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Non-offending Mothers of Sexually Abused Children: the Hidden Victims

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Non-offending mothers of sexually abused children:

The hidden victims

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to raise the awareness of health and social care professions (both in practice and in academia) of the absence of any substantial, targeted support, counselling or advocacy services for non-offending mothers of sexually abused children and of the almost complete lack of any meaningful social scientific academic discourse on the nature and extent of the unique problems faced by such mothers. What little specific research literature that does exist on this issue has been generated in the U.S. and any generalised European commentaries on child sexual abuse that exist actually focus upon: (a) the child survivor of the abuse; (b) the perpetrators of the abuse and; (c) the mother as, either, partly to blame for the abuse or as being unworthy of consideration for independent client status themselves.

METHOD: The paper will report on a series of focus group interviews carried out with a small sample of non-offending mothers of sexually abused children (n=12) and on responses to questionnaires completed by a sample of agencies working in the area of child sexual abuse (n=6).

RESULTS: The interviews concluded that: non-offending mothers feel that they are viewed by relevant professionals as either partly to blame for the abuse or as a source of support for the abused children, not as being in need of support themselves; there are no intervention strategies in place to meet the specific needs of non-offending mothers. The responses from the questionnaires supported these findings.

CONCLUSION: Professionals working with sexually abused children need to acknowledge that non-offending mothers are also victims and have their own needs for support and assistance which are separate and independent from the needs of the abused child. Academic researchers need to address the unique needs of such mothers to be treated as clients in their own right and not as, either, partial collaborators in the abuse or as being inconsequential.

A Historical Perspective of Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is not new, although it has culminated in a heightened awareness of abuse issues during the 20th and 21st centuries. Early historical accounts (Rush 1980 & Gray-Fow 1987 in Bolen 2001) indicate that child sexual abuse has always existed but has not always been acknowledged and no reference to child sexual abuse is made before the 1880's. DeMause writes *'The history of childhood is a nightmare…. The further back in history one goes…. the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorised and sexually abused'* (DeMause 1988:1 in Bolen R 2001:12).

This strongly indicates that child sexual abuse is not a new phenomenon but its recognition is comparatively new. According to Morris (1971), Vicinius (1977) and Hopkins (1979), prior to 1839, fathers automatically took custody of their children if a marriage broke down. From this stemmed a societal perspective of children as the possessions of their father. Evidence of child sexual abuse was ignored and accredited to female hysteria (Brandcraft and Stolcrow [1984] in Bolen 2001); this was a serious medical diagnosis at the time (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female_hysteria) which has long since been discredited. Writers like Brandcroft and Stolcrow (1984 in Bolen 2001) are of the opinion that patients presenting with the symptoms attributed to female hysteria were possibly victims of child sexual abuse. Bolen suggests the earliest work on child sexual abuse was undertaken by Frenchman Ampouse Tardie, a forensic-medical expert who, as early as 1862, reported on 420 sexual offences committed against children under 15. Later, from an eleven year study, he cited over 80 incidents of sexual abuse involving child victims (Masson 1984 in Bolen 2001). According to Bolen (2001), Ampouse was the first to write professionally about child sexual abuse as a social problem. The views on child sexual abuse have always been complicated. Jean Martin Charcot (1825-1893), a neurologist, presented victims of child sexual abuse as mentally ill and the perpetrators of their abuse as 'honest family men' (Cunningham 1988:347 in Bolen 2001:12). Meanwhile Binet, a French psychologist, promulgated the idea that the suggestibility of children made them unreliable witnesses and this provided a 'rationale for disbelieving children especially those involved in sexual crimes' (Cunningham 1988:349 in Bolen 2001:13).

Generally then, the view up to and including Freud was heavily weighted against believing children's accounts of child sexual abuse (Bolen 2001). Later historical evidence suggests that incest was explained in terms of girls seducing their fathers (Bender and Blau 1937 in Hooper 1992:1). This stemmed from work done by Freud (Bolen 2001) who, having heard accounts of sexual assault from female clients, first circulated the idea of the Oedipus complex as a developmental stage in girls which included penis envy and meant the father replaced the mother as the child's love object. According to Bolen (2001), Freud conjectured that girls fantasized about incest and considered their accounts to be imaginary. The thinking current at that time was that it was 'preposterous that parents would molest their own children' (Joyce 1995:200 in

Bolen 2001:14). Freud's work is cited as having 'profoundly affected the mental health profession' (Bolen 2001:19). It is clear that the understanding of child sexual abuse has been dramatically affected by Freud's ideas, not least because his psychoanalytical approach contradicts client's reality by placing the interpretation of their account by the expert in a more favourable and acceptable light than the clients own perspective. In the context of the survivor of child sexual abuse this means:

> *'Any attempt on the part of the child or her family to expose the violator also exposes her own alleged innate sexual motives and shames her more than the offender; concealment is the only recourse. The dilemma of the sexual abuse of children has provided a foolproof emotional blackmail; if the victim incriminates the abuser, she incriminates herself' (Rush 1996:275 in Bolen 2001:19).*

In the 1950's and 1960's, the attitude towards child sexual abuse was influenced by an approach which placed the blame for father/daughter incest on the mother (Kaufman et al 1954 in Hooper 1992), or the child (Bender and Grugether 1952 in Bolan 2001). In the 1960's, the blame for child sexual abuse was again distanced from the perpetrator and this time placed on the entire family including the child survivor (Machotka Pittman and Flomenhaft 1967 in Bolan 2001).

