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Why 'Historic' Abuse? Experiences of Children Reporting Abuse Historically

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Abstract

This article presents findings from a research study undertaken with twenty-one adult victims/survivors of historic abuse in care from Scotland. The research highlights how children experiencing abuse in the past faced significant barriers in relation to reporting their abuse to the adults they had access to in their lives. The key themes highlighted via the research answer two questions: why did children not disclose their abuse experiences historically?; And how did adults respond to children's disclosures of abuse historically? The findings demonstrate that for some victims/survivors of abuse, the issues related to the reporting of abuse have substantially contributed to the abuse becoming 'historic', rather than something which was addressed in the time, space and context within which it occurred.

Keywords

Historic abuse, disclosure, reporting, child abuse, empirical research, children in care, residential care

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Introduction

On the topic of historic abuse, the question arises, why is historic abuse historic? Why was it not something that was addressed at the time and within the space that it occurred? Why are victims/survivors only in recent years finding the opportunity to have their voices heard and seek justice? To shed light on some of these questions, this article, which is based on findings from a Scottish study with adult victims/survivors of abuse in care, explores children's experiences in relation to disclosing abuse historically. Individuals who participated in the research experienced abuse whilst in state care, namely whilst residing in residential care settings and foster placements.

It is important to clarify from the outset that the findings of this research are based on the experiences of victims/survivors of abuse who did not receive appropriate responses from adults, in light of the abuse they suffered during their childhood. It is acknowledged that undoubtedly there were children who were supported appropriately by adults in their lives at the time. The purpose of this article, however, is to reflect on the experiences of those children who faced barriers in relation to reporting their abuse as well as highlighting the difficulties they faced with having their disclosures responded to appropriately.

Setting the context

From the outset, it may be worth remembering Foucault (1980, p131), and his understanding of truth, whereby:

> Each society has its regime of truth, it's general politics of truth: that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

If we analyse the ways in which the 'truth' of child abuse has been constructed, a loose Foucauldian interpretation may allow us to understand why it is, that only in recent times the abuse of children in the past is increasingly gaining recognition in the UK as well as in other parts of the world (see, for example, Skold & Swain 2015).

It has been argued that social discourse on child abuse has been constructed and reconstructed in different ways throughout history, which has subsequently influenced society's perception of its existence (Bell 2011). In attempts to explain why the abuse of children occurred, it is suggested that of particular significance has been the combination of the dominant values and philosophy of society and its structures, which impact on the nature of human interaction and relationships. The argument has also been made that child abuse occurs due to the way in which childhood is defined and how notions around this are constructed and understood (Gil 1975). For example, what is the definition of childhood? What is expected of children and their behaviour? What are children entitled to? What exactly is the status of children within society?

Referring back to Foucault, we are able to see the correlation between the presence of a 'politics of truth' and children being listened to and believed when they attempted to report their abuse. In part at least, this has been influenced by how historically, views surrounding children and child welfare often devalued the status of children, consequently in some respects, this fuelled the marginalisation of children and facilitated the silencing of their voices (Stein 2006). In addition to this, there is also said to have been a devaluation of the human rights of children, whereby the rights of adults have been emphasised in detriment to the safety and welfare of children (Hawkins & Briggs, 1997). Therefore, it may rationally be surmised that because the abuse of children was understood differently to how it is understood presently in modern day society, the 'truth' of child abuse historically, was a truth which was predominantly 'unhearable' and/or 'unbelievable'.

It could be argued, then, that within historical constructs of childhood within the UK, where children were not perceived as 'credible' citizens, what they said, whether it was the reporting of abuse (or anything else for that matter), it would not necessarily be considered as the 'truth' by adults. It could further be suggested that such responses from adults were often prominent, regardless of where and how the adult was positioned in relationship to the child. The abuse of children historically may likely have been one of those 'truths' which did not 'fit' with the truths of the time; rendering the speaking of such truth a futile endeavour.

This brief consideration on the positioning of children historically is only intended to serve as an introduction to setting the context in which the ensuing research findings can be understood. However, the social constructs and understandings of childhood and child abuse do not in any way minimise the fact that

responsible adults with a duty of care, actually failed children in providing them with the care and protection they needed and deserved. As one survivor articulated so clearly:

> I accept the fact that there weren't children's rights at that time, like children were seen and not heard. So I accept that was the way it was. But people and the government did have responsibility.

