"My World Stopped" - Analysis of Media Talk Regarding Mothers of Abducted Children

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Abstract

Official police records from across the United Kingdom indicate that in 2014/15, child abduction that was perpetrated by children was the main cause of abduction and kidnappings, especially when it came to kidnapping small children. At the time this research was carried out, current literature on child abduction or kidnappings did not explicitly highlight how to psychologically protect mothers whose children have been victimised by other children in this way. Rather, it focuses on sexual offences committed against the victim. A qualitative review of the discourse used within the media was executed and obtained using national and international media text. Discourse is the "language used" within any given text (Stenner and Lizard, 2016, p.306). The generalised idea of conversation, whether written or spoken, is an entity of sequences of signs in that they are enouncements of enounces in conversation. The repertories and subject positions analysed, revealed that the media sources constantly positioned individuals and organisations against each other, with the media using common and perceived social and cultural identities to fulfil their 'moral' endeavour. Although a number of psychological coping strategies for the mother were highlighted in text, the media mainly focused on areas such as blame seeking and constructing ideas of deviance. Various implications for further research into child abduction are suggested.

Keywords: *Psychology; Forensics; Abduction; Kidnap; Children; Mothers; Discursive*

Source: Shutterstock. "Anxious women stock images" (2018) [1].

Introduction

Any person who cares for a child will explain that one, if not the most, frightening occurrence that they could go through is when they become separate from their child. For example, a child sees a toy and becomes engrossed in enjoying the moment. The care giver then moves on to continue their shopping thinking that the child is with them. Although this occurrence is usually brief, a whole plethora of emotions go through the parent(s) mind - fear, shock, and panic amongst many other feelings. Imagine how one would feel if you discovered that your child had been kidnapped or abducted?

Sadly official statistics reveal that, although relatively rare in comparison to other crimes recorded by police, abduction is on the increase. During the statistical period of 2015/16, England, Wales and Northern Ireland's police, recorded that child kidnappings and abductions rose to 1,537 up 18 per cent for kidnappings and 30 per cent for abductions on the previous year [2,3]. In 2014/15, overall, child kidnappings and abductions rose by 47 per cent. Shockingly, United Kingdom (UK) police records indicate that nearly half of these types of abductions were perpetrated by children [2]. This is in stark contrast to the United States of America (USA) where most abductions are carried out by parents, fifty-one per cent of these by fathers [4,5].

The physical, emotional, financial and psychological impact can be felt far across the family spectrum as well as society as a whole. This has left mental health experts and policy makers at a loss as to how to assist such ones, both at the time of abduction and also after the child has been returned. No greater an impact is felt though, than by the mother of the child involved. At present, sparse research findings make it extremely complicated to ascertain what type of abduction is more distressing to the child and family, especially the mother [6].

This qualitative research focuses its attention upon mothers rather than other care givers, such as the father. The mother is the usual member in any given family who will play a more pivotal role in the child's life, influencing how it grows both psychologically and socially. In most psychological disciplines, it is theorised that a mother's bond is started from the child's birth onwards, especially within ones early years - ages of 2 - 4 ([7], p.8). Research since the 1970's up until now has shown that his or her development can be encouraged or destroyed if love, care and nourishment does not emanate freely from its mother ([8], p.60).

Our analyses was effectuated upon transcribed interviews from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and other assorted national and international news outlets. This discourse was obtained through the psychological database NEXIS and the search engine Google. By applying a critical discursive perspective (CDP), it is our endeavour to draw attention to its hidden subject positions and interpretive repertoires through the eyes of a mother in distress [9]. Looking at this in a discursive way, will highlight the mother's social reality and her psychosocial processes.

By way of background information, on 13th April 2016 at approximately 16.00 hours, a mother and her two and a half year old daughter were shopping for clothes at the UK wide retailer (Primark) within the city of Newcastle upon Tyne. After browsing through the clothes together, she allowed her child to get out of her pushchair and was then approached by two young teenage girls who played with the child for approximately fifteen minutes. Between the mother putting an item back on the clothes rail and then turning around, the child had been removed from the store and abducted.

