Summary of doctoral thesis findings:

The demographic profile and psychosocial history of a group of convicted perpetrators of the rape of children under the age of three years.

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1. Motivation for current research

The current research was motivated by some inaccurate reporting from local and international media concerning the rape of a nine-month-old infant in the Northern Cape of South Africa during October 2001. Some of the media reports intimated that this form of violence was unique to South Africa (Bird and Spurr, 2004:521), and started after the country’s first democratic elections in April 1994 (Bestall and Joubert, 2002). A literature review conducted by the researcher demonstrated that such acts are neither new nor unique to South Africa, and have occurred before and after 1994. Examples include:

- Jaffe and Roux (1988:65) note that 88 cases of suspected sexual abuse of children were investigated at the Red Cross War Memorial (Children’s) Hospital in Cape Town in 1985. Twenty cases of rape, 15 of incest and seven of sexual interference were confirmed, with 47% of cases unconfirmed. Victims ranged in age from ten months to 13 years.
- Dubé and Hébert (1988:321) conducted a retrospective study of 511 cases of alleged sexual abuse in children under the age of 12 years, at the Hospital Sainte-Justine in Quebec, Canada. The youngest victim was a two-month-old infant.
- Meursing, Vos, Coutinho, Moyo, Mpofu, Oneko, Mundy, Dube, Mahlangu and Sibindi (1995:1693), in a study which explored the reporting of child sexual abuse to hospitals and police in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe, in 1992, note that the youngest victim was a two-year-old.

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Van As, Withers, Du Toit, Millar and Rode (2001:1035) report that nine infants under the age of one year, 15 toddlers under the age of two years, and 27 toddlers under the age of three years presented at the Red Cross Children’s Hospital, Cape Town, between January 1991 and December 1999, with varying injuries as a result of sexual abuse.

The present study was also in response to some media articles that suggested the rape of children under the age of three was associated with the “virgin-cleansing” myth, similarly espoused with great conviction by several politicians (Jewkes, 2004:130). There was no suggestion from the respondents who participated in the current study that their sexual acts were motivated by the “virgin-cleansing” myth. Furthermore, the “virgin-cleansing” myth is neither new nor unique to South Africa (Tannahill, 1980:364, 370; Davidson, 2001:62).

2. Issues raised for the researcher

The rape of children under the age of three years raised two issues for the researcher. The first issue concerned “grooming” that is often associated with how some sexual abusers gain children’s trust and coerce them to keep their abuse secret.

“Grooming”

The respondents who participated in the current research did not use “grooming”. Furthermore, the respondents displayed different characteristics from those used by child sex abusers listed in the diagnosis of paedophilia (American Psychiatric Association, 2000:571). These differences include that respondents in the current study did not justify their actions with excuses such as the children were “sexually provocative”, or rationalisation, such as the “educational value” or “sexual pleasure” for the child (American Psychiatric Association, 2000:571). The diagnostic criteria for paedophilia include a “period of at least six months [of] behaviours involving sexual activity with a child or children” (American Psychiatric Association, 2000:572). The respondents in the current study who disclosed their crimes to the researcher reflected isolated and impulsive acts, without premeditation.
The second issue raised for the researcher concerned why men committed such acts, and what factors in their psychosocial histories compelled them to behave so brutally towards infants and toddlers. This enabled formulation of the overall aim of the study.

3. Overall aim of the study

The overall aim of the study was to identify and describe the demographic profile and psychosocial history of ten convicted perpetrators of the rape of children under the age of three years, in order to develop an understanding of the factors in their psychosocial histories which might have influenced them to commit such acts.

4. Research design and methodology

The research was design was qualitative, as the study attempted to describe and understand, rather than explain, human behaviour (Babbie and Mouton, 2001:270). Purposive sampling (Strydom and Delport, 2005:328-9), based on the judgement of the researcher, was used to identify ten incarcerated perpetrators serving sentences in prison for the rape of children under the age of three years at the time of data collection. A semi-structured interview guide was used when conducting in-depth interviews with incarcerated respondents. The interview guide comprised five broad sections: First, an introduction to the research; second, an exploration of biographical, personal and psychosocial data relating to childhood, adolescence and adulthood; third, incarceration; fourth, an exploration of the events leading up to the crime, the crime itself and consequent prison sentence, and finally, termination of the interviews. The researcher collected data by conducting face-to-face interviews with the respondents. After each interview, the researcher transcribed the audio cassettes and included in the transcripts non-verbal behaviours displayed by the respondent, such as eye contact, fidgeting, nervous coughing or laughing, and rubbing of hands. Raw data, in the form of transcribed interviews, was organized into conceptual categories, by creating themes or concepts, thereby coding the data (Neuman, 2000:420.) Three methods of coding, namely open, axial and selective (Strauss and Corbin, 1990:58), were used. By coding each series of interviews with individual incarcerated respondents, the beginnings of theory emerged (De Vos and Van Zyl, 1998:271).
5. Findings

The findings concern the demographic profile of the ten respondents and thereafter their psychosocial histories.

