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Learning Lessons from Men Who Have Sexually Abused Children

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Abstract: The sexual abuse of children and young people by those who work with them is a global problem. Yet, our knowledge of this form of abuse remains limited. There is a dearth of research on offenders' accounts of how they perpetrated abuse within a paid work or voluntary sector environment. Thus, our focus here is on data collected during individual interviews with eight adult males who had been imprisoned for abusing a total of 35 children while in a position of trust. We examine abusers' accounts of the abuse: how they gained access to victims; how they initiated, maintained, and concealed abuse; and finally, how it might be prevented. We reflect on the relevance of this work for the criminal justice system and its significance for those outside the criminal justice field.

Keywords: sexual abuse; children's vulnerability; children's workers; sexual offenders

The sexual abuse of children and young people by those who have professional responsibility for them has been recognised as a global problem. Although now a major concern for the public, policy makers, and practitioners (Gallagher 2000), knowledge of this form of abuse remains limited (Sullivan and Beech 2002; Leclerc, Proulx and McKibben 2005). To date, much of the evidence has emerged from public inquiries, and victims' accounts of the abuse (Utting 1997; Waterhouse 2000). Little emphasis has been placed on learning from abusers how they perpetrated abuse within a paid work or voluntary sector environment (Sullivan and Beech 2004; Colton, Roberts and Vanstone 2010). In this article, we attempt to address this gap in knowledge by examining data collected during individual interviews with eight adult males (drawn from a wider study of 101 men serving sentences in a prison in the United Kingdom for sexual offences against children) who had been imprisoned for abusing a total of 35 children while in a position of trust. We reflect on what we might learn

from abusers' accounts of the abuse: how they gained access to victims; how they initiated, maintained, and concealed abuse; and finally, how it might be prevented. Although this is a small subsample with no claim to representativeness, our aim is to exploit the potential value of their accounts and tease out the lessons which might be learnt, and applied to the criminal justice system and all organisations working with children and young people.

The Problem of Professional Perpetrators

In recent years, much media attention has focused on the Catholic Church as evidence has emerged of the 'systematic abuse' of children and young people by clerics in countries including: the US (The John Jay College Research Team 2004); Ireland (Berry 1992; The Ferns Inquiry Report 2005); Germany; Italy; the Netherlands; Austria; and Switzerland (BBC News 2010a). In the face of an increasing research emphasis on cleric abuse (Langevin, Curnoe and Bain 2000; Dale and Alpert 2007; Flynn 2008; Isely *et al.* 2008; Wind, Sullivan and Levins 2008) attention should not be deflected from other organisations in which abuse has been perpetrated. Indeed, schools (Trocme and Schumaker 1999; Nhundu and Shumba 2001; Shakeshaft 2004; Shumba 2004); childcare services (Finkelhor and Williams 1988; Margolin and Craft 1990; Colton 2002; Stein 2006); hospitals (Long 1992; Kendrick and Taylor 2000); and sporting organisations (Robinson 1998; Brackenridge 2001; Leahy, Pretty and Tenenbaum 2002; Hartill 2005; Hartill and Prescott 2007; Hartill 2009) feature amongst those which have been infiltrated by perpetrators who have either created or utilised environments characterised by secrecy (Green 1999).

Professional perpetrators 'present unique considerations' on a number of levels (Moulden, Firestone and Wexler 2007, p.397). In particular, because of their 'unsupervised access to victims and the trust that is bestowed upon them' (two factors that are likely to confound disclosure), they are difficult to detect; and because of the sense of betrayal experienced, the consequences for victims are immeasurable. They are invariably male and share many characteristics with other child sexual abusers (Moulden, Firestone and Wexler 2007), but what sets them apart are the sophisticated techniques used to manipulate victims and those who might protect them (Sullivan and Beech 2002). Before we explore the challenges faced in addressing these issues we must first consider the recent legislative and policy context.

