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'It's like a much deeper understanding and you kind of believe them more …': The value of peer support for young people affected by sexual violence

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Abstract

Research demonstrates that relationships are key when working to support young people affected by sexual violence. Within these relationships, young people show a preference for non-judgemental, flexible, consistent and informal support. Peer support – defined here as support provided by those with similar experiences – is however an uncharted area for assisting young people affected by sexual violence. This paper draws on interviews with 25 respondents with knowledge and experience of setting up, supervising and/or participating in peer support initiatives for young people impacted by different forms of sexual violence in Europe and North America. The article highlights how one form of peer support, peer or 'survivor' mentoring, can provide emotional and social support; create space for 'normality'; and give choices to young people. It outlines three unique dimensions to the support provided by peers more generally: relatability, credibility and translatability. The discussion reflects on what this might mean for traditional support provided by professionals. It also draws attention to the significance of recognising both the variety of experience and identity of young survivors of sexual trauma and the impact this may have on promoting relatability within relationships.

KEYWORDS
mentoring, peer support, sexual violence, young people

Key Practitioner Messages

- Peer support for young people affected by sexual violence is a relatively unexplored area.
- Peer mentoring is one form of peer support which can provide important connections, complementing existing services.
- Young people can relate to peers with shared experiences and may find peers more credible role models and sources of information.
- Practitioners may be able to mirror elements of these forms of support by enhancing opportunities to cultivate space for 'normality', choice and control for the young people they work with.
- For those developing and supporting models of peer support for young people impacted by sexual violence, considerable thought and resources are required.

INTRODUCTION

> 'If people actually are going to know anything about trauma, they do need to witness it as directly as possible' (Judith Herman in Caruth, 2014, p. 147).

The sexual violence of young people

The term 'sexual violence' 'encompasses both sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children and can be used as an umbrella term to refer jointly to these phenomena, both with regard to acts of commission and omission and associated to physical and psychological violence' (ECPAT International, 2016, p. 16). In multiple country contexts there has been a continuous stream of scandals and inquiries detailing the widespread sexual abuse and exploitation of children and young people in supposedly 'safe spaces': within their homes, peer groups, schools and communities. The once silenced voices of survivors are increasingly becoming amplified and united – aided by digital platforms and collective movements – which underscore both the historic and present-day levels of sexual violence experienced by young people (Barter & Sanna, 2021).

There have been considerable advances in our understanding of the different forms of sexual violence that occur in adolescence. This includes an increase in recognition of peer-on-peer abuse and dating and relationship violence among and between young people (Firmin, 2017). Practitioners and services in many regions are attempting to adapt their processes in responding to abuse in adolescence, recognising the need for approaches, such as 'transitional safeguarding', which are tailored to this particular life stage (Firmin *et al*., 2019). However, questions remain as to the effectiveness and best response for young people impacted by sexual exploitation (Scott *et al*., 2019) and other forms of sexual violence (Brodie *et al*., 2020).

The impact of sexual violence on young people and their relationships

Experiencing sexual trauma in childhood can leave those affected with a range of long-lasting and wide-reaching effects (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Fisher *et al*., 2017; Warrington *et al*., 2017). Although the impacts may vary and fluctuate over the course of a life span, commonly reported effects comprise a sense of powerlessness, isolation, stigma, shame, self-blame, loss of control and lack of trust (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Warrington *et al*., 2017).

Sexual violence, including child sexual exploitation (CSE), is characterised by abusive and exploitative power dynamics and typically entail some form of betrayal, manipulation and abuse of trust (Pearce *et al*., 2013). In the context of CSE, as part of the grooming process, abusers frequently befriend the victim to establish trust and rapport while simultaneously seeking to alienate and isolate victims from their families and social networks. Sexual violence erodes a victim's sense of safety. In the later stages of recovery, forging positive social connections and maintaining healthy relationships in which young people can experience safety and stability can crucially counter some of the specific effects of sexual trauma (Bovarnick & Cody, 2021; Herman, 1997). Given the impacts on feelings of trust and safety, it is not surprising that 'the relationship' between a young person affected by sexual violence and the individual supporting them is consistently identified as being key to the success of any programme of support (Brodie *et al*., 2016; Pearce *et al*., 2013; Scott *et al*., 2019; Warrington *et al*., 2017). This is particularly relevant when working with adolescents as many responses to sexual violence that fall outside of statutory child protection plans require the voluntary engagement of young people (Brandon *et al*., 2020).

