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**Child Abuse in England and Wales 2003-2013: Newspaper Reporting versus Reality**

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Title Page

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### **Abstract**

This study examined how child abuse and neglect were reported in a sample of 459 newspaper articles between 2003 and 2013 in England and Wales. The results were compared with data on child abuse and neglect over the same decade. Sexual abuse was by far the most commonly reported, in both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers. Although neglect and emotional abuse are the most common causes of child protection plans in England and Wales, neglect and emotional abuse are relatively invisible in newspaper articles, as is physical abuse. Possible explanations for this disproportionate focus on sexual abuse, which has also been found in Australia and the USA, include the fact that sexual abuse cases reach the criminal courts more often than other forms of child victimization. Although broadsheet papers were more likely than tabloid newspapers to comment on causes and solutions beyond the individual perpetrator committing a crime, the majority of articles in broadsheet papers still did not frame either the causes or the solutions in broader terms. It seems possible that the notion of the decontextualized ‘evil’ perpetrator serves to distance journalist and reader alike from the pervasiveness and pain of child abuse. The article concludes with ideas to improve the accuracy and utility of the coverage of child abuse and neglect in newspapers.

### **Keywords**

child abuse, child neglect, child maltreatment, news, print media, broadsheet, tabloid

Child maltreatment is a significant health and social problem that transcends continents, cultures and communities (Krug et al., 2002). A broadly agreed definition is:

*“Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, result in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.” (World Health Organisation, 1999).*

While not all survivors of abuse suffer adverse effects, there can be serious short and long-term physical and mental health problems, educational, social, and economic consequences. These include physical injuries; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); alcohol and drug use; aggression; delinquency; educational under-achievement, and adverse effects on employment and economic status (Frederick and Goddard, 2007; Gilbert et al., 2009a; Norman et al., 2012; Paolucci et al., 2001; Read and Bentall, 2013). Since the effects of various forms of maltreatment can endure through the lifespan, they can compromise adult parenting capacity (Draper et al., 2008) thereby creating intergenerational cycles of maltreatment. Direct and indirect economic costs in various countries have been estimated in the billions (Fang et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2008). The evidence is clear: child maltreatment is a significant health, social and economic problem.

### **How Does the Mass Media Respond?**

Newspapers, television and magazines help to frame the way that the public sees child abuse and neglect (Franklin and Parton, 1991; Kitzinger, 2004; Lonne and Gillespie, 2014; Lonne and Parton, 2014; Mejia et al., 2012). According to Lakoff (2006) in a different context: ‘Frames are the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality –

and sometimes to create what we take to be reality.’ Journalists and media outlets need to be attuned to how they contribute to developing their readers’ ‘mental structures’ and understanding of social issues including child abuse and neglect (Hove et al., 2013). Newspapers play a critical role as they often set the agenda for television and other mass media outlets (Hove et al., 2013). Newspaper reports of child abuse and neglect have been the subject of a few studies in the U.S.A (Cheit, 2003; Hove et al., 2013; Kunkel et al., 2006; Mejia et al., 2012), Canada (Saint-Jacques et al., 2012), South Africa (Corbella and Collings, 2007) and Malaysia (Niner et al., 2013). In all these studies, sexual abuse was more commonly reported than other forms of abuse and neglect, though the extent of the difference appeared less pronounced in Malaysia. Most studies have also found that newspaper articles were predominantly event-focused (‘episodic’) with no comment on trends, data, causes or consequences to enable the reader to understand the event in a broader context (Kunkel et al., 2006; Mejia et al., 2012; Niner et al., 2013). This critique is also laid against American magazines (Horowitz, 2014). However, Hove et al., 2013 found that, in American newspapers, the topic is more commonly framed as a ‘*public problem that has societal causes and solutions*’ (p. 91). This article contributes to our understanding of the place of the mass media by analysing the ways that child abuse and neglect was reported in newspapers in England and Wales from 2003-2013.

### **The Research Questions**

- What was the frequency of different types of child abuse in newspaper coverage between April 1<sup>st</sup> 2003 and March 31<sup>st</sup> 2013?
  - Has coverage changed over time?
- How does this compare with what is known about the extent and characteristics of child abuse and neglect?

- How has the newspaper coverage of child abuse in this period been framed? In particular:
  - What was the prevalence of episodic and thematic story framing?
  - What was the prevalence of individual/societal frames of the cause and individual/environmental frames of the solutions?

## **Method**

### **Sample**

This research is based on newspaper articles on child abuse and neglect in randomly constructed weeks between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2003 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013. There were two randomly constructed weeks for each year in the decade; i.e. 14 days of newspaper coverage each year for ten years. The sample contained all newspaper articles from randomly selected Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and so on, thereby ensuring that for every year, each day of the week is covered equally. These randomly constructed weeks were adopted to control for the bias of cyclical trends in newspaper coverage by preventing the over or under sampling of typically light or heavy news days (Mejia et al., 2012).

Articles were selected through a keyword search of the LexisNexis database within the two constructed weeks. The keywords used were *child abuse*, *sexual abuse*, *physical abuse*, *emotional abuse* and *neglect*. Articles about current or recent child abuse within England and Wales were the focus. Therefore, articles about historical child abuse (i.e. when the complainant was an adult), stories involving accusations of historical abuses within the Church, and articles about child abuse or neglect committed outside of England and Wales were excluded. Historical and church abuses were excluded as their high profile nature (for example Jimmy Saville related stories) may have obscured regular patterns of child abuse and neglect coverage. These exclusions left some of the randomly selected dates with no articles

on child abuse, and so random dates for these days were chosen again and the same criteria adopted as above.

The final sample consisted of 459 newspaper articles, describing 281 different incidents or themes. The ten year sample included articles from the following UK national newspapers: *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The I*, *The Observer*, *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Express*, *The Mirror*, *The Daily Star*, *The People* and *The Morning Star* (including Sunday/weekend editions of these papers). Of these 459 articles, 280 (61%) were from tabloid newspapers and 179 (39%) were from broadsheet papers.

