

# **Speaking Out: Representations of Childhood and Sexual Abuse in the Media, Memoir and Public Inquiries**

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## **Introduction**

Prior to the 1970s, the public sharing of experiences of child sexual abuse was almost unheard of (Davis 2005). There were no survivor groups agitating for political action, no distinct genre of memoirs documenting experience of abuse and its effects, and the establishment of public inquiries typically occurred only in response to isolated incidents or crises of limited scope. The term “child abuse” was just coming into common parlance, and child sexual abuse was not yet an issue of major public concern. Today, the picture is markedly different. There are now organized survivor groups in many countries advocating for justice and redress for abuse suffered in childhood. Public disclosures by adults of their experiences of child sexual assault are widely made through the media and in autobiographical literature. And official inquiries across many jurisdictions have now investigated the sexual exploitation of children not as isolated incidents but as a widespread and systemic problem involving organizational failures to properly care for and protect young people.

The 1970s saw the (re)discovery of child sexual abuse and its constitution as a social problem (Davis 2005; Swain 2015). While there had been public awareness since the 1960s of the “battered baby” and “battered child” syndromes, during the 1970s the women’s movement named and brought attention to issues of gendered and sexual violence (Swain 2015). Child sexual abuse was the subject of key feminist texts in the late 1970s and early 1980s and it was also an important focus of feminist self-help projects (Kitzinger 2010). The main emphasis at this time was the occurrence of sexual abuse in the home, typically perpetrated by family members, and the 1980s saw intense media and social interest in the issue. By the 1990s the subject of institutional and historical abuse had also emerged, and victims and survivors were increasingly speaking out, organizing and advocating for justice (Corby et al. 2001). This is reflected in the scandal which has rocked the Catholic Church, with revelations of abuse and cover-up, and it has culminated, in many countries, in official inquiries into institutional abuse, both historical and contemporary.

This article explores the rise of concerns with child sexual abuse and corresponding representations of childhood, innocence and trauma. As Powell and Scanlon (2015, 3) suggest, evolving concerns with child abuse in the mid to late twentieth century “created a crisis for the ideal of childhood”. Focusing on sexual abuse as the cruelest violation of childhood innocence (Scott and Swain 2002; Davis 2005), the article explores the emergence of concerns with sexual abuse and associated constructions of childhood across three sociocultural forms: the popular media, autobiographical memoir and public inquiries. Each of these discursive fields both reflects and constitutes understandings of child vulnerability and each has, in recent years, been premised upon and promoted the value of “speaking out” – for the sake of children today, for children in the future and for those who suffered abuse in the past.

Drawing on the construct of therapeutic culture (Nolan 1998; Wright 2008, 2011) as an interpretive lens, the article concludes by considering how cultural narratives of childhood trauma and its ongoing effects are shaping contemporary conceptualizations of childhood.

### **Child Sexual Abuse and the Media – breaking the silence**

Child sexual abuse became the subject of significant media attention during the 1980s, initially through a focus on intra-familial abuse (Scott and Swain 2002; Whittier 2009). Beginning with a small number of articles that appeared in women's magazines in the late 1970s, incest was named as a hidden social problem, a form of sexual exploitation that had not been effectively acknowledged yet was alarmingly common (Whittier 2009). One of the first such articles ran in *Ms* magazine in 1977 (Davis 2005). The story of "Mary C", an incest victim, was published alongside an investigative report that documented the nature of incest and estimated the prevalence of child sexual assault more broadly. It stated that: "One girl out of every four in the United States will be sexually abused in some way before she reaches the age of 18" (cited in Davis 2005, 55). Similar articles appeared elsewhere. In Australia in 1979 *The Women's Weekly* published a feature article entitled, "A New Light on the Dark Crime of Incest". The "*Weekly*" was a magazine that had a tremendous influence on the national consciousness (Sheridan et al. 2002) and the publication of this article, as Scott and Swain (2002, 156) have noted, "heralded the beginning of massive media coverage on child sexual assault throughout the 1980s and 1990s".

