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The Social Construction of the Child Sex Offender Explored by Narrative

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The notion of "child sex offender" provokes aversion, but it may be that it is a social construction. We suggest that a Dominant narrative, in which child sex offenders are constructed as irredeemable, persists, despite the emergence of assumption challenging Alternative narratives. A story completion method was used to elicit themes of Dominant or Alternative narratives, theory-led thematic analysis was used to identify them. The use and analysis of narrative and free-form stories are well established in social research, but remain a novel concept in the study of offenders. The results support the persistence of the Dominant narrative with two notable exceptions. Conclusions centre on utility of the narrative method to examine offender constructions, and the pervasiveness of Dominant narratives. Key Words: Dominant and Alternative Narrative, Social Construction, Child Sex Offenders, and Thematic Analysis

Introduction

Narrative is not a fixed stable phenomenon, but part of the complex shifting pattern of meaning, making up the social reality we all inhabit. Kerby (1991) suggests that our understanding of the "other" is primarily gained from stories and narrative and that this also forms an integral part of the construction of self. The analysis of narrative is best used for exploratory purposes, sensitizing the researcher, illustrating, but not by itself, validating theory. Here, we describe the use of story to describe perceptions of offenders by members of the public and the implications of the findings.

Witten (1993) proposes that narrative functions to construct social reality and that the vocabulary we use imparts its own values. The existence of more than one narrative at any one time is likely and the prevalence of one over the other is not due to any correspondence to reality, but to its pragmatic nature. In other words, the social construction of reality at any one time does not necessarily depend on one view of any one object or being, but can be based on a multiplicity of views. The view that takes precedence, for those involved, is the one that has the most utility at that time.

The Dominant narrative construction, in Western societies, concerning child sex offenders identifies such individuals as purely male, inherently evil, inhuman, beyond redemption or cure, lower class, and unknown to the victim (who is constructed as female). This Dominant narrative persists today and is owed much to the reinforcement of the historical narratives constructing child sexual abuse and the construction of the

monolithic family (here defined as a fundamental social group of Western society: typically consisting of two parents and their children) as the social norm.

Child sexual abuse is not a new phenomenon, but the perception of it is and always has been, socially constructed. History has treated incest ambiguously: on the one hand condemning it and on the other hand punishing the victims. Guarnieri (1998) notes that children were institutionalised following admittance of sexual abuse (against them) for moral care and re-education. However, the shroud of silence associated with incest in the early 20th Century seemed even more reinforced by the institutions that tried to reform victims who never spoke about their experiences outside of the institution. Once again the “family” remained the most important institution with abused children being removed and perpetrators often not being charged. Indeed when incest became public knowledge the child was also charged.

It is argued that the social construction of the family is a key contributor to the narrative defining the child sex offender. Mumby (1993, p. 5) notes that “the social unit we call ‘family’ is not a pre-given entity but is rather partly constructed through various narrative structures that family members articulate.” The monolithic family concept takes the contemporary middle-class family as its norm and is perceived wholly beneficial to children, designed for nurturing and protecting them against a heartless world; a safe haven. There is a key assumption that parents protect their children and do not abuse them. Jackson (2000) observes that, in Victorian England, the well being of the family was paramount over the needs and rights of children, especially because child sex crimes were in effective victimless, with both parties consenting. Jackson also notes the concept of the “normal” father as being the breadwinner who protects and provides for his family and therefore remains beyond reproach. Such notions made it inconceivable to imagine that child sexual abuse occurred regularly in “good” and “normal” Victorian families where, as today, the family is considered as a private patriarchal domain in which force and aggression might well hold sway (Hammerton, 1992).

Research by Edwards and Hensley (2001) challenges the notion of the family as a safe haven for children and suggests instead that most sexual abuse occurs within the home, an assertion at odds with public perception of abusers being strangers. Children’s charities have long maintained that child sexual abuse occurs essentially within the home and that the incidence is increasing (see Cawson, Wattam, Brooker, & Kelly, 2000). Jacobs, Hashima, and Kenning (1995) tested children’s perceptions of sexual abuse and concluded that children perceive strangers to be more dangerous: However, Saslowsky and Wurtele (1986) suggest that children are 80-85% more likely to be attacked by someone they know. Despite such evidence the image of the child sex offender remains unchanged and child abuse continues to be described as a “mystery” crime committed by strangers.

Historical evidence to support the existence of a Dominant narrative, perceiving the child sex offender to be inherently “evil” and “inhuman” can be seen in National Society for the Protection of Children (NSPCC) rhetoric from 1888 which describes child sexual abuse as the “vilest crime against childhood” and abusers as “evil” (Jackson, 2000, pp. 54-55). In addition, common vocabulary used by Victorian parents in response to abusers included “dirty beast,” “dirty old man,” and “dirty devil” (Jackson, p. 32). Edwards and Hensley (2001) and Simon (1988) both note similarities in present day public opinion that perceives child sexual offences as a major problem within society and

those perpetrating such crimes as “evil.” Soothill and Walby (1991) comment that present day popular newspapers make ready use of such global terms as “beast,” “monster,” “fiend,” etc. Unidentified sex offenders described in the media frequently have identities created to fit a particular stereotype, labelling the strangers as “beasts,” “fiends,” “brutes,” and “animals.” Dehumanisation and depersonalisation of sex offenders is a common theme in press coverage, and the media depicts sex crimes against children as a highly abnormal and uncommon event, which should lead to long-term incarceration (Soothill & Walby, 1991).

