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Hegemony and discourse: Reconstruing the male sex offender and sexual coercion by men

MALCOLM COWBURN
The University of Sheffield, UK

Abstract

This paper considers issues related to hegemony and discourse and how dominant constructions of the male sex offender conceal wider issues pertaining to the hegemony of men. Initially outlining competing approaches to understanding power, the paper then seeks to link the Gramscian concept of hegemony to Foucauldian perspectives on power and language and justify the use of the term “hegemonic discourse”. It suggests that hegemonic discourse concerning male sexual coercion is embodied in sex offender recidivism data, and classification systems concentrate attention on a small population of men who are then deemed to be deviant. A closer examination of the recidivism data studies of unconvicted men in relation to acknowledged desire to rape and sociological literature in relation to the social construction of masculinities raises questions about the effect of the hegemonic discourse in relation to understanding and responding to male acts of sexual coercion.

Keywords: Sex offenders, masculinities, hegemony and discourse

Introduction

This paper seeks to problematize dominant psychological constructions of the male sex offender and acts of sexual coercion committed by men. The phrase “sexual coercion” rather than “sexual violence” has been chosen because the latter phrase, to some audiences, conjures up acts involving additional physical violence and possibly the use of weapons. This image of violence can allow a wide variety of harmful sexual behaviours to be ignored.

In this paper, all harmful sexual acts that are committed by men are considered; thus the phrase sexual coercion may more easily accommodate all of these acts. However, in choosing to use the phrase sexual coercion, it is recognized that all such acts are violating.

Another phrase that needs some clarification is “sex offender”. This term is used to refer to a man who has been convicted of a sexual offence. The word “perpetrator” refers to someone who has committed an act of sexual coercion but has not been convicted.

“Forensic discourse” particularly refers to discourses emanating from the legal definition of sex offenders. Sex offenders are defined (by their offences) by the processes of the Criminal Justice System; subsequent categorizing of sex offenders

is underpinned by legal definition. Forensic discourse is embodied in criminological studies of sex and also in the literature of the forensic sciences of psychiatry and psychology.

Central to this paper is the problem of power and discourse; in particular hegemonic male power embodied in the discourses of sexual coercion. Key concepts of hegemony, discourse and their relationship to epistemology are outlined. Using these concepts, sex offender recidivism data and sex offender classification systems are reviewed, and key areas of research that have been ignored in the development of the dominant form of knowledge in relation to acts of sexual coercion committed by men are highlighted. The relationships of these dominant understandings of male sex offenders to non-convicted populations of men are explored, and the relationship of the social construction of the male sex offender to other constructs of men and masculinities is considered.

Hegemony discourse and epistemology

This section sets the theoretical basis of this paper. It considers issues related to hegemony, discourse, and epistemological standpoint in the creation of knowledge. Establishing a clear understanding of these concepts is fundamental to the subsequent argument of this paper in that the dominant forms of knowledge about sexual coercion are inadequate because they are solely premised on studies of convicted men.

Hegemony and discourse

In many ways, this paper is about power. This includes the power to define, the power to incorporate behaviours in definitions, and the power to exclude behaviours from definitions. Central to this discussion are two terms “hegemony” and “discourse”. These terms emerge from very different traditions in relation to theorizing power (Clegg, 1989; Purvis & Hunt, 1993).

Clegg (1989) identifies these traditions as structural and post-structural. Structural approaches are concerned with hierarchical power and sovereignty: power is held by the person or group that is sovereign (Clegg, 1989). Structural approaches tend to have a rigid view of how power operates. Post-structural approaches are concerned with the operation of power in a variety of locations at historically specific moments. Power is not hierarchically located (held) but discursively present; it can be contested in a variety of settings. Power is not held by any one group; it is exercised by a variety of groups in different settings (Whitehead, 2002).

