

Harmful Sexual Behaviours by Children and Adolescents: Negotiating 'the New Normal'?

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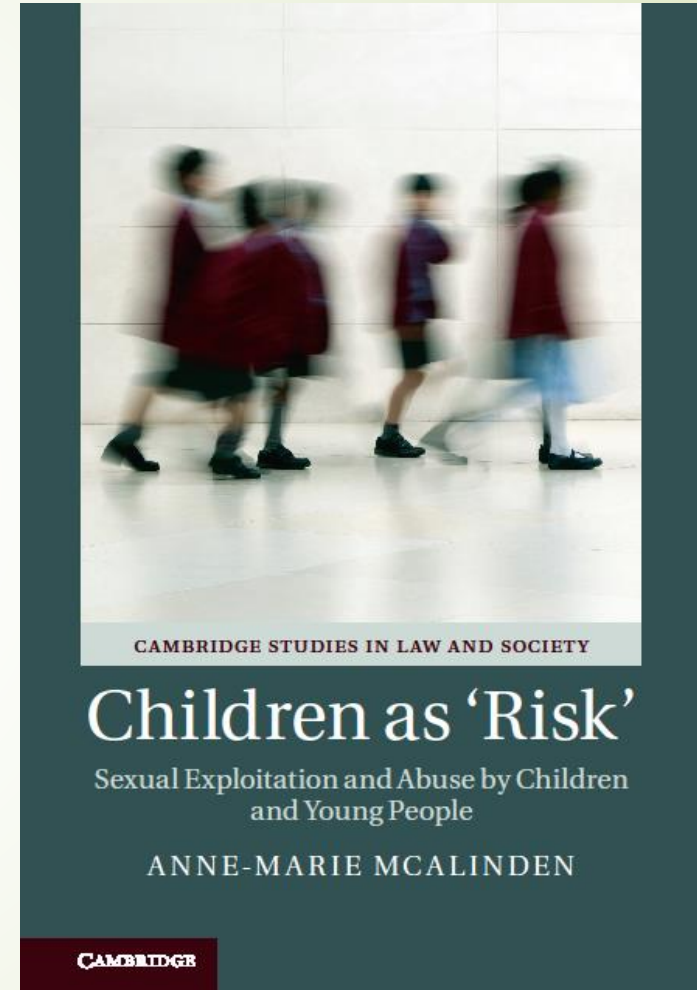
UCD ACAP Webinar

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Overview

- Nature & extent
- Emergence of HSB
- Cultural challenges
- Differentiating – Normal/risky/harmful
- Professional/policy challenges

[Funded by NOTA]





Primary Research

- 32 in-depth semi-structured interviews in NI (Feb-Nov 2016)
 - Police; social workers
 - Youth justice; judges; barristers
 - Nexus; Barnardo's; NSPCC; youth workers
 - Clinical/forensic psychiatrists
 - Medical professionals (SARC; Nurses)
 - Safeguarding professionals



Nature and Extent



A Note on Terminology

- 'Children' and 'young people'
- 'Child Sexual Exploitation' (CSE)/HSB
- 'Victim'
- 'Perpetrator'/'Offender' etc;
- 'Risk'

Nature & Extent of 'Peer Abuse' (1)

- **30-50% of CSA** (eg Radford et al, 2011/Firmin & Curtis, 2015)
 - Sibling
 - Institutional/organisational
 - CSE
 - 'Party culture' / 'gangs'
 - Peer relationships
 - On-line



Nature & Extent of 'Peer Abuse' (2)

➤ Age & Gender Dimensions

- ✓ Predominantly adolescent males (average age <15)
- ✓ Underreporting by young males
- ✓ But also females (3-12% of peer abuse) and younger children
- ✓ Gendered professional perceptions of 'risk'/'victims'

