

Michael Salter, **Organised Sexual Abuse**, Oxon: Routledge, 2013, 208 pp, hb £75.

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Sexual abuse featured prominently on the legal, political and social agenda throughout 2012 and into 2013, with prosecutions in various high profile child abuse cases, the sexual abuse allegations against the late Jimmy Saville, and, more recently, the abuse allegations made against the late Liberal Democrat MP, Sir Cyril Smith. The Rochdale sexual abuse case, where in August 2012 nine men were found guilty of running and participating in a child abuse and exploitation ring, has focused particular attention onto the issue of organised sexual abuse. Therefore, given its topical nature, a book on organised sexual abuse is to be welcomed.

Although there has been much research on child sexual abuse,<sup>1</sup> organised sexual abuse as a distinct area of research is still an emerging field. Much of the research relating to organised sexual abuse has taken place '[i]n relation to child pornography, ... and/or child prostitution, ... 'sex rings', ... multi-perpetrator sexual abuse in child care settings and ritual abuse' (27, 28). It was not until La Fontaine's coining of the term 'organised abuse'<sup>2</sup> in 1993 that such abuse as a distinct category could be examined. Two of the earliest studies on organised abuse were conducted in Britain by Creighton<sup>3</sup> and Gallagher et al.<sup>4</sup> Both studies produced similar findings, with examples of both extra-familial and family-based organised

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<sup>1</sup> For example, D. Finkelhor, *Child Sexual Abuse* (New York: The Free Press, 1984) in C. Wattam and N. Parton (eds), *Child Sexual Abuse: Responding to the Experiences of Children* (Chichester: Wiley, 1999)

<sup>2</sup> J. La Fontaine, 'Defining organised sexual abuse' (1993) *Child Abuse Review*, 2, 223

<sup>3</sup> S. Creighton, 'Organised Abuse: NSPCC experience' (1993) *Child Abuse Review*, 2, 232

<sup>4</sup> B. Gallagher, B. Hughes and H. Parker, 'The nature and extent of known cases of organised child sexual abuse in England and Wales' in P. Bibby (ed), *Organised Abuse: The Current Debate* (London: Arena, 1996)

sexual abuse. Gallagher et al<sup>5</sup> '[a]lso emphasised institutional settings of organised abuse, in which children were subject to abuse through a school or other institution' (29). These settings for organised sexual abuse, extra-familial, familial and institutional '[r]esonate in important ways with the literature on organised abuse that was published following these studies ...' (29). Within this book, Salter contributes much to the current literature on organised sexual abuse. Similarly to other academics in the field, Salter employs the terms 'organised sexual abuse' and 'organised abuse' to describe '[a]ny occurrence of sexual abuse in which multiple victims have been exploited by multiple perpetrators acting in concert, in which some of the victims are children' (6). However, Salter goes one step further, incorporating the co-abuse of children and women by some groups within his definition. By doing so he clearly acknowledges that organised abuse can continue into adulthood, and that adults and children can simultaneously be abused by the same group. Salter also conducts an in-depth analysis into organised sexual abuse as a distinct category of sexual abuse. He discusses each of the various subcategories of organised sexual abuse – familial, sadistic, ritual and torture and sexual murder - devoting a chapter of discussion to each (chapters seven - 10). This allows a thorough engagement with the issues surrounding each of these subcategories. Moreover, by devoting a chapter to each type of organised sexual abuse, Salter acknowledges that organised sexual abuse is in fact a distinct area of research, rather than a topic which is discussed alongside other forms of sexual abuse.

