

Factors Associated with Abuse in Residential Child Care Institutions

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Confidence in the public care system in the United Kingdom (UK) has been shaken by numerous and widespread scandals surrounding the abuse of children and young people, particularly those in residential child care institutions. This paper examines factors associated with such abuse, including: failings in relation to staff recruitment, training, and supervision; ineffective management and systems of accountability; the development of inappropriate institutional cultures; public ambivalence towards children in care; the slow footed response to the threat posed to children and young people by dangerous men and other youngsters in care; and the long-term policy failure to develop coherent and integrated systems of child welfare in the UK. Copyright © 2002 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

Over the past 20 years there have been widespread revelations concerning the abuse of people in residential institutions in the United Kingdom (UK) (Stanley and others, 1999). This includes a disturbing catalogue of abuse perpetrated by adults entrusted with the care and education of children and young people in a range of workplaces such as day schools, boarding schools, sports clubs and the Church (Colton and Vanstone, 1996; Gallagher, 2000; Thomas, 2000).

However, abuse in residential children's homes has attracted much coverage by the media and considerable public concern. In 1991, the 'Pindown report' revealed how young people in Staffordshire, England, were deprived of their liberty and subjected to cruel regimes of social isolation (Levy and Kahan, 1991). Since then, there has been the conviction of Frank Beck for abusing young people in residential care in Leicestershire (see Kirkwood, 1993). We have also seen a large number of prosecutions associated with abuse in Merseyside and Cheshire, and the well publicised case of Mark Trotter, who abused children in homes in Hackney, London, and who later died of Aids (Warner, 1997).

Most recently, media attention has focused on the publication of the report, *Lost in Care* (House of Commons, 2000) by the

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tribunal into child abuse in residential establishments and foster homes in North Wales, since 1974, chaired by Sir Ronald Waterhouse. Although the terms of reference of the tribunal have been criticised as being too restrictive, the scale of the inquiry was unprecedented. The tribunal sat for 201 days to hear evidence and submissions. Oral evidence was given by 264 witnesses, and written statements were received from a further 311 witnesses. The tone and style of the 937 page report is rather dry and judicial, lacking the sense of outrage that its subject matter would be expected to evoke. Yet, its measured and circumspect approach and careful weighing of evidence can also be seen as a major strength. As such, *Lost in Care* represents a uniquely detailed account of institutional child abuse, revealing an alarming pattern of sexual abuse by men operating individually or in semi-organised 'rings'. Thus, the Waterhouse report is an invaluable source document for the purposes of this exposition.

Despite the profusion of official inquiries, remarkably little serious attention has been paid to the possible factors associated with the abuse of children and young people in residential institutions. Wolmar (2000, p. 18) argues that 'even the Utting inquiry, launched [by Government] in 1996, focused more on the future provision of services rather than on understanding what went wrong'. Thus, drawing on the Waterhouse report and other sources, this paper examines factors associated with the abuse of children and young people in residential institutions. The topics covered include: the management and organisation of residential care; the culture of residential institutions; the status of children in public care; and, issues concerning masculinity and sexuality. It will be useful to begin by examining the training and education provided for residential care workers.

Training and education of caregivers

By no means all the scandals involving residential children's institutions have revolved exclusively around sexual abuse. On the contrary, one of the most publicised cases of the abuse of children in care was 'Pindown'. This term was coined by the senior manager directly responsible to denote the 'narrow, punitive and harshly restrictive regime' he established in children's homes administered by Staffordshire County Council (Levy and Kahan, 1991).

The official response to the Pindown scandal included a special review of residential care in England by the then Chief Inspector of the Social Services Inspectorate, Sir William Utting (Utting, 1991). Like the earlier Wagner (1988) report, Utting identified lack of qualified staff as a central problem underlying the poor quality of children's homes. Only 22 per cent of non-supervisory staff had any relevant qualifications. Further, many officers-in-charge were found to be unqualified. Essentially, what emerged from the report was a picture of a system in which children with the most severe personal and social problems were being looked after by staff who had the least experience and training in child-care matters. In short, young, inexperienced, isolated and untrained staff were often left to tend and work with the most problematic clients.