In a recent special edition of this journal, Kosaraju (2021) reaffirms the key messages outlined by Gilligan (2016), that engagement with young people who have experienced exploitation depends on 'build[ing] trusting relationships with children and [occurs] when principles of nonjudgementality, perseverance, reliability, flexibility and access to safe spaces underpin those relational modes of safeguarding'. Kosaraju (2021) notes that we need to re-engage with these messages and continue to develop our 'critical and reflective practice with exploited children and young people'. Critical reflection includes not only considering what might not be currently working but also exploring new ways of providing support to young people.

Responding to the need for connection – peer support

In response to our growing understanding of sexual violence in childhood and adolescence, the past decades have seen a diversification of the therapeutic landscape offering a plethora of (increasingly trauma-informed) treatments (Scott *et al*., 2019). Today, service provision accommodates a wide range of therapeutic models (Carpenter *et al*., 2016). While

conventional therapeutic work tends to be delivered by trained professionals on a one-to-one basis, the role of 'peers' in supporting recovery from sexual violence remains largely unexplored.

The Oxford Dictionary defines a 'peer' as 'a person of the same age, status, or ability as another specified person'. When working with young people, the use of the term 'peer' is often understood to be someone of a similar age or at a similar life stage. Within the wider literature, specifically in the fields of mental health and addiction, the term 'peer' is used to characterise someone who has experienced the same issues. Experience rather than age takes precedence.

The term 'peer support' covers a wide range of activities and models and may take place online, face to face, one on one or in groups. The activities may be associated with an existing organisation or be part of a stand-alone initiative. Those working in the mental health field, where peer support has expanded and evolved over the years, have commented that due to the diversity of peer support models, there remains a lack of clarity surrounding the meaning of 'peer support'. In response, a range of typologies of peer support have been developed (Solomon, 2004; South *et al.*, 2017). This has highlighted the different types of peer support available and variety of models which range from fairly informal, naturally occurring support to more structured support provided by trained peer employees.

The effectiveness of peer support has gained increasing attention and recognition in fields such as mental health and addiction (Rebeiro Gruhl *et al.*, 2016). Given the impact of sexual violence on a young person's sense of isolation and 'difference', it is surprising that this gap in support appears to exist in the sexual violence sector, particularly as 'peer support' is a key principle in trauma-informed care (The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014), an approach that is being increasingly recognised as critical when supporting young people affected by sexual violence (Bovarnick & Cody, 2021; Hickle, 2019; Sapiro *et al.*, 2016).

Patton and Goodwin (2008) propose that the lack of peer support for those impacted by sexual violence may be linked to high levels of stigma associated with this issue which may prevent people talking about it more openly. They also note that there may be some specific challenges – such as trust, boundary setting and safety – for those impacted by sexual violence that may make it harder to establish peer support mechanisms. However, in recent years studies have started to explore the 'potential' of interventions involving peers, in particular mentoring, for young people impacted by sexual exploitation (DuBois & Felner, 2016). Mentoring programmes have increasingly been adopted to enhance positive youth development across a range of groups of young people perceived to be 'at risk' (Raposa *et al.*, 2019). Evidence suggests intergenerational mentoring between a young person and adult may support social, emotional and cognitive development alongside identity formation (Raposa *et al.*, 2019). Within the literature a small number of studies have explored peer or survivor mentoring for those impacted by CSE. This form of mentoring typically refers to an older individual with lived experience of sexual violence providing one-to-one support to a young person affected by sexual violence. Rothman *et al.* (2020) reporting on a survivor mentoring programme for young people affected by commercial sexual exploitation in the USA, found the programme contributed to increased wellbeing and a reduction in levels of exploitation, drug use and problematic behaviours for the mentees involved. Buck *et al.* (2017), researching a peer mentoring intervention for young people affected by gang violence and CSE in the UK, whilst recognising the study only provided a 'snapshot', highlighted the emotional, relational and practical benefits of this form of support. Thus, there are growing indications in the existing literature that models that involve peers are possible and potentially beneficial.

