

## Abstract

Despite intense focus on child sexual exploitation (CSE) in the UK, little is known about how and why some young people manage to recover from sustained exploitation by multiple perpetrators. Using thematic analysis, three published memoirs by young people (female) about their sexual exploitation by groups of men in the UK are analysed for insight into what contributes to positive short and long-term outcomes. Despite the populist nature of the publications, the memoirs offer an important insight into young people's understandings of their exploitation. The rich detail inherent to memoir exposes the complexities and dilemmas faced by the young people and the professionals involved. Being listened and believed by family and professionals is the most significant aspect to positive adaptation post exploitation in these accounts. However, the dynamics of grooming and the nature of contemporary social work intervention and investigation render disclosure difficult. As these accounts illustrate, CSE is characterised by uncertainty and complexity and this is the domain in which social work needs to intervene more successfully to support young people.

## Introduction

Since 2010, a number of memoirs based on young people's accounts of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) have been published. We consider what three of these books add to social work understandings of how young women manage and mediate trauma and recovery in the context of CSE. Little is known about the long-term impact of CSE despite its prevalence. ~~Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)~~CSE has become a significant child abuse concern over the past two decades in the United Kingdom (UK), and beyond (Office Public Management, 2015) with international calls to end sexual exploitation (UNICEF, 2008). In England high profile criminal cases, Serious Case Reviews (SCR), (i.e. Derby, 2010; Rochdale, 2013; Oxford, 2015) and independent inquiries (Jay, 2014; Coffey, 2014) has prompted national examination of the issue (OCC, 2012; Berelowitz et al., 2013; HoC, 2013). In response the Government has issued further policy guidance (DoE, 2011; DoE, 2012; DfE, 2014) and increased CSE related inspections through Ofsted (2014).

The first account The End of my World was published in 2010 however the publicity surrounding the Rochdale case (2012) led the author Emma Jackson to update it under the new title of Exploited in 2012. In Exploited, Emma recounts her childhood leading to the key event, when, aged 13, Emma is raped by an 'Asian' man [her terminology] named Tariq, with other men taking photos in a park. After months of sexual exploitation and experiencing death threats and a gun being held to her head, Emma tells her parents who inform the Police. In Girl A (2013), we read of a similar account of repeated rape and assaults by Asian

men, disclosures and missed opportunities. The protagonist is Hannah and the events take place in Rochdale. The third account, Stolen, recounts the experiences of Katie, the youngest victim at 13. By her own description she presents as more vulnerable, experiencing bullying, parental separation, early onset of puberty and a burgeoning sense of not fitting in. All three manage to exit CSE with informal and professional (but limited social work) support. Both Hannah's and Katie's exploitation results in successful criminal convictions.

Populist memoirs of trauma and recovery are a best-selling genre in which an adult's account of their abusive childhood is recounted (Ardell, 2007; Bates, 2012). Our selected texts offer the young person's account of their experiences of sexual exploitation through a life story perspective; experiences which they locate within the context of familial and peer networks and the environment in which they live and in which they are exploited. What emerges from these accounts is that recovery is mediated by the experiences during and post exploitation but that it can lead to positive adaptation (Kelly, 1988). It is rare to have near contemporaneous accounts from victims of sexual abuse (Horvath et al., 2014). The first memoir was published in 2010 and the relative immediacy to real time events is part of its appeal. The timing and marketing of these accounts must be situated within the context of media coverage of young women being abused by groups of men. The publication of these books can be seen as an attempt by publishing houses to capitalise on this national interest as much as providing these young people with the opportunity to give voice to their own stories, to name and make sense of their experiences.

