'She doesn't have to get in the car ... ‘: exploring social workers’ understandings of sexually exploited girls as agents and choice-makers

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ABSTRACT
This paper considers social workers’ in England understandings of the agency and choice-making of girls who are sexually exploited outside the home, by extra-familial persons. To further elicit their understandings, social workers’ understandings of the agency and choice-making of girls sexually abused within the home, by a family member, is also explored. The social workers’ understandings of girls’ agency, and in turn their safeguarding response, is significantly shaped by where, and by whom the girl had been abused or exploited. Girls sexually exploited outside the home are understood to have more choice about whether or not to be in sexually exploitative situations; whereas girls sexually abused in the home are understood to have no choice about being in their situations. The understanding social workers have of girls exploited outside the home leaves social workers conflicted. They struggle to reconcile the tension of understanding sexually exploited girls as choice-makers, but not blaming them for those choices. This paper argues that a new discourse is needed around social work, and safeguarding generally, in which girls, whether sexually abused in the home or exploited outside the home, can be recognised as choice makers and agents but are not blamed for their agency. Indeed, their agency should be encouraged and enabled in positive directions.

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Introduction
What is CSE?
The term, child sexual exploitation (CSE) is a relatively new one in the UK, and has evolved from the term, ‘child prostitution’ (Department of Health 2000; Inter-agency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children 2016; Kelly et al. 1995). CSE is commonly understood as a type of child sexual abuse involving both contact and non-contact abuse (DfE 2017; Fox and Kalkan 2016). CSE was first defined by the Department for Children Schools and Families in 2009 and since then has become ubiquitous in political, public and safeguarding discourses. CSE has recently been re-defined by the Department for Education (2017) in England as:

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the
sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology. (5)

The CSE that this research is interested in is sexual exploitation perpetrated against girls by extra-familial groups of men. Groups are defined by Berelowitz et al. (2013) as:

Groups are two or more people of any age, connected through formal or informal associations or networks, including, but not exclusive too, friendship groups. (8)

Of course, this is only one type of child sexual exploitation amongst many others perpetrated in both an intra-familial and extra-familial context, and often both (Inter-agency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children 2016)

The paper also focuses on the different spatial contexts in which girls are sexually abused and sexually exploited and how the social workers’ understandings of these spaces impacts their safeguarding response.

**Context**

The phenomenon of child sexual exploitation has emerged saliently in the public consciousness over the last decade in the UK (Berelowitz et al. 2013; Casey 2015; DfE 2017; Jago et al. 2011; Jay 2014). This is primarily a result of high profile court cases concerning a particular type of CSE, in which groups of mainly British-Pakistani males have been found guilty of grooming, sexually assaulting and trafficking young people, mainly adolescent girls, in England.

As a result of the attention this type of CSE has received from politicians, the media and the public, concerns have been raised about those sexually exploited young people not being safeguarded as they should have been or, indeed, as statutory safeguarding (child protection) procedures dictate in the Children Act (1989). Possible reasons given to explain this lack of response are two-fold. First, that safeguarding professionals (e.g. social workers; police; healthcare professionals) were worried about offending racial sensitivities in local communities due to the ethnicity of the men involved and secondly, that the ‘troubled’ backgrounds of the girls involved meant they were deemed ‘unworthy’ of support by professionals charged with protecting them. Consequently questions have been asked, particularly in relation to safeguarding professionals who may have understood that sexually exploited young people were ‘putting themselves at risk’ (Berelowitz et al. 2013, 25), viewed as ‘making a choice’ to be in sexually exploitative situations and understood by professionals as essentially complicit in ‘their’ exploitation (Jago et al. 2011; Jay 2014; OSCB 2015; RSCB 2013). The safeguarding professionals’ understandings of sexually exploited girls as agents, appears to have been problematic. Indeed, concerns have been raised about whether young people have been protected as they should have been or rather, have been left at risk of harm from the perpetrators – believed by safeguarding professionals to be making a choice and therefore responsible for the consequences of their actions. The rest of this article addresses central issues within the, ‘why didn’t anyone protect those girls’ question, contributing uniquely to knowledge and drawing on broader CSA and CSE literature concerning understandings of the sexually abused/exploited child and their agency.

