



## Cultures of Abuse: 'Sex Grooming', Organised Abuse and Race in Rochdale, UK

Michael Salter, Selda Dagistanli

University of Western Sydney, Australia

### Abstract

Revelations of organised abuse by men of Asian heritage in the United Kingdom have become a recurrent feature of international media coverage of sexual abuse in recent years. This paper reflects on the similarities between the highly publicised 'sex grooming' prosecutions in Rochdale in 2012 and the allegations of organised abuse in Rochdale that emerged in 1990, when twenty children were taken into care after describing sadistic abuse by their parents and others. While these two cases differ in important aspects, this paper highlights the prominence of colonial ideologies of civilisation and barbarism in the investigation and media coverage of the two cases and the sublimation of the issue of child welfare. There are important cultural and normative antecedents to sexual violence but these have been misrepresented in debates over organised abuse as racial issues and attributed to ethnic minority communities. In contrast, the colonialist trope promulgating the fictional figure of the rational European has resulted in the denial of the cultural and normative dimensions of organised abuse in ethnic majority communities by attributing sexual violence to aberrant and sexually deviant individuals whose behaviours transgress the boundaries of accepted cultural norms. This paper emphasises how the implicit or explicit focus on race has served to obscure the power dynamics underlying both cases and the continuity of vulnerability that places children at risk of sexual and organised abuse.

### Keywords

Sexual abuse; exploitation; race; grooming; culture; media; law.

### Introduction

The terms 'sex grooming' or 'street grooming' are interchangeable catchphrases used to describe a racialised pattern of abuse purportedly uncovered by the British media. This pattern involves men of Asian and, in most cases, Muslim background who use flattery, presents and alcohol/drugs to form relationships with vulnerable underage minors who are then subject to abuse by multiple perpetrators (Cockbain 2013). Similar forms of multi-perpetrator abuse were first identified as a cause for concern in the United States in the 1970s (Burgess and Lindeqvist Clark 1984); however, the term 'sex grooming' has been recently presented in the British press as a new and specifically ethnic phenomenon. This abuse emerged to public awareness following

the highly publicised prosecutions in 2012 of nine men from Rochdale, UK, who were jailed for a total of 77 years for sexually abusing five girls aged between 13 and 15 years (Norfolk 2012a). The case has been attended by vigorous public debate over the role of ethnicity and religion in sexual abuse perpetration, as well as discussion of the failures of social services and authorities to respond to complaints of sexual exploitation from 'troubled' teenagers and children in state care. The disinterest and inaction of child protection authorities and police, who had been repeatedly contacted about the abuse of the children in this case, has been a focal point of community outrage. With the emergence of multiple similar cases across the UK, this failure to act has been attributed to the 'political correctness' that inhibited authorities and agencies from addressing the racial and cultural dimensions that have been understood as causative factors behind the abuse.

This paper compares the recent 2012 case with another that arose in Rochdale over twenty years prior, when twenty children from six families were taken into care due to suspicions of organised abuse. As much as the media took an activist stance and investigative role in relation to the 2012 case and related 'ethnic' cases, it was deeply implicated in the 1990 Rochdale case through its adoption of a sympathetic stance in relation to the accused and its misrepresentation of the facts of the case in such a way as to influence child protection practice and policy. The alleged perpetrators in this earlier case were white and intra-familial, and therefore not racialised nor represented as an 'external' threat to the sanctity of family or community. Instead, in the 1990 case, it was social workers who were apportioned blame and designated as outsiders in the media narrative, where they were characterised as sadistic and perverse. Key to the media's construction of the 1990 Rochdale case as bizarre and unbelievable was the children's descriptions of extreme abuse involving drugged drinks, chains and strange costumes. These elements were deemed to have their origins in the children's exposure to horror movies and thus were dismissed as fantasy. This points to the different ways in which culture was conceptualised in the two cases according to the racial status of the perpetrators. In the 1990 case, the apparent cultural similarities between the children's descriptions of abuse and popular media and folklore signified that the abuse was not 'real'; that is, culture was understood to be a broad yet discrete world of fantasy and imagination distinct from the sphere of sociality and interaction. In the 2012 case, the media and the court explained the perpetration of abuse by drawing parallels between the cultural backgrounds of the perpetrators and the acts they inflicted on the victims. In this account, culture was specifically conflated with the ethnicity and religion of the offenders and came to be seen as a determinative force in organised abuse.

