

Avslöjandets tid

Kvinnors bearbetning av
sexuella övergrepp

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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.

Summary

Aims and issues

In this thesis eight women talk about their lives and personal experiences of child sexual abuse. The aim is to explore the phenomenon of working through this abuse, its prerequisites and conditions. The following three issues are discussed:

- *How can working through child sexual abuse be understood as a phenomenon?*
How can it be understood as an individual, social, collective and discursive labour? What changes follows for women working through child sexual abuse?
- *How are girls' and women's agency narrowed and widened in the narratives?*
What are the historical, discursive and social contexts associated with narrowing and widening of the working through of child sexual abuse?
- *How are different constructions of gender and other power structures related to women's working through child sexual abuse and to its conditions?*

The study covers both what happened in the women's lives and their talk about past events. I explore this on two levels - the level of the narration and the level of the narrator - and in two historical periods that I have called the *Time of Silence* and the *Time of Telling*.

Method and theoretical framework

The main study consists of 30 interviews conducted in 2003-2005 with eight women, all abused in childhood and all but one by their father. The women were between 29 and 69 years old, from different geographical background and representing different social classes. The study also includes other related materials such as experiences from the interview situations, letters, articles from newspapers, photographs and documents from social authorities, child psychiatry and courts of law.

The material is understood from the perspective of social constructionism, narrative, discourse, doing gender (West & Zimmerman 1987) and doing difference (West & Fenstermaker 1995). Stories are considered as organized and interpreted experiences situated in discourse,

and social practices and interactions are understood as capable of constructing “truths” about what and how girls and women “are”. These situated doings are conceived as means of constructing either difference or sameness and are related to either inequality or equality. Two analytical concepts of central importance are agency and resistance. My use of the term *agency* is developed from a feminist understanding, linking action with social and political conditions, subordination and self-realisation (Deveaux 2002). I define it as different contextual conditions that open up or shut down the individual’s opportunities to interpret her situation, act on it and exercise power. I also analyse how women’s agency vary with disciplinary (external) and self-regulatory (internal) social control (Foucault 1987; Giddens 1994:164ff; Lindgren 2003:349; Nilsson 2008:127ff). When working with the material I have translated the term working through into *resistance* since I found the latter difficult to use as an analytical tool. It appeared too blunt, imprecise and lacking context. The term resistance turned out to be a better description of what the women were talking about. I examine resistance, using ideas from Foucault (2002:105ff) and Kelly (1988:61ff). Thus I consider it an act in which someone exercise power, or as one side of power relations, and as an active opposition to abusive and controlling behaviour.

A second, theoretical study was made in 2006, concerning the Swedish debate about sexual violence between 1970-1996. The purpose of this was to understand the context of time, place and agency when first disclosing the experience of sexual abuse. Databases and media archives were searched for books, articles published in newspapers and magazines, and for programs shown on TV. The main key words used were rape, incest and sexual abuse. A quantitative, bibliometrical analysis was applied along with a discourse and doing gender/doing difference analysis of books- and article headlines.

Main Results

The women’s narratives and interpretations of past events change with time and place. Different social context within the narratives and different times for telling bring different answers. The women also consciously reflect on how their thoughts about what occurred have changed over time. Despite these changes I see 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.

A Time of Silence

The Time of Silence appears as the historical period during which it is literally impossible to think about disclosing or debating sexual abuse, at least for those abused by their father. This period stretches from the 1930's, when the oldest women interviewed were born, through the 1970's and 1980's when the women start to disclose the abuse, up until the mid 1990's, when the last of the women start to remember and tell. Before the end of the 1980's the only woman who discloses abuse and is met favourably is the one not abused by her father. Out of the seven women abused by their father, all say that they either lack awareness of the abuse or lack awareness of the possibility of talking about it. On the narrative level, this lack of awareness is associated with social control.

The abusive father has the most dominant influence over the girl's actions in the narratives from the Time of Silence. He creates fear and conformity through a continuum of violence directed either towards the girl herself, her mother, her siblings or towards all of them. Only as an exception are there explicit demands of obedience. My interpretation is that it is not necessary for the father to tell his daughter not to reveal the abuse. The violence of everyday life brings about a situation where she knows that disobedience is followed by punishment and a sense of mortal danger. The violence works as a disciplinary control and leads to self-regulation in the form of obedience and silence.

