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Blame and Culpability in Children's Narratives of Child Sexual Abuse

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Though child sexual abuse (CSA) is a global problem, victims are treated differently across the world. In the UK, there is a dominant assumption that victims are passive, which risks further marginalising those who do not identify themselves in line with prominent understanding of 'vulnerability'. Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews, this paper shares the perspectives of girls who were placed in secure accommodation for their own protection, owing to professional concerns of CSA. Despite their experiences being reported almost identically in their files, this sensitive research shows that girls understood and narrated their journeys in strikingly different ways. Each shared complex relationships with their abuser and admitted to absconding with them on multiple occasions. Despite disparate narratives, the girls unanimously rejected being labelled as 'vulnerable' and instead felt that they were responsible for the abuse that they had endured. I argue that limited understanding of CSA problematises girls who claim sexual agency, meaning that they are consequently forced to shoulder responsibility for their own exploitation. By sharing the voices of those who are usually unheard, this paper concludes by calling for a radical reframing of the way that victims are treated, both by professionals working with them and by policies written about them.

'This paper shares the perspectives of girls who were placed in secure accommodation for their own protection, owing to professional concerns of CSA'

KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGES:

- Girls believed that professionals held them accountable for being sexually abused.
- The structural disadvantages of childhood meant that children sometimes relied on their abusers for food and shelter.
- Victims sometimes felt that their abuser was their only friend.
- Professionals sometimes mistook resilience for culpability.

KEY WORDS: vulnerability; girls; sexual exploitation; blame

Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) describes a wide range of sexual actions perpetrated against children, with a key defining element being that a child is *unable* to consent to sexual activity while she or he is under the age of consent (World Health Organization, 2003). This should not detract from the fact that vulnerable young people over the age of consent may also

'A child is *unable* to consent to sexual activity while she or he is under the age of consent'

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experience CSA. On account of its hidden nature, the prevalence of CSA is largely unknown, however, in the UK, the government claims that around one in 20 children experiences some kind of sexual abuse between the ages of 11 and 17, equating to around 220 000 children nationally, at any one time (HM Government, 2017). Research suggests that only ten per cent of children who experience sexual abuse report this to someone in authority (Radford *et al*., 2011). Despite representing a vast and global concern, little is known about how victims of CSA cope with the impact and consequences of such abuse (Palmer and Foley, 2017). Instead, research tends to focus on the perspectives of professionals working with young people who have experienced CSA (Gilligan, 2016) or the perspectives of adults recounting abuse that they experienced as children (Woodiwiss, 2014). Approaches to tackling the issue of CSA are in their early stages (Lefevre et al., 2017) and children's voices are almost entirely missing from debates to shape the future of essential interventions and services (Gilligan, 2016). This paper addresses this important gap by exploring CSA from the perspective of young victims in order to examine the narratives that are constructed by others on their behalf.

'Provisioning services for 'risky' children has reified traditional oppositional categories, positioning some children as 'vulnerable' and others as 'troublesome''

Provisioning services for 'risky' children has reified traditional oppositional categories, positioning some children as 'vulnerable' and others as 'troublesome', depending on which service first assesses them (Ellis, 2016; Rosier, 2011). There are global inconsistencies in assumptions about children's competence, which are particularly evident in global variances around the age of sexual consent and around criminal responsibility. For instance, whilst the age of sexual consent across Europe and the USA is set at a minimum of 16, the minimum age of criminal responsibility is set much lower at an average minimum age of 14 across Europe and ten in England and Wales (Hazel, 2008). Remarkably, some USA states have no minimum age of responsibility (Cipriani, 2009). While young offenders are expected to take responsibility for their transgressions, children in care report that their views are overruled by professionals claiming to protect children's 'best interests' (Daniel, 2010). Hence, while on the one hand, children are held to account for their actions and behaviours, on the other, they are denied decision-making responsibility about important factors, such as where they live and with whom (Bradt and Bouverne-De Bie, 2009; Thomas, 2000).

