

The Groomers and the Question of Race

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Abstract

The last decade has witnessed a number of prominent police-led operations relating to child sexual exploitation (CSE) in England. Whilst much of the public discourse related to *Operation Yewtree*, *Operation Fernbridge*, and others has focused on the criminal nature of CSE, race has been absent from that discourse; conversely, the public debates relating to grooming cases by men of Pakistani heritage have been marked by the presence of race. By critically evaluating the above cases this article aims to put forward three related arguments. First, it aims to highlight and explain contrasting ways in which CSE is debated vis-à-vis the category of racialised politics. Second, it demonstrates how racialised discourse of CSE, initially considered to be a feature of far-right rhetoric, has taken centre ground. Finally, drawing upon analysis of various reports it aims to question the links between race and CSE to show how racialised discourse of CSE helps undermine its victims.

Key words: Grooming, Racial Politics, Child Sexual Exploitation, Policy

Introduction

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) cases have become an almost ubiquitous feature of our national public discourse. This is largely due to three critical sets of events: *Operation Yewtree*, arising from incidents linked to Jimmy Savile; *Operation Fernbridge*, which is connected to historical incidents of CSE by people in political power; and the on-going grooming cases by 'men of Pakistani heritage' in a number of British towns and cities as far back as 2004. Whilst each of these cases differs, they have a number of themes in common. They all relate to the sexual exploitation of girls and boys usually, but not exclusively, in care. In other words, the exploitation is of some of the most vulnerable members of our society. The cases all involved grooming, whereby the perpetrator(s) would start by plying the victim(s) with alcohol, drugs and gifts, before sexually exploiting them. Finally, victims were systematically let down by institutional failure, whether this be the police, social services or other professionals (Norfolk, 2011; 2012; Rochdale Borough Safeguarding Children Board, 2013).

Despite these similarities, there are a number of stark contrasts. Some of the cases have been interpreted through a *cultural repertoire*, whilst the others have been marked by a *criminal repertoire*. For example, it is clear that both *Operation Yewtree* and *Operation Fernbridge*, involving mainly politically influential white men, are represented by the latter, criminal repertoire, whilst the 'grooming' cases by 'men of

Pakistani heritage' are often seen through the perspective of race and culture: the cultural repertoire. Despite the similarities in grooming in all of the above cases, it is clear that the idea of 'grooming' is used within a particular racialised context. The 'grooming' cases are often discussed through an *oppositional discourse*, namely Pakistani men are seen as the sole perpetrators whilst white girls are seen as the ultimate victims. This racialised bias in news reporting relating to grooming is highlighted by Harker (2012). He notes how similar incidents of CSE and grooming involving non-Asian men in a number of towns and cities in the UK do not receive similar, sensationalised news reporting and commentary. This further prompts observations relating to *deviance amplification* (Hall et al, 2013) of racialised CSE; news reporting does not simply *report 'fact'*, rather it is part of an *ideological state apparatus* (Althusser, 2008) which helps socially construct CSE through racialised sexual political lenses; Pakistani hyper-sexualised masculinity is seen to be directly targeting vulnerable white girls. The racial politics of CSE also allows the far-right to make an entry point from the margins of society to the mainstream on the back of media reporting to publicly defend the victims of 'grooming' cases and not those connected with *Operation Yewtree* and *Fernbridge*.

Grooming and the absence of race

The broadcasting of the much debated ITV documentary, *Exposure: The Other Side of Jimmy Savile* (Thomas-Williams et al, 2012), in October 2012, led to the Metropolitan Police establishing *Operation Yewtree*, with three areas of investigation: firstly, CSE linked to Jimmy Savile; secondly, CSE linked to Jimmy Savile and others and, finally; CSE by others. Race is a notable absence from the public discourse associated with *Operation Yewtree*, despite the fact that most of these men were from white middle-class backgrounds. One of the key factors which explains this is the racialised politics of the media and how it draws upon the power of *whiteness* and the privileges associated with it, inevitably allowing white perpetrators not to be 'racially marked' (Gabriel, 1998). In fact, if we look at the following cases it is clear how the public conversation surrounding Savile and others takes on a *criminalised narrative* – emphasis is placed on the criminal intent, not race nor culture, for the motivation behind the sexual exploitation (Gray and Watt, 2013). To date, a number of prominent media celebrities have received prison sentences as part of *Operation Yewtree*, including Rolf Harris, Gary Glitter, Chris Denning and Max Clifford, with others awaiting trial. A detailed account of the Savile case is included in an extensive report, *Giving victims a voice: joint report into sexual allegations made against Jimmy Savile* (Gray and Watt, 2013). The report documents how the offences were not only opportunistic sexual assaults but that 'grooming or planning is said to have occurred'. Within the recorded crimes associated with Savile there are 126 indecent acts and 34 rape/penetration offences; 73% of Savile's offences were against those

