



A Qualitative study into understandings of child abuse

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ABSTRACT

The term 'child abuse' is undoubtedly recognised throughout society, however the definition behind child abuse does not appear to be universally acknowledged. Both lay people and professionals have struggled to attach a solid and universally acceptable definition to the term, which leaves the obvious question as to what child abuse is and how it is understood within society.

This study attempted to explore child abuse from a social constructive perspective to identify and analyse prominent themes surrounding child abuse in current society.

Ten semi structured interviews were conducted and analysed using thematic discourse analysis, from which three significant themes were identified. These significant themes surrounded shifting boundaries of responsibility, the media as a position of power and the abnormality and pathological implications associated with child abuse.

These findings were concurrent with previous literature into both child abuse and the social construction of identity. This has therefore shed more light into the somewhat clouded construct of child abuse.

The implications provided from this study centre upon how these themes could be deconstructed on a societal level, such as media campaigns to draw public attention to misconceptions.

However, it is acknowledged that deeper, more detailed discourse analysis must first be considered before strong implications could be taken from the study and this may be seen as the starting point for future research.

KEY WORDS	SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM	THEMATIC ANALYSIS	CHILD ABUSE	ABNORMALITY	SOCIETY
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Introduction

The term 'child abuse' is undoubtedly recognised throughout current society. However, despite a wide breadth of research into the area, and universal agreement that something must be done about the problem, it appears no concrete definition has been established as to what exactly child abuse is and what constitutes child abuse (Hoyano and Keenan, 2007). As Cobley (1995) stated, not only are different definitions adapted between the public and professionals, even members working within the same profession cannot seem to agree on how to define child abuse. Ten years on from this claim, it was reiterated by Whitney et al (2006) that there still appeared to be no clear agreement between welfare practitioners. The evident issue is, if the area itself is so blurred, how can cases be classified, prevention be promoted, prosecution be executed and counselling be successful?

It would appear this difficulty of definition would relate to child abuse being a socially defined construct, a product of a specific culture and context (Corby, 2006), and as such a fabrication constantly adapting to suit the current societal climate.

Therefore, this study attempted to explore how child abuse is socially constructed in current society.

The origin of child abuse as a defined construct can be dated back to the work of American paediatrician, Doctor Henry Kempe, and his medical discovery of battered babies in 1962 (Corby, 2006). He inferred that some of the physical injuries of children he was treating were not accidental injuries (Cobley, 1995), rather they were the results of mothers deliberately physically harming their children (Corby, 2006). He coined this condition 'Battered Child Syndrome' and following this the concept of physical abuse became a major social issue (Corby, 2006).

From this a medico-social discourse of child abuse was born, in which it was assumed child abuse could be clearly identified and prevented and was due to an underlying pathology within the individual abusers (Jack, 1997). This attracted national publicity and funding as through the application of a medical label, it implied child abuse was a treatable condition and claims were only aimed at those who had the 'illness' (Corby, 2006). It was therefore assumed if a child was abused; an individual could be identifiable for blame (Jack, 1997)

This dominant discourse of medicine is still evident in Western culture today and has been amplified through the disciplines of psychiatry and psychology (Bell, 2011). However, the obvious limitation in adhering to this psychological discourse is that through locating the issue at an individualistic level, little attention is drawn to the wider societal factors that child abuse holds (Best, 1990). In response to this, it is evident that research needs to look beyond the particular individuals involved and study child abuse in reference to the workings of a society (Best, 1990).

Whilst the medical/psychological discourse of child abuse still appears relevant and observable in society, another socio-legal discourse became apparent following the Cleveland scandal in the 1980s (Jack, 1997). An emphasis was placed on the legal frameworks involved in the protection of children, along with the rights and protection of their families (Jack, 1997). This also saw a shift in societal opinion, from one of which social workers had been condemned for reacting to abuse cases too late, to concerns that social workers were reacting too quickly without sufficient evidence to

do so (Hoyano and Keenan, 2007). This has resulted in a mistrust of social workers (Jack, 1997), with a significant level of blame placed on the social worker and authorities, sometimes even more so than the abuser, as the villain of the story (Butler and Drakeford, 2008).

This animosity towards social work and authorities that are involved in the protection of children has been exemplified by the high profile abuse cases and inquiries in recent years.

