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Deconstructing Narratives of Child Sexual Abuse

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Perceptions of Child Sexual Abuse in the Caribbean: Overview of Research Findings



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- Hour 1: Culturally Contexted Perceptions of Child Sexual Abuse: An Overview of Research Findings
- Hour 2: Patriarchy, Gender Inequality and Culture: Colliding dynamics in the Construction of Child Sexual Abuse in the Caribbean
- **Hour 3: Deconstructing Narratives of Child Abuse (Survivors' Voices)**



Deborah Donovan Rice, MMT
Executive Director
Stop It Now!



Stop It Now!

Deconstructing Narratives of Child Sexual Abuse

Dr. Adele Jones
Professor of Childhood Studies, University
of Huddersfield, UK

Presentation

- The UNICEF Study
- Summary of themes from survivors narratives
- Exploration of selected themes through illustrated interview extracts
- Deconstruction of survivor's words to examine some of the implications for professional practice

Study

- UNICEF-commissioned study of child sexual abuse in the Eastern Caribbean (partially funded by DfID)
- Carried out by the University of Huddersfield with Action for Children
- Study of survivors experiences –a small part of a larger mixed methods study

Narrative interviews with self-selecting survivors

Interviews driven by participants - enabled to tell their stories in whatever way and at whatever point they wanted to begin. Set within a therapeutic environment- researchers had counselling expertise. Participants offered ongoing counselling.

Interviews recorded and transcribed and analysed using a discourse analysis approach.

Demographic breakdown of respondents

- 11 Survivors from 3 Islands:
- 10 females and 1 male participated
- Age range from 18 – 45 yrs.

Respondents in this small sample reflective of the range of socio-economic groupings – findings credible (if not generalisable) and supported by the wider study findings

Summary of themes- Child sexual abuse:

1. Occurs across socio economic levels
2. Happened mostly in the home and often more than one child abused (all abusers in this study were men)
3. Begins by grooming and predatory advances
4. Education not a protective factor
5. Men protected by status within society
6. Family life stressors and other risk factors do not have to be present
7. Some behaviours within families help to sustain patterns of abuse
8. Children may experience co-abuse, multiple abuse and/or serial abuse
9. Multiple long-lasting and far-reaching effects

Occurs across socio economic levels

The interviewees reflected the range of socio-economic circumstances and social strata of Caribbean societies and confirm findings from the larger study (and international studies) that children are abused in homes across the socio-economic spectrum.

Begins by grooming and predatory advances

*Sexual abuse often begins by grooming, predatory advances to test how far the abuser feels he can go. Survivors described being “prepared” for sexual abuse– this was called ‘**pre-sexing**’. The behaviour included singling out the child for special attention, treats and gifts, making sexual remarks, manipulating situations to be alone with the child. Some people recalled this happening to them and then watching in horror as the behaviour was repeated with a younger sibling.*

Happened mostly in the home and often more than one child abused

Most people had been abused in their own home but some were abused by trusted men -known to the family but outside the family.

Some survivors described being specifically targeted by men, especially when abused outside of the home, within the home it appeared that all children in the family were at risk of 'serial abuse' – the abuser moving 'down the line' as children get older.

Education not a protective factor

Several of the interviewees reported that their abusers were highly educated people - they were likely to be fully aware both of the illegality of their behaviour and also of the social and psychological consequences.

Education was not a protective factor for the interviewees but there was some evidence that it acted as a protective factor for the abuser. Interviewees suggested that high status positions matched by educational background provided abusers with a closed 'boys network' which served to protect their interests and reputations.

Men protected by status within society

Men used their status within the community to influence people in positions of authority to ignore the abuse, to pay off victims' families or to intimidate families into keeping the secret. Men were described as considering themselves immune from detection and prosecution and were often very plausible and convincing. Many of the experiences revealed people in positions of authority, i.e. doctors, police, teachers etc., had been aware of what was going on and had done nothing.

Family life stressors do not need to be present

In some families, there were clearly social pressures linked to poverty (especially in single-parent households); however this was not true of other families and it was clear that while social pressures may increase the risk of children being placed in vulnerable situations, stressors and negative social factors do not need to be present for children to be abused.

Some behaviours within families help to sustain patterns of abuse

All the survivors described living in a family system that sustained the abuse in some way. In some cases this was because manipulative, predatory behaviours towards the child had become 'normalised' and part of the fabric of the family, in others it was because the non-abusing parent (the mother in most cases) was not available to provide protection and in cases in which children were abused by men outside the family, children did not tell their fathers because they were fearful of the response.

Non-abusing parents offered no protection to their children either because they were unaware of the abuse, they were unwilling to believe the child, because of economic/ social dependence or because of fear of consequences

Co-abuse, multiple abuses and serial abuse

The abuse experienced by survivors took many forms including: rape, inappropriate touching, fondling and exposing children to adult sexual behaviour. Some survivors had been subject to physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse simultaneously, some had been abused by someone who was clearly a serial abuser and some survivors had been abused by a multiple of different abusers.

All of the survivors had been abused repeatedly over a period of years.

Effects of abuse

- Relationship with own children severely affected
- Difficulties with relationships and inability to trust
- Uncontrolled rage as a child
- Self hate and self-blame
- Severe depression
- Alcohol and drug use
- Distorted sexual behaviours
- Sexually transmitted disease
- Teenage pregnancy
- Abortions

Narrative Illustrations:

- Multiple abuse
- Grooming behaviours
- Non-abusing parent
- Family break-up
- Relationship difficulties

Survivors' words

- Correlation with physical violence
- Empowering women
- Compartmentalization and resilience
- Rage and projection
- Cyclical abuse/learned behaviour

Resilience and strengths

Strength and resilience enabled by

- Talking about the abuse
- Support and understanding
- Counseling
- Religion



Victimhood and Survival

Thank You

www.unicef.org/barbados

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