

Race, culture, community and abuse

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Abuse is abuse, regardless of who perpetrates it. Sexual abuse is perpetrated by people, either individually or collectively; it is not committed by cultures, races or communities as a whole. As we know, the majority of sexual abuse is contextual and situational, which means that cultures, races or communities may believe that some forms of sexual abuse is acceptable, that it may go unpunished or can be covered up. Examples of this are evident from the practices of certain indigenous cultures to the secrecy of activities within some religious sects, to the culture of silence within some university sports teams. This may mean that certain groupings of people (whether they be communities of a certain race, culture, or combination of the two) may be more prone to sexual abuse that receives little or no response from the wider community. However, it does not mean all of the larger culture, race or community will engage in or condone the abuse.

In England over the last couple of years we have started to see the emergence of gangs of ethnic minority men, mainly Asian, organising and perpetrating the sexual abuse of vulnerable young white girls (in [Rotherham](#), [Peterborough](#), [Newcastle](#) and [other locations](#)). The problem is that, like all sexual abuse, this is not new; ethnic- and gender-based violence has occurred as long as there has been gender and ethnicity. What is new is the size and scope of the abuse, and the factors that capture the attention of the majority culture. Clearly, we have not done enough to prevent, educate and prosecute individuals and communities around sexual abuse. There is an argument that a perfect storm of political correctness, fear of reprisal and a dissolving of intra as well as inter community relations has resulted in these cases not being prosecuted as they should ([The independent](#)). This is unfortunate, as waves of sexual violence such as these have occurred elsewhere in human history (e.g., the sexual assault of women in times of war and its aftermath).

The cases in the UK have been reported on as a race issue with male, ethnic minority men sexually abusing white, working class, vulnerable white girls. This has fuelled conversations about immigration and race relations, thereby making an already complicated issue even more loaded. Which has resulted in a number of articles and think pieces, each of varying degrees of nuance and rigour, from journalists ([The independent](#)) and political leaders ([Sarah Champion MP](#); [Sajid Javid MP](#); [Jeremy Corbyn MP](#)) weighing in on the debate. However, the real issue here is that this was targeted grooming of children by adults who happened not to be white against victims who were white. The same offences and behaviours are happening in white communities as we write this.

We would argue that overarching race and cultural issues are not precursors to sexual abuse, especially child sexual abuse. Instead, abuse-related and problematic sub-cultural factors (and the processes underlying them) can indeed contribute to abuse. Sexual and social deviance does not adhere to cultural, ethnic, or national boundaries. What we are seeing in these cases are people who sexually abuse children because they want to, regardless of their own race or culture. The fact that the victims are white and of a different cultural heritage speaks more to elements of criminality than over-arching cultural themes. These people are making a decision to sexually abuse across race and cultural lines, why? Is it because vulnerable white girls are easier for them to get access to, is it because they don't want to offend against their own culture or race, or is it simply access to any child?

The race or the culture of a perpetrator of sexual harm should play no role, positively or negatively, in formal responses to abuse. Those who abuse should receive the same prosecution, as well as treatment and rehabilitation opportunities. Interestingly, research by [Professor Malcolm Cowburn](#) over the past 20 years shows that ethnic minority communities are less likely to engage with treatment (especially sex offender treatment), arguing that it does not speak to their cultural needs. We need to get better – a lot better – at understanding that the issues that race and culture throw up, as well as how these can be better navigated in treatment. However, a part of this improvement invites a reflection: how many of these cultural and race issues are real, tangible issues and how many are our own cognitive distortions that serve to prevent engagement?

In terms of the direction that the field of sexual harm is moving – towards a combined model of prevention/rehabilitation, we need to do more to engage with all communities on understanding, preventing and responding to sexual abuse. We need to work more effectively and openly with all races, cultures and communities to see how we can adapt our messages around sexual abuse, so that we can better prevent it. Sexual abuse is an interpersonal offence, its committed by people and therefore has to be prevented by people of all races, cultures and communities.