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Contested Vulnerability: A Case Study of Girls in secure care

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ABSTRACT

Figures from 2015 show that two hundred and five children entered secure accommodation from England and Wales. 47% were placed because they were on remand or sentenced for committing a serious offence. 43% were placed by social services under a child welfare order. The remaining 10% were secured by their local authority on criminal justice grounds. This paper uses the example of girls in secure care to explore understandings that are applied to young people considered ‘vulnerable’ and ‘troublesome’ simultaneously. While policy around secure accommodation claims that it offers a therapeutic intervention, to help young people work through their problems and learn appropriate coping mechanisms, it also keeps them ‘safe’ by physically locking them away from the world in which they have been entrenched. Using detailed ethnographic fieldwork, this paper explores the experiences of girls living in a setting usually exempt from scrutiny and showcases their views of being ‘worked with’ in an institution designed to enable reform. Significantly, findings show that girls rejected the ‘vulnerable’ label that was ascribed to them and instead felt that vulnerability was better defined by life experience instead of age. By examining girl’s own perspectives of their complex pathways into secure care, this paper will contest the binding of childhood and vulnerability and argue that such an act disenfranchises girls from the services that are designed to help them.

1. Introduction and background

This paper uses ethnographic data collected with girls in a Secure Unit in England to consider the cultural and political twinning of age with vulnerability. Findings demonstrate that assumptions based solely on age classifications undermine the complexity of issues facing girls in trouble and hence significantly increases the risk of disenfranchising them from the services that are most able to offer help and support. Interventions for ‘children in trouble’ have traditionally been informed by two conflicting views of childhood, firstly that children are innocent and vulnerable and are therefore in need of protection (Daniel, 2010) and secondly, that children need to be socialised into useful and active members of society (Stainton Rogers, 2001). Despite these oppositional views of childhood, research and practice has frequently shown that ‘children in trouble’ share similar characteristics of social exclusion and poverty, often do poorly at school and have experienced abuse or neglect at home (Gray, 2009; Muncie, 2006). Although children who break the law often simultaneously fit into the category of the ‘troubled’ child, in the UK, needs and justice services are apportioned to divide children between welfare or justice organisations. So while a child suffering abuse at home might be dealt with in a welfare capacity by the social services, if the same child is caught stealing, he or she will instead become the responsibility of the youth justice system (O’Neil,

2001:27). The circumstances in which children first become known to professional agencies play an important role in defining their future involvement in state interventions and define whether they are perceived as being troubled or troublesome (Worrall, 1999).

While it is agreed that children in the youth justice system generally have the same needs as those in welfare services, politically these children are characterised in very different ways. Much of Europe adopts a welfare approach to young offending, with an average minimum age of criminal responsibility of fourteen (Hazel, 2008). England and Wales, however, hold the lowest age of criminal responsibility at ten years old (Goldson, 2013). Other responsibilities are not served in the same manner, as Goldson aptly highlights, these same children are not deemed to be ‘sufficiently responsible’ to own a pet until they are twelve years old, yet they ‘face the full rigor of the criminal law’ a full two years earlier (Goldson, 2013:120).

The responsabilisation agenda for children in the youth justice system does not coincide with the treatment of children in other areas of public life. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) stipulates that children under the age of eighteen are entitled to a special protection because of their status as ‘children’. UNCRC makes particular assumptions about the vulnerabilities of children and asserts that children have the right to protection from harm. While the recommendation stands that all citizens under the age

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of eighteen are treated as children, its translation into UK policy means that children in the welfare state are treated very differently from those in the criminal justice system (Daniel, 2010). While young offenders are encouraged to accept responsibility for their actions (Bradt & Bouverne-De Bie, 2009), looked after children are encapsulated in a set of professional constraints where professionals override their views to make decisions on their behalf (Thomas, 2000). So whereas on one hand, troublesome children are perceived to be 'competent' and capable of taking responsibility for their own futures (Muncie, 2006), children in the welfare state are not (Thomas, 2000). Despite its commitment to UNCRC, the UK still receives criticism suggesting that children's views are not given due consideration when important welfare decisions are being made (Lewesley, Marshall, Towler, & Aynsley-Green, 2008). While British children are not permitted to make important decisions like where they live and with whom, the policies and strategies aimed at tackling 'problem youth' render young people exempt from conditions which usually protect their rights as children (Smith, 2005). The reluctance of social work to engage with young people in the criminal justice system has meant that once children offend, vulnerable children are incarcerated for behaviours that would have been seen as an outcome of disadvantage in much of the rest of Europe (Smith, 2005). It is certainly worth noting that the majority of children entering secure accommodation under a welfare order are girls, which raises important questions about the gendered aspect of provisioning for vulnerable young people.