Burdon and Gallagher (2002) note that society still chooses to incarcerate sex offenders despite the effectiveness of Alternative treatments. Therapeutic treatment is not a new concept and various measures have been used, including behaviour modification (aversion therapy) and the more successful cognitive behavioural programmes that are used presently in the UK. These treatments focus on relapse prevention (Laws, 1995). Gallagher (2001) reports that meta-analysis of current literature on treatment efficacy suggested that sex offenders receiving cognitive behavioural treatment along with hormonal treatment used in the US were less likely to reoffend than those not receiving treatment. Despite this evidence, the prevailing tendency is to simply incarcerate sex offenders without recourse to therapies, suggesting that the overall perception is that, which is allied with the Dominant narrative of predatory behaviour which cannot be mediated.

Child sexual abuse vocabulary in Victorian England constructed the perpetrator as male and victim as female, a perception that still persists today. Jackson (2000) explains this in terms of societal norms depicting and judging girls and women in terms of sexual reputations which were not applied to boys. Soothill and Walby (1991) comment that where media accounts (present and historical) report on female offenders, they are rarely, if ever, depicted as “evil” but more often described as “sex mad” or “temptresses.” The descriptor “evil” is attached only to the male child sex offender.

Social commentary in Victorian England described the urban poor as a savage tribal group in which child sexual abuse was likely to be more prevalent (Jackson, 2000). The lower classes were thus perceived as a dangerous, bestial group within Victorian society with low moral standards, a perception which echoes today. The narrative defining the child sex offender as a stranger is evidenced by Jackson who notes that parents in Victorian times appeared to fear the risk of paedophiles as much as they do today: advising their children not to talk to strangers or wander far from home. Jackson also posits that those charged with child abuse during the Victorian and Edwardian period were usually not family members. This was not because family members were not abusing their children but rather because family abuse was kept secret or, if revealed was dealt with outside of the court by their own community.

Sex crimes against children committed by men in positions of trust were a common theme in media reporting of sexual offences. In such cases the professional occupation of the offender is highlighted and considered to be of primary interest. Frequently absent in the reporting of offences committed by men in positions of trust is the use of labels such as “sex fiend,” “beast,” “brute” etc: these terms being reserved for the unidentified sex offender. Child sex offenders are further constructed in history and today as members of “outgroups” similar in ways to labelling witches as “outsiders” thus, making it possible for communities to take collective action against them. Such collective

action can be understood through frustration-aggression theories of intergroup behaviour, but such aggression is often selective and subject to social consensus as to who should be attacked (Tajfel & Fraser, 1978). Alternatively, individual motivational theories posit a direct causal link between group “excitement” or “arousal” and the collective, but random, “spilling over” into action. Either position can explain the existence of a “seek and destroy” phenomenon observed by instances of collective community-based action against child sex offenders.

Douglas (1970) suggests that the prevalence of court cases involving strangers and the use of insults and threats enables the community to create a facade of an abuser who is demonic and stalks his victims. Therefore it is someone who cannot possibly be a member of their community. Collective community action to oust child sex offenders is still a common response today, together with vigilantism and public pressure to introduce mandates known as “Sarah’s Law” in the UK (after the disappearance and murder of Sarah Payne) and “Megan’s Law” in the USA (after the rape and murder of Megan Nicole Kanka). These mandates allow active notification of sex offenders’ names and addresses when offenders are released to the community.

In all it is clear that the Dominant narrative constructing the child sex offender is rooted in history and that we still construct narratives that promote a particular image of the abuser. This study seeks to examine narratives about sex offenders in order to test the assumption that the Dominant narrative still persists in shaping public perceptions of child sex offenders despite the existence of an Alternative narrative that challenges the predominant assumptions of the dominant narrative. The study’s design was to explicitly elicit thoughts and feelings, revealed through theory-led thematic analysis, which could be subsequently attributed to the construction of the child sex offender. Free-form narratives elicited through story completion allowed the participant to construct accounts of their own perceptions. This provided data in a meaning-centred context, which led to a thematic exposition of the elements constructed. This study then explored the social construction of sex offenders through free-form narrative, deriving and examining the themes exposed in the stories.

Method

Participants

A diverse opportunity sample of 10 men and 10 women (N=20) was recruited via posters in a university campus and surrounding areas asking for volunteers. No exclusion criteria were applied. Age range was from 18-60 with 45% of the sample being over 40. The academic qualification range was GCSE,¹ or equivalent, to degree or higher. Forty-five percent of the sample was in the “degree or higher” category.

Approval for the project was sought from the university ethics committee (UEC), which monitors all research with human participants, carried out by university members. The UEC approval was granted as the project researchers intended to gather informed consents and to keep all documentation received from participants anonymous and

¹ GCSE is the General Certificate of Secondary Education taken (usually) by 15-16 year olds. It is usually taken before the General Certificate of Education at Advanced Level (A levels), which can be used as entry qualifications to University level education

confidential. All procedures also complied with the Code of Conduct of the British Psychological Society (www.bps.org.uk).

