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# Mystification and social agent absences: a critical discourse analysis using evolutionary psychology

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## Abstract

One focus in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been the detection of absences from texts which mystify the social agents being described. This is the focus of this article, the text-data coming from a UK newspaper website campaign to allow parents access to information about child sex offenders. CDA is explicit about being politically committed in its text analysis. But this commitment becomes problematic when CD analysts are analysing texts to assess how texts are likely to mystify readers generally. To make such assessments valid, I argue that analysts need to try to reduce the intrusion of their own subjectivity especially if they are not members of the target readership. CDA is theoretically eclectic, but absent from its theoretical sources is biologically-based explanation.

This article contributes to mystification analysis in CDA. Using the text-data mentioned above as illustration, I show the following: how evolutionary psychology, a biologically-grounded paradigm, can be used as a lens over potentially any text-data relating to child sex offenders to highlight social agent absences which are mystifying for readers generally, while simultaneously reducing analyst subjectivity. The article also contributes more generally to CDA methodology for the detection of mystifying absences from texts.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Orientation

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a branch of linguistics that is concerned, broadly-speaking, with highlighting the traces of cultural and ideological meaning in spoken and written texts (see, for example, Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard, 1996; Fairclough, 1992, 2001; Hodge and Kress, 1993; Weiss and Wodak, 2003). It has become well-established drawing on a number of research methodologies and analytical approaches (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). One particular focus in CDA is to highlight how texts can obscure or mystify the events being described and more specifically mystify the nature of the social agents associated with the event.<sup>1</sup> This article is concerned with this particular focus in CDA and with the problem of analyst subjectivity in the following: assessing a text as being mystifying, for readers generally, of events and associated social agents, and so not just from the perspective of the analyst. In relation to text-data on child sex offenders (this phrase henceforth, unless otherwise stated, referring to adults who sexually abuse children), I address this problem, offering a solution through employment of the biologically-based paradigm of Evolutionary Psychology. First, though, in 1.2 some background on the problem of analyst subjectivity in CDA.

### 1.2. The problem of analyst subjectivity in CDA

One of the charges made against CDA in recent years is that it merely makes partial readings of text-data, subjective interpretations of text-data in line with the commitments, the political values, etc. of the individual analyst (Widdowson, 1995); a related charge is that CD analysts neglect to pick up on aspects of a text which may be in tension with their interpretations (Widdowson, 1998). CDA's explicitness about being committed in analysis of texts is understandable from a diagnostic viewpoint. Many, if not most critical discourse analysts are left-liberal, politically-speaking. When critical discourse analysts look at texts to diagnose their values, ideologies, etc., it is because many of these values are problematic from a left-liberal perspective. So it would be difficult not to be politically committed in such analysis. And indeed, critical discourse analysts (e.g. Fairclough, 1996) have argued that it is impossible to analyse a text without such commitment, the intrusion of the analyst's subjectivity being a normal part of any hermeneutic procedure. But this commitment becomes problematic when CD analysts are analysing texts to assess how texts are likely to be *read generally*. Indeed, it becomes even more problematic when critical discourse analysts do this kind of analysis by proxy when they are not members of the target readership (see O'Halloran and Coffin, 2004). One kind of analysis by proxy is mystification analysis.

In hard news reports of demonstrations, conflicts, wars, etc. where people are killed or injured, CDA is on reasonably safe ground in its analysis of mystification and its

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<sup>1</sup> The branch of CDA which is concerned, in part, with locating and describing mystifying language is known as Critical Linguistics (Fowler et al., 1979; Hodge and Kress, 1993). See also Fairclough and Wodak (1997) on where Critical Linguistics is situated in CDA.

highlighting of absences of social agents. This is because it is difficult to argue for such scenarios (assuming human agency for deaths and injuries is known to the journalist) that finding an absence of human agency is merely a personal interpretation. With regard to news text, CD analysts have focused on the absence of social agents as a result of nominalisation (e.g. 'the killing of the demonstrators'), short passivisation (e.g. 'the demonstrators were killed') or insufficient specification of agency in a news text (e.g. 'gunmen killed the demonstrators').<sup>2</sup> If it is further assumed that agency could not be inferred from elsewhere in a hard news text, then a social agent absence from such a text stands a good chance of being an absence for readers generally, particularly if they are reading for gist. This is because such readers do not habitually look for absences in their reading of hard news texts (see O'Halloran, 2003).

If CD analysts are on reasonably safe ground, under the above conditions, in highlighting absent social agents from hard news texts, what about social agent absences in other instances? How is CDA best able to detect social agent absences which are mystifying for readers generally, from texts which are not part of the hard news register, while at the same time avoiding the charge that they have been detected subjectively by the analyst? Presumably a case can be made that the theoretical commitments of a particular paradigm make it especially suited for the following: using it as a lens on appropriate text-data in order to detect potentially mystifying social agent absences, absences which would be *expected* to be presences from the perspective of the paradigm. Though the paradigm may be disagreed with, because the social agent absence would be detected via the epistemological commitments of a particular paradigm, at least the analyst's own subjectivity would be reduced in analysis.

