Child Grooming and Sexual Exploitation: Are South Asian Men the UK Media's New Folk Devils?

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Abstract

In May 2012, nine men from the Rochdale area of Manchester were found guilty of sexually exploiting a number of underage girls. Media reporting on the trial focused on the fact that eight of the men were of Pakistani descent, while all the girls were white. Framing similar cases in Preston, Rotherham, Derby, Shropshire, Oxford, Telford and Middlesbrough as ethnically motivated, the media incited moral panic over South Asian grooming gangs preying on white girls. While these cases shed light on the broader problem of sexual exploitation in Britain, they also reveal continuing misconceptions that stereotype South Asian men as 'natural' perpetrators of these crimes due to culturally-specific notions of hegemonic masculinity. Examining newspaper coverage from 2012 to 2013, this article discusses the discourse of the British media's portrayal of South Asian men as perpetrators of sexual violence against white victims, inadvertently construing 'South Asian men' as 'folk devils'.

Keywords

Folk devils; masculinity; media representations; moral panic; sexual exploitation; South Asian men.

Introduction

Over the last four years, the United Kingdom (UK) has been beset by a moral panic concerning 'South Asian men' grooming white girls for sexual exploitation. This moral panic derived from a number of well-publicised cases, the most infamous of which took place in Rochdale, Greater Manchester. Here, a group of nine men, eight of Pakistani origin or descent, preyed on under-aged white girls for sex before trafficking them for prostitution. The men involved were convicted of rape as well as conspiracy to engage in sexual activity with children, trafficking for sexual exploitation, sexual activity with a girl under sixteen, aiding and abetting rape, and sexual assault. Further grooming rings involving South Asian men and white under-aged girls were simultaneously exposed in Derby, Shropshire, Oxford, Telford and Middlesbrough, while similar cases in Preston and Rotherham had already gone to trial. Media reporting of these cases

emphasised that most of the perpetrators were Muslim men of Pakistani origin who had preyed on white girls, linking public perception of sexual exploitation to race and culture (Sian, Law and Sayyid 2012). Based on an analysis of news coverage over a two year period, this article examines media portrayal of South Asian men as predators who groom and sexually exploit white children in the UK.

Grooming and sexual exploitation

The term 'grooming' commonly describes 'the tactics used by child sex offenders in their efforts to sexually abuse children' (Craven, Brown and Gilchrist 2006: 287), though there is no universally accepted definition (Gillespie 2004). Salter (1995), for example, conceptualises grooming as a range of actions performed by the offender during the initial stages of sexual abuse. Grooming strategies are intended to secure further opportunities for abuse, while reducing the likelihood of disclosure, often by establishing trust with the child and/or carer. Similarly, Gillespie (2002: 411) argues that grooming is 'the process by which a child is befriended by a would-be abuser in an attempt to gain the child's confidence and trust, enabling them to get the child to acquiesce to abusive activity'. According to McAlinden (2012: 11) grooming entails: (1) the use of a variety of manipulative and controlling techniques; (2) with a vulnerable subject; (3) in a range of interpersonal and social settings; (4) in order to establish trust or normalise sexually harmful behaviour; and (5) with the overall aim of facilitating exploitation and/or prohibiting exposure.

The academic literature identifies three types of grooming: (1) self-grooming; (2) grooming the environment, along with significant others; and (3) grooming the child (Craven, Brown and Gilchrist 2006). As the scope of this article is limited to the grooming and sexual exploitation of under-aged girls, only the third type will be discussed in detail.

Child grooming usually involves both psychological and physical measures. Perpetrators use psychological grooming as a precursor to physical grooming, developing an initial relationship with the child and building trust by making her/him feel good, then slowly beginning to breach boundaries. Psychological grooming also encourages the child not to disclose the abuse through tactics like isolating the child, making her/him feel responsible for the abuse, issuing bribes, and/or making threats (Craven, Brown and Gilchrist 2006). When physical grooming occurs, the perpetrator/victim relationship is gradually sexualised. Craven, Brown and Gilchrist (2006: 295) give several examples of how an abuser may do this: 'intentionally entering the bedroom while the child or young person is undressed, or getting dressed together and exposing himself to the child'; desensitising the child to his touch by tickling or stroking; having sexual conversations; or having normal conversations while sexual touching is taking place.