Aims and objectives

This paper draws from a small-scale, exploratory study that was designed to learn more about peer support models for young people (aged 10–24) who have experienced sexual violence. Twenty-five respondents, spanning both practitioners and peer supporters, from 12 different organisations and initiatives, with experience of engagement in relevant peer support initiatives took part in the study. The respondents were located across five countries, three in Europe and two in North America. This paper draws on the findings to examine the question 'what is the value of "peer support" for young people affected by sexual violence?'

METHOD

A call for evidence was circulated with international child protection networks and among professional contacts working in the field of youth sexual violence in an initial attempt to identify examples of structured peer support initiatives. This yielded limited results and as such the team applied a purposive approach to sampling, reaching out to individuals known to have specialist knowledge and experience of delivering these forms of support. This was supplemented through undertaking online searches using key words to further identify relevant programmes and initiatives. Eighteen organisations and initiatives were identified and representatives from these groups were contacted.

The respondents

Twenty-five respondents from these 12 initiatives took part in semi-structured interviews. All of these had a focus on sexual violence with some also addressing related issues (e.g. domestic violence). Eighteen respondents had been involved in establishing peer support initiatives and/or supervising peer supporters from 10 different organisations or initiatives. The remaining seven were 'peer supporters', individuals who had lived experience of the issue and had supported other young people, and these were drawn from four organisations.

It is important to note that the type of organisations and support offered varied among respondents. Representatives from seven programmes spoke primarily of mentoring support. The terminology used by respondents differed with some preferring the term 'survivor mentoring' to 'peer mentoring' to emphasise that these mentors were at a different stage of recovery to those they were mentoring. These models tended to involve an older individual with lived experience of sexual violence (the mentor) providing one-to-one support to a young person (the mentee) who was currently receiving services from the organisation. There was, however, a great deal of variability in the professional status of, and intensity of support provided by, mentors. Some mentors were employed full time whilst others provided support on a voluntary basis. Other respondents had experience related to different forms of peer support including group work, peer-led workshops and peer support groups. Within these later models the peer supporter often took a facilitation or coordinating role, the focus was not necessarily on developing a one-to-one relationship with a young person.

The interviews

The majority of interviews were undertaken individually, however group interviews were arranged at the request of some participants who shared a preference to be interviewed alongside other colleagues or peers. The majority of interviews were undertaken in English as respondents were either native speakers or were fluent in the language. In group interviews with two pairs of peer supporters (both at the same service), a staff member from the organisation acted as a translator. Having a support worker translate, rather than an independent professional translator, was the preferred choice of the respondents.

Interview questions were designed to: explore the background to the development of peer support within the organisations or groups; the types of activities and support provided through peer support initiatives; the recruitment, training and support provided to peer supporters; and perspectives on the value and challenges of such initiatives.

The study received ethical clearance from the ethics committee of the Institute of Applied Social Research at the University of Bedfordshire. Written consent was given by all participants. In the majority of cases, the interviews took place online and were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Analysis involved a six-stage process following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. This involved an inductive form of coding with two of the authors, reading, re-reading and discussing a selection of transcripts to identify initial codes. Whilst this open approach to the data was taken, the aims of the research and the authors' awareness of the literature and theory surrounding peer support also influenced the development of the codes. All transcripts were then coded by the first author using the software NVivo 11 and subsequent themes across the data set were identified and discussed within the research team. In writing up the findings, a key theme related to the perceived value of peer support for this group of young people. This paper therefore focusses on this aspect of the findings.

FINDINGS

The type of support provided through peer support initiatives

Before exploring why peer support as a general approach was believed to be of value for young people impacted by sexual violence, it is helpful to firstly describe the type of provision provided through the most common model of support mentioned, one-to-one mentoring. Respondents likened mentoring support as being at a mid-point between support that would be provided by a friend and that which would be provided by a professional. Mentors and mentees spent time together informally, going for coffee or doing activities together. Mentors offered practical support such as accompanying young people to appointments or helping them fill in paperwork. They also advocated on the young person's behalf and signposted them onto other services. One respondent spoke about how the support could be described as 'emotional mentoring'. It involved 'relationship building'. This focus on the relationship appeared to differ for those respondents who had more experience of group-based peer support. Within these forms of support the peer supporter often took a facilitation role, the focus was not on developing a one-to-one relationship with a young person.