### **Coding**

The 459 articles were imported into the NVivo10 database so that they could be coded into different categories for analysis. Two researchers used an iterative process of coding until satisfactory inter-rater reliability was reached. Cohen's Kappa was calculated on the ratings of 8.5% of the newspaper articles to determine the extent of inter-rater reliability for each of the three framing dimensions of the coding system: frame of the story (episodic/thematic), frame of the cause (individual/ societal), and frame of the solution (individual/ environmental). Accounting for chance, inter-rater reliability was high ( $K=0.85$ ) for the coding of all three types of framing.

The definitions of these framing dimensions of the story are outlined further in Table 1.

#### *INSERT TABLE 1: DEFINITIONS OF FRAMING*

These definitions were adapted from the coding systems developed by Hove et al. (2013) and Mejia et al. (2012), which in turn were derived from both deductive and inductive manual-

holistic approaches to frame analysis. In particular, the definition of the frame of the article and frame of the cause as episodic (event-focused reporting) or thematic (context and wider issue focused) was adopted from Hove et al. (2013). Hove and colleagues coded story frames into the categories of episodic or thematic and thus did not account for both frames being present in the same article. While there are statistical advantages to this mutually-exclusive frame, we agreed with their analysis that episodic and thematic reporting in one article can be helpful and reporting does not need to be either/or. Therefore, in our coding system if an article has a thematic trait, even if it also has episodic traits present, it was coded as thematic. We adopted the frame of the solution as individually focused on offenders or victims and / or environmentally focused on broader systems beyond the individual from Mejia et al. (2012) (see Table 1).

In addition, articles were coded for:

- Type of abuse: Sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, neglect, various (subcategories: various including sexual abuse, various excluding sexual abuse)
- Type of newspaper (tabloid, broadsheet)
- Information relating to the victim (age, gender, single or multiple victims)
- Information relating to the offender (age, gender, relationship to victim, single or multiple offenders)

## **Results**

### **Types of Child Abuse Reported in Newspapers**

Throughout the decade child sexual abuse was more commonly reported than all other forms of child abuse and neglect combined, in both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers (see Figure 1).

*INSERT FIGURE 1: REPORTING CHILD ABUSE IN TABLOID AND BROADSHEET NEWSPAPERS*

Overall, from 2003 to 2013, 55% of reporting covered child sexual abuse only, 10.9% concerned neglect only, 6.8% physical abuse only and 0.2% emotional abuse only, with 27.2% of stories being about multiple forms of abuse. In the entire 10 year sample there was only one article that had emotional abuse as its sole concern. The 'multiple' category consists of articles mentioning more than one type of abuse. When the 'multiple' accounts that include sexual abuse were included in the total percentage of newspaper reporting, accounts of sexual abuse increased to 75.4% of the articles.

Reporting of child neglect, physical and emotional abuse remained consistently low throughout the decade. While reporting of sexual abuse fluctuated considerably over time, it was far higher than other forms of abuse and neglect in each of the ten years (see Figure 2).

*INSERT FIGURE 2: CHILD ABUSE NEWSPAPER COVERAGE 2003-2013*

### **Comparison with Estimated Prevalence of Types of Abuse**

Child protection data gives a useful overview of the scope of child maltreatment dealt with by authorities. The number of children with child protection plans gives a better indication of the relative extent of categories of child abuse and neglect than notifications to children's services because these cases are substantiated by a social worker i.e. there is some confirmation that child abuse and/or neglect has occurred.

Table 2 shows the percentage of child protection plans by type of abuse from April 1<sup>st</sup> 2003 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013. On average, the majority (43.5%) were for neglect followed by emotional abuse (24.9%). Physical abuse comprised 14.2% and sexual abuse comprised 6.8% of cases whilst 10.7% were for cases of multiple forms of abuse.

*INSERT TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE OF CHILD PROTECTION PLANS BY TYPE OF ABUSE IN ENGLAND AND WALES 2003-2013*

Figure 3 demonstrates that neglect and emotional abuse were the most common sources of child protection plans and that these issues were relatively invisible in newspaper articles.

*INSERT FIGURE 3: CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT DEPICTED THROUGH NEWSPAPER ARTICLES AND THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN SUBJECT TO CHILD PROTECTION PLANS*

It is important to note here that some child abuse is not notified to authorities and thus is not reflected in child protection data (Harker et al., 2013; May-Chahal and Cawson, 2005; National Crime Intelligence Service, 2005). One national self-report survey found that 10 per cent of respondents reported having been sexually abused as a child involving sexual contact, with a further 6 per cent reporting experience of non-contact abuse (May-Chahal and Cawson, 2005); figures which far exceed cases coming to the attention of government agencies.

In another study, 2275 children and young people from 11-24 years were interviewed about their experiences of abuse and neglect (Radford et al., 2011). In 2011, young people between 11 and 17 reported some form of sexual abuse (11.3%), physical violence by a parent or guardian (2.4%), physical violence by another perpetrator (36%), emotional abuse by a parent or guardian (3%) and/or emotional abuse by another perpetrator (31.9%).

It is clear from the discrepancy between self-report surveys and officially-recorded identified cases that some child abuse remains hidden in England and Wales, and indeed in all countries where research has been conducted (e.g., Millard and Flatley, 2010; Sedlak et

al., 2010), perhaps particularly the incidence of child sexual abuse. So perhaps while the reporting of sexual abuse does not overemphasise the problem of sexual abuse (Cheit, 2003), it does appear to under emphasise other forms of child maltreatment, particularly emotional abuse and neglect.

### **Victims and Offenders**

The ages and genders of all victims and offenders were coded where reported. If one article included more than one victim and/or offender, the age and gender of the victim(s) and offender(s) were coded separately. Where evident, the number of offenders and victims in cases reported in newspapers were also noted, alongside the relationship between the offenders and children.

Ninety seven per cent of all event-focused articles (i.e. episodic framed articles) reported at least one piece of information relating to the offender (316 / 327 articles). This does not necessarily mean that all information relating to the offender was reported, it simply means that in 316 of the episodic articles at least one incident of child abuse was reported and the report gave at least one piece of information relating to the perpetrator (e.g., age, gender and/or relationship to the child). Overall, child sexual abuse committed by men *outside* the family was the most common form of abuse reported in the newspaper articles.