**Demographic profile**

The respondents who participated in the current research comprised three coloured and seven black men. They were all serving lengthy prison sentences for the rape of children under the age of three years at the time of data collection. The respondents ranged in age from 19 to 61 when they raped children aged between three months and three years. None of the respondents completed their school education. Only one respondent in the current study was married. Nine of the respondents had children. Most respondents did not live with their children. All of the respondents had experienced unemployment for at least two years when they raped very young children. The respondents therefore experienced the “slow progress in education” and “economic stagnation” documented in the United Nations Human Development Report (2005:22) that has been attributed to South Africa’s decline in the Human Development Index rankings since 1990. The respondents were part of one of the most unequal societies in the world.

**Psychosocial histories**

The respondents’ psychosocial histories were associated with poverty, maltreatment, and attachment difficulties, or what Simons, Wurtele and Durham (2008:557) refer to as the convergence of many adversities. It is possible that these adversities affected the respondents’ ability to develop resilience. However, similar histories are not uncommon to many men in South Africa. Why, therefore, do many men with similar psychosocial histories, not rape particularly young children? The current research suggests that men, with similar psychosocial histories, who do not rape have developed resilience (Bolger and Patterson, 2003:157), and had a “relatively good outcome” despite their experiences associated with potentially serious sequelae (Rutter, 2007:205).

It is also possible that men, with similar psychosocial histories to the respondents in the current study, who have not raped very small children, had caring individuals and positive role models in their lives, such as caring teachers and older mentors to help them “beat the odds”, as reflected in the study concerning resilience and high-risk individuals conducted by Werner and Smith (2001:153, 173). In the current study, there was no evidence of such

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1 This in no way suggests that only men from these racial groups commit such crimes.

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persons having played a mentoring or caring role. Furthermore, the respondents lived their lives with poor social and community cohesion that many believe is at the root of violence against children most particularly (World Report on Violence against Children, 2006:11-2).

Differing experiences of maltreatment

It is also possible, based on the extant understandings of sexual offenders generally, that the respondents’ childhood reflected in the current study had some differences in their experiences of maltreatment.

The possible association between childhood physical punishment and violent offending during adulthood has been suggested by various researchers. The first different finding in the current study, in comparison with the literature, was that all the respondents received frequent and severe corporal punishment administered by their mothers. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that punishment was administered in silence and was therefore accompanied by verbal abuse. This resulted in psychological conflict (Ney, Fung and Wickett, 1994:711).

Only four respondents reported that they received physical punishment from their fathers/stepfather. This finding differs from Smallbone and Dadds (1998:10), as well as McCormack, Hudson and Ward (2002:11), who report that rapists had particularly problematic relationships with their fathers. However, all the respondents in the present research reported problematic, and violent, relationships with older males, such as uncles, older brothers and/or their mothers’ boyfriends.

The respondents all reported various forms of neglect, including insufficient food and clothing, and that some mothers and other care givers deliberately withheld food as a form of punishment, actions that are physical neglect (Pritchard, 2004:12). Research undertaken by Ney et al (1994:705) identified “the worst combinations of child abuse and neglect” as physical abuse, physical neglect, and verbal abuse, all of which constituted the childhood experiences of the respondents in the current research, most often received from their mothers. These particular combinations of physical abuse and neglect, as well as emotional or verbal abuse, affect children greatly, and decrease their enjoyment of life and optimism (Ney et al, 1994:705).

Such maltreatment possibly led to attachment difficulties, and compounded respondents’ difficulties to develop resilience.
The second difference in the present research, when compared to the literature, concerned respondents’ development of a “heightened sexualized childhood” that Simons et al (2008:557) found was more associated with child sexual abusers than rapists. In the present study, the respondents, as children, frequently witnessed violent behaviours (or what Simons et al, 2008:557 refer to as violent media), and witnessed and/or heard sexual activity between their care givers and other adults (that Simons et al, 2008:577 refer to as pornography) in extremely overcrowded, noisy and stressful living conditions. It is highly possible that this led to the respondents’ age-inappropriate commencement of sexual intercourse, also associated with a “heightened sexualized childhood”.