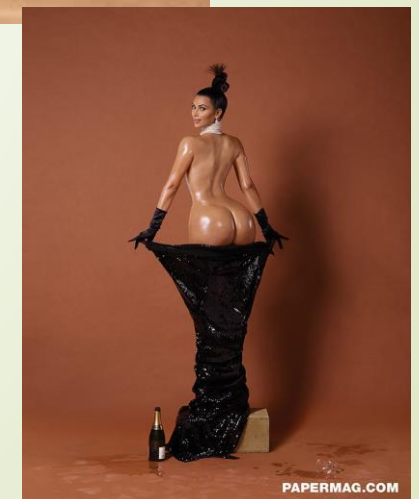
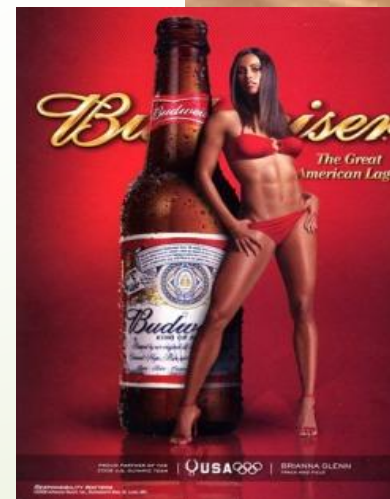
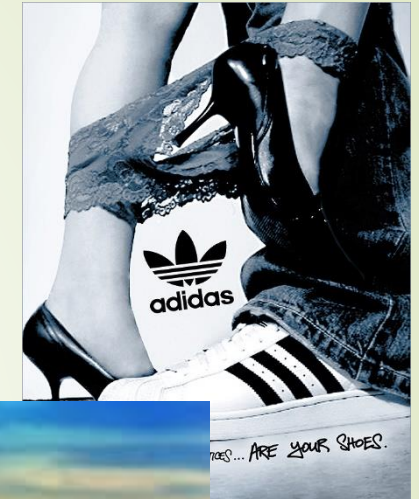





The Cultural Emergence of HSB

The Media & A 'Culture of 'Sex''

- Sex/sexuality as 'the **wallpaper** of children's lives' (Bailey, 2011: 12)
- **Advertising** – entertainment – celebrity culture – subliminal messages
- 'the **unwritten rules**' about sexual behaviour (Powell, 2010)
- Sex as '**glamorous, fun and risk free**' (Brown and Strasburger, 2007)
- 'Under age sex' and 'sex with randoms is the norm' (BASW, 2016)



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- ✓ *'It is like a TV event now ... So sex gets you places. And that is reality when you look at it.'* (Int 21, 23 June 2016, Social Work Practitioner)
 - ✓ *'the culture of sex now is that you can have sex and it's OK. You can have sex with many different people, many different partners, and it is OK.'* (Int 2, 18 April 2016, Independent Forensic Psychologist)
 - ✓ *'It has almost changed the discourse from being, you shouldn't do it at all, you know, until you are in the right sort of situation... to, you must do it at all times, at all cost, sort of thing ... youngsters struggle more nowadays with not wanting to do it, but not knowing how to say "no".'* (Int 6, 25 April 2016, Independent Safeguarding Consultant).

'New Media' & changing modes of communication

- Internet as an **alternative social space** – negotiation of identity
- Blurred distinction between **'real' & 'virtual' self**
- **Prolific social media use** – 10M users within the UK, 80 % via smartphone (Turgoose, 2016)
- **Gulf between adults and children**: communication without adult censorship

- ✓ *'they can be anything they want to be in their rooms ... they can channel Beyoncé or Kim Kardashian or whatever, and the sexual agenda is up there. Which is why I think so many of them get into hot water.'* (Int 29, 10 Oct 2016, police officer)
- ✓ *'there is **an addictive quality to using technology ... it blurs boundaries, dulls sensitivities** ... And when you link it in with risk taking, which is a normal part of adolescence, you can see why people are now saying, well what is the social norm here?'* (Int 24, 6 July 2016, Independent Treatment Professional)
- ✓ *'It is just an extension of your hand, your phone, take a picture and send it on. In the bathroom with your bits out, send it on. It literally doesn't take five seconds, which is where the difficulty is.'* (Int 32, 2 Nov 2016, police officer.)

Access to pornography

- Exposure to pornography/sexualised environment
- **Internet as enabler**/facilitator
- Accidental & intentional exposure by children u 13 (Sun et al, 2016)
- **Gender differences** - boys more likely to be exposed to/ deliberately access pornography (Horvath et al, 2013)
- **'Scripts:** 'warping sexual boundaries' (Int 4, 21 April 2016, Senior Social Work Practitioner)

- ✓ exposure to pornography is 'massive' or 'at the bottom of most cases' (Int 31, 17 Oct 2016, Police Officer; Int 32, 2 November 2016, Police Officer)
- ✓ 'are only about **two or three clicks away** from something inappropriate' (Int 4, 21 April 2016, Senior Social Work Practitioner)
- ✓ 'their sexual development ... their whole sexual knowledge, their whole experience of what a relationship is, what your body image is, how everything works, is all based on pornography' (Int 1, 16 Feb 2016, Service Manager, HSS Trust)

'Corporate paedophilia'

