

Child Sexual Abuse: Past and Current Myths

Christopher R. Goddard



Violence and assault within the home have always occurred in the shadows. Throwing light on the problems has never been easy, with the players in the tragedies disappearing and the action ceasing as soon as they were illuminated. For health and welfare workers now faced with large numbers of child sexual abuse victims the fact that the problem of child sexual abuse remained hidden for so long is difficult to comprehend. The evidence does not indicate a large increase in child sexual abuse, so the uncomfortable reality must be that the victims suffered in silence or their cries for help remained unheard or unheeded. As Hewitt so graphically proposes, the problem has always been:

“... characterised by silence and shame on the part of the victim, and disbelief and ignorance on the part of the community.”
(1986:11-12)

Violence and assault within the home have always occurred in the shadows. Throwing light on the problems has never been easy, with the players in the tragedies disappearing and the action ceasing as soon as they were illuminated.

Health and welfare practitioners the world over must be reviewing cases, contemplating alternative explanations for hitherto unexplained behaviour or relationships, and feeling uneasy about what might have been occurring in families with whom they were working.

In the 20th Century, society has realised that children are not adults in miniature. Childhood is now recognised as something unique (Gagnon, 1965). Many have become concerned with children's rights but as Markey (1981) notes, the concern has failed

Christopher Goddard is Senior Lecturer, Department of Social Work, Monash University.

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to protect children from continuing sexual abuse.

“Although a ten year old girl is excused by twentieth century child development specialists from the rigors of child labor, this same child is portrayed as a seductress as she goes through stages of her psychosexual development.” (Markey, 1981:2)

Several myths have contributed to the continued exposure of children to sexual assault.

THE MYTHS

A number of authors have described in detail the myths that surround child sexual abuse and incest (see, for example, Hewitt, 1986:20-31; Nelson, 1987:34-95; Driver, 1989). These myths have been extremely influential and have been responsible for the failure to recognise the size and seriousness of the problem. The myths include the suggestion that children lie or fantasize about sexual abuse (Hewitt, 1986:20; Driver, 1989:27); that children are ‘sexy’ (Nelson, 1987:38), or ‘seductive’ (Hewitt, 1986:29; Driver, 1989:30); that incest reflects a caring relationship (Nelson, 1987:50); that incest is acceptable in some cultures (Hewitt, 1986:31; Nelson, 1987:45; Driver, 1989:33); that mothers are always collusive (Nelson, 1987:62); that the sexual abuse is not harmful but the ensuing interventions cause problems (Hewitt, 1987:27; Driver, 1989:44); and that strangers rather than family members are the real danger (Hewitt, 1987:22).

Three of these myths in particular have had a profound effect on the intervention into and treatment of child sexual abuse. These three myths, that children fantasize, that children are seductive and that intervention tends to be more harmful than the abuse itself, have been particularly deeply entrenched. This is certainly the case when they are taken in conjunction with one another to provide consecutive and mutually supporting excuses for inaction. Thus a report of child sexual abuse may be treated as a fantasy, and then, if further evidence is forthcoming, blamed on the child, and then, if further information contradicts this, intervention is seen as pointless and harmful. As MacLeod and

Saraga (1988:25) have described, such myths continue to exert a profound influence on intervention. As Russell (1986:5) proposes, the experiences of incest victims have long been discounted, and two figures, in particular have played major roles: Freud and Kinsey.

FREUD'S ROLE

Until very recently, many reports of child sexual abuse were dismissed as children's fantasies. This response is a legacy of Freud's work (Faller, 1988).

Many of Freud's women patients suffered from hysteria and recounted experiences of child sexual abuse, particularly at the hands of their fathers. Freud described a causal link between these early experiences of victimisation and adult neurosis and stated this publicly in 1896 (de Young, 1982). This provoked an ‘ambivalent’ response from his peers and, perhaps more importantly, he found it impossible to reconcile these accounts of assault with men many of whom he knew personally (de Young, 1982).

