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Policing child abuse

Martin, Denise; Kelly, Lynn ; Jackson, Sharon ; Byszko, Sabina

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Policing Child Abuse: Challenges and Opportunities for Specialist Units

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Structured Abstract

Purpose

Drawing on Literature from the field and the recent experience of an evaluation into Child Abuse Investigation in Scotland, this paper will argue that evidence from the literature suggest that a more holistic approach drawing on the ideas of communities of practice could improve the way in which Child Abuse investigations are conducted.

Design

This article has been informed by a recent evaluation of a new national unit that was set up to investigate suspected child abuse in Scotland. This unit was established as part of the transition from eight regional police services in Scotland to a single national police service, Police Scotland. An important part of this evaluation was to consider the messages from previous research into the development of national police units and the role of the police in child protection investigations more generally.

Findings

What was uncovered was that the challenges that police officers face in the current context of child abuse investigation particularly around construction of child abuse investigations, collaborative working, staff well-being, and training.

Value

This paper contribute to a growing body of work examining the way child abuse investigations are conducted by police and the importance of inter-agency collaboration to support this. It contributes to academics debates and knowledge about the overall investigation process where to date there has been a paucity of literature and research which has tended to focus on evidence and experiences and to a boarder literature recognising the need for holistic approaches to approaches to tackle Child Abuse

Article Classification Viewpoint

Keywords: Child Abuse, Communities of Practice, Police, Special Units

Introduction

In 2013 the Scottish Government established a national police force, replacing eight autonomous regional police organisations (Terpstra & Fyfe, 2015).   The Police and Fire Reform (Scotland) Act

2012 set out 'policing principles' which reinforce the importance of localism. According to these principles 'the main purpose of policing is to improve the safety and well-being of persons, localities and communities in Scotland' (Terpstra & Fyfe, 2015:531). Despite claims that reform must 'strengthen the connections between services and communities' (Scott, 2013: 136), the scale of this reform has raised questions about the nature of the relationship between the police and the communities which they serve. The reform principles also recognised the need for the police in Scotland to collaborate with other agencies to 'prevent crime, harm and disorder'. It is within the context of these key principles, that is; to improve the safety and well-being of persons, localities and communities, police and community relationships and collaborative working that issues of child abuse investigation will be conceptualises within this paper.

We will argue that the key principles outlined are being increasingly important in the light of recent policy initiatives that have come into force across the United Kingdom and elsewhere, where we have witnessed a shift in governmental focus onto strategies for controlling and monitoring serious offenders, including child abuse perpetrators, on release from incarceration and during periods of community supervision and parole licence (Lieb et al 2011). Government agencies in the UK for example, are now required to work together in multi-disciplinary groups to make case by case decisions about individual offenders, and decisions about releasing information about particular offenders resides with senior police professionals. These approaches coincide with a shift in perspective from concern about the potential for rehabilitation towards and focus on risk. This shift in emphasis has been possible in part due to the increase in technological tools for surveillance and information gathering that are now available to the police. However, this shift towards a risk agenda has meant a narrowing of focus. Mellon (2009: 22) suggested 'We have built a Child Protection System which is experienced by families as a Modern version of the Spanish Inquisition. According to Liz Davies, in a response to the 'Working Together' consultation document published in 2013 the approach to inter-agency working to safeguard children had shifted away from proactive child protection and subsequently encouraging a narrowing of focus on the role of agencies engaged in Child Abuse Investigations. Clapton et al (2013) argue that claims-making in relation to the worries about increases of the prevalence of child abuse have meant that children have become the key focus but that families have been subjected to a harsher approach with a distance created by social work and families including the application of surveillance type strategies. Before turning to examine how this may have shaped police role in investigations we examine the extent of the problem.

