Child sexual exploitation, selling and swapping sex: reflections on researching the experiences, pathways and perceptions of those involved

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My own UEA pathway ….

1980-1982…. MA/CQSW at UEA

1982-2002… Social work and Area Child Protection Committee (now LSCB) development work including CSE

1997-1998…Post-Graduate Diploma (Children and Families) UEA which included a small research project on ‘child prostitution’/CSE- young people’s perspectives

2002-2009…PhD (subject: Pathways through CSE and Sex Work) UEA,

2000-to date….Teaching and researching in the School of Social Work UEA
Child Sexual Exploitation:
From ‘It doesn’t happen here’
to ‘it’s happening on an industrial scale’ ….

- In the mid/late 1990s some children’s charities and academics were trying to raise awareness of what was then called ‘child prostitution’
  - however the prevailing view was– ‘But it doesn’t happen here’.

- In 2000 ‘Safeguarding Children Involved in Prostitution. Supplementary Guidance to Working Together’ was published
  - however the prevailing view was: ‘Maybe in big cities, but it doesn’t happen here’.

- In 2009 ‘Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation. Supplementary Guidance to Working Together’ was published
  - however the prevailing view was-‘We’ve got a protocol, but it doesn’t happen here’.

- In 2014 and 2015 independent inquiries into CSE in Rotherham, in Rochdale, in Manchester and in Oxford were published (Jay 2014, Coffey 2014, Bedford 2015, Casey 2015)-sadly it is now clear that it happens everywhere……………..
Why does research in this area continue to be important?

In terms of children and young people…

- There is increasing international awareness of the extent of CSE and some positive changes in attitude, policy and practice in the UK.

However there are tensions…..

- the main discourse now locates young people experiencing CSE as victims of abuse, restricting acknowledgement of them ‘as active agents capable of making their own decisions’ (Pearce, 2010:2).

...resulting in some young people being blamed and not heard?

In relation to adult sex workers…

- ‘the notion of justice is one arguably based on a continuing perception of sex work as a crime against morality’. (Dodsworth 2012:520)

But……

- the narratives of those involved suggest a far more complex picture of a sense of victimhood and agency differing throughout their lives.

…another signal to listen more carefully to those involved?
My starting point:
‘Natasha’s experience and perceptions……..

‘My Mum was involved in prostitution. I think that’s where I got the idea from. Me and my friend……..it was like a dare…..we made loads of money ......and the money was good ......so we just carried on…….’

‘It was the worst mistake of my life’……..
People say it's easy money, but you disrespect yourself each time. .... Is my life really worth £30?’

How did ‘Natasha’, who saw selling sex as her ‘family business’, manage to exit when others, with less extreme histories, couldn’t or chose not to?

Are there identifiable risk and protective factors determining pathways taken through CSE and, for some, sex work?
‘Pathways into Sexual Exploitation and Sex Work: The Experiences of Victimhood and Agency’

A qualitative study of 24 women involved in selling/swapping sex, half of whom were under 18 when first involved in CSE

- Aged range 18-65
- 16 were white/British, 1 black/British, 3 mixed heritage/British & 2 Polish/British
- 17 were mothers, but only 7 had relationships with their children
- Most described backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage
- 15 still involved, 4 exited, 4 not currently working but might return.

Aims of the research:
- to listen to women’s stories, focusing on the meaning for them of their childhood and adult experiences
- to develop an understanding of how different meanings ascribed to often similar experiences influenced perceptions of victimhood or agency and pathways taken.
- to inform service provision from the perspectives of those involved
Emerging patterns…..

Why, when they had similar background experiences, did some women feel they were victims and others that they were survivors?

The findings indicate:

- that a sense of agency, or the lack of it, was a significant factor in pathways taken

- however, this was not fixed but varied, as did a sense of victimhood, for those involved in selling/swapping sex at various times in their lives.

- the pattern varied depending on interconnected psychosocial factors and the meaning given to them by those involved at different life stages.

- analysis of the data indicated a need to manage an inner and outer identity, and a related need to manage the co-existence of other identities such as daughter, partner, mother, friend…..
Key findings…..

Whatever the age of first involvement …… what appears to determine who is likely to be the most vulnerable, and who most able to ‘manage’ is:

- the accumulation of risk factors in early childhood
- the personal, familial and wider ecological resources available to individuals across the lifespan

and crucially…
- the individual meanings ascribed to childhood and adult experiences … early damaging experiences, which may increase the likelihood of involvement, also affect the ability to deal with that involvement and simultaneously manage other life experiences, roles and identities…

How these factors are managed:
- influences the degree of victimhood or agency, vulnerability or resilience each individual perceives they have

…………and the pathways they felt forced or empowered to take.
Three groups emerged from analysis of the women’s stories:

- They reflect three different psychological and behavioural strategies for managing experience of CSE, and for some, continued involvement in sex work as adults.

- They also denote the ways in which meanings given by the women to often similar experiences of adversity led them to different perceptions of agency and choice.

