Social and Political Narratives about Child Sexual Abuse Seminar: An update report

August 2018

INTRODUCTION

1. This report provides a summary of the seminar on social and political narratives about child sexual abuse, which the Inquiry held on 26 February 2018.

2. This document is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of all the views expressed at the seminar. Its purpose is to summarise the discussions and to highlight key areas for future work. The seminar did not constitute a formal evidence-gathering session.

3. The Chair and the Panel of the Inquiry were present at the seminar. Proceedings were chaired and facilitated by a member of the Inquiry's legal team.

4. The seminar was attended by academics, professionals, practitioners, and victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. The full list of participants can be found on the Inquiry's website.[1]

5. The seminar was made up of two sessions. At the end of each session, core participants and other attendees in the public gallery were invited to make comments or observations.

6. The Inquiry would like to thank everyone who contributed to or attended the seminar.

7. The seminar was informed by a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) commissioned by the Inquiry and undertaken by Jo Lovett, Maddy Coy and Liz Kelly at London Metropolitan University's Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit. The REA summarises the existing evidence base on social and political discourses about child sexual abuse in England and Wales from the 1940s to 2017. It also identifies the ways in which those discourses may have influenced institutional responses to child sexual abuse. The full REA report and a summary report can be found on the Inquiry's website.[2]

8. The REA reviewed 340 texts (237 published literature texts, 68 serious case reviews and 35 national/institutional inquiry reports and guidance). It identifies five key institutional 'arenas' where debates have occurred in relation to child sexual abuse: legal, government policy, clinical, social work and the media. Individuals and groups in these arenas have different ways of thinking about child sexual abuse that are informed by their particular experiences and perspectives. Their perspectives incorporate ideas about how and why child sexual abuse takes place, who perpetrates it, who becomes a victim and survivor, how common an experience it is and what impact it has. These different ideas influence how the perpetrator, victim and survivor, and context of abuse are presented and responded to.

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1 Seminar: Social and Political Narratives about Child Sexual Abuse: Participant List. Available at: www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/4275/view/IICSA%20Social%20And%20Political%20Narratives%20Seminar%20Participant%20List.pdf
2 The full and summary reports, as well as additional information on the seminar, are available at: www.iicsa.org.uk/research-seminars/social-and-political-narratives-about-child-sexual-abuse

9. In reviewing the literature, two broad types of discourses emerged:

   - dominant discourses
   - counter discourses

10. Dominant discourses appear to take for granted as 'truths' certain ideas relating to child sexual abuse. They seem to have dominated thinking in the different arenas named above. A total of 31 dominant discourses were identified from the literature reviewed. These were split into three overarching categories:

    - discourses of deflection (from perpetrators and institutions)
    - discourses of denial (of harm or extent of harm)
    - discourses of disbelief

11. Counter discourses have been expressed by those at the margins of social and political power. They challenge dominant views by considering power relations, belief, and recognition and support for victims and survivors. They emerged in the 1970s and originated in feminist and survivor movements. A total of six counter discourses were identified from the literature reviewed. These were split into two overarching categories:

    - discourses of power
    - discourses of belief

12. The REA concludes that these various discourses mean that the way child sexual abuse has been recognised, analysed and responded to over time is complex. It draws out a number of examples of the way discourses have influenced institutional responses. It also recognises a number of important moments that have radically changed the way child sexual abuse has been talked about and understood, and that have led to legal, policy and social developments. The most notable of these was the Cleveland Inquiry of 1987.

13. The seminar used the REA as the starting point for a discussion about current child sexual abuse narratives in England and Wales. The seminar focused on three particular areas:

    - narratives about child sexual exploitation, including if and how child sexual exploitation differs from other forms of child sexual abuse
    - peer-on-peer abuse
    - online-facilitated abuse

14. The seminar sought to explore how the current ways of thinking and talking about these three areas help or hinder effective and sensitive responses to child sexual abuse by a range of institutions and professionals, and how best to challenge unhelpful narratives.

Session 1: Current narratives about child sexual abuse and links to responses to child sexual abuse

15. This session explored current narratives about child sexual abuse and their links with responses to child sexual abuse.

16. Participants agreed that the REA provides a useful framework to help understand narratives about child sexual abuse. They agreed that many of the discourses identified in the report are still relevant and evident in their own work, including some that were identified decades ago. For example, participants noted that discourses of disbelief, when there is an outright refusal to accept that child sexual abuse has occurred, are still evident today and are a barrier to reporting child sexual abuse.

