

HUMILIATION IN THE HOME

Survivors of Childhood Rape in the United States¹

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Introduction

I worked for fourteen years as an individual and group therapist, court advocate, trainer, and workshop leader for, among others, survivors of childhood rape, as their family members, educators, and community leaders. I heard stories that unfortunately became common-place of the rape of our children by their fathers, uncles, brothers, grandfathers and, more rarely, mothers and grandmothers. By the end of my career, I came to expect a new female client to tell me she was a survivor of childhood rape.

Therapists have long held that sexual assault is among the most humiliating experiences a human being can have. My work with survivors confirmed this. It also confirmed that the consequences of that humiliation are suffered for a lifetime by not only the survivor herself, but the community at large. I made many observations, including the fact that the humiliation suffered by childhood rape survivors is multi-layered and complex and reaches far beyond the act of rape itself. In addition, it was my experience that more often than not, the perpetrator considered himself “a religious man”, and often quoted from the Judeo-Christian Bible to justify his actions.

The information in this paper comes from my experiences with the survivors I worked from as well as years of research on the issues and consequences of childhood rape.

The Rape

Survivors of childhood rape that takes place in the home suffer several layers of humiliation. First, of course, is the act of abuse itself, the humiliation of being sexually violated by a loved and trusted family member who mercilessly manipulates the child’s love and trust of the perpetrator and the child’s family members to meet his own pedophilic needs. The memories of these acts continue to feed the survivors’ shame and often result in a life sentence of torment. It was not uncommon for my clients to fervently wish that they could forget the rape memories. But as we shall see later on, the memory of the rape itself is only one source of humiliation and terror for the survivor.

¹ I was privileged during my tenure as a therapist to work with many clients from various “subcultures” within the American culture, i.e. those whose families had immigrated but who kept practices or patterns from the “old country”, I only saw 1 woman from an Orthodox Jewish family and no members of the Muslim community. Many of my clients, however, were raised in fundamentalist Christian homes.

In addition, the survivor may believe that no one is as strong as the perpetrator. This belief continues into adulthood and further serves the perpetrator by blocking effective therapy and empowerment of the survivor. Conversely, as we shall also see later on, if the child believed that someone could have, should have intervened, it is often her belief that that intervener should have somehow been herself.

The Role of Religion

Survivors often reported that their perpetrator was a “religious man.” This could mean anything from a practicing fundamentalist to a church deacon or pastor but in any event, allowed the perpetrator to justify his violent actions by reliance on perverse interpretations of passages in the Judeo-Christian bible. Because the child was most likely also raised with the same religious beliefs, and because a child’s psyche is incapable of successfully challenging their elders’ religious “beliefs”, this justification not only works well for the perpetrator but serves to “cement” these warped interpretations into the survivor’s psyche. Consequently, if at some point in her adult life the survivor can begin to question the perpetrator’s actions, the old religious messages rear their heads and serve as a continued source of shame and humiliation.

This was an obstacle to healing for one woman we can call “Sadie”. Sadie’s first memory was of being raped by her father at 3 years old. Subsequently, and well into her teen years, she was raped by a grandfather, uncles, and several older brothers (she was the 3rd of 11 children, with all of the births taking place at home, attended only by her father because “if animals can deliver without medical assistance, a woman should be able to do the same”). Despite the fact that it was the late 1960’s when such things were not discussed, Sadie found the courage to tell her mother about her father’s rapes. Devout Catholic that she was, the mother pulled out the bible and began reading certain passages to Sadie, focusing especially on the fifth commandment: “honor they mother and father”.² This religious indoctrination (some may call it brainwashing) stayed with Sadie all her life. Despite years of therapy, she never could shake the feeling that by telling her story and talking about her childhood, she was committing a grave sin. Sadie killed herself at age 45. She was unmarried and left no will. Under Michigan law, then, her body was returned to her closest surviving relative to dispose of as he saw fit. That was Sadie’s father. In the end, she was unable to break free of his control over her.

I also often heard perpetrators described by their survivors as “pillars of their communities.” This greatly contributed to the survivors’ reluctance to report the rape and leads to the second layer of shame.

² Sadie later told her school principal who appropriately called in child protective services. When they showed up at the door, Sadie’s father admitted to all of the rapes and then challenged the social worker, informing her she could remove Sadie if she wanted to, but neither he nor his boys were leaving the house. The social worker left, leaving Sadie in the home. Sadie was 9 years old.

The Second Layer: “It Must Have Been My Fault”

The second layer of shame the survivor suffers is the internal message that she did something wrong. This can range from believing that she invited or “enjoyed” the rape to missed opportunities for revenge. In fact, it is most common for female survivors of childhood rape to internalize the humiliation suffered and engage in lifelong self-destructive behaviors. Hence the correlation between childhood rape and such things as prostitution, chemical dependency, self-mutilation or “cutting”, promiscuity, eating disorders, and strings of abusive adult relationships. It is crucial to understand, however, that all of these behaviors are survival mechanisms and stem from the psyche’s desperate attempts to manage the humiliation memories and gain some power and control over her life.