### 1.3. *Content and structure of this paper*

The text-data for analysis in this article comes from a website campaign by the UK Sunday newspaper, *The News of the World*, a campaign for parents to have access to information on child sex offenders. A key argument of this article is that an appropriate paradigm for detecting mystifying social agent absences from potentially any text-data relating to child sex offenders is the biologically-based paradigm known as Evolutionary Psychology. Despite CDA's eclecticism (Weiss and Wodak, 2003), it has not dwelt on or drawn upon biologically-based explanations of sex differences even though evolutionary psychological explanations have entered the popular domain<sup>3</sup> and CDA concerns itself with social change and the ebb and flow of current discourses (e.g. Fairclough, 1992). It is the social construction of gender which has informed CDA. To be sure, explanation based on gender social construction is highly appropriate for text-data relating to many arenas of human activity, in, for example, showing inequities in the representations of women as against those of men in job advertisements (Mills, 1995). But there are arenas of human

<sup>2</sup> See van Leeuwen (1996: 38).

<sup>3</sup> For example, see 'Rogue Males: What Makes Young Muslim Men Turn to Terrorism' by Lionel Tiger in *The Guardian* (2 October 2001). This newspaper article drew on EP to illuminate why the perpetrators of the September 11th 2001 atrocities in New York were all young men. More recently in *The Observer* (24 August 2003), the journalist Jonathan Heawood writes: 'we take it for granted now that evolutionary biology, among other things, helps us to understand human behaviour'.

behaviour where a biological mode of explanation is an appropriate focus, areas such as explaining typical types of sexual abusers of children.

It is with the eclectic tradition of CDA in mind that I will do the following: illustrate via the text-data mentioned above how Evolutionary Psychology: (i) can be used as a lens on potentially any text-data relating to child sex offenders to detect social agent absences which can lead to mystification for readers generally; (ii) crucially at the same time reduce analyst subjectivity in this detection. I do this in Section 5. But first, in Section 2, I outline Evolutionary Psychology and discuss it in relation to how it illuminates the nature of child sex offenders. In Section 4, I provide some background on the tabloid website campaign.

## 2. Evolutionary psychology and child sex offenders

### 2.1. *General ideas from evolutionary psychology*

Because Evolutionary Psychology (from now on EP) has not been drawn upon in CDA, this section provides an outline of EP and shows its explanatory power in relation to typical types of sexual abusers of children (since sexual abuse of children is the topic of the text-data we shall meet). As I said above, EP has entered popular consciousness in its explanations of sex differences. This has partly been as a result of many of its central academic thinkers writing books aimed at a wider reading public (e.g. Miller, 2000; Pinker, 1997, 2002; Wrangham and Peterson, 1997). One of the central figures in EP is Steven Pinker, who to linguists is well known for his best-seller, 'The Language Instinct' (Pinker, 1994). Because of space constraints here in setting up EP, I will draw heavily on another of Pinker's books, 'How the Mind Works', a book written for both general readers as well as professional academics (Pinker, 1997: x).

The defining issue for EP is that aspects of our psychology are inherited from our hominid ancestors. Natural selective pressures would have affected our ancestors in the 4 million years or so of hominid evolution, continuing when *Homo sapiens* emerged about 150,000 years ago. Because natural selection of adaptations which promoted reproductive success took an enormous amount of time, much longer than 150,000 years, EP holds that the adaptations of our hominid ancestors still affect us. While we live in the modern world, for EP our minds are in many ways adapted for the stone-age (Pinker, 1997).

EP contends that the mating strategies of our male and female ancestors would have differed. A male with 50 female partners could have had numerous children, but for a female with 50 male partners, there would have been no real benefit in terms of reproductive quantity. Since reproductive quantity paid for males, EP argues that natural selection would have favoured males who had an appetite for multiple mates and a disposition to strive mightily for them. Aside from this arithmetical argument, the difference in parental investment must also have been a vital factor for natural selection. Since females, not males, can become pregnant, the former are then the greater-investing sex, parentally-speaking. Natural selection would have favoured females who chose prudently—for resources, protection, good genes. That is, the greater parental-investing sex biologically-speaking was (and on EP's rationale still is) more likely to be the chooser; the lesser parental-investing sex biologically-speaking was (and again on EP's rationale

still is) more likely to be the competitor. So, 'selection would therefore have favoured in men, but not in women, psychological adaptations to promote the pursuit of low-cost reproductive opportunities' (Salmon and Symons, 2001: 39). Given these psychological adaptations, EP also expects:

“natural selection to have produced psychological adaptations specialised to detect and use reliable information about mate value in the context of mate selection.”

Salmon and Symons (2001: 32)

One empirical study, Buss (1994), lends support to the point just made that natural selection would have favoured psychological adaptations to help detect cues about mate value. The study attempted to ascertain what men and women look for in a potential mate by asking subjects to select and rank from a list of the same criteria. It was conducted on 6 continents, involving 10,000 subjects belonging to both traditional foraging cultures as well as modern cultures; in fact 37 cultures in all, embracing monogamy, polygamy, liberalism, communism, capitalism, different religions, etc. Buss (1994) reports that universally men place a higher value than women on youth and on looks. On average men want a bride 2.66 years younger; women want a groom 3.42 years older. For EP, youth and looks are indicators of female sexual reproductive value. This explains why male sexuality is linked more intensely with visual stimuli and thus ease of arousal, this ease being in line with low-cost reproductive opportunities. Here again are Salmon and Symons (2001: 59–60):

“The fact that videos and, in the last few years, the internet so thoroughly dominate male-oriented erotica testifies to the deeply visual nature of male sexuality.”

And on the converse of this, here is Pinker (1997: 472):<sup>4</sup>

“It would make no sense for a woman to be easily aroused by the sight of a nude male. A fertile woman never has a shortage of willing sexual partners, and in that buyer's market she can seek the best husband available, the best genes . . .”

