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To cite this article: Inga Tidefors & Margaretha Drougge (2006) The difficulties in understanding the role of sexuality in sexual abuse towards children: In-depth interviews with perpetrators, International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being, 1:3, 178-187, DOI: [10.1080/17482620600724534](https://doi.org/10.1080/17482620600724534)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17482620600724534>



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Published online: 12 Jul 2009.



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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## The difficulties in understanding the role of sexuality in sexual abuse towards children: In-depth interviews with perpetrators

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### Abstract

There is almost a theoretical vacuum concerning sexuality and eroticism when it comes to sexual abuse towards children. This paper can be seen as an attempt to, in some degree, fill this vacuum. Various theories claim that sexual abuse is not primarily an act of sexuality. Instead, sexual abuse is motivated by aggression, hostility, revenge and a need to reclaim power and control. This paper, which is built upon in-depth interviews with 29 perpetrators of child sexual abuse, addresses the problem of a lacking sexual dimension. The perpetrators' resistance to talk about sexual acts and erotic feelings, as well as unwillingness among professionals to ask, will be discussed and the consequences this "denial" might have for the abused child. A deeper understanding of the dynamics behind sexual abuse towards children it is hoped will result in more efficient treatment methods, with the aim of reducing the risk of new perpetrations. A more profound understanding of concrete sexual actions directed towards the child will also be of value to the adult helping the exposed child to work through experiences of sexual abuse.

**Key words:** *Sexual abuse, eroticism, kissing, counter transference, incest taboo*

### Introduction

During in-depth-interviews or during therapies with perpetrators of child sexual abuse, the investigators or the therapists listen to various life stories. The perpetrator talks about his or her own life and sufferings, and about the abusive acts. These acts contain everything from caressing the child in a sexual manner, touching the child's genitals, to vaginal, oral as well as anal penetrations. The perpetrator, however, very seldom spontaneously talks about sexual arousal as a part of the sexual abuse and of whether acts like kissing took place during the abuse. From these experiences, an interest was raised to address the problem of a lacking sexual dimension in sexual abuse towards children.

This presentation is built upon two different data collections. The first is part of a Swedish doctoral dissertation "From childhood to crime – 20 men convicted of sexual abuse of 38 children" (Tidefors Andersson, 2002), in which 20 men were interviewed in depth and tested with a number of

psychological instruments. The interviews dealt with the time span from childhood to the revelation of the committed perpetrations. They included information about how the abuse started, the men's feelings before, during, and after the abuse, the images they had of the child and the ongoing abuse, and how the abuse ended. One of the results was the great quantity of erotic material in the narratives dealing with the abuse. From a sexual perspective, these parts of the interviews were filled with more lust and life than anything the 20 men had previously talked about. The following is an example given by a stepfather trying to explain his feelings for a 13-year-old stepdaughter.

I have had intercourse with a lot of women but always without any feelings. Intercourse is something you just have to do. But with her, it was different. It was something I wanted and it was good and nice. For the first time in my life intercourse was filled with joy and lust.

Despite statements like this, followed by many questions about sexual acts and feelings, the missing question about the kiss in the interview material became obvious. This led forward to a complementary data collection consisting of interviews with nine perpetrators of child sexual abuse dealing with what function the kiss had had for the perpetrator in the sexual abuse.

The aim of this paper is to present the result of the re-analyses of the initial interview material focusing “sexual abuse and erotic feelings” and the analyses of the complementary data collection, focusing on the function of the kiss for the perpetrator in the sexual abuse situation and to problematize the impact of theories and studies in this field.

#### *Concepts of, and theories about, the perpetrator*

In the clinical literature, sexual abuse towards children is named regressed paedophilia or incest and permanent paedophilia (Groth, 1979) or primary and secondary paedophilia (Glasser, 1988). Regressed paedophilia or incest implies that the adult might also have sexual relations with other adults but when faced with, for example, prolonged crises the adult’s sexuality is directed towards a child. Permanent paedophilia means that the adult lacks an ability to have sexual relationships with other adults and the sexuality is directed only towards pre-pubertal children. Some perpetrators show interest in the child as an object, but this interest disappears, as the child grows older. Pfäfflin (1992), however, issues a warning concerning labelling the abuse only according to the sexual act. You may find completely different reasons behind what at a first glance looks the same. “Sex offenders are people with a sad personal history, in which their deviant sexual behavior represents an effort to banish the pain they experienced during their developing years” (Pfäfflin, 1992, p. 5).

