



# WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

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RETHINKING WHAT WE KNOW

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## Introduction

### Rethinking our Knowledge about Child Sexual Abuse

Most people believe, at least to some extent, that they know what child sexual abuse (CSA) is, what is wrong with it and what, if anything, should be done about it. Those of us who are professionals with expert knowledge in particular fields related to the sexual abuse of children may believe this even more strongly. Amongst other things, we may know what behaviour constitutes CSA and the key characteristics of perpetrators; we may have an image of the victimised child and be able to anticipate their needs; we may know how to intervene to protect abused children or how to assist them to recover; we may know the causes of such abuse, how to respond to perpetrators and some of the short- and long-term effects experienced by victims. While for some people this knowledge is the result of research or specialist training, most of us regard the knowledge that we have about CSA to be self-evident or based in common sense. This belief is somewhat ironic, given that less than thirty years ago the problem of CSA was almost completely absent from professional discourse and public consciousness.

Arguably, the reason that CSA and what should be done about it now seem obvious to us, is that various interpretations or diagnoses of the problem have gained particular currency in our society over recent years. Some of these different frameworks for understanding CSA have become so deeply embedded in our language, cultural logic, laws, social policies and professional practices that we are often unconscious of their existence and effects, or the fact that multiple frameworks or truths about CSA coexist and compete against one another. In other words, we rarely recognise that our knowledge is fragmentary, contested and invariably short of being objective fact.

The primary objectives of this Discussion Paper is to disrupt this comfortable sense of 'knowing' that many of us have in relation to CSA and to heighten our awareness of the assumptions and judgements upon which our knowledge and actions are inevitably based and qualified.



## Influential Ideas about CSA in the Recent Past

### Before the 1970s

At the start of the last century in Western society, the prevailing wisdom concerning CSA was the province of medical science and the emerging fields of psychiatry and sexology. Within these fields, the sexual assault of children by adults was widely regarded as a rare event and professionals commonly proposed alternative explanations for the material evidence of such assaults which was presented to them.<sup>1</sup> An influential theory promulgated by Freud reflected and supported the scepticism of professionals in this period. It proposed that claims of incestuous abuse are, by and large, the victim's delusions, symptomatic of the psychiatric condition 'hysteria'.<sup>2</sup>

Within the criminal law of various jurisdictions, CSA in the form of forcible and statutory rape experienced a level of recognition, but the majority of the small number of cases prosecuted concerned abuse by non-family members.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the rape of children by non-family members tended to be constructed within legal discourse less as a crime against the child and more as violation of the child's father's property rights. To the minimal extent that the crime of incest was addressed within legal discourse, it was similarly viewed less as an injustice against the child, and more as a crime against nature, the institution of the family or the future generation which stood to be polluted by inbred offspring.<sup>4</sup>

### The 'Discovery' of Child Abuse

While it is clear that concern about CSA was not completely absent from public discourse for the first half of the twentieth century<sup>5</sup>, the 1970s marked a watershed in our cultural conceptualisation of CSA. Prior to the 1970s, CSA was not widely talked about in the media, it was rarely a subject of public policy, and it was only very narrowly investigated as a subject of medical research. Following the 'discovery' of 'the battered child' by the medical fraternity in the 1960s, medical science began to more closely investigate the private, secluded and venerated world of the family.<sup>6</sup> A range of abusive behaviours against children within the family, including sexual abuse, gradually came to be articulated. These categories of abuse in turn became objects of medical and social research, and

1 Masson 1992, Myers et al 1999, Breckenridge 1999, although some professionals, including Freud initially, acknowledged the widespread sexual assault of children (Masson 1992, Smart 2000).

2 Masson 1992

3 Myers et al 1999

4 Bell 1993

5 Smart's research (2000) critically challenges the notion that child sexual abuse was unknown prior to the 1980s or that there was a 'monolithic silence' surrounding it. She argues that a number of groups of reformers throughout the twentieth century attempted to define adult-child sexual contact as harmful in one way or another, but each met with considerable opposition.

6 Goddard 1996

psychological theories proliferated to make sense of parents' frequent failure to protect their children or to explain the susceptibility of particular children to victimisation. To an unprecedented degree, CSA was acknowledged to exist and to cause physical and psychological harm to children.

### **Feminism and CSA**

At the same time that medical science was naming and classifying the sexual abuse of children as a problem of 'child abuse' resulting from the psychopathology of individuals or families, the women's movement was gaining political power and, with it, a social stage upon which to theorise gender oppression. Feminists problematised CSA as 'male violence', pointing to the overwhelming predominance of men as perpetrators of such abuse. To this extent CSA was viewed, along with other forms of violence perpetrated by men against women and children, as an expression of male social power and a means by which patriarchal social relations are reinforced and reproduced.<sup>7</sup> Feminists named the sexual exploitation and violence perpetrated against women and children crimes of rape and sexual assault, thereby positioning them as issues of social and criminal justice.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Proliferation of Ideas about CSA**

By virtue of these two influential forces, by the 1980s CSA was firmly established in the public consciousness as a serious social problem justifying a social policy response. In addition to feminist and psychological constructions of CSA, from this time new voices emerged and old voices were resurrected to shape our thinking about CSA. The children's rights movement constructed the problem of child abuse in the family, and in the broader community, as a problem of children's developmental vulnerability and lack of social and political power.<sup>9</sup> To these advocates, patriarchy and psychopathology alone do not provide an adequate explanation for the particular vulnerability of children to abuse, including their abuse and neglect at the hands of female parents and caregivers.

