

Violated and desecrated.

Sexually abused males' narrative construction of religion

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ABSTRACT

The impact of sexual abuse on religious functioning is an underresearched area, notably with male victims. We are in need of comprehensive theories and sound research. Based on research by the author on religious coping and the religious dynamics in male survivors, this article outlines parts of a narrative theory, provides a case study, and concludes with implications for research on religious coping with sexual abuse. It is claimed that research should take into account the effect of sexual abuse on religious constructions and the plurivocal nature of the personal narratives.

As a victim or survivor of childhood sexual abuse, I am strongly motivated to put this topic on the agenda of church, science and society. As a christian, I am inspired by the search for justice and acceptance, and the desire for an intimate relationship with God. As a scientist, I am interested in how the dynamics of religion and sexual abuse interact. As a man, finally, I decided to take a gender-specific perspective. This choice has been enforced by studies that highlighted the major and specific impact of sexual abuse on males, contrary to common assumptions that boys and men are less vulnerable in terms of prevalence and consequences (Lisak 1994, Mendel 1995). How are we to understand the connection between violation (taken as a psychological process) and desecration (taken as a religious term)?

The past decade has shown an increasing number of publications concerning sexual abuse. Numerous books and articles are dedicated to prevalence studies, personal testimonies, advice for therapists and pastoral workers, research on psychological consequences, theological analyses and critiques of patriarchy, power and so on. More recently, research on the effects of sexual abuse on men in the psychological, social and sexual domain has been intensified. One of the consequences of this research is, that the prevalence estimates have risen

to 5 - 10 % in general populations (Mendel 1995; Violato & Genuis 1993). Another consequence is the suspicion that the negative psychosocial effects of sexual abuse may be as dramatic for males as they are for females (Garnefski & Diekstra 1997). Still, the number of studies focusing on male victims is limited (Bolton, Morris & MacEachron 1989; Bramblett & Darling 1997; Dhaliwal, Gauzas, Antonowicz & Ross 1996; Dijkstra 1996; Holmes & Offen 1996; Holmes, Offen & Waller 1997; Julius & Boehme 1997; Luster & Small 1997; Mendel 1995; Schulte, Dinwiddie, Pribor & Yutzi 1995; Watkins & Bentovim 1992, Wellman 1993). Furthermore, until now little attention has been given to the religious or spiritual dynamics, except when perpetrators are clergy (Isely & Isely 1990).

Specific attention to religion and spirituality with male survivors is present in publications from a clinical background, aiming at helping survivors and therapists or clergy (Ganje-Fling & McCarthy 1996; Ganzevoort 1996; Hunter 1990; Lew 1988). Some scientific research has been published focusing on religious dimensions in abused males. Belitz & Schacht (1992) explored some cases of boys involved in satanic cults as a response to sexual abuse. Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis & Smith (1989) note that sexual abuse is a significant predictor of non-religiosity in men. Rosetti (1995) found that males abused by priests have less trust in God than non-abused males. McLaughlin (1994) also found reduced trust in God or church officials, but did not differentiate between abused males and abused females. Others limited their research on religion and sexual abuse to abused women (Elliott 1994; Hall 1995; Kane, Cheston & Greer 1993). No studies are known that systematically address the religious dimension in abused males on a scientific level.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT - BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Sexual abuse is here defined as the situation in which a child is brought to perform and / or undergo sexual acts by someone with relative power or relational preponderance where the child does not wish to do so, or is not capable to decide or has no control over the situation. This definition stresses the aspects of power and voluntariness, and ignores arbitrary limits like age. The terms 'religion' and 'religious' are used to denote the processes of meaningful action and experiencing (including behavior, cognition, emotion, social context and religious tradition) in relation to transcendent beings. Please note that this is not meant as a strict definition; an open concept of religion is chosen to account for new and ideographic religious phenomena.

The present research project, started 1996, has three stages. In the first and third stage, we use a qualitative design; in the second stage we employ a quantitative method. The first stage consists of the analysis of 12 biographical interviews, using an open format. These interviews have been conducted between October 1996 and April 1997. One central question in the analysis is how the interviewee constructs his life story and his experiences of sexual

abuse and religion, and what roles he attributes to himself and to significant others within this life story. After the interviews, the respondents were asked to complete and return a questionnaire covering family background, sexual experiences, religious upbringing, psychosocial effects and functioning, present religious attitudes, convictions, experiences, behavior, pastoral and psychosocial help received, and expectations for the future.