**Methodology**

The research was qualitative, social constructionist and framed by the author’s position as a post-structuralist feminist. I chose to look at girls, not boys because although CSE and CSA affects both boys and girls evidence shows that girls are more likely to be sexually exploited than boys (Beckett 2011; McNaughton Nicholls et al. 2014: Wild 1986). Furthermore, I wished to explore related, relevant gender issues concerning girls; including the potentially conflicting intersection in the social workers’ understandings and constructions of adolescent female sexual agency; sexually abused/exploited girls and of sexually knowing/innocent girls.
Interviews were conducted with eighteen social workers from three adjacent local authorities in one area of England. The sample consisted of five men and thirteen women. The social workers worked in various areas of safeguarding including, teenage domestic abuse; with young offenders; child sexual exploitation; children with disabilities; children at risk of entering into care; duty social workers who assess initial referrals and managers responsible for teams of social workers. The requirement was that the social worker had, or was likely to be referred a CSE case; they had all had at least one CSE case. A convenience sampling procedure was used; social workers were recruited through word of mouth, networking and the researcher visiting social care departments and asking for participants. Although the sample cannot be viewed as representative, due to the sampling procedure and relatively small number of participants, the consistency in the social workers’ understandings was striking.

The interviews were semi-structured, audio recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. The themes were established in three main ways: identifying the reoccurrence of certain topics within the data; participants generally saying the same things about certain topics and finally, topics on which the social workers expressed similar areas of uncertainty and ambiguity (Ryan and Bernard 2003).

The social workers were asked a number of questions about their understandings of CSE that takes place outside the home and CSA that occurs in the home. Also discussed, was their understandings of the families of sexually exploited girls and the social workers’ understandings of the perpetrators. In order to elicit their understandings further the social workers were given three vignettes. Each girl was given a different age and a different abusive/exploitative context; the purpose of which was to explore whether the girl’s age and the ‘type’ of abuse/exploitation she was the victim of affected the social workers’ understanding and safeguarding response. The first vignette involved a fourteen year old girl who was being sexually abused by her step-dad. She insisted that she didn’t mind having sex with him as he was nice to her and gave her gifts. The second vignette concerned a thirteen year old girl who had been sexually exploited by an extra-familial group of adult men for six months. She received alcohol and drugs in exchange for sexual activity and was insistent that she was not doing anything she did not want to. The third vignette focused on a fifteen year old girl (nearly sixteen) who had been sexually exploited by various groups of men for three years. She had not engaged with services and was starting to groom other young girls. All three girls asserted that they were making a choice to be in these situations. The social workers were asked what they thought about the girls saying that they didn’t mind being in these situations, they were making a choice and they weren’t doing anything that they did not want to. Interviewees were also asked how they would safeguard the girls involved.

This Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) funded research was granted ethical approval from the University of [Anon] social research ethics panel and furthermore complies with the ESRC(2015) ethical standards and those of the British Sociological Association (BSA 2015). As more than two local authorities were approached, approval was sought and received from the Association of the Directors of Children’s Services (ACDS 2015). The primary concern was that the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and their employing local authority were maintained, and also that of any young people they discussed. To ensure this, the locations and identities of the social workers and their employing organisation have been anonymised and pseudonyms used.

Findings

This section begins with a discussion on the different ways in which social workers constructed girls who had been sexually exploited by extra familial persons, and girls sexually abused by a person within their home for example, a family member. This is followed by an exploration of how the social workers constructed the agency and choice-making of girls differently depending on where, and by whom the girl had been exploited or abused. Girls sexually exploited by extra familial persons were constructed as having more choice about whether or not to be in exploitative situations than girls sexually abused in the home. Sexually exploited girls were constructed as needing to make certain
choices if the CSE was to stop, such as recognising what was happening to them, choosing to meet the social worker ‘half way’ and co-operate with them and, choosing to disclose evidence to the police. The social workers understood that the choices the sexually exploited girls makes determine how she is safeguarded. Whereas the girl sexually abused in the home was constructed as unable to make any choices, she was an ‘ideal’ victim (Christie 1986) and was immediately safeguarded.

**Social workers’ understandings of sexually exploited girls**

The social workers constructed sexually exploited girls and their families as socially and economically deprived and understood that in all likelihood, the girl and her family would already be known to social care. The girl’s family life was understood by the social workers as the main reason she was vulnerable to exploitation; her social and economic deprivation causing her to seek out emotional and material gain from men:

> It’s (the CSE) a, maybe a bit of escapism from what’s going on at home. (Sue)

> … we are talking about young females who have, to be blunt, had a poor experience of parenting …. (Nigel)

The sexually exploited girl was constructed by the social workers as a multidimensional victim: a victim of her life already, that is socially and economically deprived, a victim of CSE and furthermore, her victimhood is reinforced because she does not understand that she is a victim of CSE. Finally, the social workers understand she would remain a victim into her future life.