## 2.2. (Child) sex offenders: male nature and male behaviour

It is due in part to this sexual dimorphism, and thus the greater ease of arousal through visual stimuli in men than in women, that an EP perspective can help to explain why sexual offences are overwhelmingly committed by men, evidenced in the following prison data for England and Wales (June 1999)<sup>5</sup>:

	<b>Imprisoned for Sexual Offences</b>	<b>Prison Population</b>
<i>Male</i>	4,929 (99.7% of total imprisoned sex offenders)	48,956
<i>Female</i>	17 (0.3% of total imprisoned sex offenders)	2,436

<sup>4</sup> Pinker (1997: 472) continues: “Symons (1979) points out that women are more choosy than men in consenting to sex, but once they have consented, there is no reason to believe they are any less responsive to sexual stimulation.”

<sup>5</sup> Cullen and Minchin (1999).

This is not, of course, to say that men are biologically motivated to commit sex offences. Rather, it is that a key aspect of such behaviour (which would be in tandem with other factors such as personal dysfunction, abnormality, cruelty, etc.) is associated with the greater potential in men for ease of arousal.

A more specific EP invoking of the male/female dimorphism, with regard to child sex offenders, is found in [Medicus and Hopf \(1990: 142\)](#):

“The male/female dimorphism helps in explaining why adult human sexual behaviour with children and adolescents is almost exclusively an adult male phenomenon.” [Medicus and Hopf \(1990: 142\)](#)

In terms of visual cues, and thus relating to the visual nature of male sexuality, [Medicus and Hopf \(1990: 139\)](#) indicate how some body traits of children, such as smooth skin, relative hairlessness, and softness can have similarities with adult females for male child sex offenders. [Medicus and Hopf \(1990\)](#) refer to sexual offences against children as being an almost exclusively adult male phenomenon. Indeed, in the UK less than 5% of sex offences against children are committed by women, many of which actually involve coercion by a male partner ([Grubin, 1998](#)). That the overwhelming number of sex offences against children is committed by men is, from the perspective of EP, for the same reason that the overwhelming number of sex offences is committed by men. A final point in this paragraph: though what constitutes an offence in sexual terms is socially constructed, an EP point of view unpacks the above figures as showing that the greater potential of men than women for sexual offending is not socially constructed.

Biological modes of explanation are sometimes perceived as espousing genetic determinism—the idea that genes determine human behaviour. EP, however, stresses the importance of environmental factors, making a distinction between human nature which is fixed (i.e. our genetic endowment) and human behaviour which is not. Human behaviour is the mediation of social environment with human nature ([Tooby and Cosmides, 1992](#); [Cronin, 2000](#)). So to contextualise and elaborate upon what I outlined about child sex offenders above: from an EP perspective, a key aspect of male nature helps to explain why male (child) sexual offenders vastly outweigh female offenders—because of the greater potential for ease of arousal. However, why only *certain* men commit this kind of behaviour has to be explained via their upbringing, other factors relating to social environment, aspects of their own psychology, etc. This does not mean, though, that nature factors and nurture factors necessarily operate independently in influencing whether a male will end up as a sexual offender. It is quite possible, for example, that boys can be raised in an environment where sexual abuse of other people (children or adults) is implicitly condoned or even explicitly encouraged. Should a male end up as a sexual offender in such a context, then nurture would be acting inextricably with nature.

### 2.3. *Step-relations and sexual abuse of children*

[Daly and Wilson \(1988\)](#) contains an EP perspective on infanticide and sexual abuse of children. When Daly and Wilson looked at mid-70s statistics of infanticide in North America, they found that in the USA, a child living with one or more step-parents was

about 100 times as likely to be fatally abused as a child living with biological parents. In their 1983 study of Hamilton, Ontario in Canada, statistics showed that, for children of 2 or younger, the risk of child abuse by a step-parent was about 40 times that of abuse by a biological parent. 'Abuse' here ran the gamut of baby battering to sexual molestation of older children. These figures are especially significant given that step-parents are much smaller in number than biological parents. [Daly and Wilson \(1988\)](#) are explicit in stressing that rates of step-parent infanticide or sexual abuse are small, but that rates of infanticide or sexual abuse by biological parents are significantly smaller. For EP, these data provide strong support for the existence of childcare modules in humans that help parents channel parental investment preferentially towards their children. For EP, the much higher rates of abuse and infanticide are a by-product of parental care adaptations failing to fully activate in step-parents.

Infanticide by step-parents is usually by step-fathers rather than by step-mothers and sometimes as a finale to sexual abuse ([Daly and Wilson, 1988](#)). Likewise, sexual abuse by a parent which does not lead to infanticide is usually by a step-father.<sup>6</sup> This is because of: (i) a by-product of parental care adaptations failing to fully activate and (ii) the reasons given in 2.2 why sexual offences are overwhelmingly committed by men. As [Pinker \(1997: 458\)](#) says, between half and three-quarters of all reported incest cases are between step-fathers and step-daughters, usually initiated by the step-father; the majority of other cases are between father and daughter, involving almost always coercion by the father. [Pinker \(1997: 459\)](#) does, though, provide some qualification on his comments on step-fathers:

“Fathers who sexually abuse their daughters tend to have spent less time with them when they were small. Step-fathers who have had as much contact with their young step-daughters as biological fathers do are no more likely to abuse them.”