17. Two interrelated themes emerged during the discussion in Session 1:

- narratives that individualise the issue of child sexual abuse
- narratives that create and perpetuate notions of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victims of child sexual abuse

Narratives that individualise the issue of child sexual abuse

18. Participants discussed the unhelpfulness of narratives that present perpetrators of child sexual abuse as a narrow and distinct group of individuals who display and engage in deviant behaviour. They noted that placing too much emphasis on the deficits of individuals can lead to responses that focus on managing individuals without acknowledging the wider context in which the sexual abuse occurs and the places

that have enabled abusive behaviours to be displayed. An example is responses that are only concerned with implementing risk assessments to prevent perpetrators from accessing children. Participants considered that such responses do not promote the need for institutions to engage in the broader solutions required to prevent child sexual abuse. This linked to several dominant discourses described in the REA: for example, that perpetrators are somehow 'other' and different from the majority of people in society, or that child sexual abuse is a problem caused by 'a few bad apples' who can be isolated, risk assessed and managed.

19. Participants mentioned how some of the language used to describe perpetrators of child sexual abuse can perpetuate the notion that it is a problem caused by a small number of individuals. For example, terms such as 'paedophile' and 'cyber-paed', or viewing perpetrators as weak, vulnerable, objects of pity or 'dirty old men', were mentioned as adding to individualised narratives that are not meaningful or helpful in responding to child sexual abuse.

20. It was also noted that these ways of thinking and talking fail to recognise the many ways in which child sexual abuse and exploitation can occur and who the victims and perpetrators are. For example, institutions focusing on risk assessments to 'keep the bad apples out' apply this only to adults who may present harm to children, which does not acknowledge or

adequately deal with peer-on-peer abuse. In an educational context, for example, participants noted that when peer-on-peer abuse does occur, the institutional response typically focuses on the incident itself as opposed to addressing the wider educational context. Unlike potential adult perpetrators, there is no risk assessment carried out on people or places where peer-on-peer abuse occurs. This can lead to limited protection for both victims and perpetrators of peer-on-peer abuse.

21. Participants stated that the narrative of perpetrators of child sexual abuse being 'a few bad apples' was not just a professional or institutional view, but also a public view they had encountered. They noted that the idea child sexual abuse is limited to individuals prohibits society from fully engaging with the problem and suggesting solutions to prevent it.

22. In addition to narratives that present perpetrators of child sexual abuse as somehow 'other', participants acknowledged that the 'othering' of victims and survivors continues to be a problem. Victims and survivors can themselves be seen and treated by professionals as 'weird' or 'dangerous', and somehow different from the majority of people.

23. Participants discussed another narrative that presents child sexual abuse as an issue concerning a small group of perpetrators: the notion that (male) perpetrators of child sexual abuse have all been victims

of it. Participants noted that this 'societal myth' needs to be eliminated, particularly because male victims and survivors will find it difficult to come forward if they feel they are going to be seen as potential perpetrators. This also applies to narratives that continue to make links between child sexual abuse and homosexuality.

Narratives that create and perpetuate notions of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victims of child sexual abuse

24. The notion of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victims of child sexual abuse was a strong theme of the discussion. Participants discussed how, in some existing narratives about child sexual abuse, victims are not always seen or presented as worthy of victim status. Instead, they can be blamed and seen as in some way responsible for the sexual abuse they have experienced.

25. This theme was discussed in relation to online-facilitated child sexual abuse. Participants commented that children who have been victimised in this way are sometimes seen and talked about as agents of the abuse who 'should have taken more care online' and 'not been stupid enough to allow the abuse to happen'.

26. In the REA, 13 of the 31 dominant discourses identified were noted as being of particular relevance to online-facilitated child sexual abuse. These narratives:

- deflect responsibility for online-facilitated child sexual abuse from perpetrators and institutions and instead place blame on the victim
- deny the harm or extent of harm caused by online-facilitated child sexual abuse
- deny that online-facilitated child sexual abuse has taken place

Participants considered the current criminal justice system plays a part in these narratives because it has an inadequate understanding of the different stages of child development, the nature and role of online content in children's lives, and how children behave online.

27. Victim-blaming and notions of the 'undeserving victim' were also discussed with reference to child sexual abuse that has included an element of grooming. Participants considered that there was a professional and social lack of understanding of:

- the power dynamics often present between the perpetrator and the victim within the grooming process
- how perpetrators operate to take advantage of a child's vulnerability
- the nuances of children being groomed online versus offline

Participants described how this lack of understanding can create and perpetuate narratives in which some victims are seen as complicit in, and enablers of, the sexual abuse they experience. This was again mentioned with reference to the criminal justice system. Participants discussed accounts of child victims of online-facilitated sexual abuse giving evidence in court and immediately being challenged by defence barristers who use the victims' digital footprints as a way of denying their victimhood.

