SELF-CENTEREDNESS AND THE ADULT MALE PERPETRATOR OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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ABSTRACT: Self-centeredness has been identified as a quality of the adult male perpetrator of child sexual abuse, but little or no effort has been expended toward defining the concept clearly. In this paper, the research literature on the perpetrator and psychoanalytic writings on narcissism are reviewed for the purpose of developing a comprehensive definition of self-centeredness. Literature related to the social and developmental context of child sexual abuse also is discussed. In the final section of the paper, implications for primary prevention and treatment are drawn.

Child sexual abuse represents a fundamental disregard of the well-being of the child. Children clearly are not prepared to be sexual partners of adults, yet hundreds of thousands of children are sexually abused each year. What is going on for perpetrators which permits them to disregard the wishes and interests of children to the point where they use children sexually? Are perpetrators loathsome creatures incapable of caring for others, including children? Is their level of pain so high and their need to assuage their pain so pressing that they are temporarily blind to the needs of the child? Do they care
about the children they victimize? This paper attempts to answer some of these questions. It suggests a conceptualization of the perpetrator which might elucidate some of the dynamics of perpetration. Answers to these questions would provide a foundation for treatment planning and for primary prevention.

In many ways, the research literature on the perpetrator is incomplete. It can offer only partial and unsatisfactory answers to the above questions. The psychoanalytic literature on narcissism shows promise of illuminating some of the dynamics of perpetration. Literature related to sex role and sexual socialization provides a context in which to understand the processes of child sexual victimization. In this paper, the research literature on the perpetrator and psychoanalytic writings on narcissism first will be reviewed for the purpose of developing the concept self-centeredness. Then, literature related to the social context of sexual abuse will be discussed. Treatment implications of an expanded understanding of self-centeredness will then be drawn.

THE RESEARCH LITERATURE ON THE PERPETRATOR

From the early reports to the more recent, there has been a continual development of the portrait of the male sexual abuser of children. Throughout these reports, various manifestations of self-centeredness can be observed. One of the early reports identified such qualities as “self-centered and withdrawn,” “schizoid,” having “superficially self-assertive, aggressive personalities,” being “quiet, docile, submissive individuals who freely expressed feelings of inadequacy and inferiority,” and as “exposing the genitals before the victim” (Apfelberg, Sugra, & Pfeffer, 1944, pp. 766–767). An underlying theme in the report is a divided self, where submissiveness and aggression were found in the same individuals. Weiner (1964) also noted a division within the perpetrator: he pointed out a tendency to isolate affect from intellect. In this report, the notion of the divided self is associated with self-centeredness, but the nature of the connection is not delineated. Later studies provide a more in-depth analysis of the connection.

Other qualities described in the literature can be considered self-centered and self-serving. The incestuous father frequently has been found to state his incestuous behavior was providing his daughter