CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

Scholars of social policy, history, and media have outlined the ways in which prominent physicians, children's charities, and 'moral panics' have shifted the understandings of child abuse and guided child protection policy in the late twentieth century.[1] Yet, attention must also be paid to the activism and campaigning of people who were themselves personally affected by child abuse. This is a recent history. It was as recently as the 1960s that clinicians invented the battered child syndrome, hoping to draw public and political attention towards abused children. Discussions about this term between paediatric radiologists and the NSPCC were ingrained with concern about the emotional inner lives and lived experiences of children and parents. Nonetheless, children, parents, and survivors did not initially have public policy or media spaces in which to represent their own experiences in their own terms.

This began to change from the late 1960s and through the 1970s, as parents formed small self-help groups and made representations to Parliament, looking to make public the inner dynamics of family life. Likewise, sets of moral and media crises—notably about paedophilia and the death of Maria Colwell—brought to the fore questions of how parents, teachers, the state, and the voluntary sector should educate, protect, and empower children. The processes through which experience and emotion became forms of expertise, akin to and in tension with medical, legal, social work, and political forms of evidence, accelerated from the 1980s. It

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was in this decade that numerous new groups led by parents mobilised, alongside groups looking to represent children and to provide mechanisms for children's self-representation on the public stage and in everyday life. These new voluntary groups drew on and contributed to a reconfiguration of parents and children in professional discourse, whereby psychologists and social workers made new examination of the inner lives of families. Such organisations powerfully mobilised media interest in parent and child emotions and experiences—often representing their work in terms of tropes of ordinariness, respectability, and gendered emotion.

By exposing their experiences and emotions, parents found new levels of influence and shifted professional, media, and policy debates of the 1980s and 1990s. Many parent campaigners displayed professional and experiential forms of expertise, and clinicians and social workers, likewise, following pressure from parents, began to discuss their family, personal, and emotional lives in press. By the 1990s and 2000s, the processes through which experience and emotion became expertise shifted once again. Importantly, for the first time, survivor experiences became publicised through agony aunt columns, public policy research, and in memoirs. The fora through which survivor experience became visible, for the first time, extended earlier interests in, and mechanisms created to access, child and parent voices, and also reflected the development of trauma studies. While the experiential and emotional accounts offered by children, parents, and survivors were in part in tension with professional accounts, for example in the Cleveland case, from the 1990s new models of partnership also developed between statutory authorities, families, and media. In this context, and particularly under the New Labour governments, leaders of voluntary organisations were appointed on consultative panels and as tsars, exercised informal power in Tony Blair's extended 'sofa government', and made significant interventions through media collaboration.

By looking at this history, we see the extent to which experience and emotion have become specially valued, akin to and challenging ideas about professional expertise and evidence, and thus a growing influence in policy and upon broader social attitudes, in late twentieth-century Britain. This book thus traces the emergence of a politics of expertise, experience, and emotion, and builds a framework for later examinations of how, exactly, children, parents, and survivors navigated, used, rejected, and subverted new public and political spaces. Already from this book, it is clear that any types of experience and emotion which became significant were heavily mediated: by cultural narratives and structural hierarchies; by the work of campaign groups, press, policy, and psychological and sociological research; and by conversations between and among children, parents, and survivors. Moving into the twenty-first century, questions began to emerge about *whose* experiences and emotions were being disseminated publicly, and about the extent to which voluntary organisations were representative of broader identity-constituencies. Critical challenges were also raised in relation to survivor memoirs, with press asking whether the public sharing of experience was—and should be—therapeutic, mobilising, or entertaining.

The history of late twentieth-century Britain is incomplete without attention being paid to small-scale sites of family and voluntary activism, which transcend precise characterisation but which incorporated facets of self-help, identity politics, and non-governmental organisations. These forms of activism have blurred the lines between 'the public' and the long-standing sites of 'expertise' in medicine, law, and policy. Voluntary groups were often organised and led by people who themselves had personal experiences of the issues faced by their membership. Through the campaigning of these small organisations, some members of the public have themselves become 'expert'. This has, to some extent, always been characteristic of lay people drawn into the organisation of voluntary action, but status was now conferred as the result of personal experience and the description of emotion.

Voluntary organisations may have been characterised by their development of a form of experiential and emotional expertise, but the deployment of professional forms of knowledge was also important in establishing their influence. Nonetheless, the small size of these organisations, and their struggles for funding, enabled them to remain critical of government, media, and professions. The work of these groups thus adds nuance to theories in policy, sociology, and history that there was a 'gap' between 'the expert' and 'the public' in the post-war period, whereby 'experts' gained authority over 'the public' and the public felt less engaged in the processes of democracy.[2] Experiential and emotional forms of expertise have bridged gaps between expert and public thinking, and children, parents, and survivors have actively mobilised, deployed, and subverted these new forms of moral, social, and political authority.

