

5 Telling It Like It Is: Understanding Adult Women's Life-Long Disclosures of Childhood Sexual Abuse

LOUISE LIVESEY

This paper seeks to explore some of what we can learn from looking at adult women's stories of their experiences of disclosing childhood sexual abuse. The research upon which the paper is based is an inter-disciplinary analysis of "what happens" when women disclose child sexual abuse to others over the life course. A socially aware understanding of the meaning of narrative and story-telling has become of key importance in this research and begins to offer new ways in which to develop research on sexually abusive experiences which broadens the agenda of research on childhood sexual abuse. In particular understanding narrative has offered new ways of accessing and understanding issues relating to later life (that is, post-childhood) for women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse.

Introduction

This paper will provide some preliminary thoughts on the analysis of the research data and how it can be understood. Of key importance is a discussion of how the listener can challenge the person disclosing in various ways and specifically this paper examines the *tellability* challenge and what new understandings this can provide to social scientists. In this way narrative, and the telling of self-stories, has much to offer our understandings of the effects and impacts of childhood sexual abuse.

Samantha: I have told other people but not by any means all my friends. Some people have been at a loss as to what to say, and I have worried afterwards that they will be wondering why I have chosen to burden them with a disgusting piece of my personal history that they did not ask about and didn't feel qualified to discuss. And that has made me question myself severely as to why I couldn't keep my mouth shut - why I feel some compulsion to tell people. I always compare this to the Ancient Mariner who has to tell his sad story to people even though they did not want to hear it as it was too depressing. I wondered whether the compulsion to tell people was mere sensationalism, but discarded that theory. I felt that, certainly

in the early days, I was hoping for people to show that they cared for me by (1) confirming that it wasn't my fault and (2) being angry with the perpetrator.

Discussing disclosure of childhood sexual abuse is a complicated task, not least because disclosure is a deceptively simplistic term covering many varied speech acts. In an attempt to be clear what I mean by disclosure I offer the following definition:

To disclose abuse means that the speaker tells someone that they have experienced sexually abusive events in childhood.

It may seem like a simple definition but the “taken-for-granted-ness” of it has been worn away in recent years by the psychological take-over of childhood sexual abuse in general and of disclosure in particular (see Armstrong, 1991 and 1994 and Kelly, 1996a and 1996b for more discussion of this). Disclosure in the psychotherapeutic tradition has become characterised as a set-piece event which is seen as part of the ‘healing process’ (see for example Schatzow and Herman, 1989) rather than as a spontaneous activity women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse might initiate. My simpler, working definition of disclosure purposefully excludes any notion of how detailed the disclosure is and what the intent is.

Disclosure, however, is not as simple as has previously been thought and is in fact a multi-faceted event. What this paper focuses on is the way in which narrative and story telling play important roles in disclosure and in the understanding of disclosure. This arises out of my research into adult women’s disclosures of childhood sexual abuse and it is apparent that story telling and narrative are aspects hardly ever considered in the literature on this subject. In particular this paper focuses on one aspect of narrative and story-telling, that of *tellability*, in the examination of some accounts of disclosure in a hope to explore some of the aspects of disclosure in a new way.

Disclosure and Cultural Narratives

To talk about disclosure of childhood sexual abuse is to automatically tap into ongoing cultural narratives about childhood sexual abuse. As Chris Atmore has said there is currently “a present and unprecedented plethora of popular cultural references to child sexual abuse” (Atmore, 1998, p.124). We are all familiar with the contemporary varied cultural narratives about experiences of childhood sexual abuse. These narrative discourses are deployed, produced and reproduced, in many of the common fora in which abuse is discussed - on the news, in magazine articles, books, documentaries and chat shows. The purpose of disclosure is both public and private at the same time in many cases. It

relates to the telling of a private story (with all its necessary specific detail) and the reproduction¹ of cultural narratives, public stories.

Most of the stories about disclosure that I have heard during my research were about disclosures that, subtly or explicitly, worked against the grain of the cultural narratives. It seemed that the perception of cultural narratives was that they were disempowering in that they are reliant on characterising women who had experienced abuse as having a narrow range of possible stories to tell rather than embracing the diversity of experience.

