

Reflections on the Jimmy Savile disclosures

Grooming and denial behind the masks of masculinities

Malcolm Cowburn

Professor of Applied Social Sciences, Sheffield Hallam University

The disclosures concerning the predatory sexual nature of Jimmy Savile raise questions about what inhibits victim-survivors of sex crimes from reporting the harm that was done to them. Linked to this it focuses attention on cultures that support, explicitly or tacitly, male predatory sexual behaviours. This brief paper draws together a mixture of personal experience, a reflection on grooming and male dominated culture, consideration of social denial of sexual harms, and ends by highlighting the need to develop cultures wherein victim-survivors of sexual assault are not silenced.

My personal reflection is in many ways troubling and irresolvable. Many years ago I was involved in helping workers - in the criminal justice system and social services - deal with unfolding issues related to the sexual abuse of many children by groups of adults. It is not appropriate, here, to identify this situation, but suffice it to say that it received national attention in the media. One element that recurred in my discussions with staff was that the children spoke of being taken to 'big/posh' houses where they were abused. The name of Jimmy Savile and other unnamed senior public figures occurred in these peripheral disclosures. These disclosures were not of a kind that could be followed up – they lacked detail and I was only hearing them third or fourth hand. However, whatever their status the disclosures left me with two unresolved issues – that powerful public people may be involved in the sexual abuse of children and that if this was the case it was very difficult, if not impossible, to bring a prosecution against them. Thus, potentially the voices of some victims were very effectively silenced. The recent disclosures indicate the power of these silencing forces. It is not just Savile who is being named as a high profile sexual abuser at the moment; other senior public figures are now coming to the active attention of the police.¹

In 1984 David Finkelhor introduced his theory of child sexual assault - 'the four preconditions'. Although the theory is almost thirty years old it has had great influence, particularly with practitioners working with both offenders and victim-survivors of sexual assault. Finkelhor suggests that before an offence can be committed four preconditions have to be fulfilled: firstly the offender must be motivated to abuse, secondly, he² must overcome his 'internal inhibitors', this is probably best summarised as conscience (one offender described it to me as 'the bobby in the brain'), thirdly, the offender must then overcome the environment where the offence is to occur (that is, he must ensure that there is nothing in the environment that will prevent him from committing the offence) and finally he must overcome the victim. For the purposes of this paper the last two preconditions are most relevant. A key part of both controlling where the offence will occur to avoid interruptions and in silencing victims is the grooming process. Olsen et al (2007: 241) describe grooming as 'the subtle communication strategies that child sexual abusers use to prepare their potential victims to accept sexual contact'. This involves controlling both the victim by concealing the threat posed, and manipulating the environment to ensure that the offence will occur without disturbance.

I do not have strong memories of Jimmy Savile's various television programmes but I do remember one aspect of his performance. When, on camera, next to a young woman he would affect a soft spoken tone and use almost courtly terminology to refer to her as 'young lady' etc. He would occasionally emit a falsetto groan that marked his well-controlled and gallant response to her 'beauty'.

¹ See for example www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-20303606

² As men commit most sex crimes, I use male pronouns in this paper

Thus he portrayed himself as a man with sexual desire that was controlled by his shyness and his good manners: he was thus attracted but ineffectual. Campbell (2009: 432) highlights that grooming involves ‘strategies to present a specific image in an interpersonal relationship through the use of language that indicates the sender’s “persona” to the receiver’. She identifies five particular grooming strategies employed by offenders (Campbell, 2009: 434): Supplication (presenting a helpless public persona); Intimidation (presenting a powerful or harmful persona); Self-promotion (presenting as competent); Ingratiation (presenting likeable or affiliative behaviours); Exemplification (presenting a self that is worthy – demonstrating high moral values). Apart from his use of supplication and ingratiation Savile also used both self-promotion and exemplification. In his series ‘Jim’ll fix it’³ he presented himself as able to fulfil any person’s wishes – he was powerful and effective. However, his acts of fulfilling wishes were very clearly located within a philanthropic framework of doing ‘good’. It is easy to see how difficult it would be for his victims to report such a man and how difficult it would be for such accusations to be taken seriously. Additionally, it is likely that the use of intimidation was saved for his off-screen acts of abuse and subsequently silencing victims. Thus, to return to Finkelhor’s framework, briefly, it is clear that Savile was very successful in manipulating the environment both where the offences occurred and in also controlling the wider public environment with regular appearances as an eccentric but very active philanthropist. These performances also contributed to the silencing of his victims.

