

*We have all been appalled at the abuse suffered by so many young girls in Rotherham. Children were ignored, sometimes even blamed, and issues were swept under the carpet – often because of a warped and misguided sense of political correctness. That culture of denial which let them down so badly must be eradicated. Today, I am sending an unequivocal message that professionals who fail to protect children will be held properly accountable and council bosses who preside over such catastrophic failure will not see rewards for that failure.*

David Cameron, 3 March 2015

## **Introduction**

On the morning of the Child Sexual Exploitation summit (March, 2015) David Cameron announced that social workers and other local officials across the country may face up to five years' imprisonment if they were to wilfully neglect child abuse. He proposed that a new piece of legislation would be introduced which would send "an unequivocal message" to social workers that those who failed to protect children properly would be held properly accountable (Holehouse, 2015). This announcement was made following the release of an independent inquiry report into child sexual exploitation (CSE) in Rotherham. The author of this report was a senior civil servant, Louise Casey.

Casey was appointed to lead on this inspection into Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council (RMBC) by Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. At the time, Casey was working for Pickles as Director General of the Troubled Families programme. Although both projects referred to different situations, CSE in Rotherham and 'turning around' lives of troubled young people in the other, there are a number of similarities between the two (Casey, 2012:4). Partly, this was because children's welfare has long been a source of concern for politicians but also because in more recent years there

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has been an explicit focus on penalising certain groups which fail to accept responsibility for their own actions (Gillies, 2005). Casey's findings from the Rotherham Inspection would not only raise a number of concerns about the way in which CSE was handled but it would also produce information which would promote the criminalisation of social workers (Featherstone et al. 2015).

Despite this contentious issue it is difficult to disagree with the Rotherham Report's opening declaration which stated that 'terrible things happened and on a significant scale' (Casey 2015:5). However, whilst we agree with this comment and believe that substantial improvements do need to be made to the way in which professionals approach child sexual exploitation, we will argue that the inspection carried out may actually prevent us from fully understanding what did happen in Rotherham, why it happened and consequently, what is required to minimise the chances of it happening again.

In this article, we will begin by detailing the historical context in order to explain what happened in Rotherham between the years of 1997-2015 and how certain events culminated with the initiation of Casey's investigation. We will then explore the report produced following the Rotherham inspection which we will refer to throughout the rest of the paper as the 'Casey Report'. By using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach we will firstly examine what was written in the report and how it was written and, then, using Steven Lukes' Three Dimensional Power framework, we will discuss some of the issues that we expected would be discussed but were not.

In our analysis of the report we will explore and discuss why we believe there may be more 'uncomfortable truths' than those explicitly highlighted in the Casey report (Casey, 2015: 5). We will then conclude by making the argument that the current government's 'moral

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agenda' and neo-liberal reforms, which actively focus on local practice and local politics, do little to actually address the problem of CSE (Gillies, 2005:71). We suggest that if social work organisations are to address this issue properly then all groups in society need to work together differentially.

### **Setting the scene: Rotherham 1997-2015**

The phenomenon of CSE has only been fully recognised recently (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2013). Although social workers have been coming to terms with understanding how to handle issues such as secrecy and grooming since the 1980s, they have been 'clueless' when faced with the 'organised barbarianism' perpetrated on young women by groups of men (Ferguson, 2015). Thus in the early 1990s when community youth workers in Rotherham, a large town in the South of Yorkshire, started to uncover information relating to this new form of child abuse, which was being perpetrated by adults against children as young as 11, there was little properly known about it at that time (Pidd, 2014).

Youth workers however were still concerned with what they learned and reported their anxieties to senior members of Rotherham Council. In 1997, the council responded by founding a youth project, called Risky Business. Its purpose was to carry out voluntary work with young people between 11 and 25 years, providing sexual health advice, and help in relation to alcohol and drugs, self-harm, eating disorders, parenting and budgeting. By the late 1990s, Risky Business had identified that there were a large number of girls who were at risk of sexual exploitation (Jay, 2014). Yet despite promising to make CSE a priority, the support of senior members from the police and the council began to wane once reports started to reveal that the number of children being abused was growing and that this abuse was being predominantly perpetrated by Asian men (Pidd, 2014).

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In 2002 a study was carried out by an unnamed home office researcher. Her findings suggested that an estimated 270 children had been sexually exploited. However, senior police officers were reluctant to believe the data contained in the research report and argued that these figures were in fact exaggerated (Williams, 2014) . In an effort to prove the figures were excessive the police commissioned another researcher, Dr Angie Heal, to carry out further evaluations. This led to two further reports being published in 2003 and 2006 which not only supported the findings of the home office report but also indicated that there were links between CSE and drugs, guns and criminality in the borough (Jay, 2014).