Instruments

A story completion form containing six scenarios, generated by the researchers to elicit thoughts and feelings related to the identified themes, was used. The stem stories were generated by examination of the literature on sex offenders and went through a process of refinement by the researchers. This entailed examination of the research literature and the specialist media to identify themes and scenarios that appeared pertinent. The researchers constructed several stem stories and then exchanged the list. The stories that appeared on both lists were retained while the others were discussed and refined or discarded through mutual agreement. The retained stem stories were refined until they were succinct and contained key words that were designed to prompt assumptions related to the identified themes, but not suggest the direction of the response (either the Dominant narrative or Alternative narrative). The six scenarios were presented in the order it is shown in on Table 1, with space provided between each item for the participant's response.

Table 1

Vignettes Provided for the Participant and the Identifying Numbers for Analysis

V1	A newsreader reports that someone has been convicted as a child sex offender...
V2	A convicted child sex offender moves into a community...
V3	A treatment centre is opened within the community and is planning to provide treatment for convicted child sex offenders...
V4	A child confides in a trusted adult that someone has been touching them ...
V5	A suspected child sex offender is being questioned by police about sexually assaulting a child...
V6	The family of a recently convicted child sex offender are talking about the conviction...

In addition, respondents were asked where they thought they had gained their perceptions of child sex offenders and what they thought had most influenced their current perceptions. The respondents were allowed to name their influence in an open-ended question.

Data Analysis Procedure

The technique used to identify themes within the stories was theory-led thematic analysis. The stories from each stem were collated and related patterns or themes were identified. The themes were sought on the basis of recurring activities, feelings, and meanings mentioned in the stories. Emergent themes were collated to form an inclusive representation of the combined attitudes and beliefs.

As each theme was identified, arguments for inclusion were constructed or rejected. Evidence for each argument was determined by the existence (in the collated data) of supporting phrases, absence of such data, or the existence of data that negated the themes. When the identification of themes and evidence reached a 70% agreement from both researchers it was agreed that the theme was existent and usable.

Themes relating to either the Dominant or Alternative narrative, based on relevant research, were identified and defined. These themes were connected to the age, sex, and socioeconomic class of the perpetrator and the sex of the victim, together with issues around the nature of the perpetrator (whether s/he was innately evil or whether the urge to abuse could be controlled).

In this way, the data was reduced to a manageable set. We identified various themes which provided satisfaction that there was a significant amount of agreement about appearance of these themes amongst the stories. Through the level of agreement, decided beforehand, we found seven themes that could be examined and started to seek confirmatory and contradictory evidence that the themes were present in the stories produced and whether or not they referred to a Dominant or Alternative narrative. These themes and their evidence are detailed in the Results section.

Once this set of evidence was revealed and the researchers agreed about both the appearance and the relation to Dominant/Alternative narrative, the extent of the appearance (percentage of respondents relating it) and the interpretation was discussed and agreed upon. This process was repeated several times until a refined and clear set of thematic points and interpretative evidence was in place. See the Results section for more details.

Questions relating to where the respondent thought s/he had gained the information about sex offenders were categorised into several units, collated, and a descriptive statistical (frequency) analysis was applied.

Results

Perception Questions

In addition to the story completion task, participants were asked to identify where they thought they gained their perceptions of child sex offenders and what they thought had most influenced their current perceptions. The results are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 below.

Figure 1. Number of categories influencing perceptions of child sex offenders (N=20).

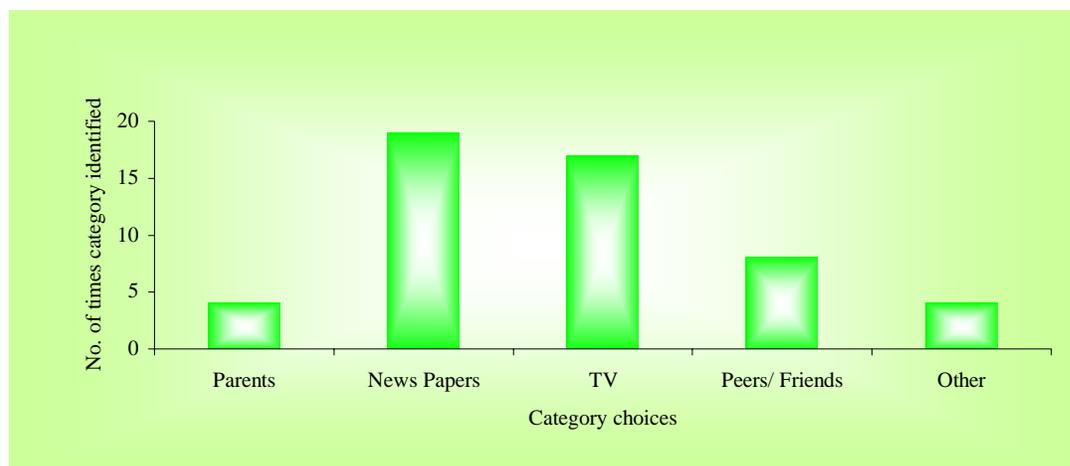


Figure 1 illustrates the number of items that were identified as being influential in gaining perceptions. Media were the most commonly chosen categories. The “other” category included influences such as books/magazines and school/teachers.

Figure 2. Most influential category identified in shaping perceptions. (N=20).

