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Exploring the Unspeakable – Therapeutic Work with Paedophile Clients



By Stuart Avery

As therapists, we strive to embody empathy, authenticity and a non-judgmental attitude. But how do we manage this when working with clients at the far reaches of societal acceptance? And how does social discourse around paedophilia - the ultimate taboo subject – affect the working practices of therapists brave enough to enter such “unspeakable” territory?

Public and media preoccupation with paedophilia is considerable, and yet the research that exists on this emotive subject suggests a limited public understanding, and uncertainty amongst professionals over its definition, treatment and management^{1,4,5}. Furthermore, the word “paedophile” appears to have taken on a life of its own in modern society, being used inaccurately in the media to categorise an exceptionally complex and varied range of people and problems under a stigmatising label that evokes fear and disgust^{2,5}. Well-informed discussions are eclipsed by social hysteria and moral panic^{1,2}. Whilst mainstream media promotes “stranger danger” and the “one-dimensional monster” stereotype, research indicates that 80% of child sexual abuse occurs in the home, perpetrated by a family member or close friend³. Some research suggests that widespread denial and distorted perceptions of paedophilia, both in social and professional contexts, actually exacerbate the problem and hinder efforts to tackle it effectively³.

This article is based on interviews with seven therapeutic professionals working with offending and non-offending paedophiles. The participants outlined some major barriers to promoting effective therapeutic interventions with this client group,

including inaccurate perceptions, high levels of stigmatisation, and ineffective current measures focusing on punishment rather than prevention and support. They seemed to be telling me: "What we do works, but society isn't ready to hear it."

My participants felt that social perceptions of paedophiles were highly inaccurate compared with their lived experiences of working with paedophilic clients. Narrow stereotypes and the "paedophile" label made it almost impossible for people concerned about their behaviour to seek help, or for offenders to rehabilitate. They felt stigmatisation and hopelessness in paedophilic people fostered isolation and self-loathing – factors that may greatly increase the risk of offending against children:

I do think there's a direct correlation... If everybody's telling you you're going to do it anyway, and shuts the door in your face at every opportunity, and you've got no friends, no one to turn to... you are going to reoffend, definitely.

Black and white media and social perceptions were seen to "split off" all paedophiles as monstrous and psychopathic, when in fact inappropriate sexual feelings or behaviour by otherwise "normal" people - who are often highly distressed by them - are far more common than many in society would like to think.

Resources for working with paedophilic offenders to prevent re-offending are sorely lacking, and, with the exception of StopSO, The Specialist Treatment Organisation for the Perpetrators and Survivors of Sexual Offences, and the StopItNow! helpline, there is nothing for non-offenders with paedophilic concerns. Achieving significant changes in the levels of paedophilic offending are unlikely unless this is addressed. *The Dunkelfeld Project* in Germany, which offers free, confidential therapy to anyone with sexual interest in minors, demonstrates that alternative views to paedophilia *can* be developed, with successful results. In the UK however, a dearth of preventative measures, support, funding, research and services persists, despite intense public preoccupation with the subject. Current approaches deal almost exclusively with punitive measures and fail to tackle the problem by prevention and discussion, as these therapists' comments suggest:

Why aren't we working with somebody who hasn't even created a victim yet? That makes sense to me.

We had waiting lists with men and women on them who were telling us - telling forensic services - they felt they were dangerous... But there was nothing available for a person who feels he or she is a risk before they've committed an offence.

The danger of projection and splitting was a key theme in my interviews. It is evident in inaccurate, all-or-nothing perceptions, in "othering" all people with paedophilic traits as monsters, in the lack of political or social will to offer support, and in the absence of well-informed, balanced discussions. The bottom line appears to be: "Nobody wants to engage with this issue." Splitting off paedophiles to a societal desert island certainly protects us from engaging with challenging and unsettling

notions about what “normal” people are potentially capable of, but is this attitude a barrier to addressing the problem of paedophilia effectively? My research presents an alternative, more compassionate way of thinking about paedophilia, embodied in my participants’ lived experiences. Their voices have remained largely unheard beneath the noise of a strong, ingrained social discourse – but could acknowledging their experiences make the “unspeakable” discussion a little easier?

Whether we are therapists working with paedophilic clients, or simply engaged in the process of helping all our clients uncover the truth and authenticity of their experiences, being able to “discuss the unspeakable” feels an important and necessary part of the work. Conducting this study helped me to challenge and bring awareness to my own prejudices and defences, and made me think deeply about my own relationship with compassion and humanity. For me, hope and compassion for all human beings, and not wishing to write off any person as “unsavable”, whatever they have done, are central values to my practice – values echoed by one of my participants:

I'll not be part of a society that feeds people to the wolves... to discard a whole population, just say: "Put them on an island or shoot them" is indefensible. It's scandalous.

Whether or not we as therapists wish to work with paedophilic clients, the hopefulness and compassion we strive to bring to the therapeutic relationship seem to me to offer a valuable starting point for a new perspective on paedophilia that could affect widespread change and potentially reduce offending.

Anyone wishing to discuss aspects of this article is welcome to contact Stuart at info@stuartavery.co.uk. The full dissertation that this article is based on is available at www.sexuallyinappropriatebehaviour.org/avery

References:

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4 McCartan, K., (2008). Current Understandings of Paedophilia and the Resulting Crisis in Modern Society, in Carroll, J. & Alena, M., (2008), *Psychological Sexual Dysfunctions*, pp51-84. New York: Nova Biomedical.

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