The dissociation of ethnicity from the universal and invisible norms of white, Anglo-Eurocentric culture forms the foundation for traditional Orientalist ideas of cultural superiority and Samuel Huntington's (1993) spurious assertion that there is an irrevocable 'clash of civilisations' between the Middle East, the Orient and the Western world. These ideas have experienced popular revival in anti-multicultural politics in many Western countries that have most recently centred on populist drives to curb Muslim immigration from non-western countries (Dagistanli and Grewal 2012). Indeed recent invocations of these classical tropes can perhaps explain why the debates around organised abuse have come to pivot on a set of contested political issues pertaining to migration and multiculturalism that have limited if any relevance to the protection of vulnerable children. In our analysis of the two Rochdale cases, we suggest that Anglo-European cultures, like cultures constructed as less 'civilised', harbour 'subterranean values' (Matza and Sykes 1961) that can be refashioned by perpetrators to structure and legitimise organised abuse. The paper will conclude by considering the implications of the racialisation of organised sexual abuse for the welfare and safety of vulnerable children, and provide some reflections on the role of 'culture' (as opposed to its popular one-dimensional equation with ethnicity) in multi-perpetrator abuse.

### **Organised abuse and the issue of race**

Allegations of organised sexual abuse, defined as cases in which multiple adults conspire to sexually abuse multiple children, have proven highly contentious (Salter 2013). Up to one in five children and women in treatment for child sexual abuse disclose organised abuse, and victims are over-represented in other populations including homeless women and prisoners (Salter and Richters 2012). Surveys of social workers and mental health practitioners in Australia, Britain and the United States have consistently found that a significant proportion has encountered at least one case of organised abuse (Salter and Richters 2012). In Britain and elsewhere, the issue of organised abuse gained public prominence in the 1990s; however, the culture of news production proved remarkably hostile to victimised children and women (Atmore 1997). Accused adults and the advocacy groups that formed to represent them garnered considerable media attention with their claims that therapists and social workers were engaging in professional malpractice *en masse* in order to coerce children and adults into inventing false allegations of severe sexual abuse (Kitzinger 2004). However, in the wake of a series of national and international sexual abuse scandals, it seems that a 'tipping point' has been reached as evidence of the systematic and organised abuse of children has accumulated beyond the point of plausible deniability (Middleton 2015, this volume).

Throughout the controversies associated with organised abuse, race has rarely been explicitly identified as an issue. However Scott (2001) has argued that organised abuse poses an existential threat to the hegemonic narratives of order and 'civilisation' that prevail in the Global North and stabilises the line of delineation from the supposed barbarism of the Global South. Children's descriptions of premeditated and coordinated abuse by multiple perpetrators contradict the assumption that sadistic violence has been consigned by 'civilised' nations to ancient history or 'far off' countries (Salter 2008). The respectable appearance of white alleged perpetrators of organised abuse has featured prominently in media and academic commentary as evidence of innocence (Cheit 2014). Hence ideologies of race and 'civilisation' have been an issue, albeit often implicitly, in debates over the credibility of organised abuse allegations. Nonetheless race – and its conflation with 'culture' – has emerged as a central theme in a parallel discourse focusing on sexual assault and child exploitation by ethnic minority perpetrators. As will be discussed, British social workers and therapists have become reluctant to report or respond to organised abuse cases for fear of public backlash. However the targeting of 'white' girls for abuse by 'ethnic' groups or gangs has emerged as a form of organised abuse that can be recognised and acted upon, albeit in a limited fashion until recently.

### **Rochdale 2012**

In 2012, a journalist for *The Times* newspaper, Andrew Norfolk, brought to light a string of police investigations into networks of men from mostly South Asian and Pakistani backgrounds sexually exploiting teenage girls (particularly those in state care) (Norfolk 2012b). The response of social services and the police to these cases was revealed to have been lacklustre at best. Attempts to investigate were hindered when many victims refused to give statements about their abuse (especially where they or their families were threatened with violence if they spoke out); however, child protection and criminal justice agencies have been deeply ambivalent and at times hostile towards children who go missing from care homes.

The 2012 report from the Joint Inquiry into Children Who Go Missing from Care found that teenage girls groomed and sexually abused by groups of men were viewed by staff as making a 'lifestyle choice' or denounced as promiscuous 'slags' (All Party Parliamentary Group 2012). A police officer was said to have described a victim as 'white trash' (Norfolk 2012c). Children abused by organised groups were viewed by staff as 'making their own choices' and engaging in consensual activity (Ward 2012). Those girls who did complain were denounced as 'lacking credibility' (Norfolk 2012b). Some victims have suggested that the authorities did not believe them because they could not comprehend the seriousness of the abuse they were disclosing

(Norfolk 2012b). Reports from police and social service agencies have emphasised a lack of training on the subject of sexual exploitation and a lack of dedicated, specialist personnel (Norfolk 2012b).

