

‘THE ULTIMATE BETRAYAL’ FEMALE CHILD SEX OFFENDERS: AN EXPLORATION OF THEORIES, MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS AND THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN RELATION TO FEMALE PERPETRATORS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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Abstract

Following the recent case of Vanessa George, the nursery worker who sexually abused children in her care, this dissertation has chosen to look at this group of offenders in more detail. The sole method of data collection chosen for this study was library-based research. Using a range of textbooks, journals, newspaper articles and websites the researcher was able to gather information on this topic.

The study discusses a number of theoretical explanations put forward in attempt to explain the actions female perpetrators of child sexual abuse. It explores a number of high profile cases of female sex offenders these being; Myra Hindley, Rosemary West and Vanessa George. The ways in which these women were represented in the media is examined looking at the imagery and language used. Finally the role of the Internet in sex offending is examined with a more specific section on what it is about the Internet that may be driving women to commit sexual abuse against children. Here the importance of male-coercion is highlighted.

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Introduction

The area of female perpetrators of child sexual abuse (CSA) has been relatively neglected in comparison to the number of studies and theories published exploring male perpetrators of such abuse. Both societal and professional denial of this phenomenon may go some way to explaining the lack of research into this issue. The gender-role expectations of women being maternal and caring are possibly one of the reasons for this and explain the extreme emotive reaction from members of the public to cases of such abuse perpetrated by women.

However one must question these expectations which arguably reflect that presumption that women are innately protective and caring towards children. Historical examples show that this is not the case; one only has to consider Myra Hindley's participation in the Moors Murders and more recently the shocking case involving Vanessa George for this to become evident. These issues will be addressed in the next chapter where background information to this area will be examined.

The case involving Vanessa George inspired this dissertation to be carried out as it thrust the issue of child sex offending into the public spotlight. Taking this into account along with the discussed fact that the majority of literature on CSA focuses on male perpetrators, this dissertation shall focus female perpetrators by looking at a number of issues surrounding the topic. It aims to be able to effectively explore a number of issues relating to this taboo area. It will firstly explore theoretical explanations of why females may offend in this way looking at; cycle of abuse and male-coercion theories in order to address this aim.

Following this, the study will explore the way in which these women are portrayed in the media giving particular focus to the demonization of such women in comparison to their male counterparts. It will use examples of previous historical cases in order to effectively demonstrate this. Myra Hindley and Rosemary West shall be discussed to give an historical context of how the media represent such women who were both involved in child-sex murders. It will discuss the more recent example involving Colin Blanchard and the four women including Vanessa George who received the majority of media coverage, of whom he encouraged to sexually offend against children.

Following on from this chapter will be the exploration of the link between the Internet and child sexual abuse. It will start by looking at the role of the Internet in child pornography. This will not include a gender-specific approach but consider male and female perpetrators of this form of offending. However in the latter half of this chapter the case of Vanessa George will once again be considered. This section will speculate what it is about the Internet that could lead women to sexually offend against children. A number of factors including the way in which online contacts may fulfil the emotional needs of women will be discussed here.

Having established the content of the main chapters of the dissertation the researcher will then bring all these findings together in a discussion where links will be established between the three preceding chapters. It shall finish by providing a conclusion by summarising the main key findings of this research project.

Chapter One - Background

Introduction

The area of female child sex offending has been selected for this dissertation for a number of reasons. As discussed it is an area which has been relatively under researched in the UK with the majority of studies being conducted in the USA. This meant that the study could attempt to fulfil the originality component of the dissertation criteria by looking at areas which have not been studied yet.

Typologies

Where it has been explored, writers have described female child sex offenders as being either sole or co-perpetrators. Sole female perpetrators who by description offend alone are less common than co-perpetrators but have been shown to exist in a number of studies (Saradjian, 1996; McCarthy, 1986). A typology of these female sole perpetrators has also been established in a number of studies. One of the more documented of these typologies is the 'teacher/lover' female sex offender (Matthews et al, 1989) who target young male adolescents. Examples of these women can be seen in cases of teacher-student relationships which are often reported in the media. This demonstrates the existence and frequency of this type of female perpetrator of sexual abuse. The public may not view these cases in the same way as the case involving Vanessa George perhaps due to the age of the victims or possibly their gender expectations.

In a study by Rudin et al twenty-five percent of female offenders were either; babysitters, teachers or nursery staff (ibid, 1995:969). These roles provide legitimate access to children allowing some women to abuse this position of trust and sexually offend against children in their care.

However as a society we tend to see a female secondary school teacher who is having a sexual relationship with a pupil to be less abusive than a male teacher and pupil in the same situation (Dollar et al, 2004). This double standard raises a number of questions about our societal beliefs and gender attitudes such as the misconception that women are incapable of committing sexual abuse. This notion may be reinforced through the opinions of some male victims of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. Interestingly, in a study of the male victims who had been abused by either their mothers or other women in their family women, eight percent described their experience as 'wholly beneficial and natural' (Elliot, 2004:5) as opposed to abusive and wrong. This may stem from the myth that for a boy to have sex with an older woman is viewed with approval (ibid). This may further add to the fact that sexual abuse by females is viewed as less serious than that by males within a professional context (Hetherington and Beardsall, 1998 cited in Denov 2004).