Of major significance is the case of eight year old Victoria Climbié, who died as a result of the horrific brutalities bestowed upon her by her Great Aunt and Great Aunt's boyfriend. Her death resulted in a hugely influential public inquiry, in which details and evidence were made open to the public via a website, making it a 'global event' (Gabb et al, 2006). Not only were the details surrounding the abuse shocking to the public, it was the fact that Victoria had been known to authorities beforehand (Taylor, 2008).

The media response to this was one of shock, repulsion and failure (Taylor, 2008). This repulsion was aimed not only at Victoria's murderers, her social worker was also portrayed as an evil monster, with a significant level of blame attributed to her.

The more recent case of seventeen month old 'Baby P', who died in 2007 following a series of severe injuries whilst in the care of his mother, her partner and another male counterpart, also raised the existence of media discourse on child abuse. The imagery presented in the media was highly sensitive and emotive, with bloodstained photographs of Baby P's clothing printed across a number of high profile newspapers (Garrett, 2009). Again, those involved with Baby P before his death were targeted and demonised in the media, resulting in death threats to the social workers involved (Garrett, 2009).

This influence of the media has been described by Moira Peelo (2006), as cited in Butler and Drakeford (2008), as strengthening the construction of social commentary through signal crimes. She argues that through the reporting of mega crimes, the media confirms a society viewpoint and in doing so restores a sense of control. However, the media does not yield only to the targeting of professionals; it also appears to enhance public understanding and awareness into the realms of child abuse.

Kitzinger (2004) carried out qualitative research to ascertain the impact and effect media coverage has had on public awareness of child sexual abuse. The general consensus was that a rise in media coverage into this phenomenon reflected positively upon public awareness. Many reported the media had informed and altered their personal views into child sexual abuse. However, it could also be acknowledged that the media had influenced participant's understandings of what constituted a child abuser. Whilst previous research has identified the majority of abusers to be related to the victim and to have no specific characteristics (Cicchetti and Carlson, 1989) participants maintained a mental image, with specific characteristics, as to how they perceived a child abuser (Kitzinger, 2004). This was suggested by Kitzinger (2004) to be a consequence of the media constructing stereotypes, focusing on extraordinary men as opposed to what research reveals. For example, in her research into the construction of media templates in child abuse she found for every headline which referred to a child abuser as 'man', there were

three headlines using terms such as 'pervert', 'monster' and 'criminal' (Kitzinger, 2000).

This may possibly tap into the Quantitative study from Price et al (2001), who found the majority of respondents characterised a child abuser as an alcoholic, along with other indicative characteristics such as male, uneducated, single parent and those with children. However, what this study didn't explore was the reasons behind these chosen characteristics and why participants had constructed abusers in this way.

Therefore, whilst themes of the media, medicine and psychology have been identified, the current study identified the gaps in the literature. It was acknowledged that these themes had not been explored from a societal level in which the general public construct their understandings of child abuse. Instead, most research has been employed on either a professional or secondary data led basis. Whilst Kitzinger (2004) studied child sexual abuse on a public level, her work remained descriptive and didn't seek the underlying meanings and inferences her data produced.

Therefore, the aim of the study was to explore child abuse from a lay person's perspective and to attempt to analyse the themes which have influenced and constructed the current understandings of child abuse within the United Kingdom.

Methodology

The conceptual methodology inferred by this study was that of a social constructionist perspective. This yields to the understanding that the human experience is determined through a historical, cultural and linguistic fashion (Willig, 2008). Therefore understandings, categories and concepts of the world are veracious to historical and cultural implication (Burr, 1995). This was relevant to this study in the attempt to trace the indications and undertones surrounding participants' experience and the social practice of child abuse (Willig, 2008).

The epistemological position within this perspective is that knowledge is constructed through everyday interactions with one another. Language is central to this construction of knowledge and is a powerful tool in the creation of versions of reality (Tuffin, 2005). From an ontological level, social constructionism proposes that reality operates at a linguistic level along with a visual level (Tuffin, 2005). Therefore, the current study harmonized with both the epistemological and ontological perspective in the exploration of language.

A qualitative method also served to be the most appropriate in corresponding to the perspective of critical social psychology and social constructionism, as the complexity and fluidity of contexts can be fully adhered to (Lyons, 2007) and meaning and understanding can be explored, in comparison to measurement and cause.