> It (CSE) sets a precedent for further relationships down the line, you’re not going to be fourteen forever … going to be twenty, twenty-one and what sort of relationship are they going to have then …. (Kelly)

However, there was a caveat. When asked if CSE could only happened to a socially and economically deprived girl the understanding of the social workers was that it could happen to other girls – commonly associated by the social workers with being middle class and from a professional family – but only if something happened in the girl’s home-life to de-stabilise her ‘normal’ life. Life events such as her parents working long hours, or a bereavement might result in her becoming vulnerable to exploitation:

> If you’ve got a family that work long hours or have got a business, they (the girls) spend a lot of time at home on their own, that can be a vulnerability. (Kate)

Thus, the primary understanding of the social workers was that there had to be something wrong in the girl’s life to make her vulnerable to exploitation. For example, she is sexually exploited because she is socially and economically deprived or because her parents work long hours, rather than because of the men who were exploiting her-the latter was never articulated as the primary cause of the exploitation. The social workers reasoning about why girls were exploited was directed towards the girl and her family, rather than the perpetrators, in turn absenting the perpetrators from blame and implying that primary blame for the CSE lies with the girl and her family.

Furthermore, the social workers understood that as a result of the girl’s social and economic deprivation, she exhibits certain traits that indicate she is vulnerable – the main one being that she has un-met needs. This trait was understood as the over-riding reason why certain girls are so vulnerable to CSE. The word ‘vulnerable’ was used more than any other to describe sexually exploited girls. The social workers were asked to explain what they meant when they used the word vulnerable and invariably they explained what it is about the girl that made her vulnerable to exploitation. None of the social workers constructed sexually exploited girls as becoming vulnerable because of the exploitation, rather seeing vulnerability as a pre-existing characteristic of their life beforehand.

Dichotomously, the social workers never discussed what it was about the girl sexually abused in the home that makes her vulnerable to abuse for example, the social workers never suggested that the reason she was abused was because she was from a socially and economical deprived family. The
sexual abuse of girls in the home was understood by the social workers as something that just happened to her:

I think CSA, you know the young person could be saying no, or held down by force … the young person would be saying no, crying throughout … . (Josie)

(CSA) an act … an explicit act taken place on a child without their consent. (Sadeem)

This variance in their understandings is significant as it informed the social workers’ different understandings of girls’ agency and their capacity to make choices. The spatial context in which the girl was abused and exploited affected the social workers’ understandings and in turn, their response.

All that view about she doesn’t have to get in the car […] whereas CSA, it’s almost like umm, for me it’s more there was no consent at all […] whereas with CSE well, she must have consented to something, maybe she consented and it went too far where you wouldn’t necessarily think about that with CSA you would just think she’s … this has happened to her. (Nell)

**Social workers’ understandings of agency and choice-making**

The social workers’ understandings of sexually exploited girls as agents and choice-makers was complex and multifaceted, in comparison with their relatively straightforward understandings of girls abused in the home. Interviewees understood that sexually exploited girls make choices about entering into situations that maybe sexually exploitative, remaining in them, and getting out of them; unlike girls sexually abused in the home, whom they understood have no choices.

**She makes a choice**

Sexually exploited girls are constructed by the social workers as agents because they have more choice about whether or not to be in the sexually exploitative situation in the first place:

Yeh, but at the end of the day, they are both abuse, you know, both of them are being abused, umm, there might not be a choice in, in, child sexual abuse that’s happening in the home environment, umm, the girls … they may choose, there might be more of an aspect of choice in CSE, in terms of they are vulnerable but they are actually going along with what’s being asked of them because there is gain for them to be made at the end of it. (Azim)

Girls sexually abused in the home are constructed as having no choice about being in ‘their’ abusive situation. Their choices are limited, constrained and they are understood to have no opportunity to demonstrate agency. On the other hand, girls who are sexually exploited outside the home are constructed as having more choice about whether or not to be in the exploitative situation in the first place. Sexually exploited girls go out to it (potential or actual sexually exploitative situations) and they don’t really have to. But, the social workers understand that the choice the girl makes to go out to it is only being made because of her social and economic deprivation that makes her vulnerable to the perpetrator’s tactic of offering them something material and emotional for example, money, alcohol and affection. This was offered as an explanation by all the social workers to explain why girls choose to be in sexually exploitative situations, for gain. Nonetheless, the girl is making a choice to do so, unlike girls sexually abused in the home.