- 'Sexualisation of childhood' (Olfman, 2008)
- Childhood innocence as the ultimate 'fetish' & commodity (Faulkner, 2010).
- E.g. Video games as 'cultural zones of exception' (Atkinson and Rodgers, 2016: 1291)
 - Affirm abusive norms
 - Deny or minimise harm
 - Ignore social rules



- ✓ 'the pressures they are under, not only from their peers but from **media**, the **music** they listen to, the **videos** they watch, the films they have access to.' (Int 7, 13 May 2016, Former Police Officer)
- ✓ '**It is that game thing.** There really should be much more public awareness of them, because they are horrific, absolutely horrific. And people think, oh pornographic ... clear porn, oh that's terrible ... But I think the other is far more insidious, really.' (Int 21 April 2016, Senior Social Work Practitioner)

'Gang'/'party culture'

- Reinforces 'culture of transient sex' & 'sexual experimentation'
- Exchange 'sex for popularity' (see e.g. Melrose, 2013; Firmin, 2011)
- Difficulties re experimental - 'risky' /problematic and harmful sexual behaviours?
- Victims not self-identify – 'just having a good time' (Melrose, 2013: 162)
- Prevalence of 'rape myths' (Coy et al, 2013; Gurnham, 2016) – confusion around 'consent' - negate recognition of 'harm'

✓ 'it is definitely more relationship based. It is about introducing that person who thought they were in a relationship, say to a house party and then, you know, do you want drugs, do you want alcohol? It's that kind of passing around that happens. And we see that house party model more.' (Int 11, 26 May 2016, Safeguarding Professional)

✓ **'the complete normalisation of what is sexually harmful behaviour and lack of understanding around that. The complete lack of understanding on giving and getting consent as well ... There's young people who have actually been raped on their first night of being with someone, and then going on to have a relationship with them, because they don't actually recognise that it is wrong.'** (Int 21, 23 June 2016, Social Work Practitioner)

Experiential Sexualisation (1): Gender & Sexual Identity

- **Binary constructions** - boys as 'risky', girls 'at risk' (Harvey et al, 2013)
- **'Gendered double standard'** (Ringrose et al, 2013)
 - Desirability & innocence
 - More harshly judged
- **Performative aspect** (Butler, 1990)
- Also **impacts on boys**
 - peer pressure
 - Blurring of boundaries re age
- **Complex & nuanced**
 - Girls as sexual aggressors
 - LGBTQ+

- ✓ *'it is disproportionate for girls. there's more weight put on girls to act and behave in certain ways and I think you see that through what people describe as "the porn star experience" now. So you've got the pouting, you've got selfies, they must be able to perform these certain acts.'* (Int 2, 18 April 2016, Independent Forensic Psychologist)
- ✓ *'young women, you see them one day in their school uniform ... and the next day all dressed up in makeup and brows and more maintenance than I ever knew in a lifetime. And it is obvious that they look 18 or 19. So that scenario of the young fellas ... the actual blurring of what does a 15-year-old look like any more ... I think, is difficult.'* (Int 12, 26 May 2016, Nurse Consultant in Sexual Health)

Experiential Sexualisation (2): Resilience

- Longer-term resilience of some victims
 - ✓ Positive self-image/ strong emotional supports etc;
- Resilience against sexual & social 'scripts'
 - ✓ Family environments;
 - ✓ Competency/autonomy; emotional/social & cognitive development
 - ✓ On-line interactions
- Structure-agency nexus
- Increase resilience & capacity to negotiate identity

- ✓ *'I think if young people get good, fact based information, then they will make appropriate choices for where they are at.'* (Int 19, 16 June 2016, Youth Worker, FPA.)
- ✓ *'For a lot of kids ... viewing online pornography is very prevalent and for a lot of children they get desensitised to it and ... a lot of them are not viewing that.'* (Int 15, 3 June 2016, NSPCC Worker)
- ✓ *'we are now in a virtual world. So reality and virtual are so intertwined, whereas a lot of young people get them both confused. And their communication and ... their social life now is evolved round a screen. And that in itself has reduced resilience ... They just don't know how to communicate any more'* (Int 13, 31 May 2016, Public Health Nurse)



Cultural Challenges



‘Culture of Confusion’ – What is the ‘new normal’?

