Kelly, Liz. "Weasel Words (1996)." *The Trouble & Strife Reader*. Ed. Deborah Cameron and Joan Scanlon. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. 48–53. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849662956.ch-007>>.

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7. Weasel Words (1996)

Liz Kelly

Over the last few years I have become increasingly alarmed by the ways in which feminist perspectives on child sexual abuse are being undercut by the acceptance of flawed concepts and ideas. It would be bad enough if this were confined to professional perspectives, but more and more I have encountered women's organisations using the word *paedophile* and subscribing to 'cycle of abuse' theories. The ease with which this language now trips off women's tongues disturbs me greatly; do we too — on one level — want to distance ourselves from the implications of sexual abuse in childhood, confine it to limited contexts, have a group of men who we can justify thinking and talking about as 'other'?

Immediately the word *paedophile* appears we have moved away from recognition of abusers as 'ordinary men' — fathers, brothers, uncles, colleagues — and returned to the more comfortable view of them as a small minority who are fundamentally different from most men. Attention shifts from the centrality of power and control to notions of sexual deviance, obsession and 'addiction'. 'Paedophilia' returns us to the medical and individualised explanations which we have spent so much time and energy attempting to deconstruct and challenge.

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

In much of the clinical literature on sex offenders, 'paedophiles' are separated not only from men in general, but also from other men who sexually abuse. Similarities — in

the forms of abuse, in the strategies abusers use to entrap, control and silence children—are ignored. Fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers who abuse are hardly ever suspected of being interested in the consumption, or production, of child pornography, nor are they thought to be involved in child prostitution. This in turn means that investigations of ‘familial sexual abuse’ seldom search for or ask questions about these forms of abuse. This contrasts with what we know from adult survivors who tell of relatives showing them pornography, expecting them to imitate it and being required to pose for it. Some also tell of being prostituted by relatives. A significant proportion of organised abuse networks are based in families.

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

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

These confusions have, if not created, at least contributed to a context in which men who seek to justify their wish to abuse have been able to organise politically, and even seek the status of an oppressed ‘sexual minority’. They also form the basis for a differential approach in terms of intervention, with responses being proposed in relation to ‘paedophiles’—such as life licences, and denial of any contact with children—which would cause outrage if proposed in the case of fathers. The issue here is not whether the responses themselves are appropriate, but the way in which spurious distinctions are being made between ‘types’ of abusers; these result in abuse by family members being regarded as less ‘deviant’, and therefore, less serious than abuse by men outside the family.

Cycle of Abuse

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

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

No study has yet demonstrated that there is an obvious 'cycle' even within samples of convicted offenders; the range of those reporting experiences of abuse in childhood varies between 30% and 80%. Few of these studies define abuse in childhood in the same way. Some consider whether the individual was abused in the same way as he has subsequently abused children, whereas others include *any* form of abuse in the individual's childhood whilst focusing on *sexual* offending in adulthood. Yet the psychological mechanisms involved in moving from experiences of physical abuse and neglect to sexual abuse cannot be the same as those where the same form of abuse is involved.

In all studies to date either a majority or significant minority cannot be fitted into the theory. Alongside these glaring problems with the evidence for the proposition, there is seldom any exploration of the precise mechanisms whereby those who have been victimised become victimisers—which is not simple repetition, as many models suggest, but rather a *reversal* of roles.

A rather deft theoretical sleight of hand occurs when proponents of this pernicious idea recognise that women do not proceed in great numbers to abuse. There are two ways in which mothers who have been abused are implicated: experiences of abuse are presumed either to make women less able to protect their children, or to

impel them to choose an abuser as a partner. (The influence of this idea is been so strong that some social services departments consider knowledge of a woman's abuse in childhood sufficient to place her children on the at risk register!)

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

The second proposition, that women choose abusers as partners, is remarkable. Very few women begin relationships knowing their male partner has abused children—prospective employers have legal rights to information about Schedule 1 offenders, prospective sexual partners do not. If 'choice' is operating here it is made by men. We know that some experienced abusers deliberately target single mothers. If we listened to what women have to say we would also know that some men, when trusted with information about a woman's own abuse or that of her child by another man, use that as 'permission' to act similarly.

Recognising the deliberateness of abusers' behaviour is disturbing; it is much more comfortable to believe that abusers and/or their partners are merely repeating what they learnt in childhood. 'Cycle of abuse' is based on a psychic determinism: experience A leads to behaviour B with minimal choice/agency in between. Apart from offering abusers *carte blanche*, it makes the thousands of survivors who, as result of their own experiences, choose to never treat children in similar ways, invisible. This theory does an outrageous injustice to countless women whose courageous testimony made sexual abuse in childhood a social issue. It also makes a travesty of support for children, since the aim becomes to prevent them 'repeating the cycle' rather than to enable them to cope with having been victimised. By presuming the impacts and meanings of abuse we close off the most important question of all: what makes the difference in how children and adults make sense of, and act in relation to, experiences of childhood victimisation?

It is psychic determinism which connects 'cycle of abuse' to the view that the impacts of sexual abuse are in every respect, and in all cases, devastating: that survivors can only be rescued from an appalling future through intensive therapy.

However, studies which use community samples, rather than adults or children in therapy, discover a wide range of impacts; from those experiencing extreme levels of distress through to many who fit within the 'normal' range.

The negative consequences of the 'cycle of abuse' idea are being most strongly felt by child and adult survivors. It is now commonplace for adults who have been abused in childhood—women and men—to *believe* that they cannot be trusted around children. In my experience when women are asked to explore the issue in more depth none have felt a desire to sexually abuse children. Their conviction that this will be the case comes solely from ideas in the public sphere. So powerful is the idea of a 'cycle', though, that even academics who recognise that most people do not 'repeat the cycle' refer to this as 'breaking' it. We need to ask ourselves why this notion has taken such a hold within public and professional thinking. Most crucially it excludes more challenging explanations—those which question power relations between men and women, adults and children. 'Breaking cycles' is a much easier and safer goal to discuss than changing the structure of social relations.

Some important connections

There are two contexts in which the concept of 'paedophilia' is used. One proclaims difference, as already discussed, in order to protect 'normal' men. The other asserts difference in order to legitimise abusive behaviour.

This 'sexual freedom' model is frequently presented as an alternative and radical approach. It is based upon a belief that all laws on sexual conduct, except where explicit force or violence are used, are an incursion into individual freedom and privacy, and as such a form of coercive social control. This has been argued in relation to children and young people by self-defined paedophile groupings like PIE (Paedophile Information Exchange) in Britain and NAMBLA (North American Man/Boy Love Association) in the USA. The philosophical assumptions which are the basis of this perspective are:

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

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

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

The importance of maintaining our feminist perspective and challenging approaches which refuse to name men and male power was graphically illustrated by the hysterical response in sections of the media to the recent publication of *Splintered Lives*, a report on the sexual exploitation of children. What some male radio and newspaper journalists balked at was not the need to take sexual exploitation seriously, but our temerity in questioning the distinction between 'paedophiles' and other men. Taking note of what resistance to feminist analysis turns on has always been an important guide for me in knowing when we were onto something important. Talk about the 'paedophile' and the 'cycle of abuse' indicates a point of resistance to feminist analysis which needs to be challenged *now*.

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