Legislative and Policy Context

The UK response to this problem has been characterised by a legislative and policy focus on childcare practice, including measures to curb those who abuse within organisations (Sullivan and Beech 2002). The emphasis has been on the creation of professional environments (Sullivan and Beech

2004); safer recruitment, and supervision of staff (Warner 1992; Utting 1997; Waterhouse 2000). Numerous guidelines on contact with children have been directed at local authority staff, teachers, social workers, child minders, foster parents, NHS staff, and volunteers (Home Office 1986; DHSS 1988; Home Office 1993; Home Office 1994). The Children Act 1989 provided guidance and regulations relating to residential and day care, and other initiatives have included: Quality Protects (Department of Health 1998) in England; and Children First (National Assembly for Wales 1999) in Wales; the Waterhouse Report (Waterhouse 2000) resulting in a Children's Commissioner for Wales, and later England, and the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000; the Care Standards Act 2000; the establishment of the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB); the registration of social workers with the General Social Care Council; the offence of abuse of position of trust (Sexual Offences Act 2003); and the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006.

Freel (2003) reminds us that: 'All organisations working with children and young people have a duty of care to provide the highest standards of welfare and protection' (p.486). Yet, in spite of a raft of initiatives in recent years, organisations continue to fail in this duty. This failure is evidenced by abusers' continued success in accessing child victims through their involvement – in a paid or voluntary capacity – within a range of organisations. Recent examples in the UK include the much-publicised case of a female nursery worker, who abused very young children in her care, and made and distributed indecent images through her mobile phone (*Guardian* 2009); the case of two newly-recruited foster carers who, over a two-year period abused four children in their care (Hopkins 2007); and that of a priest who indecently assaulted a young girl in his parish and over time, built a collection of more than 56,000 images of child sexual abuse (BBC News 2010b).

Given the initiatives in regulation and screening outlined above, the question of what continues to facilitate such abuse is of paramount importance. According to the detective inspector who led the police inquiry, the latter 'presented a veneer of respectability which may have put him beyond suspicion' (BBC News 2010b). 'Organisational malaise' was identified as one of the contributing factors in the case of abuse by foster carers referred to above (Hopkins 2007). Here, a failure on the part of management to deal with staff sickness or incompetence worked to the abusers' advantage as they were more easily able to manipulate birth parents. In the case of the female nursery worker, rules relating to the banning of mobile phones from the premises were 'relaxed' because the nursery's landline was unreliable (*Guardian* 2009). This allowed the abuser to circulate images of the abuse perpetrated. Indeed, the recently published Serious Case Review (Plymouth Safeguarding Children Board 2010) highlights the nature of the organisational culture which made this abuse more likely, a finding which resonates with a description of the culture within the church by a cleric in an earlier study by two of the authors of this article (Colton and Vanstone 1996). Clearly, if we are to address this problem we must understand the organisational cultures

within which the abuse takes place (Laws 1989; Kaufman *et al.* 1996), and in particular, the extent to which abusers use their positions to place themselves beyond suspicion; manipulate significant others; and exploit weaknesses in organisational policies and procedures in their pursuit of sexual activity with children.

Methods

The eight men who are part of our wider study (Colton *et al.* 2004) had, between them, abused a total of 35 children while working in a position of trust. Five out of those eight were employed in education and three worked in voluntary organisations. A case study approach was adopted in exploring, through detailed interview responses, the strategies that abusers employed in perpetrating abuse. Whilst in what follows we include some information about our sample and the offences committed, more detailed consideration of our methods may be found elsewhere (see Colton, Roberts and Vanstone 2010).

The Sample

As can be seen from *Table 1*, the majority of men in our subsample were aged between 46 and 65 years (six) and single (five). Four were educated to degree standard, and only one had no qualifications. Five men worked within an educational setting, and of those, four were qualified teachers. Four men committed offences while working within a school environment, and three while working for a voluntary organisation. One man offended against children in his own home while providing individual tuition.

Two men had previously committed sexual offences against children, and one had received a prison sentence. While research (Craissati and

TABLE 1
Abusers' Characteristics

	No. abusers (n = 8)
<i>Age range (years)</i>	
18–30	1
31–45	1
46–55	4
56–65	2
<i>Marital status</i>	
Single	5
Married	1
Divorced	2
<i>Qualifications</i>	
No qualifications	1
GCSEs	1
A Levels	2
Degree/higher	4