Cultural narratives both constrain and shape the personal narratives and to tell a personal story that directly contradicts or confuses the cultural narrative is to run the risk of being dismissed. For stories to have a purpose they must comply with what we, as an audience, expect from that story. Jennifer Coates (2000) summarises these expectations as being that there will be narrative clauses whose order matches the real time order of events described and, additionally that there will be *tellability* or a point to the story. Coates argues that “the worst thing that can happen to a narrator is that their story is seen as pointless; narrators need to avoid the “So what?” challenge” (Coates, 2000, p.1). Thus the *tellability* of personal stories is actually determined by the listener rather than the speaker. To put it more strongly, it is the listener who has the final arbitration because it is they who can posit the “So what?” challenge to the speaker.

To understand disclosures made by adult women I think we need some understanding of these cultural narratives of sexual abuse and how they work. As Vicki Bell has argued:

the silence of women survivors should be placed within the context of the ways in which incest has been spoken about and analysed in relation to them. As the ‘speakouts’ on incest have shown, several aspects of the disparate discourse on incest required the silence of survivors in order to maintain credibility.

(Bell, 1993, p.80)

To broaden Bell’s assertion I think it is not just the silence of survivors which needs to be examined in this way but also the speech of survivors. Such an expansion would allow us to also focus on the speech of women and to have more understanding of the fact that speech and silence are not dichotomously constructed, as is suggested in much of the literature, but are in fact both discursively constructed. I would argue that we need to contextualise the speech of women survivors in a way which places cultural narratives against the grain of the personal stories by women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, and by doing this we can thus highlight the dissonance between personal disclosures of abuse and the cultural narrative archetypes. An approach that allows this to happen must, by definition, go beyond traditional linguistic or narrative analyses. Ken Plummer, in his analysis of sexual stories, argues that the stories we tell about intimate details of our lives are

not simply ‘languages’ or ‘texts’ or even ‘discourses’. I want to move right away from the current, almost obsessive, concern of much analysis that reduces dense, empirical *human* life to *texts*. Social reality may be approached metaphorically as a text, but it is not in actuality a text ... [the] stories *I will be discussing must be seen to be socially produced in social contexts by embodied concrete people experiencing the thoughts and feelings of everyday life* ... If they are ‘texts’, then they are text embodied by breathing, passionate people in the full stream of social life. (emphasis original; Plummer, 1995, p.16)

The stories that Plummer collected, and the stories I collected from my participants, cannot be seen solely as *texts* for *analysis* which can tell us *how* the stories are told. Rather they are also narratives of individual subjective truths; they tell us how people think of themselves and others and of the events that they are relating.

Narrative and Disclosure

What I hope to do in the rest of this paper is to focus on aspects of narrative in adult women’s stories of disclosures and it is guided by a concern to examine the role played by *tellability*. On the surface of our culture we can see exhortations to speak about childhood sexual abuse in our daily lives: chat shows, glossy magazines and documentaries about abuse all contain subtle invitations to speak. Identification with the guests on a chat show and Helpline numbers on magazine articles and at the end of documentaries exhort women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse speak about their experiences to others. However these exhortations rely on the common cultural narratives about the experience of childhood sexual abuse.

I wish to start with a letter to the problems page of *Best* (March, 2000), a popular women’s magazine (Figure One). The letter writer asks *Norah*, the resident agony aunt, for advice on disclosing the sexual abuse in childhood she experienced to her mother. The writer articulately explains her reasons for wanting to disclose in her letter. However *Norah* begins by making these motivations problematic. *Norah* tells us that it is not the case that the writer wants to tell her mother to try and improve their relationship but that the writer, in fact, wants to punish her mother for not discovering the abuse. The writer is advised to seek support from organisations specialising in adult survivors of sexual abuse and is told to recover by “taking off the armour that is no longer protecting you, just dragging you into the mire”. Discourse analysis might suggest that this reply alludes to the discourses of the vengeful abuse victim, the discourse of the ubiquity of the need to ‘heal’ and, discordantly, the discourse of “pulling oneself together” in *Norah*’s final comments.

