

Researching Child Sexual Abuse: Towards a child sensitive methodology.

Professor Simon Hackett, School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University.

Abstract:

Researching the experiences of people who have been sexually abused as children or who have themselves committed sexually abusive acts raises a range of methodological and ethical dilemmas. In the past, researchers have often relied on retrospective research designs, with the majority of studies of child sexual abuse undertaken with adults who are asked to recall their childhood experiences of abuse. However, there are compelling reasons to involve children in research in order to hear their voices and experiences directly. At the same time, the complex dynamics inherent in child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation pose specific practical and ethical challenges to researchers wishing to undertake research in this area. Key issues that are addressed in this chapter are: the benefits of involving children who have been affected by sexual abuse in research, choosing ethically and developmentally sensitive methodologies, the gender and power of researchers, confidentiality and informed consent, safety and protection of research participants, and managing distress and disclosures.

Key points:

- User perspectives in the sexual abuse field, particularly the perspectives of children and young people affected by sexual abuse, are under-developed.
- Research into sexual abuse has the potential to give voice to the experiences of children and young people who have been victimized.
- Researchers in the field of child sexual abuse need to be particularly mindful of the dynamics of children's abuse experiences in planning and designing research studies.
- Obtaining consent is a core researcher skill and an ongoing process in research with children who have experienced sexual abuse.
- Research designs that share power and actively involve children and young people as partners in child abuse research are warranted.
- The choice of research methods should be informed by attention to the child's age, developmental status, abilities and preferred modes of communication. Researchers need to be prepared to demonstrate creativity and responsiveness to children's needs.
- Children who are prior victims are not necessarily more vulnerable to emotional distress in answering sensitive research questions about violence than non-victims.
- Safeguarding considerations and risk issues are inevitable elements of research focusing on children's experiences of sexual abuse. Researchers need clear written information sharing protocols to assist in decisions about disclosures.
- Researchers need to ensure that children are offered appropriate support at all stages of the research process.

Introduction:

The sexual abuse and exploitation of children is a highly sensitive phenomenon that occupies a particular position in current society. It represents an experience that affects a significant minority of children and young people. In their study of a nationally representative sample of children living in the UK, Radford and colleagues (2010) found that 0.5 per cent of under 11s, 4.8 per cent of 11-17s and 11.3 per cent of 18-24s reported contact sexual abuse as defined by the criminal law at some point in their childhoods. Radford and colleagues (2010) found that most perpetrators of sexual abuse were known to their victims and 65.9 per cent of the contact sexual abuse reported was perpetrated by young people under the age of 18. Despite this, open and balanced debate about the true extent and nature of child sexual abuse and its causes and consequences remains rare. Recent media reporting of historical cases of celebrity 'paedophiles' such as that relating to the Savile case and Operation Yewtree, whilst raising the spectre of widespread sexual abuse in society, have also tended to promote a distorted discourse of sexual abuse that happened at a now distant period in our history, 'out there' in institutions, perpetrated by renowned and, at least in retrospect, easily identifiable, odd, adult men. The true and ongoing risks to children from those known to them are arguably being hidden in the face of these more lurid reports of high profile scandals.

It is against this particularly controversial societal backdrop that research into child sexual abuse takes place. Whilst there have been a huge number of studies internationally into sexual abuse over the last three decades, the evidence base into child sexual abuse remains inadequate in several important dimensions. Specifically, in a recent review of the evidence into child sexual abuse in the family, Horvath and colleagues (2014) conclude that there is a considerable amount of literature addressing victims' experiences from practitioners' perspectives, but there is less drawing directly upon victimized children's views and experiences.

In this chapter, I explore some of the ethical and methodological challenges that working with children and young people on studies of child sexual abuse entails and I seek to propose ways in which they can be overcome.

Why involve children and young people in research into sexual abuse?