The term hegemony has its origins in structural understandings of power. It is derived from the Greek verb meaning to lead, and referred to the holding of political power. Antonio Gramsci is recognized as a key exponent of this term (Bocock, 1986; Clegg, 1989). Gramsci (1971) used the term to describe the dominance of one social class. This domination was not only manifested politically and economically, but also

culturally. Bocock (1986, p. 63, emphasis added) has offered this (much cited) definition:

...[hegemony occurs] when the intellectual, moral and philosophical leadership provided by the class or alliance of class and class fractions which is ruling, successfully achieves its objective of providing the fundamental outlook for the whole society

Structuralist understandings of power and hegemony have been criticized by feminist (Delphy, 1977; Millett, 1970; Rich, 1976; Walby, 1986) and profeminist (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1987, 1995) scholars for ignoring gender in theorizing of (class) dominance. They have largely attempted to insert gender into a structural analysis of power. Emerging from this project, however, are two major theoretical concepts: patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity.

Patriarchy, as a concept to denote the structural oppression of women by men, was first used in the early 1970s by Kate Millett (Millett, 1970; Whitehead, 2002). However, from the outset, the term has been fraught with ambiguity, complexity, and conflict (see Smart, 1995, pp. 130–135, for a full exploration of these problems). The term has been criticized for being too generalized in its use and being underpinned by essentialist assumptions (Rowbotham, 1979); similarly critics have highlighted serious problems in the relationship between patriarchy and the capitalist state (Barrett, 1980; Randall, 1982). Linking most criticisms is dissatisfaction with the monolithic, ahistoric, and inflexible nature of the concept (Whitehead, 2002, pp. 86–88). Whitehead (2002, p. 87) succinctly summarizes the concerns of many feminist critics of the concept of patriarchy: “...patriarchy is not only reductionist ...[it] is unable to explain and analyse male dominance and its differentiation across multiple sites”. Smart (1995), however, asserts that, while the concept of patriarchy has become unhelpful, the adjective patriarchal continues to retain some critical purchase.

The term hegemonic masculinity is a subtler concept in that it avoids identifying and reifying a particular masculinity as hegemonic, and focuses attention on praxis.

Hegemonic masculinity is:

...the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Connell, 1995, p. 77).

Here the focus is on practice (what men do) and it specifically concentrates on current behaviours and thus does not make ahistoric universalist claims.

However, although the concept has been very influential in the 1990s in theorizing male dominance, it has recently come under critical scrutiny. Apart from the nebulous nature of the hegemonic masculinity (Donaldson, 1993), Jefferson (2002) has shown that while Connell was clear in his formulation of hegemonic masculinity

as fluid and contingent, some of his followers have reified this term and use it to refer (albeit vaguely) to one particular form of masculinity.

Also addressing similar problems, Hearn (2004, p. 58) has usefully summarized the main problems with hegemonic masculinity as a critical concept:

...there are three unresolved problems. First are we talking about cultural representations, everyday practices or institutional structures? Second, how exactly do the various dominant and dominating ways that men are—tough/aggressive/violent; respectable/corporate; controlling of resources; controlling of images; and so on—connect with each other? Third, why is it necessary to hang on to the concept of masculinity rather than, say, men's practices ...when the former concept has been subject to such critique ...and is in use in such very different and sometimes confusing ways?

While hegemonic masculinity, as a critical idea, has provided useful insights into the dominance of a certain group of men in certain contexts and at specific times, it has not, despite Connell's intentions, had sufficient clarity of focus onto what specific groups of men do to maintain their dominance. It is in this area that post-structuralist approaches are particularly helpful. Clegg (1989) identifies the key feature of this tradition as being the focus on the exercising of power rather than merely holding power. Lukes (2005, p. 86) also draws attention to the distinction between the concept of power and the mechanisms of power: concern with how power operates to include or exclude men within the definition of sex offender is of key concern to the present paper.

Whitehead (2002) designates this tradition, whose concern is the mechanisms of power, as discursive and he identifies the work of Foucault as being of key importance. Here, the word discursive is taken to mean pertaining to discourse(s). It is necessary to clarify, briefly, what is meant by this term. Burr (1995, p. 48) has noted:

A discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events.

And referring specifically to Foucault, Bell (1993, p. 42) comments:

For Foucault, it is both less and more than "language". It is less in that discourse is not a description of the whole language system ...it is more in that it is not just speaking and writing, but entails social and political relations: one cannot dissociate discourse from a social context where relations of power and knowledge circulate.

