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## **Sexuality, innocence and agency in narratives of childhood sexual abuse: implications for social work**

Running head: Special Issue Sexuality and Social Work in the Contemporary World'

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### **Abstract**

*This article explores how girls' and young women's sexual behaviours have been and currently are constructed and responded to within social work. Contemporary views of childhood consider young people as sexually innocent and lacking (sexual) agency. Moreover, the experience of sexual abuse is believed to be traumatic and to result in long-term adverse life experiences. Such narratives can influence how social workers perceive and respond to abuse and indeed whether sexual activities involving young people are understood as abusive. Drawing on different but related Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded projects, the article introduces narratives of girls who were resident at the school where allegations against Jimmy Savile originate from. It then considers research looking at adult women's engagement with the childhood sexual abuse (CSA) recovery literature and draws links from this to the ways in which cases of sexual exploitation in UK towns such as Rotherham are responded to. Both examples challenge dominant understandings of CSA, raising questions of girls' agency but also of how sexual experience might act to remove a responsibility to protect girls from abuse. We argue that there is merit in separating out wrongfulness from harm in how social workers respond to such issues.*

Keywords: child sexual abuse (CSA); child sexual exploitation (CSE) childhood; sex; Jimmy Savile; harm story; social work; agency

### **Introduction**

In 2016 there are few who would argue that sex between adult(s) and child(ren) is wrong and a form of sexual abuse and this is our starting point in this article. However, many would also argue that such abuse is inevitably and overwhelmingly harmful. It can be difficult to refute such a view in a climate in which Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) has, in the UK, become highly politicised, especially in the wake of allegations made in recent years against the former BBC entertainer Jimmy Savile. This can make it difficult to even raise questions about

whether current assumptions are helpful for those who are victims of CSA or for practitioners who have to negotiate the complexity of working with such cases. In the article we explore contemporary concerns around CSA. We argue that our current narrative is based on a premise of harm. We do not dispute that harm may indeed feature in some cases, both in the immediate aftermath of abuse and in the longer term and into adulthood, contingent on a range of personal and contextual factors. However, this is not inevitable and its presumption might itself be damaging to victims of abuse whilst also constraining our ability to adequately explore the subject (see Woodiwiss, 2014 for fuller discussion).

Definitions of CSA range from voyeurism to sexual penetration but a common feature is an inability to give informed consent to an activity (World Health Organisation, 2003). While definitions are broad and incidences likely to be experienced in different ways, we use the umbrella term CSA to encompass the key elements of childhood, sexuality and sexual abuse that inform contemporary views on the sexual abuse of children and young people.

Sexuality is mediated through available discourse (Schaub et al, 2016) and through stories (Hicks, 2008). Currently, available discourses in respect of CSA are of risk, vulnerability and harm. This was not always the case; the aetiology of 'the harm story' (O'Dell 2003) shows the extent to which our understanding of both the experience and consequences of CSA have changed over time. Our contemporary story does not simply reflect new perceptions of trauma but is also informed by changing understandings of childhood and (concerns around) childhood sexual innocence. As a society we have gone from believing that CSA has little real effect, to measuring its wrongfulness primarily in terms of the damaging effect it is presumed to have on its victims, who are constructed as passive and lacking both agency and sexual knowledge. In this article we trace a brief aetiology of societal and social work responses to CSA, offer examples from research projects which problematise the subject, concluding that current understandings are inadequate.

A specific problem with current understandings is that they lack sufficient

appreciation of how selves and identities are constructed discursively. Plummer states 'everywhere we go, we are charged with telling stories and making meaning—giving sense to ourselves and the world around us' (1995: 20). However, we are not free to tell any story but are constrained by the circumstances or contexts of their telling, these contexts being both culturally and historically specific (Woodiwiss 2014,, Lawler 2002, Plummer 1995, 2001). Present-day society is increasingly informed by a therapeutic culture (Furedi, 2003; Woodiwiss 2009), reinforced through a variety of cultural texts, including self-help and self-improvement literature. These inform the stories we can and do tell, making it increasingly difficult to tell alternative stories.

