

# **Deflection, denial and disbelief: social and political discourses about child sexual abuse and their influence on institutional responses**

## **A rapid evidence assessment**

### **Summary report**

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## **Disclaimer**

This is a Rapid Evidence Assessment prepared at IICSA's request. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone.

Due to the nature of the research report, the authors have worked with the predominant ideas on child sexual abuse and use the language in which those ideas were commonly expressed over the period from the 1940s to 2017. The use of language that encapsulates these ideas and meanings should not be read as an endorsement of any of the identified discourses.

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## Background

The aim of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA or 'the Inquiry') is to investigate whether public bodies and other non-state institutions have taken seriously their responsibility to protect children from sexual abuse in England and Wales, and to make meaningful recommendations for change, to help ensure that children now and in the future are better protected from sexual abuse. As defined in current government policy in England and Wales, child sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person under the age of 18 to take part in sexual activities. It includes contact and non-contact abuse, child sexual exploitation (CSE) and grooming a child in preparation for abuse (HM Government, 2015b).

However, definitions and understandings of what counts as child sexual abuse have been subject to substantial change over time. As part of its work, the Inquiry commissioned this rapid evidence assessment (REA) to understand what the social and political discourses have been about child sexual abuse, and the ways in which these discourses may have influenced responses to child sexual abuse by institutions. These questions have cross-cutting relevance for the work of the Inquiry.

The overarching aim of this REA was to summarise the existing evidence base about social and political discourses concerning child sexual abuse in England and Wales from the 1940s to 2017 and identify the ways in which those discourses may have influenced institutional responses to such abuse.

## Defining discourses

The term 'discourse' has been interpreted and applied in a broad way in this research. Discourses can be defined as clusters of ideas that provide ways of talking about issues such as child sexual abuse (Hall, 1997). This includes the language, terminology and definitions used but also how child sexual abuse comes to be understood, through the key points of change, and the different lenses through which it has been viewed, for example, through a focus on gender, social class or sexuality. It is important to look at which discourses have dominated ways of speaking about child sexual abuse over time, and who is speaking, because the language used to describe it is significant in determining how the issue is addressed. Discourses also produce meanings that can become accepted 'truths' and sustain particular power relations in society.

The contexts in which discourses about child sexual abuse originate are wide ranging. They include academia, politics, the media, and social movements or civil society groups such as the feminist, children's rights and victim and survivor movements. They can be amplified by the media and through government policy. Discourses may be linked to particular institutional contexts or 'arenas'. They circulate both within and across these and can be key to how institutions respond to child sexual abuse. Competing and contradictory discourses can co-exist within the same time periods, and the views and approaches held by some may be contested by others, which can create shifts.

## Defining institutional responses

'Institutional responses' are defined here as practices relating to child sexual abuse in institutions such as schools, churches and the media, including how they have responded to allegations made about sexual abuse within their own institutions or elsewhere; their treatment of victims and survivors and perpetrators; and their formulation of child protection and safeguarding policies. While the family as a social institution is outside the Inquiry's scope, it does feature in relation to institutional failure and recurs as a core theme in a number of the discourses identified in the review, predominantly throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

## Method

An REA method was used to identify and synthesise existing literature relating to the overarching aim above. This report is not a discourse analysis. Rather, it provides a descriptive and thematic analysis of the literature reviewed, and an exploration of whether links can be made with the institutional responses documented in the literature.

Three types of literature were searched and reviewed:

- Published literature which generated and/or employed discourses and secondary research that discussed the use of discourses by others (237 texts)
- A sample of serious case reviews (68 texts)
- A sample of national/institutional inquiry reports and guidance (35 texts).

The searches took place in March and April 2017. Texts were included if they were written in English, published between 1940 and 2017, and focused on England or Wales. Some international texts were also included where there was evidence of influence or relevance. Texts were screened for relevance and quality assurance before inclusion. The findings are presented as an integrated analysis of all three literature types.

## Limitations of the evidence base

There are a number of limitations that are important to note when considering the findings presented here. First, it was difficult to draw conclusions about causal relationships between discourses and institutional responses within the parameters of an REA as it was hard to ascertain what individual practitioners, specific groups of professionals or organisations understood about child sexual abuse and what their thinking would have been at particular points in time. Where it has been possible to trace and track influences, this is discussed with reference to specific discourses.

In addition, an REA can only capture what has been discussed in the (searchable) literature. Materials relating to child sexual abuse during the 1940s to the late 1980s were harder to identify compared to later periods. There was also more literature on certain sectors and institutions (for example, social work) than others (for example, education).

