

Avslöjandets tid

Kvinnors bearbetning av
sexuella övergrepp

av

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Abstract

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In this thesis the aim is to explore how the phenomenon of working through child sexual abuse can be understood; its historical, discursive and social conditions and relations to gender and other power structures. The main study consists of 30 interviews conducted in 2003-2005 with eight women, 29 to 69 years old, representing three different social classes, all abused in childhood and all but one by their father. The study also includes other related materials such as letters and documents from social authorities, child psychiatry and courts of law. A second study was conducted in 2006, concerning the Swedish public debates about sexual violence between 1970–1996. The purpose was to understand the context of time, place and agency when first disclosing the experience of sexual abuse. The material is understood from the perspective of social constructionism, narrative, discourse, doing gender and doing difference.

The result shows an overriding pattern concerning agency and change, related to the public debates about sexual violence. In the narratives, the Time of Silence is characterized by girls' and women's voices being controlled both through a continuum of violence exhibited by the father, and through different forms of rejections. In this context conscious thought about the sexual abuse and/or about disclosure becomes socially forbidden and impossible. With the Time of Telling, starting with the public debates about incest and child sexual abuse in the 1980's, there follows a weakening of social control. In this context conscious thought, language, disclosure and talk about the abuse become legitimate. Through these changes, the working through of child sexual abuse can be seen as being linked to an historically specific agency situated in the late 20th century. It emerges in a Swedish socio-political development concerning issues of power, sexuality, gender, age and kinship, initiated by the 2nd women's movement. Taking place in equal and gender equal relations it can be understood as an individual, collective and discursive equal rights project, and more specifically, as resistance against past social events. It involves an oppositional stance towards the abuse and the abuser with interpretation, emotion and action within a certain ethics related to women's and children's rights.

When talking about their fathers, mothers and about working through the sexual abuse the women construct three different discourses. Resistance is situated within one political/feminist and one professional/psychopathological discourse about women's and children's subjection to sexual violence. The political/feminist discourse is also constructed when talking about significant relationships, together with a third discourse about care. Acts of caring are related to gender as sameness, equality and traditional notions about "femininity". The discourses consist of both ideology and practice anchored within the women's and men's movements of the 1970's.

The resistance reaches out towards both media and social relationships, making comparisons, openness, solidarity and a sense of community possible. When others indirectly through debates, or directly in person, confirm past abuse they also confirm and attach importance and value to the women. This opens up a possibility to trust their perceptions and memories, and to personally confirm their past. In this way the women can, together with others, create both a personal history and themselves as an embodied, changeable being. Becoming valuable is the common theme, which can best be understood in relation to their experiences of depreciation during both historical periods.

In the narratives, the same construction of gender, age and kinship as difference is accomplished, both before and since the sexual violence debates in Sweden, and by both the abusive father and other people. It is connected to depreciation, rejection and disciplinary social control over self, voice and actions, and is reinforced by the father's physical and sexual violence. When gender, age and kinship are produced, a "bad" girl/women is produced: unreliable, seductive or in other ways deviant, less worthy, and responsible for "bad" behaviour such as the abuse itself or its disclosure. The construction is reproducing a historical pattern shown in earlier research and in the sexual violence debates. The women criticize this situation, in which their rights to be heard are still too limited and are indirectly or directly expressing demands for equal rights.