

A CUSTOM DISTORTED: BELIEFS ABOUT SEXUAL ABUSE INVOLVING TEENAGERS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY AT A RURAL SETTING IN SOUTH AFRICA

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This paper is based on the findings of a study that took place in a rural setting in KZN. The study is part of the NRF/Thuthuka-funded research on care and support for sexually abused teenagers with intellectual disability. The leader of the research is Dr Nareadi Phasha, a senior lecturer in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Johannesburg.

INTRODUCTION

Children worldwide are at risk of being sexually abused, but those with intellectual disability are at a significantly greater risk, being among the most stigmatized and marginalized of all the children. However, in South Africa, a country which has been identified as a hub for various forms of sexual violence and abuse against women and children, little has been alluded to about occurrences of such instances amongst individuals with intellectual disability, except in the media during special days which mark the observation of violence against children and women. In this era of HIV/AIDS infection and misconceptions about sexually transmitted diseases (example: that sleeping with a virgin person would cure a sexually transmitted disease), which occur alongside incorrect assumptions about people with intellectual disability, the spotlight focuses on community understandings about sexual abuse of teenagers with intellectual disability as a social problem.

The following points prompted interest in this study:

- **Statistical reports internationally:** Studies alluded to the seriousness of sexual abuse involving people with intellectual disability. For example, Kristin's (2007) documentation of this problem in United States which revealed that people with

developmental disability are assaulted, raped and abused at a rate two times greater than their non-disabled counterparts. Similarly, Keity and Connelly (2001) noted that over 50% of women with disability had experienced sexual exploitation by the time they reach adulthood, whilst Ticoll, Mirriam, Panitch (1993) estimated that 39% - 68% of people with intellectual disability would experience sexual abuse before they reach the age of eighteen. According to UNICEF (2005) instances of sexual abuse involving teenagers with intellectual disability in developing countries tend to be 1.7 times greater than those committed against their non-disabled counterparts.

- **A caution by Balough, Bretherton, Whibley, Graham, Richold and Worsely (2001) that estimates of sexual abuse of people with intellectual disability are subject to a lack of disclosure and under-reporting**, due to communications problems (Davies, 2002) and/or their lack of understanding of abuse (Howe, 2000).
- **Diminished care and support in instances of sexual abuse of intellectual disability.** Jansen (2005) indicated that sexual abuse centre may claim not to have expertise to provide counseling to people with intellectual disability, or an agency dealing with intellectual disability may claim that it does not have expertise to handle sexual assault. Due to communication difficulties, a police officer may fail to question a potential witness who has an intellectual disability, and an attorney may feel that a person with intellectual disability will not make a credible statement because of her state or condition.
- **Misconceptions about sexuality of people with intellectual disability, which render them vulnerable to further abuse:** These include incorrect assumptions that people (especially teenagers) with intellectual disability are promiscuous or oversexed (Wilde, 1997). They are regarded as sexually inactive and at lesser risk of being sexually victimized (Howe, 2000).

METHOD

In an attempt to examine the reasons for **our** concern, we carried out in-depths interviews on a face-to-face basis with each adult whose professional and community responsibility permits them to be in closer contact with teenagers with intellectual disability. These included: teachers [Life Orientation], support staff, police, social

workers based at special schools and the local crisis centre. Points of recruitment included 3 special schools for learners with mild intellectual disability; local police station, crisis centre (medico-legal practice). All these institutions were based at a rural village in KwaZulu Natal province of South Africa. Also parents, local religious leaders and a traditional healer participated in the study.

PROCEDURE

Interviews began with teachers at special schools and a preliminary analysis was done after each session. This involved identifying tentative themes to be explored in subsequent interviews. This was followed by a full transcription of all the tapes and a formal analysis of data, which involved open, axial and selective coding. It was during the formal data analysis that we decided to invite community members such as parents, religious and traditional healers. For convenience and safety reasons, interviews took place at participants' places of work, following their written consent and permission from relevant authorities. The questions posed centered around the following issues:

- Own understanding of sexual abuse involving teenagers with intellectual disability.
- Prevailing understandings of this matter as a social problem.

RESULTS

Sexual abuse of teenagers with intellectual disability is well known and common. Interestingly, in this small village located in KZN Province, it was found that people with intellectual disability are viewed as having spirits which were associated with the family's punishment from God or ancestors. The gist of the matter is that the family of an individual is cursed or has been bewitched. Sometimes, when ancestors are displeased with a particular family, they will punish by making the family member/s bear a child with an intellectual disability. This happens when the family does not perform appropriated traditional rituals.

Intellectual disability is perceived as spirits. The spirits that live in people with mental disability are evil (satanic), love sex, sexually provocative/attractive and make them run after men for sex. A teacher at a school which caters for learners with intellectual disability maintained that:

I have heard a traditional doctor saying that people with disability have lots of evil spirits that make them sexually attractive. And these evil spirits make them act in way that makes you sexually aroused.