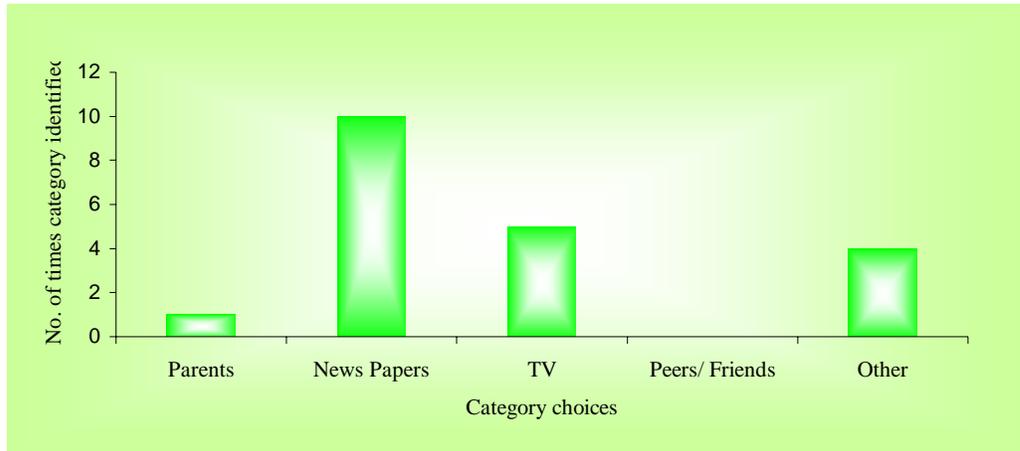


Figure 2 further illustrates the media influence on current perceptions with 15 participants stating that their perceptions were most influenced by the media.

Results of Thematic Analysis

The data analysis aimed to identify themes associated with either the Dominant or Alternative narrative, as revealed in the review of the literature which was described in the introduction (see Table 2).

Table 2

Elements of the Narratives as Revealed in the Literature

Dominant	Alternative
Stranger	Stranger or familiar
Male	predominantly male
Older	older or adolescent
innately evil	socially created
lower socio-economic status	Classless or any class
Uncontrollable	Treatable
female victim	no victim gender bias, victim either male or female or sex not mentioned

Data was gathered from 20 participants, each completing six stories. The notation following the excerpts refers to the participant number, vignette number, and sex.

Stranger/stranger or familiar

This theme encompassed a variety of individuals depicted in the scenarios and was defined for coding purposes as follows: “Includes the offender being described as unfamiliar or familiar to the victim; identified via relationship to or within social network”.

Due to the inclusion of vignettes four and six, which depicted a child talking to a trusted adult and a family member as the offender, no participants constructed all stories solely consisting of strangers. However, the majority of stories coded as “stranger” 9/20 (45%) occurred before the participant read either vignette four or six, suggesting that participants more readily associated child sex offenders as strangers unless prompted. The stem stories were presented one at a time as outlined above: Therefore, the participant would not be “reading ahead” and would not receive a sense of the study’s attempt to expose either type of narrative. The later stories did prompt the participants to consider other characterisations, but the prevailing construction before prompting was of “stranger”. This demonstrated that the order was crucial to the construction format the respondent chose and may bear further investigation.

It cannot be known, of course, and information was not sought regarding what extent of the respondents may have had first-hand experience of child sexual abuse and whether responses were shaped by this and not general societal responses. It is possible that *some* responses were influenced by experience, but no comment can be made about this.

Stories coded as “stranger” typically featured men approaching children in either a play area or at a school and included predatory language.

“He had been targeting the children at the local school when he was seen by a parent.”

“The incident happened in the local park...the man was seen talking to two little girls and then took them into his garden shed.”

Nearly all of the writers (95%) created characters familiar to the victim and of these only three occurred before vignette 4. Characters included: “Vicar”; “Priest”; “Scoutmaster”; “Teacher”; “Police”; and “Daddy”.

Among these were 3 family friends, two of which were baby sitters. The constructed response to these offenders was surprise and anger, with many referring to children as not being trustworthy and practical problems such as whom the crime would be reported. Vignette six enabled family members to be coded within the “familiar” category. Prior to vignette six only one family member was constructed. Family members were depicted as fathers in the majority of cases and the response to these offenders was often of disbelief, shame, and support for the abuser (in 7 scenarios), during which the offender was described as ill, not guilty, and in need of help. Only four participants expressed acceptance of guilt.

“Daddy must have been very mixed up and ill when he did what he did...The onus on the mother is very heavy...we must be there for him.”

The stigma attached to sex offenders was extended to their families in a number of stories.

“The family will have to move away now because everyone knows at the girls’ school and they don’t want to go out anymore.”

Male/predominantly male

Seventy percent of the writers constructed the child sex offender as male, with only 3 referring to female offenders. The theme was defined for coding purposes as: “Includes names or pronouns identifying the offender as male or female”.

Male strangers were depicted as having multiple victims and convictions, with no mention of family. A speculative interpretation to this might be that respondents are constructing such men as “loners”.

“The man had a number of convictions”

“A lone man with a beard and glasses is known to live there”

If the male offender was described as married, they were depicted as abusing children outside of their family (5/20):

“Snook married with two children aged 10 and 8 found guilty of molesting boys within his troop.”

Female perpetrators were only constructed by three writers and common to these constructions was the unlikelihood that women would be suspected as a child sex offender. In two scenarios this assumption was potentially harmful to the children involved and fatal for an innocent man.

as police and social services was involved, and the children were taken away from them [mother and father], but sadly for the children the father dies and the girls were reinstated with their mother, only to find that the culprit was the mother and not the father!

“They [community members] picket the house...a petrol bomb is thrown...the lone man lost his life...the child molester was in their community but no one suspected the young smartly dressed lady at number 50.”

