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**Searching for safe space: the absent presence of childhood sexual abuse in Human Geography  
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## **Searching for safe space: the absent presence of childhood sexual abuse in Human Geography**

### **Abstract**

In 1993, Julia Cream published a paper deconstructing the politics surrounding the 'cluster' of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) diagnoses in Cleveland, UK. In 2013, in a viewpoint article in this journal Dowler et al., called for a change in higher education governance, after the widely publicised Penn State CSA scandal. Within this twenty-year period, these were two of only a handful of papers to be published in geography, focusing on CSA. Upwards of 1 in 8 people in the UK, North America, Australia and New Zealand are survivors of CSA. Other social science disciplines have established the impact CSA can have on mental health, relationships and life choices, all of which are lived out in space and place. CSA survivors are also over-represented amongst geographically marginalised groups. We argue that human geography's silence on CSA represents a significant oversight not only in terms of understandings people's relations to, use of and perceptions of space and place but also in terms of contributing to the silencing of survivors. We call for a recognition that this absent presence is associated with individual and social processes of dissociation and denial.

Keywords: Childhood Sexual Abuse, Trauma, Dissociation, Survivors, Voice

### **Introduction**

'Repression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness.' (Herman 2001, 9)

We were inspired by *Gender, Place and Culture's* celebration of the last 20 years of publication to write this brief overview of a significant gap in the geography literature over this same period. Whilst we have been writing this article, a number of high profile court cases have led to the prosecution of well known British entertainers and the setting up of a government inquiry to investigate networks of abusers at the highest level of institutions of the state. Repression, dissociation and denial may continue but the hiding places for abusers are increasingly exposed.

Since the 1970s, feminist scholars have brought the systematic study of rape and domestic violence into the academy. Early work focused on 'street rape' and violence perpetrated by strangers, increasingly pointing to acquaintance and date rape and other types of abuse in intimate relationships. As research with adult women continued, the issue of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) began to emerge in the mid 1980s, with specific reference in epidemiological studies (Russell 1983; Summit 1983; Kempe and Kempe 1984).

Feminist geography and publications emerged out of the same social movements and research agendas. Beginning in the late 1980s, pioneering scholars such as Valentine and Pain began to look critically at the geography of violence against women, with the initial focus being mainly on women's access to public space and its social justice consequences (Pain 1991). These

geographers have contributed by pointing out that constraints imposed by fear on women's use of space, limit their access to space thus impacting on their ability to participate fully in society (Valentine, 1989).

Pain's survey of women living in Edinburgh, conducted in the mid-1990s, was groundbreaking in its scope and in the information it generated about women's emotional relationships to and physical access to public and private spaces. It demonstrated the complexity and impact of fear and the subtle social forces keeping women in their place (1995, 1997). Matching the epidemiological studies of the 1980s, Pain's (1995) survey found that twenty-five percent of her respondents had been sexually abused before the age of 16, in contrast to only 10 per cent who reported being the victim of sexual violence in adulthood. This led her to suggest that fear of violent crime may be linked to a lifetime accumulation of physical and sexual abuse (see also Koskela 1997). However, this is when the field of geography began to diverge from other fields concerned with sexual violence. Whereas other subject areas saw figures like these and began to study CSA and its effects, neither Pain, nor any other human geographer that we have identified has acted on the implications that CSA is widespread and has potentially dramatic and long-lasting impacts on survivors' personal geographies. We therefore observe that CSA is a 'present absence' in human geography; its absence can be identified in the body of human geography literature and, whilst not in itself an exclusively feminist issue, it is also noticeably absent in feminist geography literature. We argue that this present absence resonates with themes of silencing and dissociation, powerful processes in the context and experience of sexual abuse.

Silencing and dissociation are key aspects of the experience of childhood sexual abuse, with significant geographical implications. Through the traumatic experience of violation, children are constantly frightened, shamed and silenced; they lose a voice for the overwhelming experiences they are suffering and their silence can persist into adult life. This silencing renders their experience unspeakable and has enabled many perpetrators to go unpunished and unchecked. During sexual abuse, children learn to protect themselves through separating parts of themselves from the immediate physical and temporal experience. Once established as a survival strategy, dissociation can persist into adult life (Hawkins 2007). Survivors can find themselves “disoriented spatially and temporally, [with] other places and people [being] projected onto the places and people present” (Burstow 2003, 1303). At the social scale, dissociation happens when wider communities (including academic ones) continue to deny the existence, extent and impact of CSA, thereby rendering CSA doubly unspeakable. Only a handful of papers in geography *focus* on CSA (Cream 1993; Horton 2001; Grubestic 2010; Dowler et al. 2013), contributing geographical knowledge to this important field of study.

