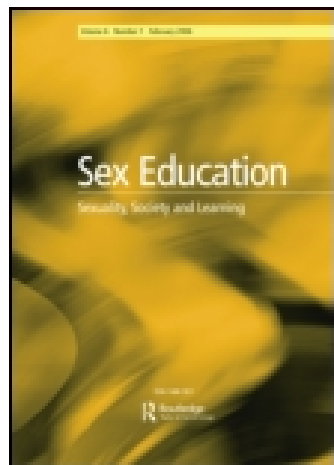


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### Thinking outside specious boxes: constructionist and post-structuralist readings of 'child sexual abuse'

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## Thinking outside specious boxes: constructionist and post-structuralist readings of ‘child sexual abuse’

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Contemporary western understandings of ‘childhood’ reflect (adult) cultural projections of children as (sexually) innocent, vulnerable beings. In this paper, I examine how projections of children and their ‘sexual culture’ are maintained and reproduced through child sexual abuse therapy in North America. I argue that such specious frameworks pose conceptual problems for exploring how children interpret their sexual experiences. Seeing that research involving direct contact with children has been rendered practically impossible, the ability to theoretically ‘step outside’ narrow conceptual frameworks is critical. In providing avenues to denaturalize age categories, social constructionism and post-structuralism have made breakthroughs in this regard; yet both are limited in their ability to offer solutions to the said conceptual impasse. I focus the remainder of my paper on illustrating the merits and shortcomings of constructionism and post-structuralism as analytical tools. I conclude with some conjectures about the uses of each perspective both in research on children and in therapy.

### Introduction

Therapeutic intervention programmes for children (defined in this paper as prepubescent youths<sup>1</sup>) who have experienced sexual abuse encompass overt and covert lessons in sex education. Overt sex education yields lessons, for instance, on body part identification and bodily boundaries (Kenny et al. 2008). Covert sex education, on the other hand, is more inconspicuous, encouraging children to adopt new sexual identities or to redefine their sexual experiences according to predefined standards of health and normalcy. Where sexually abused children are concerned, this most often means adopting the identity of the blameless victim – a specious cultural projection that neither fits the norm nor, I will argue, is necessarily ‘healthy’.

Elizabeth Reis (2001, 2) argues that sexual cultures comprise classifications that guide how we define ourselves and others, and how we behave accordingly. Clinical sex education curricula reflect dominant (adult) cultural (western) frameworks for understanding children and victims, and these ‘lessons’ in classification are transmitted to children in therapy. In informing how children interpret their sexual cultures, they also get in the way of understanding how children process their sexualities outside hegemonic prescriptions. For instance, some children undergoing sexual abuse victimization therapy interpret their experience as neither abusive nor harmful (Angelides 2004, 160). For children declared child sexual abuse (CSA) ‘victims’, however, therapy can be mandatory, even if they deny having been molested (Gallo-Lopez 2000, 273). In these instances,

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the first task for therapists is to lead children to recast their denials of injury as accounts of abuse and of victimization (Davis 2005, 167).

In other words, therapists encourage children to rewrite their experiences to fit the parameters of the dominant CSA framework, wherein victims and offenders are conceptualized in absolutes: against the knowing adult perpetrator, the child victim is cast as innocent and blameless (Kitzinger 2005, 165). Accordingly, children in therapy are automatically ascribed the status of victim, heedless of their accounts of what transpired. Once they acknowledge both abuse and victimhood, children are prompted to recognize their innocence (Celano et al. 2002), as per the now famous dictum 'sexual abuse is never the child's fault'. Children who feel that the dominant framework does not reflect their interpretations are nevertheless expected to adopt it. Indeed, children's espousal of the dominant framework and concomitant denial of alternative narratives are seen as markers of therapeutic success.