Denial

Although society has slowly begun to recognise the existence of female child-sex offenders there has been both an historical societal and professional denial of this issue. This will no doubt have contributed to the fact there is less research on the topic compared to other issues

within criminology. The denial of the existence of female child-sex offenders has been evidenced in a number of studies. Elliott (2004), for example states that eighty-six percent of victims who tried to tell someone were not believed the first time they disclosed that they were being abused by a woman. This may have extremely damaging psychological implications for victims who have summoned up the courage to tell someone only to be told that they must be lying. This societal denial may well explain the lack of reporting of female-perpetrated sexual abuse issue by victims in the past.

Co-perpetrators

Females described as co-perpetrators of CSA usually offend in collusion with a male co-offender. In the majority of cases men are seen as the primary instigators of such abuse however some have shown that women also may initiate this abuse, particularly cases involving female adolescents (Hunter et al, 1993; Margolin, 1991). The issue of male-coercion is often discussed synonymously with female co-perpetrators of abuse. This approach focuses on how men encourage women to participate in sexual abuse of children. Three historical examples of male-coerced female offenders will be referred to throughout the dissertation these being; Myra Hindley, Rosemary West and Vanessa George.

The topic of female perpetrators of child sexual abuse is highly contemporary in nature following the case of Vanessa George in 2009 which propelled the issue of female sex offenders on to the public agenda. This also highlighted a number of issues surrounding this topic including dispelling myths that women are not capable of such crimes and also that these women rarely exist.

Following this case, a broadsheet newspaper article stated that according to police 'the number of women abusing children is rising' (Townsend and Syal, 2009). It goes on to estimate that there may be as many as '64,000 in the UK suggesting that the number of female child-sex offenders recorded in official statistics is grossly underestimated.' (ibid) Reasons for this under-estimation could include the taboo nature of the subject resulting in the discussed professional denial which may have made it difficult for victims to report such abuse.

Cases

There have been a handful of high-profile cases involving female child sex offenders. Rosemary West and Myra Hindley were both separately involved in child-sex murders occurring in the 1960s and 1970s. Myra Hindley became the female icon of evil (Murphy and Whitty, 2006) as a result of her involvement in the horrific Moors Murders which took place between July 1963 and October 1965. Along with Ian Brady, Hindley was involved in the kidnap, sexual assault, torture and murder of five children. Myra Hindley received a whole-life sentence for her crimes which only two women have ever been given (Gavin, 2009).

Rosemary West is the second woman to have ever received a whole life sentence for her involvement in the sexual assault and murder of ten young women along with her husband Fred West. Like Hindley, West became the embodiment of evil for her failure as a woman through her 'inadequacy as a mother and perversion as a wife' (Storrs, 2004:18). It has been

widely documented that Rosemary West had a dysfunctional sexual history with suggestions that she herself was a victim of sexual abuse as a child. Her experience of being sexually abused as a child may give weight to the 'cycle of abuse theory' given to explain female perpetrators of child sexual abuse which will be explored further in the next chapter of the dissertation. It is important to state that although both cases involved both male and female offenders it is the women in these cases who the media and the public were and remain fascinated with.

This prolonged media and public fascination with these women is likely the result of their perceived failure as women and in the case of Rosemary West her failure as a mother. This failure is evidenced in many peoples' minds in relation to their inability to protect the children who they were involved in abusing and murdering. The notion of female perpetrators of child sexual abuse having failed their gender-role expectations may help explain why it is that cases of female sex offending stir up such emotive responses from the public. However these expectations are largely based on the stereotypical assumption that women are somehow innately caring and maternal towards children.

More recently was the case of Vanessa George in 2009, a nursery worker at Little Ted's Nursery in Plymouth. She was convicted of sexually abusing nursery children in her care. It is this case that highlights the use of the Internet in child sex offending as George became part of an online paedophile ring. It was on a social networking site that she came into contact with Colin Blanchard who introduced her to three other women he had met online who all became involved in the case these were; Angela Allen, Tracy Lyons and Tracy Dawber. All of these individuals encouraged each other to commit acts of sexual abuse on children and had graphic online conversations of CSA.

Role of the Internet

Officials believe that the Internet is facilitating the growth in the number of sex abusers of children (Brennan, 2006). This may be one of the reasons which explain why police believe that the number of female sex abusers of children is increasing. The Internet is therefore a key component to exploring increases in female perpetrators of child sexual abuse and will be explored in detail in the latter part of the research project. The issue of whether technology is driving cases in female paedophilia will be discussed or whether it is the case that paedophiles would offend regardless of access to technology.

Having set the issue of female sex offenders within its wider context the following chapter will provide an explanation of the methodology used to carry out the study.

Chapter Two - Methodology

This research project will be utilising secondary research as the sole method of gathering information. It will involve the undertaking of library-based research in an attempt to conduct a critical analysis of existing literature on the topic. It would have been possible to choose primary research which would have taken the form of interviews however this was not chosen for a number of reasons.

