

Abstract

Tidefors Andersson, I. 2002. *From childhood to crime – 20 men convicted of sexual abuse of 38 children*. Department of Psychology, Göteborg University, Sweden

Sexual abuse of children is a horrible reality raising strong feelings in those struck by it, as well as in the public. However, we lack the necessary knowledge to understand, and explain, the mechanisms behind those perpetrations. The aim of this study is to enhance the psychological insight into adults who direct their sexuality towards children. This insights applicable primarily in the development of treatment methods, but also in preventive work. More profound understanding of concrete sexual actions directed towards the child will be of value to the adult helping the exposed child with working through experiences of sexual abuse.

A group of twenty convicted child molesters were interviewed in-depth and tested with a number of psychological measurements including a projective test. The men's histories were followed from childhood through adolescence and adulthood up until the committed perpetrations were revealed. Each period of their lives is introduced with a descriptive section including socioeconomic data. The various periods of their development are analysed and interpreted from the Attachment Theory point of view, Erikson's Phase Theory, and the Theory of Mind Concept. Various aspects of the interview are also related to relevant test results.

As boys, the majority of the men were exposed to emotional neglect, and sometimes to sexual abuse. There was often a general lack of limits, sometimes including sexual limits. There was a "non-order" about what was permitted or prohibited, and actions were not given a reasonable meaning. Sexuality developed as something neutral and concrete and did not fit into a normal human context. Where there is a lack of conversation and reflection in a child's formative years, no cultivating process takes place. In such environments, being a boy is a risk factor. Men exposed to sexual abuse will seldom talk about it, or reveal the abuse and boys and men seem to replace telling with acting out.

As adults the men participating in this study had difficulties seeing whom they were themselves. On the outside they looked ordinary, but they were "torn" inside, and their mental ability to profoundly understand others being injured or never developed. There was a pattern common to all participants that can be summarised as follows:

Those who were able to relate their own histories and who could identify themselves as young boys in situations of neglect or abuse, had a greater ability to see the perspectives of the abused child. Those described their childhood as "happy" or relatively free of problems were those who saw the child as an equal sex partner or as forcing the perpetration. The analysis here indicates that many sexual perpetrators first have to develop a capacity for self-reflection before they can acquire an insight into their own functioning and that of others. An increasing number of studies show that adults who were maltreated as children have a poorer ability to reflect. Psychotherapy is a method where the individual may gain access to his own history – making it possible to feel empathy with his own predicament. Thus, in an indirect way, the ability to understand the exposed child is being "trained".

Studies of those factors that increase the child's risk of being exposed to physical violence and neglect are relatively common, whereas equivalent studies of the risk of being exposed to sexual abuse are few. The existing few show no correlation with socioeconomic status. This lack of connection between sexual abuse and socioeconomic status may very well be the reason why it is not studied. The scarcity of studies of the connections between societal factors and sexual abuse of children, has been explained either by the general proposal that the child molesters have a genetic predisposition, or that there is a greater acceptance of particularly men's sexual interest in young girls. The lack of research may also stem from the fact that many perpetrations occur within "ordinary" families, and we dare not touch the family. We know too little about the situation of children in those families who have no contact with social services.

The participants in this study confirm the picture that the sexual child perpetrator from a socioeconomic perspective may be "anybody". As opposed for example to physical violence, sexual child perpetration is therefore basically an interpersonal problem. This study suggest that we must facilitate a greater openness between families and society's support systems, and we must stop hiding behind an "argument of floating integrity" and dare to see the way children lead their lives in order to save the children of today and support the parents of today – parents who themselves suffer from tormenting their children.

Key words: child molesters, in-depth interview, projective test, psychological measurements

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