



A partnership to prevent child sexual abuse

Professor Sarah Brown and **Dr Nadine McKillop** explain how their international collaboration is working towards preventing child sexual abuse in the UK, Australia and beyond

How has your research into the prevention of sexual violence developed? Have factors such as the internet and social media impacted this work?

SB: Over the past decade, my work in this area has broadened. In 2005, my book about sex offender treatment programmes was published, which had been the focus of my work until then. In the following years, I examined a range of factors associated with sexual offending, such as empathy and grooming, and recently conducted a review of the risk and protective factors for both victimisation and perpetration of abuse. I also reviewed what offenders suggested parents can do to protect their children from abuse. With UK colleagues, I have examined social workers' confidence in dealing with these cases, and we are currently conducting a review to examine children's views about speaking out. The internet has been a feature of my work more recently, with a current project comparing Australian and UK students' experiences of viewing sexual material online.

NM: I worked with both perpetrators and victims as a psychologist before moving into academia in an effort to better understand the origins and course of sexual offending. My aim was to contribute to the emerging empirical base from which to understand and respond to the issue and reduce the extent and impacts of sexual violence and abuse in the community.

My research has expanded from investigating the origins and progression of child sexual abuse in adults to examining the potential similarities and differences between males who begin sexual offending in adolescence and those who refrain from offending until adulthood. More recently, this has expanded to include investigations into internet-related sexual behaviour and pathways to sexually abusive behaviour to meet the current needs in this area.

Can you discuss what sparked the international collaboration between UK and Australian researchers? What have been the main benefits?

SB: I was awarded an Applied Research Fellowship from Coventry University to visit Professor Stephen Smallbone and his colleagues at Griffith University, Australia, to develop a collaborative relationship, which was initially sparked by our communication about the *Journal of Sexual Aggression*. During my visit, I built collaborative partnerships with professionals within the clinical and research team that have led to several international visits between countries to progress and expand this research agenda.

SB & NM: Both groups have an interest in the intersection between psychology and criminology and these collaborations have

helped to develop a stronger sense of the problems and current prevention strategies at a global level. More recent developments in the sphere of internet-related risks for sexual violence and abuse have emerged out of these collaborations, with international comparisons planned to help determine common and specific prevention strategies at an international level.

One of your current projects is the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)-funded study on children speaking out about abuse. What is your methodology and how do you hope to enable children to feel comfortable and supported?

SB: We are conducting a review of UK research that includes children's views on speaking out about child abuse to answer the following questions: what helps to facilitate communication with children? What do children and young people tell us about what works best in enabling them to speak out about abuse and concerns? What do children and young people want from 'help' services? How do they want to access help? We are committed to ensuring that young people are fully involved in the review and will be consulting with the NSPCC's young people's involvement group to discuss emerging findings and recommendations and produce a young person's version of the report.

Sexually violent situations and solutions

Researchers at **Coventry University**, UK, the **University of the Sunshine Coast** and **Griffith University**, Australia, are elucidating the context surrounding child sexual abuse to establish evidence-based prevention and care

THE NATIONAL SOCIETY for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) estimates that 16 per cent of young people have experienced child sexual abuse, which translates to around 2 million young people in the UK. Preventing sexual violence in the future demands a deeper understanding of the context in which it occurs, which will highlight the risk factors that must be mitigated.

Sarah Brown is Professor of Forensic Psychology at Coventry University, UK, and Vice Chair of the National Organisation for the Treatment of Abusers. Over the past two decades, her research has begun to elucidate the circumstances of sexual abuse, guiding the development of new evidence-based approaches in the care of victims and the rehabilitation of offenders.

OFFENDER BEHAVIOUR

A key aspect of Brown's research is working with offenders in rehabilitation programmes to understand what led to their engagement in sexual violence. Dr Nadine McKillop from the University of the Sunshine Coast in Australia collaborates regularly with Brown. "One key aspect is to gain knowledge directly from people who sexually abuse children to determine why they initially engage in this behaviour and the reasons they continue or discontinue over time," McKillop explains. "Information gained from these methods of enquiry informs prevention efforts and improves outcomes for victims, offenders and the community as a whole."

Understanding offender behaviour in a broad context is crucial. One of Brown's recent collaborations with McKillop and others revealed some key differences between perpetrators who begin sexual abuse as adolescents and those who begin as adults. In general, an adult's first victim is typically a female family member, while adolescents more commonly abused younger, non-familial females.

In another study, Brown and her team found that the victim's age also correlated to the circumstances of their abuse. For

example, older victims were more likely to be assaulted later in the evening than younger victims. They identified that an offender's first sexual abuse incident usually targeted children with whom they often spent time interacting, and it frequently occurred at home and when another person was in a different part of the building.

These findings are important as they can contribute to a better understanding of contextual risk factors and potentially guide preventive strategies. "Historically, much of the research and focus in the sexual violence and abuse field has been concerned with understanding individuals who perpetrate these crimes, with less regard to the context in which these offences occur," McKillop explains. "Acknowledging the interactions between the personal and situational dimensions of this behaviour is key to making sense of the circumstances that surround sexual violence and to tailor our preventive responses accordingly."

DEVELOPING STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

Elucidating the risk factors associated with child sexual abuse is vital, but Brown was surprised to discover that this was as far as previous research had gone. "It seems that the focus of researchers to date has been on identifying factors that increase the risk of abuse or perpetration, and not on factors that might have the opposite effect," she elaborates. "This is a significant gap in our knowledge, as identifying factors associated with a decreased risk of victimisation and/or perpetration can help us to develop effective prevention strategies and interventions."

Brown's research has been crucial for the development of preventive programmes, victim support and offender rehabilitation schemes in the UK and beyond. She is now working on methods to rapidly assess the indicators of risk or victimisation in the context of child sexual abuse, and to determine measures that will inform broader initiatives aimed at preventing abuse.

WORKING COLLABORATIVELY TOWARDS THE PREVENTION OF SEXUAL ABUSE

OBJECTIVE

To understand the circumstances surrounding sexual abuse to create novel evidence-based prevention approaches.

KEY COLLABORATORS

Dr Nadine McKillop, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia • **Professor Stephen Smallbone**, Griffith University, Australia • **Professor Richard Wortley**, University College London, UK • **Professor Theresa Gannon**, University of Kent, UK • **Dr Anita Franklin**, Coventry University, UK • **Dr Geraldine Brady**, Coventry University, UK

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She is the Deputy Executive Director of the Centre for Research in Psychology, Behaviour and Achievement at Coventry University, Vice Chair of the National Organisation for the Treatment of Abusers (NOTA) and a member of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA). Brown has been conducting research in relation to sexual violence since 1994 and was the Editor of the *Journal of Sexual Aggression (JSA)* from 2008 until 2014. She is currently an Associate Editor of *Child Abuse and Neglect* and Editorial Board member of *JSA* and *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*. Brown has published on various topics including sexual aggression, intimate partner violence, offender engagement, empathy, risk assessment, evaluation and forensic testing.