Thus, through therapy, children who at first discount having been abused are brought to recognize the abusive (read harmful) nature of their sexual encounter and then to understand that they were not responsible for bringing on the 'bad touch(es)'. When children recognize their experience as abuse *a priori*, it certainly makes sense to lessen feelings of blame or responsibility. In the absence of these feelings, however, this strategy's usefulness becomes paradoxical. More precisely, it aims to produce in children a sense of having been harmed in order to mitigate this same sense of harm. Moreover, 'impos[ing] a meaning that [...] directly contradicts the child's own perception [...] reinforces the idea that they lack power and control' (Angelides 2004, 159), thus reproducing the discursive and material conditions that can render children more, not less vulnerable.

In this paper, I argue that western understandings of children as innocent and vulnerable lie at the heart of the above-mentioned paradox and that these specious configurations pose conceptual problems for research exploring children's sexual identities. I do so by exploring how, in North America, the singular label of sexual abuse 'victim' is imposed on children through therapeutic intervention. Hegemonic CSA frameworks, I suggest, have created a conceptual impasse that, along with the practical impossibility of research involving direct contact with child 'victims', has made the ability to theoretically 'step outside' narrow frameworks critical.

In the next section I review how CSA emerged as a category of trauma. I show that, through this category, all acts defined in Canadian legal standards as sexually abusive are equated with serious harm, and all children are understood as victims who have been grievously injured. Following this, I explain the emergence of this category as made possible in part through the pre-existence of a western paradigm according to which children are understood as innocent and vulnerable. Next, I dispute the idea that these conceptualizations, upheld in therapy, render children less vulnerable to harm. I focus the remainder of the paper on demonstrating how two theoretical approaches, social constructionism and post-structuralism, may provide starting points for transcending conceptual impasses. I conclude with some reflections on future directions for research on children's sexual experiences and cultures and for sex education curricula in the context of therapy.

### Configurations of the child sexual abuse victim

Several authors have noted how, prior to the 1970s, CSA was believed to be an uncommon and minor offense. Abuse victims' prognoses were seldom highlighted as a matter for concern. In certain cases, victims were blamed for its occurrence, while perpetrators' fates elicited sympathy (Jenkins 1998; Pratt 2005). 'Discovered' by medical experts who sought

to expose the problem of child battery (Pfohl 1977), the phrase ‘child abuse’ came to be more broadly defined to include sexual violence, which became the focal point of social concerns by the mid-1970s (Best 1990, 7).

Following from its discovery, CSA remains by and large a ‘medical’ problem (Pratt 2009). According to Best (2008, 100), ‘medical problems are described as diseases, disorders, syndromes, or disabilities. The people with these problems are ill; they display symptoms. They need to become patients, who can receive treatment from medical personnel.’ In accordance with this medical framework, child victims are considered ‘ill’ and deemed to need treatment; being abused is equated with being sexually polluted, and the genesis for apparent or latent trauma (Davis 2005, 249).

We owe the assemblage of these medicalized configurations to the advocacy of several medical ‘experts’ who promoted the recognition of CSA as a socially distressing problem in the early 1970s. For instance, psychologists of the family systems approach argued that: ‘without therapeutic intervention for the child [ . . . ] victim feelings of guilt and self-blame and self-punishing behaviors would continue into adulthood, contributing to new dysfunctional families and perhaps sexual abuse of the next generation’ (Davis 2005, 63). Driven by such expert opinions, CSA came to be seen, both within and outside the medical domain, as the unquestionable source of personal, familial, and social damages if left untreated.

Around the same time, feminists joined forces with medical experts to advocate for victims’ rights within the anti-rape movement (Angelides 2004, 147). Advocating against child exploitation of all kinds, these feminists recast the experiences of all CSA victims as analogous to those of adult female rape victims. Against the idea that children could actively participate in, respond to, or enjoy the sexual advances of adults, they asserted that children could never be at fault nor implicated in these acts – *ipso facto* recast as incidents of victimization. Furthermore, as with rape, all sexual victimization was said to result in profound and long-lasting trauma (Davis 2005).