It was the 2012 convictions in Rochdale that brought these issues to the national spotlight and challenged the victim blaming assumptions that had stymied prior investigations. The prosecutions were based on the abuse of five girls (described almost uniformly in media reports as 'white') in 2008 and 2009 although forty-seven girls have been identified as possible victims of the group, some as young as 12 years (Hull 2012). Over a two-year period, the victims were passed around the group of men for sexual abuse after being plied with food, alcohol and drugs (Watt 2012). Rochdale council, social services and police have been the subject of sustained criticism for failing to act on earlier reports that the victims of the case were being sexually abused by adult men.

One of the victims reported the abuse to police in August 2008, stating that she was being given alcohol and raped by multiple men. She provided police with her underwear, which was found to contain traces of one of the men's DNA. Two members of the abusive group were arrested and released on bail; however, it took police 11 months to compile a brief of evidence for the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) after interviewing her on four occasions. In July 2009, an 'experienced' CPS lawyer ruled that the victim was 'not credible' and decided that the two men who raped her should be released without charge. During this time she was sexually abused by 21 more men (Norfolk 2012a). The abuse of the girls continued until May 2010, ten months after the case was dropped, when police revisited the investigation after a Rochdale youth project raised concerns about other complaints. Only then did the newly appointed chief crown prosecutor, Nazir Afzal, reverse the decision not to prosecute the men.

Throughout the case, the race of the offenders was a key issue. While testifying in court, one of the victims stated that a perpetrator told her he was doing nothing wrong delivering her to numerous men for sexual abuse because 'in his country you're allowed to have sex with girls from the age of 11' (Norfolk 2012d). As evidenced in comments of this sort, the perpetrators themselves reinforced the 'race issue', as well as through their multiple claims that their prosecution was driven by racism. In one particular instance, the 59-year-old ringleader, Shabir Ahmed, was dismissed from court after calling Judge Gerald Clifton a 'racist bastard' (*The Guardian* 2012). Outbursts to this effect foregrounded race while providing leverage for those arguing that the abuse was racially motivated. Far-right groups capitalised on these circumstances and protested outside court during proceedings (Veevers 2012), intimidating and assaulting the men's legal counsel (Narain et al. 2012). A solicitor for one of the accused alleged that a member of the jury was in touch with far-right groups, a claim dismissed by the judge although apparently accurate details of jury deliberations appear to have been leaked to two far-right groups (Narain et al. 2012; Norfolk 2012a; Veevers 2012). Race also arose as an issue in sentencing, with Judge Clifton stating that the men targeted the victims because they were 'not of your community or religion' before adding that 'lust and greed', not race, had triggered the prosecution (*Manchester Evening News* 2012a). In fact, it was not true that all of these men looked outside their ethnic communities for targets. One of the Rochdale perpetrators was subsequently convicted for the sexual abuse of a Muslim girl (Carter 2012: 10). A recent pilot study conducted by the Muslim Women's Network (MWN) UK on the prevalence of sexual abuse and exploitation among Asian/Muslim girls indicated that 'a vast majority of the perpetrators were men from the same ethnicity and faith as the victims ... also because they are more easily accessible' (MWN UK 2013: 57). That the sexual abuse of Asian girls and young women is a serious problem is obscured by popular focus on the abuses perpetrated against girls and young women from the dominant ethnic group.

Aside from the expected far-right opportunism in hijacking such cases for racist agendas, varied and politically diverse voices have insisted on the centrality of race or ethnicity in this case. The Children's Minister at the time, Tim Loughton, maintained that ethnicity has been a factor in the recent cases, that some 'closed communities' had been instrumental in allowing the abuse to slip 'under the radar' because of their reluctance to report the offences, and that all of this had been exacerbated by 'political correctness around ethnicity' amongst social workers and the police (Doyle 2012). Then-Conservative Party co-chair Baroness Sayeeda Warsi claimed that 'pretending' ethnicity had no part in the case risked opening the door to the BNP and other white extremists (Watson 2012), while Chief Crown Prosecutor Nazir Afzal – himself of Pakistani descent – argued that organised sexual exploitation of white women was 'a particular problem in Asian communities' (Norfolk 2012e). Former Home Secretary Jack Straw suggested that traditions of female modesty and a lack of sexual access to women within 'their own' community led to Pakistani men seeking sexual release with white minors. He called for Muslim women to remove their veils so that Asian men who are 'fizzing and popping with testosterone' can have an 'outlet' within their own community (Bingham 2012). Straw also referred to the vulnerable young victims as 'easy meat' for predatory Pakistani men.