Child sexual exploitation likewise has no set definition. In the UK, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) recently warned that police forces and agencies still have no baseline definition to work from. Different forces use a variety of different terms (including 'localised grooming', 'street grooming' and 'internal trafficking'), all of which have slightly different meanings (Cockbain 2013). The National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People (2008) developed the most commonly used definition by the Government:

> The sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of performing, and/or others performing on them, sexual activities. Child sexual exploitation can occur through the use of technology without the child's immediate recognition, for example the persuasion to post sexual images on the internet/mobile phones with no

immediate payment or gain. In all cases, those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources.

In January 2011, British children's charity Barnardos published *Puppet on a String: The Urgent Need to Cut Children Free from Sexual Exploitation*, noting the increasing sophistication of grooming of children for sexual exploitation. Children were being 'brainwashed by abusers in the most pernicious way ... often transported between towns and cities to be subjected to multiple acts of abuse by groups of men' (Barnardos 2011: 2). Despite several non-governmental organisations reporting high numbers of victims of sexual exploitation who have accessed their services in the last decade, there have been comparatively few prosecutions. A general lack of knowledge about the risk of grooming and sexually exploiting children and young people in the UK complicates the detection, investigation and prosecution of these crimes. Drawing from the Home Office's annual data on all charges for criminal offences in England and Wales, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) identified only a quarter of the 17,000 reported cases of sexual offences involving children under 16 went to trial in 2012.

To date, the majority of research on sexually exploited children concerns the trafficking of women and children across international borders (Shelley 2010). While international trafficking and exploitation of women and children has received significant media and political attention, little is known about the extent of the problem in the UK. Of the 609 children Barnardos was working with in 2009, one in six had been trafficked into the country for sexual purposes (Barnardos 2009). Data on 'street grooming' for the purposes of sexual exploitation is similarly scarce and largely anecdotal. A paucity of support services for victims is thus unsurprising. In 2009, only 40 local authorities of 209 provided specialist services in relation to child sexual exploitation. Even the CPS acknowledges the lack of adequate information and research on sexual exploitation (CPS 2013), explaining that practical and ethical issues complicate collection of data and research on young people exploited through sexual violence/grooming.

Race, gender, crime and moral panics in the UK

Mainstream literature exploring the intersections between race, ethnicity and gender is still fairly scarce. Early scholarship on this subject challenged the notion that 'race' is only relevant to the lived experience of minorities, ignoring 'white' as a racial category (Afshar and Maynard 1994). Discussions on race were limited to racism, construing the experiences of minority groups solely in terms of oppression. As a social construction, the meaning of 'race' varies according to time, place, circumstances and relevant racialised categories ('black' or 'minority ethnic') that are, in turn, influenced by historical, political, policy, and cultural contexts. The concept of hegemonic masculinity, first developed by Connell (1995), referred to 'the most honoured way of being a man' by requiring 'all other men to position themselves in relation to it', simultaneously legitimising 'the global subordination of women to men'. Although Connell argues that hegemony is not synonymous with violence, it is often 'supported by force' (Connell 1995: 258).

The British media's construction of a specifically South Asian notion of hegemonic masculinity began long before the recent spate of high-profile cases of child sexual exploitation and grooming. The Ouseley report on the Bradford race riots (Ouseley 2001), and the Cantle Report on the Oldham, Burnley and Bradford riots (Cantle 2001), focused on cultural difference as the primary causal factor for these events, maintaining that British South Asians and white Britons led 'parallel lives'. Media coverage of the riots described angry young men who were alienated from society and their own communities, and had become entangled in a life of crime and violence, a vision that provided the bedrock for the construction of what Claire Alexander calls the 'new Asian folk devil' (2000).

Alexander argues that, until the race riots in England, 'Asian young men had been largely invisible, presumed to be the beneficiaries of a rigid system of male hierarchy and privilege, in which the concerns were about the women, not men, due to the issues surrounding arranged marriages' (Alexander 2000: 5). Following the riots, emphasis on the criminality and deviance of the rioters reflected 'the ongoing process of the criminalization of Asian youth and their increased visibility in the criminal justice system' (Alexander 2004: 542). South Asian youth, and particularly young South Asian males, came to be seen as living in 'a pathologized culture of poverty to stand as a symbol of its failures and an increasing threat to wider society' (Alexander 2004: 536). Since then, government concern with community cohesion has fuelled the media's appetite for identifying South Asian men as cause for moral panic, including over 'no-go' areas for whites (Bunyan 2001) and Asian territorial brutality (Jones 2005). Moral panics involving South Asian men now extend to terrorism, violence and Asian notions of masculinity (Sian, Law and Sayyid 2012).

