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THE CONVERSATION

Rolf Harris guilty: but what has Operation Yewtree really taught us about sexual abuse?

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Guilty on 12 counts. Dominic Lipinski/PA

After a lengthy trial, a jury has found entertainer and TV presenter Rolf Harris guilty of 12 counts of indecent assault. On July 4 2014, he was sentenced to a custodial sentence of five years and nine months.

Harris's conviction adds to the sad litany of cases of sexual abuse of girls and women by male celebrities – a list that includes TV and radio personality Stuart Hall and the publicist Max Clifford. The large majority of survivors who testified in these cases came forward following the posthumous exposure of Jimmy Savile for sexual assaults against hundreds of children and adults.

The Savile explosion and the subsequent Met-led Operation Yewtree have laid bare the horrifying extent and degree of Savile's abuse, and his manipulation of those with whom he came into contact. As Peter Spindler (then the officer leading Yewtree) so powerfully and succinctly put it, Savile "groomed a nation".

It appears that the unmasking of Savile has created a climate where victims of other celebrities have been able to come forward – often several decades after their abuse – confident that they will be believed and that the authorities will seek justice, on their behalf.

The Yewtree inquiry has provoked very strong feelings indeed. Many argue the inquiry has rightly cast a devastating spotlight on how individuals used elements of their celebrity, wealth, power and reputation not only to sexually abuse women and children, but also to prevent that abuse from being investigated. Others believe that Yewtree amounts to a witch hunt against celebrities, and the criminalisation of largely “harmless” behaviour.

Some in this latter group have gone on to query why these supposed victims have come forward only now, occasionally suggesting that nothing happened and that many “victims” are just trying to enrich themselves.

However we interpret the Yewtree saga, it is undeniable large numbers of people have been abused by celebrities, who one way or another skilfully manipulated those around them to protect themselves.

Beyond this, there's not a great deal more we can learn from the cases themselves. As disturbing as they are, they comprise only a tiny percentage of all sex offences – and instead of picking over their individual horrors, we should consider the much larger and more insidious problem of which they are just a small subset.

Everyday problem

The post-Savile celebrity sexual abuse cases follow a torrent of high-profile child sexual abuse scandals over the past 30 years, including in children's homes, the Catholic church, as well as on-street exploitation (to name just a few). Nor are Savile and his ilk the first celebrity sexual offenders. They were preceded by the pop star Paul Gadd (aka Gary Glitter), convicted of child sex offences in the 1990s and again in the 2000s, and Jonathan King, jailed for seven years in 2001 for sexually abusing boys.

And lest we forget, the vast bulk of child sex abuse takes place in far more “mundane” settings – most child victims are abused by someone known to them, not a stranger, and around 30% of perpetrators are thought to be members of their victims' immediate family members.

The most recent prevalence survey by the NSPCC found 11% of young adults had experienced “contact” sexual abuse in childhood. Although this is a minority, it is clearly a very substantial number of children.

Our understanding of child sexual abuse has come a long way over the past 20-30 years. There are now more ways in which it can be detected, and the police are far more effective at investigating it. But once the furore over celebrity sexual abusers dissipates, then societal concern will diminish and children (and women) will continue to be sexually abused. They almost certainly were being abused as I wrote this article, and will be as you read it.

Still, our approach to child sex abuse, as with so many social and criminal ills, is often to shut the gate after the horse has bolted. Yes, we gnash our teeth and beat our chests when we discover abuse – but we still do little to prevent it. In short, our approach to sexual offending more generally needs a dramatic overhaul.

Wake up

That will require a serious long-term public awareness campaign, where every citizen is given the chance to learn about the extent and nature of sexual abuse, how its perpetrators commit their crimes, and how they avoid detection.

To achieve this, we must ensure that every child in the country receives adequate sex education lessons. It is ridiculous to expect children to understand and avoid sexual abuse if they haven't been adequately taught about normal, consensual sex. An Ofsted report published last year found that sex education was poor in more than one-third of English

schools, leaving these children vulnerable to abuse.

But even more importantly, we urgently have to address male socialisation. Of course some sexual abuse is committed by women, but they are responsible for only a small proportion of offences – by some estimates, as low as 6%. Sexual offences against both children and women are crimes committed overwhelmingly by men, both men and boys.

If our society is serious about changing that, we have to change the way boys are socialised. As things stand, too many grow up to believe it is acceptable to sexually assault children and women.

Not a watershed

The exposure of Savile and the convictions of Harris, Clifford and Hall might well offer some form of “closure” to their victims. The rest of us have come to a strange sort of crossroads. We will never again be so naïve about the existence of sexual abuse nor the prevalence of sex offenders, however well we might think we “know” them. Indeed, many commentators appear anxious to formally designate Savile/Yewtree as a “watershed” in our response to sexual abuse.

This is a dangerous delusion. While the Savile affair and everything it has unleashed may do something to advance our understanding of sexual offending, we have also been shown the abject state of our ability to deal with it.

And even as these abusers who for so long thought themselves beyond the law have finally been brought to justice, there is little to think the situation is changing.

Next, read this: Notes on a scandal: the Jimmy Savile case is all too familiar



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