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A cautionary tale regarding 'believing' allegations of historical child abuse

Abstract

Allegations of sexual abuse made against the former BBC entertainer, Jimmy Savile by former pupils of a girls' residential school attracted worldwide publicity when they were reported in a TV programme in 2012. The Savile case has had major political and cultural reverberations, with the establishment of official inquiries across the countries of the UK to investigate claims of historical abuse. Responses reinforce what has become a default position in respect of allegations of historical abuse - that we should believe those telling such stories. This article presents a case study, which introduces an element of caution in that regard. Accounts of the past are constructed in particular social and cultural contexts and cannot be regarded as necessarily reflecting any wider, objective reality. Moreover, unquestioning 'belief' is not in the interests of those who claim abuse, of those accused of such abuse or of any wider conception of natural or social justice. The article begins to address some of the ethical issues raised when professionals encounter stories of historical abuse.

Keywords: residential care, historical abuse, stories, victims, allegations

Introduction

Over the past 25 years, countries across the western world have been confronted with cases of historical abuse in residential school settings. Allegations emanating from one such school, Duncroft, in the South of England, sparked what has, arguably, become the highest profile case yet, that involving the former BBC entertainer, Jimmy Savile (Furedi, 2013). In October 2012, an Independent Television (ITV) documentary, *Exposure, The Other Side of Jimmy Savile*, reported claims by several women that Savile, who had died the previous year, had sexually abused them as teenagers. A number of those women had attended Duncroft, where Savile had been a visitor in the 1970s and alleged that he had abused them there and at screenings of TV shows he had taken them to. The *Exposure* documentary sparked a social and cultural crisis in the UK, shaking the legitimacy of institutions such as the BBC. Its reverberations continue with the high profile prosecutions of 1970s celebrities and speculation about a paedophile conspiracy reaching to the heart of government. Jurisdictions across the British

Isles have established commissions to investigate claims of historical abuse, which has become a major public policy concern.

The Savile case has spawned several public reports, most notably, *Giving Victims a Voice* (Gray and Watt, 2013). This report was jointly produced by the Metropolitan Police and the National Association for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), a major children's charity following *Operation Yewtree*, a police investigation into celebrity abuse. It concluded that (victims') 'accounts paint a compelling picture of widespread sexual abuse by a predatory sex offender (Savile). We are therefore referring to them as 'victims' rather than 'complainants' and are not presenting the evidence they have provided as unproven allegations' (2.4).

Another Police operation involved Surrey Police contacting former Duncroft pupils to invite testimony regarding Savile's activities at the school, stating: 'Please be assured that the welfare of victims is the primary concern of both Surrey Police and Barnardo's (another large children's charity). This is a search for the truth and you will be believed'.

This developing moral imperative to 'believe' those who allege historical abuse owes, in part, to recognition of past injustices and concern to offer reparation for these. The origins of this trend are in collective claims made in respect of victims (and increasingly their descendants) of massive historical wrongs such as slavery or the holocaust. Increasingly, the focus of such claims is shifting from state actions to individual criminal offenders (Cohen, 2015). When confronting the wrongs of the past there is an understandable concern to listen to the voices of those who, historically, have been marginalised, ignored or deprived their human rights. Many of the advances in how victims are dealt with in the criminal justice system can be attributed to the actions of feminist reformers who successfully highlighted and challenged the historically discriminatory treatment of those alleging sexual abuse. In the case of those who claim to have been abused in care settings an assumption is made that children in care were a marginalised group and that any contemporaneous disclosures of abuse they might have made were met with scepticism and denial. In that sense it is wholly understandable to listen to them now, to attempt to put such wrongs to right and to look for some just means of redress and reparation.

These are powerful arguments, which most fair-minded individuals would sign up to. There are, however major difficulties in doing so unquestioningly. Firstly, there are precedents, which ought to counsel a healthy scepticism in respect of a default position of 'belief'. The

satanic ritual abuse (SRA) controversies, which emerged across America over the course of the 1980s and the UK in the 1990s were premised upon a presumption of believing children, no matter how unlikely their tales might seem to be. SRA has now been discredited; a recent retrospective on it (Beck, 2015), posing questions about just how societies could be prone, only thirty years ago, to such irrational beliefs.