In the second stage these questionnaires, reviewed and refined on the basis of the interviews and comments by experts, will be used in a statistical design, aimed at determining correlations between specific sexual abuse items and specific religious items, as well as other factors mentioned above. In the third stage another twelve interviews are planned with a more structured format, to answer questions raised in the previous stages of the project. At present, the analysis of the first series of interviews is under way. In this paper, working in the perspective of psychology of religion, I will present a preliminary model to understand the dynamics of sexual abuse and religion, document an illuminative case study, and discuss some implications. Future publications will address theological themes and pastoral care.

ROLE-ASSIGNMENT AND NARRATIVE - A THEORETICAL MODEL

Congenial to social constructionist approaches (Gergen 1994), an upsurge of narrative theory can be found in disciplines like psychology and theology. Taking a narrative turn has certain advantages. Most pertinent to our focus here is that a narrative approach takes humans seriously as subjects of their own lives, acknowledging them as authors of their life stories, while asking what constraints are placed upon this authorship by the social context.

The narrative perspective in my work is governed by the definition of narrative as the story-like structure in which the author (from his or her own perspective) experiences and understands life, assigns the parts and roles, and through which (s)he positions him- / herself relationally, and accounts for him- / herself in front of the audience. This definition helps us determine six dimensions to be explored: structure, perspective, experience, role assignment, relational positioning, audience (Ganzevoort 1998a, 1998b).

In this paper, I will focus on the dimension of role assignment to illuminate the narrative construction of religion and sexual abuse. Role assignment describes the way the author attributes specific roles to him- / herself, and to other characters in the story. Through this assignment, (s)he construes a constellation of roles deemed useful for the maintenance or enhancement of the narrative structure and identity of the author. The correlation between the roles in the story, their conflict and complementarity, is an important feature of the narrative process.

The theoretical model I am constructing is inspired by Sundén's role theory (1966, 1975) and by narrative approaches. Sundén's point was that religious

perception and interpretation is informed and facilitated by the stories of the religious tradition. In this process, he distinguished two related dimensions: the person takes a particular role for her- / himself, and is informed by the religious stories in ways that facilitate the anticipation of a particular role for God. If, for example, someone can identify with the role of Abraham in the story of being called to sacrifice his son, he or she may anticipate God to offer help and guidance in due time. This construction of the role system may lead to trust and obedience. (Translations of Sundén's work use terms like role-adoption, role-taking, role-playing, and role-anticipation, but are not consistent in which term is used for which dimension. Holm & Belzen 1995 Eds.)

Sundén's theory has some potential, but this is limited by its one-sidedness. The presupposition that religious roles are dependent on stories available in the religious tradition does not account for idiosyncratic and new religious constructions. Furthermore, the biographic origin and determination of social and religious roles is underestimated. For this reason, I propose a revision of his role theory that includes the roles originating from both the individual biography, the meta-narratives of a community and culture, and the religious tradition.

Furthermore, as Belzen (1996) points out, the concept of plot in narrative psychology can overcome the static nature of Sundén's concept of role. I agree that roles should be conceptualized as dynamic positions in the negotiated social drama. Therefore I turned to the narrative perspective mentioned earlier, of which role-assignment is one dimension.

The central theme I have chosen for my model is that the roles of the self are the mediating factor between social context, life experiences (including sexual abuse) and religious images. I stress the notion of the social origin of roles. The foundation of our story is the way we are addressed in our early years. Our story is a response to the messages we receive. These messages, often not verbalized, create the role the child has to adopt as the counterpart of the role the parents and other caretakers have taken. In the developing life story, the individual organizes these roles in a hierarchy of central and marginal roles. Central to my view is that each role has several complementary roles. That is: each role functions in a drama, in which it asks for a counter-role that serves as its legitimation and support. But for every role more than one complementary role is available. Thus, each parental role involves the child in a specific social drama, in which it can choose from a number of complementary roles. Each role of the child demands the parent to act in a specific way. This interaction can be seen as the negotiation of roles.

Roles are built on ambivalence and ambiguities. Here I incorporate Erikson's critical encounters of ego-development. Every role is a means of coping with the demands of social life and communication with significant others. The polarities of basic trust / mistrust etcetera ideally result in a stable, but not exclusive, position of basic trust. Likewise the conflicts of autonomy and

shame, initiative and guilt, intimacy and isolation, ask for a dialectic balance in which the first pole dominates. Kelly's Personal Construct Theory (1955) can be of use here. The 'dichotomy corollary' states that 'a person's construction system is composed of a finite number of dichotomous constructs'. One of the poles of each construct is the nominal pole, which is determining and dominant in interpretations; the other pole is the contrast pole (Adams-Webber 1982). Traumatic experiences like sexual abuse can destroy the dialectic balance of this ambivalence, and force the person into an extreme role. Furthermore, trauma tends to be experienced and 'remembered' in a fragmentary, rather than storied way (Herman 1993). The traumatic experiences cannot be integrated in the plot or role system. The developing role system of the individual therefore becomes distorted and fragmented.

