Introduction

Poststructuralism provides a critical lens through which to understand and explore subjectivity and knowledge. Central to its ontology is that knowledge is a social product and that language and discourse are key to this production. Poststructuralist conceptualisations of the subject seek to demonstrate the limits of available and circulated discursive categories (Miller, 1998) and to depict how deeply engrained constructions or discourses are produced, reified and thereafter often accepted as ‘truth’. In turn, this renders particular objects of knowledge both ‘real’ and thinkable, whilst invisibilising others. Conventionally, poststructuralist research uses discourse analysis to deconstruct language in order to demonstrate how knowledge is produced and what the implications are for subjects and their subjectivities (Gavey, 1989). This analytic technique is useful to investigate how the subjection of the individual to various cultural, material and historical discourses and conditions produces and/or limits particular possibilities for subject positions and in turn for identities.

Critical approaches to discourse analysis address social concerns by recognising how discourse, as a historical, social and cultural constituent, is used as a means to construct and conceal power relations (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). This analytic approach is ‘critical’ in that it reveals the role of discourse in the production and maintenance of the social structure, and the unequal relations of power that exist within this structure (Phillips & Jørgenson, 2002). The key objective is to distinguish ‘the links between discursive practices and broader social and cultural developments and structures’ by analysing how discourse at the micro level of language in interpersonal conversation connects to macro-level institutions such as religion, politics, science, economy and the law (Phillips & Jørgenson, 2002, p. 78).

Discourse, as a historicised and institutionalised set of constructed ideas, norms, rules and practices, locates subject positions for individuals by providing categories (such as male or female) which we take for granted as self-knowledge (Wilbraham, 2004). Foucault’s (1972, 1981) philosophy of history and power demonstrates that discourse is both an effect and an instrument of power that operates through selection, exclusion and inclusion. Parker’s (1992) epistemological
framework for discourse analysis aims to identify ‘contradictions, construction
and functions of language’ as a means to critically interrogate the constitution
of the modern subject and its location in regimes of power and knowledge by
deconstructing the emergent discourses in a given data set (Parker, 2004, p. 310).
Parker's (1992, 2004) epistemological framework thus allows for a methodology
of discourse deconstruction which aligns with Foucault's (1980, 1981) epistemo-
logical approach to language and power/knowledge. This critical Foucauldian
approach suggested by Parker (1992, 2004) thus aims to demonstrate the way dis-
courses construct objects of knowledge and subjects within frameworks of power.

Parker (1992) offers seven criteria (in italics below) for distinguishing dis-
courses. Firstly, discourse is always realised in texts. Texts refer to ‘tissues of
meaning’ (Parker, 1992, p. 6), or a web of related referents, which are able to
evoke connotations, interpretations and allusions beyond the individual that
‘authored’ them. Discourses are also arrangements of meanings that make up
or constitute objects and thus analysis requires some degree of objectification.
Furthermore, discourses contain subjects because they make available positions
for particular types of selfhoods and, in turn, identities. Discourses are com-
prised of metaphors, statements and allusions that can be pulled together into
a coherent and regulatory system of meanings. However, discursive systems are not
isolated but rather ‘embed, entail and presuppose other discourses’ (Parker, 1992,
p. 13) and thus discourses are always in articulation with other competing and col-
laborating discourses. Additionally, because there are contradictions in discourses
and discourses implicitly contain their own negations, ‘a discourse reflects on its
own way of speaking’ (Parker, 1992, p. 14). Finally, discourse is located in time
and history; it is contingent on context and thus always in flux. To these seven
criteria, Parker (1992) provides three auxiliary criteria proposing that discourses
are implicated in the structure of institutions such as religion, law, politics and
science; discourse reproduces power relations; and discourse has political effects
through its capacity to sustain these power relations.