Moreover, the present situation takes no account of the memory wars that raged over the course of the 1990s (see Hacking, 1995) and which continue to be fought out. These converge around questions of the possibility of memories of sexual abuse being repressed and subsequently recovered. Questions of repressed memory and of dissociation are hotly contested, however. Patihis *et al* (2014) argue that the growing consensus among academics and clinicians is critical of the claims made for such concepts. They identify, though, a growing gap between academic knowledge on the subject and public perception, where such beliefs persist. This public mood, sustained by a wider cultural and emotional script around victimhood (Radstone, 2005), acts to legitimize the police's stance of assuring victims they will be believed. The emotional appeal of this position, centred as it is on the sufferings of others and the desire to put things right makes critique difficult. Furedi (2007) notes that those who do raise questions may be accused of denial or of re-traumatising victims of abuse. Radstone, however, argues that trauma theory's 'politics, its exclusions and inclusions, and its unconscious drives and desires are as deserving of attention as those of any other theory' (2007, p.9).

A further, linked difficulty is an epistemological one in that police statements such as that by Surrey Police in the Savile case equate believing 'victims' with 'the truth'. This takes no account of the wider circumstances within which such accounts are constructed but is rooted in a naive realist paradigm, whereby reported accounts are assumed to accurately mirror the way things were (White, 1997). This ought to be immediately problematic for academics, because, as Riessman and Quinney caution, situations in which 'a story seems to speak for itself, not requiring interpretation - (is) an indefensible position for serious scholarship' (2005, p. 393). It ought, equally, be an indefensible position for criminal justice policy. Recent developments where stories told about sexual abuse by the former Prime Minister and Home Secretary and against the singer Cliff Richard have unravelled suggest a need to consider the complex role that stories play in how humans seek to make sense of their worlds (Plummer, 1995). They can rarely be assumed to accurately mirror any wider reality.

This article seeks to explore what Tilly (2002) identifies as the complex relationships between personal stories and wider social processes. People tell stories for a whole host of reasons (Taylor and White, 2000, Sikes and Piper, 2010). Sometimes, these stories, whatever purpose they might serve for those who recount them, are not directly reflective of any wider reality. Hoyle et al note that stories about sexual abuse are 'likely to be influenced by the prevailing cultural discourse and consequent preconceptions about sexual predators and their alleged victims' (2016, p.3). Author (2010) and Author *et al* (2012) identify some of the difficulties in assuming that 'victim' accounts alone provide a mirror on residential care.

There is, moreover, an, ethical difficulty in starting from a position of wishing to right historical wrongs in cases of historical abuse. Burnett, (2013) makes the point that there are two sets of victims in cases of historical abuse – those who were abused and those falsely accused of such acts, while Hoyle et al (2016) describe some of the experiences of those falsely accused. Any just response requires that both the interests of those who allege abuse and those accused are considered. Furthermore, Cohen (2015) identifies some of the difficulties and rightful limitations of reparation in cases where seeking such impacts on innocent third parties, such as the spouses and children of those identified as wrongdoers. This is the case in most historical abuse cases, the ethical implications of which require attention.

Given the problematic relationship of people's accounts to any wider truth it may not be disrespectful or unethical to probe and question these in a suitably sensitive manner; it may be necessary in the interests of natural and social justice to do so and to consider the wider implications of not doing so. To open up some of the complexity I present a situation from my own experience as a former residential care worker, now a social work academic. It has no direct relation to Savile, but the aim of recounting it is to offer some reflections on how individual stories might be constructed within a cultural context that valorises particular stories, most notably those that tell of sexual abuse. This state of affairs is ethically problematic at a number of levels, and needs to be opened up to academic debate.

Background

Around 2008, I received an e-mail at my University address, which read:

Dear Sir,

I am a 29 year-old man. Growing up, I was in 42 foster and residential care placements. After spending time in the jail I have got my life together. I am now a writer and want to write something on the experiences of young people leaving care and was wondering if you could help me with the statistics.