The next part of the literature review concentrates on the extent to which the lack of support for mothers of sexually abused children is reflected in academic literature, which appears to neglect, or overlook them in the context of child sexual abuse. Such neglect and the negative attitude toward non-offending mothers found in the literature is indicative of a lack of support for those mothers. It is important to define child sexual abuse because there is a diversity of understanding about what involves. There is the strong tendency to assume that child sexual abuse is the same as incest and includes contact; however, as Barker and Hodes (2004) assert, 'any activity that leads to sexual arousal in the perpetrator' (2004:42). Barker and Hodes (2004) go on to define child sexual abuse as any sexual molestation of children by adults or older children, which again infers contact, but later defined child sexual abuse as

> *'Forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including penetrative… or non-penetrative acts. They may include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at pornographic material or watching sexual activities, or encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways'* (Barker and Hodes 2004: 42 bold italics ours).

This study used the above as its definition of child sexual abuse, alongside the concept that:

> *'... children are incapable of being sexually provocative or seductive. They do not understand what this is or the meaning of sexual body language. Once again this is the shifting the responsibility for the abuse from the abuser onto the child. It gives us the impression that we should feel sorry for the poor man who has been taunted by a 'seductive' child. The only person responsible for the abuse of a child is the abuser'.*
> http://www.gvawp.org.uk/InfoWomen/pdfs/ChildSexualAbuseinfopack.pdf

While this review acknowledges that women also abuse children, current statistics show 97% of offenders are men

(http//www.gvawp.org.uk/infoWomen/pdfs/ChildSexualAbuseinfopack.pdf).

However writers still exhibit mother blaming attitudes, even though mothers have been described as 'the primary adult actors in child protection' (Hooper 1992:4) and, according to the Metropolitan Police & Bexley Social Services (1987), they are also the main source of referrals to professionals regarding child sexual abuse.

This study discovered no Irish and only two British books which solely focus on the impact of child sexual abuse on the mother: Hooper 1992 (1992); Trotter 1998. Tamraz (1996) endorses this saying '… Few research studies have investigated non-offending mothers…' (1996:77). It has been difficult to find literature on the issue of services and support for non-offending mothers or reference to the non-offending mother's role in the context of child sexual abuse or child protection between 2000 and 2006, the exception being Hill's (2001) article in which he too refers to the tendency of the literature to overlook mothers of sexually abused children.

Wyatt (1985 in Bannister 1998) asserts that, as the mother is the non-abusing parent in most cases of intra-familial sexual abuse, she has a crucial role to play in helping her abused child because professionals consider that the non-believing mother cannot protect her child (Furniss 1991). Jones and Ramchandani (1999) indicate that child protection workers often need the mother to openly acknowledge the child's account of abuse very early in the process of disclosure and investigation, denying her the time to work through and adjust to what has happened. Mothers are described as 'a key resource for children' (Rickford 1992:15), but not as independent clients themselves in need of care and support. Feiring, Taska and Lewis (1998) assert that it is imperative to meet the needs of mothers because their studies indicate that the majority of children who are believed and supported by their mothers when they disclose their abuse recover better than those who are not believed or supported by mothers. In an American study Spaccarelli and Kim (1995 in Elliott and Carnes (2001) affirm that 'parental support was the single best predictor of resiliency in sexually abused girls' (1995:322).

Hooper (1992) and Trotter (1998) both assert that much of the literature on child sexual abuse emphasises the mother's possible collusion, failure to prevent the abuse and failure to identify the perpetrator as abusive before he abused. Porter (1984) suggests that emphasising mothers' failure to protect places the responsibility for protection erroneously on the mother not the perpetrator. These assertions indicate a lack of support for mothers of sexually abused children in the literature on child sexual abuse. After intra-familial abuse has been disclosed, the mother is seen as supporter and enabler, and responsible for empowering the child (Bagley and King 1990; Bannister 1998) but is not identified as requiring assistance themselves. Hill (2001) asserts '… the literature on child protection practice continues to focus on assessing mothers "ability to protect" and even on the possibility of collusion … mothers of sexually abused children are entirely overlooked in influential texts on partnership…' (2001:386)

Bannister (1998), Finkelhor (1986) and Calder (2001) provide evidence that many writers blame mothers for the sexual abuse of their children especially where the abuse is committed by her husband or partner. Johnson (1992) writes 'The mother is the family member most often neglected or maligned when daughters are abused, mothers

are accused' (1992 in Feigenbaum 1997). Hooper (1992) cites evidence that abusive tendencies are formed during adolescence but, in spite of this, as Hildebrande (1989) avers, therapeutic work with mothers requires them 'to acknowledge how the marriage relationship or partnership as the structure and organization of the family may have contributed to the sexual abuse (Hildebrande 1989:244).

