

Gender, Desire and Child Sexual Abuse: Accounting for the Male Majority

A. Mark Liddle

Introduction

Although it appears to be generally accepted in the literature that males predominate as perpetrators in cases of child sexual abuse, the implications of this male majority for explanatory accounts of such cases on the one hand, and for theories of gender on the other, have remained largely unexplored. The bulk of 'mainstream' academic and professional literature on the subject has tended not to focus on questions concerning either the prevalence of child sexual abuse or the apparently gendered character of the phenomenon, but has concerned itself instead with issues such as diagnosis or disclosure, family dynamics, individual psychopathology, sequelae and treatment, and so on. A notable contrast to this general posture can be found in the work of feminist authors, where it is usually argued that child sexual abuse is both widespread and closely related to other forms of victimization such as rape or wife abuse. More importantly, feminist writers have been especially vocal in describing child sexual abuse as being a phenomenon specifically perpetrated by men, and they have in some cases pointed to the causal centrality of 'male sexuality' or 'male socialization' in the genesis of such abuse. While claims of the latter sort have been made with increasing regularity by feminists since the mid-1970s, however, they have not led to widespread calls in the mainstream literature for a re-examination of current theory.

Within those works which do make reference to the disproportionate involvement of males in child sexual abuse (and which regard this feature as being relevant to causal explanations), there has also been a tendency to account for the disparity in terms of single factors. The disparity has been explained in terms of property-sharing

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arrangements among men, for example (Herman and Hirschman, 1977), or the psychodynamics of childhood sex-identification (Frances and Frances, 1976; Rist, 1979), while others have attributed it to a higher sex drive among males than females (Gebhard et al., 1965), or to the operation of patriarchal power (Hirsch, 1981; Janeway, 1981). Other writers have focused more specifically on the relative absence of female perpetrators, and have argued that women's greater involvement in day-to-day child care accounts for their *anti-erotic* interest in children (Morgan, in Tong, 1984: 183–4), while others have accounted for the low involvement of women in child sexual abuse in terms of either their greater empathy (de Young, 1982), or their greater awareness of the costs of personal victimization (Rush, 1980). More recently, as detailed more fully below, child sexual abuse has also been described as being a manifestation of male violence (Hanmer and Maynard, 1987; Hearn, 1990), or as reflecting the more general operation of forms of male sexuality which involve an eroticization of dominance.¹

Whether or not these various accounts are thought to be convincing even as *partial* explanations of child sexual abuse, it is clear that an adequate explanation of the disparity in question will need to be both sociological and gender-based, given that adult–child sexual interactions take place on a wide scale (this fact renders implausible those explanations that focus strictly on psychopathology or individual circumstances), and given also that males greatly outnumber females as the initiators of these interactions.² Moreover, since a capacity for being sexually aroused by children is an obvious prerequisite to engaging in sexual behaviour with them, it should also be clear that such an account will need to make reference to connections between child sexual abuse, gender and the social structure of affect and desire, within which a more detailed description can be given of the gendered *body*. While many of the factors referred to in existing accounts are of considerable importance to any effort to explain the genesis of child sexual abuse, the matter of *motivation* is surely paramount, since it bears directly on the properties of individual adults who would choose to interact sexually with a child in the first place.

This motivational question has of course received a great deal of attention in the mainstream literature on child sexual abuse, but it has usually been addressed from within an individualizing, pathologizing perspective, which has itself been placed on the defensive by feminist work which stresses both the structural charac-

teristics and the apparent 'normality' of much sexual victimization. The question has also been addressed at some length from within feminist work itself, as described below, but the micro-details of 'male motivation' have for the most part been submerged in such work by a broader focus on patriarchal power, or on gendered patterns of social control.

In what follows, it will be suggested that men's greater involvement in child sexual abuse needs to be understood in terms of certain 'masculine propensities', which are themselves a result of complex and interactive processes of gendering and embodiment. An understanding of these processes and their impact in the lives of individual men is approached through a focus on gender and desire as practice, although it is recognized that such practice takes shape from within specific historical and material circumstances. A practice-based sociological account of the male preponderance in child sexual abuse offers not only to give theoretical prominence to macro-level factors, such as those so effectively highlighted within feminist and other recent work on gender, but also to allow for a theoretical linkage of these with the more local details of everyday sexual politics, and with the emotional and other complexities which seem to occasion matters of sexual desire and attachment. These claims will be further elaborated below, after some of the building blocks for such an account have been abstracted from descriptions of 'masculine socialization' within the child sexual abuse literature, from feminist and other work on (male) sexuality, and from some recent contributions in the sociology of masculinity.

Masculinity, 'Male Sexuality' and Child Sexual Abuse

Carol Smart has recently observed that the 'problem of child sexual abuse is, for feminism, the problem of masculine sexuality' (1989: 50) but, as noted above, even a brief perusal of the literature suggests that 'masculine sexuality' is not widely regarded as having causal centrality in the genesis of child sexual abuse. Although there are occasional references in this literature to such things as 'male socialization' or 'male sexual socialization', references of this sort have for the most part also remained disconnected. However, in his 1982 paper, 'Sexual Abuse: A Sociological Perspective' David Finkelhor does offer an account which makes more than cursory reference to masculinity, and which also illustrates a perspective on gender itself that appears to have wide currency. The paper therefore provides a useful point of departure for describing the

connections between masculinity and adult-child sexual interaction, and also for illustrating some of the more general shortcomings of 'socialization'-type theories of gender.