This is explained by [Pinker \(1997: 458\)](#) by the Westermarck Effect, after the 19th century anthropologist, who held that it is growing up in intimate closeness with a person in their early years which provides the key information used by the mind to categorise the child as 'son' or 'daughter'. Finally, as well as discussing step-father abuse, [Pinker \(1997: 457, 458\)](#) also addresses the issue of why incest between brother and sister is more likely to be initiated by the brother as well as being much more likely to be initiated by a step-brother:<sup>7</sup>

“A hypothetical ancestral girl made pregnant by a brother or father would be precluded from having a child with a nonrelative for the nine months of pregnancy,

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<sup>6</sup> In Finland, a 1996 study of over 3700 girls found that sexual abuse of a step-father was 15 times as common as incest by a biological father ([Sariola and Uutela, 1996](#)). Of the 198 reported cases of paternal child sexual abuse in England between 1983 and 1985, in roughly 46% of the cases the offenders were step-fathers and 54% were biological fathers, even though only 4.6% of all children were living with a step-father and 63% of all children were living with both biological parents ([Gordon and Creighton, 1988](#)).

<sup>7</sup> The following is from [Grubin \(1998: 21\)](#) on adolescent child sex offenders and contains numerical data which relates to abuse in the home:

“A database holding information on over 1,600 adolescent sex offenders in North America has been compiled by the National Adolescent Perpetrator Network (Ryan et al., 1996) . . . the vast majority of victims (91%) were between the ages of 3 and 16, with nearly two thirds under the age of 9.39% of victims were related to the offender and lived in the same household, while only 6% of victims were strangers.”

and were she to keep the baby, for another two to four years of nursing. She wastes a precious opportunity for reproduction on a child that may be deformed. Incest should be thoroughly repugnant. But a male who impregnates his sister or daughter could be adding to the number of offspring he sires, because her pregnancy does not foreclose his impregnating someone else. There is a risk that the child will be deformed, but if it isn't, the child is a sheer bonus (more accurately, the extra dose of his genes in that child are the bonus). Incest repugnance might be weaker, making him more likely to cross the line. It is a special case of the lower costs of reproduction for males and their less discriminating sexual desire . . . For step-fathers and step-brothers there is no genetic cost at all."

#### 2.4. *EP and non-biological explanations for sexual abuse of children*

From an EP perspective on the statistics I presented in the last section, the ratio of very high male (child) sex offenders to very low female (child) sex offenders is highly likely to be universally stable, since EP is an epistemological perspective which goes beyond time and place. Non-biological perspectives (see, for example, Finkelhor, 1984) usually argue that the reason men, not women, overwhelmingly commit (child) sex crime is due to social factors only (e.g. males are not socialised into preparing for motherhood while females are, making the latter less likely to abuse children). But from a non-biological viewpoint, the ratio of very high male (child) sex offenders to very low female (child) sex offenders would not be stable. This is because with a change in societal conditions fewer men (and perhaps more women) may become child sex offenders.

A sole non-biological argument with regards to the prospect of growth in the number of female child sex offenders is, however, problematic. One reason is because of analogy with feminist predictions in the 1970s, due to changing social conditions, of an explosion in female crime which has not occurred (Wrangham and Peterson (1997: 114). But a crucial reason why a non-biological explanation is limited is that EP's explanation is itself limited—in the sense of its scope of application. While EP can provide a key reason why sexual abuse of children is overwhelmingly committed by men, EP cannot say why only certain men commit such offences. Equally, EP can explain why step-fathers and step-brothers are more likely to commit offences than biological fathers and brothers, but not why only certain step-fathers and step-brothers do. Since a biological perspective is explanatorily insufficient with regards to child sex offenders, why should a non-biological perspective alone be explanatorily sufficient? Lastly, while EP endorses the ratio of male to female offenders as likely to be stable, it does not endorse the statistics for the *number of men* who commit these crimes. Since the latter will need a fair degree of explanation from a non-biological perspective, such statistics would on such a perspective be regarded as unstable.

Statistics for sexual abuse of children, as for any crime, are descriptions of behaviour in specific times and places. However, because they are descriptions and not explanations of such behaviour, how do we know whether such statistics for one era might apply to a contemporary setting? How do we know whether such statistics for one country or culture apply to others? On a solely non-biological explanation, where it is societal conditions only which explain why adults who sexually abuse children are overwhelmingly men, it



becomes harder to apply statistics from one context to another. This is for the simple reason that conditions will vary to different extents from society to society. EP, however, being a universal epistemological perspective beyond time and place, thus provides an 'explanatory glue'. It enables statistics for sexual abuse of children in, say, Canada to apply to the UK context in telling us who are likely to be typical offenders in the UK.

### 3. The value of EP for detecting social agent absences from texts

Because EP discriminates offenders from an epistemological perspective which goes beyond time and place, this means that EP can also be used as the following: a lens on potentially *any* text-data relating to sexual abuse of children (e.g. not just North American) to highlight the likely social agents as being (i) step-fathers (ii) step-brothers (and to a lesser extent brothers); (iii) fathers who have not had intimate closeness with the child in the early years. Because EP is an explanatory framework rather than a descriptive one, this can be done without the laborious process of searching for and consulting statistics on child sex offenders.

