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Vulnerability and child sexual exploitation:
Towards an approach grounded in life experiences

Abstract

As child sexual exploitation (CSE) has risen to the top of the UK's political agenda, the concept of vulnerability has become a central frame through which to understand and address the issue. This article analyses problems with the concept of vulnerability as it is commonly understood in relation to CSE, taking first steps towards developing an empirically-grounded account of the notion which is more sensitive to the lived realities of victimhood for sexually exploited young people. Drawing on data from participatory qualitative research into life stories of 'moving on' from CSE in a large Northern city in England, the article illustrates how vulnerability is shaped through individual factors, situational dynamics and structural forces, connected by human agency through time. It argues that in order to respond effectively to vulnerability within the field of CSE, we need to move beyond discussion of 'risk factors' and denial of agency, towards an understanding of intersectional inequalities, social marginality, 'critical moments' and how these shape the investments and actions of vulnerable young people.

Keywords: Agency, grooming, risk, responsibilisation, vulnerable

Introduction

Since the turn of the century child sexual exploitation (CSE) has risen to the top of the political agenda in the UK, with failures to protect young people drawing widespread media criticism and public horror. Over the same period there has been major shift in how CSE has been conceptualised. Until the end of 1990s, those involved were seen as 'child prostitutes', technically criminals even though they could not consent to sex. Since landmark policy guidance in 2000, involvement is now treated as child abuse and the concept of vulnerability has become a central frame through which to understand and address the issue (Department of Health and Home Office, 2000: 21; Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009: 49; Department for Education 2011: 29). CSE policy now focuses on the identification of vulnerability, targeted child protection interventions and criminal justice action to apprehend and punish offenders. The implications of this re-framing have been discussed extensively (Phoenix, 2002 this journal; Melrose, 2010), heralded as an important step forward by some, with others noting how these developments are underpinned by deep contradictions and do not address fundamental policy and practice shortcomings (Phoenix, 2012a; Melrose, 2013).

The rising profile of CSE operates within a wider context of concern about various manifestations of child sexual abuse in English-speaking societies since the 1970s, which Pratt (2005) argues has been continually reshaped by two key social forces; insecurities arising from deep political, social and economic transformations, and cultural understandings of the purity of children. Concerns with CSE are in part motivated by a desire for progressive responses to previously normalised injustices, but also by delineations of purity and danger which reinforce order in the face of an uncertain world (Pratt, 2005). Prior to 2000, poverty and disadvantage featured prominently in understandings of CSE (see Melrose *et al*, 1999; Barrett, 1998), whereas recent commentary centres predatory sexually abusive men preying on 'vulnerable' girls (Barnardos 2011; Melrose, 2010; Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009). This shift has taken place within a wider policy environment and political leadership consensus which has downgraded the importance of structural factors in social difficulties (Flint, 2006; Harrison and Sanders, 2014), with attempts to tackle crime now about control of 'undesirable' populations rather than wider transformations (Garland, 2001).

This context sets the stage for vulnerability management, an increasingly popular governance technique across wide-ranging social policy and criminal justice interventions (Brown, 2015), including child protection (Daniel, 2010). Employing the language of vulnerability gestures to caring and sympathetic approaches to 'vulnerable' people, but grassroots perspectives tell a different story, indicating unintended exclusionary side effects for some (Brown, 2015 and 2017). This paper analyses problems with the concept of vulnerability as it is commonly understood in relation to CSE. It is one of only a few studies which have captured the voices of people who have experienced CSE (see also Pearce *et al*, 2002 and Hallett, 2017). Drawing on empirical data from small-scale participatory qualitative research with people who have experience of CSE, it takes first steps towards developing an account of vulnerability which better reflects the complexity of sexually exploited young people's lives. A short policy section critiques how vulnerability is commonly understood within the field of CSE. After an overview of methods, the article then uses empirical life story data and wider theories of vulnerability to advance an individually, situationally and structurally constituted account of vulnerability in relation to CSE, showing how these dimensions are connected by human agency over time. It ends with discussion of policy implications, arguing we need to move beyond a focus on 'risk factors' and denial of agency, towards addressing intersectional inequalities, social marginalisations and how these shape the investments and actions of vulnerable young people.