The religious dynamics in my perspective are intertwined with the dynamics of the personal life story or role system. Every stage of the developmental process of a child can bring forward specific images of God, colored and interpreted by the emotional situation of the period of these images. The religious experience, interpreted and framed in the religious tradition and its stories, is a transitional world in which the role of the individual is complemented by a role of God (Rizzuto 1979). In this interplay of roles we have to reckon with two sides. One is the variety of roles provided by the Christian tradition. The other is the life story of the individual, in which the person already has some roles, created by the roles that significant others, parents, friends, ministers, have chosen for themselves. When- and wherever these two meet, the role of God, the image of God, and the role of the self are negotiated to construct a meaningful religious story.

Like other traumatic experiences, sexual abuse challenges the role system beyond what normally could be integrated. The specific impact of sexual abuse is subject of my research, but some preliminary remarks are in order. Firstly, sexual abuse is a physical trauma. The violation of the body involves all sensory systems of the individual. This directness of the experience makes it virtually impossible to ignore. The individual is forced to make sense of his or her senses, and at the same time he or she is unable to do so. Secondly, sexual abuse is a relational trauma. The damaging of the capacity for trust, intimacy, autonomy, self-expression, love results in a diminished relational faculties. This influences the relation with God as well. Thirdly, sexual abuse is - like any sexual interaction - a transcending experience. In surrender and receptivity, in ecstasy and tenderness, in desire and fear, sexuality and spirituality are closely linked (Nelson 1992). Abuse and corruption of sexuality therefore affect the healthy development of religion.

Due to the gendered nature of roles, my research is focused on the specific experiences of sexually abused men. From the earliest stages of development, the boy is treated as male, placed in masculine roles, and expected to act accordingly (Harris 1995). Although the myths of masculinity have lost some impact in recent years, the experience of male victims of sexual abuse show the

power they have till the present day. Boys and men are expected to be strong, self-confident, taking initiative, sexually enterprising, and emotionally less affected by sexual interaction. Sexual abuse means for males that they cannot live up to the standards of these myths. They may try to deny, minimize, overcompensate, or accept the role the perpetrator has put him in. These coping-mechanisms will be used in the relational and religious roles and plots of his personal narrative. He will live according to these mechanisms as a strategy to survive, far beyond the moment the strategy has been proven to be dysfunctional.

To conclude this section, I believe that a social constructionist approach of roles and negotiated dramas can help us understand the effects and experiences of sexual abuse, and the religious dynamics. The case study I would like to present now illustrates several of these processes.

ANDRÉ - A LIVING DOCUMENT

The case I chose to describe involves a man in his fifties, of whom I will give you a short biography. André (not his real name of course), was born as the first and unwanted child in a half-jewish family. He lived with his grandmother most of his childhood, but frequently he walked the half an hour road to his parents. Often his mother sent him back, as she had men over. At age four, André and his mother were imprisoned during World War II. There André was forced to have sexual contact with a soldier. His mother viewed the incident as part of normal life in a prisoners' camp. After the war, at age seven, his father, who had physically abused him for a number of years, started to abuse him sexually, using force and threats, and eventually going as far as anal intercourse. This lasted until André reached the age of thirteen. After that, his mother abused him for some years, accompanied by one of her many male friends. At approximately the same time a neighbor, a teacher and several people he met on the streets, took advantage of his vulnerability and his longing for warmth and attention. A life of misery followed, in which both homosexual and heterosexual relationships all ended suddenly and unexpected. One relationship, his marriage, ended when his wife and three children died in a car accident. At age fifty, André joined a pentecostal community, was baptized, but the promised healing of his memories did not occur. Later, he joined a catholic church, in which he was baptized again, because the priest did not recognize the earlier baptism. Furthermore, when accused of sexual abuse of children (unjustly, according to him) André was asked by the priest not to attend church anymore. Now that he has moved, he has joined a new parish.

The accusation of abusing children of a female friend may not be correct. He has been in custody for five months pending investigation, but he describes being acquitted after the mother of the children admitted having exploited the children herself for porn industry. In André's story more instances of suspicion are mentioned. The family physician did not believe him when as a child he

disclosed the abuse by his parents. He also feels being suspected when he is friendly to children: 'Nowadays when you see a child in the streets, and you think it's cute, and you as if he's enjoying a game or anything, you're a dirty old man.' This fear of unjust suspicion may have been effected by the abuse and its aftermath. It is not necessarily based on misbehavior conducted by André.