Medical experts and feminist activists played two key roles in influencing CSA debates. First, they contested the widespread belief that CSA was a figment of children’s imaginations. However, this ideological shift took years to become incorporated into Canadian legal standards (Sas, Wolfe, and Gowdey 1996; Backhouse 2008). Still, the eventual importation of medical and feminist insights on CSA into the legal realm speaks to the success of both these groups in establishing their ‘expertise’.<sup>2</sup>

Medical and feminist ‘experts’ were also influential in expanding how CSA is defined to include a wide range of behaviours. Believing any of these to be potentially traumatic (Jenkins 1998, 130), ‘experts’ have stressed the need to disclose CSA in order to detect and curtail trauma. Read alongside a medical model, any attempt to resist the label of victim is (re)presented as a confirmation of victimization and of profound psychological scarring, rather than an account that is valid in its own right. Indeed, for clinicians, ‘the phenomenon of not remembering should neither disqualify the patient from being believed nor serve to discourage the therapist, but in itself is a symptom indicative of severe traumatic experience’ (Prozan cited in Pratt 2009, 80). As the following section will attest, the practice of disqualifying children’s standpoint is intimately tied to western, adult projections of childhood.

### Childhood innocence, vulnerability and victimization

As suggested, the recognition of CSA victims was born of a struggle in the 1970s to contest prevailing ideas about their willingness to participate in exploitive sexual acts.

Although we can trace the (re)discovery of these victims to the actions of feminist and medical ‘experts’, it is unlikely that the changes proposed by these experts would have transpired in the absence of a frame of reference encouraging public reception of their ideas. Indeed, for target audiences to adopt new practices requires ‘cultures and social structures that allow them to recognize’ and accept the validity of these practices (Best 2008, 301). The successful recognition and acceptance of CSA victimization as a *problem* in North America stem in part from existing cultural frameworks of childhood innocence and vulnerability.

Far from being ‘new’, the notion that children are innocent can be traced back in western philosophy to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/1993). The idea that they are incomplete beings ‘in training’ as future citizens – thus apt to learn, or conversely, vulnerable to corruption – is rooted in the work of John Locke (1693, 1697). Both theorists understood childhood as a fixed biological period separating childhood and adulthood. Both also stressed the necessity for adults to heed to children’s needs and vulnerabilities. Thus, we can understand growing concerns over children’s sexual exploitation against a backdrop of western conceptualizations of children as innocent and vulnerable – traits understood as ‘inherent’ to individuals traversing a biological bracket of life that itself renders them susceptible to abuse (Kitzinger 2005).

Rooted in modern developmental psychological approaches,<sup>3</sup> North American therapeutic programmes for CSA ‘victims’ are premised on these conceptualizations, particularly the idea that children are invariably corrupted and harmed by CSA. Understood as being (sexually) innocent and vulnerable beings in training, children exposed to the carnal knowledge of adults are perceived as having been damaged (Kitzinger 2005, 169). Their victimization is seen to pose a threat to their development as healthy future citizens, especially if it goes undetected. Successful completion of therapy (which relies on children’s recognition of their victim position) is presumed to constitute the only recourse.

Evidently, the clinical framework for CSA both begins from and buttresses cultural projections of children as innately more vulnerable to harm, a vulnerability that is seen to reflect their position as incomplete beings ‘in training’. From this perspective, CSA is corruptive ‘training’ that produces damaged beings. Working from the same perspective, therapists are inclined to adopt the mutually constitutive notions that CSA is always harmful and that children are naturally weak, and to read abused children’s experiences as necessarily harmful and traumatic.

Furthermore, in reading children as biologically less mature, clinicians may repudiate children’s denial of their victimization as an undeveloped grasp of a problem too advanced for them to comprehend. Their task then becomes one of translating a complex problem in a child-accessible manner. This is again in light of the perceived incontestable ‘need’ for children to recognize their experience as exploitative. In overriding children’s interpretations, however, therapists further bolster naturalized child/adult as well as victim/offender dichotomies.