Figure One Let Norah Help You - No-one Understands Your Problems Better ...

If Only I Could Tell My Mum That My Father Abused Me

- Q. *I am in my 30s and single. I was sexually abused by my father from around age eight. I never told anyone and tried to put it out of my mind. My parents divorced when I was 16. I'd love my mother to know the truth, so she'd understand why I am the way I am, and not see me as the miserable black sheep of the family. I used to think all the time about killing myself; these days I think things could get better and I might be like my sister - happy, married and at ease with myself.*
- A. *Hope is a wonderful thing - but if it remains unfulfilled too long, it can be destructive. You're stuck in a secret misery, as you were as a child, hoping your mother will rescue you. Not telling and denying to yourself what was happening is how you survived. You're still denying it - but, maybe unconsciously, you're punishing your mother for not noticing - then and now. The need to demonstrate a hurt that can't be spoken of can be dangerous if it shows itself as deep depression or acts of self-harm. Telling your mother won't kill her, and could save you - but it's not your first step. Call Childline (tel: Freephone 0800 1111) to get details of local support for adult survivors of sexual abuse. Find the Samaritans' number (Yellow Pages) and keep it with you at all times. You can recover, but first you have to take off the armour that is no longer protecting you, just dragging you into the mire.*

Taken from *Best* problem page (March, 2000). Used with permission from *Best* magazine.

What is of interest here is that the writers desire to disclose is somehow turned around to become a need to punish her mother which in turn must itself require punishment. *Norah's* reworking of the writers intentions changes the writer from one seeking healing to one seeking revenge and moves the portrayal of the writer from being a woman seeking to improve familial relationships to a woman seeking to destroy them. What has actually happened is that the *tellability* of the story about wanting to disclose has been transformed into another story which is, apparently, more tellable – the story that women who have experienced abuse need therapeutic intervention, that their stated intentions mask their real (if unconscious) intentions, and that women who have experienced abuse are infantilised and unable to move on in their relationships.

Using the above example as contextualisation I want to examine two further examples of the *tellability* problem in disclosure narratives. Both come from my research with adult women who have experienced childhood sexual abuse. The first comes from a written piece sent to me by *Ellie*². *Ellie* related the story of her seeking Social Services help at a time when she was concerned that the abuse she was suffering at the hands of both her parents be perpetrated against her sister after she left home. *Ellie* had approached the NSPCC previously and agreed to wait until her A Levels examinations because it was feared that her father's violent physical abuse might endanger her exam performance. *Ellie* then relates that the situation deteriorated she decided to confide in her GP in case, at the end of her exams, it was impossible for her to tell anyone. *Ellie* continues the story here:

Ellie: The day of my last exam I saw my GP again and she called Social Services. Two weeks later I hadn't heard anything so I went to my local Social Services department. Eventually I saw my key worker and she said that she'd just sent a letter to my home address asking me to get in touch with them (my Mum usually reads all my post before I can get to it). She then decided to interview me there and then (something I wasn't prepared for). The moment I said that my Mum sexually abused me but my father only physically abused us all she seemed to lose all respect for me and treated me like a child. I think she thought that I was messing her around or at best telling lies to cover for my Dad sexually abusing me.

Although *Ellie* was very clear about her reasons for formal disclosure at this time the reinterpretation by the social worker is that *Ellie* is either covering up for abuse by her father or "messing her around" for which she understands lying. But this reinterpretation is not apparently based on any particular characteristic(s) relating to *Ellie* as a narrator. It is not *Ellie* as a narrator, which prompts the reworking, but rather the fact that the disclosure explicitly challenges the one of the cultural narrative - *Ellie*'s story is of sexual abuse of a girl child by a woman. Both Kelly (*Unspeakable Acts*, 1991) and Elliot (*Female Sexual Abuse of Children*, 1994) have written about the lack of cultural narratives about abuse of girls by women. It seems that in this particular situation when confronted by a contradiction between the personal narrative and the cultural one the social worker made a choice to reinforce the cultural narrative and therefore dismissed *Ellie*'s narrative.