The psychoanalytic concepts about sexuality constitute our most used symbols about sexuality, and those concepts are nowadays used so frequently that they are no longer connected with their origin (Larsson, 2001). Socarides (1988) is one of a few psychoanalysts who specifically discuss the phenomenon of paedophilia. Paedophile patients who have gone through psychoanalysis have withheld their identity and this lack of analytical material has led to a neglect of the condition. Socarides (1988) summarizes that the paedophile at the same time strives to be the loved child and the loving mother. While the paedophile experiences a merging with the child, the child also becomes a substitute for the mother. Thus, there exists both a wish to be a child and envy against the child for being a child.

Glasser (1986) talks about the “Core Complex” in perversion, which may be traced to the earliest relationship with the mother. The mother had not satisfied the child’s deep emotional needs and the mother had been too intrusive and invading. Aggression is, according to Glasser (1988), an important element of perversion: “A second reaction to the danger of annihilation is to respond with *aggression*” (Glasser, 1988, p. 125). Stoller (1986) declares that a perverted individual carries a wish to hurt others. In one way or another, this individual while growing up has been exposed to traumatizing violations of his identity as a boy. A mother with an ambivalent attitude towards the son might create confusion and a lack of trust towards the surrounding world. This lack of trust together with a low self-esteem is the foundation of the hostility present in the dynamics of perversion. The hostility develops into a desire of revenge and turns into a tragic force of repetition. To summarize, the psychoanalytic and the psychodynamic theories until now claim that the abuse is not primarily an act of sexuality. Instead, sexual abuse is partly about aggression, hostility and revenge, partly about a need to reclaim power and control and a wish to decrease separation anxiety. “Paedophilia goes beyond sexual need and is, ultimately, a pseudosexual act” (Groth, Hobson & Gary, 1982, p. 137).

#### *Sexual dimensions*

Even if a majority of studies about the perpetrator is not built on psychodynamic theories, the same lack of sexual dimensions is found in articles. One exception is in-depth interviews with sentenced perpetrators in Norway showing that, besides themes such as vulnerability, shame and ambiguity towards roles, sometimes the sexual urge has a prominent feature (Hermstad, 2006). As early as 1988 however, Hacker and Rembor published the paper “Sexuality: The omitted component dealing with sexual abuse” pointing to the fact that most experts fail to examine the sexual aspects of sexual abuse. Hacker and Rembor relate this to general societal norms, which connect sexuality with guilt and shame and the strong taboo that surrounds sexual abuse. Professionals are uncomfortable with sexual issues in a broader sense and “... professionals, are so unprepared to deal with the shocking revelations of clients that they may contribute to the latter’s problems” (Hacker & Rembor, 1988, p. 13).

Quinsey (1986) points to the need to discuss sexual preference. “The very fact that some child molesters exclusively choose boys and others choose girls would appear to be difficult to explain without invoking the concept of sexual preference” (Quinsey,

1986, p. 158). This field needs a deeper understanding of sexuality in a broader sense, for example, the connection between sexual arousal and the forbidden (Quinsey, 1986).

Skinner (1998) reflects on reactions, which arise during the research process on sensitive issues. The investigator could be prepared with "... a fairly exhaustive schedule of questions, and yet during an interview a respondent talks about an area which has previously been unforeseen but which may have important implications for issues within the study" (Skinner, 1998, p. 534).

Studies concerning knowledge and attitudes about sexual abuse seldom explicitly focus on the sexual component. For example, prison personnel, were asked to describe and assess known sex offenders and known inmates incarcerated for non-sexual crimes (Weekes, Pelletier & Beaudette, 1995). The sex offenders were described as more dangerous, violent, aggressive, tense, evil, weak, afraid, unpredictable, immoral, mysterious, incorrigible, irrational, and mentally ill, compared to the other inmates (Weekes et al., 1995).