Firstly given the highly sensitive nature of the topic, gaining access to victims and offenders of child sexual abuse would have been extremely difficult along with the potential issue of continued renegotiation of access throughout the research stage (Noaks and Wincup, 2004). Given its highly sensitive nature it is very probable to assume that this method of research would not have been given ethical clearance by the university ethics committee. Even if the research project had been granted ethical approval the fact that there are only a small number of female perpetrators of CSA in custody meant that it would not have been logistically possible for an undergraduate student to access these women in the short time period given for undertaking of research.

A further potential challenge that may have arisen should primary research have been carried out would have been the nature of the offences committed. The researcher may have had to listen to graphic accounts of women's sexual offences. This may have caused the researcher and participant to feel uncomfortable which is not ethically permitted (Blagden and Pemberton, 2010).

In choosing to conduct library-based research the methodological problems of primary research discussed have been successfully overcome. As well as being able to avoid the problems attributed to primary research there are several further advantages in choosing to carry out library-based research.

Firstly, it allows access to good quality data for a small fraction of the resources involved in primary research (Bryman, 2004:54). It is both less time-consuming and is less expensive as it does not involve the travelling and administration costs which primary research may have generated.

An additional advantage in selecting library-based research is the access to published academic sources such as books and journal articles. The researcher can be assured that the information in these sources has been deemed credible and relevant to the realm of criminology given that they are often peer-reviewed. In looking at this material the researcher is able to view the historical context of female sexual offending. This would not have been possible from conducting primary research alone as here the researcher would have been using one sample or group for analysis.

A final advantage of using library-based research is that the researcher is able to become familiar with the information which in turn may help increase the credibility of the final dissertation (Sarantakos, 2005). This is possible due to the fact that the researcher is able to

develop knowledge of the wider background of the chosen topic. Furthermore the researcher can be made fully aware of the key terms and academic terminology used within the sources.

Having discussed the advantages of library-based research it is also important to explore its limitations. Having conducted a literary search into the area of female perpetrators of child sexual abuse it has become apparent that fairly little attention has been given to this issue in the literature in comparison with other criminological issues. This therefore requires a more extensive search for literature and reliance on inter-library loans of which undergraduates are given 15 for their final year. Given this restriction the researcher must be selective in choosing which sources to request (Jupp et al, 2003) Also, to aid the amount of literature that could be used in the Internet chapter of the dissertation male and female offending online was considered. Here one had to ensure however that male theories and explanations are not inaccurately generalised to being applicable to female sex offenders.

A further limitation of using library-based research is that there is the danger that this research project will simply be repeating the existing data and fail to find any new or original contributions to the topic. In an attempt to overcome this, the dissertation will examine the very contemporary element of Internet use and how it may be causing the number of female child sex offenders to rise.

It appears that no research has been published on the issue of the Internet with regards to female sex offenders, therefore by exploring this area the researcher hopes to fulfil the desired requirement of originality within the research project. By looking at a number of studies conducted into child sex offenders and the Internet, the researcher aims to be able to speculate what it is about the online world that could be causing more women to sexually offend against children.

When trying to find literature based on the Vanessa George case, the researcher had to rely on newspaper articles as the main source of data. This is due to the fact that the case is so recent that little if any academic work has been published on this case. In order to ensure the reliability of the newspaper articles, the researcher used articles from a number of newspapers. Bell highlights the importance of using reliable sources in data collection to improve the validity of a piece of work (Bell, 2007).

Having explored the central issue of the study within a wider context in chapter one and stating which methodological approach was used, the first main chapter will now be discussed. This shall examine the theoretical explanations put forward in an attempt to explain female child-sex offending. This is important as in understanding why females commit such acts may help give treatment professionals a way of working with such offenders. As yet there is no sex offender treatment programme established for women, only for male offenders. This needs to change if we are to help prevent further victims of abuse. The current format of treating female sex offenders is basic and 'adopts a cognitive behavioural approach little different to the methods used with male offenders' (Freel, 1995:35).

Chapter Three - Theories of Female Child Sex Offending

Cycle of Abuse

This theory explores how offending behaviour may be the result of abuse the offender suffered in childhood or adolescence. This theory, also referred to as the 'victim-to-offender cycle' (Boyd and Bromfield, 2006) emerged as a result of an article in 1962 by Kempe et al entitled 'Battered Child Syndrome' (ibid, 1962 cited in Boyd and Bromfield, 2006). It was in this article that perpetrators of physical abuse who offended against their children were found to have also been the victims of physical abuse at the hands of their parents in childhood (Kempe et al, 1962).

This approach which initially examined prior victimisation of perpetrators of physical abuse has since been widened and utilised to explain sexual offending against children. One of the ways in which cycle of abuse theory explains sexual offending against children gives reference to social learning theory. Children's experience of primary socialisation is central to this theory and demonstrates that children learn certain behaviours, including deviant behaviour from observational learning within their environment (Bandura, 1969). Having experienced sexual contact with adults as children, these individuals may have learnt that this is an appropriate way to behave thus increasing the chances for victims of CSA to become perpetrators.