- Changing norms - children/childhood
- Norms - ‘ideal victims’
- Normalisation of ‘risky’ behaviours on-line among adults & children
- ‘Sexual scripts’ & ‘gendered double standard’

> ***‘The new normal’***





Impact of the Culture of Confusion (1)

- 'Normal' – 'Risky' – 'Harmful'?
- **Gulf** between adults & children re 'normal' behaviours
- 'Victim' – 'Perpetrator' **terminology not always helpful:** 'the victim-offender continuum' (McAlinden, 2014)
- **Gendered perceptions** around 'risk' & 'victimhood'/vulnerability



Impact of the Culture of Confusion (2)

- Dilutes capacity of C & YP to say 'no'
- Inadvertent infringement of legal norms (e.g. sexting)
- Blurring of boundaries between coercion /consent
- Impact on victim's capacity to see themselves as victim

Societal & Familial Responses

Cultural dimensions of HSB

- **Community reaction** often as negative & severe as for adult SO (e.g. Hackett et al, 2015; Harris et al, 2016)
- **'Collateral consequences'**: stigma; exclusion; attacks
- **Northern Ireland dimension:**
 - Paramilitary attacks
 - Culture of 'shame' re sex/sexuality

Familial Responses

- **Loss of family relationships** - 'collateral consequence'
- **Impact on family** – e.g. forced relocation
- *'a massive head mess for parents'* (Former Police Officer)/ *'you love the person but not what they have done'* (SARC Professional)
- **Familial reaction & 'offending identity'** – 'secondary deviation'



Differentiating 'Normal' / 'Risky' / 'Harmful' Behaviours?



‘Normal’ – ‘Risky’ – ‘Harmful’?

- **Consequences for victim** (+ perpetrator; & families)
 - From embarrassment to death (e.g. in case of sexting)
 - **Subjective** - victim resilience
- **Motivation of perpetrator**
 - Attention seeking/revenge/affiliation with group/intentional infliction of harm
 - ‘**multiplicity of intentions**’ – change over time
- **Contextual factors/degree** of harm:
 - ‘intensity, duration & frequency’ (Ashurst, 2015)
 - **Power** differentials (inc age disparities); **coercion**
 - Use of **secrecy** (grooming)

A Taxonomy of 'Harm'

► Peer-based **RELATIONSHIPS**

- 'mutuality, consensuality, choice' (Int 6, 25 April 2016, Independent Safeguarding Consultant)
- Exploratory/experimental, not exploitative

► Peer-based **RECRUITMENT**

- Problematic, may grow out of healthy relationships/contexts (e.g. siblings/party culture)
- Recruit victim for self or other children/adults
- 'Continuum of offending' (McAlinden, 2014: 186) (e.g. CSE; ICA)

► Peer-based **RISK**

- Overtly harmful, abusive/exploitative – possible criminal offending - aggression/coercion; age/developmental differences; causes distress
- E.g. 3rd party/non-consensual sexting



Challenges for Legal Frameworks



Key Challenges for Law & Policy

- The 'confusion of years' re childhood/adulthood
- Playing 'catch up' re new forms of behaviour
- May apply frameworks designed to protect to criminalise e.g. 'sexting'
- Can't accommodate 'messy' forms of HSB – 'victim-offender continuum' (inc with juries)
- Difficulties for families, esp with sibling/intra-familial abuse

'The Confusion of Years' re Childhood/Adulthood

(Int 26, Judge, Aug 2016)

'It does seem to be a big anomaly that ... if I am a 17 or 18-year-old boy I can have sex with my 16-year-old girlfriend, but I can't get a picture of her, even though I have obviously seen her naked.

It is also very, very wrong that it is technically wrong for a girl to have a picture of herself on her phone, when clearly she can see it every single day when she gets a shower. I don't understand why there is any need for the criminal justice system to get involved in that at all ... We all have difficulties with this in our unit.'

(Int 32, Nov 2016, Police Officer)

- *'Lots of mixed messages' on capacity/consent (Int 24, July 2016, Independent Treatment Professional)*
- Tensions between age of criminal responsibility (10); age of consent (16); and age of consent for 'indecent photographs' (18)
- Reliance on age rather than consent

Judging 'decency' by contemporary standards

...