2. Local authority secure children's homes

Secure units are one of the few institutions in the UK that are commissioned to provide accommodation for both 'troubled' and 'troublesome' children simultaneously. While units are sometimes owned by local authorities, they can also be owned privately and commissioned to grant places to children in the youth justice system as well as those in local authority care. From a criminal justice perspective, young people can be placed in secure accommodation if they are on remand awaiting trial, if they have been sentenced to a Training and Detention Order (DTO), or if they are found guilty of committing a crime chargeable under Section 53 under the Children and Young People Act 1933, that is, they are found guilty of committing a 'grave crime' which would receive a sentence of over fourteen years or 'life' if tried in an adult court (Goldson, 2002; O'Neill, 2001). The age of the child sentenced often determines whether they will be placed in a Youth Offenders Institute, Secure Training Centre or a Local Authority Secure Children's Home (LASCH), with the preference being to select the youngest and 'most vulnerable' to go to the small number of LASCH places. The passage below illustrates how a child could end up in a LASCH under criminal justice sentencing. While informed by empirical data, this example is a fictitious one to protect young people's anonymity:

Joanne is fourteen and has been found guilty of murdering a child her own age. Joanne is known to self-harm and has attempted suicide a number of times. Joanne's crime is a high profile one and her case is frequently discussed in the media. There are concerns that inmates might disclose Joanne's identity to the public. Joanne's situation makes her vulnerable and it is judged that she should be held in secure accommodation for her own safety.

Children in secure accommodation in a welfare capacity are usually detained under Section 25 of the Children and Young People Act (1989). The act stipulates that:

- (1) *Subject to the following provisions of this section, a child who is being looked after by a local authority may not be placed, and, if placed, may not be kept, in accommodation provided for the purpose of restricting liberty ('secure accommodation') unless it appears that —*

- (a) *(i) he has a history of absconding and is likely to abscond from any other description of accommodation; and*
(ii) if he absconds, he is likely to suffer significant harm; or
 (b) *if he is kept in any other description of accommodation he is likely to injure himself or other persons.*

The passage below illustrates the circumstances that often surround young people coming into a LASCH under a welfare order. While informed by empirical data, this example is a fictitious one to protect young people's anonymity:

India is fourteen and has been living in local authority care since she was three years old. India has been staying with her birth mother, although her social worker has forbidden it. Care workers have reported India missing 104 times and sometimes do not see her for days at a time. India often returns with bruises and burns on her face and body, she also self-harms and has attempted suicide twice. India discloses that she earns money by sleeping with older men. India's social worker fears that she cannot keep India safe and calls for her to be placed into secure accommodation.

In much of Europe, these children would be protected by their legal status of 'child'. In the UK, the shift towards more conservative and punitive measures means that children and families are held increasingly accountable for their own failings (Muncie, 2011), regardless of the poverty and social disadvantage in which they are embedded (Sharpe, 2012:106). While 'giving voice' was the aim of UNCRC, the UK have repeatedly been criticised for breaking numerous conditions for UNCRC, including the age of criminal responsibility and the high number of young people in custody (Muncie, 2011). Within an economic environment of budget cuts and reduced spending, agencies working with young people are increasingly encouraged to hold young people accountable for the circumstances in which they are entrenched by promoting 'individualised responsibility' and 'self-governance' (Cradock, 2007:162). Liebenberg aptly points out that 'responsibilising citizens also succeeds in irresponsibilising governments' (Liebenberg, Ungar, & Ikeda, 2015:1007). It is through this notion of responsibilisation that criminally active young people, often living in poor conditions, are regarded culturally as making a deliberate choice to offend and therefore 'have no-one to blame but themselves' when they receive punitive sentences (Harris, 2004:30).

LASCH's are commissioned to balance punishment and care within an intervention which seeks to simultaneously encourage reform. The mixing of young people with extreme welfare orders and those with criminal justice sentences is partly defended by claims that despite their legal classifications, both groups enter the unit with similar needs.

3. Caring for the girls

Professional concern about the morality of young women is not a new phenomenon (Barter, 2006; Barton, 2000; Chesney-Lind, 1989; Hutter & Williams, 1981; Kitzinger, 1988; Leonard, 1982; Miner, 1912; Zedner, 2006) and it is therefore fitting that the majority of children placed in secure accommodation for welfare reasons are girls (Held, 2006). While offending by boys is often reduced to immaturity or low level rebellion, offending by girls is still perceived as being symptomatic of individual pathology (Sharpe, 2012). Professionals frequently report that girls are 'more difficult' to work with than boys (Barter, 2006:354) and that girls are seen as 'nasty' and 'manipulative' (Sharpe, 2012:110). Gaarder's research inside the US juvenile courts found that girls were being described as 'dirty' by probation officers who felt that incarceration would help protect them 'from the dangers associated with their sexuality' (Gaarder, Rodriguez, & Zatz, 2004:p559). Despite these findings, official statistics have repeatedly confirmed that boys are much more likely than girls to offend and girls are much less violent than boys; in fact, violent offenders make up only 16% of incarcerated women (Prison Reform Trust, 2017).

