The ambivalent child.
Sexual abuse and representations of childhood in the media and social arenas.*

Morena Tartari °

Summary. *This article analyzes social representations concerning children presumed to be victims of sexual abuse and childhood as a social category, and how such representations contribute to a definition of abuse as a social problem. The results come from an ethnographic study and highlight how different social actors, including parents, construct and deconstruct ambivalent representations of childhood within media and social arenas. The conflict between cultures of different professional groups enhances the ambivalence of such representations. Risk, agency, and vulnerability are concepts that explain social dynamics and relations between these different social actors in a society made sensitive to emotions and risks and where therapy culture plays a fundamental role in defining abuse as a social problem.*

Key words: *childhood, social representations, sexual abuse, risk.*

Introduction

This article considers social representations forming within social and media arenas and concerning children who are alleged victims of sexual abuse. The term "alleged victims" means that attention centers on children who are going through the particular phase of a judicial inquiry where a child cannot be considered either a victim or a non-victim, and the alleged perpetrator of the crime cannot be defined as either guilty or not guilty. Because this is a liminal phase, it makes manifest representations of childhood and practices that are less evident in different judicial or treatment phases involving children. In this phase, in the Italian criminal trial, interventions of justice professionals and physical and mental health professionals become controversial. Even the role of the parents becomes controversial when they are not involved in the alleged crime as presumed perpetrators: they have undertake responsibility for the alleged event that has happened to their children; and they sometimes choose to enter media arenas with themselves as entrepreneurs. This is also the phase which institutions and experts need to regulate, and for which they need to make practices involving children significantly uniform, with the aim of reducing risks and errors.

The definition of a social problem proposed by Spector and Kitsuse (1977) has established a conceptual reference for grasping the complex social dynamics underpinning the construction and reconstruction of sexual abuse as a social phenomenon within social and media arenas. Interest groups, claims makers and media – meaning experts, social and health professionals and workers, educators, families, politicians – are the social actors who come into play in defining the abuse problem as socially relevant. If problems are socially constructed as Blumer argued (1971), then the researchers' task is 'to describe and explain the definitional process in which morally objectionable conditions or behaviors are asserted to exist and collective activities which become organized around those assertions'. As Spector and Kitsuse (1977) suggest, this task requires that researchers focus on 'how those definitions and assertions are made, the processes by which they are acted upon by institutions, and how those institutional responses do or do not produce socially legitimated categories of social problems and deviance'. So social problems are not objective conditions of a given society, but a set of activities considered as processes (see also Critcher, 2003).

Through the analysis of social representations of childhood, the research presented in this article contributes to the understanding of the construction of the definitions and assertions that characterize sexual abuse as a social problem. Because social representations are a form of knowledge socially

elaborated upon and socially shared, and because they have the practical aim of constructing an image of the world and orienting our actions within our world (Santambrogio, 2006), they appear fundamental for understanding the process of sense attribution within social and media arenas in regard to sexual abuse.

The work presented here is a part of a wider research project. The Grounded Theory (GT) approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006) was chosen because it enables the study of a specific topic in order to identify the process underlying the participants' assertions or the phenomena observed. The GT is suitable for exploring social processes and phenomena to produce conceptualizations, and it shares with Symbolic Interactionism the vision of a social reality in constant change. Sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1969) are considered effective starting points for the GT (Charmaz 2006): they suggest directions in which to look, without orienting the researcher toward predetermined theoretical explanations. In particular, the analyses carried out in this article utilize the concepts of public arenas (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988), risk society (Beck, 1986), parents' social anxiety (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1990), childhood as a rare good (Zelizer, 1994), as well as the concepts of agency and subjectivity (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998) and child vulnerability (Furedi, 2004). In the wake of new childhood studies, these last concepts constitute an approach that must not be neglected when social representations of childhood are analyzed, because they consider the child as a social actor in relation with other actors within the family and society, and not as a mere passive receptor of the socialization processes determined by adults (James, Jenks & Prout 1998; Corsaro, 1997). In social representations analysis, the works of Moscovici (1976), Doise (1992) and Abric (1987; 1994) are considered fundamental. Access to the field was prepared by using the conceptual baggage provided by the GT and the sensitizing concepts, which thereafter made it possible to discuss the results, and to identify correspondences and affinities between data-generated concepts and theoretical concepts in the literature.

