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Experiences of intimate relationships in young men who sexually offended during adolescence: interviews 10 years later

Intimate relationships and sexuality are important, but often complicated, aspects of life. In this study we examined experiences of intimate relationships and sexuality in 20 young men, aged 22 to 31 years, who had sexually offended during adolescence. The participants were interviewed and the transcripts were thematically analysed. The main picture observed was that of young men with unfulfilled needs and a low capacity to meet those needs.

Additionally, the men's experiences of intimate relationships and sexuality seemed to be affected by their experience of having sexually offended. Some men longed for closeness with a partner but were afraid of getting too close. Others distanced themselves from relationships, claiming that they did not need others. These findings may demonstrate the men's self-protective strategies for handling their identification as sexual offenders. These 20 men could also have been struggling with universal questions about closeness and sexuality while bearing other burdens, such as mistrust in others and feelings of shame, that interfered with this struggle.

Keywords: adolescent sexual offending, follow-up study, intimate relationships, interview study, sexuality

Introduction

The progression from adolescence to adulthood is a period during which many individuals struggle with several relational questions. In this study, we examined the experiences of intimacy and sexuality of 20 young men who had sexually offended during adolescence. Our findings will be discussed in the light of attachment theory and from a gender perspective.

There is a growing interest in exploring intimate relationships and sexuality from an attachment theory perspective (Laschinger, Purnell, Schwartz, White, & Wingfield, 2004). Central to attachment theory is how people, from experiences of early relations, develop so-called internal working models of self and of others, as well as of future relations (Bowlby, 1988). Since the participants in the present study were young adults, we used Bartholomew's and Horowitz's (1991) four-category model as a frame of understanding. This model describes attachment styles among young adults and is built on Bowlby's (1988) postulation that experiences of early relations provide the base for the development of internal working models. In this four-category model combinations of an individual's self-image (positive or negative) and an individual's image of others (positive or negative) are described. An adult characterised by a secure attachment style tends to have a positive self-image and a positive image of others and tends to be comfortable with both intimacy and autonomy. An adult characterised by a dismissing attachment style tends to have a positive self-image and a negative image of others and tends to avoid relationships. Furthermore, this individual is commonly perceived as emotionally distant and as having a limited propensity to communicate emotions. An adult characterised by a preoccupied attachment style has a negative self-image and a positive image of others and a low degree of avoidance of relationships. In close relationships, this individual can be demanding, have an excessive fear of separation, and be highly dependent on others to gain a positive self-regard. An adult with a fearful attachment style has a negative self-image, commonly involving feelings of being

unlovable and unworthy of care and support. Moreover, she or he has a negative image of others involving fears of rejection, betrayal, and abandonment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

A child has a capacity to experience non-specific sexual impulses and has the ability to masturbate, at an age as early as two years old (Diamond, Bonner, & Dickenson, 2015; Martinsson, 1991). Also, the foundation for different aspects of sexuality, such as attraction and sexual orientation, is laid early in life (Martinsson, 1991) although attraction, orientation, and sexual identity can be changed over time (Diamond, et al., 2015). However, sexuality is generally associated with the sexual development that takes place during puberty (Helmius, 2010). Through various sources such as peers, parents and school, but more specifically through sexual exploration, the adolescent gains sexual knowledge and experiences (Erikson, 1968). Today, other sources such as the internet and social media also influence these experiences (Jonsson, Bladh, Priebe, & Svedin, 2015). Additionally scripts, consisting of combinations of the individual's own history and the cultural context concerning what it means to be female or male, influence how she or he perceives her- or himself not only as sexual beings, but also as women and men (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Thus, knowledge from different sources such as peers, parents and school as well as earlier experiences provide the basis for the acquisition of skills regarding sexual interaction, which in turn play an important part in guiding the adolescent in future sexual interactions (Cortoni & Marshall, 2001). Moreover, a belief in being sexually capable contributes to overall sexual health in adolescence as well as in young adulthood (Rostosky, Dekhtyar, Cupp, & Anderman, 2008).