“At the same time he was trying to resolve this conflict, he began to see hysterically neurotic symptoms in his own siblings. Did that mean that his own revered father had incestuously victimized his own children?”
(de Young, 1982:44)

“... characterised by silence and shame on the part of the victim, and disbelief and ignorance on the part of the community.”

(Lesley Hewitt, 1986)

Freud went on to decide that the stories that he had uncovered were fantasy rather than actual experience and from this position he formulated the Oedipus complex for males and the Electra complex for females. According to the theory of the Oedipus complex, the young boy (from three to six years of age) lavishes love and affection on his mother. This love has sexual overtones and places the boy in competition with his father. Psychopathology, according to Freud, arose not from sexual trauma at the hands of adults but from failure to resolve this Oedipus complex (Finkelhor, 1979).

Interestingly, Freud described but did not to the same extent elaborate upon the female Electra complex and was far less explicit in describing its resolution (Salkind, 1981). The process, however, is similar: the young girl desires her father but is afraid of her mother, and learns to repress these feelings and identify with the parent of the same sex. Rush's (1980) 'Freudian cover-up' was in place. Freud according to de Young (1982) had exonerated his own father and at the same time exonerated all fathers everywhere.

According to Rush (1980), Sigmund Freud knew that child sexual abuse occurred but he could not face the implications of this abuse and thus found it safer to alter his accounts of reality. In this, Rush says, he was merely reflecting the ethos of an age where forbidden sexual activity was permitted as long as the activities were kept hidden.

"Freud ... appeared to demand only that forbidden sex be practiced with tact and discretion so that surface Victorian respectability was in no way disturbed."

(Rush, 1980:104)

Herman and Hirschman (1981:10) claim that Freud "... turned his back ..." on the victims and "... denied the truth ..." of what they said was happening. According to Ward (1984), this ability on Freud's part to avoid what faced him allowed psychoanalysis to develop safely with the unpleasant sexual assaults of childhood confined to the realms of fantasy.

Finkelhor (1979) states that two lasting negative developments resulted. Firstly, generations of women who have revealed such experiences have had them discounted. Secondly, in inverting the original theory, the blame for whatever happened was placed on the child.

"Such experiences were the result of the child's Oedipal impulses rather than the adult's predatory ones. It was an ironic development: Freud's revised theory took the moral opprobrium directed at the offender in such situations and placed it on the victim."

(Finkelhor, 1979:8-9)

The myth of the seductive child, according to Driver (1989:31), helps a society that is defensive about child sexual abuse explain this occurrence. Thus, instead of blaming the perpetrator, Brownmiller describes how the psychoanalytic literature "... points a wagging finger ..." at the abused victim. (1986:275)

According to Herman and Hirschman (1981), the legacy of Freud's refusal to recognise incest was a prejudice remaining today (and shared by professionals and the general population) that children lie about sexual abuse. This is borne out by my practice experience where some doctors continue to prefer to believe that sexually transmitted diseases are more likely to be

caught from towels and bed linen than from sexual abuse.

The Freudian framework of childhood sexuality, according to Glaser and Frosh (1988:31), is not only the most detailed theory available but also the most powerful and dominant. Markey (1981) explains that later generations of psychoanalysts built their own myths upon Freud's foundations, and refers to the work of Abraham (1927), Kaufman, et al., (1954) and Barry (1958). One exceptional case, Markey explains, could be used by three different writers to develop further myths and extend 'male biases' (1981:4).

KINSEY'S CONTRIBUTION

A major contribution to the myths that children desire sexual activity with adults, and that it is not the sexual abuse but the subsequent intervention that causes the child trauma, was made, not by psychoanalysts but by social scientists: by Kinsey and his colleagues (MacLeod and Saraga 1988:25). Kinsey and his fellow researchers (1948:1953) established that childhood sexual experiences were extremely common but, Finkelhor (1979:16) believes, did as much as possible to "minimize" the importance of the problem.