The grooming model: excluding the most vulnerable?

CSE is commonly understood as a process by which predatory adults (usually male) strategically target 'vulnerable' young people (usually female), posing as boyfriends to establish control over their victim, then using violence and coercion to force them into sex with other men for material gain (see Barnardos, 2011; Melrose, 2010 and 2012). In UK CSE policy, vulnerability is understood in terms of a young person's abusive relationship with someone who has power over them 'by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources' (DCFS, 2009: 9). The latest definition focuses on individuals taking advantage of an 'inbalance of power' to coerce young people into sexual activities in exchange for things (HM Government, 2016: 3-5). Known as the 'grooming model', this was originally promoted by campaigning charities as a means of

countering pathologisations of 'child prostitutes'. It draws heavily on western ideals of childhood as dependent, innocent and pure (Melrose, 2013), juxtaposing the purity of the child and the pollution of the sex offender (see Pratt, 2005). Barnardos (1998) 'Whose Daughter's Next?' was one early highly influential campaign, which placed emphasis on how anyone could be a victim of CSE. Since the grooming model came to fore, other 'models' have been advanced including the 'party model' (Melrose, 2012), 'online abuse' (Whittle *et al*, 2013) and sexual exploitation by criminal gangs (Berelowitz *et al*, 2013), all centring on the relationship as central in patterns of abuse. Attempts to stress that 'anyone' can be a victim are driven by a desire to avoid pathologisation, but these narratives can obscure profound disproportionalities in vulnerability which have been evident for some time.

A variety of 'vulnerability factors' are associated with CSE, which are primarily based on particular life experiences, behaviours and/or population groups (see Chase and Statham, 2005; Pearce, 2009; Brown *et al*, 2016). Campaigns have highlighted the particular vulnerabilities of population groups such as boys and young men (Palmer, 2001; Cockbain *et al*, 2014) and children with disabilities and learning difficulties (Franklin *et al*, 2015, Fox, 2016). Social class is largely absent from research on CSE, but appears in national press coverage of failures to safeguard (white) 'working-class girls' (BBC, 2018). CEOP (2011) found that 'looked after children' (disproportionally from disadvantaged backgrounds) made up over one third of cases. Transgressions such as 'anti-social behaviour', drug use (Pearce *et al*, 2002; Jago, 2011), crime (Phoenix, 2012b), absconding from school or care, aggressive behaviour (CEOP, 2011) and association with gangs (Berelowitz *et al*, 2013) all appear as significant. Critics of risk factor approaches argue that these profile and explain social problems rather than analysing how wider processes of marginalisation shape and direct social patterns (Webster *et al*, 2006), erasing structural dimensions of 'risky' behaviour (Phoenix, 2012a). Tendencies to individualise risk have also been criticised as lacking sensitivity to the complexities of CSE as experienced by Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) young people (Sharp, 2013). Approaches to vulnerability which centre risk factors potentially underscore the pathologies they seek to challenge, as attention turns to addressing the 'problems' (usually behaviours) specified.

Within official policy on CSE, acknowledging agency is associated with victim-blaming, with some arguing that this amounts to a 'closed discourse' (Phoenix, 2010). The language of

'exploitation' establishes young people as always and inevitably passive, positioning them as either forced/coerced or irrational (Melrose, 2013). Young people's repeated return to exploitative situations, as well as transgressions such as drug use, are mainly configured as effects of perpetrators having 'conditioned their responses' (DCSF, 2009: 21 and 47). Pearce (2013; 53) advances a social model of 'abused consent' which enables consent to be contextualised, focussing on how the child may be violently manipulated into consent, influenced by societal attitudes which normalise violence/coercion in sexual relationships, or involved in 'survival consent', where poverty can be a 'push factor'. Such framings foreground and contextualise the legal issue of consent, vital in terms of acknowledging the power and culpability of abusive adults, but how far they resonate with young people's understandings remains unclear.