Such statistics may, indeed, be problematic in themselves or misleadingly presented. Any crime statistics are always likely to be incomplete since they are statistics based on recorded crimes only. Furthermore, child sex offenders are 'a heterogenous group of individuals' (Grubin, 1998: v) and so, given this, statistics may not be discriminating enough in how they represent this heterogeneity. Statistics may not be discriminating enough in other senses: for example, because of 'the failure of (UK) official statistics to differentiate the age of the victim in relation to many sexual offences' (Grubin, 1998: 3). As Grubin goes on to say, as a result it is not always possible to determine accurately the numbers of sexual offences against children that result in cautions, prosecutions or convictions. Given all of the above, it is quite possible to present statistics relating to abuse of children in a misleading or confusing way. Indeed, Grubin (1998: 18) in referring to an often quoted series of studies of sexual deviancy (Abel et al., 1987, 1988; Abel and Rouleau, 1990), says the following:

'Unfortunately, the results are presented in a confusing manner which makes it difficult to differentiate specific offender groups and deviant behaviours, with many individuals and behaviours counted more than once.'

How statistics can be presented in such a way as to make it difficult to differentiate specific offender groups will become apparent in Section 5.

Due to the potential for presenting statistics on sexual abuse of children in a misleading way, another advantage of EP is that it can be used to 'see through' any potentially misleading presentation of such statistics. Shortly, we shall look at some text-data on child sex offenders to illustrate how EP can show whether or not the representation of social agents in any such text-data is mystifying. Moreover, EP can be used to do this for any such text-data relating to other contexts (different countries, different periods of history, etc.) where statistics are unavailable or where statistics are incomplete.

As I mentioned in Section 1, the text-data in this article is part of The Campaign text from the website of the UK Sunday tabloid, *The News of the World*. In Section 4, I provide

some social and situational context for this text-data. In Section 5, I use EP as a lens on the text to detect social agent absences and to help me organise the analysis, I draw on part of van Leeuwen's (1996) scheme in CDA for analysing the degree of determination of social agents. I then go on to argue that these representations are likely to be mystifying for readers generally, and because their detection is theoretically constrained, analytical subjectivity is reduced.

#### 4. The campaign text from 'forsarah.com'

##### 4.1. Introduction

In July 2000, *The News of the World*, a UK tabloid newspaper, orchestrated a campaign to persuade the UK government to provide parents with information on convicted child sex offenders living in their areas ('Sarah's Law'), modeled on a similar implementation in the USA. The campaign followed on from the sexually-related murder of an eight-year old girl, Sarah Payne, in Sussex, UK.<sup>8</sup> She had been abducted close to where she lived. 'forsarah.com' is the campaign website set up by *The News of the World*. My preference for analysing text from this *News of the World* website instead of *The News of the World* tabloid editions is because the contents of the website that I examine were in the public domain for a much longer time (well over a year). Let me now give some situational context for my text-data.

##### 4.2. The homepage of forsarah.com

The homepage of forsarah.com includes the phrase, 'For Sarah', in very large type-face, prominent pictures of Sarah Payne as well as the caption 'The News of the World Campaign to Protect Children from Sex Offenders'. Alongside some introductory text, the homepage has a number of hyperlinks as follows:

The Campaign  
 Britain Backs Us  
 Get Help Here  
 A Mother's Anguish

The Campaign text is divided into two parts by the following headings: (i) 'Protect Our Kids' and (ii) 'Why We Need Sarah's Law'. The Campaign text is the first hyperlink on the website.<sup>9</sup> It is the core of the website, given also the caption of the homepage and the fact

<sup>8</sup> The pathologist, Vesna Djurovic, at the trial of Roy Whiting, who was sentenced for committing the murder, said that Sarah Payne was the victim of a "sexually motivated homicide" (Metro November 21 2001).

<sup>9</sup> The following is a brief set of synopses of the other hyperlinks: *Britain Backs Us*: Presentation of figures in pie-chart form which the website uses to show support for the campaign.

*Get Help Here*: Material taken from a document prepared by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

*A Mother's Anguish*: quotes from Sarah Payne's mother together with endorsement of 'Sarah's Law' by both mother and father.

that it is in this text that *The News of the World* makes recommendations for changes to the law as well as the justifications for these changes. As the focus of my article is on how EP is useful in highlighting mystifying social agent absences from this text-data for readers generally, while helping to reduce analyst subjectivity, examination of the actual linguistic content or 'presences' in the text-data will necessarily be partial. It will be partial in the sense that I will show how certain language choices *reinforce* these absences and thus mystification. Clearly, there is much variety in reading behaviour—texts may be skimmed or scanned; words, clauses, sentences, paragraphs may be cursorily read or even jumped over; certain words may be fixed upon more than others, etc. We can never say which presences in a text will be picked up by readers generally. In looking at absences from a text, any subsequent focus on presences can only be to identify those presences which *potentially* reinforce the absences. Consequently, with a focus on absences and mystification, there is no need to describe the whole text.