## Exploring discourses about child sexual abuse over time

How child sexual abuse is constructed and defined is critical to how the perpetrator, victim and survivor, and context of abuse are presented and responded to. Discourses about, understandings of, and responses to child sexual abuse have shifted in a variety of ways over time. For example, legal definitions of offences have determined whether or not certain manifestations of child sexual abuse have been recognised as a criminal offence. Similarly, how perpetrators of child sexual abuse are labelled has implications for both the perpetrator and the victim and survivor. For example, 'sexual misconduct' in the education sector has been described as blurring the boundaries between immorality and criminality and between harm to others and reputational damage (Bingham et al., 2016). This has meant that child protection implications have not always been recognised because the term 'misconduct' can disguise sexual abuse. The shift in language from 'child prostitution' to child sexual exploitation also represented a significant change in understanding – although there is an ongoing debate about whether or not the separation of child sexual exploitation from child sexual abuse is a valid and useful distinction.

Discourses about child sexual abuse have been shown to be in a continuous state of change and evolution. In some interpretations, they have been described as moving from societal denial of the existence of abuse to recognition and acceptance that child sexual abuse manifests in various forms (Kempe, 1978). Others have defined this as 'cycles of discovery and suppression' in which new findings about child sexual abuse are met with significant resistance (Olafson, Corwin and Summit, 1993). Child sexual abuse has also been described as 'strikingly unusual for being repeatedly "discovered", discredited, re-established and discredited over time' (Nelson, 2016, p.91).

Some discourses about child sexual abuse are cyclical in nature; others are more linear, while others still are tied to particular moments in time. Yet there are key points of change, often catalysed by specific events. A notable example is the Cleveland Inquiry of 1987. This Inquiry into the sexual abuse of 121 children – and the means by which they were medically diagnosed as having experienced sexual abuse – is widely described as a 'watershed' moment. It had a significant impact on legislation and policy about child sexual abuse and both created and amplified a number of discourses about it. Further shifts could be seen in response to other high-profile cases such as the child murders of Sarah Payne and Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman. These cases led to shifts that focused particularly on the characterisation and management of perpetrators.

The literature identified five key institutional arenas where debates have occurred in relation to child sexual abuse. These debates have had implications for the institutional responses to child sexual abuse. The five arenas are shown in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1:** Five key institutional arenas

Legal Arena	Government Policy Arena	Clinical Arena	Social Work Arena	Media Arena
<p>This is one of the most prominent fields in which discourses about child sexual abuse have circulated. Substantial changes in the law on sexual offences have seen the definition and redefinition of multiple offences relevant to child sexual abuse. Concepts of childhood and children's rights are key to this.</p>	<p>There has been a raft of government policies relating to child sexual abuse from the 1940s to 2017. Inquiries and high-profile cases of abuse have often led to the development of government policy regarding child sexual abuse. The Cleveland case is a particularly pertinent example of this.</p>	<p>In the health disciplines, approaches to perpetrators have been influenced by medicalised models of deviancy and pathology. The Cleveland case had a significant impact on the role of paediatricians and medical evidence in sexual abuse cases.</p>	<p>The area of child protection has undergone extensive shifts. Events which have received high-profile media attention have been linked to changing policy and practice. Tensions between keeping families together and listening to children are evident, as are those between empowerment and protection.</p>	<p>The media has been a vehicle for conveying a number of key discourses about child sexual abuse, such as 'stranger-danger' and 'paedophile'.</p>

## Framework for understanding the key discourses about child sexual abuse

During the identification and analysis of discourses in the literature, serious case reviews and institutional texts, two broad types of discourses emerged: dominant discourses and counter discourses.

Dominant discourses appeared to take for granted as ‘truths’ certain ideas relating to child sexual abuse. They emerged in relation to the different institutional arenas described above and can be seen as having dominated thinking on the subject in these contexts. These could be split into three overarching categories:

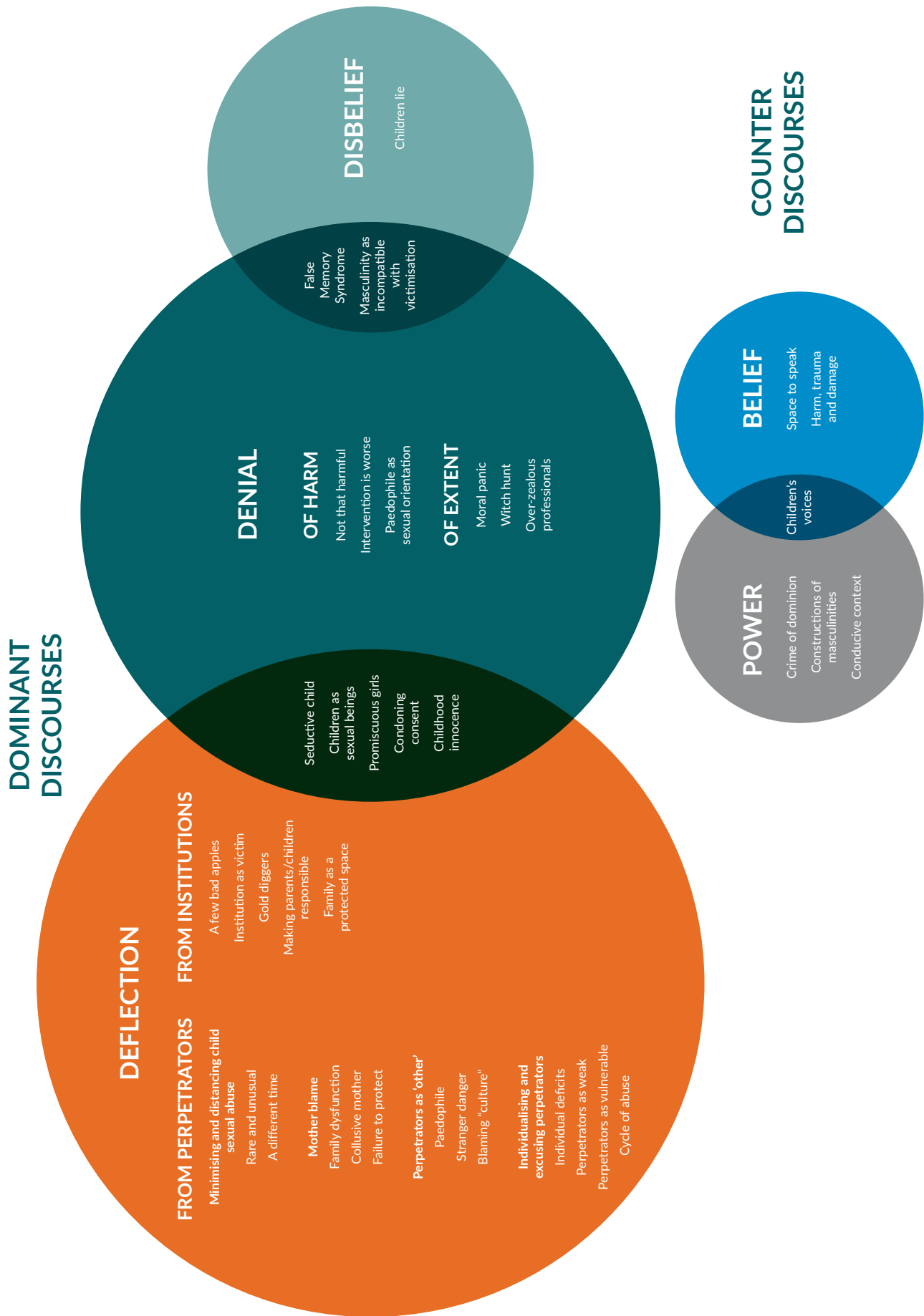
- **Discourses of deflection:** These discourses serve to either deflect responsibility for child sexual abuse from perpetrators or deflect responsibility from institutions. Discourses which deflect responsibility from perpetrators are characterised by: minimising perpetrators’ actions and distancing attitudes to abuse; blaming mothers; and ‘othering’ perpetrators in some way. Discourses that deflect responsibility from institutions are characterised by similar themes of minimising either an institution’s space to intervene or the sexual abuse itself.
- **Discourses of denial:** These discourses serve to deny either the harm caused by child sexual abuse or the extent of the abuse. Denying that child sexual abuse is harmful positions it as consensual or minimises its harmful impacts. Denial of extent of harm shares a common thread that abuse has been exaggerated or fabricated.
- **Discourses of disbelief:** These are discourses that outright refuse to accept that child sexual abuse has occurred. There were fewer of these discourses compared to the other two but tendencies to disbelieve allegations of child sexual abuse remained a constant thread throughout the period under review.

Counter discourses were expressed by those at the margins of social and political power and challenge dominant views. These could be split into two overarching categories, drawn together by how they prioritise the voices of victims and survivors:

- **Discourses of power:** These discourses challenged dominant understandings and explanations of child sexual abuse by exploring the role of power and status in sexual abuse.
- **Discourses of belief:** These discourses started from the position of belief in the existence of child sexual abuse and the harm it could cause to victims and survivors. They attempted to create a climate of support and recognition for those who had experienced child sexual abuse by allowing space to speak for those who had been marginalised or silenced.



Figure 2: A conceptual model of discourses about child sexual abuse in England and Wales



The identification of these five broad, overlapping categories of discourse led to the development of a conceptual model in which a range of more specific discourses could be organised. Thirty-one dominant and six counter discourses were identified and structured using this model. This is illustrated in Figure 2 opposite.