The relationship as central

The 'relationship' was what was perceived to be key in peer mentoring initiatives. One respondent felt that mentoring could be a helpful strategy for countering negative attachments that young people may develop in contexts of sexual exploitation. This point has been acknowledged in the literature for young people affected by commercial sexual exploitation (DuBois & Felner, 2016). By building connection, and a sense of belonging, it was felt that mentoring may in part help to support that young person to break away from the exploitative relationship.

The relationship was also perceived as important for creating space for choice and 'normality' (taking part in age-appropriate everyday activities), again elements that are often distorted in exploitative and abusive relationships. Interestingly, research identifies that these elements, supporting choice, voice and a sense of 'normality', may be overlooked by those providing traditional services to children and young people affected by sexual violence (Brodie *et al*., 2016; Warrington *et al*., 2017). Numerous respondents emphasised that participating in peer mentoring was voluntary and that young people could choose to engage or not. This again being potentially different from traditional support where young people are mandated, or expected, to engage. Respondents also shared that the informal nature of the relationship enabled young people to talk about what they wanted, when they wanted, without expectations.

> '… and also to have a space to not talk about it [the exploitation], to have a space where people who have shared experiences and they understand it, where all we are doing today is eating ice cream. That's it'. (Professional respondent 12, Organisation H)

The young person described above was in control of how the time was spent, there was not a specific plan or outcome. There was no need to talk about the abuse, or the consequences of those experiences, the young person had choice and agency to direct the interactions. It was also acknowledged by some of the respondents that peer mentoring would not be for everyone, but that it was about providing young people with more choice about the support available to them.

The unique elements of support provided by peers

In addition to the emotional and social support that peer mentoring in particular was perceived to offer, there were other dimensions to the support provided by peers more generally that appeared significant. Three key elements emerged through analysis as to why there was something unique and special about support provided by a peer in either mentoring relationships, group work, peer-led workshops or peer support groups. The relatability of peer supporters, their status as credible role models (and therefore the credibility of information delivered by peers) and the ability of a peer to 'translate'.

Relatability

Respondents shared that young people impacted by sexual violence could often better relate to peers who knew what it was like to have experienced something similar as opposed to professionals lacking these experiences. Although it was acknowledged that no two experiences were the same, there was a belief that similar experiences led to a shared understanding.

> 'What we realise and have seen now, throughout the years with the girls, is that there's nobody else that can relate to them the way that the survivor mentors can, and they do not feel as understood, they do not feel that they can open up or trust anyone else as easily as the systems have failed them so much… it's just an alliance and a trust and a bond that's built, that none of us can give them, and it's really vital, in my opinion, for the girls… I think to have that ability to relate to the girls the way that they do, and they feel a connection as well, in their own way of being able, because they understand each other in a way that none of us do'. (Professional respondent 1, Organisation A)

The importance of 'feeling understood' was seen as critical and something that those without lived experience may struggle to demonstrate. Being able to relate and understand was seen as a mechanism for developing trust, a critical element that is central in trauma-informed work and key to the effectiveness of working with young people impacted by CSE (Gilligan, 2016; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

> 'I think a professional may know things through books, I think that the person who has experienced something like that [sexual violence], it's something that she feels in her spirit and her soul and she really knows really what has happened'. (Peer supporter respondent 23, Organisation J)

As noted here, respondents emphasised the visceral nature of these types of shared experiences. A sense that this 'knowing' was deeply felt and something that had to be lived rather than learnt. The significance of this shared understanding also led to higher levels of credibility among peers.

