'An Uncomfortable Comfortableness': 'Care', Child Protection and Child Sexual Exploitation

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from a qualitative research inquiry into child sexual exploitation (CSE) involving young people with experiences of CSE. The paper considers how 'care'—understood as an act, an orientation and/or set of relations (including statutory responsibilities at the level of the local state)—featured as a recurrent theme across the data in respect of the ways in which participants made sense of the problem of CSE, why they were vulnerable and at risk, and the ways in which people should respond to such risks. Findings suggest that young people who are without care and recognition from protective adults, and who are not permitted as active agents in setting the terms of their own support, are vulnerable to CSE. Not only do adult care-giving and practices of child protection feature in participants' accounts as being part of the problem, but they suggest that the instigation of these practices, made as a response to CSE, can ignore and serve to compound that which they are attempting to prevent and disrupt. There is an urgent need for care responses to address the complex underlying issues behind CSE, and to open up the possibility of interventions beyond narrow child protection responses.

Keywords: Child sexual exploitation, care, child protection, vulnerability, risk, young people

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Introduction

Recent years have seen a resurgence in the attention paid to child sexual exploitation (CSE). High-profile criminal trials relating to charges of organised CSE in Rochdale, Derby and Oxford have been the focus of significant national media attention, prompting widespread political and public debate—in particular, around the 'grooming' of children and young people by gangs of male, predatory adults. In addition, reports such as the *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997–2013* (Jay, 2014) and the Ofsted report into CSE (Ofsted, 2014) have raised concerns about the lack of awareness of CSE amongst those working in professional roles with children and young people—highlighting their misinterpretation of risk and, in particular, social workers' failure to respond to vulnerable young people. This is particularly concerning, given the high number of young people found within these reports to have experienced CSE who were also already involved with social services.

It does not negate any concern we should feel upon reading these reports to state that none of this is particularly new. Whilst CSE is now well established within child protection policy, guidance and legislation, as a form of abuse and a social care concern, this has not always been the case. Prior to the year 2009, whilst 'CSE' may have begun to feature in local authority and county council protocols, the UK guidance for this issue referred to 'children involved in prostitution' (see Department of Health, 2000). There has been a long campaign to recognise young people involved in the exchange of sex as victims of abuse (Warrington, 2010)—a campaign (and long resistance to it), however, which has, in part, led to the problem becoming framed in a particular way. As Melrose (2012) observes, the language surrounding CSE has resulted in the issue becoming almost synonymous with grooming, and in danger of being reduced to a problem of children being groomed and exploited by adult men. This is despite a now significant body of literature outlining risk and vulnerability indicators, recognising that CSE is more complex than individual problems and events and cannot be separated from wider familial, socio-economic factors (Appleton, 2014).

That young people in receipt of local authority care are particularly vulnerable to CSE is also well established. Such young people, and particularly those who are looked after, feature highly within CSE statistics and statistics relating to adult sex workers (Coy, 2008), and previous or current involvement with social services feature as vulnerability or risk factors within assessment tools for CSE (see, e.g. WAG, 2011). That being so, there has been little recognition or attention given towards the ways in which care and the practices of child protection might feature in the problem of CSE itself. So, whilst involvement with social care services is known to form part of a young person's vulnerability, the emphasis is markedly on the reasons behind why a young person may be in care—on the absence or abuse of care

in the family home — rather than on the experience of being in care or of having social services involvement in one's life. Attention has been given towards concerns about a low awareness or limited understanding of CSE amongst social care practitioners and professionals, and a subsequent stereotyping of vulnerability, in which young people are likely to be viewed more as a risk than at risk (Clutton and Coles, 2007; Jago *et al.*, 2011). Here, the focus is on how practitioners may fail to recognise or respond to CSE, and not on the problems with care responses themselves.

'Care' can be understood as an act, an orientation and a set of relations between individuals, family and the state (Tronto, 1993; Holland, 2010). Care is something given to objects of concern, things or people in others' charge. Those in the care of others are under their protection and authority. To care is to provide for and look after. It entails being able to envision and 'see' that someone or thing needs care. It also implicates a notion of authority and oversight, attentiveness and reciprocity (Cockburn, 2005).

This paper considers a line of argument, arising from analysis and developed in line with findings from a research inquiry into CSE involving young people, on the ways in which 'care', as both category and concept, is bound up with the problem of CSE and how we might best respond to it. First, I begin with a brief overview of the research study from within which the data are taken.

