

Editorial

Investigating child abuse and safeguarding children: Contemporary developments in the application of psychology to policing practice

Michael Lewis¹, Rob Ewin²

¹ University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK & Ashworth Research Centre, Mersey Care NHS Trust, Liverpool, UK

² Learning and Development, Cumbria Constabulary, Cumbria, UK

Correspondence to Dr Michael Lewis: MLewis9@uclan.ac.uk

The police service, as well as Local Authorities, are under increasing pressure to prioritise, prevent, and disrupt child sexual abuse, and which has arguably been driven by a number of high-profile UK-based national case reviews and inquiries that have subsequently highlighted collective failures. There is thus a call for empirical study to inform and enhance practice, and to meet the priorities outlined within the Home Office's child protection agenda. This special issue brings together emerging research and developments on investigating child abuse and safeguarding children, with an emphasis on informing policing and investigative practice. A collection of work is presented that draws on a range of unique methodologies and samples to engage readers and offer thought-provoking implications for development.

With the aim of synthesising existing UK literature on contact child sexual exploitation (CSE) perpetration, Mooney presents a comprehensive systematic review, identifying four significant analytical themes from 23 research articles, which are as follows: Barriers to examining a complex phenomenon; Recognising the contact CSE perpetrator; Understanding the contact CSE perpetrator; and Responding to the contact CSE perpetrator. Indeed, it is well documented that there are significant knowledge gaps when examining the networks, prevalence, and pathways associated with contact CSE. Mooney acknowledges this but also recognises that there is a growing body of work attending to the characteristics and modus operandi of CSE perpetrators that can inform threat assessment, as well as law enforcement disruption strategies, prevention, and safeguarding policy. A range of findings were proposed that have clear implication for policing practice, and which are of value to professionals working in this area. Mooney places importance on the need for a definition of child sexual abuse that captures exploitation as opposed to existing terminology that reportedly shifts and subsequently results in a different, often inconsistent, operational

response. Mooney thus argues for consensus among professionals when defining CSE. Of equal emphasis is the finding that the gravity of sexual offences become more severe when perpetrators engage with others (i.e., multiple perpetrator sexual offending), and which calls for policing strategies to attend to group-based sexual offending against children; an area that Mooney identifies as requiring further empirical investigation.

Following on from this is the work of Holmes, Boulton and Panter who sought to examine the decision-making processes of police investigators of sudden and unexpected death in children (SUDC). A mixed methodology was utilised to attend to quantitative and qualitative data relevant to police officer decision-making during simulated SUDC investigations. Twenty-six serving police officers at the rank of Detective Sergeant or Detective Inspector participated in this unique simulation exercise. Two key themes emerged as relevant to decision-making within the carefully designed scenario, and which focussed on uncertainty within the presenting circumstances; and feelings of personal anxiety. Based on this, Holmes and colleagues suggest that police officer uncertainty and anxiety are associated with progressive decision-making in the first steps of the SUDC investigation, with there being a preference for 'action over inaction' in this context. Moreover, the authors acknowledge that participants within their study did not attend to the National Decision Model (NDM) at any point during the scenario, and which is said to call into question its utility in such specific, and indeed challenging, investigations. Holmes and colleagues subsequently purport that the NDM may hold little practical value for police officers investigating child death and recommend that training takes this into account whilst also ensuring that organisational policy places consideration on investigator welfare when working in this area.

The third article within this special issue extends beyond the UK to consider gender and victim stereotypes in perceptions of child sexual abuse in Puerto Rico. A vignette depicting a hypothetical case of child sexual abuse inflicted by a teacher on a student was administered to a community sample of 525 adults. Vignettes differed based on teacher and student gender, and which were randomly allocated to the sample. Based on this approach, Vázquez-Tirado identifies several findings worthy of note for safeguarding practice. Results, for example, support the notion that child sexual abuse perpetration can extend to female adults; yet this was argued to not be well recognised as male perpetrators are often attributed greater responsibility. Blame was, in part, also placed on victims, particularly those from minority ethnic groups, and which Vázquez-Tirado indicates has unhelpful implications for reporting abuse to relevant agencies due to issues of powerlessness and stigmatisation. The

author concludes that cultural norms and gender misconceptions need to be accounted for when proactively safeguarding children, with the findings of this work having practical implications for a range of agencies involved in protecting children, including the police.

The work of Martínez-Cengotitabengoa and colleagues broadens this special issue to focus on child protection more generally. Whilst the research does not focus on policing practice per se, it considers the utility of videoconferencing during the Covid-19 pandemic as a means of facilitating psychological assessment of clients referred via Social Services for evaluation in cases of child protection, and where child abuse may be of concern. The research was conducted in a clinical psychology setting in the UK and utilised content analysis to objectify human communication through the generation of categories. Focus was on qualitatively analysing clinician ($n = 6$) and client ($n = 19$) experiences of utilising videoconferencing to facilitate psychological assessment. Martínez-Cengotitabengoa and her team present a range of themes arising from the data set; however, videoconference fatigue emerged as an important issue for professionals using remote technology, with more emotional effort reportedly required to engage both children and adults. Nevertheless, observing the client and family dynamics in their own environment, albeit virtually, was thought to offer the advantage of supporting information gathering in a more naturalistic way; an approach that could be utilised by a range of professional disciplines looking to obtain information from vulnerable others.

Thus, it becomes clear that this special issue approaches the investigation of child abuse from a range of perspectives, including exploration of perpetrator characteristics, police officer decision-making, victim stereotypes, and assessment via videoconference during the pandemic. Utilising a range of innovative methodologies, each paper offers an evidenced-based approach to understanding unique aspects of the investigative process and influencing factors, and how the application of psychology can inform and improve practice. As such, this special issue comprises an important collection of papers that would be of benefit to professionals working in child protection, but where there is undoubtedly an emphasis on policing. We would like to offer our thanks to the authors for their outstanding contribution to the special issue, as well as to the reviewers for their timely and constructive feedback.

Thank you.