Older/older or adolescent

Half of the writers included the age of the offender within their scenarios, with the majority (8/10) placing the offender between the ages of 42 and 74. The theme was defined for coding purposes as: “A statement of age numerically or any variation of old or young”.

All ages were applied to male child sex offenders, none of which were family members. Instead they tended to fit the stranger stereotype as being a loner and having previous convictions.

“An old man who lives in the community. It turns out that the man has had several prison periods and has been assaulting young boys for years.”

Not all sex offenders were categorised as above the age of forty. In two scenarios by different writers they were described as twenty and twenty-six, although only one was convicted.

Innately evil/socially created

This theme related to the nature of sexual offending and to what it can be attributed to. It was defined for coding purposes as follows: “Includes reference to causal factors explaining sex offender behaviour as attributable to either trait or social factors”.

Half of the writers constructed the child sex offender as innately evil, often with reference to treatment.

“There is no treatment for this kind of offence, the sickness is too deep rooted, sadly it stems from their lack of human decency.”

Only three writers (15%) created stories in which the offender in the scenario was coded as socially created: Explanations included the offender as a victim of sexual abuse and mental illness.

“It could have been started by themselves being abused in the first instance.”

Uncontrollable/treatable

This theme is linked heavily with theme 4 and both appeared to have provoked the strongest sentiment among those who thought that child sex offenders are irredeemable. It was defined for coding purposes as follows: “The ability of a sex offender to function as a “normal” member of society; the manageability and likelihood of reoffending”.

The strongest response, stating the most powerful emotions, was the notion that however the child sex offender is constructed, it is not possible to control them within the community. *All* participants included this response type. Most included taking measures to prevent sex offenders from entering the community or removing the sex offender from the area, either through protest or force.

“He woke up to find his house under attack from an angry mob. He was scared.

‘Evil pig’ ‘bastard’ they shouted. He hid in the cupboard until the police came...he knew they would get him.”

In addition the notion of a sex offender entering a community also provoked a high level of fear.

“This causes people to panic, securing their homes against intruders and transporting their children by car for even the shortest journeys.”

In response to a treatment centre being opened most participants stated that a likely response would be to take measures to prevent it at all cost:

The staff [of the centre] are subjected to abuse, verbal and then physical, and within a month of it opening it was no surprise that the centre was the victim of a fire which razed the centre to the ground...unconfirmed reports state that the firemen were among the crowd of 400 who watched the blaze.

This theme also provoked the most violence, with eight writers (40%) constructing incidents from brick throwing to burning down the houses of sex offenders. Two stories resulted in the death of the sex offender and many suggested that the only way to control sex offenders was to kill them.

“Will 30 years of solitude do anything to rehabilitate him or is it better for him to die now.”

“Rip this beast’s head off.”

In contrast five writers (25%) included scenarios in which sex offenders were treatable, of which two had also described the sex offender as socially created. However, both writers felt that the level of risk was too high within a community setting.

“Help would obviously be needed for these awful people—we don’t know why they offend...I would feel uneasy never-the-less knowing ex-sex offenders were nearby.”

When the sex offender was a member of the family mental illness was more readily accepted with characters being supportive and understanding, not feared.

“Daddy must have been very mixed up and ill when he did what he did... The onus on the mother is very heavy. We must be there for him.”

Lower socio-economic class/classless or any class

This theme was defined, for the purpose of coding as follows: “Includes a clear statement of class or refers to a particular vocation which can subsequently be classified”.

Eight writers (40%) identified the character as having a particular job. All were in positions of trust and could be identified as being in middle-class professions and not pertaining to the original theme. Characters included: “Vicar”; “Social worker”; “Scoutmaster”; “Teacher”; “Police”; and “Priest”.

Female victim/victim either male or female or sex not mentioned

There were nine stories describing either boys or girls as the victim. This theme was defined as follows: “Includes names identifying the abused as male or female, or any variations of he/she”.

Four writers constructed stories with solely girls as victims compared to two constructing boys throughout. Three writers’ vignettes contained both male and female victims:

“The best thing is to put them behind bars where they cannot harm little girls.”

There were few stories constructing parents as the abuser (5/20), and of those three fathers and one mother were described as abusing their daughters compared to one abusing his son:

“The mum is very upset and knew nothing about her husband’s behaviour. The daughter tried to tell the mum but thought she would be blamed.”

“Little Tommy sat quietly praying that this appeal would not be allowed. This was the first time in years that he was not being abused by his father.”

Discussion

This study has successfully demonstrated that the use of narrative construction is a viable method to examine the psychology of perceptions of sex offenders. The findings derived from this technique support the notion that the Dominant narrative still persists in shaping public perception of sex offenders. However, there were two important differences: first was the inclusion of those familiar to the victim as an integral part of many scenarios and second was the characterisation of boys as victims at almost an equal number of scenarios containing girls. This demonstrates that the pervasiveness of the Dominant narrative may be less influential.

It is important to reiterate that many participants constructed “strangers” as offenders before being prompted by the fourth and sixth vignettes. This suggests people generally think of sex offenders as strangers unless prompted to think of an Alternative, and when this Alternative is offered people still did not construct a family member or close friend as an offender unless further prompted. Despite research that suggests much abuse occurs within the home, people still do not readily perceive this to be the case, constructing sex offenders as non-family members. Furthermore, when constructing family members as abusers many attempted to keep the family together by being supportive and understanding, often attributing their actions to illness or not accepting that a loved one is guilty of this crime at all. Support for the notion of the family as a safe haven is offered in scenarios describing offenders as married with children but abusing children outside of the family.