The research

The data considered here formed part of an in-depth qualitative inquiry into CSE in south-east Wales. This paper reports on the data from part of the study involving nine young people identified as having experienced sexual exploitation. The wider study also involved twenty-five 'non-specialist' professionals, from a range of backgrounds, who have a role in its identification and prevention. Utilising methods principally based around semi-structured interviews, the overarching research aim was to explore how 'CSE' is understood, in terms of both what the problem is and what the solutions to it might be.

The data were analysed using a form of thematic analysis, based on grounded theory, as a way of representing descriptive, analytical categories revealing how research participants 'construct' their day-to-day worlds with others through talk. Using an inductive and deductive, data-driven theory-informed approach, analytical themes arising from coding and categories across the data-sets were created. Initial codes were formed and related codes were grouped or merged from across each data-set to create potential coding themes and sub-themes. Thematic maps exploring possible links and relationships between these themes were a way of reorganising the data into what were mainly descriptive themes. At this point, a comparative analysis across both participants' sets of data was conducted to enable a

more rounded treatment of the data. Finally, these themes were refined to create overarching thematic categories within and across the data-sets. This analytical process was accompanied by an iterative process of reviewing and cross-checking these emerging themes and interpretations with relevant literature, concepts and theory.

All the participants chose to take part in this research. The British Sociological Association's statement of ethics, along with that of the third-sector organisation working with all the young people, provided guidance to the research. Ethical approval was granted from the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The young people who took part in this study were aged fourteen to seventeen at the time of the research. Eight were female and one was male. This gender imbalance might seem to support a normative view that victims of CSE are female (with males featuring largely as perpetrators); however, it signifies this view rather than supports it. Young men are less likely to be recognised as victims of CSE, and are therefore less likely to be referred for support—impacting on access to young male participants for the research.

While their histories and circumstances were varied, they shared in the claim that they each had experience(s) of the 'exchange of sex for some form of pecuniary reward or some form of material benefit' (Melrose, 2012, p. 159). All the young people had some past or present involvement with statutory care services; eight were or had been 'looked after' (for two of them, this was as a result of their risk to sexual exploitation) in either foster or residential care. All had experienced placement moves.

The problem of CSE

The paper begins by considering the ways in which care featured in what the young people had to say about the problem of CSE. The young people reported different experiences and gave a range of reasons for their involvement in exchanging sex. They spoke of experiences that can be made sense of through concepts of 'grooming' (van Meeuwen *et al.*, 1998) and 'transactional sex' (O'Connell-Davidson, 2005), and by considering their sense of agency and sense of self-underpinning a perception of sex as the unavoidable or inevitable currency of exchange or, conversely, as a way of exerting themselves to meet needs. Whilst this was so, they all spoke of CSE as a problem of 'people taking advantage' of some vulnerability or need. They each insisted that CSE is something that could happen to *anyone*: anyone who was in vulnerable circumstances or with vulnerabilities that could then be exploited. Nathan's assessment of the problem stands for much of what the young people had to say:

> *Nathan*: It doesn't just happen, it happens because either things just aren't addressed people are less able to fend for themselves and they don't get the help *they need*, for whatever reason, and are put into difficult positions and

sometimes it *does* take them there and if, people were there to help them in the first place then they wouldn't, then this wouldn't happen.

When the young people spoke of what made *them* vulnerable, they relayed experiences directly related to their care, or the lack thereof. They described feelings of instability, uncertainty and powerlessness, a lack of 'home', or place to feel at home. They described feeling a sense of difference, of not being like 'normal children'. They invoked a sense of an absence of trusting relationships, and spoke of seemingly serial practitioners and carers who came and went. They considered themselves to be ignored and unwanted, and as having been without the affect and relationships that others take for granted, and they described in many ways feeling unseen by those who *should* care for them and want to help them:

> *Danny*: Like I wanted to get out of there (pause) no one would take me you know.

> *Sarah*: I didn't have no one to trust really. There's no one there. No one is going to come and help, you know.