Straw's comments are regrettable on various levels, not least for perpetuating myths about group rape as driven solely by repressed sexuality and consequently uncontrollable sexual desire, as well as reproducing well-worn Orientalist (and Colonialist) fantasies about the rapacious sexual appetites of Muslim men. In particular, Straw's remarks construct South Asian, Muslim culture as sexually repressed and responsible for producing rapists who cannot cope with the sexual freedoms of the West. Additionally, the questionable links made between culturally inscribed sexual repression and rape enables the racialisation of sexual offences for other ideological purposes. As Humphrey (2007: 14) has succinctly put it: 'When crime is blamed on culture, either culture is criminali[s]ed or crime is culturalised'. The ways in which entire Muslim communities have been urged to take responsibility for the sexual abuse perpetrated by a minority of Muslim men has generally ignored existing community partnerships between Muslim religious leaders and the police that have led to child sexual exploitation arrests (Wright 2012) or the public denouncements of sexual abuse by imams and clerics that preceded and followed the case (Norfolk 2011; Wright 2012).

Popular narratives stating that the misogyny of the perpetrators was culturally determined functioned to decentre the systemic failures to protect vulnerable girls while obscuring the similarities between the victim-blaming attitudes of the perpetrators and authorities. The racially loaded insults of the perpetrators towards their victims included claims that Western society allowed 'young girls to parade on the streets' where men could take advantage of them (Narain 2012). Elsewhere a perpetrator in the case suggested that the teenagers were 'selling their bodies for money ... It wasn't us victimising them; it was them victimising us' (Norfolk 2012e). While both tabloid and investigative media outlets characterised such views as evidence of the men's barbarism, very similar sentiments were expressed by authorities, as discussed, who had derided the girls as 'sluts' and 'slags'. Journalists in their coverage of the case advanced arguments that blamed victims for their 'lifestyle choice' or an alleged willingness to 'give up their affection and their beauty to men in exchange for a packet of crisps or a bit of credit on their mobile phone' (Trilling 2012).

The victim-blaming attitudes expressed by the offenders as well as some segments of the media and authorities are, in themselves, unremarkable. Recent studies have shown the endurance of social perspectives that lean towards apportioning some degree of blame to victims of sexual assault for their victimisation (for a meta-analysis, see Suarez and Gadalla 2010). What is more noteworthy in this case is that notions of responsibility held by both the perpetrators and some segments of the majority culture appear to reinforce one another: the offenders apportion blame to the victims' sexually permissive culture, while the majority culture blames what is perceived

as the ethno-cultural and religiously determined attitudes borne of a broader sexual repressiveness. From both perspectives, culture is understood reductively as determined by race and ethnicity; it is the 'culture' of others that caused the abuse of vulnerable women and girls. While we will argue that it is true that culture does indeed play an important role in sexual violence, what appears to be overlooked is that the misogyny that enabled the abuse was not specific to one particular ethnicity or religion.

Hence a number of overlapping ideological themes characterised the grooming scandals and associated social outrage, with the Rochdale perpetrators and a number of British commentators constructing claims to cultural superiority on the supposed lack of self-control and discipline of another cultural group. For the perpetrators, Western cultures and families were failing to socialise girls into an appropriate state of modesty or adequately police their behaviour, rendering the girls deserving of abuse. For some British commentators, the coordinated exploitation and abuse of vulnerable girls and young women was indicative of Muslim men's lack of control and self-discipline. Within both of these arguments, the moral status of the girls and young women involved is marginal at best and irrelevant or impugned at worst, while 'culture' is understood to be a primary factor in the sexual abuse of children.

### **Rochdale 1990**

In March 1990, four children from one family in a low income area of Rochdale were made wards of the court and taken into care after describing disturbing experiences of sexual abuse. It is important to note at this point that the specific details of their disclosures are unclear. Child protection services are legally restricted from releasing confidential information about their investigations to the media, leading to considerable media speculation and sometimes distortion in coverage of contested allegations of organised abuse (Goddard 1994). This has, in some cases, included the imputation of salacious but inaccurate details that are widely reported and negatively impact on the public reception of the allegations (Kitzinger 2004).

However media reports at the time suggest that the chronology of the case is as follows. In November 1989, teachers at a school in Greater Manchester contacted social services about the traumatised behaviour of a six year old boy. They reported changes to the boy's behaviour including disturbing descriptions of being taken to a special house by 'ghosts' who gave him a special drink that made him 'fly'. He also described being locked in cages and experiences of abuse and humiliation. The boy was interviewed by social workers in March 1990. In a separate interview the following day, his sister described being chained to a wall in an old house and other frightening experiences (Sharratt 1991). The boy and his sister stated that other local children were also being abused in a similar way. When they were interviewed, these children described ritualistic sexual abuse by 'ghosts' and 'witches' who gave them sweets that made them 'fly' (Sharratt 1991). In 1990, twenty children from six families in the area were taken into care, although five were subsequently returned under court protection. It was alleged by child protection authorities that the children had been subject to sadistic forms of organised sexual abuse by their parents and others.