28. Participants discussed a continuing problem for those who have experienced sexual abuse as an adolescent and the judgements that professionals make about what constitutes a victim of child sexual abuse. Participants shared several experiences, including recent encounters with professionals who have used language such as:

- 'she's not acting like she's been raped'
- 'making active lifestyle choices'
- 'placing themselves at risk'
- 'prostituting themselves'
- 'being promiscuous'
- 'being fantasists' or 'attention seekers'

It was suggested that the use of such language keeps the focus on the behaviour of the victim and deflects attention from the behaviour of the perpetrator. Furthermore, participants considered that such language continues to deny the concurrency of victimhood and agency that exists within some abusive contexts. Instead, it maintains a narrative of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victims. It inhibits effective identification and response by ignoring a number of important dynamics in abusive contexts. For

example, the dynamics of power, authority, status, masculinity and gender. Participants explained that this makes children feel responsible for the abuse and less likely to report for fear they will not be believed. This links back to the discourse of 'children lie', identified in the REA.

29. The discourses of 'failure to protect' and 'mother blame' highlighted in the REA were noted as still being relevant today. Participants described how these narratives lead to ways of thinking about who is and who is not a 'deserving' victim. This was discussed in relation to peer-on-peer abuse and online-facilitated abuse. Participants noted that the blaming of parents (and mothers in particular) was apparent in media and political narratives about these forms of abuse. For example:

    • parents being told they should have placed tighter controls on children's access to the internet
    • parents being blamed for not protecting their children (or other children) from abuse in certain contexts/spaces where there is no provision in place to keep children safe

    Participants discussed the view that perpetrators of peer-on-peer abuse are seen as 'a few bad apples'. There was a lack of recognition in policy that children who have been sexually abused or who have sexually abused someone else can sometimes be the same child. This lack of recognition can result in a failure to protect children.

30. The role of the political arena in creating and maintaining particular narratives about deserving and undeserving victims was also raised. For example, a recent encounter was mentioned in which a Member of Parliament had talked about child sexual abuse as a 'council housing problem'.

31. Participants spent some time discussing what is understood by the term child sexual abuse. This included the differences between child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation, and the difficulties with the current definition of child sexual exploitation as a particular form of sexual abuse. A number of participants considered that it is no longer meaningful or helpful to make a distinction between the two because the concept of 'exchange' – the defining feature of the distinction – has now become too broad and confused. It was noted that the 'exchange' can be tangible such as money or gifts, and intangible such as receipt of affection, love, or protecting a friend or sibling from being sexually abused.

32. Participants discussed whether any form of child sexual abuse arguably includes some kind of exchange element. They noted that keeping child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation positioned as separate concepts perpetuates the idea that there are only two different, static forms of child sexual abuse. In reality, this may not reflect the more nuanced and changing experiences of children. Participants concluded that from a victim

and survivor perspective, it is an irrelevant distinction with connotations that maintain ways of thinking about 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victims.

33. Participants stated that having these two separate concepts was also unhelpful to professional practice. For example, it is unhelpful in clinical settings, in the investigative processes of police or social workers, and in the way services for victims and survivors are funded. It was discussed that the media attention given to child sexual exploitation has helpfully raised awareness of particular manifestations of child sexual abuse. However, in practice, there is professional variation in terms of whether children's experiences are 'routed down' a child sexual abuse response or a child sexual exploitation response. This was considered to be partly the result of a lack of professional clarity about what 'exchange' means.

34. Participants considered that child sexual exploitation can be professionally interpreted as causing less harm compared to other forms of child sexual abuse. They noted that a lack of professional understanding of consent, for example, was hampering the effectiveness of risk assessment tools used by some local authorities. Risk assessments can be focused on the negative behaviours of the child victim and not on the perpetrator or the context in which the sexual abuse is taking place. A concern was raised that the lack of clarity about the distinction between child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation has been used as a reason for some local authorities not to investigate.

35. This lack of clarity and understanding was also cited in reference to the criminal justice system. Examples were shared of the judiciary placing the blame on victims for the sexual abuse they experienced and juries in child sexual abuse cases drawing their own interpretations of what is or is not 'that bad'. This was linked to a perceived lack of public understanding about the different forms child sexual abuse can take.