**Choosing to put herself at risk**

Sexually exploited girls were constructed by the social workers as agents because they ‘put themselves at risk’ and ‘engage in risky behaviours’. This type of language was repeatedly used by the social workers throughout the interviews:

It’s (CSE) all about risk and it’s that risk-taking behaviour isn’t it? (Sue)
Massive risk taking behaviour but children who are vulnerable and prepared to take that risk if it means a bit of affection. (Beth)

The understanding of the social workers that girls place themselves physically and socially in positions that make them vulnerable to abuse was commonplace. Girls’ risk taking behaviours was understood by the social workers as another primary cause of CSE, rather than because there were perpetrators putting girls at risk. However, although the social workers constructed girls in this way, they also all explained that the reason why girls put themselves at risk and make themselves vulnerable is because the gifts they receive obfuscate their understanding about the situation that they are in and because they have feelings for the perpetrator of fear, love or both. Moreover, they are children, who do not understand what is happening to them, drawing on dominant constructions of childhood being a time of innocence, naïvety and cognisant incompetence (Lee 2001).

… you can’t let yourself be in the situation where men are abusing you, it’s not right for them to be doing that … they’re children and they don’t understand that they are being abused at times, because of the little present that they’re getting …. (Barbara)

Choosing to understand

Another facet within the social workers’ understandings was that sexually exploited girls need to demonstrate agency and make certain choices if they are to escape the exploitative situation. There were significant expectations on the girl and the choices she needs to make if the CSE was to stop:

You have got to learn from your own experiences and mistakes … The only way you can make a change is when they acknowledge that … well yeh, I’ve had enough, I don’t want any more, I want some help to get out, I think otherwise … there’s nowt really you can … you know when they say … you know it’s like with anyone, an alcoholic, a drug user, when they say they want that help you can put that help in place but if they don’t want that help there’s nothing … very little that you can do in there? (Cath)

The language Cath uses regarding drug addicts and alcoholics was unique within the data, however her understanding about what it takes for a sexually exploited girls to stop being exploited was not. She draws on dominant discourses about people addicted to substances who need to ‘hit rock bottom’ if they are going to change, or indeed survive. Her comments are noteworthy as it was an interesting choice of language to use when referring to sexually exploited girls: in so doing, she places significant expectations on sexually exploited girls, implying that they are left to ‘get on with it’ until they can help themselves, an understanding that was never applied to girls sexually abused in the home. This language also reflects a sense of defeatism about how to support sexually exploited girls, common throughout the data; alongside the understanding that girls need to want help and need to choose to work with the social worker if the CSE is to stop. The social workers understand that unless the girl chooses to accept help from social care and chooses to want to change her situation then, there is very little that the social worker would be able to do. Thus, the social worker’s ability to make choices about safeguarding the young person, is directed by the girls’ choices rather than safeguarding procedures directing the response the girl receives.

In contrast with this understanding of sexually exploited girls, was the social workers’ understandings of girls sexually abused in the home, who were never discussed as needing to choose to get out of the abusive situation or needing to choose to recognise the abuse. This was evidenced by the social workers’ responses to the vignettes, wherein the girl sexually abused in the home was immediately safeguarded by either the girl, or the perpetrator, being removed from the home. The social workers’ understandings about how they would respond to intra-familial sexual abuse was relatively unequivocal. Whereas with girls sexually exploited outside the home, the understanding was that the girl would remain in the exploitative situation until she understood what was happening to her, chose to accept help and made the choice to leave.
The social workers expressed frustration at this perceived status quo – that there was so much onus on the sexually exploited girl to essentially resolve her own situation. However, they failed to reflect on, or recognise that they were part of a system that perpetrated this ‘stand-off’. One of the reasons for this is that safeguarding procedures within social care systems are not yet designed to respond to abuse and exploitation that takes place outside the home (Firmin 2013; Firmin, Warrrington, and Pearce 2016). Social workers are trained to look for, and to respond to abuse and neglect in the home. However, when exploitation is happening outside the home, as the findings from this research suggest, social workers seem unclear about what procedures they should be following, or if the procedures that are in place are effective. Procedures are partly the problem, but also, is the social workers’ differing understandings of girls’ agency in those different contexts and the understanding that if a girl is deemed to be making a choice, she has to accept responsibility for that choice.