During 1990, accused parents sought assistance from public figures – many of whom, including a local MP, became their advocates – and contacted media organisations such as *The Mail*. In September 1990, they successfully applied to modify a blanket injunction that had restricted media coverage of the case (Aldridge 1994). The accused parents then gave a range of interviews to the press claiming that their children's descriptions of sexual abuse involving rituals and costumes were the result of watching graphic horror movies. *The Mail* adopted a sympathetic posture towards these claims although the initial reporting of the case by other media organisations was relatively balanced, with newspapers acknowledging the substantiation of allegations of ritualistic and sadistic abuse in previous child protection investigations in Britain (Aldridge 1994). In September 1990, police announced that there would be no prosecutions for

lack of criminal evidence. In response, the local social services committee held a special meeting to review the contentious cases but concluded that the actions of the director of social services in the case had been appropriate. A subsequent review of the council's policies and procedures by the Social Services Inspectorate found that they were in accordance with government guidance.

In the lead up to the release of this report, a number of 'leaks' appeared in the media claiming that the report would 'denounce' the management of the Rochdale case. Such a finding was not, in fact, within the remit of the report which considered a sample of 30 previous child protection cases. When the report was released, it supported (rather than criticised) the integrity of the council's child protection practice. It appears that these leaks were made in an effort to substantiate the claim of accused parents that they were the subject of false allegations. Aldridge (1994: 74) suggests that this provides evidence of 'the extent of pressure group activity in this and similar cases' where organised forms of child abuse had been alleged. Indeed, Rochdale and other cases of ritualistic abuse were central to the formation of the British False Memory Society and other advocacy groups for people accused of sexual abuse (Kitzinger 2004).

These organisations developed close links with a number of journalists, academics and media organisations, which had a significant impact on media coverage of Rochdale and allegations of organised abuse generally. The activities of lobby groups for people accused of sexual abuse were very influential in press coverage of sexual abuse throughout the 1990s. Cases of organised abuse, in particular, came to represent an egregious injustice and some journalists adopted a highly activist stance on behalf of the accused (Kitzinger 1998). For example, journalist Nick Clayton, who was the press officer for the Orkney Council during 1991 when another high-profile organised abuse case emerged, stated: '[M]any of the reporters who came to cover the story had already made up their minds when they arrived. There was an assumption, almost without exception, that the abuse had not happened and the whole affair was down to the evil social workers' (O'Sullivan 1997). Media foreshadowing or retrospective reporting of other government inquiries into organised abuse cases has frequently claimed that the accused were 'exonerated' or no abuse took place, where inquiries made no such finding (Kitzinger 2004; Rafferty 1997).

In March 1991, after a prolonged High Court hearing, ten of the fifteen children still in care were returned home. The judgment contained the criticism of social work practice that the media had anticipated, but had not found, in the Social Services Inspectorate's report. The Judge in the case, Justice Brown, criticised the social workers for the quality of the evidence provided to him, specifically that interviews with children were not recorded consistently via note-taking or videotaping. His position was that these breaches of good practice rendered the children's testimony 'valueless and unreliable', effectively excluding the children's statements from consideration (Dyer 1991). He then went on to make damning claims about social work management. It is notable that the Judge did not ask for, and therefore did not receive, evidence from the social work team regarding their investigatory practices. Nonetheless Justice Brown argued that children should not be removed from their homes for suspected ritual abuse by social workers 'before expert advice is taken' such as from a child psychologist or psychiatrist.

Ritualistic abuse is a controversial variant of organised abuse in which children are subjected to sexual abuse by multiple perpetrators in the context of ceremonies and rituals (Salter 2012). Despite vocal claims during the 1990s that ritual abuse does not exist, it had been substantiated by British police and child protection authorities in a number of organised abuse cases by the late 1980s (Brindle 1990, *The Independent* 1991). However the details of these cases remained largely confidential and never achieved the same level of publicity as Rochdale and other contested or ambiguous cases. The backlash against the Rochdale allegations was such that the limited media acknowledgement of these prior cases was overtaken by claims that allegations of

ritual abuse are fanciful or ridiculous (Aldridge 1994). The Judge's criticism of the social work department focused on the ways in which children's evidence was evinced and recorded; however, these criticisms were interpreted by the press as definitively establishing that the only abuse that had taken place in the case was the child protection intervention itself. There was little consideration of the different evidentiary standards of child protection services and criminal law, and a wholesale and uncritical acceptance of the judgment of the High Court. It is rarely acknowledged that not all children were returned home in the Rochdale case. In particular, the boy whose initial disclosure triggered the investigation remained in care for five years, as did his sister, and they were only returned home under strict council monitoring.