Girls are more likely to be placed in secure accommodation for their own safety with issues relating to sexual practices, hence having their liberty restricted by being identified ‘at risk’ rather than ‘a risk’ (O’Neill, 2001). Research confirms that professionals are faster to act over concerns that girls are sexually active at a young age (Carlen, 1983; Hudson, 1984; O’Neill, 2005; Sharpe, 2012). However, the emphasis on the ‘vulnerability’ of children in care and the ‘responsibility’ afforded to young offenders raises interesting debate, especially since we are reminded that offending and exploitation are often interlinked (Phoenix, 2012).

Coy (2008) reports that girls with care backgrounds are significantly overrepresented in the sex industry. Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a global issue and the World Health Organisation states that children and young people under the age of sixteen are unable to consent to sexual activities (World Health Organisation, 2003), however laws about consent vary from country to country. There have been strong attempts by campaigners to safeguard victims of CSA, especially for young people who are under the age of consent when abuse takes place (Melrose, 2013). While achieving significant change for young people who could have previously been tried as ‘prostitutes’ after being sexually abused, the term CSA reinforces the vulnerability of the child and their inability to consent. Since ‘vulnerability’ is more usually accentuated for girls, it is not surprising that it is more often girls who are secured under welfare orders because of concerns about their sex lives (O’Neill, 2005). Furthermore, while girls cannot be legally tried for ‘prostitution’ offences while they are underage, they can still be incarcerated for displaying ‘inappropriate’ sexualised behaviour under welfare routes instead of criminal justice ones.

Melrose argues that the language around CSA has been purposely framed to portray children as passive to avoid blaming abuse on those who are too young to give consent (Melrose, 2013: p157). While these legislative changes are welcomed, girls in this study firmly rejected the view of themselves as ‘vulnerable’ and felt that such descriptions undermined their experiences. The additional assertion that LASCH residents are ‘children first and foremost’, while supported by UNCRC, contradicts the prominent view of responsabilisation that is instilled in young people in other aspects of their everyday lives. As we will see, the girls felt that they were responsible for their own life choices and found much of the LASCH provision patronising. This paper will explore the twinning of childhood with vulnerability and share young people’s views about the intervention they received and its perceived effectiveness in reducing harmful behaviour.

4. Methods

4.1. Sampling and recruitment

This paper draws on data collected in an ethnographic study of Hester Lodge secure unit to explore contradictions around the twinning of vulnerability and responsabilisation with childhood. By examining girl’s own perspectives of their complex pathways into secure care, this paper will contest the binding of childhood and vulnerability and argue that such an act disenfranchises girls from the very services that are designed to help them.

Data were collected using a range of qualitative methods, including participant observations, semi-structured interviews with all female residents, case note analysis and interviews with five members of staff. I spent a year visiting the unit and conducted over 300 hours of participant observations. Interviews were conducted with fifteen girls, aged between twelve and sixteen. While I saw the girls almost daily, for long stretches of time, I interviewed each of them alone and in a separate part of the unit on three different occasions. After a year of data collection, I had collected 45 hours of interview data and an eighty-thousand-word research diary.

The research prioritised the views and perspectives of girls living inside Hester Lodge. Semi-structured interviews invited participants to

share their perspectives about their complex pathways into the unit, as well as their views about everyday life inside the unit. All fifteen girls living in Hester Lodge during 2010 took part in the research. Young people’s views were at the heart of the research but because they were placed into secure care against their will, it was important to explore how girls were perceived by professionals who worked with them (Boswell, 1998). In order to do this, I analysed the files of the twelve girls who gave consent for their file to be included in the research. A cross-section of Hester staff was interviewed to contextualise young people’s experiences amongst legislative controls and unit constraints. In total five staff were recruited, three female and two male. Staff were selected due to their differing approaches and mixed popularity with residents and the ages of staff participants varied from mid-twenties to late-fifties. Interviews were transcribed and entered into NVIVO along with fieldnotes, where they were subject to content analysis under the following themes: agency and negotiation; vulnerability and resilience; relationships; identity; offending; substance use/abuse. The use of a range of qualitative research methods offered a greater understanding of the complexity of life in secure accommodation. For instance, when during a disagreement, Natalie becomes angry and shouts, ‘I HATE you’ at her keyworker, it was possible to see that she subsequently requested to sit with him during mealtimes, watched television with him in leisure times and hugged him every night before bed. This immersion in fieldwork generated rich and previously unseen data about a particular time in the lives of young women who are experiencing intense intervention after a serious and often traumatic event. The vulnerability of the girls involved meant that as a researcher, I was extra careful to respect young people’s boundaries and spent much of my time in the unit as a calm and friendly observer. I never intervened in heated discussions between young people or staff and made sure that I only ever made positive comments to both groups. In the first stages of fieldwork I was often asked by members of staff to share observations of minor misdemeanours, to which I was politely unhelpful and made comments such as ‘oh sorry, I wasn’t paying attention’. After a number of such comments, I was told by a team leader ‘oh you’re just too nice’ and my opinion was not asked for again. To make further distinction that I was not a member of staff, I rejected the offer of having my own set of keys. This meant that I had to travel with the group and could not ‘nip off’ through a locked door when I felt like it. It also meant that I was not complicit in rule breaks when residents wanted to play jokes on staff by leaving the room in which they were enclosed.