### Voicing abuse, stifling voices

Beginning in the early 1960s, Philippe Ariès (1960/1962) challenged the biological ‘fact’ of childhood by positing that childhood is instead an *idea* born out of the seventeenth century. Ariès’ work launched an undercurrent of sociological research focused on construct(s) of childhood(s). Scholars within this emergent tradition examine how naturalized characteristics of childhood vary across cultures and over time. Correspondingly, many challenge the notion that children are necessarily innocent and vulnerable,

and argue instead that such attributes are made of adult 'readings' of children, rather than innate traits or essences (Cook 2002; Gittins 1998; James and Prout 2005).

To date, the field of developmental psychology has remained largely impervious to the contributions of this 'new wave' of research (Woodhead 2005, 79). This is not to say that children's voices have been completely ignored. As Kitlinger (2005, 177–9) documents, there exist at present several therapeutic programmes that aim to empower children to assert themselves, express their feelings and trust their instincts. Such programmes are geared towards recognizing children's agency to feel and to act by and for themselves, thereby challenging constructs of passivity and dependency as inherent traits. Yet the practice of dismissing children's resistance to the label of victim as nothing more than a measure of psychic concealment countermands potential advances towards child-voice sensitivity.

Negating children's rejection of the victim label runs counter to the empowerment rhetoric cited above and denies children agency. While children are, in one instance, encouraged to express and to heed to their intuitive feelings, these are, in another, altogether denied. Children's feelings are seemingly only recognized when they follow a particular script, one that aligns with the dominant CSA framework. When children manifest differential accounts, their voices are muted anew.

Ironically, some children, deemed to have been sexually *coerced*, are brought before therapists *against their will*. During therapy, a new narrative is *imposed* on them for the purpose of underscoring that they have been sexually *oppressed*. The premise for understanding adult–child sex acts as coercive lies in the assumption that adults possess more knowledge, including sexual knowledge, than children, which translates into an uneven distribution of power (Angelides 2004, 148). Yet it is precisely the idea that clinicians possess (more/better) adult and expert knowledge that is believed to justify imposing alternate narratives on child-clients. Such therapeutic interventions would also be considered coercive if the knowledge-as-power argument was consistently applied. What is more, the above stated logic is problematically founded on the assumption that all children lack knowledge and power. This premise reinforces the assumptions that are at the root of structural power imbalances between children and adults and that deny children access to power. Arguably, to disregard children's reflections on their sexual experiences – to *infantilize* their interpretations – renders child-clients more, not less, vulnerable, and is tantamount to (re)victimization.

In addition, clinicians' substitution of their clients' narratives clouds the multifaceted and convoluted experiences of children and victims (both heterogeneous groups) by merging together their individual understandings as those of the standardized 'child' and sexual abuse 'victim'. Having said this, further research on children's interpretations of their sexual experiences, especially those labelled (by adults) as abusive, is decidedly warranted. However, securing ethical consent for research involving direct contact with children, and particularly child abuse 'victims', is difficult at best (Allen 2009).

Therefore, the ability to theoretically 'step outside' specious frameworks is critical to gaining a more holistic understanding of children's sexual knowledges. In the remainder of my paper, I examine two theoretical frameworks – social constructionism and post-structuralism – and assess the extent to which these can help us transcend the stalemate of dominant frameworks and the cultural projections upon which these are based.

### Social constructionism

Social constructionist research touches on a wide variety of topics, extends to numerous disciplines, and is motivated by diverse and sometimes contradictory goals (Holstein and



Gubrium 2008). Notwithstanding their differences, these projects share a common principle: phenomena taken-for-granted as objective facts are neither objectively knowable nor inevitable (Hacking 1999, 12–16). For instance, constructionists of social problems (Best 2008; Spector and Kitsuse 1977) focus not on the causes of objective ‘problems’ *sui generis*, but on the processes through which we come to subjectively define conditions as such. In doing so, they challenge the taken-for-granted ‘reality’ of conditions considered worrisome. They argue instead that these conditions exist *as we know them* only in so far as they have been brought to our attention and packaged in particular ways (Spector and Kitsuse 1977, 75; Loseke 2005, 16).

