

| The Psychology of Individual Adult Abusers

Written Responses for the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Martin Henry

June 2022

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Preface

The Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry (“SCAI”) held roundtable sessions on 22nd and 23rd March 2022, at its premises in Edinburgh. The sessions were open to the public.

The purpose of the sessions was to explore, with relevant experts, aspects of the psychology of those who abuse children in a way that would help the Chair of SCAI to understand them and to apply that understanding when deciding, at a future date, what recommendations ought to be made for the protection of children in care from abuse.

In advance of the sessions, the experts were invited to consider a set of questions and they provided written responses which were used to assist in facilitating the discussions. The responses provided by Martin Henry, Independent Consultant, are set out below.

Written Responses

1. Individual Abuser Psychology

- 1a. Drawing on your professional experience, what characteristics of child abusers impact upon the likelihood and/or nature of their abuse of children?

The personal characteristics of child (sexual) abusers that correlate to the risk of sexual offending against children or the modus operandi (MO) of any abuse are well-documented in research. However, in my experience, it is not possible to 'profile' personal characteristics in such a way as to predict the likelihood of behaviours occurring with any convincing degree of reliability. Research has already concluded that many men (and some women) engage in sexual fantasy about 'minors' (particularly post-pubescent young people) sometimes supplemented by pornographic imagery but will not go on to translate intermittent fantasy into behaviours. Ephebophilic sexual attraction does not necessarily form a core aspect of their sexuality or sexual functioning, although it may be a regular feature of their thinking or fantasy life. It appears to be more likely that the presence of one factor in itself does not provide a good indicator of risk, but more that the number of characteristics—combined with the interaction between these characteristics at any given point—may increase the likelihood of offending behaviour. Also, it is apparent that frequently the escalation into abusive behaviour may, to some extent, be influenced by external life circumstances or events.

- 1b. What does your professional experience tell you about abusers' perceptions of children and how those perceptions may contribute to their perpetration of abuse?

Child sexual abusers are a diverse population, and equally their perceptions of children and childhood are diverse. Some may idealise children, some will find the attributes of pre-pubescent children arousing, some will find particular characteristics of particular children more engaging than others, some will use scenarios of childhood to relive or unpick memories or events from their own childhood in a sexualised way, some may be unable to form or sustain effective or meaningful adult relationships and find it easier and less-challenging to have emotional and social proximity to children, etc.

- 1c. What does your professional experience tell you about the link, if any, between the viewing of pornography including indecent images of children and the abuse of children?

In my experience, there is little convincing data to show a direct link between the viewing of (legal) adult pornography and the likelihood of risk to children. However, the viewing of indecent images of children is of more interest as an indicator. An important distinction needs to be made between regular and

deliberate access to sexual imagery (especially, but not exclusively, video) of children, and the exchange of sexual images of young people between young people themselves. This is a crucial point, since digital and online technology has transformed the sexual lives of young people—and to an extent the way in which their sexuality (and their understanding of it) develops. In my work with boys and men who had been arrested for accessing and downloading indecent images of children, it was clear that they formed a very diverse population of offenders. The application of a one-size-fits-all legal sanction to such a diverse range of behaviours and offenders is unhelpful from a clinical point of view, and ill-informed public assumptions hinder, rather than progress, prevention or effective response.

2. Individual Abuse in Religious Institutions

2a. Some members of religious orders were obedient to most of the strict rules, requirements, and practices of their orders, yet they flouted rules of their orders devised for the protection of children (e.g. being kind to children and providing them with the best possible care,¹ refraining from corporal punishment,² never being alone with a child³ and never fondling a child⁴) and abused children. What does your professional experience tell you about this?