Kinsey, in a section entitled "Significance of Adult Contacts", stated that, in spite of the widespread nature of these experiences, there were insufficient data to enable conclusions to be drawn about the significance of this behaviour between children and adults; it is important to examine this section in detail:

"The females in the sample who had had pre-adolescent contacts with adults had been variously interested, curious, pleased, embarrassed, frightened, terrified, or disturbed with feelings of guilt."

(Kinsey et al., 1953:120)

Kinsey and his colleagues at the Institute for Sex Research, Indiana University, state that these sexual contacts are a source of pleasure for some children and involve considerable affection, and that some women felt that their socio-sexual development had been beneficially influenced by these experiences in pre-adolescence. They go on to describe, however, how:

"... some 80 percent of the children had been emotionally upset or frightened by their contacts with adults. A small portion had been seriously disturbed; but in most instances the reported fright was nearer the level that children will show when they see insects, spiders, or other object against which they have been adversely conditioned." (Kinsey et al., 1953:121)

Kinsey blames cultural conditioning for the disturbance resulting from these sexual approaches, stating that:

"It is difficult to understand why a child,

except for its cultural conditioning, should be disturbed at having its genitalia touched, or disturbed at seeing the genitalia of other persons, or disturbed at even more specific sexual contacts." (Kinsey et al., 1953:121)

Children, according to the Kinsey approach, are:

"... ready to become hysterical as soon as any older person approaches, or stops and speaks to them in the street, or fondles them, or proposes to do something for them, even though the adult may have had no sexual objective in mind." (Kinsey et al., 1953:121)

Kinsey describes as 'the current hysteria' (perhaps a telling choice of phrase) the emerging interest in sex offences, and whilst many would agree with his caution that the emotional reactions of significant adults can cause further serious damage to the child victim of sexual abuse, few would nowadays concur with his definitions and conclusion.

"The exceedingly small number of cases in which physical harm is ever done the child is to be measured by the fact that among the 4441 females on whom we have data, we have only one clear-cut case of serious injury done to the child, and very few instances of vaginal bleeding which, however, did not appear to do any appreciable damage."

(Kinsey et al., 1953:122)

Kinsey and his associates, in their survey of over 5000 men, did not report data on sexual contacts between boys and adults, although they did state that most were homosexual contacts. Herman and Hirschman (1981) suggest that this was because Kinsey and his colleagues regarded this as so unusual that they did not analyse the data.

As Herman and Hirschman (1981) note, the Kinsey studies have become a household name. Their discoveries concerning homosexual contacts among men, masturbation and extramarital sexual activity were widely disseminated and discussed. And yet:

"... the finding that grown men frequently permit themselves sexual liberties with children, while grown women do not, made virtually no impact upon the public consciousness, even though this finding was repeatedly confirmed by other investigations."

(Herman & Hirschman, 1981:16)

According to Herman and Hirschman (1981), Kinsey and his colleagues not only minimise the importance of child sexual abuse and "cavalierly belittled" the reports, but also failed to show respect for children's integrity. In their determination to demonstrate sensitivity towards the offenders, however, Kinsey and his fellow researchers:

"... failed to distinguish between essen-

tially harmless acts committed by consenting adults, 'nuisance' acts such as exhibitionism, and frankly exploitative acts such as the prostitution of women and the molesting of children. Ignoring issues of dominance and power, they took a position that amounted to little more than advocacy of greater sexual licence for men.'

(Herman and Hirschman, 1981:16-17)

In fact Herman and Hirschman (1981) propose that Kinsey saw the male perpetrator as in need of protection from the persecution of females. In a section entitled 'The Protection of the Individual':

"In many instances the law, in the course of punishing the offender, does more damage to more persons than was ever done by the individual in his illicit sexual activity. The histories which we have accumulated contain many such instances. The intoxicated male who accidentally exposes his genitalia before a child may receive a prison sentence which leaves his family destitute for some period of years, breaks up his marriage, and leaves three or four children wards of the state and without the sort of guidance which the parents might well have supplied."

