Rape

Rape Death and Resurrection: Male Reaction after Disclosure of the Secret of Being a Rape Victim

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Abstract Males are also rape victims. The scant information we have on this phenomenon can be explained by its rarity or by the reluctance of male victims to disclose their past victimization. In this study, 23.8% of 235 prisoners that were interviewed disclosed their past sexual abuse. Eleven suffered an acute reaction (for example, attempted suicide). 77.7% of the prisoners who did not have an acute reaction after this disclosure were sex offenders. Sexual abuse has a special meaning for the male victim. Their gender identity and gender image are tarnished by the use which another male had with their body. It seems that sex offenders come to terms with this fact by acting out or by proving their sexual virility in a strange and cruel way. This article describes male prisoners' reactions after their disclosure of having been a rape victim, and suggests a tentative explanation, based on theory and therapeutic experience.

1 INTRODUCTION

The traumatic effects of sexual abuse of children, particularly girls, have been noted extensively. It has been found that this experience often leads to the development of diverse symptoms that may help the child accommodate to this traumatic incident. Unfortunately, without timely adequate treatment the symptomatic maladaptation will persist into adult life.¹

Substance abuse, suicide attempts, depression and self-abuse have been observed to be common sequelae to sexual abuse. Several authors report a high prevalence of low self-esteem and borderline personality disorder among those victims who have not received any treatment.²

A number of explanations for this self-damaging behaviour exist. Psychodynamically, self-abuse (drug abuse or suicide attempts) may represent a perpetuation of the victim's tendency to internalize anger. Alternatively, there is the possibility that some victims may attempt to control their anxiety and the intrusive thoughts related to their past sexual abuse through self-medication. Other victims may engage in self-abusive behaviour (for example, cutting their wrists) for the same purpose as it induces a sense of calm by stimulating the body endorphins.³
Consequently, both theory and research make clear the importance of disclosure of the trauma, as this is the first step towards healing. In 1896 Freud was one of the first to emphasize the importance of disclosure or reproduction of childhood victimization during the psychoanalytical treatment process, since 'at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experiences'. Later he renounced this theory and chose to pursue his patient's fantasies rather than focus on real life events.

Ferenczi, unlike Freud, remained convinced of the importance of the effects of sexual abuse — the 'terrible truth' — on the psyche. Ferenczi also noted the child's need to remain silent, and the abused child's attempts to deal with the trauma through dissociation, and even identification with the aggressor.

Many others have also documented the persistent anxieties and fears suffered by the victimized child should the abuse become known, and that most often abused children are reluctant to tell of their experience(s). In cases where the abuser is a family member the secret is kept most anxiously. Loyalty to the family demands that the integrity of the self be sacrificed and the child's total submission to the aggressor at the expense of the self.

Male victims are more reluctant to disclose their traumatic experiences than females. Therefore, sexual abuse among men and boys is significantly under-reported. Hence, not many such cases are known, and our knowledge regarding the phenomenon of the male rape victim is still sparse. There is however accumulated knowledge on what is known as the 'cycle of abuse': It has been found that many sex offenders were sexually abused in their past.

Our decision to investigate the disclosure process was precipitated dramatically several years ago when one of our patients was 'saved from the rope' following an attempted suicide and pursuant to his disclosure that he had been raped by a stepbrother.

2 STUDY METHOD

2.1 Subjects

The subjects for the study were 235 convicted males committed to Ashmoreth Prison in Israel. Apart from security considerations, Ashmoreth prisoners are not different from the general prison population in Israel in regard to demographic characteristics and criminal career variables.

Ninety-five subjects were patients of the mental health outpatient clinic of the Mental Health and Clinical Criminology Center. The other 140 subjects were randomly selected from the general prison population. There were no significant differences between these two groups and between them and the general prison population regarding age, marital status and criminal career.