Prevalence of child abuse

The abuse of children is recognised as a global concern (Ramirez et al., 2011), but establishing the scale of the problem, is problematic. In the UK estimates have tended to draw upon data either from prevalence or incidence studies. Incidence data, which rely on official statistics, only reveal the numbers of children who are known or considered to be at risk of abuse and the number of officially reported incidents (Jackson et al., 2015). However, available data suggests that incidences of known child abuse are rising. Recent Scottish Government figures on levels of recorded crime in Scotland indicates that the number of reported child abuse cases has increased over the last ten years (Scottish Government, 2014a) and the most recent data available from Children's social work statistics reports that during the period 2012-13 over 2,600 children in Scotland were identified as needing protection from abuse (Scottish Government, 2014b). Moreover, the number of children subject to statutory child protection measures has likewise increased over the last 10 years within Scotland (Scottish Government, 2014b).   The NSPCC (Bentley et al., 2016) published a comprehensive overview which attempted to grasp the extent of the problem within the UK but concluded that there is a paucity of data across the UK and the data which does exist is often incomplete. Some examples of data that is unavailable include data from Accident and Emergency services, and incidents of assaults as reported to the police and broken down by age of the victim. The headline figures for instances of abuse and neglect across the UK show an overall increase in reporting of child sexual abuse across all four nations and an increase in child neglect across England and Wales.

Police responses to child abuse across the UK

The role of the police in responding to child protection concerns in the UK has evolved considerably over the last 40 years, to the point where they now occupy a central position in the investigation of child abuse allegations (Garrett, 2004). Recognising the increasing complexities of the issues, including emergent forms of abuse such as child sexual exploitation and internet child abuse, has resulted in a shift towards establishing specialist divisions to tackle these cases (HM Government, 2010). The need for specialist units dedicated to the investigation of child abuse was also indicated by the Bichard Report (2004) into the Soham murders in 2002 (van Diijk et al 2015), the inability of forces to share information across force borders (the suspect Ian Huntley being previously convicted) and the inability of the force to effectively investigate the crime were raised. Criticisms of the way in which child abuse investigation has been conducted are not new and numerous reports into case such as Victoria Climbe (Laming 2003) and Daniel Pelka have consistently raised similar

issues. A recent report by the HMIC into the child abuse investigation in the Metropolitan Police has also raised concerns about the way investigations were conducted. It suggested

'It is clear to inspectors that the majority of specialist staff responsible for managing child abuse investigations are knowledgeable, skilled, committed and motivated. Despite this, there are inconsistencies and significant weaknesses in the service the MPS provides to vulnerable children in a wide range of areas… Too many cases fell well short of the expected standards required for a good investigation'. (Rogers 2017)

One recommendation from this report was to ensure clear strategic leadership of child protection issues, one of the missing aspects to effective child protection. However, Punch (2015) warns that previous assessments of child abuse investigations are often highly critical and that these reports fail to acknowledge the complexities of child abuse investigations.

In Scotland, the emergence of specialist police units responsible for investigating child abuse can be dated back to the early nineteen eighties, where the establishment of 'child protection' units heralded a recognition by police services that a more child-centred approach was required, particularly in the context of child sexual abuse and an understanding that the role of the police in such cases was not restricted to prosecution but should also include aspects of child protection. Across the UK, this change in perspective led to the introduction of the first set of multi-agency child protection guidelines in the UK (Lloyd & Burman, 1996). The police in Scotland responded to these guidelines by introducing specialist units to respond child abuse and sexual assault.   Lloyd and Burman (1996) concluded that the introduction of these specialist units had brought about greater collaboration and co-ordination between the police, social work and other professionals and had led to greater clarification about the respective roles and responsibilities of all the agencies. Tensions did however remain, including the timing and direction of the interviews with victims and perpetrators but the consensus was that overall, and these units were beginning show improvements in the ways in which serious crimes against children were being handled by all agencies.