According to Alexander (1999), a culture of Islamophobia has emerged over the last decade, coinciding with more frequent coverage of 'Muslim culture' in government documents and academic publications. The construction of a monolithic Muslim identity was rooted in dominant Western assumptions concerning 'perceived racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation' (1999: 45), despite the diversity of Muslims and Muslim communities in the UK. For instance, Britain is home to many long-established Muslim communities of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Somali descent, speaking a wide range of languages, including Urdu, Bengali and Arabic.

Foucault's concept of problematisation directs attention to the ways in which a problem comes to be framed and the implications of this framing for how the 'development of a given into a question ... transform[s] a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which the diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response' (2000: 118). Using this concept to examine the portrayal of South Asian sex offenders by the British media underscores the underlying and often implicit assumptions behind the construction of South Asian men as a 'problem' requiring an urgent solution.

Journalists report on crime and criminal justice policy selectively, over-reporting certain news items while omitting others, thus framing issues with a particular slant or bias (Reese 2001). Research indicates that print and TV media have accorded disproportionate and increasing attention to crime over the past four decades, focusing on individual criminal incidents and their victims rather than on patterns of crime or possible causal factors (Reiner et al. 2003). Mirroring press coverage of crime in general, reporting on violence against women and girls has increased since the 1980s.

The news media's role as an agent of moral indignation is often explored through the sociological lens of 'moral panics'. This concept was developed in the 1970s (Cohen 1972; Cohen and Young 1973) to explain the disproportionately high public concern over a social problem. Concern generated in a moral panic arises from identifying a specific threat that has the potential to destroy important social values, norms or regulations, catalysing 'a demand for greater social regulation or control and a demand for a return to "traditional values"' (Thompson 1998: 8-9). Thompson (1998: 12) suggests that 'in complex modern societies [a moral panic] seldom develops as a straightforward upsurge of indignation ... there is a "politics of social problems" or, to put it another way, they are "socially constructed"'. Moral panics thus reflect, and often reinforce, prevailing power relations.

According to Cohen's early conceptualisation, the collective action that a moral panic triggers is marked by 'mass hysteria, delusion and panics' (1972: 11) that serve to focus public anxieties and fears on a specific category of deviants identified as 'folk devils'. Moral panic incites intensified hostility towards a particular group, category or cast of characters. The 'discovery' of

the group seen as threatening or harmful to the sanctity of society is accompanied by an oppositional repositioning of the rest of society as defenders of the society's moral values. Changing relative power-ratios between groups is thus key to understanding potential triggers of moral panic and the broader context within which these moral panics develop (Rohloff 2008).

Seldom have the actions of dominant groups come under the necessary level of media scrutiny which can result in a moral panic. Instead the media seemingly focus on the actions and practices of marginalised groups, demonstrating the centrality of unequal power relations in generating moral panics. Media representation of particular crimes, and the groups they affect, likewise shapes the depiction of some crimes as forming part of a worrying pattern (for example, forced marriage), while others (for example, the murder of domestic partners) are often discussed in disaggregate form, with news reports treating relevant cases as isolated incidents (Franklin 1999).

Assessing the precise impact of selective media coverage on broad social attitudes is challenging, because many people choose which newspaper to read on the basis of existing views, not *vice versa*. Although concerns about the impact of framing social issues in the media on individuals' attitudes are longstanding, this remains a complex subject without definitive conclusions (Barker and Petley 2001). Examining the link between media representations and policy-making is more amenable to empirical scrutiny. The purpose of this article is to consider whether South Asian men, and Pakistani men in particular, have been constructed as folk devils by the British media's framing of recent cases involving the sexual exploitation of white girls by South Asian men.

Methodology

Five national newspapers were analysed to explore how the British media represent grooming cases. Both conservative and liberal editorial perspectives were examined: the *Daily Telegraph* (including the *Sunday Telegraph*) is a right-of-centre broadsheet; *The Guardian* (including the *Observer*) is a left-of-centre broadsheet; the *Daily Mail* (including the *Mail on Sunday*) is a right-of-centre newspaper; *The Times* (including the *Sunday Times*) is a moderate right of centre newspaper; and *The Sun* is a right-wing tabloid. To ensure the Rochdale, Oxford, Middlesbrough and Telford cases were included, articles were collected for the period of 1 January 2012 to 31 December 2013. The selection of a two-year time period, and a range of editorial perspectives, allowed for the quantitative analysis of the extent of reporting on South Asian sexual offenders, and qualitative analysis of the text of individual articles. This provided a representative overview of British media reporting on these crimes during 2012 and 2013. It was considered vital to include *The Times*, as Andrew Norfolk, their Chief Investigative Reporter is heralded as being instrumental in breaking the Rotherham grooming scandal through his two-year investigation into the sexual exploitation of teenage girls by gangs of men (See Norfolk 2012a, 2012b).