Where young people fall short of 'vulnerable victim' ideals, sanctions appear (O'Connell Davidson, 2011: 463, this journal). Phoenix (2002, this journal) argues that binary understandings of victimhood in CSE opened the door for social control 'in the name of protection. Empirical youth justice research has also indicated that CSE interventions are more punitive than official accounts indicate (Phoenix, 2012b). Other empirical work has shown how 'vulnerable' young people who fail to 'perform' their vulnerability in line with expectations may see reductions in entitlement to support and assistance (Brown, 2015: 180). Denial of agency is especially problematic for teenagers, who are less likely to meet expectations of 'innocent child' and more likely to be seen as wilful and acting with intent (Hallett, 2017). Critical accounts note how CSE policy is grounded in concerns with transgression of traditional ideals of femininity (Melrose, 2013) and the violation of such ideals by working class girls (Phoenix, 2012a). Concerns with the vulnerability of 'wayward' girls are longstanding (Walker, 1962), but the rise of vulnerability in the field of CSE further entrenches this in policy and practice, potentially repackaging it with a friendly face. Research with those affected notes how conceptions of vulnerability to sexual exploitation exclude young people's perspectives (Hallett, 2017), indicating we need to look again at building understandings of vulnerability that better match the empirical realities of CSE as they are lived and experienced.

Moving on from child sexual exploitation: A participatory project

This paper draws on data gathered through participatory research undertaken during 2016. The project investigated experiences of 'moving on' from CSE, with a focus on vulnerability over time. It was a partnership with the charity Basis Yorkshire and their service user group 'The Lionesses' (a group of young women with experience of CSE), funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and The University of York. It included qualitative interviews and also workshops where young people with experience of CSE worked with an artist and researcher to co-produce an animation and set of resources: *Breaking Through: Moving on from Child Sexual Exploitation* (Brown, 2016).

A standpoint known as the 'new sociology of childhood' was an important influence (James and Prout 1997), with children and young people seen as marginalised within socio-economic structures and processes whilst also playing a role as active agents within these systems. Research questions related to; how and why vulnerability to CSE changed over time; what insights life stories of CSE could provide into lived experiences of vulnerability; how structure and agency feature in accounts of sexual exploitation and 'moving on'. For fieldwork, a working definition of vulnerability was used which took this as a means of describing people's lived experiences of social insecurity or harm, carved out by biological and bodily frailties, social inequalities and institutional forces which persist over time, and shaped by the choices, views and experiences of individual social actors. Arts-based co-production methods were used based on their transformative potential in challenging exclusionary processes and illuminating lived experiences.

The qualitative research was exploratory and involved task-based interviews with six participants who had experienced sexual exploitation as children and had 'moved on' from it in some way. Five females were interviewed and one male; four adults and two young people under 18, with ages ranging from 16 to 43 years old. Despite attempts to recruit BME participants, the young people were of white UK ethnic origin. Barriers to accessing BME young people in CSE research are significant. For example, in a major report exploring CSE amongst Asian and Muslim girls, Gohir (2013) notes how it was not possible to speak to young people directly due to difficulties in them speaking out being exacerbated by a culture of honour and shame which prevents victims coming forward. In terms of young people's backgrounds, four had been in care, three had been sexually abused or abused as

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children. Four had lived in city housing estates as children, one adult woman described being from a 'nice house' and the young man described a relatively affluent background, due shortly to leave home to go to university.

The sample size for the qualitative element was small, but rich insights into young people's perspectives were generated via life mapping activities and in-depth discussions, providing data from a group often seen as 'difficult to reach' and 'highly vulnerable'. As Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame (1981: 167, cited in Emmel, 2013, original emphasis) argue, 'several life stories taken in the *same set of socio-structural relations* support each other and make up, all together, a strong body of evidence'. Interview data were analysed using ideas taken from 'thematic network' approaches (Attride-Stirling, 2001), complemented by informal data gathering through the researcher's participation in various meetings, conversations and correspondence. Young people then transformed the data into a set of resources, launched on BBC Radio 4's *Today Progamme* in 2016. This paper draws on the interview data which formed the basis for the resources and animation.

Ethical considerations were of paramount concern in the design and implementation of the project, which was subject to approval through the University of York's ethical review process. In some cases support workers were present at interviews, where interviewees expressed a preference for this. A support worker was present in all of the group-based creative workshops. Young people were given vouchers of their choice as a thank you for their time and expertise. Names that appear here and in the resources are pseudonyms chosen by participants, apart from one person who preferred their real name.