However, putting forward this notion may facilitate the occurrence of dangerous inferences being made about all victims of CSA. Some may believe that all victims will automatically become abusers themselves. This could in turn create unsympathetic attitudes towards victims of sexual abuse or indeed their families. It is therefore necessary not to imply a direct causal relationship between the two variables, as a number of studies have found that the majority of victims of CSA do not go on to offend in later life. An example of this finding is demonstrated by Campbell et al in 2001 who conducted a retrospective review of 843 patients receiving forensic psychotherapy. They found that of female perpetrators of CSA only one reported prior victimisation in childhood. For male perpetrators the rate was higher, with 35 percent of perpetrators reporting sexual abuse as a child. Whilst supporting the notion that not all victims of CSA will become perpetrators this finding also infers that male victims of child sex abuse are in some way more likely to become abusers than females (ibid, 2001).

One reason which may explain this could be that females are generally considered to internalise their emotions, directing any aggression or frustration inwards and attack themselves. The psychological implications of being a victim of child abuse may lead some women to engage in self-destructive behaviour. This is evident in studies of female prisons where self-harm and suicide attempts are higher than in men's prisons. For example in 2009, one in three female prisoners self-harmed compared to fewer than one in ten male prisoners (Ministry of Justice, 2010). It appears that men are more likely to project their emotions externally, on to others in the form of aggressive behaviour which in the case of victims of

child sexual abuse may lead a proportion of male victims to offend against children (Carmen, et al 1984).

Furthermore, research has shown that being the victim of a female abuser has a more damaging effect on victims. A number of studies have shown in cases involving both a male and female abuser, victims report that the abuse inflicted by a woman was much more distressing (Denov, 2004). This increased psychological effect could mean that these victims are more damaged and are therefore at a higher risk of offending themselves.

Despite the cycle of abuse theory providing a reasoned explanation for why some women may commit CSA there still exists one problem. This being that given that this theory is well publicised there is the potential danger that some female offenders could report previous abuse to professionals in order to evoke a degree of sympathy and perhaps slightly better treatment compared to predatory perpetrators with no prior victimisation experience (Matthews et al, 1989). If this were found to be common this theory may lose its credibility.

Male Coercion

In all three of the high-profile cases discussed in the background chapter to this research project there is a mutual denominator, a male co-perpetrator. In the 1980s feminists discussed the influence of male dominance and coercion to explain why in the cases where a female offender is identified, most women victimise children in conjunction with a male accomplice (Grayston and DeLuca, 1999). Matthews et al state that female co-perpetrators can be separated into being either passive or active abusers (ibid, 1991).

Passive offenders are described as being women who are aware of the abuse but who do not intervene and prevent it from occurring. It is necessary to point out a methodological flaw of a number of earlier studies of women offenders who did not separate them into the two categories, thus creating the misleading impression that all women described as co-offenders in these studies physically committed abuse themselves (Finkelhor, 1984). This type of female offender also includes those who obtain potential victims for their male accomplices (Green and Kaplan, 1994: 960).

On the other hand active female offenders who are argued to be in the minority are those who physically engage in sexually abusing children. Vanessa George is an example of an active co-abuser who sexually abused children in her care. However, it is necessary to point out that she also displayed characteristics of a passive offender by agreeing to find children for Blanchard to abuse. This may demonstrate an overlap between the two types of female co-perpetrators which may create theoretical and methodological issues for future research.

There are a number of explanations for female co-abusers engage in CSA which include the manipulation of women by male perpetrators. When exploring male perpetrated sexual abuse writers tend to explore the sexually deviant thoughts of the perpetrator, however when looking at women committing the same crime this is not the focus. For example, in one study by McCarty it was found that none of the female perpetrators of CSA demonstrated a primary sexual interest in children (ibid, 1986). This implies that other motivations such as the manipulation of women by male perpetrators could lead them to passively or actively engage in this horrific form of abuse.

An example of a manipulative male co-offender is Colin Blanchard, who is described as having a 'svengali-like influence' (Morris, 2011) upon the women involved with CSA. This description provokes connotations of male-dominance thus succinctly giving weight to the theory of male coercion. Furthermore in his summing up on Blanchard's trial Mr Justice Royce stated that 'Even though, once drawn in by you, they played a full part.... if there is a predator in this, it is undoubtedly you' (Mr.Justice Royce, 2010). This demonstrates the authenticity of the theory of male-coercion in these cases. Blanchard's role could be seen to be similar to that of Ian Brady. The issue of the influence of dominant male perpetrators will be revisited in chapter six.

In further efforts to explain male-coercion theory the importance of women's emotional dependence on male co-perpetrators is highlighted (McCarty, 1986). This may cause some women to go along with the abuse for fear of losing their partner. However, emotional dependence has also been attributed to motivations for sole female perpetrators to commit CSA. This is argued to be of particular relevance in intra-familial abuse cases involving single mothers and their son. In this sense it is argued that women see treat their older children as surrogate intimate partners (Faller, 1987 cited in Lertherby et al, 2008:301).

Having explored the main theoretical explanations of female child sex offenders the next chapter shall examine media representations of three notorious child sex offenders; Myra Hindley, Rosemary West and Vanessa George. The chapter will give particular focus to the imagery and language used by various media reports in order to provide a historical context of how media reporting may have changed.