As this report shows, discourses are rarely static and unchanging. Many shape shifted over time as they were influenced by and intersected with other discourses, and as they were used by institutions in defence of current or previous decision-making. Some were influential at certain points but went dormant only to re-emerge in an altered form, while others persisted, albeit that their salience rose and fell.

Counter discourses can gain more traction in so far as sets of ideas which were at one point marginal and only held by specific groups in society could become more widely accepted, acknowledged and even adopted. Examples of aspects counter discourses which have gained traction and dominance (albeit not universal acceptance) over time in England and Wales included:

- the view that child sexual abuse existed and was a crime, as a result of which victims and survivors of that crime existed (see for example, Alcoff and Gray, 1993); and (linked to this)
- that child sexual abuse caused harm to victims and survivors (see for example, O'Dell, 2003).

## Dominant discourses

### Discourses of deflection

#### Deflection from perpetrators

##### 1940s – 1960s

The view that child sexual abuse was not widespread (here labelled as a discourse called 'rare and unusual') led to a limited recognition by professionals that abuse was taking place (see, Nelson, 2016; Scott, 2001a; Dominelli, 1989; Eisenberg, Owens and Dewey, 1987). There was also a perception that child sexual abuse happened within certain groups, such as lower social classes, and a failure to recognise how widespread it was across all social groups (here labelled as the 'blaming 'culture'' discourse). This was one of the discourses that positioned perpetrators of child sexual abuse as 'other'. This persisted until the 1970s (Nelson, 2016; Dominelli, 1989; Kelly, 1988; Lukianowicz, 1972). The idea that 'perpetrators are weak' and not in control of their actions was another prominent discourse at the time (see, Smart, 1999).

##### 1970s – 1990s

The idea that child sexual abuse could be attributed to problems within individual families caused in some way by the mother (labelled here as 'mother blame' discourses) was salient during the 1970s to 1990s. Specific discourses of 'family dysfunction', 'collusive mother', and 'failure to protect' influenced the way professionals dealt with child sexual abuse (see for example, Hooper and Humphreys, 1998; Kelly, 1988; MacLeod and Saraga, 1988). It was also suggested in the literature that such views influenced government policy, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Views about gender roles within the family have also determined how child sexual abuse was perceived. Expectations around the mother's role in keeping her children safe have fed into the view that mothers of children who had been sexually abused were responsible for the abuse and somehow 'colluded' in it or 'failed to protect' their children (see for example, Nelson, 2016; Kelly, 1988). These expectations were also evident in the ways mothers were represented within the serious case review sample, implying they persist up to the present day.

As in earlier decades, the idea of perpetrators as ‘other’ and somehow different and separate from the rest of society, persisted. This was particularly evident with the use of the term ‘paedophile’. This term came from medical descriptions of people who displayed sexual attraction to prepubescent children, but was increasingly used in the media to describe all perpetrators of child sexual abuse, particularly those outside of the family. The term was used to emphasise the difference between perpetrators and ‘normal’ members of society (Salter, 2018; Cowburn and Dominelli, 2001; Wyre, 2000).

The ‘cycle of abuse’ theory – a discourse suggesting that experiencing sexual abuse in childhood led people to perpetrate abuse – was particularly popular amongst professionals and in policy in the 1980s and 1990s, despite a lack of clear evidence to support it. This was evident in professional and policy literature which cited past abuse as a risk factor for becoming a perpetrator and which used past abuse as an explanation for a perpetrator’s actions (see, Kelly et al., 2000; Brogi and Bagley, 1998).

### 2000s – 2010s

A range of discourses that deflected from perpetrators were prominent in the 2000s. ‘Blaming “culture”’, for example, attributed blame to specific communities through a focus on their race and cultural or ethnic group. This served as another way in which perpetrators were seen as not part of ‘normal’ society. This was evident, for example, in the recent focus on race in public debate on child sexual exploitation, and, specifically, the attention given to cases of child sexual exploitation involving South Asian male perpetrators and White victims, with no comparable coverage given to White perpetrators and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic victims and survivors (see, Gill and Harrison, 2015; Tufail, 2015; Cockbain, 2013).

More recently, perpetrators were constructed as vulnerable (here labelled as the ‘perpetrators as vulnerable’ discourse), particularly in relation to children and young people who sexually abused. However, it was applied inconsistently, with children who sexually offended described as vulnerable and in need of support but often treated in the same way as adult sex offenders (Smith et al., 2014).