Vulnerability and CSE: An approach grounded in lived experiences

The account of vulnerability developed here has individual, situational and structural dimensions, connected by agency through time. After outlining the various dimensions, particular attention is given to the dilemma of human agency in relation to CSE.

Individual factors and situational factors: Family, people, places

As documented in large amounts of childhood development literature, adverse influences can mean children are vulnerable to 'disruptions' in the developmental process (Brotherton and Cronin, 2013). The new sociology of childhood literature warns against reductive

assumptions about how children and young people's bodies and immaturity might incline them 'naturally' to vulnerability (James and Prout, 1997). However, even sociologists of childhood would accept that childhood vulnerability is a biological fact, although its cultural mediation is important. The significant effects of child physical and sexual abuse on childhood development have been well-documented (see Kempe and Kempe, 1978; Finkelhor, 1984), and were important in several of the life stories:

> When I was seven my dad left, or the man that I thought we my dad. He left and my mum was poorly. She ended up with Bipolar. Then, when I was ten, we went into foster care with her friend. They'd been friends for 18 years so my mum trusted her with her life. We'd grown up with her; we had no issues, but she was emotionally and physically abusive towards us all. (Phoenix, aged 23)

Emotional or psychological difficulties in adolescence often related to disrupted attachments (see Pearce *et al*, 2002 and Pearce 2013). Sharon (aged 43) found family environments 'too hard' after being sexually and emotionally abused by members of her biological family:

> … if I was ten minutes late, and the foster parents had to tell me off - I do agree with that - I'd faint. I fainted quite a few times in foster care when they were telling me off because of probably the fear, thinking what they were going to do to me […]

Not all interviewees talked about disrupted attachments, and family bonds were described as strong and protective in some instances. Indeed, assuming links between child sexual abuse and 'poor attachment' has been shown to be stigmasiting and pathologising (see Burman, 2008), and the mother (or carer)–child relationship must be see in its broader context, with account taken of immediate and extended family, community and state (see Hooper and Kaprowska, 2004). Psycho-emotional and developmental dimensions tend to dominate accounts of vulnerability at the expense of structural factors (Ecclestone and Brunila, 2015), but individual factors resonated strongly in interviewee accounts and remain important to consider.

Beyond their families/carers, interviewees were embedded in complex sets of social relations which were central to experiences of CSE. The most prominent figure in these was

the abusive and coercive adult (usually but not always male) well-chronicled in CSE research and policy. Serial 'relationships' with abusive older men were more common than 'one-off' exploitations, with contact made via friendship groups, the internet and family friends. Abusive relationships or encounters often included serious violence and/or threat of violence, with adults isolating young people through control (see Melrose, 2010; O'Hara, 2018 this journal). Liberty spoke about a new relationship with an older male: 'I am scared of telling them [agencies] because he's threatened to come after me, my mum and [baby daughter]'. The structural dimensions of violence against women and girls are considered below, but the 'chance' or proximity of exposure to abusers also seemed important in the stories. Jade (aged 16) gave this account of abuse from a male house guest (aged 19 at the time) who later received a custodial sentence for grooming her at aged 12:

> …. he sort of stole my innocence because, like, any other time I wouldn't have lost my virginity at that age. It's disgusting. I know sometimes it's not people's fault and everything, and I understand that, but he just like, he started taking control. He used to cause trouble in the house between me and my mum, cause trouble between me and my sisters, write stuff on Facebook about me while he lived in my house.

Abusive relationships were described as originating in particular places (parks, town centre, taxi-ranks, online forums) and recreational activities featured often, raising questions about if CSE occurs more in certain neighbourhoods or contexts and also about how public space for young people might shape vulnerability (Phoenix, 2012b). Friendships also frequently featured as important mediators of vulnerability, rarely noted in policy and practice. Natalie (20), for example, commented how having 'no friends' was important in her continued involvement in CSE.

