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## The implications of psychotherapeutic discourses for victims and offenders of female perpetuated child sexual abuse

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**Abstract:** Although child sexual abuse has been studied extensively in the academic literature, research studies have often failed to contemplate the female child molester or to initiate specific protocols for the psychotherapeutic treatment of both offenders and victims of female perpetuated child sexual abuse. By analysing the transcribed corpus of six semi-structured interviews using Foucauldian discourse analysis, this article examines the ways in which expertise and authority play out in the language practices of six experienced psychotherapists around this contentious issue. Findings indicate that female child molesters are socially represented in varying and often contradictory ways and that practitioners may face ideological dilemmas when working therapeutically with this client group. Five main narratives emerged from the data: 1) A taboo subject 2) Avoiding the elephant in the room 3) Letting down the sisterhood 4) A discourse of contradictions and 5) The female paedophile as a 'cloak and dagger figure' or 'loving caregiver'? Informed by a linguistic paradigm which views language as constructive rather than representative, this article draws attention to the effects and contingencies of current psychotherapeutic discourses on female perpetuated child sexual abuse. It aims to shed light on the potential complexities of recovery from this type of abuse and to point to new directions in the field of psychotherapeutic research.

**Keywords:** Female child molester, child abuse, professional discourses, child protection, feminism, Foucauldian discourse analysis

**S**exual offending has traditionally been viewed as gender asymmetrical perpetuated only by males (Turner et al., 2009). As such, much of the literature has focused on victim impact issues and developing sex offender treatment programmes relating to the sexual crimes of men. Because the social construction of femininity is inconsistent with the idea of women as sexual aggressors (Wilbraham, 2004), female perpetuated child sexual abuse is rarely acknowledged let

alone openly discussed within the therapeutic setting. This is particularly the case when the offence has been initiated by a lone female or a mother figure (Denov, 2004a; Gannon & Cortoni, 2010).

My motivation for conducting research on this topic arose from my increasing awareness of female perpetuated child sexual abuse as a forensic psychotherapist practicing in an addiction service. As clients began to hint at rather than openly speak about their sexual abuse experiences at the hands of women, I reflected upon my own discursive ambiguity and

began questioning long held assumptions and beliefs related to contradictory gender ideas, especially the difficulties I experienced in reconciling a maternal subject position with a sexual offender one. This involved reflexivity and scrutinising my counselling practices (Whitaker, Ryan & Cox, 2011).

Moreover, having been introduced to Foucault's (1982) work during my undergraduate training in psychology and later on in psychotherapy and forensic psychology, I became interested in the role of social representations and discourses in defending and maintaining stigmatising practices and the impact this might have on identities. In addressing a gap in the knowledge, I thought that Foucauldian ideas could be applied to provide ideological insight into poorly explored discourses particularly around the links between gender, power, violence and abuse (Reid, 2012). I liked the idea of exploring what we actually do in our talk as practitioners and resolved to carry out an investigation into this 'hot topic' at an ideological level of analysis thus linking the macro context of powerful normalising discourses to the micro context of professionals constructing their professional identities at work. The main aims were to explore what happens in the therapeutic setting around this subject matter, to reveal potential blind spots and to unsettle taken for granted assumptions. The key objectives were:

- To interrogate what is said by experienced psychotherapists about female perpetuated child sexual abuse;
- To examine the kinds of social explanations underpinning the discourses;
- To explore what can be learned from practitioners' discursive practices to inform the field of psychotherapeutic policy and practice.

## Underpinning Concepts

### Significance of Study and Justification for Research

Foucault (1972) has provided a critical lens through which power/knowledge can be explored by depicting how deeply ingrained discourses are produced and conceptualised and where certain objects of knowledge are represented as real and thinkable whilst others are rendered invisible (Parker, 2004; Kramer, 2019). Discourses are an institutionalised and a historicised set of constructed ideas, rules, norms, and practices which are in a constant state of flux (Foucault, 1971; Parker, 2004; Kramer, 2019). Discursive practices locate subject positions into categories such as masculinity or femininity which are often taken for granted (Wilbraham, 2004). Discourses however are ideological insofar as discursive practices within similar categories can exist, negate, and/or

compete with one another (Brookes & McEney, 2020). Which discourses establish themselves as dominant at any one time is dependent upon a range of factors including the public media (Levenson, Brannon, & Fortney; Zack, Lang & Dirks, 2018) the discourse of powerful actors (Foucault, 1982; Kendall & Wickham, 1999) and institutions such as psychiatry which represents an important platform for the re-articulation of ideology (Brookes & McEney, 2020; Kramer, 2019; Parker, 2004).

### Current Diagnostic Categorisation of Sexual Offending and its Implications for Psychotherapeutic Practice

The terms paedophilia and hebephilia have been produced as diagnostic categories in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-1V) (Harrison, Manning, & McCarton, 2010). Paedophilia refers to an enduring sexual attraction to prepubescent children and hebephilia to pubescent children aged between thirteen and fifteen years (Harrison, Manning & McCarton, 2010). Both are socially constructed phenomena which are historically and culturally specific (De Mause, 2008; Hays & Baker, 2014; Kramer, 2019). Neither of these domains were recognised as clinical entities or if acted upon (criminal behaviours) until they were introduced into French law in the nineteenth century (Davidson, 2008; Foucault, 1976/84).