The findings from the Heal reports were taken seriously and prompted a series of police investigations which took place between 2008 and 2013. Operation Central began in 2008 and in 2010, eight men were tried for a series of sexual offences against young girls.

However, despite 80 perpetrators having been originally identified, only five were indicted (Pidd, 2014). Rotherham failed to secure any further convictions until February 2016, when four men and two men were found guilty of 55 offences (BBC, 2016).

In September 2012, confidential police and social services' documents which threatened to expose a deliberate 'cover up' of information by the council were leaked to investigative journalist Andrew Norfolk from *The Times* newspaper (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2013). It was at this point, when the media became interested in Rotherham, that the situation started to gather more momentum. Norfolk's articles prompted the Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC) (2012-2013) to carry out a year-long inquiry into the issue of localised grooming which was reported to have taken place in both Rochdale and Rotherham.

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Although the HASC report was extremely critical of the practice conducted by both local authorities, it was even more disparaging towards Rotherham. This was in part because the Chief Executive in Rochdale appeared to have 'faced the situation head on' (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2013:27) whereas the Rotherham Local Safeguarding Children's Board was criticised for trying to protect rather than scrutinize its members (Home Affairs Select Committee, 2013). Nonetheless the committee recognised that CSE was a national problem, not one just reserved to the North as depicted by Andrew Norfolk investigative journalism. The HASC (2013) further identified that the majority of Local Children Safeguarding Boards were not fulfilling their responsibilities because professionals appeared to misunderstand the grooming process by assuming that young people were willing participants rather than victims of sexual abuse. But what is also of interest, and a point we will return to later, is that the HASC also noted that the majority of child protection practice was focused on children under 5, and not on teenagers. Despite highlighting this as an issue, it is interesting to note that no consideration was given as to why this may have been the case.

The HASC (2013:62) concluded their report by making a number of recommendations to government, most importantly that 'the commitment must be maintained' to tackle this problem nationwide. These included improved training and also an increase in resources. However, both the Children's Minister at the time, Tim Loughton, and his successor Edward Timpson, both felt that their focus needed to be channelled towards ensuring 'a decrease in resources' (2013:11). Their comments concerned the HASC who responded by arguing that if CSE was to be tackled appropriately then the government needed to recognise that the 'failure of these cases was both systemic and cultural' (2013:11). Therefore, if government were to seriously tackle this issue they needed to provide authorities with more resources and support.

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In November 2013, in response to the Committee's findings, Rotherham Council commissioned Professor Alexis Jay to lead an independent inquiry into the situation. They were not prepared for what she would find. Instead of confirming the findings of the Heal Reports which asserted that hundreds of children had been sexually exploited, Jay contended that the figure was actually closer to 1400; a number she considered to be a 'conservative estimate' (Jay, 2014: 1). In addition, Jay condemned Rotherham for failing to act effectively against the abuse that had been undertaken. Although Jay recognised that 'good work' had been carried out by Risky Business, she asserted that the agency had not been consulted or listened to effectively, because its success incited 'professional jealousy' in others (Jay, 2014: 81).

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 2015, Eric Pickles announced that there would be yet another independent inspection which would examine the council's exercise of its functions on governance, children and young people, and taxi and private hire licensing (DCLG, 2014a). Despite numerous other locations such as Bristol, Oxford, Newcastle Rochdale, and Derby experiencing similar concerns about large scale CSE, Rotherham was the only place that 'benefitted' from central government scrutiny. This inspection would be led by Louise Casey, who is also well known for her candour and her ability to get things done quickly. Casey's opposition to the kind of methodical, rigorous research that might lead to more credible findings is renowned. During a speech to the Association of Chief Police Officers, she argued that research was a hindrance and not a help and stated that "If No. 10 says bloody 'evidence-based policy' to me one more time I'll deck them" (*The Guardian*, 2005).

However although these comments sound alarming, there were still other concerns to be considered. In her Troubled Families role, Pickles was the minister to whom Casey

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ultimately reported to. It was therefore concerning when Casey was selected to lead the Rotherham inspection given that Pickles had made claims that the report would be an 'independent inspection' (DCLG, 2014b). Even though Casey was certainly independent of Rotherham, she was not independent from central government, the agency which commissioned her report.