Following these criteria, Parker (1992) outlines 20 steps that frame his dis-
course analysis process. These 20 steps involve the researcher

- turning the text into the written form (transcription);
- free-associating to different meanings;
- systematically itemising the objects of knowledge within the text;
- treating the text itself as an object of study, rather than what it appears to
  refer to;
- systematically itemising the subjects and subject positions in the text;
- reconstructing presupposed roles and rights of subjects specified in the data;
- mapping the networks of relationships into discourses to then be located in
  relations of knowledge and power;
- bringing knowledge of discourses from outside of the text to amplify the
  system of discursive relationships inside of the text;
- contrasting discourses against one another in order to identify the different
  objects that they constitute;
- identifying overlapping discourses that constitute the same objects in dif-
  ferent ways;
• drawing on other texts to elaborate on the discursive networks within the text of analysis;
• reflecting on words used to describe particular discourses, especially those that are morally and/or politically loaded;
• identifying how and where the discourses emerged;
• describing how the discourses are dynamic and changing;
• identifying those institutions reinforced by particular discourses;
• identifying those institutions subverted by the emergence and circulation of particular discourses;
• indicating those subjects that are advantaged and/or disadvantaged by the circulation of a discourse;
• ascertaining which subjects and institutions would want to promote and/or dissolve a given discourse;
• demonstrating the ways that a discourse connects with other discourses that sanction oppression; and
• demonstrating how discourses endorse the dominant narrative and subjugate the marginalised narrative.

A critical approach to discourse analysis is a politically fuelled process (Phillips & Jørgenson, 2002). It aims to expose, interpret and override current prevailing and oppressive discursive practices (Van Dijk, 2001). While language conventionally transmits culturally normative productions of the self, the ‘critical’ imperative of this type of discourse analysis attempts to understand the mechanisms underlying this transmission. It is in this way that the analysis operates as the means through which resistance narratives and discourses can be produced and reproduced and, in doing so, challenge dominant narratives and give voice to excluded discursive frameworks most often belonging to marginalised groups.

Victims of female-perpetrated sex abuse: An apt object of analysis

Female-perpetrated sex abuse (FSA) has recently become the object of increased interest in the international academic literature (see Gannon & Rose, 2008; Kramer, 2010; Kramer & Bowman, 2011; Sandler & Freeman, 2007; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). The recent acknowledgement of female crime over the course of the last three decades coincides with broader gender-specific changes, such as the entry of women into the economic workforce, media representations of and emphasis on female sexuality, and the promotion of female empowerment and gender equity (see Gavey, 2012; Gill, 2012; Lamb & Peterson, 2012). This discursive explosion concerning female sexual, political and economic empowerment is the very technology through which the female body becomes the site of deepening surveillance. Over the course of history, the accent on the ‘natural’ association of femininity to nurturing, caregiving, attachment and passivity resulted in limited reporting and incarceration of female offenders (Denov,
2003). Yet, as discursive frameworks for female subjection begin to include the ‘thinkability’ of female sexual prowess, desire and liberation, so the numbers of female sex offenders begin to ‘rise’ and thus the academic turn to it as an investigative object. However, given the recency and thus the exploratory nature of this interest, very little work has been directed to understanding FSA victims. While some global work has provided broad overviews of general female sex abuser characteristics, occurrences and circumstances and, to a lesser extent, specific case studies, to date there is very limited academic information about FSA victims (McMahon, 2011). Likewise, the media is currently peppered with images and stories of women who have committed a variety of sex crimes; however, the victims of these women remain invisible (Kramer, 2015).

The question therefore arises as to what accounts for the continued academic and public invisibility of FSA victims and, in turn, how and in what ways self-identified victims construct their victimhood. Foucault (1978) provides an important framework for beginning to respond to this question. In his seminal text *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) argues that sexuality is a privileged site in the historical production of the human subject. He uses the term ‘apparatus of sexuality’ to denote a system that comprises ‘discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 194). Foucault (1978) argues that sexuality and the self are both products of historicised and institutionalised discursive practices or forms of knowledge that are relayed and circulated through modern power. Here power refers to all those apparatuses of knowledge embedded in religious, political, economic and legal practices and the organised hierarchical cluster of relations between them such that subjects and social practices are both the vehicles for and the effects of power (Digeser, 1992). For Foucault (1978) this power/knowledge coupling emerges at a particular historical and cultural moment and operates to produce and regulate bodies, constitute subjects and reify sexualities.