It has been suggested that relational dynamics acquired early in life may influence the experience of intimacy and sexuality later on in life. Even though there exist many differences between attachment to caregivers and attachment in an adult intimate relationship, some resemblances have been observed. For example, Hazan and Shaver (1987), and Shaver,

Hazan, and Bradshaw (1988) highlight that an intimate relationship between adults resembles that between a child and its main attachment figure. This resemblance can be seen, for example, in non-verbal interactions, such as extended eye-contact between two adults in love, and between a child and its main attachment figure (Hazan & Diamond, 2000).

In several studies it has been suggested that difficulties related to attachment may be associated with a propensity for violence and sexual offending (e.g. Burk & Burkhart, 2003; 1995; McCormack, Hudson & Ward, 2002; Smallbone & Dadds, 2000) and it has been suggested that “the attachment and the sexual behavioural systems are interrelated” (Smallbone & Dadds, 2000, p.12). One line of reasoning is that the adult unconsciously, by the perpetration, tries to compensate difficulties related to attachment in early childhood and some authors have suggested that attachment patterns can provide a base for the classification of sexually offending behaviours (Ward, Hudson & Marshall, 1996; Ward, Hudson, Marshall & Siegert, 1995).

In the long term, having been sexually abused as a child might cause both physical and mental illness in adults (Nelson, Baldwin, & Taylor, 2012) and there is an association between sexual health problems in adults, such as sexual avoidance and sexual compulsivity, and having been a victim of sexual abuse as a child (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2015). Furthermore, an individual’s own history of childhood sexual abuse correlates with a higher risk for sexually harming others (Jespersen, Lalumière, & Seto, 2009; Seto, & Lalumière, 2010). Maniglio (2009) concludes, in a systematic review of 578 studies, that experiences of sexual abuse in childhood increase the risk of medical, psychological, behavioural, and sexual disorders. Similar results were found in a non-clinical sample that included approximately 6 000 young people (16-23 years) in Sweden, using the Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children. Those who had experienced sexual abuse in childhood, reported more symptoms related to trauma such as anxiety, depression, and sexual concerns compared to

those who had not experienced sexual abuse in childhood (Svedin, Priebe, Wadsby, Jonsson, & Fredlund, 2015). It has been suggested that child sexual abuse should therefore be considered as a general, non-specific risk factor for psychopathology (Maniglio, 2009). A study of imprisoned sexual offenders focused on which consequences a history of being sexually abused as a child might have for non-criminal sexuality. Among sex offenders, those who report experiences of sexual abuse as children reported an earlier onset of puberty, more frequent masturbation, a more frequent use of pornography, and a lower general satisfaction with their sexual lives as adults (Cale, Leclerc, & Smallbone, 2014). However, the men from this study displayed diverse and mainly unproblematic non-criminal sexual lifestyles.

Another risk factor for emotional, physical, and sexual abusive behaviour is adherence to patriarchal models of family and gender. According to Sernhede (2003), the traditional role of masculinity in Western society is under deconstruction, making the identity formation process for young men more complex than ever before. Those who cling to a traditional and compensatory view of masculinity will have an even more difficult task in understanding “how to be a man”. Young men, who are disappointed with themselves and their lives, may attempt to prove their masculinity through sexual control over others (Totten, 2003). Some men might engage in excessive sexual activities or use coercive sexual behaviour in order to gain a feeling of masculinity. It is possible that socially vulnerable men with experiences of early conduct problems and youth criminality, compared to other men, are to a higher degree influenced by stereotypical views about gender (Lindroth, Tikkanen, & Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2013; Totten, 2003).