Casey has also been noted to have a clear position on social workers which is as unequivocal as her position on research. When discussing the Troubled Families Programme, Casey has been quoted as saying 'we are not running some cuddly social workers' programme to wrap everybody in cotton wool' (quoted in Winnett and Kirkup 2012) as well as suggesting in her own report that social workers colluded with parents to find excuses for their failures (Casey, 2013).

Despite these antagonistic feelings towards social workers being voiced publicly, Casey's report into Rotherham was still accepted unconditionally by the government. The findings, which reported that social work agencies were 'in denial' and unable to deal with 'uncomfortable truths' (Casey, 2015:5), would not only lead to the resignation of the entire Cabinet of Rotherham Council, but also initiate plans to implement a criminal charge for those who failed to protect children from sexual exploitation (Stevenson, 2015). In the next section we explain the methodology used to analyse the Casey Report in more detail.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, known as the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), was adopted to analyse the Casey Report. Although there is no consistent CDA methodology and no single way of gathering data (Wodak & Meyer, 2009), Fairclough & Wodak (1997: 258) suggest that CDA examines discourse – language use in speech and

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writing – as a form of 'social practice' because 'discourse is socially constitutive'. As well as being socially conditioned, it also constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities and relationships between people and groups of people. Since discourse is so socially consequential, it gives rise to important issues of power and may, under certain conditions, be operationalised or put into practice (Fairclough, 2010).

Using DHA to analyse documents, such as the Casey Report, enables researchers to decipher 'the ideologies that establish, perpetuate or fight dominance' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009: 88).

Reisigl and Wodak (2001) recommend a focus on five questions identified within the DHA which are: How are persons named and referred to linguistically? What traits, characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to them? By means of what arguments and argumentation schemes do specific persons or social groups try to justify and legitimise the exclusion, discrimination, suppression and exploitation of others? From what perspective or point of view are these namings, attributions and arguments expressed? And are the respective discriminating utterances articulated overtly, are they even intensified or are they mitigated? These five questions help to identify different types of discursive strategies which Reisigl and Wodak (2001) have referred to as: referential; predicational; argumentation; framing; and intensifying.

These strategies enabled us to carefully identify and examine inconsistencies and paradoxes within the Casey report (2015). This method of critique also made explicit ways in which discourse(s) may have been manipulated and operationalized which we considered to be highly significant given that the report was concerned with the practice of child protection. However, we recognised that analysing the discourse(s) within the Casey Report only enabled an examination of what had been published and more specifically, what was



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deemed to be publishable. We thus developed our analysis further by drawing from Steven Lukes' radical view of power. This provided us with a framework to consider and examine information that was not to be found in the content of the report but which could reasonably be expected to be considered or included.

Lukes (2005) has highlighted how there is a second dimension involved because the exercise of power goes beyond explicit and overt behaviour in decision-making. Drawing on the work of Crenson (1971:26) who argued that the proper object of investigation is 'not political activity but political inactivity', the second dimension encourages the examination of the ways in which legitimate issues, concerns and grievances have been kept off political agendas by effectively closing off discussions. Lukes (2005: 28) extended this analysis of power further to include a 'third dimension' whereby power is used to ensure legitimate grievances are not even raised because people 'can see or imagine no alternative to it'.

All three dimensions of power are considered in the following sections. In part one of the findings section, we explore how DHA analysis of the text in the Casey Report revealed the observable interests and decisions of politicians. In part two, we consider some of the 'uncomfortable truths' which were absent from the report and discuss the factors that had been suppressed (Casey, 2015:5). In the discussion section, we examine why the focus of the government's response was to predominantly frame CSE as a 'local government' problem, rather than address the myriad of structural factors which contribute to children's vulnerability nationally.

## **Part 1: Discourse analysis of the Casey Report**

### *1. Labelling Rotherham as a 'troubled' organisation*

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The first discursive strategy that we used to analyse the report was 'referential or nomination strategies' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001: 44). By examining how persons were named or referred to linguistically in the Rotherham Report, we noted that participants were rarely discussed as individuals. Instead, the behaviours and (in)actions of these individuals were imputed to whole organisations. In the same way that an anti-social or truanting child is enough for a family to be labelled as 'troubled' (Casey, 2012), the failings of officers and councillors from RMBC were treated as a failing of the entire council. This created a political myth that Rotherham is a single homogeneous entity, not an organisation which consists of different individuals from different hierarchies, for example:

*Rotherham has at times taken more care of its reputation than it has of its most need (p5)*

*RMBC demonstrates a resolute denial of what has happened in the borough (p10)*

*RMBC has a culture of suppressing bad news and ignoring difficult issues. This culture is deep-rooted; RMBC goes to some length to cover up information and to silence whistle-blowers (p11)*