Across a range of Western countries, mass media coverage during the 1980s carried the issue of child sexual abuse beyond the feminist activism and self-help of the 1970s, and in the process constituted it as a significant public issue (Whittier 2009). While earlier reportage was largely limited to abductions and rape by strangers, during the 1980s stories of sexual abuse in the family began to feature in newspapers, films, documentaries, current affairs television programs and on chat shows (Kitzinger 2010; Whittier 2009). Such was the attention to the issue that an article published in the early 1990s in the leading academic journal in the field, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, noted that "the current period has been marked by unprecedented and sustained professional and media attention to child sexual abuse". This attention included publication of retrospective surveys indicating that "close to 40 million United States adults ... and one in three Canadian women ... recall having been sexually abused as children" (Olafson et al. 1993, 16).

The 1980s was thus a time of considerable transformation in public discussions and understandings of child sexual abuse and the media played a vital role in bringing the issue out into the open (Robinson 2008). As Kitzinger's (2010, 89) research has shown, prior to the mid 1980s people who had suffered abuse "had to process their experiences in an almost total vacuum". Interviews Kitzinger conducted with survivors, both before and after dramatic shifts in public representations in the 1980s, reveal the profound effect that this emergent discourse had on people who had been victims of sexual abuse in childhood. As she noted: "In interviews conducted during the early 1980s women struggle to articulate the literally unspeakable" (Kitzinger 2010, 89). In contrast, similar research she undertook in the mid 1990s revealed that by this time

there were “far more cultural resources” for people to draw on in confronting their abuse. Critically, a language had emerged for making sense of experiences of sexual abuse and there was also a much broader awareness of the issue amongst the general public (Kitzinger 2010; Swain 2015). Along with emerging research on the effects of abuse, this new discourse helped legitimize people’s experiences (Wright 2011).

Reaching a far wider public than those engaged in feminist projects, but drawing on key principles developed through the women’s movement, mass media coverage enabled survivors to recognize, name and categorize their experiences. As Kitzinger (2010, 95-96) argues:

Media attention, whether through television, films or newspapers, in the form of documentary or fiction narratives, had profound implications for what people could imagine, what they could say, and what they felt they had a right to resist. It influenced how survivors constructed their identities and envisaged possibilities for the future. The media discovery of sexual abuse fundamentally transformed private and public discourse about this issue: opening it up for both personal reflection and community discussion.

Yet while there was an enormous opening up of the subject, representations of the child victim nevertheless remained limited during the 1980s. While the archetypal victim had broadened from the abducted child to encompass a much wider group of children abused in their own homes, the focus remained on girls and young women. Media representations thus tended to reinforce and extend gendered notions of childhood vulnerability – it was girls who were at sexual risk, not only from the dangers posed by deviant strangers but also from male predators within the home.

Scandals involving the Catholic Church, and the uncovering of abuse within institutions more broadly, shifted representations of the typical victim of child sexual assault. With the media coverage of court cases of accused priests, survivors beginning to speak publicly about their experiences, and the airing of documentaries examining clerical abuse, the boy child as victim increasingly came into view. In 1999 in Ireland, for example, a three-part documentary series, *States of Fear*, examining the history of residential care practices was aired on the national broadcaster. It painted a picture of a severe and brutal system of “care” and uncovered widespread historical sexual abuse of children in Irish institutions. In addition to expert commentary, it featured men who were the child victims of sexual abuse. The documentary provoked an enormous response from the Irish public (Raftery and O’Sullivan 2001) and was part of a wider cultural shift in the 1990s that saw increasing levels of openness and disclosure, as people began to speak about experiences of abuse through the popular media (Smith 2001).