### **Information about Victims**

**Gender:** The majority of victims identified in newspaper articles in the current study were female (n=174), though there were also a significant number of male victims (n=54). This is a ratio of approximately 3:1. The majority of alleged victims in self-report surveys were also female. (Radford et al., 2011)

**Age:** The majority of victims identified in the current study were between 10 and 15 years (n=156). Seventy victims were identified as one to four years old, 68 as five to nine years old, 25 as under one year old, and 14 victims as 16 to 18 years old.

**Number of victims:** There were 229 mentions of multiple victims throughout the article sample and 133 mentions of single victims.

### **Information about Perpetrators**

**Gender:** The majority of perpetrators in the newspaper articles were male (n=240) and there were reports of 52 female offenders. This is a ratio of approximately 5:1. The majority of alleged perpetrators in self-report surveys are also male. (Radford et al., 2011)

**Age:** The age of the offender(s) was noted in 337 of the articles. The majority of these perpetrators were between the ages of 26 and 40 (n=151). There were 112 offenders over the age of 40 years; 53 between 18 and 25 years; and 21 offenders were under the age of 18 years.

**Number of perpetrators:** There was one perpetrator in the vast majority of cases reported in the newspaper articles (n=247). There were 63 reports of two to three offenders across the article sample and more than three offenders in 47 cases reported in the newspaper articles.

**Relationship between victims and perpetrators:** The relationship between perpetrators and victims was reported 249 times in 312 articles (79.8%) in the current study. The perpetrator was in the child's family in 89 of the 249 cases (35.7%). Abuse by teachers was reported 29 times (11.6%). Harker et al. (2013) estimated that there is approximately double the number of children abused or neglected by a parent or guardian (520,000) than by an adult outside of the home (260,000). Compared to this self-report data from a large sample of young people, newspaper articles appear to report proportionately more extra-familial abuse than familial abuse.

## **Framing Child Abuse**

Articles were analysed to determine whether the newspaper articles used an episodic or thematic frame overall (see Table 1 for definitions). Of the 459 articles, 71.2% used a purely episodic frame (n=327), only discussing specific details about a crime without any contextual comment, whereas 28.8% of articles also used a thematic frame. Figure 4 shows that episodic framing is more prevalent in tabloid newspapers (82.5% articles) than in broadsheet newspapers (53.6% articles).

*INSERT FIGURE 4: EPISODIC AND THEMATIC FRAMES OF BROADSHEET AND TABLOID  
NEWSPAPER ARTICLES 2003-2013*

Articles were also analysed for the way that they depict *the causes* of child abuse (see Table 1 for definitions). The causes of child abuse were framed in terms of individuals in 76.3% of the total sample of newspaper articles. All these articles were framed as the perpetrators' responsibility. There were no articles that blamed the victim for the abuse.

Societal causes of child abuse were evident in nearly a quarter of the articles analysed (23.7%). Forty-four of these articles (40.4%) blamed children's services in reports on the outcomes of Serious Case Reviews. Religious or cultural practices were identified as a cause of child abuse in 18 of the articles (16.5%), e.g., ritual child abuse in witchcraft. The third most common societal cause reported related to problems with formulation and/or implementation of the law (n=15; 13.5%). Most of these articles were concerned with the courts giving sentences that were too lenient.

Tabloid newspapers were more likely than broadsheet newspapers to frame the causes of child abuse in terms of individuals (see Figure 5). 84.6% of the articles in tabloid

newspapers framed the causes only in terms of individuals, whereas 63.1% of the broadsheet articles were framed in this way.

*INSERT FIGURE 5: BROADSHEET AND TABLOID FRAMING OF THE CAUSES OF CHILD ABUSE 2003-2013*

Finally, articles were analysed for the ways that they framed the *solutions to child abuse* (see Table 1 for definitions). Thirty seven per cent of the articles framed the solutions in terms of individuals; 27.2% incorporated environmental solutions and 35.9% offered no solutions in their articles.

Once again, broadsheet newspapers are more inclined to include environmental solutions than tabloid newspapers. Only 16.1% of tabloid newspaper articles, compared to 44.7% broadsheet articles, offered solutions that incorporated broader societal efforts to deal with child abuse. However, still nearly a quarter of broadsheet articles (23%) incorporated solutions only framed in terms of individuals. There was no notable difference between tabloid and broadsheet papers in the number of articles that offered *no solutions* (Tabloid - 37.9%; Broadsheet – 33%).

## **Discussion**

### **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to this study. First, this study excluded reporting of landmark cases of abuse in the Catholic Church and widely reported abuses by the celebrity, Jimmy Saville (due to the historic nature of these abuses and not wanting their inclusion to distort general patterns and trends in reporting of child abuse). Such high profile cases may have led to increased reporting of other incidents of child sexual abuse and therefore

impacted the frequency and content of that coverage. However, our findings were similar to those of comparable studies (e.g., Hove et al., 2013; Mejia et al., 2013).

Secondly, in common with other studies, this study relied on Lexis Nexis. It is possible that this database did not capture all of the newspaper articles that covered all types of child abuse. There are also limitations to only including newspapers and excluding other forms of media reporting such as television, radio and internet sites. This is significant, as a larger portion of the population is exposed to other mass media whilst newspaper readership is in decline. However, the agenda-setting role of the newspapers for television renders newspapers' place in framing the issue critical. It also means that the frequency and frames of child abuse on television news may not differ markedly from those of newspapers (Hove et al., 2013).

The exclusion of historical cases because of their sometimes high profile nature, may not have achieved its intention of increasing representativeness, given that the 'politics of outrage' (Parton, 2014) and the strident media coverage (Lonne and Parton, 2014) may have become, at least temporarily, the norm in the UK.

Our definition of 'individual' as encompassing only the child and/or perpetrator ignores the fact that some of the reports falling under our definition of 'societal' and 'environmental' include discussion of individual professionals.

By its nature our data is more descriptive than explanatory. It does not permit us to understand *why* journalists under-report neglect, intra-familial abuse and contextual factors. Qualitative interviews may be useful in addressing these questions in future.

Finally, this analysis cannot demonstrate the effect of episodic/thematic news reporting on audiences, it can only demonstrate the frequency of the framing. However, it is reasonable to assume that people gain at least some of their understanding of the prevalence, causes and prevention of abuse from newspapers (Hove et al., 2013; Lonne and Gillespie,

2014). Furthermore, a recent analysis of child protection and media reporting in Quebec suggests that newspaper articles not only influence public attitudes but also reporting behaviour to child protection services (Saint-Jacques et al., 2012).

