Weasel Words: Paedophiles and the Cycle of Abuse, by Liz Kelly

In making child sexual abuse a political issue, feminists focussed attention on male power, challenging the idea that abusers were abnormal, sick individuals. Recently, however, the term "paedophilia" has been creeping back even into feminist discussions. Here Liz Kelly warns of the consequences.

Over the last few years I have become increasingly alarmed at the ways in which feminist perspectives on child sexual abuse are being undercut by the adoption and acceptance of extremely flawed concepts and ideas. It would be bad enough if this was confined to professional perspectives, but more and more I have encountered use of, and support for, some of these ideas in women's organisations. The consequences of this sloppy thinking are immense, and it behoves anyone who thinks of themselves as a feminist to take the meaning and implications of using the word 'paedophile' and subscribing to 'cycle of abuse' theories extremely seriously.

What has happened over the last couple of years is an increasing awareness of not just the extensiveness of sexual abuse, but also the ways in which adults organise abuse networks, and the ways some of these are linked to child pornography and child prostitution. Whilst feminist analysis has had a profound influence on how sexual abuse in the family is understood, this has not yet been applied to these other contexts.

The return of the 'paedophile'

The issues became particularly clear to me whilst undertaking a review of what we know about sexual exploitation of children (Kelly et al, 1996). The spark for this piece was attending two seminars at which the word *paedophile* was used routinely, without question, in which I was the lone dissenting voice: one feminist suggested that there was not a problem since 'fathers who sexually abuse are also paedophiles'. The necessity of it was confirmed when I heard French, Swedish and Belgian delegates (all senior women policy makers) link the concept of paedophilia with cycle of abuse. One neatly summarised their perspective: 'It is deplorable that one out of three children could be a paedophile in the future'.

The ease with this these terms now trip off women's tongues disturbs me greatly; do we too -on one level- want to distance ourselves from the implications of sexual abuse in childhood, confine it to limited contexts, have a group of men who we can justify thinking and talking about as 'other'?

Documentation of 'organised abuse' networks tends to preface this with the word 'paedophile', and indeed many in the child protection field have begun using 'paedophile' as either a collective term for all abusers or to refer to what is presumed to be a particular type of abuser (invariably those who abuse children outside the family contexts).

Immediately the word *paedophile* appears we have moved away from recognition of abusers as 'ordinary men' - fathers, brothers, uncles, colleagues - and are returned to the more comfortable view of them as 'other', a small minority who are fundamentally different from most men. The fact that they have *lives*, kinship links and jobs disappears from view in the desire to focus on their difference. Attention shifts immediately from the centrality of power and control to notions of sexual deviance, obsession and 'addiction'. Paedophilia returns us to the medical and individualised explanations which we have spent so much time and energy attempting to deconstruct and challenge. Rather than sexual abuse demanding that we look critically at the social construction of masculinity, male sexuality and the family, the safer terrain of 'abnormality' beckons.

Disguising and distracting

The self-serving construction of paedophilia as a specific, and minority, 'sexual orientation' acts as a useful distraction to both the widespread sexualisation of children, and girls in particular, in western cultures and the prevalence of sexual abuse. In one US study a significant proportion of 193 male college students reported that they could be sexually interested in children if they were guaranteed that there would be no legal consequences (Briere and Runtz, 1989). The representation of the 'ideal' heterosexual partner for men continues to be younger, small, slim with minimal body hair. Across many cultures sexual access to girls and young women is often the prerogative of powerful men: chiefs, priests and religious leaders through customs such as 'devadasi'. The western echo of this age-old patriarchal tradition can be seen in the pre-requisite young girlfriend (occasionally 'under age') of older rich men. There is an important theme here which links male power, economic power and young women.

The separation of 'paedophiles' in much of the clinical literature on sex offenders from all men, but also other men who sexually abuse, has involved the presumption of difference. Similarities - in the forms of abuse, in the strategies abusers use to entrap, control and silence children - are ignored. In this way fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers who abuse are hardly ever suspected of
being interested in the consumption, or production, of child pornography, nor are they thought to be involved in child prostitution. This in turn means that investigations of 'familial sexual abuse' seldom involve either searches for or questions about these forms of abuse. This contrasts with what we know from adult survivors who tell of relatives showing them pornography, expecting them to imitate it and being required to pose for it. Some also tell of being prostituted by relatives. A significant proportion of organised networks are based in families.