Simply put, constructionists study meaning-making, or knowledge production. Meaning, or ‘knowledge’, is understood to emerge out of particular contexts, symbols and institutions (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Whether or not conditions are, in actuality, troublesome is secondary to asking why and how we have come to ‘know’ that they are. If the latter set of questions is prioritized, it is because ‘what we see as our most urgent problems at any point in time are not necessarily those that produce the most harm’ (Sacco 2005, 8), while many harmful conditions go virtually unnoticed (Loseke 2005, 10). Commanding a new caste of interrogations, social constructionism deflects attention away from familiar understandings and suggests the possibility of constructing alternative frameworks. Hence, social constructionist theory is an analytical tool serving the dual purpose of raising awareness and subverting that which is accepted as ‘fact’.

Quite a few social-problems scholars have used constructionism to document how CSA emerged as a social ‘problem’. As earlier indicated, the meaning bestowed upon the contemporary construct of CSA is a relatively recent creation. Constructionists have drawn attention to the subjective process through which we have come to ‘know’ CSA via two primary strategies: by describing rhetorical tactics used to identify CSA as a ‘problem’ deserving of our attention (Davis 2005; Kitzinger 2004); and by comparing understandings of adult–child sex acts historically and across cultures (Jenkins 1998; Pratt 2005, 2009).

On account of this scholarship, we can begin contesting several commonly held beliefs: that CSA is an objective category; that it has always existed as we know it; that its present (western) configuration is universal; and that its recent detection is the product of a rise in incidence, rather than the outcome of claims-making activities. Indeed, social constructionism allows us to confront these deeply sedimented notions. In contrast to ‘objectivist’ theories of social problems, constructionism problematizes the framework, or conceptual lens, through which we understand CSA, rather than the condition itself.

Loseke (2003, 80–6) highlights how social problems frameworks configure social concerns through the assemblage of various claims and constructs. Specifically, she notes that successful claims – those which persuade us that certain conditions are harmful or otherwise noteworthy – are reliant on configurations of ‘pure’ victims who are cast as suffering indiscriminately as a result of these conditions. Proposed solutions to social problems are based on the construed nature of these victims and of their suffering.

For instance, CSA rhetoric is particularly persuasive because it draws on cultural projections of children as pure, innocent and vulnerable beings who cannot be but critically and permanently scarred by sexual encounters with adults (Kitzinger 2005, 165). The insight that CSA claims have been packaged in an instrumental and calculated manner allows us to recognize that the dominant CSA framework constitutes but one chapter of an infinitely more nuanced story. More specifically, the idea that all children are deeply psychologically scarred by acts considered sexually abusive can be understood as one (as opposed to the only) framework for understanding children’s experiences.

The social constructionist perspective offers a method through which we can begin chipping away at taken-for-granted understandings of CSA: first, by tracing the history of its sedimented meanings; and second, by stressing that the framework through which we understand child sexual victimization is neither inevitable nor absolute. That said, social constructionism falls short of theorizing an alternative. Although we can use it to understand how a particular framework has evolved, the constructionist perspective does not enable us to chart what has yet to be constructed. In other words, constructionists may offer an explanation as to why children's voices are sometimes dismissed, but they do not propose a remedy.

Best (2003b, 147) would disagree with this contention, for, he would argue, historical and cross-cultural comparisons provide us with ample examples of alternative understandings. However, he argues elsewhere (Best 1990, 9) that the belief in the 'truth' of western 'knowledge' about threats to children is sustained through the temporocentric and colonialist conviction that historical and cultural 'others' were/are less sophisticated in their understandings than we. This conviction works to write off alternative understandings as primordial or uncivilized. Comparisons over both time and space will continue to be held against recent, 'enlightened' western configurations of CSA, so long as our current frameworks remain intact. While constructionists call attention to the possibility of understanding CSA differently, they cannot offer viable substitutes to dislodge current frameworks. Indeed, 'constructionists can never step completely outside the social worlds they describe' (Holstein and Gubrium 2003, 190). Rather, they encourage us to see that it is possible to 'think outside the box' but remain within it.