According to Finkelhor, the preponderance of male perpetrators can be understood in terms of 'several differences between men and women' (1982: 100), which leave women much less prone than men to abuse children sexually. These differences bear directly on such things as sexual interest, the 'focusing of appetites', and emotional needs, and are therefore relevant to the matter of what the perpetrator's *motivations* might be for initiating sex with a child. Men are described as learning at an early age that it is appropriate for them to be attracted to persons who are smaller and weaker than themselves, for example, while women are described as being conditioned into nurturant roles which are antagonistic to the presence of sexual arousal. On the other hand, women do not learn to sexualize personal relationships in the way that men do; women learn to view these relationships holistically, and they also acquire an ability to satisfy their 'needs' in the absence of sexual behaviour, while men do not. Men have few opportunities to practice nurturing or express their 'dependency needs' outside of sex, and they also learn to link personal competence to sexual conquest or performance, and to prop up their self-esteem by reasserting their sexual power in the face of attacks on their egos. In light of these differences, Finkelhor suggests that the prevalence of child sexual abuse can be reduced if men are afforded more opportunities 'to practice affection' outside of sex, first of all, and if the performance principle in heterosexual sex is 'de-emphasized as the ultimate criteri[on] of male adequacy' (1982: 100). Thirdly, Finkelhor concludes that men must become more involved in child care, and he suggests that:

Men who are comfortable relating to women at the same level of maturity and competence will be men who will be less likely to sexually exploit children. As men change their relations with women, they will also change their relations with children. (1982: 100)

Although this conclusion might be thought controversial (there is an unresolved tension between the claim that men pose a greater threat to children than women do, for example, and the claim that we should strive for men's greater involvement in child care), the paper's frankness about the gendered character of child sexual abuse surely provides a refreshing contrast to the bulk of mainstream work on the topic, in which issues of this sort seldom even arise. Many of

the described 'differences' between men and women also sound familiar enough, although they are offered in the absence of much empirical support, and similar claims — concerning the greater empathy of women, for example, or the way in which prevailing notions of sexuality foster the idea that young girls are 'fair game' sexually for men (Hirsch, 1981: 136), and so on — are often encountered in the literature.

While these claims do offer some useful insights, however, accounts of this general sort also have a distinctly *cerebral* ring to them. That men's appetites are focused in the way that they are is said to be a consequence of 'learning', for example, while both men and women are said to be socialized to be able to distinguish between 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' objects of sexual attraction. Besides creating an impression that men and women somehow *absorb* roles, attitudes, models and beliefs that exist 'out there' in the social world, to be donned by pre-existing bodies like so many costumes to be worn, these claims reflect a rather hydraulic model of human agency, in which it appears to be suggested that people act the way that they do simply because they have learned to act that way (or because they have been 'socialized' or 'conditioned' to act in the ways that they do act). In addition, these accounts fail to capture much of the complexity of gendered consciousness, and from the kind of tension, ambivalence, doubt, inadequacy and personal *choice* that litter the field on which child sexual abuse is played out. Perspectives from this general school of thought also cannot accommodate the *historicity* of gender, that is, they cannot capture the idea that gender categories are forged in an ongoing fashion within lived human relations, which themselves take shape within the constraints of particular material and historical circumstances. Perspectives which rest on notions such as 'social learning' or 'socialization' have been further criticized for lacking any clear reference to the structure of *power*, and for assuming that such things as gender 'norms' somehow arise in a political vacuum, in the absence of real struggle or contest. Lastly, it must be added that the sort of account in question tends to homogenize such things as 'masculinity', 'femininity' and, for that matter, 'men' and 'women', where it is at least arguable that these notions do not have stable, unitary referents.

That power is crucially relevant to the way in which sexual desire is 'focused' has been recognized by feminists for some time now, on the other hand, and the general thesis that sexuality is socially

constructed is near axiomatic in feminist work. Most of the early classic (second wave) feminist texts dealt at some length with issues concerning the sexualization of women's bodies, for example, where the latter processes were seen to be bound up with patriarchal power relations and with the general social control of women, and later works have continued to describe linkages between sexual intimacy and oppression, or between eroticism and domination.³ Some of the above criticisms can also be levelled against certain feminist accounts of 'male sexuality' however, which, although they do supply the requisite focus on power, also often obscure some of the complexity referred to, by retreating into a now familiar categorical vocabulary of undifferentiated social blocs, and by describing almost every facet of gender relations in terms of an unbroken flow of oppression from men to women. Male sexuality in these accounts is sometimes clearly described in instrumental terms, as being one of a variety of tools of oppression available to individual men for the conscious consolidation of their own material and power advantages as men, where individual men themselves are described as almost clone-like bearers of a unitary (and essentially predatory) male personality. Brownmiller's (1975) interest-based, quasi-conspiratorial account of male sexuality can be criticized on the grounds referred to, for example, as can those which label men as 'the enemy' and heterosexual women as 'collaborators' and 'counter-revolutionaries' (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group, 1982).⁴ Although most feminist work does not attribute such an unmediated degree of conscious instrumentality to male sexual behaviour, it nonetheless does seem that the 'multifaceted nature of masculinity [is] a problematic often neglected by feminists', as Nava puts it, 'who have in some instances been guilty of retaining notions of essential (and disagreeable) masculinity while simultaneously refusing any notion of essential or natural femininity' (1984: 87).