When writing about the creation of political myths, Ernst Cassirer (1946: 285) argued that in 'primitive societies', it was not the individuals but the group which was 'the moral subject' whereby 'a sort of miasma or social contagion' developed and encouraged contamination of others. It was as a result of this collective identity that revenge and punishment was therefore directed to the group as a whole rather than specific individuals. However, it needs to be noted his was not always case in the Casey Report because in some parts staff were praised:

*Inspectors found many committed, hardworking and dedicated staff working for Rotherham Council including frontline staff and social workers. Inspectors acknowledge that it cannot be easy for them to go into work every day intending to do a good job... (p14)*

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Yet, in the majority of cases, where individuals were commended, it appeared as if they were being utilised to demonstrate that they were exceptions to the rule because they were acting in the face of significant pressure.

## 2. *Traits of Rotherham*

The use of 'predicational' discursive strategies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001: 44) was examined to understand the ways in which traits, characteristics, qualities and features of participants, or more specifically, of RMBC in its entirety, were presented in the report. Casey (2015) identified that RMBC had three main traits: a series of problematic cultures; an attitude of denial; and archaic attitudes and dispositions.

### **A series of problematic cultures**

The word 'culture' appears 38 times in the Casey Report. In the overwhelming majority of these instances, it is used to depict problematic behaviours originating within, and specific to, the council. We are informed that Rotherham suffered from, 'an archaic culture of sexism, bullying and discomfort around race' (p9). This point is reinforced a page later when we are reminded that there was 'a pervading culture of sexism, bullying and silencing debate' (p10) which suppressed 'bad news' and ignored 'difficult issues'. This problem which was not only 'deep-rooted' (p11) but stemmed from 'a wider culture of clinging onto anything positive within Rotherham and not facing up to the truth of the situation' (p24).

Although Casey acknowledged that culture is difficult to 'inspect' (p28), references are still nonetheless made throughout the report to an 'unhealthy culture' (p28), a 'macho culture' (p28), a 'culture of shouting and abuse' (p30), a 'culture of not following up actions' (p66), a 'silo culture' (p67) and 'a culture of patronage and an unwillingness to tackle unacceptable conduct by some Councillors' (p77).

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This prominence of cultural explanations for the lack of action around CSE is an exemplar of the *culturalization of politics* (Brown, 2006: 19). With all the references made to culture, Rotherham is thus portrayed as an organisation which was 'ruled by culture' (Brown, 2006: 20). With so much focus being placed on the 'culture' of Rotherham, the culturization of politics approach appears to neglect the role of the political agencies who, in the wider cultural context, also had a significant influence on the way in which Rotherham functioned. Whilst some government officials may see their role as increasing the public's awareness of abuse, the approach actually adopted by policy makers and other professional groups has instead contributed to 'a climate of fear, a climate of mistrust and a climate of blame' (Ayre, 2001:889). This is apparent in that the Casey Report fails to include the wider implications of the roles that policy makers have on social work practice; a significant point which even the HASC noted and subsequently warned Tim Loughton and Edward Timpson that any failures in cases of CSE needed to be considered as 'systemic and cultural' issues (HASC, 2013: 11).

Elsewhere, Mamdani (2004: 18) has argued, when discussing Islam in what he terms 'Culture Talk', that 'bad' cultures seem to have 'no history, no politics and no debates'. Instead, people appear to adhere to or conform to a simplistic and apolitical notion of 'culture'. And in this context, this has led to the (in)actions of politicians and national newspapers in the case of Rotherham being excluded or overlooked in the Casey Report (Maier, 2013).

### **An attitude of denial**

Following the interviews that were carried out as part of the investigation into Rotherham Casey noted that there were four 'distinct forms of denial' were noted:

1. Denial of the accuracy of Professor Jay's methods and findings;

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2. Denial of the extent of the issue of sexual exploitation, particularly in Rotherham;
3. Denial of culpability as a result of Rotherham holding the belief that sexual exploitation was 'being dealt with elsewhere';
4. Denial that sexual exploitation remained a significant problem (Casey, 2015: 19).