Literature Review

Although current literature does not cover this specific area of research, research has been carried out to investigate parental distress and the importance of social support when abduction occurs and the children are subsequently sexually abused. Spilman [6] investigates the psychological and emotional distress faced by both mothers and fathers and how they are able, or not, to cope with this traumatic life event. Distress from this traumatic occurrence, the continuation of legal proceedings and the child's acclimatisation back into school and home life (if found) can also cause significant difficulties with both child and parent. These distresses can include: stress, anxiety, clinical depression, feelings of guilt, incompetence and failure that they did not see it occurring and that the missing child was not returned back earlier to their legal home.

One of the most important findings within Bonman., *et al*'s. (1996) research highlighted, that support and help to cope with distress as a family is "critical". This can often stop children becoming addicted to illegal substances, alcohol and turning to a life of crime in later years. Even perceived support from both family and friends is of importance, as Spilman highlights that this can be more vital at times and improves coping mechanisms than actual received support, creating a buffering effect [6].

Newiss and Traynor [10], using both quantitative and qualitative research, use as their main focus the real world impact upon society and their families of abduction and the kidnapping of children. Low (2011) as cited in Newiss and Traynor [10], highlights that current research and statistics infer that mothers only seem to be the one that plays a pivotal role in the familial healing process. This study also shows that abduction of children is normally for sexual gratification of the offender which tends to conclude in the demise of the child. This research also supports the notion that child abduction can be prevented but does not currently assist in the resettling process or how important a role the mother can play.

Most research that has been carried out is empirically quantitative, thus limiting its reflection of the real world. However, De Young and Buzzi's [11] phenomenological study interviewed those who had been or were going through the effects of abduction, examining their differing coping strategies between parents of murdered children and those whose children had been abducted for a long period of time. It was found that coping strategies, in general, were the same whether their child was still missing or had been murdered. However, there were stark differences between how personal assistance from family members, friends or professionals were received, with friends being the most supporting, thus assisting with the child's coping strategies [11].

Current Study

Due to different social teachings, especially from parental upbringing throughout childhood, mothers and fathers respond differently to traumatic events, both psychologically and emotionally [6]. Although there has been research into abduction and kidnappings, at the time of print, very little has been explicitly written discursively concerning the effect on mothers who have had their child abducted by other children - although this is the most prevalent form of abduction within the UK [2].

Although empirical studies help one to see statistical relationships, critical discursive psychology enables us to examine the unfolding discourse or talk surrounding the subject of abduction in a detailed way. Our communication is a cultural type of resource we use to express, not just our emotion, but rather our constructions in the individuals reality. This language describes the subject's lifeworld that is in the talk, whether imagined or real. It can assist us in highlighting how this very traumatic event effects the personal identity that is co-constructed between society and the individual. Critical discursive psychology (CDP) in particular enables us to see how an individual's responses to any given situation can be linked too much wider social and cultural value, including societal morality, religion and personal belief systems.

Also, a major part of CDP entails the concept of constructed identity, in particular the identity of the mother. We must remember that our identity is not the same as the notion of personality which contains stable characteristics that psychologists seek to understand by means of questionnaires and psychological examinations. Davies and Horton - Salaway [12] define identity as 'our theory of ourselves'. This 'theory' is a combination of the way in which we talk about ourselves and the way that other beings feel about us in their talk. Humans construct this personal identity from available resources from birth onwards. To illustrate, parents, other family members, friends, culture, society, religion and other prevalent modalities seek to construct our physical and psychological fluid identity.