Historically there has been limited recognition of the high levels of skills and knowledge required by those working in specialist police units, where it was reported that divisions were often unaware of the duties that task forces perform). Moreover, the skills and knowledge of the officers within such units were often diminished, with officers being portrayed as 'social workers' rather than as a highly trained and skilled workforce operating as a specialised unit (Aarons, et al. 2004). The move towards a more child centred approach to child abuse policing also proved challenging in the context of general policing, as child abuse investigators moved away from performance target-oriented

outcomes towards interagency working and child protection. This resulted in fewer investigations and prosecutions as the cases were uniquely complex and sensitive. This new approach meant that many units started to experience new stressors which arguably further propelled their sense of separateness (Maguire et al. 2013)

Child Protection Policing: Implications for Police Officers

Police officers investigating child abuse are prone to high levels of work stress which places them at a greater risk of psychological harm than the general population (MacEachern et al, 2011; Stevens & Higgins, 2002). Professional and public expectations about the standard of competency expected of a police officer are high and the range of skills and knowledge is diverse (Shapiro et al, 1999). It is therefore unsurprising that these very high expectations can in some instances, impact on the sense of well-being and job satisfaction of the police officer (Brough & Frame, 2004). Of particular note are the expectations placed on police officers in relation to interviewing vulnerable children and adults who have perpetrated crimes against children. Wright et al. (2006) revealed that police officers do not consider the mastery of forensic interviewing skills in themselves to be the issue, but rather the challenge seems to be in relation to high levels anxiety and apprehension that such interviews caused when conducted with children who had experienced abuse. Furthermore, police officers were concerned that working in the area of child protection resulted in them becoming desensitised to the issues that the children were experiencing (Wright et al, 2006). Client-related stressors have been found to have a lesser impact on job-related stress than issues in relation to professional burnout. Empirical studies draw a picture of police officers being negatively affected mostly by organisational constraints, such as workload and inadequate systems of supervision and management (for example: Kop, Euwema, & Schaufeli, 1999; Bakker & Heuven, 2006). Measuring the impact of the emotional burden of child protection work may be problematic due to the subjective nature of police officers' experiences (MacEachern et al. 2011; Oxburgh, Williamson & Ost, 2006). However, some of the strategies for reducing stress in police officers investigating child abuse include the provision of internal mental health services, as well as the co-location and joint training for police and child protection services (Wright, Powell & Ridge, 2006). Some practitioners also can use techniques such as informal debriefings with colleagues to reduce stress following interviews (Ahern 2016a). Other strategies for practitioners investigating on-line images included preparing themselves mentally (Burns 2008). Anderson et al (2015) suggest training officers in personal resilience promotion techniques, particularly mental preparedness might be one strategy that police forces adopt to support individuals.

It appears from studies that police officers are finding themselves in the uncomfortable and stressful position of being expected or expecting to manage their emotions in situations that are psychologically demanding. The simultaneous demands of maintaining an unemotional response to human anguish and abusive behaviour, simultaneously trying to demonstrate empathy to the victims of child abuse, can place the police officer in situations of great emotional distress.   This can be further compounded where this role is in conflict with the wider goals and expectations of their organisation.   These conflicting expectations can indeed have an impact on the progress of a prosecution as it has been demonstrated that while there is no direct link between empathy and the amount of investigation-relevant information obtained was found, there was evidence to suggest that more emphatic approaches to interviewing victims of abuse can lead to the adoption of more appropriate questions, and consequently, elicit more items of relevant information (Oxburgh et al. 2014). Making a child feel at ease and establishing rapport with the child prior to asking abuse-related questions is also critical (Hershkowitz et al, 2014). Ahern et al (2016b) found that this was particularly the case with child exploitation victims who were more reluctant to disclose their experiences maybe due to the original abuse uncovered by other means (reported by a witness or police surveillance). Their interviews with practitioners found that establishing rapport over time through sustained contact and discussion of neutral topics was more likely to yield trust relationships that aided disclosure at a later date. Indeed, police personnel play an important role in facilitating the investigative process for underage victims as the link between children's positive experiences of police involvement is positively correlated with more detailed and credible accounts of abuse (Davidson et al., 2006). However, due to resources constraints this could be challenging, it also takes a specific skill set that would need to be harnessed and developed in practitioners.