In any case, even if interest-based *general* accounts of male sexuality are thought to be convincing, or if such accounts are thought to be convincing in regard to particular *forms* of male (sexual) violence or harassment — such as rape or 'flashing', for example — they seem much less credible when applied to child sexual abuse specifically. As an example of the former, Sandra McNeill notes in her discussion of 'flashing' that 'It is useful for men that the form male sexuality takes acts as a type of social control over women', and she moves on to ask rhetorically, 'Could this behaviour be part of the mechanism by which a powerful group maintains its power?'

(1987: 99). In these remarks, a connection is drawn between the *effects* of a particular form of male sexual behaviour (the terrorization of women, the buttressing of an oppressive gender structure and so on) and the motivations of individual male actors, where the connection gains whatever credibility it has from reference to the very real consequences of flashing for women (and for the furtherance of male power). Brownmiller's discussion of rape involves the same sort of instrumental linkage between male sexuality and the furtherance of men's power over women, where support for the linkage is again thought to be provided through sole reference to the *consequences* of rape or the threat of rape, for women's freedom and dignity (that is, from the fact that the existence of rape or its threat has functioned both to limit women's freedom and to buttress 'male power', it is supposed to follow that men rape *in order* to bring about these consequences). While most general accounts such as Brownmiller's only refer to child sexual abuse as part of a wider catalogue of forms of oppression seen to follow in the wake of an essentially predatory male sexuality, the perspective is often extended specifically to cover the occurrence of child sexual abuse, where the latter is construed as somehow operating to maintain patriarchy. Jill Radford remarks that the 'sexual abuse of girl children' in the family 'take[s] on new meaning' (1987: 43) for example, when power relationships between men and women, and the general maintenance of monogamous heterosexuality are considered. Elizabeth Stanko offers a similar view, when she grafts an equation of femaleness and powerlessness onto a theoretical account of child sexual abuse. She notes that

the female child is powerless: her position in the family structure . . . her lack of life experience . . . do not often give her the structural or emotional power to fend off sexual advances: her femaleness is powerlessness. As such, incestuous assault is perhaps the most glaring example of men's power over women and women's sexuality. (1985: 24)

Needless to say, these remarks do little justice to *male* victims of child sexual abuse, whose invisibility in this account means that they cannot serve to challenge the general linkage of male sexual behaviour with the social control of women. Some reference to male victims is surely required however, as Nava (1984: 87) argues, since this

challenges the idea of men and women as unambiguous social categories which stand in immutable opposition to each other, because in relation to adult men,

gender divisions within the category of youth are attenuated. In the context of cross-generational relations, boys may be as powerless as girls.

Feminist insights concerning desire and the sexualization of bodies also find numerous points of contact in the work of Michel Foucault, and a number of Foucault's arguments concerning embodiment and the incorporation of desire are of obvious relevance to a gender-based theory of child sexual abuse. More specifically, Foucault's views on the role of *incitement* in the deployment of forms of sexuality, and on the relationship between power and desire, offer to provide some of the building blocks for an account of masculine sexuality, and for a description of the masculinization of bodies. As is now well-known, Foucault described a variety of diverse sexualities as being 'instrument-effects' of power — the sexual 'deviant' is both a product of a mutual embrace with power, for example, and a port-of-call for power's continued expansion and growth. In his account of the multiplication of perversions in the late nineteenth century, Foucault (1979: 42–3) argued that rather than moving to repress sexual diversity, power moved to establish '*lines of penetration*', in order to effect an *incorporation* of perversions and 'a new *specificity of individuals*'; it did so through the incitement of pleasures, the caressing of bodies, and through the *consolidation* of patterns of sexual conduct in individuals. The strategy was to 'strew reality' with aberrant sexualities, and to do so by acting as a mechanism of *attraction*, to draw out the anomalies that it sought — '[p]leasure spread to the power that harried it; power anchored the pleasure it uncovered'. Power 'wrapped the sexual body in its embrace', and effected in these 'circular incitements . . . *perpetual spirals of power and pleasure*' (1979: 44–5). These processes are not limited only to the production of 'peripheral' sexualities, however — the 'stimulation of bodies', the 'intensification of pleasures', and the 'incitement to discourse' (1979: 105–6) are part of a general deployment of sexuality, according to Foucault. Hence, although Foucault does not draw any specific contrasts between male and female sexuality in this regard, his general view of 'deployment' would also seem to allow for connections to be drawn between particular constellations of sexual desire, and the masculinization or feminization of bodies, where processes involved in the latter reflect different patterns of prohibition and incitement for men and women, resulting from an asymmetry in the (gender) structure of power. As suggested above in the discussion of Finkelhor's reliance on concepts from socialization theory however, processes of masculinization and feminization

are also bound up with a rich complexity of emotional and other correlates – ambivalence, creativity, doubt, error and so on – which cannot be properly incorporated without more specific reference to individual agents and to gendered subjectivity. Foucault does not pay much attention to the ‘affective nuances’ of embodiment or of the consolidation of desire, and individual agents themselves are sometimes difficult to discover in his work, underneath the grand designs of power.⁵