Given the linkage between stories and identity, privileging one story over others is problematic in that it might render other selves less or unimportant, 'fixing' one identity, at the expense of other possibilities. It may also silence those whose experiences do not conform to this story. One of the stories that has come to dominate twenty-first century culture in the UK relates to sexual abuse in childhood. This public story of CSA constructs perpetrators as monstrous and victims as not only innocent and lacking agency but also as inevitably and overwhelmingly damaged. We argue that these propositions are not straightforward.

### **Social work and child 'rescue'**

An impulse to 'rescue' vulnerable children, and especially girls, runs through social work's DNA (Clapton et al, 2012). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a broad alliance of campaigners raised concerns over the sexual abuse and prostitution of working class girls, reflecting religious and moral beliefs around sex and an assumption that children were asexual beings who should be protected from its damaging consequences (Cree, 1995; Jackson, 2000). The focus on girls rendered male prostitution largely invisible, reflecting a view that it was female sexual behaviour that was dangerous and subject to the reputational consequences of being a 'fallen' woman or girl (Brown and Barrett, 2002). Abuse brought particular disgrace when it happened in the family. Incest

was regarded as 'an evil which is altogether unthinkable' (Corby, 2000, p.26) subject, as a result, to a conspiracy of silence, which perhaps rendered further abuse more probable. Victims of incest 'were more likely to be sent to an institution than those who had been assaulted by strangers' (Jackson, 2000, p.66).

Early social work was bound up with the purity movement. The stated aim of one of its progenitor organisations, the National Vigilance Association (NVA), was to protect women and girls 'against outrage, abduction and prostitution, and the terrible wickedness and cruelty of the White Slave Trade' (cited in Cree, 1995, p.13). The term 'white slave trade' reflects the fact that many of those bringing the subject to public attention had previously campaigned for the abolition of black slavery. Motivations, thus, reflect a mix of reforming zeal underpinned by a heavy dose of moral censoriousness and, arguably, prurience (Butler and Drakeford, 2005).

Following publication of a series of infamous articles in the Pall Mall Gazette (Cree et al, 2014; Woodiwiss, 2014), this purity campaign culminated in mass demonstrations in Hyde Park, London and the passage of The Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885, which led to the raising of the age of consent from 13 to 16. The overall result of this Victorian focus on sexual behaviour was to legitimise state claims to become involved in what previously was thought to be the private sphere of family and inter-personal relations (Cree, 1995). Cree further notes that prostitution was regarded as being about more than just private sexual conduct but became symbolic of a wider working class immorality, being implicated in wider social evils such as overcrowding, squalor and even public health epidemics. One might reprise this concern to the present day where the spectre of sexual abuse can be used as a trope to express wider societal concerns around social and sexual (im)morality.

## **Children, childhood and sex**

### Childhood and sexual innocence

Contemporary CSA discourse needs to be set in the context of understandings of childhood and of sex. Childhood is often constructed as a time of sexual innocence with children seen as asexual (Jackson 1982, Green 2001). Sexual abuse is seen to introduce sex to the sexually unknowing child, and thereby can be viewed as a violation of childhood (Kitzinger 1997). The asexual child is constructed in opposition to the healthy adult, who is expected to conform to particular norms of sexual knowledge, activity and desire (Woodiwiss, 2014). The transition from one to the other is said to be disrupted by sexual knowledge and/or activity in childhood. In contrast to the healthy adult woman, the healthy non-abused child is constructed as sexually innocent (Kitzinger 1997, Lamb 1999) and in need of protection (Robinson 2012). This construction of childhood becomes problematic for the child who is sexually abused and therefore no longer sexually innocent and, by extension, no longer in need of protection. It also allows for the idea that sexual thoughts or activities, identified as inappropriate in children, must have come from outside the child as 'childhood sexuality is conceptualized as the result of an outside or deviant stimulus' (Egan and Hawkes 2009: 391). This can prohibit acknowledgement and discussion of children's and young people's sexuality. At another level, it may deny them access to the sexual education and knowledge, which in turn might help them resist inappropriate or unwanted behaviour (Robinson 2008), because such knowledge can itself be seen to be a corrupting influence (Robinson 2012, Smart 1989). Furthermore, as innocence has become sexualised (Jackson 1996) children's sexual innocence and purity can itself be viewed as sexually attractive or fetishized (Kitzinger 1997, Green 2001, Renold 2007).