It has also been suggested that police officers' personal beliefs play a significant role in their everyday practice, often leading to inaccurate evaluations and incorrect interpretations of facts. Hughes-Scholes, Powell & Sharman (2014) found that the indicators used by investigators to determine the validity of young victims' statements are not always reliable. Factors that influence officers' decision making include the perceived credibility of the witness; however, the lack of a clear and universal means of measuring victims' credibility has posed a real barrier for investigators (Powell, Murfett, & Thomson, 2010). What is more, police officers' beliefs about questioning child witnesses are often in dissonance with best practice procedures (Guadagno, Powell, & Wright, 2006). Challenging such beliefs, perhaps through specialist training, may facilitate learning and adhering to best practice guidelines (Powell, 2008; Hughes-Scholes, Powell & Sharman, 2014). It seems to be particularly important in the context of police officers acting as gatekeepers to the

judicial system, and therefore, their perceptions may influence the outcome of the case and whether prosecution will be pursued (Hughes-Scholes, Powell & Sharman, 2014).

In many instances, predominantly in sexual abuse investigations when physical or corroborative evidence supporting the allegation is scarce, the case authorisation is a complex and multifaceted process (Phillips et al., 2012). It has been found that the lack of appropriate support and recognition for police work in the area of child abuse contributes to the quality of interviewers' performance (Davies et al. 1998). Police officers often experience anxiety and confusion around judicial decisions not to proceed with certain charges or cases (Guadagno, Powell & Wright, 2006). The evidence used by police officers in order to authorise child abuse cases for prosecution often consists of interview records and corroborative evidence. Police professionals involved in child abuse cases often present a lack of clarity over the objectives of investigative interviews. Elements such as the victim's credibility and competency are considered by police officers when making case authorisation. Some research indicates that there is a linear relationships between disclosure rates and age, with middle children (7 to 14) being more likely to disclose abuse than younger children (3-6 years) (Hershkowitz et al 2005), and then disclosure reducing in adolescent groups. Leach et al', study confirmed earlier findings (Pipe et al 2007 cited in Leach et al 2016 p6 -7) that such age/disclosure relationship existed but that this was influenced by a variety of factors. For example younger children less likely to disclose intrafamilial abuse as they may not be recognise abusive behaviour, be fearful of reporting it or feel loyal to the suspect, adolescents may perceive abusive actions as consensual rather than abusive. More serious forms of abuse are also more likely to be reported. Making officers aware of these variations and the need to understand the way that children with different experiences of abuse is critical, particularly in understanding why disclosure occurs or not in the process of the interview.

It has been speculated that a more robust understanding of the legal system combined with more effective training in the use of appropriate interviewing techniques may alleviate many of the structural limitations that prohibit the usefulness of child witness statements for evidential purposes (Powell, Wright & Hughes-Scholes, 2011). Transparency of the interview processes, appropriateness of questioning techniques and adoption of an open-minded, understanding, non-judgemental approach are considered key to the effectiveness of investigative interviews with young witnesses (Read et al., 2014).

Investigations about the efficacy or otherwise of continuous professional development of child abuse investigators is confined to studies examining the purpose and potential effects of training in the field of investigative interviewing. These studies suggest that there is gap between what is

recommended and what is performed in practice may be further reinforced by inadequate expertise of interviewers (Powell & Barnett, 2015). There is a link between issues of staff competence and child sexual abuse case attrition (Christensen, Sharman & Powell, 2015). Poor competences of child investigative interviewers may be the result of structural issues related to the most current training programmes, however they may also reflect attitudinal barriers (Powell, Guadagno & Benson, 2014; Wright & Powell, 2007). Previous research indicates that officers who undergo training including input on repeated practice, simulations which are monitored through feedback and systematic analysis of actual recorded forensic interviews are perhaps better prepared to adhere to international recommendations (Lamb et al., 2002). A study into factors influencing investigators' adherence to best practice guidelines revealed that the majority of police officers who have more than 10 years of experience in the police force had not accessed additional learning materials since the completion of their internal training course (Smith, Powell & Lum, 2009). There is evidence that the improvement of interviewing practices acquired through training is detectable not only immediately after the training has ended, but can be maintained months after the end of the course ceased (Powell, Guadagno & Benson, 2014; Cedeborg et al., 2013; Powell, Sharman & Cauchi, 2011). Research-based knowledge may also potentially improve the quality of information available to courts (Cedeborg et al., 2013).

