

SHORT CONTRIBUTION

Open Access



Science and child sexual abuse: navigating the pathway between emotion and objectivity

Richard K Wortley*

Abstract

Child sexual abuse is an issue that generates strong emotions, but scientific analysis of the problem demands dispassionate objectivity. This paper explores the tension between these two opposing responses. The scientific analysis of child sexual abuse can produce results that conflict with accepted wisdom. Research findings, such as those showing that victims of child sexual abuse do not necessarily suffer long-term psychological harm, can be misinterpreted to suggest support for the normalisation of child sexual abuse and risk provoking a backlash. In order to develop effective evidence-based prevention strategies researchers may need to challenge popularly held beliefs about child sexual abuse, taking care to do so in a way that recognises the sensitivities surrounding the topic.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, Crime science, Rind controversy, Crime prevention

The sexual abuse of children is an issue that, quite rightly, generates strong emotions. The thought of innocent and vulnerable children being sexually exploited and debased evokes our compassion for the victims and outrage towards those who perpetrate such acts. Speaking personally, that someone close to me could become a victim of sexual abuse is intolerable to contemplate and if it were to occur I would struggle to feel anything other than a desire for vengeance against the offender.

But as someone who has a scientific interest in child exploitation and its prevention, I must try to think in a different way. In the tradition of Karl Popper (1972), science famously aspires to be the cool and dispassionate seeker of the truth. Intellectually I know that in order to prevent offenders sexually abusing children we need to try to understand the causes of their behavior. Likewise, if we are to protect children from sexual abuse we need to examine in an objective way the complex dynamic that often exists between victims and their exploiters. From a scientific point of view, getting swept up in a moral panic about child sexual abuse is not only unhelpful but it can be positively counterproductive, impeding

the development of effective, evidence-based prevention responses.

The pursuit of objective knowledge about child abuse, however, is not always a comfortable journey. When trying to account for the behaviour of offenders, portraying them as the deviant 'other' is on safe ground. More threatening is to explore the non-deviance of many offenders. The research throws up some challenging questions in this regard. If offenders are peculiarly driven to abuse children then why, on average, do they wait until their early thirties to begin sexually offending (Smallbone and Wortley 2000)? Why, if attraction to children is the result of a stable pathology, is the reconviction rate for child sex offenders as low as 13% (Hanson and Busiere 1998)? And, if child sex offenders are a small and discrete subsection of the community, why do nearly a quarter of non-offender males admit to experiencing sexual attraction towards children (Smiljanich and Briere 1996). The competing explanation to the sexual deviance model is that many child sex offenders do not have entrenched sexual attractions to children but are tempted to offend under certain situational conditions. This is an important insight, as it leads us to consider what those certain conditions are and how they might be altered to inhibit offending. But it also means that the potential to

*Correspondence: r.wortley@ucl.ac.uk
UCL Jill Dando Institute of Security and Crime Science, London, UK

experience attraction to children extends more deeply into the 'normal' population than most people would care to admit: the line between normal and abnormal becomes disturbingly blurry.

If we are uncomfortable talking about offenders in an objective way, sensitivities increase tenfold when we turn our attention to victims. A frank examination of the victimization process and the sequelae for victims takes us into truly controversial territory. We must acknowledge that children may develop emotional relationships with perpetrators to satisfy unmet needs and may 'willingly' engage in sexual activity with them (Cockbain et al. 2011; Wolak et al. 2008). We must confront the unsettling fact that children may experience 'bad touch' as stimulating and pleasurable (Sanderson 2004) and that one of the consequences of sexual abuse is the hyper-sexualisation of some victims (Berliner and Conte 1990). And we need to understand that victims of child sexual abuse vary greatly in their reactions to their victimisation, and, though many are severely traumatised, around a quarter exhibit no detectable long-term symptoms (McGloin and Widom 2001), while some may even reframe the experience in positive terms (Himelein and McElrath 1996). Again these are important, practical findings. They have implications, for example, for the sort of safety advice that children might be given, or for the tailoring of therapeutic interventions for victims of abuse.

Raising such matters, however, is not without risk. In 1998, US researchers Bruce Rind, Phillip Tromovitch and Robert Bauserman published a meta-analysis involving 59 studies examining the psychological consequences for victims of child sexual abuse (Rind et al. 1998). They concluded that child sexual abuse did not necessarily result in long-term psychological damage, and the extent to which it did depended on factors such as the degree of coercion or force employed by the perpetrator. They were at pains to stress that these findings had no implications for the moral or legal status of child sexual abuse and that they were not arguing for the normalisation of paedophilia or for any change to existing laws. Nevertheless their paper created a storm of criticism. It was picked up by a number of popular media commentators and soon attracted the attention of politicians (Baird and Politics 2002; Lilienfeld 2002; Oellerich 2000). In an unprecedented move, a resolution condemning the research was passed by the United States House of Representatives 355-0 and confirmed by the Senate 100-0. In response to public outrage about the supposed support the paper gave to child sexual abuse, the American Psychological Association, which published the paper, declined to endorse its findings.