Lexis-Nexis, an electronic database of legal documents and publications in periodicals, was used as a search tool to identify all relevant news reports during this period. All stories generated by the terms 'sexual exploitation', 'Asian men' and 'grooming' were examined. The search generated a total of 422 relevant articles: when limited to the five publications chosen, this resulted in 232 results. These results included online versions of the newspapers, such as telegraph.co.uk, guardian.co.uk and *Mail Online*. All articles were examined, though 110 were discarded as repetitions, leaving a total of 122 articles for analysis.

Analysing a year's worth of articles for each of the five newspapers yielded an initial set of thematic codes. Using these, the two authors then coded the full text of all 122 articles in order to identify core themes and concepts, creating additional codes as needed. At the end of the

process, the researchers met to discuss discrepancies in their coding in order to reach consensus.

This process yielded a number of core themes and types of articles. These fell into seven broad categories:

1. articles about a specific case of sexual exploitation by South Asian men, including articles on key court cases and/or the policing of specific cases;

2. articles on individual victims and/or perpetrators that centred on their socio-demographic characteristics – a theme found in many previous analyses of newspaper reporting on domestic violence (Wosniak and McCloskey 2010);

3. reports that outlined policy developments and/or case-review inquiries regarding whether victims had received an adequate response from statutory agencies;

4. reports on practical measures, including service provision and programs intended to address the sexual exploitation of children;

5. articles seeking to estimate the scale of the problem in the UK;

6. articles on prevention (a small but defined subset); and

7. articles on the context, nature and causes of sexual exploitation of white girls by South Asian men.

Cases involving South Asian perpetrators

The overwhelming majority of articles fell into the final category. Although these articles generally offered the least detailed discussions, when examined collectively, they illuminated the most common way of framing the issue. Articles garnering the most media attention centred on sexual exploitation/sexual offending by South Asian men with Pakistani heritage, Islam, the 'problem' of multiculturalism, the need for community cohesion, and/or concerns about harmful cultural practices.

Four of the five newspapers paid comparable attention to victims and perpetrators, policy issues and specific cases of white girls being sexually exploited by South Asian men. *The Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday* (particularly the *Mail Online*) paid more attention to victims than the other publications, with many articles including lengthy interviews. The articles from the *Mail on Sunday*, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* tended to be more comprehensive, covering the majority of the cases at greater length, while the other three papers focused on the grooming cases in Oxford and Rochdale. There were only three articles in *The Sunday Times*, all of which were editorials and, perhaps because of this, were more serious in nature and certainly less salacious than some of the other articles in *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*. These editorials concentrated on individual victims, rather than overall media or government reporting of the cases. Articles in *The Times* were similarly less opinion-based and more factual than some of the others, though still identified the victims as white and the perpetrators as Asian, Pakistani.

Further analysis revealed that three main factors inform the way the British media represents South Asian sex offenders: (1) the portrayal of victims as young white girls; (2) South Asian men as sexual offenders who pose a significant risk, requiring an urgent response; and (3) failure of statutory agencies to protect victims. Together, these factors convey broad messages about the nature of the 'problem' and how it might be tackled.

The portrayal of victims

Notwithstanding *The Sunday Times,* victims as a group were most commonly discussed in longer articles, while short reports concentrated on individual cases. Most articles described the victim's experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation, then gave an account of how the victim had escaped the abuse, especially if the escape involved the police or social services. Reports of this kind were based primarily on court transcripts and/or interviews with victims; a subset also involved interviews with professionals who regularly work on these types of cases and/or the individuals involved in supporting victims in specific cases. A minority of articles discussed relevant court proceedings.