A similar conclusion is offered by the Warner report (1992), *Choosing with Care*. More recently, Warner (1997) has argued that 'there is... no strong professional ethos around children's homes, as there would be with medicine or nursing, to act as a partial safeguard against abuse and exploitation of vulnerable young people'. Moreover, the education, training, supervision and support given to residential care workers have, on the whole, all

compared unfavourably with that provided for other social workers. Although periodic attempts have been made to raise the status of residential social workers, the scale of all these efforts has so far proved inadequate (Utting, 1997).

Management and organisation of residential care

Yet, whilst there is no doubt that improved education and training for frontline staff can make an important contribution to improving standards of care, raising the professional status of residential workers by no means represents a panacea for curing the ills of the public child-care system in the UK. Attention must also be given to the management and organisation of residential care. Wardhaugh and Wilding (1993) identify management failure across most responsibilities and all levels as a key contributory factor in the abuse of people of all ages in residential institutions.

The Waterhouse report reveals a complete failure of management and accountability at every level. For example, the report criticises the Welsh Office for its lethargy in responding to information which was available by the end of 1986 on the 'gravity of the risk of abuse'; it also criticises the then Government for taking four years to take 'effective action' (House of Commons, 2000, p. 735). The report criticises the senior management of one local authority for failing to ensure 'coherent arrangements for the management, support and monitoring of the authority's community homes and for supervision and performance appraisal of residential care staff' (House of Commons, 2000, p. 831)

Lack of clear lines and mechanisms for internal and external accountability means that frontline residential staff are, in effect, unsupervised. In such circumstances, institutions come to judge themselves by their own internal standards. Institutional abuse is also commonly associated with particular models of work and organisation, including the concentration of those regarded as the most troublesome clients in one place, large size of institutions, and bureaucracy (Wardhaugh and Wilding, 1993).

It is plain from the Waterhouse report that large institutions in north Wales were used as depositories or warehouses for those regarded as the most troublesome youngsters. This reflects a major failure of policy. The Waterhouse report relates:

This inquiry has revealed that many of the aspirations of policy makers in the 1960s in relation to children's services were not realised in the following two decades . . . [The] . . . intention of the Children's and Young Persons Act 1969 that delinquent children, whose misbehaviour was seen as a consequence of deprivation and disturbance, should receive the same programme of care and treatment as children who had suffered similarly but who had not offended was not effectively implemented . . . (House of Commons, 2000, p. 840).

This policy failure also partly reflects the reorganisation of local government and social services in the early 1970s. The amalgamation of local authority children's departments into monolithic social services departments (social work departments in Scotland), resulted in the loss of specialist skills and knowledge in child care, which were not replaced.

Local authority social services departments have long been said to manifest the worst features of bureaucracies in being hierarchical, rule bound, and slow to respond to change

(Hadley and Mcgrath, 1980). Many residential institutions in the UK are part formal organisations in themselves and form part of larger formal organisation—local authority social services departments. Thus, they are heavily bureaucratic. Colton (1988) has questioned whether bureaucratisation is a necessary and effective means of social organisation in relation to residential child and youth care. Whilst bureaucratic organisation may appear to help residential institutions to control and contain large groups of young people, it also prevents them from fulfilling their officially avowed caring function. On the other hand, bureaucratic organisation might be expected to facilitate internal and external accountability and supervision of residential staff, thereby safeguarding vulnerable young people. However, this was obviously not the case in many institutions where young people suffered abuse in north Wales.

Institutional cultures

Ineffective management and accountability contributes to residential caregivers becoming laws unto themselves, and the development of distinctive institutional cultures. The degree to which the latter can occur is illustrated by the activities and offences of Peter Howarth (now deceased), Deputy Principal at Bryn Estyn Hall. Howarth sexually abused boys placed at that institution over a ten year period from 1973 to 1984. His daily practice was to invite boys to his flat—situated on the premises—late in the evening for drinks (including alcohol), snacks, ‘the privilege of watching television’, and card and board games. Invitation was by a so-called ‘flat-list’ drawn up by Howarth, ‘then posted on his door or delivered by one of his favourites’.