4.2. Ethical considerations

Due to the previous experiences of the girls involved in this study, and because of the uniqueness of the research design, ethical issues were considered seriously and the study was reviewed extensively by the LASCH’s owning Local Authority and the University ethics board before fieldwork began. Interviews focused on the ‘here and now’ of living in Hester Lodge and did not ask the girls to recount any of the circumstances that were instrumental in their placement. Consent was gained in separate stages. Firstly, the project aims were shared with the whole group so that young people could ask general questions. Each of the female residents was given a project leaflet to read in their own time. A week later, I met with girls who expressed an interest in the study to answer individual questions and to supply a consent form if appropriate. I carefully explained that I was interested only in their views and if they chose not to share them with me, then that was as important as any other view. I reminded the girls that they could withdraw from the study at any time without giving reasons. I reiterated the differences between ‘research’ and other types of interviews conducted by professionals such as social workers and YOT workers to ensure that participants understood that the research was not a condition of their sentence. Participants were reassured that their answers would be anonymised and that identifiable information would never be shared with members of staff, unless they contravened child protection

legislation. Data was collected from girls living in one unit and therefore findings reflect the views of young people in a particular place and time, even so, many of the issues raised here may also be important to children in other contexts within the criminal justice and welfare systems.

Some girls appear more than others in the following sections. It is not the case that some views were given more weight than others, rather those who appear more frequently were girls who were able to vocalise their feelings more easily. Where certain voices may seem to dominate, the reader should appreciate that observations and informal conversations with other girls validated group cohesion around certain topics. For instance, while some girls expressed their frustration physically, others were able to articulate similar feelings into lengthy descriptions. So while some of the girls sometimes appear as spokeswomen on behalf of others, it is not the case that these girls had a different story to share. For instance, informal conversations with two welfare girls, Abbie and Hayley show that although Hayley is able to verbally express her frustration, Abbie's facial expressions and furious nods indicate that she agrees with Hayley's description of events:

Hayley: *It's shit. I hate it here!*

Abbie: *[nods furiously]*

Hayley: *we're locked up with criminals! [...] We should be somewhere separate; we're being punished but we haven't done anything wrong.*

Abbie: *[nods again] Yeah.*

5. Findings

5.1. Applying classifications

Of the fifteen girls who took part in the research, seven were placed on welfare orders and eight were serving criminal sentences. The girls were overwhelmingly white, with twelve of the fifteen girls identifying as being white British. The girls were aged between thirteen and sixteen when they were placed, but the majority (ten girls) were fifteen or sixteen. Although separated by legal sentences and definitions, frequently girls inhabited both legal labels. For instance, from fifteen participants: thirteen had lived in local authority care, fourteen had regularly drunk alcohol and taken drugs, fourteen had been arrested at least once, eleven had been excluded from mainstream school, and ten had had sexual relationships that were deemed to be 'inappropriate' by professionals working with them.

The separation between sentenced and welfare young people was made increasingly irrelevant by the fact that it was possible for girls to change legal status while they were inside the unit. Indeed, two 'welfare' girls were sentenced for crimes that they had committed before their welfare placement started and one 'offending' girl was kept after her criminal sentence expired under welfare grounds. The dual purpose of the unit was frustrating for the girls. While criminal sentencing was accompanied with a fixed end date, welfare confinement was assigned on a needs basis, therefore release dates were subjected to frequent extensions. In Hester Lodge, welfare young people typically served much longer sentences than those sentenced by the youth court and girls serving welfare orders frequently commented about the injustice of being 'locked up' with children sentenced for committing a serious crime. Hester residents were unanimous in their belief that offenders should be 'locked up': *'They should be here because they have done a crime.'* (Gabriella)

5.2. Recreating childhoods

LASCH's can accommodate children from the ages of ten to seventeen. Despite the developmental changes that occur to growing bodies

between these ages, under the definition provided by UNCRC, all young people under the age of eighteen are legally classed as children. However, as O'Neill (2001) explains, there are a number of separating markers which break open this seemingly single category of childhood, for instance, in the UK sixteen year olds are permitted to legally have sex and leave home if they wish to, while a ten-year-old can do neither. The expectations of children are therefore conflicting and while children over the age of ten can be prosecuted as a criminal, they are restricted from making fundamental decisions about where they live and with whom. This conflict between competency and agency was expressed fiercely by the girls who felt that the unit sought to erase their previous experiences because they had been 'inappropriate' for a child their age.