**Choosing to disclose**

Sexually exploited girls were also understood by the social workers as needing to make a choice to disclose evidence to the police about perpetrators. The social workers understood that if girls did not give evidence to the police, it was very unlikely that the perpetrators would be stopped. However, the social workers also deemed it as unlikely that these girls would disclose information about the perpetrators because they have feelings for them and because they do not understand what is happening to them. This was another frustration for the social workers and they found it unfair that so much onus was placed on the girl to stop the perpetrators:

I’d like to see more prosecutions, I don’t think there has been enough, and I’d like to know why that is … is it because we’re not getting the right info that we should be getting, or is it because we actually need a disclosure from a young person? This is what I find frustrating …. (Mary)

You see we’d, we’d struggle without it, we’d struggle without it, you know … and if there isn’t any evidence there won’t be any convictions. (Sadeem)

The social workers discussed how they would work with the girl to help her understand what is happening to her and support her if she gave evidence to the police, but held out little hope that this would actually happen. The understanding was that without girls giving (good) evidence to the police then it was unlikely the perpetrators would be brought to justice.

**They have no choice**

Finally, having constructed sexually exploited girls as those who make choices and need to make certain choices, especially if the CSE is to stop, the social workers backtracked; they all expressed the understanding that sexually exploited girls don’t really have any choices:

I think people think that those young people have choice, that the fifteen year old has got a choice, it’s not actually always the case, they don’t have the choice, they don’t have that, they don’t have permission not to go, they have to, they have to disappear for four days and to come back and then turn up on a motorway in… do you know what I mean, they don’t have, they wouldn’t choose to do that, let’s be honest. (Nell)

Nell illustrates this by defending sexually exploited girls, constructing them as being in sexually exploitative situations because they have no choice; they have to do it; they do not have permission not to do it; it is not their fault; how can they be blamed if they have no choice? However, this results in Nell (and the other social workers) contradicting their previous comments in which they constructed sexually exploited girls as to blame for the choices they have made to be in sexually exploitative situations. In order to alleviate the blame that social workers have assigned the girls they then invalidate the choices that they understand the girl makes, which result in her being sexually exploited. This is exemplified by the question (or statement) Nell asks at the end of the previous excerpt – ‘they wouldn’t choose to do that, let’s be honest’. The question that arises in response to Nell is, but what if a girl did choose to go off with those men. Why couldn’t she have made that
choice, within a context; in addition, vitally, is she to blame for the consequences of that choice. If asked, the social workers would answer no, she is not to blame for any consequences. However, findings from this research demonstrated repeatedly that in order to relieve the girls of blame the social workers had to re-understand the choices they constructed her as making as being invalid. The reason they do this is because if she is understood as making a choice to, for example, get in a man’s car or go missing for 48 hours – then, she is to blame. But, if her choices are understood as not valid then her actions can be nullified because – she doesn’t know what she is doing; she thinks she is control but she isn’t; she is living in fear; she is a child and the gain she receives confuses her. It is important to reiterate however, that the social workers only invalidate choices they understand girls to have made that they understand result in her being exploited; they do not reconstruct or invalidate the choices they understand she needs to make to get out of the CSE, understand the CSE and disclose information about the CSE.

**Choices to be made**

Sexually exploited girls are understood as choice-makers and agents, unlike girls sexually abused in the home. They are understood by the social workers to have more choice about whether or not to be in the sexually exploitative situation in the first place, unlike girls sexually abused in the home, who have no choices. Sexually exploited girls make choices about putting themselves at risk and making themselves vulnerable to sexually exploitative situations. Furthermore, sexually exploited girls need to make certain choices such as choosing to recognise they are being exploited and choosing to want to get out. Finally, they need to choose to disclose evidence to the police about the perpetrators if these people are to be stopped. The implication being that while all of these choices are being (or not being made) the exploitation continues. Unlike for the girl sexually abused in the home. She has no choice about her situation, she does not put herself at risk, she does not need to recognise that she is being abused or choose to want to get out. The girl sexually abused in the home is safeguarded immediately, the sexually exploited girl is not.