Since the 1990s, there has been increasing representation of child sexual assault across popular cultural forms, including television and film. The long-running primetime television series, *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)*, for example, is a realist police drama focusing on “an elite squad of detectives who investigate sexually based crimes” (NBC 2016), often with a focus on children. The program draws plotline inspiration from criminal cases in the news media, with stories covering a range of offences, including child pornography, incest, pedophilia and online sexual predators

(Blue 2011). In the documentary film genre, there has been a particular focus on the Catholic Church and its systemic practice of covering up abuse allegations and silencing victims. Documentaries exploring these issues include *Suing the Pope* (2002), *Twist of Faith* (2004), *Deliver Us From Evil* (2006), *Sex Crimes and the Vatican* (2006) and *Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God* (2012). Similar themes have also been explored in dramatic form, most notably in the critically acclaimed and commercially successful biographical drama, *Spotlight*, winner of the 2015 Academy Award for Best Picture. The film dramatized the Boston Globe's investigation of widespread child sexual abuse in the Boston area and a systemic pattern of cover-ups by the Catholic Church.

The shift in focus during the 1990s to institutional abuse and the emphasis on clerical offending, prompted by media coverage and the mobilization of survivor groups, brought the sexual abuse of boys firmly into public consciousness. This period saw a new focus on institutional abuse, of both boys and girls, in many countries, including Ireland, the United Kingdom (UK), the United States, Canada, Australia and in many parts of Europe. While there is a larger story to tell about societal shifts towards openness and disclosure that include issues of national identity and shifting relations of authority (Smith 2001; Wright 2014), what is important for the purpose of this article is to note the role of the media in the reconfiguration of childhood risk during this period. Beginning in the 1970s, but intensifying from the 1980s onwards, it played a vital role in uncovering and naming sexual abuse, first within the home as an issue for girls and later in institutional contexts, particularly for boys. And a crucial feature of media coverage since the 1990s has been the testimony of adults speaking publicly about their experiences of abuse and the damage that it has caused throughout their lives. In this rendering the child that forms the focus of the story is the child self of the adult survivor, and childhood and adulthood are linked temporally by enduring trauma.

### **Memoirs of Child Sexual Abuse – narratives of effects and recovery**

While acknowledgement of the negative effects of child sexual abuse has formed a key component of mass media coverage, since the 1990s this also found particular expression in the autobiographical memoir. Emerging within the wider social context of increasing public disclosure of sexual abuse, the emphasis on this subject in autobiographies gave rise to the development of a new literary genre. Prior to this there had been a limited number of what Bates (2012) refers to as “sexual misery memoirs” that narrated incest, but it was not until the 1990s that stories of child sexual assault began to be widely published and commercially successful. Until recent years, books in this genre were typically written by women. However, with the focus on the sexual exploitation of boys, prompted by the clerical abuse scandal and public inquiries into “care” facilities in many countries, there has been an increasing number of autobiographies written by men. While each story is, of course, unique to the life experience of the individual, there are common themes that run through many of these texts. Typically, they conceptualize abuse as a loss of childhood innocence, detail the effects of sexual assault and many include triumphant accounts of moving beyond trauma, with the writing of the text being an important and therapeutic part of that process.

A precondition for this new genre to develop, according to Bates (2012), is a wider public knowledge of child sexual abuse and she suggests that “publishers have both responded to and reinforced shifting social currents in order to create and consolidate the ‘sexual misery’ genre”. Public disclosures, made first in the context of women’s liberation groups but later through the mass media, encouraged others to speak out and a common language developed which enabled people to articulate their experiences of abuse and its traumatic effects (Swain 2015; Wright 2011). This language, which draws heavily on psychological models of development and trauma, has helped victims and survivors make sense of their experiences. Importantly, it has also provided a discursive framework for the wider public. A key element of this is the emphasis on the effects of abuse, particularly its long term impact on mental health and the ways in which it can adversely shape personal relationships. These have been key themes in sexual abuse memoirs.

