‘Mate crime’: ridicule, hostility and targeted attacks against disabled people

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CURRENT ISSUES

‘Mate crime’: ridicule, hostility and targeted attacks against disabled people

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A common understanding of the term ‘hate crime’ involves opportunistic street crime and physical assault. The perpetrators do not usually have a relationship with their victims, although they may be known to live within the same neighbourhood. There are similarities between these types of targeted attacks against disabled people and people in other identity groups, such as BME communities, lesbians and gay men, transgender people. The term ‘mate crime’, is a play on the term ‘hate crime’, and refers to considered actions against disabled people at the hands of someone, or several people that the disabled person considers to be their friends, or they may be relatives. There does not seem to be a comparable set of hostile acts against the other identity groups who may be subjected to ‘hate crime’. Acts of ‘mate Crime’ are acts of cruelty, humiliation, servitude, exploitation and theft. The occurrences of cruelty and servitude indicate that what is currently being termed ‘mate crime’, has more in common with domestic violence than ‘hate crime’ which is perpetrated by people with whom there is no relationship beyond acquaintance.

Keywords: disabled people; vulnerability; relationships; violence

Introduction

The usefulness of a concept of crime that is motivated by negative constructions of perceived difference has been questioned because it may lead to a ‘special needs’ approach which reinforces, rather than alleviates cultural differences. Yet treating people as if they are all the same does not challenge stereotypes, equalise people’s situation, nor challenge cultures that maintain systems and practices that create and perpetuate exclusion (Grattet and Jenness 2001). The terms ‘hate crime’ and ‘mate crime’ are not ideal so they will be used in inverted commas; the paper will concentrate on the concepts rather than the terms. Few incidents of disablist ‘hate crime’ are recorded so there is uncertainty about what is happening. However there is a growing body of evidence, and growing media interest, raising the profile of disablist ‘hate crime’.

‘Hate crime’ or ‘mate crime’?

Disability Now’s website has a dossier of disability ‘hate crimes’, giving brief descriptions of 51 incidents of hostility against disabled people. The largest group in

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the dossier are 31 people with physical impairments, followed by 13 people with
learning difficulties, comprising 42 men and 12 women. (Disability Now 2010).
Adding another two men with learning difficulties who died following targeted attacks
gives evidence of 53 incidents (one incident involved two people).
Only two of the incidents were treated as ‘hate crimes’ by police; in 10 cases
people were described as vulnerable. Thirteen incidents involved the death of the individual; 5 of these were murders, and one manslaughter. There were 27 incidents of
theft and 23 of assault. Fourteen attacks were noted to have followed earlier repeated
attacks. Ten people were tipped out of their wheelchair or scooter. Nine perpetrators
were ‘friends’ or relatives; they were most likely to be involved with people with
learning difficulties. It seems people with learning difficulties were most likely to die,
be robbed, and held captive, whilst wheelchairs users are likely to be tipped out of
their wheelchairs and robbed.
Attacks and theft where the perpetrator and victim share domesticity (‘mate crime’) have been included in cases described as ‘hate crime’ yet there are distinguishing features between the two sets of events:

(1) ‘Hate crime’ – violent attacks that are perpetrated by ‘outsiders’, not a part of
the disabled persons household, or outsiders may enter the home purely to
carry out the attack. There is little or no relationship between the perpetrators
and the disabled person, they may be recognised as living in the area, but there
is no reciprocal arrangement or inter-dependency. The disabled person does
not welcome any part of any relationship there may be. These may be opportu-
nistic attacks, or may be long term, repeated, sustained attacks. Examples
include Francecca Hardwick. Brent Martin, Colin Greenwood, and Christine
Lakinski (SCOPE, UKCDP, and Disability Now 2008), David Askew (Jenkins
and Naughton 2010).

(2) ‘Mate crime’ – the hostile acts of perpetrators who are ‘insiders’, sharing
domesticity to some degree, there is a mutual relationship. The disabled person
may cling to the relationship, wanting the hostility to stop but welcoming the
company and feeling part of a family or group. These situations are not oppor-
tunist, they are calculated. Disabled people in these situations are less likely
to complain to the police or other authorities because they consider the perpe-
trators to be their friends, they may justify the violence. This includes Kevin
Davies, Steven Hoskin and Raymond Atherton (House of Lords 2008, 14), and
Michael Gilbert (Sugden 2010).

The Crown Prosecution Service does not use the term ‘mate crime’ commenting that
it is likely to cause confusion (Crown Prosecution Service [CPS] 2010a). Yet there are
clear differences that warrant separate consideration.

Cultivating vulnerability
These events could be viewed as one person having control over another. However
there is the context of a culture that creates and maintains structures and practices that
disable and exclude people with impairments. This promotes a view that disabled
people are worthy of contempt and hostility (Walker 2010). Further illustrated by one
of the murderers of Brent Martin who said, ‘I am not going down for a muppet’
(SCOPE, UKCDP, and Disability Now 2008, 29). Furthermore, disablist jokes are still
considered good material for high profile comedy in a way that racist and homophobic jokes are no longer.