Who are the clients of children and young people involved in prostitution? I suspect only a minority would fit clinical definitions of 'paedophiles' - men whose sexual interest is confined to children. Whether intentionally or not, calling a section of abusers 'paedophiles' is accompanied by an emphasis on boys as victims, and the abuse of girls and young women outside the family becomes increasingly invisible. Unlike 'child abuser', or 'child molester' the word 'paedophile' disguises rather than names the issue and focuses our attention on a kind of person rather than kinds of behaviour.

Confused definitions

In much of the literature there are inconsistencies in how 'paedophilia' is defined, although the most common element seems to be the assumed 'fact' that it is not just a preference for, but the restriction of sexual arousal to, children. This 'fact' is however presumed, and the possibility that the 'paedophile' may have sexual contact with adults is never explored. Julia O'Connell Davidson's (1995) work is documenting the fact that the dividing line between the men who exploit children and women in sex tourism is neither clear nor absolute. The focus on sexual arousal moves us into further difficulties, since the recent feminist (and also some child protection professionals') emphasis on individual men choosing to act or not act, and having to take responsibility for those choices is much more difficult to sustain where 'deviant' sexual arousal is represented as having a biological basis in individuals.

These confusions have, if not created, at least contributed to a context in which men who seek to justify their wish to abuse have been able to organise politically, and even seek the status of an 'oppressed sexual minority'. They also form the basis for a differential approach in terms of intervention, with responses being proposed in relation to 'paedophiles' - such as life licences, and denial of any contact with children - which would cause outrage if proposed in the case of fathers. The issue here is not whether the responses themselves are

appropriate, but the way in which distinctions are being made between 'types' of abusers which are both spurious, and result in abuse by family members being regarded as less 'deviant', and therefore, less serious than by men outside the family.

The dangerous implications of a resurgence of the label 'paedophile' was evident in an article in The *Guardian* on 17 January 1996. It was a small piece noting a problem delaying the publication of the first British commentary on Catholic canon law due to a mistake in relation to papal infallibility. Within this document are two pages on how to respond to priests who 'are paedophiles'. The church's position is that paedophiles have diminished responsibility because their sexual urges are 'in effect beyond their control. This forms the justification for arguing that the church should not punish abusive priests except for 'perhaps only a mild penalty, a formal warning or reproof'. Anyone getting a sense of deja vu yet?

If we allow the term paedophile to re-enter discussions about sexual abuse, all the arguments about responsibility for action will have to be had all over again.

Cycle of abuse

Whilst 'cycle' explanations have a long and inglorious history, 'cycle of abuse' has become the dominant explanation of why sexual abuse happens in the 1990s. The origins of this 'theory' lie in nineteenth century philanthropy and early twentieth century psychiatry. It has proved a popular explanation for all forms of physical and sexual abuse in the family (and in a slightly different guise - 'cycles of deprivation' - has been the conservative approach to explaining poverty and Black socio-economic disadvantage). Every cycle model attempts to reduce complex social realities, which have more than a little to do with structural power relations, to simplistic behavioural and individualistic models.

Cycle of abuse has become the most commonly understood explanation of sexual abuse in childhood and has been uncritically accepted as 'the truth' by many sections of the population. Virtually every speech I have heard by a politician recently about sexual abuse in childhood and violence against women, contains some reference to it, and a significant number of workers in British refuges adhere to versions of it. This alarming and widespread acceptance of a flawed model needs to be challenged, both in terms of evidence to support it and its consequences for child and adult survivors of abuse.

In its simplest and most common form, 'cycle of abuse' proposes that if you are abused as a child you will in turn abuse others. But if we begin with what we know about the gendered distribution of sexual victimisation and offending the proposition begins to fall apart. We know that girls are between three and six times more likely to experience sexual abuse, yet the vast majority of sexual abuse is perpetrated by males. If there is any kind of cycle it is a gendered one, and that in turn requires explanation. Even if arguments that there is a hidden iceberg of female abusers have some validity to them, to reverse the gendered asymmetry would require an iceberg of literally incredible proportions.

Even if we limit our focus to perpetrators, the data here is also equivocal. No study has yet demonstrated that there is an obvious 'cycle' even within samples of convicted offenders; the range of those reporting experiences of abuse in childhood varies between 30 and 80%. Few of these studies define abuse in childhood in the same way. Some limit their data to whether the individual was abused in the same way as he has subsequently abused children, whereas others include *any* form of child abuse in the individual's childhood whilst focusing on *sexual* offending in adulthood. Clearly the latter method will produce higher findings, but the psychological mechanisms involved in moving from experiences of physical abuse and neglect to sexual abuse cannot be the same as those where the

same form of abuse is involved. These crucial differences are invariably ignored.