The qualitative method of thematic analysis was adopted, due to the theoretical freedom it elicits and the flexibility it accommodates in its potentiality for a rich, detailed and complex account of data (Braun and Clark, 2006). It allows for diversity in interpreting numerous aspects of the data set (Boyatzis, 1998), which for the study, which withholds little predefined themes, allows for greater exploration.

In order to fully comply with the social constructionist methodology, the thematic analysis was identified at a latent, interpretative level. This is coherent with a constructionist paradigm, allowing the exploration of underlying themes and assumptions. This also overlaps with forms of discourse analysis and as a result discursive themes were incorporated into analysis. Discourse analysis is the study of language in use (Gee, 2011). The patterns of talk and language are then located within social and political ideals and practices (Gough and McFadden, 2001). Due to the relevance of this, a thematic discourse analysis was adopted, in which the patterns and themes identified are socially produced, however no specific discourse analysis was conducted.

Participants

As Carla Willig (2008) suggested, qualitative work usually involves a relatively small number of participants which need to be representative of the population. With this taken in consideration, along with the time constraints imposed on the study, ten participants were recruited. As the study aimed to research understandings of child abuse of the general population, no qualifying criteria was imposed for participant's recruitment. Participants were recruited through the accessible and commonly used strategy of snowball sampling (Langridge, 2004). This took effect through close contacts of the researcher's family and friends, which then escalated into further participants. Whilst this is often a limited form of sampling, the researcher felt it most appropriate to interview people with whom she had previous contact with, due to the sensitive nature of the topic being discussed. It was assumed that this would enable participants to feel more comfortable than if talking to a stranger about such topics, which may restrict what the participants wanted to disclose.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, also referred to as guided or focused interviews (Willig, 2008). This was favoured to be the most suitable method as it encouraged participants to expand upon answers and allowed the researcher to explore understandings and conduct analysis on a deeper level. An Interview schedule was prepared prior to the interviews, initially subscribing to the notion of physical child abuse (see appendices). However, after reviewing the first few interviews it became apparent that it was not possible to segregate physical child abuse from other areas of abuse. Participants appeared unable to conceptualise this boundary and so, in reflexive qualitative tradition, the research became more general and adapted to the construction of child abuse as a whole entity. This concedes with Price et al (2001)'s claim that often the categories of child abuse interlink with one another.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed with the use of a transcribing machine and adapted specific aspects of the Jefferson Transcription System (Jefferson, 2004) which complimented thematic discourse analysis. A total of 8 hours and 40 minutes

interview time was accrued. Following this, the data was analysed in compliance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase model for conducting thematic analysis.

The first phase, familiarization with data, involved the transcription of the data and the reading and re-reading the data whilst initial ideas were noted. This developed into the second phase of generating initial codes. Through this the initial ideas and features were coded across the entire data set, with data gathered relevant to these codes, in order to begin the formulation of relevant groups. The third phase, searching for themes, appertained to the grouping of codes together into potential themes. This involved the consideration of how the amalgamation of a number of codes may enrich different levels of themes. Themes were then reviewed on two levels in the fourth phase. The first reviewed at the level of coded data and whether the themes formed a coherent pattern and the second level coded any additional, relevant data. The fifth stage consolidated and refined the themes, generating clear, unambiguous definitions and names for the chosen themes. Finally, the sixth phase was the production of this report. Mind-maps to elucidate the process of phase three, four and five can be observed within the appendices section.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by a supervisor at Manchester Metropolitan University, who acted as a gatekeeper for the research.

The predominant ethical consideration was the importance of psychological harm towards the participants. As the interviews were semi structured it could not be predetermined exactly what would be explored and due to the sensitive topic of child abuse itself, there was the potential for the interviews to enter into realms of discomfort and distress for the participant. In order to respond to this in the most appropriate and protective way the researcher fully explained details of the study to the participants before any interviews commenced. Participants were informed of the nature of the topic and the potential impact it could have. The procedure of the interview was thoroughly explained to them, including the right to refuse any questions, along with only contributing what they felt comfortable. Participants were then provided with a consent form, which they were required to read and sign before the interviews could start (see appendices). The consent form explained the possibility of psychological discomfort and that information directing them towards free counselling services could be provided, if the participants felt it was needed. However, no participants acknowledged any psychological distress or the use of counselling services afterwards. Participants were fully debriefed following the interviews and contact details were provided on the consent form if they required any further information or requested a copy of their transcript. Again, no participants contacted the researcher following the interviews. Participants were made aware of the conditions surrounding their right to withdraw from the study, such as the time limits, on the consent form.