The Waterhouse report tells us:

There was a pervasive culture at Bryn Estyn of immature and damaging attitudes to sexuality, which were very unhelpful to teenage boys whose developing sexuality needed handling with sensitivity... We heard repeatedly, for example, of the use of foul language with sexual connotations. There was evidence also of the availability of pornographic videos held by one or two members of staff: videos that were shown to a small selection of boys in staff accommodation (portrayed as ‘fun’) and ... to a wider audience of boys in the main building itself. Similarly, we heard of pornographic magazines and other sexual material kept in staff accommodation ... Thus, in the environment that we have described, it is not surprising that some of the admitted bullying amongst boys had sexual overtones and that some boys emerged with wholly inappropriate attitudes to their sexuality ... (House of Commons, 2000, p. 85)

The finding that bullying among boys at Bryn Estyn Hall had sexual overtones is highly significant, given *Childline* data which suggests that sexual assaults by fellow residents account for more than half of assaults in care (Macleod, 1997, 1999). There were also bullies among the staff at Bryn Estyn, and it is clear from Howarth’s activities how such staff help to create an environment in which sexual abusers can operate. Whilst bullies may profess to despise child sex abusers, refer to them as ‘beasts’ or ‘nonces’, in the institutional context the two go hand in hand. One helps to create the conditions for the existence of the other. The abuse of power by the bully facilitates a corresponding abuse of power by the child sex abuser. Bullies may be sex offenders themselves. Residential institutions for young men typically have macho cultures. Bryn Estyn was no exception. It appears that staff frequently manifested callousness, cruelty, unconcern, and lack of interest and

affection towards boys. Physical assaults on boys by staff were an everyday occurrence. Bullying of residents by other boys seems to have been tolerated; indeed, it may even have been encouraged by some staff as an integral part of the system of institutional control and containment. Thus, youngsters at Bryn Estyn felt isolated, unsupported, unloved and generally uncared for. The Waterhouse report reveals how Howarth cunningly exploited their vulnerability.

But how did Howarth manage to get away with committing such crimes over a lengthy period? Here again, it is evident that the institutional culture can also play a part in the suppression of complaints against abusers. According to the Waterhouse report, there was a 'cult of silence' on the part of staff at Bryn Estyn '[There] were grounds for suspicion and gossip about Howarth's 'flat list' activities for many years, but the Principal, Arnold, threatened staff with dismissal if they gave currency to the rumours' (House of Commons, 2000, p. 829). Complaints by children were also stifled: 'few resident children made complaints of abuse. Those who did complain were generally discouraged from pursuing complaints and recording of complaints was grossly defective'. The suppression of complaints is a common characteristic of enclosed, inward looking, organisations which reject criticism, are unreceptive to new ideas, and encourage routines and patterns of practice that are rigid and conservative (Wardhaugh and Wilding, 1993).

Status of children in public care

The abuse of young people in residential institutions is associated with the neutralisation of normal moral concerns. Victims are seen as less than fully human by their oppressors who, in the absence of effective systems of internal and external monitoring, wield almost absolute power. Children in residential care also lack value and worth in the eyes of the wider community; they are easily stereotyped and this affects the resources made available for their care (Wardhaugh and Wilding, 1993). The abuse suffered by children and young people in residential homes throughout the UK ultimately reflects deeply embedded social attitudes and associated structures of social injustice. Historically, children and young people placed away from home have been drawn from the poorest strata of society (Holman, 1988). Today, this group is cruelly referred to by right wing commentators as 'the underclass' (see Murray, 1994). In nineteenth century Britain, welfare provision took the form of a stigmatising, deterrent Poor Law founded on such notions as the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor (Gregg, 1973; Holman, 1988). During the nineteenth century large residential institutions were built by local poor law authorities, churches and charities; they were characterised by regimented regimes founded on discipline, training and religion. Their purpose was twofold: to care for the destitute and abandoned whilst protecting society from the perceived threat to social order posed by 'dangerous' children (Colton and Hellinckx, 1994; Ruxton, 1996). As Hendrick (1994) observes, children take a dual role, both then and now: as 'victims' but also as 'threats'.