Signed: James (anonymized)

I replied that I'd be happy to help in whatever way I could, concluding, 'But I think I know you.' In the early 1990s I had worked in a secure unit where James had spent a few months. I was not involved directly in his day-to-day care but he and I made some sort of connection. Following on from the e-mail, I re-established contact with James through everyday engagements such as going for a coffee. A few months after this initial e-mail James sent me a short story he had written, called *The Monster Within*. It was presented as an autobiographical account.

The story begins with two friends, James the author of the account and his friend Jamie, standing in the dock of the High Court:

'Here we are, both 20 years old, Jamie is a couple of month older than me. Both of us are arguing with our brief (lawyer) who is trying to tell me to plead not guilty (to a murder charge) because of mitigating circumstances.'

The two are remanded in custody. James is seen by a psychiatrist, who asks him what had happened to lead to a man's death.

..., me and Jamie had been out robbing so we decided to splash the cash up the West Port, ... the strip clubs. ... When we walked past the Western Bar Jamie said 'let's go in for a laugh. When we went in to the bar I looked in the corner and there he was. It was the first time I had seen him, seen the beastie bastard since I was 15'

When I started getting the flashbacks I could smell his sweat. Jamie pulled the blade out the back o' his jeans at that moment I knew I was going to kill him. ... I knew the full pub was looking at me a didn't give a fuck a just wanted him to feel a small part o' the fear and embarrassment he put me through - I say small 'cause if I had from now until eternity I still wouldn't have enough time to put him through the pain he put me through. I put he blade in to his gut until my hand couldn't go in any further ..."

"... his name was Nel" ... and as soon as I said his name the stuff started coming back every thing I had forgotten came back as if it were yesterday. ... He was a failed middle-weight boxer ... then he started working at my last residential school at first I thought he didn't like me because I was a wee wideo. Soon I was to know it was something more sinister.

I started feeling a little bit more at ease in Doctor Robertson's presence.

Okay here goes, I was in a residential school - at first everything was brilliant ...

Then:

I think it was going into my second week in to the summer holidays. At night time I went for my usual shower before toast & tea for supper when I came out the shower Nel was standing in front of my towel so I had to brush past him naked then he said in a creepy voice

"You should be putting more weight on that wee body"

When I went to bed that night after sitting watching a movie in the lounge; something never felt right. I was half asleep when I heard the room door open ... Then I heard a moaning sound from the corner of my room when I looked through the gap in the cover Nel was sitting in my bedroom chair having a wank. I just started shouting at the top of my voice

Another member of staff (McGuire) appears on the scene and reassures James, but he too is implicated in subsequent events:

The next thing I remember is waking up belly down on my bed with a heavy weight on my back. - there was a horrible smell to his sweat and he was groaning in my ear then I felt a

sharp pain in my bum so hard that when I think about it I can feel it now then just as he was finishing doing it I could see a camera pointed in my face I think it was McGuire who took his turn next then in that creepy voice he said "you know nobody will believe you"

Again, the story continues recounting a similar tale of sexual abuse perpetrated by the same characters on another boy. James then acts, phoning a child abuse helpline to report the abuse, prompting police involvement and the arrest of the two abusers. The story concludes with a twist, when James is assessed as unfit to plead and sent to the state mental hospital:

I knew they were making a mistake. When I was getting led out the dock ... What about Jamie? I shouted then I seen my reflection in the mirror and it was Jamie who was staring back. I screamed through fear.

"I know Jamie's real, I know he's real"

"Isn't he?"

James presents here what Tilly (2002) might describe as the 'standard story' of abuse in residential care. 'To construct a standard story,' Tilly advises,

start with a limited number of interacting characters, individual or collective. Your characters may be persons, but they may also be organizations ... Treat your characters as independent, conscious and self-motivated ... supply your characters with specific motives, capacities and resources. Furnish the time and place within which they're interacting with objects ... (2002, p.26).