## Background literature

CSE is a major public concern ~~in contemporary in the~~ UK, with estimates from the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England (2012) indicating that at least 16 500 young people may be victims. Definitional uncertainty characterizes CSE despite the lengthy definition developed by the National Working Group and endorsed by the Government in their supplementary guidance (DCSF 2009). The uncertainty arises from the many permutations and forms of CSE; from the lone perpetrator recruiting on the internet, to sexual assault by young men at parties (Melrose, 2013) to groups of men who act collectively to groom young girls. The current definition is not all encompassing because acts of CSE are both part of the safeguarding arena but also that of gender based violence (Brayley & Cockbain 2014). The form of CSE encountered in these texts, a loose network of men raping and sexually assaulting young people, shares many similarities with contemporary concerns and strategies to eliminate violence against girls and women (Home Office, 2015). CSE is part of the spectrum of child sexual abuse, (CSA), (DCSF, 2009; DfE, 2015) although complications arise with the uncritical merging of the terms CSE, CSA, 'child prostitution' and young people who sell sex in the literature. The lengthy Government (DCSF, 2009) definition of CSE is commonly accepted and applied in practice however we also locate CSE within the framework of sexual violence against women and girls (WHO, 2002). CSE can involve single or group perpetrators, or gangs and occur on and offline or involve both.

Prevailing attitudes and understandings of sexual violence are the lens through which public discussion and responses are mediated and young women make sense of their experiences (Kelly, 1988; Warner, 2009). The media reporting of CSE has contributed to a stereotype, in which young white females, often thought to be in care, are exploited by 'Asian' men (Cockbain, 2013). Available national data suggests a more nuanced reality with victims and perpetrators from all ethnic groups (CEOP, 2011; OCC, 2012). Gohir (2013) found that the exploitation of BME girls, in this instance, young Muslim women, occurs but is more hidden. The exploitation of young men is also less well understood or recognised (OCC 2012). Being in care, or having previously been in care, does appear to be a factor (OCC, 2012) although young people in parental care are also vulnerable. Young females in residential care seem to be particularly at risk (Coy 2009) with a study in Northern Ireland indicating that over forty percent were at risk of sexually exploitation (Beckett, 2011).

Few research studies in the UK explore how young people cope with the consequences and impact of CSE (Taylor-Brown, 2002; Pearce, 2002, Pearce, 2009; Sanders et al., 2009; Dodsworth, 2012; Dodsworth, 2014). The DCSF (2009) supplementary guidance on CSE only dedicates two paragraphs out of 97 pages to long-term support needs. They stress the need for the young person to develop a "meaningful relationship with appropriate adults" (DCSF, 2009, S.6.41). This is reinforced in the 2011 and 2012 Government Action Plan on CSE. Whilst the impact of exploitation will be unique to each young person, it is likely that they will experience a range of physical, psychological and health needs both during and after the exploitation (DfE, 2011; Jay, 2014). Some young people may

suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or ongoing mental health difficulties (Hossain et al., 2010; DoH, 2014). Given that non-school attendance is a primary indicator for CSE (Scott & Harper, 2002; DCSF, 2009) young people may lack educational qualifications. Without re-engagement with education, future employment options will be limited but research indicates that it is challenging to reintegrate young people into formal education (Scott & Skidmore, 2006). As Jay (2014, p. 43) emphasises the potential impact is “devastating” across all domains and can lead to significant socio-emotional problems in adulthood.

## Methodology

Following the six-stage process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), three published memoirs were examined using thematic analysis. The principal focus is what the texts can contribute to understandings of how young women recover after being subject to CSE. Close and repeat reading of each book was followed by initial coding; each researcher coded independently although some *a priori* categories had been agreed. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), researcher judgement is used to decide what a theme is; our thematic coding is informed by our previous practice as child protection social workers and our continued registration. Adopting a flexible approach, we added and refined themes as the coding continued to a point where three main themes had been identified in relation to the idea of recovery. The process of grooming, disclosure and investigation are linked by the need to be heard and believed; the personal, professional and public acceptance of the nature of the exploitative experiences has to occur to allow space for ‘recovery’ to commence.

Non-fiction in the form of memoir offers a different kind of knowledge for social workers, as it can “illustrate the density of the sequences of cause and effect in individual lives” (Thomson et al., 2002, p. 336 ). The benefits of memoir to social work study have recently been established with social work book groups, where students learn about the *quality* of lived experiences (Scourfield and Taylor, 2014). Our choice of thematic analysis as the method for analysing these books was driven by an interest with how young people give meaning to their experiences. However these meanings are themselves shaped by broader social discourses and each author presents their account within certain socio-cultural parameters. Bruner (2004) argues that the nature of autobiography is to shape what is remembered, that language has the power to ‘structure’ our perceived experiences. A particular feature of the populist memoir is that it reverses Bruner’s (2004) dictum that autobiography makes the ordinary strange; here we examine accounts whose strangeness is belied by the ordinary way in which they are told.