Miller (1990) and Barker and Hodes (2004) suggest that, prior to 1980, the collusion of the mother was assumed and blame was apportioned to her in equal measure. According to Rich, (1977 in Hooper C~A 1992:13), 'motherhood is characterised by personal responsibility'. Tamraz (1996) suggests a covert form of mother-blaming prevails in current literature, citing from her American literature review the example of the working mother abandoning her child to be abused, and the non-working mother giving her child a victim mentality by providing a role model of dependency. However, Bagley and Naspini (1987 in Bagley 1990) cite primary data demonstrating that few mothers know about intra-familial child sexual abuse and that the idea that men abuse because their wives are sexually withdrawn was untrue. Bagley and King 1990) question the prevalence of the myths about mothers' collusion and suggests 'This stereotype is part of an ideology which perpetuates male dominance' (Bagley and King 1990:49), while Rickford (1992) reports that professionals working with mothers of sexually abused children find the model of assumed collusion less than helpful. The perpetuation of this model of mothers as directly or indirectly collusive is symptomatic of the absence of support for mothers of sexually abused children in literature. It is imperative that literature and society place the blame for child sexual abuse with the abuser and stops seeking to shift blame onto mothers or the child victim.

Armstrong (1978 in Bagley and King 1990) argue that sexual abuse of a child does not arise from 'physical addiction'' instead, it stems from an 'assumed prerogative, super-structured with rationale, protected by traditions of silence, and even more than in rape, an assurance of the objects' continuing fear, shame, powerlessness and therefore silent acquiescence' (Armstrong 1978:277 in Bagley and King 1990:47). This acknowledgement of child sexual abuse as a premeditated, considered act or acts, is often not made clear in academic literature and both society and theorists seems to endorse (or encourage) the view, that in some way mothers have to share the blame for child sexual abuse within the family. This apparent effort to render the non-offending

mother directly or indirectly responsible for the intra-familial child sexual abuse is important because it is these assumptions that may lie behind the paucity of services for mothers of sexually abused children.

Mother-blaming within the literature is sometimes very subtle. Bagley and King (1990) for example appear supportive of the innocence of non-offending mothers but insist that it is 'essentially the mother must (after her child discloses abuse) acknowledge her role as parent and protector to her child and apologize for her inability to effectively carry it out in past circumstances' (Bagley and King 1990:177). This seems to suggest the belief that mothers must apologise for not stopping something they did not know was happening and again places the responsibility for preventing the abuse on the mother rather than the perpetrator. Meanwhile Kelly (in Rickford 1992) states, 'mothers are either represented as collusive and offered no support, or else they are good mothers who believe in and support the child so they are just left to get on with it' (Rickford 1992:15).

Dergamo and Forgatch (1997) reveal that, following divorce, a mother's parenting is affected by her distress and her ability to cope is very dependent on her networks of support. Hooper (1992) and Trotter (1998) demonstrate that, in the plethora of literature concerning child sexual abuse, the impact on the mother of her child's disclosure and her separation from and feelings of betrayal by her partner or husband are to a large extent ignored. According to Bannister (1998), mothers experience feelings similar to those of the sexually abused child, 'these include, shock; disbelief; anger; powerlessness' guilt and betrayal' (1998:79). Bryerly (1985) specifies the life changing decisions non-offending mothers have to make in the aftermath of a disclosure of child sexual abuse which renders her breadwinner, witness, and lone carer. Hooper (1992) further stresses:

> '[Mothers'] *resources (emotional, social and material) are generally depleted by the disclosure of their child's abuse and the losses this involves for them, at the same time as the expectations on them are increased by the child's needs and by the demands of professionals'* (Hooper 1992:13).

Hooper (1989) in Trotter 1998; 97) also states, 'mothers should be heard … for their own sake, not only as appropriate or inappropriate reactions to the child'. Written, practical and societal support for non-offending mothers is vital because as Print and Dey (in Bannister 1998) acknowledge, the response of mothers to their child's disclosure of sexual abuse is critical because children who are not believed and supported by their mothers suffer more serious long term effects than those children who do receive that maternal support. Furthermore, they suggest that, in a high number of cases, it is legitimate to view the mother as a secondary victim of the child sexual abuse.

However, the initial disbelief, guilt, sense of betrayal and loss felt by the mother are often lost in the victim focused process of a Child Protection investigation, and are rarely mentioned in the literature. Feigenbaum (2001) agrees that 'very few studies have looked at the impact of disclosure on mothers' (2001:478) and Bagley and Mallick (1999) assert that family therapy should be included in the help assigned to the child victim.