To summarise, experiences of neglectful parenting and poor attachment, sexual victimisation, and adherence to patriarchal models might play a role in how an individual experiences sexuality and intimate relationships as an adult. Difficulty and dissatisfaction with intimate relationships can increase the propensity to continue with harmful sexual

behaviours in men who have sexually offended (Marshall, 2010; Martin & Tardif, 2013). Therefore, it is important to study intimate relationships and sexuality in men who have sexually offended. In order to understand intimate relationships in this group of men, both coercive and non-coercive sexuality needs to be considered. Research to date seems to have mainly focused on coercive sexuality in men who have sexually offended, while there seems to be little knowledge regarding their non-coercive sexuality. Furthermore, less is known about young adults who sexually offended during adolescence. Therefore, we aimed to explore experiences of intimate relationships and sexuality in young men who had sexually offended in adolescence.

Method

Participants

In 2003–2007 data was gathered for 45 male youths aged 13–22 years who were in treatment for having sexually offended (Tidefors, Goulding, & Arvidsson, 2011). The youths were then asked whether they could be contacted for follow-up studies and all of them had consented. When contacted for the present study, about 10 years later, 20 men agreed to participate, 11 declined, and 14 could not be reached. Nineteen out of the 20 participants in the present study were in inpatient treatment at the time of the first data collection and six of them had lived in foster-homes. The 20 participants were aged 22–31 years ($M = 25.7$, $SD = 2.3$). According to records from the past treatment facilities, all but two of the 20 men in the present study had been exposed to childhood abuse. Ten had been sexually abused as children, 16 had been neglected, and 13 had been physically abused.

Concerning the offences committed by the 20 participants, twelve men had offended against a child, three had offended against peers, two had offended against adults, and three of the men had offended against victims of mixed ages. Regarding the sex of their victims,

nine of the men had female victims, eight had both male and female victims, and three of the men had male victims exclusively (Tidefors et al., 2011).

When being interviewed for the present study, ten of the men were employed, three were studying at grammar school level, and one was unemployed. Three participants were in treatment for drug abuse, two were imprisoned, and one was on conditional release.

Interview Questions

The participants were interviewed about how they perceived their lives today. The interview included questions about sexuality and intimate relationships through questions such as: Can you describe your sexual life? Can you describe your experiences of intimate relationships? How do you feel about sex? Is there anything during your childhood that you think might have influenced your sexuality today? Follow-up questions were used to ensure better comprehension of the participants' experiences.

Procedure

The participants were contacted by phone or mail by the first or third author. They were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw their consent at any time, and that data would be reported in a way that would secure their anonymity. A date and time was then agreed upon for the interview and the first or third author decided upon a meeting place. Since the participants lived in various parts of Sweden, most interviews took place in conference rooms in hotels. Some interviews were conducted at the Department of Psychology at the University of Gothenburg. Upon meeting with the participants, the researchers further explained the aim of the study, both verbally and with written material. The participants then signed an informed consent form. The interviews lasted 45–90 minutes. The study was reviewed by the Regional Ethical Review Board, University of Gothenburg.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using data-driven inductive thematic analysis to identify patterns within the data and report their meanings and the participants' perceived reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcripts were scanned for information about intimate relationships and sexuality. Initially, half of the interviews were read through by the first author. A quarter of the interviews were then read by all three authors individually, and initial shared patterns related to experiences of sexuality and intimate relationships were discussed. We also found a pattern in the participants' presentation of themselves as men and this pattern was also discussed by the three authors. The parts of the interviews that covered these subjects were then further analysed. Extracts from the interviews were organised into two main themes that were believed to capture the narratives of sexuality and intimate relationships and the participants' presentation of themselves as men. Subthemes were created to give structure to the main themes.

Findings

The first main theme consisted of relationally oriented narratives of experiences of intimate relationships and sexuality. These narratives were divided into three subthemes labelled "I need to protect myself", "I am not interested", and "I have resigned". The second main theme described experiences of being a man. This theme consisted of three different ways in which the participants talked about themselves as men "A modern man", "A macho man", and "A destructive man". Main and subthemes are presented in Table 1, and selected quotations in the text illustrate the essence of the subthemes. Each participant was assigned a fictitious name. These names and the age of the respective participants are added after each quote.