#### *The function of the kiss*

As far as we know, there are no previous studies dealing with what function the kiss has had for the perpetrator of child sexual abuse. In a Swedish study, however, randomly selected 16 to 24 year-olds were interviewed about experiences of sexual abuse before the age of 18 (Martens, 1989). The five most common acts against female victims were: genitals were touched; caressed in a sexual manner; suggestion or demand to perform a sexual act; kissing and hugging in a sexual manner and the perpetrator showing his/her genitals. Among male victims, the order was suggestion or demand to perform a sexual act; caressing in a sexual manner; kissing and hugging in a sexual manner; genitals being touched and sexual intercourse (Martens, 1989). According to these results, there is evidence that kissing is a part of sexual abuse.

The lack of studies might partially be compensated by some theoretical thoughts. From a psychodynamic point of view, the kiss reveals something about our personal history. Freud (Blue, 1996) declared that the mother's breast, prepares us for the love-kiss. "Every kiss implies the vulnerability, the closeness, the sensuality and the trust that exist between a mother (or mother figure) and her child" (Blue, 1996, p. 15). The link between the kiss and the early feeding indicates that the kiss may also represent what our early attachment was like (Phillips, 1997).

In one study where prostitutes were interviewed it was found that mutual kissing was not offered to costumers, rather it was reserved to the prostitutes' private relationships (Månsson, 1981). This finding supports the notion that a kiss is connected with closeness and mutuality. "Kissing on the mouth can have a mutuality that blurs the distinctions between giving and taking" (Phillips, 1997, p. 97).

#### *Impact on professionals*

Studies focusing the impact on professionals working with child sexual abuse more often deal with sexual aspects. Therapies with adolescent sexual offenders provoke many feelings (Nyman, Risberg & Svensson, 2001). Among many other emotions, there is the therapist's own experience of sexual content. Often the stories arouse "... distance to our own lust and our own sexual fantasies. But sometimes we must accept the opposite, although it involves feelings of shame and fright. Sexual abuse is about sex and of course we create inner pictures of what is communicated" (own translation from Swedish, Nyman et al., 2001, p. 136).

Professionals who have had long-term contact with both victims and perpetrators show the highest level of personal emotional impact, and jurists the least (Thorpe, Righthand & Kubik, 2001). However, a group of 42 mid-west city judges expressed an increased pressure in sexual offence cases; partly because of the media coverage and publicity, partly due to their own emotional experiences (Bumby & Maddox, 1999).

Therapists with comprehensive experience of working with perpetrators were interviewed in-depth (Farrenkopf, 1992). A majority reported "... a shift in their perspective, becoming discouraged about client change. Half of the therapists experienced emotional hardening, rising anger and confrontation" (Farrenkopf, 1992, p. 217). Unpleasant and threatening feelings can arise when caring for patients who have sexually abused children, but this can be compensated by a caring culture, with support from the scientific society, and with continuous existential reflections among the caring staff (Sjögren, 2004). Lewis Herman (1992) discusses how professionals in this field are perceived by their surroundings and recognizes that the professional is looked upon with suspicion and runs a higher risk of being isolated and stigmatized.

#### **Method**

This paper is built upon data consisting of in-depth interviews. Interviews should be used when trying to obtain descriptions of specific situations and actions

and when wanting non-biased descriptions of phenomena as perceived by the individuals themselves. In research interviews, where the researcher wants to detect different themes in narratives, open questions are used. Open questions are also in line with an intention to hand over as much control as possible to the respondents. An interview with a low degree of structure provides an opportunity of getting unexpected and interesting answers. Sometimes these answers are not easy to categorize and analyse, but often contribute new aspects to the phenomena and such descriptions are the strength of qualitative research (Kvale, 1996).

The method used for the analysis of the interviews was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). In IPA one tries to understand what a phenomenon is like from the participants' point of view, in combination with putting critical questions to the text (Smith & Osborn, 2004). The first step is to read the transcripts a number of times to annotate what is interesting or significant about what a respondent says and each reading might provide new insights. The next step consists of returning to the texts and transforming the initial notes into concise phrases "... which aim to capture the essential quality of what was found in the text" (Smith & Osborn, 2004, p. 68). In the original IPA analysis the left-hand margin is used to annotate notes of interest, what the participants actually said, and in the right-hand margin, theme titles are documented. In the present analysis, the software Nvivo (Gibbs, 2004) was used in marking notes of interest and in naming the themes. The labelling of the themes in this study was not connected to any specific theory but was picked up from the transcripts. The software Nvivo consists, among other things, of a text coder and a search tool and it is possible to save continuously all the steps taken and reflections made (Gibbs, 2004). In IPA, the respondents' stories stand for themselves and the researcher tries to understand the content, its meanings and complexity (Smith & Osborn, 2004). In this presentation, the choice was also to stay close to the data, which meant reporting what the respondents themselves expressed about sexuality, erotic feelings and kissing during the abuse.

