

Book Reviews

Freda Briggs, *From Victim to Offender: How Child Sexual Abuse Victims Become Offenders*

Allen & Unwin, 1995, ISBN 1-86373-759-6

This book, with its attractive cover, a provocative title, and bearing the name of a well-known author in the field of child abuse research, created a series of expectations. I expected that the book would explore the “victim becomes offender” phenomenon, an aspect of child abuse which is inadequately addressed in the literature, and to which numerous myths, legends, fantasies and assumptions attach. Many of my expectations about the book’s content, however, were unfulfilled, and I remain perplexed about the *purpose* of publishing a book in this form.

Although the spine and cover carry the name of the “author”, Freda Briggs in fact contributes only the preface and the postscript. The preface advises that the contributions in the book were collected during a larger research project, and rather than locate the content within an analytical and explanatory framework, it tantalises the reader with the existence of a set of understandings, knowledges and discussions which are “outside” this text.

The introductory chapter is written by a psychologist, Kevin Wallis, who has worked with offenders. He sets out the boundaries of the analytical terrain pertaining to child sexual abuse and discusses the Sex Offender Assessment Program (at Cooma Correctional Centre). This is a program which does not “treat” sex offenders but where “the emphasis is on risk assessment and where possible, risk reduction through devising offender management plans and re-education groups” (p15). In this chapter, Wallis’ statement that a theoretical model of transgenerational perpetuation of paedophilia is “speculative”, throws up a range of questions which are not addressed elsewhere in this book. Wallis questions the current strategies employed in working with perpetrators of sexual abuse, and proposes that many of the “treatment” programs rely upon knowledge which remains in the realm of the unknown. What might have been of most use, then, would have been the inclusion in the book of an examination of the program at Cooma, with some discussion of the “success” or otherwise of this particular approach within a prison setting.

This first chapter also serves as a reminder of the complexities, tensions and confusions which attach to any analysis of, and construction of responses to, paedophilia. Wallis states that “legal action reinforces the social reality that sexual assault is a crime and places the legal responsibility for the offences onto the perpetrator” (p13); while

“... the threatening milieu of prison only strengthens the dynamics of the sexual offence by encouraging the sexual offender to view himself as a victim, not a perpetrator, and by reinforcing the offender’s use of deception and manipulation as strategies to avoid detection” (p14).

Perhaps these comments contain an implication that a legal response, with a non-custodial outcome, is preferable, but there is not opportunity in this chapter, or elsewhere in this book, to explore a range of structural, institutional, therapeutic or other responses.

The other eight contributions to the book, written anonymously, and collected during the larger research undertaking, are narratives of abuse — both the experience of childhood sexual abuse and the perpetration of sexual abuse of children by male and female

adults who cite their own “sexualisation” in their childhoods as the foundation of their own role as perpetrators. Their narratives contribute little to the reader’s knowledge about the sexual abuse of children. That children are abused, and abused in the ways described in these contributions, has been stated already. These detailed and personal remembrances are little more than the retelling of previously documented scenarios in which children are exploited, demeaned and punished. Briggs may want to construct an argument that the “telling” is therapeutic, and she seems to support this position in her comment about one contributor that “he had already written his autobiography as part of his therapeutic program and he was prepared to share this with readers” (pxi). However, she does not locate these stories in a context which furthers our understanding of how we should respond to these adults who themselves perpetrate sexual abuse of children, or how we should evaluate the range of legal, therapeutic, custodial and other responses available. While the introductory chapter by Wallis reminds us that for some perpetrators, the abuse of children is an example of “love gone wrong”, perpetrated by adults who should not be viewed as “monsters”, this collection does nothing to take up the analytical threads, or indeed the “treatment” possibilities, but delivers the stories as exemplars of particular abusive experiences.

If read as the formal documentation of research interviews conducted during Briggs’ larger study, then these personal statements could be considered as valuable and interesting accounts which contribute to a larger, and more comprehensive analysis of the connections between the experience as victim and the perpetuation of abuse as offender. Their publication in book form, with little attention to their place in that larger project, and without an analytical landscape through which to view them, dilutes the significance of Briggs’ thesis. It also does little to further the readers’ understanding of why some victims of abuse become abusers and why others do not.

As such, this book allows the reader a glimpse at a larger and more complex canvas, and fails to take up some of the tensions which arise in the narratives. How significantly different, or relevant, is the experience of abuse within an educational institution compared with that experienced in a domestic or family setting? Is this a relevant issue at all, or is *all* sexual exploitation of children to be perceived, and responded to, with the same set of legal/therapeutic/punitive measures? Is the experience of, the effect of, and the consequence of sexual abuse different when accompanied by physical or other forms of abuse?¹ Does this matter?

The book does *not* achieve its goal of helping “to explain the incomprehensible — how victims become offenders and repeat the behaviour which they may have hated while they were in the victim role” (pxiv), as stated in the preface. Rather, it informs us that *some* victims become offenders. On a positive final note, the book is effective in provoking a range of questions about the sexual abuse of children, specifically about paedophilia, and it creates an interest in the larger research project, of which these stories form a part.

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1 The research reported by Lyndy and Hugh Potter in this volume, “The Impact of Childhood Abuse Experience on Adult Survivors” at 133 suggests that it is.