It was this that many of the young people expressed, directly or indirectly, as being at the root of the problem of CSE. They considered themselves as having to manage without the sorts of care and attention that ought to be guaranteed to all young people. The problem was therefore preventable— something that doesn't have to happen ever because, if there had been no vulnerability or need to begin with, nothing to be *exploited*, then there could have been no exploitation:

> *Hannah*: I was SO lonely at the time, nobody was listening to me or anything like that and I think part of me was like sod it, and that's why, stuff started and I ended up in trouble.

> *Kerry*: Because no one's been there to help *them*, they, then they just turn to *what's* available.

> *Nathan*: No one addresses the diff like I said the difficulties that they *face*. Um, and, sometimes given that they KNOW something bad is going to happen, their emotions just kind of go, I *need* this . . ... Like I mean, the more supported they are even though they have issues it can, they have something else, someone else to turn to, you know. Whereas I think the more, isolated you are the more you do what uh can be taken advantage of.

In this way, it is a continued lack of acknowledgement from those who should care and want to help them that can leave young people exposed to those who would take advantage of them. In various ways, the young people were 'invisible' to significant figures in their lives who might, or should, give them the care and help they needed. Engaging in risky behaviours was often understood by the young people as their best attempts not only to cope, but to assert themselves—even when to cope meant controlling how out of control they could get; even when asserting oneself meant going missing; when finding help meant 'having to do things' in return:

> *Danny*: How I ended up dealing with it all like, it's about coping you know, like, you're just prepared to with anyone for anything like.

> *Katie*: You're doing it for money—you're doing it to get what you need. Like even with your friends you can't keep skanking off them to help you out with anything because then no one will be your friend in the end.

Sarah spoke poignantly of her experiences of exchanging sex as 'an uncomfortable comfortableness', providing a sharp reminder that underpinning the exchange of sex is a subjective self with unmet emotional needs—needs being met to some extent through the exchange of sex. Sarah's phrase could stand for much of how the young people spoke of their experiences-the familiarity of feeling objectified and powerless, and the experience of being sexually exploited as a less familiar violent extension of these feelings. Understanding this is a step towards grasping how it might be that, for some young people, the exchange of sex appears as an expected condition or a viable option—perhaps the only or best one available at that point. In short, the seeming contradiction of feeling in some ways visible as a person (being appreciated, looked at, 'looked after'), whilst also being exploited, can occur because the objectification in exchanging sex is cast as something expected, acceptable or a least-worst option. For young people who consider themselves to be vulnerable and without *care*—without attention, acknowledgement and help—'sexual exploitation' can be a solution of sorts: 'help' and recognition, of *some form*, from *someone*. In being taken advantage of, they were simultaneously acknowledged and felt wanted or were coping, whilst also being abused and exploited.

Care as risk?

This troubling positioning of care, the parallels between the ways in which the young people talked about care and their exploitative experiences, is now considered a little further, beginning with the ways in which the young people talked about 'people' involved in their lives. It is telling that respondents used the term 'people' to refer generically to a diverse range of others: their social workers, caring professionals and those who exploit. It is perhaps taken as given within policy and practice that there is an obvious distinction between who it is who helps and who it is who exploits. Yet this differentiation is not always made or is not clear within the young people's accounts. 'People', so homogenously applied, indicates the blurring that exists across these two categories. When the young people talked of 'people who take advantage', they spoke of them as 'dirty horrible men', 'predators', 'mingers' and as people who 'completely fucked me up'. Yet they also spoke of them as 'someone who was there', who made them 'feel safe' and of 'people who put you up' and 'who relieve one kind of strain on you'. 'People' who take advantage and 'people' who help can be one and the same. Regardless of the

exploitative context, a point made by all respondents was that some of their needs were being met in *some way* by those who took advantage of them. They recognised that these exploitative relationships and situations they were involved in were not good—yet there was something good to be got from them.

This leads on to a related aspect—one equally troubling. Anyone can help can also mean that no one can. 'People', the young people's carers and the social workers tasked to help them, can also create feelings of shame, power-lessness and intimidation. Claire in particular asserted that there is no one who can help. All 'adults'—people who exploit and people who are supposed to help—cannot be trusted and do not care. Like Claire, whilst the young people reported experiences of not seeking help for reasons such as being blackmailed, controlled and abused by those who exploit, they also reported feelings of powerlessness, intimidation and fears of exposure by those tasked to care as forming part of their unwillingness to seek help. This can be seen in what Claire has to say:

> *Claire*: Adults are a bit intimidating, and um, because if they think you're lying, they go into a self-defence mechanism where they fold their arms and stand over you sort of thing, which is very intimidating.

