

## **Professional Interests and the Emergence of 'Child Abuse' in Britain, c.1960 – 1987.**

My PhD will research child abuse in Britain from approximately 1960 until the Cleveland sexual abuse scandal of 1987. Although child abuse is a phenomenon with a very long history, the 1960s and 1970s appear crucial in the emergence of our modern understanding of this issue and in the explosion of a prolific discourse on child abuse. This is also however a period in which models of explanation and understanding were contested and changed rapidly. My doctoral thesis will provide a case study to explore in much greater detail Ian Hacking's seminal analysis of child abuse as an idea in 'constant flux'.<sup>1</sup> In the British context, this period of emergence has attracted some attention, though mainly from sociologists and social workers rather than historians. The most significant of this work provides a useful starting point in its suggestions about the ways in which 'material conditions and ideological forces' in 1970s Britain shaped child abuse.<sup>2</sup> My PhD will analyse this important subject in the depth it deserves and draw on a much broader range of historical sources. In doing so, it will significantly add to our knowledge of how changing conceptions of childhood, family, and the role of the state directed the creation of child abuse. It also proposes a distinctive approach. Though Hacking claims that child abuse was created by physicians, most literature on Britain focuses on child abuse as an issue within social policy, and as a concern of social workers.<sup>3</sup> My thesis will explore the respective influences of all relevant actors in creating child abuse, yielding broader conclusions on the power dynamics between professions. Key actors include paediatricians, radiologists, psychiatrists, lawyers, academics, the media, government and social workers. Whilst many current works narrate child abuse as a series of 'moral panics'; my work will focus on collaboration and tension between these actors. The infamous Cleveland scandal provides the perfect culmination for this thesis, as the actions of social workers and paediatricians were challenged by police surgeons, an official Inquiry, and the media, raising issues of professional accountability and authority. This study will problematise the broad category of child abuse by considering different actors' prioritisation of types of abuse, debates about identification and the signifiers of abuse such as 'failure to thrive', and the tensions between physical, psychological, and social explanations. As such, I aim to provide a case study of more general significance which uses the subject of child abuse to explore the challenges to medical models and medical authority in a period in which social explanations of well being were reaching a peak of influence.

Although this remains a highly sensitive subject, records relating to professional positions in this period are now generally available. My doctoral research will benefit from the extensive archives of the British Association of Social Workers held at the Modern Records Centre in Warwick, which are particularly revealing for inter-professional relations. The interplay of interests in creating abuse will be studied, for instance, through discussions at the numerous conferences on child abuse and inquiries into prominent cases throughout this period. However, the research will also involve analysis of records relating to the full range of medical professions and groups involved in this area, drawing heavily on material in the Wellcome Contemporary Medical Archives Collection, a broad range of contemporary medical literature, media reports, and government records in the National Archives. This will be further supplemented, where possible, by interview of surviving practitioners from the period and analysis of existing oral history material relevant to the subject.

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Hacking, 'The Making and Molding of Child Abuse', *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (1991), p. 253.

<sup>2</sup> Nigel Parton, 'Child Abuse, Social Anxiety and Welfare', *British Journal of Social Work*, 11 (1981), p. 381.

<sup>3</sup> Social policy: Parton 1979, Parton 1981, Hendrick 1994, Fergusson 2004. Social workers: Beckett 2003, Hallett and Stevenson 1980