## **Presence**

Although there is consensus that the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse is high, pinning down the numbers continues to challenge (Pereda et al. 2009a). Debates over how to define child sexual abuse, abusers and those who have been abused are contested; numbers of survivors vary depending on the population sampled, definitions used and the methods of data collection (Wyatt and Peters 1986; Briere 1992; Leventhal 1998). Low disclosure rates also

impact prevalence studies, particularly those focused on males, because of issues of shame and very real concerns of stigmatisation (Holmes et al. 1997; Romano and De Luca 2001).

The most comprehensive study to date is the World Health Organisation's meta-analysis of published research, which attempted to establish global prevalence across all age groups (Andrews et al. 2004). The meta-analysis covered studies including non-contact, contact and penetration activities. At the time of the report, only three regions had sufficient studies of sufficient quality for the establishment of prevalence estimates: Australia and New Zealand, a sub-section of European states, and Canada and the USA. Figures in all three regions provide some indication of the huge numbers involved (see Table 1). Rates in these regions, ranged from 1 in 7 to 1 in 4 females and 1 in 25 to 1 in 15 males. Using region-specific rates and the national population estimates for 2004, the sheer number of survivors of CSA in just these regions alone approaches 100 million. To put this into perspective, there are more survivors of CSA in North America than there are Canadians. If all the survivors from just these three regions were to form a state of their own, its population would rank 13th in the world. On sheer numbers alone, CSA merits being more than a marginal interest within human geography.

[Table 1 goes here]

More recent studies indicate that there is likely high prevalence of CSA in other parts of the world (Pereda et al. 2009b). However, establishing prevalence internationally is challenging because of vast differences in social and cultural contexts, cultural and legal definitions of childhood, conceptualisations of sexual abuse and consent, public education about and encouragement to report on incidents of CSA, institutional processes, welfare surveillance,

methods of gathering data, legal frameworks and processes, and attrition rates from reporting to conviction. These are further compounded by the different ways in which gender operates across cultures.

In a 2006 attempt to speak across these differences, Pinheiro (74), used the following definition of sexual abuse:

... the involvement of a child in sexual activity that she or he is not able to fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society .

This report also explicitly included sex and human trafficking, prostitution and pornography as significant activities through which the sexual abuse of children and young adults is perpetrated, estimating that 150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 experienced sexual violence worldwide during 2002 alone (Pinheiro 2006).

While exact prevalence rates may be difficult to pin down, all research into this area points towards high numbers. Studies indicate that CSA is widespread in all social classes (Phipps 2009) and ethnic groups (Payne et al. 2014) and involves institutions as well as individuals (Biehal and Parry 2010) most obviously faith institutions, particularly the Catholic church (McLoone 2012; Pilgrim 2011, 2012).

### **Long-term impacts of CSA: geographical implications**



While CSA, by definition, takes place in childhood, its long-term impacts are well documented (Goodyear-Brown 2012). These effects may be similar to those experienced by survivors of other traumas such as natural disasters, war, genocide and forced migration (Finkelhor 1988; Herman 2001), all topics considered relevant to mainstream human geography. Starting with the work of Lindberg and Distal (1985), Jehu et al (1988) and Finkelhor (1988), the literature has developed to include survivor accounts (Malone et al. 1996) and the specific examination of young people (McElvaney et al. 2014), elders (Jeary 2005; Cook et al. 2011) and populations facing additional challenges as a result of their body ability or intellectual challenges (Olkin 2001; Darja 2009; Plummer and Findley 2012).

The spatial aspects of survivorship have been long recognised by mental health professionals. Herman (2001), for example, argues that the first task in recovery for a survivor of CSA is to secure a safe environment, beginning with securing control over his or her body, and extending outwards to secure control over their wider geographical context. Only then can their sense of safety be restored. Others argue that, given their experience of interpersonal violence, CSA survivors' way of perceiving the world is both necessary and realistic:

For the most part, traumatised people experience the world as dangerous not because they have been rendered inadequate by the trauma, and therefore, have an essentially distorted worldview. They so experience it because events or conditions have brought home how very dangerous the world is and have precluded the editing out practices by which less traumatised people construct an essentially safe and benign world (Burstow 2003, 1304).