A similar point can also be glimpsed in what Leah has to say about her current support worker and why it is that *this* relationship has helped her when others have not:

> *Leah*: It's just like being able to talk about stuff, things, where they're not going to run off and tell other people and start gossiping and stuff like that, I mean she doesn't give a reaction and if she does it's always a positive one she's not like, *oh my god* and make you feel like, oh I must be bad if her reac-tion's that.

Feelings and fears of exposure and judgement—of people hearing or reading personal details about oneself—whether it be amongst social workers or people in exploitative contexts were talked about as being experienced in similar ways by the young people.

This blurring in the ways the young people talked about people who help and who exploit provides context to a necessary, more layered understanding of why it is that young people may not ask for help, may reject help or may 'choose' to stay in abusive relationships. Moreover, this cannot be attributed solely to the manipulation and deceit of perpetrators. Acknowledgement must also be given to young people's wider social networks and how they ex-perience their relationships with others. To get a sense of the complexity of the problem of CSE, what is laid out within policy can be turned on its head. That is, exchanging sex can be a solution of sorts to the problem of young people's invisibility to those who should help them, whilst the 'solu-tions' outlined within policy, the practices of social care and more specifically those of child protection, although talked about by the young people as

fundamental to solving the problem, were also talked about as forming and reinforcing parts of the problem. This point is developed further below.

Katie

Katie's story provides an illuminating example of the discussion thus far. Katie described how the insecurity and instability she experienced whilst growing up in foster and residential care formed part of the reason why she met and stayed with her 'boyfriend':

> *Katie*: I was in care and I was moved around here and there and anywhere. So I was always doing runners, and then when I met (name of person deemed to be exploitative) it was having someone who was there for me you know.

Katie, like many of the young people, invoked an absent sense of stability and belonging in what she had to say about her lack of 'home'. Her boyfriend was someone who was there for Katie, and she talked about how she felt herself to be safe with him, even though, as she explained, 'he got me selling myself on the streets'. The relationship was abusive in many other ways:

> *Katie*: I couldn't breathe without him. I couldn't go out to the shops. Couldn't see my mum. He let me go and see my mum on Christmas day for the afternoon that was it. He was there for me and you know I just wanted someone to love me.

The relationship was abusive, yet it provided some of the stability and security that Katie craved. 'He' was *someone* who was there for her when she felt there to be no one else. Katie's explanation of the care responses from social services provides a stark outline of their importance in the creation and resolution of the problem:

> *Katie*: Social services put me in a secure unit. I was in care see and they knew he was beating me up and tried moving me around care homes but I would go missing all the time, I was living with him. In the end they put me in a secure unit up in (place name) and I did a runner and phoned him, asked him to pick me up.

Whilst removing Katie from the exploitative relationship by placing her in a secure unit may be understandable as a protective response, it can be considered wholly inadequate in many ways—not least because, in essence, it bears unsettling similarities to Katie's experiences of being controlled and shut away by her boyfriend. Katie's boyfriend gave her feelings of safety and of being wanted. By staying in the relationship, her need for drugs was also being met. From Katie's perspective, as she went on to say, in the secure unit, she had no one there for her and she was 'left clucking' (detoxing from heroin) on her own. Previous attempts to help her by moving her, did not help because part of her reason for being with her boyfriend stemmed from her feelings of insecurity and instability. Responding to Katie's situation by continuing to move her, reinforced those feelings. Moreover, her need to

stay with 'him' was compounded by her drug addiction. Katie needed support to address her drug addiction, the abusive and exploitative relationship she was in, and her feelings of being unwanted and uncared for, which underpinned the problem, as Katie perceived it.