Thus it is not a fixed part of the person we are. CDP seeks to examine this identity in the particular time and place that it was set. Johnston (1973) as cited in Davies and Horton - Salaway highlights this notion of social and culturally constructing an identity by expressing 'what you can say you are according to what they say you can be'. Via this media talk, we will be able to envisage their discourse and how it shapes the available identity positions for the mother. As we are not static beings, our interactions vary. This being said, discursive repertories can highlight what impact mothers have on the necessary healing process and its explicit effect on them, society and others surrounding them [12].

This research's endeavour is to bridge the gap left in the current research, by examining the talk within these media sources and to dissect their subject positions and interpretative repertoires. These critically discursive research methods are examined on a micro and

macro level, thus showing that it is possible to assist mothers, who have a greater impact upon familial ties with the settling process after the trauma of abduction and how this in turn will filter through the family psychologically to the children themselves. Our rationale will ask: by examining the talk within the examined newspapers and other media sources, do these display constructed coping as a series of subject positions that we can then take up with the repertories available and does this talk assist mothers to understand the traumatic events psychologically?

Method

The aim of this research paper, is to highlight both the active and constructive elements that are embedded within the media's talk and its social environment that are relevant to the child's abduction by analysing its construction using CDP as a means of methodology [9]. This will enable us to make sense of ourselves as self-interpretive beings. Humans are not separate beings from the cultural, moral and socio-political environments in which we belong ([13], p.32). Discourse refers to language or talk in use or as social action. It refers to language not in the lexicographic sense, but as a form of interaction between human beings, conversation and communication.

The audio data was obtained from the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) Radio Four PM programme, that was published on i-Player, entitled: "The High Street Abduction" [14]. This was then downloaded and transcribed using the Jefferson [15] transcribing talk technique on to a word document (see appendices four, p. 30). Furthermore, a thorough search through the academic Nexis database was carried out for any newspaper or online news data covering the same abduction (see appendices two, p. 12).

Text was carefully selected, so that no one political, social, cultural or religious opinion would dominate the data set as a whole, thus endeavouring to give a contextual overview of talk available to analyse. As there was a considerable amount of text available, both through Nexis, Google and Google Scholar, we made sure that text data was selected for its relationship to talk pertaining to the mother rather than solely on the actual details of the police search operation itself, although some police operation details were left intact for contextual reasons. Furthermore, as the talk was analysed, the present reality outside of this discourse was bracketed out (not focused upon) in order to allow us to solely focus on the material at hand ([16], p.443).

Design

At the beginning of our analysing the audio transcriptions and newspaper data, each article was individually examined, coded and its individual interpretative repertories and subject positions highlighted before examining any patterns that recurred across the talk. This was then carried out for each item of data before any comparisons were carried out to obtain patterns of interpretative repertoires and subject positions.

Although the researcher did not explicitly carry out the interviews concerned, it was necessary to gain ethical approval for this research from the university ethics committee. As our research contained material of a nature that could upset or cause psychological distress, both to the reader and the researcher, measures were put in place to offset such occurrences through supervision and regular communication.

All identities such as names and ethnicity were removed along with any other characteristics that could lead to either the victim or their family or the perpetrators identity becoming apparent ([17], p.8). Also, the researcher ensured that when analysing the data, they carried out a full risk assessment, so that implementation of safety measures could be made ([17], p.16). Data was securely kept in line with the Data Protection Act 2018, by password protecting all information. No information was shared outside of the ethics committee or research team.

Analysis

Discursive psychology starts with the assumption that the reader will understand that any talk is constructed between, in this case, the interviewers and the interviewees. Young (1989, p.153) as cited in Stenner and Taylor ([16], p.443) explains that this "conjuring up" of

information into the discourse of these events happened in the past tense and thus comes from the interviewees memory. The memorised talk by the BBC and other media sources, analysed how these co-constructed dichotomies were examined. A considerable amount of the talk surrounded social, moral and individualised identities, thus revealing a range of subject positions and interpretive repertoires.