*'If you look at the term indecent from a legislative point of view ... **not decent to me is different from not decent to you and it is different from someone of an older generation** ... as a 15-year-old, your concept of what is decent and not decent is so far off the scale to what mine would be, or my mother's would be... So what we would say to them is ... what you think about it, or what your peer thinks about it, is neither here nor there. Because **if it comes into the realms of an investigation and your phone gets seized, it won't be somebody your age that's judging whether it's indecent or not.**'*

Int 29, Oct 2016, Police Officer

Consent

*'It is about our attitudes as well and what we accept as consent ... "sure she's nearly eighteen. Sure what about it, she is streetwise." And **they apply their own personal judgement** or their own moral judgement to it, and that means then it is not dealt with as it should be'*

(Int 31, Police Officer, Oct 2016)

- Culture of 'victim blaming' e.g. re LAC
- 'Condoned consent/'normalised consent' (Pearce, 2013)

Configuring Consent in the digital age

'I had a case and I could have cried for the young girl ... she alleged that fellas had abused her in a car ... he sent her a text when he got home. And she sent him a text back ... At the end of the text she put LOL. And I had to bring her in and say, "what did you mean?" ... And she said, "I don't know. I just did. And I just can't explain it." And it blew the case out of the water. Because half the jury would have thought it meant "lots of love." Half the jury would have thought it meant "laugh out loud." We couldn't say what it meant and she didn't really even know what she meant when she sent it. Why did she send that to somebody who had just abused her? But children ... they put Xs [kisses] on everything. So there are difficulties with that.'

(Int 30, Senior Prosecutor PPS, Oct 2016)



Policy & Professional Challenges



Recognising the Complexity of Cases

- Challenge personal values/cultural **assumptions** – e.g. age (childhood), risk' etc;
- Think beyond '**binaries**' – 'victim'/'perpetrator'/'gender' etc;
- **Nuances** of behaviours - The 'victim-offender **continuum**' (McAlinden, 2014) & 'dual vulnerabilities'
- The structure-agency nexus: recognise **culture/context** in the digital age
- **Professional curiosity**: 'digging a bit deeper' (Int 31, Police Officer, Oct 2016)

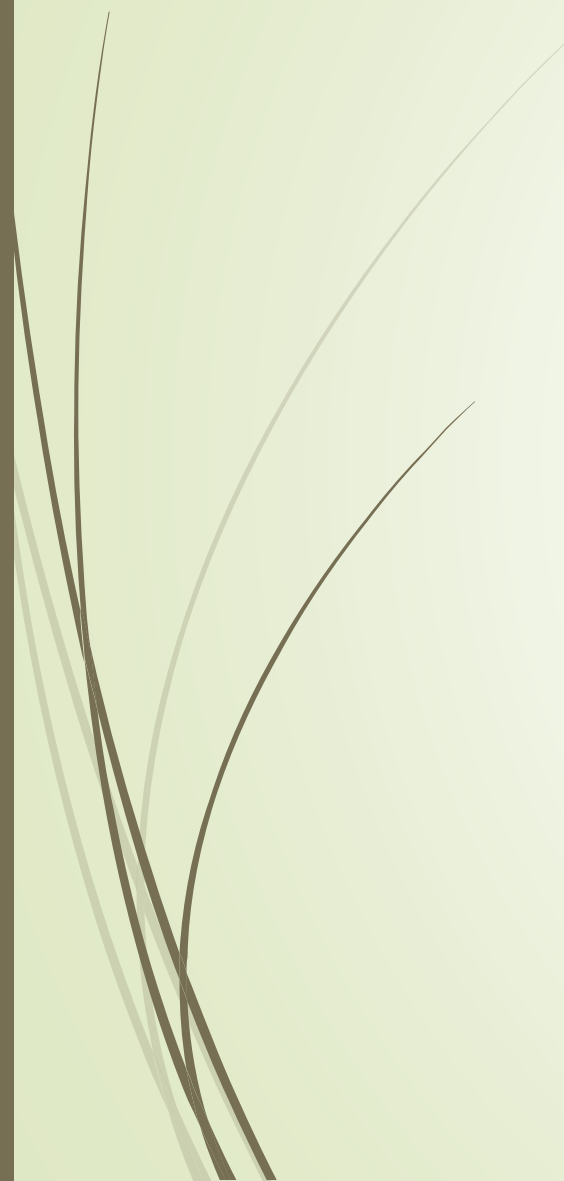
Bridging the 'normalisation gap'

- Need to 'to *reframe* where do they see sex.' (Int 16, 6 June 2016, Social Work Consultant)
- Culture of *openness* around sex and sexuality: 'embrace the fear'
- *Education/awareness* esp re 'consent' / privacy / respect/harm etc;
 - ✓ Develop language & tools around HSB for children & parents
 - ✓ Navigate challenging behaviours (inc as 'bystanders')
 - ✓ Plural sexual identities



Moving beyond 'risk'

- Reframe 'the regulatory approach' – balance risk v resilience
- Support families inc as 'protective others' – 'strengths-based approaches'
- Engage greater number of children/ families/ communities via schools
- Consistency of message among adults and children around privacy and consent (e.g. sharenting)



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