The requirement for police officers to be effective requires both a personal and organisational commitment to their ongoing professional development. The recent HMIC report of the Metropolitan Police Service highlighted the lack of training for staff key roles, for example one Child Sexual Exploitation investigator expected to engage in proactive work had little previous child protection experience or speciality training to undertake the role (Rogers 2017). The need for ongoing high quality professional development opportunities for those is specialist police units has been accepted (NPIA, 2009) but needs to also reflect broader issues such as effectiveness of training and providing broader learning and support mechanisms and trying to better understand the impact of conducting interviews and gathering evidence can have on investigating officers.

Multi-Agency Investigations

Multi-disciplinary working derives from the concept of 'communities of practice' which argues for the importance of professionals' constructions of their identities in joint practice and learning (Wenger, 1998). Charman (2014: 106) states that it may not be recognisable and that, 'The very essence of social interactions with work colleagues or across occupational boundaries is about the subconscious exchange of tacit knowledge, which is therefore, unlikely to be recognised by participants or indeed measurable'. Currently, 'working together' to protect children is promoted in various policy developments which claim that shared approaches provide valuable tools for

assessment and intervention (HM Government, 2010; Scottish Government, 2014a). Yet, police officers report that professional collaboration, among other factors such as hefty caseloads, is a common work stressor (Wright, Powell & Ridge, 2006; Powell, Wright & Hughes-Scholes, 2011; Powell et al. 2014; Powell, Guadagno & Cassematis, 2013). Police personnel identify different organisational missions and contrasting thresholds to be barriers associated with joint working with child protection services. Collaboration with legal professionals is linked with strains over different standards of questioning expected from lawyers versus police, as well as the unpredictability of child abuse cases (Wright, Powell & Ridge, 2006). Co-location and co-training of police and child protection services have been found to alleviate stress and inconveniences of collaborative working; however, co-location may also provoke interpersonal and individual tensions (Wright, Powell & Rigde, 2006). In a study of collaborative working between police and social work, some professionals reflected concerns over the establishment of joint units and how they may influence the blurring of professional identity. Overlap of roles and responsibilities in multi-disciplinary teams may cause confusion and uncertainty for staff whose co-location is often determined by pragmatic planning or budget cuts (Garrett, 2004). On the other hand, sharing building space and case work routines may facilitate workers' reflection on their professional values (Frost & Robinson, 2007). Charman's (2014) study of COP between police officers and ambulance drivers also found that they believed effective face to face communication was critical in the management of joint incidents. Co-location of services in relation to child protection suggested that information sharing can foster better understanding between occupational challenges and capabilities (Crawford and Xavier L'Hoiry 2015).

Co-location could also be important to support victims of child abuse. The service delivery of multi-disciplinary centres established to support sexual assault investigation in Victoria Australia were viewed as more easily accessible and this aided victims in a number of ways for example reducing travel time, being able to be updates on their case of a regular basis, also the ability to establish rapport with investigators also presented itself or ensure that they had relevant support (Powell and Cauchi 2011).

Emerging Effective Practice

One of the most effective ways to establish communities of practice might be through the establishment of specialist pro-active multidisciplinary teams. Operation RESET in Australia provides a good example of effective proactive practice and illustrates that when viewed as a public health issue that needs a holistic approach, Child abuse can be effectively tackled. Operation RESET came about due to concerns over the inability of previous attempts to reduce and tackle Child Abuse

amongst Aboriginal communities (Bailey et al 2015, Mace et al 2015). The strategy underpinning RESET was that the responsibility for reducing child sexual abuse must be a shared responsibility between government agencies and communities and that approaches should be holistic ensuring the incorporation of community and families. The operation included the targeting of high risk areas characterised by particular factors that indicate higher incidences of child abuse and the development of a project team of social workers and detectives who had specialist knowledge of child abuse and aboriginal communities. Outreach work was also incorporated including general networking with community actors and also providing training to school staff and families in protective behaviours and indicators of abuse and enhancing victims after arrest.