Media portrayal of victims was overwhelmingly sympathetic, though clarified that these views were not necessarily shared by statutory agencies. According to the media, many of the professionals working with the young victims viewed them as having made 'lifestyle choices' (Syal 2013) by freely engaging in sexual activity involving Pakistani men: some labelled the girls, even those as young as twelve, as 'prostitutes' (Syal 2013). *The Sunday Times,* explained how social workers had 'stock phrases: she's making her own decisions or teenagers will do what they want to do' (Smith 2012: 10). In this vein, the *Mail Online* examined how victims were treated during court cases by criminal justice system professionals; Doughty's (2013) article described one of the victims in the Telford case as:

> … a damaged and vulnerable teenage girl, who had been 'passed around and used as meat' by a gang of Asian men since she was 13 years old. Then she had to spend 12 days in the witness box, facing cross-examination from defence barrister after defence barrister, until she finally broke down. … Jurors were visibly angry and dismayed at the aggressive tactics of one particular lawyer. Another barrister walked out of court in disgust … .

This problem was not limited to statutory agencies: the father of one fifteen-year-old victim described her as 'unruly, mischievous and vulgar' (Carter 2012a: 8).

While media representations of female victims of violence often reflect dominant societal attitudes towards women, thus perpetuating gender inequalities (Berns 2004), this was not how these media outlets portrayed the victims. In many articles, the girls were described as 'vulnerable' (Laville and Topping 2013: 8). For instance, in an article typical of coverage of this issue in *The Guardian,* Laville and Topping (2013: 8) described the victims in the Oxford case as:

> … children between the ages of 11 and 15 who had grown up with no nurturing, little love and even less protection, girls who would not be listened to or missed when they ran away from children's homes or played truant from school, girls easily groomed into believing they were being shown affection.

Other articles, including one in the *Mail on Sunday* (2012b) and another by Carter (2012b), highlighted the fact that most of the girls came from 'deprived family backgrounds, with many of them being cared for by local authorities'. Meanwhile, the *Mail Online* explored how cases reported in Birmingham by the Muslim Women's Network found that 'victims were already vulnerable to being sexually exploited by gangs, as they had a limited knowledge of sex, suffered from disabilities, or were seeking to escape a harsh background' (Edwards 2013). By highlighting the vulnerability of the victims, the media sometimes unintentionally cloaked the key causal factors behind sexual violence: gender, power and control (Karmani 2013).

Constructing child sexual exploitation as a cultural problem

The more sympathy that is engendered for victims, the more perpetrators are demonised and reviled. Reports variously described the South Asian men involved as 'evil' people who had

undertaken 'depraved acts' (Mogra 2013). One report described the Rochdale cases as involving girls being 'recruited into sexual factory farming by Muslim men described as "pure evil" by detectives' (Pearson 2012a). This type of framing sets up the conditions under which South Asian men *in general* can be constructed as folk devils.

The second and most significant factor influencing the way that the media framed these cases centred on the construction of sexual offending by South Asian men as a specific problem requiring an urgent response. During his two-year investigative work for *The Times*, Norfolk (2012c) claimed that he 'revealed a crime model that police and care agencies refused to recognise – that most of the victims were white and a majority of those in identified abuse networks were men of Pakistani origin' (Deans 2013). Almost every newspaper reported on the fact that the perpetrators were South Asian men targeting white girls. For instance, the *Daily Telegraph* claimed that one of the victims in the Rochdale case 'was singled out because she was white, vulnerable and under-age' (Ward and Bunyan 2012: 1). Viewed collectively, the British media's coverage of the Rochdale case implied that one of the most shocking aspects was the fact that the abusers were Pakistani Muslim men while the girls they abused were white.

Careful analysis of articles from the sample revealed that two primary arguments were used to set this frame. The first included newspaper reporting that stigmatised immigrant communities in general and Pakistani men in particular, constructing child sexual exploitation as a cultural problem, while ignoring its place on the broader continuum of violence against women and children. The second argument ascribed blame to British multiculturalism, associating this with a fear of appearing racist in the face of 'cultural problems': articles advancing this argument paralleled articles that focused on responses by statutory agencies, as seen in the following sub-section.

Despite these patterns, the representation of child sexual exploitation by Pakistani men was far from uniform across the five newspapers. An overwhelming majority of articles in the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* stigmatised Pakistani men and blamed multiculturalism, as did a significant proportion of the articles in *The Telegraph*. For instance, the *Daily Mail* referred to the 'worrying trend of Asian men grooming and sexually exploiting vulnerable girls' (Greenwood 2013a) and the 'dangerous trend of Pakistani men grooming young white girls' (Greenwood 2013b). The *Daily Telegraph* identified a 'pattern of men from Pakistani backgrounds grooming young white girls for sex' (Marsden 2013a: 12). Given its political perspective, *The Sun* surprisingly only published one article on the grooming cases in 2012 and 2013, though the reporter did argue that 'White girls were targeted because they were not in the mainly Pakistani gangs' community or religion' (Veevers 2012: 12-13).