### Limitations

Populist memoirs, as a source of data, are potentially problematic. First, they have a predetermined narrative template. Each book follows a similar pattern beginning with the author’s happy childhood, then their introduction to and abuse by a network of men whilst they are still under the age of 16, their attempts to break free from their exploitation and the investigation and support process. Second, there are important questions about authenticity; how much of what is written is an accurate account of the events? This operates at two levels; can accounts based on memory be accurate (Thomson et al., 2002; Bruner, 2004)

and are they actually fictitious? (Bates, 2012). Contextual evidence supports the authenticity of the texts; Emma gave evidence to a Home Office Select Committee (HOC 2013) and Hannah's account can be read in tandem with the SCR (Griffiths, 2013). Finally, two of the young people were assisted by a ghost-writer, which may dilute authenticity as there may be aspects of the text that represent different agendas other than the stated aim to raise awareness. For instance, in one book the ghost-writer is also a tabloid newspaper journalist. Drawing on the work of Bruner (2004) we acknowledge that memoirs are always modulated by socio-cultural context and cultural memory; that is part of their power.

## Findings

The memoirs support and confirm much of what is already known about CSE, in particular the push and pull factors and vulnerability factors in relation to the child, their family and the environment. However they also contribute to our understanding of how young women cope and move on from CSE. These texts illustrate that recovery is a 'non-linear process' (Banyard and Williams, 2007). In fact, what we learn is that recovery is a misnomer; what occurs is a gradual adaptation to their altered circumstances, and is subject to fluctuation. Coping with the after effects of the abuse varies depending on time, context and social situation. Documented in these accounts, are some of the short and long term consequences of their exploitation; confusion, post-traumatic stress disorder, social isolation and suicidal thoughts. However, their desire for age appropriate experiences, despite the above, is striking. They return, with some difficulty, to

school or college, apply for University and think about their futures. They meet young men of their age and have consensual sexual relationships, which for Emma leads to the prospect of her own family. A key feature of recovery as it represented by these young women is its variability and fluctuating nature. There can be no simple return to 'normal', pre-exploitation life; a new normal must be worked out but one which is safe (Berelowitz et al., 2013).

### Resilience

Drawing on work about CSA, it is suggested that a combination of resilience (individual traits) and protective and compensatory factors (family and environment) provide the foundation for recovery (Marriott et al., 2011).

Resilience theory (Rutter, 1987) is a model already applied in the field of CSE to account for young people's varying strategies and exit routes from CSE (Pearce, 2009; Dodsworth, 2012; Dodsworth, 2014). Less well acknowledged is how small acts of defiance during the exploitation provide an important reference point later on; they are indicators of what Hauser and Allen (2006) call 'resilient development'. The authors recall the small steps they took towards reclaiming their self-esteem (e.g. reapplying their makeup after an assault) Later, the gestures are bigger as they begin to say no to the perpetrators; they challenge and refuse them despite knowing that such defiance could lead to further physical assaults; Emma's refusal to get into a car is later punished by anal rape. They mimic their perpetrators behaviour with peers, become challenging and defiant at home and at school. Emma develops a hard aggressive demeanour, noting, "I got some power" (Jackson, 2012, p. 218) and experiences a rush in refusing her abuser on one occasion. Such behaviours, whilst deviant, allow the

young women to experience a form of power in situations where they lack control (Bottrell, 2009) and suggest the possibility of positive outcome.

### Re-framing abuse

Encapsulated by the phrase “getting my life back”, each author documents how they make changes to their lives in a slow and unsteady way. The notion of turning points (Rutter 1987) or ‘critical moments’ proves significant as they write of gaining new perspectives on their experiences. Each narrator reframes their experiences, which ultimately leads to relocating responsibility back with the perpetrators with Hannah noting, “he must have known I didn’t like it” (Girl A and Bunyan, 2013, p. 91). Throughout each book, we are taken on a journey that explores these young women’s developing understanding of themselves as victims of rape and abuse, which is pivotal to their ‘recovery’. Hannah rejects the label ‘prostitute’ early on noting that “ Escort girls want to do it – and have the choice to do it...But for me it was rape because I did not want to do it “(Girl A and Bunyan , 2013, p. 139). Hannah’s self-belief is evident; as she repeatedly states that she never wanted sex with any of these men and never felt any attraction to them.