In all studies to date either a majority or significant minority cannot be fitted into the theory. Alongside these glaring problems in evidential support for the proposition, there is seldom any exploration of the precise mechanisms involved whereby those who have been victimised become victimisers, since this is not simple repetition, as models suggest, but a reversal of roles.

Double Distortion

A rather deft sleight of theory occurs when proponents of this pernicious idea recognise that women do not proceed in great numbers to abuse. There are two ways in which mothers who have been abused are implicated: experiences of abuse are presumed to make women less able to protect their children or to choose an abuser as a partner. These propositions are frequently used in tandem, but they are different arguments. (The influence of this idea has been so strong that some social services departments consider the knowledge of a woman's abuse in childhood sufficient to place her children on the at risk register!)

The first proposition is usually supported through reported cases, although few of its supporters take seriously what prevalence research tells us: that in any group of women a substantial number will have a history of abuse. Harriet Dempster's (1989) Scottish Study provides an explanation for why there may be a higher than predicted proportion: mothers who have been abused are more likely to report the abuse of their children. The link proposed here is precisely the opposite of that which 'cycle of abuse' presumes. These mothers are so determined to protect their children, their own experience makes them more willing to seek formal intervention. Presuming a negative link prevents researchers and practitioners from countenancing an alternative 'positive' one. The tragic irony which some women encounter is that if they reveal their own abuse their report may be accorded less validity.

The second proposition is remarkable. Very few women begin relationships knowing their male partner has abused children - prospective employers have legal rights to information about Schedule 1 offenders, prospective sexual partners do not. Since no clinician has yet devised a certain way of distinguishing abusive from non-abusive men, how do women achieve this? If clinicians/researchers really believe that women have 'abuser detection antennae', why are there no studies designed to discover how they do this? If 'choice' is operating here it is made by men. We know that some experienced abusers deliberately target single mothers. If we listened to what women have to say we would also know that some men, when trusted with information about a woman's own abuse or that of her child by another man, use that as 'permission' to act similarly.

Recognising the deliberateness of abusers' behaviour (Conte et al, 1989) is disturbing; it is much more comfortable to believe that abusers and/or their partners are merely repeating what they learnt in childhood. 'Cycle of abuse' theories rework old orthodoxies; transforming abusers into victims, and placing mothers back in the collusive frame. Quite how the theory is supposed to explain abuse outside the family (and more children are abused by known adults than family members) has not yet appeared in print.

Psychic determinism

'Cycle of abuse' is based on a psychic determinism: experience A leads to behaviour B with minimal choice/agency in between. Apart from offering abusers carte blanche to avoid responsibility, it makes the thousands of survivors who, as result of their own experiences, choose to never treat children in similar ways invisible, logically impossible. This theory does an outrageous injustice to countless women whose courageous and passionate testimony made sexual

abuse in childhood a social issue. It also makes a travesty of support for children, since the aim becomes preventing them 'repeating the cycle' rather than enabling them to cope with having been victimised. A recent twist is the shift from talking about the sexualised behaviour some children who have been abused display as 'acting out' to defining children as young as three and four as 'abusers'. By presuming the impacts and meanings of abuse we close off investigating the most important question of all: what makes the difference in how children and adults make sense of, and act in relation to, experiences of childhood victimisation.

It is the psychic determinism which connects 'cycle of abuse' to the view that the impacts of sexual abuse are in every respect, and in all cases, devastating: that survivors can only be rescued from an appalling future through intensive therapy. However, studies which use community samples, rather than adults or children in therapy, discover a wide range of impacts; from those experiencing extreme levels of distress through to many who fit within the 'normal' range.

Disputing 'cycle of abuse' does not mean there are no examples where experiences of abuse are present in generations of families, or that some individuals have decided to deal with past hurts by inflicting pain on others. But the negative consequences of this 'idea' are being most strongly felt by child and adult survivors; these consequences are extensive and seldom referred to. It is now commonplace for adults who have been abused in childhood - women and men - to *believe* that they cannot be trusted around children, that there is an inevitability that they will abuse them. In my experience when women are asked to explore the issue in more depth none have felt a desire or wish to sexually abuse children. Their conviction that this will be the case comes *solely* from ideas in the public sphere. Some adult survivors are very clear about the pernicious consequences of this model, as these examples from a research project I am involved in will illustrate:

My mother was abused by men outside her family - she hasn't abused myself or my brother. I know many people - male and female - who were abused, some continuously and severely. They have not become abusers. I am very sceptical about this theory. The majority of abused are female, the majority of abusers are male. Where are all the female abusers.