Insert table about here

Experiences of Sex and Intimate Relationships

Some narratives expressed the men's characterisation of love and sex as something positive that they had longed and strived for. More noticeable though were the various expressions of

how difficult loving sexual relationships could be. The types of relationship the men chose to involve themselves in sometimes seemed to be influenced by their experiences of having sexually offended. Different strategies were described for how to achieve some, but not too much closeness. Narratives of loneliness and ambivalence were also present, as were descriptions that downplayed the importance of intimate relationships and sexuality.

I Need to Protect Myself

The men described having often been in, or having had recent experiences of, long-term relationships with a partner they cared about. However, almost every positive description also reflected a sense of fear and a wish for self-protection. There were narratives of wanting to have sex exclusively within a committed relationship, and in some descriptions this wish was connected to having sexually offended. Some said that they could talk about everything else with their partner, but not the offence. They expressed a worry that information about the offence might be used against them in a quarrel or break-up. Some also expressed a fear of exposing themselves to new or casual relationships. Chris described how having sexually offended affected his choice of sexual relationships:

I only have sex in a relationship. To meet someone in a bar, that doesn't exist for me. That could be one way the offence has affected me. (Chris, 26 years)

The association between having sexually offended and avoiding casual sexual relations was expressed more implicitly by Gary. He did not make that association himself, but touched upon having something in his history that he was ashamed about:

I was ashamed. Talking, especially to new girls, is fine at first, but when I start to think about sex, it feels weird and I stop talking. I'm not a person who can have sex with people I don't know. I think that's a bit weird. (Gary, 27 years)

There were expressions of ambiguity regarding the intimate relationships the men seemed to long and strive for. Adam's quote shows the difficulties some of these men seemed to have with intimacy. Adam expressed a wish to open up about the difficult experiences he had been through, but he was also anxious about how his girlfriend might react:

Now I have a girlfriend who listens, but you don't want to talk too much either. You never know if it's going to affect your relationship. (Adam, 25 years)

In other narratives, self-protection was related to the consequences of closeness and the avoidance of intimate relationships. For these men intimacy seemed threatening; the men expressed a more global avoidance of intimacy, not specifically related to a fear of being revealed as a sex offender:

It fades away completely for me, you know, getting to know someone. No matter how good it is, I get weary after a while. (Martin, 22 years)

I Am Not Interested

This subtheme consists of descriptions that downplayed the importance of intimate relationships and sexuality. Here, sex was described as unimportant, uninteresting, and something that was not meant for these men. Sex was also described as something the men were uncomfortable engaging in and talking about. Some said that sex could be "too much". Others gave contradictory accounts of their experiences of intimate relationships. Vincent described feeling that sex might be something expected in an intimate relationship, but to him it did not seem that important; he even described it as uncomfortable:

Well I don't see it as negative. It's ok. There are times when it doesn't feel so good. (Vincent, 25 years)

Sometimes the lust of others was described as too strong. Adam had a girlfriend who wanted to have sex more frequently than he did, and his way of dealing with this was to push her

away. Initially, he described sex as good, but later in his story sex was described as something repulsive that he was reluctant to engage in.

It's too much when she's onto me. I reject her then. She's a bit hornier than me. I feel like a pensioner then. When I want to then we do it, but when she wants to, then I don't want to. Because she wants to do it all the time, and I think it's too much. (Adam, 25 years)

Gabriel also expressed a hesitation towards sex and seemed to find it bothersome or even repulsive. He described preferring the company of his friends, but acknowledged that he was willing to engage in sex to have children. He also talked about the wish to have sex as something desperate.