However, André also describes what he calls his last 'intimate relation' in such a way that suspicion of abuse is warranted. This relation involves a fifteen year old paperboy always looking sad. André invites him in to talk, helps him doing homework, discloses some of his own history, and invites the boy to tell him about his home situation. Within a few weeks, the boy moves in with André, and six months later together they move to the house of the boy's mother, who is in love with André. When he finds out that she physically abuses the boy, the two of them flee the house, live in hotels for some weeks until they find an apartment. A sudden termination of the relation occurs when the boy phones his father and moves in with him. André hasn't heard from him since. Suspicion arises when André makes conflicting statements about the age of the boy (15 or 17) at the time the relation turned sexual, and especially when he describes the sexual interaction as mutual voluntary: 'Actually, I didn't want anything with him. But he was, well, at some point he only wanted to cuddle and a lot more. Yes, then it happened of course. Naturally I am not made of stone.' Here the initiative is attributed to the boy, despite the age difference of 35 years and the highly confusing triangular relationship with the mother and the boy. Concerning the sudden departure of the boy, André says: 'I don't mind at all that he chooses his own life. Maybe eh, maybe he falls in love with a girl. I never thought of him as a homosexual kid. Or bisexual. Well, a little. But not totally. I don't mind about that. But the way he left. I could not say goodbye.' André reinterprets (incorrectly) the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, used by his parents against him, as a culturally acceptable phenomenon: 'it's about little boys, so I assume it concerns paedophilia. And in that time, like still in Arab countries and Israel, it was quite normal that a child was offered to you.' The sudden departure, André's discussion of the boy's sexual orientation, the attribution of initiative and responsibility to the boy, and the legitimation of sexual interaction with younger children makes me suspicious in reading the text. At least it raises the question how the boy has experienced this situation. From an observer's point of view I would label this relation as psychologically abusive, regardless of legal issues. The boy is trapped in a troubling situation at home, vulnerable and longing for comfort, lured into sexual interaction, and held responsible for it.

The analysis of the interview shows the centrality of the struggle for intimacy, acceptance, trust and the sense of controlling his own life. These struggles place André in opposing roles. André portrays himself as a warm person, longing for intimacy, and at the same time keeping his distance. He takes the role of the rejected child, but also of the accepting adult. He describes himself as helpless and manipulated by others, but at the same time he may be the

manipulator, and he indeed takes the role of someone in control of his own life and actions, including some of the childhood sexual experiences, which I would label as abusive.

A closer look at the roles in the story André tells makes clear that the central dialectic is between the roles of the child and the adult. It seems that the other roles are specifications of these central roles, and that the conflicts in the other, less central, roles are extrapolations of the conflict between the child and the adult in André's role-system. In many ways André takes the role of a child. Retrospectively, he describes himself as a child in terms of innocence and unawareness, claiming that he was unable to think of the abuse as anything but normal. The innocent self-description is threatened at a young age. Besides abusing him, his parents react with extreme contempt and aggression when he tells them being bisexual. André stresses that he entered several (abusive) relations voluntarily. André mistrusts adults: 'Adults are still threatening. To say it childlike: when I have to meet someone new, I'll pray with the same childlike words, please take my hand, 'cause I'm trembling meeting something unknown.'

His attitude towards children is confused. He loved his own children and still misses them. He feels mercy for children in trouble, and argues adamantly against sexual interaction with young children. At the same time he does engage in sexual interaction with teenaged boys and states repeatedly that he feels more secure with children than with adults. It can be postulated that André sees children as equal because he himself takes the role of a child. As I stated in describing the theoretical model, the roles of the self are construed in interaction with the messages received from significant others. The abusive, neglecting and condemning messages of his parents effects in the conflicting roles of an innocent, helpless and bad child.

How do images of God function in this story? Several conflicting images or roles can be drawn from this case. To the innocent and unaware child that André once was, and in part still wants to be, God was the unchallenged source of love and trust. To the rejected and abandoned child André found himself to be, God was the one that left him. To the child that encountered demanding and critical parents, God was both the forgiving and harsh judge. But, and here I believe a correction to popular views is needed, these images of God are not simply copying the images of parents. They are complements, counterparts of the roles the individual takes for himself. André rejects the view of God as a Father, but instead focuses on the image of God as a Son: 'I couldn't see God as love. I could find that much more in Jesus, because He was the Son.' Here André finds Jesus to be an ally to the child he wants to be. André does not trust God as a Father, but he can only trust Jesus as He is portrayed in the New Testament.