All these features appear in James' story. The Western Bar, for instance, is a sex bar on a street called the West Port, in a Scottish city. The story was set in a residential school that James had attended. There is sufficient detail to draw the reader in – having a shower before toast and tea, for example, is a realistic and believable depiction of the kind of routines that existed in residential schools. The protagonists, the brutal child abuser and the helpless victim have become the stock-in-trade of popularized accounts of institutional abuse and the morality tale is completed with the phone call to the helpline and the appearance of the police to arrest the assailants. The story also reflects the dominant story of child sexual abuse whereby victims seek 'closure' through the disclosure of abuse and through bringing their abusers to 'justice' (author at al, 2012).

Intriguingly, however, the conclusion to James's story leaves the reader to question just how real the account is, introducing an element of ambiguity that is missing from most standard stories of abuse in care. It is this that I go on to explore in the remainder of the article. James' story didn't chime with my own professional knowledge and experience of residential care settings or in the context of our relationship. The relationship was such that I felt able to directly probe its veracity with him and he assured me it was fictional. The Savile revelations and the fact that personal accounts have driven the entire affair prompted me to re-visit James' story in order to explore why he had chosen or felt the need to construct his experiences of residential care in the way he did and whether he might have told them differently. I contacted him and asked if he would be prepared to discuss his story with me, which he agreed to.

Tensions and ambiguities, are at the heart of how stories function to help the teller make sense of their world. Leskelä-Kärki argues that 'The borders of fictional texts and autobiographical accounts can be complex and shifting' (2008, p.327). She draws on Stanley's (1992) term 'auto/biography' to capture some of this complexity, which 'disturbs the supposed binaries of self and other, fact and fiction, past and present, reality and representation, autobiography and biography, pointing out how these intersect in different narratives. The complexity of this interleaving entails that 'truths' cannot be straightforwardly reported (MacLure, 2003); accounts must be interpreted as personal memory and individual representation, not as fact (Banks, 2014). Portelli goes further, noting that 'The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge' (2006, p.37).

Ethical considerations

James agreed to be interviewed. I went through the normal processes of asking for and recording his consent. I was aware, however, that procedural consent in this context was inadequate. Pirrie et al (2012) claim that it is more important to exercise personal virtue and ethical imagination than it is merely to follow ethical guidelines and that properly ethical consent could only reside in the relationship of trust that existed between James and I. This seemed appropriate given the focus of the interview was less about seeking empirically valid research data than it was about providing insights for theoretical reflection. The nature of my

relationship with James had obviously moved on from that of social worker/child in care. As Mollenhauer (1983) notes, a child grows up and the asymmetry of an erstwhile care relationship, if it is still maintained, dissolves. Any continuing relationship is characterized by a greater mutuality and reciprocity involving friendship or mutual attachment (Author, 2014). My relationship with James still included aspects of help and advice but within a relationship in which I imagined a greater ethical symmetry (Lynch, 2014). Nevertheless, the fact was that any story I was told would be constructed within the context of a previous relationship, within which I was perceived as having some prior knowledge of James and his past. I was still someone he had liked and wanted to please, albeit from a point of having moved on in his life to a point where he was no longer dependent on or beholden to me. He had, nevertheless, initiated contact from a position of asking for help. Specifically, I had to consider that he might have retracted any mention of sexual abuse in his original story in order not to offend me or indeed to avert any action he may have realised I would have had to take. And, of course, any 'new' story he told me would, equally, be contingent and mediated by the circumstances of him telling it to me in a particular context.

The subject matter of historical abuse added a further layer of complexity to my involvement, which I had to be aware of. Doucet, (2008) writes of the ghosts that haunt a researcher's understanding. A number of ghosts of those I know who have been, I believe, falsely accused and in some cases falsely convicted of abuse haunt my engagement with this subject. This experience has had a major bearing on how I engage with the subject. I am aware that my starting position is to question allegations of abuse and in so doing I may be seen to dismiss accounts that are genuine or genuinely held. On the other hand, because I am swimming against the tide on this issue, I need to make sure that I can show my workings on it and that my arguments are robust.