There follow the questions that guided the in-depth analysis presented here: what are the childhood social representations that different social actors, including parents, have of the child as the alleged victim of abuse?; what connection can be identified between the social representation of children as alleged victims of abuse and the more general representations of childhood, outside this particular judicial situation?; what is the role of the risk society in determining social representations of children, also in their connection from general to particular in this border situation?; how do these

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social representations affect the construction of the sexual abuse problem as a social problem?

Applying risk theory to childhood representations is unusual: many studies are restricted to ecological and technological risks (for example, see Adams, 1995; Douglas, 1985). As Jackson and Scott (1999) argue, there is a very close connection between prevalent childhood representations and representations concerning risk. Adults create these representations – adults whose world has become less stable and less predictable. The concern to prevent risk shows that the management of risk is at the basis of the social construction of childhood and of children's everyday experience (Jackson & Scott 1999, 90). Children are considered incompetent to evaluate risks, so that adults must do it in their stead. There are three strictly connected aspects to analyze: how childhood is constructed and reconstructed as a social category; practices and representations of parents and experts; and a general awareness of risks.

Methods

The results presented in this article come from a wider corpus of data collected on media representations of two sensational cases of child sexual abuse. They then extend to discourses, practices and social representations of the interest groups and moral entrepreneurs involved, at a national level, in the construction of child abuse as a social problem.

Only one of the cases that I studied will be analyzed here. Within the framework of Grounded Theory, the research was carried out by means of ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis. At the local level, I conducted forty in-depth interviews with social actors (moral entrepreneurs, policy-makers, politicians, health and social workers and professionals, educators, teachers, lawyers, journalists, parents, citizens) involved in the cases; an ethnographic study of the two communities where the cases occurred (daily life; religious, civic and political events; public events related to the alleged abuse); and documentary analysis of (local and national) newspaper articles and television programs about the cases. At national level, I collected twenty in-depth interviews with social actors (moral entrepreneurs, policy-makers, politicians, professionals and experts belonging to the health, psychology-psychiatry and justice fields, journalists) that participated in the debate on child abuse in the media and social arenas; I conducted an ethnographic study on eight Italian conferences and two public events against pedophilia

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and child abuse; and I monitored blogs and websites with a role in the cases and/or in the national media and professional debate.

The decided-upon sample of interviewees was homogeneous: interviewees belonged to the various professional categories and interest groups and had differing degrees of involvement in the case and in the media arenas. The interest groups were established by professionals in the health, psychology-psychiatry and justice fields and corresponded to two different national networks for the legal assessment of child abuse. The expression 'interest groups' stems from the work of Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994). For ethical reasons, it is not possible to provide the names of the groups observed and the interviewees, nor other information that might make them identifiable.

I created an ethnographic journal and fieldnotes for all the participant observations that I carried out. The in-depth interviews followed a conversational, dialogic approach (La Mendola 2009) and were partially structured. They were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and accompanied by fieldnotes; the documents collected were also supplied with fieldnotes. The triangulation method was used to validate data (Denzin, 1970; Fielding & Fielding 1986; Yin, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The field considered was characterized by a complex set of forces and dynamics; it was not geographically circumscribable to a specific place like the village-community where the case had developed: it arose in an composite social space where the relations among social actors occurred not only within the space of that community but also at a national level, within different social and media arenas.

The results presented in this article are based on the analysis of all the in-depth interviews collected, 158 articles from two national newspapers (*Il Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica*), transcriptions of 7 national TV program talks (both newspapers articles and TV programs collected during a period of 30 days after the event), and transcriptions and fieldnotes of 7 conferences organised by the interest groups at both local and national levels. Text analysis to identify major categories of social representations was carried out using the software Atlas.ti.

Results. Social representations of the child and experts' practices

Child sexual abuse involves a wide array of professionals: medical examiners, childhood neuropsychiatrists, psychiatrists, psychologists in general, and in particular childhood psychotherapists and legal

psychologists, criminologists, judges and lawyers. The expertise of the professionals appears to have a decisive impact on how representations spread in social and media arenas with regard to children who are alleged victims. Experts who attend to the child as the alleged victim during the criminal trial can be seen as dividing between two broad interest groups that determine different representations of the child: one of these groups makes use of psycho-clinical knowledge, while the other bases its assertions on a psycho-legal knowledge. Disparagingly, the experts in the former group are often called *abusologists* (a neologism) or *believers*, while the members of the latter group are sometimes termed *paedophile defenders* or *skeptics*. In this article, I refer to these groups respectively as *child savers* and *anti child savers*, as suggested by de Young (2004). The division of professionals into these two groups tends to simplify the social world and does not take into account a large portion of professionals who, by assuming different or more moderate positions, are outside these groups. However, all the interviewees, even those who did not belong to these two groups, described this division of expert knowledge.

