to neutralize the abuse. The techniques Sykes and Matza (1957) outlined can be seen throughout by all. As Joshua did not participate in the interview process, we cannot determine how he was able to neutralize, internally, his own behaviors and persist in them over the span of time.  What is clear, however, is that there are external neutralizations for his behaviors.

There is a clear denial of responsibility as outlined above. Even more, Jim Bob, Jill, and Jessica all clearly point to the denial of any injury both physically, and emotionally, by stating so clearly. By comparing Joshua's actions to those of "pedophiles" and their experiences to women who have had it worse, they also denied any injury that has been done. By speaking as voices of the collective victims, Jill and Jessa work to neutralize Joshua's behaviors, calling attention to the "agenda,"  "bribe," and motives of others as more important and more harmful than Joshua's actions.

This is not to say that they are not experts on their own experiences. They lived through this experience and continue to live through the aftermath. What is important and the purpose of this thesis is how those messages they conveyed to a worldwide audience will be used and interpreted by those in similar situations to determine how to proceed forward. If the most widely

54

available interpretation of what SSA is and the effects that it has on the future is

what the Duggers have presented, then likely SSA will continue to be

conceptualized as exploratory, benign, and normative.

# CHAPTER SIX

# CONCLUSION

Sibling sexual abuse, or SSA, is a serious problem. Unlike adult perpetrated child sexual abuse, there is no concrete definition of SSA. Definitions vary by study and as such contribute to a popular myth that SSA is exploratory in nature and thus benign. SSA is gendered, victims are predominantly female and offenders are predominantly male, which lends to the need for SSA to be considered in the larger umbrella of sexual violence as many of the characteristics that legitimate sexual violence in general also legitimate SSA. Sexual abuse by brother offenders included more force, threats and coercion, whereas adult perpetrated cases generally involve grooming methods (or ways of gaining access to/and or trust from the child) such as gifts and making the child feel special that they share a secret or in some cases *threats* of force but not actual force. This leads to long lasting and deleterious effects that are often more severe than adult perpetrated sexual abuse. The known social conditions that manifest potentialities for SSA occur when there is an obvious power imbalance where one sibling has power over the other. SSA is clearly a nefarious gendered harm that requires local power imbalances as well as a context within which this kind of harmful behavior is minimized.

On the well-established constitutive role that cultural meaning plays in harm, I probed the cultural meanings that sustain sibling sexual abuse, and evidently other forms of sexual violence.

Statements made by The Duggars are optimal data for researchers to examine, as they are in the public domain, "there" to analyze systematically. Their hyper-visibility makes their constructions of the abusive behavior and their reactions to the abuse, tools of interpretation that others can rely upon in the event that their family is experiencing this type of abuse. The Duggars perpetuate patriarchal power and lack of responsibility on the part of boys and men for the harm they do.

They did so by channeling particular discourses.  I found that The Duggars channeled specific ways of thinking about gender that are used to legitimate and perpetuate gendered harms, such as the logic that Joshua was "a little too curious about girls." They negated his actions by stating that the victims were asleep, or unaware of what was happening, an insinuation that one must be awake or aware of the intent to be a victim of sexual abuse. Their statements also pointed to the neutralization of Joshua's behaviors by comparing his actions to pedophilia and reinforcing that his behaviors were not anything close to that.

They also supported, through discourse, patriarchy. This was clear through visual aspects such as Michelle's gaze, the elevation and location of the seating, and through the verbal interactions. Jim Bob was constructed as the knower and taker of action, Michelle was associated with feelings and passivity.

These findings support patriarchal ideology and gendered ways of being. Jim Bob was obviously the person in charge and nothing happened until he chose to take action.

This research is an examination of the stories one family told about their experiences with SSA.  It cannot act as a representation of how all families experience SSA, or even tell about it. Indeed, The Duggars are unique because of their celebrity.  They may be unique because of the powerful grip of patriarchal ideology, rooted in religion and traditionalism. I suspect, though, that The Duggars distill elements that are prevalent in American culture. They are not subcultural.

Cases of SSA are not widely available for research due to the various issues with formulating research around a very sensitive topic. What is interesting about the Duggars is how their multiple statuses make them ideal for being public voices of SSA in American culture today. In other words, how might this situation have been different had this been a family that wasn't the epitome of white, conservative, evangelism that American ideals are founded upon? Future research could focus on how race factors into the experiences and outcomes of SSA. Interviewing families who have experienced SSA who are not celebrities, of various statuses in society to examine what stories they tell about past abuse and comparing them to the stories of the Duggars could give a more deep rooted understanding to how status may play into life experiences.

Ethically, though, I cannot and would not collect stories of ongoing or future abuse.

Future research could also consider the voices of sibling offenders, to determine how they narrate their behaviors.  An interesting angle would be to consider the life-course narratives of sibling sex offenders as a population, much like Messerschmidt (2000) obtained and compared stories told by young sex offenders, to determine differences and similarities in the stories they tell. This could help to create a more solid understanding of this harm. Findings may also uncover the salience of the sibling relationship and create a pathway for understanding how to mitigate future harms.

While SSA remains a form of sexual harm that doesn't have the public attention, it is irresponsible not to consider how perceptions of sexual assault in the era of the #metoo movement are changing. Hyper-awareness and dedications to ending sexual assault could lean toward a connection of SSA into the larger umbrella of sexual assault. Resolving this form of sexual harm warrants a different kind of approach because it is so close to the family. Prior research on SSA focuses on the chaotic environment in which SSA occurs, and lends toward a more therapeutic, transformative justice approach. An approach that focuses on rehabilitation and accountability for the offender, as well as victim centered treatment of the entire family unit rather than a punitive criminal justice approach, would be ideal.

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# VITA

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