TABLE 2
The Offences

Offence setting	Offence/s	No. victims	Victims' gender / age (years)
Voluntary organisation	Indecent assault	5	male / 14
Primary school (teaching assistant)	Gross indecency and indecent assault	3	male / 8 & 11
Comprehensive school (teacher)	Indecent assault/USI	1	female / 14
Boarding school (teacher)	Indecent assault	12	male / 12-17
Voluntary organisation	Indecent assault and gross indecency	3	male / 11-12
Home tuition (teacher)	Indecent assault	8	female / 9-13
Voluntary organisation	Buggery/indecent assault/taking/possession indecent photos	1	male / 13
Comprehensive school (teacher)	Indecent assault	2	male / 14 & 15

McClurg 1996; Jespersen, Lalumiere and Seto 2009) indicates that a significant number of abusers report having experienced childhood sexual victimisation, only one of the men reported having been sexually abused as a child (by a friend of the family); another reported physical abuse by his mother.

As can be seen from *Table 2*, victims ranged in age from eight to 17 years. While much research evidence highlights the predominance of female childhood sexual victimisation (Russell 1983, 1984; Finkelhor and Korbin 1988), other researchers have found professional perpetrators to be more likely to abuse same-sex children (Sullivan and Beech 2004). The majority (six) had abused male victims. Two men had between them offended against a total of 20 victims, remaining undetected for some years. These men benefited from the considerable privacy afforded them within their working environments. In one case, such privacy resulted from the nature of the abuser's living accommodation at a boarding school; in the other, from an environment which was wilfully created within the abuser's own home.

Results and Discussion

Gaining Access to Victims: Recognising Vulnerability

There is a dearth of evidence as to the extent to which perpetrators deliberately seek out employment in order to sexually abuse children (Barter 2003). We know, however, that the majority of abusers in Faller's (1988) study sought out positions in institutions which would enable them to abuse. Moreover, Sullivan and Beech (2004, p.46) found that 15% of their sample chose their work '... exclusively to sexually abuse children ...'; and 41% admitted that '... abuse was part of their motivation for

choosing their job . . .'. Abusers in our study reported being drawn to specific roles within organisations because they allowed easy access to victims. Indeed, two reported taking up employment in order to access potential victims. One, who worked in a primary school, recalled how he was sexually attracted to boys aged eight to twelve years, and 'planned the job to get close to young boys . . .' Over time, he became a trusted member of staff and used that to his advantage.

Abusers have been found to adapt when the environment does not prove conducive to abuse (Leclerc, Proulx and McKibben 2005). One abuser had previously taught within the statutory sector, but took on a home tutor role in order to access children to abuse. He described how that role provided him with 'opportunities' to offend. Whereas the physical environment in his first home did not allow him the private space he needed to abuse his pupils, moving to a new home enabled him to work in an area that was set apart from the rest of the family. The isolated nature of that work environment allowed him much privacy, and facilitated his subsequent offending against seven of his female pupils.

The three men whose offences were committed in voluntary organisations were attracted to those locations because they provided access to victims (Sullivan and Beech 2002). One man, who worked for a well-known voluntary scheme, recalled how his role provided 'opportunities' to be alone with young people and facilitated abuse. Another abuser who held a supervisory role within a voluntary organisation made use of that role to change shift patterns, thus ensuring that his victim was always alone in the same car as him when volunteering. This man recalled how he 'made some very calculated moves' and 'manipulated the system very cleverly and made sure that it was well covered up'.

Spiegel (2003, p.141) notes that: 'perpetrators often possess an uncanny penchant for identifying and selecting vulnerable children' to abuse. Some of the characteristics which place children at heightened risk of abuse include: exhibiting a need for 'acceptance, care and affection' (Spiegel 2003, p.141); previous experience of abuse (Jones 1994); physical or social isolation (Sloan 1988); and special needs (Westcott and Clement 1992), with children with disabilities more likely to be abused than non-disabled children (Stuart and Baines 2004).

Those who abuse within community settings present 'as big a threat to children as those in foster homes and residential establishments' (Gallagher 2000, p.813). Both paid work and voluntary roles allowed abusers in our sample to access victims and maintain abuse, in some cases over many years. The pastoral role, in particular, afforded access to the emotional vulnerability of some pupils. In two cases, the pastoral elements associated with teaching roles provided opportunities for abusers to access and abuse children in their care. One teacher abused a total of twelve victims at four different boarding schools over a 17-year period. He recalled how a number of factors combined to enable ready access to victims and provide an effective 'screen' for his offending; namely, expectations in terms of his role that he would work closely with children; the boarding school environment and the difficulties some children encounter

in adapting to that; and the privacy which his on-site accommodation provided.

