

SHORT CONTRIBUTION

Open Access



Introduction to the special edition 'Child sexual abuse: analysis and intervention'

Ella Cockbain^{1*} and Danielle M. Reynald²

Sexual offending against children is often framed as a 'unique, inexplicable phenomenon' (Wortley and Smallbone 2012 p. 46). Child sexual abuse is after all virtually unparalleled in its ability to generate outrage, disgust and confusion (see, e.g. Greer 2003; Martellozzo 2012; Wortley and Smallbone 2012). Attributing such illegal and disturbing behaviour to an inherent criminal 'disposition' or medical abnormality (e.g. paedophilia) can have the comforting effect of othering offenders.

Yet there are evident flaws in the idea that those who sexually abuse children form a clearly delineated group of deviant monsters Wortley and Smallbone (2006a, 2012). Until recently, research focused overwhelmingly on assessing the psychopathologies of convicted child sex offenders in clinical settings Wortley and Smallbone (2006a, b). Yet despite substantial research of this nature, few empirically-substantiated patterns in offenders' demographic or personality characteristics were found (Kaufman et al. 2006). Exceptions, such as a marked tendency to be male rather than female, are generally so broad as to be of little practical use in targeting interventions. Herman (1988 p. 702) argued that from a diagnostic standpoint 'the most striking characteristic of sex offenders... is their apparent normality'. There is also a small but growing body of research highlighting the criminal versatility of sex offenders (e.g. Cockbain and Wortley 2015; Simon 1997, 2000; Smallbone and Wortley 2000, 2004). Contrary to popular perception, the average sex offender has so far been shown to be a criminal generalist rather than a committed specialist.

If we are to get better at explaining and preventing child sexual abuse, the research field must evolve beyond its traditional focus on individual psychopathology. One particularly fruitful area in recent years has been the rapid growth in studies from a situational perspective (e.g., Brayley et al. 2011; Cockbain et al. 2011, 2015;

Deslauriers-Varin and Beauregard 2010; Leclerc et al. 2008, 2009a, b, 2011; Terry and Ackerman 2008; Wortley and Smallbone 2006b, c, 2012). Rather than address the 'why' of child sexual abuse, such situational enquiries typically focus on the 'what', 'where', 'how', 'when' and 'who'. A better understanding of the immediate dynamics of situations in which offences occur can open up new avenues for interventions, informing targeted manipulations designed to deter offending, improve detection, support victims and so forth. After all, understanding factors promoting child sexual abuse is only half the challenge: the other half is translating this knowledge into on-the-ground efforts to tackle the crime.

Amid these developments, we were delighted to have the chance to bring together leading researchers and practitioners worldwide for Crime Science journal's first special edition on child sexual abuse. We hope that this special edition will help increase awareness of and interest in theoretical, empirical and practical developments in the prevention of child sexual abuse. It includes a broad array of research and commentaries, covering four different continents, many different forms of sexual offending and diverse aspects to offending, victimisation, identification and intervention. Indeed, the breadth of coverage of the edition itself highlights just how much about child sexual abuse remains unknown and unexplored. Some of the contributions may make for unsettling and provocative reads, not just because of the sensitive subject matter but also because of the challenges to accepted wisdoms that they contain. We must remember, however, that engaging scientifically with controversial issues and unearthing and confronting false assumptions are critical steps in advancing responses to sexual abuse of children. The order in which we discuss the contributions below reflects the order we suggest when reading the special issue.

In his short commentary, Wortley (2015) argues that one of the most fundamental challenges facing child sexual abuse research is maintaining objectivity in the

*Correspondence: e.cockbain@ucl.ac.uk

¹ UCL (University College London), London, UK

Full list of author information is available at the end of the article

face of such an emotive and controversial issue. Moral panic based on untested—or outright erroneous—popular wisdom impedes the development of the scientific evidence-base on child sexual abuse and effective counter-measures. If the field is to progress, he contends, then researchers must not only commit to ‘dispassionate objectivity’ in their enquiries but find the ‘courage to challenge some sacred cows’.

In their research article, Cockbain and Wortley (2015) contest the commonly held view of internal (or domestic) sex trafficking as highly sophisticated and well-organised with evidence from their exclusive data on internal sex trafficking of British children. With little empirical research done on internal child sex trafficking, this paper offers unique empirical insights about the dynamics of this type of crime based on innovative analyses of victim, offender and crime event characteristics from six major UK police cases. Testing these data against expectations derived from the opportunity theories of crime, and in particular the routine activity approach, this paper provides strong support for the opportunity framework and the viability of situational prevention in tackling internal child sex trafficking.

The CRAVED (concealable, removable, available, valuable, enjoyable and disposable) model was designed to explain why certain products are stolen more than others. Its application has largely been limited to the acquisitive crime literature in which it was developed. In their research article, Beauregard and Martineau (2015) explore whether the model has untapped potential in explaining patterns of sexual victimisation. Using a sample of 350 Canadian sexual homicide cases, the authors examine victim selection from a routine activity perspective using CRAVED.