In understanding the particular prevalence of CSA in their communities, indigenous people also looked beyond feminist and psychological frameworks of meaning. They constructed the problem of CSA in their communities as resulting from, or

<sup>7</sup> Edwards 1987, Driver and Droisen 1989, Stoltenberg 1990

<sup>8</sup> Mackinnon 1989: chapter 7

<sup>9</sup> For example, Mudaly 2002, Atwool 2000



being exacerbated by, the disintegration of traditional social systems following European invasion.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, colonialism's legacy of acute and pervasive social disadvantage has been viewed as responsible for generating and sustaining a social environment in which CSA and other forms violence could proliferate unchecked.

In a somewhat similar vein, right-wing moral conservatives have interpreted the contemporary prevalence of CSA as a symptom of the moral decline of society caused by the breakdown of the traditional family and the liberalisation of attitudes towards sexuality. Within this framework, the harm of CSA is seen foremost as the violation of children's sexual innocence.<sup>11</sup>

Sexual libertarians have also contributed vocally to public discourse on CSA. They challenge a view of CSA as wrong and harmful and argue that adult-child sexual contact is a normal and natural expression of human sexuality, that abusive relationships are exceptional, and that the real social problem is an overbearing Victorian attitude towards sexuality in our culture that denies children's sexual needs and desires as well as their inherent desirability.<sup>12</sup>

### Implications for How We Think about CSA

This brief and rather crude summary of some of the more influential ideas about CSA that have emerged in recent decades raises some important issues for consideration. Firstly, our ability to see something as a social problem would appear to depend on it first being represented to us as a problem through language.<sup>13</sup> Before psychiatrists, medical researchers and feminists named CSA as a problem and developed theories to explain it, it was not something that we could easily think or talk about. It only became tangible to us in this way once it had been constructed and constituted in the public domain as a social object. Once this occurred it became more widely available as an issue for philosophical reflection, research, policy intervention and political mobilisation.

Secondly, the way CSA is constructed as a social object is highly contested. This is not to say that multiple constructions or interpretations of a social problem cannot be complementary in nature, adding layers to our understanding. This is

<sup>10</sup> See for example, ABC 2001, Lees 2001

<sup>11</sup> Haaken and Lamb 2000

<sup>12</sup> Jefferys 1990: 188-209. See for example, O'Carroll 1980

<sup>13</sup> Baachi 1999

arguably the case with the constructions of CSA generated by feminists and by child rights activists, as these both highlight different dimensions of children's structural vulnerability to sexual abuse. However frequently, these constructions or frameworks of meaning compete against each other to exclusively represent the 'truth' of the issue. They achieve this by marginalising or suppressing alternative constructions of the problem.<sup>14</sup> For instance, in order to maintain a view of CSA as male violence, feminism has largely ignored women's sexual abuse of children<sup>15</sup> and children's unique physical and structural vulnerability to sexual abuse, which is not shared by adult women and other victims of male violence.<sup>16</sup>

The third implication that arises is that the act of naming CSA in particular ways, and creating knowledge about it, is inherently political. We can see that to be able to command a social stage upon which to represent a social problem in a particular way requires certain social power. This may be the power of being a professional in a revered field of knowledge, such as medicine. It could be the power imparted by a social movement, or the power that comes from owning an element of the mass media or belonging to a political party. Membership of a particular gender, class, age group or ethnicity may also impart social power.

Without such power, many significant voices are unable to contribute to our understanding of CSA, and they may be further disadvantaged by the social policy agenda constructed by others in relation to CSA. Child victims are a group conspicuously absent from cultural meaning-making in relation to sexual abuse. Their lack of social power renders them dependent on adult advocates to represent their issues in the public domain, and this may result in their abuse remaining invisible or being ineffectively addressed.<sup>17</sup>

14 Bacchi 1999

15 In recent years, feminists have begun to more seriously investigate women's use of violence in intimate relationships (such as the sexual abuse of children). See for example, FitzRoy 1999

16 Miller 1990

17 Mudaly 2002, Atwool 2000

## Overview of the Discussion Paper

This Discussion Paper explores these different issues. It isolates and interrogates some of the dominant frameworks of meaning that surround CSA in contemporary society, pointing to how particular frameworks enable us to see and respond to certain dimensions of the problem while obscuring others from our



view. It also looks at how dominant frameworks of meaning become interwoven in the fabric of our social world and thereby function as indisputable truth.

To this end, language is an important sphere of investigation. Some of the terms and categories that we commonly use to name and conceptualise child sexual abuse, like 'incest' and 'paedophilia', are examined, and the Paper reflects on how these terms affect our thinking about CSA as a social problem and convey meanings beyond those we may have intended. The law is another important sphere of social activity in which these competing knowledges of CSA are pervasive. The child protection provisions of three different pieces of legislation used to protect children who have been sexually abused in Victoria are compared and contrasted in the Discussion Paper, to demonstrate the coexistence of fundamentally contradictory views of *children*, *child abuse* and *child protection* within the law. The contradictory ways that CSA is viewed in scientific research is also considered, as is the role of science in authenticating and mobilising political support for particular frameworks of meaning in relation to CSA.

This Paper has been written for a broad range of practitioners who come into contact with CSA in one way or another, including direct service workers, policy makers, researchers and activists. I encourage you to reflect on the implications such an approach to looking at CSA has for practice in your particular area of work. In the concluding pages of the Paper, a handful of general implications for practice are drawn together to assist you in this reflective process.