Service users in health, welfare and criminal justice systems have a right to be consulted about their experiences, especially when these experiences are critical, sensitive and harmful, such as experiences of sexual abuse. At the same time, researchers have an ethical responsibility to protect the rights of participants in and through research. If participation in research leads to a significantly greater probability of harm than non-participation, then it challenges the boundaries of this responsibility. Thus, the principle of beneficence, in other words maximizing the benefits of doing research whilst minimizing risks to research subjects, is often cited as a core element of research ethics (Ybarra et al., 2009). Harming anyone who has experienced sexual abuse through involving them in research is not justifiable, but equally not consulting them may also contribute to the

ongoing silencing of victims. This means that the design of any study into sexual abuse that actively involves human participants, irrespective of their age, requires careful ethical consideration on the part of researchers. Such designs include, most obviously, surveys or interview based studies of people known to have been affected by sexual abuse as victims or perpetrators (such as the Case Example at the end of this chapter), as well as more general population based surveys where it can be assumed that a proportion of those responding will have experienced abuse (such as Radford and colleagues' [2010] prevalence study referred to above).

It is now widely acknowledged internationally that service user perspectives should be a central feature not only of service planning and evaluation in health, social care and criminal justice systems (Warren, 2007) but also in social research in these areas (e.g. Lowes and Hulatt, 2005). However, in contrast to the general momentum that has been generated on this issue, user perspectives in the sexual abuse field, particularly the perspectives of children and young people affected by sexual abuse, remain woefully under-developed. For example, Hackett and Masson's (2006) study of the views and experiences of young people one year or more following the end of therapeutic interventions as a result of their problematic sexualised behaviours represents one of only a few attempts to establish children's views in the sexual aggression field. In this study, service users often considered unreliable and hard-to-reach were keen to share their views in order to help the professional system improve for other users who would follow them.

Considerable work on research methodology over the last two decades has charted a conceptual shift from research *on* children, to research *for* and *with* children (Lewis, 2004). Involving children and young people in research about their experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation has been viewed as important in that it can provide different and more accurate estimates of the prevalence of abuse (Cashmore, 2006), as well as distinct insights that are crucial in developing services for children and families affected (Masson, 2004). Additionally, sexual abuse is a crime that often takes place in secrecy and through which the perpetrator seeks to silence the child who is victimized. One of the powerful dimensions of research into sexual abuse is, therefore, its potential to give voice to the experiences of children and young people who have been victimized. Involving children and young people affected by sexual abuse in research studies should not, of course, be seen as either therapy or a substitute for post-abuse professional support, but it may nonetheless have important emancipatory and therapeutic benefits in the aftermath of abuse.

Save the Children (2004, p. 10-14) suggest that the benefits of involving children in research about violence can be delineated into: benefits for the child; benefits for the research; and, benefits for society. In Table One below, I draw on the work of Save the Children to summarise and develop these benefits as they pertain to involving children and young people in research on child sexual abuse and exploitation:

Table One: the benefits of involving children in research about sexual abuse and exploitation (adapted and developed from Save the Children, 2004)

Benefits:	Themes:	Elements:
To children	<p>Assertion of their right to participate</p> <p>Participation can help to protect children</p> <p>Children's participation can help to heal the past</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children have the right to decide if they wish to get involved, to what degree and how. Active participation by children can help to challenge the silence about sexual abuse and the stigmatization of those children who have experienced it. Children are most vulnerable to sexual abuse in situations where they have little opportunity to voice their views. A participative approach can help build skills to resist exploitation. Participation in research teaches children how to access information which can be crucially important in survival following sexual abuse. Increased self-confidence is protective. The process of involvement, if supportive and understanding, can help children to explore past experiences and regain confidence for the future. Participation can be a tool out of victimisation, passivity and silence.
To research	<p>Children's participation can bring new insights</p> <p>Children's participation can focus the research</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participation of children in research can produce better quality data, as it helps focus the research, and clarify the analysis and the interpretation of data. Unique perspectives and insights on abuse are provided by children. The nature of child sexual abuse is shifting given new technologies. Retrospective studies of adult survivors' experiences of child sexual abuse may not reflect the current realities for children. Adult researchers may have less insight into the daily lives of children than they think they have. Obtaining data from children themselves increases the possibility of presenting a picture of child abuse that is freer of adult interpretations. As a population group, children are disproportionately affected by sexual abuse and exploitation. Therefore the natural way to obtain information about abuse is to work with them as informants or co-researchers.