Considering children's legal responsibilities alongside their inability to consent to sex creates an interesting paradox which largely remains undebated (Ellis, 2018). As it stands, although children may claim that sex was consensual, sex with a child is illegal, regardless of the circumstances. Campaigns to raise awareness of child abuse have tended to showcase particular images of children to evoke sympathy for the 'innocent' child in need of protection (Kitzinger, 2015). Such campaigns tend to depict young children curled up in the dark, sometimes clutching a teddy. Although these images heighten public anger about the injustice of CSA, images of very young and frightened children do little to evoke concern for the older child who appears 'sexualised' and claims that sex with her attacker is consensual (Woodiwiss, 2014). Different abuses can be experienced in different ways and as Melrose (2013, p. 155) reports, there are often 'multiple types of abuse operating with the same victims at any one time'. To champion one type of victim over another lessens the responsibility of care towards the seemingly 'knowing' child simply because he/she does not fit into an 'innocent' typology

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(Kitzinger, 2015; Woodiwiss, 2014). Somewhat misguided views about the asexuality of childhood have meant that sexually aware children are at risk of being judged as 'damaged goods' and no longer in need of protection (Green, 2006, p. 83). In fact, the opposite is true and Coy (2016) offers a clear overview of the commodification of sexualised youth. Indeed, where children and young people appear to be consenting to sex, work by Pearce (2013) highlights ways in which consent can be abused. She introduces the notions of 'coerced consent', 'survival consent', 'condoned consent' and 'normalised consent', all of which are relevant to the experiences of children and vulnerable adults experiencing exploitation (Pearce, 2013, p. 66).

'Sexually aware children are at risk of being judged as 'damaged goods' and no longer in need of protection'

Secure Accommodation

In England and Wales, children can be placed in secure accommodation if they are remanded in custody or if they are found guilty of a 'grave' crime (Ellis, 2016; Goldson, 2002; O'Neill, 2001). Only the youngest and 'most vulnerable' offenders are placed in secure accommodation. Additionally, children can be detained on a secure order under Section 25 of the Children and Young People Act 1989 if they have suffered serious abuse and are deemed to be unsafe in a community setting. Usually those secured under Section 25 have a history of absconding. Secure accommodation therefore provides accommodation for serious young offenders alongside vulnerable children in need of protection. Although they are secured for different purposes, it has been argued that children under both orders have similar needs and therefore require similar care and support (Ellis, 2018; Goldson, 2002; O'Neill, 2001). Whilst units are usually mixed, it has been noted that girls are more likely to be admitted to secure care through a welfare route than their male counterparts, and girls who are at risk of sexual exploitation are given priority for welfare beds (O'Neill, 2005, p. 114).

The Research

Findings reported in this paper derive from an ethnographic research study convened over 12 months in one secure accommodation unit in England, named here as Hester Lodge. After receiving ethical approval from the local authority and the university ethics boards, I spent a year visiting the unit to observe everyday life. All of the girls residing in Hester Lodge were invited to take part in a series of interviews exploring 'young people's decision making in secure accommodation'. In total, 15 girls each participated individually in three in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

'Findings reported in this paper derive from an ethnographic research study convened over 12 months in one secure accommodation unit in England'

Interviews were designed to capture changing views and perspectives about life in secure care. In addition, girls were asked for permission to access their case files so that parallels could be made between how their perspectives differed from those held by the professionals who assumed responsibility for them. Additional data were generated through individual interviews with five members of staff. All names have been anonymised to protect the identity of the girls and the staff who worked with them. Interviews were transcribed and entered into a qualitative data analysis programme alongside participant

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observation field notes and case file content analysis. All data were subject to thematic analysis using NVivo. Initial themes reflected the foci explored within the in-depth interviews and all data were coded into themes and sub-themes. The framework was modified iteratively to allow for the emergence of new themes as the analysis progressed. Following this preliminary analysis, I identified three case study girls who exemplified diversity within the themes. The data associated with these girls were then reanalysed to explore contextual complexities within and across their accounts.