Hester Lodge aimed to design and deliver service provision to teach, shape and enrich the lives of those placed in the unit. Activities planned were those which staff felt that 'real children' should be enjoying. Real children, or more explicitly, real 'childhoods' were seen as being twinned with innocence and 'presented as a time of play, an asexual and peaceful existence within the bosom of the family' (Kitzinger, 1988:78). There was a strong feeling amongst staff that residents had been prevented from experiencing 'everyday play' associated with childhood. In line with Hester policy, staff took pleasure in providing a full schedule of enrichment activities which were designed to occupy and interest young people. *'They colour in, play football and play different games with staff [...] the aim of the unit is to give them their childhood back'* (Care worker).

Since free time is associated with problematic behaviour for teens (Harris, 2004), enrichments had another purpose in addition to creating enjoyment for young people. Enrichments also acted to fill time and to divert attention from other 'less productive' behaviour. Enrichments included activities such as painting, colouring, baking and drama. Activities were scheduled with care and forethought because most residents had a history of self-harm, attempted suicide and absconding. Therefore activities requiring abusable materials, sharp objects (scissors, screwdrivers, even biro cartridges) or leaving the unit grounds, were strictly prohibited. The diverse client group made this task increasingly difficult and as a result, some young people found that activities at times seemed patronising rather than enjoyable. Even so, Hester staff felt that they were instrumental in reshaping the futures of those in their care and felt that they could 'save' children from the adulthood that they were travelling towards (Hill, Davis, Prout, & Tisdall, 2004; James & James, 2004; Parton, 2008). Despite the fact that many of the girls had been living independently before they entered the unit, some of them embraced the version of childhood that Hester introduced to them:

'I feel different - I feel like a child. I'm doing sport, I'm drawing things. When I started using drugs, I didn't care about anything, only drugs. Before I used drugs, I was still a child, I'm back to that now.'

(Gabriella)

The idea of introducing young people to an idealised notion of a 'happy' childhood was prevalent in many areas of life in Hester Lodge. From the exchanges between girls and staff, it appeared that Hester staff had a prescribed notion of childhood, and of how children should be treated based on their perceived emotional capabilities. This generalising of children as a homogenous group was also found by Mayall in her study about children in school (Mayall, 1998). There was a feeling amongst staff that residents had not experienced 'proper' childhoods and part of the unit's ethos was to offer young people a space where they could be safe from harm and free to play like children. It was unanimously agreed by staff that childhood was – or should be – intrinsically bound with play (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Punch, 2003).

Despite Hester's aims for 'appropriate' activity for children, residents often felt that the classification of 'child' did not fit them well. Although they were 'children', their lives had been filled with

seemingly ‘adult’ activities - sex, alcohol and drugs. They therefore saw Hester’s enrichment programme as being infantilising. As Hayley explains, *‘we do crap stuff, like playing board games. I’m fifteen, not twelve!’* Girls resisted staff constructions of ‘proper childhood’, and similarly to girls in Sharpe’s study, felt that ‘getting into trouble is just what young people do’ (Sharpe, 2012:75). Therefore, while Hester sought to remake children, the girls felt that they were not children, but rather they were young people, looking forward to becoming legally independent adults.

‘Thirteen year olds hang around with their mates, but I’m in secure, so how am I meant to be doing that? Like that’s what thirteen year olds do isn’t it!’

(Lola)

5.3. Remaking girls

The unit was open in sharing its reformatory aims with residents, and while it hoped to teach young people to ‘stay away from crime’, it also encouraged residents to respond obediently to staff requests and to ‘be good’, for girls, ‘being good’ also seemed to imply that they should be ‘more girly’. Girls learned that staff were more amenable to their requests if they complied with staff expectations for them and some recounted acting *‘the part’* to show staff that they had *‘changed my ways’* (Brittany). Paradoxically, although Hester girls were encouraged to ‘act like children’, when they did become exuberant and boisterous, they were berated for being childish: *‘She said, ‘you’re a little girl, be quiet’* (Chantelle). These contradictory messages were played out on a daily basis as the unit looked for girls to embody a particular type of childhood; one that was calm and obedient rather than ‘giddy’ or ‘wilful’. Girls were expected to conform to a particular type of femininity, that is, they should be ‘confident, but not too confident’ and certainly not ‘laddish’ (Harris, 2004:29).

By seeking to shape girls into a particular version of girlhood, staff continually undermined residents’ experiences by stating that they had been ‘inappropriate’ and harmful for them. This instance occurred most frequently when girls talked with each other about sex or drugs: *‘I tell them, but you don’t know that, you’re just a little girl. You’re too young for that!’* (Female Care worker). Preventing girls from talking about their experiences did not undo them or change their opinions about how appropriate they were. To justify their own views, staff often resorted to sharing stories of their own children at particular ages so that they could highlight to resident which activities would be appropriate for them. Rather than taking on board staff suggestions, residents felt certain that their offspring would be choosing to share only certain activities with their parents:

‘Hayley does not feel she is putting herself at risk and seems to think that this is a normal lifestyle for a child of her age. She seemed surprised that my daughter did not drink and was convinced that she would be doing so secretly.’