The social representations of children constructed by these two groups tended to be antinomic. For instance, one polarization concerned the legal reliability of the child as the alleged victim of abuse, in which the concepts of credibility and competence were sometimes used erroneously as synonyms. In the interviewees' narratives, *child-saver* experts appeared to evaluate the child as always 'reliable', 'credible', 'competent', and probably not 'suggestible'. By contrast, according to the interviewees, *anti-child-saver* experts often consider the child to be 'unreliable', 'not credible', 'highly suggestible', 'incompetent', because they think that the child's brain function is 'not sufficiently mature' for him/her to be a witness able to testify as an adult.

> [*this group of professionals consider*] *that the minor has not developed enough cognitive functions of the amygdala, and so on. [If the child is] less than twelve years old he/she hasn't the cognitive functions to testify, and if over twelve years old he/she lacks emotional functions. Obviously, they are careful not to say this in public… […] So on the one hand we have the idea that 'children are never reliable' and on the other hand that 'children are always reliable'. I feel out of place in that milieu. I want to stay outside these two areas of reasoning, that are aligned with one another.* (legal psychologist and psychotherapist; in-depth interview)

The child manifests relative incompetence because his/her neuroperceptual apparatus has not reached… […] It is very difficult to

make this understandable, because during the hearings judges and lawyers start from an adultmorphic position, as if the attributes of a child witness were the same as those of a reliable adult witness, and this is a foolish thing we meet almost everywhere. There is an aspect of dominant adultmorphism. (childhood neuropsychiatrist; in-depth interview)

Hence an adultmorphic representation of the child was characteristic of the *child savers* group, but this representation was rejected by the other group. The representations that these two groups offered about children as alleged victims were reflected in the practices of assessment and treatment of these children.

One of the practices in which such different representations conflicted was the videotaping of a child's testimony, because major international conventions grant the right of informed consent to children. This means that the child's subjectivity comes into conflict with the representations that consider him/her not sufficiently 'mature' to decide about the videotaping of the judicial hearing.

[This psychologist] couldn't videotape the depositions of many children, because when children saw the video camera… because you know that there is informed consent under the international conventions of Strasbourg and New York, because of them you can't conceal a video camera. When these children saw the video camera, they began to cry and scream. […] They hid themselves under the psychologist's desk and two or three children had major physiological reactions… So the psychologist stopped the videotaping. (*legal psychologist and psychotherapist; in-depth interview*)

In this regard, an important issue arises: in some ways the child appears to be a completely passive subject with respect to experts' decisions, but the law recognizes in him/her a subjectivity that is often not coincident with the experts' representations.

Another important aspect concerns the representation of the allegedly abused child as the victim of a trauma. The *child savers* consider the child to be in need of treatment by health professionals because of his/her alleged abuse, which means psychological or psychotherapeutic treatment for trauma elaboration even prior to the criminal trial?. But the *anti child savers* considers that, in this initial judicial phase, psychological or psychotherapeutic treatment would interfere with the child's testimony, creating false memories. According to these experts, treatment should be avoided; they consider the child's own resilience to be sufficient, meaning that the child's intrapsychic and relational resources will enable him or her

to get over any possible trauma without the support of an adult. Hence, on the one hand, representations are polarized around a child's vulnerability and, on the other, around his or her invulnerability. According to interviewees, the *child savers* group 'hyperpathologizes' a supposed trauma, overloading it with negative emotions, while the *anti child savers* group 'hypopathologizes' it, sometimes denying the existence of trauma and regarding treatment as marginal or even iatrogenic.