There were many stories constructing child sex offenders as men in positions of trust rather than family and close friends. This could be interpreted as the family still being perceived as a protective environment. As Kraizer (1986) notes, people do not like to consider that someone they know well could commit this type of crime.

The emergent theme relating to social class did not offer support to the Dominant narrative as expected. Perpetrators were described as neither lower class nor classless, but instead depicted as men in middle-class jobs, often in positions of trust. Soothill and Walby (1991) note that a common focus within news reporting is, similarly, men abusing positions of trust, especially if the victims are male. This can offer some explanation for the changing narrative from strangers as perpetrators with female victims, to an acknowledgement of the sexual abuse of boys and perpetrators as usually familiar. Also, as the media was stated as major influence for information, the respondents may be reflecting media imagery. Soothill and Walby (p. 77) further note that the focus of the press has often been “the down fall of the professional middle-class,” however studies of American and British surveys on differences in the backgrounds of sexually abused children have reported no class distinction (Finkelhor & Barron, 1986; La Fontaine, 1990). The construction of the sex of the victim is also reflected in the above surveys, highlighting girls at higher risk of sexual abuse than boys, although the incidence of sexually abused boys is thought to be higher than the number of crimes reported (Finkelhor, 1986; Finkelhor & Barron, 1986; La Fontaine).

Within descriptions of the “stranger” as the offender there emerged the notion of multiple victims: However, Grubin (1998) argues that this is not the case. It was also noted that sex offenders were often described as having many convictions, a statement further dismissed by Grubin.

In exploring to what to attribute these beliefs, the sample within this research cited a range of influences, but overwhelmingly stated that the media most influenced their perceptions of child sex offenders. Durham, Elrod, and Kinkade (1995) support this finding, arguing that beliefs about crime are influenced by media coverage that reports a distorted image of crime. The availability of information and the way it is presented by media agencies may give viewers the impression that they are more in danger of crime than statistical analysis would suggest. In addition, Collings (2002) notes that media stereotyping of sexual abuse influences social judgements, offering a possible explanation for why people think this leads them to the belief that all sex offenders will reoffend and the subsequent judgement that they must therefore be dealt with punitively.

In contrast, Edwards and Hensley (2001) argue increasing prison sentences and inclusion on sex offending registers, which essentially corners sex offenders who might have sought help/treatment and reinforces the need for secrecy within the family. They further argue that sex offenders are generally not classified with other types of offenders and the nature of their crime evokes a response from the public that is rarely rivalled by any other. The result is public pressure for stronger punitive measures to control those that cannot and do not deserve to be treated (Edwards & Hensley, 2001). This response was observed in this study from those who did not believe that sex offenders would respond to treatment. Such statements were often expressed dramatically and with violent conclusions.

Edwards and Hensley (2001) state that the level of emotion felt by the public on the subject of sex offenders makes legislation difficult and limits options. They argue that legislators, who are obviously not separate from other members of society, hold the same beliefs about sex offenders and therefore confound any possible legislative change. If, as the results here seem to suggest, the view is only slowly changing from the Dominant narrative then the public's view may be reflected in the way offenders are treated upon conviction. Furthermore, unlike other legislation, the fundamental belief in punitive measures that has existed cross-culturally and throughout history is perpetuated.

The construction of the child sex offender as a member of an "out-group" was apparent in the responses to the discovery of a sex offender within the community, which created a variety of responses, most perceiving the risk to be high. All participants stated that they would take action to remove the offender from the community. This can be attributed to the perceived fear of strangers, continuously making it difficult for a sex offender to reintegrate into society that can inadvertently result in an increase in stranger attacks. This has been illustrated by community notification in the United States. Petrosino and Petrosino (1999) suggest that community notification can increase stranger attacks and "grooming" because sex offenders are forced to operate in another area. This is reflected in the scenarios that showed resistance to sex offenders being placed within the immediate community.

A further consideration is that participants describing vigilante tactics and other types of demonstrations made the assumption that the sex offender was living alone. They did not differentiate between types of sex offender nor did they consider the effect that their actions might have on the victim and his/her family. This is supported by Burdon and Gallagher (2002) who report that people generally do not differentiate between sex offenders, believing all to be as dangerous. This research did not imply the nature or severity of the sexual offence committed, yet all respondents assumed that the sex offenders were a great risk to children. So the question again arises, what is the impact that public knowledge has on the family of sex offenders? Freeman-Longo (1996) argues that in publicly identifying sex offenders the victims may also become known, especially if they are a family member. In effect public identification can inadvertently expose the victims of sexual abuse leading to scrutiny, not only of the child but also the family involved. Furthermore, the consequences for the family of public notification, in some states in America, have resulted in less offences being reported.

It was clear from this research that if the whereabouts of a sex offender was divulged the public would take action. Freeman-Longo (1996) notes that sex offenders are usually ostracized as a result of public notification laws, exacerbating the problem

and leading to relapse. In contrast, Kemshall and Maguire (2001) note that in concealing information regarding the whereabouts of convicted sex offenders the public could perceive that there is something to be feared from them. However, in reality, information such as this is not released because the likely response from the public would be to hunt them down.