### **Why are Physical and Emotional Abuse, and Neglect, Being Ignored?**

Our findings are strikingly similar to analyses of newspaper coverage in the USA (Hove et al., 2013; Kunkel et al., 2002) and Australia (Lonne and Gillespie, 2014) in that child sexual abuse is by far the most commonly reported form of child maltreatment. A word frequency search of the 459 newspaper articles in this sample found that the word ‘sex’ was the third most frequently used term, after the words ‘child(ren)’ and ‘police’. A cynic could argue that these words sell newspapers within a highly competitive market in England.

Unlike in Australian newspapers (Lonne and Gillespie, 2014), most articles did report the number of children involved in cases, the gender and age of the victims and the perpetrators. However, seventy one per cent of the articles had *no* thematic analysis. The episodic crime reports of individual child sexual abuse cases mirror the majority of child victimisation that reach the criminal courts (Lonne and Parton, 2014); they do not represent the majority of child abuse and neglect depicted through self-report surveys and child protection data (Gilbert et al., 2009b; Harker et al. 2013; Radford et al., 2011). In part, this is due to the confidentiality inherent in child protection cases. It is the criminal court cases that are easily accessible to journalists, although this does not explain why there is so often little context to the articles.

There was only one article that featured emotional abuse, approximately one in 10 articles that featured neglect and approximately one in 17 articles that featured physical abuse. Articles on physical abuse appeared more prominent in Australia (Lonne and

Gillespie, 2014) and in Quebec (Saint-Jacques et al., 2012) than in this sample of newspapers articles in England and Wales.

The reasons for the fluctuations in newspaper reporting of child sexual abuse are unclear. It might be worth noting some of the high profile cases at the time, which could have influenced the reporting of child sexual abuse in this sample. For example, in 2012-2013, there was major coverage of Jimmy Saville (although these articles were excluded from the sample). The spike in 2007-2008 may have emanated from the high profile inquiries into the 'Baby P' case that dominated the news in 2008 and caused an increase in reporting of cases in the same local authority. In 2009-2010, there was significant reporting about the Catholic Church's reaction to allegations of child abuse (although these articles were also excluded from the sample).

Newspapers help to '*shape the conceptual borders of child maltreatment*' (Saint-Jacques et al., 2012). Lonne and Gillespie (2014) and Hove et al. (2013) found similar lack of reporting of neglect and emotional abuse in Australia and the USA respectively, the most common forms of maltreatment to underpin child protection plans. Hove et al. (2013) argue that the lack of reporting of neglect is partly because it is difficult to define. At its most extreme, the impact of neglect and physical abuse is clear. In England and Wales, physical punishment of children is considered 'unreasonable' if it involves an implement (e.g., whip, cane or belt) and/or if it leaves a mark on the child. However, it is legal to hit children with 'reasonable punishment' (Section 58, Children Act, 2004), yet this term is not defined in law. Problems with definition of physical abuse can arguably present the same definitional problems as neglect in all but the most extreme of cases.

This lack of clarity in terms of legal definitions may be matched by a lack of clarity in terms of moral judgement. While we assume that most people judge sexual contact with children to be wrong, and therefore newsworthy, some people (including journalists and

editors) may be ambivalent, for instance, about whether hitting children is morally justifiable in some circumstances and therefore not worthy of condemnation or reporting. This, if true, could constitute a reciprocally reinforcing pair of processes.

### **Beyond ‘Evil’: The Importance of Reporting Possible Causes and Potential Solutions**

In other areas, such as mental health, contextual factors - including causal beliefs - have been shown to be powerfully predictive of attitudes and responses (Read et al., 2006). The newspaper articles in this study usually lack contextual information. These results are similar to findings in Australia (Lonne and Gillespie, 2014), South Africa (Corbella and Collings, 2007); Malaysia (Niner et al., 2013) and some of the research in the US (Kunkel et al. 2006; Mejia et al., 2012). It is interesting to note that Hove et al. (2013) found that recent American newspaper coverage of child abuse commonly uses a thematic analysis. This does not appear to be the case in England and Wales. Perhaps this reflects a difference in the competitive environment of tabloid newspapers in the UK. The frames tabloid newspapers present are likely to be more influential because they are read by far more people than broadsheet papers. In 2012 the combined circulation of *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* was 4.6 times greater than that of the two best-selling broadsheets (*The Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*) combined (Audit Bureau of Communications, 2012). Tabloid newspapers rarely report contextual factors in either the causes or solutions to the widespread health and social problem of child abuse. Instead, they often simply report salacious details of crimes.

One would expect broadsheet newspapers to frame articles with a thematic analysis much more often than tabloid papers. So it was disappointing to see that 63.1% of the sample of articles in broadsheet papers only framed the cause of abuse in terms of a ‘bad’ individual, and only 44.7% offered any solutions that incorporated broader societal efforts to address child abuse. Even when causes were framed in societal terms, more than half of these

articles focused on systemic failures identified through Serious Case Reviews (by definition extreme cases) or they focused on perceptions of lenient sentences. The newspaper coverage in England and Wales does not usually serve to connect people to the broader societal problem or effective policies and programmes to prevent it. It would be good to see comparable thematic analysis to American newspaper articles.

There are clearly many barriers for journalists to be able to frame articles differently, not least lack of time to write thoughtful well-researched articles. However journalists rarely report drops in the financial markets, humanitarian crises overseas, or even a poor performance by the England football team, without considerable analysis of causes and identification of potential solutions.