aged under 18 years, with the total victim age range between 8 and 47 years old (at the time of abuse); of those, 82% were female and most were in the 13 to 16 age group (Gray and Watt, 2013: 5).

Grooming does not only affect young girls but also young boys. The sexual exploitation investigated by *Operation Fernbridge*, which started in 2012 with a view to examining claims about a paedophile ring with links to the government during the early 1980s, included allegations made by males and females. *Operation Fernbridge* is particularly interested in investigating allegations of sexual abuse and grooming at the Elm Guest House, South London by prominent public figures, including politicians, judges, pop stars and government ministers during the late 1970s and early 1980s (Milmo and Peachy, 2013). The cases investigated by *Operation Fernbridge* follow a similar pattern to the grooming cases associated with Rochdale, in that the victims were plied with alcohol prior to being abused (Boffey, 2014, July 5).

There are parallels between CSE cases in Rochdale, Rotherham and other areas, and *Operation Fernbridge*, in terms of institutional failures in protecting the most vulnerable. *Operation Fernbridge* comes alongside the much debated 'Westminster paedophile dossier' compiled by the late Geoffrey Dickens MP and based on allegations of a network of paedophiles made up of senior political figures at the heart of the British political establishment during the 1980s. The dossier was passed on to the then Home Secretary, Leon Brittain in 1984, who acknowledged receiving it and assured Dickens in a letter that the relevant police authorities had been informed (ibid). Despite this confirmation, the dossier subsequently disappeared from Home Office files. In fact it was later pointed out that the 'Westminster dossier was just one of 114 potentially relevant files found to be missing by officials when they did their initial search' (Boffey 2014, July 5). Following the *Wanless-Whittam review* (2014), which looked into the Home Office handling of CSE during 1979-1999, some, including Norman Tebbit, argued that there 'may well' have been a political cover-up over child abuse in the 1980s (Boffey 2014, July 6). On 7 July 2014, the Home Secretary, Theresa May, established the Independent Panel Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IPICSA) to respond to some of the issues arising from *Operation Fernbridge*. Since then, IPICSA has been embroiled in a series of controversies regarding the role and political connections of its Chair. Initially, it was announced that the retired English judge Baroness Butler-Sloss was to chair IPICSA, yet after 8 days she was forced to stand down after it was brought to general attention that her brother was Attorney General during the time that these abuses were taking place, and the potential conflict of interest this represented. In September 2014, Fiona Woolf, a leading British solicitor and Lord Mayor of London, was announced to replace Butler-Sloss, yet in October 2014 she too had to resign following scrutiny by some victims groups which highlighted the close connections between her and Lord Brittain (Mason, 2014).

Grooming and the presence of race

The connections between sexual grooming and race in Britain have a complicated history; it starts with the far-right in Britain, with statements made by the former leader of the British National Party (BNP), Nick Griffin, as early as 2001 (BNP, 2011). Similar sentiments were also expressed by Ann Cryer, the former Labour MP of Kirklees, West Yorkshire during 2002 (Marsden, 2013). Griffin made connections between Muslims and sexual grooming in an undercover BBC documentary, 'The Secret Agent' (Gwynne and Wightman, 2004). Griffin was in fact arrested in 2004, following the exposure by 'The Secret Agent', for incitement to racial hatred, but later acquitted at Leeds Crown Court in 2006. In the same year, a Channel 4 documentary, *Edge of the City* (Hall, 2004), further reinforced a racialised narrative of 'Asian men' in Bradford grooming white girls. In fact, Griffin was able to draw upon this controversial documentary to further legitimise his views by arguing how 'all those media hacks and politicians who demonised me for talking about this should hang their hands in shame. The programme should be shown in every school in Britain' (BNP, 2011).