Justice Brown attributed the children's descriptions of bizarre and sadistic abuse to watching 'horror movies'. This was the claim made by the parents of the children once the case became public and it was largely accepted by the press. This was a period of heightened public anxiety in England over the influence of 'video nasties' and horror movies on children (Campbell 1995). In the Rochdale case, social workers were widely ridiculed in the press for mistaking children's descriptions of horror movies for abusive events. However an expert witness for the Official Solicitor testified to Justice Brown that the children's disclosures of abuse were clearly distinguished from their accounts of the horror movies shown to them by their parents (Campbell 1995). Nonetheless the Judge accepted the testimony of two other defence witnesses, psychologists Elizabeth and John Newson, that exposure to horror movies explained the children's descriptions of sexual abuse. Campbell (1995: 61) notes that, in the aftermath of Rochdale, 'the new cause for concern was not the spectre of cruelty *to* children but the cruelty *of* children' as false accusers 'infected by the video nasty'.

The internal contradiction in this argument is that it simultaneously construes the children's disclosures as 'bizarre' and without a basis in reality, while acknowledging that these disclosures have antecedents in Western culture and media, specifically in the symbols and tropes used to frighten and titillate children: ghosts, witches, demons and so on. Such fear-inducing symbols and narratives have long been used in European parenting as a 'disciplinary tactic aimed at control' (Tatar 1992: 236). Similar tactics feature prominently in cases of organised abuse, where perpetrator claims of supernatural powers and vengeance are a common method of controlling young children (Salter 2012). This may include showing children horror films that are then 'acted out' by the abusive group (Salter 2013). This phenomenon was known at the time of the Rochdale 1990 case, which occurred in the aftermath of the 1989 conviction of nine adults in Nottingham who pleaded guilty to 52 charges of incest, cruelty and indecent assault (Campbell 1995). The child victims in the case described being shown graphic horror movies by their parents who then recreated the nightmarish scenarios using strange costumes and abusive rituals (Campbell 1995; Tate 1991).

Psychologist Elizabeth Newson also testified in the 1989 Nottingham case that the children's allegations were the result of watching horror movies, although the Judge did not accept her argument and the accused were convicted of child sex offences (Campbell 1995). The similarities between the children's disclosures in the two cases were rarely mentioned and indeed Nottingham and other similar substantiated UK cases of organised abuse (see Scott 2001: 189-190; Tate 1994) were almost entirely absent in subsequent press references to Rochdale and organised and ritual abuse generally. After the mid-1990s, the subject of organised and ritual abuse was rarely the subject of media scrutiny except as an example of 'hysteria' and 'moral panic', despite continuing prosecutions (for example, Davies 1998; Morris 2011) and the ongoing presentation of victims to crisis services (Scott 1998).

### **Understanding cultures of sexual abuse**

Given the vitriolic response to the child protection intervention in Rochdale in 1990, we suggest that the pertinent question is not why did the authorities not act sooner in the 2012 case, but

why did they act at all? A range of commentators have argued that racial 'sensitivity' or 'political correctness' has stymied investigations on the grounds that social workers and police 'don't want to seem racist' by identifying the ethnic background of the perpetrators. These claims have been counterbalanced by a coalition of police, politicians, women's groups and agencies who have sought to play down any racial or ethnic element to the case. In a two-year inquiry, the Children's Commissioner for England has gathered data on cases of organised abuse and found that it is 'in all communities' (Berelowitz et al. 2013). They identified white men as the largest perpetrator group, but noted that the prosecution of white men who sexually exploit white girls has received relatively negligible media attention (Berelowitz et al. 2013). A subsequent report by the Child Exploitation Online Protection Centre made similar findings. Putting aside methodological criticisms of these reports (see Cockbain 2013), they have been generally used to bolster the argument that 'race' is irrelevant to the subject of child sexual exploitation and organised abuse, and to combat the racist proposition that ethnic minority status inclines some men towards perpetration of organised forms of sexual abuse.

This paper contests the polarised positions that have characterised debates over the Rochdale 2012 prosecutions. It rejects the argument that *either* race is irrelevant to this case *or* that it was primarily racial factors that inhibited authorities from intervening earlier. To the contrary, the public reception and response to earlier allegations of organised abuse has been implicitly racialised insofar as descriptions of organised and sadistic sexual exploitation have been considered congruent with the 'culture' of racialised communities but incommensurate with the moral norms of non-racialised 'white' communities. The absence of media coverage of organised abuse by 'white' perpetrators was not a product of disinterest *per se*, but rather an effect of the hegemonic 'media template' established in the aftermath of Rochdale 1990 and other complex allegations of sexual abuse, that framed such allegations as beyond belief (Kitzinger 2004).