Credibility

There was a belief among respondents that individuals may be positively influenced by messaging delivered by peers as this potentially carried more weight and higher levels of credibility. One young respondent reflected on her own experiences of seeking out support and shared an analogy to describe why experience matters:

> 'Yea, at the time I said "is there someone I can talk to who experienced the same things?" I mean not even like directly talk to them about their experience. Like the thing I always said is like if you are pregnant for instance, and you are going through it, naturally you'd want to ask someone going through that rather than ask someone who did not really have a clue or read up on it. It's having that first-hand experience. It's like a much deeper understanding and you kind of believe them more. So if a professional sat there and said to me "oh yea it's going to be fine", I'd probably be like "um, but you do not really know because you have not been through it and you are not my age and you do not know what school's like and stuff". But if it's another young person who had been through it and said "you know what it might be really bad at the time but it does get better" and you do believe it more because you think, yea you are not lying, because you have been through it'. (Peer supporter respondent 19, Organisation K)

This respondent illustrates how having shared significant experiences enhanced authenticity and trustworthiness. This aligns with other studies which have underscored the unique positioning of peers in building trust and credibility with young people, and adults, affected by sexual violence (Buck *et al*., 2017; Deer & Baumgartner, 2019; Hotaling *et al*., 2004). However, this respondent also indicates that alongside experience, age may also be an important factor for young people. She alludes that someone who may be older may not be able to truly understand what it was like to be in school. Therefore, age may still be a factor that influences the credibility of peers in the eyes of some young people.

Respondents also felt that peers were 'living proof', legitimate role models illustrating that things could change and get better.

> 'When the survivor [peer mentor] goes out and meets them, and they are able to see that their story is similar to theirs, and that they have been able to triumph in their own ways, it really creates the sense of hope for them'. (Professional respondent 1, Organisation A)

> 'It's authentic and she [the peer supporter] sends the message "I've been where you have been and I managed to get out of it"…'. (Professional respondent 6, Organisation E)

Respondents felt there was something powerful about young people being able to see themselves in those who were supporting them. The term 'role model' wasn't explicitly used by respondents but this access to, and connection with, someone who could in part fulfil that role, someone who was seemingly 'further along' in their recovery, was perceived to be an important element to these forms of support. This aligning with others who have suggested that peers play a critical role in providing hope (Deer & Baumgartner, 2019; Hotaling *et al*., 2004).

Translatability

In addition to being relatable and credible, one respondent also shared how she felt the peer supporter could fill another unique role in helping to be a 'translator' or mediator between young people and professionals. This respondent reflected on a recent conversation with a mentee who described what a mentor was for them:

> '[She said] "They can be your translator". So she was like, it's not that I'm not willing to work with those backline [professional] people but I need someone to translate what I'm feeling, she's like, because

> otherwise, she was explaining that in that situation she just kind of acted out and she's like then those backline people look at me like "oh, you have got behaviour problems, you are a problem"'. (Professional respondent 10, Organisation F)

A peer supporter who has themselves been a part of these processes and navigated the system, but has that distance, may act as a helpful guide for both parties, young people and professionals.

DISCUSSION

The findings highlight a number of distinct elements of support that may be provided by a peer. Emotional and social support were recognised as key functions provided by peer mentors, the relationship cultivated space for 'normality', choice, control and connection. Whilst one could argue that practitioners working with young people should be able to fulfil this role, there were specific elements that were believed to be distinct and instinctive about support provided by a peer. These revolved around relatability, credibility and translatability. However, the findings also raise questions concerning traditional forms of support and the practicalities and resourcing of peer mentoring and broader forms of peer support.

Firstly, what is perceived to be important and meaningful for young people is in essence a strong, authentic relationship which provides emotional and social support. In the UK, and elsewhere, one-to-one support provided by key workers is reportedly the most common form of support for young people affected by CSE (Scott *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, there should be existing foundations for such relationships and types of support to be nurtured. However, research studies in the UK context have highlighted that currently services are struggling to create these 'trusting relationships' and that there is a need for safeguarding systems to create more space for trusted relationships when working with adolescents affected by extra-familial forms of harm – including sexual violence (Firmin & Owens, 2021; Hanson & Holmes, 2014). In this study, having space to create a relationship, and to some extent shape and determine the focus of conversations and activities, was thought to be important. Such an approach is supported by those advocating for more participatory and strengths-based approaches to supporting young people affected by sexual violence (Bovarnick & Cody, 2021; Brodie *et al.*, 2016; Sapiro *et al.*, 2016). Such approaches, however, require time, flexibility and creativity, not necessarily the presence of lived experience. It has been argued that voluntary sector specialist services for young people affected by different forms of sexual violence, including CSE, are best placed to support young people due in part to their flexible approaches and less prescriptive timeframes (Gilligan, 2016). However, limited resources and increasing pressures on services delivering care mean that it may be harder for these organisations to develop these relationships (Butler *et al.*, 2017). Commissioners must acknowledge that the effectiveness of services depends on the relationships built between practitioners and young people, this is essentially the glue that holds everything together.