Lukes (2005, p. 88) also highlights Foucault's concern with power and knowledge:

[Foucault] proposed that there is a deep and intimate connection between power and knowledge, viewing these mechanisms in relation to the various applied social scientific disciplines that, so he argued, render them effective: their effectiveness, in his view, largely derives from the shaping impact on people of experts' knowledge claims (Lukes, 2005, p. 88).

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1984) provides a vivid and pertinent (to the present paper) example of the interplay of power and knowledge in creating a hegemonic discourse concerning sexuality and sexual behaviours. Foucault (1984, pp. 53–73) highlights the role of medical science in providing an intellectual structure of justification for the attitudes and values of the dominant group in a society:

...It thus became associated with an insistent and indiscreet medical practice, glibly proclaiming its aversions, quick to run to the rescue of the law and public opinion, more servile with respect to the powers of order than amenable to the requirements of truth ...it claimed to ensure the physical vigour and the moral cleanliness of the social body; it promised to eliminate defective individuals, degenerate and bastardized populations (Foucault, 1984, p. 54).

Medical science is clearly a form of knowledge that sustains the power of a particular social group. It is the shaping impact of expert knowledge claims with regard to sexual coercion that is the concern of this paper. The experts are particularly drawn from forensic psychology and criminology and their concerns are largely with the convicted sex offender, yet their expert knowledge is given a wider field of relevance (in, for example, social policy and popular media, see Cowburn & Dominelli, 2001).

Running through the scientific approach is an assumption of superior knowledge based on an objective scientific epistemology that ensures access to the truth about the social world. It is, therefore, necessary now to consider issues of epistemology and power.

Epistemology

The framework for understanding the social world and people within medical and mainstream psychological approaches is developed from the natural sciences (Nicolson, 1995). The object of study is observed and, from these observations, general laws are derived. Proponents of a natural science approach to social data suggest that empirically validated data can be discovered through systematic observation, measurement, and collection of facts which, when analysed, reveal laws about the physical and social world (Van Langenhove, 1995). These laws form the basis of predicting future events: personal behaviours, social movements, and so on. Van Langenhove (1995, p. 14), notes:

Within the natural sciences model for social sciences, the idea of explanation is copied from the models of explanation used in the classical physical sciences such as inorganic chemistry and Newtonian physics. These models are aimed at generating law-like predictions based on causal relations.

Inextricably linked to the epistemological foundation of the scientific approach is methodology. The most important feature of this manner of conducting enquiry is objectivity. Nicolson (1995, p. 123) has pointed out:

Traditional academic experimental psychology employs reductionist methods, which set out to exclude both the social context and the structural/power relations between individuals as inherent “bias”.

It is not necessary to describe in any detail the debates surrounding the possibility or not of value-free, objective research (see Bhaskar, 1989; Harding, 1991). However, Harding (1991) notes that the conventional approach in natural science:

...fails to grasp that modern science has been constructed by and within power relations in society, not apart from them. The issue is not how one scientist or another used or abused social power in doing his (sic) science but rather where the sciences and their agendas, concepts, and consequences have been located within particular currents of politics. How have their ideas and practices advanced some groups at the expense of others? (Harding, 1991, p. 81).

Additionally, Hearn (1998) has pointed out that what often stands as objective social science is in effect the worldview of a socially and economically dominant group of men. This group asserts its power through scientific discourse in which its worldview masquerades as the objective truth: in effect it has created an hegemonic discourse.

From ideology to hegemonic discourse

Hegemonic discourse as a concept brings together terms from diverse traditions of theorizing power; as such this needs some exploration and justification.