Reflecting the wider cultural influence of psychological and therapeutic discourses (Wright 2011), it is common for authors to describe the process of writing the book as an important part of their journey, first in coming to terms with experiences of sexual assault and its aftermath, and later in processes of recovery. In his memoir of life after clerical abuse, James Miller (2016) noted in the Foreword to his book that the motivation for writing a memoir was a desperate need to understand why he had suffered a breakdown a decade earlier. The question driving him was “what does it actually mean to speak of the adult effects of childhood sexual abuse?” For Miller, comprehending this was a way of trying to escape its negative effects, including very self-destructive behavior. After completing the manuscript, he says he “gained a good understanding of why traumatic events of almost forty years past still affect [his] mental health”. Like many who speak publicly about experiences of child sexual assault, he also expressed hope that sharing his story might have wider benefits:

Having engaged this difficult exercise for me, it also became my hope that by sharing my story that others similarly affected, or those who care for such victims, might better understand the nature of this illness and in some modest way be better placed to recover or to assist. If one person benefits I consider my job done. (Miller 2016, viii)

The increasing number of memoirs detailing experiences of child sexual abuse and its effects indicates that there is a market for such books. In many of these texts, mental health problems, suicidal thoughts or actual attempts, drug and alcohol use, and relationship problems loom large. While Miller’s book has been well received, the genre is not without its critics. Many of the concerns about the publication of memoirs on child sexual abuse were canvassed in public discussions surrounding the case of acclaimed British pianist, James Rhodes. Rhodes’ former wife had sought an injunction to prevent the publication of his autobiography, *Instrumental: A Memoir of Madness, Medication and Music*, arguing that its release would be damaging for the couple’s son. Rhodes was repeatedly raped as a child by a teacher at his school and the book details this and the effect it had on his life. The publication ban was overturned in 2015 by the Supreme Court. The initial suppression of Rhodes’ story through the injunction was likened by his supporters to the silencing he had experienced in childhood as a victim of

sexual assault. The legal decision allowing him to publish his story was thus acclaimed as a victory for free speech and important to Rhodes' empowerment as a survivor of child sexual abuse (BBC 2015).

Yet the question raised, particularly by conservative commentators, was why is a book like this necessary? The title of an article in *The Spectator* speaks volumes: "Another child abuse memoir: Why can't the past be private?" Its author, Brendan O'Neill (2015) begins by declaring that he feels torn over the Supreme Court decision. "On one hand, the lifting of the legal injunction ... is a great strike for freedom of speech. But on the other hand – another child abuse memoir. Really?" After carefully noting that of course censorship is a "bad thing", he then lays bare his disdain for the public expression of such stories of victimization:

Rhodes' book will become part of today's tsunami of misery memoirs, taking its place next to book after book about the beastly things that are done to children. From WH Smith to your local library, you can't swing a tote bag these days without hitting a tome on child abuse, evil mums, wicked priests, dastardly dads and other memoir monsters. (O'Neill 2015)

O'Neill expresses concern that there is a strong appetite for such material and he suggests that there is "an element of moral pornography here, a weird urge to peer into other people's screwed up pasts". This "cult of revelation" as he describes it, "speaks of a serious collapse in the distinction between our private lives and public personas" and he urges everyone, for the sake of civility, to "discriminate between that which is private and that which should be public" (O'Neill 2015). This line of argument points to a deep rift between supporters of freedom of expression and conservative views on the cultural shift that occurred in the late twentieth century towards openness and disclosure, particularly with regard to making "private life" public (Wright 2011, 2014). What conservative commentators may not fully appreciate, however, is the way in which silence has long acted as a mechanism to protect abusers (Swain 2015). The freedom, then, to talk publicly about abuse is an important countervailing action, and it can be a critical means of breaking the hold that the abuser has over their victim.

The question of whether so-called "sexual misery memoirs" are necessary and why anyone would want to read them are recurring themes in the critical reception of this subgenre of autobiography (Cooke et al. 2011; O'Neill 2015; Sutherland, 2008). With regard to the question of who would want to read them, there is clearly an audience. While critics may dismiss the literary appeal as a kind of "pornography of suffering", there are strong redemptive and inspirational qualities in these texts, including the overcoming of major obstacles (Bates 2012). The issue of whether they are "necessary" is a question that perhaps may best be responded to by looking at the wider effects of such books – culturally and socially – on collective understandings of child sexual exploitation. Autobiographical accounts have been an important part of broader social processes of bringing the issue of child sexual abuse to light and constructing a cultural narrative of its effects. More broadly, as Bates (2012, 61) has noted, these texts provide an insight into "the influence and reception of ideas about trauma and psychoanalysis in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century popular culture". The emergence of the "sexual misery memoir" and its reception is suggestive of the influence

of therapeutic culture (Wright 2008, 2011). Evidently, there are therapeutic dimensions for the author, and presumably the reader, but these books also have a critical social function; they are part of contemporary discourse shaping public understandings of the vulnerability of children and the often profound and lifelong effects of child sexual abuse. In speaking out, a key dimension of the project of second wave feminism is powerfully demonstrated: the personal is political.