Ethics and Consent

Interviews were conducted in the 'visiting suite' of the unit where conversations could not be interrupted or overheard. All of the girls living in the unit were invited to take part in the project. I carefully explained the voluntary nature of the research and reiterated the differences between a researcher and other kinds of professionals. Consent was confirmed at the beginning of each contact and participants were reminded that they could withdraw at any time without explaining why. I practised phrases that participants could use to avoid answering unwelcome questions, such as 'I'd rather not talk about that thanks'. Interviews were designed so that young people could set the pace and veer off track if they wanted to. I refrained from sharing my own thoughts but occasionally felt that I had to, for instance, when one girl claimed that she deserved to be beaten because she was a 'really, really bad child'. Instead of directly opposing her view, I used a reflective listening technique and asked 'what can a two-year-old possibly do that is '*really, really* bad?' After which, she thought for a moment, giggled a little and then talked about the language that had been used in her home: 'They always said that it was our fault. Looking back, I guess maybe it wasn't'. (Robyn)

Findings: Hester Girls

From the 15 girls who took part, five entered the unit under criminal justice sentencing, seven girls entered under child welfare orders and the remaining three were held simultaneously under both orders while rulings proceeded through the court. Participants were aged 13–16 and case files revealed that the girls came from similar backgrounds: all were known to social services; most featured on the child protection register; almost two-thirds had been excluded from mainstream education; and all but one had previously committed a crime. The girls almost unanimously reported that they had been raped, often in early childhood. Thirteen had previously been accommodated under a care order and most had experienced a number of placements around the UK.

'Focusing primarily on three girls highlights the complexities between the common narratives that participants used to talk about their experiences'

Although 15 girls contributed to the study, the rest of this paper will focus specifically on data generated with three girls. These three girls were not unique within the sample; however, they typify the experiences described by others. Focusing primarily on three girls highlights the complexities between the common narratives that participants used to talk about their experiences. On one level, the similarities between them were

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stark: all were 13 when they met the man who first groomed them; all were living in local authority care; all had difficult early experiences of neglect and abuse; all self-harmed and had attempted suicide; all had been raped as young children; and, ultimately, all three felt that they were held accountable for being sexually exploited. Despite their similarities, these girls viewed their experiences differently and emphatically denied their likeness when staff drew parallels between them. They described their abusers in contrasting ways and ascribed different identities to themselves and their circumstances. While Hayley described herself as a 'survivor' who managed to develop resilient strategies to make her abuse bearable, Lola styled herself as a 'sensual person' and claimed that she was competent at maintaining a self-sufficient lifestyle. Abbie embodied the most common description of all and reported herself to be her abuser's 'girlfriend', claiming that her relationship was caring and consensual. Despite claiming responsibility for their sexual encounters, they were all under the legal age of consent and therefore unable to consent to sex. The next section will set the context for each of the three girls and position them in relation to the identities that they have ascribed for themselves.

Hayley – 'I'm a Survivor'

Hayley was known to social services from birth and placed on the child protection register following reports of neglect and abuse. Hayley was raped in the family home but was not put into care until she was 13 years old, then she met Tom. Tom was 20 and Hayley found him 'good looking'. He bought her things, usually drugs and alcohol, but sometimes other small gifts too. Tom was keen to have sex and eventually Hayley 'let him'. She was dismayed when he 'just wanted to do it all the time'. Sometimes, Tom sent his friend Jim to meet Hayley instead. Jim bought Hayley alcohol and drugs and, after a few weeks, explained that he had 'bought' her from Tom and that he was her 'pimp'. Jim subsequently sent Hayley to have sex with men at parties and in cars, hotels and B&Bs (bed and breakfast). Hayley was certain that Jim would find and kill her if she ran away. Hayley frequently absconded from care to be with Jim and sometimes enjoyed their liaisons because she liked 'doing drugs and stuff' and they sometimes 'had a laugh'. Occasionally, if Hayley felt that she needed 'a break', she would encourage another girl from her children's home to go with Jim in her place. Hayley used the word 'exploitation' to describe what happened to her and agreed that neither Tom nor Jim cared for her. Despite this, Hayley felt that she had made particular choices to befriend Jim, like 'pretending to be nice' to 'stay on his good side'. She maintained that she could look after herself: 'If I couldn't look after myself, then I wouldn't be here, let alone here and doing well'.

