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65 Wellesley St. E., Suite 300, Toronto, Ontario, M4Y 1G7 (416) 924-2100 Fax: 924-2930

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Frederick Mathews, Ph.D., C.Psych.
Community Psychologist
Central Toronto Youth Services

Introduction

If you have seen a comedy film or rented a comedy video for your children in the last 10 years chances are you and they will have witnessed scenes about the sexual abuse of boys and young men - and laughed. Impossible? You might not think so by the time you've finished reading this paper.

At a time when female victims are finally finding a voice to express their fears and talk about their experiences, male victims are being laughed at. Not only is violence and sexual abuse directed toward males not taken seriously in North America, it is seen as material for comedy and entertainment! In fact, in many popular culture mediums such as film, videos, comics, and commercials, abused and victimized males are portrayed as objects *deserving* of derision or humourous comments and jokes.

This paper focuses on one of these mediums, namely, comedy films and videos. It is intended for a general readership. The purpose of the paper is to speak out and open a dialogue about the disturbing portrayals of male victimization in comedy films and videos, to locate these portrayals in a social context, and to discuss the potential harm they cause male victims.

Films reviewed in the study were chosen at random from the comedy section of a local video store. The selection process stopped once the author had obtained three films in each of the years between 1982 - 1992. A total of 30 videos were reviewed, out of which 9 contained images of male victimization and abuse.¹

Comedy Films and Videos

Ladybugs (1992)

Rodney Dangerfield stars in this film as an employee of a large company. The company sponsors a girls soccer team, the "Ladybugs", that is doing very poorly in the standings.

¹ Because of the disturbing number of depictions of the abuse of males found in the films reviewed above the author has begun a non-random search of comedy films. Among the comedy videos released in the first three months of 1993, 3 out of 4 reviewed contained scenes exploiting the physical or sexual assault of males - *Honeymoon in Las Vegas*, *Shakes the Clown*, and *My Cousin Vinny*. The first two films exploit for humour males being grabbed or punched in the testicles, the third exploits the sexual assault of males in prison.

The president of the company coerces Dangerfield into becoming the coach of the team and gives him an ultimatum to turn the situation around.

In a desperate attempt to improve the Ladybugs' standing Dangerfield sets out to talk his girlfriend's young and athletic teenage son, Matthew, into dressing up as a girl and playing for the team. In one scene in front of Matthew's school, Dangerfield attempts to engage the reluctant Matthew in his scheme. In this scene Dangerfield is cruising along beside Matthew in a minivan repeatedly asking him to get inside. After several failed attempts by Dangerfield to get him inside the van to talk, a middle age woman (who appears to be a neighbour picking up her grandchildren at the school) asks Matthew, "Who is that man, is he bothering you?". The implication of course is that Dangerfield is a child molester 'cruising' to pick up a young male victim. The misreading of the situation on the part of the woman is played out for humour.

Once Matthew agrees to disguise himself as a girl, he and Dangerfield go to a clothing store to buy a dress and wig. They tell the salesperson that the dress is for his younger sister. The sales clerk is clearly confused and suspicious and her discomfort is played up for humour. At one point Matthew is in a change room and cannot do up the zipper in the back of the dress. He calls Dangerfield in to provide assistance and to help him put the wig on. The change room in which Dangerfield and the boy are standing does not have a door but a pull-across material curtain that is about 18 inches off the floor.

At this point the elderly female neighbour from the previous scene enters the shop with her young granddaughter. After selecting a dress for her she is escorted to a seat in front of the change room to wait for it to be vacated. From her vantage point she can see Dangerfield and Matthew standing toe to toe under the curtain, though she is unaware who these persons are. While sitting there with her granddaughter she hears the conversation between Dangerfield and Matthew, a conversation full of innuendo about sexual abuse. Following, is the dialogue verbatim. No additional comment is necessary.

Dangerfield: "Just remember we've got to be careful. I don't want your mother to find out. She'd kill me."

Boy: "God, I can't believe I'm doing this."

Dangerfield: "Don't worry I'll be finished soon."

Boy: "Ouch, take it easy, that hurts."

Dangerfield: "Don't worry if it's too tight, you'll get used to it."

Wayne's World (1992)

In this film "bad guy" Rob Lowe, a wealthy promoter and competitor with "good guy" Wayne for the attention of the female lead is pulled over by a police officer and anally penetrated with a gloved finger under the guise of searching for drugs. Several scenes later Lowe's anal penetration is exploited again for humour when he is seen getting out of his car walking bow-legged with obvious discomfort.