Within western society, the offending behaviour of paedophiles/hebephiles are conceptualised around the notion of gender, subjectivity and harm (Hays & Baker, 2014) Two main discourses (psychological and feminist) exist simultaneously and are deployed in the discursive practices of both professionals and media sources to explain this kind of conduct (Hays & Baker, 2014; Feelgood & Hoyer, 2008). From a psychological perspective, the paedophiles/hebephiles sexuality is viewed as harmful as their actions can involve unequal power relations with emotionally immature children who do not have the ability to consent or comprehend that they are being abused (Hays & Baker, 2014; Feelgood & Hoyer, 2008).

Feminist discourses on the other hand are grounded in patriarchy and preconceived notions of male domination and female victimisation (Feelgood & Hoyer, 2008). These discourses frequently portray the sexuality of males alongside a continuum of their potential to abuse women and/or children (Hays & Baker, 2014; Hislop, 2001; Landor, 2009). Whilst the women's rights movement has helped reveal the extent of male sexual violence in both public and private spheres, they have been less forthcoming in approaching women's capacity to inflict violence, particularly sexual violence (Brayford, 2012; Hislop, 2001; Landor, 2009).

## The Female Child Sexual Offender

Whilst the introduction of typologies of female child molesters and the more recent public arrest of British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell (for her role in the sexual exploitation and abuse of young girls) are indicators of a shift in more traditional feminist discourses; social representations of women remain inconsistent with the idea of a female paedophile (Christensen, 2018; Daly 1998; Mathews, Mathews & Spelz, 1989; Gannon & Cortoni, 2010; Hislop, 2001; Saradjian, 1996). These representations have been backed up by the powerful discourses of psychiatry which conclude that acts of paraphilia including paedophilia are extremely rare in females (Hays & Baker, 2014).

Indeed, women that do engage in paedophilic acts are typically categorised as predisposed offenders and viewed as psychologically impaired due to prior sexual victimisation in childhood by men (Mathews, Mathews & Spelz, 1989) Because of these presuppositions, this type of female sexual offender can be perceived by psychiatry and the criminal justice system as less culpable than their male counterparts (Denov, 2004a; Tardiff et al., 2005). Likewise, in heterosexual co-offending partnerships, the female offender is frequently depicted as a passive, overly dependent woman who has been coerced by a male(s) to engage in sexual practices with minors (Gannon & Rose, 2010; Kite & Tyson, 2014). As a paradigm which views language as constructive rather than representative, this article draws attention to the effects and contingencies of current psychotherapeutic discourses on female perpetuated child sexual abuse as they affect how both victims and perpetrators of this kind of abuse are heard, understood, and ultimately treated.

## Literature Review

In reviewing the literature, I sought to examine current prevalence rates of female perpetuated child sexual abuse and to take a critical view of the discourses around this topic. No previous studies examining the topic of female paedophilia using Foucauldian discourse analysis were found in the search. Discursive studies tended to focus on hebephilia in women and more specifically the female teacher sexual offender (Davidson, 2008; Landor, 2009; Reid, 2012; Zack, Lang, & Dirks, 2018). The literature review begins with an exploration of how female child molesters are currently positioned within western society both publicly and professionally. It then goes on to evaluate the prevalence rates of this kind of offending behaviour.

## Media Discourses

In relation to media discourses of sexual offending, Zack, Lang, & Dirks (2018) conducted a discursive study using thematic coding methodology to investigate how the presence of male victims of female sexual offenders' challenges public views on sexuality, gender, rape, and power. Their results pointed to a double standard in that although the public presume equality in both the sentencing and management of male and female paedophiles/hebephiles, more punitive attitudes were expressed towards male sexual aggressors. Moreover, in Reid's (2012) discursive study, the media appears to have a romanticised view of female teacher sexual offenders constructing young male victims of hebephile women as lucky and representing their sexual relations as a rite of passage. These mainstream discourses can have dangerous implications for society as according to Gannon & Rose (2008), the results of several quantitative studies indicate that male prisoners with convictions of rape have frequently been sexually victimised by women during their early teenage years.

## Professional Discourses

In relation to professional responses to sex crimes, there appears to be a distinction in how allegations of child sexual abuse are received and reported by child protection agencies and that this is determined by the gender of the alleged offender (Bunting, 2005; Lambert & Hammond, 2009). In Buntings' (2005) and Lambert & Hammond's (2009) quantitative research studies using questionnaires, professionals were disinclined to perceive women as capable of playing an equal or pivotal role in the sexual abuse of children or that they could experience deviant sexual arousal towards minors. Likewise, in Denov's (2004b) qualitative study using thematic coding methodology, mental health professionals and police officials had an unofficial yet habitual way of perceiving rape and sexual molestation with men as culprits and women as victims. Even when faced with irrefutable evidence of the sexual abuse of children by females, professionals made every effort to minimise their actions, view them as less culpable and to see the abuse as innocuous (Denov, 2004b). This indirect negation of women's potential for sexual violence is likely to contribute to recognition barriers in both official sources and policy and practice including psychotherapeutic practice (Brayford, 2012; Bunting, 2005; Denov, 2004b).