I don't want to think about those things. I'd rather be with my friends. I'm not a desperate person who has to have sex. If she wants to be desperate she can find someone else. As soon as you meet someone they want to have sex. It's no good for me. I'm fine getting children and that, but those who have sex 24/7, they've got to be sick. They need help. They'll die for sex. I don't get it. (Gabriel, 25 years)

I Have Resigned

In this subtheme, the narratives described loneliness and a combination of longing for a relationship and accepting being alone. The longing for relationships and sex was present, but the hope of having someone seemed to have vanished. Ted's hope for a relationship seemed ambiguous. His narrative turned back and forth as he alternately persuaded himself of the positive aspects of being on his own and struggled with feelings of being rejected to incorporate being alone as a part of being him.

Not much sex right now. Actually, I've not had anyone. I've become used to it. Well, that's me. But I would like to have a girlfriend /.../ or, maybe I'm

better off alone. If it's just me, then I don't have to fight with anyone. (Ted, 26 years)

Some described loneliness, but also talked about longing for someone. Others described a more enforced loneliness due to their having been imprisoned for long periods. In some stories, there was a lack of experience of consensual sexual relationships. Jacob expressed this in a dejected way that allowed him to view sex as unimportant.

I didn't answer questions about sex, because I haven't had sex in several years. I don't care anymore. (Jacob, 27 years)

Experiences of Being a Man

This theme consists of interpretations of how the men talked about themselves and their intimate relationships. Some of their ways of talking could be described as indicative of a more modern way of being a man. Here, the men expressed a wish for equality with their partners and indicated that they allowed themselves to show vulnerability. Other types of expression could be described as indicative of a more macho way of being a man. These were characterised by descriptions of needing to be tough, of having frequent casual sex, and of preferring to have several relationships simultaneously. This subtheme also included acceptance of violence and coercion. The third way of talking indicated a self-image as a destructive man. Here, the men sometimes explicitly tried to explain why they had sexually harmed someone.

A Modern Man

This subtheme consists of narratives about intimate relationships that reflect equality and respect. Some men also expressed feelings of vulnerability, and some were able to reflect on their own present and earlier behaviours and thoughts. Some men described an ability to see the needs of their partner. There were also descriptions of an accepting attitude towards same-sex relationships.

One of my childhood friends is gay, and he makes a move at me. I just tell him that I don't do his type. Maybe in my next life. You never know. (Mark, 26 years)

Ralph, who had been imprisoned for a long time, described his relationship during a time when he could not have any physical contact with his girlfriend. Despite the strain this situation put on their relationship, he described the trust and confidence between him and his girlfriend.

I feel quite secure in myself. And I think, if she wanted to be with someone else, she would tell me. She is also secure within herself. Whatever makes her happy, whatever is best for her, I'll accept. As long as she's happy, that's what really means something. (Ralph, 25 years)

In the following quote, Patrick reflected on his change of attitude towards women. He described having made a transition from having a macho view and expressed views that could reflect a more modern way of being a man.

I know now that it's really dysfunctional to treat women like I did before. I used to see women as objects. /.../ The more emotional part, I feel like I'm getting there now. You wouldn't have liked me if you met me a year ago. Well, maybe you don't like me now either, but I had a completely different mentality and attitude then. (Patrick, 24 years)

A Macho Man

This subtheme consists of utterances that could be viewed as reflecting a macho attitude. Here, the men's perspective seemed mainly self-focused. There were also descriptions of what the men included and excluded from their view of coercive sexuality. It appeared customary to some men to be persuasive and to dictate what happens in the sexual sphere. Some contrasted themselves against the stereotypical picture of someone who sexually

offends, and described themselves as popular and attractive, and thus with no need to sexually offend. Martin described having no problems meeting girls and used this to explain why he could not have abused anyone:

I wasn't the nicest guy in the world, but I absolutely didn't rape her. I was hard and manipulative, but I've never violated a girl with force. Considering how many chicks I've had, it just wouldn't occur to me. Not a chance. I had like three to four chicks a day in school. (Martin, 22 years)

Patrick, whose views had shifted from a macho view to a more modern way of being a man, also talked about what he defined as non-coercive sexuality. By making his partners like him, he put himself in a position where he could persuade them into sexual activities that they may not have wanted to participate in.