What the evaluation of Operation Reset clearly demonstrates is that there is room for more holistic approaches to be encouraged. The success of this strategy was not reactive but when this style of policing is necessary there is still capacity to respond in a way that incorporates multiple agencies and can have successful outcomes. These types of case may involve extensive resources, have multiple victims and extend across borders, with the increase in on-line child exploitation these scenarios are increasingly likely. One such case that illustrates this is discussed by van Dijk et al in 'What Matters in Policing'; it was also the topic of one of the presentations panels at the recent third international conference on Law Enforcement and Public Health. The session led by Maurice Punch outline one of the most extensive and devastating child abuse cases in Amsterdam. The crimes of Robert M were first uncovered not via the Amsterdam police but as the result of online images uncovered by police in the United States. These images were traced back to the Netherlands because of the t-shirt of the child displaying a popular Dutch cartoon character. The images featured on a crime watch style programme were identified by the grandfather on one of the victims. This led to suspicion of a young male nursery teacher in his late 20's who worked in the local nursery but also babysat for a number of children outside of the day care centre. After further investigation, it was found that Robert M had 50,000 images in his possession and committed numerous sexual offences against 83 different victims. The presentations from key personnel in this case at the conference indicated that the only way to tackle this case was through a holistic approach involving a number of agencies and an ongoing action plan to support the victims and their families in the long-term, even to the point of finding new homes for victims should they wish to move away from the area in which the abuse occurred. Long-terms psychological support was also on-hand for the victims and their families. This case illustrated the need for a multi-agency co-ordinated approach. What was clear was that this was a resources intensive investigation that had a key impact of the staff involved. There need to be more research into how these protected cases are investigated, what makes them effective and how can we measure success. Prosecutions might be

one way of measuring this but what about the long terms impact of the staff, families and victims involved and can good practice from these investigations be captured and learned from (Punch 2015).

The National Child Abuse Investigation Unit

Returning to the present day, in Scotland, the National Child Abuse Investigation Unit (NCAIU) was established in early 2015 as a specialist unit for dealing with child abuse and exploitation cases. This focus was in part due to a number of high profile, unprecedented child abuse cases, including those linked with prominent and widely-recognised public figures such as the late Jimmy Savile, that the need for a more robust mechanism for detecting child abuse crimes was recognised. The intended vison for the NCAIU was that it would respond to complex cases of child abuse across Scotland by deploying highly skilled police officers in units across the country while also working with a range of agencies and in partnerships. They have started to have some success but possibly learning lessons from other models establish abroad such as the one applied with Aboriginal communities may be the next step. One example of effective practice established during the evaluation was a day conference organised around Child Death. This conference brought together officers from across Scotland and used in depth analysis of Child Death Cases including Daniel Pelka as a way to reflect on best practice and identifying lessons learned. While this particular conference was restricted to police officers, what it demonstrated was how these events need to be encouraged more broadly to ensure that real communities of practice can be established. Working towards this through co-location and more opportunities to learn from previous experiences could support this. Charman (2014:116) argues through informal and situated learning opportunities police officers and ambulance personnel were able to traverse occupational boundaries aiding shared goals. One initial finding from our evaluation found that relationship building between the procurator fiscal and NCAIU was leading to improvement in respect to the quality of investigation and evidence. Although it was still too early to tell the impact this could have on prosecution. The importance is that more holistic approaches where agencies activity see to work together could lead to even better and effective child abuse investigations. Specialised training, increased learning opportunities and increased support for staff could help enable such improvements.

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