Perceptions that attacks are motivated by perceived vulnerability, and the language of perceived vulnerability, add to the problem of lack of recognition (CPS 2010b). Locating motivation with vulnerability is superficial; vulnerability simply makes it easier to carry out acts of hostility (Waxman 1991).

Yet disabled people may find they need to appear vulnerable, dependent, and grateful in order to get the support they need, and are forced into a situation and a form of behaviour. This is linked to the cultural expectation that disabled people will have a ‘carer’ to take responsibility for them (Morris 1993). Some carers have devoted their lives to looking after someone; this may become their main purpose and status in life. In the media and in social policy carers seem to be heralded as saviours of disabled people and the social care system.

This provides a situation that allows carers and pseudo-friends, if they are so minded, to:

take control of:

- where the disabled person lives;
- who they live with;
- when they get in or out of bed;
- when they may use the toilet;
- what they wear;
- if they get out of the house;
- who they are friends with, and when or if they have contact; and
- what and when they eat.

control behaviour or punish by:

- knowingly leaving equipment and other items out of reach;
- knowingly making the home inaccessible;
- withholding personal care; and
- withholding medication.

take advantage of a situation for personal gain by:

- making fraudulent use of blue car parking badges;
- making the motability car their own, whilst the disabled person does not get to use it; and
- claiming carer’s allowance, but not actually supporting the disabled person.

These are ways for one individual to have power over another, which are done by ordinary people, in ordinary homes. These activities may not be considered to be unreasonable behaviour by those carrying them out, the disabled person themselves, or others. These activities would not be considered crimes by many and can easily be carried out without recourse to violence or even argument.

**Relationships and domesticity**

A key feature of ‘mate crime’ is the disabled person’s desire for relationships and friendship. Raymond Atherton seemed to have been:
befriended by groups of teenagers who abused his kind, gentle nature and exploited his vulnerability. They damaged his [Atherton’s] house, took his money and ate his food. ‘But because of his vulnerability, he couldn’t say no to the people who came to his door, even though he knew he might end up being assaulted or his property damaged. When anything happened he couldn’t name the visitors who assaulted him.’ Hemingway [the police officer who led the enquiry] says she felt that Atherton would ‘rather have their company than no one’s’. (Carter 2007)

The desire for a relationship of some sort, the grooming and the servitude bear many of the hallmarks of domestic violence. ‘Mate crime’ is not always sexual partner violence. However the particular situation of disabled women living with domestic violence is noteworthy: ‘It is important to be aware that, proportionally, many more disabled women are abused than non-disabled’ (Hague et al. 2008, 83). The links with ‘mate crime’ are particularly evident for disabled women in domestic violence situations:

A number of the women said they were made to feel, and indeed often felt, that, because of their impairments, they were undeserving of a relationship and should be grateful. … Interviewees who were in same sex relationships in particular had often been disbelieved and denied help. (Hague et al. 2008, 17–18)

The reliance on others at home for support is particularly marked:

The women’s narratives extensively illustrate intense and painful vulnerability to, and dependence on, their abusers for everyday tasks. They also emphasised their isolation, inability to leave their abusers (due in part to the limited availability of support services), and also their lack of educational or employment opportunities. (Hague et al. 2008, 16)

Hague et al. (2008) also found evidence of control of finances being taken to buy alcohol and or drugs, whilst disabled women were denied prescriptions and items for personal care.

Organisational response

The disabled people discussed would probably be described as having ‘mild’ or ‘moderate’ learning ‘disabilities’, physical or sensory impairments. It is unlikely they would have reached the attention of services because they would not meet the eligibility criteria of critical or substantial need. Inflexibility in social care also severely limits choice and control, as Ruth Bashall commented in Getting away with murder the portability of social care packages is essential in moving away from violent home life. (SCOPE, UKCDP, and Disability Now 2008, 24). Furthermore, disabled women need the right support in order to escape abuse:

Women who directly employed abusive PAs found it difficult to criticise or ‘discipline’ them while they were dependent on them for care. The absence of adequate professional support led to much anxiety and some women were afraid their funding would be cut back if they reported difficulties with their PA. (Hague et al. 2008, 19)

Disabled people’s organisations do not pay a great deal of attention to domestic violence, whilst women’s refuges do not pay much attention to violence against disabled women and few are accessible to women with mobility impairments.
Reducing the incidence of ‘mate crime’

Several things need to happen to change the dominant culture which currently allows these situations and events to happen. The media needs to take disablism seriously and not allow disablism to dominate, disablism (not impairment or the experience of disability) needs to be the butt of jokes. Putting disability comedy into the control of disabled people who ridicule disablism would go a long way towards culture change. There needs to be change within the criminal justice system and community safety systems which recognise that hostility toward disabled people, which is triggered by a perception of vulnerability, is a complication of hatred. Personalisation, which puts power and control with disabled people, will go a long way to shift the dominant expectation of dependence. The right peer support mechanisms need to be in place to send a clear message that, given the right circumstances, disabled people are not vulnerable and dependent. The development of disabled people’s organisations in the Department of Health’s user led organisation programme can also go a long way to shifting the culture toward disabled people being in control.

References