A common statement among those that expressed sex offenders as being beyond redemption was that it is not possible to cure them. However Gallagher (2001) notes that it is not the aim of current treatment to provide a cure, but rather to arm sex offenders with risk reduction skills aimed at preventing a relapse. There was great opposition to the notion of treatment centres expressed by the participants and in many cases opposition to the value of treatment for this type of offender. Regardless, Hall (1995) and Gallagher (1999, 2001) note that those who received treatment were less likely to reoffend. It could be argued that the current Dominant narrative, which does not endorse treatment in the community, could effectively become self perpetuating because whilst the public does not allow treatment, even as a follow up to prison treatment, sex offenders have less chance of rehabilitating. Webber (1987) reports that hostility toward community centres is attributable to fear and lack of information. Benzvy-Miller (1990) argues that the public has unrealistic attitudes and perceptions of offenders, fearing that living close to offenders will expose them to greater risk and decrease the value of their property.

Brown (1999) notes that community based treatment has not been supported by the public and campaigning by the public has resulted in centres being closed down. She also found people would take action to prevent a centre from opening (supporting the current findings of this research) with many stating they would start a petition or take more drastic action, including moving away from the area. However, Brown further reports that most people would be willing to endorse treatment and punishment together (a finding not supported here). Furthermore, it is possible to assume that even those who were treated would receive the same public response when released because generally people appear sceptical of the efficacy of treatment. It should be noted, however that this research introduced treatment in a community setting rather than a prison setting, which could have yielded different and less emotive responses.

Benzvy-Miller (1990) notes that it is not surprising that the public fears the impact that sex offenders have on their community as it is cultivated by the media. As stated earlier, the response of participants to what most affects perceptions of sex offenders highlighted the media as being most influential. People fear sex offenders being treated within their community because treatment is not considered an effective intervention for this type of offender. Indeed Roberts (1992) reports that the Canadian public over-estimated recidivism rates for offenders on parole, yet Falshaw, Friendship, and Bates (2003) report reconviction figures for those who had been treated within the community as low.

The fear expressed by the people within this study could indicate their outrage at the police or justice system for not protecting their children from sex offenders: Therefore, they feel that their only option is to take action. However, continually moving sex offenders into new areas does not solve the problem. As Petrunik, 2002 argues, it keeps law enforcement agencies in the public's favour. The National Criminal Justice Association (NCJA) (1999) reported the case of a 60-year-old wheel chair dependent sex offender who upon release from prison had to be relocated eight times as a result of

community protests. They further included that he was not welcome at church and shunned by his neighbours. In addition, Zevitz and Farkas (2000) note the negative effect that being a family member of a sex offender can have. The NCJA reports that children are often excluded from schools and recreational activities and ostracized by friends because of their relation to the sex offender. This was reflected within this research where scenarios made reference to the negative impact that conviction of a family member of a sexual offence can have on the remaining family. Some stated that family members were shunned and no longer welcomed by friends or other community members: The result being that they would have to relocate in order to have a “normal” life.

In further discussing treatment efficacy, Perkins (1991) and West (1987) state that treatment is only successful if the offender is willing to change his/her behaviour. This can be related to the need for incentives or to live normal lives upon release from prison. However Edwards and Hensley (2001) note there is little incentive for sex offenders to enter treatment programmes when the response they receive from the public will be the same whatever they do. This was supported by this research by the number of references to the pointlessness of treatment. No scenarios considered that the sex offender moving into the community had been successfully treated in prison, which is possibly an indication of a lack of knowledge about current practices.

Ward (2001) argues that therapists need to construct a concept of a good life for the sex offender in order for rehabilitation to be successful, based on the same value system as every one else; such as having a job, money, and somewhere to live. This is arguably very difficult to achieve no matter what view of offenders persists and will probably be impossible while narratives remain the same. In addition, Brown (1999) notes that an important part of the rehabilitation of child sex offenders is to have accommodation and work opportunities. This is unlikely to be acceptable to people who think child sex offenders cannot be rehabilitated and indeed Brown notes that very few of her sample would be prepared to provide accommodation or employment to a sex offender.

Further support for the Dominant narrative construction is the identification in this research of sex offenders being older. Soothill and Walby (1991) note that many news reports concerned middle-aged men. This assumption was reflected by the results in this study. No story was constructed with adolescents as perpetrators, although evidence suggests that there are increasing numbers of adolescents being convicted (Gomes-Schwartz, Horowitz, & Cardarelli, 1990). This is supported further by Ryan and Lane (1997) who report an increase in the number of adolescents being charged with sex offences.

Public awareness and understanding of sexual offenders might serve to identify the beginnings of such behaviour. Studies suggest that convicted sex offenders admitted to exhibiting deviant behaviour in adolescence (Hathaway & McKinley, 1967; Hunter & Becker, 1994). Perhaps, like those known to us, it is difficult to perceive that adolescents who are probably under the care of their parents could be capable of this type of crime.

The final theme addressed is the notion of sex offenders being predominantly male. Within this research the sex offender was constructed as male in the majority of cases. This is supported by Finkelhor (1986) and La Fontaine (1990) who also note that there are increasing numbers of women reportedly committing this type of offence. Among the stories constructing women as the abuser there was surprise and disbelief at

the notion of women committing this type of offence. Soothill and Walby (1991) posit that even when women are guilty of a sexual offence the severity of the crime is usually played down, depicting women as seductresses or lesbians, which is markedly different to male abusers portrayed as “monsters” and “beasts”. In addition it can be argued that women are socially constructed as caring and protective (Stainton-Rogers & Stainton-Rogers, 1999) and therefore, not readily associated with the harming of children.