Chapter Four - The Media and Female Child Sex Offenders

The following chapter will explore media representations of three notorious female sex offenders; Myra Hindley, Rosemary West and Vanessa George. It will examine the imagery and language used in the news coverage of these women, exploring concepts including their demonisation by the media. It is important to point out that all three cases involved a male co-perpetrator. Ian Brady was Myra Hindley's accomplice and Fred West was Rose West's co-offender as well as her husband. In the more recent case involving Vanessa George, Colin Blanchard was the one who encouraged George and the other women involved to sexually offend against children.

Despite the presence of a male perpetrator in all three cases, the majority of media attention was directed at the women in these cases. One of these reasons may be the discussed notion that women who offend in this way are seen to violate the traditional gender roles associated with women. Hindley and West, who were both involved with the sex murderers of many children, continue to evoke disgust and revulsion for their crimes as strongly today as when their crimes occurred.

The more recent case of Vanessa George once again thrust the issue of female sex offenders into the public spotlight and the same collective outrage as seen in the Hindley and West cases, was directed at the nursery worker who sexually abused children in her care. It emerged that there were three other women involved but the greatest amount of media attention was focused on Vanessa George. This may be as a result of her occupation which was to provide a safe environment for children and which she so strongly violated.

Myra Hindley



Myra Hindley was the co-offender with Ian Brady and together they were responsible for the infamous Moors Murders which took place between 1963 and 1965. Their victims were all sexually abused before they were killed. It is stated that this was solely for 'Brady's sexual gratification' (Hawkins, 2010) thus implying that Hindley herself had no sexually deviant pathology towards children. This gives weight to the male-

coercion theory of explaining why women may sexually offend against children, to satisfy the illicit needs of their male co-perpetrators, rather than themselves.

Her image, which is displayed above, was used in many media reports of her crimes and was personified and depicted as the representation of feminine evil (Storrs, 2004). This image still carries these connotations today and also appears in modern stories involving Myra Hindley. Her expression is particularly cold and emotionless arguably making her appear almost masculine. Aggressive criminality is often viewed as typically masculine behaviour by the

media which may explain why this pictured was used (Scrapec, 1993). Furthermore society arguably more readily accepts that a man is capable of such vile offences against children whereas women are not. Therefore by using an image which makes Hindley appear masculine reflects this gendered notion.

Headlines described Hindley as a 'monster' (Sapsted and Bunyan, 2002) demonstrating her demonisation by the media and reflecting the public disgust that a woman could be involved in such horrific crimes. Rosemary West was another child-sex murderer who received a great deal of media attention.

Rosemary West



Rosemary West was also a co-perpetrator with Fred West, her husband, and they were responsible for the torture, sexual abuse and murder of ten young women including Fred's own step-daughter during the early 1990s. The murders were extremely graphic and it is believed that their victims were tied up, tortured, sexually abused before being mutilated and dismembered (Masters, 1997).

The tabloid media dubbed her the 'most depraved woman on earth' (Burn, 1996:154) however, unlike the case of the Moors Murders they tended to more often use images of the Wests 'House of Horror' rather than West herself. Her image, as seen above, was used in many newspapers and is very different to Hindley's. Obviously the image is in colour, due to technological advances, but her face looks much softer than Hindley's, almost motherly. Her expression is also quite different and makes her look like a normal, everyday woman unlike the cold-faced image of Hindley. This image may have been used to communicate the shocking fact that a mother, who surely should have displayed maternal and protective feelings towards children, committed such atrocious acts of violence (Hawkins, 2010).

Her failure to do so may explain why she like Hindley, was described as an 'evil monster' by journalists in press reports of her crimes (Berrington and Honkatukia, 2002). This illustrates the demonization of these women who are considered as inhuman by both media and wider society.

West was sexually abused herself in childhood which gives weight to the cycle of abuse theory discussed earlier in chapter three (Masters, 1997). However this is not an aspect which the media were concerned with, perhaps due to the fact that it would have given her an element of victim status and may have negated somewhat from the vile nature of her actions.

One element of Rose West's life which the media did focus on however was that Rose West was bi-sexual and this was commented upon widely within the media. The media's focus on her sexuality throughout was arguably an attempt to further add to her existing moral corruption. Headlines about Rose West such as 'Lesbian tells of violent sex sessions' (Bennett, 1995), told of how Rose West was sexually aggressive. Publishing stories such as

these allowed the media to build up a profile of Rose West in the public's mind of a morally corrupt and dangerous woman.

As mentioned, media attention was primarily directed at Rose West and not Fred. One reason for this may be because of the fact that Rose was a woman and she was almost 'doubly deviant' for failing her gender expectations as well as failing to obey the law. Another reason put forward to explain this could be the fact that only Rose stood trial for the murders. Fred West committed suicide before their trial took place and so Rose was left as the only defendant of the case. The majority of reporting was therefore not surprisingly directed at Rose as the public only had one person to hold accountable in a court of law (Winter, 2009). Even so it is likely that she would still have received the majority of media attention as Myra Hindley did.

Media reports of Rose West clearly demonstrate how women who commit these sorts of offences against children provoke such an emotive response compared to their male counterparts.

Vanessa George



Image (a) Vanessa George

Image (b) Vanessa George

In December 2009, Vanessa George was given an indeterminate prison sentence for sexually abusing children at the nursery where she worked in Plymouth (Harris and Salkeld, 2009). It is not known how many children she abused but this case brought, once again to the public's attention the topic of female perpetrators of CSA.