To society	Enhances children's position as active citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working in partnership with children challenges the status quo in terms of what children can realistically contribute and challenges existing notions of children's capacities and vulnerabilities. • Research with children on violence and abuse can contribute to positive intergenerational communication, which may increase the chance that children are listened to and their opinions taken into account.
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Connecting the dynamics of child sexual abuse with the challenges of engaging children and young people in research

If the benefits of involving children and young people in research are so extensive, then why have researchers traditionally shied away from approaches to research into child sexual abuse that actively involve children and young people, either those who have been victimized or those who have victimized others? Two primary justifications are often given for not engaging children: first that they are somehow unreliable given their immature status; and second that they are vulnerable to exploitation by researchers (Kirk, 2007). However, as Kirk (2007) maintains there is now a growing body of literature that demonstrates that children can be competent participants in research as long as researchers make their participation possible and recognise the ways in which children communicate. Likewise, there are very many ways of meaningfully involving children and young people that utilize their capacity for agency in non-exploitative ways.

However, research into child sexual abuse may be particularly challenging in both of these regards. First, adults rarely speak openly to other adults, let alone to children, about sex and abuse. How should researchers communicate with children on such matters and what would the impact of this be? Second, children who have been affected by sexual abuse have already by definition been exploited as part of their abuse experience and there are legitimate concerns about research processes replicating this exploitation. For example, asking a child to meet in a private space with a researcher to talk with an unknown adult on personal issues, offering that such exchanges are confidential and not to be shared with anyone outside the room, using distinct techniques to win the child's trust and establish rapport, and videoing or audio recording such interactions, are part of the standard repertoire of qualitative social research approaches. However, they are also mirrored closely by the processes of grooming, coercion and emotional force that sexual abusers often use in the commission of their abusive acts. This means that researchers in the field of child sexual abuse need to be particularly mindful of the dynamics of children's abuse experiences in planning and designing research in order for their involvement to be an ethical, positive and corrective interpersonal experience, rather than one which however inadvertently replicates their earlier abuse experience. In the sections below, I explore the practical consequences of this in respect of a number of key ethical dimensions.

Consent

Consent in any research with children is a contested issue, especially the difference between assent and consent and children's legal and cognitive abilities to make decisions about their own participation. Consent issues in research with children who have experienced sexual abuse are particularly sensitive. In overt ways, child sexual abuse is an assault on consent. Children who have been sexually abused have experienced their boundaries being transcended by an abuser who, in the commission of the abuse, rides roughshod over the child's ability to consent to key aspects of their body, behaviour and sexuality. Children cannot, of course, consent to being abused, yet often an abuser will use deliberate strategies to coerce children into the abuse and to make them believe that they are willing and 'consenting' participants.

The legacy of distorted consent in abuse can leave some, though by no means all, children who have been sexually abused with a variety of consequences which include: suspicion of the motives of others; inhibited trust of adults; a feeling that saying no is not meaningful; pressure to go along with things to meet others' needs even if this is contrary to their own needs; and, a lack of belief that they are valid individuals with a real say in what happens to them. Researchers need to be particularly mindful of these possibilities when devising ways in which to negotiate consent with children affected by abuse. Researchers should:

- offer clear information, in developmentally appropriate and understandable formats about the study that specify precisely what participation would entail;
- clearly state that participation is voluntary, that non-participation is a legitimate choice and that withdrawal is possible at any point;
- emphasise that non-participation or withdrawal from the study would not affect any professional services being received by the child or family;
- be explicit about how any information gathered will be used, who will have access to it and how it will be presented; and
- allow adequate time for the child to ask questions and receive answers prior to agreeing consent.

Obtaining consent is both a core researcher skill and represents an ongoing process in research with children who have experienced sexual abuse, and should not be viewed merely as something to be signed off at the beginning of a study. In the Case Example offered below, for example, consent had to be negotiated and renegotiated before, during and after interviews with young people affected by gang sexual violence.

One particularly difficult question is whether children and young people affected by sexual abuse should be able to give consent to participate individually or whether parents or carers are also required to give their consent alongside that of the child. In the Case Example, the researchers delineated sub groups of young people at different ages with different consequences for parental consent. Many research ethics committees expect to see parental *consent*, in addition to child

assent to research participation. In this context, assent is:

“different to consent in that it is not a legally endorsed process, assent refers to children’s affirmation to participate. Assent recognizes that while children might be unable to give legally valid consent for themselves, it is important to involve them as much as possible in the decision about whether they would like to participate, or not, in the research” (Lambert and Glacken, p. 787).

