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PERPETRATOR EXPLANATIONS OF THEIR  
MOTIVES FOR ABUSING YOUNG CHILDREN  
SEXUALLY



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## OUTLINE



- **Background**
- **Aim of the research project**
- **Methodology**
- **Key Findings**
  - **Perpetrator explanations for their motives to sexually abuse young children**
- **Conclusion**
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## BACKGROUND

- South African population is estimated at 51.8million (Stats SA, 2011)
- It has some of the highest incidences of child and baby rape in the world with more than 67,000 cases of rape and sexual assaults against children reported in 2000. Child Welfare groups believe the number of unreported incidents could be up to 10 times higher.
- The 2009/2010 South African Police Service report indicates a significant increase of 36,1% (7 276 cases) in the incidence of all sexual offences against children between 2008/2009 and 2009/2010.
- 39,5% of sexual offences were committed against children aged between 15 and 17 years.
- Of the 27 417 cases of sexual offences against children, 60,0% were committed against children below the age of 15 years.
- 29,4% of these sexual offences involved children aged 0 – 10 years.
- SAPS 2011/12 figures suggest children are subjected to sexual abuse more than any other crime in South Africa.

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## BACKGROUND CONTINUED

- The figures are an unwelcome observation in a democracy with some of the most progressive policies but with an estimated 7% conviction rate for reported rapes.
- There are conflicting views about why some men sexually abuse very young children with arguments suggesting motives to be:
  - the need for acquisition of position of dominance
  - sexual gratification
- The sexual abuse of Baby Tshepang at the time when high rates of HIV/Aids were recorded in the country led to a suggestions that abusers are motivated to rape children by a belief in the virgin cleansing myth.
- Contestations illustrated the complexity of child sexual abuse as a social problem highlighting that not one explanation is adequate for understanding this phenomenon. Furthermore, some scholars argued for the importance of including the gendered nature of the problem in the debates.
- To date there is a paucity of research examining sociological explanations for sexual abuse of very young children in South Africa, more importantly, perpetrator perspective on the issue

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## Aim of the research project

- Why this study:
  - Limited research on sexual abuse of young children in South Africa. One psychosocial study was completed in Gauteng for children under three years by Kleijn (2010).
  - International literature available on causes of CSA focuses more on biological and psychological causes – with emphasis on objectivity and facts.
  - High rates of baby rapes call for exploration of perpetrators' frame of reference for a deeper understanding of CSA of infants.

Therefore the study aimed to:

- Understand how perpetrators of sexual abuse of young children make sense of sexually abusive acts towards young children.
- Examines factors that motivate them to sexually abuse young children,
- Add to the body of knowledge, stimulate international debates, and inform policy and practice on child protection practices.

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## Methodology

- This qualitative study was conducted from 2008-2013.
- Fieldwork took place during 2009/10.
- Grounded theory methodology was used
- Eight correctional centres in three South African provinces participated
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted in eight languages with 27 incarcerated male sex offenders, aged between 15 and 86, including 4 whites and 23 Africans, all convicted for sexual abuse of young children.
- Their victims were between 18 months and 7yrs old including 3 boys and 30 girls.
- Vignettes were used for those who denied the offence.

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## Key findings

- HIV/AIDS myth was dismissed by perpetrators as an explanation for high rates of infant rape
- In providing motives for child sexual abuse perpetrators explanations highlighted two key factors:
  - reports on personal backgrounds which they perceived as causal factors. These included childhood adversities and inadequacies in intimate relationships with adults women
  - perpetrators' narratives illustrating pro-abusive attitudes to young children.

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## Personal backgrounds - Childhood adversities

Table 1: Participants' reported childhood abuse and their perpetrators

Perpetrator of abuse	Type of abuse			
	Physical	Emotional	Neglect	Sexual abuse
Father	4	2	4	1
Mother		1	2	
Stepfather	1	1		
Stepmother	1	1		
Aunt			1	1
Uncle		1		1
Grandmother	1	1	1	
Cousin				1(female)
Brother	1	1		
Stepbrother				1
Sister		1		
Half sister	1			1
Nephew				1
Neighbour		1		1 (female)
Teacher (female)	1			1

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## Childhood adversities - continued

Table 2: Perpetrator details of childhood sexual abuse

Name	Age at the time the abuse took place	Relationship to abuser	Gender of abuser
Raphael (15)	11	Nephew	Male
Saul (19)	17	Unknown gang	Males
Nathan (26)	12	Neighbour	Female
Hebron (42)	Between 4 and 16	Aunt, uncle, other women	Females and male
Ruben (36)	15	Stepbrother	Male
Phil (60)	Approximately 5	Maternal uncle, teacher	Male and female
Javan (86)	Approximately 6	Half-sister, cousins	Females

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## Childhood adversities - continued

- For childhood sexual abuse victims, some abused children who were at the age at which they themselves were sexually abused.
- They reported being socialised to perceive adult-child sex as “a play”
- They reported being highly sexualised at an early age; having violent arousals; and triggers for sex
- They blamed these experiences (their abusers) for sexual interest in and offending against children.