A specific form of violence used by the father is depreciation. This reproduces an historical interpretation of girls and women described in earlier studies of gender (Johannisson 2005; Laqueur 1992; Skeggs 2000) and the exposure to sexual violence (Bergenheim 2005; Finkelhor & Browne 1991; Jansson 2002; Kelly 1988; Kelly et al. 1996; Olafson et al. 1993; Plummer 1995) which signifies that different expectations on what it means to be and act as woman or man have been followed by different expectation concerning women's and men's sexuality. Women have been categorized as

either asexual and honourable, virtuous and normal or loose, unreliable and deviant. When revealing abuse the girls and women have risked being seen as responsible; lying or seductive. In the narratives this is recreated by a depreciation directed at the mother and/or at the girl who are made into “bad” people with “bad” bodies: useless and whorish. The depreciation creates gender, age and kinship as difference. The categories “man” and “father” (especially “biological father”) are given a high value while “woman”, “mother”, “girl”, “daughter” and “child” are given a low. Higher value is connected to a wider agency and the opportunity to be in control of those of lower value.

In the narratives the mothers also control the girls’ actions, either by giving legitimacy to the fathers’ abuse and disciplinary actions, committing sexual abuse themselves (one mother) or by aggression and rejection. The fear of the mother is a contributing factor in self-regulation. Concern for, and solidarity with the subordination, dependence and vulnerability of mother and siblings also make girls protect them from different social risks by keeping quiet.

On the few occasions when abuse is revealed or discovered the adults reject both subject and girl. The girl is rejected both as a person and as a body. Other people, including the abusive father, are constructed as victims. My interpretation is that the act of discovery threatens a social value related to notions about the “good” fatherhood and the “perfect” family. The same construction of gender, age and kinship is recreated. Abused girls are made unreliable/untrustworthy, loose or in other ways untouchable and dangerous. These sanctions narrow and lock the girls’ agency, resulting in self-regulation; conformity, silence, self-reproach, self-depreciation and shame.

In the narratives about the Time of Silence the girls or young women also exercise resistance towards the abusive fathers. Social relations with other children and adults widen their agency. Resistance involves interpretation, emotion and action within certain moral notions on how you “should” and “should not” act towards other people. Agency is widened through significant caring relations, within and outside the family, and through a loyal “we” springing from shared subjection to different forms of violence. Even though it is impossible to disclose the sexual abuse, the girls/young women still resist the father by interpreting events. Resistance relating to both the abuser and the abuse is, however, totally subordinate in the narratives. When occurring it involves an ethical, critical judgment of the abuser’s actions, is connected to having social relations with solidarity and to existential experiences of being valuable to others. I interpret this as acts of working through the abuse.

Political and discursive changes

During the 1970's and 80's political changes takes place in Sweden. In the narratives they tend to have a decisive importance as historical, discursive widening, or narrowing, of girls' and women's agency. Predominant is a weakening of social control with greater possibilities of action for the girls/women. I consider this change a result of the new women's movement, and on a wider scale grounded in a universal discussion about human rights developing in the 20th century, particularly at the end of the century. Women and children were then defined as oppressed and discriminated. Gender equality and women's liberation became highlighted ethical values. With these changes a public, loyal "we" emerges through media debates about rape, incest and sexual abuse. The subjection to sexual violence becomes publicly visible, with ethics, compassion and action on behalf of the abused. In the debates gender, age and kinship are constructed as difference. The exposed victims are women, girls, daughters and children while the abusers are men and fathers. Interpretation of specific sexual acts as violations, and awareness of possibilities to name them, talk about them and seek help, thus become both legitimate and possible. The changes coincide with girls and women starting to disclose sexual abuse.