Foucault’s (1978) *The History of Sexuality* is indispensable for any investigation of how subjects are constituted and in what ways this constitution is subject to the power/knowledge coupling. The unique nature of FSA is that it is constituted at the intersection of gender (female), sexuality (sex) and several forms of power (abuse). Foucault (1978) does not prioritise theorising about gender and thus using solely his theoretical framework would compromise the important role of gender in any critical study of gendered abuse. It is therefore necessary to complement Foucault’s (1978) account of power, production and subjection with Butler’s (1989, 1999, 2004) proposals about gender identity formation. Butler’s gender theory is of particular relevance given its emphasis on gender performativity as a driver of both the reproduction of and resistance to normative gendered discourses. Accordingly, the use of Foucauldian theory as a primary framework to understand FSA victimhood must be complemented by and at times pitted against theories on the hegemony of masculinity (Bartky, 1988; Connell, 1993; Hearn, 2004) and Butler's (1989, 1999, 2004) theory on performativity, all of which provide specific examples of the way that sexuality and gender are socially
constituted. The aforementioned theories are all based on poststructuralist conceptualisations of the subject and seek to demonstrate the limits of available and circulated discursive categories (Miller, 1998). This overall theoretical framework allows for a demonstration of how deeply engrained constructions and regulations of sexuality and gender render particular objects of knowledge (such as FSA victimisation) (un)thinkable. This hybrid theoretical framework thus seems useful for an investigation of the ways that the subjection of the individual to various cultural, material and historical discourses and conditions produces and/or limits particular possibilities for the FSA victim subject position and in turn restricts possibilities for sexuality, gender and identity. It is also an appropriate ontological framework for Parker’s (1992, 2004) critical Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis. Together, this ontology and epistemology are able to highlight the productive power of the apparatus of discourses, institutions and knowledge in constituting ‘truth’ (Parker, 2004) in relation to FSA.

By examining the intersections between power, sexuality and gender in the production of FSA victimhood, critical discourse analysis is able to explore the ways that power/knowledge provide the discursive coordinates by which FSA victims are able or unable to occupy a victim subject position. Consequently, this type of analysis exposes the role of modern power in the way victimhood is able to be produced or not be produced in a particular historical and cultural moment and, in turn, call for a more complex, variable and dynamic understanding of both gender and sexuality as instruments and effects of modern power. In essence, then, the critical discourse analysis of FSA victimhood assumes that ‘power is inscribed within discourses’, and, as such, discourse has its ‘own intrinsic technology’ that transmits, produces, reinforces and sustains power and in this way constitutes social subjects (Purvis & Hunt, 1993, p. 488, emphasis in the original). Such an analysis thus provides a framework for understanding how points of power are embedded within the discursive representations and practices of self-identified FSA victims and how this then determines the possibilities for their subject positions.

Method

This chapter is based on a larger study conducted by Kramer (2014) in which the primary objective was to demonstrate how constructions of gender and sexuality interact at the interface of modern power to produce the conditions of possibility for FSA victimhood. This was achieved by interviewing FSA victims to identify and interrogate the ways in which they construct victimhood. The only criterion for participation was self-identification as a victim of FSA. While sexual abuse was broadly understood in line with sexual coercion or sexual behaviour deemed inappropriate by the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act No. 32 of 2007 (sexual assault, incest, sexual offences against children and rape), participant selection was not constrained to this definition and rather relied on self-identified victims’ own constructions of sex abuse.
Once ethics clearance was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand, a call for participants was circulated through publicly accessible channels across South Africa, including on-air radio; online blogs, social networks, magazines and newspapers; as well as in print media (magazines and newspapers). These calls resulted in approximately 35 responses from FSA victims, FSA perpetrators and people who had some knowledge about FSA cases. Of these 35 respondents, 16 self-identified as FSA victims and were thus requested to participate in the study. Two of these self-identified FSA victims indicated that they were unwilling to participate due to the fear of their victimhood being exposed. Three of the requests for participation went unanswered and one respondent agreed to participate but did not arrive at the interview location on the agreed date and was thereafter unreachable via email or telephone. Despite these difficulties, the call for participants produced a final group of ten, including five women and five men, of which one identified as homosexual. Seven of these purposively selected participants were South African (four men and three women), one male participant was Zimbabwean, whilst the other two female participants were Australian and American, respectively. These latter three participants served as international comparison cases that add value to the data by juxtaposing the local contexts and their specificities as important to the ways in which possibilities for victimhood are produced. Participants were selected according to an extreme-case purposive sampling strategy, which allows for the investigation of that which is considered ‘deviant’ and/or ‘transgressive’ in order to illuminate the normative (Patton, 2002). This is appropriate for a study that intends to investigate largely excluded forms of victimhood in order to point to the way that gender and sexuality are constituted in FSA specifically and in sexual violence more broadly.