## 5. Using EP to locate social agent absences from the campaign text

### 5.1. Part 1: 'Protect Our Kids'

#### 5.1.1. The text

The sentences are numbered for ease of reference:

1. **Protect Our Kids**
2. **Empowering Parents to Protect Children**
3. It is every parent's right to have controlled access to information about individuals in their neighbourhood, including convicted child sex offenders who may pose a risk to their child.
4. In appropriate cases this access should be also given to responsible members of the public who have a responsibility for the care of children.
5. There must be severe penalties for any person who abuses access to this information.
6. Parents should be able to access a local record of all organisations to determine if their employees or volunteers are subject to the child access vetting procedures.
7. Government should establish a task force to review existing programmes to promote child safety for children and parents.
8. **Empowering Victims of Sex Abuse**
9. When passing sentence, courts should have the power to prevent offenders contacting or living near victims.
10. The orders would be made on the basis of representations made by the victim.
11. Release licence conditions should include restrictions on contact with victims.
12. Every child victim of sexual abuse should as of right receive appropriate support, counselling and therapy.
13. **Making Prevention More Effective**

14. The existing police vetting arrangements for people intending to work with children should be extended to cover all voluntary organisations.
15. The Government should make funds available to allow voluntary organisations to apply for the vetting information free of charge.
16. The existing Sex Offenders Register should be amended to:
  17. • Require registration to be made within 72 h of release from custody.
  18. • Require registration to be made in person at designated police stations.
  19. • The offender should be required to have his or her photograph taken for identification purposes at the time of registration and at any other reasonable time when his or her appearance has changed.
  20. • The re-registration of offenders should take place at pre-determined intervals.
  21. • The penalty for failing to comply with the register should be increased from six months' to five years' imprisonment.
  22. • Offenders should be required to notify foreign travel (sic).
  23. • Sex Offender Orders should be extended to enable high-risk offenders who fall outside the current sex offender registration requirement to be included in the register.
  24. • Sex Offender Orders should be revised to enable the police to make greater use of them as a pro-active tool.
  25. • It is every victim's right to understand the sentence imposed by the court. Victims have a right to know what period in custody the offender will actually serve.
  26. • Sex Offenders should be subject to a risk-assessment process at the time of their sentence by the court and indeterminate sentences be imposed in appropriate cases.
  27. • Where an offender is assessed as suffering from severe personality disorder, and as a consequence poses a significant threat to children, he or she should be detained in secure accommodation.
28. To date, as a direct response to the campaign, the Government has agreed to implement many of these proposals.
29. However, the politicians are still resisting to the heart of Sarah's Law, that is parents' right to controlled information about child sex offenders in their neighbourhood.

### 5.1.2. *Detecting social agent absences through the lens of EP*

The text contains the following linguistic realisations of social agents in relation to sexual abuse of children:

Individuals in parents' neighbourhood who may pose a risk to their child × 1

Child sex offenders × 2

Offender(s) × 6

Sex offender(s) × 5

High-risk offenders × 1

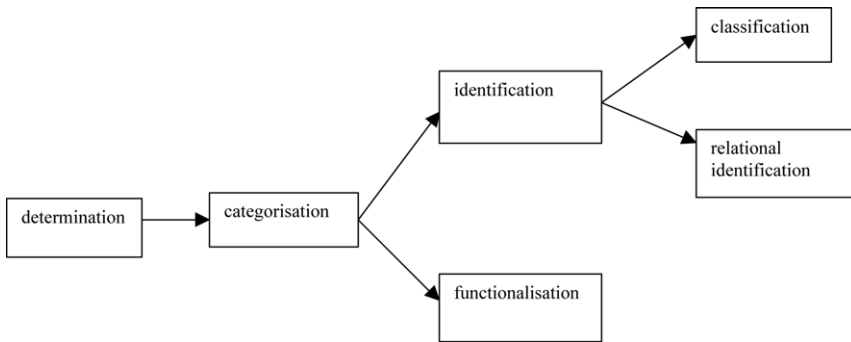


Fig. 1. Part of the increasing determination of linguistic representation of social agents in van Leeuwen's (1996) CDA scheme.

In order to analyse the level of determination of the social agents present in the text-data, I draw on the above scheme from van Leeuwen (1996). As can be seen in Fig. 1, categorisation of social agents can be realised in terms of their identities and function. *Functionalisation* refers to social agents in terms of activity, in terms of something they do, for example, an occupation or role. So 'sex offenders' would be an example of functionalisation and 'child sex offenders' or 'high-risk offenders' would be examples of more specific functionalisation. *Identification* occurs when social agents are defined, not in terms of what they do, but in terms of what they are. One type of identification is *classification*—where social agents are referred to in terms of age, gender, country of origin, class, race, etc. Another type of identification is *relational identification*. Relational identification represents social agents in terms of their personal, work relation or kinship relation.

The advantage of looking at the part 1 text through the explanatory lens of EP is that we immediately see the following types of relational identification are absent (and without the laborious task of having to search for relevant statistics as well as taking into account the set of problems related to statistics detailed in Section 3): (i) step-fathers (ii) step-brothers; (iii) fathers who have not had intimate closeness with the child in the early years. Thus, what is absent is any reference, explicit or implicit, to the home as a key site of sexual abuse of children.

Consider more specifically the following recommendations:

9. When passing sentence, courts should have the power to prevent offenders **contacting** or living near victims.
10. The orders would be made on the basis of representations made by the victim.
11. Release licence conditions should include restrictions on **contact** with victims.  
[my bold]

Looking at 'contact with victims' (11) and (9) through the lens of EP, we are also able to move along the route of determination towards inferring relational identification with regard to social agents involved here. Through the lens of EP, 'offenders' who perhaps have served jail sentences may want to visit the victim because they are step-related or even biologically-

related. Finally, the stability of EP as an epistemological perspective is important here since it allows us to perform this analysis from a universal and thus strong position.

We now move to consider how certain presences in Part 1 of The Campaign text help to reinforce the lack of determination of social agents likely to be involved in sexual abuse of children.