Responding to CSE

Katie's story, as with those of the other participants, finds support from an established body of literature arguing that sexual exploitation is a multifaceted problem requiring multiple responses (see, e.g. Kerrigan-Lebloch and King, 2006). The matter of unmet needs being met through the exchange of sex brings into focus the need for care responses to address the complex underlying issues that a young person is dealing with. The young people, when reflecting on their care experiences in relation to their CSE, spoke of how people 'just see the surface exterior'-both in terms of the problem and in respect of a young person's behaviour. As such, those tasked to help them can misperceive the problem and thereby misdirect their practice. As Nathan explains, dealing with 'sexual exploitation' on its own will not solve the problem:

> *Nathan*: Try and work on the issues that make them vulnerable to it, and then as they become as their life becomes a bit more *stable*, um hopefully they should be able to withdraw from, what is making turn towards that . . . sometimes I think they try to deal with sexual exploitation on its own, and I think that, it can sometimes sort itself, temporarily but, the underlying issue needs to be, *dealt* with as well otherwise they might just come back to it, and sometimes I think that, unless um, yeh the underlying issues are dealt with, and you may not be able to get to them when you start off but they can just quite easily fall into the risk of doing it again.

The young people insisted that the focus on removing them from exploitative situations and relationships does not resolve the '*real* problem'—that is, those underlying issues, whatever these may be. Moreover, as Nathan goes on to warn, this can be unhelpful at best but may compound the difficulties young people are facing at worst:

> *Nathan*: I think that when people try to *pull* them out *really quickly* that sometimes, if it's an emotional issue, it can sometimes *cause* them damage as well because they haven't, even if it's an unhealthy outlet they haven't dealt with that and so it can just be redirected somewhere else and cause more issues for them somewhere else.

The 1989 Children Act links the notions of control and care by stating that it is often necessary to provide control in order to care for a child if there are concerns that they are at risk to themselves or a risk to others (Roesch-Marsh, 2012). Yet, as O'Neill (2001) has argued, defining young people as victims of abuse in need of protection does not necessarily create better outcomes for them, and they may become subject to forms of protection that are

perceived as punitive in their effect—something expressed by Katie and Nathan above. Echoing concerns within the literature (see Creegan *et al.*, 2005), as the young people see it, 'protection', instigated as a sole response, misunderstands the problem and may only provide a short-term resolution. In this way, protective responses instigated to support and help young people can become risk factors in their own right (Pearce, 2007, p. 207).

Moreover, these responses may serve to reinforce the problem of CSE itself, because many of the young people spoke of how this narrow and misdirected focus led them to feel further ignored and unacknowledged by professionals. The young people did not typically invoke a need for some specific help such as money, housing, help with addiction; albeit such issues lay behind their involvement. This is not to suggest that they did not want help in these areas, but rather that their focus was on formal care relationships, in which they could feel recognised as people first and where the work by professionals in relation to their needs came second. The multitude of professionals involved in the young people's lives, mobilised only because of their need for protection, meant the young people were of concern. Yet, perversely, the relationships with some professionals and carers, driven by the requirements of child protection, could compound those issues due to a lack of opportunity given for young people to feel they were of concern for reasons other than their 'neediness'. Many of the young people expressed frustration towards people just 'doing their job'. These were cast as people who 'don't *really* want to know', 'don't know what to do with you' and 'don't really care'. The young people felt objectified by perceived feelings of indifference from those tasked to care and support them, and the opposite, to feel pitied, was something spoken of as equally harmful, leaving a young person feeling objectified through assumptions about their dependence and weakness. When a person is defined only by their need, they are to some extent discounted as a full and integral 'other'. In many ways, the young people could be considered as having 'experienced that peculiar lack of respect which consists of not being seen, not being accounted as full human beings' (Sennett, 2003, p. 13). Many of the young people described their positive experiences with social workers or other professionals in terms that saw them feeling listened to, acknowledged and informed, and, as Kerry tells us, it is this which helped her to move on from CSE:

> *Kerry*: You've got to move on really so just keep on talking to people, and the more you talk to people the more you come to your senses about what went on really …. Well I haven't been in the situation since I came along with (worker's name). She helped me to get myself out of my own situation. And I talk to her a lot about the stuff that have happened. It's been helpful just to talk to someone that I didn't know from before, just to be able to talk to them about it all without them knowing about me first.