With their informed consent, participants engaged in a one- to two-hour semi-structured interview with the researcher. The interview schedule covered areas such as participants’ background life histories and their experiences of their self-identified sexual victimhoods. Participants were asked to discuss if and how they think the abusive experiences affected their lives in the long term and whether they feel that this effect may have differed if their abuser had been male. Those victims who had been sexually abused by persons of both sexes were asked to compare each experience. Participants were also asked about their understandings of terms such as ‘victim’, ‘violence’, ‘abuse’ and ‘trauma’.

During the data collection phase, a key thread across the interviews was the use of the format as a ‘confessional’ space by the participant. This was most certainly emphasised by the use of particular spaces for the interviews, which positioned the researcher firmly in the field of psychology, such as conference rooms at the International Congress of Psychology and psychologist colleagues’ practice rooms. Given the traditional ethical procedure that requires informed consent and assurance of confidentiality at the beginning of the research procedure, all of the participants related their stories, often for the first time, with the understanding that they were private and confidential. This ethical requirement inadvertently and ironically supported the confessional format and thus the incitement to sexual abuse discourse. In addition, given the researcher’s position in the discipline of psychology, together with questions directly related to
participants’ sexualities and sex lives as well as the context of the interview as an anonymous and confidential space, participants felt not only the desire to speak but also the obligation to do so. This is in line with Pryce’s (2000) suggestion that the incitement to discourse operates at the nexus of the expert (or psychological) gaze and the implication that the interview is the standard device to elicit content to be interpreted and decoded. Furthermore, the interview, by virtue of its structure, implies that there is a value to confession, especially if there is an expert present. Thus, the interview itself is a key vehicle for the production and transmission of power/knowledge and the further refinement of FSA victimhood as a category for human science and (self-)knowledge.

Analysis

Parker’s (1992) principles and stages for critical discourse analysis informed the way data were selected, understood and interpreted in the study. The overall analysis involved reading the verbatim transcripts according to these frameworks and stages and selecting discursive themes in the data. Themes were then either collapsed into one another to form larger themes or structured hierarchically to form sets of subthemes with an overarching theme. Themes were thereafter labelled and defined. It must be noted that this process is cyclical and requires multiple levels of rereading and recoding (Willig, 2001). Accordingly, a combined analysis took place by relating core themes and patterns within the data to discursive patterns within the larger cultural context. Specifically, metaphors, wording, expressions, idioms and colloquialisms used by the participants were systematically coded according to the most significant themes that ran through the data and interpreted in terms of how language forms part of the construction of subjectivities and contributes to either the reproduction or the resistance of hegemonic discourses (Phillips & Jørgenson, 2002). This coding process was guided by Butler’s (2004) theory of performativity, especially regarding the ways that participants produced their victim subject positions. The Foucauldian understanding of discourse as a means ‘to describe and critique the discursive world people inhabit and to explore their implications for subjectivity and experience’ underwrote the analytic procedure (Willig, 2001, p. 91). This type of discourse analysis is geared for application to interview data that explore victims’ discursive accounts of FSA because the detailed and rich analytic output allows for the demonstration of how the organisation of discourses at a particular cultural moment provides the conditions of possibility for FSA victimhood (Parker, 2004).

South African FSA victim discourses

In the overall study by Kramer (2014), victimhood was constructed through various discursive strategies and coordinates employed by the self-identified FSA victims. In line with Butler’s (1989, 1999, 2004) theories on performance, the
participants mobilised discourses on gender, sexuality, criminality and victimhood in producing the conditions of possibility for taking up victim subject positions. In particular, victimhood was built on specific discourses that provided the participants with the means to construct a subjectively fathomable aetiology for their abuse. These discourses arose from participants’ access to particular institutions and disciplinary frameworks such as psychology, religion, the law, tertiary education and the media. Throughout this process, FSA victimhood was negotiated as a condition arising from an ‘impossible’ or ‘inconceivable’ crime, and the interviews were thus a site for the construction of, resistance to and ultimately reification of heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality as they intersected with criminality and psychopathology. The resultant themes demonstrate the ways in which gender, sexuality and power must be configured in order to provide the possibilities for identifying as a victim of FSA.