Apart from performing his public philanthropic role, Savile’s sexually harassing and abusive behaviours were also located in a cultural context. This is clearly recognised by the recent resignation of the Director General of the BBC. The culture of the BBC at the time of the offending and more recently in relation to the attempts to suppress the disclosure of his behaviour is relevant. However, wider societal attitudes and values in relation to sexuality and gendered behaviours are also of importance. Here the work of the Feminist Social Anthropologist, Peggy Reeves Sanday (1996; 2003; 2007) is helpful. Sanday studied a range of societies across the world and also campuses in the United States and identified some of these social groupings were ‘rape-free’ whilst others were ‘rape-prone’. In ‘rape-free’ societies, gender relations were marked by respect for women as citizens; there was significant female power and authority, and the near absence of interpersonal aggression in social relations. In ‘rape-prone’ societies, social relations were marked by interpersonal violence that was linked to an ideology of male dominance enforced through the control and subordination of women.

However, rape-prone communities not only provide cultural support to (some) men in committing rape, they also effectively silence victim-survivors. There is a range of studies on what inhibits victims of sex crime from reporting the assault that they have experienced. In 1984 Williams suggested that media driven constructions of ‘the classic rape’ – a surprise attack from an unknown stranger in a secluded public place – prevented women, who were harmed by somebody that they knew, from seeking official help. It is a truism to say that Jimmy Savile was not an unknown stranger. Weiss (2011: 445), more recently, suggests that victims’ review and (re)interpret their experience before making a decision to report their assault to authorities. This is not a simple process, Weiss (2011: 446, emphasis in original) comments that:

...acknowledging rape requires more than merely recognizing one’s situation as criminal by law; it also requires that victims be willing to define an incident as rape, identify the persons who hurt them as rapists and label themselves as rape victims. Therefore, victims may choose to deny their experiences as rape because it is in their best interests to do so.

In many cases identifying adverse sexual experience as rape is not easy; in her analysis of 276 ‘non-reporting’ accounts, Weiss (2011: 460) identified four distinct strategies used by victims to neutralize their victimization and to justify non-reporting – ‘denying criminal intent, denying serious

³ Thanks to Hilary Pengelly for (re)awakening my memories of this television programme!

injury, denying victim innocence, and rejecting victim identity'. Thus, apart from the manipulations of the offender in seeking the silence of the victim(s), sometimes the person who has been harmed may not wish to declare this harm in public. There is insufficient space here to develop this analysis in relation to Savile's many victims, however what is of interest is that the offender denial, and victim survivor denial may be supported and nurtured by various forms of social denial.

In his study of 'atrocities' Stan Cohen (2000: 1) suggests that widespread denial occurs when:

... people, organizations, governments or whole societies are presented with information that is too disturbing, threatening or anomalous to be fully absorbed or openly acknowledged. The information is therefore somehow repressed, disavowed, pushed aside or reinterpreted. Or else the information 'registers' well enough, but its implications – cognitive, emotional or moral – are evaded, neutralised or rationalised away.