Yet the Casey Report gives little credence to the responses given by those who were interviewed. Despite quoting from the interviews of twelve participants, all of whom could not establish how Jay (2014) arrived at a figure of 1400 children, Casey does not use their concerns to explore this number further. This is concerning given that previous reports, carried out by the unnamed home office researcher and Dr Angie Heal, found that an estimated 270 children had been sexually exploited (Williams, 2014). Instead of considering this, Casey argued:

*...it was not possible to assess numbers based on RMBCs own records, leaving room for ongoing and further disputes around the number of victims of CSE... We have concluded that the 1400 figure is a conservative one and that RMBC and South Yorkshire Police (where some also dispute the figures) would do better to concentrate on taking effective action rather than seeking to continue a debate about the numbers (2015: 22).*

Rather than therefore exploring the interviewees concerns further, this inconsistency which has emerged in the data collection is instead explained as participants who are 'in denial'. Their denial to accept what has happened is then further supported through the use of emotive phrases such as 'the uncontested facts' (p.139), 'undeniable and cohesive facts' (p.26) and 'uncomfortable truths' (p. 40). Yet these affective terms do little to explicate how Jay arrived at the figure of 1400 children, and they do not answer the queries of the twelve participants. But as Skeggs (2004:81) has argued 'texts are processes in which

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political work is done' and the Casey Report uses their comments to produce an argument that there was a collective denial present in Rotherham. Perhaps this particular narrative was constructed to persuade the media, the government and members of the public that they should be suspicious of RMBC as a whole. In doing so alternative perspectives and other courses of action are, in effect, de-legitimised and closed off.

### **Archaic attitudes and dispositions**

A number of references within the report referred to temporal aspects of the different types of 'cultures' and behaviours found to symbolise Rotherham. Casey (2015) noted how 'an archaic culture of sexism, bullying and discomfort around race' (p10) emerged as a result of some councillors holding 'racist or wholly outdated or inappropriate views' (p32). It is also made explicit that 'several' participants commented that 'going into Rotherham Council was like going back in time' (p28). Yet it is again interesting to note that despite only 'several' people commenting on such a feeling, Casey still takes these views seriously enough to develop a theme about the attitude and disposition of Rotherham.

This unquestioning acceptance stands in direct contrast to the action taken above when twelve or more participants expressed confusion as to how the figure of 1400 sexually exploited children was reached by Alexis Jay (2014). This is perhaps because the idea that RMBC was 'outdated' was beneficial in supporting the Casey Report's central argument, namely that the council was 'not fit for purpose' (p9). In order to strengthen this argument the council was criticised for being 'unable to move on and change' (p5), exhibiting 'discomfort around race' (p9) and being too concerned with 'misplaced political correctness' (p9).

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Lawler (2012: 410) has highlighted how white working class communities are often depicted as occupying 'anachronistic spaces', unable to keep pace with a rapidly changing multicultural society. Mamdani (2004:18) has also highlighted how Islam is often portrayed as 'a lifeless custom of antique people who inhabit antique lands'. In this context, Casey used the 'extreme whiteness' (Lawler, 2012: 410) of the council in working class Rotherham and the 'archaic customs' of Islam and contrasted them with metropolitan middle-class ethnicities which are at ease with modern multiculturalism and diversity. In doing so, the report is then able to firmly contend that RMBC was 'not fit for purpose' and that CSE was a localised 'cultural' problem because the values and beliefs of the town belong to a past time (p.5).

### *3. Rotherham is solely responsible*

An examination of 'argumentation strategies' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001: 44) highlighted two core arguments in the Casey Report: the first justified the exclusion of other agencies from being held accountable for the failures in Rotherham; and the second emphasised the strength of the 'evidence' against RMBC.

The first argument proposed that CSE was an issue which was best tackled by local services. This argument ensured that the blame for the level of sexual exploitation that took place was the sole responsibility of services in Rotherham and South Yorkshire. At the same time, this localised focus nourished the view that the Rotherham situation was a one-off. Two very similar paragraphs, but in separate areas of the report, demonstrate the way this focus was almost exclusively maintained on the legal and regulatory powers and responsibilities that exist, but were not effectively used within Rotherham. These paragraphs also help to

portray the role of the government as one of gifting powers and responsibilities to local authorities:

*Tackling CSE effectively requires a council and its partners to mobilise their services and powers together. The Council has a duty to safeguard the victims. It also governs the landscape in which CSE is played out including many schools, care homes, parks, taxis and take away food shops. Councils have powers of licensing and regulation which can be used to disrupt illegal activity in these places and keep the community safe. This is in addition to the duties and powers of the police (Casey, 2015: 16).*

*Tackling CSE is a community safety issue. Street grooming was happening in the community of which RMBC is the custodian including parks, takeaways, taxis, at the Interchange, in hotels, in houses, in alleyways and in the town centre. These are all areas where the local authority has a presence and has powers and responsibilities which could have contributed towards disrupting perpetrators and protecting victims, such as injunctions and powers to tackle nuisance behaviour (Casey, 2015: 53)*