Structural factors: Intersectional social divisions, institutional responses

Decades of feminist research has shown how child sexual abuse is informed by patriarchal structural forces (Herman, 1981; Saphira, 1981), and gender is clearly of central importance in dynamics of exploitation, which in this research included unwanted touching, rape, coercion and manipulation of emotions. As feminist researchers have powerfully demonstrated, patriarchy provides the context for the continued abuse of women and girls. Along with gender, young people's vulnerability was also compounded by other

intersectional oppressions, including age and sexuality in particular. There were no BME interviewees so ethnicity did not feature, in itself highlighting how BME young people are more 'hidden from view' (Ward and Patel, 2006), with mainstream CSE services struggling to meet their needs due to their 'white nature' (Sharp, 2013: 106). Indeed, the absence of 'race' and ethnicity indicates that it is an important structuring factor in vulnerability to CSE. For Daniel (18), his gender and sexuality was a major barrier to disclosure, especially after coming out at aged 13:

> … my town was quite conservative - there weren't many out gay people around that I knew or could talk to. So I downloaded a couple of apps onto my iPod that were gay chat apps and started talking to people on there about it, just asking questions, trying to understand it. From there it led to older guys messaging me and it spiralled down into sexual talk, meeting up, pictures […] I didn't want people to know anyway that I was sexually active so it wasn't something I shared.

After his abuse was reported to the police, he experienced responses as highly gendered:

> …if I was a girl it would've been a completely different situation. I would've been sympathised with more. But because I was a boy it was more like, 'You're doing this yourself; you should be looking after yourself'.

Sharon (43) described how norms of 'appropriate' female sexuality shaped her experience of 'degrading' health interventions for gynaecological infections following rape and abuse, 'I used to think, they're going to think I'm a right slag. Sixteen years old and I've got that. That's all that was in my mind, and I still didn't tell anybody'. Natalie (aged 20), who grew up in care, talked about police officers calling her a 'slag' and at age 15. There are hints of social class being important here. Drawing on Skegg's (1997) work on class and gender, it might be argued that in a society that signals working-class femininities are deficient, barriers to disclosure of abuse are augmented for working class girls, due to fears about being stigmatised or further shamed.

Material resources were another important factor. For Natalie (aged 20), economic drivers of her exploitation related to being in care:

> … some guy pulled up in a car next to me and started asking me stuff. At first, I was a bit like, I didn't want to, but then it was, 'I'll buy you this and I'll buy you that.' I didn't have no money when I was in care; you weren't allowed it. It was like, I might as well do it, and then got it more serious.

Hallett's (2017) recent study shows how 'unmet need' is central in the exchange of sex and Melrose (2013; 16) argues that in conditions of socio-economic marginalisation, selling or swapping sex might represent the 'best' way to survive when confronted with limited opportunities for income generation. For Liberty (aged 17), financial risks and rewards were central in her relationship with an older male:

> … he gets my cigs and my money [sighs] and he used to buy [daughter] stuff, to give to me to give to her. I don't know how to explain it. Sometimes he gives me my bus fare for college and then sometimes he gives me money for food or clothes, stuff that I need, stuff like that. I know what I'm doing is wrong because I just know anyway, it's wrong to go and see him but I keep going just for my cigs and my money.

As sexuality plays an increasingly prominent role in consumer cultures, less well-off young women excluded from opportunities to take part and may be inclined to enter a 'sexual marketplace' as a way of participating (Phoenix, 2012a). Yet to acknowledge material dimensions of vulnerability is not to argue that it only poorer young people are vulnerable. Daniel's account of his 'middle class background' was important here. His access to multiple internet devices was a major factor in his continued abuse, but his family's means to fight hard for services to support him resulted in one of the most comprehensive systems of support described in the interviews (although not without issue), indicating that the family's social and material capital potentially leveraged certain enhancements to support.

Age was also a key theme, with each interviewee talking about systems of social organisation that made them feel side-lined, disrespected, or undermined as young people. Liberty (17) said that her support workers 'all talk in bubbles'. Sharon (aged 43) was abused at home and ran away regularly, but was not spoken to privately by police when she was returned:

> … [they would ask] 'Why have you run away?' and I didn't used to speak. I didn't say anything. They'd always ask in front of your parents. How the hell are you supposed to speak and tell them the truth?