The lay assumption that, on disclosure, an abused child will immediately feel better for having told and behave accordingly, is untrue (Bannister 1998); rather there is evidence from Ainscough and Toon (1993), Bagley *et al* (in Bagley and Mallick 1999) and Jones and Ramchandani (1999) that the child's behaviour may alter, sometimes dramatically, as a result of the abuse. Ainscough and Toon (1993:65) list forty eight possible effects, while Bagley (1990:14) states 'child sexual abuse destroys the spontaneity and freedom of childhood and imposes a state of lonely terror on the victim…, profound psychological problems almost inevitably result' (Bagley 1990:14). Mullen and Flemming (1998) assert:

> '…*the fundamental damage inflicted by child sexual abuse is to the child's developing capacities for trust, intimacy, agency and sexuality, and that many of the mental health problems of adult life associated with histories of child sexual abuse are second-order effects*' (Mullen and Fleming J 1998).

Yet these effects are frequently omitted from the academic literature, along with any consideration of their affect on the mother/child relationship. Furthermore, Feigenbaum (2001) addresses this issue, stating 'a common reaction to disclosure is for the mother to withdraw from her daughter. This may be due to remorse, guilt, self-blame, depression or even anger' (Feigenbaum 2001:478). Likewise it can be asserted that '… child sexual abuse has long-term repercussions for adult mental health, parenting relationships, and child adjustment in the succeeding generation' (Roberts *et al* 2004).

The mothers in the studies by Hooper (1992) and Trotter (1998) refer to negative, disturbing and worrying changes in their child's behaviour following the disclosure of sexual abuse. Hooper (1992) cites a variety of behaviour patterns which mothers in her sample had experienced from their children; anger, ambivalence, sexually inappropriate behaviour; distrust; neediness. He goes on to state clearly that mothers reported a lack of help in dealing with these difficulties. It is interesting to note that foster carers receive training regarding the care of an abused child (Finkelhor 1986: O'Hagan 1986), but mothers of sexually abused children do not.

Trotter (1998) highlights the difficulties non-abusing mothers face when there are other children in the family, because siblings are also neglected in the literature and in practice. Mills (1988) points out the lack of books and information aimed to help parents with this task, indicating that far more are available in America. Trotter (1998) also emphasises the benefits to those mothers who were able 'to involve themselves … with adult survivors' (1998:60). In her interviews with mothers, Trotter (1998) was able to identify a lack of empathy from professionals tantamount to being dismissive, claiming that '…experts were not always as helpful as the might have been' (Trotter 1998:61). Hooper (1992) and Trotter (1998) identified a sense of abandonment among mothers, especially when the official process was completed and professionals withdrew. Jones and Ramchandani (1999), in their research into the child protection process, found that mothers felt they received suspicion rather than help. Mothers in all three studies expressed a sense of being left without support advice or guidance. This constitutes substantial evidence of the propensity of academic literature to ignore the damage child sexual abuse does to the relationship between non-offending mothers and their children which is another way of denying support to mothers of sexually abused children.

A review of literature from other countries, suggests that a different approach exists and that there is more current literature being generated about support for non-offending mothers. Nurcombe (1999) writes about a treatment programme in Queensland including non-offending parents as standard. Carnes and Leslie (2000) refer to The Family Advocates Programme, an early intervention model in America, which initiates professional support alongside the non-offending primary carer during the investigation into the abuse allegations. Also in the U.S., Alaggia et al (1999) cites a peer support programme led by paid non-professional staff who have themselves been sexually abused or are the mother of a sexually abused child. Junich and Litrownik (1999) report good results following the use of a video tape about coping with child sexual abuse with non-offending parents during the initial investigation into the child's disclosure. In another U.S study, Massat *et al* (1999) reported that participants in their study identified another parent of a sexually abused child as the most helpful kind of support.

In Britain, child psychologists at Park Hospital for Children in Oxford (Wright and Portnoy 1990), the National Children's Home (Eaton 1993) and Barnardos (McDonald and Winkley 2000) found programmes that offered help to mothers and children simultaneously were more helpful than those which dealt with them separately. A thorough scrutiny of academic journals dealing with the subject area of child sexual abuse seems to suggest that scant attention has been paid by academic literature to the lack of support for non-offending mothers since Trotter's work in 1998. Acknowledging this is vital because the literature either reflects a societal attitude of not supporting mothers or perpetuates it through its use in training child protection workers.

Sociological research contributes considerably to our understanding of families, resulting in a plethora of theories about why families function as they do; this paper admits that it is impossible to deal fully with any of these theoretical perspectives due to the constraints of space. However, it is illuminating to very briefly consider functionalism and Foucault's and Weber's perspectives on power. 21st century perceptions of family are strongly affected by functionalism and Parsons, one of its most prominent proponents, argued that society is made up of structures and that the downfall of the traditional family structure was tantamount to the collapse of society

(Parsons in Walklate 2004). Parsons maintained the family has two essential functions (Morgan 1975 in Bernardes 2002): the socialization of children; and the maintenance of adult personalities. He asserted that the 'nuclear family' was essential to industrial society (Newman and Grauerholz 2002). The functionalist view is deeply embedded in common sense thinking about society's expectations of the family and sees the family as controlling and regulating the reproduction and socialization of children. According to functionalism, families provide 'an antidote to the dehumanising effects of society... a haven in a heartless world' (Lasch 1977 in Newman and Grauerholz 2002:90). However, functionalism is silent regarding domestic violence and child abuse during the era in which this theory was most popular. As Cheal (2002) indicates, families are both the context of love and nurture and the arena of violence and murder.