Not coercion in that way. I nagged the girls into having sex and anal intercourse and that, but absolutely no coercion in any way. I've never had to do that. I'm just really good with girls. I find it easy to make them like me. (Patrick, 24 years)

Gabriel stated that girls should not have had several sexual partners. He needed to know if he had met a "good girl".

I have to hear from her friends what kind of girl she is. If she's a good girl. I have to know the truth. I can't just listen to her and then I hear something else that she's had sex with ten other guys. That's no good. (Gabriel, 25 years)

A Destructive Man

This subtheme consists of descriptions of how the men perceived having sexually abused someone. They described their own understanding about what had happened and how they felt it had affected them. Some men seemed to distance themselves from having sexually offended and some emphasized that they had moved on. Other narratives were about their

fear of disclosure or fear of what they might be capable of. There were also narratives of how shame and disgust affected these men's views of themselves and of relationships. Other narratives described an urge to overcompensate for their sexual offenses by having excessive consensual sex. Fred described his sexual experiences as dirty and he regretted involving himself in what he described as destructive sexual relations.

I've felt like I've had to overcompensate because of what I did. It sounds strange, but I've been like a nymphomaniac. I've had to have sex all the time with different people. Prostitutes. I'm not proud of it. It's a wonder I haven't had sex with men. You make yourself dirty. If I could I'd take it back. Sex becomes nothing, like a handshake. I might be running from my stigma – a rapist. So I've been compensating. (Fred, 27 years)

Others seemed not to view the offence as something harmful for the person who was abused. Gary minimised his effect on his victim, and seemed somewhat frustrated realising that in the eyes of others, he was a perpetrator.

I know other people see it as a big thing, but nobody besides me and the one I supposedly abused really know what happened. I know I've done wrong, but I can't change it. I know I haven't hurt her, forced her, or hit her. I don't know how to explain it to you, but there's nothing I can do about it today. (Gary, 27 years)

Some men described how feelings of shame and disgust had negatively affected their lives. For Tobias, his thoughts about what he had done seemed to be present all the time, influencing him in many ways.

The thought of the sexual offence is with me almost all the time. You can't just forget about it like nothing ever happened. I have to live with it for the rest of my life. In the beginning it affected my sex life. I think I felt shame. A

shame that I don't think I had when I was younger. A shame that I had to carry. So I was sort of disgusted by sex, almost like I despised it. There are feelings of anger and shame still that I have to live with. (Tobias, 22 years)

Vincent believed that he had done among the worst things you can do to another person and he expressed worry about what else he could have done. He still could not understand how and why it happened.

I know I've done among the worst things you can do to another person. Now I've done that, what else can I do? Don't I have any boundaries? It's a scary thought. (Vincent, 25 years)

Some men attempted to give the impression that everything was fine now. They had adopted an explanation for why the sexual offence occurred, although they seemed unable to repress feelings of shame and disgust.

I felt like a failure. I feel happy now, but when it happened, I felt like a failed person. I try not to think about it. But I do think about it once or twice a month. I think, shit, I've been so disgusting. (Adam, 25 years)

Discussion

Studies on sex offenders are often based on adolescent or adult samples. In this study we aimed to examine experiences of sexuality and intimate relationships in 20 young men who had sexually offended during adolescence. We also examined how they presented themselves as men. The interviews revealed a picture mainly of young men with unfulfilled needs and a low capacity to meet those needs. Some longed for love and closeness, but at the same time they were afraid of getting too close. Some talked about relationships in a distancing way and stated that they did not need others.

The men talked about a range of experiences of intimate relationships and sexuality. Their experiences seemed to be greatly affected by their experiences of having sexually

offended in the past. Some of the men related that their identification as a sexual offender affected both how they approached new possible partners and the way they formed these new relationships.