There is much to be valued in *Organised Sexual Abuse*. Salter's approach to discussing the different types of organised sexual abuse noted above is somewhat novel, in that much of it is based on the interviews he conducted with twenty-one adults who

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

described organised abuse during childhood. The empirical research conducted by Salter took the form of an initial pre-interview phase, where potential participants were sent a questionnaire to complete before being contacted individually to discuss the research in more detail. Interviews, face to face and telephone, were then arranged with twenty-one participants. These interviews were semi-structured, and '[w]ere conducted within an open framework to allow for focused, conversational, two-way communication' (178). It is important to note Salter's acknowledgment that when asked by interview participants why he had chosen this area of research, he explained his historical role as a carer for a victim of organised sexual abuse. This experience as a carer suggests that Salter may have been more of a partial, than an impartial researcher. However, explaining his relationship to, and affinity for, this area of research reassured participants that he had some understanding of their experiences. As Salter explains, '[i]f I was a dispassionate "outsider", they knew from experience that it would be unlikely I would be able to grasp the full range of their experiences' (178). Salter transcribed all of the interviews and anonymised identifying data. He then used a qualitative analysis programme to create coded categories and to identify common themes that emerged from the data, based on the principles of grounded theory (179). As Salter himself acknowledges, empirical research on organised sexual abuse is scarce. Being able to engage with and analyse such detailed accounts from those with experiences of organised abuse ensures that the book retains the important human aspect that is often lost in discussions on such a sensitive topic, particularly in reported cases within law reports. The inclusion of qualitative research in the book also serves to reinforce many of the points that Salter makes, particularly with regard to the role of the criminal justice system in dealing with instances of organised sexual abuse. Salter outlines two key interlinked propositions that underline his discussions on the responses of the criminal

justice system. Firstly, he argues that the justice system has been slow to recognise and respond to violence against women and children and that such violence '[o]ften falls outside the definition of 'real' crime unless it overlaps with some other policing or policy priority' (88). Secondly, he claims that this '[r]eflects a more general minimisation of the seriousness of gendered violence' (88) which '[r]enders the lives of children and women who have survived extreme abuse very difficult' (88). Consequently, victims of organised sexual abuse '[f]ace systemic barriers to seeking help, finding support and being believed ...' (88) when they tell the truth about the abuse they have suffered and attempt to seek justice for the crimes committed against them. These assertions find validation in various statements provided by Salter's interviewees, such as; '[t]here was nobody. I tried going to the police as a kid, and got laughed out of there. I tried everything. I tried writing letters to the prime minister ... And nothing happened. And there's just that feeling that there's not real hope' (99).

Another strength of the book is Salter's extensive discussions on the underreported types of organised sexual abuse. The stereotypical form that organised sexual abuse takes is that of sex or paedophile rings, consisting of extra-familial male abusers that target post-pubescent young girls, similar to that which occurred in the Rochdale child abuse case. Although touching upon this well known form of organised sexual abuse in some detail, Salter dedicates a large proportion of the book to other, often underreported, forms of organised sexual abuse, such as familial organised abuse (chapter seven), sadistic abuse (chapter eight) and ritual and torture in organised abuse (chapter nine). The importance of dealing with the issues surrounding these less well recognised forms of abuse is succinctly summed up by Salter when he states; 'Child protection investigations or legal cases

involving allegations of organised sexual abuse are regularly invoked to illustrate the dangers of “false memories”, “moral panic” and “community hysteria” (2). Indeed, the issue of false memories and potentially unreliable evidence is one which regularly bemoans the effectiveness of the criminal justice system in dealing with any type of abuse, including domestic violence, rape, and sexual abuse as well as organised sexual abuse. A Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) Report published in 2011, highlighted that ‘[C]PS solicitors are often reluctant to take up cases of child sexual exploitation because victims are often perceived as unreliable.’<sup>6</sup> Although the CEOP report is discussing exploitation from gangs, arguably the same analogy can be applied when individuals experience organised sexual abuse. In chapter seven, which is devoted to a discussion on familial organised abuse, Salter analyses the responses of interviewees who described this type of abuse. He makes the important observation that ‘[a]buse within openly dysfunctional family types is more likely to be detected due to their contact with police and health and welfare services. In contrast, organised abuse within apparently “normal” families ... can go unnoticed for many years, if at all’ (104). One interviewee explained how her parents ‘[w]ould make sure that they would follow all day-to-day laws, and look good, and respectable. And it worked, because nobody dug underneath, and had a good look at them’ (106). Indeed, research ‘[f]inds that cases of ... familial abuse ... are under-represented in the criminal justice system, which indicates that they are less likely to be detected and prosecuted’ (40). By highlighting and tackling the issues surrounding less reported forms of organised sexual abuse, Salter’s book is an invaluable resource to those working with victims of organised sexual abuse within the criminal justice system. It is also