Analysis

The following analysis was drawn from across the data set of the ten interviews/transcripts. Whilst each theme could be noted across the majority of interviews, selected examples have been chosen to provide an appropriate insight into each theme. However, this does not discount the evidence of themes which have not been drawn upon.

Following thematic analysis of the data, three key themes have been established- The shifting of responsibility, Power of the media and Abnormality.

Theme 1: A shift in responsibility

The main overarching theme to be derived from the study is that of an incongruous shifting of boundaries, relating to the positioning of participants in different levels of responsibility.

The shift can be noted through the change in pronouns and narrative at particular stages of the interviews, dependant on the orientation of the issue.

For example, participant 7, when questioned about who abused children was able to answer almost immediately and positioned herself within the answer.

P7: that it's always a person known to the child or family... but I don't think it's ever a stranger'
(10- 12)

The language used adopts a firm grounding in her understanding, with the use of 'always' to insinuate little room to modify and facilitate the possibility that an abuser is a stranger. The statement is openly personalised and the responsibility of the claim has therefore been placed upon oneself. However, when discussion turns to the personal reaction of someone close to her being accused of abuse, a shift in response can be recognised.

P7: I know I said that it generally is someone close to you who is the perpetrator but you don't expect that ... erm you'd be waiting for that concrete proof
(119-121)

In this instance it took considerably longer to formulate an answer and a depersonalisation was noted as she imposed the pronoun 'you' as opposed to 'I'. This appears to warrant the responsibility of her answer away from oneself and placed onto others.

This shift of pronouns is also present across participant 9's interview. When the talk is around the positive response to child protection and the contributions society has made in this, participant 9 willingly involves herself as a member of society.

P9: we've set up refuges for these women and children to actually escape, we've set up things like ChildLine... we're setting things up to help
(663- 668)

The use of 'we' implies the role of an active member of society, involved in the promotion of protection of children. However, when the talk has negative implications, the use of 'we' is no longer apparent:

P10: they're damned if they they get it you know (.) if they overreact and equally if they don't overreact then they're damned

(487- 489)

This extract was in reference to the role of social workers. It is apparent, through the use of 'they' that the participant does not associate with this area of society and sees social work as a separate entity. Therefore, when the talk was positive, participant 10 identified in being actively responsible, however when the talk is negative and socially undesirable the shift is away from identification and responsibility.

This shift in responsibility is also evident in Participant 1's understandings. At first he appears to refute the ways in which authorities and social services define child abuse, condemning their position of expertise:

P1: A lot of TEACHERS and professional people consider that if a child falls over and are bruised... might raise the alarm to social worker or the authorities and that's=not=that's=not physical abuse... is purely and simply accidental accident

(22- 33)

Participant 1 appears to shun the authorities as being unnecessarily punitive and in doing so asserts the expertise away from them and into the public domain. The use of 'purely and simply' could be interpreted to demean the work of authority and brush it off as obvious and simplistic. However, when the interview surrounds identifying a child abuser, participant 1 disregards any knowledge of expertise and reverts responsibility away from himself:

Participant 1: I'm NOT (.) I don't think I'm qualified enough to be able to say yay or nay on that
(113- 114)

A final example of the ways in which responsibility is displayed comes from participant 2, in this instance responsibility and identity refers to from where his understandings have developed:

P2:well I spent two years as a policeman and (.) it was indoctrinated into me

(53- 54)

This statement asserts responsibility towards the police in constructing his understandings and in doing so relieves any responsibility or control away from himself and his opinions.

Theme 2: Power of the media

The second theme which appeared to generally dominate people's information and understanding of child abuse was the power and control the media held.

Despite a conflict in the positioning of the media through the data set as either positive and informative, 'a fantastic media scenario' (Participant 1) through to something 'which you can't believe anyway' (Participant 10), participants noted the importance of the media:

P6: that's what society sort of revolves around isn't it the media=I think they control most of society that's where everyone gets their perceptions and stereotypes of things people are always gonna go with what the media says

(476- 479)

This was reiterated by Participant 2 who, despite stating he felt that media and television went over the top sometimes, acknowledged the dependency society held for the media

P2: these days we depend on newspapers and the television to highlight things

(177- 178)

Of particular significance was the media influence in understanding the work of child protection services. Most of the talk about authority figures, in particular social workers, related to the negative impression that social work is failing to protect children. After reading through the interviews this appeared to be a major issue for participants to comprehend, with more emphasis placed towards the role of the authorities than the abusers.