In some cases, children were 'referred' to abusers by colleagues who perceived the former as being in a position to help where others had failed. One man, who was head of year at a secondary school, reported first having contact with his victim – who later became pregnant – when another staff member referred her to him. Clearly, this victim was extremely vulnerable at the time: she was a victim of bullying, and was self-harming. Another abuser, who worked at a primary school, built a reputation for himself amongst staff and parents as someone who could control 'troubled' children. Thus, he gained easy access to victims who were sometimes referred to him by unwitting colleagues and mothers. He recalled how 'every figure of authority referred X [victim] to me . . . He had nowhere to go . . .'.

For yet another man, the provision of personal care to a victim with physical disabilities worked to 'screen' the abuse. This abuser ' . . . took advantage of [the victim's] need for help with catheterisation and washing down . . .' to perpetrate abuse, and remained undetected for many years. Of course, the success of such 'inventive' strategies (McAlinden 2006) is highly dependent on the child's vulnerability. These abusers were extremely adept at recognising that vulnerability in all its forms, whether demonstrated through behaviour problems; feeling homesick within a boarding school environment; being the victim of bullying and self-harming as a result of that; or being in need of personal care and highly dependent on others for that. That vulnerability, together with significant others' unquestioning acceptance of the part played by the abuser in the child's life placed these children at serious risk of abuse.

Initiating and Maintaining Abuse

Some of the abusers in our study perpetrated abuse within their work environment. However, others abused victims in their own home having first gained the trust of parents or carers by 'helping' the family, sometimes with routine chores. While some child sexual abusers threaten or use physical force against their victims in order to facilitate sexual activities (Langevin, Curnoe and Bain 2000), others use pornographic material, treats or rewards (Elliott, Browne and Kilcoyne 1995; Sullivan and Beech 2004). None of the abusers in our sample admitted using force against their victims. Rather, other ploys were evident, including using the authority afforded them by their roles to manipulate victims; and the offering of rewards, to enable the maintenance of abuse.

For some, massage served as a precursor to abuse, and several men described in some detail the importance of 'touch' in initiating abuse. One abuser, for example, made what he described as 'calculated moves beginning with a touch on the shoulder to lower resistance'. He was very mindful of children's responses and acknowledged that there would have been many more victims had he felt ' . . . he could get away with it'. He explained how carefully he monitored those responses:

. . . if children backed off . . . I wouldn't go near that child again . . . if they didn't object or didn't say anything then I just progressed from that . . . I knew it was OK to carry on to an extra stage.

In a preventive sense, this man's account brings into sharp focus the need to equip children with the knowledge as to what is, or is not, appropriate in terms of physical contact; and to enable them to find the confidence to speak out when they feel uncomfortable.

Concealing Abuse: Building Trust

Trust is key to the grooming process (McAlinden 2006); it prepares the victim, the family, the wider community, and also institutions, for abuse. The building and maintenance of trust was a central theme in many abusers' accounts of their strategies prior to, and also during, abuse. Moreover, trust proved critical in concealing abuse from parents and colleagues. Where abuse has been disclosed within organisational settings, abusers' colleagues have often expressed shock and disbelief (Green 2001). This was the case for several men in our study. One concealed his abuse ' . . . by being a good teacher, popular'. So successful was he, that up to the point that he pleaded guilty, those around him – including the victim's own mother – refused to believe the allegations. Two other men – one a teacher at a secondary school and another who provided tuition within his own home – described how their reputations enabled them to avoid detection. Indeed, the latter, who offended against seven of his pupils, talked of 'leading a double life' as family man and abuser for many years.

The close relationship these abusers built with their victim, and those near to the victim (Leclerc, Proulx and McKibben 2005), together with their reputation, appears to have enabled them to evade detection. The confidence exuded by the teachers in our sample was striking. There was an expectation that they would take a close interest in pupils, and because of that they felt secure in the knowledge that the abuse was well hidden: so secure that they did not feel it was necessary to ' . . . go to any great scenario of pretence or concealment . . .' Notwithstanding that confidence, the silence of their victims was critical. Silence supports abusers and enables the maintenance of abuse (Kirby, Greaves and Hankivsky 2000). Gallagher (2000) argues that where abusers are respected members of their communities, children encounter extreme difficulty in resisting and breaking that silence. In an organisational sense, this situation is compounded by: attempts by staff and managers to protect reputations or conceal inadequate procedures; and a failure to act on disclosures (Sullivan and Beech 2002).