Details of the latter sort are much referred to in some of the more recent writing on masculinity, however. In one of his more recent works, Robert Connell (1987) argues that the structure of gender relations cannot be understood through an exclusive focus on either the division of labour or the structure of power, for example, and he points to the existence of a third structure – the ‘structure of cathexis’ – which must be incorporated into any complete theory of gender. Along with Foucault and a variety of feminist writers, Connell claims first of all that sexuality itself is socially constructed, and that a social organization of sexual desire and attraction can be described.⁶ The term ‘structure of cathexis’ is meant to refer to this organization, and he notes that its shape is historically specific. According to Connell (1987: 99), each gender order (this term refers to ‘the structural inventory of an entire society’) can be described in terms of interlocking structures of labour, power and cathexis, where patterns of cathexis also become attached to particular gender-constructs. The latter, masculinities and femininities, can therefore be described partly in terms of a particular focusing of desires, a spectrum of possible objects of desire, and a specifiable inventory of emotional forms and models of attachment. Since masculinities and femininities are also differentiated at the level of power relations and locked into the division of labour, however, some constructs rather than others come to gain ascendancy in particular moments. *Hegemonic* masculinity is a construct of this sort – and it is further argued by Connell (and also by Carrigan et al., 1987, and more recently Brittan, 1989) that this form is inscribed not only in the personalities of individuals, but in dominant institutional and state forms as well. Hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to subordinated masculinities (such as homosexual masculinities, most notably), and to femininities, where the global domination of men over women is the most central fact bearing on the way these constructs are hierarchized or organized. More important for the present discussion, however, is the idea that hegemonic masculinity is linked to particular patterns of cathexis, where a

genitally-focused sexual desire is strongly bound up with themes of performance, superiority and achievement, for example. As with all gender-constructs, hegemonic masculinity *informs bodies* – or, as Carrigan et al. put it, '[m]asculinity invests bodies' (1987: 182) – and this particular kind of investment arguably takes place on a wide scale. Connell adds that bodily incorporations of this sort are part of what gives gender its 'natural' feel, and reference to this 'naturalness' therefore seems to lend credibility to ideological descriptions of current gender practices as being somehow necessary, or rooted in essential features of maleness and femaleness.

References of this sort to the gendering of bodies are not meant to suggest a mechanical or deterministic process that somehow *acts on* individuals from outside, however. While bodies are historicized in gender, these processes also involve the individual's embracing of *projects*, which in turn leave indelible traces on the body and its responses. Masculinities and femininities, which can also be described as *ways of being*, or ways of living certain relations, in some sense present themselves as *alternatives* to the individuals who navigate through fields of gender practices. The 'alternatives' may be severely limited by a variety of factors, of course, and the state of play within particular gender regimes⁷ may be incommensurable with that in another through which the individual must operate (that is, particular circumstances may make it impossible for an individual to bring off a reconciliation of different sets of gender practices – the gender dynamics within a particular family may be thoroughly incompatible with those in another regime such as a school, for example), but individuals must in any case adopt a *posture* with respect to the gender practices that are presented to them, whether this takes the form of active resistance, resignation or zealous embracement. Specific intersections of the structures of labour, power and cathexis also give rise to sets of *interests*, where the latter will also bear on the 'posture' taken by individual agents (or by social groups bound up in gender politics). Connell's references to individual life histories serve to illustrate the complexity of this sort of navigation, and also to illustrate that it is already misleading to speak of an individual as being 'gendered' (in some final sense, like a *product* of social forces), since gender is constituted unceasingly in everyday relations. Moreover, reference to the details of ongoing gender relations within the context of individual lives suggests that unitary models of personality (such as those often reflected in claims about male socialization, or about

the representative 'male oppressor'), have little contact with reality. In addition to obscuring the presence of *change* over time, these models are arguably inapplicable even to *particular* moments in an individual's life history, especially given the level of doubt and ambivalence that commonly seems to occasion matters of sexual desire and attachment. Once again, the richness of evidence concerning the way in which patterns of cathexis are experienced by individual actors, should begin to make most descriptions of such things as 'male sexuality', 'male desire' or 'masculine personality' seem like the shallowest of caricatures.

In short, an account such as Connell's has the advantage first of all of accommodating precisely those facts of gender-as-lived that are most immediate and compelling to us, such as the experience and texture of gendered bodies, or the affective nuances of attraction and personal attachment. It also has the advantage of allowing facts of this sort to be theoretically related in a fundamental way to material circumstances and to wider sets of practices (such as the division of labour for example, or the structure of power relations). In other words, an account of this sort promises to locate individual bodies and subjects within the real constraints that surround them, but also to leave room for the operation of creativity and resistance. Lastly, the focus on practice is of special relevance to the male majority in child sexual abuse, since it rescues such things as personality and sexual desire from the realm of inevitability (in whatever terms the latter is thought to be grounded), and places them squarely in the stream of human history — it construes gender as being something that people *do*.