> Some of these colleagues have made it known that one mustn't intervene with therapeutic treatment during a trial for child abuse, because false memories could be created [in children], by the unconscious, the mind, the psyche, memories. [In one case], a lawyer told mothers to stop the psychotherapy of their children, as he feared it might be claimed? during the trial that the child had said all these things because he was in [psycho]therapy. [...] (*legal psychologist and psychotherapist; in-depth interview*)

According to some interviewees, in this trial phase professionals who attend to children are not adequately trained to manage their emotions, so that either the experts feel the need for emotional distance from child, or they show strong emotional closeness to the child – a sort of identification with the alleged child victim. Distance and closeness appear to correspond to the representations of the child as either a vulnerable subject or an invulnerable one:

> In a child abuse case? [...] what disturbs people listening to the child is a very complicated process that I call countertransferal, meaning the emotions aroused by that news, by that encounter, by those people, and very frequently the emotion is 'how horrible, how awful, let's kill the monster!', which means putting oneself on the alleged or real victim's side, a monsterification. Otherwise it means taking the completely opposite view: 'no, these facts can't be right, it's impossible they happened, I wonder why these children are saying this, maybe someone suggested it to them, but it isn't true.' These are two very strong emotions: one concerns immediate adherence to the fact and monsterification of the suspect, and the other concerns denial of the fact, and so also concerns monsterification of the child, not exactly the monsterification of the child, but in the end, the falsification of the child. (*psychiatry and chief of a clinical centre for child abuse; in-depth interview*)

> And the children, poor things, suffer because they have a secondary victimization due to [psycho]therapies, because they are considered children who have been treated for a trauma they didn't have, but they had the trauma of being considered traumatized. You know, luckily, children often have a certain resilience, so not all of them are harmed incontrovertibly, they often react well,

but as long as the parents think of them as ill, they're ill! Because if an event is real for people, it is real in its consequences. (*lawyer; in-depth interview*)

The excessive emotional involvement of the *child savers* could generate victimization of the allegedly abused children caused by an induction of false memories due to therapies? and treatments received in the absence of a trauma, because these children were not really victims of abuse.

The parents involved in the research reproduced the representations of the group of experts emotionally involved in the children's occurrences. Representations of children as innocent, as victims *tout court*, who 'always tell the truth' were frequent: victims of a slow judicial system, victims of the media that did not respect their privacy, victims of the abusers, victims of a society that marginalized them as victims, sometimes victims of experts who might be mistaken in their diagnoses.

The children feel ill regardless… ! [interviewee laughs] Inevitably, these children feel very ill… but all clinicians say these things! [interviewee is ironic] (*legal psychologist and psychotherapist; in-depth interview*)

Children are never believed, the percentage of children who are not believed is very high. […] These children feel very ill! […] Think of the generation that will be born from these children, a number of them have been harmed and suffered. When they're adults, what percentage of deviance will these children have?! (*mother 1, in-depth interview*)

Children feel ill… they feel very ill. (*mother 1, interview in a TV program*)

[…] Children are certainly victims regardless of those responsible, even if these days [the counterparty] has attempted to make us pass not for victims, but almost for offenders. (*mother 2, in-depth interview*)

Enough of these doubts about our children […] [There is] discredit on what our children are attempting to voice, with a lot of grief (*title and crosshead of an article; newspaper* La Repubblica)

Representations circulating within media arenas appeared to be simplified in comparison to those offered by the experts. The central core of child vulnerability was maintained as the aspect with an emotional grip on parents and the public in general, as the following titles suggest.

Paedophilia. Also women do it. With them children are more defenseless. (*title of an interview with an expert; newspaper* La Repubblica)

[… Children] are only three years old, it is easy to induce suggestion (*title of an interview with an expert; newspaper* Il Corriere della Sera)

Some of the journalists interviewed provided an explanation of the mechanism simplifying and selecting the representations of the child as an alleged victim. In television programs, especially, a journalist cannot go into details on a case of abuse, cannot describe what happened. Consequently, he/she can only use abstract terms like 'abuse' and 'maltreatment', and the public can only imagine what occurred. Whilst murdered children can appear on television, the images of alleged victims of child abuse are not permitted. In this way, with the object of compassion missing, public attention focuses on the perpetrator or alleged perpetrator of the crime, owing to the need to fill the absence of the child victim and his/her images with symbols of his/her suffering.