#### *Participants in the initial data collection*

The participants were 20 men convicted of child sexual abuse. Eleven of the men committed the molestation in their role as a father, five men had assaulted children for whom they did not have a function as a parent, and four men had abused both their own and other children. Altogether, the 20 men were convicted for sexual abuse towards 38 children.

Fifteen of the 20 men had directed the perpetration/s towards girls, four towards boys, and one man towards boys as well as girls. The acts ranged from touching the child in a sexual manner (2 men), mutual touching where the adult sometimes masturbated but also tried to stimulate the child (3 men), attempts to have sexual intercourse (4 men), to completed intercourse (11 men). The touching as well as the intercourse was directed towards the vagina or the penis, the anal region as well as the mouth. When the molesting started, most of the men turned to prepubertal children, and only two started their abuse at a time when the child had become a teenager. The youngest child was two years old and the oldest was 15 years. The length of their punishment spanned from six months to seven years. Two men were sentenced to unlimited care in a special forensic psychiatric hospital.

#### *Participants in the complementary data collection*

The participants were nine individuals, eight men and one woman, sentenced for sexual abuse towards 15 children aged from two to 15 years. Some were sentenced for occasional perpetrations, others for ongoing abuse up to six years. The 15 children consisted of four biological daughters, two step-daughters, one foster daughter, two biological sons, and the rest were boys and girls known by the perpetrator. The abusive acts were of the same nature as in the initial data collection. The length of punishment was in the span from one up to eight years.

#### *Procedure*

The ethical committee at Göteborg University approved of the study design before the data collection began. In the initial data collection, the 20 men were asked by the psychologist in the prison or in the forensic psychiatric hospital to take part in the study. After informed consent, the data collection began. The institutions were located all over Sweden and the interview took place at the institution where the participants were staying. The interviews were carried out by one of the two authors (IT). The nine participants in the complementary data collection were inmates at prisons in the area of Göteborg and these interviews were carried out by the other author (MD).

#### **Results**

The analysis dealing with sexual acts, erotic feelings and the meaning of the kiss, resulted in six major themes: (1) a wish to be sexually normal; (2) the

permitted or allowed versus the forbidden; (3) a force that was impossible to resist; (4) a demanding need for the child; (5) a wish for mutual sexuality; and (6) the kiss as an expression of mutuality.

### 1. *A wish to be sexually normal*

A wish to be normal was a main theme throughout the respondents' thoughts about their sexuality. It was part of the respondents' struggle to explain and understand their assaults and this wish resulted in a great ambivalence. A common answer to the question of how the respondents looked upon their own sexuality was "I'm very normal, I think".

I don't think my views about sex is any different to anyone else's. This has also been confirmed in discussions about sex with my friends . . . what you do and don't do. And by what you read in Readers' Sex-Queries and that kind of things, so I think that I'm probably very normal. Rather more to the end of the scale of having taboos around sexuality, compared to others, than being of the open-minded sort. Extreme forms of sex are not common to anyone, I suppose. (A middle-aged man sentenced for sexual abuse towards three nieces 2, 4 and 6 years old.)

In the complementary data collection, seven out of nine, answered to a direct question that no kissing had taken place during the sexual abuse. This can be understood in different ways. One interpretation could be that the kiss occurred, although the respondent did not want to talk about it. Certain studies point out that more kisses occur in sexual abuse than what is told. As mentioned above, Martens (1989) found that kissing and hugging in a sexual manner comes fourth for female victims and for male victims, the same acts come third, when answering questions about the most common acts during the abuse. If kisses do occur, as shown in Martens' data, but the perpetrator does not want to acknowledge it, a few different interpretations are possible. One is that the respondent does not see the kiss as an abusive act and therefore does not tell about it. Another interpretation could be that the respondent disregards the kiss in order to maintain the view of himself as an adult sexual individual. Kissing your victims would lead to viewing yourself as a paedophile—a person who is sexually turned on by a child.