Like Kerry, 'just talking' was spoken of by all the young people as having helped them. Yet there were many instances across the data where

'talking' was experienced as harmful and exposing. 'Just talking' as a positive experience stood for a process of openness and mutuality between two people, and not a one-sided search for the secrets of some abusive encounter. It represents being given time, yet having time to disclose to someone ready and willing to listen to them was not enough. It is about talk as constituting a more interdependent encounter, in which young people can choose if, when and how they share the issues that concern them. How young people participate in defining their need has consequences for whether, and how, interventions can respond to meeting that need (Williams, 2000). Young people who are able to manage the conditions in which they relay and discuss their personal details and experiences can perceive this as a therapeutic form of disclosure, whereby they feel acknowledged and visible in a way that is positive and which is an essential prerequisite in tackling the problem itself. Conversely, this same information, garnered in a different way, can leave them feeling visible in a way that is exposing and unsafe, in which they can feel more vulnerable and further overlooked as a person.

Discussion

The young people aligned experiences of care and being looked after with the problem of CSE. All of the young people interviewed in this study had experience of local authority care and several of them were 'looked after' young people. Such young people featured explicitly and implicitly in the ways in which the young people made sense of the problem. Such words offer a sharp contradiction in which to make sense of participants' understandings of the problem, reflecting a cruel and yet familiar paradox: being in care, or involvement with social services, is often part of the problem. Whilst it would be wholly inappropriate to collapse the care experience as *the* cause of complex social problems such as CSE—many children will have experienced harm before coming into care—it is nonetheless the case that the role of care in the problem itself is one 'we cannot readily dismiss' (Shaw *et al.*, 1996, p. 9).

Thinking of care as a way of 'seeing' helps develop this point. To care is to provide for and look after; it entails being able to envision and 'see' that someone needs care; it also implicates a notion of authority and oversight. It is the balance between these elements that shapes and determines the nature of any relationship and its likely impact. A thread running through the data is that young people can in many ways be invisible to those who should care for them. If the purpose of placing young people in care settings where they are overseen by professionals tasked to care for them, is to protect them from further harm by recognising (*seeing* and *seeing to*) their needs and vulnerabilities, then at least some young people seem to experience this attention negatively. Thus, young people in this study considered themselves as 'seen' but more as objects of surveillance, known only for and so defined by their need; outside of this, they felt themselves to be unwanted and

unacknowledged. This can leave young people looking for the sorts of care, relationships and attention that any person needs, leaving them vulnerable to people who might exploit them for sex. The paradox bears repeating: the sorts of attention given to a vulnerable child or young person by those with an official duty of care can be attention that makes for further vulnerability to sexual exploitation if it is experienced as 'blotting out their individuality and subjectivity' (see O'Connell-Davidson, 2005, p. 55).

Yet it can be very difficult for professionals to provide the sorts of care, attention and affection that all children and young people—in fact any persons—need. Looking after others is much easier said than done, just as seeing can signify both the (simple) recognition of visible surfaces and (with much greater difficulty) true understanding. Sennett (2003) writes about the ways in which seeing and being seen go to the heart of respectful relations of care and welfare. He also argues that the social relationship between carer and cared for is a particular kind when the relationship is a professional one. It is not the same as friendship, and neither can it directly replace familial relationships. It is one which by its own nature requires a combination of closeness and distance, compassion and reserve, if it is to allow the care-receiver and care-giver to arrive at anything like mutual respect. Mismanaged, such caring relationships can impose concern in ways which people are defined according to their need. Alternatively, if the relationship strays into compassion and sentimentality, this may similarly demean. This resonates with much that the participants had to say. Yet the young people did not tend to speak (as Sennett does) of reserve or distance as positive qualities within the professional caring relationship. They wanted them to be close, personal and compassionate, and felt unacknowledged to the degree that this did not happen. The difficulty, then, is that, when the state acts *in loco parentis*, professionals operating in this context cannot somehow fulfil that role in the way that they might as parents. Whilst this elemental need is often recognised by practitioners, time, administrative constraints and professional boundaries necessarily curtail the ability of practitioners to provide the sorts of care that they might otherwise wish to give (see Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010).