An account of why authorities did not intervene earlier in the Rochdale 2012 case cannot ignore the systemic delegitimising of the testimony of children describing organised abuse, which has had a stultifying effect on the willingness of authorities to protect at risk or abused children. For example, following Rochdale 1990, children removed from home after disclosing organised abuse were returned in cases where forensic evidence of abuse was evident, and where the children maintained their complaints of abuse (Nelson 2008; Rafferty 1997). Nelson (2001) reports on a range of UK agencies including child protection units and sexual assault services that 'categorically' confirm their ongoing work with cases of organised abuse of the kind disclosed in the 1990 Rochdale case; however, as one worker put it: 'You risk your career and your job'. In one Scottish case, social workers were criticised for *not* acting on disclosures of organised abuse after it was found that three sisters had been subject to years of emotional, physical and sexual abuse by their parents and others (Seenan 2005). However social workers stated they did not want to make the 'same mistakes' as their colleagues who had acted on such allegations.

The two Rochdale cases from 1990 and 2012 reveal radically divergent views of the influence of culture on sexual abuse depending on the racial status of the accused. In the 2012 case, culture was understood to be the precipitating factor in sexual abuse perpetration but, in the 1990 case, it was understood to be the precipitating factor in false allegations. In the 1990 case, sceptical commentators drew an association between the children's disclosures and widely available narratives of evil-doing within Western culture, the kind routinely transmitted to children via mass media. The judge and many others assumed that these stories were the ultimate origin of the children's disclosures, and that the children (and the teachers and social workers who interviewed them) had become confused about the difference between fantasy and reality. In media, legal and academic commentary, a simplistic constructionist framework prevailed in which what was cultural was necessarily *fantasy*; hard cold fact was ruled by reason and rationality. In this view, culture is at best the vestigial trace of an irrational past, preserved in

myths and pop culture but otherwise a spent force in contemporary Western life. In contrast, in the 2012 Rochdale prosecutions, culture and religion were enthusiastically foregrounded as determinative factors in the behaviour of the accused men. Constructing the ethnic and religious Other as ruled by their culture reinforces arguments about the irrational barbarism characterising the Islamic non-West, locating sexual violence within a homogenously perceived, pre-modern culture, while obscuring more complex questions about the motivations of groups of sexual offenders and the vulnerability of some children and young people to exploitation.

This paper proposes that organised sexual abuse, like other forms of sexual violence, takes shape and meaning in the context of cultural and normative frameworks that are present in both racialised and non-racialised communities and institutions. The factual circumstances of the 2012 Rochdale abuses demonstrated a 'bond' between the offenders, in which they were collectively engaged in the sexual exploitation and humiliation of young women who were mainly from a cultural group outside of their own (notwithstanding the fact that there may be many unreported others within their own communities). It is also an extreme and violent manifestation of attitudes that separate women into the dichotomous moral categories of virgin/whore. While the Pakistani perpetrators in the Rochdale 2012 case might not be classified as socio-economically underclass (especially in comparison with their victims), they can certainly be described as violent and misogynistic. It is clear that they hold intransigent views about women that could, to some degree, be traced back to the intensely patriarchal codes upheld in some segments of Pakistani society.

However variations of these codes are also present in European traditions and institutions of masculinity. During the colonial periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, at the very same time that colonial ideologies constructed a racist narrative tracing the emergence of European man from irrational ritual and religion to secular progress and technology, all-male fraternal ritual orders began to proliferate throughout the Western world (Salter 2013). These orders created idiosyncratic ritual performances that ostensibly enshrined civilised (white and ruling class) masculine virtues of brotherhood and civility. The more libertine of these fraternal orders eroticised these ritual activities. These contradictory forms of masculine self-understanding – secular rational man stripped of ritual, and homosocial man bonded with his brothers via ritualised activity – evolved simultaneously in the Western cultural imaginary, and they continue to shape incidents of multi-perpetrator sexual offending. A persistent 'subterranean' tradition of sexualised violence as a form of homosocial bonding persists, paradoxically, amongst all-male bastions of the 'civilised' Western ideal, including military groups, sports clubs and university fraternities (Kelly 2000; Sanday 2007). Salter's (2013) research on organised sexual abuse points to similar dynamics operating in sexually abusive groups that target children rather than adults.