This statement was corroborated by a community member who is acting as an assistant to the local African church minister, which is highly regarded as praying, and healing the sick as well as casting out the demons from possessed people. Giving an account of his experience of casting out “demons” from people with intellectual disability, a community member stated that:

I experience a very unusual feeling when I am around any person with intellectual disability. I do not know how to explain such a feeling but my body just reacts in a certain way ... like aroused and longing for sex. So what I can say is that the spirits of these people with intellectual disability make men feel attracted to them, and for that reason, it becomes difficult to explain whether these people are sexually abused or not.

A mother who believed that intellectual disability in her daughter was caused by a curse from her husband’s first wife corroborated the belief about “spirits”, as she asserted that:

My daughter has bad spirits, and what I have noticed about her is that the spirits inside her make her grab and chase after men to have sexual intercourse with her. I strongly believe that the spirits in her love sex very much and she cannot control them.

The belief about spirits and intellectual disability was corroborated by a religious leader (a minister or a pastor of a local church who indicated that:

I can assure you that they (teenagers with intellectual disability) have spirits that attract abusers, and most of the time the spirits do not come out easily. You can say they are demon possessed and their spirits love sex.

Alongside these popular misconceptions that teenagers with intellectual disability have a high sex drive, and that they are sexually attractive and provocative, there was a **striking** conception that the spirits that works in them were powerful as to make another person **wealthy, successful, respected** and **feared** in the **community**. To acquire that power, a person has to sleep with teenagers with intellectual disability, implying that some ‘traditional healers’ advise their clients to have a sexual intercourse with

teenagers with intellectual disability. This was captured explicitly in the traditional healer's words:

Some witchdoctors do tell people to sleep with teenagers and children who are "mad" in order to get some of the spirits in them that will make a client to be rich and be respected in the community. Such things exist even here at (Thoweni, a fictitious name). Also these people who are "mad" are having some spirits which the witchdoctors need to strengthen their powers. So to get those spirits they have to sexual abuse these mad children. You must know that traditional healers and sangomas use spirits to work. The spirits can do many things for you, depending on what you want. The action of sexual abusing people who are mad is called *Ukuthwala* or "*Ukuthwebula kocanzi*" in Isizulu. All your things will increase or multiply because of these spirits. The issue of *Ukuthwala* or *Ukuthwebula* is so complicated because you must follow all the instructions pertaining to them. If you miss one all your things will be gone. We as true traditional healers, we distance ourselves from witchcraft and we discourage it – we promote humanity.

A teacher at a special school said:

People have embarked on doing wicked things to make their businesses grow and flourish. There is a practice called *Ukuthwala*, I do not know what it is called in English ... but this involves using and sleeping with people with intellectual disability. In this case, teenagers fall victims because their blood are considered as pure (not contaminated).

A social worker at the crisis centre indicated that:

There is a widespread understanding in our community that people with intellectual disability have some sort of power. And for people to acquire that power, they should sexually abuse them. You know this myth is so widespread and unfortunately it is wrong.

The *Ukuthwala* process

In an attempt to provide a deeper understanding of sexual abuse involving teenagers with intellectual disability at this rural settlement, the *ukuthwala* process was examined in order to establish if sexual abuse of teenagers with intellectual disability can be traced in the practice. Apparently, *Ukuthwala* is known and continues to exist in most rural areas of KwaZulu, Natal and Eastern Province, but under different interpretations, namely: (a) the abduction of a girl for marriage and (b) wealth-giving process.

- (a) **Abduction/capturing of a girl for marriage.** In this instance a girl is abducted by a young man to his home with the help of his peers. It may or may not be with the consent of a girl, but often it is done with the consent of the girl's family. When the girl arrives at the young man's home, a message that the girl has been taken is sent to her parents and an offering of a cow is made (Kate Wood, 2005:314). The process involves having sex with the girl, and if she resists force is used. She may even be held down by other men for penetration to take place. This form of sexual encounter marks the girl's union with the man, and in their tradition the act is not in any way regarded as rape (Wood, 2005).
- (b) A second interpretation is offered by Felicity Wood and Michael Lewis (2007), based on their intensive study about the life of Khotso Senthusa, a practitioner of *Ukuthwala* in the Lusikisiki area of Eastern Province. The definition involves **the possession of a wealth-giving creature, frequently known as Mamlambo (in Zulu/Xhosa) or Mamokebe (in Sotho) or a Mermaid (in English).** The creature is described as a beautiful woman having a snake or fish-like torso. She is believed to be dangerous, seductive, possessing power to offer wealth and power, and also able to bring about terrifying ruin to the owner who does not oblige to the snake wants. Mamlambo demands offerings in exchange for the wealth she provides to her owner, which could include bread and banknotes. As she feeds on blood, she may demand the blood of animals or even the blood of relatives – such as demanding its owner to kill a particular animals or person (Wood & Lewis, 2007).