A key concept in the structuralist analysis of power is the term ideology. Purvis and Hunt (1993, p. 474) have noted that this term is concerned with understanding “...how relations of domination or subordination are reproduced with only minimal resort to direct coercion”. Marxist thought construed ideologies as being “...preformed systems of ideas that political protagonists wielded as weapons in the class struggle” (Purvis & Hunt, 1993, p. 474). However, the work of Gramsci, and subsequently Laclau and Mouffe (2001), challenged the inflexible association of ideas with particular economic and political positions, and preferred to focus attention on how particular elements of culture combine to have power and significance. It is here that the term ideology overlaps with discourse and many commentators have conflated these terms. Purvis and Hunt suggest that a way out of this conceptual confusion and towards understanding the differential power of discourse(s) is to distinguish clearly between discourse as process and ideology as effect (Purvis & Hunt, 1993, p. 496). This distinction is of key importance for this paper. A discourse becomes ideological when it is linked to maintaining hegemony:

...what makes some discourses ideological is their connection with systems of domination. Ideological discourses contain forms of signification that are incorporated into lived experience where the basic mechanism of incorporation is one whereby sectional or specific interests are represented as universal interests (Purvis & Hunt, 1993, p. 497).

However, discourse(s) not only provides an inclusive framework for understanding, inevitably, discourse(s) also exclude items, experiences, and voices. Purvis and Hunt (1993, p. 485) note:

Discourses impose frameworks which limit what can be experienced or the meaning that experience can encompass, and thereby influence what can be said and done. Each discourse allows certain things to be said and impedes or prevents other things from being said. Discourses thus provide specific and distinguishable mediums through which communicative action takes place.

Thinking specifically of discourses in which sexual coercion is construed, feminist commentators have persistently drawn attention to the widespread nature of harmful male sexual behaviours (see for example Jackson, 1984, for an account of early feminist activity in this area, and also Liz Kelly's (1988) elaboration of a continuum of male sexual coercion). Yet these voices have largely been ignored in forensic consideration of male sex offenders.

It is the contention of this paper that forensic discourse relating to sexual coercion serves an ideological function in that it represents the sectional interests of men in that only certain acts of sexual coercion are considered and incorporated into the development of social policy and penal practice in response to the perpetrators of sexually coercive acts. Other acts—the coercive sexual behaviours of a wider (unconvicted) group of men—are excluded and ignored.

Hegemonic discourse and the social construction of the (male) sex offender

This section develops the notion of hegemonic discourse in relation to the social construction of the male sex offender. Of particular interest are recidivism data and the taxonomies of sex offenders that have been developed by forensic science.

Recidivism data

Plummer (1995, p. 19) has noted that:

...all factual representation of empirical reality, even statistics, are narratively constructed.

Thus, official statistics embody one particular narrative of sex offences and sex offenders. Statistics relating to sex offending are underpinned by legal definitions of what constitutes a sex offence. They create an account of sexual coercion that is framed within legal definition and embodied in the actions of criminal justice agencies. Thus, to review criminal statistics is to see them as one account of a social phenomenon from a particular standpoint.

Generally, official crime statistics relating to sexual coercion reveal:

(1) increasing numbers of sex crimes reported and (2) some (few) persistent offenders. The following aspects of these data are herewith considered in greater detail: (1) the continual increase in the number of reported sex offences; (2) rates of recidivism for sex offenders; (3) rates of recidivism for sex offenders with no previous

convictions; and (4) the proportion of sex offenders without convictions cited in the literature.

The continual increase in the number of reported sex offences

In reviewing information in relation to this area, it is important to make clear the distinction between offences reported and convictions secured. In 1991, the total number of sex offences reported was 29 423. In 2001, it had risen to 37 311 (Home Office 2001, 2002). In 1991, the total number of sex offence convictions was 8843. In 2001, it had fallen to 5042 (Home Office 2001, 2002). Table I provides a detailed breakdown of this pattern in relation to specific offences.

From these data, there emerge two clear and overlapping populations that commit acts of sexual coercion: the perpetrators and the offenders. It would appear that (sex) offenders are approximately 1% of the larger population of people who commit acts of sexual coercion. These are the visible population: it is this population that is identified (by criminal conviction). It is this population that is punished for committing sexual offences. It is this population that is incarcerated, subjected to treatment programmes, and studied by psychologists, sociologists, and criminologists.

This worrying trend in increased crime reporting and reducing conviction rates was noted, with concern, by the British Government in the White Paper that preceded the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (Home Office, 2002, p. 9). Additionally, on the basis of their extensive review of prevalence studies, Percy and Mayhew (1997) have estimated that there are 15 times more unreported sex offenders than reported ones. Thus it appears that the majority of sex offenders have not been subject to public notice, and their offences remain outside hegemonic discourse relating to sexual coercion.