When research into CSA survivors focuses on specific sub-populations, the geographical implications become even more apparent. Groups of people whose access to space and place has been severely curtailed are much more likely to have a history of CSA than those in the general population. Research from the USA and UK reveals higher prevalence rates of survivors within populations of patients of acute mental health admission wards (46 per cent) (Wurr and Partridge 1996) and prison populations (59 per cent) (Johnson et al. 2006; Williams et al. 2012). People who are in some sense placeless, such as homeless persons or missing persons are also more likely to have had experience of CSA than the general population (Tyler and Cauce 2002; Parr and Fyfe 2013). Among homeless populations prevalence rates can be as high as 77 and 86 per cent (Goodman et al 1995; Rew et al. 2001). People whose mental health issues restrict their mobility, such as people experiencing agoraphobia, severe anxiety and depression (Harris and Landis 1997; O'Leary et al. 2010) also demonstrate a higher prevalence of CSA. What these prevalences point to is the very strong likelihood that being sexually abused as a child will impact upon a person's access to, use of, behaviour in and perceptions of place and space.

## **Absence**

While survivor voices have been absent or hidden in geography as a field of study, human geographers have not ignored CSA entirely. The identification of CSA in children in the 1980s was accompanied by a rise in challenges to the authenticity of children's, survivors' and experts' claims of prevalence and impact. In the UK the first controversy settled around Cleveland, with the vilification of health professionals who diagnosed CSA in the children they saw in their

clinical work. Cream's (1993) paper brought to the fore the politics of place involved in cultural-political contests over the meaning of CSA. Analysing media reports on the Cleveland crisis from the time, she explored the difficulties feminists faced in challenging dominant public-private dichotomies. She demonstrated how feminist analyses of CSA were sidelined and silenced by a socially conservative, far right pro-family agenda and she called for an analysis of CSA centred on power, linking it directly to geographies of fear and to limitations on women's access to space.

In the past twenty years her call has been partially answered, with a few geographical studies touching on the role CSA plays in discourses of power. Most recently this has focused on the enrolment of CSA in socially conservative, far right discourses about the dangerous, potentially-paedophile other (Ruddick 2007b; Caluya 2011; Cooper 2011; Ghertner 2011; Howlett et al. 2011; Howitt et al. 2012) and in the control of the spaces of sex work (Hubbard 2005; Hubbard and Whowell 2008; Hubbard et al. 2008; Mai 2013; Yea, 2013). It is also present in studies that examine the silencing of those who protect children from harm, including sexual abuse (Ruddick 2007a). Other work in human geography has touched on the act of sexual abuse itself as part of broader socio-political strategies (Mohammad 1999; De Leeuw, 2007) and on the cover-up of CSA as part of nation-building (Crowley and Kitchin 2008).

One might expect to find mention of CSA in human geography studies relating to children and parenting. Parents control their children's personal geographies by managing where they are allowed to go, when and with whom (Pain et al 2005; Valentine 1997) including in cyberspace (Hearn 2006; Valentine and Holloway 2010). Being a 'good-enough parent' (Winnicott 1973, 173) requires creating a holding environment in which risk and safety are

balanced with opportunities for freedom and development and embodied parental love (Valentine and McKendrick 1997; Gabb 2004). With the exception of Pain (2006), these geographical studies of parenting have treated fears around CSA as endemic to contemporary culture, steering away from linking them to participants' own experiences. While critiques of victimhood in political discourses and the highlighting of resistance and resilience in lives lived under difficult conditions are essential (see Ritterbush 2012 and Tutu 2013), so are efforts to critique and counter the global exploitation and abuse of millions of children (see for example Paul and Hasnath 2000). Whilst this may be partly a product of human geography's discursive turn, the overall effect can be conceptualized as one of dissociation: child sexual abuse is conjured as a shadow, a source of fear or a discourse, rather than as an actuality in the lived experience of a significant proportion of adults and children throughout the world.

We would argue that paying attention to the survivors of CSA is not just a social justice issue, but is also essential for gaining an understanding of how people come to be in the places they occupy, how they perceive those places and how they inhabit and behave in them.