The case was unlike that of Hindley or West with regards to the imagery that was used by the media. In many stories about George, a wide range of images were used, some showing her to look like an ordinary woman. This may have been to send out the message that unlike the existing male stereotypical preconception that a male child sex offender has a certain appearance, there exists no 'ideal type' for a female abuser. This may be due to the rarity of such cases where women are perpetrators of CSA.

On the other hand the use of the juxtaposition of these contrasting images may make readers re-assess how they view others in their everyday life. This may be in that someone who appears to be a friendly nursery nurse is in fact capable of such depravity against children whom she was supposed to protect. It also calls into question the way in which we trust people such as nursery and school staff who have legitimate access to children. The violation of trust by perpetrators such as nursery teachers such as Vanessa George makes it more

shocking when such cases are reported in the press. As a society we take for granted that our children are being handed over to staff in nurseries and schools and that these people will look after our children and keep them safe.

Similarly to the other two cases discussed, the majority of media focus was given to George and the other women involved in the case. Reports involving Vanessa George frequently graced the front pages of many national newspapers, for example when she appeared in court for her sentencing. On the other hand, when Colin Blanchard, the main perpetrator who was the link to all of the women involved, was sentenced it appeared in a small article on the BBC Manchester online news page (BBC News, 2011).

Moral Panic

In discussing the media and their representations of female sex offenders it is important to briefly consider the purpose of the media's reporting of such crimes. One advantage is that it is able to perform an educative role thus raising public awareness in an attempt to allow parents to better safeguard their children. Through the medium of the media, important messages can be sent out to a larger audience than would be reached through leaflets or discussion groups. This is one clear benefit of the media reporting sex crimes.

On the other hand, there is the risk that extensive media coverage of one issue can lead to the development of a moral panic. An example of this can be seen in the case of James Bugler who was abducted and horrifically murdered by two ten-year old boys, Robert Thompson and John Venables.

It was during media reporting of this case that it was stated the boys had watched Childs Play 3 and that they had re-enacted some of the scenes from this horror film. This led some to believe that if children watch violent films this would make them become violent individuals. This is an example of how a moral panic can ensue following the media's reporting of all types of crime. However, many dispute this and do not believe that watching a violent film on its own will necessarily lead to that person becoming violent; other factors must be taken into account (Buckingham, 2001).

In light of the most recent case involving Vanessa George who was a nursery worker, the subsequent media attention has arguably made people look at women in a different way, especially those working closely with children. The public may be starting to become as wary of females, as they are males, in relation to their capacity to sexually offend against children. This may lead to calls for tighter security checks on childcare staff and increased surveillance in nurseries. This may be one of the real-world consequences of the moral panic.

This case highlighted the contemporary issue of the Internet which this study argues requires further exploration. Its link between child pornography is well published which the following chapter will begin by discussing. However what also requires consideration is to determine what it is about the Internet specifically which can lead to women like Vanessa George engaging in CSA in the way that she did.

Chapter Five - Sex offending and the Internet

It has been argued that the Internet has facilitated the formation of a new category of sex offender, 'the Internet sex offender' (Sheldon and Howitt, 2007:1). There are many ways that the Internet can be utilised for sexual means. It is important to state that the Internet can be used for non-deviant sexual means. For example, it may allow those from the gay community to communicate with one another (Cooper and Sportolari, 1997). Chat rooms are one of the modes of the Internet used by individuals to contact others from all over the world who possess common interests. Despite the fact that the Internet will not solely be used for negative sexual purposes, there is the possibility for deviant interests to be validated and encouraged if like minded users associate via this mode of communication.

Child Pornography

One of the most documented ways sex offenders misuse the Internet is to access and download child pornography. Accessing child pornography is argued to be a key factor in the development of sexual offending, with 40 percent of those arrested for accessing pornographic images of children also found to have sexually abused children (Wolak et al, 2005 cited in Jewkes, 2007). However, there is a controversial, conflicting argument put forward that online child pornography may actually prevent offenders carrying out contact offences on children. Holmes et al stated that they expected to see the 'emergence of offenders for whom there has been no direct contact with children, and whose crimes are exclusively related to the Internet' (ibid, 1998 cited in Calder, 2004).

Due to the many arguments surrounding this area and whether it has a direct causation in relation to contact offences, it is important to discuss the role of the Internet in facilitating access to these images. This chapter will then look at other ways in which sex offenders may become physical perpetrators of CSA as a result of using the Internet. Here the Vanessa George case will also be explored, looking at the potential reasons why the Internet may have led her to contact offending.

Definitions

Compared to the pre-Internet era it is argued that the Internet has caused more people to access and view such images (Carr, 2004). The term child pornography itself is problematic in terms of that what it may encompass due to its cultural specificity. For example, in Denmark child pornography was decriminalised in 1969. Therefore its definition would not have included the illegality of such material as it would have in other countries during that time. It was recriminalised in the 1980s in Denmark however it has been suggested that many of the images which are in circulation on the Internet are in fact images which were developed during this period of decriminalisation.