The study of the debates in this thesis concerning sexual violence shows that there is a major change in the pattern of publication in Sweden between 1970 and 1996. The number of books, TV-spots, and articles in daily and scientific press concerning rape, incest and sexual abuse increase exponentially, whereas before 1970 these themes had been practically invisible in the media. This change is centred around, and grows out of, a series of proposed bills in 1976 and 1982, which together with political protests and campaigns leads to a sexual crime legislation put into effect in 1984. 1982 marks the starting point of a turnaround and focusing of the debate on incest. During the first years this debate is being mainly political and feminist, urged on by the women's shelter movement. After 1984, with the new sexual crimes act in effect, and a conceptual shift in newspapers and magazines, from incest to sexual abuse, professionals from different areas, mainly medicine and psychology, take control of the debate, making it apolitical and professional. With this shift comes a change in discourse. A discourse about women's and children's subjection to sexual violence, which grew out of the 1970's, is confronted in the 80's by a discourse about men's subjection to slander and abuse. Within these discourses problem, victimization, credibility, responsibility and rights are constructed in different ways. Gender, age and kinship are constructed as difference, but in another way than before. On the one hand, the problem is constructed as sexual violence, with subjection, credibility and rights attributed to women, daughters and children. On the other the problem is constructed as slander, with subjection, credibility and rights attributed to men and fathers. With

these different doings follow different aggressors; men and fathers or women, daughters and children. Women, daughters and children as the aggressors recreates the historical gender construction of a deviant, unreliable, lying category of women. This construction is repeated in the narratives about the Time of Telling and as a consequence, narrows girls' and women's possibilities for resistance.

The Time of Silence as discursive labour

When talking about the Time of Silence the women construct four discourses, recreating the political and discursive changes: one concerning caring, two regarding women's and children's subjection to sexual violence (one feminist and the other psychopathological) and one psychopathological about men's and father's subjection to abuse.

When the women talk about significant people in their lives; women and men, girls and boys, they do gender as sameness within a discourse about care, with ideals taken from the women's and men's movements in the 1970's. I consider this an expression of gender equality in Sweden at the beginning of the 21'st century. In this, caring works as a normative value with traditional notions of women as standard. The interviewees mainly talk about caring with social and existential meaning and then about relations within or outside the family where people are important to one another and where there is mutual caring. By speaking about mutuality the women can be said to value themselves positively, and the girls that they once were. This positive valuation is contrasted with the depreciation of the abuser. I see this as opposition against violence and rejection. The women are using the discourse about caring as resistance. They compare, evaluate ethically and interpret relations and situations. Subjection to different forms of violence is set against compensating relationships which become existentially life saving by helping them deal with danger, isolation and suffering.

When speaking about fathers the talk expresses the feminist discourse about women's and children's subjection to sexual violence, *and* the pathological discourse about men's and father's subjection to abuse; the former stronger than the latter. In the former, different forms of violence are interpreted as life threatening, daughters are interpreted as being silenced and the social position of the fathers is interpreted as being stronger than the daughters'. By the discourse the women criticize their fathers, making them "bad" and constructing themselves as victims of a crime. In the latter discourse abusive fathers are instead made "good", vulnerable in the family and/or abused in their own childhood. The discourse is connected to a lack of relationships with mutual caring and works as disciplinary control over resistance. Within the discourse no protests are possible.

The talk about the mothers also follows a feminist and psychopathological discourse but here I see the latter as the strongest one.

Critique is either directed towards the mothers' structural and social situation, or towards them as persons. In the latter discourse the mothers are made "bad" and co-responsible to the abuse, the suffering and the silence. My interpretation is that in the talk of mothers and fathers the same discursive constructions are recreated as in the incest debate. Within a feminist discourse fathers are held responsible and mothers and children are the victims, whereas in a psychopathological discourse the victims are either the children or the fathers. Both discourses regarding women's and children's subjection to sexual violence work as structural agency enabling resistance, but the latter also shifts the responsibility for the abuse to non-abusive mothers and contribute to a lower value of the woman/mother category.

A Time of Telling

When the Time of Telling gradually replaces the Time of Silence the women's talk about the new era is mainly about working through the sexual abuse by resistance towards the abuser and the abuse. Three major changes now coincide with, and presuppose each other in their lives: A *public debate* about sexual abuse; *conscious thoughts* about sexual abuse and of the possibilities of talking about it; and adults proving willing to enter into *personal conversations* about it. Personal change arises in a social, collective change and is situated in a changed socio-political context. The historical time is mid to late 1980's, a time when talking about sexual abuse becomes, for the first time, part of an everyday practice.