The Naked Gun 2 1/2 (1991)

In this sequel of the original comedy/farce, Leslie Nielsen returns as the bumbling big city police detective Lt. Frank Dreben. In one scene Nielsen arrives to investigate a crime only to cross paths with his old flame played by Prescilla Presley. She is filmed in slow motion standing in sunlight flinging her hair back and forth. Nielsen stares at her transfixed, provides a detailed voice-over description of her breasts and beauty, and concludes with a statement that she reminds him of his mother, alluding to mother/son incest. At the end of his voice-over another star of the film George Kennedy approaches Nielsen and says, "Frank, snap out of it, you're looking at her like she was your mother for Christ's sake".

A little later in the film Prescilla Presley seeks out Nielsen for old times sake at a restaurant they used to frequent. She finds him and during their dinner conversation Nielsen angers Presley who then walks out of the restaurant. Nielsen stands and calls after her boasting that he is still single and likes it and that he, "Has not had this much sex since (he) was a boy scout leader".

Rambling Rose (1991)

This film starring Laura Dern and Robert Duvall is billed as a comedy/drama. In the film a young woman comes to live-in as a housekeeper with a wealthy family in the depression era southern United States. She befriends the 13 year old son played by Lukas Haas.

In one scene a restless Dern climbs into bed with Haas to talk to him about her love for his father and her confusion. While she is in his bed, Haas asks her if he can explore his natural "curiosity" and touch her breasts. She declines at first but yields after some persistence. Eventually the boy manages to talk her into letting him touch her genitals as well. He subsequently masturbates her to orgasm, though he has no idea what he is doing or what is happening to her. Haas even asks her if her heavy breathing is a sign she is "sick".

After climaxing she becomes aware of herself and pleads repeatedly and tearfully with the young boy not to tell on her. The boy is portrayed as the "seducer" and the sexual contact with an older woman is scripted as a male rite of passage that "he" enjoyed.

Rude Awakening (1989)

This is a film about a group of "hippy" friends who leave 1960's New York to live a communal lifestyle in a Central/South American jungle. They return 20 years later after finding a briefcase containing documents indicating that the U.S. is planning to invade this jungle country. The F.B.I. becomes aware that these persons have this information and set out to catch them.

One of the stars of the film is Eric Roberts, who plays a long-haired, buckskin-wearing, charismatic person with a gift for drawing people out. In one scene of the film he is at a social gathering talking to a tense writer who is portrayed as being "gay". A friend of the writer joins them at which point Eric Roberts is ignored. When Roberts confronts the writer for his rudeness and touches him on the shoulder the writer protests vehemently about being touched, stands up, and tries to get away. Roberts follows the man trying to break through his defenses to get at his discomfort with being touched. In their next scene together the writer is sobbing deeply on Eric Roberts' shoulder and confesses, "He was my uncle, he said it was just going to be a fishing trip". The implication of course is that his uncle sexually molested him as a boy. Also, the script leaves the impression that being sexually assaulted by a man "makes" a male "gay".

In another scene in the film the F.B.I. commanding officer who is chasing Eric Roberts and his friends is seen typing on computer keyboard. He appears to be quite sad, and as we find out, is working on his autobiography. One of his agents walks into the room, picks up a page of the manuscript, and reads the following aloud, "Tears of shame ran down the cheeks of the fat 10 year old. Bend over, my father commanded, and bare your buttocks to me". At this point the F.B.I commander snatches the page out of his hand. Though the actions of the father are not stated specifically, there is an implication that as a young boy the F.B.I. commander may have been either beaten or sodomized by his father.

Private Lessons (1987)

In this film Eric Brown stars as Philly the 15 year old son of a wealthy businessman. Over the course of the film Philly is seduced by a young live-in housekeeper in her twenties (Sylvia Kristal) while his father is away on business. There are numerous scenes depicting the sexual abuse of a boy in the film and the exploitation of power by the housekeeper and a young female school teacher.