A prominent example of this comes from participant 3, who was asked to describe what she knew of the Victoria Climbié case:

P3:That she (.) the social services went round but nothing was done about it... and then she died as a consequence

(126- 128)

As can be noted, the description of the abuse has included no mention of Victoria's abusers, what abuse she endured, etc. Instead the preliminary focus is on the failure of the social services. Another significant point to draw attention to is the blame to the social services for Victoria's death, participant 3 made no reference to how Victoria died, instead referring to the responsibility of the social services as though they were the cause of her death.

All ten participants noted the failures and missed opportunities of social workers. Only two of the participants had personal experience with a social work investigation (11 and 12) and the rest of the participants asserted their understandings to have come from the media.

The second area concerning media influence involves the construction of a public understanding of both child abuser and an abuse victim. Participants were aware that child abusers:

P5: just look like ordinary people they don't look (.) like abuser
(71)

P10: it could be anybody (.) it could be anybody (2) they don't show it in their face do they

(46)

However, some participants were able to describe a vivid image they held of an abuser, which appeared consistent across the data set. The dominant image was presented as a working class male, with many participants attributing specific characteristics such as age, skin colour and even down to precise details of appearance, for example as Participant 6 noted, 'usually with glasses'.

Participant 7 indicated her image of an abuser to have come from television programmes:

P7: you don't see (.)a MIDDLE CLASS WHITE FAMILY having a problem and airing it on Jeremy Kyle do you=you see the local chavs off the council estate

(94- 96)

This not only explained where her image had come from, it also justified why she didn't see certain groups of people as abusers. This appeared to be a common feature across interviews. Once participants had described their image of a child abuser, they acknowledged where it had come from, namely the media.

P9: I wasn't conscious that I used he rather than she but now you mention it I probably do think that abusers more as a male erm and I think that's because of the erm incidents that are reported there seem to be more erm male

(97-99)

This statement can be understood through Potter's (1996) concept of category entitlement. This involves asserting a claim as coming from a credible category, in this instance the media, in order to separate our descriptions from our interests. In doing so, participant 9 has insinuated that this concept of an abuser is not necessarily a personal one, but has been constructed through facts.

This separation of fact from personal opinion is also evident within participant 3's interview:

P3:I've been very very surprised by physical looks of some of the people who have been abus=accused and convicted of severe child abuse (.)I would have thought they don't look any different from any other sort of person but I suppose if you asked me to describe somebody I would pick obviously folk looking type of person

(28- 32)

This could be likened to what Potter (1996) terms stake inoculation, in which the claim made counteracts what would have initially been expected. This again infers that the description given isn't a reflection of Participant 3's own prejudice but has been provided as fact by another source.

Participants were also able to infer characteristics of a victim of child abuse:

P7:I feel like it's a working class (.) kid erm like a Baby P a child whose not probably from a particularly affluent family... erm Baby P definitely first springs to mind as the first thing you think of because it was so (.) such a prominent case erm

(39- 43)

This description works in the same way as the previous two examples, in attempting to manage the dilemma of stake (Hepburn, 2003). The relevant procedure employed is one of systematic vagueness (Potter, 1996), where the participant remains systematically vague due to the description drawing attention to her stake in the

claim. This can be seen as the participant first begins to describe her image of an abuse victim, however upon realising this is compromising her stake in the claim she reverts to a vague description and justifies where her claim has been sought from

Theme 3: Abnormality of abuse

The third theme identified across the data set was towards the construction of child abuse as an abnormality, associated with psychological problems.

The first way in which this was apparent was through the representation of 'normal' as not associated with abuse. This can be drawn from participant 3's lack of personal experience with abuse:

P3:cos you come from a quite a, you know a nice background and you hear about that and, you can't really imagine it

(148- 149)

This therefore implies that abuse doesn't happen in this 'nice background' that participant 3 refers to and instead must be attributed to a different environment.

Participant 4 also draws on this when discussing the influence that books had on her understandings of abuse:

P4:normal people just wouldn't think of a situation like that

(195)

This again infers abuse is not something that 'normal people' can be associated with and so the area of child abuse must reflect abnormal society.

Participant 5 draws upon an understanding of abuse as an unnatural phenomenon, when discussing whether children fighting could be constituted as abuse:

P5:don't think that's abuse (.) think that's just natural childhood

(21)

This positions abuse outside of natural childhood and in doing so subtly highlights how abuse is unnatural.