Research findings

Research findings from this study demonstrated that victim/survivor's historic experience in relation to the reporting of abuse was fraught with difficulties and tensions. Analysis of the interviews undertaken with victims/survivors evidenced how their difficult experience in relation to reporting abuse fell into one of two categories; barriers in reporting abuse and inappropriate responses to the reporting of abuse. Therefore to frame the findings of the research, two questions are asked: primarily, why was it that historically children in care did not disclose their abuse? And secondly, when children did disclose their abuse, what responses did they receive?

1. Why did children not disclose their abuse experiences at the time?

Children did not always disclose their abuse because they either felt unable to or were unwilling to do so. Victims/survivors of abuse spoke of their reasons for non-disclosure, which were either singular or multiple and occurred simultaneously or ran concurrently. What did become clear is that there were a multitude of barriers present for children historically, which impeded their ability to disclose the abuse they were suffering. The reasons shared by victims/survivors regarding their non-disclosure are presented below.

People already knew but did not act

'They knew it was going on… Everyone knew about it and done nothing'.

Victims/survivors spoke of how the adults they came across in their lives were already aware of the fact that the abuse was taking place, therefore in essence, there was nothing there to actually be disclosed. The view that dominated such accounts was centred on the idea of what purpose would be served by stating that which was already known but not acted upon?

One participant recalled his experience of this in sharing:

> There was one guy who was the deputy officer in charge of the main stay. He had known in '72, '73 with the first abuse, he had known what was happening and done absolutely nothing to prevent it. He didn't say anything; he didn't report it to the police or anything like that.

In some situations therefore, adults were aware of the abuse children were suffering yet did not act; leaving children with very little to do or say. A sense of futility may have been present for children, whereby repeating that which was obvious and already known to adults may have appeared to be somewhat of a pointless exercise.

Nobody to tell

'Because there was not always someone to turn to'.

On a similar note, children also experienced a sense of how there was actually nobody they could share their sufferings with. Whatever the reason, children in some cases felt the avenues to make disclosures were not available. As one individual stated: 'We didn't know who to speak to'.

Children were sometimes isolated in their abuse experiences and did not have access to adults who they felt they could disclose their abuse to. Historically therefore, children felt they had nobody to tell, either because there was nobody available who they could trust to share their experiences with or because they simply did not know who they could possibly turn to.

Lack of opportunity

'They didn't let us speak to anyone alone'.

Apart from there being 'nobody to tell', historic experiences of children wanting to disclose their abuse were often impacted by the 'lack of opportunity to tell'. One victim/survivor shared their experience of being visited by their social worker, which highlights some of what children experienced in this light:

> Our social worker would come once a month, and you were in a cubicle, it's only about the size of a doorway… and there was two seats and a glass door, but the nun would come in beside you and the social worker would ask you if there's anything worrying you. You couldn't tell her.

Children in care often lived in remote areas and would be visited by social workers and others on occasion, but the space for private conversations with

external individuals was restricted by those who were often perpetrating the abuse, therefore making it virtually impossible for children to speak openly and freely regarding their experiences of abuse.

Fear of further harm

'No way you could tell anyone, you would get battered'.

Another reason behind children historically not feeling able to openly and freely speak of their abuse was due to the fact that in some cases they actually feared further harm:

> And he had his hand on a knife and said, 'I know people at the home so if you're thinking of telling anybody it'll get back to me, and it will only make matters worse for yourself.'

The very real threat of further harm and the potential for the extension or escalation of the harm, which had already been suffered by children, posed a significant barrier to them feeling able to disclose their abuse to relevant adults. Some victims/survivors expressed how they were hopeful that if they stayed silent the abuse would stop, or that the next episode of abuse would not be as severe as to what had previously occurred. A multitude of fears around the further harm that would be caused to them therefore, caused some children to suffer their abuse in silence.

Fear of not being believed

'I couldn't tell anybody because I thought they wouldn't believe me'.

A substantial point of concern for some children, which impeded their ability to disclose the abuse they were experiencing historically, was the fear of not being believed. Their experiences were so acute that children sometimes found themselves believing that no adult would ever believe that they were suffering at the hands of another adult. For example:

> Social workers would visit every three months, asking how we're doing and give us a couple of quid. But you just knew better than to say anything, because if you tried they'd be going, 'are you sure it's not you?'

For some children therefore, the fear of not being believed in this way prevented them from disclosing their abuse experiences to professional adults and others.

Protecting loved ones

'It would have killed my dad and my gran if they had known what was going on in the home, it would have killed them'.