McKillop et al. (2015) also apply the routine activity approach to investigate contextual risk factors in offenders’ first known child sexual abuse incident. Focusing particularly on how victim age influences the timing, context and nature of the first abuse incident, they surveyed 100 adult males convicted of contact sexual offences with children about situational characteristics of these incidents. Their research article highlights the importance of age-related routine activities in defining the opportunity structures and convergence settings for these incidents. It also raises important issues around the conceptualisation of guardianship against child sexual abuse.

With the proliferation of the Internet has come concern about the risks children face online. One such issue that has attracted growing research interest is sexually motivated online communication with children, also known variously as online grooming, luring or solicitation. In their research article, Quayle and Newman (2016) analyse 264 reports of grooming received by a Canadian

watchdog (cybertip.ca). They explore factors associated with reporting suspicious online activity of this nature, looking at various parties’ (victim, suspect, reporter) characteristics and the behaviours triggering concern.

A growing body of research exists on the associations between child sexual abuse victimisation and diverse physical, psychological, economic and social outcomes. In their research article, De Jong and Bijleveld (2015) argue that a major limitation of this literature is that few studies examine systematically the mediating role that may be played by characteristics of the abuse. In their article, they investigate the association between sexual victimisation in childhood and three family outcomes: teen parenthood; marriage; and divorce. Using a sample of 910 victims in the Netherlands, they examine whether and how the nature of the abuse, characteristics of the victims and their relationships to the perpetrators affected the outcome variables.

Leclerc et al. (2015) turn their attention to the under-researched area of child sexual abuse in youth-oriented organisations. Using a small Canadian sample ($n = 23$) of adult males who admitted to sexual offences against children in youth organisations, they obtain recommendations for preventing abuse in these specific contexts from offenders themselves. Drawing on this offender-based research approach, their research article concludes by mapping these prevention recommendations unto the 25 situational crime prevention techniques to illustrate how the data can inform situational prevention.

In their short commentary, Belur and Singh (2015) reflect on the changing situation around child sexual abuse in India. Attitudes and responses to child sexual abuse in India diverge greatly from those we take for granted in the United Kingdom or United States, for example. In the wake of new legislation on sexual offences against children, the authors highlight some unintended but potentially problematic consequences of criminalising all sexual activity involving under 18 year-olds. Their discussion focuses on three key areas: autonomy and consent; age determination; and mandatory reporting.

Rayment-McHugh et al.’s (2015) theoretical article highlights key ways in which existing analyses of and responses to child sexual abuse can be strengthened by adopting more focused place-based approaches. Based on evidence showing that child sexual abuse—like all other types of crime—is concentrated in particular places, they argue in favour of prevention initiatives that target small, clearly-defined locations over larger population-based approaches. Their line of argument concludes with the presentation of a conceptual model of place-based prevention which elucidates six critical steps for preventing child sexual abuse at the local level.

Overall, this special issue collection offers original insights into various dimensions of the problem of child sexual abuse and highlights fruitful directions for future research in this area. Wortley highlights the overarching need to focus on establishing a scientific evidence-base if the ultimate goal of tackling child sexual abuse is to be achieved. The other contributions in this special issue illustrate how this goal can be achieved through: (1) improvements in the conceptualisation and operationalisation of key constructs related to this type of crime; (2) using various types of unique data for more precise, more holistic and richer measurements when studying child sexual abuse in its diverse forms; (3) applying innovative analytical approaches to improve the robustness of research findings and practical interventions for prevention; and (4) a greater focus on understanding child sexual abuse not just in the developed world but in developing countries, including changes to attitudes and legislative responses there.

Perhaps one of the most powerful contributions that this special edition makes to both researchers and practitioners is its overall insight into the use of different and innovative data sources to triangulate key findings about different forms of child sexual abuse. Using very different datasets, the contributions collectively highlight the importance of opportunity in facilitating various forms of child sexual abuse and how various types of situational approaches may be beneficial for prevention. Equally significant in these contributions is the lesson that context gives rise to specific opportunity structures that are critical when we consider the risks and effects associated with various forms of child sexual abuse, as well as practical interventions for harm reduction.

Author details

¹ UCL (University College London), London, UK. ² Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia.