These examples have shown how the abnormality of child abuse is subtly insinuated within the language of the participants. However, participants also acknowledged the abnormality of abuse on a more explicit level.

Of particular interest is the consistent way in which participants 7, 8 and 2 have constructed the abnormality of a child abuser:

P7:they obviously have some sort of psychological problem (84)

P8:they'd obviously need constant psychological (.) care (334- 335)

P2:obviously you you don't wanna go down the line of the weirdos who obviously (.) should never be allowed anywhere near children (30- 31)

The use of 'obviously' presents the statements as undeniable truths amongst society, requiring no need to be challenged or debated. The statements communicate a socially acceptable 'knowledge of truth', pertaining to the construction of abnormality as reality.

This has also implicated the understandings of a psychological deficit within child abusers. Further, it could be argued the theme excuses the behaviour of the abusers as 'obviously' something out of their control. This is also evident in participant 7's account of priests accused of child abuse.

P7:priest's life is probably a very difficult life a life of abstinence a life of celibacy erm ... have no outlet for that in the (.) so called normal world and (.)you know I think that it most definitely did happen
(622- 626)

Participant 7 attempts to explain and justify why a priest may abuse a child, due to the abnormal life they live away from society. This would again infer obvious reasons as to why a priest may turn to child abuse.

This abnormality is not restricted only to the abusers, it is also subjugated onto the victims of abuse. One of the most prominent examples of this comes from participant 10, who refers to the victims of child abuse as:

P9:literally because they are (.) psychologically so broken they they put up with it

(512)

This was also implicated participants 1,4,5 and 7, who proposed, victims have to endure the mental scars and depression for the rest of their lives. This places victims within the realms of mental illness and as the participants impose this to be life long, insinuates victims are abnormal for the rest of their lives. This places them within a discourse of inferiority and oppression as the title of victim forever remains.

Discussion

The production of three themes have been attended to within the analysis section, pertaining to shifting boundaries of responsibility, the media as a position of power and the abnormality and pathological implications associated with child abuse. This is concurrent with the literature reviewed in the introductory section.

To begin with, the notion of abnormality and individual pathology of abusers supports research relevant to the medical/psychological discourse of child abuse, presented by Jack (1997) and the work of Bell (2011), who also acknowledged how people are consistently provided with information that constitutes what is normal and abnormal within society. The theme is also complimentary of Gough (2001), who reported a similar theme of abnormality when interviewing participants about homosexuality. They also commented on the natural and normality of heterosexuality, inferring homosexuality to be the opposite and therefore an unnatural phenomenon. The claim by Reicher (2001) that something about human psychology allows for prejudice behaviour as inevitable can be adopted to the prejudice of abnormal individuals within child abuse.

The research was also successful in identifying the individual pathology attributed to abusers, an area which appears to have been largely ignored. The inference of this

may be that as the dominant discourse still surrounds positivist research, psychology may agree that abuse is an abnormal phenomenon. This study therefore highlighted gaps in the literature that should no longer go unchallenged.

With reference to the theme of media as an influential power tool, research considered prior to the study can once again be supported. It adheres particularly to the work of Garrett (2009)'s presentation of the new media discourse existing within child abuse scandals and the effect it has on social work professionals. Research by Kitzinger (2000) also supports the findings of the negative image of social work. She argues that each new case that arises may be willingly received as a fail on the part of the professional due to the image of failure fitting with what people already know about scandals. Therefore, the role of the social worker may go unquestioned as people already see the social worker at the forefront of blame, due to the previous history of wrongdoings

Kitzinger (2004)'s work is also re-exemplified, with the common theme of the media exerting vivid images of 'child abusers' and 'victims of child abuse' to the public and in doing so constructing understandings that have become blurred with constructions of reality.

However, a new finding was also produced within this theme. That is the power positioned towards the media could be interpreted as a procedure for constructing the factuality of child abuse and managing the dilemma of stake involved in exerting opinions and understandings. The dilemma of stake is an element of interaction in which the speaker says what they do in accordance with what is being claimed. To manage this we construct our descriptions and inferences in ways which appear separate from us and disguise our own interests (Hepburn, 2003). In this instance, participants are constructing their descriptions in accordance with media coverage. Potter (1996) suggested six procedures involved in managing the dilemma of stake, which he termed 'the reality production kit'. The three that were most relevant to the analysis in this study were category entitlement, stake inoculation and systematic vagueness.