6. Respondents’ explanations for their rape of very young children

All the respondents who participated in the current study recalled their anger, directed towards men and women, on the day that they raped very young children. Some of the children were related to these men and women. Anger is an emotion frequently recalled by individuals before and during rapes (Marshall, Marshall, Serran and Fernandez, 2006:88). The researcher proposes that this anger was the culmination of years of maltreatment and deprivation, the resultant inadequate resilience to cope with adversity, and the use of violence as “normal”.

The respondents raped children under the age of three years in an act conceptualized by the researcher as “spontaneous violent action” (Van Deventer and Jordaan, 1998:768). While the act itself was spontaneous, this research suggests it was, partly, an outcome of years of deprivation (noted in the respondents’ contexts of maltreatment) that resulted in aggression and hostility that was initially directed inwards (noted in respondents’ suppression of their feelings whilst experiencing physical and emotional abuse as well as neglect), dulled any sense of improving life, and highlighted the respondents’ complete helplessness and abysmal prospects (Van Deventer and Jordaan, 1998:768), experienced as powerlessness. A provocation, such as stolen cattle, or drunken men in a shebeen using crude expressions to describe a respondent’s mother, or rebuttals from desired or actual sexual partners, resulted in senseless, violent action and was a way of reacting to what the respondents experienced as a desperate situation, and re-gaining a sense of control, despite the result of the action (Van Deventer and Jordaan, 1998:768).
The respondents’ comments concerning their rape of very young children suggest that the motive for their acts were revenge. Groth, Burgess and Holmstrom (1977:1242) propose that an “anger-retaliation” rapist has a motive of revenge. Similarly, Hesselink-Louw and Schoeman (2003:16) report that the motive for rape from an “infantophile” in their study, defined as an individual who raped a child aged two years or less, was revenge. In the context of the current study, respondents’ anger, and their associated need for revenge, was directed towards desired or actual sexual partners, family members, and in some instances, men who were not related to the respondents.

Eight respondents reported very high levels of alcohol use during childhood and adulthood. In addition, three of these respondents also used dagga, and a fourth both dagga and Mandrax. Prior to the rapes, six respondents reported “binge drinking”. Most experienced ejaculation during the rapes. The reported incidence of alcohol usage by respondents in the current study was higher than that reported by the South African Police Service, who notes that 20 to 30% of rapes involve alcohol (Crime Information Analysis Centre, 2001:12). At least three of the respondents in the current research reported that they were not under the influence of alcohol when they raped very young children. The possible use of alcohol by one respondent is unknown.

Mention must be made of how some respondents accessed the children they raped. One respondent “found” a toddler in a street, unattended. Another had been drinking with the toddler’s parents who remained “asleep” as he raped their child in the same room. Some of the young children were raped by respondents who described themselves care givers. Clearly, this raises very serious questions about some parental care and the supervision of particularly young, and extremely vulnerable, children.

### 7. Conclusion of present research

The key issues that emerged from the current study included that:

- The respondents’ childhood was associated with harsh physical and emotional deprivation experienced most particularly from their mothers.
- Disruptions to childhood primary care giving relationships led to a lack of opportunities to form secure attachments.
- The respondents experienced frequent and severe corporal punishment. They also witnessed violence that was often associated with alcohol.

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• Respondents’ poor school education compounded their deprivation during adulthood.
• Factors that might have facilitated resilience, such as positive role models and completed school education, were absent.
• Respondents’ sexual relationships were associated with one-night stands and multiple relationships, and marked by emotional immaturity and attachment difficulties. Some of these relationships were reportedly associated with abuse and violence.
• Respondents showed different features to those typical of paedophilia and other more frequently observed patterns associated with child sexual abuse.
• The “virgin-cleansing” myth did not appear to influence the respondents who participated in the present research.
• Unemployment was experienced by all the respondents.
• Many respondents reported individual and family features associated with the development of Conduct Disorder during childhood, and Antisocial Personality Disorder during adulthood.

Thus, the conclusion of the present research is:

Some men experience childhood with extreme forms of maltreatment most particularly from their mothers, the development of age-inappropriate heightened sexuality, and are without positive role models or mentors in their lives, reflecting their lack of social and community cohesion. Such maltreatment possibly affects childhood and adulthood attachment as well as the development of adequate resilience in the face of adversity. The use of violence becomes normal. In response, some unemployed men possibly rape children under the age of three years, spontaneously, and often after “binge drinking”, as a need for revenge in response to their feelings of anger directed towards both men and women, not necessarily related to the young victims of rape.

However, these findings, based on a small sample, cannot be generalized to all men who rape children under the age of three.

8. Reference list


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