Victims often encounter numerous obstacles in relation to disclosure (Alaggia 2004). It is hardly surprising, then, that in our study, abuse was disclosed in only three cases; in one instance, disclosure came ten years after the abuse had ended. As is so often the case, the abuse was mostly discovered accidentally, sometimes when other offences committed by the abuser came to light. Abuse perpetrated over lengthy periods of time can result in negative consequences for victims (Beitchman *et al.* 1992; Wolfe, Sas and Wekerle 1994). Given this, together with the sense of betrayal that

victims experience when abused by those in a position of trust (Moulden, Firestone and Wexler 2007), it is crucial that obstacles to disclosure are further examined.

Preventing Abuse: Safeguarding Children

The facilitation of easier disclosure may in itself be preventative, but given that ‘. . . any organisation or institution, whether statutory or voluntary, where children are cared for is vulnerable to infiltration by professionals who wish to abuse’ (Sullivan and Beech 2002, p.159), it is crucial that as wide a range of preventive measures as possible are put into place, and this can be achieved only if there is a deeper understanding about how such vulnerability is exploited and how abuse is facilitated.

With this in mind, abusers in our sample were asked to consider the issue of prevention. Several men referred to the need for closer monitoring and control of those working directly with children:

By always ensuring more than one adult is working with child.

The situation must never be allowed where one teacher and one pupil are together alone – no locked doors.

Monitoring is constantly needed, not only on appointment but throughout working life . . .

However, the extent to which situations and individuals were manipulated in the pursuit of sexual gratification which feature in the following responses, make for salutary reading:

People in positions of authority need to be brave enough to imagine it’s happening. My major ploy was that I was too nice to be doing anything. Adults need to listen to children . . . I manipulated the whole situation. I groomed every adult I was in contact with in order to offend. They must have asked themselves a thousand times why is he alone with the boys? Had I been questioned that would have frightened me off . . .

I was a very manipulative sort of person. I don’t think anybody could have seen it . . . I knew where I wanted to go and went there and got it. Unfortunately, the mother and the child didn’t stand a chance.

Although this man was well aware of the risks, he continued to offend:

I knew what I was risking but I still did it. I don’t think deterrents work . . . I was always in a tug of war situation, living with a risk. I couldn’t dispose of my sex drive. I had to continue to control it.

Indeed, it is feasible, as this last extract implies, that one form of prevention might emanate from abusers themselves, namely, seeking help from family or professionals:

If people had been aware of my sexual tendencies – my wife for example. If I’d told people or approached a specialist or expert but then of course I didn’t because I

didn't want to be found out and I was enjoying what I was doing . . . because I was getting such sexual satisfaction from it.

Conclusion

In this article we have focused on the accounts of eight men who had been imprisoned for perpetrating child sexual abuse while in a position of trust: how they gained access to victims; how they initiated, maintained, and concealed abuse; and finally, their views as to how such abuse might be prevented. Here, we reflect on what we might learn from these accounts, in particular, the lessons for the criminal justice system and other organisations which work with children and young people, including the voluntary sector; social services; educational establishments; those who provide sports-based activities; and those who engage workers to work with children.

We have focused on the extent to which abusers engineered opportunities to gain unsupervised access to victims; on how, having obtained a position of trust, they then exploited that position; and how they displayed behaviour which resulted in their being looked up to by other adults and children. As a result of the latter, they were often asked to assist with those who were most vulnerable; their subsequent arrest for abuse was met with shock and disbelief on the part of colleagues and parents/carers. While some men joined an organisation in order to abuse children, one of the most striking features of the offenders in our study is their ability to identify and select vulnerable children to abuse.