Articles in *The Guardian* were more likely to offer critical commentary. In a number of pieces (Laville 2012, Martinson 2012), various reporters claimed that the UK has 'an emerging model of child sexual exploitation in which large groups of Asian men target vulnerable white girls on the streets' (Laville and Topping 2013: 8). Indeed, one article published in *The Guardian* online claimed that 'group grooming, as distinct from solitary sexual predators, tends to be by British Asians of Pakistani Muslim background living in poorer communities in the north' (White 2012). This viewpoint was mirrored in *The Times*. Sherman (2012) stated how:

> The Times has consistently argued that most child-sex offenders in England are white men, usually acting alone, but that in northern England and the Midlands a pattern of group offending has developed in which men of Pakistani heritage are significantly over-represented.

Other reporters from *The Times* (2012) acknowledged 'while *The Times* has always recognised that the majority of child-sex abusers are white men, we make no apology for having pointed out that a significant number of the perpetrators in grooming cases were of Pakistani origin'.

Other articles explicitly blamed Pakistani Muslim culture for the way these men had behaved. Articles taking this stance constructed the sexual exploitation of children as an inextricable feature of traditional South Asian (especially Pakistani) culture. For instance, the *Daily Telegraph* claimed that 'the status of women among some Asian men led to cases of white girls being sexually abused' (*The Telegraph* reporters 2012). Describing the perpetrators in the Rochdale case, they argued that 'All but one are Pakistani Muslims who come from a patriarchal peasant culture that obviously regards young white British girls as easy meat' (Pearson 2012a: 21). In more inflammatory terms, the *Mail Online* referred to the perpetrators as a 'small minority who see women as second class citizens, and white women probably as third class citizens' (Dewsbury 2012). *The Times* was similarly expressive: 'we can't say they haven't got an issue within their community because we've now had so many cases … What no one is going to say publicly is that some of them may regard and treat white girls in a totally different way to their own girls' (Norfolk 2012d). Discursive strategies associated with moral panics permeate representations of child sexual exploitation in the news media. Perpetrators are labelled as deviants among whom the problem is seen as pervasive: in this case, among all Pakistani/South Asian Muslims.

Another common theme in the media's representation of these cases was their effect on the South Asian community. *The Guardian* argued that 'a vibrant, cohesive, multicultural community has had to face the suggestion that the extreme and violent sexual exploitation by a group of Asian men of vulnerable white girls had a racial element' (Laville and Topping 2013: 8). Similarly, *The Telegraph* argued that 'Britain's Pakistani community must urgently address the problem of gangs of men systematically grooming and abusing young white girls' (Evans 2013a: 10), while a related piece suggested that 'some Asian communities are still "in denial" about ethnicity being a factor in child sexual exploitation cases' (Silverman 2013: 12). *The Times* quoted Jack Straw who stated: 'That is an issue that has to be addressed within the Asian community . . . these are small communities, so people would have a rough idea that there is a group of men who are abusing white girls in this way' (Norfolk 2012e). Media coverage of these cases commonly blamed the men involved and sought to hold whole communities accountable. Carter (2012a: 8) warned that the cases had 'sparked concerns about racial tensions in the north-west', especially as regards 'far-right elements'. Each of the papers detailed how, during the Rochdale trial, members of the British National Party and the English Defence League were present outside the courthouse to draw attention to what these groups called an 'epidemic of Muslim paedophile grooming across Britain' (Griffin 2012).

The *Daily Telegraph* was the only paper that discussed the different religious and ethnic sub-groups often subsumed under the label 'South Asian'. Pearson (2012b: 21), for instance, declared that 'it is an insult to Hindus, Sikhs and decent, integrated Muslims to classify those brutes [that is, the perpetrators] under the catch-all title of "Asian male"'. The Sikh Awareness Society echoed this sentiment, petitioning against the use of the generic label 'Asians' to describe those convicted of sexual grooming.[1]

Despite the overwhelming focus on culture, ethnicity and race, some of the articles considered multiple angles in their reporting. For example, Topping, writing for *The Guardian*, warned that 'a focus on ethnicity could mean victims are missed' (Topping 2012: 1). Carter (2012b) made a similar point in publicising the findings of a recent CEOP report (2011), stating that:

> … while it may appear there are a lot of stories focusing on cases involving predominantly Asian groups exploiting young white women, it's important to

> recognise that these are not the only child exploitation cases in the UK. Child sexual exploitation is not confined to one community, age demographic, social status or gender ... [I]n one case the first contact had been a white British male who groomed the girls as girlfriends, then passed them on to an Asian gang. The issue was one of vulnerability, not ethnicity.