'Hayley used the word 'exploitation' to describe what happened to her'

Abbie – 'He's My Boyfriend and He Loves Me'

Abbie was taken into care at the age of two following reports of neglect and sexual abuse. Abbie was fostered but subsequently moved to a children's home when she was 11 years old where she made frequent disclosures about being raped and bullied in her residential home. At 13, Abbie began to abscond to

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stay with 'friends' and was moved to a different home in another area. Abbie continued to abscond and sometimes complained of 'pains inside' and revealed cuts, bruises and burns on her body. Abbie claimed that she absconded to be with her 'boyfriend' Danyal who she loved. Abbie disclosed that she had sex with Danyal's brother, cousin and friends, but that she did not mind since they 'were fit' and 'crazy about me' and that Danyal did not mind either since they gave him money afterwards. Long term, Abbie hoped to marry Danyal and have children with him. Abbie was desperately unhappy in Hester Lodge and felt that she had been separated from her best friend and the only person who loved her:

'Abbie hoped to marry Danyal and have children with him'

> 'When I'm old enough to get a place of my own, I'm going to go to my boyfriend and explain to him that my social worker is being bitchy and she's trying to stop me spending time with him. And then we're going to have kids together, and get married and then we'll forget about my social worker.' (Abbie)

Lola – 'I'm a Sensual Person Who Just Likes Sex'

Lola was known to social services from birth and placed on the child protection register following reports of neglect and abuse. Lola entered care when she was 11 years old after being reported missing and found living with a known sex offender. Lola's school reported that she self-harmed, used drugs and absconded regularly. At 13, Lola absconded from care and made money selling sex in a strip club. After being found beaten and unconscious, Lola was hospitalised and subsequently transferred into secure care. Upon release, Lola continued to abscond from her care home and reported frequent sexual encounters, which resulted in another secure order. Lola described herself as a 'prostitute' and felt that the terms of her sexual encounters were chosen and directed by her. She referred to the men who she slept with as 'punters' and described choosing to have sex with some men, while refusing to have sex with others. Lola had friendships which she knew were seen as inappropriate, such as one with a convicted paedophile who gave her 'a place to stay for a few weeks'. Lola described herself as a 'player' or as 'sensual person who just likes sex', however, she had a dim view of men in general and claimed that 'most men are shit'.

'Lola described herself as a 'prostitute' and felt that the terms of her sexual encounters were chosen and directed by her'

Absconding: Grooming and Culpability

Hayley, Abbie and Lola were placed in Hester Lodge after each spending almost a hundred nights 'missing'. All three absconded for weeks at a time and subsequently reported living with men who abused them. They each offered different explanations for absconding but were united in the view that absconding felt like the best option at the time. All three described being given drugs and alcohol by older men who initially asked for no payment. As noted by Palmer and Foley (2017), grooming often makes children feel special and more 'grown up' than their peers, and all three reported that they found it difficult to make friends of their own age. Lola, Abbie and Hayley reported that they ran when things were difficult in care, and all felt that (at least initially)

'All three described being given drugs and alcohol by older men who initially asked for no payment'

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they absconded to 'have fun', to be with their friends and to take drugs. The girls described their behaviour while missing as 'normal teen' behaviour and felt that they had been unfairly punished because they were 'in care' and known to the authorities:

> 'Thirteen year olds hang around with their mates… Like that's what thirteen year olds do isn't it? Experiment with alcohol, and cigarettes … I'm just carrying on drinking and smoking and taking drugs and having sex.' (Lola)

> 'Social services like to make problems that aren't there.' (Hayley)

Being missing in the early stages of their exploitation was recounted as being fun and exciting: 'Sometimes I'm like "Ha-ha, I'm missing"' (Hayley). Furthermore, the girls recounted their experiences as 'normal' and typical of other relationships that were familiar to them. Research by Barter (2011) claims that inter-relational violence was considered a 'normal' part of young people's sexual relationships. Therefore, despite violent episodes, Abbie fiercely defended her relationship with Danyal and believed that she was genuinely loved by him:

> 'I know he's not using me… That's what she [social worker] thinks. I know my boyfriend would never do that to me, he loves me to bits and he gives a fuck about me. He's always nice to me and he never says "I don't want to talk to you", he never does that to me, he's always nice, his friends are nice to me.' (Abbie)