In some cases, state interventions intended to ameliorate vulnerability directly compounded it. Instances of not being believed could be especially traumatic, often connected to resentment about mistreatment from services:

> It all came out about my dad in the January and they didn't believe me, but they didn't offer me a medical, an interview or anything. They took me back home. […] I lived there for eight months before they come and… They only took me out because […] I'd been overdosing and stuff and I wasn't safe. (Natalie, aged 20)

Lack of action against perpetrators was central to the pain and suffering of CSE. Some interviewees had made reports that never made it to court. Some had been through court proceedings resulting in convictions, but certain acts of abuse remained unprosecuted, which years later remained the cause of deep upset and anger. Violence and harm was also directly perpetrated by state actors and agencies. Sharon was routinely pulled out of her bed during the night at her care home and sexually abused by groups of staff as others watched. Three decades later, a criminal case against the manager of the home was coming to court; the outcome was of the most tremendous significance to her.

Yet interventions and services could also provide safety, validate self-worth and support decision-making. Educational interventions, support from specialist CSE projects, appropriate therapeutic support, social care and housing assistance were all described as key in the process of 'moving on'. For Phoenix, two police officers who investigated her rape had been crucial in her journey as 'they believed in me', regularly going the extra mile in the process of bringing her case to court. Adults 'listening' was important, alongside material provision such as places of safety:

> I was put in a private children's home, which pretty much saved my life. […] There was me and another girl that lived there. There were only three bed spaces at that home and so it didn't feel like a children's home. They actually listened to you.
> (Phoenix, aged 23)

Structural factors and social scaffolding can never fully explain why some vulnerable children are exploited and others are not, but are crucial to acknowledge if we are to move towards an understanding of CSE which tackles rather than avoids the question of agency.

The dilemma of agency

To speak of agency in CSE is fraught with difficulty and complexity. Although seldom acknowledged in policy, relationships with abusers connected with the desires of young people, and complex perceptions of risks and rewards. Drug-taking featured frequently, with abusive men using their power to control and manipulate access to substance use, as in this account of a 'party':

> I was like, 'Oh, I don't know,' and she [friend] was like, 'Come on. Do you know what I mean? Drugs, alcohol…' I went with her and anyway we went to [hotel] […] they started giving us weed and stuff. It was like, 'Oh, have a bit of that and a bit of that.' Then, he's giving us drinks, I think it was whisky, and then he was putting stuff in front of our noses and telling us to snort it. I was like, 'No, I'm all right. I don't take that shit.' He was like, 'No, no, no, take it,' so I felt like I had to take it. Then, when that started kicking in a load more guys just came walking into the room but I didn't know whether I was imagining it or whether it was actually happening. (Natalie, aged 20)

Desire and meaning in sexual relationships existed alongside consciousness of abuse and exploitation. Liberty (17) did not even like to say the word 'grooming', she preferred the 'g-word', indicating how uncomfortable she was with professional narratives. For her, moving on from a relationship with an older male was an active process characterised by ambivalence and uncertainty:

> I'm just scared. I know I can do it. In a way I'm scared to do it but in another way I'm not scared, it's just I need time to think of what I really, really want to do. So, it's just all too much but at least I'm not seeing him every day like I used to.

Taking account of the benefits as well as risks of relationships with abusive older males is not new in CSE research (Pearce, 2013), but tends to be simplified to 'perpetrator conditioning', which risks a denial of young people's own truths and understandings.

Adaptive forms of coping ran through all the stories, with participants recalling behaviours such as self harm, drug use, aggression. These behaviours became the target of interventions designed to address 'vulnerabilities' or 'risks', or to encourage 'positive choices', which lead to resentment. Phoenix (23) described being 'manipulative' as a teen: 'you've got to go out and do that. It's how you fight'. Her behaviour led to her being judged as 'unstable':

> I threatened [therapist] and I told him, 'You ask me the same question again, I'll pick the chair up, launch it at you and then I'll throw it outside. I really don't mind.' I was escorted off the premises. Yes, I was mentally unstable apparently [...] they did nothing. They blamed it on my behaviour.

