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Female sexual abusers: Assessing the risk

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Abstract

Successful risk management within child protection is problematic and in many cases is a delicate balancing act between parental and children's rights. Reversing the expected gender roles creates a dynamic that may increase the difficulties of risk assessment even further. This paper focuses on women who sexually abuse children and discusses the particular problems relating to the assessment of risk in professional practice. The data was gathered in the UK and drawn from a series of qualitative interviews with child protection professionals, including 3 police officers, 2 lawyers, 15 social workers, 6 probation officers, 8 health workers and 11 counsellors. The interview data have identified some links between the gendered assumptions and the rationales used by professionals to explain the abusive behaviour.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse; Female perpetrators; Risk

1. Introduction

> Child protection workers have a duty to promote children's welfare as well as to protect them, to **maximise** their well-being as well as to **minimise** any danger. They cannot just work to avoid risk. For instance, they never face a choice between a safe and a risky option. All possible avenues hold some dangers and they involve making complex assessments, balancing risks and deciding on the safest path (Munro, 2008: 59 – emphasis in the original).

As Munro suggests in the above quote, over the last four decades child sexual abuse has been a central concern for those professionals working in the field. Child protection has always been thwart with difficulties and dilemmas never more so than when faced with a female perpetrator.

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While this is difficult enough when the abuse is physical, women who sexually abuse children challenge the very core of social perceptions of femininity, since women tend to be identified as the primary carers of children and as victims rather than 'victimizers' (Mendel, 1995: 21). It is understandable given that child sexual abuse is so gendered in terms of perpetrator and victim that professionals may fail to identify or tend to minimise the behaviour when women are involved.

There are other difficulties in understanding the sexual abuse by females. For instance questions have been raised about the act itself – is it possible for a woman to sexually abuse (Mathis, 1972)? The new definition offered by the UK Government in the current document Working Together to Safeguard Children attempts a very inclusive approach suggesting that sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing children and young people to take part in activities including,

> …assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside of clothing. They may also include non-contact activities such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, pornographic material or watching sexual activities, engaging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse (including via the internet). Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010: 38)

Such acts, apart from rape, are obviously not determined by gender and some victim studies have shown that there is little or no difference between the types of offences committed by male and female perpetrators (Rudin et al., 1995).

There is little doubt that the sexual abuse of children is commonly a male crime and the majority of victims are female (NSPCC, 2009; Bunting, 2005; Mendel, 1995). It is this gender balance that plays a significant part in the ideology within bureaucratic structures and professional practice and thus in the way cases are managed. When gender roles are challenged, particularly where the sexual offenders are female and in the mothering role, professionals may find managing risk difficult especially since the focus in recent years has developed around maintaining family relationships (Saraga, 2001; Roberts, 2001).

This paper considers some of the underlying factors that create problems for professionals who work with female perpetrators and their victims. The data were gathered from a series of interviews undertaken with police, social workers, psychologists, health staff and counsellors. While there can be no empirical generalisations from such a small study the narratives highlight the individual experiences and dilemmas of working in this highly sensitive area. The fieldwork itself identified some of the problems concerning disbelief at a very early stage. For instance some of the police child protection units contacted were rather sceptical of the research and dismissed any discussion about the possibilities of female perpetrators by saying they had "never had any dealings with female abusers" or suggesting "it doesn't happen here". It was interesting to note that interviews with social workers in one of these areas revealed at least two female sexual abusers had been identified in the previous twenty months – but were not investigated by the police.

It was not just denial or unwillingness amongst child protection professionals there were other issues voiced here including a general concern about any revelations that might show the child protection system *in a bad light*. And this is hardly surprising considering the number of social workers in particular who are used as scapegoats if the efforts to ensure children are protected fail. Beck (1992) considered the issue of scapegoating in his analysis of the risk society. He proposed