## Methodology

### Establishing Prevalence Rates of Female Perpetuated Child Sexual Abuse

A range of methodologies including in depth interviews, large scale self-report studies and case files have all pointed to the existence of female perpetrated child sexual abuse (Gannon & Cortoni, 2010; Ten Bensele, Gibbs & Burkey, 2016). However, there is disagreement among researchers as to its prevalence (McLeod, 2015). Differing percentages of sexual victimisation by females reflect sample selection and the particular methodology employed in obtaining results (Brayford, 2012; Gannon & Cortoni, 2010). With large discrepancies in data sets, establishing true prevalence is difficult if not impossible and sexual victimisation perpetrated by women, particularly within the private sphere is likely to be both under-identified and under reported (Brayford, 2012; Saradjian, 1996).

The Lucy Faithful Foundation child protection charity warns that the issue of female perpetrated child sexual abuse far exceeds current conviction rates and estimates figures of between 48,000 and 64,000 female child molesters in the United Kingdom (Townsend & Syal, 2009). Furthermore, the monitoring of calls to the UK charity Childline between 2005-2006 demonstrated a high prevalence rate (NSPCC, 2007). Of the 82% of children (n=6763) who reported the gender of their abuser, 44% of boys and 5% of girls stated their perpetrator was female (Brayford, 2012; Peter, 2009). Indeed, rates of reporting female child sexual abuse to the Childline Helpline has increased dramatically over the past five years at a rate of 132% as compared to a 27% increase in the reporting of child sexual abuse by male perpetrators (Brayford, 2012; Peter, 2009).

### Research Aim

Building on a well-established body of work within social and discursive psychology, the present study contributes to the literature and the growing interest in the topic of female perpetrated child sexual abuse by exploring psychotherapist's discourses in the context of their therapeutic work in private practice. The study seeks to answer the following research question: "What do interviews with experienced psychotherapists reveal about current social representations of female child molesters and how is female perpetrated child sexual abuse portrayed by professionals in contemporary society"?

### Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was a French philosopher, political activist and literary critic who was interested in the relationship between knowledge and power. Foucault (1971) was particularly interested in how the topic of sex was discussed through criminal, religious and medical discourses and he examined what people in France held to be true about the nature of crime and how they sought to protect society from it (Whitaker, Ryan & Cox, 2011). Foucault (1971) argued that the development of concepts and theories around sexuality tended to gravitate towards certain themes at certain points in time. Through analysing what is said about these kinds of topics we can see how certain discourses might shape political decisions for instance how we treat those that transgress against societal values (Gee, 2005). For Foucault (1971), discourse delineates into various institutions such as psychiatry and/or the prison system, all with their own intrinsic logic on how to discipline society. This has real consequences for the way people live their lives (Foucault, 1971; Gee, 2005; Parker, 2004).

Foucauldian discourse analysis is a research method for studying language (spoken or written) in relation to its social context. Here, language is viewed as a social activity which is influenced by the wider society and its various institutions, commonly known as macro discourses (Parker, 2004). Discourse covers all forms of communication and shapes the world we live in (Gee, 2005). When professionals (such as psychotherapists) communicate, they draw on assumptions and generally accepted knowledge claims (Parker, 2004). They make statements that make sense to others and in so doing, either reinforce those assumptions or challenge them. Either way, they contribute to the flow of knowledge over time (Parker, 2004).

Psychotherapists as powerful agents have an important role to play in safeguarding the interests of their clients by challenging power imbalances and issues related to social justice through revealing the unspoken and unacknowledged aspects of human behaviour and its implications (Parker, 2004). Importantly, it holds social realities to be relative upon interested parties and the political nature of these interests (Foucault, 1982; Parker, 2004).

Foucault (1972) coined the terms archaeology and genealogy to help map the networks of accepted concepts and taken for granted truth claims. Genealogy focuses attention on the constructive dimensions of discourse whereas archaeology focuses on the subjectification of people (Foucault, 1982).

Subjectivity is a complex product rather than a pre-existing condition and functions as a process by which individuals position themselves and others as subjects of a debate. Certain people within society such as psychiatrists or psychologists are made 'authorities of delimitation' (Foucault, 1982). These are individuals who through their training and education are granted the authority to label, define and discuss the objects (clients/patients) of a discursive formation (Foucault, 1982; Gee, 2005).

The most important challenge from a Foucauldian perspective is to understand how and why we hold something as knowledge by looking for contingencies (what might happen) rather than causes and holding a healthy scepticism in relation to all political arguments (Foucault, 1982; Kendall & Wickham, 1999). This involves the suspension of judgment in order to allow problems to be viewed in a new light. An important task of this study was to uncover latent ideologies in the psychotherapeutic endeavour and to question their taken-for-granted nature.