Yet, this distinction is often not straightforward to maintain in cases of child sexual abuse. It would, for example, be highly unethical for a child who wishes to talk about abuse experiences to be constrained by a parent who has perpetrated that abuse or who does not believe the child’s account.

In their very helpful paper reviewing approaches to issues of consent in research with children across studies, Lambert and Glacken (2011) note ambiguity in the way in which researchers address issues of parental consent and considerable variation in the way in which the legal position is interpreted across research organisations and contexts. They note, for example, that the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health advises researchers to seek parental consent for all children under the age of 18 years, whilst the UK Health National Research Ethics Service (NRES) states that it is ‘possible to apply’ the principle of Gillick competence to research studies not governed by the Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) Regulations and that ‘children who are felt to be competent to understand the research proposal and thus make decisions can give consent on their own behalf’ (cited Lambert and Glacken, p. 785). Although the principle of Gillick competence does not specify a minimum age at which children should be regarded as competent, NRES further states that it would be unwise to use this principle for children younger than ten years of age. The Department of Health (2001), by contrast, recommends that it is good practice even where children are deemed legally competent to involve their family in any decision-making process. One suggestion put forward by the National Children’s Bureau (1993), and cited by Lambert and Glacken (2011), is that children should give ultimate consent to participation, whereas parents should give consent for the researcher to invite their child to participate in the study.

Confidentiality

It is usual for researchers to negotiate issues of confidentiality alongside those relating to consent. Anonymous survey designs are the only way of guaranteeing absolute confidentiality to child participants. The standard practice in much interview based research is to give children a commitment in advance of the interview that what they say as part of taking part is confidential and will not be shared with anyone else, unless there are issues of risk identified, in which case this information might need to be shared with someone outside of the research team in order to protect the child or other persons at risk. Usually, this then leads to a further clarification of the anonymity of data, and an explanation on the part of the researchers that any information offered by the child could be

used by the researchers in reports or publications, but giving a commitment that this information would not be used in a way that identifies the individual child.

This standard position may be problematic in research based research with children and young people who have been affected by abuse, including both those who have perpetrated abusive behaviours and those who have been victimized. As highlighted above, much child sexual abuse is facilitated by secrecy and attempts on the part of the abuser to control and silence those victimised by coercing them into a position whereby the abusive behaviour is regarded as 'our secret'. Researchers may have to actively work against this with children in order to delink any connection for the child between confidentiality (which in research terms is meant as a guarantee of safety) and secrecy (which in abuse terms is a threat and means of silencing the child). In addition, the orthodox research position described above places the power and control of the information squarely with the researcher, who the child is asked to trust to manage this information. My own approach to this issue in interview situations has been to explain carefully the limits of confidentiality with children and give guarantees about how I will protect their privacy and identity in the use of the data, but at the same time emphasizing that participants own their own information along the lines of:

"You can tell anyone you like everything that I say to you today. None of what I say to you is a secret if you choose it not to be. But I will keep what you say safe and private and make sure that I use the information you give me in the following ways..."

This kind of language and approach models openness, participant control and utilises the decision-making abilities of the child. In the Case Example below, the researchers went one step further. Here, worried that young people may have felt, in retrospect, that they had disclosed too much to researchers about their experiences, they offered young people a cooling off period of one month after the interview during which time it was possible for them to ask for any aspect of what they had said to be discounted by the researchers. The specific approaches required in relation to confidentiality will, of course, vary according to the research design, aims and focus of different studies. However, this is an area that needs careful planning and consideration.

Researcher power issues

Mostly, even those researchers who have sought to include children affected by sexual abuse in research have tended to do so with children as passive recipients or research subjects. Few studies have directly involved such children more directly as active partners in the research process. This mirrors the passivity of children in abuse situations. If researchers wish to model an approach to research with children affected by abuse that counters the dynamics of that abuse, it is important to use research designs that involve children and young people as actively as possible. This may include, for example, recruitment of children and young people as expert informants to research planning processes, advisors on the appropriateness of data collection measures, consultants on data

analysis, members of research advisory groups and co-authors of research reports. Models of community based participatory research (CBPR) are particularly well suited to researching with children and young people affected by sexual abuse as these approaches are designed explicitly to minimize the power imbalance in the research process. Jacquez, Vaughn and Wagner (2013) highlight how CBPR is diverse in terms of the particular methods used, but the common factor is 'the shift from the typical power dynamic inherent in the adult/child relationship to include youth as active participants in one or more phases of the research process' (p. 177).