Overlapping with representations of perpetrators as weak or vulnerable was the idea that perpetrators abused children because there was something ‘wrong’ with them which drove them to offend (for example Groth et al., 1982, cited in Taylor and Quayle, 2003). These types of ideas ranged from the popular clinical notion of ‘cognitive deficits’ (where perpetrators were seen to have distorted beliefs about children) to sexuality and problematic social behaviour. There were also publicly held attitudes that perpetrators had ‘perverted minds’ or moral deficits (Frameworks Institute, 2016).

The idea of ‘stranger danger’ – that perpetrators of child sexual abuse existed outside of the home and family environment – strongly influenced public attitudes and responses to child sexual abuse (Williams and Hudson, 2013; Jewkes, 2010; Kitlinger, 2004). An example of this was the public support for sex offender notification schemes and the emphasis on external controls and vetting of individuals who would have contact with children as a way of preventing child sexual abuse (for example McAlinden, 2006). This way of thinking again emphasised the idea of a difference between perpetrators and the rest of society and may have led to child sexual abuse within the family being overlooked. The current media focus on online ‘paedophiles’ could be seen as a variant of this (Jewkes and Wykes, 2012).

Some reviews and inquiries which looked at non-recent child sexual abuse have located abuse in a past social or historical context and made a clear distinction between this ‘different time’ and the present day (Furedi, 2013; Gray and Watt, 2013). The implication was that these attitudes and behaviours were confined to the past, and were not a problem in the present. Institutions have been criticised for using this narrative to justify actions taken in the past and to avoid accountability (Jay, 2014).

## Deflection from institutions

### 2000s – 2010s

In addition to the discourses that deflected attention from perpetrators, there was also a range of discourses that deflected responsibility from institutions in the 2000s. These discourses are labelled here as ‘a few bad apples’, ‘institution as victim’, ‘gold diggers’, ‘making children and/or parents responsible’, and ‘family as a protected space.’

One approach to understanding child sexual abuse in relation to institutions was the idea that it was a problem of ‘a few bad apples’, or a small and distinct group of individuals who could be isolated and kept out of institutions through risk assessment and vetting processes (Hartill, 2013). This placed emphasis on the limitations and actions of individual perpetrators rather than the institutional context within which they offended (Stanley, 1999). It has been argued that this approach has been evident in the response of institutions like the Catholic Church to allegations and incidents of child sexual abuse and has also driven policies that focus on the treatment of individual offenders and the selection and recruitment of staff (Death, 2015; Sullivan and Beech, 2002).

Another discourse labelled here as ‘institutions as victims’ looked at a narrative in which the institutions positioned themselves as the victims of perpetrators who had abused children within that context (Gilligan, 2012), or victims of unjust accusations of abuse resulting from over-zealous investigations. Another discourse (labelled here as ‘gold diggers’) suggested that some victims would make allegations of abuse for (in the view of this discourse) financial gain (see for example, Webster, 2005).

Another way in which responsibility for child sexual abuse had been deflected from institutions was through a focus on the role of parents and children in keeping themselves safe (labelled here as ‘making parents/children responsible’). Awareness raising programmes for parents and children could (usually inadvertently) reinforce this (Frameworks Institute, 2016). Views on the relationship between the family and the state more generally also influenced how child sexual abuse had been understood and responded to, with the belief that families were a protected space that should be free from state interventions (labelled here as the ‘family as a protected space’ discourse) (Ward and Patel, 2006; Fox Harding, 1991).

## Overlaps of deflection and denial

### 1940s – 1960s

The discourse of ‘the seductive child’ – the idea that children had an innate sexuality and might therefore seek out sexual activities – was evident during this period. This idea deflected responsibility from the actions of the perpetrator to the behaviour of the child and, at the same time, denied the harm done to children by sexual abuse by depicting them as the initiators of it (Olafson, Corwin and Summit, 1993; Kelly, 1988).

### 1970s – 1990s

This period saw a continuation of similar ideas to the ‘seductive child’ with discourses of ‘children as sexual beings’ and ‘promiscuous girls’.

The idea of children as sexual beings affected the way people thought about child sexual abuse (Green and Masson, 2002; Ward and Keenan, 1999; Campbell, 1988). In this discourse, it was not suggested that children sought out sexual activity but instead that they had an innate sexuality and might therefore respond to sexual advances from adults. This perceived sexuality of children has been characterised as threatening and helped to generate professional anxiety about being exposed to expressions of sexuality by children, sometimes leading to a lack of intervention (Green 2005; Farmer and Pollock, 2003). Girls

in particular were also seen as behaving 'promiscuously' and putting themselves at risk of abuse through their own behaviour, which detracted the focus from the perpetrators of abuse and denied the harm caused by it (Gohir, 2013; Ayre and Barrett, 2000). This was evident in the way sexual exploitation of girls was described as 'child prostitution' and girls described as 'risk taking' (for example, Berelowitz et al., 2012).