To refresh the reader's memory, our rationale, as mentioned within our introduction, asks us that by examining the talk within the examined newspaper and other media sources, do these display constructed coping as a series of subject positions that we can then take up with the repertories available and does this talk assist mothers to understand the traumatic events psychologically? We highlight our main subject positions first.

Subject positions

Subject positions are developed repertoires in which the interviewee's identity is developed further. They pre-exist the discourse in many ways, as their meanings are constructed by society and culture (Davies and Horton - Salaway [12], p.402). This child abduction case is a prime example of this.

1) **Soulless:** Although the discourse does not specify names of individuals, so as to protect the victims and perpetrators and meet ethical concerns, the majority of the media sources removed any personality or soul of the individuals it wanted to highlight. This was especially so with regard to the teenagers who abducted the toddler, assigning them the identity of "kid-nappers" or just as "the pair". Here the media are positioning themselves as moral arbiters on behalf of their readers. They also presume that their readers share the same identity and feelings as each media source does:

   "The Guardian Newspaper - [SB said]: They were playing with her. [The toddler] was running to and from the girls. Her mother was not suspicious, she simply thought the girls were playing with her daughter and were being quite sweet. This went on for some 15 minutes" (A3:658-662).

   "The Daily Star Newspaper - After 15 minutes the pair coaxed the child into a lift, with the older teenager holding her hand, and out of the store. SB continued: "They offered her sweets" (A3:216-218).

2) **Emotions:** But on the other hand, the media regularly positioned the mother in a favourable way using the term 'mother' and 'mum', thus using terms that engendered compassion, sympathy and fellow feeling not just from general society but particularly from other parents and grandparents. By showing a form of deep emotion for her plight, the media clearly positioned themselves on the mothers side, although the mother left her daughter to play with two complete strangers whilst shopping:

   "The Sun Newspaper - Her mum is now determined to treasure every moment with her" (A3:146).

   "The Irish Daily Mirror Newspaper - Her mother was not suspicious, she simply thought the girls were playing with her daughter" (A3:282-283).

3) **Good versus Evil:** Here we see a distinct leaning in the media discourse, socially constructing identities of two distinct groups - good and bad. With the media acting as moral agents, they position the mother and her toddler as good, innocent and naive and positioning the teenage abductees as evil, from disadvantaged poor families. This inference to belonging to a 'broken' family unit', highlights that the media sources position themselves on the politico-social issue of traditional familial unity and that the 'kidnappers' do not belong to such a unit, they do not belong to traditional or a 'normal' part of decent society. The media is quick to highlight that they are already known to social services, thus strongly implying that the family were troublemakers and deviant before this incident. The media also regularly refer to the 'chaos' of parenting that these 'kidnappers' have had over the years which has caused those children to become dysfunctional and dangerous to society:

   "The Daily Mirror Newspaper - [Judge] She continued understandably to have nightmares about what happened and about what might have happened. She won't let her out of her sight any more. She's constantly worrying about her and other children" (A3:336-339).

   "BBC Interview: And listen (.) You can hear him trying to reassure (.) the distraught mother" (A4:705/706).

"BBC Interview: STORE MANAGER: ((Whilst on the phone to police call handler - in background to Mother)) IT'S OK (.) We are doing everything we can. MOTHER: ((Back ground interaction with store manager whilst talking to police call handler)) HELP ME PLEASE! ((VERY DISTRAUGHT)). MOTHER: Literally, my world stopped (0.3) Honestly (.) I could not think straight (.) I could just not stop feeling BAD" (A4:712-717).

"The Guardian Newspaper: JC, defending the younger girl, said her client had been sexually exploited and was "a damaged, vulnerable young girl" (A3:675-676).

BBC Interview: They did not co-operate with the police from the very outset (.) apart from a very brief prepared statements (.) both of which stated that: (.) "they had found a girl (.) inside Primark (.) that they believed lost (.) and they were taking the child home (.) to their mother (0.4) in order to seek advice as to what to do" (A4:979-982).