The second core argument related to a number of 'facts' which Casey often presented as 'uncontested', 'undeniable' or 'cohesive' (p.5, 26). These were presented as 'truths' and were labelled as 'uncomfortable' and, on one occasion, 'awkward' (p.34). The language of 'facts' and 'truths' is synonymous with an *ethic of justice* approach (Gilligan, 1982). Casey even stated that 'what we ended up doing was sort of an investigation, an inquiry rather than an inspection' that tried to 'get under the skin of what was happening' in Rotherham (Aston, 2015). However, in contrast to an *ethic of care* approach, which emphasizes empathy and compassion over right or wrong, an *ethic of justice* approach emerges from situations where formal rules can be applied and where concrete decisions about right and wrong are made. In this context it was evident that Casey's approach attempted to apportion blame and deliver justice where it was felt to be needed.

#### 4. *The presentation of a credible report*



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Framing strategies were used to explore how certain perspectives and arguments were presented (see Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). The report is presented, or framed, as an independent, and therefore objective, well-resourced inspection/investigation into what happened in Rotherham. The 'Background and Methodology' section of the report sets out the scale of the work. Readers are informed that 200 interviews were conducted and the written literature surveyed by the Inspection Team comprised of 7000 documents; 68 past and current cases in Children's Services; 19 staff case files; and 22 taxi licensing cases.

The report unfortunately does not clarify how all of this data was systematically collected, recorded, analysed or stored, or what previous experience members of the Inspection Team, many of whom worked for Casey on the Troubled Families programme, had in undertaking similar pieces of work. It is also difficult to conceive how Casey and her team analysed so much information given that they were only initially given eight weeks to carry out the inspection and leave 'no stone unturned' (DCLG, 2014b). It is evident that the team did struggle with this timescale as they requested, and were granted, an extension of six weeks. However what is of concern is that this is still much shorter than the timeframe provided for the Jay Report (2014) which was compiled over 8 months.

##### 5. The emotive production of uncontested facts

The fifth and final strategy in the DHA explored the extent to which issues were articulated overtly and whether they were intensified or mitigated (see Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). The very first sentence of the Casey Report states 'Terrible things happened in Rotherham and on a significant scale' (p.5). As we stated at the beginning of this paper, we do not disagree with this statement. However, the report goes on to create the impression that things were much worse than even Casey and her team had expected and these are the comments

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which further intensify the emotive production of what Casey refers to as 'the uncontested facts':

*However, this was not the situation I encountered when I reached Rotherham. Instead, I found a Council in denial. They denied that there had been a problem, or if there had been, that it was not as big as was said. If there was a problem, they certainly were not told – it was someone else's job. (p5)*

To further strengthen this argument, the report comments on how the Inspection Team found that 'the position had worsened' (p87) following an OfSTED inspection which had rated the Children's Service as 'inadequate'. The introduction concludes with:

*The commissioning of the [Jay] report and later, the resignation of the Leader, are actions suggestive of a council that:*

- *accepts the need to examine its past*
- *accepts that it may have got things wrong*
- *has an intention to put right those wrongs*
- *wants to challenge its shortcomings*
- *and wants to ensure that nothing like this would happen again*

*Except that's not the Rotherham we found upon arrival for this inspection or have seen since. (p14)*

As mentioned previously, affective terms have the power to persuade readers that they should be suspicious of what they read. Indeed, Casey utilises emotionally charged language similar to the quote above throughout the whole report. Such affective documents reflect and generate feeling rules that incorporate profound regret at 'past actions or inactions' with which the child's suffering could have been prevented (Warner, 2015:113). Through texts such as political statements and official documents, discourse is therefore provided with the power to travel and affect its readers (Altheide, 1996).

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This is evident in some of the section headings in the report which include for example, 'Children's Services Failure', and questions such as 'Where were the police?', 'Where were the rest of the council?' and 'Cover up?' Far from being the product of a 'robust and thorough' (DCLG, 2014b) inspection, the Casey Report is instead laced with loaded, emotive and subjective rhetoric which firmly places blame and suspicion on local services. Yet rhetorical questions about wider social, political and economic contexts in which these services operate such as: 'Why did central government withdraw their resources?' and 'Where was the political support for social work?' were absent from the report. In essence, there was no critical reflection regarding the consequences of wide-ranging neoliberal reforms on social work policy and practice (Garrett, 2009; Rogowski, 2013).