### **The emergence of the 'harm story'**

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, sex involving children was considered to be an issue of morality more than harm. Indeed, with the exception of a few psychiatric studies that focussed on whether victims would be 'put off sex with men' (Kitzinger 1993:220), sex between an adult and child was still largely seen as 'non harmful'. The consensus up until the 1970s within psychology and popular understandings was that child sexual abuse had few if any long-term negative

effects (Kitzinger 1993, Jenkins 2004). It was not until later that it came to be understood in terms of harm and psychological damage, whereby it has become 'the degree of suffering (not the grotesqueness of the injustice) that speaks of the wrongness of the assault' (Armstrong 1996: 300).

The 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of a new story, which constructed CSA as a social problem requiring a social and political solution (Armstrong 1978, 1994, Kelly 1988, Rush, 1980, Ward 1984). This new story acknowledged the possible adverse effects of CSA but also showed 'the other side of being a victim' and allowed for the possibility that 'the process of coping with negative effects may, in the long term, have positive outcomes' (Kelly 1988:159). However, this story, which initially recognised that victims had indeed survived, was gradually replaced during the 1980s and 1990s by another in which, to claim an identity as a survivor, victims had to first acknowledge a damaged victim identity (Woodiwiss 2009).

Ideas of 'harm' became central to the story of CSA in the 1980s and these were readily embraced by social work. A paper by Finkelhor and Browne (1985) on the traumatic effects of sexual abuse proposed that the experience of sexual abuse could be analyzed in terms of four traumagenic dynamics – traumatic sexualization, betrayal, powerlessness, and stigmatization. The conjunction of these four dynamics was argued to make the trauma of sexual abuse unique and different from other reactions to adverse childhood experience. A discourse of harm, based initially on Finkelhor's work became incorporated into the emerging field of child protection, becoming a mainstay of post-qualifying courses.

Although influential, Finkelhor's original work has been critiqued on account of its clinical and legal sampling frame and its blurring of research findings and moral judgment (Rind et al, 1998). Rind et al's meta-analysis of papers on the effects of child sexual abuse challenged Finkelhor's claims of traumatic consequences. Subsequent research has likewise noted a 'lack of negative outcomes for many children involved in cross-generational sex' (Angelides,

2008: 364–365), recognizing that whilst some victims might be damaged by being sexually abused, we should not assume that long term, or even immediate, harm is unavoidable. Indeed a number of writers have recognised that CSA is not inevitably damaging (Woodiwiss 2014, Armstrong 1996, Hacking 1995, Lamb 1999, McNally 2003, O’Dell 2003) and does ‘not necessarily lead to any permanent emotional damage’ (Herman 2000:33), nor does it inevitably result in lasting psychological harm (Finkelhor 1990, Hacking 1995, McNally 2003). Nevertheless, the linking of CSA with trauma has become so sedimented that there is not only an expectation that victims will develop symptoms but, for them to be seen as ‘real’ or genuine, their ‘suffering must be long and severe’ (Lamb, 1999: 113). In this way, sexual abuse can be viewed as wrong only when (or indeed if) the victim can show evidence of having been harmed. Within this, there is a danger that harm might only be identified in some young people and not others, with those who deviate from the ideal ‘innocent’ child less likely to be seen as harmed, thereby not having their experiences seen as abuse and thereby subject to respectful or protective responses. We argue that the wrongfulness of CSA ought to be acknowledged whether or not the victim can demonstrate harm, whether immediate or long term.