The functionalist approach perceives society as a system which, when it 'functions', produces social cohesion (Bernardes 2002). Parsons believed that industrial societies needed stable families as a base and further purported that stable families included a clear division of domestic labour, with women taking most responsibility for children through the expressive roles of caring and providing security. Meanwhile men's role is instrumental, demonstrated by being the breadwinner. According to Newman and Grauerholz (2002), Parsons broadened women's roles to include, not only nurturing children, but also stabilizing and comforting men. It can be contested that this underpins assumption such as Bagley and Mallick's (1999) assertion that the mother's failure to fulfil her role as wife is a reason why men sexually abuse children.

Functionalism places parents and in particular fathers, generally, in a position of unquestionable authority supported by the wider organisation of society. This renders children vulnerable and adults powerful. Socialisation of children in the past has meant teaching children to be 'seen and not heard', subject to parental [and particularly paternal] authority and to obey parents/adults without question. Where a family is functioning well, the adults make demands on their children that are in the children's long term best interest. However, as Finkelhor (1986) asserts, a sexually abusive father or father figure abuses his authority by lying to the child about the acceptability of his actions. There is evidence from practice (Jones and Ramchandani (1999) that children are told by the abuser that the mother knows about the abuse and does not mind or that all families do these things.

It could be contested that, functionalism, adopted in lay circles as well as academia, fosters the tendency of child sexual abuse literature to blame mothers, for example Macionis and Plummer (2002:440) state:

> '[Functionalism] *minimizes the problems of family life. Established family forms reinforce patriarchy and incorporate a surprising amount of violence, with thedysfunctional effect of undermining individual self confidence, health and well being, especially of women and children'.*

However functionalism does not stand alone in its underpinning of society's understanding and expectations of mothers. The conflict perspective describes society and family in terms of conflict and struggle (Newman and Grauerholz 2002). Though this perspective acknowledges the inequalities which exist within the family, it does not comment on those inequalities which exist between adults and children especially in the context of intra-familial abuse. Social exchange theory (Newman and Grauerholz 2002) on the other hand uses market principles to describe family experiences. The concept of rewards and costs are difficult to appropriate within the family setting and in the context of abuse, fails to show that the cost of the effects of child sexual abuse always outweigh any positive contribution the abuser makes. Symbolic interactionism examines language and body language and asserts that understanding of family lies in the interpretations of individuals (Ibid.). The danger of this theory in the context of child sexual abuse is that abusers can try and disguise their abusive actions and suggest the child has misunderstood ordinary social interaction as abusive.

From yet another perspective, Weber perceives men as having economic power and therefore coercive power over their dependents. According to Weber, men's power is seen as traditional in origin, therefore it seems that patriarchal power inside the family is backed by a wider societal patriarchy in which men continue to be seen as most powerful (Macionos & Plummer 2002: 445. This belief in and societal acceptance of male power and dominance is open to exploitation which encourages child sexual abuse or masks it. Once again the male abuser is in a place of authority supported by society and by the way society is run. Survivors of child sexual abuse find this 'society deep' acceptance of men's power difficult to challenge

Power in the family is perceived as based on self restraint, the traditional father figure is perceived as 'natural'. People are not coerced but discipline themselves and use negotiation to get their needs met or their voice heard. Sherratt and Hughes (2000) assert that this version of power is more open to diversity. However, Dobash and Dobash (1979) highlight Foucault's silence regarding domestic violence. Foucault's thinking does not deal with what happens when negotiation breaks down. In the context of child sexual abuse, there is no negotiation only coercion and exploitation. Data highlight the reality of this by indicating that 'three-quarters of sexually abused children do not tell anyone about the abuse at the time and around a third still have not told anyone about their experience(s) by early adulthood' (www.nspcc.org.uk/WhatWeDo/AboutTheNSPCC/KeyFactsAndFigures/KeyFacts_wda33645.html).

These theories regarding power have to a great extent been absorbed into the popular culture of Ireland and accepted as a 'norm'. Feminists (e.g. Walby 1990) have sought to contest underlying patriarchy but power imbalances remain prevalent in families and in society. As Bernardes (2002) contests, it would be an acceptable assumption to presume that 21st century sociologists are preoccupied with studying family lives. However Bernardes asserts that, 'In fact, family living is absent from many of the social sciences, even in sociology, the study of family lives is far from a central concern' (2002:27). Similarly it can be contested that non-offending mothers are neglected in academic literature as part of a wider disregard of the family or families.