While seemingly advantageous and exciting initially, all three found that circumstances suddenly changed in ways that they did not expect, which meant that instances that started out affectionate often became hostile and unpleasant: 'It were gradual and then all of a sudden it were like all changed … I were just drugged up all the time' (Hayley). Whereas Lola reports being complicit in choosing and selecting particular men to have sex with, Hayley instead describes surrendering herself to 'let it happen'. Palmer and Foley (2017) noted that cannabis and alcohol often led to the blurring of choice and consent and created uncertainty around relationship boundaries and expectations. This blurring is demonstrated in Hayley's case and it impacts particularly on her feelings of culpability, because whilst Hayley had *chosen* to meet up with Jim, she had never *consented* to have sex with him. In fact, Hayley's age restricts her from giving her consent, nevertheless, Hayley is left feeling responsible for her experiences:

'All three found that circumstances suddenly changed in ways that they did not expect'

> 'I just let it happen because if I didn't let it happen, it'd put me in more danger, it'd end up me being killed if I didn't do as I were told. So I just went along with it for my safety.' (Hayley)

The issue of absconding featured heavily in the girls' narratives and highlights the complexity of the relationships that they shared with their abusers. While Hayley talks openly about being coerced and exploited, Abbie and Lola continued to see their relationships as consensual (Lola) and even loving (Abbie). Abbie was emphatic about the love that she shared with her boyfriend, despite the unwelcome attention that she received when in his company:

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> 'Danyal's brother came into the room and sat next to me, and started kissing me and all that, for some strange reason, you know, as boys do. And then his other brother came in the room when I was getting away from his brother, well, I was trying to get away from him… I was backing up trying to get my face away from him. And then his brother comes in wearing shorts and I covered my eyes… because their bits look horrible.' (Abbie)

'The girls felt that the lifestyle offered by their abuser was safer or otherwise preferable to the 'care' that they received in care'

Although professionals noted frustration that girls absconded with men who physically and sexually harmed them, the girls felt that the lifestyle offered by their abuser was safer or otherwise preferable to the 'care' that they received in care:

> 'I ran away from my children's home. And I wouldn't go back because people in the home were threatening to burn me alive and beat the fuck out of me.' (Abbie)

> 'I am safe with them. They take care of me because I belong to him.' (Hayley)

> 'I was working in a strip club. I was prostituting myself all the time… Just loads… It was fun I liked it. I mean, I didn't like the men that used to come in…' (Lola)

However, rather than helping them to escape their problems, absconding had unintended consequences and marginalised them from professional support. The girls were all significantly harmed while absconding and all three needed medical attention, which required a hospital stay.

Why Does It Always Happen to Me?

'Care workers noted little sympathy for girls who absconded'

Care workers noted little sympathy for girls who absconded and suggested in case files that absconding indicated complicity to abuse. The girls were aware of these views, and although they reported their first sexual experience as rape, all felt that subsequent sexual abuse was at least sometimes 'consensual'. They also reported that when subsequent abuse occurred, they were sometimes misbelieved unless medical examinations validated their claims. Secure care staff were unified in their views about the innocence of the girls who had experienced CSA, but the girls themselves described Hester staff as being unusual compared to carers who they had known previously. In line with Pearce's (2013) notion of condoned consent, Lola and Abbie noted frequent instances when carers had insinuated that they allowed men to abuse them. When Lola reported being abused by a man 'old enough to be my grandad', her carer suggested that she had encouraged the attack because of her clothing choices. As she explains:

> 'She [carer] thinks that I'm a bit of a slapper… I can tell by the way she talks to me and she'll always make comments about the way I dress… I'm not being a tart, it's just the type of fashion I'm into. They said that if they'd been sexually exploited that they wouldn't be wearing clothes that would attract men.' (Lola)

The girls felt that carers mistrusted their sexual awareness and viewed them as being sexually predatory. Thus as Woodiwiss (2014) suggests,

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the sexually 'active' child is still seen as making herself 'available for sex'. Lola described how these messages followed her through different placements and subsequently meant that her behaviour was policed accordingly:

> '[Male carer] came and sat next to me and I smiled at him, so I got proper bollocked and I got an out of group sanction for a week… [female carer] basically said "Lola, we know why you're here and we have to be careful" and I was like "what! I'm going to rape him am I now?!"' (Lola)