Hove et al. (2013) comment on professional norms and audience expectations preventing journalists from doing a better job. It is interesting that they suggest one criteria for the way that an article is framed reporting is ‘not offending people’. However, perhaps one of the roles of journalists is to challenge public perceptions of the causes and solutions to child abuse. It is perhaps easier to see child abuse as entirely explicable in terms of one ‘evil’ perpetrator, as the tabloid newspaper *The Sun* frames it, rather than as a public health problem that can be addressed systematically. The focus on bad individuals serves to hide the poverty and social exclusion that underpins much abuse of children (Lonne & Parton, 2014). Use of sensationalist terms like ‘evil’ also suggest that perpetrators of sexual abuse cannot change their behaviour. This is contrary to the largest meta-analysis of sexual offender treatment programmes, which found that cognitive behavioural programmes are effective in reducing recidivism rates. (Lösel and Schmucker, 2005)

Perhaps the notion of the ‘evil’ perpetrator also serves to distance journalists and readers alike from the pain of child abuse. This idea of the ‘evil’ perpetrator was a common feature throughout episodic reporting in the sample. Vocabulary that was regularly used

included: ‘vile’, ‘depraved’, ‘monster’, ‘beast’ and so on. Use of such vocabulary could serve to not only distance the reader from the events (the notion of ‘us and them’), but also to comfort the reader by suggesting the idea that these events do not happen in their world. It suggests that the perpetrators are not part of humanity; they are ‘animal like’ and ‘beasts’. This might be comforting to readers if it makes them think of the events as not part of “normal” society but as separate from it. This has the unfortunate consequence of perpetuating the idea that nothing can be done to change the issue; that it is not a social problem but instead an individual problem that has nothing to do with their lives.

It is perhaps the information that was *not* present in the articles, more than the reported information that may offer the most insight. The voices of children and non-offending parents are usually absent in the coverage (Lonne and Parton, 2014). Contextual information and social and structural facts known to underpin physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect are often missing. Prevention, education and policy options are largely absent.

There were 21 articles in which children were perpetrators of sexual abuse (6.2% of the articles in which the age of the perpetrator was identified); none of which offered any thematic analysis. In self-report surveys, sexual abuse *by* children appears to be a more significant problem. Radford et al. (2011) comment on the basis of a large self-report survey:

“It was notable that of the 0.5 per cent of under 11s, 4.8 per cent of 11–17s and 11.3 per cent of young adults aged 18–24 who had experienced contact sexual abuse as defined by the criminal law, 65.9 per cent of contact sexual abuse of children and young people (0-17) was perpetrated by other children and young people under the age of 18 rather than by adults in or outside the home.” (Radford et al., 2011)

### **Pathways to More Accurate and Productive Reporting**

Cognitive behavioural treatment programmes for adult sexual offenders reduce recidivism (Arkowitz and Lilienfeld, 2008; Lösel and Schmucker, 2005). Success from treatment programmes for young sexual offenders appear even better as judged by recidivism rates in some studies (Reitzel & Carbonnell, 2006). There are also promising programmes that serve to reduce physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect e.g., home visiting programmes (Nurse-family Partnership - Olds et al., 1988, MacMillan et al., 2009); parent education programmes (e.g., Triple-P – Prinz et al., 2009) and child sexual abuse prevention programmes (Mikton and Butchart, 2009). It is possible to help children to overcome the trauma of child abuse (Lonne and Gillespie, 2014) and, with political and public will, the blight of poverty that underpins much child abuse and neglect can be reduced (Horowitz, 2014). More attention to these solutions in newspaper articles could make the problem seem less insurmountable to readers and journalists alike. Feature articles about examples of successful prevention and offender treatment programmes might be helpful (McCosker et al., 2014).

Though space in newspapers and journalists' time are inevitably limited, it might prove possible to improve accessibility of relevant data and ease of access to expert opinion, including the voices of children and adults abused as children. Perhaps a better relationship between journalists and agencies with expertise can be created to improve the quality of articles so that the public can get a better sense of context, analysis and solutions to the public health problem. Hove et al. (2013) suggest that 'child welfare advocates' should focus less on the ways that journalists frame the issue and more on universal communications that inform people what they can do. These two approaches, however, are not mutually exclusive.

While this analysis focused on newspaper articles, it is well known that newspapers are increasingly using the web to promote their journalism. The future of journalism includes videos, links and multi-media presentations of issues, thereby expanding the potential space

to cover issues. This may offer opportunities to contextualise child abuse and neglect in a broader framed narrative that includes promising solutions. In this way, newspapers could contribute more to public understanding of the phenomena, to amelioration of its consequences, and, perhaps most importantly, to its prevention.

An example of the potential contribution of newspapers, published since the study period, was headlined ‘Two million children are referred to social services’. The article focussed equally on neglect and abuse. It identified a range of possible causes for increased referral rates, including increasing poverty and recent welfare reforms. Interviews with experts referred to possible solutions, including, besides addressing poverty, improved recruitment, training and retention of social workers (Dugan, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study, despite using a somewhat different methodology, are consistent with a number of studies elsewhere. The underreporting of neglect, emotional abuse, intra-familial abuse and the social context of abuse and neglect are all important deficits that need to be better understood and effectively addressed. Better relations between human services and journalists can lead to the public being more accurately and productively informed about what is a social issue of major concern to the community.

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TABLE 1  
DEFINITIONS OF FRAMING

<b>Frame of Story</b>	
<b>Episodic</b>	Event or series of events
<b>Thematic</b>	Explores broader context (episodic framing may also be present)
<b>Frame of Cause</b>	
<b>Individual</b>	Focused only on children or perpetrators in case
<b>Societal</b>	Incorporates roles of non-offending family members / organisations in causing the problems e.g., failure of social services
<b>Frame of Solution</b>	
<b>Individual</b>	Focused only on children and or perpetrators in case e.g., prison, psychiatric hospital or supervision orders
<b>Environmental</b>	Solution incorporates offender community rehabilitation orders <sup>1</sup> and/or broader efforts to change the media, government or other institutions (Mejia et al., 2012)
<b>None</b>	Includes justice system intervention <i>if not convicted</i> . <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Incorporating ‘offender community rehabilitation orders’ into the ‘Environmental Solution’ category was decided upon as this form of punishment considers the effect of the offender’s actions on the wider community and demands that the offender “gives back” to the community as punishment. It aims to help the offender become a law-abiding, responsible member of the community therefore incorporates the role of the offender’s role in society as a potential cause of and solution to his/her unlawful behaviour.

<sup>2</sup> For example, a newspaper article may be reporting that someone has been arrested on suspicion of committing an offence, but they have not yet been charged with an offence, or been found guilty of committing the offence. Therefore there is no solution suggested as the report is merely mentioning their potential involvement in a case.