As the film opens Philly and a friend are caught by a young female teacher peeking in a window and watching a woman undress. The teacher admonishes Philly and suggests that he needs to get acquainted with girls of a more "appropriate" age. The scene is an important 'marker' in the film which is a story about Philly's coming of age and the evolution of his appreciation of "older" women. As he "matures" through his sexual experiences with the housekeeper (all of which occur over a summer) Philly runs into this teacher again at the end of the film. She fails to recognize him at first because of his more "mature" appearance and presence. He reminds her of their earlier conversation about the need for Philly to find girls of a more appropriate age and asks her if he can take her to dinner to, "Discuss it in detail". She first appears astonished at his invitation then smiles coyly and nods acceptance.

The slow process of seduction of Philly occurs over many scenes. In one scene Kristal catches Philly spying on her while she is getting ready for bed. She invites him in to her bedroom and slowly strips naked in front of him. Philly exits this scene with some astonishment and embarrassment. In another scene Philly catches her in his father's bath

tub taking a bubble bath. She invites him to wash her back then to get into the bath with her. Eventually he agrees but only if he can wear his bathing trunks. She eventually talks him out of the trunks and touches his penis. At this point Philly becomes visibly shocked and runs out of the bathroom with Kristal in pursuit. She apologizes and suggests they make up for any hard feelings by sleeping together. He doesn't really understand her request and appears uncomfortable. Ultimately, he manages to slip away but only after Kristal gives him a long and seductive kiss.

Eventually they start going out on dates and have intercourse. With each subsequent sexual encounter Philly becomes more "manly" in appearance, starts wearing suits, parts his hair on the side and eliminates his boyish bangs.

The film is written to portray the seduction of the young male by the older female "teacher/lover" who initiates him into sex as a rite of passage into manhood. Philly, uncomfortable with her advances at the beginning of the film, "comes around" and is shown maturing into a "man" before the audiences eyes.

Volunteers (1985)

In this film Tom Hanks stars as a wealthy, spoiled, and entrepreneurial Yale graduate who joins the Peace Corps to escape the clutches of thugs to whom he owes money. He ends up in a rural village in Thailand working on a project to construct a bridge.

While in the village he befriends an English-speaking Thai male named Atun who appears to be in his late teens. This association leads to various misadventures including the two of them being taken prisoner by a local black marketeer, Mr. Mee, a person Tom Hanks has trouble taking seriously. While tied up in the back of a truck enroute to Mr. Mee's palace Tom Hanks makes a remark about how fortunate it is to be invited to Mr. Mee's home and how he intends to exploit the "invitation". His young companion warns him not to joke because Mr. Mee has a "testicle collection".

Once inside the palace the young male is slapped on the buttocks by one of three immense and semi-nude sumo-type palace guards. The guards' sexual interest in the young male is obvious. As the large skull-festooned doors of the palace close the young man warns Tom Hanks not to say anything because the guards want to, "Use (him) like a woman" to which Hanks replies, "Well you'll just have to show them that you can take it like a man".

In a later scene Hanks and his young companion return to the palace to rescue a fellow Peace Corps worker kidnapped by Mr. Mee. The person they set out to rescue is Hank's romantic interest. As part of the plan to rescue the woman the young male has to distract the three large guards while Hanks slips past them. Hanks reminds the young man that the guards, "Like (him) a lot", and then sends him out to "seduce" and distract them by borrowing a cigarette and asking them if, "They come here alot".

Police Academy II (1985)

In this sequel to the original *Police Academy* the misadventures of police cadets in training continue. In one scene in the film, the antagonistic hard-nosed Lt. Mauser is held down by two male medical assistants and is anally penetrated with a gloved finger by a large, strong, rough-looking nurse. When he protests she tells the two assistants to, "Shut him up", at which point they tape his mouth closed. At this point the nurse pulls on a rubber glove, wiggles her fingers and says to the victim, "We'll talk later". The sergeant is set up for this anal penetration by the star of the film, Steve Guttenberg, a practical joker seeking revenge for all the intimidating the lieutenant does of his fellow cadets.

Airplane II: The Sequel (1982)

In this film Peter Graves stars as a scatter brained pilot of a commercial space shuttle. In one scene he is seen in the cockpit talking to a young boy who has brought his dog "Scraps" along on the flight. Graves asks the boy if he can hold the dog. Graves checks the dog's genitals and declares that Scraps is a "boy" dog. At this point the dog growls implying he is suspicious of Grave's "interest" in his genitals. Graves then turns to the boy and asks him if he likes when Scraps, "Wraps his paws around (his) leg and rubs up and down." The conversation and the entire scene is highly sexualized.