This leads to a wider point. If we are to fully understand and consider our responses to CSE, in respect of their role in the problem and solution, CSE must be understood in the context of young people's lived experiences of the authority and power relations between them and the adults around them. This is particularly so when considering why it is that some young people might turn to exchanging or 'selling' sex as a solution over seeking support from those who are there to care for them (O'Neill, 2001). This is to acknowledge a wider societal frame not much recognised within policy and directed practice. Whilst the policy discourse surrounding CSE recognises the role of power and control, it does so only in relation to a grooming process (between individuals). Yet 'grooming' can and needs to be understood as taking place within, and shaped by, a much wider context of

established relations of power and control, command and subordination between adults and children—relations within which children and young people can sometimes (and also expect to) feel unheard and unnoticed. Adult care-giving as something administered to those who are vulnerable, on their behalf, and the practices of child protection partake of a general framework of cultural understanding and relations of power that also inform the problem itself. This aligns with Sarah's assessment, heard earlier, of her experiences of CSE as 'an uncomfortable comfortableness'—a familiar powerlessness, albeit described in abusive terms, yet also bringing feelings of care and safety, feelings otherwise absent. As Ennew (1986, pp. 140–1) argues, 'the sexual exploitation of children is less a set of abnormal practices than an extreme manifestation of prevailing social and sexual values', yet support often 'only deals with one aspect of the problem and only very seldom does it try to place that aspect within the context of the social and sexual relations of which it is a part'.

Framed solely as a child protection issue, CSE can be difficult for professionals to respond to in the ways in which the young people spoke of wanting and needing. Biggs (2001, pp. 304–5) argues that social policy creates and legitimates social problems, partly through contributing 'toward the material conditions, either through action or inaction, that increases the likelihood that a social ill will occur'. The current focus on grooming, and the emphases on young people's lack of agency, deflects attention from much wider socioeconomic structures that cause adversity, whilst also directing practice to see the needs and wishes of an individual young person as *secondary* to their protection. Young people's participation within their own welfare is based on perceptions of their ability—at the macro level within policy and at the individual level of practice by the professionals working with them (Leeson, 2007). Yet, when a young person's victim status is hinged so heavily upon their being without agency, as it is with CSE, a difficulty arises in positioning young people as capable. Protective responses are legitimated by discourses of childhood and grooming, and so also become the *necessary* and, for many young people, the *sole* response, whilst ignoring their role in the creation of the problem.

Yet the problem *and* the 'solutions' are embedded within and can be made sense of through considering young people's (in)visibility within care structures, practices and relationships. Care and protection, in which a young person feels as subject, recognised as a *person*, not only of notice because of their need, but understood, acknowledged and consulted, can begin to address the problem itself. It is within interdependent relationships, with some opportunity for reciprocity, that the young people can feel a sense of certainty, stability and control over their lives. Such an insight does not seek to oversimplify the problem of CSE and the ways in which we might respond to CSE, but rather to contribute to a better understanding of the issue by revealing the often contrary, sometimes counterintuitive, but typically complex nature of the phenomenon and its causes. Moreover, much of

this aligns with the core values underpinning a 'coproduction' approach to social care—one that seeks to shift (inherently unequal) care relationships from subordination to parity, in which the joint nature of these relationships is recognised, alongside regarding 'consumers' (in this case young people in care) as active and whose contribution to that relationship is not just welcomed but also valued (see Cahn, 2004, p. 22).

Conclusion

'Care'—experiences, systems and relations between carer and cared for—sit at the crux of both the problem of CSE and the ways of responding to and preventing young people from becoming caught up in it. Not only do adult caregiving and practices of child protection feature in the young people's accounts as being part of the problem, but the instigation of these practices, made as a response to a young person's involvement in sexually exploitative situations, can ignore and serve to compound that which they are attempting to prevent and disrupt. This point is, perhaps, an uncomfortable one to digest. It is, however, one that should not be wholly new to readers, and especially so to those familiar with literatures related to CSE. In order to respond better to young people, and move away from the blaming of individual social workers' failure to recognise and respond appropriately to CSE, there is an urgent need for social care to consider its own role in the problem. There is a need for policy and practice frameworks to recognise that 'sexual exploitation' is more than just a problem caused by and experienced through grooming and coercive relationships, not least to acknowledge the complexity of this problem and in so doing to open up the possibility of interventions from practitioners beyond narrow child protection responses. This directs towards two final concluding points. There is much here to support early intervention, in the form of support to families, in order to help them provide better care, as well as support to children and young people in the form of counselling and mentoring relationships. Where the family context for care becomes no longer possible, when young people come into the care of the state, there is a need to recognise young people's need for more therapeutic relationships with the professionals around them who act '*in loco parentis*' as care-givers. Young people who remain without recognition, without care, from protective adults, and who are not permitted as active agents in setting the terms of their own care and support, are vulnerable in many ways to those who may want to harm them, and are likely to remain so.

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