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## Childhood adversities - continued

**Factors which predominated during most of these men’s childhoods are :**

- Absent fathers (imprisoned, uninvolved or unknown)
- Family disorganisation
- Death of a mother during early childhood
- Instability due to multiple carers
- Witnessing domestic violence
- Substance misuse by carers
- Poverty
- Early exposure to crime
- Institutional care

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## Personal backgrounds - Inadequacies in intimate relationships with women.

- Absent fathers led to lack of role models during childhood and thus lack of opportunity to learn about manhood and how to treat women.
- Self esteem led to difficulties in establishing and maintaining relationships with women
- Poor socio-economic status was perceived as a disadvantage in maintenance of relationships with women – women want money after sex and if you don't have it they report you for rape.
- New democracy empowered women and threatened patriarchal order.

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## Perpetrators' narratives of pro-abusive attitudes towards young children

- **Seeing a child's physical attributes as sexually attractive**, e.g., physique, mannerisms, hairlessness, age and purity/virginity made sex enjoyable.
- **Seeing a child as a powerless object** – **Nathan** said when he was aroused he went out to find ways to satisfy his desire and “ *I didn't see a child, I saw an object*”.

**Raphael said** “*It's like if you ...maybe that person, they didn't get needs like maybe they wanted to have sex with the other girl and they didn't get it and they know if they are going to force that woman she is going to call the police or so. So they think ah, when I do small children they can't speak for themselves.*”

Children were viewed as easy targets and rendered vulnerable by lack of language, lack of sexual vocabulary, culture of obedience to adults, acceptance, forgetfulness, friendliness and elasticity of genitalia.

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## Perpetrators' narratives of pro-abusive attitudes towards young children continued...

- **Seeing a child as a woman** – sexualisation of childhood. Some men talked about seeing their victims as their equals and were able to justify abusive acts.

Doing so, conflating the words child and woman, meant that in their fantasies childhood ceased to exist as children's friendly behaviours were interpreted as a sign that they are capable of initiating and taking charge of sexual acts with adults.

***Emmanuel:** The way I see it, I can say there are no children anymore in this world.*

- Others reported seeing a child as a woman when they were in a drug induced state.

***Shepherd:** A child, I just give her...I don't know how to put it...I make her grow, I groom her. They say you groom her and she becomes beautiful. And you picture her as a beautiful older person. Isn't it there are those who are fat, you imagine her as a grown up, beautiful. Isn't it you tell yourself in your mind?*

***Shepherd:** Yes, in his mind, he ends up with a vision of her beautiful vagina, you see. Then he ends up raping her.*

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## Perpetrators' narratives of pro-abusive attitudes towards young children continued...

- **Seeing a child as seductive**

Men positioned themselves as having no agency and externalised blame. Men claimed that children seduced them, demanded sex, rendering the men powerless to resist due to the uncontrollable sexual urge.

Children six years and below were positioned as having agency.

However, narratives illustrates child grooming prior to the abuse.

- **Seeing child rape as a tool for revenge**

Child rape seen as most effective tool to humiliate or punish women who: wrong men, reject men's sexual advances because a "no" by women is unacceptable to men.

These men believe in a sense of entitlement to sex. Therefore using force is a way for some of these men to maintain their position of dominance over women and children who resist male power and authority. And to put women in their place.

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## CONCLUSION

- One of the first sociological studies to explore perpetrator explanation of sexual abuse of very young children in South Africa;
- Perpetrator backgrounds illustrate that circumstances under which some children are raised make them vulnerable to abuse and increase the risks of offending later in life
- Although the damaged adult explanations predominate, socio-cultural factors play a role in the child sexual abuse discourse. Messages of violence as a way of life and male domination persist.
- When children witness domestic violence, they learn to tolerate it
- They may learn to use aggression early in life to resolve differences and are likely to progress these tendencies to criminal acts. They learn to devalue women and children, become hostile to them and not deem it problematic to treat them as objects.
- The study found that most men reported experiences of being disempowered due to childhood adversities and socio-economic circumstances which led to difficulties in accessing sex, a factor which heightened the risk for sexual offending towards children.

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## CONCLUSION continued...

- The objectification of children contributes to debates which argue that sexual violence is often gender based and that this affects babies as well.
- The gendered nature of the problem illustrates complexities in debates about sexual violence which highlight the role of both sexual gratification and the need for the acquisition of power as illustrated in this study.
- Given the perpetrators' feelings of disempowerment, use of children as sex objects, externalisation of blame to position themselves as having no agency in the abuse, the idea that children can be given the status of women when it suits some men, transfer of anger from women to children through child sexual abuse for revenge, the age, gender and carer status variables which give triple authority to perpetrators, it is reasonable to argue that although sexual gratification contributes to child sexual abuse, the need for power and control is the dominant explanation by this group of perpetrators.

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THANK YOU FOR LISTENING.