In an early scene in the film, the camera pans down the rows of seats as passengers board and settle in for the flight. The camera focuses in on a priest who is reading a magazine called "Altar Boy". On the cover of the magazine is a small altar boy wearing his gown with his hands together in prayer. After a few seconds the priest turns the magazine sideways implying that he is looking at a 'centerfold', presumably of a nude altar boy.

The Social Context

The videos reviewed in this paper were drawn from a random sample of 30 comedy films made in the last ten years. Films made before 1982, or videos in other categories such as drama, action, or science fiction, etc. were not reviewed so it is impossible to comment on how widespread these images are in films in general. It is disturbing, and perhaps a sad commentary on our awareness of male victims, that images such as these could be found in 30% of a random sample from a neighbourhood video store.

It is interesting to note that in sharp contrast to the stereotype that only males sexually abuse, females were victimizers in 3 of the 9 films. In fact, there were 4 female victimizers portrayed in total, compared to 11 males.

The victimization of males in these films and videos is easily overlooked or dismissed as not being serious because of our societal norms and values which support and tolerate violence against males. It may be easier to recognize our 'blindness' to this tolerance by invoking the stereotype of 'female always' victim/'male always' offender. Flip the gender of the victim or perpetrator back and forth while reading the descriptions of the scenes above. Can the reader imagine these scenes evoking laughter if they portrayed girls or

young women being victimized in the same manner or if adult males were seducing female minors?

'Violence against males' does not exist as a concept in our society. It has been 'cultured-out' of our awareness and rendered invisible to a great extent by our process of gender role socialization. For example, males generally in our society are socialized to compete with one another, to exercise power over others, to win at the game or else take your lumps *like a man*. We encourage males to "take charge", be aggressive, be the sexual initiators, and not show their feelings. In short to be *not like women*. When a boy or a young man is victimized he can be condemned, ridiculed, or shamed for not being "man enough" to protect or defend himself. To be victimized is to be *like a woman*, according to our present gender role scripts, a status that males learn to devalue and avoid for fear of being labelled "weak".

Another problem is the widespread ignorance about the prevalence of the abuse of boys. In the U.S., a review of numerous studies about sexual abuse concluded that approximately 15% of all sexual abuse cases involved boy victims (Showers et al., 1983). In Canada, the National Population Survey determined that 25% of the victims of child sexual abuse are boys (Badgley Report, 1984). In Metropolitan Toronto, the Task Force on Public Violence Against Women and Children (1983) found that 2 in 5 victims were boys. Though these figures present a disturbing picture, it should be noted that the incidence of male victimization remains vastly underreported, perhaps more so than it is for females.

It is also important to keep in mind that the history of the child abuse field, particularly in the area of sexual abuse, is closely tied to the courageous struggles of the women's movement. Women have fought for years to bring the problem of violence against females to public attention. Yet, in spite of years of hard work and tireless advocacy women's struggle in the area of violence is far from over. Violence against females is still invisible in many ways and there remains much public resistance to acknowledge women's fear of harm. Imagine, then, how much more difficult it is for boys and young men to speak up when males are seen as the victimizers of women and female children! Male victims must contend with the history of the sexual abuse field that has given victims a female face, offenders a male face.

To be sure, women have paved the way for boys and men to begin talking about their own suffering. In fact, there likely would be no men's movement, victim or otherwise, if it hadn't been for the women's movement. Men owe women an enormous debt for this, a debt that can never be repaid. However, there is presently little receptivity to the claims of males for a voice to name their male and female victimizers or to talk about their own experiences of violence. Advocates for male victims often encounter accusations of being "reactionary" when they try to add their voices to the discourse on violence.

Indeed, the nascent male victims movement is struggling against a strong cultural and political tide of minimization, denial, and resistance. Many male victims still do not feel their stories are welcome and experience rejection similar to that encountered by female

victims 20 years ago when sexual abuse first started to surface as an issue in Canada and the United States. Though stories in the media about the abuse of boys by priests, teachers, volunteers, professional persons, and others in church and community centers, training schools, daycare centers, and orphanages, etc., have opened a door for more male victims to come forward, most continue to be silent.

The simple truth is males *cannot* be victims; males must take care of themselves. Victimized males have few resources available to them even when they do decide to seek help. Boys or young men are seldom taken seriously when they try to share their feelings of confusion, fear, or pain when they are victimized by an older woman or female teen. After all, girls get sexually assaulted and hate it but boys are "seduced" and are supposed to enjoy it or be grateful for the experience. Females *may* be blamed for their victimization; males will almost *certainly* be.