### 2000s – 2010s

In the 2000s, some explained the sexual exploitation of children by what was interpreted as children's own 'choices'. For example, the idea that children willingly engaged in sexual acts in exchange for payment or reward (Pearce, 2014, 2013). However, these children might have been making decisions in coercive contexts in which their agency and power to make decisions was limited (Pearce, 2014; Coy, 2009; Melrose, 2004). This affected professionals' identification and response to child sexual exploitation (Gillespie and Ost, 2016; Reisel, 2016) and serious case reviews highlighted how children were seen as consenting to sexual activity rather than victims of abuse in need of support or intervention – this discourse is therefore labelled here as 'condoning consent'.

### 1940s – 2010s

In contrast to this, throughout this period as a whole, children were also viewed as inherently innocent, and the ideal version of this required children to be asexual and unknowing and therefore unlikely to engage in sexual encounters (Green, 2005; Ennew, 1986). This way of thinking – here labelled as the 'childhood innocence' discourse – on the one hand, highlighted the fragility and vulnerability of children. On the other hand, some have argued that it compounded their powerlessness and dependency (Dominelli, 1989). The value attached to the innocence of children arguably also stigmatised those children whose innocence was perceived to be lost (Scott, 2001a), and prevented professionals from engaging with children as sexual beings and therefore addressing issues of sexual abuse and exploitation (Hackett et al., 2015; Green, 2005).

## Discourses of denial

### Denial of harm

#### 1940s – 1960s

Discourses that child sexual abuse was 'not that harmful' (the idea that sex between adults and children did not lead to long-lasting harm) and that 'intervention is worse' (the idea that involving professionals and possibly removing a child from their family network was more negative than living with ongoing sexual abuse) appeared to be particularly dominant at this time. The harm done to children was also seen as lessened when abuse took place within 'a loving family environment' (Nava, 1988). Ideas about levels of harm were gendered. For example, the abuse of boys by male perpetrators was viewed as more harmful than the abuse of girls by males due to the former being perceived as homosexual activity and therefore categorised as less 'normal' (Green, 2005). This also linked to the idea that the harm caused in cases of child sexual abuse was a result of the response to the abuse rather than the abuse itself (see for example, Kinsey et al., 1953 cited in Kelly, 1988 and West, 1981).

#### 1970s – 1990s

The idea of 'paedophile as a sexual orientation' gained traction at this time, particularly in the earlier decades. This was the idea that paedophilia, or more specifically, the attraction of some men to boys and adolescents, should be recognised as a legitimate sexual orientation. This was espoused by a number of individuals and groups, including the Paedophile Information Exchange (PIE) in the UK (Li, 1991; Thorstad, 1991). This idea had been linked to the sexual liberation movement, despite a distancing

between the two in the 1980s. Clinical literature saw homosexuality and paedophilia as associated forms of sexual deviance (Malón, 2012) and media and political discourses also associated, and even conflated, homosexuality and paedophilia at times (Robinson, 2011).

### 2000s – 2010s

The idea that child sexual abuse was ‘not that harmful’ resurfaced more recently in relation to Images Depicting Child Sexual Abuse (IDCSA) (Horsman, 2016). The use of the term ‘child pornography’ was recognised as problematic because of associations with consensual sexual activity (Edwards, 2000). The way cases of IDCSA were dealt with in law and the limited application of legal sanctions was also characterised as indicative of ambivalent views about the harm caused by them (McManus and Almond, 2014; Edwards, 2000).

## Denial of extent

### 1970s – 1990s

Within the broader discourse of denial of the extent of child sexual abuse, discourses of ‘over-zealous professionals’, ‘moral panic’, and ‘witch hunt’ appeared to be salient during the 1970s to the 1990s. The extent of child sexual abuse was contested through the idea that ‘over-zealous’ professionals pressured or encouraged children to disclose sexual abuse, believed exaggerated claims of abuse, or intervened too readily (Taylor-Browne 1997a; Cream, 1993). Terms such as ‘moral panic’ and ‘witch hunt’ used in relation to child sexual abuse drew on a similar narrative. The former term described perceived disproportionate or irrational responses to social threats such as child sexual abuse, and thereby minimised the scale of the problem (Clapton, Cree and Smith, 2013; Critcher, 2002). The term ‘witch hunt’ also denied the scale of child sexual abuse by suggesting that allegations of child sexual abuse were false and driven by a desire to damage an individual or institution (see for example, Webster, 2005).