The main overarching theme concerning the shifting of boundaries of responsibility appears to incorporate the previous literature reviewed, in which participants could shift their identity as expert and knowledgeable about child abuse, to one of depersonalisation and detachment, when sought necessary. This supports Abell and Stokoe (2001)'s work into the construction of identity and how it cannot simply be prescribed as a straightforward categorisation process. Instead it is argued that identity involves the negotiation of the identity of others and a focus upon the social action which is accomplished by incorporating the most relevant identities. This is coherent with the study in which boundaries of identity and responsibility changed upon the implications and focus of the interview. The study therefore further emphasizes the fluidity with which identity resources are arranged and displayed through interaction and talk (Tuffin, 2005).

This shifting of boundaries may also relate closely to what Billig (1992) termed the 'kaleidoscope of common sense', where shifts are fluidly made between arguments from principle and practice. This also abides to a swirling pattern where inferences regularly change places. In this instance the kaleidoscope refers to how the shift in

responsibility and boundaries is made throughout the interviews, dependent on the values and implications of what participants were saying.

Therefore, the current study has brought about new findings into the realm of child abuse. With the backing of a social constructionist approach it has been argued that the 'reality' of child abuse has been placed in one of abnormality, media power and as an overall theme the shift of identity and responsibility away from the issue. It has been argued that these themes have constructed a shift away from responsibility from the self, which can be implicated in treating child abuse as an inevitable phenomenon.

In acknowledging how the current study could be improved upon, the researcher recognizes that in employing a small sample of participants, all from locations around the North West of England, any claims and arguments presented cannot be representative of the population (Langridge, 2004). For this reason, if the study were to be carried out again, it may be better suited to either identify a specific group of people to explore or to generate a larger sample size, which would more suitably represent the general public.

Future research would assist this study by analysing deeper, through the use of discourse analysis, the themes identified, in order to explore the underlying meanings of the themes in a more advanced way than could be achieved in the current study. The implications of these findings suggest people are not willing to take personal responsibility for the protection of children. Combining this with media influence it is suggested for media campaigns to be launched, to deconstruct the notion that abuse is abnormal and therefore inevitable, and to deconstruct preconceived images of abusers and the abused. This could also encourage people to take responsibility as a society, potentiating community based projects helping tackle the existent problem of child abuse.

Reflexivity

When engaging with qualitative research, the researcher is under no illusion that there is no claim for objectivity. The research has been carried out from a particular standpoint and perspective and in doing so the subjective values of the researcher will have no doubt impacted upon the methods surrounding the research and the interpretation of data. However, this subjectivity is not identified as a problem that should have been avoided, instead in a reflexive manner the research is able to take a further critical stance (King and Horrocks, 2010).

The use of reflexivity reciprocates the unavoidable acceptance that doing social research is an interactive progression commissioned by individual subjects, with emotional, theoretical and political commitments (King and Horrocks, 2010).

The researcher therefore is actively aware of her own background and personal standpoint that may have affected the research process. Firstly, the researcher holds a middle class, highly educated background. The implication of this is the unconscious positioning of expert, either by the researcher herself or through the participants' reactions. The researcher also holds a left wing political stance, in which

a belief in the support of social change and ending oppressions is strongly held. Therefore, the analysis the research may have been guided by this political standpoint. Furthermore, the researcher is expected to progress onto a social work masters and so the personal understandings and views of social workers, which is an evident theme in the research, may have been heavily influenced by the researcher's orientation towards a social work profession. The researcher holds a strong, emotional investment in the phenomenon of child abuse, volunteering at ChildLine, and advocates strongly for the protection of children. This may have also affected the chosen themes.

This subjective standpoint potentially engages within the research through the use of qualitative interviews. This required entering meaningful relationships with the participants and as the researcher was an active member of the interviews throughout the study, a certain amount of control may have influenced the progression of the interviews to suit the researcher. Therefore, unavoidably, the researcher will have co-constructed some of the interview. It also must be noted that as the researcher was familiar to participants outside of the study, her moral and political standpoints were known and could have influenced participants' responses.

Therefore, the researcher accepts responsibility for having played a part in the construction of knowledge within the research. However, as the research was carried out from a social constructionist perspective, this may further support how societal and political factors are evident in language.

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