The Telegraph similarly argued 'not all perpetrators were Asian and not all victims were white', expressing 'concern that the authorities might concentrate too much on race rather than looking at child sexual exploitation as a whole' (Marsden 2013b). Edwards (2013), for the *Mail Online,* went even further, publicising the findings of a recent study on grooming conducted by the Muslim Women's Network UK (2013):

> Gangs of Asian men who groom and sexually exploit children have been targeting Muslims within their own communities as well as white girls ... The study shows that offenders will target vulnerable youngsters of the same ethnicity – but rely on the Asian and Muslim culture of honour and shame to mask their vile crimes. ... [I]n the majority of cases offenders will groom members of their own community, feeding them drink and drugs and silencing them with promises of marriage to conceal the abuse.

Unfortunately, balanced articles of this type were scarce, contrasting sharply with the majority. This dichotomy becomes more apparent when comparing balanced articles to those published in *The Times*. Of the 30 articles analysed, Chief Investigative Reporter Andrew Norfolk wrote or contributed to 20 of them, expressing clear bias towards his personally crafted crime model of white victims and Pakistani perpetrators.

Only one article overtly criticised how the media reported grooming cases involving South Asian men. In *The Guardian,* Harker (2012) outlined a case markedly similar to the one in Rochdale, which unfolded at roughly the same time. The case involved eight men, seven of whom are white, who groomed fifteen vulnerable girls between the ages of thirteen and fifteen. As in the Rochdale case, the men targeted girls on the streets, 'plying them with drink and drugs before having sex with them' (Harker 2012: 10). Indeed, 'their methods were similar – often targeting children in care and luring them with, among other things, cuddly toys' (Harker 2012: 10). Despite the similarities, 'the story made barely a ripple in the national media' (Harker 2012: 10):

> Of the daily papers, only the Guardian and the Times reported it – on pages 17 and 26 respectively. There was no commentary anywhere on how these crimes shine a light on British culture, or how middle-aged white men have to confront the deep flaws in their religious and ethnic identity ... Though analysis of the case focused on how big a factor was race, religion and culture, the unreported story is of how politicians and the media have created a new racial scapegoat. In fact, if anyone wants to study how racism begins, and creeps into the consciousness of an entire nation, they need look no further. (Harker 2012: 10)

Failure of statutory agencies to protect victims, the third key factor used to frame reporting on grooming and child sexual exploitation, adds another layer of complexity to Harker's analysis. Filtered through a lens of racial and cultural deviance, media coverage and government policy have shaped public perception of South Asian men as espousing hegemonic masculinity. South Asian men are stereotyped as innately aggressive, learning such behaviour through patterns of culture and socialisation, seen as causal in sexual offending behaviour. Although hegemonic masculinity is a causal factor, solely ascribing it to a particular culture or ethnic identity ignores that it is premised on cross-cultural patriarchal values and norms; there can be no South Asian/Muslim 'version' of hegemonic masculinity. It is the relationship between patriarchy and

hegemonic masculinity that is key to understanding all forms of violence against women and girls.

Are statutory agencies failing victims due to fears that they will be perceived as racist?

A common explanation for the inadequate protection of victims is that statutory services, including police, 'were petrified of being called racist' (Veevers 2012). In the Rochdale case, the *Daily Telegraph* cited this rationale: 'Police and social workers were last night accused of failing to investigate an Asian paedophile gang for fear of being perceived as racist, leaving the men free to prey on up to 50 white girls' (Bunyan 2012). The *Mail Online* went further in reporting on an interview with one of the victims of the Rochdale gang (Watson and Narain 2013):

> Girl A is convinced that she and numerous other girls were abandoned to their fate because the authorities were terrified of appearing racist. 'They didn't want to acknowledge that it was Asian men hitting on white girls in case it started a race thing ... But it's not racist if it's really happening. I never wanted to be part of anyone's agenda. I just wanted to be rescued ...'.