TABLE 2

## PERCENTAGE OF CHILD PROTECTION PLANS BY TYPE OF ABUSE

<b>Type of Abuse (Department for Children, Schools and Families, England and Wales Figures) – percentages may not tally exactly due to rounding</b>											
	<b>Neglect</b>		<b>Emotional Abuse</b>		<b>Physical Abuse</b>		<b>Sexual Abuse</b>		<b>Multiple</b>		<b>Total for all categories</b>
<b>2003-2004</b>	13,530	<b>40.6%</b>	6,130	<b>18.4%</b>	6,185	<b>18.5%</b>	2,985	<b>8.9%</b>	4,525	<b>13.6%</b>	<b><u>33,355</u></b>
<b>2004-2005</b>	14,175	<b>42.9%</b>	6,170	<b>18.7%</b>	5,925	<b>17.9%</b>	2,875	<b>8.7%</b>	3,925	<b>11.9%</b>	<b><u>33,070</u></b>
<b>2005-2006</b>	14,755	<b>44%</b>	7,110	<b>21.2%</b>	5,445	<b>16.2%</b>	2,745	<b>8.2%</b>	3,510	<b>10.5%</b>	<b><u>33,565</u></b>
<b>2006-2007</b>	15,925	<b>44.6%</b>	8,270	<b>23.1%</b>	5,450	<b>15.3%</b>	2,660	<b>7.4%</b>	3,425	<b>9.6%</b>	<b><u>35,730</u></b>
<b>2007-2008</b>	16,395	<b>45%</b>	9,180	<b>25.2%</b>	5,315	<b>14.6%</b>	2,460	<b>6.8%</b>	3,070	<b>8.4%</b>	<b><u>36,420</u></b>
<b>2008-2009</b>	16,920	<b>46.1%</b>	9,745	<b>26.5%</b>	4,785	<b>13%</b>	2,175	<b>5.9%</b>	3,090	<b>8.4%</b>	<b><u>36,715</u></b>
<b>2009-2010</b>	18,480	<b>44.2%</b>	11,535	<b>27.6%</b>	5,415	<b>12.9%</b>	2,505	<b>6%</b>	3,890	<b>9.3%</b>	<b><u>41,825</u></b>
<b>2010-2011</b>	19,865	<b>43.6%</b>	12,290	<b>27%</b>	5,175	<b>11.4%</b>	2,555	<b>5.6%</b>	5,695	<b>12.5%</b>	<b><u>45,580</u></b>
<b>2011-2012</b>	19,470	<b>42.6%</b>	13,265	<b>29%</b>	5,065	<b>11.1%</b>	2,370	<b>5.2%</b>	5,560	<b>12.2%</b>	<b><u>45,730</u></b>

<b>2012-2013</b>	19,125	<b>41.5%</b>	14,705	<b>32%</b>	5,070	<b>11%</b>	2,190	<b>4.8%</b>	4,995	<b>10.8%</b>	<b><u>46,085</u></b>
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**NOTE:** The compilation methods of the statistics can change from year-to-year and from region-to-region, and so the figures are not always comparable. For example, a new method of calculating the number of children subject to child protection plans in England was introduced in 2010. For more information there is a fact sheet on comparing child abuse statistics over time:

[http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/comparing-stats\\_wda89403.html](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/comparing-stats_wda89403.html)

*Wales:* 2009-2013 statistics taken from: <https://stats.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Service-Provision/ChildrenOnChildProtectionRegister-by-LocalAuthority-CategoryOfAbuse-AgeGroup> – also, NSPCC pdf available at [http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/wales\\_wdf49861.pdf](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/wales_wdf49861.pdf)

*England:* Department for Education (2013) Characteristics of children in need in England, 2012-13: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/characteristics-of-children-in-need-in-england-2012-to-2013> – also, NSPCC pdf available at: [http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/england\\_wdf49858.pdf](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/england_wdf49858.pdf)

Older statistics on child protection were gathered by the DCFS in *Referrals, Assessments and Children and Young People who are the subject of a Child Protection Plan*. These have now been archived but can still be accessed online at *Referrals, Assessments and Children and Young People who are the subject of a Child Protection Plan, England - Years ending 31 March 2004 to 2008 - Table E: Children who became the subject of a Child Protection Plan (CPP) 1, by category of abuse:* <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130313205001/http://education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000811/sfr24-2008.pdf>