The emerging consensus around the psychological effects of sexual abuse converged with feminist discourses around male violence and the sexual abuse of children. These prompted psychology to reassess its understanding and consolidate its ‘monopoly of defining both the “problem” of and the “solution” to sexual violence’ (Kitzinger, J 1993:234). Feminists and therapists sought to diagnose the effects of sexual abuse, to warn victims and society and to provide treatment programmes to facilitate women’s and children’s recovery. This next story, which emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s, portrayed CSA as a ‘profoundly deforming experience’ (Contratto and Gutfreund 1996) whose victims were ‘not well adapted to adult life’ (Herman 1992:110). This was a singular story of psychological damage, the ‘harm story’ (O’Dell 2003) or ‘survivor discourse’ (Worrell 2003) in which child sexual abuse was said to be so (inevitably) and overwhelmingly damaging that the effects, or ‘symptoms’, could be identified in the lives of adult victims. These ‘symptoms’ are often presented



in the form of checklists such as: Are you able to enjoy feeling good? Do you feel unable to protect yourself in dangerous situations? Have you ever experienced repeated victimisation as an adult? Do you have trouble feeling motivated? Can you accomplish things you set out to achieve? Do you feel you have to be perfect? *The Courage to Heal* (Bass and Davis, 1988, p.35). This enabled those with no memories or knowledge of having been sexually abused in childhood to recognise themselves in the CSA narrative and to rewrite personal stories to include such a history based on the correlation of 'symptoms' with perceived past abuse (Woodiwiss, 2010, Showalter 1997, Tavis 1992). There is an assumption, moreover, that remembering or retelling stories of past abuse will help make sense of often troubled pasts and will offer a cathartic experience from which the tellers find 'closure' in order that they might move on in their lives (Smith et al, 2012; Woodiwiss). The evidence for such a process is, however, questionable (Smith et al, 2012). Telling stories of CSA is not necessarily cathartic or liberating. Once told, stories can become 'freeze-dried' (Plummer, 2001); we can 'be imprisoned as well as liberated' by them (Tavis, 1992). Those who hang onto victim identities can become victims, as much of the limiting and inadequate stories currently available to them within a therapeutic discourse as of any actual or imagined past abuse (Woodiwiss 2009).

This contemporary occurrence of those who are unhappy or dissatisfied with their lives looking back to the past and/or reinterpreting the present within a narrative framework of CSA has increased in the wake of allegations made against Jimmy Savile, with an outpouring of retrospective accounts of abuse against him and subsequently, a host of other celebrities and politicians. A moral imperative to believe those who claim to have been abused has come to percolate the criminal justice system.

We suggest that the (re)telling of stories, based simply on the identification of damage and its correlation with assumed abuse is deeply problematic in a number of respects. In the criminal justice field it can result in wrongful allegations and convictions (Burnett, 2016). But, it is also unhelpful for those who are or believe themselves to be victims of CSA. Not only does it limit the

possible narrative scripts available to understand often complicated lives but this public narrative directs the tellers to construct themselves as damaged, and to reinterpret adult unhappiness and dissatisfaction as evidence of sexual abuse in childhood. When a story is based solely on damage, it not only ties it to perceptions of damage but it can also fasten the teller to a damaged identity. It is this damaged identity that gives the story substance and biographical certainty, but when it provides the only 'evidence' of abuse – not only to others but also to the tellers themselves - it must be maintained, at least until there has been some public acknowledgement of abuse. Where abuse is contested or lacks such acknowledgement, as is often the case in claims of historic abuse, it must rely on this damaged / victim self. A consequence of this is that the abuse narrative is left unsupported if this damaged self is discarded (in situations where the victim rejects their victim identity or they 'recover'), thereby providing an incentive to maintain a damaged self (at least in the face of others' disbelief). Rather than facilitating recovery, this process prevents those who might see themselves as victims (regardless of whether they are or not) from re-framing their story in more hopeful and adaptive ways. To make this point, does not detract from but may in fact emphasise the wrongfulness of actual abuse, disentangled from its association with inevitable harm or from incentives to claim abuse to make sense of unhappy lives.