I served on the Scottish Bishops Conference Working Party on Child Sexual Abuse in the early 1990s; was Adviser on Safeguarding for over 20 years to the Catholic Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh, and Chair of the Safeguarding Commission of the Conference of Religious in Scotland. It was clear that for both male and female religious orders, a complex range of dynamics came into play that allowed individuals to overcome spiritual, ethical, religious, and organisational inhibitors in order to abuse children emotionally, physically, and sexually. Frequently, significant cognitive distortion was activated to permit the behaviour, or to sustain it. This sometimes occurred when individual religious created complex paths to reconcile their personal or preferred belief systems with that of the organisation or the doctrines of the church. These personal belief systems often originated in their own families and childhoods where emotional deprivation, systematic cruelty (including excessive corporal punishment), and distorted sexual thinking (often viewing all sexual thinking and normative sexual development as sinful) formed part of family life and were parentally sanctioned. For some, it then became a matter of 'duty' or 'righteousness' to inflict cruel and excessive discipline on children, yet accommodate this within their distorted perceptions of church teaching. Where sexualised or sexually abusive behaviours were engaged in, these were both a manifestation of the abuse of power, and the traumatised, distorted, or

¹ See, for example, [Case Study Findings for Sisters of Nazareth](#), p.3.

² See, for example, [Case Study Findings for Christian Brothers](#), p.3.

³ See, for example, [Case Study Findings for Christian Brothers](#), p.3-4.

⁴ See, for example, [Case Study Findings for Christian Brothers](#), p.5.

repressed sexual development of the adults themselves that contributed to a reservoir of guilt that, in turn, simply reinforced and continued to drive the cycle of abuse. It is very clear to me that the key lies in the human formation of both the religious and clergy. Human formation is the development of a grounded and well-rounded, competent human being psychologically, physically, temperamentally, spiritually, and emotionally, which realises as far as possible their potential to adapt to vocational life. Consideration of the processes for human formation has been a fundamental factor in resolving these issues within the Church and has been recognised for almost 30 years. It has not, in my view, been adequately or systematically addressed globally, and should be a central feature of the work of the Church to prevent child abuse and to respond to its occurrence. Routes to healthy human formation in my experience can only be established when the Church is able to reconcile doctrinal dissonance on issues such as celibacy, sexual development, same-sex attraction, and the role of women.

2b. What role, if any, does the celibacy of an abuser play in the sexual abuse of children?

In my professional opinion there is no direct causal relationship between the celibacy of clergy/religious and the sexual abuse of minors. This was also a finding of the extensive and important research undertaken by John Jay College of Criminal Justice commissioned by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops ("The Nature and Scope of the Problem of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States" (2004)). However, it is also clear that in the absence of a clear and sustained programme of human formation for clergy, individual men approach a life of required celibacy differently. Where such individuals enter vocations with already distorted perceptions of human sexuality or relations this will be likely to impact negatively the ways in which they approach celibacy or adapt to it: for example, internalised homophobia; or unrealistic understanding of emotional reciprocity in relationships; or distorted views or expectations of women; or impeded sexual development; or a history of emotional or sexual trauma is likely to seriously impact on the capacity of individuals to understand, adapt to, or self-manage a lifestyle where emotional connection/intimacy needs may be strong, but where sexual intimacy is prohibited. It is easy to see how, in such circumstances, the boundaries of interactions with young people or with women might become dangerously distorted or open to abuse. In my experience, the issue of required celibacy is more likely to be a factor in 'boundary violations' in relationships between clergy/religious and other adults, and not in situations involving the sexual abuse of minors.

3. Denial & Minimisation

3a. What does your professional experience tell you about denial and minimisation of offending by abusers?

Denial and minimisation are common and important factors in the occurrence and continuation of child sexual abuse. Indeed, they are common factors in how all human beings respond to or cope with problematic behaviour in themselves or in others. They are familiar mechanisms for protecting ourselves from the consequences of our actions and to permit us the perceived benefits to ourselves for continuing illicit or unhealthy behaviours or activities. These factors become all the more effective when they are colluded with, supported, or reinforced by those in our families or communities. In dealing effectively with the sexual abuse of children, it is vital that we understand the nature of denial and minimisation instead of simply seeing these as strategic barriers deliberately put in place by offenders to 'get themselves off the hook' or to thwart professional intervention. We need to understand the 'necessary' function they fulfil to the individual or for those close to them. We need also to be more aware of the role minimisation and denial plays in the lives of victims/survivors as essential coping mechanisms.