NEWNESS

The changes highlighted in this book have longer-term precedents. The historians Brian Harrison, Craig Calhoun, and Beth Breeze have all cautioned against seeing post-war trends in the voluntary sector as 'new', tracing older traditions in late nineteenth-century publicity campaigns, identity politics, and philanthropy.[3] Certainly, the small voluntary organisations traced in this book did not embody an unprecedented form of activism. The work of these groups echoed long-standing traditions of mutual aid and self-help. ‘Figurehead leaders’ have long been significant in the voluntary sector.[4] These groups sought to influence policy-makers and to seek funding from the state while also criticising contemporary governments, paralleling the long history of a ‘moving frontier’ between state, citizen, and voluntary organisations.[5] Concerns about child abuse likewise have faded in and out of concern through various historical periods, as has state and social work interest in identifying ‘problem families’.[6] Even the idea that experience is a form of expertise has historical precedent: the belief in particular that mothering skills were derived from home life has functioned throughout the early and mid-twentieth century, for example.[7]

Nonetheless, some facets of the activisms traced in this book were peculiar to Britain in the late twentieth century. The successes of voluntary groups traced here were facilitated by growing political interest in public participation, which Alex Mold and Virginia Berridge have persuasively argued was distinctive to the post-war period and particularly to the 1990s and 2000s.[8] In the 1960s and 1970s, numerous activists mobilised to address issues of identity and inequality—a driving force behind the campaigning of many of these organisations.[9] The work of second-wave feminism in particular was significant in presenting the personal as political, and in encouraging multiple women to discuss and to challenge their experiences of violence. More broadly, the voluntary sector was flourishing in this period, also visible in the development of non-governmental organisations and new self-help groups, each presenting conflicting models of experience and expertise which underpinned the shifts explored by this book.[10]

Debates about child abuse and child protection also emerged in a renewed and distinct form from the 1960s. Importantly, new moral and political thinking about ‘the family’ inflected such debates—anxieties about an overt ‘invasion’ into family life and, by contrast, about the ‘breakdown’ of a former ‘golden age’.[11] Notably, children, parents, and survivors themselves increasingly played a role in defining these concerns, in the contexts of newly emergent ‘confessional cultures’ and ‘cultures of self-expression’.[12] Discussions about child abuse did not shift from a medical to a social problem over the late twentieth century, nor from concerns about physical to sexual to emotional violence. Rather, this book has demonstrated that these understandings were entwined. From the 1960s discussions, paediatricians immediately looked to assess the social and psychological causes of abuse and to make referrals to social agencies. Even by the mid-to-late 1980s, abuse had not solely become a social problem: paediatricians continued to discuss abuse as a 'preventable disease' or 'health problem'.[13] Discussions about child protection also interlinked thinking about the minds, bodies, and emotions of children, parents, and survivors, in terms of the physical effects of emotional turmoil, for example.

Another factor distinct to the late twentieth century, and which facilitated the influence of small voluntary groups, was changing communication technologies. Joining peer support meetings, telephone helplines became significant for children, parents, and survivors—a distinctly post-war medium first deployed by voluntary organisations including the Samaritans (established in 1953), Britain's Gay Switchboard (1974), and ChildLine (1986). Spokespeople for ChildLine spoke passionately about the 'value of voice' which, they contended, enabled children to further 'emotionally engage' with discussing their experiences.[14] In later years, groups seeking to connect with children, parents, and survivors also made substantial use of the internet, a new form of technology to the 1990s and 2000s which enabled people to make their experiences visible from their own homes, in private, and anonymously, if wanted. Survivor groups in particular created websites quickly and cheaply which were used to lobby and criticise political work, to bring people into contact with one another, and to share experiences and emotions expressed through art, poetry, and text.

Politically, the Premiership of Margaret Thatcher brought a distinct new set of contexts for the voluntary sector and for child protection. Attempts by government to 'tame' the voluntary sector, and to push large voluntary groups to meet centralised priorities, created new spaces for smaller organisations to flourish.[15] While popular individualism was a key ideological theme in this moment, new collective solutions also emerged in child protection, consciously forged by charities looking to promote group responses to family problems, and to counter a perceived 'breakdown' in community life.[16] The New Labour years likewise brought a distinct set of challenges and opportunities for voluntary groups. Individual figurehead leaders became the key focus of policy consultation. Nonetheless, Blair's governments also introduced new legislation, responding to the Sara Payne campaign, which looked to give parents more rights—and more responsibilities—in their own communities.