Finally the word “community” was added to the story beginnings as it seems an important concept within research. However, no one questioned its use or what was meant by the term “community”. As Grogger and Weatherford (1995) state, people must have some concept of what a community is, other than merely a spatial area, in order to fear crime within it. When people talk about not wanting sex offenders within their communities would they be comfortable/safer having them in the next community that may be half a mile away? Community is arguably a concept constructed to enable a feeling of “safeness” within it and anything threatening it provokes fear. It is evident that this warrants further investigation. The concept of “community” is clearly not a simple one and in respect to crime, the value of the community is high. Further studies can be performed to investigate the concept and clarify its meaning for respondents.

Implications

The total embeddedness of the Dominant narrative makes it difficult to see how those in positions of authority in society can be objective since narrative is not. There is the need to deconstruct the child sex offender by introducing Alternative narratives that include the notion that offenders are socially created rather than innately evil. Deconstructing the Dominant narrative will prove difficult when official statistics serve to confuse the public, by suggesting low reconviction rates of sex offenders in some reports whilst other Home Office reports note that special requirements should be implemented for sex offenders because of their likelihood of reoffending (Halliday, 2001). Kemshall and Maguire (2001) also report that probation managers and police officers generally thought sex offenders could not be rehabilitated and therefore the emphasis should be on control.

The role played by the media in reaffirming the Dominant narrative further prevents any shift in perceptions since, as this research highlights, the media is key to shaping perceptions held by the public. For change to occur the media would need to assist in constructing an Alternative narrative and take more responsibility for the inaccurate and stereotypical image portrayed. Of course this may be reciprocal, with the media simply reflecting the views of society. Collings (2002) suggests if the media were to take the lead in reshaping perceptions and not simply be a mirroring of uninformed views, a number of strategies would need to be implemented. Such strategies include seminars for reporters, involvement in child protection services (in order to present a more representative understanding), and also the appointment of reporters who specifically report such cases in a representative manner, not with what Collings termed a superficial or sensational approach.

Programmes currently undertaken in schools aim to provide children with knowledge and skills that could prevent sexual abuse. The length of the programmes have been criticised as not being sufficient to decrease the amount of sexual abuse.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of such programmes has not been established (MacMillan, MacMillan, Offord, Griffith, & MacMillan, 1994). It is the contention of this research that education programmes be aimed at children to address the inaccuracies of the Dominant narrative. This is needed in order to both understand and prevent child sexual abuse.

In conjunction with this, community projects should be set up with the aim of helping sex offenders to reintegrate into society. This is an idea that has already shown to be successful in Toronto: It consists of a small number of trained volunteers committed to helping offenders become part of a community again. They help the offender find employment and accommodations as well as a social network. This approach has been found to be successful in preventing any relapse and volunteers work to dispel the “us” and “them” beliefs held by much of society. They posit that it is more productive to help sex offenders to reintegrate into an understanding environment that can monitor their behaviour than to simply keep moving them into different communities (Petrunik, 2002).

The researchers are committed to investigating this approach in lowering recidivism, with a view in influencing research approaches and governmental policies. As academic psychologists working with prison psychologists we are looking at the levels of participation in rehabilitation programmes, both prison and community based. This study shows us that such research is needed.

The use and analysis of narrative

The story completion method was successful in eliciting the themes identified within the Dominant and Alternative narrative for the majority of participants. However some reported finding the concept difficult to understand (not many adults are expected or allowed free range to write or complete stories) and the process needed some clarification. The researchers almost felt that we were in the position of “permission giving”-allowing respondents free creativity in their responses. It may be that further research would benefit from the use of structured interviews, which should counter this difficulty as well as enabling further in depth exploration of themes.

It is further recognised that although a variety of scenarios was introduced the technique was limited to the identified themes. Some respondents, as can be seen from the extracts in this paper, used the opportunity to construct very detailed and even dramatic scenarios whereas some found it quite difficult to engage. It appears, for some, that these scenarios were not flexible enough to incorporate other issues arising, such as the role of the police. Future research should employ techniques that enable greater flexibility to examine all facets associated with people convicted of this crime. Furthermore, although most participants stated that treatment is not effective, it seemed that when the notion of the sex offender as a family member was introduced that treatment would be considered. Future research should explore this further, as it suggests that the Dominant narrative is flexible within certain circumstances. Finally, although there were clear definitions of the themes to enable the coding of the vignettes, it is recognised that coding still relied on the personal interpretation of the researchers.

Conclusion

Narrative coupled with thematic analysis was a viable and useful method for exploratory research in the area of public perception of sex offenders. It has revealed that, whilst the Dominant narrative remains relatively unchanged and unchallenged, there will be little movement and acceptance from the public of new measures. Political and media involvement maintains child sex offenders as being a high profile issue without focussing on the wider issue of under-reporting and policy implications of public pressure, including the effect it has on a person's chance at rehabilitation. Openness is needed at all levels to challenge the Dominant narrative. In addition to public reporting of the presence of offenders in the community, the reporting of research on offenders, rehabilitation, and the likelihood of recidivism would achieve a more open approach to the problem.

Research is needed to examine the narrative at the heart of all our perceptions. If we all hold perceptions that are erroneous or at least not supported by full and openly received evidence, then who knows what misperceptions are causing difficulties in our homes, communities, and countries?

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