Abbie did not fluctuate in the devotion with which she described her 'boyfriend', despite the fact that he 'insisted' that she also slept with his brother, cousin and friends so that they would give him money. Hayley felt that these differences meant that Abbie had been manipulated whereas because Hayley had known what she was doing, in her eyes, her abuse was consensual, at least some of the time:

> 'I said to her "At least I don't let men take advantage of me". I know that it's happening but she doesn't. Like she thinks her boyfriend loves her and he doesn't. Not at all.' (Hayley)

Abbie maintained that she enjoyed a loving and consensual relationship with her partner and felt that her lifestyle was 'nobody else's business'. Hayley and Lola internalised a sense of responsibility for events and reported that they had been complicit in their abuse. For Hayley, being knowledgeable about her abuse meant that she reflected on the times in which she had not resisted sex. Discussions that focused solely on Hayley's vulnerability did not resonate with her own sense of identity, and she believed that, rather than being empowered to change her future, she was being punished for sharing details of her past:

> 'Well, they're going to keep me in here… talking to 'em is making it more worse and making them want to keep me in here longer. So if I get another three-month order, I'm never going to trust anyone in here ever again… I wouldn't want to risk getting put back in a place like this.' (Hayley)

Although they tell their stories in different ways, each of the girls found assertions of vulnerability unhelpful and fiercely rejected their application (Ellis, 2018). However, by rejecting vulnerability, they instead embraced a notion of culpability and aligned their identities with a savvy and more streetwise version of girlhood as presented in popular media, the girl who 'has it all' and is in control of her sexuality and the power that it harnesses (Harris, 2004):

'Each of the girls found assertions of vulnerability unhelpful and fiercely rejected their application'

> 'If I were vulnerable I wouldn't even be alive now, never mind alive and looking well.' (Hayley)

> 'I can take care of myself and everyone's like "no, you're vulnerable". And I know I'm 14, so I'm supposed to think that I know everything, but I know I don't know everything, I know that you're not supposed to be able to take care of yourself at 14, but trust me, I can take care of myself.' (Lola)

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Discussion

Political and cultural expectations for youth have been guided by expectations that young people should take responsibility for their own actions, behaviours and achievements (Harris, 2004; Liebenberg et al., 2015; Muncie, 2005). Situated as they are, within this climate of responsibilisation, it is unsurprising that participants unanimously blamed themselves for the abuse that they had endured. While the act of locking girls away did ensure their 'immediate safety' in the short term (Shuker, 2013), the act of securing also further reinforced their feelings of blame, since they had been removed and locked up whilst their perpetrators were free. Techniques used to groom children typically seek to 'instil indebtedness' (Palmer and Foley, 2017, p. 1100). As a consequence, the girls felt that once they had partaken in the 'fun' aspects of absconding, they were obliged to fulfil their abuser's expectations of them.

'Within this climate of responsibilisation, it is unsurprising that participants unanimously blamed themselves for the abuse that they had endured'

Girls are caught in a conflicting paradox, in which they are either perceived to be innocent and vulnerable, or branded as manipulative and predatory (O'Neill, 2001; Sharpe, 2012). While current discussions around CSA attempt to focus on the perceived vulnerability of victims, the cultural twinning of vulnerability with innocence causes difficulties for those who present their circumstances in different ways. The focus on responsibilisation reinforces damaging messages for all children who are victims of any type of abuse and allows for a narrative of culpability to become attached to those who abscond to be with their abusers. Professional responses to disclosures of sexual liaisons further confirmed their feelings of culpability as being rational ones. There needs to be further understanding to ensure that sexually aware teenagers are not denied help because of preconceived ideals of 'deserving' victims to which they do not conform (Woodiwiss, 2014). Furthermore, Hayley and Abbie described their exploitation as building gradually and where activities began in ways that were fun and 'consensual', however, they lacked opportunities to 'get out' without feeling vilified or patronised for their earlier compliance. Current language based around protecting 'innocent' and 'passive' victims did not resonate with the girls and dogged adherence to such terminology meant that they instead felt responsible when events progressed in ways that they had not predicted. These findings therefore contribute to understanding the over-representation of care-experienced girls in the sex industry (Coy, 2009; Melrose, 2010).