### Grooming

These accounts remind professionals about the dynamics and depth of the grooming process whilst illustrating how difficult it can be to intervene. Social isolation and the gradual erosion of relationships with parents is central. Information elicited about home life and relationships is manipulated to create or magnify rifts between parent and child, fuelling conflict and challenge. This

strategy interacts with parental assumptions that attribute this conflict to adolescence. For Hannah family conflict eventually means she leaves the family home for what is a private fostering relationship. Isolation from family and peers is further compounded by the abuse itself. The CSE ensures they spend little time at home, when they do they are physically and emotionally exhausted. Shame about what is happening to them and fear of being found out adds to this emotional distance. However the bonds are strong enough for each girl to respond to threats about family members. Complying with the perpetrators demands become a way of them protecting their families: Katie comments after being multiply raped that “ I reminded myself I was doing this to protect mum” (Taylor and Clark, 2013, p. 191).

All the perpetrators use similar tactics of flattery, friendship, gifts and significantly alcohol and drugs. There is more to these ‘gifts’ than instilling indebtedness; alcohol is introduced early on, to the young people, to help them to relax and to feel ‘grown up’. During the early stages, all three think that it is brilliant (‘wicked’) to be given free alcohol and/or cannabis as it sets them apart from their peers. Moreover, the pleasurable sensory aspects are enjoyed; the warmth, laughter and the relaxation that it induces: “I don’t think I’d ever felt so alive, so happy as if my heart would burst” (Jackson, 2012, p. 92). It is rarely acknowledged how powerfully these offerings affect young people’s decision making; Emma describes how the ‘boredom’ of life without them results in her making contact with a ‘friend’ who takes her to a house to ‘chill’ where she is once again multiply raped. So the impact of alcohol and drugs is multiple; it dulls their memories whilst also confusing their understanding about choices and

consent. Recognising the contradictions is important as young people may assume a causal relationship between their choices and what happens to them; this needs to be debunked.

Alcohol misuse contributes to a profound uncertainty about what constitutes a healthy relationship and often sex is equated with affection. This uncertainty is reinforced by the response of their rapists, who talk and cuddle them as if nothing has happened after each assault. Repeated victimization by a large group of men normalizes the abuse although the young people ultimately know it is not 'normal'. In addition, they make the young women question their version of events, is calling it rape a lack of understanding on their part? "It was as though he didn't know he'd done anything wrong. I couldn't get my head straight ...was it rape or wasn't it?" (Girl A and Bunyan, 2013, p. 63). Calling the rape 'sex' and his asking to see her again constantly confuses Hannah; "I even found myself wondering if this was what actually people meant by sex" (Jackson, 2012, p. 187). Such responses, unfortunately, reinforce the elements of doubt that all three express; doubt over consent (Coy et al., 2013) and confusion over what is 'normal' in a relationship. An awareness of this confusion is important for social workers as it helps to explain why young people might be so hesitant about sharing their story and why they might then be questioned about their choices.

#### Disclsoure(s)

Tucker (2010) found that young people often feel disbelieved when they report abuse and neglect to professionals and identified a number of typical responses; being judged, practitioner uncertainty, and minimisation. In Girl A, the

relationship between Hannah, Children's Services and the Police is permanently soured when they do not believe her. Both services question the credibility of her story, with the Police Officer asking her if she really did it for the money and the social worker recording that it was a 'lifestyle choice'. This latter statement, documented in the SCR (Griffiths, 2013), has caused public and parliamentary outrage (HOC, 2013). This is an example of the behaviours of the sexually exploited young person being seen as problematic, rather than the abuse itself (Warner, 2009). These texts also suggest that uncertainty over agency and socio-cultural norms about sex can create a mind-set where a professional may feel that the young person has chosen to behave this way (Griffiths, 2013; Jay, 2014). Part of the issue is a consequence of not listening to young people's stories fully; they may have chosen to meet and drink with these men, but they did not choose to be abused by them.