36. Participants observed that one discourse that did not appear in the REA was that of 'silence'. That is, ways of thinking about who is and who is not a victim of child sexual abuse as being greatly influenced by media reporting. Linked to the points above, it was suggested that child sexual abuse is only reported if it can be sensationalised. There was a perception that non-recent child sexual abuse cases have become 'too boring' and not sensationalist enough for the media to report when compared with child sexual exploitation and online-facilitated child sexual abuse.

Session 2: Challenging unhelpful narratives and improving responses to child sexual abuse

37. This session considered how unhelpful narratives about child sexual abuse can be challenged in order to improve responses to it.

38. Over the course of the session, participants discussed some of the progress they considered has been made in relation to society's awareness and understanding of child sexual abuse and improved approaches and responses to it. They noted, for example, that people in general are now more interested in the phenomenon than when the Cleveland Inquiry took place in the late 1980s. Specific examples were shared about members of the public now being more aware of child sexual abuse and spotting signs of potential abuse. Examples of children themselves being more aware were also given, such as discussing the dangers of certain online behaviours within their friendship and peer groups.

39. Participants noted positive examples in relation to changes in legislation, such as the Serious Crime Act 2015 moving away from child prostitution to abuse through exploitation. Statutory bodies and local authorities were also described as being very open to discussions on improving responses to child sexual abuse and as having made real progress in identifying cases of sexual exploitation. Participants commented that this was partly a result of better joint working with the police and public health as well as improved knowledge-sharing.

40. Discussion highlighted the growing number of reports of non-recent child sexual abuse being received by Operation Hydrant. The police received nearly 65,000 reports of child sexual abuse in 2016/17 – an unprecedented number that does not include the viewing of indecent images of children. Participants considered that this signified that victims and survivors now feel more able to come forward and that both adults and children have more confidence that they will be believed.

41. Although participants acknowledged progress has been made, they considered that this was at a local level rather than nationally. They discussed how small well-intentioned changes in one area could result in inconsistencies in other areas. Participants noted that changes needed to be considered more carefully in order to be effective and stressed that there was still a long way to go in terms of national change.

42. Discussing the REA, the authors acknowledged that although counter discourses have made positive progress, there is still a reluctance in society to engage with these ways of thinking. The authors felt that this lack of engagement helped to create and maintain contexts in which child sexual abuse could occur. They argued that positive developments in society's knowledge about child sexual abuse were continually overridden by something else. People can 'forget' what they have previously discovered about it. For example, recent accounts in the

media were mentioned as highlighting that children are still not always believed and some of the language used to talk about child victims can still be very negative.

43. Participants discussed the use of child sexual abuse story lines in the media and television programmes and agreed that these do generate interest and awareness about the issue. They noted that the public dialogue this creates can be important to victims and survivors and helps to make child sexual abuse a societal issue, not just a matter for the professionals. Participants said that raising the issue through media channels has gone some way to reducing the shame and stigma that victims and survivors may feel, and may increase the confidence in disclosure. However, participants commented that although the media has an important role to play, using child sexual abuse as a story line should be approached with caution. This is because the issues presented only represent the experiences of a small minority of victims and survivors, and there is a risk they might invalidate the experiences of others.

44. Linked to this, participants noted that the media's sensationalised reporting of child sexual exploitation has driven public fear about particular 'group' manifestations of it in particular geographical areas. Participants considered that a national response was needed to deal with the different forms of child sexual abuse that take place.

45. Participants discussed that throughout society there is fear of labelling a person as a perpetrator or someone who has committed a sexual offence against a child, particularly when identifying someone they know. This links back to narratives that individualise perpetrators and make them seem 'other' from the majority of people in society, as discussed in Session 1. Participants proposed that raising awareness and understanding that perpetrators of child sexual abuse can be 'the person next door', 'the nice school teacher' or 'the scoutmaster' is an important component in improving public awareness and understanding of the issue more broadly.

46. Participants described what they identified as a general institutional reluctance to deal with the dynamics of power in child sexual abuse. This was said to be an important aspect to include in future training for improved responses to it. Talking about the political arena, participants also noted that there seemed to be a lack of interest in the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on sexual violence. This was said to receive far less attention than the APPG on domestic violence, for example.

47. Some narratives were pointed out as notably unhelpful by their absence. For example, despite peer-on-peer abuse not being a new phenomenon, there remained an ongoing absence of government strategy or policy framework to respond to it. Participants also noted that there is

still only minimal reference in statutory guidance to children and young people who sexually harm. They commented that lack of training and understanding of peer-on-peer abuse as well as inadequate criminal justice and child protection systems are leading to a failure to respond to it.