One important dimension of research power which is important for researchers to address is that of gender. Sexual abuse is a highly gendered phenomenon. Particular care needs to be taken with the gender of researchers, especially if interview based methods are used. Researchers need to ensure that children and young people are presented with and can exercise free choice about which gender of researcher to engage with. This is not about the skills or safety of the individual researcher, but it is about the legacy and impact of the sexual abuse upon the child. A second and critical power dimension relates to culture. In a paper on speaking out about sexual abuse in British South Asian communities, Cowburn, Gill and Harrison (2015) outline how cultural dynamics may influence the ways in which sexual abuse is discussed within and between communities. They emphasise the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to the issue of sexual violence and abuse in order to better support victims and to empower communities to respond to sexual abuse. Likewise, Gilligan and Akhtar (2006) highlight how cultural beliefs and values may impact on the effects of abuse and they urge professionals to avoid practice based in generalized assumptions about ethnicities, cultures or religions.

Abuse sensitive methods

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to outline specific methodological approaches that are developmentally sensitive and appropriate for children affected by sexual abuse, but readers are referred to the textbook of Grieg, Taylor and MacKay (2007), which is listed in the key resources section below and contains many practical suggestions for appropriate methods to use with children. Needless to say, researchers should be guided by the particular age, developmental status, abilities and preferred communication modes of the children to be engaged in research and should be prepared to demonstrate creativity and responsiveness to children's needs. As two brief examples, Masson et al. (2011) used social media as a vehicle for data collection on sensitive topics to do with sexual offending with young adults (see Masson et al., 2011 for a fuller description). Here, the use of social media offered a means for some individuals who did not want to have a face-to-face interview to share their experiences at their own pace, using a means of communication that they controlled and with which they were familiar. Second, in the Case Example below, the researchers developed an approach to interviewing that allowed young people to talk in the third person about their experiences of gang-related sexual violence.

It is also important for researchers to consider how some orthodox methods may be inappropriate for specific populations of children and young people. For example, the widespread practice of video or audio recording interviews may be highly problematic for children who have been recorded by sex offenders as part of their sexual abuse experience. Focus groups may be inappropriate for young people abused in peer group contexts. Similarly, online survey methods may need caution for children who have been sexually exploited online.

Emotional distress

Researchers or gatekeepers, such as professionals who may grant access to young people or members of ethical review bodies, are frequently worried about the potential for children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse to be distressed by taking part in research. In my experience, this is the most frequently cited reason why permissions to undertake research with children on this subject is withheld. The concerns relate to the potential that children could find the nature of questions about violence or abuse distressing as a consequence of their experiences or that in some way the questions could trigger memories of the abuse that would set back or interrupt the child's recovery from the abuse. Is this legitimate or just research paternalism and infantilisation of young people?

Ybarra and colleagues (2009) investigated self-reported stress to questions about violence in a US national online survey of over 1500 young people aged 10-15 years old. In almost all cases, young people who reported being victims were no more likely to report being upset by the survey questions than non-victimised youth. At the same time, across both victim and non-victimised groups, age did appear to factor in emotional distress. Specifically, 10 year olds were three times more likely to be upset by questions on violence than 15 year olds. It could be that developmental variation is more significant than abuse experience as a factor in influencing participant distress. In another important study, Priebe, Bäckström and Ainsaar (2010) investigated factors determining discomfort amongst adolescents in answering survey questions about sexuality and sexual abuse in Estonia and Sweden. They found that the majority of adolescent participants did not feel discomfort when completing the survey and participants who reported experiences of penetrative sexual abuse did not differ from non-abused participants in their emotional response to the survey.

Ybarra et al. (2009) conclude that although it is important to be sensitive to the potential vulnerability of victims in research, their findings do not support concerns that prior victims are more vulnerable to emotional distress in answering sensitive questions about violence than non-victims. This is also reflected in my own experience of research in this field. I have repeatedly seen the resilience of children who have lived with abuse and have integrated it into their personal experience, often with considerable strength. In my view, it is important for researchers not to under-estimate the capacities of children who have survived abuse. As long as the researchers are skilled in asking questions about abuse in non-blaming and clear ways, it need not be a stressful or distressing experience for children to answer them.