The interview

I approached my discussion with James, to some extent, as an extension of a professional/personal relationship, which inevitably included aspects of my previous role with him. As such the interview sought to fulfil some of Denzin and Giardina's identification of one of the purposes for research as being 'pedagogical, political, moral, and ethical, involving the enhancement of moral agency, the production of moral discernment ... (2007, p.18). I interviewed James in the cafeteria of a local Further education College. The interview was fully

transcribed. I provide fairly full extracts here, but acknowledge that the editorial control over these extracts is mine I have chosen extracts that fit my focus on how James has constructed his initial story and how, in other circumstances, he may have constructed a different account. Goodson and Sikes suggest that such editing 'is usual and is generally undertaken in order to support the researcher's case' (2001, p.37). Inevitably, in presenting particular aspects of his interview, I may also foreclose alternative readings.

I: Alright, ... do you want to just tell me about the background to 'The Monster Within' from your own perspective?

J: I was in a school called (name) and nothing sexual ever happened in the school, ... Most residential schools and secure units that I'd been in before then, I'd somehow...I managed to enjoy the time that I'd spent in them, but this was the first time that I'd been in complete isolation, because of where the school is, or was, located ... And, there was one member of staff who was really heavy handed and probably made my life hell, I felt like, so, yeah, that's what I loosely based the story on, that experience that I had, that feeling of isolation.

I: So, is there a basis in reality?

J: Yeah, everything that I write has got a basis somewhere that really happened,

I: So, the characters in this, were they...?

J: Completely fictional. The residential member of staff... I took, like, different ones and make it ... like, I took the bad personalities, the members of staff that I didn't like and made that into one ... it's called 'characterisation',

I: And, the plot, if you like, or the main part of the story about the sexual abuse and that, where did you get the ideas for that?

J: It was TV I think ... I think a bit of it was based on, like, an experience that happened to somebody else that I'd... I can't remember if I'd witnessed it or if I'd been ... because, with being young, you get ...the homes, I'm always aware of stuff that you get told when you're 13, 14 can suddenly seem like a memory, so I'm always aware of that. So,

I'm not too sure whether it was completely based on something that did happen or whether it was something that I was told that did happen, ... I obviously managed to take the incident ... and just take different things out of different situations that I'd been told and made one situation out of them

I: And, you've spoken about flashbacks ... where does that idea come from?

J: I took it from post-traumatic stress. I take it from the condition, post-traumatic stress, because I know that when post traumatic stress syndrome kicks in, the experiences and the pain and everything that they go through is the exact same as when they're on the battlefield, so I took the abuse as if it was really like that as well....

Already, we start to see a disruption in what might be thought of as the 'standard story' of institutional abuse. While James says that his story has a basis in reality he recognizes it as a piece of creative writing, achieving seeming credibility through its appeal to a gritty realism but not reflecting reality. His characterization is, as he says, an elision of different characters; the plot, sexual abuse in residential care, didn't happen or again is an elision of press stories and hazily remembered accounts from other pupils rather than from direct experience. It is interesting that he has internalised a therapeutic discourse, specifically that of post-traumatic stress. He also begins to introduce some of the complexities of memory, noting how 'stuff that you get told when you're 13, 14 can suddenly seem like a memory'.

James realizes that there are both incentives and drawbacks to claiming a victim identity. One of the motivations of those making such claims he identifies as that of financial compensation, but he also recognizes this as problematic:

J: These days, I think a lot of people jump on the Jimmy Savile bandwagon and they want to cast up shit that they weren't casting up before ...

He goes on to distinguish those he thinks are jumping on a compensation bandwagon with those he believes were actually abused. They, he says:

... wouldn't tell anybody, know what I mean, even if there was a million pounds put in front of them for compensation and that type of mentality, they would go, oh, you can get money out of that, that sort of things as well, but...

I: That's the wrong idea that you can get money out of allegations of abuse...?

J: Yeah, you'll be able to sue the arses of them and then suddenly, the very valid reason that you would want to tell somebody in the first place has gone. It's polluted by a financial incentive, and suddenly, when a financial incentive comes in, law comes in and law and the human ... Just because it's legal or lawful doesn't mean to say it's right and moral, so, yeah, I think law and child protection are two things that just completely collide with each other constantly.