Unlike a female, when a male is abused by another male or a female his whole personal and sexual identity *as a man* is called into question. If he is sexually victimized by a woman and does not enjoy it he could be condemned for being both weak and a "sissy". If he is victimized by a male and experiences physical pleasure from any part of the abuse his sexual orientation will be called into question. Being labelled "gay" is similar to being labelled "sissy", both are anathema to a young male growing up in a sexist and homophobic culture. Little permission is given to boys and young men to discuss openly doubts or concerns about their sexuality, sexual orientation, or "masculinity" as a result of being abused.

We need to begin talking more seriously about violence against males because males comprise the majority of victims in most categories of violent crime. And, we need to do this without diminishing or minimizing the struggle of women to bring their concerns about violence out into the public domain or without ignoring the very real inequities in power between men and women that have a direct bearing on women's experience of violence and other forms of harm in our society. This is not a competition to say who has suffered the most. The child abuse field and victims' movements can only be strengthened by males and females joining together.

However, many 'silences' remain around the issue of male victimization. When we talk about 'domestic' or 'family violence' rarely do we give specific mention to the boys and teen males who are abused, beaten, and sexually assaulted by moms, dads, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and other family members. When we talk about 'violence against women and children' rarely do we give specific mention to the fact that a large number of those children are male. When we talk about 'violence against women and children' we exclude both teen males and females.

When we talk about 'male violence against women and children' we also need to account for the research evidence that suggests women and mothers physically abuse male and female children as much as or more than men and fathers (see Gelles, 1987). Women and teen girls also sexually abuse boys and girls, though in far fewer numbers than men and teen males. Large numbers of both boys and girls are abused by women in daycare

settings (Finkelhor & Williams, 1988). Women also consume the services of teen males and females involved in a lifestyle of prostitution, though again, in far fewer numbers than men (Badgley Report, 1984). When it comes to abuse of the physically disabled, males are just as likely as females to be abused. In fact, the sexual and physical abuse of the disabled is an area desperate for attention.

It is evident that we are far from having given a voice to all who have been victimized and abused, and far from having articulated all the dimensions to the problem of violence in our society. Breaking the silence around the victimization of males will certainly be an important part of breaking the cycle of violence. There is likely a strong connection between the societal tolerance of violence against males, the widespread victimization of boys and teen males, and the predominance of male-perpetrated violence. These linkages need to be discussed openly and researched more fully.

The Harm to Male Victims

It is not too difficult to imagine what goes through the mind of a boy, or a man victimized as a boy, who watches the films reviewed in this paper and hears the laughter of those around him; they would likely shame and silence him. He would also learn a powerful lesson about the permission males have to speak out against their victimization and their male and female victimizers.

Why is it important for all caring persons to challenge the negative and humorous portrayals of male victims in films and other popular culture mediums?

- 1. They are potentially harmful to abused boys and young men and may interfere with their healing.*
- 2. They are sexist and affirm and reinforce stereotypes about gender roles that are harmful to males.*
- 3. They blame and shame male victims and force them to remain silent about what happened to them.*
- 4. They support the cultural and political minimization and denial about violence against males.*
- 5. They hinder the development of a more wide ranging discussion of the extent and scope of the problem of violence and child abuse in our society.*
- 6. By discouraging disclosures by males they feed the silence that supports and encourages more violence and abuse against all persons in our society.*
- 7. By discouraging disclosures by males they hinder the undertaking of research and the development of programs for male victims.*

8. They protect their abusers against full accountability and support their minimization and denial.

9. They legitimize violence against boys and young men.

10. They diminish the harm done to male victims and teach us to view the abuse and victimization of males as less than serious or funny.

Conclusion

The essential point here is about imagination and the kind of anti-violent society we want to create and the kind of vision we hope to inspire in our young. Depictions of any persons that are negative and victimizing hurt us all and are unnecessary. They appeal to the lowest common denominator and do little to foster healing in our society. As long as we do not challenge such images we draw a circle that leaves those who are thus portrayed outside our problem definitions, outside our search for solutions, and outside our compassion. As long as the victimization of males is treated as a joke we will, as a society, stifle the power, creativity, and energy males can bring to a partnership with women in a collective struggle to reduce and hopefully eliminate violence in our society.

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