A set of entwined cultural, political, technological, and social shifts, therefore, made the narratives traced in this book distinct to the late twentieth century, and also revealing about the growing power of expertise, experience, and emotion in multiple public spaces. The narratives traced in this book were also distinct, in several ways, to modern *British* history. On the one hand, late twentieth-century North America and Western Europe also saw the development of child, parent, and survivor organisations.[17] Nonetheless, this book has also demonstrated how distinct cultural assumptions, political contexts, and modes of voluntary action shaped how family activism was realised in Britain, for example in terms of specific and historically grounded conceptions of public and private space, family life, confessional culture, respectability, and individuality. In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, communities of clinicians—dermatologists, paediatric radiologists, and general practitioners—worked between Britain and America to conduct the initial pioneering research about the battered child syndrome. In subsequent decades, however, child, parent, and survivor groups only occasionally made direct contact with their American and European counterparts. The lack of contact reflected the limited resources held by these small groups but also, as this book has traced, a cultural assumption that child protection issues in Britain were ‘unique’, and that British people would discuss experience and emotion in a less explicit manner than those in America, for example.[18]

Contemporary Relevance

Today, it may seem obvious that politicians would declare their intentions to protect children from child abuse—as seen, for example, in the centrality of child protection to general election manifestos.[19] However, this book provides a timely reminder that it was only in recent years that child protection has featured so prominently on the political agenda. As demonstrated in the introduction, there was concern about ‘cruelty to children’ in the Victorian period and about child sexual abuse in the 1920s. Thereafter, awareness of, and concern about, child abuse was in part lost, particularly with the fracturing of the women’s movement and as the NSPCC redirected its attentions elsewhere.[20]

Concerns about child abuse therefore may seem pervasive and powerful today but have faded in and out of social and political attention over time. In this context, policy-makers and professionals cannot afford to be complacent that continuing attention will be paid to the narratives of children, parents, and survivors. Indeed, another significant ‘lesson’ from this book is that while there has been a broad shift towards listening to explanations of experience since 1960, not all individuals have benefited. Looking to cases such as at Rotherham, where 1400 children were sexually abused for over 16 years between 1997 and 2013, demonstrates that further efforts must be made to enable children to describe their experiences, with particular attention paid to facilitating the testimonies of structurally disadvantaged children. Innovation may come from the voluntary sector, and historically small charities and campaign groups have made notable attempts to address structural inequalities, and to ensure that all children feel comfortable in reporting abuse. At the same time, voluntary groups and policy-makers have also shied away from analysing the relationships between child protection and power, and from confronting questions of *whose* experiences and emotions have become expertise over the late twentieth century.

In terms of future discussion, this book also demonstrates that political and public concerns about child protection have at once been deeply political but also framed as inherently non-political. With growing social and political concern about child abuse since 1960, interest groups have sought to delineate social changes—or even social groups—whom they dislike as threats to the protection of children. Historically, the New Right and Margaret Thatcher were significant in this regard. In 1974, Keith Joseph looked to tie the post-war settlement to a vision of Britain as a 'nation of hooligans and vandals, bullies and child-batterers, criminals and inadequates'.[21] A decade later as prime minister, Thatcher's famous speech in *Woman's Own*, which used the phrase 'no such thing as society', argued that the post-war welfare expansion had placed an increased financial burden on individual men, women, and families. This, Thatcher argued, had facilitated a *moral* decline whereby children who had 'the right to look to their parents for help, for comfort' were experiencing 'either neglect or worse than that, cruelty'.[22] These speeches sought to tie social concerns about child abuse to the post-war settlement; a critique which was remade by the *Daily Mail* in the 1970s and 1980s in terms of linking violence to the permissive society.[23]

Concerns about child protection have been deeply political—used to criticise the post-war settlement and permissive society, for example—but at the same time politicians and media have sought to present child protection as non-political and an 'all-party' concern.[24] While positioning child protection as non-political, politicians have also accused one another of using the topic politically, for 'cheap publicity stunts' or 'great public relations play'.[25] Recognising this politics, one survivor, testifying to the Home Affairs select committee in 2002, argued that he wanted his 'experiences to be used to inform' not 'as a weapon to score political points'.[26] A vision of child protection as non-political has enabled politicians to bypass questions about how different parties support statutory services and the voluntary sector. At the same time, this vision has also enabled small charities to offer relatively radical programmes, visible, for example, in terms of how Kidscape's educational materials bypassed concurrent New Right anxieties about sex education.

Overall, this book traces a politics of expertise, experience, and emotion which developed in the late twentieth century in Britain, and which was often mediated and represented by small voluntary organisations. These small groups collaborated with and criticised clinicians, social workers, and policy-makers, and in doing so carved out a new space in media and public policy in which the experiences and emotions of public groups would be sought out as 'expert'. These groups challenged conceptual and lived gaps between expert and public thinking and divisions between 'professional' and 'personal' forms of expertise. They reshaped ideas of child protection to include public consultation, though there were limits in the extent to which their work would be able to subvert long-standing power structures, with gender, race, ethnicity, class, and age continuing to inflect the ability of children, parents, and survivors to enforce change. Nonetheless, the development of an expertise and a politics grounded in experience and emotion was a significant phenomenon of late twentieth-century Britain, which must be explored, traced, and analysed across the fields of health, welfare, and social life.

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