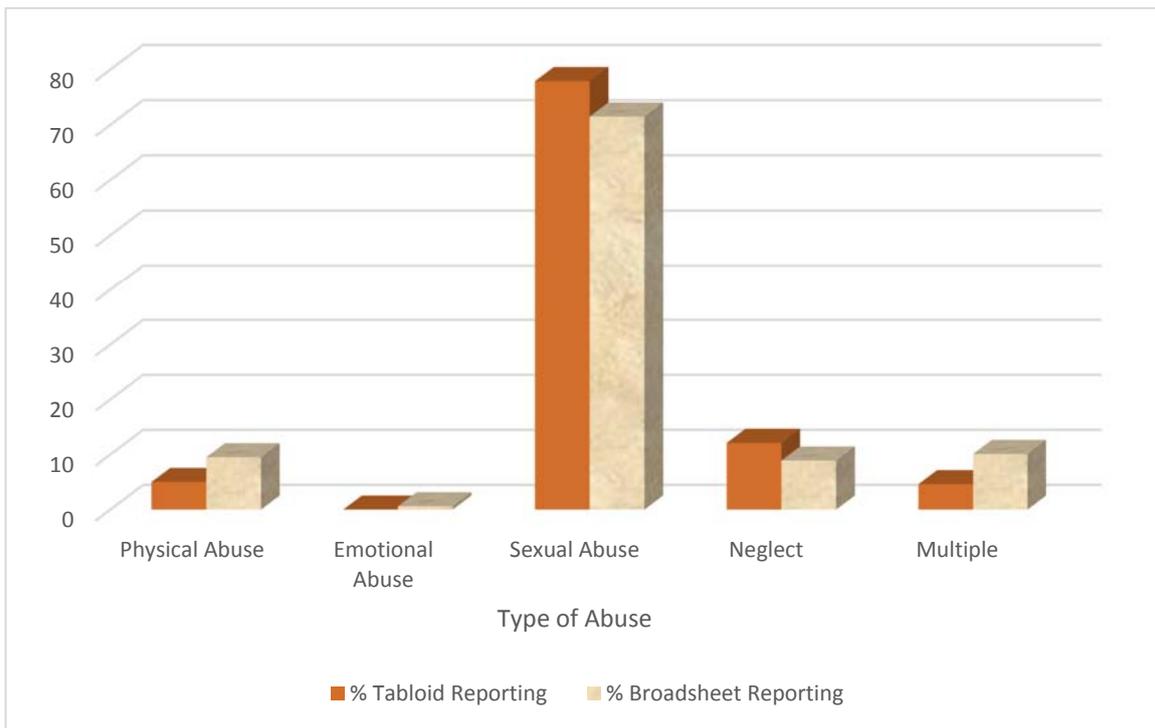


FIGURE 1 REPORTING CHILD ABUSE IN TABLOID AND BROADSHEET NEWSPAPERS

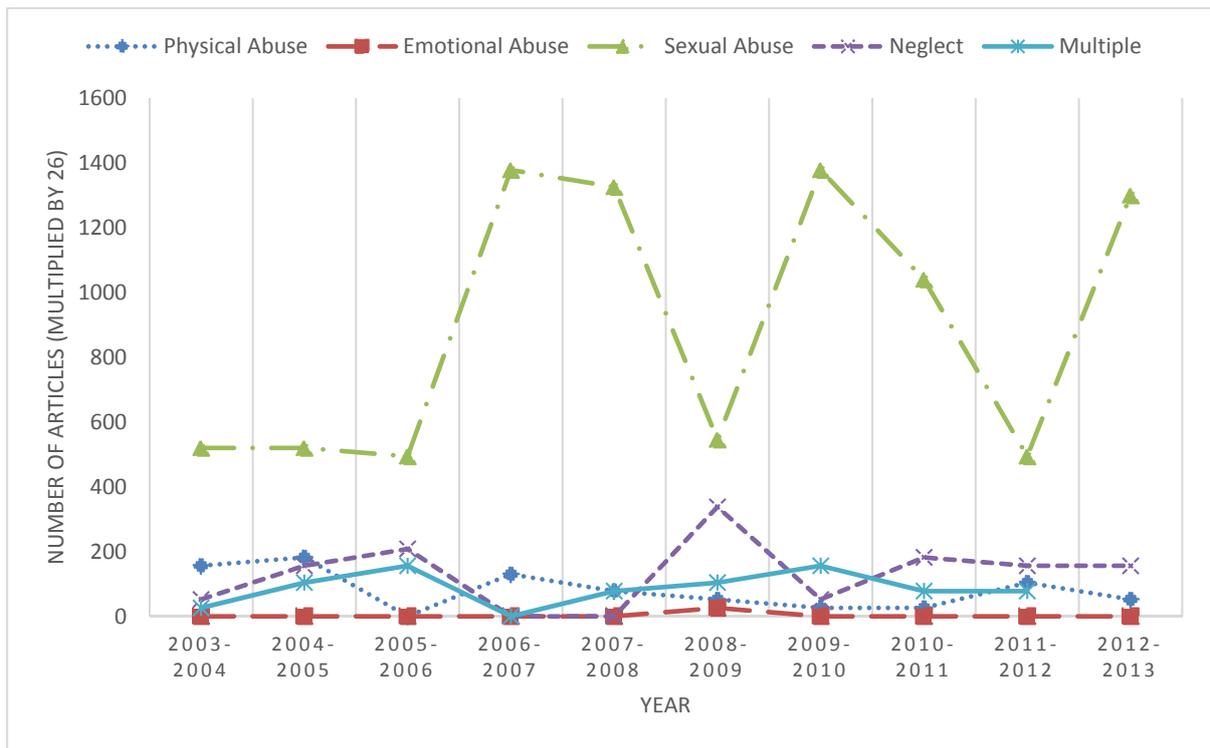


FIGURE 2 NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF CHILD ABUSE 2003-2013