Where young people were troublesome and also vulnerable, boundaries of care and control blurred. Controlling interventions designed to protect were received positively in some instances, but controlling interventions could also exacerbate vulnerability to abuse. Natalie (aged 20) had been placed in a secure unit 'for her own safety' (this is not unusual, see Ellis, 2018):

> I didn't know what was going to happen [in secure]. I didn't know if they were going to give up on me. I didn't know if was going to get moved anywhere. I didn't know what was going on. I was just in a place where... I think everything had just got on top of me from being in secure. I didn't really talk to anyone about secure; I never have. I think that's when it got on top of me and I got back involved with the guys quite seriously.

This example illustrates what Frost and Hoggett (2008: 49) call a 'double suffering', where defensive ways of coping with social and material injustice trigger repressive mechanisms which in turn intensify suffering. The dilemma of agency in CSE is that it is risky to speak of agency as this risks responsibilisation, but denial of agency means that those who fall short of 'ideal' (passive) victimhood are deemed 'unworthy', contributing to failures to protect the most vulnerable. The paper now draws on the vulnerability literature to unpick and address this dilemma.

Making sense of vulnerability

Using the idea of 'critical moments' youth researchers have developed a framework for understanding change and transition in young people's lives, which is useful in making sense of vulnerability in relation to CSE. Critical moments refer to significant events with important consequences for lives and identities (Thompson *et al*, 2002: 339), which combine biographical moments, structuring processes and 'linked lives' bound up with people, places and institutions. The interview stories (and also the *Breaking Through* animation) suggest critical moments in CSE journeys include family abuse, rapes, bereavements, childbirth, relationship developments (friends/family/abusive older male), involvement in education/work, and instances of being 'failed' or well-supported by services, which all have individual, situational and structural elements which young people have varying degrees of control over through time. These critical moments clustered into 'spirals' which had cumulative effects on choice and agency (Holland and Thompson, 2009: 458). As one example, asked why she had recently reduced how much she was seeing an older exploitative man, Liberty (age 17) explained:

> I got my own money through and because obviously… I got my bursary money in for college. It's taken forever since I've gone to college for them to sort out, and ever since we've been arguing a lot I've realised. I've even said to him myself, 'You're the one that's using me, you're using me for sex. You're buying me stuff just so I won't tell the police, you won't be told off'. Which is very rare for me to do

The idea of critical moments provides useful frame for making sense of how individual and situational vulnerabilities are dynamic, shaped by wider socio-economic processes and institutions, connected by the thread of human agency. Phoenix's step-father had committed suicide whilst in prison for committing murder. Here she describes how this was central in her early experiences of CSE:

> … the day of my dad's funeral, me and my sister had had an argument that morning and she'd said, 'Well, he's not your real dad anyway.' […] I refused to go the funeral and I didn't go to school so I ended up with a friend or, well, what I thought was a friend. She knew older lads who would sit there and say, 'Well, your dad clearly didn't love you for him to kill himself. I'll always be there to protect you and I'll

> always keep you safe.' It just stemmed from there really. […] I think once you go
> through it you just get used to it. They can see how vulnerable you are. You don't
> need it tattooing on your head. You can pick it out pretty much straightaway.
> (Phoenix, aged 23)

The vulnerability literature can also support more sophisticated understandings of vulnerability in the field of CSE. Within what she has called 'vulnerability theory', Fineman (2008) advances that vulnerability is inevitable, biological and permanent (humans have bodies which decay and die) over the life course. This approach seeks to resist and subvert traditional 'neo-liberal' narratives elevating the independent and 'active' citizen (Fineman and Grear, 2013). Fineman's work calls for a 'responsive state', driven by meeting the practical and ethical obligations which spring from the messy realities of our vulnerable bodies. What this looks like in practice remains unclear, and vulnerability theory potentially muddles important distinctions among specific vulnerabilities (Cole, 2016), but the approach usefully disrupts the vulnerable/invulnerable binary which is so pervasive in this policy area.

