

Book Reviews

Melrose, M. and Pearce, J. (2013). *Critical perspectives on child sexual exploitation and trafficking*. Palgrave Macmillan. 216pp, ISBN 978-1-137-29408-1, £22.99.

If you work in the residential childcare sector, it's likely that you will have seen some of the research and policy-based work published in Scotland over the last couple of years concerning child sexual exploitation (CSE) and related trafficking. Important publications from CELCIS and the Scottish Government have looked at what we know about the prevalence and nature of the problem in a Scottish context, while the Scottish Parliament's Petition committee published the findings of their 9- month inquiry in January 2014 arguing for a national strategy to tackle this issue. Recently it's been difficult to avoid discussions on this subject at conferences, training events and practitioners' forums.

If you work in the residential childcare sector, it's also likely that the issue of organised sexual exploitation of vulnerable young people is one that you will be very aware of. Although recent media coverage of the prosecution of gang members in Derby and Rochdale who targeted, groomed and systematically sexually abused young people brought this subject to public attention, many of us will have worked with accommodated young men and young women placing themselves in risky situations with older males. If you've worked with this issue in a practice setting, it's also highly likely that you will recognise how frustrating it is when we as adults recognise such situations as abusive, but young people in certain circumstances see these interactions as non-abusive and refuse to co-operate with services that are working to promote their safety.

Melrose and Pearce's publication is therefore a timely and welcome addition to the literature on this subject. However, if you're looking for a simple, practice-focussed guide to working with young people at risk of sexual exploitation, you'll need to look elsewhere. This book instead is a thoughtful and critical exploration of various aspects of this issue: definitions, gang culture and CSE, the issue in different UK jurisdictions, CSE and BME communities, and the concept of consent. This text is thought-provoking and challenging, and offers no simple answers.

There are two quite outstanding chapters that, for me, set the tone of this book. The first is Margaret Melrose's opening chapter which carefully deconstructs the notion of child sexual exploitation from a number of different perspectives. She argues that the 'subject' of CSE discourse tends to be female, innocent, dependent and passive, with no sense of agency. Constructing the subject this way makes it difficult to frame CSE involving young men, but it also simplifies the complexity of situations young people find themselves in. The CSE discourse also explores issues about the material conditions of exploitation: controversially she argues that it may be the case that some older young people make

pragmatic decisions - in conditions not of their own choosing - to sell themselves for sexual activity when they have few other choices economically available to them. It also ignores how sexual attractiveness is socially valued in contemporary society, and missing this means that we ignore key social drivers that underpin CSE.

This theme of complexity resonates in later articles which question how a simplistic and non-critical conceptualisation of CSE hampers our understanding of sexual abuse in gang settings as well as peer-on-peer sexual abuse. The second outstanding chapter is Lorena Arocha's contribution on trafficking which looks at the historical development of trafficking and CSE as intertwined social problems which become depoliticised and individualised when tackled through the risk management perspective that dominates social work practice. No easy answers are offered but you're left with a lot to think about. And, refreshingly, both Melrose and Arocha perform a deft balancing act, rigorously critiquing their subject and blasting overly simplistic conceptualisations of the issue while still recognising that the sexual exploitation of young adults is a social issue that urgently needs to be addressed.

I have a few minor quibbles. I would have liked to have seen a chapter dedicated to the role of new technologies in sexual exploitation, and the commercial sexual abuse of young men - although touched on in various chapters - is rather surprisingly not afforded more space. Also, some analysis of how CSE is now broached in schools would have been interesting. Carlene Firmin's chapter on peer-on-peer abuse looks at various ways of conceptualising this subject (CSE, domestic violence, serious youth violence, etc.) but doesn't touch on the obvious option of thinking about this behaviour as adolescent sexually harmful or sexually offending behaviour, thus ignoring a considerable literature that is highly relevant to her topic. Some discussion about the tension between the concepts 'child sexual exploitation' and 'child sexual abuse' (CSA) would also have been fruitful - should we move to thinking about CSE as a form of CSA with certain characterising dynamics and features? Also the content of some chapters has been covered by reports or peer reviewed publications by the same authors elsewhere, although this volume pulls together a great deal of work in one place that was previously only available to academic audiences.

All in all though, this is a rewarding and accessible read, recommended for thoughtful practitioners and policy makers as well as academics and researchers with an interest in the complexity and messiness of frontline practice.

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