## Data Collection

Methods of recruiting participants were based on purposive sampling beginning with some personal contacts (gatekeepers) within the field to allow participants to be contacted through word of mouth. Participants were also contacted purposively through P.S.I (Psychological Society of Ireland), I.A.C.P (Irish Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy) and B.P.S (British Psychological Society) websites. Forty emails were sent to potential participants. Twenty failed to respond, fourteen responded but maintained that they did not possess enough knowledge in the area to contribute to the research. Six psychotherapists agreed to participate.

The material presented in this article represents the corpus of semi-structured interviews with six accredited psychotherapists in private practice, four females and two males. All the professionals were highly experienced practitioners and had been working in their current field for 6–30 years (Mean=14 years). Five participants were trained in integrative psychotherapy (using a combination of modalities including cognitive behavioural, systemic family therapy, psychodynamic and person-centred counselling) and one participant was psychoanalytically trained. It was not necessary for participants to have experience working with victims/offenders of this type of abuse. Rather, the focus was on how they were creating discourse around the topic. However, five out of six practitioners did claim to have either direct or indirect contact with client cases involving female child sexual abuse.

## Ethical Considerations

Whilst there were no significant risks associated with participation in this study (as identified by the ethics board at Coventry University, UK); given the emotive and challenging subject matter, special consideration was given to the psychotherapist-participants during the research process. Taking an open and transparent approach, each professional was given a recruitment letter, informed consent form and participant information sheet clearly outlining the topic area, purpose and benefits of taking part. If participants experienced any adverse emotional effects from the study, they would be referred to a counsellor at Coventry University following interviews. Each professional was advised that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Permission to record interviews was granted by all participants. In order to adhere to legislation and assure anonymity, no other demographic information was included. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names (Christenson, 2018).

## Procedure

Due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted by the researcher online and audio-recorded through the business platform Zoom between March and May 2020. Interviews were approximately fifty minutes in duration and the data was transcribed verbatim. The aim was to elicit in depth responses using a semi-structured protocol. This enabled the researcher to structure and guide the interviews and to elicit more information if needed (Christensen, 2018). Open-ended questions helped draw out more detail concerning professionals' discursive constructions thus minimizing the risk of desirability bias (Christensen, 2018; Gee, 2005). Topics centred around the professional's experience of working therapeutically with this client group, eliciting characteristics of female child molesters and their victims, exploring women's capacity for sexual aggression and deviant sexual arousal, modus operandi of female child molesters and training initiatives for professionals in the management of such offenders (Please see Appendix 1).

## Data Management

The management of data was based on a broad theoretical framework involving a step like approach derived by Foucault (1971) and (Kendall & Wickham, 1999). This involved the researchers' immersion into the data in order to get well acquainted with the accounts and to create thematic summaries by asking these questions (Potter & Wetherell, 1995; Foucault, 1971):

- What rhetorical devices are being used to make an argument – personal account, nuances, metaphors and/or counterstatements? (These are linguistic techniques used by individuals when their primary objective is to influence beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour. They can also be called slanters because they are used to give a positive or negative slant on a particular subject)
- Whose voice is designated special rights, advantages, or immunities and to what effect? (For instance, might female offenders be viewed as less culpable than their male counterparts because of the ways they are socially positioned within society?)
- What normalising judgements are at play? (What generalised and taken for granted statements are being used in the discourse)
- What class of person gains or loses from the deployment of such discourses? (Who is advantaged by the narratives and who is disadvantaged).

The next phase involved identifying core themes, functions, and consequences of the discourses (each identified through colour coding) with particular emphasis on identifying patterns of variation and consistency as well as contradictions within the dialogue. The final phase involved making hypotheses about these functions and their effects whilst simultaneously examining the intrinsic power relations (Parker, 2004; Potter & Wetherell, 1995).

## Data Analysis and Discussion

From a Foucauldian perspective, interview talk is not merely a mode of relaying information. Rather, professionals choose to use it more or less strategically and, in a manner they feel appropriate or required in a specific situation (Kramer, 2019). The focus of these interviews was on psychotherapist's narratives about female child molesters and how they portray the whole issue of female perpetuated child sexual abuse. It related core themes within the data to discursive patterns within broader societal contexts (macro discourses). Normalising judgments, metaphors and expressions were systematically coded and interpreted in relation to how language practices contribute to the reproduction or resistance of ideologies in the formation of subjectivities (Wilbraham, 2004).