(Notes in Hayley’s case file)

This highlights that rather than viewing her own experiences as different or irregular, Hayley felt particular activities associated with being a teenager were something that her carer’s middle age status excluded him from knowing about. Since the strict rules around personal conduct in Hester meant that young people were berated for voicing views which contradicted the unit’s interpretation of ‘appropriate’ behaviour, residents tended to avoid conflict and framed their thoughts to conform to particular staff preferences, *‘I wouldn’t ask Janet for that [tattoo magazine], she’d go ‘um, um, um’ because she likes me to be a little girl’* (Lola). As a consequence, the encouragement that they should ‘act like children’ left some girls feeling dejected and aware that they did not conform to the type of childhood expected by the unit. For instance, Lola felt that because she disliked Barbie and other ‘girly’ interests that her keyworker selected for her, she was *‘letting her down’*, despite *‘trying really hard’*: *‘She wants me to enjoy my childhood ... but I*

don’t think I could, even if I tried really hard, because I don’t really want to act like a child because it’s not very me.’ (Lola). It would be fair to argue that despite staff employing emotional labour in their attempts to engage and care for the young people in the unit, the girls also took on their own feelings of moral responsibility for the wellbeing of staff. Despite meaning that the girls were sometimes compelled to hide their feelings, it also showed that there was genuine concern and care between the staff and young people in the unit – which was noted by both sides and felt to make a real difference in the level of support given to young people (Ellis, 2016).

Often the girls reported that they did not recognise the ‘playful’ and ‘carefree’ notion of childhood that James and James (2004) suggest that adults expect of children: *‘I’m not like that ... I’ve grown up with older people, older brothers, you know’* (Gabriella). The girls were frustrated with the idea that competence was linked to age and instead felt that knowledge is founded on experience instead. This suggests that there was a serious disjuncture by what staff feel young people ‘should’ know and what they did know.

5.4. Vulnerable or responsible

The term ‘vulnerable’ was frequently used in Hester Lodge and resident case files illustrated that professionals working with the girls felt that they were vulnerable. The girls were legislatively described in these terms too: *‘Abbie is a vulnerable young girl with high levels of risk and need’* (File notes). Hester girls strongly disagreed with descriptions of themselves as vulnerable and rather than embracing the identity of a ‘child in need of protection’, suggested that professionals had acted unnecessarily in restricting their liberty. Since responsabilisation policy and cultural norms stipulate that young people must take responsibility for their actions (Muncie, 2005), it was unsurprising that girls rejected assertions that they were unable to care for themselves (Harris, 2004; Stephen, 2000). Indeed, the contradiction between ‘taking responsibility’ for criminal actions and being ‘too vulnerable’ to manage everyday decisions did not sit comfortably with most of the girls. The girls asserted that, like adult identities, children’s identities are ‘multiple and fluid’ meaning that children should not be treated as a homogenous group any more than ‘adults’, who are also ‘in a constant state of becoming’ (Butler, 1990; Holland, Renold, Ross, & Hillman, 2008; Thomas, 2000). For residents, being told that they were vulnerable contradicted their life experiences:

‘They say ‘but we’re adults and you’re children, we know what happens in life’ and I think ‘you probably haven’t seen half of it!’

(Lola)

There was much discussion with the participants about what the word ‘vulnerable’ meant and the girls were eager to share their own definitions of the word:

‘It means that you have got specific things in your life that are like a risk to you or a risk to others. So it could be my offence or it could just mean that I’ve got things on the out that make me at risk, like my self-harm.’

(Natalie)

Although all of the girls had firm ideas about the definition of the term ‘vulnerable’, most rejected this word as being an adequate description of them. Of the fifteen girls interviewed, only one described herself as being vulnerable – coincidentally, this girl was convicted of the most serious crime and was serving the most severe sentence. This raises an interesting point and highlights the malleability of such categorisations. For Natalie, the idea that she had been ‘vulnerable’ allowed her to diminish her own responsibility over the crime that she had committed and offered her a morally accountable explanation for her experiences, the label of ‘vulnerable’ therefore provided the context to undertake significant moral work with this young person but also gave her a chance to distance her very serious behaviour. All of the other girls fiercely rejected the notion of vulnerability and instead

insisted that they could care for themselves:

'I can actually look after myself [...] I don't think I'm vulnerable.'
(Brittany)

'I know I ain't vulnerable [...] I know about me and nobody can tell me what I am.'
(Lauren)

The girls fiercely rejected staff assertions that age made them vulnerable and in response asked staff to identify instances that made them more exposed to risk than adults. When presented with physical instances which rendered them 'vulnerable' in comparison to someone older or physically larger than them, most of the girls were able to share a nuanced view of vulnerability, reiterating that vulnerability is a subjective concept which affects adults as well as children:

'They're like, 'well, when a big strong man comes and tries to take advantage of you, and they're much stronger than you ...' [but then] ... if a bigger stronger man got the big strong man, then they're vulnerable! Everyone is vulnerable like that.'
(Lola)

Rather than feeling that their difficult experiences proved their vulnerability, the girls felt that they had demonstrated strength and independence by surviving these experiences. Their status as children meant that most of the girls had been excluded from employment and hence their access to earning money in legitimate way had been restricted. As a result, the girls admitted that they had often earned cash in illegitimate ways, usually by selling sex. Although they acknowledged that these experiences had often been unpleasant, most championed their ingenuity and were proud that they had been instrumental in providing shelter and sustenance for themselves. They felt that their survival illustrated their independence and competency:

'People say I'm vulnerable because I do let people take advantage of me but I'm not vulnerable because if I were vulnerable I wouldn't even be alive now, never mind alive and looking well.'
(Hayley)

In addition to their denial of vulnerability, the girls strongly rejected assertions that age alone makes a person vulnerable. They argued that they were 'more switched on' than adults more than twice their age. As Lola explained, vulnerability is not age dependent and therefore not simply a childhood issue. For Lola and others, being a child was not an adequate reason for adult justifications that they 'know more about the world'. Hence the view of the Hester child as one 'not yet capable of reason' and 'not yet fully agential' was felt by the girls to be inappropriate. Subsequently, girls felt that professionals had misjudged their maturity and hence would conceal their activities more carefully in the future. Indeed, most saw professional labels of vulnerability as something that they could 'grow out of' at sixteen when they were beyond the reach of social services:

'I told them [social services] to eff off ... I'm sixteen so yet again I've got my own choice. I've always wanted to be sixteen! Everyone's racing to get to sixteen.'
(Robyn)

'My social worker can swivel, I ain't seeing a psychiatrist. I'll be sixteen in twenty-five days.'
(Chantelle)

Robyn and Chantelle's strong feelings about the term 'vulnerability' show that it was perceived by young people to be a label imposed by services and not an accurate description of their circumstances. To avoid such discussions and sanctions in the unit, the girls enacted the display of an obedient child to encourage staff to feel that they had taken on board Hester teachings: *'I like say, 'yeah I am sorry and I won't do it again' (Brittany)*. Despite their own beliefs in their individual competence, rather than debating their views with staff, the girls

discovered that it was easier to *'put up and shut up so you can just get out fast'* (Lauren). By playing the part of a compliant resident, many of the girls were able to act along with the regime without accepting its messages and ideals. Hence, rather than empowering girls to be independent and competent, branding 'adult' topics as inappropriate meant that girls were forbidden from mentioning them, let alone discussing them with one another. For girls who had experienced sexual exploitation, rape, violence and drug abuse (amongst other things) this meant that opportunities to learn new coping strategies were lost. Instead girls felt that they would refrain from sharing such information in future (Ellis, 2016), meaning that they did not learn the skills to successfully negotiate their needs in the future or learn mechanisms of keeping safe once they were seen officially out of the reach of social service intervention.

6. Discussion

This paper explored the apparent contradictions that girls faced in secure accommodation and considered young women in terms of the status of 'childhood' that is applied to them in a legal context. In secure accommodation policy, young people are perceived as being emotionally and behaviourally malleable. Although the ideals and expectations of 'proper' children were unanimously agreed by staff, girls felt that this idealised notion of childhood could not be blended with their own experiences. While rejecting the label of 'vulnerable' the girls displayed a nuanced understanding of competency and were able to illustrate contexts in which adults would be as equally vulnerable as they were. Instead of being 'vulnerable', the girls asserted that they were capable and independent young people, able to survive and flourish in times of adversity. This rejection of 'vulnerability' highlights a tension between the professional discourses used to provide care for children in trouble and places children in a difficult position where they need to selectively share information with professionals to avoid further chastisement (Ellis, 2016). Instead of shrugging off children's experiences as 'inappropriate', professionals could help young people to understand the contexts in which being 'a child' makes them more vulnerable. By addressing practical and structural constraints (such as restrictions of paid labour or state benefits for children) young people could perhaps glean a better understanding about the issues that are in their power to influence and those that are not. Understanding vulnerability in a structural sense may enable girls to celebrate their successes and plan a pathway for their future based on professional knowledge and support.