## **Part 2: Some 'other' uncomfortable truths**

The first part of our analysis examined what was written in the Casey Report. In this second part we explore that which was not discussed. Drawing on Lukes' Three Dimensional Power framework, we wanted to consider the following questions: What had been kept off the agenda surrounding Rotherham? What had not been done or examined? What kind of decisions had been avoided?

Lukes' framework complements the DHA analysis, as it provides a lens through which the absence of the central state in anything that happened in Rotherham can be revealed. It should be noted that early examples of 'non-decision making' included the sole focus on RMBC and the narrow 'Terms of Reference' for the inspection (DCLG, 2014b). These political and territorial boundaries that were imposed upon the purportedly independent inspection team prevented the possibility occurring that central government did play a role in the events that unfolded.

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The three areas we will concentrate on in particular are ones that we believe should have been central to discussions of child protection practice: resources, media narratives, and child protection procedures.

### **Lack of available resources**

Although the report does briefly highlight that in interviews community and social workers felt that 'resources were an issue' (p. 39), there is no in-depth examination of how a reduction in resources may have actually impacted on the services provided. Yet as mentioned previously, a recommendation made by the HASC (2013) stated that if there was going to be any degree of success in tackling the issue of CSE then financial support for agencies was needed.

In addition, Jay (2014) highlighted in her report that Risky Business, the agency originally created by Rotherham Council to address the issue of sexual exploitation, closed in 2011 because of funding cuts. However, this information was not included in the Casey Report. Instead, a counter-argument was advanced, one which presented the uniqueness of RMBC and argued that the decision 'to close the service down' was made because of the issue of CSE:

*Rotherham is different in that it was repeatedly told by its own youth service what was happening and it chose, not only to not act, but to close that service down. This is important because it points to how it has dealt with uncomfortable truths put before it (Casey, 2015: 5).*

Jordan (2011) has contended that the sudden reduction in council resources occurred when the Coalition Government was elected in 2010 and a raft of cuts and reforms were introduced yet the consequences of such actions were not discussed explicitly in the report. Rather than acknowledge the role that central government may have played in contributing

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to Rotherham's overspent budget, this point appears to have been overlooked. Instead,

Casey rebukes Rotherham further:

*Financial pressures should always be considered but the issue for us is whether there was evidence that decisions about children's safety were unduly affected by financial decisions (2015: 43).*

This may be Casey's view but it does not account for the significant costs that are incurred if the provision of secure accommodation is required by the agency to help keep children safe from sexual exploitation. Residential placements are expensive and charge anywhere in the region from £3000- £5000 per week (McNicoll, 2014). In 2012, the Directors of twelve Children's Services in the North East of England wrote a joint letter to the Department for Education (DfE) warning that extra funding was needed if any serious or unintended consequences were to be avoided (Pearson, 2012). At a time when all local authorities were expected to make millions of pounds worth of cuts (see Jordan, 2011), it would have been unreasonable to expect Rotherham to fund placements for so many children without financial support from the government.

### **Media narratives and public perception**

Both Casey (2015), and the HASC (2013), criticised RMBC for focusing on children not teenagers but neither explored why this may have happened. Yet given that they had witnessed a child abuse tragedy grip the media's attention, it was only natural for Rotherham, and other councils, to focus their attention and resources on children under the age of five. Peter Connelly, also known as Baby P, died in 2007 and in 2008 social workers and councils across England watched Sharon Smith, and her team from Haringey, get vilified and condemned for their perceived failures (Warner, 2015). The story of Peter's death

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became 'a full-blown national outbreak of public hysteria' with 'a tabloid narrative' which was driven by official panic, fear and blame avoidance (Jones, 2014: ix). To omit this narrative from the report suggests that the government had an 'uncomfortable truth' of its own to conceal. It was, after all, David Cameron, with the support of Rebekah Brooks and a petition of 1.6 million signatures from The Sun, who contributed to one of the most significant moral panics ever known in social work (Jones, 2014). Similarly, whilst the Casey report made reference to the 'race issue', this was only considered in the context of local services and 'RMBC's inability to talk about race' (p.34). No meaningful discussion of wider racial inequalities and injustice, the racialization of CSE in the UK, the 'contaminated whiteness' (Tyler, 2008: 26) of young white working-class women who associate with working-class minority ethnic and immigrant populations, or media moral panics surrounding the putative deviance of Muslim communities more generally can be found in the report.

### **Procedures in child protection practice**

The final point that was not considered by Casey relates to a criticism she made within the report under the heading 'Children's Social Care Failure' (2015: 42). In trying to explain why social workers failed children, Casey contended that this was because 'children's social care operated in a straitjacket of assessments which failed to acknowledge CSE' (p.42).