3b. What does your professional experience tell you about the shift in attitudes of abusers from denial and minimisation to acceptance?

The move from minimisation to acceptance can be long and arduous, but equally I have encountered offenders who are eager to understand their behaviour more clearly in order to effect change. There is most certainly a significant cadre of sexual offender for whom denial and minimisation are powerful and strong dynamics. For them a robust programme of tailored and grounded professional intervention is required to work through this as a precursor to legitimate thinking and safe behaviour where possible. In my experience, however, there is also a significant group of offenders (primarily young people and those accessing indecent and illegal images of children online) for whom a targeted (either groupwork or individual) programme of psycho-educational intervention can enable this shift to take place relatively quickly, and significantly reduce the risk of future offending in conjunction with other bespoke interventions without recourse to custodial sentences.

4. Individual & Group Abuse

4a. Drawing on your professional experience, why do some people abuse in groups, some in isolation, and some both in groups and in isolation?

My professional experience has almost entirely been confined to work with abusers who have operated individually (other than those who have exchanged

indecent images online with others). My experience with contact abusers who have operated in an 'organised' way or in groups seems to have shown that these individuals operated within 'family' groups (or within institutions that emulated family groups) and with others with whom they had a familial connection or through a community of interest or where predetermined bonds inferred high degrees of congruity between them, high levels of trust, and the ability to develop a familial or institutional 'culture' together that legitimised their thinking or behaviours.

5. Victims & Attachment

5a. Drawing on your professional experience, please explain (if you can) why different children within care settings may be treated differently by caregivers—some favoured and well-cared for, whilst others are abused?

I cannot speak with any degree of authority about children in care settings as I have not worked in the care or residential care sectors. Nevertheless, one observation from my role as Chair of the Independent Review of Sexual Abuse in Scottish Football was that the common assumption that outward signs of 'vulnerability' in young people was a sound indicator that they may be more likely to be subject to abuse was not reliable. In the (sexual) abuse of boys, it seems that boys who were socially gregarious, assertive, skilled, and popular were often targeted for sexual grooming and/or abuse. To understand this, it is vital to understand how the effective silencing of (adolescent) male victims might be effectively achieved. Since the primary reference group of these boys is their peers, the stakes of 'compliance' and the necessity for concealment becomes higher. Developmentally when boys move from pre-adolescence to adolescence, their primary reference group changes from parent/family to peers. The peer group becomes a central feature of how an adolescent boy models himself. Therefore, affirmation, approval, acceptance, and inclusion by the peer group becomes a primary concern. Boys therefore will conceal or minimise those things that might jeopardise this, and may also inflate or exaggerate anything that might improve their status/acceptance by their peers. Navigating and managing these peer relations is a key aspect of adolescent development. Same-sex attraction or sexual activity historically would have led to summary rejection by peers, if not actual violence and threat. For the adolescent boy disentangling sexual abuse from this is extremely difficult and becomes even more so when it also challenges his own perception of self-reliance and masculine efficacy (i.e expectation that he should be able to protect himself and failure to do so implies inefficacy and weakness). Where abusers are in clear positions of power (as in the case of football coaches where future careers and reputation are in their hands) it becomes easier to groom and insinuate themselves into the lives of boys, to wield disproportionate power over them, and especially in sub-cultures that are hyper-masculine. Briefly, therefore, it is important that we do not rely on archetypes of vulnerability when looking at

which young people may or may not be likely to be targeted or groomed for abuse.

5b. A strong attachment may be formed between a child and her/his abuser. How can you, drawing on your professional experience, explain this?