Table I Crime reports and convictions¹

Offence	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Rape of a female (CR ²)	4045	4142	4589	5032	4986	5759	6281	6523	7132	7809	7929
Rape of a female (Con)	559	529	482	460	578	573	599	656	631	594	559
Rape of a male (CR)					150	231	347	375	504	600	654
Rape of a male (Con)					9	24	45	46	61	45	53
Indecent assault—female (CR)	15792	16235	17350	17579	16876	17643	18674	18979	19524	20664	20301
Indecent assault—female (Con)	3791	3695	3471	3390	3321	3344	3401	3246	3189	2924	2847
USI ³ —girl u 13 (CR)	315	253	268	275	178	171	148	156	153	181	155
USI—girl u 13 (Con)	168	148	143	109	122	94	60	78	76	73	67
USI—girl u 16 (CR)	1949	1563	1443	1446	1260	1261	1112	1084	1135	1270	1237
USI— girl u 16 (Con)	1073	924	723	705	603	576	472	511	436	449	437
Incest (CR)	389	344	484	316	185	157	183	189	139	121	80
Incest (Con)	157	127	127	96	62	62	64	72	42	50	45

¹Home Office, 2001, 2002

²CR, crime report; Con, conviction

³USI, unlawful sexual intercourse

Rates of recidivism for sex offenders

The popular view that most sex offenders are aberrant “men beasts” who invariably re-offend (Cowburn & Dominelli, 2001) is contradicted by research findings. The studies commented on in this section and the next section are largely taken from three literature reviews (Fisher, 1994; Furby et al., 1989; Hanson & Bussiere, 1998). In a review of 61 studies undertaken in Europe and North America between 1943 and 1995, Hanson and Bussiere (1998, p. 357) noted that, as a group, sex offenders have a low rate of recidivism:

Only a minority of the total sample (13.4% of 23,393) were known to have committed a new sexual offense within the average 4–5 year follow-up ...even in studies with thorough record searches and long follow-up periods (15–20 years), the recidivism rates almost never exceed 40%.

Recidivism rates also vary when the type of offence is considered: incest offenders 4–10%; rapists 7–35%; non-familial child abusers 10–29% against females and 13–40% against boys (Marshall & Barbaree, 1990, cited in Fisher, 1994, p. 12).

Additionally, the number of previous convictions appears to affect the rate at which offenders are subsequently reconvicted. Hanson and Bussiere (1998) point out that offenders may be re-offending and not being caught, but this is an unknown.

However, Soothill and his colleagues (1998) have suggested that given the length of time of follow-up in many recidivism studies (10–20 years), it is unlikely that the re-offences of a known sex offender would remain concealed for this length of time.

Rates of recidivism for sex offenders with no previous convictions

Soothill and Gibbens (1978) found that 12% of first offenders were reconvicted within 10 years. Similarly, Phillpotts and Lancucki (1979) noted that within a 6-year follow-up period, only 1.5% of sex offenders with no previous convictions were convicted of a further sexual offence. West (1987, p. 18) notes that:

It is a common misapprehension that sex offenders are very liable to repeated convictions. Certainly some of them are, but that is not the general rule. The typical sex offender appears in court once only and never again.

Many other commentators (Furby et al., 1989; Howard League Working Party, 1985; Quinsey, 1986; Quinsey et al., 1984) have also drawn attention to this feature of sex offender recidivism.

The proportion of sex offenders without convictions cited in the literature

Table II summarizes the findings of a sample of studies undertaken in the last 50 years; the studies are drawn from the literature reviews mentioned in the previous section. They are frequently cited studies (as a search of the Athens database shows) and are referred to here because the data concerning previous convictions are clearly stated.