He identifies three forms that societal denial can take: (i) literal/complete denial (nothing happened); (ii) interpretive denial (something happened but it's not what you think), and (iii) implicatory denial (what happened was not really bad and can be justified). In the Savile case initially press and public reactions were literally denying that the recently deceased public philanthropist could be guilty of such crimes. However, as more people felt able to speak publically about their experiences it was not possible to sustain a position of complete denial. However, denial at an interpretive level occurs (initially) by only focussing on Savile and the past (such things do not happen now in the BBC or elsewhere)⁴. This has, in part, been challenged by a number of women with high profiles who have clearly stated that they were (often) in the past sexually abused by men working for the BBC and that nothing has substantially changed within the culture – Sandi Tosvig in interview said 'I am not sure that it has changed completely if I am honest. The very famous boys thinking that they can get away with all sorts of things that are not necessarily pleasant.'⁵ It was noteworthy that the male interviewers with whom she was talking very quickly terminated the discussion. This neatly introduces consideration of the final form of denial identified by Cohen. Implicatory denial can be seen in operation in the way that the culture of the BBC – in the past - is now being construed as the problem – Savile was supported by a corrupt culture within the BBC. What is not occurring is any wider consideration of sexual harm as an endemic feature in social groupings, communities and 'society'.

Potentially, public investigations could widen their field of inquiry beyond the institutional culture of the BBC to wider social norms and values; social norms and values that are 'rape-supportive' and that deny victims the opportunity to voice their experiences. This would however, require recognition that acts of sexual harm are a social problem and require social policies to address them. A 'public health' approach to sexual violence (Sanday, 2003; HM Government 2007; Laws 2008) is a way forward. Such an approach recognises acts of sexual harm as a social problem and not only the product of an individual pathology. This approach is proactive rather than reactive, but it also challenges established gendered ways of being (so successfully manipulated by Jimmy Savile). Sanday (2003: 342) describes it thus:

A public health strategy aimed at preventing sexual harm needs to incorporate a social critique of the behaviour of men (which includes the identification of '...cultural and social mechanisms by which violence against women becomes a socio-cultural script for masculine identity'.

Such an approach would make it more difficult for sexually harmful men, such as Savile, to conceal and normalise their activities within sexist and misogynistic (sub)cultures. More significantly it may enable victims not to be silenced for 30 years.

⁴ See for example www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20190426; www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-19861688; www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-19856081

⁵ www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19861146

References

Campbell, A. M. (2009) 'False faces and broken lives: An exploratory study of the interaction behaviours used by male sex offenders in relating to victims', *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 28(4) 428-440.

Cohen, S. (2000) *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, Cambridge: Polity.

Cowburn, M. (2005) 'Hegemony and discourse: Reconstructing the male sex offender and sexual coercion by men', *Sexualities, Evolution and Gender*, 7(3) 215-231.

HM Government, in association with, Association of Chief Police Officers, Sector, V.C., National Offender Management Service, Her Majesty's Court Service et al. (2007) *Cross Government Action Plan on Sexual Violence and Abuse*, London: HM Government.

Laws, D.R. (2008) 'The Public Health Approach: A Way Forward?' in D.R. Laws and W.T. O'Donohue (eds.) *Sexual Deviance: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment*, New York: The Guildford Press.

Olson, L.N., Daggs, J.L., Ellevoid, B.L. and Rogers, T.K.K. (2007) 'Entrapping the Innocent: Toward a theory of Child Sexual Predators' Luring Communication', *Communication Theory*, 17(3) 231-251.

Sanday, P.R. (1996) 'Rape-prone versus rape-free campuses', *Violence Against Women*, 2(2) 191-208.

Sanday, P.R. (2003) 'Rape-free versus rape-prone: How culture makes a difference', in C.B. Travis (ed.) *Evolution, Gender, and Rape*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Sanday, P.R. (2007) *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood and Privilege on Campus* (Second Edition), New York: New York University Press.

Weiss, K.G. (2011) 'Neutralizing sexual victimization: A typology of victims' non-reporting accounts', *Theoretical Criminology*, 15(4) 445-467.

Williams, L.S. (1984) 'The classic rape: When do victims report?' *Social Problems*, 31(4) 459-467.