However what is not appropriately considered is that unfortunately, this is the context in which social work is practised today. Indeed, many argue against these rigid, bureaucratic systems which refuse to bend to enable creative and innovative practice (Featherstone et al. 2014; White et al. 2010). As a result, practitioners focus on completing bureaucracy speedily so as to meet targets, ration resources and assess risk (see Garrett, 2009; Rogowski, 2013),

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and are prevented from spending valuable time building relationships with teenagers vulnerable to sexual exploitation. It is important to note that these systems have not been designed by social workers, but by the Department of Education, those who are far removed from practice. The policy framework in social work therefore 'hides great complexity' and becomes a significant issue when there is frequent reorganisation, inconsistency and contradictions in policy making because it significantly affects social workers' practice (Fox-Harding, 2008:1). Rather than acknowledging the role that central government has in creating inconsistencies and contradictions in policy, social workers in Rotherham were instead depicted as 'getting their practice wrong' (Casey, 2015: 43).

### **Discussion**

Although the Casey Report was presented as a well-resourced and credible independent inspection our findings suggest that it was far from robust and is, in effect, significantly flawed. Social researchers seek validity and rigour by exploring dominant themes that emerge in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, it is apparent from the beginning of the report that rather than carry out a thorough inspection, interview extracts were employed to develop and support the government's own 'moral agenda' (Gillies, 2005:71) and concentrate on blaming those who 'wilfully neglect' vulnerable children (Holehouse, 2015).

Despite a number of participants challenging Jay's findings, Casey and her team did not use the inspection as an opportunity to explore if their concerns held any merit. Instead, through the use of emotive and affective prose, Casey diverted the reader's attention away from eliciting the accuracy of the proposed 'facts' by simply labelling participants inability to agree as a form of 'denial' (2015: 5). This distraction technique enabled Casey to

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subsequently frame participants who were unwilling to accept her 'truths' as deviants and, in turn, persuade her audience that whatever people from RMBC said, they were not to be believed or trusted.

By positioning RMBC as the agency that was 'incapable of tackling its weaknesses' Casey was furthermore able to attribute all of the troubles that emerged as being specific to its culture.

This tactic deflected the focus away from central government who, despite playing an integral role in allocating resources (to families and authorities), establishing policy and legislative frameworks, and systems of practice which affect child welfare, were in this case exonerated from all responsibility. Austerity measures, cuts to local services and a wider programme of neoliberal reform were not discussed in the Casey report. Central government were instead positioned as largely benign as it was inferred that the only significant role they played in the events which led to Rotherham's demise was when it was necessary for someone to 'step in' and make the council 'squeaky clean' (Casey, 2015: 77).

It is also significant that despite being advised by the HASC (2013) that the problem of CSE was both systemic and cultural, the government commissioned and accepted the findings of a report that failed to acknowledge the wider context of contemporary child welfare issues. Rather than explore the impact that inadequate resources, media condemnation, policy and legislative frameworks have on social workers' practice, the Casey Report (2015:5) instead overlooked these important contributing factors. Social workers were instead criticised for failing to break free from rigid, bureaucratic systems which promote the use of restrictive procedures and are designed to fit the 'child rescue model' which focuses inherently on a young child in a family abuse situation (Fox-Harding, 2008: 2).

## **Conclusion**



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The report produced by Louise Casey did little to resolve the issues that social workers and local authorities nationally encountered during that time. Although Casey acknowledged that the existing child protection system was not designed for safeguarding children from CSE, the implications of what this actually meant were not properly explored. As a result, government have missed a significant opportunity to examine why the established model of doing child protection might be so problematic for parts of social work practice.

Instead the focus remained firmly fixed on local (mal)practice and an argument was created which fostered the impression that many staff wilfully neglected children at risk of sexual exploitation. This main message conveyed in the report was that it was Rotherham's attitude and approach to child protection that was uniquely problematic. Yet it has become increasingly clear that the problem of CSE and how it is handled is not unique to Rotherham, it has been an issue that many local authorities have faced across the country (HASC, 2013).

Unfortunately, rather than considering how this nationwide problem could judiciously be resolved, David Cameron's response to the Casey Report was to berate and punish those he felt were to blame so that he could ensure the 'culture of denial' was eradicated once and for all (Holehouse, 2015). This reaction will not however address the problem of CSE as it does not deliberate the impact austerity measures and neo-liberal forms of governance have on the provision of essential services. On the contrary, it successfully contributes to the current climate that social workers face in practice today, a climate which is deeply affected by fear, mistrust and blame.

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