I always think that *in these stories children are 'victims off', like the 'voices off' of the cinema*, that is, they are *victims outside the scene*. […]Without seeing images, without hearing voices, without feeling the suffering, for to the audience the perception of abuse and maltreatment becomes an abstraction […]. In this case there is the silence of the innocent… there is this silence which is information that seems more emotional, less information more emotions, in this interplay of emotions that is so important on television, those who have suffered abuse don't arouse emotion because they are *abstract….* (*television journalist, in-depth interview*)

In this way, the media furnishes stereotypical images and representations of the children, recurrent icons or phrases that are useful for rapidly identifying the case in question, in a visual or discursive manner.

Risk awareness

The risk society's role in determining social representations of children reveals itself in two main forms: it fosters an ever-increasing risk awareness in parents and experts, and it emphasizes the responsibility of adults, especially parents, for risk prevention.
The data analysis highlighted the commitment of the *child savers* group to combating the so-called 'unfavorable experiences' of children.

One of the priorities of our work in the next few years will be to change the methods used to oppose violence against children and *unfavorable experiences* in childhood […] (*from a lecture at a child savers' conference*)

Recently, the *claims-making* aspect of abuse promoted by the *child savers* group has not concerned only the traumatic experiences of children; it has also introduced the concept of 'unfavorable experiences', thereby expanding the range of the possible interventions carried out by this interest group for the child and his/her caregivers. This also concerns interventions focused on parenthood: that is, support and enhancement of parents' responsibility to safeguard their children from innumerable risks. Representations circulating within media arenas describe a childhood 'at risk' and the need for it to be safeguarded. The media emphasize the emotional and sensationalist aspects of these representations in order to increase their ratings. For example, a mother described the perceived risks for her daughter as follows:

> Pedophilia is more widespread than one might believe. There is a code of silence. It is the same thing that happened in the past with the Mafia. […] For example, there are ice-creams with a phallic shape… I won't buy one for my daughter, because a pedophile who sees her eating that ice-cream on the street might get excited. Not to mention clothes: all these girls dressed in miniskirts, when they go around dressed in that way, those who look at them can fantasize… they could be tempted. It is better if they don't go out alone, like girls are accustomed to in these parts. (*a mother; in-depth interview*)

The role of the family was well delineated thus by an expert:

> Education comes very early: in *recognition of dangers*. […] A child has to be *trained* to act in the world, but also to recognize dangers and manage dangers, but to do this, the child needs a family experience of strong physical and affective boundaries. And he/she needs to be brought up in protection and decency (*psychiatrist and psychotherapist; in-depth interview*)

The child must be *trained* by responsible parents to be in the world and to avoid dangers. Hence he/she must be *moldable*, and parents are responsible for *training* a child to recognize risks. A heightened risk awareness of parents and experts and its spread within media arenas further reinforce the representation of children as vulnerable subjects dependent on the protection of adults.

Discussion

Childhood as an ambivalent social category

In the analysis conducted here, the use of the social representations model is useful because it aids understanding of the gap between expert and parental behavior and the objective conditions of childhood. In the social representations of the child as an alleged victim of sexual abuse, we find three conditions enunciated by Moscovici (1976): *information dispersion*: the object is complex and there are social and cultural barriers in providing complete information; *focalization*: interest in the child is circumscribed in some respects; *pressure to inference*: individuals are driven to take sides as regards the object of representation. With Moliner's reinterpretation of Moscovici (1996) it is possible to argue that the representations elaborated by the social groups considered can be studied in terms of social representations. The object of these representations is *polymorphous*. Groups are structured around this object, and it expresses the 'stakes' on which the members of both groups base their identities as professionals of childhood and sexual abuse and their groups' cohesion. The alleged child victim is at the centre of a social dynamic because he/she represents what is at stake for the two groups in the absence of a set of principles that imposes a coherent, unambiguous childhood representation within them: not all the representations offered by childhood are the results of scientific analysis.

The social dynamic between the two groups identified is easily comparable to the dynamic of other groups of professionals. Consider, for example, Bellelli's (1987) study on mental disease and how psychology and medicine students take different sides on the basis of their different conceptions of illness, and adopt different approaches to the illness and treatments of it.