For some children, a conscious choice to not disclose the abuse they were experiencing stemmed from the concerns they had for their loved ones. At a very young age, some children took the responsibility upon themselves to not let their sufferings become the cause of pain for those they cared for and had positive attachments with. For example:

> I was 15 when I came back home and I refused to go back. My mum said as well, she found bruises on my head that hadn't been treated. I couldn't tell her I just couldn't tell my mum the things that were going on there.

The pain that children themselves were suffering as a direct result of their abuse was therefore seen as something which need not cause pain to others, which resulted in some children choosing not to disclose anything to adults they trusted and loved. The responsibility that children placed upon themselves to protect others from harm, particularly their family members was therefore another factor that sometimes contributed to their silence.

Normalisation of abuse

'We were made to believe it happened because we deserved it'.

Despite the harm being caused, abuse experiences for some children in care became normalised. Therefore, some children came to understand their abuse as a normal part of everyday life, which made it difficult for them to explain their suffering to others. As one victim/survivor highlighted:

> I couldn't physically tell anybody that, that guy was hitting me when I was young. It was a case of I was made to think that if you're out of line you'll get put back in line with a whack, that's the way you were going to be treated.

For some children in care, therefore, their inability to reach out and disclose abuse was influenced by the culture or environment they found themselves in; which created a sense of normality around the abuse experiences they were having. Abuse in some instances became a means of discipline and discipline was understood as part and parcel of everyday life. Hence, what was there to tell? When children's understandings were sometimes engrained with the idea that the abuse itself was a natural response to behaviour on their part, which had been deemed unacceptable.

2. How did adults respond to children's disclosures of abuse historically?

Inappropriate responses were often the outcome of children disclosing their abuse to adults responsible for their care; and these inappropriate responses manifested themselves in various ways. Again it is reiterated, that these accounts are not reflective of all children's experiences historically, as undoubtedly there were children who were supported appropriately following disclosures. There were, however, instances whereby children did disclose their abuse to adults in their lives, and when they did the responses they received were significantly inappropriate. Victim/survivor's accounts of the inappropriate responses they received after disclosing their abuse to adults are presented below.

Ignoring children

'I reported my abuse there and then, I reported my abuse all the time, to the staff, to the police but I was ignored'.

For some children, reporting their abuse and being ignored was a common experience. The abuse the children were disclosing was therefore not acknowledged and consequently not acted upon, for example:

> And I was telling all the social workers what was going on but they weren't doing anything about it you know…We were telling the authorities throughout what was happening to us and nothing was done so they kept basically ignoring it.

For some, experiences of being ignored by the adults they were disclosing their abuse to caused high levels of frustration. In some cases children were repeatedly telling adults in positions of power what they were suffering but their plight was dismissed by not being afforded any attention whatsoever. Some victims/survivors spoke of how this left them with feelings of mistrust; whilst leaving them to believe that nobody would ever sincerely listen and acknowledge the reality of what had happened to them as children.

Disbelieving children

'I can remember going to a police officer after one of my beatings I got off of her and I told the police outside on the street and he said, "go home and stop telling your lies"'.

When adults did listen, a large proportion of victims/survivors highlighted how their endeavours in reporting abuse to adults at the time, resulted in responses

of disbelief. Children attempted to convince adults to believe what they were sharing with them in various ways, sometimes this involved drastic actions such as absconding or self-harming; yet still, it often remained that children were not believed. As one individual shared:

> Nobody believed you then, I told the police, I told the school inspector. I tried to stab myself and they got a psychologist to see me in the home but nobody believed me.

When children were disbelieved, children's 'truths' in this way were historically constructed as 'lies', diminishing the value ascribed to disclosures and consequently diminishing the scope for any potential response. After all, if the abuse disclosed by children was not credited with being based on truth, what need remained to respond to it in any way more substantial than reprimanding the child?

Trivialising abuse

'Big deal, get over it'.

Victims/survivors shared their experiences of reporting the abuse they were suffering, only to be met with a response, which outwardly at least, normalised the event as being trivial. As one individual explained: 'His attitude was that if it happened to you it happened to you - you know, 'don't come running to us' kind of attitude'.

On occasions therefore, adults were somewhat dismissive of the abuse actually taking place, as well as undermining the severity of its impact on those children disclosing what they were suffering. Trivialising the abuse in such a way, almost to the point of its non-existence was therefore another way in which some adults inappropriately responded to children's disclosures of abuse historically.