Received: 28 January 2016 Accepted: 30 March 2016

Published online: 06 April 2016

References

- Beauregard, E., & Martineau, M. (2015). An application of CRAVED to the choice of victim in sexual homicide: A routine activity approach. *Crime Science*, 4(24), 1–11.
- Belur, J., & Singh, B. (2015). Child sexual abuse and the law in India: a commentary. *Crime Science*, 4, 26. doi:10.1186/s40163-015-0037-2.
- Brayley, H., Cockbain, E., & Laycock, G. (2011). The value of crime scripting: Deconstructing internal child sex trafficking. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 5(2), 132–143.
- Cockbain, E., Brayley, H., & Laycock, G. (2011). Exploring internal child sex trafficking networks using social network analysis. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 5(2), 144–157.
- Cockbain, E., Ashby, M., & Brayley, H. (2015). Immaterial boys? a large-scale exploration of gender-based differences in child sexual exploitation service users. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, advanced online access version.
- Cockbain, E., & Wortley, R. (2015). Everyday atrocities: Does internal (domestic) sex trafficking of British children satisfy the expectations of opportunity theories of crime? *Crime Science*, 4(35), 1–12.
- De Jong, R., & Bijleveld, C. (2015). Child sexual abuse and family outcomes. *Crime Science*, 4(34), 1–10.
- Deslauriers-Varin, N., & Beauregard, E. (2010). Victims' routine activities and sex offenders' target selection scripts: a latent class analysis. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 22(3), 315–342.
- Greer, C. (2003). *Sex crime and the media: sex offending and the press in a divided society*. Cullompton: Willan.
- Herman, J. (1988). Considering sex offenders: a model of addiction. *Signs*, 13(4), 695–724.
- Kaufman, K., Mosher, M., Carter, H., & Estes, L. (2006). An empirically based situational prevention model for child sexual abuse. In R. Wortley & S. Smallbone (Eds.), *Situational prevention of child sexual abuse, crime prevention series* (Vol. 19, pp. 101–144). Willan: Devon.
- Leclerc, B., Beauregard, E., & Proulx, J. (2008). Modus operandi and situational aspects in adolescent sexual offenses against children: A further examination. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 52(1), 46–61.
- Leclerc, B., Feakes, J., & Cale, J. (2015). Child sexual abuse in youth-oriented organisations: Tapping into situational crime prevention from the offender's perspective. *Crime Science*, 4(28), 1–12.
- Leclerc, B., Proulx, J., & Beauregard, E. (2009a). Examining the modus operandi of sexual offenders against children and its practical implications. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 14(1), 5–12.
- Leclerc, B., Proulx, J., Lussier, P., & Allaire, J. (2009b). Offender-victim interaction and crime event outcomes: modus operandi and victim effects on the risk of intrusive sexual offenses against children. *Criminology*, 47(2), 595–618.
- Leclerc, B., Wortley, R., & Smallbone, S. (2011). Getting into the script of adult child sex offenders and mapping out situational prevention measures. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 48(2), 209–237.
- Martellozzo, E. (2012). *Online child sexual abuse: Grooming policing and child protection in a multi-media world*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- McKillop, N., Brown, S., Wortley, R., & Smallbone, S. (2015). How victim age affects the context and timing of child sexual abuse: Applying the routine activities approach to the first sexual abuse incident. *Crime Science*, 4(17), 1–10.
- Quayle, E., & Newman, E. (2016). An exploratory study of public reports to investigate patterns and themes of requests for sexual images of minors online. *Crime Science*, 5(1), 1–12.
- Rayment-McHugh, S., Adams, D., Wortley, R., & Tilley, T. (2015). 'Think Global Act Local': a place-based approach to sexual abuse prevention. *Crime Science*, 4, 22. doi:10.1186/s40163-015-0035-4.
- Simon, L. (1997). Do criminal offenders specialize in crime types? *Applied and Preventive Psychology*, 6(1), 35–53.
- Simon, L. (2000). An examination of the assumptions of specialization, mental disorder and dangerousness in sex offenders. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, 18(2–3), 275–308.
- Smallbone, S., & Wortley, R. (2000). *Child sexual abuse in Queensland: offender characteristics and modus operandi*. Brisbane: Queensland Crime Commission.
- Smallbone, S., & Wortley, R. (2004). Onset, persistence and versatility of offending among adult males convicted of sexual offences against children. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 16(4), 285–298.
- Terry, K., & Ackerman, A. (2008). Child sexual abuse in the catholic church: how situational crime prevention strategies can help create safe environments. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 35(5), 643–657.
- Wortley, R. (2015). Science and child sexual abuse: navigating the pathway between emotion and objectivity. *Crime Science*, 4, 18. doi:10.1186/s40163-015-0029-2.
- Wortley, R., & Smallbone, S. (2006a). Introduction. In R. Wortley & S. Smallbone (Eds.), *Situational prevention of child sexual abuse* (pp. 1–6). New York, NY: Criminal Justice Press.
- Wortley, R., & Smallbone, S. (2006b). Applying situational principles to sexual offenses against children. In R. Wortley & S. Smallbone (Eds.), *Situational prevention of child sexual abuse* (pp. 7–36). New York, NY: Criminal Justice Press.
- Wortley, R., & Smallbone, S. (Eds.). (2006c). *Situational prevention of child sexual abuse*. New York, NY: Criminal Justice Press.
- Wortley, R., & Smallbone, S. (2012). *Internet child pornography: Causes, investigation and prevention*. Oxford: Praeger.