

Book review

Protecting Children and Adults from Abuse after Savile

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The aftermath of the disclosures and investigations into the predatory behaviour of Jimmy Savile has taken several forms and directions, including the establishment of a “cottage industry” of books and reports into how he was able to abuse for so long in situations where it was assumed that his victims would be safe. This is not to suggest that there are no hard lessons to be learnt, for a range of constituencies, from examining how he, and other celebrities of greater and lesser note, were able to insinuate themselves into positions of trust and power that enabled them to abuse their “victims” over a long period of time. My concern is that those lessons may be lost or lose focus through trying to apply them inappropriately.

I am aware that, as he died before the allegations against him could be fully investigated, technically Savile should be described as “an alleged abuser”; the weight of evidence against him, however, is such that it seems inappropriate and disrespectful to his accusers to do so.

I should, first of all, admit to being able to comment with any authority only on safeguarding adults, not safeguarding children; my knowledge and experience of the latter is either old and out-dated or limited to situations where abuse of both adults and children had occurred, including across the transition from childhood to adulthood. For the point of view of this review and this book, children are those aged under 18, adults those aged 18 and above.

I do believe that abuse, including sexual abuse, is primarily about the exercise of power and its misuse, rather than any other gratification of the perpetrator. Again, this is not to suggest that sexual abusers do not

gain sexual gratification from their actions, but that, like Savile, they will sexually abuse where they can, and if one group, such as children, are not accessible, they will target another that is. Savile, for example, abused pre-pubescent children to pensioners, males and females.

This book takes, as its starting point, the 75 reviews of the practice, process and procedures in the settings he is known to have visited or been involved with. From a consideration of their key findings and themes, practical steps are identified that can improve organisational safeguarding and to reduce the incidence of abuse in the future. Consideration is also given to international research into similar celebrity abusers and to other such cases in the UK. This is a valuable and welcome exercise and provides a detailed overview of Savile’s behaviour and how he was able to manipulate and exploit the systems, and the lack of them, to his own ends. It also correctly draws the conclusion that the assumptions that an organisation somehow becomes “safe” when abuse is discovered within it and responded to and that Savile was a one-off are both erroneous and dangerous. “Celebrity” is a relative term, and the control exerted by a charismatic figure such as Savile can also be exerted and misused by a popular member of staff or volunteer.

The book makes many important points very cogently: the danger of blurring personal and professional boundaries; “whistle-blowing” being a loaded and therefore an unhelpful term; the importance of “bystander programmes”; the concept of perpetrators being “hidden in plain sight”; the impact of conflicting priorities on the emphasis placed on safeguarding practice within organisations and the need for proactive not just reactive safeguarding practice.

It would have strengthened the book’s arguments, in my view, if the context in which Savile and the other historical abusers operated had been more explicitly

acknowledged. For example, Savile began his abuse before the tragic death of Maria Colwell and the subsequent increased awareness of child abuse; it is therefore hardly surprising if there was a lack of processes and symptoms to protect children and to prevent his activity. It also made it harder to implement any protection processes when they were established on staff and volunteers already in post and with accepted “eccentric” behaviour patterns. This is not to excuse Savile or any other abuser, nor to suggest “it couldn’t happen here now”. But without acknowledging the starting point of the journey to safeguard children and adults, you run the risk of not being clear on where it is you want to get to and how you might do so.

The book does not acknowledge the fact that adult pornography is freely available via the internet, etc., but may still be abusive and exploitative of its subjects; that some sexual abuse is for the perpetrator’s financial gain, not their sexual gratification; that genograms need to be extended to include social media; the implications of the transition period from children’s to adults’ services or that all of the SCRs referred to in the chapter re Education Settings related to mainstream schools, not those for students with special educational needs, such as a learning, physical or sensory disability. The latter, particularly, would have had a resonance for safeguarding adults.

My real criticism of this book however, refers to its lack of consideration of the implications of Savile and others to safeguarding adults. A simple example: the Care Act 2014 is not mentioned once in the entire book and neither is the Mental Capacity Act 2005. “No secrets” the statutory guidance for local authorities issued by the Department of Health in 2000 is mentioned once. You cannot discuss safeguarding adults without detailed reference to both of these Acts or without referencing Making Safeguarding Personal, the joint initiative between the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services and the Local Government Association. One criticism of the Francis Report into the Mid Staffs NHS Trust in 2013 was the fact that it makes no mention of adult safeguarding or the need to refer to the local Safeguarding Adults Board: this book, and

its approach to the NHS replicates that omission and considers the NHS just as a provider of in-patient services and safeguarding – both children but particularly adults – as a multi-disciplinary activity, not a multi-agency activity. This is reflected in the statement that “Cases of abuse of vulnerable patients are relatively rare in the NHS” – a statement that mental health, learning disability and older persons services service users and their families might very well dispute.

The book and all its articles refer consistently to “vulnerable adults”; this is a term that is no longer used or acceptable in safeguarding adults and perhaps epitomises the fact that this book is really about safeguarding children post Savile and the addition of the words “and adults” in the title a tactic to broaden its market.

The book fails to draw any distinction between “abuse” and “crime”; a distinction that surely exists, at least with regard to adults who, unlike children, can have the mental capacity to choose to be abused. It also fails to recognise that most if not all abuse will meet the definition of more than one type of abuse; for example, someone who is being sexually abused is almost certainly also being emotionally and physically abused and to place abuse into hermetically sealed silos minimises the effect of the abuse and the need for broad support services to its survivors.

Finally, there is no mention of the work being undertaken by the Ann Craft Trust with Sport England to develop best practice in safeguarding adults in Sport and Activity. Given the increased emphasis on Personalisation in Adult Social Care and the decrease in institutionalised day services for adults with care and support needs, this is becoming an issue of growing importance.

The above may appear a fairly damning critique of this book, and indeed it is. Had this book focused purely on the lessons to be learnt by children’s services post Savile, I suspect it would be of great value and importance (I have to say “I suspect” because, as I said at the very beginning of this review, safeguarding children is not my area of expertise). This is a pity because

Savile had no respect for the age, gender, disability or, to my knowledge, ethnicity or religion of his victims and there are important lessons to be learnt for safeguarding adults from his extensive history as a perpetrator and manipulator of safeguarding systems and processes. There is a book if not books

that could be written to consider these; sadly, this book is not it.

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