Clearly, the *Ukuthwala* process involves sexual performances with the person's "owner" – a husband to be (as described in the first definition) or with a wealth-giving creature.

DISCUSSION

Having presented the beliefs about sexual abuse of teenagers with intellectual disability and a description of *ukuthwala*, the question is - **how then is *Ukuthwala* linked to sexual abuse of teenagers with intellectual disability?** In answering this question, we looked at two important issues:

Prevailing understanding about intellectual disability as a condition: The association of intellectual disability with evil spirits is rooted in an African belief, clearly

explained by a well known African author who was also a professor of theology and comparative religion at Makerere university, John Mbiti (1970; 204). He explained that in almost all African societies, there is a belief that when a family loose links with the living dead (ancestors), it becomes its stranger and the family may come to construe ancestors as evil or harmful, and some believe that they come to possess individuals and cause maladies like epilepsy or madness - intellectual disability. In the same vein, the idea that those spirits are powerful and stubborn because they are difficult to cast out by a religious healer could be understood in term of the belief in diviners. According to Mbiti (1970; 172), diviners are highly esteemed among Africans, and they are viewed as having a special ability to get in touch with the spirit world, hence their roles as counselors, judges, comforters, pastors and priest, fortune tellers and solvers of problems and revealers of secrets like theft, imminent dangers or coming events. Most importantly, they are expected to be trustworthy, act in a morally acceptable way without deceiving people. As means by which ancestors communicate to the people, they are believed to have special abilities to get in touch with the **spiritual world**. For that reason, anything which appears spirit-related to African should be healed or calmed down by a diviner (religious healer). If the divination process does not yield expected desired results, it could then be easy to consider the spirits that are believed to possess an individual as **supernatural**, hence the link of intellectual disability with a Mermaid's power.

Perceptions that teenagers with intellectual disability are sexually attractive and have a high sex drive. Teenagers are at the developmental stage of adolescent (which often begins at the age 11 years). During this stage the person's body changes – breasts grow larger and fuller; hips develops and the waist assumes a narrow shape whilst the pelvis widens; and hormones trigger menstruation. Experimentation with the body begins and sexual feelings develop (Pawlowki & Hamilton). For communities which view people with intellectual disability as child-like, may confuse teenager's physical developments with sexually attractiveness, whilst their behavioral changes could incorrectly be associated with a high sex drive. The misconceptions could be exacerbated by their friendliness towards people, and that their expression of sexual desires in ways that are different from the "norm". In addition, teenagers who do not get appropriate care at home may be found wearing torn clothes and walking in the street

without underwear (as was indicated by one participant). Such appearance may lead some people into believing that the teenager wants sex (especially if such things are occurring in a community which holds beliefs that a particular form of dress invites sexual abuse or a desire for sex). Clearly, the misconceptions about teenagers as oversexed could be linked to the perceptions about a Mermaid – that it is too sexual.

In the light of the above, it could be claimed that sexual abuse of teenagers with intellectual disability in the name of *Ukuthwala* (becoming powerful, feared and wealthy) is motivated by the misperceptions that they (teenagers with intellectual disability) possess qualities/characteristics similar to those of a Mermaid (which is believed to be a wealth-giving creature).

Conclusion: Teenagers with intellectual disability are the weakest and neglected members of the society, and therefore any misconceptions which put them at risk of sexual abuse/violence cannot be tolerated, more so, this form of abuse exerts serious negative implications on an individual. Moreover, like any citizen, teenagers with intellectual disability should be protected and respected as individuals. Such rights are clearly spelled out in international declarations and national legislation: the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons (1975); the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993); the Principles for the Protection of Persons with mental illness and the Improvement of Mental Healthcare (1991) and the World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons (1982). Nationally, the Constitution of South Africa (1996) guarantees them rights to safety. Their rights are further covered by National Disability Strategy (1997), the Sexual Offences Acts (2008) and the Children's Act. Therefore the findings of this study find relevance to any child protection and treatment professionals, including the entire community.

Recommendations: Aggressive and intensive training programmes to demystify the conceptions about intellectual disability and promote appropriate understanding of the condition should be carried out amongst the community and traditional healers. Poorer communities which are susceptible to these forms of beliefs should be seriously targeted. Alongside such programmes, there should be strong legislation which forbids traditional healers from misleading people into believing that sleeping with a person with intellectual disability could bring someone fortunes (wealth and power). They should be

familiarized with legislation which protects children from abuse and also the rights of people with intellectual disability.

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