Handling disclosures and protecting participants

In research with children of their experiences of sexual abuse, it is inevitable that safeguarding and risk issues are going to be present. Researchers should have knowledge of procedures in the local areas or organisations in which the research is being conducted and have clear written information sharing protocols. These need to be agreed with participants and gatekeepers prior to any data collection, not left to the point when a child says something which may be concerning. When agreeing protocols with children, I have found it important to be explicit with, and give concrete examples of, what would need to be shared and what would not.

When a child makes a disclosure of abuse in the course of research, the researcher may have little or no prior knowledge of the child's experiences and therefore whether the information being shared is already known or not. Where there is current or previous professional involvement in the life of the child, it is likely that the data generated will include both experiences that are known and information that may not have been communicated previously. In an interview situation, it is possible for researchers to discuss this with the child, but in other designs, such as survey research, this may be impossible. In making decisions about whether any information offered by a child in the course of research needs to be shared, in other words breaking the general principle of confidentiality, researchers should not be driven by the question of whether that information is previously known or not. Rather the focus should be on whether any information (either historical or current) is indicative of ongoing risk to either the child concerned or anyone else. If so, this would be reason to inform the child that the researcher needs to discuss this with another person. In general, the literature suggests that researchers should do this with the permission of, and in conjunction with the child, though as Wiles and colleagues (2008) highlight, there is little explicit reference in the literature as to what to do if this permission is not forthcoming. Managing situations where it is necessary to break confidentiality requires a high level of skill on the part of researchers and in practice such situations represent real ethical dilemmas. It is important for researchers not to give false assurances to the child about the possible outcomes of information sharing. Researchers also need good supervision and support themselves in order to be able to seek advice about these dilemmas.

Similar dilemmas exist about statements that self-incriminate a young person over the age of criminal responsibility. Wiles et al. (2008) found that while researchers felt duty bound to break confidentiality where participants were at risk of harm, this did not extend to a perceived duty to disclose information relating to involvement in crime or other illegal activity. This has also been my approach in studies I have conducted with young people whose sexual behaviour has harmed others, where I have not shared evidence of illegal activity unless it indicative of risk to the participant or any other person. This is a rather controversial interpretation of an ambiguous legal situation. For a fuller discussion of this issue and the inherent tensions it brings, the reader is advised to consult the excellent paper of Wiles and colleagues (2008).

Post involvement support

The overriding principle here is that the safety and protection of children and others who are vulnerable or who may be at risk should be the paramount concern not only during the data collection process but also afterwards. Researchers should put mechanisms in place to ensure that appropriate independent support is available for the child after their involvement in research. For example, in an interview based study of children who had been sexually abused, we not only asked at the end of interviews whether children would like to access support, but we agreed with them that we would make contact two days after the interview in order to check the impact of taking part and help identify any ongoing support needed. In planning post research contact, it is important for researchers to consider ongoing safety issues for children and ascertain, for example, whether it is safe to contact them and how best to do this. Researchers should also be very specific about how and when contact will be made and keep to this in order for children not to be left in situations of uncertainty.

Summary:

This chapter has highlighted how it is both beneficial and practical to involve children and young people affected by sexual abuse directly in studies on the subject of sexual abuse and violence. Researchers need to take considerable care in ensuring that the research process does not inadvertently mirror aspects of the child's earlier abuse experience.

Questions:

Up to three based on the key points (to help students reflect on the main issues)

- 1) What specific benefits are there in involving children and young people in research on sexual abuse, exploitation and violence: for them; for the research; and more widely? How can researchers realize these benefits?
- 2) What should researchers do to partner most effectively with children and young people in research on sexual abuse?
- 3) How far does research with children who have been affected by sexual abuse challenge received knowledge and orthodox practices around consent, confidentiality and the sharing of information? What would your approach to these issues be?

Key definitions:

Abuse is defined by the Working Together (2013) document as “A form of maltreatment of a child. Somebody may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm, or by failing to act to prevent harm.”

Sexual abuse is defined by the Working Together (2013) document as “forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening.”