All five newspapers expressed concerns that the 'issue is being brushed under the carpet because the authorities are fearful of being accused of racism' (Evans 2013b). As Norfolk (2012f) explained in *The Times*:

> Another confidential 2010 report for the Rotherham Safeguarding Children Board, noted that such crimes had 'cultural characteristics ... which are locally sensitive in terms of diversity'. It said: 'There are sensitivities of ethnicity with potential to endanger the harmony of community relationships ... Great care will be taken in drafting ... this report to ensure that its findings embrace Rotherham's qualities of diversity'. It is imperative that suggestions of a wider cultural phenomenon are avoided.

Many of the reporters who took this stance explicitly argued that respect for multiculturalism often results in neglecting manifestations of violence against women and girls specific to minority ethnic communities. A significant number of articles embraced the high profile nature of the issue, calling for the adoption of policies to foster cultural assimilation.

Blaming the authorities for failing to protect victims, many reporters shared the view that 'because police and social workers may have been scared of seeming racist ... there was a "colour-blind" approach ... that was potentially dangerous' (Watson and Narain 2013). When reporting on the Rochdale case for *The Guardian*, the Press Association (2012) described how:

> The 59-year-old ringleader was banned from court for calling the judge a 'racist bastard'. His barrister explained that his client 'had objected from the start to being tried by an all-white jury. He believes his convictions have nothing to do with justice but result from the faith and race of the defendants'. In other words, a racist who treats poor white girls as subhuman sexually believes it is he who is the victim of racism, when he is called to account for organising the gang-rape of under-age females. To be fair, it takes 40 years of well-intentioned multiculturalism to achieve that kind of moral mess ... .

The above analysis resonates with Critcher's dimensions of 'discursive construction' as key to identifying moral panics (Critcher 2009: 30). Creation of a perceived threat to moral order and consequent need for enhanced social control is the first dimension. Manipulation and over promotion of matters worthy of concern and condemnation can also be placed in this category when they generate disproportionate reactions. Delineating between panic and concern is not

always straightforward, generating significant debate over whether a given case constitutes moral panic (Critcher 2003).

South Asian men as folk devils

Cohen's recent formulation of the notion of a 'good moral panic' (2002: 11) implicitly suggests the existence of a bad moral panic. As such, it offers opportunities to make explicit the affective positioning of those who help foster and sustain moral panics, a matter that is often elided. This is critical in examining the consequences of attributing the label 'moral panic' to a particular issue, especially in determining its usefulness and whether it addresses the problem at stake. The current moral panic about South Asian sex offenders, driven by British newspaper reporting, significantly affects public perception of the problem and of what policy responses are appropriate. Construing South Asian men as dangerous sex offenders harnesses the protective role of the British State as a reformed patriarchy seeking to rescue white women from deviant and abusive minority ethnic men.

All of the newspaper articles explored in this study underscored that the victims in the recent high-profile cases of street grooming were white, while the majority of the perpetrators were of South Asian origin or descent. South Asian street grooming gangs received disproportionate coverage at the expense of other, similar cases involving mostly white perpetrators and/or ethnic minority victims. Skewed media reporting fuelled a moral panic linking ethnicity and child sexual exploitation. Over-reporting cases of South Asian men as perpetrators of grooming and sexual exploitation of white girls overlooks broader statistics and socioeconomic factors such as poverty and neglect, which often lie at the root of sexual exploitation. Research by the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (2011) about children who were groomed and sexually exploited by an offender they first met in a public place identified 1,217 offenders: 30 per cent were white, while 28 per cent were Asian (11 were Bangladeshi, 45 were Pakistani and 290 were described as 'Asian Other'). Of their 2083 victims, 61 per cent were white, while just 3 per cent were Asian and 33 per cent were referred to as 'other'. The report stressed that national conclusions about ethnicity cannot be drawn from the data, because much of the data came from a limited number of geographic areas (Cockbain and Brayley 2012). When the Office of the Children's Commissioner published *Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups* the following year, it found that the vast majority of perpetrators were men, though a wide age-range was uncovered: some offenders were as young as fourteen, while others were elderly. Critically, perpetrators and their victims were ethnically diverse. While some women's groups in the UK have suggested that concern over South Asian sex offenders constitutes a 'good' moral panic, raising awareness to protect girls from abuse, many also recognise that it distorts public perception of the prevalence of the problem *across* British society. More needs to be done to combat the full scope of child sexual exploitation and grooming cases, accounting for all potential perpetrators and victims. Raising moral outrage over this issue is a matter of priority, but should be achieved without recourse to racial stereotyping, helpful to no one lest future victims.

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[1] A petition against the use of the term 'Asians' to describe those convicted of sexual grooming of white girls is available at http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/we-the-undersigned-demand-that-politicians.

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