When presented to a list of metaphors of the relationship with God, André shows a development from the image of God in his youth (as he recalls and

reconstructs it, of course) and his images of God now. The metaphors can be distinguished in the dimensions of intimacy versus distance, safety versus threat, and dependence versus responsibility. In his youth, distance and threat are the keys to his images of God, but he also identifies with one metaphor of intimacy. In his present situation, both the metaphors of distance and intimacy, of safety and threat are less important. Metaphors of a personal God show a declining interest, and André prefers metaphors of impersonal dependence of God. These images of God are consistent with the roles André sees himself in. Only indirectly they correspond to the roles of significant others. The central role André attributes to God is the role of the child Jesus, not the role of the Father.

The conflicting roles in André's story lead to repeated conflicts with religious groups. (It is noteworthy that the religious leaders in these groups are explicitly referred to as adults.) His Jewish background is not available because of his rejection of the 'Father' in favor of the 'Son': 'I feel the God the Jews know is too harsh. That has nothing to do with love.' The Pentecostal group is abandoned and accused of manipulation when it demands him to 'recover' and 'be healed', leaving no room for his inner role conflicts and his ambivalence between childlike helplessness and adult responsibility. He leaves the Roman-Catholic church when his innocence is not accepted by the priest: 'I felt, God could never say that. When I read stories from the New Testament, He heals and forgives.' Again the messages of significant others in these religious communities seem to be important factors because they attribute specific roles to André, that are incompatible to the roles he has attributed to himself.

SEXUAL ABUSE AND RELIGIOUS COPING - IMPLICATIONS

Using the theoretical model outlined and the case study presented, some implications may be formulated. I will focus on two themes, eminently important for the study of religion and abuse. The first is religious coping theory. The second is the plurivocal nature of the personal narrative.

The last decade has been important in furthering research on religious coping. Recently, Pargament (1997) published a landmark book, in which his coherent conceptual framework is presented. He describes religion as 'the search for significance in ways related to the sacred' and coping as 'the search for significance in times of stress.' Central to his approach is the diversity of the connection between religion and coping: 'the many faces of religion in coping.'

Despite its strength, depth and breadth, Pargament's approach can be criticized for being a one-way description. Similar to Sundén's role theory, the focus is on the contribution of religion to coping. As the theoretical model and case study presented here suggest, understanding the impact of religion on coping with sexual abuse (and other crises and trauma's) can only be achieved responsibly, if the impact of (coping with) sexual abuse on religion is studied as well (Ganzevoort, 1998c). Religion should not be treated as a stable system,

but as a dynamic multidimensional personal and relational narrative construction. Every approach stopping short of this integrative demand is due to be simplistic.

In this contribution, I have focused on the dimension of role-assignment to investigate the role of God. Similarly, dimensions of structure (including time and causal explanations), perspective (including gender and power), experience (including body and emotion), relational positioning (including rhetoric devices and communication) and audience (including the plausibility of a story in front of significant others) may be studied. This may connect to religious dimensions like theodicy (structure), patriarchy (perspective), religious feelings (experience), prayer (relational positioning) and justification (audience). Personal interpretations and relations with God and religious communities may then be studied in an integrative way.

The second implication of the theoretical model and the case study is the plurivocality of the personal narratives (Hermans & Kempen 1993). Typically, people do not use one consistent and coherent story, but a blend of a number of story lines. Each story line is used to attribute meaning to specific instances, persons and events. In each story line religion may have a different place and function (Ganzevoort, submitted). The question whether religion has a positive or negative effect (if any) cannot be answered if the idiosyncratic narrative construction of intersecting story lines is not taken into account.

This implication is essential both for research and counseling. To establish the meaning and potential of religion in coping with sexual abuse, we need to listen for the variety of religious images and vocabulary, and for discrepancies and intersections between religious story lines. Religious constructions then should be evaluated to see if they are helpful or harmful. A discussion of psychological and theological criteria to evaluate religious constructions lies outside the scope of this paper. Here I stress the need to take a differentiated approach to evaluate the various religious story lines of an individual and their intersections. This may be useful in discovering the helpful potential of religious images and vocabulary for a specific individual or community.

CONCLUSION

Sexual abuse of males is a major problem with many consequences. Prevention, ethical dimensions, theological evaluation and adequate training for (pastoral) counselors are some of the areas to invest our energy, but beyond the scope of this paper. What can be done in scientific settings is exploring the effects, religious dynamics, coping mechanisms and so on. This effort to understand has only just begun. A narrative theory of (among other dimensions) religious role-assignment is useful to investigate the complexities of the narrative construction of religion by (male) victims of sexual abuse.

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