### 5.1.3. How presences in Part 1 reinforce lack of determination

Consider first the following:

26. Sex Offenders should be subject to a **risk-assessment process** at the time of their sentence by the court and indeterminate sentences be imposed in appropriate cases.

[my bold]

Mention of 'sex offenders' in 26 above and elsewhere relates to sex offenders generally, not just child sex offenders. Furthermore, because of the compound modifier 'risk-assessment', we do not have an idea of who is at most risk (e.g. family members). Taken together, the real nature of social agency is absent here since many sex offenders will not actually target children as they are not necessarily *child* sex offenders.

Not only is there no mention of the home in the text, but there are presences in it which relate to other locations and thus potentially draw the reader away from the home as a key site of child abuse. In the text, we have *neighbourhood* (3), (29) as well as parents accessing a local record to see if *employees of organisations* (6) are subject to the child vetting procedures.

We move on to part 2 of The Campaign text.

## 5.2. Part 2: 'Why We Need Sarah's Law'

### 5.2.1. The text

#### Why We Need Sarah's Law

**These are some of the most 'spine-chilling' statistics you will ever read.**

They reveal the true depth of depravity that exists so close to home.

It is why we must know who are the paedophiles among us.

1. There are officially more than 110,000 convicted paedophiles in England and Wales, around seven in every 1,000 men aged over 20. This monstrosity knows no class barriers—35% of those brought before the courts are from a professional background.
2. Detective Chief Inspector Bob McLachlan, head of Scotland Yard's paedophile unit reveals that 64% of paedophiles re-offend four or more years after their first conviction.
3. An independent study on 500 paedophiles found that they had each molested on average 380 children. Experts believe the average paedophile would have abused 200 children before ever being prosecuted.

4. Between five and nine children are abducted and killed each year. The grief and despair touches over every area of the country.
5. There are 4,000 men aged 20–25 with paedophile convictions and 6,000 aged 26–29. 21,000 are in their thirties and 79,000 over 40. Many paedophiles fall into a cycle of offending which becomes increasingly serious and frequent.
6. The number of convictions for gross indecency with a child doubled between 1985 and 1995 from 633 to 1287.
7. Adolescents make up one third of all child sex crime. This means there are around 35,000 teenagers in Britain who have committed a sexual offence against a child. Because abuse is a persistent crime, many of these youngsters will turn into adult abusers.
8. According to a Home Office survey around one in 60 men born in 1953 had a conviction for some type of sexual offence by the time they were 40.
9. There are 12,000 people on the Sex Offenders Register which came into force in 1997 and includes all sexual crime. More than 2,200 men cautioned for sex offences each year are required to sign on to it for five years. But the law does not require people convicted before 1997 to register on it.
10. More than 20,000 child victims of a sex-related crime rang the Childline and NSPCC helplines last year. But two thirds of children will never report a sex attack.

### 5.2.2. *Detecting social agent absences through the lens of EP*

Again using EP as a lens, it should be apparent that with part 2 there is also no mention of the family as a key site of sexual abuse of children and there is no realisation of social agents through relational identification. Consider more specifically paragraph 7:

7. Adolescents make up one third of all child sex crime. This means there are around 35,000 teenagers in Britain who have committed a sexual offence against a child. Because abuse is a persistent crime, many of these youngsters will turn into adult abusers.

Reading the above paragraph through the lens of EP, the social agent identification of 'adolescents' receives the greater determination of step-brothers, i.e., 'adolescents' who are more likely to sexually abuse in the home.

The text purports to supply 'statistics' on child sex offenders. But, crucially, an EP perspective helps us to 'see through' these statistics in revealing the absence of any explicit numerical data on the sexual abuse of children in the home. So a large number of the '20,000 child victims of a sex-related crime' in paragraph 10 are likely to be the victims of abuse in the family home.

### 5.2.3. *How presences in part 2 reinforce lack of determination*

Part 2 starts off with little determination of 'paedophile'. For instance, we only have the functionalisation of 'professional' in paragraph 1. But, by paragraph 4 we find the highly specific functionalisation of 'abductor'/'murderer':

4. Between five and nine children are abducted and killed each year. The grief and despair touches over every area of the country.

This is by far the most specific type of functionalisation of 'paedophile' in part 2. Consider now 'paedophile convictions' in the paragraph that immediately follows:

5. There are 4,000 men aged 20–25 with **paedophile convictions** and 6,000 aged 26–29. 21,000 are in their thirties and 79,000 over 40. Many paedophiles fall into a cycle of offending which becomes increasingly serious and frequent. [my bold]

Because:

- (i) the only example of functionalisation which narrowly determinates 'paedophile' in part 2 of The Campaign text is the abductor/murderer in paragraph 4; and because of:
- (ii) the use of the traces of the tabloid discourse type of sex offenders ('depravity', 'monstrous');
- (iii) the overall semiotic framing of the homepage with a picture of Sarah Payne (who was murdered by the abductor type of child sex offender);
- (iv) the absence of relational identification,

the reader is steered away from potentially unpacking the noun phrase, 'paedophile convictions', into its sub-categories which would include 'family-located' sexual abusers of children as well as less serious offenders (e.g. those who download child pornography). The more casual the reader, the less they are likely to do this anyway. Indeed, because the reference to 'paedophile convictions' comes straight after the reference to child abduction, some readers may misleadingly make coherence between 'child abduction' and the '110,000 paedophile convictions'. This potential coherence further helps to steer readers away from relational identification, which in turn creates a likelihood that the '20,000 child victims of a sex-related crime' in paragraph 10 will not be understood in the context of the family home.