The discursive themes identified by the study interlink across one another and various subthemes are connected to other overarching themes and subthemes. These themes therefore present the way that ‘words and phrases are linked at the level of discourse’ (Parker, 2005, p. 99). This interlinking is reflective of the broader network of interweaving institutionalised discourses that are reproduced in the participants’ discourses. Taken as a unit, these thematic elements thus represent the grid of discursive coordinates that imply the (im-) possibility of FSA victimhood. It is important to note that these themes do not reflect the participants’ own understandings of the discourses that they participate in. Rather, the themes demonstrate particular links to discourses that the participants were not necessarily explicitly aware of. The themes thus show how participants’ words, phrases, terms and expressions ‘are articulated into chains of meaning that are independent of the speakers’ (Parker, 2005, p. 100). By presenting the organisation of discourse in this way, the findings are able to demonstrate how speakers both police and are policed by language and how they are active participants in either the reproduction of or resistance to dominant and/or oppressive discourses. One of the key themes in this regard related to gender constructions and the way that these particular discourses continue to constrain possibilities for FSA victimology.

An example: Gender constructions that sustain the impossible crime

I think people’s perception of women is just that they’re not capable of something like that. Because women are seen as the victims, always.

(Participant 1)

Sexual violence is conventionally defined in dichotomised terms that imply the male aggressor and female victim (Richardson & May, 1999) and has historically been essentialised as a masculine behaviour deriving from a ‘natural’ masculine aggression (see Gidycz, 2011; Koss, Gidycz & Wisniewski, 1987). In order to
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explain their ‘impossible’ statuses as FSA victims, participants identified particular gender constructions that emphasise male aggression and female passivity. Some of these constructions were purposefully identified by participants and proposed as key to FSA victimhood impossibility. However, many of the participants also unwittingly engaged with and actively drew on discourse that inadvertently essentialised gender. In both instances there was a consistent discursive appeal to dichotomous gendering. Descriptors such as ‘male’, ‘masculine’ and ‘men’ were understood only in their antithetical relation to ‘female’, ‘feminine’ and ‘women’, without any consideration of alternative possibilities for gender. This was primarily set up as the Madonna/whore versus the male aggressor. Whilst these discourses demonstrate the particular coordinates that make FSA globally inconceivable, they were simultaneously the coordinates through which the female participants were able to occupy victim subject positions.

The Madonna/whore complex versus the male aggressor

Womanhood was consistently defined by participants in narrow terms such that femininity was coupled either with discourses on victimisation and vulnerability or with constructions of the woman as a ‘whore’. This was further accentuated with juxtapositions to an aggressive and sexually violent manhood.

In line with widely circulated discourses that a woman’s inappropriate dress code might instigate her sexual victimisation (Du Mont, Miller & Myhr, 2003; Muehlenhard & Kimes, 1999), Participant 2 placed particular emphasis on the ‘shame of being female’ and explained this shame:

[My mother] had told me that . . . girls have sex, that’s what we’ve been made for, that’s what we’re born for.

The phrase that my husband actually used was ‘jail bait’ and it’s like young women or teenagers who look older than what they are and it’s like they’re provocative and they’re in some way responsible for making men feel temptation. That is what my mother had sort of communicated to me about the neighbourhood boys. That sense of . . . well, she called me a bitch on heat. And . . . it was my fault that these boys were doing this sort of thing.

These comments align with Cahill’s (2000) suggestion that the feminine body is constructed as sexually penetrable, which renders the female subject responsible for her sexual victimisation, at least at the pre-victim stage. These extracts thus allude to engrained understandings of sexual victimisation whereby the penetrable rather than the penetrating female is possible. Despite participants’ self-identifications as FSA victims, these particular coordinates in their discourses were still tied to the improbability of FSA. However, they also allowed female participants to position themselves as victims.