The Poor Law legacy persists in attitudes towards dependent and powerless groups. In relation to children and young people placed away from home, the public attitude is largely one of indifference or, at best, ambivalence. Although generally sympathetic towards child victims of abuse, there is long-standing anxiety about the threat to social order represented by troubled and troublesome youth. Ambivalence is further fuelled by the social class background of these young people and, bearing in mind the

disproportionately large numbers of black children and children with disabilities placed away from home, by factors such as racism and negative attitudes towards disability.

Public indifference to the fate of young people in care is reflected in the policy of placing young people miles away from home. Many of those who were abused were placed a considerable distance from their home localities in isolated, rural, areas. For example, in its concluding chapter the Waterhouse report draws attention to the fact that many children in residential establishments and foster homes in north Wales were placed there by English authorities (House of Commons, 2000, p. 825). It seems to have been the case that so long as these young people were 'out of sight and out of mind' no questions were asked about the quality of care provided for them.

The abuse of children in public care clearly involves the transgression of human rights. In part, this reflects the fact that children and young people in care are defined as less than fully sentient on account of their age. As a consequence, they are subjected to forms of behaviour and treatment that would be unacceptable with individuals and groups not so stigmatised. Thus, it is evident, that any serious effort to improve the quality of residential care for young people must involve increased emphasis on their rights. The much vaunted Children Act 1989 for England and Wales did seem to take children's rights more seriously than previous legislation, and provided new opportunities for advancing the wishes, autonomy and independent actions of children and young people. However, the Act does this in a very qualified way. A broader, much more creative, approach is required. As a useful first step, therefore, local authorities directly responsible for residential care services in the UK should ensure that they fully adhere to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This recognises that children are holders of a specific body of rights, which include the traditional areas of prevention, protection and provision but also of participation.

Masculinity and sexuality

The generally low regard that society has for children in public care is further reflected in the conspicuous lack of safeguards for such children. Many children in residential care had already been deeply harmed prior to being placed away from home. It is estimated that between one- and two-thirds of those in residential institutions have been abused before entry (Report of the National Commission of Inquiry into the Prevention of Child Abuse, 1996). Thus, it is a matter of the gravest concern that many such children who were removed from their families for protective purposes were then placed in residential care and exposed to even greater risk.

Attention has been drawn to issues of masculinity in relation to sexual abuse by men who work with children and young people (Pringle, 1992; Colton and Vanstone, 1996; Macleod, 1997; Stanley, 1999). MacLead (1999) reports that all the assailants in a 1995–96 *Childline* research sample were male, whether young people or staff members.

MacLeod (1999) considers that the prevalence of sexual assaults on children and young people perpetrated by other youngsters in care—and which, as previously noted, may account for more than half of all such sexual assaults—indicates that those who have been victimised should not be placed with those who have abused. Clearly, there is an urgent

need for therapy for both groups. MacLeod also highlights the plight of young male victims who are also perpetrators.

Wolmar (2000) argues that the fundamental cause of abuse in residential care homes was the gradual replacement of women caregivers by men that appears to have occurred since the end of the 1960s. Given that most perpetrators of sexual abuse in residential care homes are men, some may feel that only women should be employed. However, Wolmar (2000) argues that this would compound the tragedy. He insists that it is essential to employ good male social workers to look after teenage males. But appropriate safeguards must be in place both before and after men are employed.