### 2. *The permitted or allowed versus the forbidden*

In different ways, the respondent touched on the subject of the allowed versus the forbidden. A

recurring pattern in the narratives, regardless of what feelings the respondents described, was that there was no clear-cut, or instantly recognizable, explanation of the feelings connected with the abuse. The main pattern was, as mentioned above, ambivalence in the respondent's own understanding of his/her feelings. This ambivalence may reflect a partly integrated incest taboo that came into awareness when telling about the abuse.

I both wanted it to continue and to end because I was fully aware that what I did was wrong. But the desire was so strong I couldn't stop it. Yes, it was normal intercourse except one time, when I did it in her anus. Sometimes I felt I was in love with her, but perhaps it wasn't love, it was about tenderness and such feelings. It was the desire that made it happen, I had such a longing for her, and I didn't care about anything else. But she became pregnant and asked me what to do. I became very scared, but I didn't think of me. I thought of her, her life. An abortion was the best thing. (A middle-aged stepfather and a 13-year-old girl.)

I was erotically aware of her and all the time I knew it was wrong. She would often make a pass at me so I didn't have to make a pass at her. I avoided her because I knew how wrong it was but sometimes I didn't manage to avoid it, because all the time I was tempted. I was under pressure, and because of that I let myself give in. The barriers you talk about just didn't work. (A middle-aged foster father and an 11-year-old girl.)

The theme, the allowed versus the forbidden, may also reflect the risk taking which, according to Stoller (1986), is part of the so-called perverted sexuality. Stoller (1986) emphasises that a person with a deviant sexuality alternates between taking risks and being bored. The risk also provides excitement and leads to sexual arousal. The deviant sexual act in some sense must evoke the original trauma, keeping it present, and thus possible to triumph over. However, there is always a risk that the person encounters his or her own experience of being a victim. However, several of the respondents "let themselves get caught". This may be interpreted according to Stoller's theory about risk taking, but another way to look at it is to see the risk taking as a wish for the assaults to end—a wish to protect the child from themselves.

The photo lab called the police. If I had taken notice of what were on those photos, I would've developed them myself. I know how to do it. I

know just as well as everybody else, that such photos are illegal. But I sent these to a photo lab, and it never crossed my mind that I had done things that are forbidden. (A middle-aged man and three nieces 2, 4 and 6 years old.)

### *3. A force that was impossible to resist*

Theories describe the compulsory component in deviant sexuality (McDougall, 1995) and that a severe and uncontrolled anxiety arises if the perverted act fails (Socarides, 1988). According to Stoller (1986), the perversion becomes nothing more than a temporary solution to the inner complex of problems and the pattern turns into a tragic force of repetition.

When she was 13 she began to say no. She didn't want to and I tried not to do it. But then this desire came over me that couldn't be stopped. I couldn't stop myself so I started sneaking into her room at night when she was asleep. I started touching her again, just to feel her. But all the time I thought: why am I doing this, this is wrong. But the desire was there all the time. I was so sexually aroused. All the time I was tempted. (A 35-year old man and his 13-year-old daughter.)

### *4. A demanding need for the child*

Besides the sexual urge, a majority talked about a demanding need for the child and this need was impossible to resist. The respondents looked upon the child as a friend or as a consoling partner and they saw maturity in the child that was not there. The child had something to offer and the respondents missed the child and longed for him or her.

I could talk to the girl and she could talk to me. That is why things went this way. We could sit for hours just talking and then I felt kind of calmer. Yes, it was so good between us. She was four and the boy was two when I met their mother. It is awful, I think. I realize that I should never have let this happen. She has grown up together with me, and most of all I wanted to be her real father. We have had a lot of fun with everything else we did and we could talk about everything. I liked the girl so much. I liked her more and more. I probably liked her more than I liked her mum, my wife. (A middle-aged stepfather and a 13-year-old girl.)