Five main discourses were established and these are addressed in turn:

1. A taboo subject
2. Avoiding the elephant in the room
3. Letting down the sisterhood

4. A discourse of contradictions
5. The female paedophile as a 'cloak and dagger figure' or 'loving caregiver'?

### Discourse One – A Taboo Subject

According to Denov (2004a), the formal culture is an important source of occupational knowledge. Through training, education and continuing professional development, professional organisations such as that governing psychotherapy/psychiatry furnish a cultural code and in so doing advocate a unique set of beliefs, values and practices which are generally adopted by those working within these organisations. From a micro level of language to a macro level, traditional sexual scripts and gender identities which view women as maternal figures rather than sexual aggressors is endorsed and maintained. Whether an actual denial of female paedophilia is a position taken up by the psychotherapists, or whether they are using the macro discourse of denial as a rhetorical device to distance themselves from this subject as a way to manage an ideological dilemma, is open to interpretation. Either way, throughout their talk, the psychotherapist-participants subject such abuse to a double edict of taboo and silence:

The taboo we don't like talking about (Sonya)

More of a taboo because women are perceived as the caregivers (Sally)

You're led to believe it's a male, exclusively male thing (William)

It's still one of those no-go areas because it, it's so challenging of any nature of what we would think of, uh, the maternal (Robert)

It would be difficult for people to get their heads around it (Reena)

This taboo also appears to permeate the formal organisational culture of psychotherapy which has omitted training and education on female perpetuated child sexual abuse. Despite the dramatic increase in calls to the Childline Helpline involving sexual abuse by women over the past decade (Brayford, 2012), not one of these six experienced psychotherapists had received any specific training or continuing professional development in this area, nor did they have any knowledge of data and information related to it:

I don't have, have that knowledge or data but I do think it should be widely distributed to counsellors (Sally)

I don't think there is such data in Ireland and if there is, I'm not aware of it (Freda)

I think we're closed on this issue because it hasn't been brought to our attention (Freda)

I've no real knowledge of the subject, you know (Reena)

I don't even know what the treatment looks like as I know so little about it (Sonya)

If you're talking about crime and punishment, all of that information has to be around before we can implement some sort of strategy (William)

The effect of this omission in training protocols is likely to contribute to recognition barriers affecting policy and practice in the management and treatment of female sexual offenders and their victims.

### **Discourse Two – Avoiding the Elephant in the Room**

The elephant in the room is an English metaphor for a controversial issue that no one wants to discuss due to social, personal, or political embarrassment or awkwardness. Throughout this second discursive formation (which links in with the first), female perpetuated child sexual abuse is construed by professionals as something that is present but avoided at all costs because of its controversy and capacity to evoke discomfort:

Brings feelings of disgust and revulsion that any female could behave in this way (Freda)

It's an area that I actually choose not to think about a lot (Sally)

Moreover, whether William in the following extract is merely adopting the position of a professional monitor of unsaid assumptions to construct himself as a competent practitioner in an interview setting, or whether he really does render women invisible as potential perpetrators, is questionable. Either way, the following statement demonstrates a possible effect of avoiding the 'elephant in the room' in that sexual abuse by a female perpetrator may not get picked up by the therapist even if their client is trying to disclose it:

This could slip by, like this could really slip by your radar. You may, you may not even pick it up really. Even if somebody is saying it, its, you're not, your maybe not even dealing with it in the same way as you would if somebody came in and said they were a victim of a, male, um, sex offender (William)

Discursive practices by powerful agents such as psychotherapists have a function and directly impact how both victims and offenders are perceived and treated. The negation of women's potential for sexual violence against children is likely to affect victim disclosure in that victims of such abuse may decide that the subject is best avoided in the therapeutic setting. This implicit collusion of disaffirmation has far reaching consequences as the client may be retraumatised and the corrective emotional experience normally experienced through the psychotherapeutic process denied.

### **Discourse Three - Letting Down the Sisterhood**

In their discursive practices, professionals draw on assumptions and generally accepted knowledge, common sense, beliefs, and background knowledge. They talk in a way that makes sense to their audience and in so doing either challenge or reinforce these assumptions. In the following excerpt, Reena talks about the challenges people face in confronting women's capacity to engage in offending behaviours normally assigned to men as well as challenging deeply rooted cultural ideals of motherhood. In particular, she talks about the difficulties reconciling two positions, that of the mother and that of the sexual offender:

So, it would be difficult for people to get their head around and to think, well, no, she was actually, because it's very coercive, it's very controlling, it's about dominance, it's about power, it's about manipulation. So, you know, people don't want to see or view a mother figure like that (Reena)

A pressure or tension to keep the status quo is also evident as professionals who deviate from traditional sexual scripts and speak openly about women's capacity for sexual aggression are often viewed as betraying feminist principles. In the following excerpt, Robert talks about his work colleague who was writing up her PHD around the issue of female perpetuated child sexual abuse and in so doing became a target for discrimination:

She got very negative criticism from women's groups, from, uh, she has a, um, feminist background. And uh, she got very critical feedback from colleagues because she was daring to actually say that women perpetuate abuse as men (Robert)

This unspoken assumption that we all belong to the sisterhood and where venturing even the mildest criticism of women is letting the side down is evident in the following passages. Most concerning is the implicit threat to survivors of female

perpetuated child sexual abuse not to expose their female perpetrators for fear of letting down the sisterhood:

There is some sense of, this will sound too jargony, but you know, you know, you mustn't let down the sisterhood, you know, because, you know, how can I be telling a man that my, my mother, you know, the female victim, you know, did this to me (Robert)

So, I think it would be quite challenging for anybody who would be coming through that trauma to say, you know, that they just dislike or disregard or have very strong feelings of dislike, um, you know, towards their mother (Reena)

A real reluctance to kind of actually admit that this has happened (Sally)

It could be argued that female sexual aggressors have much to gain from the deployment of feminist discourses that sustain and reinforce traditional sexual scripts in that it may facilitate avoidance of their detection, granting them a certain immunity whilst simultaneously silencing their victims.