Warner (1997) argues that we have failed to 'take on board the scale of the paedophile problem and the potential sources of harm they represent to children in residential settings of all kinds, not just children's homes'. According to Warner (1997), the National Criminal Intelligence Service has a list of about 4,500 convicted or suspected paedophiles in the UK, and there are some 2,000 paedophile rings with roughly five members each. Research suggests that, on average, an abuser will have attempted or committed 238 offences before he is caught. A survey of 232 abusers found that they had committed 55,000 offences between them on 16,400 children. Warner (1997) argues that it is the nature and scale of potential offenders, and the attraction to them of residential child care settings, that makes it vital to have effective checks in place for children's homes.

As earlier indicated, the Waterhouse tribunal report states that it was not presented with evidence of 'a paedophile conspiracy involving prominent persons and others with the objective of sexual activity with children in care', 'or any coherent organisation of men with that objective'. However, it is equally clear from the report that there were groups of men, 'known to each other and associating informally', who preyed on children in care 'together and individually for sexual purposes' (House of Commons, 2000, p. 774).

Although the tribunal did not find evidence of systematic recruitment of 'paedophiles' to the staff of any establishments, we have seen that active abusers were employed as caregivers in residential child care establishments in north Wales. Regrettably, it is by no means certain that effective checks are now in place to prevent such persons obtaining employment with children. As recently as 1998, Lane reported that it is possible for individuals to obtain some child-care jobs without their curricula vitae having been checked out; further, that people can still obtain jobs involving children without police checks. Applicants may not even be the person they claim to be. According to Lane (1998), employers tend to rely on two references and, perhaps, a check on the main qualifications.

Discussion

It should be apparent by this juncture that the abuse of children and young people in residential care cannot be accounted for by any single factor. Rather, the wholesale failure of the public care system reflects an inter-play between a number of factors which include: lack of adequate education, training, supervision, selection systems and registration for residential caregivers; ineffective management, monitoring systems and patterns of organisation; inappropriate institutional cultures; the ambivalence of the wider public towards children in care; and the failure to deal effectively with the threat posed by adults,

mainly men, who betray positions of professional trust and responsibility to prey on and exploit the vulnerability of children and young people. We have also been slow to recognise and respond to sexual assaults and bullying perpetrated against children and young people by other youngsters in care.

Equally, there is the long-standing failure to develop coherent and integrated systems of child welfare in the UK. This includes the lack of an effective, proactive system of family support that could avert the need for many children and young people to enter public care. How many of the victims of abuse in north Wales, for example, really needed to be in public care in the first place? How many derived positive benefit from their stay in care? Did we as a society benefit? The postscript to the Waterhouse report notes that in terms of crime prevention, the care systems in north Wales were 'notably unsuccessful'. Some regimes actually 'increased offending' (House of Commons, 2000, p. 840).

Whilst support for vulnerable families lies at the heart of the Children Act 1989, it is plain that much work remains to be done in implementing the relevant provisions. Progress has been hampered by a number of factors. The pressures on vulnerable families have significantly increased since the first Thatcher administration. For example, the extent of child poverty rose threefold. In the context of increasing social distress, the Children Act 1989 significantly expanded local authorities duties towards children in need and their families without being accompanied by a corresponding increase in resources. An effective system of family support requires a comprehensive approach embracing primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. In relation to the first, there is no substitute for action by central government to tackle social exclusion (Colton and others, 1995).

Yet, whilst an effective system of child welfare would be characterised by the provision of proactive, preventive, help for vulnerable children and their families, the latter must be complemented by competent, intelligently targeted protection for children at risk of abuse and neglect. Moreover, high quality care must be available for children who are unable for whatever reason, either temporarily or permanently, to live with their family of origin. This includes high quality residential care.

The last three decades have seen the progressive decline of residential care in all European countries, with a corresponding growth in foster family care. Despite attempts to make residential care a positive choice in the UK (see National Institute for Social Work, 1988), this trend is much further advanced here than in most other European Union countries. Some 65,000 children and young people are currently looked after by local authority social services in the UK, the majority of whom are placed with foster carers. Currently, there are less than 10,000 children and young people in residential care in England. In other parts of the European Union the proportion of children placed in residential care is much higher. For example, in the Netherlands and Denmark, both of which are noted for their progressive approach to child-care matters, roughly equal proportions of children and youth are placed in residential and foster care. In Belgium, 60 per cent of youngsters placed away from home live in residential care (Colton and Hellinckx, 1994). By contrast, in the UK, residential care has long been undervalued and seen as a 'last resort' for troubled and troublesome children and young people. Not surprisingly, innovation has been limited and the UK is some distance from the leading-edge of developments in group care. The provision of high quality residential care remains a necessity for some youngsters, and renewed efforts are required to develop a more positive image and role

for residential care. It is vital that we rise to the challenge and provide skilled, imaginative, child-centred care and after care for all children placed away from home.