I have come to the end of the analysis. Crucially for The Campaign text as a whole, since the analyses were epistemologically constrained, analyst subjectivity has been reduced in the detection of absences. In other words, if The Campaign text is just casually read, the social agent absences detailed above are likely to be absences for readers generally, not just for this analyst.

### 5.3. *Why the social agent absences are mystifying and thus problematic*

Now, there may be an absence of social agent determination in The Campaign text, but does that make it mystifying and hence problematic? On the one hand, it might be said that part 1 is a quasi-legal document and so would not need to be so specific about types of child



sex offender. Legal documents, after all, try to apply as generally as possible. But then again, Part 1 contextualises its demands via references to the 'neighbourhood' and 'employees' of 'organisations' while not making any reference at all to abuse in the home. Part 2 is not, however, a quasi-legal document and purports to provide statistics which 'reveal the true depth of depravity that exists so close to home'. But, the highest degree of functionalisation in part 2 orients the reader to a very small number of child sex offenders who would be regarded as clinically psychopathic—those who abduct children from *outside* the home,<sup>10</sup> i.e. the type of offender responsible for the murder of Sarah Payne. The preventative measures The Campaign aims to put in place are mainly angled towards this clinically psychopathic type of offender. As a result they do not address the much greater danger to children from certain males who are likely to have links with the home and fall into the categories of having no biological relationship with the child and/or have not raised the child from infancy. This much larger form of sexual abuse of children requires a set of very different preventative and remedial measures which *The News of the World* campaign does not address.

Why there is no mention in The Campaign text (part 2 especially) that the home/family is a major site of sexual abuse of children can only be speculated upon. But a website which sensationally implies that (i) all sex offenders are of risk to children; (ii) the major risk is from the local community (and thus outside the home) is then mystifying about where most sex abuse of children takes place (whether this mystification is intentional or not). Indeed, it can be further concluded that the campaign focus needs re-orientation.

Following on from the analysis, I now come on to discuss a few advantages of absence analysis for CDA.

## 6. Attractions for CDA of analysis of absences from texts

- In looking at absences first, we can address one criticism by Widdowson (1998) that critical discourse analysts focus on some presences in a text while neglecting others and so do not see that the meaning of presences they neglect may be in tension with the interpretation they make. By looking at absences first, subsequent focus on presences by an analyst is merely pointing out that, should readers pick up on them, these presences can potentially reinforce an absence for readers.
- Given the effort to notice absences in contrast to what is *in* the text, CDA is then on safer ground in assertions about the following: how absences from a text potentially manipulate readers generally who read for gist, and so readers who are much less likely to expend effort searching for absences from a text. The analysis is then more likely to have general validity.
- Creating value-neutral texts is difficult if not impossible to achieve (Gouveia, 2003). But another advantage of mystification analysis on the basis of absences, and where analyst subjectivity is reduced, is that less mystifying representations can actually be prescribed. This is not to say that with the necessary changes the text in question would then be

<sup>10</sup> See: <http://www.ncis.co.uk/ukta/2002/threat9.asp>. This is the website of the 'National Criminal Intelligence Service' of the UK.

value-neutral; only that the text would be less mystifying, for readers generally, with regard to absences.

## 7. Endpoints

Because EP is a universal perspective, the methodology I have used in this article can be applied to potentially any other text-data related to the sexual abuse of children from anywhere else in the world and when statistics are not available (i.e. not just to the UK or North American contexts mentioned in this article) or where statistics are incomplete/not discriminating enough with regard to the nature of the offender. Because of this, EP can be used to ascertain whether public discourse more generally obscures family abusers as agents of sexual abuse of children. But crucially in its application, analyst subjectivity would be reduced.

As I said at the beginning of this article, evolutionary psychological explanations have entered the mainstream, but as of yet have not been used in CDA. A reasonably detailed outline of EP has been given in this paper not only because it was necessary for the purposes of the text analysis but also to flag EP and its potential usefulness to others who work in CDA or rhetoric studies generally. So, for example, some critical discourse analysts, for appropriate text-data and context, could find it profitable to draw upon the work of feminist evolutionary psychologists<sup>11</sup>:

“Evolutionary feminists, writers like Patricia Gowaty, Sarah Hrdy, Meredith Small, and Barbara Smutts, agree with traditional feminists about the evils of patriarchy, but they do not disconnect humans from their biological past. The logic of evolutionary feminists appreciates the rich details of patriarchal history . . . , but it simultaneously rejects the notion of plumbing the human condition through reading merely the last 6,000 years of history.”  
 Wrangham and Peterson (1997: 124–125)

An eclectic, multidisciplinary CDA (e.g. Weiss and Wodak, 2003) means different types of feminism might be more or less appropriate for different types of text-data and more or less appropriate for different foci on different types of text-data. Finally, let me be clear that I am not suggesting that CDA needs to have biological knowledge and theory at its core; only that it could be profitable for CDA to draw on EP, and potentially alongside non-biological perspectives, when relevant to the data in question. Further research may also show how, for very different topics, other paradigms can be used as lenses on relevant text-data to reveal mystifying absences and in so doing help reduce analytical subjectivity.

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<sup>11</sup> See Pinker (2002: 342) on how ‘... research on the biological basis of sex differences has been led by women’.

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