Ellie herself later went on to say in interview that

Ellie: People find it incredibly hard to swallow that a mother could abuse her child and I mean that is probably something that comes up time and again, that people will blank it, it'll be like they haven't heard it and erm, they'll kind of ask questions like "Couldn't your Mum do anything about the abuse?" and stuff like "And have you talked about it with your Mum?" and stuff like that. I don't know, if they've really understood what I've been said then they wouldn't have actually said any of that ... I've had a few times that it wasn't really abuse if it was from

your Mum and, erm, that it was, I don't know, that it was maybe something not serious and not to make as big a fuss over.

The second story I want to share comes from another participant, *Alice*, who told me about her involvement with a church group. *Alice* is a committed Christian and is active within her church. *Alice* attends a regular prayer meeting at the church and she relates her feelings about the group in one section of the interview:

Alice: Most of the people in that group except for one I would happily tell, one person in the group knows a bit about my background but the rest of the group don't because of this one member. And she's a lovely, kind soul but she can be hopeless, I know she will. I don't want to tell somebody who is going to tell me how to handle it. [...] Those are the people I find the most difficult, the ones who have got the answers. "Well you should just do this dear", "what you need to do dear, is,", "you know you just need to forget that, just let it go" you know, I've heard that over the years, and it makes me so fucking angry I can't tell you. It's so cruel, but there's no harm in this person, you know, she isn't trying to be cruel but I think she's saying "I don't want to hear this, I can't hear it" you know and looking back I think that's the problem really, people haven't wanted to heard. They, I mean even if they couldn't cope with it or I felt they couldn't cope with it, I won't share it.

In the context of the current focus I think *Alice* here is talking about preempting the *tellability* challenge. The cultural narratives in this case are not general ones from the wider population but ones specific to her Christian beliefs and the cultural of the church group she attends. But it is *Alice's* final comments that hold the most interest where she states that if she thinks people won't be able to hear what she is saying then she doesn't tell them. *Alice's* decision to disclose (or not) is directly related to her perception of whether the listener will understand the *tellability* of her story.

Tellability and the Response to Disclosure

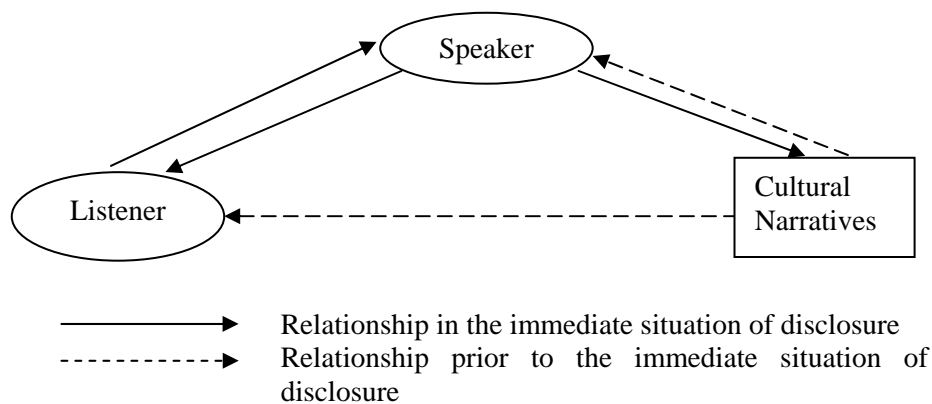
The agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained) but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know. And this discourse of truth finally takes effect, not in the one who receives it, but in the one from whom it is wrested. (Foucault, 1976, p.62)

The relation between the ability to question and the ability to create a discourse of truth is explicated by Foucault as being a reciprocal one – it is the listener who questions, in effect who frames and controls the discourse but the speaker who answers and displays the knowledge which becomes the basis for the

discourse of truth. I think this duality and contested reciprocity³ is key in understanding disclosures. Disclosure cannot be seen as a speaker giving the truth to a listener but must instead be viewed as a reciprocal relationship in which the speaker gives the truth in a way, which is both limited, controlled and ultimately shaped by the listener (and indeed by previous listeners). However, at the same time, the speaker then becomes subject to (and subject of) the discourse of truth which is arrived in this way and it is their experiences which become subject to the limitations of the discourse. This power relationship in the nature of 'reciprocal' truth making is key in understanding the *tellability* problem within disclosure of childhood sexual abuse.