The current Government has taken a number of steps in the direction required. Unlike its predecessors since 1979, the Government has at least expressed a commitment to tackling social exclusion and has begun to introduce a range of practical measures for which it deserves some credit. Moreover, in November 1998, following the publication of Sir Williams Utting's review of *Safeguards for Children Living Away from Home* (Utting, 1997), the Government introduced an initiative called 'Quality Protects'. This is a major three-year programme designed to transform the management and delivery of social services for children in England (Department of Health, 1998, 1999). In addition, the Government plans to establish a General Social Care Council. This body will be responsible for setting standards for services and individual workers, and will handle the registration of all those working in the services, including residential social workers (Lane, 1998).

However, residential work with children and young people in the UK seems likely to remain the poor relation of a developing social work profession whose own legitimacy is subject to constant challenge. As we have seen, the education, training, salaries, supervision and support, given to residential care workers in the UK have all compared unfavourably with that given to other social workers. This does not seem to be the case in all European countries. Major differences exist between the UK and other European Union countries with regard to the occupations involved in residential child and youth care. In Belgium, for example, there appears to be a distinctive child and youth care profession—that of the social pedagogue or social educator. By contrast, this occupation does not exist in the UK. The role of the 'social educator' is perplexing to the British observer. This is compounded by the difficulty in distinguishing a common core of tasks undertaken by social educators everywhere. Current practice also makes it difficult in English to link education with the wider range of nurturing services—social, psychological and familial—associated with the term in other European countries. The same is broadly true in relation to the term 'pedagogy'. It may be significant that the learning, scholarship and vocabulary associated with a distinctive residential care profession are largely missing in the UK.

The catalogue of abuse in residential child-care establishments in the UK has inevitably undermined the efforts of residential child-care workers. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that nothing that has been said above is intended to detract from the important contribution made by the many residential social workers who strive with patience and commitment to provide high standards of care for vulnerable children and young people. Indeed, it is a testimony to the achievements of such over-stretched but dedicated staff that the public care system in the UK has not been afflicted by even worse problems.

Further, the maltreatment of children in institutions is by no means confined to residential children's homes. The prime sites of such abuse include schools, boarding schools, sports clubs and the Church (Colton and Vanstone, 1996; Gallagher, 2000; Thomas, 2000). Thus, child abuse in the workplace is perpetrated by a range of occupational groups in different sectors. Besides public sector residential social workers, these groups include teachers, members of the clergy and sports coaches. Such facts are often distorted by the media treatment of abuse scandals in children's homes. Gallagher (2000, p. 795) rightly argues that, 'if all children are to be protected, . . . policy and practice measures to prevent abuse need to be directed towards a much wider range of institutions.'

In Warner's view, the fundamental problem with the deluge of inquiries into children's homes has been the lack of follow through. Warner (1997) argues that ... 'preventing abuse in children's homes is now a matter of political and managerial will. We know what needs to be done, but collectively we are incapable of summoning up the energy to do it'. The earlier Warner report entitled, *Choosing with Care*, focused on the recruitment and selection of staff in children's homes and the need to ensure that police checks were part of an integrated and effective system of selection (Warner, 1992). However, Warner (1997) has since ruefully observed that although the Conservative administration accepted most of the 83 recommendations in his report, it did not will the means in the form of resources; it also failed to check up systematically on how many of these recommendations were actually implemented.