Whilst Participant 2 drew on the ‘whore’ end of the spectrum in constructing femininity, other participants relied on women-as-victim gender discourses and explained that ‘women are expected to be caring and loving’ (Participant 3).
In turn, the most appropriate explanation for FSA is that ‘a lot of these women are actually victims anyway’ (Participant 4). Participant 5 explained that female-to-male sexual submission is normative with her comment that ‘I think if, if I had to meet someone that I respected and trusted enough I think it would be okay to kind of submit in a way’. This conception of the victimised and passive female was supported by the following participants’ heteronormatively gendered constructions:

And I think women sometimes . . . probably also because of their like nurturing instinct, that they are very protective and like . . . I think women maybe have an incredible instinct for justice and taking care of things and putting things right again. (Participant 1)

Obviously within . . . society they [women] are seen as the weaker, the weaker sex. (Participant 7)

In order to support these claims as well as to explain why FSA is often considered harmless and innocuous (Denov, 2001), participants provided concrete examples of the difference between a sexually violent female and a sexually violent male. Participant 1 explained that her boyfriend ‘wasn’t as upset about it because it wasn’t a man . . . so it was almost . . . not that severe’. She went on to identify how society actively gendered her experience:

If it’s a woman it’s almost . . . but that’s like a perception that society builds . . . That women aren’t criminals. That women can’t do anything wrong. And that’s the perception that I think you grow up with . . . And it’s kind of instilled in you.

Male violence was also explicated as a physical act whereas female violence was constructed as a mental and emotional form of abuse. For example:

Because I mean men tend to be more forceful. You know. They tend to use more violence . . . But I mean with women, it’s sort of a negotiation thing. (Participant 6)

I remember that it’s [the male abuse], it’s something that, that was very like forceful. Like much more forceful and much more like violent. And abusive. Ya. Um . . . but with her, it was a more emotional, manipulative thing . . . Like if it’s, if it’s a male then it’s the dominant figure and he’s overpowering you and then, you know, you’re kind of like this timid, you’re the lady then you’re vulnerable but if it’s a lady then I think it makes you think as if you could have done something to avoid it because that power struggle is not part of it. (Participant 5)

I never ever look at a female now and undermine her size; first of all, um, because I think at the end of the day it’s not necessarily always a physical overpowering. It’s more of a mental overpowering, um, psychological where you’re broken down to a point where even physically you don’t want to do anything. (Participant 7)

These extracts are important examples of the gendering of violence. Participant 5’s construction of her female sexual abuser as emotional and manipulative is a key
illustration of how, in the event of a sexually violent act by a woman, physical abuse is transformed into verbal or emotional abuse. Emotion is so deeply engrained in the construction of femininity that even where there is female-perpetrated physical violence, it is both normative and acceptable to explain this event by restructuring it as emotive. This is made easier by virtue of the physical domain being so readily aligned with masculinity and, in this way, so obviously opposed to womanhood.

Participants explained FSA invisibility by drawing on examples of gendered constructions of the vulnerable and victimised female as well as by offering illustrations of typical male gendering to demonstrate the normativity of male dominance and aggression. For example:

I mean obviously in society the male is the dominant figure. And I mean he has the power and everything. (Participant 5)

These gendered discourses are explored further in the following section, with a particular emphasis on the ‘normalcy’ of male sexual violence.

**Male sexual violence as normative**

We live in a world where people think that only men can abuse women. (Participant 6)

Sexual abuse discourses are rooted in gendering norms that imply female victimisation and male aggression. These discourses are so immutable that any alternative conception of sexual violence is rarely considered. Consequently, both male-perpetrated sexual abuse and female experiences of rape are considered to be ‘normal’ (Rutherford, 2011). Participants drew on these discourses to explain reasons for non-disclosure of their FSA experiences as well as reasons for their own ambivalences about claiming FSA victimhood.