The evidence from these memoirs reinforces a key finding of recent inquiries into CSE (OCC, 2012; Berelowitz et al., 2013; Jay, 2014) that the way services respond to young women influences their willingness to disclose. Many young people are 'institutionally ignored' in their bid to seek support in leaving exploitative situations. They are disbelieved, or not considered to meet the thresholds for statutory intervention (Berelowitz et al., 2013). Moreover, poor initial professional intervention makes it much harder for the young women to trust formal support again. Being believed is central to these accounts. Indeed each author seeks acknowledgment of their experiences; they want and need to be believed by family, professionals, police, courts and ultimately the public (jurors). Recovery here is helped and hindered by the responses of others.

Attempts to disclose are physical and behavioural as much as verbal. As the exploitation increases in frequency, the authors describe physical deterioration; being tired during the day, hungry, unwashed. They begin to be argumentative at home, challenging at school, getting into fights with peers and running away. Hannah goes as far as smashing the counter of a takeaway in a bid to be noticed and arrested to avoid further exploitation. The young people assume that their physical and behavioural changes will be noticed and questions asked and when they are not it further compounds their isolation. Indeed it is indicative of a tendency for family members and professionals to problematize their behaviour, and attribute it to 'adolescence' without questioning what is underneath; their behaviour is a consequence of the abuse not a cause of it. Any mismatch between physical and behavioural indicators and what the young person need to be explored further, especially when the behaviours and physical signs so closely resemble the indicators of CSE (DoE, 2009). At no point should any professional think that a young person is choosing to be exploited (Griffiths, 2013; Jay, 2014).

Multiple disclosures are a feature of two of the accounts and illustrate that that disclosure is a process and not a one off event (Kelly, 2005; Pearce, 2011).

Hannah reflects on what else she would need to do or say to be taken seriously and rescued; she writes of feeling 'betrayed' by social services when they do not respond with careful thought or concern. Hannah cannot understand why being repeatedly missing from home is not investigated but instead dealt with as if it was a routine matter. Statutory guidance from the DfE (2014) now stipulates return from home interviews and safe and well checks but can it does not

address the increasing powerlessness that social worker can feel when a young person repeatedly puts themselves at risk. Yet unhelpful responses lead the young people to lose all trust in social workers indefinitely, creating challenges in any post abuse investigation and support work. These testimonies remind social workers and the Police to respond to young people as individuals and not as routine matters.

Two factors motivate full disclosure in these books. First, is the development of trust with individuals, who makes themselves available repeatedly and do not judge the young person for returning to their exploiters. This is a model of assertive outreach that is used by many projects that support young people at risk of CSE (Pearce, 2009). Hannah tells a sexual health worker after months of engagement and encouragement and Katie tells a school counsellor. Second, each girl reaches a 'critical moment' (Thomson et al., 2002) in which they are conscious of making a decision, seeking help and reclaiming control despite the perpetual threats of violence and intimidation. These critical points are extreme in Katie and Hannah's cases they are linked to their sixteenth birthday and the perpetrator's belief that they will be free of parental control. They are aware that unless they can escape they will be subject to a lifetime of abuse. Emma's 'last straw' comes when she is forced to take a pregnancy test in a public toilet, which makes her feel 'like an animal' (Jackson, 2012, p.228). Following the pregnancy test she is threatened with gang rape as her 'birthday present'. All three reached a point where they feel they having nothing more to lose.

The rich detail of these texts highlights why disclosure may be so hard, both for

the victim and for the professional. There is an ambivalence in their accounts that is linked to notions of shame, guilt and uncertainty. They have absorbed and internalised social norms about behaviours which prevent them from being open about their abuse (Coffey 2014). The shame they feel is twofold. They express beliefs that when it comes to rape, women are rarely believed and often regarded as culpable, which is compounded by multiple abusers (Coy et al., 2013). For instance, Katie wants to tell her mother but does not do so because of her fear that “she would be disgusted with me. She would call me a dirty, little slag and she’d be right” (Taylor & Clark, 2013, p210). Emma is also aware that at school she is being pointed at and laughed at (Jackson, 2012. p. 207). Hannah’s impulse is to run to her parents but the shame stops her (Girl A. & Bunyan, 2013.). Key family members unintentionally reinforce these feelings. Hannah makes several references to her father telling her that her drinking would put her in positions where she would end up being raped. All three are attuned to strong cultural messages and assumptions that hold women and girls accountable for acts of sexual violence (Coy et al., 2013).