### **Public Inquiries – looking back, looking forward**

The politicization of child sexual abuse is strikingly evident in a number of countries in the establishment of commissions of inquiry. Public inquiries comprise a key response of governments to major scandals or social crises. In the last decades of the twentieth century there was a rapid rise in inquiries into various forms of child abuse. The estimate made by Corby (2001) and his colleagues with regard to the UK is illuminating. They found that between 1945 and 1999 there were almost 80 official inquiries into child abuse. Yet only two of those inquiries were conducted prior to the 1970s (Corby et al. 2001, 7). In the following decades there was a burgeoning of inquiries investigating a range of child protection related issues and rising concerns about institutional abuse in particular. In the 1980s, a small number of inquiries began to specifically investigate sexual abuse in out-of-home “care” settings; in the UK two were conducted in 1985 but these were considered “isolated examples” (Corby et al. 2001, 83). The situation was similar elsewhere. As Swain (2014, 4) has noted with regard to Australian inquiries: “Before 1990 it was rare for sexual abuse to be directly addressed, and in cases where it was raised, the information provided was often excluded from public reports on the grounds of morality”. By the 1990s, however, things had changed markedly and sexual abuse became a key focus of a number of large official inquiries. It also emerged as a key finding in inquiries that had not initially set out to specifically investigate sexual assault.

By the late 1990s there were growing concerns about past abuse, particularly in institutional settings, what is now typically referred to in the literature as “historical institutional abuse” (Daly 2014; Sköld and Swain 2015). Many inquiries across the world from the late 1990s to the present have been charged with investigating the treatment of children in out-of-home “care” settings, such as orphanages and industrial schools. Official inquiries have also been established in the wake of major sexual abuse scandals, for example, revelations of widespread and systemic child sexual exploitation in the Catholic Church and the exposure of the English television and radio personality, Jimmy Savile, as a prolific predatory sex offender. Historical institutional sexual abuse is now an issue firmly on the political agenda in a number of countries. While there have now been many inquiries examining wide-ranging historical abuse in institutions, two very large inquiries focusing specifically on sexual abuse are currently underway: the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013-2017) and the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales (established in 2014 but with no specified end date). The funding for the Australian Royal Commission, totaling \$434 million (AUD) (Australia 2014), reflects a strong political commitment to examining past failures and improving policy and practice to

better protect children in the future. The Independent Inquiry in the UK also has a large budget, almost £18 million (GBP) over the last year alone (United Kingdom 2016).

Official inquiries have a number of functions. In addition to developing policy and discharging legislative obligations, they are charged with establishing facts, identifying wrongdoing and assigning blame; their primary function, however, is widely acknowledged as “learning lessons” from past events in order to prevent future reoccurrence (Beer 2011; Burgess 2009). Scholarly analysis of inquiries has focused predominantly on their role in bringing about improvements in institutional and professional practice and on their function as an instrument of government (Corby et al. 2001; Prasser 2006). Yet inquiries also have important social and cultural functions (Wright 2014). In seeking to learn lessons from the past, they play an educative role for policy makers and society more broadly. They also throw into sharp relief issues of major social concern: they are symbolic of an open and transparent society “where the voices of the powerless are heard” and the powerful are held accountable, and they provide a cathartic function for victims and survivors and, indeed, for the wider public (Burgess 2009, 4; Wright 2014).