A similar need for the child is described by Sjögren (2004) in interviews with perpetrators of child sexual abuse sentenced to care in forensic

psychiatric hospitals. This need consists of a longing for a devoted togetherness, and this longing goes beyond sexuality. The longing also contains a wish to rest from conflicts and demands, which characterises relations with, firstly, adult women. In the perpetrators, all-embracing loneliness the relation to a child is perceived as a solution (Sjögren, 2004).

### *5. A wish for mutual sexuality*

Some respondents did not look upon the child as a child and some even believed they gave the child something that he or she wanted. Some of the respondents, who perceived the child as approving the sexual act, compared the situation to a relationship with a lover.

She slept over at my place sometimes after I had moved out from her and her mother. It felt good to hold her. Then it became more and more sexual. She didn't say no. She kind of agreed to it every time. I did not think about her as being younger. But we did not have proper sexual intercourse. I only lay there with my dick between her thighs and embraced her. It was so cosy and it felt like I had someone who cared about me. It felt just like we had an affair. (A 30-year old man, earlier a stepfather to a 12-year-old girl.)

A common pattern, when the interview dealt with the concrete acts during the molestations, was to talk about the relationship the respondents had with the child before the abuse, and the general activities they did together with the child. The sexual acts often started with caressing, then touching the genitals and for some these acts escalated into intercourse. None of the respondents spontaneously mentioned kissing when talking about the abuse.

He liked very much to be stroked and fondled and I think he liked very much to sit next to me, when we watched TV for example. And he thought it was very nice to be stroked on the back and touched in every way. Yes, I think he also had a need to receive that kind of thing. And then I caressed his chest and belly with my hand, he would sort of pull in his stomach to make a space between his trousers and his stomach and then I thought that this probably feels nice for him. I can imagine that I too felt satisfied. (A middle-aged father and his 13-year son.)

When I felt that she was reacting to my touching and that she herself was turned on, it became some kind of double turn-on. You felt some sort of response. I think she was nine, ten years maybe

when I touched her legs and her thighs and she parted her legs and gave me a clear sign that she wanted to be touched further and further. Then she approached me and I approached her. We were at home on our own sometimes so all the time the opportunities for something to happen got bigger. The thought of her was there all the time and it was exciting and you fantasised about it too. Then, when it escalated I touched her breasts and felt that they were getting stiff and hard and that her vagina was getting wet. (A middle-aged foster-father and a 9-year old girl.)

The majority of the respondents talked about the acts directed towards the child in a sexual way. In one study, sexual offenders were interviewed about their experiences of group treatment (Garrett, Oliver, Wilcox & Middleton, 2003) and a majority expressed a positive experience but that they would have liked to spend more time discussing victim issues. One conclusion, by Garrett et al. (2003), is that sexual offenders have a deeper interest in understanding their offending acts and its impact on victims than is commonly assumed and it is the professionals, and not the perpetrators, who avoid such aspects.

It was both she and I. We had great confidence in each other. There was no barrier between us really. Of course, you may interpret it like it was only me who wanted to satisfy my own sexual needs. But she too, could come and pick me up and say: 'I feel horny today'. We had such confidence in each other, there was no limit, everything was gone and we had intercourse at home, in the car. We both had a rather strong sexual temperament. (A father who had sexual intercourse with his biological 13-year-old daughter.)

Erickson (1999) has pointed out an important paradox: "The major obstacle to studying incest avoidance in humans has been the incest taboo" (Erickson, 1999, p. 167). In the interview above, an opportunity was given to try to understand what feelings are aroused when having intercourse with one's own child. What it is like "to be together at the wrong side of the incest taboo". The following questions (Q) and answers (A) will illustrate this:

- Q How did you perceive your daughter during the intercourse?
- A That it was with my daughter, I didn't want to think about it. And probably, neither did she that I was her dad. Otherwise it wouldn't have worked out