Table II Selected sex offender recidivism studies 1957–2002: proportion of offenders without previous convictions

Study	Percentage without convictions
Radzinowicz, 1957 (70 citations in Athens)	83%
Fitch, 1962 (43 citations in Athens)	79% of heterosexual offenders 52% of homosexual offenders
Gibbens et al., 1978 (22 citations)	87%
Gibbens et al., 1981 (17 citations)	89%
Marshall 1994 (14 citations)	73%
Wilcox et al., 2002 (5 citations)	75% of offenders against adults 80% of offenders against children 60% of offenders who had offended against a child outside their own family 86% of offenders who offended against children in their own family

A rarely commented upon feature in these studies is that the majority of sex offenders in each sample do not have previous convictions for sexual offences. This finding has been consistently affirmed in a number of studies over a period of time.

To summarize, these data offer a picture of low re-conviction rates for convicted sex offenders, and very low rates of offenders with no previous convictions. Additionally, it appears that the vast majority of offenders have no previous convictions and are not subsequently re-convicted. Yet the number of reported sex crimes is increasing while the number of convictions for such crimes in the UK is decreasing. However, forensic classification systems are developed from research based on samples of convicted sex offenders, and they play a key part in wider psychological discourses about male sexual coercion.

Forensic science: Classification systems

In the scientific study of anomalous behaviour, the indispensable role of classification is well established. Understanding the taxonomic structure of a deviant population is the keystone of theory building and the cornerstone of intervention. It provides a pivotal underpinning for research on a population and is an essential prerequisite for determining the optimum response of society to deviance. Whether the goal is making decisions about intervention, treatment, and disposition, tracking down the

development roots of a deviant behavioral pattern, or following the life course of this pattern, failure to take the taxonomic structure of a population into account can lead to serious practical, methodological, and theoretical errors (Knight & Prentky, 1990, p. 23).

In the above quotation, from leading authors in the taxonomic study of male sex offenders the scope and purpose of classifying sex offenders is clear: it is to identify and understand deviant sexual behaviours with a view to identifying them earlier and providing appropriate treatment to make society safer.

Some of the most influential work in developing taxonomic systems has been undertaken from the Massachusetts Treatment Center (MTC); this is a treatment centre that caters for offenders who have been processed through the judicial system, either directly from Court or from a prison (Knopp, 1984, pp. 227–228). The MTC and other treatment centres in the United States have been centrally involved for over 30 years in developing sex offender taxonomies (Knight & Prentky, 1990). Typologies have been developed for both “child molesters” (Cohen et al., 1979; Groth et al., 1982; Knight, 1988; Knight et al., 1989; Knight & Prentky, 1990; Knight et al., 1985;) and rapists (Cohen et al., 1971; Groth & Birnbaum 1979; Groth et al., 1977; Knight & Prentky, 1990). The typologies have been developed through rigorous examination of data relating to sex offenders who have been processed by the courts and, generally, sentenced to live in secure treatment centres.

However, although these attempts at categorizing identified populations of sex offenders may develop understandings of these populations, they do not recognize that the populations on which they are based are likely to be a minority of the population of men who commit sexual offences. That is to say they do not recognize that “deviant” populations are identified solely by criminal conviction, and that this is not considered to be problematic. Additionally, the behaviour of the sex offender is not located within a societal or cultural context, it is seen to originate exclusively in the “development roots” of the individual. Thus, acts of sexual coercion committed by men who are never convicted of an offence are irrelevant to this social construction of the sex offender. As a component of a community safety strategy, sex offender classification systems may therefore be of limited value, particularly as these systems deflect attention from the behaviour of the wider group of unconvicted men. As such this “scientific” attention constitutes a key part of the hegemonic discourse that shields the behaviours of wider populations of men from critical scrutiny.

Beyond the hegemonic discourse

This section moves beyond the hegemonic discourse of the male sex offender as deviant and separate from other men. It considers a body of (primarily psychological) literature that raises questions about the assumed non-coerciveness of the non-deviant population of men. Some of the studies below were reviewed by Stermac

and her colleagues (1990). It then moves on to consider sociological approaches to understanding sexual coercion by men. These approaches attempt to understand male sexual coercion as a social phenomenon rather than an individualized pathological symptom.