Following the *Edge of the City* documentary, a number of towns and cities in the north of England witnessed the arrest and subsequent sentencing of men of Asian heritage for CSE. *Operation Parsonage* in Keighley (2005), *Awaken Project* in Blackpool (2006, 2007, 2009), the *Engage Project* in Blackburn (2006), and *Operation Messenger* in Oldham (2007, 2008) are some of the many operations that have been launched related to CSE by 'Pakistani men'. The case of Laura Wilson in October 2009 once again captivated the national conversation about race and CSE. Wilson, from Rotherham, South Yorkshire, was groomed for sex from the age of 12 and was stabbed to death at the age of 17. In 2010, grooming cases in Derby hit the national headlines, in which nine men sexually groomed white girls, the youngest of whom was 12 and the oldest of whom was 18 years of age. The reporting of both of these cases help establish within the public imagination a link between sexual grooming and image of the menacing 'Muslim sexual predator'. The racialised national debate was given impetus following the intervention of the former home secretary, Jack Straw MP. Straw argued that the best way of making sense of these cases was not through a criminal model, but that the explanations lay within the cultural fabric of Pakistani societies. Part of the 'cultural reading' involved an explanation of sexual grooming based on Pakistani culture, which is seen to be responsible for perceiving young white girls as 'easy meat'. This is clearly articulated in a Radio 4 interview with Straw in January 2011:

There is a specific problem which involves Pakistani heritage men ... who target vulnerable young white girls.

We need to get the Pakistani community to think much more clearly about why this is going on and to be more open about the problems that are leading to a

number of Pakistani heritage men thinking it is OK to target white girls in this way.
[...]

These young men are in a western society, in any event, they act like any other young men, they're fizzing and popping with testosterone, they want some outlet for that, but Pakistani heritage girls are off-limits and they are expected to marry a Pakistani girl from Pakistan, typically.

(cited in BBC, 2011)

The links between race, religion and sexual grooming was etched in the public consciousness after the Rochdale sexual grooming cases in the North West of England. A total of 47 girls, a number of them from care homes, were identified as victims; nine men were convicted. One of the men was a father of five and a religious studies teacher at a local mosque. The ring leader of the gang, 59-year-old Shabir Ahmed, also known as the 'daddy' and from Oldham, was convicted of 30 child rape charges and was jailed for 19 years (Korn, 2012).

The long list of sexual grooming cases highlighted above and discussed extensively within the media (Norfolk, 2012; Vallely, 2012) using a racialised repertoire raise a number of challenges. Firstly, if both the local and national media were to be believed, then the problem is essentially cultural, one that is deeply engraved in the cultural DNA of all Pakistanis and which allows them to behave in such manner. Herein lies the problem: that view assumes that masculinity is fixed and that all Pakistani men of a particular age are susceptible to acts of sexual deviance. Moreover, the policy implications arising from this assumption also take a racialised form, which can ultimately lead to racial profiling of Pakistani men. Secondly, it reinforces a notion of masculinity which is violently patriarchal, rooted in crime, and which controls women through force, sexual violence and exploitation. The perpetrators are projected as sexual menaces patrolling the streets, keeping a watchful eye for the next target. This, as argued by Cryer (Marsden, 2013) and Straw (BBC, 2011) is a result of cultural influences brought about through traditional gender roles, family authority and cultural stereotypes used to control the autonomy and choice of young women. A key theme arising out of the above two points articulated by both political actors and media discourse is the idea of *racialism*, that is to say, there are cultural traits which are hereditary in some groups which they do not share with other races (Appiah, 1992:13). Racialising the crime and the criminal is a strong feature of the grooming cases, an echo of Stuart Hall's *Policing the crisis*, in which he charted the emergence of an apparently new and frightening form of crime and social threat, namely muggings carried out by some black young men in the 1970s (Hall et al, 2013). Similar to the 'grooming' offenses, Hall noted how, in the 1970s, muggings were objectified and transformed as a moral panic despite the absence of a legal definition of mugging as a distinct crime. Hall's study demonstrated how certain racialised minority groups are singled out and located at the centre of moral panics, against whom the state then uses the strong-arm of the legal system to maintain law and order.

The question of race?