- Q Did you look at her?
- A Yes, I have done that. I opened my eyes sometimes.
- Q Do you still remember those things?
- A Yes, of course, everything that has happened. I don't have a bad memory, so of course I remember everything that happened.
- Q Did you arouse her, was she excited?
- A It wasn't, no it didn't
- Q What did you say?
- A Don't want to, I don't want. . . .
- Q No, but when you had sexual intercourse, was she aroused then?
- A Yes, of course, and so was I.
- Q How do you feel about that – as a father having internal images of...
- A (interrupts) Of course, in those moments, we both switched it off; what am I doing, what am I doing
- Q Yes?
- A If we put it like this, the game started like this: "Ok, let's go to bed..." Then you don't think that you are neither father nor daughter
- Q But the image now, inside your brain?
- A (interrupts) the devil...
- Q Can you imagine your aroused daughter now?
- A No, no....
- Q But you do have a picture of her like that?
- A Yes I have. That's right, I have. Have to think about how I shall tell about them. How would I feel if I see this? I see her as a victim, I feel sorry for her and then I am the one who reacts against it. It doesn't fit, but it is bloody rotten it went that way really, bloody, bloody rotten. Sexual intercourse for two years, very frequent, it's awful (cries) stop it now, stop it."

#### 6. *The kiss as an expression of mutuality*

Only after a direct question, the majority in the complementary data collection answered that kissing had never taken place during the molestations. A few told about kissing when the abuse had been going on during a longer period and these respondents described the relationship with their victims as a mutual relationship.

We were playing at a party my wife, her daughter, and I. My wife had made a room reservation at a hotel for all three of us. But my wife wanted to stay with a friend. So there we were, in the twin bed. I believe she was more for it than I. Well, then things happened the way they did, and kissing too. But the following day I was ashamed and did not dare looking at her. (A middle-aged stepfather and a 12-year-old girl.)



One possibility is that the kiss is a rare component in child sexual abuse. This can be understood according to for example Stoller (1986), who points out the dimension of hostility in perversions. It is likely that an act of hostility excludes kissing, since the kiss is an expression of mutuality. Intercourse may take place with one part passive or forced, whereas the kiss requires cooperation and mutuality, or as one respondent named it “confirmation of togetherness”. “The kiss is important, it is so intimate. Yes, more intimate than intercourse, more a confirmation of togetherness.”

Another possibility is that the perpetrator cannot cope with the symbiotic regression the kiss may symbolize. “I have turned off my feelings. I envy others when I see them kissing. My mother never kissed me.”

The kiss will perhaps be too strong a reminder of things that the perpetrator was deprived of earlier in life. This is in line with the thought that the kiss may symbolise symbiosis; the mother’s breast preparing us for the lover’s kiss, an erotic kiss is a make believe suckle (Blue, 1999). The feeling of an early deprivation of needs is both described by Sjögren (2004) and Hermstad (2006). Perpetrators of child sexual abuse have early experiences of betrayals and deep feelings that it is impossible to trust adults (Sjögren, 2004). An unlucky combination of the need to be close and a difficulty managing intimate relations leads to an attempt to find this with a child instead (Hermstad, 2006).

### *Comprehensive understanding*

One aim of this article was to take a closer look at the impact theories and previous studies have had on this field. In the initial data collection, many questions about sexual acts and feelings were asked, but no direct question about kissing. In the complementary data collection, the majority answered that no kissing had taken place during the sexual abuse. It should be pointed out that especially the complementary data collection had few participants, thus the results cannot be generalized to other perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Combining the analysis of the 29 interviews and the existing theoretical concepts and studies resulted in two possible interpretations that could be elaborated on in further studies: *the counter transference is agitated* and *the incest taboo sets a limit*.

One possibility is, as in the initial data collection, that the researcher’s counter transference is agitated. Counter transference refers to the unconscious response, which is always aroused within the therapist (Norman & Ylander, 1999). When the patient affects the therapist’s unsolved problems, some form

of distress reaction is to be expected. The therapist’s defensive reactions of distress are the essence of the phenomenon called counter transference (Norman & Ylander, 1999). Freud looked upon counter transference as a disturbing factor (Gitelson, 1952), but “... a counter-transference reaction, if the analyst is ‘open’ enough to analyse it, can be an integrative experience” (Gitelson, 1952, p. 7). The counter transference aspect may only be brought out here as a possible suggestion, since no data was collected via interviews with therapists and researchers.