I guess I’d expect being abused by males is sort of normal and I had fitted that into a way of surviving in the world. But being violated by my mother, I actually . . . didn’t ever qualify that as quite normal so it was my dirty little secret that I’ve never said to anybody whereas there was some knowledge about the male sexual assaults . . . I think . . . in my mind I had an acceptance of male sexual abuse. I mean, I just sort of knew that it’s just what happened. But . . . I didn’t see it as normal, what my mother was doing. (Participant 2)

Similarly, Participant 1 and Participant 8 explained how they would have treated the situation differently had their perpetrators been men:

I think I probably would have spoken out about it. I probably would have said something because that would be . . . almost more socially acceptable. That’s kind of what I feel . . . But I think because it’s a woman it’s so . . . bizarre . . . It’s not something you hear about all the time. You hear about men doing stuff like this all the time. But you don’t hear women. And I think . . . even then . . . if it was like . . . a random man or like a family member, maybe I would have said something. But because of, ya, definitely because it was a woman, it definitely felt like
you couldn’t say something. Because it’s your caregiver, you know . . . I think it is different because the moment a woman is abused by a man, it’s almost . . . it’s so much more open. Like people speak about it all the time. It’s almost like the everyday thing now. (Participant 1)

I would think if it was a guy I would have recognised it right off for what it was . . . Um, but being a woman, it took me, you know, years and years and years to make that connection . . . I think if my father was the primary caregiver and had been doing this, I would have recognised it as sexual abuse. (Participant 8)

Participant 8’s comment alludes to ‘the repeated juxtaposition of child care and sexual abuse’, which implies that these two objects are inevitably linked (Mazur & Pekor, 1985, p. 11), despite meanings of caregiving being antithetical to meanings of abuse. This widely held perception persists despite research demonstrating the low rates of child sexual abuse (CSA) in caregiving situations (see Finkelhor, Vanderminden, Turner, Hamby & Shattuck, 2014). Given that gender constructions inextricably link caregiving to womanhood, the widely held belief that caregiving and CSA are tied begins to make FSA conceivable. However, as indicated by Participant 8, it is still easier to comprehend a male sexual abuser, even when that male is occupying a female role such as that of a caregiver.

Participant 5 reported that when she disclosed that she had been raped to her loved ones, ‘they just assumed it was a guy’. She went on to say that her mom had been raped as well but her perpetrator was ‘a male, obviously’. For Participant 8, ‘you almost expect that a sexual abuser is going to be a guy’. Even more interesting is that male violence was regarded as so normative that its aetiology was considered irrelevant. Rather, men were treated as naturally sexually aggressive and unable to control their innate sexual urges. For example, Participant 1 referred to ‘the dodgy man’ that sexually abuses children and Participant 2 stated that ‘I don’t expect a male to understand what he’s doing but I do expect a female to’. The same treatment was not applied to female sexual perpetrators. Rather, participants attempted to use the interview context as a space to develop an aetiological framework for why a woman might be sexually transgressive. This was particularly centred on the turn against maternity and the warping of a natural inclination to caregiving. This is significant, as in the same way that men were treated as naturally aggressive, so women were treated as naturally nurturing.

Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to demonstrate the power of a Foucauldian-informed critical discourse analysis by using the example of FSA victimhood discourses. This was achieved by indicating how the analysis reads historical and material conditions for FSA victimhood through the language of the subject in order to identify possibilities for an FSA victimology. Using Foucault’s (1978) understandings of the constitution of the self and his examples of the way power emerges as a cluster of relations at a particular cultural and historical moment, as
well as Butler's (1989, 1999, 2004) proposal for gender formation as backdrops, this analysis examined the ways that discourses on gender and sexuality as instrument-effects for power/knowledge provide the conditions of possibility for identifying as a victim of FSA. The constitution of sex and gender is thus channelled through an apparatus consisting of institutions, discourses and ‘truths’ which produce and are produced by the subject. Sexuality and gender can therefore be more critically appreciated through understanding the historical, political and material conditions that constitute them. In tracing the gendered conditions of possibility for subjects to identify as FSA victims, this chapter has charted some of the coordinates of the discourses that constrain men to perpetrators and women to victims in a mutually constitutive production of sexual abuse. This process demonstrates the power of Foucauldian-informed critical approaches to discourse analysis by providing compelling evidence for the way that such an analysis offers an avenue for rethinking the roles of gender and sexuality in outlining the parameters of ‘truths’ for sexual transgression, victimhood and sexual violence.

References


The power of critical discourse analysis