In this model of disclosure the cultural narratives have already influenced both the personal story of the speaker and the understandings of the listener. The speaker then reinforces the cultural narrative (or transgresses it) and the listener must choose how they want to co-construct the speaker's story - whether that is through acceptance, rejection or ambivalence. The inclusion of cultural narratives in the disclosure situation allows us to further explore Bell's assertion that contextualisation of the silence (and speech) of women survivors within the ways in which abuse has been spoken about is needed.

Figure 2 The relationship of the effects within the disclosure situation



This understanding of disclosure as an interactive process has often been overlooked. Disclosure, as with any conversation, is a two-way flow in which both participants have the ability to shape the nature of the interaction between them. The importance lies within an acceptance of the power of the listener to both control and influence the nature of disclosure and the truth-giving discourse that surrounds the disclosure. In *Ellie's* case the resistance of the social worker to creating a truth-giving discourse which challenged the cultural narratives disallowed *Ellie's* disclosure as told and therefore prevented the

achievement of her aim of protecting her sister. In *Alice's* case it is the possibility that the reciprocal relationship will not be entered into by others which prevents her from disclosing, even to a group from which she otherwise draws strength and comfort.

In the process of disclosure the woman who have experienced childhood sexual abuse is involved in an active process of assessing cultural narratives and creating (or recreating) her own story in relation to them. Croghan and Miell (1998) argue that any:

act of resistance was itself deeply enmeshed in existing cultural representations, and engagement with these representations [is] an integral part of creating an alternative view. Refuting a negative version of events involved the account maker in an implicit appeal for sanction to an audience which, together with the authors of these accounts, was immersed in common cultural values while at the same time struggling to establish alternative versions of events.

(Croghan and Miell, 1998, p.454)

In other words the act of resisting the cultural representations is one which involves both the speaker and the listener and is one in which both parties must engage with the cultural representations involved. In fact this describes each disclosure event because the 'account maker' will always be enmeshed in trying to differentiate her experience from stereotypical views. To establish another version of events, another representation or understanding, the speaker and listener must both concur that this is the process in which they are engaging or the speaker will be thwarted in this effort. However this process is more tenuous for the speaker than for the listener because, ultimately, it is the listener who has control of the process of understanding-construction in the disclosure situation. It is easier for the listener to impose their reinterpretation upon the speaker, either explicitly as in *Ellie's* case or without admitting doing so as in the problem page writers case, than it is for the speaker to impose their reinterpretation upon a listener.

Conclusions

To finish I want to return briefly to *Samantha* whose statement I used to open the paper. In the first statement *Samantha* makes clear that it is actually the “Why?” question about story telling which worries her most. This is similar to but also different from Coate’s assertion that the worst possible challenge is the “so what?” question. “So what” is dealt with in our cultural narratives – it refers to issues about how child sexual abuse must be tackled, issues of silence and speech. “Why?” as opposed to “So what” does not so much challenge the story as it does the speaker. The “why?” question, posed only after the speaker has finished disclosing may contain elements of the “so what?” question but it also takes the question further - moving from challenging the story (“So what was the point of that?”) to challenging the speaker (“So why tell me this?”) and that transformation of questioning may hold an important key to the experience of disclosure for adult women.

In a section of interview transcript *Samantha* directly confronts these same issues.

Samantha: If I was really thinking about it you would tell people why your telling them, before you even told them. You would say, you know, that you wanted some support or you wanted to know what they thought or something, you know. Then you might, then *I* might have got out of it what I wanted, you know ... I mean you often think don’t you when people tell you things, why are they telling me this, I often think it, very often you know, you start off on something and I very often don’t know if they want something from me, an answer, or if they are telling me out of interest in which case have they stopped to find out if I am interested or why are they telling me. I mean that’s maybe how people felt when I told them because I gave them no clue about why I was telling them.