By considering secure accommodation as a socialisation tool, the contradictions around the unit's purpose are minimised. Although children enter for different reasons, they are all seen by the state as being marginalised and excluded from mainstream society, and therefore as presenting a risk to themselves or others. Placing these children together means that they can be socially reformed, regardless of the needs they presented before their incarceration. So while the state asserts that young offenders need to be put in 'their place', it also needs to ensure that welfare children who are seen as 'out of place' are taught to fit in to society in ways which are socially acceptable to the general population (Read, 2011). Through building caring relationships with the girls, Hester sought to teach both offenders and victims that their previous pathway had not been appropriate for them. Although staff were certain that they were acting in young people's best interests, residents did not share Hester's philanthropic vision and frequently rejected the changes that staff attempted to illicit from them. Girls' own descriptions confirmed that, rather than being vulnerable and in need of saving, they perceived themselves as responsible citizens, able to care for themselves. Given the responsabilisation agenda, it was unsurprising that girls rejected assertions that they were incapable of caring for themselves (Harris, 2004; Stephen, 2000). The contradiction between 'taking responsibility' for criminal actions and being 'too vulnerable' to manage their own lives was frustrating for girls and they went to lengths to dispel images of themselves as vulnerable by recounting

instances where they had showed resilience and thereby survived challenges and hardships. For these girls, professional assertions about vulnerability were experienced as unhelpful and condescending. While it is already known that there is an overrepresentation of girls with a care background in the sex industry (Coy, 2008) the portrayal of vulnerability as a childhood issue undermines the long lasting disadvantage faced by women and girls in such situations and rather than helping girls avoid this well-trodden pathway, instead fed feelings of resentment towards secure placements. As a consequence, most of the girls saw vulnerability as something that they could 'grow out of' and instead of aspiring to change their lives, they sought only to be sixteen and released from social service scrutiny.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

This paper shared data from an in-depth study of girls in secure accommodation that reveals a previously unseen world of everyday life from young people's perspectives in a locked and secure institution. The generation of rich ethnographic data enabled exploration of girls' understandings of their labelling as simultaneously 'vulnerable' and 'troublesome'. While accepting that those who had broken the law could be seen as 'troublesome', most of the girls shunned the label of 'vulnerable'. Those detained under a welfare order felt that they had been unfairly targeted by professionals looking to limit their freedom. What is usually forgotten in debates about 'vulnerable children' is that, as one resident aptly observes, she had experienced more - at the age of thirteen - than most adults twice her age. For Lola and others, vulnerability could not be explained as being only age related since their bodies were almost as they would be when they were fully-grown. Such basic descriptors of vulnerability succeeded only in convincing girls that their behaviours were wrong because they were young, in this way important and crucial chances to reframe their future trajectories were missed. Helping girls to consider vulnerability in its wider terms, such as emotional vulnerability and financial vulnerability would enable them to identify how and where they had been taken advantage of and could help them understand the constraints around which they had been confined. Helping girls to understand how their legal categorisation of 'child' had rendered them vulnerable in a structural sense, might have helped them to realise that as well as being vulnerable, they were astute and resilient young women who had used the resources that were available to live independently. By understanding the limitations in which they were placed, politically, financially and structurally, young women would be given a means to understand their previous choices and set them within the constraints in which they were entrenched, hence instead of 'blaming' themselves for past choices, girls would have an opportunity to plan different pathways for their future based on professional and structural help and support.

Although 'enrichment' activities were planned to occupy and entertain young people, residents often saw little value in them and felt that their implementation proved that the unit had underestimated their complex, and often traumatic, life experiences. The isolated nature of the unit housed young people away from the hardships in which they were usually entrenched - but only temporarily. Amongst a full timetable of activity, there were limited opportunities to share experiences and coping strategies with one another. Staff had their own reasons for minimising discussion between young people, and in particular felt that sharing sensitive information might encourage young people to emulate behaviours and share strategies shown by others, particularly harmful behaviours like self-harm. Most residents reported feelings of loneliness and described being involved in manipulative relationships outside of Hester, in this way, the unit missed a crucial opportunity to help girls develop and manage potential relationships with each other while in a 'safe' space with additional emotional support. Since the girls had similar backgrounds and often similar experiences, with guidance they could have perhaps forged meaningful friendships and developed coping strategies and networks to use in their everyday lives outside of

Hester Lodge. Although policy makers are concerned that girls with particular sexual experiences may 'contaminate' other girls, they miss the point that these girls' lives are often intertwined with each other outside of secure accommodation anyway. At least two pairs of the girls had known each other - and lived in the same children's homes - before entering Hester Lodge. It is therefore naïve to make assumptions that young women living in the unit did not know about the experiences and behaviours of their peers. I argue that the implied vulnerability applied to these teenage girls puts them at greater risk of exploitation and in fact, the only girl who claimed not to have been in an exploitative sexual relationships was the girl who was felt by staff, to have been 'the most' exploited by her 'boyfriend' and his friends. Sharing stories and strategies between one another may have allowed this girl to gain a deeper understanding to identify her own experiences in the stories shared by others. Of course, above everything, what this study has shown is that the girls are all different, hence applying only two ways of working, with the 'offenders' or the 'vulnerable' will never be effective. Practitioners instead need to be equipped with specialised training and support to ensure that they are able to work with young people on a case by case basis while using discretion to encourage young people to engage with one another where relationships will be helpful for recovery and rehabilitation.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

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