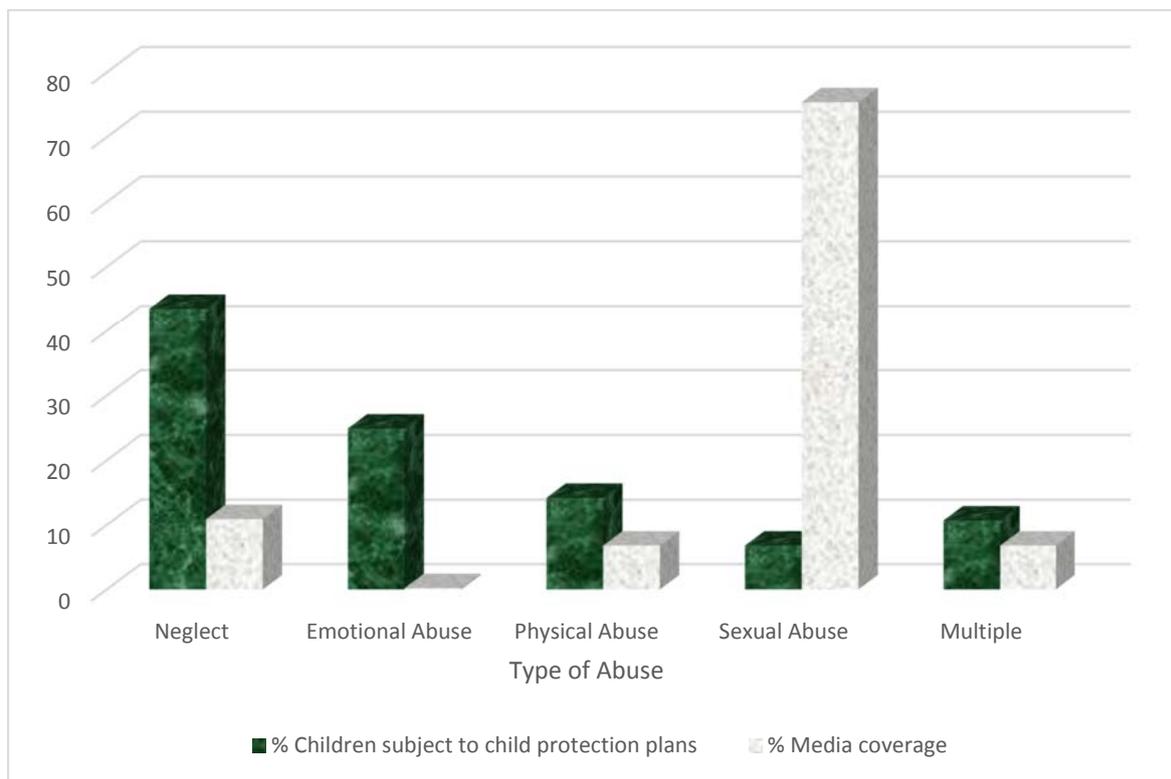


FIGURE 3 CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT DEPICTED THROUGH NEWSPAPER ARTICLES AND THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN SUBJECT TO CHILD PROTECTION PLANS

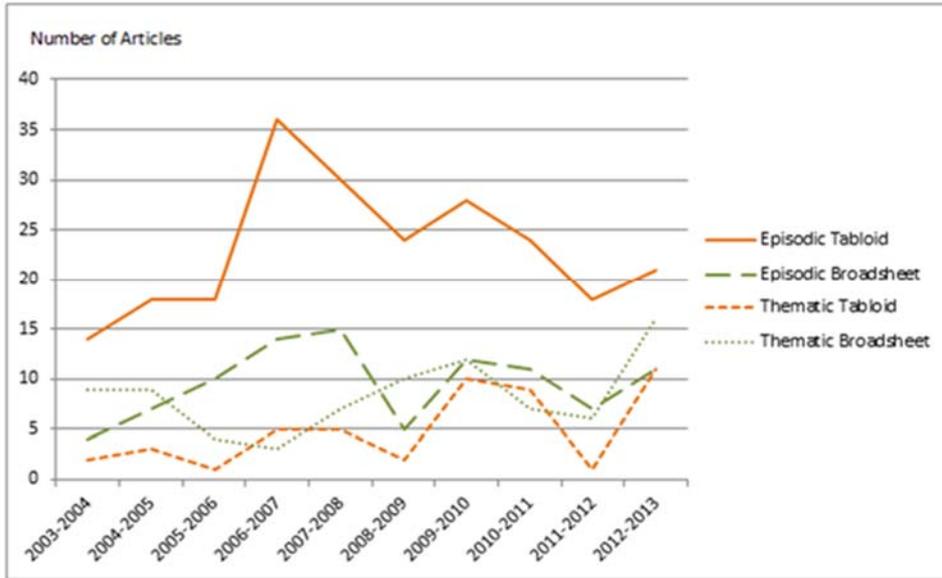


FIGURE 4 EPISODIC AND THEMATIC FRAMES IN BROADSHEET AND TABLOID NEWSPAPER  
ARTICLES 2003-2013

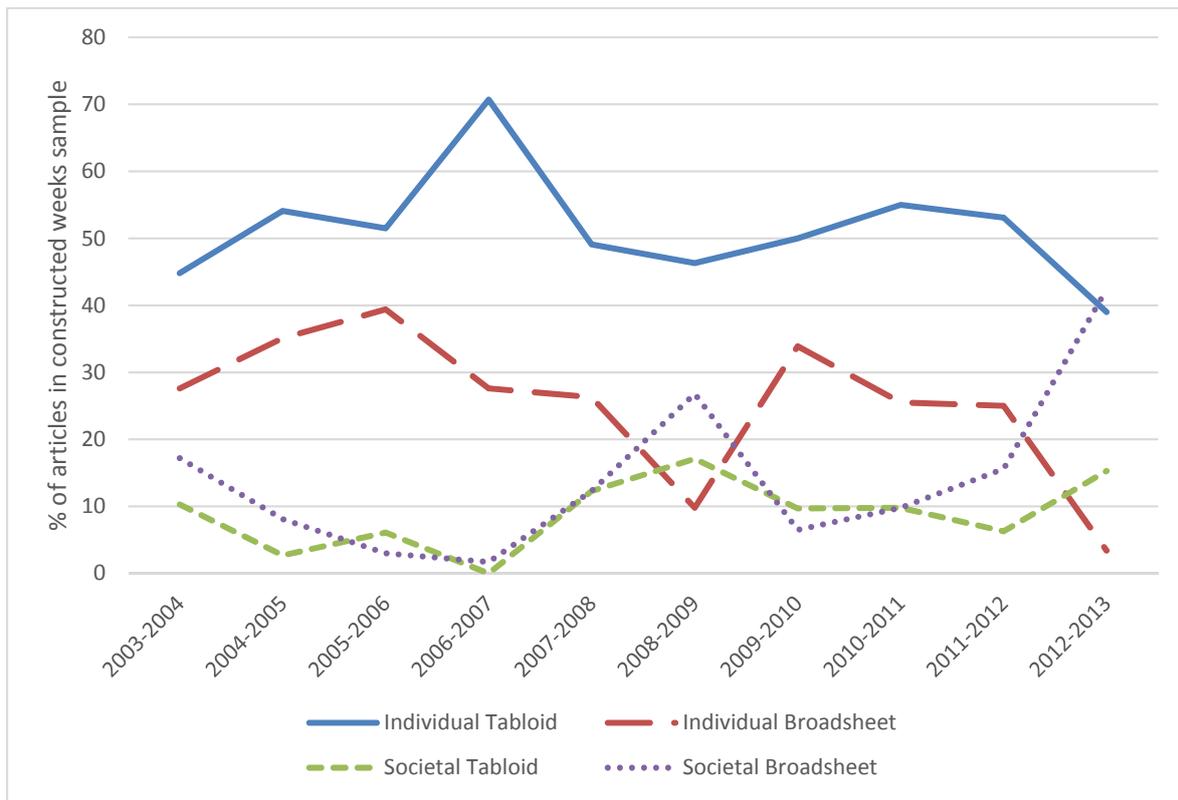


FIGURE 5 BROADSHEET AND TABLOID NEWSPAPERS FRAMING THE CAUSES OF CHILD ABUSE 2003-2013