It is important to stress that those of the 140 subjects who were found in need of treatment during the interviews, did benefit from the interviews and received the appropriate treatment.
2.2 Procedure

A 45-minute 71-item structured clinical interview was administered by one of the authors, a female clinical criminologist working in this prison and known to most prisoners as a professional non-custodial person. The interview consisted of questions that were intended to elicit very brief answers about the subject's developmental history from birth to 18 years; the number of significant caregivers involved in the subject's life; as well as changes in residence and home life situations and institutionalization; the relationship with parents and siblings; the history of victimization; abuse of drugs; and criminal history.

3 FINDINGS

Among the 235 subjects, 56 (23.81%) disclosed past sexual abuse (24.2% of the outpatients and 23.6% of the others). Forty-five (80.3%) of them (20 outpatients and 25 others) with no obvious acute reaction (NR group) and many without even exhibiting any form of embarrassment. Eleven (19.6%) of the subjects suffered an acute reaction following the disclosure of their past sexual victimization (AR group).

Of the subjects in the NR group, 77.7% were convicted sex offenders sentenced for various sexual offences. Only four subjects in this group (those who disclosed their past victimization with no exceptional reaction) had been sentenced for other crimes. Apart from the common factor of their past victimization, the subjects differed in age, background, personality, psychiatric diagnosis, home environment, type of victimization, and involvement in the prison inmate society. Nine or 20% of them had been raped by a family member or caretaker, 14 (31.1%) had been placed in children's institutions at an early age and one had been placed in a foster home.

All 11 subjects in AR group were, as children, abused by a family member or caretaker, compared with nine (20%) in the NR group. Most of the 11 subjects grew up outside their natural homes, with only 36.4% remaining at home with their parents (in comparison to 76.7% in the NR group).

In the AR group – comprising the 11 subjects who reacted severely to their disclosure – six had attempted suicide; three had committed a dangerous assault on a fellow inmate; one had verbally attacked a prison officer; and one did not return from furlough. (The Table describes the characteristics of the inmates who displayed an acute reaction.) They shared the following common features: serious involvement in the criminal society; early institutionalization; unstable home environment; and victimization by a parent or caretaker. None of them had been sentenced for having committed a sex offence.

4 DISCUSSION

Professional literature has reported the reluctance of sexually abused victims to disclose their past experience(s), and that most abused children never reveal their secret either during childhood or later. Indeed, the only person for whom denial is as great as that of the perpetrator may be the victim.
Gender stereotypes further increase the alienation of male survivors of sexual abuse. Males, as they grow up, are culturally and environmentally, directly and indirectly imbued with the male ethic of self-reliance. The 'ideal' man is traditionally viewed as strong, silent, and in control of his emotions. As a result, victims often express a lack of identification with their own gender, plagued by doubts concerning homosexuality and especially worried that the abuse will be discovered.

Feelings of self-blame, alienation and embarrassment, and the fear of the social stigma of homosexuality and possibly additional abuse should the abuse be made public are the main factors which contribute to the low rate of disclosure/reporting by sexually abused male victims.

They perceive themselves to be vulnerable to attack and to be virtually helpless. Consequently, most males who have been sexually abused as children, closely protect what they believe to be a secret that cannot and must not be revealed. Denial is likewise identified as a frequent response employed to obtain relief from the tension and fear.

Because of social taboos related to the topic, many sexually abused victims lack the opportunity of venting their feelings or clarifying the events and the experience. Consequently, many victims perceive sexual abuse to be an experience unique to themselves and view themselves as social oddities.

Whether as a result of their traumatic experience or because of any other predisposition developmental factors, some child victims commit crimes and are imprisoned in their adult years.

In prison special meaning is attached to the fact that a prisoner was raped at some time in his past. Prison life is a meagre material existence in a sexually deprived, cruel, male environment. Prisoners are pressured by prison regime and discipline, by the prison staff, by the deprivation of privacy and by other 'pains of imprisonment'. In this environment, issues of power and masculinity have special significance.

When in prison the inmate is part of the 'captive' society and is governed by the inmate code - social norms or an informal convict culture. This code is zealously upheld and any deviance is severely punished. Two important norms within this society are relevant to our discussion, namely the preservation of the secret and the machismo hierarchy. Revealing their 'secret' means, in this context, breaking the convicts' code of 'keeping secrets'. As R explained when discussing his attempted suicide: 'I'm a traitor, I've betrayed myself, I've exposed my secret. A traitor should die.' Furthermore, by admitting his being used by another man for purposes of sexual satisfaction, the victim places himself on an even lower status, as a personal servant of another prisoner. His disclosure exposes him to the danger of additional violent and abusive victimization in prison as the ward harlot or the powerless, incompetent failure.