### **From CSA to Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)**

Recent policy on CSA, (DoH/HO, 2010) developed, largely, in response to advocacy by the children's charity Barnados, reifies simplistic constructions of children's sexuality into an abuser/victim binary. While the CSA discourse is premised on harm, that on CSE raises questions of agency. Exploitation is conceived in terms of a 'child or young person's limited availability of choice' (Dcsf, 2009, p.9), suggesting some, albeit constrained, agency. The wider discourse of exploitation promulgated by major children's charities, however, positions young people involved in sexual activity as victims of abuse, thus negating the possibility that they might be agents capable of making their own decisions in sexual matters (Pearce, 2010). Barnados position is unambiguous -

no child, whatever age, can consent to their own abuse.

Research suggests that matters are not that clear-cut. Melrose (2013) locates most young girls' sexual involvement with older men (whose age is not specified in her research) within a contemporary 'partying' lifestyle within which sex goes with the territory. It is rarely overtly coercive or exploitative. This raises questions of whether the absence of coercion can be said to equate with informed consent; a range of personal and structural factors inevitably constrain choice for some young people and this is likely to be particularly true in the case of girls who come to the attention of social work. On the other hand, a philosophical or sociological understanding of agency might see young people not merely as victims of their circumstances but as engaging of their own volition in activities that others might regard as wrong or not in their best interests. In the current climate, discourses of exploitation and protection trump and act to silence legitimate debates around children's rights, particularly sexual rights.

Signal cases such as that in Rotherham (Jay, 2014), where young girls were used for sex by gangs of men reflect the assimilation of a CSE narrative into wider public and professional discourse. They also highlight consequences of constructing childhood as a time of sexual innocence, within which the sexually knowledgeable and/or active child is seen as making herself 'available for sex' and therefore not seen by some as sexually abused (Woodiwiss, 2014). This 'culture of denial' has been well documented in recent years (HM Government 2015). Clearly some social workers and police officers were aware that these girls being used for sex but they failed to identify this as sexual abuse. Indeed, in the early 1990s the sexual abuse of children was often referred to by social workers in Rotherham as 'child prostitution' (Jay 2014). These girls were sexually knowledgeable and active; they might also be argued to have exercised a degree of agency, albeit within a context that placed particular pressures on them and limited their choices. Their sexual knowledge and experience in such cases can become equated with blame (Woodiwiss, 2014) leaving them open to claims that they were a 'corrupting influence' through their procuring of other

girls. As childhood is constructed as a time of sexual innocence and these girls were sexually knowledgeable, they can be positioned outside of childhood and as having no innocence to protect. This, in turn, can distance them from rightful adult concern and responsibility.

Social work has been forced, in responding to cases such as Rotherham, to tread a path between the new-found heightened awareness of CSE, while negotiating the complexities of young people's sexual behaviours, including why they may appear to be 'choosing' abusive relationships. There is evidence from serious case reviews of social workers on the ground coming to sensible and contextualized conclusions around children's sexual activity and reaching decisions that prioritise considerations of sexual health (e.g. Wiffin and Peplow, 2014). These everyday decisions, however, can be deemed subversive of a child protection industry view that increasingly sees social work's role as policing young people's sexual behaviours. Responses to events in Rotherham, which, on the one hand, might be argued to take the sexual abuse of the sexually knowing girl seriously, on the other hand fail to adequately address questions of agency and complexity and may be seen to revert to moralising concerns.