Sexual exploitation is defined by NSPCC as a type of sexual abuse in which children are sexually exploited for money, power or status.

(<http://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation/what-is-child-sexual-exploitation/>)

Case Example:

"It's Wrong, but you get used to it": a qualitative study of gang associated sexual violence towards, and exploitation of, young people in England.

The study was undertaken in 2013 by a team at the University of Bedfordshire led by Professors Jenny Pearce and John Pitts. Key reference: Beckett, H. et al. (2013)

Aim

The research was commissioned by the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England as part of its Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups. The overall aim of the research was to consider the scale and nature of gang-associated sexual violence and exploitation in six areas of England.

Methods

Individual interviews were held with 150 young people who had experienced gang related violence and these were complemented by 11 focus groups with 76 professionals and 8 single-sex focus groups with 38 young people. The sensitive nature of the research and the potential vulnerability of research participants required great care on the part of the researchers to minimise issues of risk and harm to young people. A detailed ethical protocol was developed was used to structure the research.

All participants were accessed through agencies that could advise of any potential risks associated with young people's involvement in the research and ensure that appropriate follow-up support was in place. The researchers acknowledge that this requirement introduced a degree of bias into their sample and excluded other potential participants who were not involved in professional agencies, however they felt that the risks of engaging those outside of services were too high given the resources and timescales set for their study.

As the primary focus of the interviews was on young people's experiences of gang-related sexual violence and exploitation, both as victims and perpetrators, interviews were highly sensitive in nature. In order to make the interviews as comfortable as possible for young people, they were conducted so that young people could talk about issues in the third person, unless they actively chose to do otherwise. Interviews used a conversational format, using an interview schedule as a framework for discussion. The language and terminology used with young people was critical. As some young people did not recognise the violence and exploitation inherent in their personal circumstances, the researchers were careful to explore these issues within the wider context of 'relationships, sex and gangs: the good and the bad' in both the interviews and focus groups with young people rather than use prescriptive and value laden terms such as 'gangs' and 'violence' or 'abuse'.

Informed consent with young people was a critical issue in the study. For participants under the age of 16 years, parent/ carer consent was obtained in addition to that of the young person, unless this was deemed contrary to the best interests of the child. For those aged under 13, opt-in parental consent was obtained; for those aged 13-15, opt-out consent was obtained unless the policy of the facilitating agency required otherwise. The researchers, however, saw that informed consent was not just something to be agreed at the outset of the research but was a dynamic process to be negotiated and renegotiated throughout the research.

The researchers also sought to give young people control over the interview process and their contributions. Young people could terminate the interview at any point and did not need to answer any of the questions being asked. The researchers recognised that some young people may have inadvertently shared more than they planned to, so they checked with each young person at the end of their interview whether they had shared anything that they would rather not be used in the research. Any material designated as such by the young person was not included in the research. Young people were also able to withdraw their contribution within one month of their interview and were given explicit advice as to how to do this, both verbally and in writing.

Findings

The researchers found significant levels and many types of sexual victimisation within the gang-environment, with young women being particularly at risk. Young women were much more likely to recognise the exploitative and violent nature of sexual interactions being described than young men. Many young women were blamed by both young men and other young women for their experiences of sexual victimisation within gang contexts. Many young people viewed rape and sexual assault as 'normal' sexual behaviour with little recognition of the meaning of a sexual offence. Few thought that young people would report or talk about their experiences of sexual violence, and fewer still thought that they would talk to professionals as opposed to peers.

Methodological conclusion

The researchers were able to engage young people considered particularly hard-to-reach to talk about their experiences of widespread and extreme gang associated sexual violence. Their use of carefully constructed interview methods gave voice to a hitherto neglected area in the sexual violence field in the UK.

Guide to further reading:

Grieg, A., Taylor, J. and MacKay, T. (2007) *Doing Research with Children*. London, Sage. This is an excellent textbook on research with children, including very helpful practical materials, approaches and exercises.

Lambert, V. and Glacken, M. (2011) Engaging with children in research: Theoretical and practical implications of negotiating informed consent/assent. *Nursing Ethics*, 18(6) 781–801. This is an excellent, focused paper on consent issues in research with children. It is a review paper which includes both conceptual and practical suggestions.

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