James also identifies the pitfalls of assuming a victim identity:

J: No, but I know that it would be easy to be a black hole in your heart if you let it be. It's easy to label yourself a victim and I think as soon as you do that, you've pigeon-holed yourself into some sort of corner that you're never going to get out of, ...

I: Just going back a step to... You were speaking about being a victim, or if you had identified yourself as a victim, you wouldn't be doing what you are doing now.

J: No, no danger. I think, as soon as you call yourself a victim, you're suddenly placed in the same room...wee, dark, dim lit room ...

Throughout the course of the interview, James offered some ambivalent views of his experiences in the care system and in so doing starts to open up the possibility of a different story of residential care, one that is potentially more positive and certainly more nuanced than the current dominant view. In his introductory statement he said he had 'mostly enjoyed' his time in it. Elsewhere however, he says:

J: I just try to forget about the care system as much as possible as well, I don't think it did me any good at all. I can't think of one thing that the care system did for me that was good, do you know what I mean, maybe I shouldn't have been in care in the first

place. But, there you go, you're dealing with a completely broken child, so what else do you do with it?

But he also says:

J: I had a social worker who was brilliant at showing affection and teaching me the difference between right and wrong and phoning me at nine o'clock at night and doing stuff that he wasn't supposed to do, keeping in contact when he wasn't supposed to keep in contact. But, I also had other things like, members of staff would take me to... like, because I didn't have any family, members of staff would take me home for Christmas, so you were somehow made to feel a bit normal. So, that was against the rules, so the staff that really made humans out of you rather than made a statistic out of you, that's the staff obviously that I look back on with fond memories, that I managed to spend time with people, with people's families and stuff like that and I was really privileged, looking back, because...knowing they shouldn't have done that ...

One is left to ponder a picture of a possible residential care James might have presented had he not felt compelled by dominant cultural scripts into telling a story of child sexual abuse. He attended a school that, just prior to his going there, had been run by a religious order. He is able, from accounts from other residents of being cared for by 'the Brothers' to know that the public image of them is not reflected in the experience of many of those they cared for. And just as his sexual abuser is a composite of different characters he goes on to imagine a 'good priest' who, again is based on his experience of 'sound' staff members.

I: So, what about your current (writing), you were talking about writing something involving the Brothers and...? I suppose one of the things that interests me, you acknowledge that sometimes religious orders ... running schools have got a bad press, but you had heard differently ...?

J: ... I only heard that the Brothers were bastards when it came to, like, hitting you or giving you a clout on the back of the ear, but apparently they were alright. Like, at (School) anyway, ... but I'd only heard good things about them, I never heard bad things and usually, word of mouth travels quicker through kids than what it will through the adults, so I'd never heard anything bad, so I wanted to try and show that

part in a good light as well, that there's just something about a priest being in a field, kicking a football about with these young laddies, that the audience will probably think straight away, oh, this guy's suspect, the priest, because that's what they've been force fed for the last 20 years now about priests working with kids. But, we've got to flip that on its head again as well and have the guy being a good priest, because it's not something that's really done these days, a good priest. So, my priest, my brother, my monk or whatever he is, being a good guy. Probably maybe based it partly on NS, partly on TS, partly on PT (members of staff that James and I both knew), all one guy, but he's a priest. And, he's working in a residential school, so it's called characterisation, ...

I: Yeah, what is the mental health issue, because...?

J: Schizophrenic and it's only one character.

I: I know, I know, yeah.

J: It's that one person that he thinks is amazing and, Jamie is this and Jamie is that and Jamie's this and Jamie's that, where, in fact, Jamie's actually him..., so it's not until he looks at...obviously at the end and sees Jamie in the mirror that he realises he is Jamie. So, it's up to the reader to view which one is actually the personality, it could be Jamie... Is It Jamie that was actually the personality full time or was It...is it made up? ...did that really happen or did that all...in his head in the one day in court?

Within a therapeutic discourse it might be claimed that mental health difficulties are a common consequence of having been sexually abused and one might expect confusion on the part of anyone who may have been abused. That confusion does not invalidate the possibility of abuse. On the other hand, the debates that rage over recovered memory can suggest a peremptory rush to seek explanations for mental health issues in past experience of sexual abuse. In James's story the introduction of the mental health issue is, as he claims, a literary device to introduce an element of irony, which Antze and Lambek (1996) identify as being largely and problematically missing in discussion of traumatic memory.