To apply some of the above notions to an account of child sexual abuse then, it might be suggested first of all that the male preponderance should be described in terms of a particular but contingent masculinization of bodies — a masculinization characterized by sets of responses which are prerequisite to engaging in sex with children, and which are simply not attached to prevailing constructs of femininity in the same way. These responses, and their affective correlates as well, are the residues of historically specific paths of masculinization taken by individual men, which are themselves presented from within a structure of power that offers sharply differing patterns of sexual prohibition and incitement to males and females. While some degree of preoccupation with sexual desire (and with the scope to exercise it) is perhaps a characteristic feature of masculinities in general, femininities have tended to take their

shape in response to the facts of 'male desire'. As Mariana Valverde expresses the latter point, women's 'purpose' in the sphere of sexuality has largely been

to actualize goals or ideals or desires that did not originate with them. In this sense it is correct to say with Freud that female desire is the 'dark continent', the great unknown of Western culture. It is not that we have not been allowed to have desires, but rather that we have not been allowed to express desires independently of male desire. (1985: 158)

Rosalind Coward similarly notes that the shape of female desire has tended to 'fit' the organization of 'male privilege', and that representations of female pleasure and desire operate to produce and sustain 'feminine positions'. These positions:

are neither distant roles imposed on us from outside which it would be easy to kick off, nor are they the essential attributes of femininity. Feminine positions are produced as responses to the pleasures offered to us; our subjectivity and identity are formed in the definitions of desire which encircle us. These are the experiences which make change such a difficult and daunting task, for female desire is constantly lured by discourses which sustain male privilege. (1985: 16)

These insights can also be applied to the structure of 'male desires' of course, except that the 'definitions' and 'discourses' involved are very different; sexual desire is ascribed a great deal of *importance* in processes of masculinization, and is strongly linked to such things as personal adequacy and success. Matters of this sort are heavily thematized within hegemonic masculinity, and they lend an urgency to 'male desire' which is reflected in an ordering of priorities which itself carries a certain abuse-potential. After all, if personal adequacy is thought to be bound up with the satisfaction of imperious sexual desires, then it is more likely that other matters such as the feelings and needs of partners, the social implications of sexual behaviour or the possible harm to be caused by a particular interaction, will be shunted down the list or ignored.

Although language always seems to invite us to reify, the responses and desires referred to should not be regarded as being pure, primitive driving forces (like water, perhaps), which somehow erupt or flow out in the presence of the appropriate stimuli. The incitement or cultivation of desire is undoubtedly a function of a complex dialogue or dialectic, involving bodies, representations, the unconscious and lived experience, where the complexity of lived relations

is usually sufficient to guarantee that desire will be mediated by a variety of factors. Hence, one can feel guilty about desiring, can want to desire something and not, can have second-order desires to seek to master first-order ones, or can even feel desire and revulsion simultaneously. To a certain extent perhaps, this kind of ambivalence may resonate with real contradictions in the structure of gender relations; where navigation through apparently incommensurable regimes can leave or consolidate a curious mix of psychic and bodily residues. Desire may also be shaped in cases where individuals have chosen to make it an object of practice, whether the choice is rooted in a resistance to current gender relations (as in the case of 'political' lesbians, for example), or a belief that particular sets of desire simply require extirpation for other reasons (as in the case of certain religious zealots). In other words, the shape and intensity of desire will also be affected by individual commitments, or by the kinds of projects that individuals choose to take up. Desires structured within hegemonic masculinity are widely supported and reinforced, however, both by prevailing ideologies of male and female sexuality, and by widespread participation in the sets of relations which excrete these. Hence, the resilience both of popular *beliefs* about men, women and sexuality (for example, no means yes, women enjoy coercive sex, men should not be 'led on' lest they reach the 'point of no return', and so on), and also of their pervasive bodily inscriptions.

In any case, it is not enough to claim simply that the gendering of bodies leaves men more prone than women to abuse children sexually, where this proneness is described solely in terms of a differential incorporation or cultivation of sexual desire. After all, nothing whatever *follows* from the mere presence of a specific set of desires in an individual, and the majority of men obviously do *not* participate in adult-child sex, whether they have the requisite desire to or not.⁸ There is another facet of masculinization that is also relevant to the genesis of child sexual abuse, however, having to do with what might be called the hegemonic masculine character structure. Such things as 'affective correlates' have already been referred to in the above discussion of sexual desire, but the manner in which emotions tend to be *organized* within dominant processes of masculinization is also worth considering, since reference to this organization tends to defuse both power-based accounts of male sexuality on the one hand (for example, male sexual behaviour is reducible to power-assertion, men sexually victimize others because

they have eroticized behaviours that involve domination), and instrumental or interest-based accounts on the other (men sexually victimize women *in order* to maintain patriarchy, or *because* this behaviour will buttress a social structure within which their interests are well provided for).

There is a sense in which hegemonic masculinity is not just a final 'way of being' or an end-state, but a diverse yet thematically unified *beacon* for individual behaviour; it presents itself as an interwoven set of representations, models which invite individual participation. The beacon is such that one can only orient oneself toward it however, it remains elusive — hegemonic masculinity is something that one can never incorporate enough to satisfy the omnipresent standards. Hence, there is a sort of compulsiveness about maintaining one's masculine credentials, which has been exhaustively described since the advent of the 'men in crisis' book genre which began in earnest in the early 1970s. In this literature it is claimed that the 'male role' is oppressive to men, for example, or that codes of male sexual behaviour tend to cripple men emotionally, and it has even been suggested more recently that men are 'dominated by desires not authentically their own' (Brod, 1988: 271).⁹ The truth in all of this seems to be first of all that prevailing forms of 'male sexuality' can perhaps be better described as being fundamentally *alienated* than as reflecting an uncompromised power or thirst for domination, and secondly that personality structures formed within hegemonic masculinity are relatively inclined to be tenuous, divided and characterized by fundamental anxieties about personal adequacy and *dependency*. These features have led some writers recently to describe both male sexuality and the psyches of men in terms of powerlessness within power, where the idea is that men's personal inadequacies and self-brutalization are the flip side to their mastery of the public sphere in capitalist patriarchy (see for example Soble, 1986; Brod, 1988; Seidler, 1989). However convincing these general contrasts are thought to be, the point to be made here with respect to child sexual abuse is that dominant processes of masculinization do more than just create a momentum toward the cultivation of sets of desires compatible with adult-child sex; it is arguable that they also generate a second propensity in large numbers of men, an inclination to *yield* to their desires in the pursuit of validation and personal competency. In these terms, child sexual abuse involves an alienated emotional structure unable to resolve dependency needs, that abandons itself to lessons deeply inscribed on the masculine