All three mention another stigma; a concern that they will be viewed doubly negatively as victims of abuse because the perpetrators were ‘Asian’ men. Media coverage of specific cases of CSE involving white girls and Asian men has led to a pervasive stereotype (Cockbain 2013; Coffey 2014). This coverage has argued that ‘political correctness’ has hampered investigation and intervention. The collective professional refusal to acknowledge what was happening is attributed by Hannah to a fear of being labelled racist. However other stereotypes are evident in all three books. Passing comments about the “Asian community” being

one big family where everyone knows each other illustrates a lack of understanding about the diversity of the different communities within the British Asian population. References to forced marriages, the practice of marrying young girls 'back home' [e.g. Pakistan] and a view that white British young people are promiscuous recur repeatedly. The fear of people's reactions to them having 'sex' with Asian men further delays disclosure. Emma and Hannah both mention acquiring a negative reputation amongst peers for having 'sex' with Asian men and Katie terminates a pregnancy in fear that the child might be mixed race and that she would be found out'

### Investigation

The process of disclosure and investigation takes months (for Emma) to years (for Katie and Hannah) and occurs in a piecemeal fashion. The toll of the investigative process is immense. They repeatedly experience a range of emotions such as doubt and uncertainty as the minutiae of their abuse is examined by the Police and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). For Hannah this self-doubt is reinforced after the CPS decide not to prosecute; she wonders why she bothered to tell anyone "so that the people in suits and the people with social -work degrees could throw it back in my face" (Girl A & Bunyan, 2013, p241). All three locate the power with the Police and CPS during this process, commenting on their uncertainty about how the case is progressing and why certain decisions are made. In effect, the process contributes to re-traumatization as each narrator documents their loss of control over the

situation. Hannah describes her depression, suicide attempts and descent into heavy drinking. Both Emma and Katie are diagnosed with PTSD during this time.

Despite being prepared for the adversarial nature of Court, two authors comment on the effect of being disbelieved during their trials. These cases occurred before the revisions to the CPS Guidelines (2013) on prosecuting child sexual abuse. Whilst protections are in place such as video recording and screens they are repeatedly questioned on their versions of the events. They experience multiple defence barristers asking similar questions, having their credibility tested and their behaviours reframed to imply they consented to sex. High profile cases such as in Rochdale have led the CPS to issue guidance (CPS, 2013), which stipulates attitudinal changes to victims; potential contradictions and inconsistencies are to be understood as symptomatic of abuse and exploitation, not of being an unreliable witness. It is the credibility of the account, not the victims that should be the focus and it advises that prosecutors must be mindful of the indicators of CSE in making decisions about victims.

In two texts the conclusion of the trial is a demarcation point. For Hannah, the guilty verdicts, mark the moment she 'gets her life back' as she thanks the jurors "twelve ordinary wonderful people for believing her" (Girl A and Bunyan 2013, p323). A successful outcome does not bring instantaneous relief for Katie as only three out of six of the men involved were found guilty. This causes further anger: "these men could have spared me further trauma by admitting their guilt, but they were arrogant and refused" (Taylor and Clark, 2013, p. 271). Memories of the abuse reoccur in the "darker moments" (Girl A and Bunyan, 2013, p. 340) as

they begin to work out how their past will shape their futures. Emma, who is much older at the time of writing her book has reached a point where she is able to advise other young survivors of abuse “the experience doesn’t have to define them” (Jackson, 2012, p297). This sentiment illustrates the view of Kelly (1988) that coping with sexual violence may result in permanent and positive changes in attitudes and behaviour.

#### Insights for social work practice

Responses to CSE are changing globally, nationally and locally in response to high profile cases and growing professional and public awareness of the issues involved (Office Public Management 2015). At a national level media reporting, Inquiry reports and SCRs have detailed the many ways in which professionals, including social workers, have failed to comprehend the experiences and needs of sexually exploited young people. This is shifting although change remains patchy (Ofsted, 2014; OCC, 2015), however according to Ofsted (2014) social workers are listening to young people and representing their views well. Such changes have taken place since the CSE detailed in these books and partly in response to the cases that they describe. Despite such changes, more needs to be done. These books provide insights into young people’s experiences that remain relevant to social workers and can assist them with their reflexive practice.