Our argument thus far has been to seek to problematize assumptions around the inevitability of harm that can be presumed as a result of CSA and to raise questions around girls' sexual agency. We have further sought to identify some of the consequences of assuming childhood as a time of sexual innocence, especially for those children who are sexually knowing and therefore no longer innocent. We now go on to illustrate these arguments through research examples.

### **The Jimmy Savile story and sexual agency**

Our first example draws on findings from an ESRC funded project to collate information about the activities of Jimmy Savile.. In 2012, Savile became engulfed in accusations of sexual abuse. Early allegations against him emerged from Duncroft, a Home Office girls approved school in the South of England. Some former Duncroft residents claim that, during the 1960s and '70s, Savile sexually

abused them on school premises and while on visits to television studios.

Not long after the Savile story broke, one of the authors of this paper was approached by a former Duncroft resident, who had gone on to become a lawyer and later became involved in internet blogging under the blogname of annaraccoon. She claimed to have information, which cast a different light on the Savile story. Specifically, she claimed to have shared a dormitory with one of those making allegations against Savile in the mid 1960s. Subsequent documentation from both interview and police sources confirms that Savile first visited Duncroft in 1974. Annaraccoon began blogging her own account of Duncroft and a number of other former residents commented on her blogs, casting further doubt upon the veracity of some of the accounts reported. This information in annaraccoon's view merited academic study and publication, which she herself was unable to do for health reasons. She wanted to ensure that the data was safeguarded and subject to proper academic analysis. Around this time, the ESRC put out a call for 'Urgent' research grants, which one of us successfully applied for.

In the project, we digitally collated annaraccoon's blogs along with the comments on these, official reports into the Savile case and interviews with several former staff and residents from Duncroft. The data we use for this article draws on these interviews.

Undertaking research of this nature could be represented as further dismissing the accounts and hence the experiences and identities of those claiming abuse. However, it does illustrate the extent to which public narratives can inform or limit the telling of personal stories, while, as a result of the major discrepancy of accounts, also confronting major issues of justice. The project was approved through the Ethics processes at the University of Edinburgh. All participants gave informed written consent.

Before they were admitted to Duncroft, girls were mostly sexually experienced, it appears. It is entirely likely, given present day knowledge of CSA that, for some

girls, this experience may not have been consensual or appropriate. Their sexual knowledge, however obtained, led one staff member to report that 'most of them I think knew a whole lot more than they needed to at that age. They were a pretty sophisticated crowd really for those days ...'. This was a view shared by the girls themselves. 'Yes, there weren't any virgins, I think there was probably only one that we knew of there' (former pupil, 1970s). Another was even more forthright:

'... we were mostly sexually active, highly precocious, I was the only one who didn't take drugs, I was the only one who didn't smoke, and I was definitely sexually active, and even sexually aggressive (former pupil 1).

An example of girls taking the initiative in sexual matters is given. Media publicity of the Savile case suggests that he used trips in his Rolls Royce to sexually abuse girls. A different version of that story is provided in the following excerpt, which suggests that some of the girls could be sexually forward and that, contrary to the received story, Savile sought to exercise sexual restraint.

... so I said, if you take me out for a car ride on my own, I said, as soon as we get down the road the first thing I'm going to do is I'm going to try and get your pants off. And, he turned round and said...because, I was tempting him, and that, it was sort of in the girls to be provocative like that. So, I was saying that, to see...and straight away he turned round and he said, nothing like that is going to happen. I mean, he wasn't horrid about it, he just said, I can't take you, I can't take you for a car ride. (former pupil 2).