## Overlaps of denial and disbelief

### 1970s – 1990s

In the 1990s the concept of ‘False Memory Syndrome’ emerged, where individual reports or disclosures of child sexual abuse were viewed as the result of false memories of abuse (Scott 1997). This could be seen as a discourse of denial (as the clinical explanation of the ‘false memory syndrome’ might have been used to minimise the scale of child sexual abuse) and of disbelief (as it might have been used to undermine the credibility of victims and survivors). It was seen as having an influence in the legal arena (Nelson 2016).

### 2000s – 2010s

The discourse of ‘masculinity as incompatible with victimisation’ emerged most notably in the 2000s. It was consistently identified in the literature by victims and survivors and professionals as a barrier to the recognition of exploitation of boys (for example, Beckett et al., 2013; Gohir, 2013) and was evident in some serious case reviews. The idea that masculinity was incompatible with victimisation could be traced from the association of masculinity with sexual prowess and stereotypes of men as strong (McNaughton Nicholls, Harvey and Paskell, 2014).



## Discourses of disbelief

Whilst some sources in the literature described an overriding culture of believing children ‘at all costs’ (Beckett, 2002), there was also evidence that this was not always the case. The ‘children lie’ discourse showed that children have been represented as capable of, or even likely to, make false allegations of abuse (Nelson 2016). This belief was implied by professionals working with children who were reluctant to suspect a colleague of perpetrating child sexual abuse (Horwath, 2000, cited in Timmerman and Schreuder, 2014, p.719) and, historically could be seen in legal attitudes to children as witnesses (Temkin, 2002). The theory of ‘Parental Alienation’ which originated in the US in the 1980s and which exerted some influence amongst legal and child protection professionals, suggested that children were subject to ‘brainwashing’ by one parent who induced them to make false allegations of abuse against the other (Nelson 2016). The idea that children lied about sexual abuse featured in many of the serious case reviews in the sample, with this disbelief leading to a lack of professional action or intervention. In several of the serious case reviews, children also appeared to be caught in a ‘telling trap’ in that when they did not disclose abuse this was taken as evidence that abuse was not occurring, but when they did they were disbelieved.

## Counter discourses

The counter discourses revolved around power relations and belief, recognition and support for victims and survivors. Both originated in feminist and survivor movements and operated to counteract dominant discourses around deflection, denial and disbelief.

## Discourses of power

The discourses of power challenged dominant understandings and explanations of child sexual abuse by exploring the role of power and status in relation to who did what to whom.

### 1970s – 1990s

The discourse of ‘crime of dominion’ described abuse in which a person in a dominant, powerful or privileged position (for example, a father, a priest or a sports coach) took advantage of a victim who was less powerful and privileged in terms of their age, sex, race or class. There were a range of factors that could reinforce a sense of adult power over children. These factors included ideas about children’s natural vulnerability, which could facilitate the entrapment of children in abusive situations (Nelson, 2016; Campbell, 2015; Gallagher, 2000; Cream 1993).

The ‘constructions of masculinities’ discourse recognised the role of gender in structuring power relations. Feminists have critiqued dominant explanations of child sexual abuse that used stereotypical definitions of masculinity in which an innate ‘male sexual drive’ or an ‘uncontrollable sexuality’ was used to explain why men perpetrated sexual violence which rendered them less blameworthy (Barter, 2006; Green, 2005; Dominelli, 1989; MacLeod and Saraga, 1988). Related to this was the identification of a ‘macho’ leadership environment in many institutional regimes that created a culture in which sexualised bullying became normalised (Colton 2002; Waterhouse, 2000; Stanley, 1999).

### 2000s – 2010s

In the 2000s, the discourse of ‘conducive context’ challenged the view that children were sexually abused by ‘a few bad apples’. Instead it looked at the structures of and opportunities within institutions that created a conducive environment for sexual abuse to take place. This discourse rejected the idea that child sexual abuse could be stopped by excluding and warding against individual ‘sick’ or ‘wrong’ paedophiles. Instead it focused on the need for institutions including nurseries, schools, children’s homes and churches, to address that there were ‘closed worlds’ with ‘zones of impunity’ in which a ‘culture of

silence and authoritarianism' existed (Salter, 2018; Hartill, 2013; Dale and Alpert, 2007; Colton, 2002; Waterhouse, 2000; Herman and Hirschman, 1977).

## Overlaps of power and belief

### 1970s – 1990s

Discourses of power and belief had in common the desire to champion 'children's voices', which was another counter discourse that was identified. This discourse emerged as particularly salient during the 1970s to 1990s and highlighted that children were often not heard because of the power differential between adults and children. It emphasised that children's structural dependency required a clear commitment from adults and institutions to listen to children and to treat them as subjects of their own lives, not as objects of concern. A number of more recent national and international policies and guidance better reflect the idea that children's voices must be heard on decisions that affect them (HM Government, 2015b; House of Bishops, 2011; Association of Chief Police Officers, 2005; Child Protection in Sport Unit, 2005; HM Government, 2004; Butler-Sloss, 1988).