Colton and Vanstone (1998, p.516) draw our attention to the 'highly secretive' world of child sexual abusers and the extent to which, despite differences in individual cases, perpetrators succeed in concealing abuse. The extent to which the men in our sample were able to conceal their offences was striking. They were sophisticated in their approach, drawing on their authority to manipulate children, sometimes rewarding their victims to ensure silence. Elements of organisational environments and organisational roles appear to assist with this and are, therefore, conducive to the sexual abuse of children. Situational power allowed abusers to exert control over their victims and significant others. Moreover, factors such as a child's vulnerability; expectations associated with individual roles; and the trust so readily placed in perpetrators, all combined to enable access to victims and the maintenance of abuse.

How might organisations which work with children address this? Clearly, existing safeguards are not wholly effective, and risk assessment needs to be far more subtle and sophisticated. In reflecting on prevention, offenders in our sample offer some solutions. First, the need for lone working to be limited, with no locked doors. In our study, lone working allowed offenders the privacy and isolation needed to facilitate abuse, which in some cases remained undetected for many years. Second, constant monitoring procedures should be in place, from appointment throughout an individual's working life. Third, there should be regular questioning of the actions of individuals working with children. The con-

tribution such an approach might make to prevention should not be underestimated, for as one offender in our study recalled, had he been questioned by colleagues, that would have 'frightened me off'. Fourth, organisations should adopt a more sceptical, less trusting approach, maintaining awareness that abuse may be taking place, and remaining alert to individuals' capacity to manipulate colleagues, parents and carers in the period leading up to, and during, abuse. Clearly, others' unquestioning acceptance of the part played by the abuser in the child's life proves crucial to enabling abuse. The teachers in our sample were expected to work closely with children; they were confident that this expectation, together with the relationship they built with their victim and their reputation enabled them to evade detection.

If we are to provide environments in which children are safe, we need to examine critically the culture of relevant organisations (Colton and Vanstone 1998), ensuring that they are characterised by 'sustained vigilance, ongoing monitoring, and a culture of safety' (Sullivan *et al.* 2011, p.15); ensure that there is continued alertness to perpetrators' capacity 'to create and then abuse trust' (McAlinden 2006, p.341); ensure that children and young people are equipped with the knowledge and understanding which will enable them to speak out when they feel uneasy, and that they are listened to when they do so.

With teachers and sports coaches increasingly featuring amongst those accused of sexually abusing children and young people (Sullivan and Beech 2002; Hartill 2009), it is encouraging to see the emergence of a number of initiatives aimed at further safeguarding children in the UK. The NSPCC's Safeguarding Children and Young People in Sport initiative, for example, focuses on safer recruitment, inappropriate behaviour by coaches, and policies and procedures relating to training and reporting concerns. Moreover, it is intended that the new Vetting and Barring Scheme will strengthen existing guidance and impact on recruitment and monitoring procedures in relation to those working with children and vulnerable adults. The introduction of this scheme, however, has been fraught with controversy. Labelled as 'draconian', the scheme was suspended by the Home Secretary, Theresa May, in June 2010 with the intention that a more 'common sense' approach be taken which does not disaffect those wishing to work with children (BBC News 2010c). It is to be hoped that in the face of competing interests, and fear of offending sensitivities, the emphasis remains firmly on keeping children safe. Of course, barring measures can be effective only where offending behaviour has been detected. There is no room for complacency, for while attempts are made on a number of levels to lessen the risks posed by child sexual abusers, there is little likelihood that these will subside (Gallagher 2000). Moreover, assumptions should never be made that they have been eliminated.

There are several limitations to this study. It is based on a small sample of convicted, imprisoned male child sexual abusers, and, of course, their characteristics and strategies may be at variance with others who remain undetected. Notwithstanding this, the value of the work lies in the detailed

accounts of offending which have emerged from individual interviews with perpetrators (Elliott, Browne and Kilcoyne 1995); the potential for lessons learnt about the way in which offenders structured their working environment in order to offend to be applied to all organisations working with children (and vulnerable adults); and for these to inform a preventive agenda.

Despite numerous attempts to scrutinise those who work with children, abuse continues across a range of organisations and settings, in the statutory, voluntary and private sectors. One of the defining characteristics of the narratives of abusers in our sample was the extent to which they talked of being provided with ‘opportunities’ to offend: sometimes by the organisation in which they worked; and sometimes by unwitting colleagues, parents and carers. If we are to work towards reducing children’s vulnerability to this form of abuse we must ensure that we understand how it is perpetrated (Sullivan and Beech 2002; Shakeshaft 2004) so that we may deny abusers those opportunities.

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