However, one may tentatively reflect that, since the kiss as well as erotic feelings are absent, on the one hand in the clinical literature, on the other hand in scientific articles, neither the therapist nor the researcher see any reason to focus on it. This lack of theoretical illustration may coincide with the professional’s own notions of what sexual abuse is an expression. It is easier to think of sexual abuse as power, control, and sadism. Scrutinizing, for example, the kiss may force the professional to see the abuse more as an erotic act. The professional, therefore, “forgets” to ask about the kiss in order to “protect” his or her own concepts about “good” sexuality as opposed to “assaulting” sexuality.

Groth’s (1979) assumptions that the sexual abuse is about power, anger, and sadism may act as a protection for the therapist or the researcher in order to cope, working with sexual offenders. Those theories may be applicable to the act of rape, but not necessarily for abuse that started with other pressure than physical violence. Professional’s concepts may limit what the patient or respondent “is allowed” to tell.

The concept of counter transference can thus help us to focus on our own feelings, but it is possible that not asking about sexuality also has something to do with the incest taboo. The incest taboo plays a role for the perpetrator as well as for the professional in research and treatment. If the perpetrator is a parent, the incest-taboo is violated, which leads to restrictions of what “is allowed” to talk and to ask about. Are the investigators and therapists able to feel and think beyond their own taboos? It is important to be aware of which construction the perpetrator wants and needs to make of his or her crimes. At the same time, it is just as important to notice which construction we ourselves want and need to make of actions like child sexual abuse.

### **Discussion**

The first prevalence studies dealt with a man as the perpetrator and a girl as the victim, but there has been a development in the view of who the

perpetrator is and who the victim is. "The perspective of the helping professions had progressed from blind to one-eyed with respect to sexual abuse" (Mendel, 1995, s. 8). Today we also discuss the male victim and the female perpetrator. Perhaps the same can be said about the sexual component in sexual abuse towards children. It is time to recognize more than aggression, hostility and revenge.

It is important to stress that no data collection via interviews with sexually abused children was done in the present study. However, it is possible to reflect on what could happen in the relationship and communication if adults cannot handle that the perpetrator also has exposed the child to sexual acts like kissing during the abuse. One of the 20 informants in the initial data collection, abused as a boy by an uncle from the age of eight to ten, said the following about being a victim:

I think very much about this, because there was no violence. So I think that I wanted it, that I liked it. Those thoughts and feelings are difficult to handle. In a way, you put it aside, you have no energy to engage in this.

It is obvious that we cannot talk about the dimension of sexuality in sexual abuse towards children in a way that characterizes the abuse as enjoyable for the child. In addition, the adult abuser, as in the example above, who has her/himself been abused as a child, can argue about the child's sexual arousal to "defend" or "rationalize" both the old events and the acts for which s/he is responsible. Nevertheless, it is necessary to create an open situation in treatment, where the perpetrator is allowed to talk about the role of sexuality. Further, it is important to take care of abused children, who have been exposed to acts and feelings they are not enough mature to understand and handle, in an open way and to talk about it using the children's own terms. More profound understanding of concrete sexual act directed towards the child will be of value to the adult helping the exposed child working through experiences of sexual abuse.

In 1986, Finkelhor wrote: "The study of child molesters is not an easy task. Such individuals do not make enthusiastic or cooperative subjects, and the matters of most interest to the researcher are often the exact ones the subjects are least interested in divulging" (Finkelhor, 1986, p. 142). The experience from the interviews with the 29 respondents in the present study, however, is rather the opposite. Stoller (1991) points to an interesting disparity between psychodynamic theories versus data from interviews. He establishes that the stories told by real persons with own experiences of the phenomena

under investigation have scarcely been heard. Using interviews makes it possible to gather extensive and detailed knowledge. "Only then should we turn on the advanced-theory machine" (Stoller, 1991, p. 5). The concept of an existing erotic component does not exclude the existence of other aspects. Several emotional states may be active simultaneously during the sexual abuse towards a child, but there is almost a theoretical vacuum surrounding sexuality and eroticism.

## Conclusions

This article may be seen as a step towards filling the vacuum surrounding sexuality and eroticism, and to give a specific and empirically grounded theoretical contribution to the dynamics behind sexual abuse towards children. It is easier to understand evil acts connected with aggression in comparison to evil acts connected with something good. To look at the abuse as impossible to understand, sometimes seems to be the best way to understand. As professionals, however, our task is often to make the incomprehensible more comprehensible.

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