These factors may account in part for the acute reaction of the 11 prisoner subjects described in the Table. Since for most of them their status in criminal society was extremely important, it seems plausible that they preferred death to the results of the disclosure - the fate of a traitor and/or sexual abuse by their peers in prison.
The question still remains why sexually abused victims serving time for sex crimes disclose their secret (sexual abuse) with relative ease? Trauma has been found to be pathogenic for children who lack ‘protection’ and suffer from parental neglect and an unstable home environment.34 Disruption of early attachments in relations with primary caretakers and the quality of relationships within the family and with other significant people during formative years are cited by several authors in this connection.35 Some studies add the importance of the relationship between the assailant and the victim.36

All 11 subjects who suffered a severe reaction (AR) had, as children, been abused by a family member or caretaker, and most of them grew up outside their natural homes. Thus they apparently lacked a stable, protective home environment. It would seem that a severe disruption of early attachments to significant figures, whether by placement in an unprotective environment or by abuse by the significant person, can be an important predisposing factor. Intertwined with the breaking of the convicts’ code these factors may have triggered the severe reaction by the AR group. Still, this does not explain the fact that in the NR group there were several cases of intrafamilial rape and an unstable home environment with no such outcome.

In the light of the above, it appears that the role that the deviant sex act itself plays should be examined as a plausible explanation for the non-reactive disclosure of the sex offenders. While the developmental antecedents of sexual aggression have not been extensively studied, existing data indicate that abused males tend to externalize their victimization and most probably mask the potential to become sexual offenders.37

It has been found that abused males display more anger than depression or guilt, and have difficulty in coping/dealing with their anger.38 The abused male may gain a temporary sense of power and control by his ability to intimidate or overpower other people, usually females and smaller children.39 Thus it seems that perpetrating an aggressive, sexual act may be interpreted as a releasing of anger and/or the process of ‘acting out’ by some abused males.

Chronic emotional neglect may predispose a child to accept the overtures of a child abuser who offers closeness and acceptance.40 To the extent that the adult contact meets the needs of the child at the time, the experience may not be ego-alien,41 and the child may begin to accept the experience(s) as an inevitable part of interpersonal closeness.42 In this instance, memories of the abuse become integrated into the total personality organization and become essentially ego-syntonic.43 Thus the ‘at-risk’ child will come to identify closeness with adult-child sexual activity, internalize it as an ego-syntonic part of the self, and in turn, perpetuate it in an adult pattern of rationalized self-justified victimization of other ‘at-risk’ children.44

If indeed the sexual abuse was not ego-alien, and the feelings of anger following the abuse were relieved, little or no embarrassment would be anticipated, nor would an acute reaction be expected upon the disclosure of past victimization. However, when the victim is not able to come to terms with his past victimization, and it is ego-alien, embarrassment and a severe, acute reaction are to be anticipated, especially within the cultural context of a prison society. Attempted suicide, or alternative real or symbolic life-risking behaviour, may be understood to be self-punishment. In the context of the convicts’ code of behaviour, it is presumed to be an act of bravado to
prove one's machismo or power. Being rescued from death and the subsequent 'return to life' also contain a degree of symbolic meaning (resurrection) – thus releasing the past victim (now convict) from his past experiences and opening the way for treatment and rehabilitation.

The need for improving the identification of male victims is indicated by their inner turmoil and suffering and the well-warranted suspicion that many more male children are sexually abused than indicated by documented reports. Male victims may benefit from early treatment, particularly if such treatment is provided prior to the completion of a victim-victim/perpetrator cycle. Since male victims, as a group, may shelter increased potential to become perpetrators when adult, early identification and treatment of male victims of child sexual abuse may offer hope for them, and for their potential female and male victims.

Notes

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Seghorn et al.
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