METHODOLOGY

Given the highly sensitive and private nature of the research topic – child sexual abuse – and considering that no previous research findings exist in this area, it was deemed most appropriate to adopt a qualitative approach to data collection. However, there were two samples: non-offending mothers of sexually abused children; and organisations with a specific interest in the welfare of such mothers. So, suitable data collection instruments had to be designed to provide the required findings from both sources.

Interviews are the most common form of qualitative research, involving the collection of information by verbal communication. However, as there are a number of different types of interviews, consideration was given to the most appropriate for this study. For the purposes of this research, it was decided, for the sample of mothers of sexually abused children, to carry out the interviews over the telephone and record them. This, it was reckoned, would encourage more open and honest disclosure of highly sensitive and personal experiences, as the interviewees would not have to face a stranger asking them for extremely private and possibly traumatising information. For the organisations, such privacy matters were not so relevant and so, hand delivered and hand collected questionnaires were deemed most appropriate.

Analysis of the data from the telephone interviews was not an easy matter, given the quantity of information. The data from these was analysed using a combination of grounded theory and discourse analysis. The telephone interviews preceded the questionnaires and the data from the former constituted the structure and content of the latter. The data from the questionnaires was analysed manually.

The sample of mothers was accessed via gatekeepers, relevant organisations who work with child survivors of sexual abuse and their mothers. Each was contacted in turn and asked to act as a source of contact between mothers of sexually abused children and the researcher. Contact was made with organisations in order to gain access to representatives who were to provide the data, via the questionnaires, responding to the information obtained from the telephone interviews among the sample of mothers.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The mothers interviewed were aged from late twenties to early fifties. Some were themselves survivors of sexual abuse. The women came from a wide range of educational backgrounds. All the respondents lived in different geographic areas. All the abused children of the mothers in this study were girls. Even the relatively small amount of primary data gathered was difficult to analyse, the client-led approach used over the telephone meant that specific information was not directly asked for, but the clients were allowed tell their stories in their own way. The questionnaire sent to organisations was similarly difficult to scrutinize, but every effort was to represent the comments and feelings of the participants as accurately as possible. The validity of the

information from the different organisations questioned rested on their expertise and cognizance therefore it was important to include a brief resume of their spheres of activity.

1) CCPAS

The Churches Child Protection Advisory Service is the only independent Christian charity providing professional advice, support, training and resources in all areas of safeguarding children and for those affected by abuse. CCPAS runs a helpline, training, sex-offender supervision, advises government, Children's Services Departments, police and probation services, faith organisations and other bodies on policy and practice and in individual cases.

2) JACAT

Jointly funded by Social Services and the Health Service, JACAT hopes to achieve:

*   The highest possible standards of therapeutic work with our clients
*   A steady improvement in the handling of child abuse issues
*   The wider dissemination of information regarding child abuse
*   Better support for workers in the area
*   A heightened general awareness of the complexities of working in this field

3) MOSAC

Mothers of Sexually Abused Children is a self help support group for non-abusing parents and carers of sexually abused children and a registered charity since 2002. Initiated by three mothers, MOSAC offers counselling services to mothers of sexually abused children, a drop in service and individual and group support, and is involved in awareness raising. The group also offers confidence building courses for young people facilitated by women's refuges and a course for adults facilitated by the local College. MOSAC also supports members who wish to pursue qualifications.

4) Stop It Now

This is public information and awareness raising campaign regarding child sexual abuse that:

*   Aims to prevent child sexual abuse by increasing public awareness and empowering people to act responsibly to protect children

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- Believes that it is the responsibility of all adults to take positive action to prevent the sexual abuse of children

- Is an alliance of leading children's charities, working with the government and child protection agencies, to promote public education and prevent child sexual abuse

- Believes that the sexual abuse of children must be recognised as a public health problem that affects everyone

- Aims to break through the secrecy and taboo that surrounds child sexual abuse and to ensure that child sexual abuse is everyone's business

5) LASA

League Against Sadistic Abuse provides the following support services to adults who suffered any of the following types of abuse in childhood:

- Emotional abuse

- Physical abuse

- Sexual abuse

It is a support network for the carers and family of people who allege they have been abused in a ritual setting.

6) St Mary's Sexual Abuse Referral Centre

St. Mary's Centre offers high quality, comprehensive and co-ordinated forensic, counselling, and medical services to males and females who have experienced rape or sexual assault, and their supporters. A free counselling service is available to supporters as well as the person directly involved.

Three issues introduced by the organisations and not covered elsewhere in the research are discussed at the end of this analysis. The information collected from mothers and organisations is laid out as follows.

- Topic or theme
    - What mothers say
    - What organisations say
    - Whether this is supported or not by the literature review.

Support

The primary data indicate that mothers feel support at the time of their child's disclosure was difficult to find:

    a. None of the mothers mentioned feeling supported by social workers and three referred negatively to their experiences of working with Child Protection teams.

    b. Two respondents referred positively to feeling supported by the police responding to the initial allegations.

    c. Three received support from other sources

    d. One comment: 'the support offered me was non existent'.

    e. Another said 'mothers need someone who is there for them'.

    f. One respondent mentioned that the support from an NSPCC group was good but not long enough.