**Discussion**

**Choice and blame: reconciling the tensions**

The social workers’ understandings of sexually exploited girls as agents leaves them conflicted. They knew they should not blame girls for demonstrating agency in the context of sexually exploitative situations but were seemingly unable to separate out agency from blame; thus, they reconstructed the choices that they understood the girl to make which resulted in her being exploited as, invalid or unreal; choices made only because the girl was under duress and was misguided. This could be viewed as a progressive way of avoiding victim-blaming, however it is counter-productive if it simply serves to deny girls’ agency, as Smette, Stefansen, and Mossige (2009) notes:

> There is always the fear that talking about victim’s capacity to act will inevitably result in victim blaming [...] We must reject as axiomatic the idea that any mention of victim agency equals victim blaming. (354–355)

**Separating choice and blame**

Missing from all the social workers’ understandings was that sexually exploited girls make choices within a context, a context that maybe limited, abusive and constrained, but possibly not all of the time recognising the transient nature of the sexually exploitative situation, but whatever choices girls make, in whatever context, they are never to blame (Gallagher 1998; Lamb 1999; Melrose 2013; Vera-Gray 2016). The social workers conflation of choice-making and blame is not uncommon in relation to understandings of sexual assault and rape (Angelides 2012; Atwood 2006). More generally, the ‘blame culture’ is ubiquitous in the media and within our justice systems (Kelly 1988; Lamb
It seems likely that these influences, in part, may shape the social workers’ understandings of sexually exploited girls, especially those girls who may subvert dominant constructions of the sexually abused child by demonstrating agency and indeed, resilience (Melrose 2012; Pearce 2007). A new approach is needed to better understand and safeguard girls sexually exploited outside the home (Dodsworth 2015). This applies to not only social workers but other key partners with responsibility for protecting sexually exploited girls such as the police, the criminal justice system, health and education.

Thus, there is a need to separate out discourses on choice and blame. This may enable better understandings of sexually exploited girls but also, hopefully move discourses forward regarding CSE, placing blame always and unequivocally on the perpetrators. However, whether the current CSE discourse is able to accommodate sexually exploited girls who demonstrate agency is questionable (Melrose 2013; Robinson and Davies 2008; Warrington 2013). Reports have shown repeatedly that the agentive sexually exploited girl presents a paradox for safeguarding professionals which has often led to them being left unprotected (Berelowitz 2013; Jay 2014; Jago et al. 2011). Discourses on adolescent female sexual agency are historically fraught with social panic and resistant to change (Egan and Hawkes 2007, 2010, 2012; O’Dell 2008). This becomes even more complicated when female, adolescent sexual agency is discussed in the context of sexual exploitation (Eriksen 2009; Kitzinger 1995). Feminist writers have questioned how, in this context, sexually exploited girls expressing agency may be deemed outside the realms of protections as they do not fit dominant constructions of the sexually exploited/abused child (Cruz and Stagmatti 2007; Kitzinger 1997; Scott and Swain 2002; Woodiwiss 2014). Thus, on-going feminist critique is necessary (Egan 2013; Kehily 2012): otherwise, girl’s sexuality; the sexual exploitation they are victims of, but also the agency they demonstrate may become a conduit by which to constrain and restrict girls’ sexual agency, possibly repressing progress that has been made on these subjects (Robinson 2013; Tolman 2002).

Juxtaposed with the social workers’ understandings of sexually exploited girls is their understanding of girls sexually abused in the home, who are not recognised as choice-makers, rather they are understood to have no agency within their situations. Therefore, blame does not need to be alleviated from them. They are objects, victims and constructed as wholly blameless. The social workers drew on dominant constructions of sexually abused girls as non-agentive, ‘innocent’ victims, not recognising their ability to demonstrate agency or resilience (Kitzinger 1997; O’ Dell 2003; Rock 2013). The social workers’ differing understandings stem, in part, from their perception of the ‘home’ as a physically bounded space, a space that restricts and confines girls, meaning that they are unable to demonstrate agency in sexually abusive situations as they are physically and socially trapped. As Slater (1998) observes:

“The public and private are seen as different realms of experience and value, spatially and temporally, separated and epitomised by different sorts of people and roles. (144)”

The spaces that sexually exploited girls inhabit outside the home are understood by the social workers as not being physically boundaryed and thus they are understood to have more freedom about whether or not to enter into those spaces, unlike girls sexually abused in the private space of home. Moreover, it is clear that despite definitions of CSE and CSA being known by social workers, they are still struggling to apply these in practice (Beckett and Walker 2017).