In many cases, strong attachments between abusers and a child may significantly precede the first attempts or acts of abuse. Indeed for many young people it becomes difficult to differentiate between those first incidents and the substance of the relationship that has gone before. This is the nature of grooming. But we should also consider that such attachments may have been legitimate (such as affinity between blood relations or family friends) for a long time, and may not have been a clear avenue leading towards abusive opportunities or acts. Some relationships are developed for the purposes of abuse (whether explicitly or implicitly), but some are not. These relationships may become contexts within which abusive dynamics can be rehearsed and played out. In other words, in every relationship of affinity, reciprocity, or emotional intimacy, abuse (emotional, physical, or sexual) is possible (not probable, possible). How are any of us able, in such contexts, to determine what risk looks like or to understand the blurred boundaries of abuse clearly or reliably? Sometimes we cannot until it crosses particular lines, and even so we are perhaps rendered less sure about what we can or should do about it. In my work with young people who have experienced attachment difficulties or disruption in early life, it becomes even more difficult to distinguish between affection and exploitation. For some, they have explained that they did not understand fully that what was happening was abusive because it didn't involve physical pain. This is made even more complicated by the ability of some abusers to meet emotional needs and a need for belonging but at the same time sustain the exploitation and abuse of a young person.

Such strong attachments are not just the context within which abuse occurs but are prerequisites to sustaining the abuse (or the secrecy which allows it to continue). Where attachment is strong so is affinity and loyalty, even love. Under such circumstances it becomes difficult, painful, and sometimes impossible for people to disclose or reveal their experiences without destroying someone with whom a strong bond may have developed. This is a powerful dynamic that anyone who wants to understand abuse needs to think through. It should also, however, be remembered that sometimes these attachments are not permanently reciprocated and where time, physical distance or even death can allow people the freedom to express their experiences more openly.

6. Grooming

6a. Drawing on your professional expertise, how would you define the term "grooming"?

Grooming is the development of a connection or relationship of trust (sometimes rapidly but more often over a period of time) by an adult with a child/young person as a means whereby exploitation or abuse might take place. It is a form of manipulation that can extend to other adults or family members so that suspicion is removed, and concealment is strengthened.

6b. In your experience, how do abusers groom children and/or children and their families? How do they create opportunities for abuse?

There are infinite ways individuals might groom children/young people or other adults. Indeed, "grooming" is not an obvious process so when it is in train it is frequently not seen as anything other than what it ostensibly is: the development of a relationship. It is usually only once the purpose of the process is understood that it is possible to understand the process itself. Most usually, as is the case with the development of all relationships, it involves the investment of time. Also, to establish trust a strong measure of reciprocity is involved; the adult and the child/young person share common interests, rewards are provided (emotional and material), and a degree of dependency developed whereby the adult becomes an accepted and important figure in the life of the child/young person. It also may involve the construction of a degree of acceptance and approval by other people who are important to the child—most notably parents or peers. In some situations, the possibility of withdrawal of affection or proximity is inferred so that the child/young person learns to meet the needs of the adult or follow their wishes to avoid losing the positive aspects of the relationship which may, for some young people, amount to the most significant features of their current lives. The creation of opportunity becomes easier the stronger the connection and the greater the trust. Generally, an introduction to abusive acts will be 'tested' allowing the abuser to assess the likelihood of 'complicity' and co-operation before further gradual escalation. We should remember that this is not always the case, and is related sometimes to the arousal patterns of the adult and their capacity to control these.

7. Victim to Perpetrator Journey

7a. Some victims of abuse go on to abuse. What is the current understanding of this victim to perpetrator journey? What does your professional experience tell you about it?

In my experience the likelihood of previous trauma in the lives of perpetrators is significantly high. However, this does not present a direct causal link between a