Discussion

I now turn to consider what James's story might add to our knowledge about the vexed question of historical child abuse. If nothing else, it problematises what is rapidly becoming the default position in the UK policy and criminal justice communities of straightforwardly 'believing' those who claim historical abuse. It raises a number of ethical questions that need to be opened up but are more often closed down in the current moral or, as Piper (2014) argues, immoral panic over child abuse. I address these questions at personal and policy levels, concluding with some discussion around the politics of voice that are central to this issue.

At an individual level, James's story functions to perform identity work through which he comes to understand himself as overcoming adversity. What is interesting, though, is that despite the fact that he says he did not experience sexual abuse while in care, this is the story he chose to write himself into. A more cogent and reflexive story is one of moving on from ambivalence over feeling loved in his birth family and resultant serial care placements, but as Hacking (1991) argues, the banality of such everyday experience pales into insignificance when set against the public recognition that claims of sexual abuse brings (McLaughlin, 2012).

That James felt drawn to articulate his experiences of residential care through a prism of child sexual abuse says something about the way that stories are constructed; we are not free to tell any story but draw on narrative frameworks that are currently circulating (Woodiwiss, 2014). The story of child sexual abuse, especially in residential child care settings, is the story we have, as James says elsewhere in the interview, one we have been 'force fed' for the last 25 years. It is hardly surprising, even if not helpful, that he should choose to interpret an aspect of his experience within that trope. Woodiwiss (2009) offers the important insight that those who hang onto victim identities become victims, as much if not more so, of the limiting and inadequate stories currently available to them within a therapeutic discourse as from any actual or imagined past abuse.

In the interview, James himself recognises difficulties with a victim identity. And, while he may be able to step back from it, others who tell stories of sexual abuse may be less able to disentangle themselves, given the complex interleaving of auto-biographical and fictional accounts identified earlier in the article. One might speculate on the difficulty complainants against Jimmy Savile might have in retracting their initial stories, now that these have been relayed to the world through the *Exposure* programme, Stories, once told, can become freeze-dried (Plummer, 2001). And, telling them is not necessarily liberating; it can, equally, narrow our range of possibilities for understanding our lives (Tavris, 1992). Hacking (1992) goes further and suggests that the symptoms of child abuse can be iatrogenic, induced by the helping professionals involved in such cases. In this way the predominant focus on sexual abuse may actually create its own victims, through the construction and reification of individual and collective accounts of abuse, which may or may not bear any relation to a wider reality. This serves to consign those who are encouraged to see themselves as victims to what James identifies as 'a dim lit place'. In this sense, 'believing' victims may not be therapeutic as it is assumed to be but may actually serve to promote victim identities from which it is difficult to escape.

At a policy level, equating people's stories of sexual abuse with 'the truth', as Surrey Police have done, exposes worrying developments in respect of the criminal justice system. It blurs the boundaries between what might legitimately be considered to be the therapeutic possibilities of recounting one's story and having it believed with the evidential. A starting point of belief also precludes, or at very least makes more difficult, inquisitive and investigatory questioning and thus opens up what Webster (2005) identifies as a climate that encourages fantasy and fabrication.

Abuse stories, once they move beyond the therapeutic to be considered within a criminal justice frame, are not neutral; they implicate and can have serious consequences on the lives of others, particularly those accused of abuse and their families. Beckett back in 2002 recognised the potential for false allegations of

abuse. This possibility has increased significantly in the wake of the Savile case. The emotional appeal of rooting out sexual offenders is also used to justify increasingly punitive criminal justice responses, paving the way for the erosion of the long-established legal principle of innocent until proven guilty. This focus on the victim may be argued to right the wrongs of a past where those claiming abuse were not heard but a default position of belief can have regressive and retributive results (Enns, 2012).