'These findings therefore contribute to understanding the over-representation of care-experienced girls in the sex industry'

While interventions to address CSA tend to focus on providing safety for young people at particular flash points, these individualised responses remain insufficient in tackling the wider problems of CSA. Featherstone et al. (2018) argue that social work practice works within a deficit model in which professionals are encouraged to consider what children and families are lacking. They suggest instead that social work should focus on the societal structures which impede family life, by asking 'what do this child and family need in order to flourish?' (Featherstone et al., 2018, p. 19). This approach would shift the blame away from those seen as 'at risk' of abuse and instead focus upon those seeking to inflict abuse and the cultural structures which allow these abuses to happen.

Blaming women for the behaviour of men is not a new occurrence (Barter, 2006), and in fact, as Coy (2016) aptly summarises, only Nordic countries hold men to account for illegally buying sex instead of blaming women for selling

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it. These messages were not missed by the girls who unanimously felt that they were being blamed for their abuse since they were 'locked up' while their abusers were free. Since the Jay Report (2014), there has been an increase in criminal proceedings against perpetrators of CSA, however more thought needs to be given to the placement of CSA victims with young offenders. While secure accommodation staff tried to ensure the best outcomes for both, the overriding message of the unit continued to be based around tackling offending behaviour, which further incriminated young victims in the role that they played in their abuse.

Conclusions

By sharing the voices of those who have been incarcerated 'for their own protection', this paper explores the complex and conflicting feelings that resulted in victims claiming responsibility for abuse that had been inflicted against them. Although these girls were labelled as 'vulnerable' by those working with them, all firmly rejected this terminology as a fit for their experiences. Instead, participants believed themselves to be competent and exceptionally knowledgeable 'about life'. Like other girls involved in the sex industry (Coy, 2008), they had lived independently, provided for themselves financially and managed a range of difficult and acrimonious relationships. Therefore, as Brown (2014) suggests, the term 'vulnerability', which is heavily used in policy, is not one that resonates with young people.

'The term 'vulnerability', which is heavily used in policy, is not one that resonates with young people'

This paper lends new insights to international debates around the experiences of children who have suffered abuse and exposes the feelings of blame that often stay with the victim years after the abuse has ended (Gilligan, 2016). This research shows that early attempts to reframe children's narratives of abuse are not working and that children need help to recognise the factors that made them vulnerable to abuse. Policymakers need to rethink the continued use of responsibilisation for children, to ensure that, as a society, we support those who have been systematically excluded and mistreated. Indeed, children need to be informed about their rights and equipped with confidence that they are worthy and capable of forging an independent life without violence or abuse.

This paper reports that girls frequently absconded to be with men who abused them. Their reasons for absconding were diverse but all felt that professionals were unable to provide help when they needed it. Girls recalled absconding to change their living arrangements and described trading sex for food, accommodation, alcohol or drugs. It is essential that children and young people are given support to recognise abuse for what it is and that they are supported to tell their stories without fear of blame or persecution. In order to intervene and disrupt the cycle of exploitation, earlier attempts need to be made to form stable and trusting relationships with vulnerable young people, including attempts to rehouse children who report being bullied or feeling unsafe in care placements. While the practice of securing victims of CSA did periodically disrupt the cycle of abuse, it often did little to reframe the perceptions that girls had about their abusers. The girls' reflections on their experiences differed in important ways and, therefore, interventions need to maintain flexibility to work in different ways with victims. While Hester Lodge

'It is essential that children and young people are given support to recognise abuse for what it is'

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reframed their views about exploitation in general, after 12 months of intensive support, participants maintained that they had played a key role in facilitating their exploitation.

Aside from recommending a dramatic overhaul in the language used to communicate with and about children at risk of exploitation, this paper highlights significant differences in the ways that exploitation is experienced by its victims. Since perpetrators are adept at using a range of techniques to befriend children and enforce their compliance, responses and interventions need to be equally diverse in their tackling of exploitation. Alternative services should confront the possibilities that, at points, victims present as being complicit in their exploitation and therefore need to feel included and supported in the approaches which attempt to remove them from exploitation. This paper calls for a radical change in practice and the immediate retraining of staff working with vulnerable children and young people around the risks and vulnerabilities of sexual exploitation.

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Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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