I was asked by the editors of this special edition of *Crime Science* to set out a 'where to from here' research

agenda for child sexual abuse. I might have written about the need for more studies on non-treatment offender samples in order to redress the current sampling bias in the literature; or the need to keep a focus on intrafamilial abuse, often overlooked but still overwhelming the most pressing child sexual abuse problem; or the need for evaluation studies to examine the effectiveness of proposed prevention strategies; or, in the case of online child sexual exploitation, the need to bring social scientists and computer scientists together in order to develop truly multi-disciplinary responses to the problem. However, rather than compile a list of research topics, I have chosen instead to focus on a more fundamental challenge facing those interested in taking forward a scientific examination of child sexual abuse. As the Rind case demonstrates, there is often a clash between scientific evidence and popular knowledge and it is easy for well-meaning and useful research to be misconstrued. With care and sensitivity, researchers must have the courage to challenge some sacred cows concerning the sexual victimisation of children, not because they do not care passionately about the plight of victims but because they do.

Compliance with ethical guidelines

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

This is an invited contribution from the editors. It is a commentary for the special edition that is intended to set out the challenges for future research in this area. It highlights a fundamental problem encountered by researchers in this field, that is, the fact that many findings will conflict with accepted wisdom and may generate a backlash from advocates and the public.

Received: 5 April 2015 Accepted: 2 July 2015

Published online: 11 August 2015

References

- Baird, B., & Politics, N. (2002). Operant conditioning, Galileo, and the American Psychological Association's response to Rind et al. 1998. *The American Psychologist*, *57*, 189–192.
- Berliner, L. & Conte, J. R. (1990). The process of victimization: the victim's perspective. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, *14*(1), 29–40.
- Cockbain, E., Brayley, H., & Laycock, G. (2011). Exploring internal child sex trafficking networks using social network analysis. *Policing*, *5*, 144–157.
- Hanson, R. K., & Bussiere, M. T. (1998). Predicting relapse: a meta-analysis of sexual offender recidivism studies. *Journal of Consulting Clinical Psychology*, *66*, 348.
- Himelein, M. J., & McElrath, J. A. V. (1996). Resilient child sexual abuse survivors: cognitive coping and illusion. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *20*, 747–758.
- J. Sanderson. (2004). *Child-focussed sexual abuse prevention programs: How effective are they in preventing child abuse? Research and Issues Paper Series, No. 5*. Brisbane: Queensland Crime Commission.
- Lilienfeld, S. O. (2002). When worlds collide: social science, politics, and the Rind et al. (1998) child sexual abuse meta-analysis. *American Psychologist*, *57*, 176–188.
- McGloin, J., & Widom, C. S. (2001). Resilience among abused and neglected children grown up. *Development and Psychopathology*, *13*, 1021–1038.
- Oellerich, T. D. (2000). Rind, Tromovitch, and Bauserman: Politically incorrect—scientifically correct. *Sexuality and Culture*, *4*, 67–81.

- Popper, K. R. (1972). *Objective Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rind, B., Tromovitch, P., & Bauserman, R. (1998). A meta-analytic examination of assumed properties of child sexual abuse using college samples. *Psychological Bulletin*, 124, 22–53.
- Smallbone, S., & Wortley, R. K. (2000). *Child sexual abuse in Queensland: Offender characteristics and modus operandi*. Brisbane: Queensland Crime Commission and Queensland Police Service.
- Smiljanich, K., & Briere, J. (1996). Self-reported sexual interest in children: sex differences and psychosocial correlates in a university sample. *Violence and Victims*, 11, 39–50.
- Wolak, J., Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K. J., & Ybarra, M. L. (2008). Online “predators” and their victims: Myths, realities, and implications for prevention and treatment. *American Psychologist*, 63, 111–128.

Submit your manuscript to a SpringerOpen[®] journal and benefit from:

- ▶ Convenient online submission
- ▶ Rigorous peer review
- ▶ Immediate publication on acceptance
- ▶ Open access: articles freely available online
- ▶ High visibility within the field
- ▶ Retaining the copyright to your article

Submit your next manuscript at ▶ springeropen.com