One way of understanding some of these findings could be that the men were using self-protective strategies to handle their identification as sexual offenders. Some described handling their secrets by choosing long-term relationships, which they thought carried a lower risk than casual relationships of their being revealed as a sex offender. These self-protective strategies may also reflect the men's vulnerability and mistrust of others. Even so, they described that their trust in long-term relationships was fragile and to disclose themselves as sex offenders seemed to be beyond the limits of their trust. It has been described that vulnerable individuals might be able to change their lives in more positive directions if they are supported by someone close to them, such as a friend or a partner (Chung, Little & Steinberg, 2005). A trusting intimate relationship might then possibly function as a protective factor. In the narratives in the present study, there were few descriptions of trusting relationships. However, the men in this study seemed to strive for something that they described as "normal", good relationships which might signal their longing for intimate relationships. The relationships they longed for seemed unrealistic though since the men talked about them in terms of what they wanted or needed without considering a potential partner's needs.

In the narratives about the preference for casual sexual relations, there seemed to be an emotional distancing from partners and a focus again on the men's own needs or feelings. For some, possible partners were described in terms of what they could contribute to meeting the men's needs, rather than of being individuals with their own needs. A similar kind of self-focus was described in a review by Christopher and Sprecher (2000), in which sexually coercive men were found to endorse a relational style characterised by a non-committing,

manipulative, and game-playing approach. The relational style was also characterised by a lack of adequate communication skills in relationships, having many sexual partners, and preferring casual sex. Different pictures of sexuality also came through in the narratives here. Some men were dismissive towards sexuality, and said that sex was not important, and some were resigned and had given up on the possibility of having sex with another person.

When reflecting on themselves as men, the men also talked, directly or indirectly, about their offences. Self-protecting strategies also came through in these narratives. Most reasoning about themselves as men seemed self-focused. Some described themselves as macho men: popular with girls, having many sexual partners, and having no need to force anyone into sex. The men who expressed macho attitudes also tended to blame the victim of their abuse. Denying the offence, diminishing their responsibility through blaming others or the circumstances, and minimising the severity of harm to the victim have been viewed in previous studies as coping strategies used by those who sexually offend (Marshall, Marshall, Serran, & O'Brien, 2009; Ward et al., 1995). However, some of the men described an ever-present shame as if they had no self-protective strategies at all. By having sexually offended, these men also damaged their own picture of themselves as "good people". According to Hermstad (2006), for example, social shame is one of several secondary negative consequences of committing sexual abuse, and instead of reconciliation, feelings of self-condemnation and hopelessness often arise. Shame is said to have its roots in a self-focused position, resulting in vulnerability to social threat, competitive behaviours, and a need to prove oneself as acceptable and desirable to others (Gilbert, 2003). As a result, shame is a feeling associated with anger and feelings of inferiority. In addition, shame produces conformity and fundamentalism, and it can lead to feelings of alienation and of being an outsider (Heller, 2003). Consequently, creating a narrative about oneself as someone other

than an offender can, at least momentarily, have a positive and protective function for the offending individual (Blagden, Winder, Gregson, & Thorne, 2014).

The men's need of protective strategies against others and their own views of sexuality can also be understood from an attachment perspective. A secure attachment style characterises individuals who have good relational functioning and are capable of investing themselves in mutual and satisfying relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). However, investment in intimate relationships requires risk-taking and coping with feelings of vulnerability, and thus a certain degree of self-confidence (Cook, 2000). This kind of risk-taking and exposing oneself as vulnerable are difficult for most people, and possibly more so for the men interviewed here. A negative internal working model of the self is common in men who have sexually offended and this inner working model can be linked to problematic relational strategies (Marshall, 2010; Smallbone & Dadds, 2000; Ward et al., 1996). The men's apparent need to protect themselves and dismissal of sexuality as unimportant can be viewed in the light of a dismissing attachment style. A dismissing style is characterised by emotional distance and avoidance of intimacy, which function to avert the pain that can be associated with intimacy. The narratives about having given up hope, choosing to be alone, or not being brave enough to initiate new relationships can be viewed in the light of a fearful attachment style, characterised by a fear of rejection and emotional detachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). In some descriptions of being a macho man, sexual coercion can be understood as a kind of emotional detachment. Other characteristics of a person with a fearful attachment style are impersonal sexual behaviour and preoccupation with the satisfaction of one's own needs (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), which were also seen in the stories of being a macho man.