The organisations indicated that their clients were dissatisfied with their experiences of support:

    g. All six organisations referred to mothers' complaints concerning lack of support.

    h. Two suggested peer support programmes as a way forward.

    i. One organisation suggests 'support should come from someone who understands the dynamics that follow disclosure and the emotional journal the mother travels'.

    j. All organisations referred to the current provision as 'patchy, 'difficult to access'.

    k. One organisation comments, 'almost every mother I have met … has complained about the paucity of support, advice and help available'.

Hooper (1992) refers to similar difficulty of finding support which the mothers in her study experienced and both she and Trotter (1998) report that mothers feeling deserted after the initial investigation ended. Rickford (1992) suggests two extremes exist with mothers, either being blamed for the abuse or being judged whether they are 'good mothers' and supportive toward their children.

Effects of improved support:

1. Mothers felt that their recovery would have been quicker and possibly less painful with more support:

    a. 'To succeed in supporting her family through such an experience, she needs all the help she can get'.

    b. 'The child protection people didn't care for you as a person, you were just a case'.

    c. 'The abuser seems to get more attention than the mother'.

    d. Another mentioned feeling blamed for choosing a partner who then abused their daughter.

    e. Mothers indicated that there should be the same degree of help regardless of where one lives.

2. Asked about the effect of increased support on mothers, the organisations responded:

    a. 'Support may not actually reduce the distress but would help mothers respond to it in a less negative and unhealthy way'.

    b. Mothers acknowledged that the sooner they are enabled to come to terms with and make more sense of what has happened to their child the better.

    c. 'Mothers would be more robust in matters of child protection … if they received more consistent, informed and lasting support'.

    d. 'I am in no doubt that if there were universal services for mothers… the trauma of disclosure … would be softened'.

    e. The organisations referred to the availability of support as being a matter of luck.

    f. Even in their localities, they counted the coverage as 'patchy'.

    g. They universally agreed that coverage should be in 'every major city … countrywide'.

The literature review indicates that these issues are often overlooked about child sexual abuse or child protection. Attempts to find some way of blaming mothers for the sexual abuse of her child, as in the example above criticising the mother's choice of partner, is significantly unsupportive of non-offending mothers because it refuses to place all the blame on the perpetrator of the abuse. It also indicates a lack of understanding in

academic discourse of the subtlety of the abuse cycle. Rickford (1992) suggests mothers can only be collusive or supportive, but Hill (2001) contests this, indicating that the feelings and process of coming to terms with intra-familial child sexual abuse are far more complex. Some of the articles, Rickford (1992) and Hill (2001), were written about small self-help groups set up by mothers for mothers and others, Wright and Portnoy (1990) and Eaton (1993), were facilitated by statutory agencies. This seems to support the evidence of primary data that the best help is from someone who has been there'. It also indicates that, where such groups exist, they are very useful. The fact that only five such groups were found during the course of this investigation emphasises the paucity of support for non-offending mothers in 2006.

Recognising the mother beyond her role as the child's supporter/protector:

1. Two out of the six organisations referred to helping the mother to help her child:
    a. 'Mothers would be more robust in …child protection, helping their child through the process of disclosure, court hearing or lack of it, and in their contribution to the healing of their child if they had more consistent, informed and lasting support'.
    b. 'I would agree that scant attention is paid to mothers in their own right apart from being their child's supporter/protector'.

2. Five organisations referred to the mother as having needs in her own right:
    a. 'There is little recognition of the mother's needs…'
    b. 'Mothers find it difficult in accessing counselling services in their own right'.
    c. 'Help, sensitive to the needs of the mother for the inevitable distress she will feel'.
    d. 'Unfortunately mothers are the forgotten victims'.
    e. 'Mothers … have struggled to access appropriate and sensitive help at the time they have needed it'.

Hooper (1992) and Hill (2001) assert that there is a tendency in the literature on child sexual abuse to refer only to supporting the non-offending mother in the context of ensuring she protects her child.

The organisations raised three other issues:

1. the effects of lack of funding on service provision for non-offending mothers;

2. the belief of two organisations that mothers are too wary of statutory agencies to use any groups they facilitate;

3. the literature they produce to assist families in coming to terms with intra-familial child sexual abuse is not used by statutory agencies nor do these agencies offer their own literature.

Lack of funding:

One organisation indicated that support for mothers can be '…expensive to run, but the cost in human misery where such help is not readily available … (this would) make the expenditure fully justified'. The literature did not comment on funding because support for non-offending mothers is rarely mentioned, their needs are not recognised or recorded, therefore they are not considered to be in need of services.

Belief that mothers are suspicious of statutory agencies:

The idea that non-offending mothers are wary of the statutory agencies was mentioned by almost all of the mothers, a particularly negative response and an attitude that appears to exist towards social services/child protection workers.