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<sup>6</sup> CEOP, ‘Out of Mind, Out of Sight – Breaking down the barriers to understanding child sexual exploitation’ (Executive Summary, CEOP thematic assessment, June 2011) 14 at [http://www.ceop.police.uk/Documents/ceopdocs/ceop\\_thematic\\_assessment\\_executive\\_summary.pdf](http://www.ceop.police.uk/Documents/ceopdocs/ceop_thematic_assessment_executive_summary.pdf) (last visited 15th January 2013)

significant for those agencies who are responsible for protecting children and responding to warning signs, such as child protection services and teachers.

Salter's description of his own experience of being the friend and carer of a survivor of organised sexual abuse in chapter five is a particularly interesting feature of the book. He highlights the lack of care and support offered to those with histories of sexual abuse, both inside and outside of the criminal justice system. In attempting to care for his friend Sarah he discovered 'the limited range of services available to her' (85) and realised 'that adults with histories of sexual abuse are offered very little assistance indeed' (85). More specifically in the context of the justice system, he describes the difficulties they encountered in getting agencies to take notice of the abuse that Sarah was suffering, explaining that '[n]either the police nor any other agency intervened to protect Sarah despite repeatedly being notified of her plight' (75, 76). He also decries the standardised approach of the police in assessing the credibility of rape complainants. 'Since Sarah did not conform to this model, she was considered to be a malingerer who was not a legitimate focus of attention or concern despite her injuries' (81). Perhaps of most use to those working in the criminal justice system, Salter highlights how for some victims, organised sexual abuse can occur during childhood and continue into adolescence and adulthood. Indeed, if children and young people do not get the support that they require, as noted above, there is a risk that they may continue to be exploited as a vulnerable person into adulthood. Salter initially became friends with Sarah in his late teens and during his mid-20s lived with her for a year. Sarah was subject to organised sexual abuse throughout that time. It is also clear that Sarah suffered abuse as a child, with Salter recalling how she suffered flashbacks of the childhood abuse that she had endured; 'she ... began speaking about a

childhood memory of being submerged and nearly drowned in a tub of icy water' (79). It becomes clear from Salter's narrative that Sarah was actively pursued throughout her teens and into her twenties by the abusive group. Indeed, even when Sarah was moved to a new city to start afresh, '[s]he still had to be vigilant, since it was clear that the abusive group was still tracking her movements' (86).

Throughout his monograph, Salter repeatedly discusses the relationship between gender, power and the perpetration of organised sexual abuse. More specifically, he discusses the link between masculinity and sexual offending, devoting chapter three to an exploration of the historical ideologies of masculine sexuality, in which he argues that '[o]rganised abuse is a produce of a pervasive ideology of masculine sadism ...' (57). Salter also makes reference to the gendered, that is masculine, dimension of organised abuse when examining the various sub-types of organised abuse. There is clear merit in discussing the gendered dimension of organised sexual abuse, especially in the detail to which Salter does, as it allows the discussions on organised abuse to be situated within '[t]he study of gendered violence more broadly' (3). Nevertheless, the male gendered dimension in the commission of sexual abuse more generally is not a particularly novel area of discussion. Indeed, it is well documented that generally the '[p]erpetrators of sexual abuse are overwhelmingly male ...'<sup>7</sup> However, Salter does not just explore the gendered nature of organised abuse in the context of masculinity, he also mentions women who are in some way involved in organised sexual abuse. This is particularly evident in his examination of familial organised abuse where he specifically discusses maternal complicity in such abuse. Indeed, one of his interviewee's explained how his mother was '[a] regular and proactive