Inquiries investigating child abuse and neglect rest on widely held beliefs and values that conceptualize childhood as a period of innocence and vulnerability. The opening line of the Terms of Reference for the Australian Royal Commission states that “all children deserve a safe and happy childhood” (Australia 2013). It goes on to affirm Australia’s international obligations to protect children, noting that all forms of abuse are a violation of children’s rights and a crime under Australian law. As with other major inquiries, the work of the Royal Commission is widely covered by the media; it thus has considerable cultural reach. Harrowing stories of child sexual exploitation and institutional failure have been the focus of much media coverage since the Royal Commission was established in 2013. What this inquiry has revealed is that child sexual abuse is endemic. Many trusted institutions that care for and educate young people – schools, churches, sporting and community organizations, hospitals and health care providers – have failed to protect children, often with dire consequences.

Abusive authority and the loss of childhood innocence are recurring themes in historical abuse inquiries. The testimony of victims and survivors – the remembering and recounting of experiences of abuse – has become central to the investigative processes of inquiries (Sköld 2013; Sköld and Swain 2015; Swain 2014). Testimony is a key focus of the work of the Australian Royal Commission, and to date over 6,000 people have told their stories of sexual abuse in institutional contexts to one of the Commissioners. Many have also spoken in public hearings and through the media, and a number of memoirs have been published, some of which have received considerable media attention (e.g. Miller 2016; Waks 2016). As with the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales, and similar inquiries elsewhere, the Australian Royal Commission has fostered an important national conversation about child safety and the long term effects of childhood trauma. In Australia, the UK and in other countries conducting inquiries, news coverage regularly features stories of institutional sexual abuse, bringing with it – as did the feminist charge of the 1970s and 1980s – a language with which to discuss the issue. The openness with which child sexual abuse is now covered by the media and examined in social life more broadly contrasts starkly with the veil of silence which has shrouded the subject for so long.

Inquiries typically have both a forward looking and backward looking focus. They move, temporally speaking, between a concern with understanding the past to how such knowledge can be utilized to improve the future. Many survivors who speak publicly or provide evidence at inquiries share in this aspiration. Indeed, a common statement made by those giving testimony is that they are doing so in the hope that lessons can be learnt, so that what happened to them does not happen to other children. In recounting the experience of abuse, and in assessing its aftermath, the child self of the adult survivor is brought into view. At times this is vividly captured in the media with photographs of victims and survivors when they were children. One of the most poignant images in recent times is that of prominent Australian activist and survivor, Peter Blenkiron. At a public hearing of the Royal Commission that took place in Rome to question the senior Vatican cleric, George Pell, Blenkiron wore a tee shirt printed with a photograph of himself as a child. Overlaying the bottom part of the picture was the text, “No More Silence”.

The complex connection between childhood and adulthood is powerfully represented in inquiries into historical sexual abuse. As with media representations and memoir narratives, inquiries affirm the notion of a rupturing of childhood innocence through sexual assault. Furthermore, through survivor testimony and expert witnesses, inquiries support research findings which reveal the effect of sexual abuse is often deep-seated trauma that is ongoing and lifelong. As Swain (2015) argues, much inquiry testimony has encoded notions of the helplessness of children. Inquiries have thus contributed in important ways to wider cultural narratives of childhood vulnerability and understandings of the ongoing trauma that can result from child sexual abuse. Inquiries have also helped shape more complex frameworks for understanding the past more generally, challenging idealized childhoods and notions of “care” provided by key social institutions, such as schools and churches. Drawing on psychological knowledge, historical abuse inquiries powerfully illuminate the ways in which the past can shape the present for victims and survivors, and for the people close to them. The conceptualization of childhood innocence has been vital to the politicization of child abuse, both historical and contemporary, and speaking out about personal experiences has been a critical component of this.