body – tension, desire, dependency, powerlessness and heavy rationalization seem to have a disturbing rendezvous on this field. While the power structure of gender has everything to do with the fact that more men than women are able to pursue the satisfaction of their desires, as feminists have argued for some time now, and while this structure is also reflected in the way in which these desires are incorporated and distributed, as argued above, this ‘second propensity’, which seems to follow in the wake of dominant processes of masculinization, seems much less clearly related to material and power advantages.

If the above arguments are thought to be convincing then, the male majority in child sexual abuse can be accounted for in terms of this ‘double propensity’ and its distribution within the current structure of gender relations, on the one hand, and a structure of power which affords greater freedom to men than women in the satisfaction of their desires, on the other. While this structure of gender relations is coherent and uniform enough to sustain the broad contours of a particular demography of affect and desire (one in which monogamous heterosexuality and its affective correlates will be sustained, for example), it also contains enough complexity and contradiction to guarantee that there will be nothing *automatic* about the places that individuals take up within it. Hence, while there may be block differences between groups of ‘feminized’ and ‘masculinized’ individuals at the level of desire, there will also be wide variations within such categories, reflecting differences in practice, interests or commitments (for example, while the category of ‘gay masculinity’ can be broadly distinguished from ‘hegemonic masculinity’ at the level of desire, each category reflects broad differences within it). As far as men who do *not* engage in adult–child sex are concerned therefore, it would also seem that they might be distinguished from those who do, in a variety of ways. Some men may simply never experience the requisite interest or desire, of course (although they might experience them given the presence of different conditions), or they may have such desires but lack the courage to pursue them. Alternatively, some men might simply never have the opportunity to act on desires of this kind, or they may have the opportunity but fear the consequences of taking it up. It is likely that the largest number of men however, although the structure of their desires is or could be compatible with adult–child sex, would simply choose not to pursue these desires, whether they have the opportunity or not. One is reminded again of Cameron and

Frazer's remark (see note 8, below), that most men 'could not' bring themselves to do what Peter Sutcliffe did, even though many men share some of Sutcliffe's desires. The point to be made is just that inclinations or propensities remain as such, until a decision is taken to act on them. Hence, the final link in the chain of causation is simply that, given all the other conditions discussed above, some men choose to engage in sex with children.¹⁰ The conditions under which the choice is made may reflect a more restricted 'room to manoeuvre' than those obtaining for someone who could not experience any desire in regard to children, or someone whose strength of character provides an asset in deliberating over the matter, but the element of choice is of considerable importance nonetheless, and ties in with the general view put forward above, of gender as practice.

Desire, Self-Critique and Transformation – Some Implications of Child Sexual Abuse for Practical Gender Politics

It has already been claimed above that a focus on gender (and desire) as practice is essential for theorizing the male preponderance in child sexual abuse, and it can now be added that such a view is also essential not only for the amelioration of child sexual abuse, but for grounding a practical politics of liberation. In order to elaborate these claims, it is worth considering some of the implications of perspectives which regard desire as being *outside* the sphere of practice. Consider first of all the following remarks of Roland Summit, a well-known American researcher into child sexual abuse:

There isn't an easy way to diagnose or pick out an individual who is susceptible to incest and that's why I say that, as far as I know, all of us males are susceptible. I have not found any compelling rule that makes any of us immune. Almost none of you as females is susceptible. That's not equal opportunity, but that's the reality. Women simply don't look to sex to prove power in an aggressive and intrusive way. Women don't look to their children quite as readily as the objects of great ecstasy or of orgiastic sexual pleasure. Somehow women's affectionate approach to their children is lots less genital, lots less orgiastic, lots less specifically sexual. (in Ross, 1980: 29)

While this kind of reference to the gendered character of child sexual abuse is a valuable first step in addressing the problem, it also reflects a sort of fatalistic resignation, as if male behaviour is governed by a kind of ceaseless determinism against which there is no 'compelling rule' to save us. To be a normal man in this regard