48. Participants emphasised the need for a national government strategy for children who perpetrate sexual violence or exhibit sexually harmful behaviour. They mentioned that attitudes towards children who perpetrate sexual harm is an area where no social movement or progress has been made in more than 30 years. It was felt that there has been a lack of government leadership on this issue, despite the media attention it has received in recent years.

49. Participants stressed that an effective response to peer-on-peer abuse must consider the protection of perpetrators and victims. Specific shortfalls in current legislation and policy were noted in relation to this. For example, the disconnect between the legal age of consent (16) and the legal age of criminal responsibility (10) means children can be criminally responsible for a sexual offence but not legally able to consent to sexual activities. Participants argued that policy and legislation need to be better aligned with the broad range of ways in which child sexual abuse can take place.

50. In reconsidering the distinction between child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation, participants suggested that the definition of child sexual abuse needed to be reviewed so it includes the different ways that both child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation can be manifested.

51. In addition to the five institutional 'arenas' identified in the REA, participants proposed that, in the context of online-facilitated child sexual abuse, 'industry' needed to be made a sixth arena. It was noted that industry plays an important role in detecting and preventing perpetrators and better protecting children online.

52. Participants noted that the role of government is not just to implement legislation against child sexual abuse and that the government needs to do more. They proposed it was imperative that government understands what is going on and what it can do to help change wider attitudes and support practitioners. Participants agreed that considering the statistics on prosecution of child sexual abuse did not help to understand change and that there needed to be a way to measure both change and solutions.

53. Participants asserted that child sexual abuse should be viewed as a public health issue with government leadership and strategy behind it. As part of this, they noted the importance of understanding the general public's current perceptions and awareness of child sexual abuse. Participants considered that this was an important first step to being able to

change attitudes and promote the need for everyone to take collective responsibility for protecting children.

54. There was discussion on the need for constant dialogue that informs public understanding of the different forms child sexual abuse can take. Participants emphasised that narratives need to be created that move society away from seeing children, particularly adolescents, as 'troublemakers'. Social understanding of the different developmental stages of childhood is needed to help contextualise and better understand abuse and what behaviours are and are not acceptable. This was said to be particularly important in relation to child sexual exploitation and peer-on-peer abuse.

55. Participants emphasised that dramatic, emotive 'shock and awe' tactics in educating society need to be avoided so that people do not feel they are powerless to tackle child sexual abuse. Discussions need to employ clear language and focus on solutions.

56. Participants discussed the value of reporting statistics to promote child sexual abuse as a public health issue. It was argued that an important function of putting a focus on such statistics is to advocate that a whole system approach to responding to child sexual abuse is needed. This would help to better target and allocate resources. There was, however, a concern that doing this continually would make statistics less meaningful and reduce their impact.

57. Discussion highlighted that difficult conversations are necessary and that people's discomfort in talking about child sexual abuse needs to be addressed. Participants observed that these conversations must include why children abuse other children. They stressed that to achieve a constructive societal response to child sexual abuse, there needs to be a move away from seeing it as a taboo subject.

58. Participants suggested that a different space is needed in which victims and survivors can give their accounts without feeling they will be blamed for what they have experienced. Close working with victims and survivors was viewed as important in changing views and narratives. More work with child victims was also encouraged, to understand what they are experiencing and to empower them to talk about relationships. Participants stated that this would help to disrupt unhelpful narratives. It would also better educate professionals and society about the different forms child sexual abuse can take and how this may change in accordance with different stages of child development.

59. Participants agreed that more work should be undertaken with perpetrators as well as more interventions that could help to prevent perpetration of child sexual abuse. They suggested that engaging with and having conversations with perpetrators was necessary to better understand their motivations and the contexts in which

abuse occurs. This also included having meaningful conversations with children who have sexually abused other children to understand their motivations and the contexts involved.

60. Some participants advocated mandatory reporting by those in professional settings.

Future work

61. The seminar enabled valuable discussion on narratives about child sexual abuse and how these narratives could be challenged to improve the responses of institutions and society. It contributed to the Inquiry's Interim Report, particularly the recommendations about the cultural challenges that need to be addressed. The Inquiry has learnt much about the language it uses and how to more easily recognise, define and counter unhelpful narratives in different professional and public arenas in the course of its work. The Inquiry will use the insights provided by this seminar to identify areas for further investigation and scrutiny.