Since the turn of the millennium, geographers working with spatially marginalized populations have begun to pay some attention to the issue. Passing reference has been made by geographers to the over-representation of CSA survivors amongst women in penal systems (Allspach 2010; Schliehe 2013), amongst homeless women and men (Klodawsky et al. 2006; Radley et al. 2006; Whitzman 2006; Klodawsky 2006, 2009; Christensen 2012; Hodgetts et al. 2012; Fotheringham et al. 2013) and missing persons (Parr and Fyfe 2013). Geographers have also begun to recognise that for children, being spatially marginalised can increase the risk of being sexually abused (Hanlon and Shankar 2000; Young and Barrett 2001; Peters 2006;

Neumayer and Plumper 2007; Meth, 2013; Tutu 2013; Licona and Maldonado 2013). While this demonstrates an increased awareness by geographers of the issue of CSA over the last two decades, most papers simply reference studies done in other fields without contributing to understandings of space and sexual abuse. None of these papers, for example, interrogate the processes by which CSA and spatial marginalisation interact.

That there is research outwith geography for geographers to draw on, highlights that the neglect of the topic within our discipline is not necessarily replicated elsewhere. Indeed there are multi-disciplinary journals devoted to the topic, which to our knowledge geographers have not contributed to: see for example *Journal of Child Sex Abuse, Child Abuse and Neglect, Journal of Family Violence, Journal of Trauma, Violence and Abuse*. That many other disciplines in the academe have welcomed debate, empirical work and accounts from survivors which privilege lived experience, renders the absence of similar studies in geography even more perplexing.

### **A geography of absence**

Dowler et al.'s 2013 paper, marks twenty years since the publication of Cream's work. It is another piece of critical feminist geographical analysis, this time bringing a discussion of CSA into the heart of the academe. Using the case of former Penn State assistant football coach, Jerry Sandusky, who was found guilty of 45 cases of CSA, the authors call for radical changes in the governance of higher education institutions. They critique the 'old boys network' of

fraternal leadership which enabled a culture of violence and oppression to continue unhampered at Penn State, effectively silencing those who could have spoken out against what they doubtless knew was happening. Dowler et al call for leadership based on a feminist ethic of care and responsibility centred on 'the intention of learning to listen and being responsive to the needs and suffering of others' (2).

Human geography has paid some critical attention to the ways in which CSA has become strategically enrolled in discourses that serve to perpetuate cultures of "banal violence" (Dowler et al. 2103, 2). This work has made an important contribution to understanding contemporary political movements. Without a counterbalancing exploration of the embodied experiences of survivors, however, such a focus risks reinforcing the very separation of experience and knowledge it critiques. It is critical that human geography not only critique the use of CSA in dominant discourses but that the subject also engage in listening and being responsive to survivors.

In concluding, we would draw attention to a troubling aspect of human geography's silence on this significant topic, one that leads us to ask whether the vestiges of an "old boys club" continue to exist within the discipline. A few months prior to Jerry Sandusky being found guilty in Pennsylvania, a retired human geography professor in the UK admitted to 21 charges of child pornography. These related to the possession of 13,000 images and film, including some which fell into the most serious category of child pornography (The Yorkshire Post 2012). For these crimes, David Sibley will be a registered sex offender until the year 2022. During sentencing, the judge is reported to have said that Sibley's biggest punishment would be the loss of "his good name". As far as we are aware, this has not happened in Sibley's professional

world. Geographers have published on the sexual exploitation of children by a football coach and have provided an analysis of how the leadership of a prominent American College provided the context for it to happen (Dowler et al. 2013). In relation to Sibley's crimes, however, until this paper no-one in geography has referred to his convictions or wondered about the ethics of a field that remains silent on the topic from within. It is timely to reflect on how the culture of academia in general, and geography in particular may recreate the dynamics which silence the experience of child sexual abuse across cultures and societies. Paraphrasing Herman, we can only conclude that 'Repression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of [disciplinary] as well as individual consciousness' (Herman 2001, 9).

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**Table 1. WHO Regional estimates of CSA prevalence**

<b>Region</b>	<b>Males (%)</b>	<b>Females (%)</b>	<b>Total CSA survivors<sup>i</sup></b>
Canada and USA	6.7	26.5	58,719,000
Most of Europe <sup>ii</sup>	3.8	15.8	35,487,000
Australia and NZ	5.9	29.1	794,000

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<sup>i</sup> These estimates of numbers of CSA survivors are derived from CIA (2014) population estimates for the respective countries and assume that proportions of men and women are equal.

<sup>ii</sup> The WHO meta-analysis found sufficient studies to estimate prevalence for Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (Andrews et al. 2004) .