(Kinsey et al., 1953:20-21)

Kinsey et al. (1953) claimed that society had threatened the security of most of its members in order to protect itself from serious sex offenders. Thus:

"The child who has been raised in fear of all strangers and all physical manifestations of affection, may ruin the lives of the married couple who have lived as useful and honorable citizens through half or more of a century, by giving her parents and the police a distorted version of the old man's attempt to bestow grandfatherly affection upon her."

(Kinsey et al., 1953:21)

It is as if, two generations after Sigmund Freud, the researchers at the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University had similarly drawn aside a sheet, were made uncomfortable by what they saw, and hastily made to shroud the discoveries in secrecy once again.

Perhaps the final word on the work of Kinsey and his colleagues should be left with Brownmiller (1986) who describes how Kinsey defined the difference between rape and a good time as to whether the girl's parents were awake when she came home.

DISCUSSION

It is only recently that the extent of child sexual abuse has come to professional and public attention, and the strengths of the myths have been revealed. One of the first cases on my caseload as a trainee social worker, twenty years ago in rural England, involved an adolescent girl well-known to police and social services as a 'runaway'. On at least two occasions I assisted in returning

her to her mother and stepfather. She later became pregnant and told me that she "couldn't" tell me who the father was, because it would mean trouble for her and her mother.

I remember wondering if a woman social worker would have provided a more appropriate and comfortable relationship for this adolescent. It was not until years later, however, and miles away in another social services department, that I started to think that perhaps I had been returning that child to sexual abuse.

Nearly 100 years ago, Freud, according to many writers (eg. Rush, 1980; Ward, 1984), changed his views that sexual trauma in childhood quite commonly occurred and could cause major problems later in life (a view that aroused considerable hostility in his colleagues) to the more acceptable proposition that childhood sexual abuse was the product of fantasy (Waldby et al., 1989:89). About 40 years ago, Kinsey and his research team "...broke new ground..." (Finkelhor, 1979:9) and were able to describe the prevalence of masturbation, premarital and extramarital sex, homosexuality and even sexual contacts with animals, but did not address the problem of child sexual abuse (Russell, 1986:7-8). Herman and Hirschman (1981:17-18) believe that a judgement was made that the public was not ready to hear about the sexual abuse of children.

It can be reassuring to be wrong in good company. It is also comforting to look at the mistakes of others, or even those we have made ourselves, years later in the belief that we have rectified them. Such a reaction, however, can create a false confidence.

Freud has been accused of cowardice in his failure to confront the reality of child sexual abuse (Masson, 1984). This may be the case, although we are unlikely to know for certain. It is equally important to remember that, as Rosenfeld (1987) suggests, Freud was a product of his time and our current practice is similarly constrained.

The philosopher and historian of science, Thomas Kuhn, has argued that science cannot be viewed in terms of a gradual evolution of knowledge but rather in terms of "...revolutionary changes and discontinuous epochs..." (Charlesworth, 1982:9). As Charlesworth describes, the dominant ideas, or 'paradigms' as Kuhn called them, define what is fact, what is problematic, what is interesting and what is important (1982:32).

Child sexual abuse is now regarded as a major problem but there are still disagreements over many facets, as events in Cleveland in England have shown: the incidence, the causes, and the appropriate courses of action for victims and perpetrators, to name but three. Yet words of caution, with few notable exceptions (eg. O'Hagen 1989a; 1989b), are few and far between.

Working with children and families places

a great responsibility on us all. The problem of child sexual abuse continues to cause controversy and anguish to all involved, and it is unlikely that, in 50 years time, our current practice will be viewed as entirely appropriate. The myths that currently guide us will then be exposed.

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Kieran O'Hagan