The term 'Internet sex offending' can include a variety of behaviours all involving child pornography, from trading to producing such images (Jewkes and Yar, 2009). With the technological development of the Internet some argue that this led to the increase in the quantity of this material. However others believe that the quantity may not have increased but that it is now more widely available and that many images are copied (O'Donnell and Milner, 2007). The vast amount of images in circulation makes policing this issue very complex as many sites have restricted access or have specific codes and passwords which must be entered before visiting a site or downloading an image. However, one way in which offenders are tracked down is through their credit card details as often offenders will have used these in order to access illegal sites. Some users may believe that in downloading images of children they are not actually committing CSA as they are not physically abusing a child. However, one must consider the victims in these images which Internet sex offenders view.

How important is technology?

On the other hand, others may argue that technology is irrelevant in the occurrence of sex offending and that if someone is going to sexually offend against children it will happen with or without the involvement of the Internet. This argument however does not correspond to the case of Vanessa George where, without use of the Internet the crimes could not have occurred in the manner in which they did. Colin Blanchard would not have encountered the women who he did not know and who were from all areas of the country that he then encouraged to sexually offend against children. Apart from one of the four women involved, the first time he and the other women came into physical contact was in the court when their trial took place. This begs the question as to whether the Internet may in fact be driving contact offences of CSA, even for those who do not display a prior sexual interest in children (Carr, 2004).

Characteristics of the Internet

This chapter will now discuss how the specific characteristics of the Internet may lead some females to engage in CSA. Three key and unique aspects of the Internet are that it is both accessible and affordable whilst also having the crucial component of allowing users to be comparatively anonymous (Quayle and Taylor, 2005). Demetriou and Silke (2003) illustrate how the anonymous element of the Internet, along with the availability of deviant content, has the potential to facilitate a high level of illegal online activity. They set up a game site advertising free games but also a fake link to hardcore porn and they found that more people clicked on the hardcore porn link than the free games (ibid, 2003 cited in O'Donnell and Milner, 2007).

The degree of anonymity afforded to the Internet may evoke a false sense of security within individuals causing them to say and do things in the 'virtual world' that they would not do in reality. This is known as the 'Mardi Gras phenomenon' (Fowler, 1997 cited in Gillespie 2000:47), a term often utilised by psychologists. In this case it describes how Internet users feel that they are wearing a mask thus allowing them to act incognito. Users are able to assume a variety of online personalities including deviant ones, as they do not have to fear

the same reprisal as they may do should they act in such a way in daily life. In addition, online they will be connected to other users with similar interests.

However, the case of Colin Blanchard questions this phenomenon as the women did not solely indulge his deviant requests online, through chat room conversations, but they became perpetrators of CSA in reality in their offline worlds. Many may find the reasons for the women's compliance incomprehensible however it is important to consider how the Internet may have driven this extreme form of deviance.

One argument put forward is that the Internet helps to fulfil the emotional needs of some women (Quayle et al, 2005). Women who are unhappy or feel neglected by their partner may strike up online relationships with the opposite sex to boost their self-esteem and to seek the attention they need in their offline world. This could subsequently lead some people to become dependent on the person within their online community who is increasing their self-confidence. In order to maintain the relationship some women may go along with the person's requests, as in the case of Vanessa George. She is described as becoming 'obsessed with Colin Blanchard' (Morris, 2011:1) which may partially explain why she went indulged his vile requests for her to sexually abuse children in her care. This explanation however, does not absolve George of any responsibility for her actions by implying that her emotional vulnerability and subsequent online obsession with Blanchard caused her offending. She chose to take online conversations into her offline world and sexually offended against children.

Many would argue that this indicates that George and the other women must have possessed a deviant pathology prior to their online exchanges with Blanchard. Others argue that Blanchard served as the 'catalyst which encouraged them to act out their deviant fantasies' (Carter and Morris, 2009). It is hard for the reasonable person to comprehend that online coercion alone would facilitate such crimes. However it is likely that George and the other women would have indulged whatever sick or illegal behaviours Blanchard requested as their obsession with him was so great.

Chapter Six - Discussion

It is necessary to remind the reader of the initial aims of the study and demonstrate how the project has fulfilled these. At the beginning of the study it was established that a number of aims were to be addressed. Firstly, the study intended to look at a number of theoretical explanations put forward by different writers to explain females sexual offending against children. This was explored in Chapter Three of the study where 'cycle of abuse' and 'male coercion' theories were considered. The second aim was to look at previous cases of females who sexually offended against children and explore the various ways in which they were represented by the media. Chapter Four looked at the famous and well documented cases of Myra Hindley in the 1960s, then Rosemary West in the 1990's and finally to present day looking at media portrayals representations of Vanessa George. The final aim was to examine the Internets' role in sexual offending both in general and also in relation to women specifically who offend against children. It was here that the Vanessa George case was included given the fact that the central component of this case was the offender's utilisation of the Internet.

Key Findings

The findings of this study have brought a number of issues to the attention of the researcher which need to be stated. The first of these key findings is the frequency in which a male co-offender is involved in cases of CSA where a female perpetrator is identified. Not only in statistics but also in the 3 cases used to illustrate media representations, the role of a dominant male co-offender remained constant. This is not to say that all female sex offenders will be co-perpetrators with male offenders however it is an interesting finding which questions the motives of these women. Is it that they had a prior existing deviant sexual interest in children that their male co-offenders encouraged to act upon? Or is it that these women went along with the requests of their male counterparts for other reasons such as fear of losing their partner or fear of violence against themselves. This is an interesting debate which important to highlight from the findings of this study. Once the motivations for female to engage in CSA, clinicians may then be able to establish a sex offender treatment programme specifically for female sex offenders of which there is currently an absence of.