There is something deeply problematic in referring to women as *easy meat*, as Straw did; women are seen as voiceless sexual objects or commodities without any dignity, self-worth or respect. In fact, the 'easy meat' metaphor helps us to make sense of some of the institutional failures that have been masked by the public fixation on the race and culture of the perpetrators. It is clear that professional attitudes toward some of the young girls from mainly white working-class backgrounds may have played a significant role in how the CSE cases were recorded, reported and detected. The House of Commons Home Affairs Committee Report which took evidence from a range of professionals within the care sector and local authority workers documented how, despite repeated complaints, young girls were not protected by the professionals that were paid to do so. It noted how young girls in care were systematically let down by a range of agencies which had the responsibility for their protection, including children's social care, health services, the police and education, practitioners from the Connexions service, the Youth Offending service, the Probation service, drug and alcohol misuse services, and leaving care services (House of Commons, 2013). Moreover, it provided the following insights into the ways in which vulnerable girls in care were perceived by their care workers:

There has been a failure among care professionals to recognise the fact that some children are being exploited. Instead many professionals referred to them as being 'promiscuous', engaging in 'risky behaviour' or having 'consented' to sexual activity.
(House of Commons, 2013: 12)

The above observation relating to institutional failure drew upon how the professional perception of working-class girls played a crucial role in influencing attitudes which viewed those in care as less worthy of protection by care workers because it was felt that such actions constituted young girls' 'life style choices'. This finding was echoed in a report by The Office of the Children's Commissioner (2012), an organisation that was established in the UK and underpinned by the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, noted how the young person was seen to be 'prostituting herself', 'risk-fuelled', 'sexually available' or even 'asking for it' (Berelowitz et al, 2012). This is an important contribution towards the understanding of CSE, especially of those in care, particularly in light of the fact that many people working in child protection viewed children above the age of five as somehow not vulnerable (House of Commons 2013: 7). In light of this observation, it is not surprising to note the statement made by a young girl in Manchester as part of a detailed report by Ann Coffey MP titled *Real Voices: child sexual exploitation in Manchester*, which noted the degree of apathy in young girls reporting sexual-micro aggressions: 'If my house got burgled, I would go to the police; but if someone touched me, I would not go to the police because it feels it would be a waste of time' (Coffey, 2014: 11).

A detailed insight into institutional failure is further provided by a number of Serious Case Reviews (SCR). SCRs are part of the child protection system; they are underpinned by a range of statutory duties and usually carried out through a multi-agency partnership when a child dies or is seriously injured and abused or neglected (HM Government, 2013). The Rochdale Borough SCR (2013) provides a number of observations relating to the systematic institutional failures regarding CSE. It noted how Greater Manchester Police had information regarding CSE in Rochdale as far back as 2004, and how it failed to record, investigate and examine repeated concerns by parents (RBSCR, 2013). It found that hospital staff were 'too busy' and 'lacked professional training' and, as a result, 'opportunities are missed when teenagers want to talk' (RBSCR, 2013: 49). The failure of social workers, the RBSCR found, was due to a range of factors, including social workers' perception of and assumption about young people. They were, social workers thought, making a 'lifestyle choice':

The concept of 'lifestyle' is likely to have been used as shorthand for a range of behaviours – sexual activity, alcohol and drug use, friendships seen to be negative, early teenage pregnancy. Whilst it was often legitimate for professionals to be concerned about the impact of some of these behaviours both on the young people and on their children, by summarising them as 'lifestyle' with its implications of free choice and the potential for moral judgement, they betrayed and reinforced the concept that the young people had the freedom to make meaningful choices about the way they could live their lives. Given their economic, social and family backgrounds and the corrosive effect on the self of sexual exploitation this was fundamentally misconceived. In the words of X's father 'it's what they expected of our children.'

(RBSCR, 2013: 106)

One of the many questions arising from the RBSCR report was about the extent to which institutional failures documented in the report were unique to Rochdale. In answering this, the RBSCR drew on a report published by Barnado's to note a 'shocking lack of awareness [of CSE] that stretches from the frontline of practice to the corridors of government' (Barnado's, 2011). To consider Rochdale's experience as unique to the Borough, the report commented, 'would be to fundamentally misunderstand the prevalence of CSE and the slow development of good practice at a national level' (RBSCR, 2013: 113).