history of previous sexual abuse and the perpetration of abuse. Indeed, most people who have been sexually abused or exploited in childhood/adolescence do not go on to abuse children, and it is crucial that this is widely understood. However, for people who do sexually abuse, it has been my professional experience that previous abuse is likely to feature in their own personal histories. This does not necessarily mean that this has been sexual abuse. I have worked with sex offenders who have experienced both simple and complex trauma. Simple trauma is most often associated with a one-off event or experience (irrespective of its "seriousness"), but which is not complicated by factors such as relationships that are 'core' to survival. The psychological impact of simple trauma may be considerable, but generally tends to be more straightforward clinically to treat. "Complex" trauma involves exposure to repeated or multiple events often over prolonged periods, which are likely to be interpersonal and invasive. Without the capacity to address each event timeously the impact therefore becomes cumulative and therefore more challenging to address from a clinical point of view. This may have involved witnessing repeated incidents of domestic abuse; sustained childhood bullying; serious emotional and psychological abuse; exposure to serious acts of violence in conflicts or in communities; abandonment, serious and protracted neglect. Whilst many people who have survived trauma do not act out through sexual abuse it is important (professionally) to understand as best as possible the sequelae of experiences that have contributed to an adults' problematic thinking or sexually abusive behaviour. A sexual interest in children may also occur in adults whose life trajectory has been relatively problem free.

7b. What protective factors, if any, may minimise the risk of victims becoming perpetrators?

The single most important protective factor in my experience is attachment. (The development of a secure emotional bond with another person or people.) Secure attachment in childhood and the greater resilience that follows from it is singly the most important factor in protecting people from a wide range of problematic and risk-prone thinking and behaviour in adolescence/adulthood. Similarly, when a child experiences sexual victimisation the stronger the secure (safe) attachments in their world, the better the chances of surviving and doing so without problematic behaviours emerging as a mechanism to act out or figure out previous abusive experiences. Within this context it is also important that children and young people have the capacity to express themselves and their experiences and to have this taken seriously. Where adults listen to young people and respond effectively to their problems or concerns, the quicker abusive experiences or relationships can be remedied/stopped. Where 'grooming' has taken place, it is important for children to learn how to make safe choices within relationships through experiencing positive bonds with others.

8. Risk, Recruitment, & Training

8a. In your professional experience, what risk assessments do you use, and what are the barriers to the implementation of the risk management strategies?

I am no longer working in the field.

8b. Drawing on your professional knowledge and understanding, if you were asked to design a process to ensure recruitment meets with child protection requirements, what would you advise?

See below.

8c. In your opinion, how could existing child protection requirements and recruitment practices be strengthened?

Safe recruitment processes are essential if individuals who may present a risk are to be excluded from using employment opportunities as a way of accessing children/young people in order to exploit or abuse. Clearly Disclosure Scotland checks provide a basis for this, although are only a part of the picture.

(Disclosure Scotland is the government agency that provides criminal records checks to employers and voluntary organisations. I have commented through my report on Sexual Abuse in Scottish Football that had disclosure checks been undertaken on the majority of the known perpetrators they would still have been cleared to work with young people because they did not have previous convictions or intelligence known to the authorities that suggested risk.)

It seems to me that for posts that involve direct work with children/young people or vulnerable adults, a series of attitudinal tests should be applied that may expose any problematic thinking regarding children and their care—problematic thinking related to problem-solving and interpersonal relationships including sexuality, accountability, and power. These ‘tests’ should be as interactive as possible and focus on positive aspects of safe caring, as well as potential problematic areas. For clergy/religious I have already commented that a robust programme of “human formation” is required to understand the history and functioning of the individual when undergoing evaluation for vocations, but equally importantly this programme needs to be built into ongoing ‘supervision’ and spiritual direction throughout the lives of clergy and religious.

For those entering professions such as social work I recommend a similar programme of “human formation” throughout the recruitment process, undergraduate education, and ongoing professional supervision. Supervision for those working in social care and social work should not be confined to ‘case management’ (allocation and workload management, resourcing, and planning and review) or service matters, but also include an explicit dimension of ongoing psychological assessment and support. I also strongly believe that social workers should not be recruited directly from undergraduate courses, but should always

be subject to probationary periods where formative and psychological wellbeing and suitability are assessed and proper 'screening' is part of a lengthy process of professional admittance. Issues concerning professional ethics and conduct should be more actively enforced through SSSC and its complaints process, and not left to employers whose grievance and disciplinary procedures are more connected to employment conditions and are not necessarily consonant with professional ethical concerns.