One adult survivor told me that her father, the local pharmacist and “pillar of their community”, repeatedly raped her and gave her addictive drugs such as barbiturates and amphetamines. She never told anyone because in her little girl’s mind, she knew that no one would believe their “pillar” was capable of such heinous acts.

Perhaps two of the saddest statements I ever heard came from a twelve year old survivor, lets call her “Kim”, and a nine year old survivor, we can call her “Lisa”. Both were in treatment for sexual abuse by their stepfather and father, respectively. And both told me that they were sorry they had reported the sexual abuse. As this was at the height of the “its ok to tell” movement in the US in the mid-1980’s, I was taken aback and asked the girls to explain.

Kim told me that her reporting the rape had resulted in her stepfather serving time in prison. This was supposed to be a “good” result but with eerily empty eyes, Kim explained that if she hadn’t told, he wouldn’t have gone to prison, and if he hadn’t gone to prison, she could have gotten a new bicycle out of him in exchange for not reporting the rape. Implicit in her statement was Kim’s understanding that she could continue getting things from her rapist in exchange for continued rapes. Kim had learned early on to take her rage and humiliation and turn them into survival mechanisms, albeit self-destructive ones. She now understood that in a patriarchal culture, she was a commodity and, to a limited extent not fully comprehended by a 12 year old, this allowed her to manipulate and control her perpetrator. Kim’s early lesson illustrates the connection between prostitution and childhood rape.

Lisa regretted reporting her father’s rape of her for what seemed on the surface to be a very different reason. Lisa had been forced to perform oral sex on her father. She told me that during the rapes, he had talked to her, told her he loved her, and how special she was to him. After Lisa told, he was removed from the house, allowed only supervised visitation with his children, including Lisa.

Like Kim’s experience, this was supposed to be a good thing and lead to safety and healing. But during those visits, her father refused to speak to Lisa or give her attention of any kind. At 9 years old, Lisa understood that the price she paid to protect herself was her

father's "love". Lisa's experience would most likely lead to a life-long addiction to humiliating and self-destructive relationships, comprised of a prostitution-like exchange of sex for "love". And the chances were high that this "love" she received would be abusive and extremely conditional.

Lisa's story also exposes yet another related layer of humiliation often suffered by survivors of childhood rape. The sexually abused child is often told that she is the perpetrator's favorite, that he loves her the best. This is especially true in cases of father-daughter rape. It is also not unusual for this proclamation of "love" to be followed by threats of harm and even death to other family members if the child were to report the rape and for the abuser to tell the child that she will be responsible if he goes to prison for the rape. This mixture of love and violence leads the female survivor into a hellish labyrinth of abusive relationships from which she cannot extricate herself. And, as she has learned, the abuse she suffers within those relationships is her fault.

A Gender Difference

Contrary to Lisa's and Kim's self-destructive patterns, male survivors tended to externalize their humiliation and are therefore more at risk of becoming perpetrators themselves. The former victim is now at risk to becoming the "terrorizer". His identity is linked to the perpetrator and in that way, he convinces himself that he is no longer a victim, that he is now in control. Like the female's internalization of the humiliation, however, these actions prevent healing and simply perpetuate the cycle of violence. Moreover, they leave the survivor prey to those who understand and would misuse his suffering and his need to gain power and control over his life.

Survivors' Guilt and Childhood Rape

Nor are the layers of humiliation suffered solely by those children actually raped. "Survivors' guilt" was a term used originally to refer to the deep shame and humiliation of those who survived the Holocaust while their loved ones perished.³ It was soon discovered, however, that the term also applied to those siblings in a household who for one reason or another (gender, age, or other "disfavorment" by the perpetrator) were not raped by the household perpetrator. These children believe, in defiance of any sort of logic at all, that they could have, *neigh should* have, stopped the abuse. A male client once told me that he should have been brave enough and strong enough to stop his father from raping his sisters. The fact that he was four years old at the time of the rapes had no impact on his survivors' shame.

Conclusions

These are the lessons learned by the survivors of childhood rape and their siblings. Given the tendency of the repetitive violent cycles, it is not just these individuals that suffer from the multiple layers of humiliation but the community at large. In addition, sexual

³Many parallels have been drawn between the suffering of Holocaust survivors and survivors of childhood rape. This alone speaks to the deep humiliation experienced by these children.

violence against women and children is still pervasive in today's world, whether it be in the home or as part of war or in refugee camps. The need to inflict this humiliation on vulnerable segments of our population has been the subject of many a study, yet eradication of sexual violence still seems a distant dream. The question of why should continue to haunt us.

Myself, after decades of listening, researching, contemplating, networking, and writing on this topic, it is my personal belief that responsibility for these heinous acts may be laid at the feet of the patriarchal cultures in which we find ourselves. Eradication of such violence, then, involves first and foremost assuring women's voices, power, and control in and over all aspects of their lives, political, personal, and religious.