The final point I want to open up for possible future consideration picks up on the politics of voice alluded to earlier. Justification for listening to those who claim abuse derives from a humanitarian concern to listen to the voices of the marginalised and dispossessed. It is a short step, however, to begin to speak for such subaltern groups. When Spivak (1988) asked "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she concluded that (s)/he could not. The voice of the subaltern is appropriated by cultural elites who presume they can speak for subordinated groups. As in other expressions of remembrance, historical child abuse has become a free-floating sentiment with little anchor in actual events. It is therefore malleable and open to misappropriation (Calder, 2008). As in Spivak's (1988) discussion of colonial experience the presumption of a particular former child in care experience can have unintended and unhelpful consequences, one of which is to create a climate within which those who have been in care are encouraged to reinterpret this experience as one of victimhood. An example of such a dynamic is apparent in *Time To Be Heard*, a Scottish Government initiative established to listen to those who had been in care. Many of those who came forward to the forum recounted experiences which they 'did not categorise ... as abuse, even when, to us as Chair and Commissioners hearing the account, it seemed clearly to go beyond the bounds of anything that might have been categorised as reasonable chastisement (Shaw, 2011, p.49). In this respect it is worth bearing in mind Stan Cohen's question in respect of political responses to past abuse: 'When is collective memory gradually constructed as a shared, democratic experience; when does it result from state-organised 'memory work?' (2001: 41). Much of what we currently understand about historical abuse in care might be a consequence of state-organised 'memory work' aided and

abetted by children's charities such as the NSPCC and compensation lawyers. The apparatus for such state-organised memory work has been put in place with the establishment of the various commissions to investigate historical abuse, populated by cultural elites. This only adds to the likelihood of the voice of those brought up in care being further misappropriated. One survivor of alleged historical abuse recently noted that a cottage industry has built up around this issue, involving 'a lot of people whose careers are progressing at our expense: students doing PhDs on institutional abuse, charities which have been set up ...' (Holland, 2016)

Concerns about the way the voices of former care home residents can be co-opted by cultural and political elites is not to argue that these voices should not be heard and listened to. However, that listening needs to go beyond believing; it may, indeed, involve disbelieving, or helping those who tell stories to reframe these in ways that are likely to be more helpful to them. It must also, as Couldry (2009) argues, 'be embodied in the process of mutually recognizing our claims on each other as reflexive human agents, each with an account to give, an account of our lives that needs to be registered and heard, our stories endlessly entangled in each others' stories' (2009, p.580). In this regard, the accounts of those accused of abuse also need to be given voice.

Were we to listen to the voices of those brought up in care from a different vantage point, were the stories in circulation more positive ones, former residents of care settings might be free to interpret past experience in an entirely different light. To return to James, in other circumstances he may have told an alternative story of his time in residential care. He speaks of his social worker 'who was brilliant at showing affection and teaching me the difference between right and wrong' ... and of those staff members in residential settings that 'broke the rules' to take James home with them for Christmas 'so you were somehow made to feel a bit normal.' He speaks of 'good' religious brothers. Ironically, these positive, humanising aspects of residential care are the very ones that have become lost within a dominant child protection paradigm. The intention of this

article is to open up debate on different ways of addressing this troublesome issue.

Conclusion

The fact that James' abuse story is, by his own account, fictional does not negate the reality that some stories of past abuse undoubtedly do reflect actual events or at least an honest representation of these. His story, however, ought to introduce an element of scepticism to the position of public authorities that, in pursuit of 'the truth' victims 'will be believed'. This is problematic at a number of levels; it consigns those encouraged to tell stories of abuse to very narrow and limiting way through which to interpret their pasts. From a criminal justice or legal perspective it contributes to an unreflective impulse to pursue any sexual allegation, which is likely to lead to miscarriages of justice. Any intellectually defensible and humane position on dealing with allegations of past abuse needs to take into account the various ways in which people's stories are constructed and laid down and to investigate and interpret these with proper social scientific rigour and ethical discernment. Ultimately, this is an optimistic position, recognizing that stories can change and identities are not fixed. James himself no longer feels the need to seek recognition through a tale of abuse but can begin to make sense of his life from a far richer range of perspectives.

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