BBC Interview: DCI: These were two young girls who (.) lived in quite a chaotic home with lot of siblings (0.4) they only seem to have each other as friends (.) spending a lot of time together" (A4:986-987).

4) **Forgiven:** Finally, the media discourse revealed that, on one hand the mother of the toddler forgave the 'evil' children who kidnapped her child but the parents of the kidnappers have persistently obstructed the investigation, blaming the police and toddler's mother for what happened. This deviant subject position highlights once again that the media wish to portray the mother as 'angelic', positioning herself as going even beyond the culturally expected norm towards the defendants and their family by designing a new identity for herself as the ideal mother or member of society. The talk shows this even though they clearly 'have no remorse':

"The Daily Mirror Newspaper: [Judge] "And when attempts were made to find out what was really the case, there were one our two isolated comments made but then they said nothing because members of their family had advised them to say nothing. There may be a conflict of interest between members of the family giving advice to your clients and the advice you are giving your clients" (A3:443-447).

"BBC Interview - MOTHER: I forgive them a long time ago (.) you know. These are children (.) why would you hold (.) something against a child?" (A4:1071 and 1072)

"BBC Interview - MOTHER: Pity (0.6) Pity, Pity. My child is back (0.4) with no idea what happened that day (0.4) she's okay (.) her life has continued normally (0.6) but they (.) what has happened that day (.) ↑ is having more impact on them" (A4:1031-1033).

"The Sun Newspaper: She said: "I do feel for their mother, it must have had an enormous impact on her life too. It is a nightmare on both sides." She must never have imagined her children would go out and take someone else's child." I don't think any parent would imagine their child capable of such a thing."" (A3:137-140).

Interpretative repertoires

Interpretative repertoires bridge a gap between macro and micro discourse. They have socially and culturally available styles that allow them to be understood within the discourse by readers [18]. The repertories contained within the media discourse preform various functions. For example, these allow us to make different distinct identities that the person can use or choose to ignore depending on what they feel is at stake in their interaction.

1) **Distress:** A regular repertoire found within the media sources was the distress that was felt by the mother. For example, we are told that the mother found the situation extremely distressing. This was mentioned in all but one of the thirteen media sources. By this repertoire, the media wanted its readers to feel that it had sympathy for the distressed mother. They wanted its readers to feel what they portrayed, not purely out of sincerity and human kindness, but by connecting with its readers socially and culturally. These accepted feelings and emotions would hope to attract more readers thus increasing their revenue:

"The Irish Daily Mirror Newspaper: However, after the kidnappers enticed her daughter away with sweets, the mum was so 'utterly distraught' she began banging her head on a wall, it was said" (A3:256 and 257).

"The Sun: THE mum of a two-year-old girl snatched from Primark by two sisters has told of the terrifying moment when she realised her daughter had gone" (A3:94 and 95).

"BBC Interview: ANDREW: So picture the scene (0.8) ((baby crying in background)) Primark staff and security guards are searching everywhere (.) store announcements are being made (.) a ↑ mother (0.5) is freaking out! She was seen (.) beating her head against a wall (.) Her child has been gone now (.) for ↓ 25 minutes!" (A4:736-739).

2)   **Trauma:** A further repertoire that we found within the discourse, was the highlighting of how the mother was exposed to severe trauma. For example, one common repertoire found was that the mother was asking many questions and wanted constant contact with her child upon return. These included such actions as holding or cuddling and by allowing the child to see that she was emotionally there for her ([19], p.285). Another common repertoire found is the trauma experienced by the mother. Interestingly however, only one media article briefly mentions the father of the abducted child, although both parents were married, lived together and it was both parents who attended court hearings. This talk shows that the media sources understand the constructive use of the mother's identity here, highlighting pre-conceived cultural thoughts around the importance of the mother figure in a small child's life and that it is still idealised as her responsibility to bring up any such children, even in a 'modern' world with equal rights between sexes within the UK:

"BBC Interview: MOTHER: = ARE YOU STILL LOOKING? =" (A4:733).

