



Guardian Article Response

The rhetoric used in this article does raise concerns when compared to the reporting of similar sexual offences perpetrated against children. It is almost as if the fact that the victims, all young boys in the early stages of adolescence, were in some way complicit because of their emerging sexuality and that this somehow diminishes the scale of psychological injuries inflicted.

It remains true that many early pubescent boys do develop an interest in other boys. Quite why this is so is still unclear but it may be due to a surfeit of female hormones in the early stages of puberty (which is why boys experience the first stages of breast development) and may be Nature's way of protecting the gene pool from immature insemination. Or it might also be a means of protecting young boys from sexual exploitation by older females or young girls being exploited by over-sexed adolescent boys. In any event, this phase is usually short in the majority of males and they quickly develop more heterosexual interests.

Clearly, youngsters during this phase of physical and psycho-sexual development are especially vulnerable to exploitation by others. Firstly, the need for sexual gratification has burgeoned and requires satiety which inevitably leads to some form of experimentation. If this takes place between two boys at roughly the same level of development and is mutually 'consenting' the likelihood of lasting damage is minimal. However, when it involves adults it is a very different matter altogether because 'control' is inevitably lost so 'No' and 'Stop' aren't likely to be realistic options. Sexual activity will inevitably be far more serious than that expected or intended and at a pace that overwhelms the victim's ability to cope emotionally with the profound impact of early sexual experience.

Secondly, the individual has not developed any solid coping strategies for this new and profound influence in their thinking and behaviour. Human sexuality needs to develop gradually and safely if the individual is not to develop serious associated perceptions or 'hang-ups' consequent to badly formed conceptions about human sexual behaviour which is a huge defining part of who we are as individuals and as a species.

"Most of the abused boys willingly met the men and consented to sexual activity, according to Detective Inspector Delphine Waring from South Yorkshire police, who led the inquiry."

Was it 'willing' or were they persuaded at length by their abusers? Children are programmed to regard anyone over the age of 25 or so as 'old' and the thought of sexual intimacy should be utterly repugnant, just as adults regard intimacy with children equally so. If the victims had been young girls, the rhetoric would have been 'they were groomed' to meet the men.

Secondly, and astonishingly, is the suggestion they 'consented'. The law is clear on this issue: Any child under the age of 16 cannot give consent. Again, if the victims had been girls, this would have been stressed on any number of occasions – but not in this case. I find it extraordinary that a police Inspector leading an investigation of this kind could be so fundamentally ignorant on this point. Does this then mean that the abusers would not be charged with statutory rape? Am I surprised? No. In a case involving a seven year-old boy orally raped by a thirteen year-old a forensic psychologist described this as consenting in his report.



"Initially quite a few of the boys did not see themselves as victims because they had willingly gone to meet Marsh or Davis and there was no coercion or force used in most cases ... For some of the boys this was their first sexual experience."

This is classic: many victims do not properly understand their role in these circumstances and in time this can lead to a range of cognitive assumptions regarding their ordeal in terms of responsibility for what happened. In turn, these assumptions may exacerbate existing psychological injuries and negatively reinforce them each time such behaviour is repeated as some victims are driven to re-enact traumatic events.

As a first sexual experience for a young boy, this is potentially disastrous to their psychological well-being and psycho-sexual development as it is extremely unlikely it would have proceeded on the victims' terms and thus been emotionally as well as physically traumatic. It is good that this point has been made because many victims of sexual assault and rape do not always know they are victims and thus unlikely to report the crime allowing the perpetrator to remain at large and the damage inflicted to remain unrecognised and untreated. A further enduring consequence of unresolved sexual trauma is the propensity for subsequent sexual encounters to trigger the 'fawn' or 'freeze' mode whereby the individual reverts back to childhood with a concomitant lack of control over the situation and is thus once again highly vulnerable to exploitation by others.

The inescapable truth is that these two men wilfully targeted young men and boys via the internet and lured them into meeting. This did not happen spontaneously but deliberately and over a prolonged period. They knew only too well what they were doing and why they were doing it. Furthermore, for one to have HIV, not disclose this to his victims and go on to have unprotected sex indicates a complete lack of regard for the victims as anything other than objects to be used for sexual gratification. Clearly, their safety was never an issue to these men.

The internet can be an incredibly dangerous place for vulnerable people to be targeted and abused by others. I agree that vulnerable individuals must exercise more caution in this respect when interacting with complete strangers or in what they choose to look at. Parents also have an obligation to be more aware of what their children are using the internet for – a task that is a lot easier said than done. But that does not mean they are to blame for the actions of these two men, or those like them. They made bad decisions and choices, for sure, but that is a reflection of their vulnerability to on-line predators who initiated proceedings and knowingly exploited vulnerable youngsters; the responsibility is entirely theirs for doing so though this is not made abundantly clear in the article as it should be.

To be fair to the police in this instance, the reporting of what was said may characteristically be flawed and / or misquoted and we must exercise some caution in taking this article at face value. The key issue here, as always, is the way the press have represented this story. There is a refreshing lack of sensationalism about it, but the overall rhetoric is still dubious and leaves the reader with the impression that, actually, these boys got what they asked for.