Samantha here questions and works with her problems about disclosure but her conclusion is a startling one. Her solution to the “Why” question is to answer it before she has begun. And yet, moments later in the interview, *Samantha* said to me that this was an ideal which wouldn’t solve the problem because either she wouldn’t do it or because the speaker still wouldn’t understand. So whereas *Alice*’s solution is to pre-empt the *tellability* challenge by not telling, *Samantha* suggests directly tackling the problem by answering the challenge before it arises.

Tellability, as we have seen, can be a key problematical site in understanding disclosure of childhood sexual abuse, particularly when we are considering social stigmatisation and reluctance to disclose. The notion of *tellability* confuses the issue of disclosure because rather than being able to portray disclosure as a situation in which one person gives information to another in a relatively simple process of active agent and passive receptor, the situation is actually much more complex. Not only are both people involved

actively engaged in the disclosure process within differentiated roles but additionally cultural narratives play both an active and a passive role in the situation. Moreover the issue of *tellability* is one where the listener can exercise their power to retain control over the construction of meaning within the disclosure event. Additional to this, the challenge of *tellability* also shows us how important aspects of narrative are in disclosure of child sexual abuse.

References

- Armstrong, L. (1991) "Surviving the Incest Industry" in *Trouble and Strife* 21.
- Armstrong, L. (1994) *Rocking the Cradle of Sexual Politics: What happened when women said incest*, London, Women's Press.
- Atmore, C. (1998) "Towards 2000: Child Sexual Abuse and the media" in Adrian Howe *Sexed Crimes in the News*, New South Wales, Federation Press, p.124-144.
- Bell, V. (1993) *Interrogating Incest: Feminism, Foucault and the Law*, London, Routledge.
- Coates, J. (2000) "What do we mean by a 'story'?" in *University of Surrey Roehampton Working Papers in Linguistics* Volume 2, London, University of Surrey Roehampton.
- Croghan, E. and Miell, D. (1998) "Strategies of Resistance: "Bad" mothers dispute the evidence" in *Feminism & Psychology* 8(4) 445-465.
- Elliot, M. (1994) *Female Sexual Abuse of Children*, New York, Guilford.
- Foucault, M. (1976) *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, London, Allen Lane.
- Kelly, L. (1991) "Unspeakable Acts: Women who abuse" in *Trouble & Strife* Volume 21 pp.13-20.
- Kelly, L., Burton, S. and Regan, L. (1996a) "Beyond victim and survivor: sexual violence, identity and feminist theory and practice" in Adkins, L. and Merchant, V. *Sexualising the Social: Power and the Organization of Sexuality*, London, Macmillan.
- Kelly, L. and Radford, J. (1996b) "Nothing Really Happened: the invalidation of women's experiences of sexual violence" in Hester, M., Kelly, L. and Radford, J. *Women, Violence and Male Power*, Buckinghamshire, Open University Press.
- Plummer, K. (1995) *Telling Sexual Stories: power, change and social worlds*, London, Routledge.
- Schatzow, E. and Herman, J. (1989) "Breaking Secrecy: Adult Survivors Disclose to their Families" in *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 12(2) p.337-34.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the permission given by *Ellie*, *Alice* and *Samantha* in reproducing their research data in this paper. I would also like to thank Anne Threadgold at *Best* for her help in gaining copyright clearance to reproduce Figure One. Finally I would like to thank the ongoing support of my work at University of Surrey Roehampton by Dr Lorraine Radford, Professor Pat Mahony and Professor Jennifer Coates.

Notes

- ¹ All the names used here are pseudonyms selected by the research participants themselves.
- ² Even challenging cultural narratives involves reproducing them in certain ways: as illustrations or objects for analytic dissembling for example.
- ³ I say contested reciprocity because the possibly conflicting interests of the speaker and listener mean that the reciprocal arrangement is not one of mutuality but possibly one of conflict.