This needs to be addressed especially given that the number of females being sent to prison for sex offences against children is rising. Admittedly it is a very small increase of only 1 percent (Ministry of Justice, 2010) however it may signal the start of a rising trend as people become more confident in reporting such crime. It is also necessary to point out that this percentage only represents those who are caught, many sex offenders are undetected. Effective treatment programmes should be designed and implemented for utilisation with these types of offender.

With regards to media representations of female perpetrators of CSA, it is clear that they are portrayed differently to men who are involved in the same illicit behaviour against children. Society's gender expectations that women are innately protective and nurturing towards

children is what makes it so difficult for the public to accept that women are then capable of such deviance. This is evidenced in the collective outrage that ensued following the cases discussed in Chapter Four. As mentioned in all three cases, male co-perpetrators were involved, however, the media and public directed the majority of their focus and hostility towards the women. This arguably makes it appear that as a society we are more accepting of such behaviour from a man than a woman. Not in the sense that we excuse it but that we are better able to comprehend that a man has the capacity to commit CSA as opposed to a woman.

These women are depicted as almost inhuman and as violating the gender norms of femininity which is then reflected within the media. Their demonisation is represented through a combination of imagery and language. From the infamous image of Myra Hindley to the candid images of Vanessa George who appeared seemingly normal. In examining the different images used in media stories of these women it became apparent that there was no specific type of image used. Myra Hindley's image showed a very cold, hard woman on the other hand the picture of Rose West sent out an entirely different message perhaps in an attempt to make people realise that the normal looking everyday woman could be capable of these crimes

One further key point that this study highlights is the need for others to recognise that women are just as capable as men in relation to their ability to sexually offend against children. The fact that cases involving female perpetrators are met with so much shock shows that this idea is still difficult to accept for many people, a problem which must be addressed within society. In order to encourage more victims to come forward and report their abuse from females we need to acknowledge both professionally and in society that women do commit CSA.

This is starting to change however there is still a great deal of taboo surrounding this topic which explains why many victims are reluctant to talk about it. They may fear not being believed which would only cause further psychological damage. This added to the fact that victims who have been abused by both a male and female abuser state that the abuse from the woman caused more distress, perhaps at the notion that it was the ultimate betrayal particularly for those cases involving a maternal perpetrator.

Another key issue to point out is the debate over whether the technology is driving deviance or whether it is other way round. Would women commit CSA regardless of the role of technology, more specifically the Internet? One way in which the Internet has made it much easier users with deviant sexual interests in children is to access and download child pornographic images. Not only that, it has also enabled people to become part of online paedophile rings as in the case of Vanessa George. The question here is whether these crimes would have happened if it had not been for the Internet. Not perhaps to the victims that were involved in this case but would Vanessa George and the other women have offended regardless of her use of the Internet, as sole perpetrators? She displayed no prior deviant sexual interest in children which may support the notion that without the Internet many of the crimes of CSA would not occur. However, it may be that she could have offended before and simply not been reported, this is pure speculation and there is no evidence to suggest this is the case. It is necessary for this to be highlighted as it may provide new grounds for further research.

Summary and Recommendations

Having explored a number of issues associated with female child sex offenders a number of conclusions have emerged. We as a society continue to view these women not only as violating the legal norms but also the gender norms ascribed to women, arguably making them worse than males who commit the offences. The capacity for women to commit CSA has been documented in the discussed cases with many more in existence the study simply could not have included. This has highlighted the need for more research to be dedicated to this area of criminology.

In all three cases discussed of female sex offenders the media gave more attention to these women than their male counterparts. This highlights the fact that women who commit this type of offence arguably are still seen as worse than men who commit CSA in the sense that it is more shocking and that they are going against their gender in failing to protect to children.

The role of the Internet may be an important component in some cases of female child sex offenders for the reasons discussed in the previous chapter. If women commence online relationships with manipulative men this may be a further way in which CSA may be facilitated as a result of the Internet.

Whilst carrying out research this study identified a number of gaps in the literature, a number of ideas for future research can therefore be identified. It is important that the same amount of literature is dedicated to looking at female perpetrators of CSA as well as males. In doing this victims should be more prepared to report the abuse and will not have to fear being met with disbelief.

One area of research could be to look further at the role the Internet plays in CSA perpetrated by women. This study explored several of the characteristics it could be argued lead women into committing CSA were a male instigator is involved. However no study currently exists which has looked into sole female sole perpetrators of CSA and the Internet. This could be due to their rarity and further exploration into this area would be warranted. As technology continues to advance at such a rapid rate, a study exploring this in detail could be very beneficial.

Furthermore, writers may consider carrying out a detailed content analysis of all cases of female child sex offenders that are reported in the media. In doing this more accurate inferences could be made about the way they are represented. This study was limited to carryout examination of only three cases mainly due to the time restrictions of this being an undergraduate study.

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