That non-offending mothers will not attend groups run by statutory agencies is not borne out by the literature which mainly refers to groups successfully facilitated by different statutory agencies; for example, the National Children's Homes project (Wright and Pornboy 1990) and Park Children's Hospital (Eaton 1993). Similar success is reported by two of the organisations which are run jointly by different agencies, one with a high level of volunteer support from mothers of sexually abused children. Two mothers mentioned attending a joint initiative run by the NSPCC and Social Services in 1998 and 2004 in two areas of the country 200 miles apart. The courses sounded similar though not necessarily the same and comprised of a ten-week 'course' of two hours per week. The programme was referred to as a 'Non-Offending Partners Group' and informed mothers of the abuse cycle of the perpetrator, seeking to help mothers understand the grooming process applied to their child and how the abuse may have been hidden from them and their relationship with their child deliberately undermined by the abuser. Both mothers found some parts of this group work helpful and other

parts unhelpful. However this investigation has failed to discover how widespread these groups are and whether anything similar is still being conducted.

Organisations' literature not used by statutory agencies:

Information about coping with child sexual abuse is mentioned in the literature, with Cousins Mills (1988) indicating that there seemed to be more available in America during the eighties than in Europe. Material has been produced by the NSPCC, Childline and Kidscape, but none of the mothers mentioned receiving this information from social workers or child protection teams or finding it in their local libraries. One of the organisations questioned produces a series of leaflets and feels that these too are under used by statutory agencies.

Theories outlined earlier appear to record reasons why families perform as they do, without considering whether any kind of accountability should be imposed on them. Nor in turn do theorists take responsibility for the views they perpetuate and the affects these have on real people and their lives. Much of the lack of support experienced by non-offending mothers and the negative view society has of them could stem from academic theorising which has become written into public lay 'knowledge'. That sociology is not obsessed with family matters is a dire indictment against it (Bernardes 2002).

An examination of current academic literature revealed that the majority of books and articles scrutinised for this study almost entirely omitted mothers completely from discourses about child sexual abuse. Of those texts which did mention non-offending mothers, many made cursory remarks concerning the need for mothers to support and protect their abused child from the perpetrator. A very small number of books allocated just one chapter to the consideration of non-offending mothers and even here this investigation discovered that mothers were only written about as supporters and protectors, rarely in their own right as having been hurt by the abuse themselves and therefore in need of support and services. Seventy four books and articles were reviewed and only two were found which focused exclusively on non-offending mothers and discussed their needs in addition to their supportive and protective role. A considerable number of texts were found which discussed mothers only in the language of collusion and blame. This study emphatically asserts that the exclusion of non-

offending mothers and the negative treatment of them reflect their marginalisation in existing research. This is considered important to the assessment of the support received by non-offending mothers because, although the mothers themselves may not read the academic literature, the statutory agencies working with them could find such texts are part of their training. This could mean that professional attitudes towards non-offending mothers and the services they offer them would be influenced by what is clearly highly biased and negative literature.

The emphasis on the non-offending mother as supporter/protector is paramount throughout the review of the literature and while it is not the intention of this study to suggest that the child victim should be less than the primary focus of child protection initiatives, this study does claim that mothers have the need and the right to be treated more holistically as clients of social services themselves with their own agenda of needs. They are referred to as the primary actors in incidents of abuse and their importance to the abused child's recovery is second to none. This investigation has confirmed that mothers need support in recovering because they too are harmed by incidents of sexual abuse. In a tiny glimpse at the international scene, it becomes apparent that in Europe, America and Australia, peer groups, buddy systems and advocacy programmes are being found to improve the recovery of whole families.

The literature includes an analysis of sociological theories relevant to our understanding of the family. Due to the constraints of space, it is extremely brief, but is sufficient enough to indicate that some of the thinking behind our beliefs about family may encourage a lack of support for mothers, both in the context of intra-familial child sexual abuse and in the wider sense of mothering. For example, the notion that mothers are held more responsible for the well being of children than fathers surely calls for a fresh examination of the status and support given to mothers and perhaps a new look at the sociology of motherhood.

The reports of the mothers and the organisations challenge the validity of the exclusion and negative treatment of mothers of sexually abused children in academic discourses about child sexual abuse. A strong and urgent need for support and services offered to mothers of sexually abused children is identified. There is currently no government funded department responsible for the support of mothers in the aftermath of child

sexual abuse nor is there a systematic network of support services. The majority of mothers felt unsupported, both at the time of disclosure and later on and they intimated that more ongoing support was vital. Such feelings were sustained by the impressions received by organisations as well.

This study would recommend the initiation of fresh discourses regarding mothers, especially in the context intra-familial child sexual abuse. Furthermore the negative view of mothers perpetuated by the academic literature calls for a review of our understanding of motherhood, parenting and family and the effects negative theorising has on real people and real situations. Practically, the recommendations are that support groups are required in every major town and city nationwide and there should be free, easily accessed counselling for mothers as part of the support offered to the child victim. Much could be learned from the work done in other countries which perceives providing support for mothers as a standard part of the child protection process.

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