The present Government has taken steps to improve the pre-employment screening of child care workers. Since 1986 applicants for public employment allowing substantial access to children have been subject to a 'police check' for possible criminal records. In addition, employing authorities have been able to access two lists held at Government level—The Consultancy Service Index maintained by the Department of Health, and 'List 99' held by the Department for Education and Employment—comprising names submitted by employers of former staff who had placed a child's welfare at risk. Ongoing revelations of abuse in children's homes, have prompted the Government to seek to establish a fully integrated information system that draws on criminal records and the Government lists in the form of a 'one-stop-shop' service called The Criminal Records Bureau. The Bureau is expected to start operations in July 2001 (Thomas, 2000).

However, both the ethics and effectiveness of pre-employment screening measures have been questioned. The ethical questions raised include civil liberties issues concerning privacy and rehabilitation rights, the inclusion of posts not falling within the access to children criteria, the taking into account of non-relevant offences, and the relative powerlessness of job applicants to seek effective redress. The effectiveness of pre-employment screening has been called into question by evidence of variation in decision-making based on criminal record disclosure and in the interpretation of checking arrangements, which give rise to the continuing possibility of sex offenders 'getting through' (Thomas, 2000). Indeed, as earlier noted, a significant proportion of abusers never come to the notice of law enforcement and child protection agencies.

The difficulties associated with the pre-employment screening of child care workers, partly reflect the problematic nature of the term 'paedophile', which is widely used—albeit with differing meaning, levels of knowledge and understanding—by therapists, law enforcement and child protection agencies, the media and general public. The feminist analysis of sexual offending regards the labelling of a man as a 'paedophile' unhelpful. The label serves to mask the normality of the male perspective that views young girls as attractive and desirable, and the fact that sexual offending is almost exclusively a male activity. Kelly (1988) conceives male violence and sexual assault as lying on a continuum from 'normal' behaviour through to behaviour that is generally regarded as deviant and criminal. In Kelly's view, the labelling of a man as a 'paedophile' by experts—who are mainly male—removes him from this continuum by focusing on the person rather than the behaviour. The paedophile is thus seen as being fundamentally 'different' from other men: he does not have sex with adult partners, tends to prefer boys and operates outside the family. This construction prevents recognition of the 'normality' of men

targeting young girls, acting within the family and having adult relationships at the same time.

On this view it is not surprising that attempts to identify 'the paedophile' by means of checklists, and such like, have proved problematic (Thomas, 2000). The feminist perspective suggests that protecting vulnerable children and young people from sexual predators requires greater consideration of the possible links between masculinity, sexuality and child sexual abuse. Although initiatives such as 'Quality Protects' can contribute to raising overall care standards, they are not designed to address the fundamental causes of child sexual abuse.

Pre-employment screening is one in a series of initiatives to combat the sex offender. Other measures include the creation of a sex offender register, 'intelligence-led' policing, the development of the National Criminal Intelligence Service Paedophile Section database and the Forensic Science Services National DNA Database. All such initiatives entail the collection, use and circulation of personal information by law enforcement and protection agencies to combat the sex offender. The production and exchange of personal information to tackle 'serious crime' is inevitably undermining traditional notions of 'confidentiality' and 'privacy'; it has also, according to Thomas (2000), led to pessimism about the possibility of future positive work with sex offenders in the community; work, moreover, that could help to protect vulnerable children.

Finally, whilst improvements in child-care services are beginning to occur, it is important to recognise that improvement is relative and we have begun from such a low base. Throughout the UK the state of our public care system remains conducive to the abuse of children and young people. The shortcomings highlighted in the Waterhouse report are by no means restricted to north Wales and are still prevalent across the UK. They are not the fault of the present administration, but rather are symptomatic of generations of neglect and policy failure. In truth, services for our most vulnerable children are beset by problems of quite awesome magnitude; they are a national disgrace, and do not even approximate the standards to which any civilised nation should aspire and which exist in other European countries. Political consensus and long-term commitment are required to bring about fundamental improvements. The government and all political parties in the UK must work together to establish a public child care system that any country would be proud to call its own.

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