Different groups develop different representations of the object 'childhood' according to their interests. This is what Doise (1992) terms the 'sociological anchorage' of a social representation. This phenomenon determines the coexistence of many representations of the same object that refer to the groups under consideration. The sociological anchorage of childhood representations manifests itself in a set of general opinions shared by the two groups identified and a set of specific opinions that differ between them. The representation shared by the two groups concerns childhood perceived as a 'minor' or 'weak' social category from a psycho-clinical and psycho-legal point of view. The specific opinions of the groups illustrate how the object of the representation is *polymorphous*. On the one hand, it is viewed as a representation of children as subjects to protect but who have agency. On the other hand, the children are represented as 'immature' subjects (also biologically immature), as vulnerable human beings but at the same time invulnerable and resilient, able to make autonomous decisions but also completely dependent on an adult and that

adult's decisions, as competent or incompetent witnesses, and as in need of treatment or victimized by treatment. These two different representations correspond to the divisions and antagonisms between the groups, because the stakes are different for them: predominance within the power field of child abuse assessment and treatment. According to Doise (1992), this phenomenon corresponds to psycho-sociological anchorage in which each group develops its representation also on the basis of the rivalries and conflict relationships with the other group.

The object 'childhood' is particularly polymorphous because, for example, ambivalent representations can be constructed and reconstructed even in the same group: we might consider the adultmorphic representation of the child witness that coexists with the representation of the child as a 'minor' subject. Another example is the coexistence of the vulnerability representation of the child with his or her sufficient independence to decide whether or not the hearing may be videotaped. Peripheral representations have gradually developed around the central core of the representation of subject 'minors', and they can be transformed in relation to the stakes of the two groups. Consider, for example, how the focus of attention shifts from traumatic experiences to unfavorable experiences of childhood. Child vulnerability no longer concerns solely traumatic experiences but is also determined by those situations that hamper the child's proper psycho-emotional development.

The two groups identified may be represented as promoting and adhering to two different *cultures of childhood*. Their opposition resembles the 'protectionists' versus 'liberationists' opposition in regard to the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' (CRC). The tension between the 'protectionist' and 'liberationist' positions seems to connote, antagonistically, different conceptions of childhood coexisting within the CRC (Ronfani 2003). As Belotti (2008) suggests, there is an unresolved antinomy between protection and independence of childhood, and it concerns difficulties of comparison and composition between representations of the child as saved and protected versus the individualized and participatory ones. In this regard, it is interesting to note how some interviewees represented political affiliations within these groups: the *child savers* group could be viewed as progressive and left wing, and the *anti child savers* group as conservative and right wing. These positions also comprised different representations of the family and sexual abuse.

Within media arenas, the main childhood representation was that of a vulnerable child. The difference between these interest groups was identified and synthesized in *believing* and *not believing* in the children's

statements. Furedi (2008) describes the myth of child vulnerability as follows:

> Babies and infants are seen today as both intensely vulnerable and highly impressionable – above all to parental influences. They are said to be both greatly sensitive to the damaging effects of parental incompetence or neglect and responsive to parental nurturing and stimulation.

According to Furedi, contemporary Western society has difficulty in accepting that children are capable of extraordinary resilience, because experts support the concept of determinism, i.e. that the child's normal or pathologic development is determined by his/her early experiences. Furedi argues that child vulnerability is often expressed by means of the locution 'children at risk'. This means of representing childhood implies a redefinition of the concepts of both risk and childhood. Furedi (2002) offers an explanation as to why 'being at risk' is an ambiguous concept: children at risk are usually associated with particular lifestyles and certain situations, encounters and experiences. Being at risk concerns not only what we do but also who we are, and so turns into a fixed attribute of the individual. As a result, experts can draw profiles of those who are at risk and identify patterns of behavior that are useful in describing people more exposed to risk. In this way, the parents' past becomes an indicator as to whether or not a child is 'at risk'. The emphasis on risks restricts the individual's agency.

Childhoods at risk and sexual abuse

Today the child is a rare and valuable good (Zelizer, 1994), and as such the child is to be protected. Within the family, where social forms of life and love have changed, risks perception has also changed. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990) propose an explanation for the relationship between parents and the risks for their children:

> […] The more evil in the world, the more methods parents have to develop in order to protect their child (the more Chernobyls, the more searching for contaminated powdered milk…and so on).