- Each group took a different pathway into, through and/or out of involvement.
Group One: ‘Who I Am’ (no choice but to stay involved)
-the pathways for this group started to be defined in multiple early childhood experiences of neglect, rejection and abuse leading to an increasing inability to cope as most of the trauma and loss was unresolved…this negative pattern continued throughout their lives.

‘I’ve been on drugs all my life- I put that down to my upbringing. I blame him (her stepfather), because if he hadn’t treated me the way he did I wouldn’t have turned out the person I did and need the drugs I need to live each day to the next.’ (‘Cindy’)

‘Nothing’s coincidence - everything you do you do for a reason. If someone tells you for so long that you’re crap, then you believe you are crap.’ (‘Ella’)

‘Heroin’s like armour. Nothing bothers me...you don’t feel no emotional pain, rejection or hurt. None of them emotions get through.’ (‘Xanny’)

This group appeared to have little agency or capacity to manage more than one role or identity and saw themselves as victims not survivors.
Group Two- ‘What I Do’ (felt that they had a choice about involvement)
For them, sex work was seen as a job of work, but one that did not define them.

‘I have food on the table, so I don’t condone or condemn it. It’s enabled me to have a good life and travel.’ (‘Rosie’)

‘I’ve always been anti-pimp even from the early days. I used to watch other pimped women & think, are they all mad? Why don’t they just cut out the middle man? …
…..It’s about me being free to be me…………it’s this sort of balancing act’. (Bella’)

Their stronger relationships and sense of self worth may have enabled them to retain a sense of themselves as managers and copers not victims
Group Three: ‘Not for Me’ *(no choice but to exit)*

- this group felt it was impossible to sustain significant relationships and successfully manage other roles alongside that of sex worker.

‘Fiona’ who previously saw sex workers as……

‘the family I never had’

began to see sex work as……

‘not bettering myself but killing myself’

‘I had my daughter - that’s why I stopped prostitution. My daughter was my wake-up call’. (‘Mary’)

‘We have to respect our body. If we aren’t going to respect it and we’re going to sell it to anybody, nobody else is going to respect us are they? We have to respect ourselves before we can get respect back.’ (‘Fiona’)

A crucial protective factor was the ability to see an alternative life as possible
Themes from the three groups……

There were critical moments
and potential turning points on the women’s pathways……

However outcomes appeared to be dependent…

*not* on the critical moments themselves,
but on each woman’s cognitive appraisal of them.

So…
a sense of identity, agency and choice was
informed, formed, or reformed
by the sense made of specific experiences
feeding into a sense of self
in which self-esteem was nurtured or starved.
Key determinants of pathway outcome were:

- whether, and how, the search for approval and affection was resolved;
- whether feeling ‘different’ led to a sense of defeat or strengthened resolve;
- whether coping strategies were adaptive or maladaptive;
- and crucially:
  - whether individuals experienced the availability of a secure base relationship, whatever form it took.
Implications for policy and practice:

What is crucial, whatever the age, is the development of a sense of being loved and lovable, and to have someone to rely on, which fosters qualities of resilience.

We therefore need to provide services which ensure the provision of a secure base relationship:
- from which people can begin to develop a belief in the availability of others
- and begin to trust and change the way they think and feel about themselves and others.

In this way turning points/critical moments could more readily be recognised and used to enable those involved in CSE and sex work to make more informed choices.
“An examination of the perspectives and experiences of police officers working with children and young people at risk of, or involved in, CSE” (2014, Dodsworth & Larsson, funded by Norfolk & Suffolk Constabulary)

Some positive messages from recent research:

“Speak to them and listen to them and don’t prejudge people….I think that is where the police force are improving”

“Because we do care we do want to do a good job, we want to make it work”

“I am loathe to criminalise young people, particularly when I see their vulnerabilities”

“They need to see us as people that want to help them and want the best for them and make sure they are kept safe”

“it is important to persevere with young people who can’t see the risk”

“You can do the work without passion but you don’t do it as well”
“An examination of multi-agency working with children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation from the perspectives of the key safeguarding agencies” (forthcoming, Dodsworth and Sorensen, CRCF, funded by Norfolk SCB and Norfolk Constabulary)

Some reflections on multi-agency working with CSE from safeguarding agencies

“The MASH …it’s been good to have that single point of contact when there is a more multi-agency discussion and there is more decision making and the feedback has definitely improved”.

“At multi-training agency events you get to develop relationships and actually, as in all things in life, it is about the relationships and if you can foster positive local relationships particularly between the practitioners then you know that you are going to be in a position whereby you know you are more likely to get successful outcomes than negative outcomes”.

“We’ve moved a long way. Lots of what we have in terms of our response to CSE, I wouldn’t say is perfect, but it’s a good base. We should celebrate and share some of that practice. We’re all really good, aren’t we, at identifying what’s wrong but sometimes we don’t take forward and build upon the best practice we have.”
Whatever the pathways and perceptions of levels of agency and choice...support is more effectively delivered...if we listen to what those involved in CSE and sex work have to say

‘Be there for people. They’re just normal human beings. The only way to find out anything is if you stop putting people in boxes and start looking at them as human beings and talk to them. …You’ve got to get past what they’re doing, past the drugs they’re on and find the person inside.’ (‘Amy’)