"It confirms everything victims of abuse already believe about themselves. It offers no hope of healing, ... it denies the possibility of survival. It allows 'experts' to look at these distant mad, bad, sad unfortunates, sexual deviants, rather than themselves ... It removes any responsibility from perpetrators"

Why, when the evidence is shaky and the implications for child and adult survivors so negative, has 'cycle of abuse' become widely accepted as an explanation? On one level it is a neat and accessible concept. In offering this 'common sense' explanation it represents abuse as learnt behaviour as if it were the same as learning a nursery rhyme. Apart from the basic fact that abusing others is a very different action to being victimised, a thinking and decision-making process is involved before we act similarly or differently to events we have been witness to or experienced. Much of the knowledge developed on offenders over the last ten years shows that they are careful, deliberate and strategic in entrapping children.

So powerful is this 'idea', though, that even academics who recognize that most people do not 'repeat the cycle' refer to this as 'breaking' it. We need to ask ourselves why this notion has taken such a hold within public and professional thinking. Most crucially it excludes more challenging explanations- those which question power relations between men and women, adults and children. 'Breaking cycles' is a much easier and safer goal to discuss than changing the structure of social relations.

Some important connections

There are two contexts in which the concept of 'paedophilia' is used. One proclaims difference in order to protect 'normal' men (see previous

discussion). The other asserts difference in order to justify and legitimise abusive behaviour.

The sexual freedom model is frequently presented as an alternative radical approach. It is based upon a belief that all laws on sexual conduct, except where explicit force or violence are used, are an incursion into individual freedom and privacy, and as such are a form of coercive control. This has been argued most cogently in relation to children and young people by self-defined paedophile groupings; PIE (Paedophile Information Exchange) in Britain and NAMBLA (North American Man/Boy Love Association) in the USA. The support for what has been deliberately called 'inter-generational' sex in order to disguise the power differentials involved, has extended in recent years to include some of those who have defended pornography from feminist criticism, such as Gayle Rubin and Tuppy Owens. The philosophical assumptions which are the basis of this perspective are:

- that paedophilia is a sexual orientation, and therefore that paedophiles are an oppressed minority, with whom other sexual minorities ought to have a 'natural' affinity;
- that 'inter-generational' relationships are not just about sex, but are beneficial and based on a form of love that is more honest than most familial relationships;
- that what is seen as sexually abusive varies culturally, and that in some cultures adult/child sex is acceptable;
- that children are sexual beings, but this is denied and controlled by adults;
- that consensual sexual relationships are possible between children and adults.

Critics of this position have raised a number of uncomfortable issues including: that it is overwhelmingly men who argue this position; that it is invariably adults arguing (albeit in disguised forms) for *their* right to be sexual with children, usually boys; that sexual activity is prioritised above other rights children lack, such as the right not to be hit, or to sex education. It is also the case that childhood (unlike gender, class, race and sexuality) is not *only* a product of oppressive social relations. Whilst the social construction of childhood does disadvantage children in relation to adults, early childhood involves levels of dependency on others which no amount of social change can remove. This material reality makes the notion of non-coerced consent between children and adults inherently problematic.

Whilst the most eloquent supporters of the sexual freedom position clearly locate themselves within the gay and/or paedophile movements (Sandfort, 1987) there are some heterosexual groupings which promote similar arguments, particularly sexualized family relationships. The most well known is the Rene Guyon Society based in the US, whose slogan has been 'sex before eight or else it's too late'. In 1990 their membership was estimated as 5,000 and they have been public in promoting 'kid porn' (O'Grady, 1992). Evidence has also emerged of a number of new 'religious movement' (often referred to as 'cults') promoting adult/child sex within the group, and much of what is currently known points to this being primarily heterosexual and following the patriarchal tradition of privileging male leaders' sexual access.

Both approaches to paedophilia, and cycle of abuse explanations, function to exclude feminist understandings and approaches. They all, in different ways, serve to excuse or justify abusive behaviour and provide an extremely limited basis from which to work towards the right of children to live free from intimate intrusion. The importance of maintaining our perspective and challenging approaches which refuse to name men and male power was graphically illustrated by the hysterical response in sections of the media to the recent publication of a report on sexual exploitation of children (Kelly et al 1996). What some male radio and newspaper journalists balked at was not the need to take sexual exploitation seriously, but our temerity in questioning the distinction between 'paedophiles' and other men. Taking note of what

resistance to feminist analysis turns on has always been an important guide for me in knowing that we were 'onto something' important. Talk about the 'paedophile' and the 'cycle of abuse' indicates a point of resistance to feminist analysis which needs to be challenged *now*.

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