In his paper entitled “How dangerous are rapists to children?” Richard Laws reviews both self-report surveys and physiological assessments relating to male sexual response to accounts of coercive sexual behaviour. He notes that many of the studies were unable to distinguish clearly and consistently the convicted rapist from the so-called normal male. He comments:

...more alarming, perhaps, are the findings from self-reports and phallometric testing of so-called normal males. Here we find patterns of behaviour and sexual response that are strikingly similar to those of sexual offenders suggesting considerable overlap in their developmental histories. Those who proceed to become adult sex offenders apparently fail to develop the inhibitions that constrain normals. For their part, normals appear to harbour many of the same feelings, have the same fantasies, but fail to act upon them (Laws, 1994, p. 8).

It is worthy of note that Laws describes sex offenders and “normals” in a way that ignores that they are men. The literatures that he reviewed concerned the attitudes and behaviours of men, whether or not they were convicted of a sexual offence. The difference between normals and sex offenders continues to be unclear in research that examines the attitudes about, and proclivities towards, sexual violence in populations of normal adult men. Most of these studies, conducted in the last 30 years, use samples of white middle-class college students in the USA. Although they cannot be regarded as representative of the general population, this research reveals that a significant proportion of normal men have pro-rape attitudes and proclivities.

Kanin (1969) found approximately 25% of university males admitted using force in attempted intercourse, even when they knew it was unwelcome and hurtful. Malamuth (1981) estimated that 35% of college males reported the likelihood of rape if assured of not being caught or punished. Rapaport and Burkhart (1984) found that 28% of college males had engaged in coercive sexual activity. Kanin (1985) revealed that 13% of men studying a variety of subjects reported using force or threats to obtain sexual intercourse with a female. Muehlenhard and Linton (1987) reported that over 77% of college females had been involved as victims and 50% of college males had been perpetrators of sexually abusive acts. The male subjects in Petty and Dawson’s (1989) study reported that they considered it unlikely that they would be caught and punished if they did carry out a rape. Stermac and her colleagues (1990, p. 146) note:

A fairly consistent finding of approximately 30–35% of the males across the studies indicated that there was some likelihood they would rape under these conditions.

Although, these findings are derived from research of a small segment of adult male populations, they do begin to highlight problems with the hegemonic discourse concerning male sexual coercion. These studies suggest that there may be areas of similarity between the male sex offender and the wider population of men. A consideration of sociological literature in relation to this area emphasizes this point. In 1993, Liddle noted that:

The bulk of “mainstream” academic and professional literature on the subject [of child sexual abuse] has tended not to focus on questions concerning either the prevalence of child sexual abuse or the apparently gendered character of the phenomenon, but has concerned itself with issues such as diagnosis or disclosure, family dynamics, individual psychopathology, sequelae and treatment and so on (Liddle 1993, p. 103).

He did note that feminist authors had consistently highlighted the gendered nature of child sexual abuse but that this was not incorporated into mainstream discourse. He suggests (Liddle, 1993, p. 105) that a:

...sociological account of the male preponderance in child sexual abuse offers not only to give theoretical prominence to macro-level factors, such as those so effectively highlighted within feminist and other recent works on gender, but also to allow for a theoretical linkage of these with the more local details of everyday sexual politics, and with the emotional and other complexities which seem to occasion matters of sexual desire and attachment.

Building upon this, Cossins (2000) notes that psychological theories of child sexual abuse emphasize the “abnormality” of adult male sexual desire for children, she comments that they “begin with the value judgement that sexual behaviour with children is abnormal, they have failed to distinguish between what is abnormal as opposed to what is socially unacceptable”. She continues that “it cannot be assumed that because child sex offending is socially unacceptable, it, therefore, occurs infrequently” (Cossins, 2000, p. 2, emphasis in original). She goes on to suggest that because the sexual abuse of children by men appears to be a common behaviour (she refers to the literature concerning prevalence of sexual abuse), psychological attempts to pathologize those convicted of abusing children inhibit a fuller understanding from emerging. She suggests that male sexual abuse of children must be understood within an understanding of wider male practices rather than apart from them. Using the work of Connell (1987, 1995) she suggests that sexuality is an important (male) social practice for establishing a sense of individual power and potency, which are essential elements in the construction of the “Masculine Ideal” (Cossins, 2000, p. 4). As such, the sexual abuse of children should be understood as being congruent with dominant male sexual practices rather than deviant (Cossins, 2000, p. 5).