#### **Discourse Four - A Discourse of Contradictions**

Whilst one set of discourses focused on silencing the issue of female paedophilia and preserving feminist principles and ideals, another set of discourses possibly drawn from a more psychological perspective appeared to contradict the professional's former talk. The following passages demonstrate a resistance of traditional feminist discourses with women's capacity for sexual aggression and deviant sexual arousal agreed upon by all the psychotherapist participants. This capacity is mainly allayed in gender-equal terms:

I do think they are very capable of engaging in, in exploitative and more deviant behaviour, yeah (Reena)

Uh, definitely, yes, I do think they have capacity (Freda)

I would imagine that the array of things that women might be into sexually and their preferences and if you think about fetishes and stuff like that; I would imagine that they would be equal (Sally)

There's a small group of people, who are, who are predatory paedophiles, male and female (Robert)

The behaviour is no different across the gender, its abuse is abuse (William)

So, we have this image of women, you know are sacred and mothers would never touch a child and I, I don't get it. I don't buy into that, I can't, you know, they, everybody has capacity, so, women are no different (Sonya)

Furthermore, unlike Denov's (2004b) study whose participants (police officials and psychiatrists) rendered female perpetuated child sexual abuse as innocuous, Sonya, Robert and Reena construe this abuse as a gender-neutral assault by focusing on the damage involved in the sexual exploitation of children by either gender:

Do you know if both people have raped a child, why would it be any different because it's a woman? I don't see it as any different. They have caused the same amount of pain, the same amount of damage, the same amount of upheaval in the person's life (Sonya)

It's as if the psyche of the person is penetrated and abused inappropriately, there's an intrusion into your very being (Robert)

The significance of the psychological, um, control and the ability to get into that really deeply rooted, into the psyche of another soul and kind of, you know, you know, get them so manipulated and so gaslighted to such an extent that they, they don't, they don't know what's real anymore (Reena)

However, despite the apparent acceptance of overt sexual aggression capabilities of women and the harm this can engender to victims, some participants clearly faced an ideological dilemma integrating both psychological and feminist discourses into a coherent whole. This is not surprising as from a feminist perspective, sexual abuse emanates from patriarchal constructions of sexuality and gender and where women are perceived as largely asexual and non-aggressive apart from responding to male constructions of sexuality and desire (Gannon & Cortoni, 2010; Hetherington, 1999).

The following utterances reveal the work of subject positioning by participants in relation to the ideological dilemma they are discussing and managing. Here, both William and Reena adopt the position of professional monitors of suppositions reflecting on their own tendencies to apply biases and stereotypes of womanhood:

When it's a female, it, I suppose that nurturing bias comes in (William)

So, maybe, uh, I'm being stereotypical in that, but I think if you're sitting in that situation, having, yeah, yeah it would be hard to comprehend how a woman could perpetrate

that onto a child or her own child. So, it would be difficult for people to get their head around it (Reena)

The kinds of dilemmas faced by the participants are due to normalisation processes. This is a cultural process by which an attitude, ideology or behaviour becomes so established and entrenched in social life that we come to expect something as natural and normal. It could be argued that female paedophilia in particular challenges cultural norms of idealised mother-child relationships and the natural association of femininity to passivity, nurturing and caregiving (Giguere & Bumby, 2007; Hislop, 2001; Saradjian, 1996). Such normalisation processes are demonstrated in the passages below. Reena having previously questioned her own tendency to stereotype now uses a normalising judgment (a taken for granted statement) by assigning all women with specific sex role characteristics:

Yes, because there's a natural nurture I would feel, um, from different people I've worked with throughout the years, with women, there's a natural nurture and this protective piece to protect a loved one (Reena)

Freda also uses normalising judgments in her extracts but goes one step further in reconciling a feminine position with a sexual offender position. Whilst she uses words such as 'aggressor' and 'enticer' to describe the female child molester from a psychological perspective, she simultaneously keeps in line with feminist principles and patriarchal constructions of gender and male power by reframing the abuse as a loving act:

Female aggressors would be very loving because there's a natural tendency to be nurturing (Freda)

And in this excerpt, constructing the female child molester as a protective maternal figure whose goal it is to shield their young from the violence of men at any cost:

The mother used to entice the female, her, her daughter into bed at night, um, because to protect her from the father who used to, who was a very violent alcoholic (Freda)

Like Freda, Sonya appears to resolve an ideological dilemma by using several personal accounts to discuss female perpetuated child sexual abuse in her interview. Both involved incestuous relationships, a sister who sexually molested her brother aged 12 (who later died by suicide) and a mother who molested all five of her children by stripping them naked on a daily basis and performing elaborate anal examinations on each to make sure they were clean. In the following passage, Sonya contradicts her earlier version of female paedophilia (drawn on from a psychological perspective) by representing female child sexual abuse as something that happens by accident often through a loving relationship:

It's just when you asked me about people, mothers who would have abused their children, she came into my mind, their mother. But not in a classical sense of being an abuser. I would have seen it more as a, I suppose, an accidental abuser and I'm sure that's a very wrong term to use (Sonya)

Moreover, drawing on macro discourses of typologies (categories) of female child molesters and patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality, Sonya positions this mother as a predisposed offender who is acting out issues related to prior victimisation by men in an intergenerational transmission of abuse:

Lovely woman, but just very damaged, and it's like decades of damage (Sonya)

The mother would have been abused herself (Sonya)

Psychological mitigations for sexual abuse (obsessive-compulsive disorder) are also used by Sonya as a discursive strategy to explain this woman's actions with the ensuing neutralisation of paedophilic behaviour in order to make it sound more palatable and the offender as less culpable:

So, she had a real obsessive thing about cleanliness (Sonya)

Sonya also transforms the sibling incest of a 12-year-old boy reframing the abuse as a loving relationship:

It sounded more that it was a relationship that developed rather than it being an abuser if that makes sense, um, they would have had a very close relationship and she was always very fond of him (Sonya)

This reframing of sexual abuse by Sonya was assisted at an organisational level by a governing body who did not take the disclosures of sexual abuse by the boy any further. Whilst Sonya uses personal accounts in her discursive practice, William appears to deploy a linguistic technique (likely drawn from media discourses) to either justify the behaviour of hebephile women in their abuse of young teens or to construct an identity position from he can distance himself from facing an ideological dilemma. In the following excerpts, he converts the female child molester into an innocuous offender (a wiser older woman) whose goal is to educate adolescents (both male and female) in the area of sexuality:

See women are seen, I think in society as being kind of nurturing, educational kind of, you know coming of age type. Maybe educational in regard to his sexuality (William)

These socially constructed archetypes where it's the wiser woman, maybe educating the younger male or maybe the younger female (William)

Either way the effects and contingencies of this narrative are similar. Deploying slanders to female child sexual offenders and/or reframing their abuse as loving may help absolve their criminal behaviours thus neutralising assertions of their guilt and dangerousness. Furthermore, it could be argued that adopting a perspective where an abuser is predominantly perceived as a victim is deleterious to the offender as well as the victim. Indeed, these discourses may allow an explanatory framework with which female paedophiles/hebephiles and professionals can redefine sexual abuse as consensual, acceptable, and loving. This discursive formation like the previous narratives are bound to impact the likelihood of victim disclosure keeping the problem well-hidden and underground.

**Discourse Five – The Female Paedophile as a ‘Cloak and Dagger Figure’ or ‘Loving Caregiver’?**

Discourse forms the backdrop of an individual’s reality construction and is full of positioning work (Potter & Wetherell, 1995). In this final discursive formation, female child molesters are socially constructed by professionals in varying and often contradictory ways. The words used to describe such offenders range from positive (wise, loving, protective, soft, caring, maternal, accidental) to more negative and derogatory (stealthy, destructive, creepy, manipulative, devious, exploitative orchestrator). Table 1 below demonstrates a summary of how female child sexual offenders are currently constructed by each professional.

Participant	The Social Construction of a female child sexual offender
Sonya	The accidental abuser
William	The wiser older woman
Sally	The stealthy groomer and thrill seeker
Freda	The loving protective enticer
Robert	The destructive maternal object
Reena	The creepy exploitative orchestrator

Table 1: The social construction of a female child sexual offender

Moreover, connotations (ideas or feelings words invoke) are used copiously in the discursive practices of the psychotherapists in this study to socially represent the female paedophile as an elusive and subtle ‘cloak and dagger figure’ seemingly operating under the guise of a loving caregiver:

That kind of subtle control – in terms of control, power that they would use that a lot more maybe, they would be cleverer with it (Sonya)

You know, on the surface they look really good, the image they portray to the world is that of a very caring mother (Robert)

More stealthily in terms of their grooming and stuff than, then maybe males might be (Sally)

Bringing them in, in a very, very softly approach, and you know, I do this because I love you. And then literally assaulting them in whatever capacity or fashion that takes place. They might be able to manipulate in a more sort of way, I’m here to care for you (Reena)

It was when her mask had slipped and possibly when she had alcohol in her system, she was bragging, and she was boasting (Reena)

Under the guise of protection and caring (Freda)

In some regards that disguises the fact of what they’re actually doing (William)

Judging by the similarities in these accounts, participants are likely to have made choices about how to depict female child molesters from a set of broader taken for granted narrative options (Foucault, 1971). In this case, female paedophiles are differentiated from their male counterparts and represented as more clever, subtle and devious by the way in which they enact patriarchal masculinity whilst pretending to endorse feminine practices and characteristics (as in the stealthy groomer and the destructive maternal object). What is noteworthy is that female paedophiles are socially constructed as devious and manipulative which is at odds of macro typologies (categories) of female child sexual offenders which suggests that they either co-offend with men or offend solo because of social/intimacy difficulties. This begs the question of whether female child molesters who target their own children are viewed as more manipulative because of the dual position they adopt.