## Discourses of belief

The discourses of belief created a climate of support and recognition for victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and positioned them as wise experts whose lived experiences were a source of knowledge.

### 1970s – 1990s

One of the counter discourses evident in the 1970s to 1990s was 'space to speak', which looked at the dynamics that created or limited spaces for victims and survivors to speak about child sexual abuse and to be heard and recognised by institutions (Exton and Kamaljit, 2013; Whittier, 2009; Naples, 2003; Alcoff and Gray, 1993). These spaces could open up when a 'time of telling' converged with a 'sphere of listening' (Carlsson, 2009) and often revolved around themes, such as silence, trauma and transformation. For boys, barriers to speaking were linked to fear of homophobia (Hunter, 2010).

Another counter discourse in this period was around 'harm, trauma, and damage' and looked at how victims and survivors of child sexual abuse could focus on individual recovery and healing. It looked critically at 'breaking the silence' as a way to address harm, trauma and damage caused by child sexual abuse because, while speaking out could be liberatory, it could also reinforce dominant discourses. For example when victims and survivors were invited to speak on television for 'shock value' instead of being positioned as subjects of their own lives with their own authority (Naples, 2003; Alcoff and Gray, 1993). The recognition of the impacts of harm, trauma and damage was challenged by the idea of 'victimhood' that sought to reposition victims of child sexual abuse as helpless, powerless and dependent by suggesting that they embraced, or revelled in, a 'victim identity' (Whittier, 2009). This is an example of what Nelson (2016) has described as 'backlash'.

## Conclusions

The aim of this REA was to explore what the existing literature could tell us about the social and political discourses concerning child sexual abuse in England and Wales from the 1940s to 2017. A total of 31 dominant discourses and six counter discourses between the 1940s and 2017 were identified from the literature reviewed. The dominant discourses could be categorised as discourses of deflection (from perpetrators and institutions), denial (of harm and extent) and disbelief. The counter discourses comprised discourses of power and belief. This made for a complex picture of how child sexual abuse was recognised, made sense of and responded to over time. It also showed that there has not been an agreed, uniform definition, explanation or theory of child sexual abuse over these decades.



These discourses have not existed in isolation from each other, and they have been influenced by emerging knowledge and developing policy and practice. New insights in one area have often been (not always, and not systematically) picked up in other areas, leading to contradictions in how child sexual abuse has been recognised, made sense of and responded to. The discourse around ‘children’s voices’, for example, highlighted the need for children to be heard and for children to be treated as subjects on their own lives, not an object of concern. This is now embedded in a range of national and international policies and guidance, as well as in the work of many charities. However, a tension has remained between children as objects of protection and children as social actors with voices and rights.

The second aim of this REA was to explore in which ways these discourses have influenced institutional responses to child sexual abuse. This was a much more challenging question and one which could not be fully answered through the literature reviewed.

There have been some watershed moments and events which have radically changed how child sexual abuse is talked about and understood and have led to lasting legal, policy and social developments, most notably the Cleveland Inquiry of 1987. At times, rapid progress has been achieved in a relatively short time, but this has typically been in reaction to high-profile events (Parton, 2016; Davidson, 2008). This is often the case when a ‘time of telling’ (dynamics in society which create spaces in which it is possible to speak about child sexual abuse) converges with a ‘sphere of listening’ (when it is more likely to be heard by institutions and people in a position of power) (Carlsson, 2009).

Key findings regarding the influence of discourses about child sexual abuse on institutional responses in this period included:

- Institutions responding to claims of child sexual abuse within familial contexts have obscured the actions of perpetrators by focusing on the family as a whole, and using various versions of mother blame.
- The ‘crime of dominion’ discourse was clearest in relation to sport and the Catholic Church and, to an extent also residential care settings, where the role of authority within the institution – such as coach or priest – provided additional power and resources to perpetrators.
- The policy outcome of seeing perpetrators as ‘a few bad apples’, particularly in the late 1990s and 2000s, was focused on risk, recruitment and criminal records screening as the safeguarding response, rather than examining how internal cultures might have been implicated in making sexual abuse possible and in the failure to respond appropriately to complaints and concerns.
- ‘Children lie’ has been an enduring discourse in legal responses.
- A variety of discourses of belief have emerged since the 1980s which made it easier for victims and survivors to speak about their experiences, although some barriers remained.

The findings of this REA threw up a number of questions which could be further examined, including how different discourses have influenced the responses of specific institutions to child sexual abuse over time; how specific institutions or professions understood (or should have understood) child sexual abuse in particular moments in time, and how influential discourses were in this process.

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