Moving beyond sexual practices and looking more widely at behaviours of men, in her study of incarcerated rapists, Scully (1990, p. 9) notes a strong relationship between the behaviours of male prisoners in her study and traditional expectations of men:

Externally, at least, traditional male role behavior is exaggerated [in prison]. Manhood is validated through physical strength and aggression. Expressions like anger are expected and acceptable but emotional sensitivity to others or the appearance of caring is regarded as dangerous. Any display of characteristics or behavior traditionally associated with the feminine is scorned and avoided.

These attitudes and behaviours are more widely reported in studies of men. Mac an Ghaill (1994, p. 96) in his study of “Parnell” comprehensive school in the midlands of England notes that:

male students at Parnell School learn to be men in terms of three constitutive elements of compulsory heterosexuality, misogyny and homophobia.

This is a contradictory combination that, perhaps, can only be resolved through displays of aggression both to women (misogyny) and towards other men (homophobia). Similarly, Jackson (1990, p. 124) identifies:

“Hard case” masculinity not only defines itself positively through assertiveness, virility, toughness, independence etc. but also negatively by defining itself in opposition to what it is not—feminine or homosexual.

Collier (1995) has highlighted how commonplace public male behaviours (violence) distract attention from commonplace private male behaviours (domestic abuse and sexual coercion). Cowburn and Dominelli (2001) discuss the behaviour of male vigilante gangs who target and attack men who have (wrongly or not) been identified as paedophiles. They suggest that such violent behaviours serve the primary function of endorsing the central characteristics of hegemonic masculinity.

Scully (1990, p. 116) found, when considering how sex offenders’ attitudes fit in with those more widely current in patriarchal society, that:

...patriarchal societies produce men whose frame of reference excludes women’s perspectives; men are able to ignore sexual violence, especially since their culture provides them with such a convenient array of justifications.

The above commentators usefully highlight the importance of considering male sexual coercion within the wider framework of male behaviours. In their commentaries there is frequent reference to traditional masculinity, to the masculine ideal, and hegemonic masculinity. In the discussion above, it was noted that the concept of hegemonic masculinity was intended to highlight dynamic aspects of male praxis, however it was also noted that one of the weaknesses of the concept was that it had potential to become homogenous and of little critical value. Thus while the

sociological literature may serve to highlight the commonplace nature of male sexual coercion and violence, potentially the terms in which this critique is framed distract attention from what men do.

Challenging the practices that sustain the hegemony of men

This paper has explored structuralist and post-structuralist notions of power and has used them in exploring definitions of sexual coercion perpetrated by men. It has deconstructed data derived from dominant definitions of sexual crime and suggested that to engage critically with acts of sexual coercion perpetrated by men attention should be focused beyond the dominant discourse to wider issues relating to men and how they exercise and maintain their individual and collective power.

Hearn (2004, p. 60) has suggested that critical attention should be focused on how (and which) men sustain their hegemony:

...the agenda for the investigation of the hegemony of men in the social world concerns the examination of that which sets the agenda for different ways of being men in relation to women, children and other men, rather than the identification of particular forms of masculinity or hegemonic masculinity. Interestingly, this view of the hegemony of men would also likely lead us to ask what are the various ways that there are for governmentally categorizing men—by the state, the law, medical sciences, social sciences, religion, business, and so on—and how these intersect with, complement and contradict each other.

This paper has explored the operation of the categorizing of men convicted of sexual offences; involved in this process is the criminal justice system and professions allied thereto. The process of categorizing is ostensibly concerned with developing “the optimum response of society to deviance” (Knight & Prentky, 1990, p. 23) but, as has been shown, it is as much about ensuring “the physical vigour and the moral cleanliness of the social body” (Foucault, 1984, p. 54). Hegemonic discourse concerning male sexual coercion does nothing to disturb “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” (Connell, 1995, p. 77). The task for critical scholarship in thinking about sexual coercion by men is to recognize hegemonic discourse and its implications and move beyond them.

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