The strategies for resistance that the girls/women use involves indirect, as opposed to direct, critique or confrontation of the abuser. The resistance reaches out towards a public and socially loyal "we". The narratives contain references to the public awareness of child sexual abuse. The debate is ongoing in different public medias, which the women have access to. In its wake it bring about changes with a new opened personal space and experiences of changed memory images, feelings and possibilities for action. A new time brings new meaning and new concepts. The media and related events act as tools to widen the women's agency and as a context to indirect or direct disclosure and conversations.

With this new time there follows attentiveness towards relations, a search for someone to trust and talk to. The attention works as resistance involving interpretation, emotion, and action. In encounters with others a new awareness arises concerning possibilities and action. The body with its sensory perceptions gives meaning to impressions of other people's actions and becomes a prerequisite for the decision whether to reveal the abuse. With this new historical time there also follows a longing to speak and be heard, to reveal themselves and their story to others. I see the need to speak out as an expression of a weakening of social control.

The people closest to the women also seem to develop an awareness of sexual abuse and to change in a way that makes communication possible. Disclosures are met with understanding and dialogue, and become a part of everyday practice as the incest debate escalates in the media. A mutual telling and listening arises between friends, lovers, in professional relationships and in women's shelters. Once again care is given importance. Conversations about sexual abuse happen when people are involved in each other and in each other's well being, a social context conceptualized in the thesis as the *Sphere of Listening*. This mainly involves an equal, mutually caring category but also an asymmetrical caring category. In the equal relation there are mutual openness, mutual caring and solidarity to each other. Therefore the disclosure does not become something different from what is already happening and thus no problem to overcome. The asymmetrical caring relation is instead characterized by openness, caring responsibility and solidarity with the abused. In both categories other people's expressions of emotions, sensitivity, emotional availability and compassion receive special importance as a widening of the possibilities for agency and change.

Above all, the interviewees talk about a collective resistance together with other women. The resistance recreates the feminist practises of the 1970's and comprises sisterhood, solidarity and projects structured for consciousness-raising. Equality works as the super ordinate value connected to wider agency. A common theme in the women's collective resistance is a loyal "we" which includes recognition, solidarity and a sense of safety. It is based on some form of shared experience, alike and shared through mutual openness, and on a mutual ethics. The mutual interpretation of reality forms a necessary prerequisite, which makes the narrative, and the narrator not being questioned or rejected.

The confirmation or validation (Leira 2002), which takes place in narratives about the Time of Telling, is significant. When others believe the narrator, the narration becomes truth and this brings about personal changes and transformations. Importance and value is attached to the narrator, who becomes reliable, receives legitimacy to trust in her own perceptions and memories and can personally confirm the abuse. What is then conquered is not just the abuse but also the whole life situation and the whole person; an embodied being with interpretations, perceptions, feelings, actions and value. This being is changeable and situated in equal and gender equal relations. Talking about it the women reproduces ideals within the feminist women's and men's movements of the 1970's; to be a genuine (Jaggar 2000:8) "whole person", freed from oppression in the shape of false namegiving (Daly 2006:229; Hill 2007:150ff). My interpretation is that working through child sexual abuse, in Sweden at the end of the 20th and in the beginning of the 21st century, can be described as an individual, social, collective and discursive work creating an embodied and changeable being,

by validating past events together with others. Following the socio-political changes in historical time there is a mutual transformation from non-existence to existence in a subjective sense.

The women also talk about relations where a dialogue about sexual abuse is impossible. They then create a boundary for what, in spite of all political changes and incest debates, is socially possible to talk about and change, socially and personally. Women and men, in both private and professional relations, act evasively and the interviewees interpret this as signs of their fear and pain. By avoidance the abuse turns into a forbidden subject. When this ban is overstepped the women are subjected to rejection, hostile acts, mistrust or attempts at diversion. This works as disciplinary social control.