### Post-structuralism

Given the limitations outlined above, I turn now to an examination of the insights that post-structuralists have to offer. Like social constructionism, post-structuralism is multifaceted: queer, postcolonial, pragmatist, and neopsychoanalytic approaches all share in the anti-foundational stance emblematic of post-structuralist theory. In a manner akin to constructionists', post-structuralists focus heavily on language. Following deSaussure (1916/1974), post-structuralists stress that meaning is produced through language, in contrast to objectivists, who tend to assume that language is reflective of meaning or reality. Post-structuralists favour the term 'discourse' rather than 'language' as a way of drawing out this distinction (Mills 2004, 55).

If meaning/knowledge is produced through discourse, structuring what we see as our sedimented 'reality' in the process, post-structuralists argue that discourse is intimately tied to power in two main ways. On the one hand, dominant discourses are circulated by people who have access to social and material capital that work to exclude competing discourses (Foucault 1981). On the other hand, discourses generate concrete, material repercussions or 'power effects', 'fram[ing] how we think, feel, understand and practise in specific areas of our lives' (MacNaughton 2005, 20).

Discourses, in other words, are both constructed/constituted and constructive/constitutive. For instance, discourses of victimhood:

have brought into existence new ways of conceiving of personal troubles and troubled selves, and new norms and techniques for acting on that self. These forms of subjectivity (and their integrated norms and techniques) have significant consequences for the way that other people think about and act toward victims and for the way that victims understand, experience, and evaluate themselves and their lives. (Davis 2005, 11)

For CSA, this translates into the equation of abuse with trauma, the conceptualization of this trauma as necessarily harmful, and the promise of resolution through therapy.



'Victims', in turn, are thought of as psychologically damaged and are encouraged to think of themselves in this way, regardless of their initial perceptions. This is especially true for children, who are taught to comply with and learn from adult 'experts' who possess 'knowledge' of what is in their best interest.

Indeed, post-structuralists argue that forms of knowledge produced by experts are perceived as authoritative truths or facts, which naturalize and reinforce relations of power (Gore 1993). Sexual abuse clinicians, for instance, draw from discourses of childhood and of victimhood to produce and reproduce the 'truth' about sexual victimization, which itself buttresses entrenched configurations of children and sexual abuse victims. Eclipsed through this process are the meanings that children produce about experiences read by others as sexually abusive. Children's discourses are excluded because they are understood as childish (inexperienced) rather than adult-like (worldly). For children in therapy, children's discourses are met with the added dualism of (ignorant) client/(educated) expert. From this, children learn that their purported inexperience justifies the rejection of their perceptions. The perpetuation of this ethos reproduces first the linguistic and then the material structures that make childhood, rather than children, vulnerable.

Seeking to denaturalize expert 'truths' and their power effects, post-structuralists offer two strategies of 'deconstruction'. The first consists of inverting linguistic dualisms (Derrida 1967/1978) such as child/adult, victim/offender, or client/expert. Through this strategy, post-structuralists aim to bridge the gulf that opposes both sides of the binary and ranks one more favourably in comparison with the other. For example, 'adult heterosexuality frequently remains the idealized and fixed referent', while childhood sexuality is underplayed as 'mere "experimentation", as "sex play", and as an immature precursor to "real" adult sexuality' (Angelides 2004, 163). By deconstructing dualisms, post-structuralists render visible the contingency of these categories and the normative assumptions which belie them.

The second strategy, genealogy (Foucault 1971/1977), can be compared with the social constructionist project of tracing the history of current discourses and practices to uproot taken-for-granted categories of knowledge. To be sure, constructionists and post-structuralists share similar goals and methods of attaining these, although their terminology tends to differ. Still, certain fundamental incongruities divide the two approaches ontologically and epistemologically.