Young adults with difficult backgrounds, such as those who grow up with parents with for example alcohol- and drug problems, have little chance of escaping their situation when

they are children. Perhaps the first real opportunity of doing so is when they become adults. However, the instability and lack of structure that characterises young adulthood possibly make some young people especially vulnerable, such as those who during adolescence have been placed in youth homes or foster care (Arnett, 2007). All but one of the participants in the present study were in youth homes at the time of the first data collection and six of them had lived in foster-homes. Further, most of the men had been exposed to neglect, sexual, or physical abuse, and all but two had been exposed to more than one type of abuse. However, these men seldom mentioned their own experiences of being sexually abused. One reason could be that this was too painful to talk about. Therefore it was not possible to create a theme capturing these non-present narratives. Dealing with the trauma by not talking about it can be seen as a self-protective or as a coping strategy. Trying to cope with the trauma by avoiding thinking or talking about the abuse was also found when these men were interviewed as adolescents (Tidefors, Goulding, & Arvidsson, 2012). Experiences of trauma and neglect during childhood may lead to later difficulties in symbolisation (Fonagy, 2001; Sharp, Ha, & Fonagy, 2011). An inability to understand ourselves and to relate to others also increases a tendency to externalise inner pain onto other people (Sharp et al., 2011)

Limitations

It is important to note that previous studies have shown that interviewees often tailor their responses to what they think the researcher wants to hear (e.g. Randall, Prior, & Skarborn, 2006). Therefore, it is important to note the possibility that we as interviewers, coming from the psychological field, could have affected the interviews or at least affected our interpretations of what was told. However, Ricoeur (1993) describes narratives interpreted by the researcher as both fiction and as a representation of reality. Consequently, the 20 men's descriptions were not presented as mere reproductions of what had been said, but rather they were structured creatively to enable interpretation. This means that there could be other ways

of understanding the material and that other researchers might have found other meanings in what was told. A possible limitation of this study might be that the young men were interviewed by a relative stranger. It could be argued that the men may have been more open and honest if they had had a previous trusting relationship with the interviewer. However, it is not necessarily the case that the men would have felt reluctant to talk about sensitive issues such as sexuality and experiences of abuse with a relative stranger. On the contrary, it may be easier to talk about difficulties with a stranger (McWilliams, 1999). Furthermore, the themes and subthemes overlap to some degree, which does pose a problem for their internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finding themes that did not overlap turned out to be a challenge, since the men seldom related a coherent storyline or chronology, and several narratives included a high degree of ambivalence. It is also important to note that the majority of these men lived at institutions for several years during adolescence, which might have limited the opportunities of exploring intimate relationships and sexuality. For the two men who had been imprisoned for long periods during the last ten years, there had also been limited opportunities for such exploration. Furthermore, the study sample of participants is small and the present findings must be further studied using other methods. It would also be interesting to know how young men who have not sexually offended in adolescence, would reason about intimate relationships and sexuality.

Conclusion

The experiences narrated by these 20 men can be seen as related both to the fact that they were identified as sex offenders in adolescence and to their experience as human beings. Sexuality and intimate relationships can be ambivalent, with delight, excitement, and satisfaction intermingling with disgust, distress, and uncertainty (Dimen, 2005; McDougall, 1995). Thus, sexuality and intimate relationships can be seen as both a source of pleasure and as a traumatic condition that everyone has to regulate and struggle with in a unique way

(McDougall, 1995). One way of viewing our findings could be that these 20 men struggled with universal questions about intimacy and sexuality, but they had other burdens to bear that interfered significantly with this struggle.

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