Responding specifically to the question of race, the following evidence, taken from testimonies from The Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCS), not only questions the association of race and grooming, but also provides a caution. In giving evidence to the Home Affairs Committee it stressed how CSE is not only a feature in neighbourhoods with a high concentration of Pakistani or Muslim communities, but that 'there is not a town, village or hamlet in which children are not being sexually exploited' (Berelowitz, cited in House of Commons, 2013). Second, on a related point, Berelowitz et al (2012) questioned the empirical data to

prove the link between race and grooming. A combination of under-recording, under-reporting and under-detection of sexual exploitation makes any attempt to paint a picture of perpetrators using statistics a non-starter. For example, out of the 115 submissions received to the OCS report on the victims, only 30 agencies submitted data on the perpetrators. Information on the perpetrators was provided in full in only 3% of calls for evidence, and a staggering 68% of the submissions had no perpetrator data (Berelowitz et al, 2012). The question of statistics was further highlighted by RBSCR by highlighting how 'statistical information with regard to sexual offending and ethnicity will always have inherent problems; what is known is that 80.9% of convicted sex offenders in England and Wales are identified as white, and as such focussing on race in isolation is of limited value' (RBSCR, 2013:109). Whilst this attempts to argue that race 'is of limited value' it fails to acknowledge the fundamental point that whiteness (Bonnet, 2000) has a privileged position in transcending category association through discursive invisibility. Finally, the racialised binary of the CSE debate characterising 'Asian men' as the sole perpetrators and white girls as the only victims is deeply problematic. In a crucial report titled *Unheard voices: the sexual exploitation of Asian girls and young women*, drawing upon detailed cases studies and interviews with people in the Birmingham area, Shaista Gohir (2013) shattered this racialised binary of CSE by highlighting various case studies of Muslim and Asian young girls who has been groomed and sexually exploited. The report highlighted how the perpetrators would use culture and tradition against its victims to prevent them from reporting the incidents to the police or to family members. The *Independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham* by Alexis Jay (2014) also highlighted concerns over the impact this racialised binary had on policing:

There was too much reliance by agencies on traditional community leaders such as elected members and imams as being the primary conduit of communication with the Pakistani-heritage community. The Inquiry spoke to several Pakistani-heritage women who felt disenfranchised by this and thought it was a barrier to people coming forward to talk about CSE. Others believed there was wholesale denial of the problem in the Pakistani-heritage community in the same way that other forms of abuse were ignored. Representatives of women's groups were frustrated that interpretations of the Borough's problems with CSE were often based on an assumption that similar abuse did not take place in their own community and therefore concentrated mainly on young white girls.

(Jay 2014:91)

Conclusion

The representation of *Dangerous brown men* (Bhattacharyya, 2008) through the lens of racialised hyper-sexuality builds upon much older and cruder forms of framing the

'other' or the non-European through the constructs of race and sex. The sexual conduct of black males in general and hyper-sexualised masculinity as a threat to white women has a long and complicated history which can be traced back at least as far as the transatlantic slave trade (Lemelle, 2010; hooks, 1987). In many respects, Muslim men in general and Pakistani men in particular have occupied the racial hyper-sexualised space once held not only by Black men but also Jewish men (Gilman, 1985). According to Bhattacharyya, 'their masculinity is regarded as excessive and dysfunctional, too absolute in the internalisation of restraint, too refusing of desire malleability, too literal in their understanding of ideal masculinity' (Bhattacharyya, 2008: 89).

The implications arising from a racialised discourse of sexual grooming are numerous, none of which does anything for the victims. Firstly, drawing connections between race and grooming creates a moral panic regarding some sections of the community and this can often lead to a justification of surveillance and containment of a particular community. More importantly, it reinforces a view that exploitation when carried out by certain sections of the community is more important and more 'news worthy' than others. Second, it 'ignores that the sexual exploitation of young, vulnerable people is pervasive and cuts across all ethnicities and communities. Muslim girls are just as likely to become victims as non-Muslim girls' (Muslim Council of Britain, 2013: 36). Third, it aims to undermine a long philosophical tradition of *anti-oppressive* practice: victim centred social work (Clifford and Burke, 2009). This particular approach, with its focus on tackling social and structural inequalities, has been undermined recently not only with the rise of racial-neoliberalism (Goldberg, 2009) but also a wider trend within neo-liberal discourse which has undermined the importance of social justice for all in public services by providing an ideological justification for systematically reducing the size and significance of the welfare state.

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