Chiefly, constructionist research tends to align itself with the goals of modernist science, which is to say many constructionists retain the desire to replace faulty knowledge and frameworks with more legitimate truths (for example, Best 2003a); for instance, by replacing specious projections of childhood with sounder frameworks. Although this leads them to challenge biological frameworks of childhood, they hold on to the idea that children possess a subject position, of a different 'nature' perhaps, but which can be uncovered and reclaimed as 'true'.

Conversely, post-structuralists contend that subjectivities do not exist independently of discourses that constitute them, thus challenging the supposition that individuals possess natural attributes (Beste 2006, 6). Rather than attempting to replace one framework with another, post-structuralists focus on individual, 'local' narratives to highlight difference, nuance and complexity. This allows for the recognition of alternative claims as truths in their own right, whether they stem from above or below. In this sense, the emphasis placed on local truths provides a line of flight from dominant discourses. For CSA 'victims', this translates into recognizing the denial of injury as a truth in itself; for children more broadly, it means the authentication of child narratives as valid interpretations and of children as legitimate "knowers" of their experience' (Egan and Hawkes 2008, 318), be it sexual or other.

A second incongruity relates to methods employed within both approaches to analyse power. As I have already discussed, social constructionists attempt to subvert dominant frameworks by calling attention to the subjective processes through which meaning is created. Problematically, constructionists can only draw from successful claims as their empirical object of study, since unsuccessful claims often leave little to no trace. Accordingly, constructionist research has predominantly focused on claims made by the powerful (as in Loseke and Best 2003), and on power as possessed by those whose voices are heard.

In contrast, post-structuralists read all claims, including those that are marginalized, as political, and power as residing ‘in a host of microsites all across the social landscape’ (Miller 2003, 96). The post-structuralist lens works to ‘reinstate ... inaudible speakers as claimants’ (Miller 2003, 95) by disassembling hierarchical binary oppositions and by recognizing alternative forms of knowledge as legitimate. Queer theorists, for instance, invite us to “‘stop reading straight” so that we may cease reproducing a set of heteronormative identifications that depend on the erasure or exclusion of those who are ... at odds with its normalizing agenda’ (Cavanagh 2007, 13). This project calls on therapists, amongst others, to stop ‘reading’ children’s interpretations of their sexual experiences through the hegemonic lens of adult, western ‘normalcy’. Kitzinger describes what this could look like:

A radical, deconstructionist approach ... would focus *not* on ‘giving’ children a ‘sense’ of power and telling them their ‘rights’ but, instead, on supporting them to recognize and name their own oppression. Rather than encouraging adults to be nicer to children by simply negotiating with them or ‘involving’ them in decision making, a radical approach would explore ways of openly discussing power with children and would encourage us to consider how we, as adults, manipulate children in order to obfuscate our own power. (2005, 183)

Egan and Hawkes (2008, 318–9) make a similar argument in favour of adopting: ‘A reflexive understanding of how ... children understand and can make meaning of their social location, *as children*, within the social world, displaying a level of reflexivity that is often accorded only to adults’.

Overall, post-structuralism offers three main avenues for exploring children’s sexual experiences. First, in recognizing that children possess power, even in the context of abuse, denials of victimhood can be reinterpreted not as a sign of pathology, but as a sign of resistance. Second, through this same recognition, post-structuralism disrupts the structural oppressions of childhood as a category. Recognition of power and agency allows for children’s experiences to be validated as reliable testimonials. Finally, post-structuralists propose a practical approach to interacting with children, be it in the context of therapy or elsewhere. Indeed, they encourage us to exit the ‘box’ entirely by engaging in reflexive praxis; that is to say, by rethinking and transforming our assumptions on a daily basis.

At the same time, post-structuralism can only go so far in mapping the terrain of CSA victimization. As Prout and James (2005, 25) rightly point out, we must question ‘the extent to which childhood as a text can be understood independently of childhood as a stage of biological growth and maturity’. Indeed, it cannot be denied that there exist physical, cognitive and emotional disparities between adults and children that render the latter more susceptible to victimization. For instance, children of only a few months of age are *essentially* unable to escape abusive acts physically. Furthermore, they lack the capacity to voice their interpretations of abusive situations. Indeed, they may be unable to even make sense of such situations. Not recognizing their victimization makes the situation between them and adult aggressors no less exploitive.