Accounts of the girls' sexual experience and even professed sexual aggression introduce a possibility of their agency in sexual activity, which challenges the dominant discourse of them as passive victims of predatory adults. The former residents we spoke did not regard themselves as victims (of Savile or more generally), either at the time or retrospectively and any sexual activity they might have entered into was considered to have been consensual and in some

cases initiated by them. Faced with suggestions they might have been abused by Savile one claimed: ‘..., the way the girls were, it’s a little bit like Dracula’s daughters accusing Jonathan Harker of sexually abusing them’. It might be that it is our understandings of victims as passive and sexually innocent before and/or psychologically damaged as a result of sex/abuse that has contributed to these girls not seeing themselves as victims, as these understandings do not reflect their experiences.

The examples above push us to consider that girls might enter into sexual relationships with adults of their own volition and not regard themselves to have been harmed by it. This is not to suggest that girls are to blame if they enter into a sexual/abusive relationship with an adult but nor is it to dismiss their ability to exercise agency, albeit in ways that might be constrained and that we might consider problematic. To dismiss the possibility that girls might not only exercise agency but might also remain unharmed by the experience contributes to what McLaughlin (2012) identifies as a pessimistic and degraded view of the human subject. This does not detract from the wrongfulness of adult behavior in such situations but it does suggest a need to move beyond binaried ways of understanding such relationships and to avoid assuming a damaged victim identity as a result. Such a possibility, according to Melrose, is unimaginable within the parameters of debate established by current discursive formation (2013).

### **The sexually knowing child**

The second piece of research focuses on the sexually active and/or knowing child who challenges the boundaries established between (sexually innocent) childhood and (sexually active and knowledgeable) adulthood. As noted earlier, sexual knowledge can mark a child as both potentially damaged and, as was the case in Rotherham, potentially corrupting.

Again we draw on an ESRC funded project, this time conducted by Woodiwiss. It looked at how and why women engaged with CSA, recovery and therapeutic

discourses, and why they entered therapy or read self-help manuals aimed at victims of CSA, often with no knowledge of having themselves been sexually abused. The research was based on eleven in-depth, semi-structured interviews and five written accounts, in which women were asked about their lives and what led them to engage with the sexual abuse recovery literature, their experiences of therapy / counselling, and their experiences of self-help literature. All participants gave written consent.

The majority of participants constructed a sexual abuse narrative based on recovered or false memories. The intention of the research was not to establish the truth or falsity of their claims, taking as its starting point that the women's stories were true to them (see Woodiwiss, 2009). Whilst sexuality did not feature as a major concern of the participants it did feature in their reading of much of the self-help literature and therefore provided a background against which they made sense of their own unhappy experiences. For some, these experiences provided the sole basis on which they identified themselves as a victim of CSA.

As we have argued, misconceptions about children's (a)sexuality can have the unintended consequence of removing them from the protective cloak of childhood innocence. The implications of such understandings can be seen in the story told by Jay, a research participant and adult victim of CSA (see Woodiwiss). Jay was a victim of years of abuse, much of it sexual, perpetrated by a number of men both within and beyond her family. When she revisited the period of her abuse she did not believe she was returning to a time of innocence or even to a time of childhood: 'I was a woman in my granda's bed from three years old and I got swapped for being my stepfather's mistress and my stepbrother's mistress and then the other rapes and abuse went on around it' (Jay).

Jay had felt like a woman and not a child when she was abused and she found the concept of childhood innocence unhelpful, but it did form the backdrop against which she but also those around her interpreted her childhood experiences. Following sexual abuse by her grandfather, Jay went to live with her stepmother



where she was also abused, both sexually and psychologically. She found the psychological abuse much harder to deal with and exercised a degree of agency in 'choosing' to return to her grandfather's house where she had been abused and where she thought the sexual abuse would probably continue. Through her experiences of sexual abuse, Jay was introduced to sex and was therefore both sexually knowledgeable and sexually active. This prevented her from seeing herself as a child and therefore her experiences as (child) sexual abuse: 'I didn't feel I was a child and I think that's part of why I couldn't accept it as abuse.' (Jay). Whilst Jay's experiences clearly were sexually abusive, this was an interpretation that was not available to her.