At the boundary the same depreciation is repeated as in the narratives about the Time of Silence and the incest debate. "Victimized woman" or "victimized girl/daughter/child" equal "bad"; sexually loose, asocial and dangerous, mentally disturbed and lying, different or repulsive. By seeing the interviewees' persons and bodies as "problems", and by hiding or marginalizing the social context of the suffering, the abuser is protected and the crime legitimized. In this context the women's body, perceptions, sexuality and voice becomes forbidden and impossible to be in control of.

The self-regulation on the other hand is different from the one mentioned in the narratives about the Time of Silence, because in the Time of Telling there are alternatives. In the Time of Telling there is a possibility to choose a time and a place for disclosing the abuse. In the narratives the social control is challenged. The women resist the ban to speak. They reject people not representing the listening society, and a society that they mean legitimizes child sexual abuse. Changes take place with the help of public media but the interviewees also criticize to the distrust of women and children expressed there.

The Time of Telling as discursive labour

By the narratives about the Time of Telling, working through as a discursive labour can be understood as a political equal rights project. It is expressed in two co-working discourses, one about women's and children's subjection to sexual violence and one about care. When talking about the Sphere of Listening this implies both discourses and it can be interpreted as gendered. The women are doing gender as sameness with traditional notions about "femininity" as standard for women's and men's actions. Women and men both take responsibility for caring, feelings and relations but protection, a traditional male responsibility, is also attributed to both gender categories. Care and solidarity are connected to friendship and to heterosexual and lesbian love and sexuality. I see this as an expression of a feminist discourse and a shift towards a more equal society.

I also see discursive resistance as directed towards discrimination. The women criticize a situation where the rights of women, girls, daughters and children to be protected from violence, be heard, be helped and not being depreciated, are still too limited. In this context they also actively choose silence about the sexual abuse to protect themselves.

Mirrored against the threat of depreciation during upbringing, a mutual or personal awareness of being credible and valuable becomes a central activity. This validation reproduces the project of the women's movement of the 1970's to strengthen women's rights and autonomy and, by reinterpretation and communication, transforming women's identities. When the women talk about their transformations, from a subjective non-existence to existence, they also express themselves in metaphors that recreate the feminist understanding of sexual violence as a life threatening experience. The sexually abused body can be interpreted as a subjectively "killed" body, being brought back to life and given value by other people's confirmations and validations. Similar parallels can be drawn to previous research about women working through child sexual abuse (Godbey & Hutchinson 1996; Graham-Dickerson 1999). However, there seem to be no previous research made about the social, historical and discursive context regarding this working through of sexual abuse, or about what importance doing gender and other power structures have in the process. How working through sexual abuse can be understood in a Swedish context, what it means to women in Sweden at the beginning of the 21st century and how they talk about these changes, have also not been examined earlier.

I interpret the values and patterns of practise that dominate this thesis as an expression of a Swedish socially integrated politic of equality and gender equality. Political scientist Maria Wendt Höjer (2002), who has studied the issue of men's violence towards women in Swedish politics from 1930's to 1990's, writes that significant changes have happened during the period, regarding both the way to address the problem and the legislation, but also that public politics is characterized by stability. This means that the problem is individualized and that men's experiences become the norm. This makes real changes impossible: "As long as violence is seen as a personal problem, or as an unfortunate circumstance which individual men and women may find themselves in, political action in collective terms can not be suggested" (p.192). This thesis shows that although child sexual abuse becomes a professional, individualized project during the 1980's, there is also an ongoing politicising of women's relations in every day lives. I see these changes towards a more equal and gender equality society, emerging at an historical, discursive and social level, as significant openings of the agency necessary for resistance. If the working through of child sexual abuse as a political project has any stability over time and place, future studies will have to show.

Eight women have participated in the thesis, a small amount of the total population of sexually abused women. Is the result representative? My interpretation is that qualitative and quantitative studies either have or lack access to language and narratives and should be judged by different criteria. Language has a collective, public character. People are not disconnected from the society in which they live. Their language contains socially shared symbols, concepts and meanings in order to make communication possible. In this way micro is connected to macro (Parker 1997). The thesis is based on a large number of narratives with references to a linguistic and social context beyond the immediate social situation. The narratives can therefore be said also to also represent experiences and interpretations beyond the experiences of these eight women.

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