Secondly, whilst resourcing may be an issue, it is also important for both commissioners and managers to recognise that peer mentoring, and broader forms of peer support, are not 'cheap' substitutes to offering other traditional services. The majority of respondents in the research were vocal about the importance of paying peer supporters equitably for their time. It was also evident that in order to safely support both peer supporters and young people receiving support, a great amount of time, reflection and resourcing to cover training, supervision and support for peer supporters is required (see Cody *et al.*, 2022). In addition, as one respondent shared, if we want peer supporters to provide hope and be 'living proof' that things can get better, then it's important that young people see individuals who can:

> '… look a young person in the eye and say you can live without having to be exploited. Like, you can like, "I own a car and I rent an apartment on my own and I can eat and I can go out with friends and blah, blah, blah" and so that if they are having to work three jobs just to make ends meet, then they cannot actually do that'. (Professional respondent 10, Organisation F)

The widespread use of peer support in other sectors means that there is significant learning surrounding some of these issues, particularly in regard to the inclusion, treatment and conditions of peers in the workplace (Rebeiro Gruhl *et al.*, 2016). This current study also unearthed a number of practical challenges and tensions that may be faced by both peer supporters themselves, and the staff and organisations supporting them (see Cody *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, it is important that organisations interested in exploring peer support familiarise themselves with and learn from others who have been engaged in offering this type of support in order to fully understand the planning and resourcing required.

Finally, there are two other aspects to consider as organisations contemplate offering models of peer support, and these relate to scale and diversity. It was recognised within the interviews that although there may be an increased likelihood that young people may be able to 'relate' to those with similar experiences, individuals and their experiences are diverse and as such it was important to recognise and, as much as possible, take account of this diversity. Professional

respondents who had experience of supporting mentoring programmes for example shared that they took into account both story and circumstance when matching mentors and mentees. They considered not only the type of abuse or exploitation and associated issues – such as substance abuse – but also gender, sexual orientation, cultural background, language and geography.

Given the wide range of experiences that may fall under the umbrella term of 'sexual violence', it will be important to consider the unique and often complex dynamics that may surround certain forms of abuse. Within the same service there may be young people who have experienced a one-off assault as well as those whose abuse spans a number of years. The individual may have been abused by one perpetrator or multiple perpetrators and that abuse may have occurred online or offline. The impact of different forms of abuse will differ and there may be certain elements that may be harder for a supporter to understand if they have not been exposed to that specific set of dynamics. For example, a study exploring the online abuse of young people concluded that some impacts were unique to the online nature of abuse (Hamilton-Giachritsis *et al*., 2017). Therefore, there appears to be a range of considerations that practitioners will need to explore, and it is unlikely that one or two peer supporters would have the wide breadth of experiences represented by service users. It may be the case that professionals may need to target peer supporters with particular backgrounds or from certain groups in order to offer choice for young people. This point is though of course also an important consideration for services employing any staff members; being mindful of gender, geography, culture and other dimensions of identity.

CONCLUSION

Peer support, including peer mentoring, can provide an additional, or complimentary, source of support for young people affected by sexual violence. Whilst some of the aspects reported to be important for young people may be found in other relationships with professionals, there is something unique about those with lived experience when it comes to relatability and credibility. In order to enhance relatability, services need to think more carefully about diversity and identity.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research received ethical approval from the Institute of Applied Social Research at the University of Bedfordshire (reference IASR_12/17).

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