**Conclusion**

If social workers, and indeed other professionals responsible for the safeguarding of sexually exploited girls do not recognise the potential complexities of the contexts sexually exploited girls may be inhabiting, their specific situations and constraints, it may limit their understanding and, problematically, their response (Benwell 2013; Dodsworth 2015; Firmin, Warrington, and Pearce 2016). It is important for social workers to recognise, as Jeffrey (2012) notes, that young people facing
challenging times in their lives ‘perform’ and ‘discover’ their agency in different ways (246). Social workers and others may be enabled to recognise these complexities through specific training on the subject of girls’ agency and by being given an opportunity to explore their own understandings of girls sexually exploited outside the home and girls sexually abused in the home. This may be done when under-going their initial social work degree and through professional development when in practice.

Understanding sexually exploited girls and girls sexually abused in the home in more nuanced ways, as individuals who maybe exercising agency often temporally and contextually, including with resistance, may prove more beneficial and empowering for the girls and those working with them (Overlien 2003; Pearce 2007: A Social Model of ‘Abused Consent’ (Pearce) 2013; Van der Burgt 2015). Thus, sexually exploited girls should be recognised as subjects not objects and their choice-making and agency should never be equated with blame. Not only may this be more empowering for the girls, but this approach also acknowledges rather than denies (or invalidates) the reality of their experiences (Lamb 1996). Social workers should be ‘allowed’ to recognise sexually exploited girls agency without being seen too, or seeing themselves as blaming the girl and, moreover, the diversity of girls’ experiences should be recognised (Jones 2013; Overlien 2003; Raby 2005).

As well as listening to girls and trying to better understand their lived experiences and situations, it is of prime importance that any reduced understandings of girls’ agency, as evidenced in this research, does not result in the ‘pushing’ of girls further away from the reaches of protection, in turn possibly increasing their vulnerability (Egan and Hawkes 2009). Furthermore, this research also illustrates how girls’ agency in the context of CSA in the home was not acknowledged by the social workers. This is because understanding girls sexually abused in the home as agents, who make choices, so fundamentally subverts dominant understandings of the sexually abused child that it is unmentionable, because choice is so linked to blame. As Woodiwiss (2014) suggests, there is a need to disconnect certain discourses around childhood and CSA and CSE if the diverse experiences of the individual and their agency is to be better recognised (141).

Social workers and others should separate out in their understandings choice-making from blame and not feel the need to invalidate the choice-making of sexually exploited girls to avoid blaming them. Social workers need to understand the choice-making of sexually exploited girls in a more nuanced manner in turn, enabling sexually exploited girls’ agency and choice-making in positive directions. Sexually exploited girls should never be blamed for being sexually exploited and the blame should always be placed on the perpetrators. Moreover, and problematically, is that findings from this research indicate the response sexually exploited girls receive is possibly neither adequate nor effective. Indeed, a conclusion that can be drawn from the social workers’ understandings and answer the question posed in the introduction, ‘why didn’t anyone protect those girls?’ is that sexually exploited girls in the past and, possibly currently, are not safeguarded as they should be, as a direct result of how social workers understand and construct their choice-making. Further research in this area – with safeguarding professionals from all sectors – would elicit if, fundamentally, the response girls receive depends on where, and by whom they have been abused and/or exploited, indicating that if sexually exploited girls are to be effectively safeguarded then a fundamental change is needed in safeguarding policies and procedures regarding CSE.

Any failure to acknowledge that the victimisation of children takes different forms but is endemic across spatial boundaries carries a danger of negating both its structural determinants and comprehensive strategies to tackle it which take account of these. (Pain 2003, 155)

The interviewees’ understanding that girls are making a choice is at the core of the social worker’s dilemma. As is their understanding of the spatial contexts in which they understand girls are, or are not, demonstrating agency. There is a need for social workers to move beyond the public/private dichotomy concerning their understanding of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation and recognise the geographical intersection between them (Blunt and Varley 2004; Harden 2000; Holloway and Valentine 2000). Reconceptualising children’s agency in the context of sexual abuse and sexual
exploitation may feel uncomfortable, but it is critical if the diversity and ‘reality’ of children and young peoples’ experiences is to be better understood and, most importantly, responded to effectively both within the home and outside it (Benwell 2013; A Social Model of ‘Abused Consent’ (Pearce) 2013; Raby 2005; Vanderbeck 2008)

**Disclosure statement**

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**References**