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<sup>7</sup> C. Schroeder and B. Gordon, *Assessment and Treatment of Childhood Problems: A Clinician's Guide* (New York: The Guildford Press, 2nd ed, 2002) 233

participant in organised abuse alongside his father. Sky remembered his mother as “the boss” in family life’ (111). Acknowledging that women are both actively and passively involved in the perpetration of organised sexual abuse is a particular strength within Salter’s book. Comparatively little research has been conducted into female perpetrators of any sort of sexual abuse, despite statistics suggesting that they are responsible for ‘[a]bout 5% of abuse among girls and 20% among boys...’(233). Feminine gender norms, particularly those surrounding appropriate motherhood, mean that women are often not immediately considered to be suspects in cases involving sexual abuse.<sup>8</sup> By highlighting the various ways in which women are involved in organised sexual abuse, Salter’s work will hopefully begin to dispel existing myths surrounding femininity and raise awareness of women’s involvement in sexual abuse. Consequently, these discussions are an invaluable resource for those working within the criminal justice system, particularly those investigating and prosecuting cases of organised abuse.

Despite the obvious strengths of this book, there are a number of potential shortcomings which must also be considered. As noted above, Salter discusses the responses of the various arms of the criminal justice system to organised sexual abuse throughout the book. These discussions occur sporadically and could benefit from some more development. As Salter himself acknowledges, one of the aims of the book is to examine the ‘[e]xperience of adults and children with histories of organised abuse in the criminal justice system ...’ (foreword). Arguably this aim could have been better fulfilled by dedicating a chapter to the responses of the criminal justice system to this type of abuse. Salter could then have explored the various stages within the criminal justice system, such

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<sup>8</sup> M. Elliott, *Female Sexual Abuse of Children* (London: Longman Group, 1993) 22



as investigation, case building and prosecution, and the issues that each stage presents to those who have experienced organised sexual abuse. This would have allowed Salter to potentially suggest some best practice models which should be adopted in cases of organised sexual abuse, something which Salter himself acknowledges is a challenge that needs to be met (176).

Building on the criticism above, although Salter does discuss the criminal justice system to varying degrees throughout the book, he does not discuss whether any legal provisions exist which are designed to deal with instances of organised sexual abuse. The book arguably could have benefitted from a discussion on the law in some detail. Salter could have explored statutory provisions in relation to organised sexual abuse or suggested, for example, that instances of organised sexual abuse should be reflected in the sentencing of perpetrators. Perhaps he could have identified some of the sentencing guidelines in place in different countries and whether they refer to organised sexual abuse. Salter could also potentially have critically engaged in detail with strategies that have been put in place in many countries to provide for special measures for vulnerable victims. For example, the use of pre-trial therapy and video recorded evidence standing as examination-in-chief, would be particularly useful when discussing organised sexual abuse. The inclusion of some of the above could potentially have contextualised, supplemented and expanded on his discussions on the criminal justice system. It is worth noting however that the lack of engagement with the law may have been a deliberate move on Salter's part. The research he examines was conducted throughout the world and indeed his own qualitative research took place in Australia, meaning that he was not dealing with legislation within just one jurisdiction. However, this is hardly uncommon in law books, particularly in respect of child

abuse.<sup>9</sup> Salter also faced the issue that, in the UK at least, there is currently no legislation that explicitly deals with organised sexual abuse. Indeed, it may be difficult to conceive of how legislation would be drafted to deal with cases of organised sexual abuse. Moreover, there is also a lack of law reports on case law that deal in detail with issues on child sexual abuse, as many of those reported are to do with issues of sentencing. These are all understandable reasons for not including a detailed discussion on the law on organised sexual abuse, especially within the limited length of the monograph. However it is undoubtable that a discussion on the law and legal provisions surrounding organised sexual abuse, such as that suggested above, would make good subject matter for further research.

It is clear that this book is deeply personal to Salter, not least because of his friendship with a survivor of organised sexual abuse. It is a well-written and clearly structured monograph which is engaging to read and easy to understand. This innovative book provides a sound basis for further research to be conducted in the area of organised sexual abuse.

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Word count (excluding footnotes) – 2,664

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<sup>9</sup> For example, L. Hoyano and C. Keenan, *Child Abuse: Law and Policy Across Boundaries* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2010)