Despite similarities between the 'cultures' of men who engage in group sexual assault, there has been a clear distinction drawn between what is represented as the ethnically driven misogyny of perpetrators and those supposedly isolated incidents that occur in other cultural milieu within Western society. This symbolic distinction has been drawn by political and popular media representations of organised sexual abuse and gang rape in Australia, France, Sweden, the United States and other parts of the Western world. Often these incidents are described in graphic detail by extremist websites to capitalise on public outrage and lend weight to orientalist (or colonialist) tropes about the Muslim, Arab Asian or 'Black' barbarian that preys on Western women. The extremist narrative follows a familiar script, pointing to the obvious incommensurability of Western and barbaric Middle Eastern, Asian or African cultures, the failures of multiculturalism and disastrous consequences of non-white immigration into Western nations (Dagistanli and Grewal 2012). These narratives appropriate women's rights discourses in an attempt to gloss over racist agendas (Dagistanli and Milivojevic 2013). Indeed, the consequences of racialising sexual abuse are damaging to the communities tarred by the

scope of such accusations as well as the individual victims themselves. Preoccupation with spurious notions of cultural incommensurability and the purported need for ever more exclusionary immigration policies and draws attention away from the needs of victims.

All the children involved in the two cases occupied a liminal status, both socially and discursively. They were poor and vulnerable. They were clearly not the focal point of public debate, which was orientated around the relative status of the alleged perpetrators, exculpating them of responsibility in one case and emphasising their responsibility in the other. The children feature in media discourse primarily as objects whose status was determined by their positioning within logics of blame. The whiteness of the victims in the 2012 is emphasised in order to racialise the perpetrators. However the invisibility of the shared racial status of victims and perpetrators in the 1990 case does not mean that race was not at issue. Indeed, the disclosures of the children in the 1990 case threatened the colonialist delineation between 'civilised' and 'barbaric' people. Subsequent judicial analysis and media re-interpretation sought to reaffirm that boundary by consigning European traditions of ritualistic and terroristic violence to the realm of fantasy. This lay the foundation for a prevailing attitude of disbelief in relation to allegations of organised and sadistic abuse that has constrained professional viewpoints to the present day, and contributed to the unresponsiveness of authorities that confronted another group of young people twenty years later in Rochdale.

### **Conclusion**

The apparent irony in the divergent responses to these two Rochdale cases is that the same authorities that have been recently condemned for failing to act on children's disclosures of organised abuse were excoriated two decades prior for responding to disclosures of organised abuse. Both cases represent a loss or implosion of boundaries between the civilised and the barbaric: the alleged emergence of brutal violence from 'within' the civilised body politic in the 1990 case, and the invasion of similar forms of violence from 'without' by alien (that is, racialised) agents in the 2012 case. In both instances, the responses from the media, authorities and lobby groups were to re-establish threatened boundaries and reaffirm a racially delineated moral community via symbolic processes of excision and expulsion. In the 1990 case, it was the allegations of violence that were excised. The possibility that the children's descriptions of abuse accorded with fact was denied and those that held otherwise, such as the social workers in the case, were subject to scorn and ridicule. In the 2012 case, it was the perpetrators of violence that were identified as 'Other', and those deemed not to have acted decisively to oppose them – that is, the social workers – were again excoriated. This highlights the 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' conundrum that confronts child protection agencies faced with complex cases of multi-perpetrator abuse against a shifting backdrop of selective public (dis)interest in the plight of vulnerable or troubled children and young people.

The purpose of this paper has not been to deny the role of culture in organised abuse but rather to argue that sexual violence has cultural and normative antecedents that are not simply the result of perverse, misogynistic values dictated by specific 'ethnic' cultures. Furthermore, conceptualisations of race and culture operate in the response to organised abuse in ways that disavow some cases and emphasise others. Fundamentally, the racialisation of organised abuse represents a limited way of addressing the issue. Even though the issue of culture has been key to bringing to light organised abuse by South Asian and Pakistani men, it narrows the focus of media and public attention and serves to conceal similar abuses by 'white' perpetrators. This creates room for speculation on whether the racialised publicity surrounding the Rochdale and other racialised child abuse cases is really driven by an interest to protect and redress the harms suffered by vulnerable young women and children. Locating the perversity of sexual exploitation in non-Western, non-white cultures enables issues unrelated to victim interests to be aired and justified in a public arena. In racialised cases of sexual abuse, these are normally politically sensitive issues around non-Western immigration and racially loaded debates about the

acceptable boundaries of multiculturalism in Western cultures. In many ways, it may be the race of the accused that enabled the girls in the 2012 Rochdale case to overcome official inaction to organised abuse and garner a response (even an inadequate one) from the authorities, whereas in other cases victim blaming has been rife.

*Correspondence:* Michael Salter, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Sociology and Criminology, School of Social Sciences and Psychology, University of Western Sydney, Penrith NSW 2751, Australia. Email: Michael.salter@uws.edu.au

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