Psychotherapists and other mental health professionals as authorities of delimitation (Foucault, 1982) have a pivotal role to play in constructing public understandings of female child sexual offenders. It could be argued that social constructions of subjects such as female child sexual offenders assist political ideologies by recruiting individuals (paedophiles/hebephiles) into identity positions through a process of interpellation. Interpellation is a constitutive process whereby individuals

acknowledge and respond to representations recognizing themselves as subjects and acting accordingly (Althusser, 1971).

In an attempt to endorse hegemonic femininity, the feminist movement may have become part of the problem rather than the solution by sanctioning the reframing of sexual abuse between hebephile women and teenagers as educational/romantic (as in the wiser older woman) or in relation to paedophilia the weapon (as in the accidental abuser or loving protective enticer) with which they can hide their illusive and deceptive behaviour thus avoiding both detection and treatment.

## Reflections

This analysis created a thorough critique of the current portrayal of female perpetuated child sexual abuse at an ideological level of analysis by exploring how psychotherapists make meaning around this contentious subject. The adoption of Foucauldian ideas shaped the analysis through the methodology adopted and which influenced how the data was interpreted. Alternative constructionist methods and/or methodologies would be likely to illuminate other aspects of the topic and help us view the talk in a different way.

From a Foucauldian epistemological standpoint, interview talk is deemed as social interaction which reveals the work of subject positioning by interviewees in relation to the ideological dilemmas they are discussing and managing. Here, the psychotherapist-participants were not merely relaying information to the researcher. Rather, they were drawing on macro discourses and choosing narratives strategically and, in a manner, they felt appropriate in an interview context thus directing their talk towards a socio-political endpoint.

Both psychological and feminist discourses were deployed in the discursive practices of the psychotherapists in this study. These discourses were often in direct conflict which likely mirrors current ideological dilemmas at an organisational/societal level. On the one hand, a dominant set of narratives focused on preserving feminist principles and ideals by socially constructing female sexual offenders as victims and reframing female child sexual abuse as harmless. On the other hand, countering these discourses, others acknowledged the existence of female paedophilia and the harm involved. However, these discourses differentiated the female child molester as far more subtle, devious, and dangerous than her male counterpart thus creating a pariah offender identity position.

Whilst female paedophiles/hebephiles might have much to gain from the deployment of feminist discourses which sustain and reinforce traditional sexual scripts (by facilitating

avoidance of their detection, granting them a certain immunity, and simultaneously silencing their victims); the

effects of this more recent 'pariah identity discourse' remains to be seen. Whilst these latter discourses may help give a voice to survivors of such abuse, they may also seriously undermine the offender leading to hostile stigmatising practices by professionals adversely affecting how they are viewed, treated, and managed.

The cultural diversity of participants and/or their practice clients was not wide given that most of them practiced in Ireland. To address this limitation, future studies could incorporate more pluralism by interviewing participants from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, a genealogical analysis of existing texts on female perpetuated child sexual abuse could be used as an alternative to interviews.

## Concluding Thoughts

Foucauldian-influenced discourse analysis offers a reflexivity which unsettles the taken for granted (Kramer, 2019) – a key aim of my research. Reflexivity examines our centrality as researchers and involves embracing rather than minimising our own subjective involvement (Whitaker, Ryan & Kirks, 2011).

My analysis involved an interrogative study of psychotherapists' discursive portrayals of female perpetuated child sexual abuse. In my role producing this research, I own that I was central to the sense-making. My analysis was filtered by what I felt would be most politically useful in relation to informing psychotherapeutic practice. It is important to concede that my analysis is not the only way the data can be understood. Rather, it is one of many ways of looking at the data which might be useful in terms of considering how language and practices are systematically continuing to have effects (Whitaker, Ryan & Kirks, 2011). Illuminating discursive practices leads to new questions rather than answers - specifically about the political and social role of psychotherapy and how it may be complicit in reinforcing power relations. The discursive practices of these six psychotherapists have exposed new ways of understanding the issue of female perpetuated child sexual abuse from a Foucauldian perspective and in so doing points to future paths for psychotherapeutic research.

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## Appendix 1

Interview Schedule	
1.	If you have had any experience of working therapeutically with female child molesters or their victim's, what modalities have you used and to what effect?
2.	What are your thoughts around female perpetuated child sexual abuse in terms of their capacity for sexual aggression or deviant sexual interest?
3.	What do you think are the main characteristics of female paedophiles/hebephiles? For example, age, educational background, personality traits and so on?
4.	Can you give your view on different types of female child sexual offenders in terms of their modus operandi (how they operate, access, or target their victims)?
5.	What, in your opinion are the main characteristics associated with victims of such crimes? For example, gender, age, socio-economic background?
6.	Have you ever received training or education specifically related to female perpetuated child sexual abuse? If so, what did you find most useful or informative?
7.	How do you think the process of working therapeutically with victims of female perpetuated child sexual abuse might be different from working with other kinds of issues?
8.	In your opinion, how should we be managing female child molesters? For example, in terms of risk assessment, sentencing, sex offender treatment programmes, electronic tagging and so on?
9.	Do you have any further comments to add to these questions?