Jay was also not the only one who failed to see her experiences of childhood sex as abusive. Her removal from a state of sexual innocence, and therefore childhood, not only contributed to that failure by others but also to her being subjected to further sexual abuse by both strangers and adults she knew:

It wasn't until then that I twigged that everybody knew about it and I'd been keeping this secret and it wasn't any secret, because everybody knew and that's when I started becoming angry. Because trying to keep a secret it led to other abuse. (Jay)

The 'secret' that everybody else already knew was that Jay was sexually active and knowledgeable (as a result of abuse) and this enabled them to see her as both un-corruptible (because already corrupted through sexual knowledge/activity) and 'available for sex' even though she was clearly a child. Similar regimes of belief might be discernible in cases such as Rotherham.

### **Implications for social work**

We have sought to argue that the dominance of the harm story of CSA is problematic: it is not necessarily therapeutic but may be deeply unhelpful to victims and/or those trying to make sense of difficult pasts and present unhappiness. In the wake of the Savile case, more and more adults are coming

forward to disclose historical sexual abuse. As a society, we need to consider whether this is the 'good thing' it is claimed to be within a therapeutic discourse and what might be the longer-term implications for those who do so. Far from being therapeutic, this discourse risks equating all psychological unhappiness with assumed past abuse whilst also writing off victims of such abuse as unfixable or permanently damaged.

The examples offered in this paper, serve to problematise the standard story of CSA as one of sexual innocence disrupted by abuse and consequent harm. The first example we discuss might suggest that children can be sexually knowing and even sexually aggressive; they can exercise agency. Moreover, they can engage in sexual activity with adults without it necessarily damaging them and without seeing themselves, either at the time or subsequently, as having been abused (even in situations where adult behaviour might rightly be identified as abusive). Example two suggests that assumptions of childhood asexuality and innocence are not helpful for those girls who are sexually knowing and risk diminishing the wrongfulness of their abuse, if indeed it is even recognised as abuse. Such girls are thus at risk of being written off and left unrecognised and unprotected.

At another level, the harm story fastens professional responses to anything to do with sex in a trauma paradigm, which medicalises adolescent sexuality, passing control of it to a range of child protection and sexual abuse 'experts' and charities. This is at the expense of having due regard to other discourses, which might offer a different perspective on children as human agents with rights, including sexual rights (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1999). Shaw and Butler assert that adult myth-making about children and childhood, in this case myths harm and of a lack of agency, reflect and maintain 'the relative powerlessness of children and ensures that they have little recognition as potential authors of their own biography' (Shaw and Butler, 1998, p. 180). In many ways, we witness the reprise of earlier social work responses to possible childhood sexuality as being rooted in, innocence, vulnerability, protectionism and rescue, laced with a heavy dose of moralising.

These are difficult arguments to make in a climate in which a harm story, promulgated by advocacy groups and children's charities, has taken root and within which childhood is treated as 'a moral rhetoric' (Meyer, 2007, p 85). Yet, merely invoking a story of childhood innocence does not diminish the complexity of this subject. Framing it as a morality tale of sexual predators and innocent victims is not likely to help social workers on the ground who are confronted by the practical and ethical dilemmas that such cases invariably entail. Nor is it likely to help those girls who are victims of sexual abuse whether or not they believe themselves to be victims or in reciprocal relationships of their choosing.

We end by suggesting that social workers need to pay attention to the narrative construction of stories, and the propensity of dominant stories to frame and delimit possibilities for understanding troubled lives. They should also refrain from assuming inevitable harm as a result of sexual abuse and, equally, recognize that sexually knowing and experienced girls are as deserving of protective responses as more 'innocent' victims. Ultimately, the focus of professional concern in respect of CSA requires a shift from harm to wrongfulness. The current dominance of particular perspectives and interest groups can act to close down legitimate and necessary debate on such issues.

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