"BBC News: [Judge] Her [the mother's] fears are well founded," the judge said" (A2:29).

BBC Interview: ANDREW: Back at Primark, the child's mother, went from :: despair (.) to relief (.) to joy. MOTHER: It was amazing. She's not just be found, but alive and healthy (.) happy (.) oblivious to what has happened to her (.) how much more could a parent ask for ((Sobs)). 5 or 10 minutes after they told me she been found (0.6) It was the best moment. It was like giving birth to her again ((Cries)). You know (.) :: having to hold your child again. I knew she was a bit shaky (not having to see her mom, she was quite clingy, and everything, she was ok (0.6) ◊ she's ok ((Deep sigh)) (A4:928-934).

3)   **Deviance:** The talk shows how the media constructs the notion of 'deviance' or moving away from societal and culturally acceptable 'normal' ways of thinking or morality. One way that the discourse highlighted this, was its continued inference that the children had a malevolent and sadistic disposition:

"The Chronicle On-Line: Police found search terms on a tablet owned by the girls including "kids having sex", "slavery", "abduction", and "people getting raped" (A3:161-162).

"BBC News: He added it was clear some aspect of physical or sexual harm or exploitation would have been carried out if the toddler had not been rescued swiftly" (A2:25 and 26).

"He directed her to vile porn sites and the girls claimed he first suggested they take a child" (A3:136).

Discussion and Conclusion

The subject positions and interpretive repertoires that were contained within the media talk, highlighted constructed identities of each person (mother, kidnappers etc.) or organisation (police, courts etc.). This was achieved by using socially and culturally pre-conceived norms. For example, the concept of using the mother rather than the father goes well beyond the fact that the father was not present at the kidnapping, but uses such inground societal norms that it is the mother's responsibility to provide care and emotional support to young children, like with our abductee. Also, how deviance from the so called societal norms and expectations will not be tolerated. The discourse also revealed both as individual texts and as a whole, that we are constantly positioned by the media into a good versus evil battle, as it were, with the media supporting and championing the 'righteous' and condemning the 'evil' by making sweeping generalisations and attacks on character. For example, we can see how they positioned the children who kidnapped the toddler as faceless souls. Maybe we need to ask ourselves what would have happened if they had not positioned themselves in favour with the mother of the abductee.

Although the discourse does highlight various coping repertories and positions, such as the mother frequently asking for reassurance, the need to understand what was happening, emotionally supporting the victim child and offering a secure environment and stability, the media talk mainly focuses on the abduction details itself along with the personalities of the perpetrators ([19], p.285). The media texts

do not explicitly state psychological interventions that would benefit other mothers who go through such trauma. Instead, by highlighting the context of the discourse, we discover the importance of support from both strangers and those in authority. Also, it reveals the need to discuss such traumatic and stressful life changing events with someone the victim and family feel safe with. By examining the mothers discourse, we see the need for emotional support straight from the start.

Our examination of previous qualitative and empirical research was found to cover American participants, not ones pertaining to the UK, which is important as the social and criminal demographics are different. This can be seen from the fact that in the UK child abductions by other children are the highest increase and incidence of abduction and kidnappings rather than the USA having more parental abductions, especially by fathers, as the highest prevalence [2]. Also, at the time of print, there was no found discursive psychological studies in the field of child abduction when perpetrated by fellow children, especially when the victim is young, which statistical research shows is the most vulnerable age group [20-31].

It would be prudent for more research to be carried out to focus on discursively analysing therapy transcripts of young children who have been victims of abduction perpetrated by children to examine how the psychological and physical harm that was inflicted upon them, especially at a young age, has affected the child's present life and what part of their healing was assisted by the mother. It would also be beneficial to analyse text to discover how those in authority, such as the police, use the media in such abduction cases to further their own organisations agenda. For example, for public relations purposes.

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