#### Intervention and responses that hinder recovery

Social workers need to understand the experiences and needs of sexually exploited young people (Berelowitz et al, 2013). All three accounts detail the complex decision-making and fluid dynamics of telling someone about CSE. Often

their distress was conveyed in changes in their behaviour (aggressive, challenging, secretive); physical deterioration (they became, unkempt, dirty, smelly); emotional and psychological deterioration and socially isolation (withdrawn, self-harming, despairing). These signs were misread and/or misconstrued by families and professionals. After her arrest for breaking a glass counter, Hannah did tell the police about the abuse she was experiencing but she was not believed, was held to be culpable and her complaint was not acted on. For all three the 'telling' was not an end to the abuse and the failure to protect them or prosecute their abusers compounded their sense of hopelessness and despair. It reinforced the power of their abusers and the hold they had over them. Negative interventions or responses add to the trauma these young people experience, prolonging the abuse and influencing future telling (Cossar et al, 2013). These accounts remind social workers that young people are vigilant to language and actions that infer blame or lack of respect (Tucker 2010) and that often social workers are not adults they want to tell.

#### Intervention and responses that can help recovery

CSE has significant short and long-term physical, emotional and psychological consequences for young people but positive post-exploitation life is a possibility with support (Pearce, 2009; Jay, 2014). Professional interventions and responses are critical in helping victims to talk about the abuse and develop coping strategies. Social workers need to continue to demonstrate care and professional curiosity, and avoid pathologising them. Young people require the support and understanding of key people, family and professionals, to help them begin to deal with the impact of CSE. A central aspect of the grooming process is to disrupt

family relationships and isolate the young person. There is a need for social workers to provide family interventions that repair and strengthen relationships between young people and the significant adults in their lives. Social workers are aware of the importance of direct work with young people and the importance of relationship building. The external environment and internal organisational pressures are not always conducive to promoting this and young people often complain about staff turnover (Ofsted, 2014). Building good integrated services is likely to help with capacity in this area as other agencies may be better placed to take on this work.

Professionals need to acknowledge the coping strategies employed by these young people, even if they can be perceived as 'negative', recognise they have strengths and that their global life experiences defines them, not just the abuse. They have hopes for their future and expectations of 'normality'; the desire to move beyond abuse. For Emma, Hannah and Katie that entails being partners, mothers and achieving educational and employment success. Despite the outward indicators of returning to normal, social workers should need to be alert to how young people internalise their experiences. Each describe how their experiences made them feel different from their peers (more serious/less carefree/mature/older somehow). The process of coping with their experiences is dynamic, not linear. Social workers need to remain alert to changing pressure points that may diminish the young person's ability to cope at specific times e. g. the investigation and trial. Likewise, a conviction may help but this is not the end of the recovery process for young people. They are likely to require long-term flexible support that can increase and decrease according to their needs.

Accessing such services remains a key obstacle to increasing young people's capacity to cope with CSE. Post-abuse counselling and support services remains scant and the current working practice of CAMHS is not flexible enough to meet their needs (Jay, 2014).

## Conclusion

This article has considered three published accounts of CSE using thematic analysis. The memoirs are rich in detail about all aspects of the grooming, disclosure and the investigative processes. A striking feature is the complexity and confusion that surrounds understandings of CSE by all involved; multiple factors coalesce to the point that uncertainty prevails. CSE needs to be acknowledged as complex child abuse phenomena (Stevens and Cox, 2008) and one which results in systemic challenges for social work intervention and practice. The need to be heard and believed is presented in these books as central to the young people being able to move on post-abuse; their return to safer lives occurs in tandem with professional and public recognition of their abuse. All three test out partial disclosure with their families and professionals but find themselves repeatedly not being believed, as the lines between 'normal' teenage behaviour, consent and risk repeatedly blur. These authors have important perspectives which can further the social work knowledge base, particularly in relation to the short and long term value of listening and taking seriously young people's accounts of abuse. Empirical research in this area is needed to further understanding about the outcomes for young people who are subject to CSE especially as they transition into adulthood. Recovery, as it is represented by these young women, is not a linear process; it is intimately linked

to what has happened and how those events are remembered and understood by them and by others they come into contact with.

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