Others have used similar ideas to underscore difference and diversity, focussing on recognition as central to how vulnerability is experienced. For Butler (2004), vulnerability is common to all but unevenly distributed according to cultural, political and legal structures which make some lives more 'liveable' than others. Norms of recognition are key here, with historically institutionalised racism and sexism playing a central part in human experiences of vulnerability and fragility. Such theories alert us to the social construction of vulnerability according to power, visibility, privilege and oppression. Such relational approaches to vulnerability have also been developed in moral philosophy work to reconcile tensions between respect for individual autonomy and obligations to protect those most in need. Mackenzie *et al*'s (2014: 7-9) 'taxonomy of vulnerability', encompasses inherent vulnerability (intrinsic to the human condition), situational (context-specific), and pathogenic (arising from oppression or injustice) vulnerability, with echoes of the model advanced in this paper. Critics have argued that distinguishing dimensions in this way draws false boundaries between interlinked vulnerabilities (see Ferrarese, 2016) and does not deal with the concept's tendencies to blur actual and potential injuries (Cole, 2016), but this approach does offer purchase on the messiness of vulnerability as described by those who have experienced CSE.

Emmel (2017) builds on theories of vulnerability and autonomy to show how people's innate and learned capacities shape functioning in relation to social, political and economic conditions, with institutions enabling or constraining freedoms and entitlements. He argues that vulnerability is 'top-down', shaped by societal institutions as well as individual vulnerability, but also 'bottom-up' and shaped at least in part by people's actions. Bringing the range of these ideas together with the realities of CSE helps move away from simplistic and harmful vulnerability tropes, towards an account of vulnerability as embedded in social rights, institutions and patterns of injustice, oppression and discrimination.

Concluding Comments

If we accept that disadvantaged, 'troublesome' young people are amongst the most vulnerable to CSE, it should concern us that those same young people are least likely to fit the frame of vulnerability carved out in policy. In a context of austerity politics and responsibilisation, 'at risk' groups are increasingly the target of interventions seeking to remedy 'problem' behaviour through the governance of conduct (Flint, 2006), with sexually exploited young people no exception. Life stories show how although victims of CSE are deserving of support in theory, in reality they are often seen as troublesome youth in need of punitive responses. The hardening of exclusions and attitudes towards marginalised groups which has characterised policy in recent decades catches victims of CSE in its net, which the normative force of vulnerability reinforces rather than challenges. Cultural understandings of the purity of childhood have melded with behaviourist policy to silence possibilities of young people's agency. Without agency acknowledged, wider structures and forces which provide the context for CSE are obfuscated and young people are blamed for their adaptive coping strategies.

Although it is vital to respond to the abuse of children through punishment of offenders, criminal justice interventions and responsive services for victims of abuse, understandings of vulnerability in this policy area are better matched to 'rightness' and social order than the complex empirical realities. Great importance has been given to how services should 'listen' to young people affected by CSE (Berelowitz at al, 2013) and the stories here certainly suggest this is a key element of effective responses. Indeed, listening to young people is one of the central messages of the *Breaking Through* animation. But the animation and data in

this paper show that listening is only half the story in addressing vulnerability within CSE. As well as life events and chance happenings, material assistance (financial support and housing, for example) and support services are central in experiences over time. Also at work are intersectional inequalities related to gender, class, 'race', disability, sexuality and age. These should not be reduced to 'risk factors' based on group membership/experiences, but understood as a matrix of dimensions which operate together.

An alternative view of vulnerability has been advanced here, shaped by individual, situational and structural dimensions, dynamic over time and connected through human agency. Understanding vulnerability in this way would lead to interventions that extend and reinforce wider social scaffolding which supports young people's lives and families, where access is not dependent on the performance of certain behaviours. It would mean stronger investment in institutional arrangements which mitigate intersecting oppressions related to age, gender, sexuality, 'race', (dis)ability and economic disadvantage, with laws, policies and service provision taking further account of social and material assets (not just services) in how CSE is experienced. This approach would support specific policies/interventions related to addressing abuse and grooming, but with recognition that targeted interventions are severely limited without a wider programme of social reform. The concept of vulnerability might be better utilised if approached as a way of understanding how human lives are punctuated by unevenly distributed and unequally recognised trauma and fragility, mediated by life experiences, relationships and varying institutional and social scaffolding, which in turn shapes how people navigate their past, present and future. This is reflected in the young people's animation, which ends with the words: 'I don't like victim, and I don't like survivor. Victim says that you're still part of that process – you're damaged. Survivor means that you've got through it. The author Shy Keenan calls herself a phoenix. I like that'.

[Image 1]

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Images

Image 1: The *Breaking Through* resource booklet - featuring the phoenix