The Abuse of Parents by Children

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Introduction

Michael Freeman is one of the pioneer writers on the abuse of women and children. His ability to combine academic rigour with passionate advocacy marks him out as one of the greats of legal academia. His searing indictments of the failures of the law to deal with abuse ring out as loudly today as they ever did. In this chapter I do not propose to discuss his writing, rather I propose to unworthily follow in his footsteps, and address an area of abuse where the law has failed to respond appropriately, namely the abuse of parents by their children.

Parentline was a telephone help service set up to advise parents facing difficulties. Staff were trained on the issues likely to arise: children who would not eat vegetables; babies who kept waking in the night; bedwetting. But a large portion of the calls were about something completely different. 27 per cent of parents complained of children abusing them. As the Parentline (2003: 2) report put it:

Children shouting, swearing, spitting, pushing, kicking, punching even threatening with or using weapons against their parents and other family members is the shocking reality facing many families today.

The vision of the home as a haven in a heartless world has long been tarnished. Awareness of domestic violence and child abuse means the home is talked about as much as a site of violence as it is a haven for comfort. ‘The home is in fact the most dangerous place in modern society’, Antony Giddens (1989: 408) informs us. I am afraid this article adds to that picture, with a discussion of parent abuse, an issue which has not received adequate legal or social attention. As Rachel Condry (2010: 1) points out:

Adolescent-to-parent violence does not fall within official definitions of domestic violence and the problem has remained largely unarticulated within the fields of youth justice, domestic violence, policing and criminology, particularly in the UK.
One of the primary aims of this article is to explore why it is that parental abuse has been so ignored. In part this is because the practice challenges our pre-conceptions about childhood, parenthood and families. In part it is also because the issue falls between the stools of legal categories of domestic abuse, child abuse and criminal behaviour.

Parental abuse can be horrific. ‘The terrorist in my home’ is how one mother described her experiences (Holt, 2011). A study of online reporting found parents being bitten, kicked, battered, thumped and punched (ibid). The violence sometimes moved on to the siblings and property. Notably these were rarely ‘one off’ events but ‘formed part of the daily tapestry of their lives’ (ibid). Interestingly, many parents in describing their experiences focussed on the emotional impact rather than the physical injury. Fear and guilt are particularly prevalent. Amanda Holt (ibid) notes in her study how many parents felt there was no one who could assist because the problem was unrecognised: ‘we are desperate and there just seems to be no help – where do we turn next?’ As Valerie Outram (quoted on BBC News (2009)) has put it, ‘It’s like domestic violence was 20 or 30 years ago. It’s hushed up, brushed under the carpet and no one talks about it.’ The experiences of parents and the lack of official recognition or response produced an overarching narrative among victims of ‘powerlessness and loss of hope’ (Holt, 2011: 463).

Statistics

Prevalence

Amanda Holt (2012) in her overview of the research finds its prevalence varies from 7-29 per cent of parents. Reliable data is hard to find (ibid) first, because most of the research has to rely on self-reporting and so there is likely to be considerable under-reporting, and second, because there is no consistent definition of parent abuse (Condry and Miles, 2012).

Examples of the kind of statistics that we do have are the following. Parentline (2012) found between June 2008 and June 2010 27 per cent of calls to their helpline involved aggression. Of these, 62 per cent were about verbal aggression and 8 per cent physical aggression. A study of data for the Metropolitan Police found 1914 cases reported to the police across London in one year (Condry and Miles, 2012).

Gender of Victims

Nearly all studies find that mothers are more at risk of being abused than fathers (see e.g. Evans and Warren-Sohlberg, 1998; Hong, 2011; Holt, 2012, for an overview). In the leading UK study, Condry and Miles (2013) found that 77 per cent of victims of cases of parent abuse reported to the police in their sample were women. Lone mothers are particularly prone to parental abuse (Howard, 2008). International evidence also suggests that mothers are more likely to be victims than fathers (Bobic, 2008). Where the father is the victim, then the abuse is predominantly caused by sons (Howard, 2008).