is to have absorbed or cultivated a propensity to prey on children sexually, and this facet of masculine character ever threatens to impel individual men into a slide toward abuse. Although the apparent resilience of hegemonic forms of masculine cathexis lend a disturbing credibility to Summit's claim, his remarks may also perpetuate the same politically conservative sense of inevitability that is often reflected in categorical pronouncements about male behaviour. In the latter regard, Brownmiller's account of rape reflects a similar posture on the nature of 'male behaviour'; for example, she paints a picture of the typical man as waiting to spring into raping activity at any moment, and as somehow co-ordinating this behaviour with the needs of patriarchy, or male dominance. For Brownmiller, all men are potential rapists, in the same way that for Summit, all men are potential sex abusers, although these authors seem to differ in what they conceive to be the *locus* of men's sexual behaviour. While Brownmiller construes the latter in terms of a conscious desire among men to control women (which is in turn apparently rooted in certain essential features of maleness), Summit seems to imbue it with a kind of mystical inevitability, as if even more enlightened or self-directing men should keep their fingers crossed — who knows, they may at any moment find themselves abusing children sexually. Summit does not really describe what this 'something about men' is — in fact, he appears to admit that he has no idea what it is, and this is related to his view that there is nothing that exempts particular men from acting in this way — alas, there is no 'compelling rule' to save us. His (probably unintended) *mystification* of men's involvement in child sexual abuse is just as unproductive as Brownmiller's conspiratorial account of raping behaviour, and each seems to entail the view that gender is something that *happens* to us. In either case, a flight from individual responsibility is given some unwarranted justification, and the crucial importance of *critique* for a reconstruction of social relations is obscured. On the contrary, it is arguable that gendered selves (and more importantly, gendered bodies) are first of all *contingent*, as suggested above, and secondly, that they can be taken up and *transformed* within the context of particular (collective or individual) projects. It is the latter point that Summit seems to miss — there is a sense in which self-critique and individual autonomy do act as a buttress against engaging in victimizing behaviour, but this is placed just as far beyond reach when the roots of behaviour are mystified as when they are grounded in some bedrock essential properties.

The claim that desire is or ought to be an object of practice, or that desire can be transformed or reconstructed, continues to generate considerable controversy, as reference to the current debate among feminists over 'pleasure and danger' can readily illustrate. Writers such as Califia argue that women must create new sets of sexual desires, for example (or, perhaps, unearth and give expression to previously repressed ones), where the idea seems to be that a particular (and contingent) channelling of female bodies has functioned to deny to women a whole spectrum of sexual pleasure. For writers such as Califia (referred to in Nava, 1984), gendered bodies are objects of practice, and she obviously regards sexual appetite as being sufficiently malleable to allow for the sort of creativity she recommends. Writers such as Cameron and Frazer (1987) seem to take a more cautious stand, however, and claim only that desire should be rigorously *questioned*, rather than directly transformed or repressed (although they also see the possibility that sexual desire might in the future be 'reconstructed' in a manner less compatible with sexual victimization). Valverde (1985) also argues that new sexualities can be 'built' as part of a 'sexual culture of resistance' (1985: 203), and she adds that this building should be directed not simply by reference to what is pleasurable, but to what is ethical. Elizabeth Carola similarly stresses that desires must be questioned, and that individuals must look at the social consequences involved in pursuing particular desires (in Cameron and Frazer, 1987: 176).

That changes in practice can have a significant impact on the structure of desire can also be seen among men whose questioning of current gender relations has led to changes in the manner in which their own sexual appetites are focused. If men are led to question the context within which particular sexual practices take place, they may also experience transformations in what they find erotic or pleasurable. It is not just that a questioning of the social order or an ongoing self-critique will have led them to extirpate or *deny* existing sets of responses (although it may), but that it may have had the consequence that particular experiences are no longer found to *be* pleasurable. Hence, men who join pro-feminist groups, or anti-rape groups and so on, may claim that their experience of such things as strip shows and pornography has moved from involving unreflective pleasure to active distaste. On the other hand of course, the incredible resilience of sexual response among paedophiles is now well known, and therapy designed to alter sexual desire has been shown to be extraordinarily difficult even among paedophiles

who themselves wish to have these alterations be successful.

However, this debate over the resilience of sexual desire is to a certain extent moot. Even if it is true that sexual desire is too deeply rooted to be an easy object of human practice (in the transformative sense), it is simply false that we are somehow the puppets of our gendered bodies, and although a capacity for sexual response to children is a necessary condition for an adult's engaging in sexually abusive behaviour with children, child sexual abuse is also the product of an individual failure to be self-directing and autonomous, as noted above (if there is any doubt about this point, we need only listen to the webs of rationalization that incest offenders spin – they usually either deny that victimization ever took place, or they acknowledge the victimization after the fact, but deny that they *knew* about it at the time). While dominant patterns of cathexis are rooted in wider practices and sets of relations, the role of individual choice and decision also needs to be given centre stage, and it is here that the feminist claim 'the personal is political' seems most compelling.

Summary and Conclusions

Although a satisfactory account of the male majority in child sexual abuse requires reference to both individual and sociocultural factors, the most crucial factors are arguably those bearing on the motivations or intentions of those who choose to interact sexually with children, and most of the above discussion has centred on these. Wider-ranging sociological theories offer an advantage over 'single factor' theories of course, but they have also tended to operate with concepts which submerge precisely those details about gender which most need accounting for. While numerous insights concerning masculinity and male sexuality offered by feminists and others must form part of a theorization of the male preponderance, these can be most usefully integrated in what has been called a practice-based sociology of masculinity. An account of the latter sort can describe the genesis of gendered propensities or inclinations to engage in particular forms of sexual behaviour, without losing sight of the terrain of individual choice, and without losing sight of the structure of power which arguably presents the patterns of prohibition and incitement within individual life histories in the first place. These patterns arguably result in broad differences between men and women at the level of desire, with masculinities involving structures of desire that are more or less compatible with adult-child

sex, while femininities have tended to be formed from within processes which deny the reality or the importance of independent or autonomous 'female desire'. Dominant processes of masculinization also tend to leave a second propensity in their wake, in the form of a tenuous 'masculine character structure' which reflects numerous conflicts over dependency and personal adequacy. Issues concerning adequacy, personal power and success are heavily thematized in hegemonic masculinity, as is a linkage of sexual conquest or release with competency. Hence, a tendency toward resolution of the conflicts in question through satisfaction of sexual desire may be set up. The *importance* of desire and its satisfaction within hegemonic masculinity is more than just an ideological theme; it is incorporated in the body and, given the appropriate conditions, it clamours to be heard as an outlet for resolving emotional conflicts over dependency.