Blaming children

'It's happening to you because you deserve it'.

It may be surprising, that it was possible for children to be blamed by adults for the abuse they suffered; but this was a reality for some children nonetheless. One victim/survivor who suffered sexual abuse from other children residing in the home she stayed in shared her experiences: 'I complained a few times to the police, and they said, "it's your fault and you shouldn't have worn a short skirt"'.

Some children were subject to being blamed by adults for the abuse they experienced, which rendered their disclosures a means of further harm as

opposed to benefit. Having been through the trauma of abuse itself, only to be blamed for it when disclosing their suffering to adults, may have substantially exacerbated the levels of trauma already present for individuals.

Inaction

'My head was split. I told the doctor what had happened and he didn't do anything about it. It wasn't his place to do anything'.

Can inaction be as detrimental as some actions? The answer in respect of the abuse suffered by children historically, surely must be yes; because when reporting their abuse, children were faced with adults who did not always take the necessary actions, if any action at all. Victims/survivors recounted their experiences such as:

> I told the headmaster once and he got the police in but there was nothing done about it. The police came to the school and they did absolutely nothing. They never even went to speak to her or made a report or anything, even though I had belt marks at the back of my legs.

Although in this scenario, the headmaster did take action by alerting the police, the police subsequently took no further action; resulting in an overall sense of inaction for the child. For most victims/survivors who spoke of how there had been no actions taken in response to them disclosing abuse, the inaction more often than not began with the adult they directly disclosed to. In such instances, children disclosed their abuse, adults were aware of the abuse and acknowledged it had or was happening and did nothing further. In essence therefore, despite the abuse being known of and acknowledged by adults, the outcome was inaction.

Inappropriate action

'The only thing they were going to do was send us to another place'.

Where action was taken, for some victims/survivors the actions did not correlate with what they had disclosed. Surely if abuse was the concern then those perpetrating the abuse needed to be held to account or measures needed to be taken to prevent any further abuse? Instead, at times, adults responded by taking actions, which did not make for fitting responses. In the majority of cases where this mismatch of responses was highlighted, victims/survivors spoke of how they were relocated:

> I went down to the superintendent…I told him that they keep hitting me and he told me to go back. When I went back the house parent really went for it, hitting me. It was some months later I was moved, they just said pack your things and you're going to a different house.

Where children reported abuse historically and action was taken, for some those very actions were inappropriate; in the sense that the root cause of abuse was not addressed, rather the concern was displaced via the relocation of children, or relocation of perpetrators. Yes, in this case the abuse stopped, but we cannot dismiss how the action of disrupting a child's life to relocate them, rather than directly addressing the abuse issue itself, rendered such actions inappropriate at times.

Conclusion

The discussion within this article has presented the factors impacting on children's experiences of disclosing abuse they suffered in care settings. It is argued that as a consequence of the way in which children felt unable to disclose their abuse, coupled with the ways in which abuse was sometimes inappropriately responded to at the time, are significant factors which have resulted in the modern day concerns around 'historic abuse'. Abuse needed not to have ever become 'historic', what needed to have been done was for it to be addressed appropriately at the time, space and context within which it occurred; which unfortunately was not always the case. This was perpetuated substantially by the tensions surrounding children's ability to disclose their abuse experiences to adults, as well as the responses they received in the aftermath of disclosures.

It is evident that children did attempt to report their abuse with the hope that it would be addressed at the time; often, however, adults with responsibility did not respond in appropriate ways. Victims/survivors coming forward to seek justice in the present day are not necessarily speaking of the abuse they suffered for the first time, in fact they attempted to do so as children and faced overwhelming barriers when attempting to make themselves heard. For some individuals, the difficulties they experienced in relation to disclosing their abuse resulted in them attempting to repress memories of their abuse experience, due to a sense of mistrust and fear around sharing their experiences again. Due to the barriers faced in relation to making disclosures and not having disclosures appropriately responded to, victims/ survivors often did not relate their experiences again, until recently, whereby the topic of historic abuse has become part of wider social discourse and they are able to speak as adults, not

as the powerless children they once were. As one victim/survivor summarised it: Kids were seen and not heard, kids weren't even believed.

About the author

Samina Karim works across the University of Strathclyde and CELCIS and is involved with research on the historic abuse of children in care, with a particular focus on potential financial compensation/redress for victims/survivors. She is also currently completing her PhD in Social Work, which explores the exercise and impact of power within the lived experiences of victims/survivors of historic abuse.

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