Surely, as the above example demonstrates, biological disparities are not exclusively discursive. Arguably, however, what is problematic about the above-mentioned hypothetical

is neither that infants lack adults' capacities to process information, nor that unequal aptitudes amount to powerlessness. As Angelides (2004, 150–3) remarks, and as I have argued above, children and adults engage in many interactions deemed 'ethical' and 'non-coercive' despite the differences in their makeup. These same differences are routinely used unapologetically, moreover, to justify adult exercises of power over children, as we have seen is often the case in therapy. Furthermore, as post-structuralists have strived to recognize, children do not exist 'outside' of power. Extending Angelides' critique of the powerful/powerless divide, perhaps the problem of adult–infant sex is not one of power but of sexuality. Indeed, while we cannot claim that infants lack power entirely, we can question the extent to which infants can wilfully explore their sexualities with adults.

### Future directions

Far from offering an all-encompassing exploratory framework for investigating children's sexual cultures, my paper consists above all else of a cautionary tale. As I have argued, specious understandings of 'childhood' and of 'victimization' are mutually constitutive. Furthermore, adult cultural projections of children and victims reproduce and reinforce age-related power imbalances in language as well as in practice, rendering children, even in the context of sexual abuse therapy, more, not less vulnerable. Social constructionism and post-structuralism hold promise for future research on children's diverse experiences of sexual abuse. Both encourage cautious scepticism of cultural projections of children and victims, and of their repercussions.

If we are serious about transforming the categories that render children vulnerable and providing spaces for children's voices in our investigations of their sexual experiences, however, post-structuralism seems to offer more promise in this regard. At the same time, we cannot ignore linguistic and material structures that constrain children's voices. Thus, caution should also be exercised not to reverse the polarity to treat children's voices as better, more authentic 'truths'.

Finally, while both social constructionism and post-structuralism help to dismantle authoritative discourses, it is important to remember that, on their own, they cannot liberate. Practically speaking, covert sex education through therapeutic intervention programmes might be revised to encourage children to recognize and to name power rather than attempting to 'empower' children by redefining their experiences according to preordained scripts. By recognizing children's accounts as valid knowledge, we can begin to map how they process their sexual worlds outside the dominant 'sexual culture' to which they are taught to ascribe. Rather than attempting to discern the particularities of children's 'sexual culture', which would only reify naturalized divides between children and adults, the present discussion suggests the importance of recognizing sexual multiplicities that transcend age (and other) categories.

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### Notes

1. There exists no universal standard to define 'children'. In this paper, I focus on prepubescent children, as CSA experiences are often read in conjunction with cultural projections of children's

purported 'asexuality' – or 'presexuality' – and the corruption of their sexual 'innocence' via sexual knowledge (Angelides 2004, 148–149).

2. While a comprehensive discussion of the implications this shift has had for non-clinical professionals extends beyond the scope of this paper, it is nonetheless important to note that, in North America, both culpable and victimized parties must be identified for legal cases to move forward. As such, social, criminal justice, and legal workers also have a vested interest as well as a statutory obligation to obtain children's admission that they were, indeed, sexually victimized. They, too, must adopt a singular framework for understanding what transpired and consequently dismiss alternative interpretations. As such, dominant understandings of CSA are further buttressed at every step of the criminal justice process.
3. As Angelides (2004, 143) notes, Freudian psychiatrists, leaders in child sexuality for most of the twentieth century, celebrated child sexual agency. However, as of the mid-1970s, feminists reinterpreted 'child sexuality' as a problem of power, arguing that adult–child sex is necessarily coercive (Angelides 2004, 148). This severance of child and adult sexualities relies on the idea that children are biologically 'less than' adults, an idea much better matched to more modern developmental psychologies, which inform much of the clinical CSA literatures today.

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