It is also crucial to focus on the ways in which individual subjects are bound up with processes of 'gendering', and the way that these processes themselves reflect the commitments, interests and projects of individuals and groups within gender politics. Marx's famous remark that men make themselves, but not in circumstances of their own choosing, seems especially apt in this regard. In any case, it is difficult to imagine a phenomenon more suited than child sexual abuse, to highlighting some of these complex and far-reaching connections between personality, desire and the social structure of gender. The phenomenon also offers to highlight some of the most significant tensions within hegemonic masculinity itself, on the one hand, and it should lead as well to a more serious questioning of the origins of apparently pervasive sets of desire, on the other. One would hope that an awareness of the contours of child sexual abuse might also lead to a critical *assessment* of structures of desire themselves, where ethical considerations and reference to social consequences would not be submerged in debates about ultimate causes, or about essential features of maleness or femaleness. That desire so often seems impervious to critical scrutiny is perhaps another legacy of hegemonic masculinity, within which sexual desire might be described as being something which takes itself far too seriously. Hence, child sexual abuse can be said to present a unique challenge to men, which is at least partly addressable through an ongoing, critical self-scrutiny; while such a posture may have no straightforward effects on current social practices, a questioning, radical self-critique surely has a crucial role to play in opening up some of the contradictions in oppressive gender constructs, and in the struggle for a society in which sexual victimization has no place.

Notes

1. A more detailed overview of these and other accounts is offered in Liddle (1993).

2. The available prevalence data are now sufficiently comprehensive and reliable to suggest that under almost all of the definitions currently on offer, 'child sexual abuse' is a pervasive phenomenon involving large numbers of adults and children. The evidence also now clearly establishes a preponderance of male perpetrators or initiators in adult-child sexual interactions, and lends no credence to views sometimes advanced in the literature, concerning a 'hidden reservoir' of female perpetrators. Space restrictions preclude full consideration of the prevalence data or of the statistical contours of the male preponderance itself; summaries of the former can be found in Finkelhor (1986), Bagley and King (1990) and Liddle (1993); a discussion of the latter and of the 'hidden reservoir' thesis is also offered in Liddle (1993). There are a number of important definitional issues surrounding the use of terms such as 'child sexual abuse' which also cannot be addressed here, but the term will be understood in the following remarks as referring broadly to direct adult-child sexual interactions. 'Sexual interactions' can be of either a 'contact' or 'non-contact' sort — the former category is usually defined as including sexual intercourse, masturbation and various types of sexual touching, etc., while the latter is usually thought to include sexual threats, exposure and invitations to touch. In keeping with almost all of the available prevalence studies, the term 'child sexual abuse' will not be construed here as referring to phenomena in which no child is involved as a *direct* participant.

3. Among the earlier works of this kind are Firestone (1973), Greer (1971) and Millet (1972); later works on sexual intimacy and oppression are numerous, but see MacKinnon (1982) and Stanko (1985); on 'compulsory heterosexuality', see Rich (1980).

4. For a discussion of instrumental models of male agency with specific reference to violence against women, see Liddle (1989).

5. Foucault has been criticized in these terms by Mark Poster, for example, who notes that an absence of discussion about 'the affective nuances of sexual relations' might be the 'great lacuna of Foucault's history of sexuality' (1986: 214).

6. That sexuality is socially constructed is also a central theme in the work of 'interactionists' such as Gagnon and Simon (1974) and Plummer (1975), and also in recent 'gay histories'; see also Weeks (1981, 1985).

7. The term 'gender regime' is Connell's, and is used to refer to the structural inventory of a particular institution (such as the family or the state, for example); the term 'state of play' is also employed by Connell, where it is used in Gramsci's sense to refer to a balance of social forces.

8. Cameron and Frazer (1987) have similarly noted that although most men do not move on to become sex murderers, the difference between men who do and men who do not is not to be found at the level of their desires. In their discussion of Peter Sutcliffe, whom they describe as seeming disturbingly *normal*, these writers note that:

What was needed — it still is needed — was an approach that would recognize that although the murderer is by no means typical, he is a product of his social order; though few men could do what Sutcliffe did, many men share some of Sutcliffe's desires. (1987: 33)

9. Brod appears to be suggesting that men can be in a state of false consciousness with respect to their own desires; the desires that they think they have are

not 'really' their own. For a thorough discussion of the 'men in crisis' sort of book that was popular during the 1970s, see Carrigan et al. (1987).

10. This remark is not meant to cover those men who act under some sort of *compulsion*, of course. However, although some paedophiles may be judged to be powerfully *driven* to seek out children for sex, the typical adult perpetrator in child sexual abuse is clearly not of this fixated type.

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A. Mark Liddle, formerly Research Associate at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, is Research and Policy Development Officer at the London office of NACRO (National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders), where he is conducting a three-year evaluation of community safety strategy in a large local authority area. He has published articles in the fields of crime prevention and sociology, and is currently writing a book on masculinity and state formation.