Risks for childhood have increased but, especially, risk awareness has increased. Beck (1986), Lupton (1999) and Giddens (1991) all emphasize how modern society has become extremely *conscious* of risks. Risk awareness generates uncertainty, and uncertainty generates social anxiety. Ecological risks are no longer the only threats to the child's psycho-

physical integrity: sexual abuse threatens his/her psycho-physical and moral integrity. Furthermore, as Furedi (2002) argues, the change in the meanings attributed to emotions in Western societies has expanded the spectrum of possible traumatic experiences, up to and including 'unfavorable experiences'.

Both expert groups have a role, though different, in increasing the awareness of public risks. The *child savers* group seems sensitive to childhood risks. Its agency turns to the wider public of parents and families, but also to the workers who attend to them and their children. The *anti child savers* group strongly affects the construction of risk awareness concerning the errors of experts in both the 'psy' area and the legal realm.

According to Furedi (2002), in every institutional field, therapists have succeeded in creating a demand for their interventions, on which people have grown dependent. They have thus confirmed the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of individuals, thereby creating a vicious circle. The therapeutic regime has more or less become a part of our culture and affects all aspects of contemporary society. Therapeutics is not so much a clinical technique as an instrument for managing subjectivity, with social problems increasingly interpreted from a psychological point of view.

The usefulness of therapeutics is not in dispute, but rather the extent to which certain claims by clinicians have determined a representation of childhood as constantly 'at risk', so that the contemporary obsession with children's safety lies in the exaggeration of children's vulnerability. Furedi's evaluation does not concern, for example, the adequacy of therapeutic intervention for a minor or the appropriateness of the methods used for that child's hearing; rather, it concerns the culture in which the *child savers* group and its agency are immersed and which they promote.

Current representations of childhood at risk have to do with the problem of responsibility. It is mainly parents who are responsible for children. Emphasizing responsibility amplifies risks perception and consequent anxiety, a cycle of sorts to which parents fall victim. There are many risks, and they are continuously renewed and confirmed by the activity of claims makers in the media: the perception of parents' responsibility increases when the perception of risks increases, and the reaction involves real action to keep children away from risks and threats.

The consequences of an error are irreversible, and parents are urged to prevent every form of possible risk or unfavorable experience. This increases their level of anxiety. If they do not act accordingly, they risk damaging their child, rendering him or her imperfect.

The conflict between experts generates further uncertainty in regard to risk. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1990) define as "competing advice" the different expert opinions that confuse parents and creates further anxiety:

> That which appears as the parents' "pedagogical delirium" results from the circular logic of love, the search for responsibility, disorientation, a dynamic that has its peaks and valleys.

At the centre of this dynamic are the ambivalent representations of childhood that lie in the tense space between an agent and active subject agent, on the one hand, and an object that is passive and dependent on the adult world, on the other (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Jenks, 1996; James & Prout, 1990). These dimensions also concern sexuality and children's *desiderating self* (Slater, 1997). Parental anxiety also includes unfavorable experiences concerning early sexual behavior and the accidental discovery of sexuality up to the traumatic abuse experience.

Conclusions

In this article I have developed an explanation of how different social actors construct and deconstruct ambivalent representations of childhood and children as alleged victims of abuse within media and social arenas. Among the sensitizing concepts that I have used, social representations theory enables analysis of the actions of the interest groups that compete for power in child abuse assessment and treatment, and how they affect the knowledge circulating in such arenas.

The construction of child abuse as a social problem concerns the ambivalent representations of the child. It depends on the ways in which different interest groups compete for what is at stake, on their different pedagogical and moral projects, and on their different representations of childhood. In their turn, parents construct and reconstruct these meanings, while the media spread and circulate such social representations. This happens in a society where the importance attributed to emotions and risks has increased, and where the child has become the object of strong emotional investment. The experts' practices reflect these ambivalent representations, while an increasing risk awareness induces experts and parents to be more active and responsible in protecting children from abuse, which includes experiences 'unfavorable' for their proper development. The representation of the vulnerable child at risk prevails within the therapeutic culture. The symbolic capital that this culture has at its disposal is considerable, and in some ways it is more widespread than the medical-

legal model at the root of the antitherapeutic culture. They are expressions of different cultures of childhood. Their conflict causes uncertainty and anxiety, and performs an important role in the construction of child abuse as a social problem. Within a socio-constructionist framework, the present study has offered a model with which to explain certain processes and social dynamics that contribute to the definition of this social problem.

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