## **Concluding Comments**

Childhood has long been idealized as a time of innocence and vulnerability and sexual innocence is central to this conceptualization (Robinson 2013). It is not surprising, then, that child sexual assault is widely considered the “paradigm case of victimization” and that the concept of trauma has become the dominant way of understanding the psychological effects of abuse (Davis 2005, 3; Scott and Swain 2002). Since the 1980s, there has been significant and sustained attention to the issue of child sexual abuse, not only from professional groups with an interest in child welfare and psychological trauma but also from the popular media and through other cultural forms, including memoir. With the widespread dissemination of stories of child sexual assault, the issue has become part of the cultural landscape of crime and deviant behaviour and the wider public consciousness about childhood. The sustained media coverage this

subject has received and its representation in popular cultural forms, for example, in autobiographical literature and film, attests to its sociocultural significance as an issue of widespread interest and concern, one that reflects deep-seated fears about children's vulnerability and safety.

As this article has shown, central to representations of child sexual abuse from the late twentieth century to the present has been the voice of victims and survivors. The public disclosure of experiences of abuse has had a profound social and cultural impact. As Davis (2005) has argued, it enabled sexual abuse to be constructed as a common experience of victimization, one that tied people together as a social group with shared experiences of exploitation, which itself came to be understood as part of a wider social pattern. It also enabled a collective story to be told, one that could be understood not only by victims and survivors but also by the broader public. This was important politically because it enabled people to mobilize collectively, and this has happened particularly since the 1990s with revelations of widespread abuse by the clergy and also by people in positions of authority in other institutional contexts.

Critical to representations of childhood and sexual abuse over the last two to three decades are notions of innocence lost and the ongoing trauma suffered by many victims. While feminist perspectives have been critical, they have been underwritten and to some extent supplanted by a wider cultural embrace of psychological knowledge and therapeutic discourses, which stress the importance of disclosure (Davis 2005; Nolan 1998; Rose 1999; Wright 2008, 2011). Speaking out is understood as both a personal and political act, an important part of the process of regaining control over one's life and diminishing the power of the perpetrator. The influential Swiss psychologist, Alice Miller (1997, 1), for example, articulates the essence of this widely held view, suggesting that "the results of any traumatic experiences, such as abuse, can only be resolved by experiencing, articulating, and judging every facet of the original experience within a process of careful therapeutic disclosure". For the majority of people affected, this happens long after the abuse, with disclosures typically not made until adulthood (McElaney 2015).

Accounts from survivors attesting to the damaging effects of sexual abuse powerfully illustrates the consequences of innocence lost. A group of men in the Australian town of Ballarat – revealed as an "epicenter" of clerical abuse – recently spoke publicly of the impact on abuse on their lives. Andrew Collins said that when he thought about his time at the school where he was abused, he "felt like a terrified child again". Philip Nagle commented, "I've had three marriages, three divorces, I'm a hard ass, I've got no friends". He said he wished he could "press the reset button and start it all over again". Another survivor, Peter Blenkiron, wished to remember the many people he had known who have suffered with depression, and that for him, the trauma was like "a ticking time bomb". Blenkiron said that the abuse took everything in his life that was important to him and he went on to say, "I battled the suicide option for 12 years. I'm a broken man" (Burin 2015).

Representations of child sexual abuse are part of the contemporary cultural landscape and stories from those who have experienced abuse have reinforced longstanding conceptualizations of childhood. Notions of innocence and vulnerability have been brought into sharp relief through survivor accounts detailing the ongoing and often profoundly negative effects of sexual victimization when they were young. While

the stories are narrated by adults, the child is ever present, as traces of the past, of the child self, are all pervasive. The dominant narrative that has emerged is that childhood trauma shapes the life that unfolds. Yet, while the notion of trauma reinforces established conceptualizations of childhood vulnerability, it does so in a particular way, with psychological explanations being predominant. The idea of childhood as a crucial period for the shaping of adulthood is affirmed through the production and dissemination of scholarly research, expert commentary and the spread of lay psychological knowledge. This is evident in the language of trauma drawn upon by victims and survivors, for whom speaking out is often acknowledged as therapeutic. But it is also profoundly political, for it shapes claims for justice and recognition. In this era of intense focus on child sexual abuse, particularly historical abuse, there is a widespread belief that examination of the past holds the hope for a better future. Remembering and understanding the childhood selves of adult survivors – and childhood pasts more generally – is a central part of this process.

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