Boys Are Not Sexually Exploited? A Challenge to Practitioners

This paper will argue that the view that ‘boys are not sexually exploited’ is unfortunately very common amongst many professionals working with vulnerable young men. It will look at some of the reasons for this and why it is essential for things to change in the future, in order to protect some of our most vulnerable young men under the age of 18 from further sexual abuse. This includes looking at why young men are not seen as at risk, the effect of wider societal attitudes to sex, the changing prostitution street scene, and the impact of the internet and mobile phones. Lastly, this paper looks at the effects of past sexual abuse on young men and the vulnerability of young men who are looked after.

The paper draws on evidence collected from Barnardo’s Young Men’s Project (BYMP) which was originally established in 1989. Since its re-launch, in May 1999, it has been providing a free and confidential service aimed at preventing and reducing sexual exploitation of male children. BYMP is a London-wide service working specifically with boys and young men under 18 who are experiencing or who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Throughout the paper we will be using the term ‘sexual exploitation’ rather than abuse through prostitution, or child sexual abuse. This is to signify the importance of defining a spectrum of abusive relationships that can fall under the term sexual exploitation, rather than one single model of abuse (for more explanation on terminology and this definition, see Harper and Scott, 2005 and Scott and Skidmore, 2006).

An Invisible Problem?

This section will briefly consider the ‘hidden history’ of male sexual exploitation—it does not represent a comprehensive

* Correspondence to: Paula Skidmore, Department of Applied Social Sciences, London Metropolitan University, Calcutta House, London E1 7NT, UK. E-mail: p.skidmore@londonmet.ac.uk

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review of the research literature but tries to identify what, if anything, we do know about the differences for exploited boys and young men—and where the gaps are in our knowledge.

Contemporary research accounts overwhelmingly focus on girls and young women who are sexually exploited (e.g. Pearce et al., 2002; Cusick et al., 2003; Melrose and Barrett, 2004). References to male exploitation are fleeting. Traditionally within academia these have been predominantly raised in one of two ways:

- Research on HIV/AIDS prevention from the health service context with sex workers and ‘rent boys’ (e.g. Barnard et al., 1990; Barnard and McKeganey, 1996)
- Research on sexual identity and the subculture of the gay community (e.g. Weekes, 1985; West and de Villiers, 1992)

In the ‘adult prostitution’ literature the overwhelming majority of resources do not address male sex work at all—so much so that we could be forgiven for thinking that prostitution is not something that men ‘do’ as a job at all. Men in this literature are resolutely the offenders—‘pimps and punters’—whilst women are the sex workers. The persistent invisibility of boys and young men sexually exploited through prostitution has been strongly emphasised by the most recent UK research literature reviews (Chase and Statham, 2004; Home Office, 2004; Drinkwater et al., 2004).

However, arguably less visibly, a child protection focus has begun to address this neglect—promoted in part by the writings of Richie McMullen from Streetwise Youth (1987, 1988). These attempted to shift the attention to how young men experience chaotic life situations, including homelessness, substance misuse, other criminal involvements (such as petty/survivalist theft)—and crucially to argue that many of these young men had experienced early sexual abuse and/or violence within the home. This research sought to identify the commonalities between male and female child sexual exploitation with regard to similar patterns of social and economic disadvantage and constrained choices; the Barnardo’s publication No Son of Mine (Palmer, 2001) is a clear example of this shift; Palmer identified two ‘categories’ of boys and young men who are at risk:

1. those ‘escaping’ from situations where they are vulnerable to abuse, who engage in transactional sex for survival on the street
2. those whose early sexual abuse ‘conditions’ their own abusive behaviour towards peers, leading them to a ‘prostitution life’.
What is the Nature of the Exploitation of Male Children?

The few pieces of work which address this issue emphasise the lack of ‘visibility’ of male sexual exploitation. Donovan (1991), in common with the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) pilot research findings in Nottingham (Skidmore, 1999), identified how sexual exchanges take place in public toilets, parks, bus/train stations, ‘cruising’ areas, shopping areas and arcades. Such hidden locations could, in part, explain the neglect of this issue in the literature where the research focus has usually been on traditional ‘red light’ areas of major urban cities and towns and the visible female sex worker. Virtually nothing is known about those who purchase sex and sex acts from boys and young men: this is also the case for those who exploit girls and young women in this way (Save the Children Sweden, 2005).

Some of the largest studies of male sexual exploitation have been undertaken by Davies and Feldman (1992, 1997) who interviewed 81 young male sex workers in Cardiff and 49 in London, many of whom were under 18. Interestingly, common lifestyles and social networks were identified from the research despite the two very different geographic locations. The research found that for boys and young men:

- sex work was an alternative to low paid/mundane/no work
- most had very few dependable long-term relationships
- some maintained separate ongoing family relationships
- most had casual social relationships at common ‘meeting places’—a ‘macho’ and erratic lifestyle or character
- most worked ‘spasmodically’ and were ‘semi-street’ based, for example, in bars/cafes—it was not an ‘organising principle’ of their life
- the majority were not homeless, or engaged in substantial drug/alcohol misuse
- most were also engaged in other illegal activities (e.g. burglary/car theft)
- socialising and making money were linked (e.g. drinking, dope smoking, playing arcades)
- income helped to maintain a ‘street credibility’ in the social group—for immediate and specific ends
- secrecy and ambivalence about sexual orientation were common
- self-image and self-esteem were often created by interaction with the ‘lifestyle’ group
- a minority disclosed past sexual abuse.

However, more recently, the Pandora street work project which reported contact with 87 boys and young men in Bristol over a 12 month period, directly contradicted a number of these findings (Darch, 2004). This study identified:
• 98% of the young men as having Class A drugs dependency
• almost all had housing problems and were working from the street
• 90% had been in care at some time
• all were currently, or previously had been, involved in other criminal activities
• all had experienced crimes against them, from homophobic abuse to rape, and none had reported these to the police
• many were confused about their sexuality and felt ‘ashamed’ about being viewed as prostitutes, but 20% identified themselves as heterosexual
• around one quarter disclosed previous sexual abuse.

We have no way of knowing if the differences identified in these pieces of research are due to the passage of time (a ten year difference in the data collection), geography, the nature of the service contact, or if they are due to a genuine shift in the experience of sexually exploited male children. The polarised representation of sexually exploited boys and young men into ‘victim’ and ‘offender’ may lead to problems in identifying appropriate service interventions for them, as they are channelled into either child protection or criminal justice responses. This raises the question, should practitioners actively look to ‘find’ and ‘reach’ young men, or provide the open door, but ‘wait’ for them to make the choice to seek help and support? It is also important to note how, apart from these examples cited above, much of the research that does exist is based on very small numbers of boys and young men (e.g. Melrose et al., 1999 interviewed only four young men; Skidmore, 1999 interviewed ten males under 18). We are therefore a long way from knowing how representative the findings of these studies are.

The BYMP

The next section will outline key dimensions of how to provide effective support to male children at risk of sexual exploitation, based on knowledge acquired by the BYMP. In common with Barnardo’s services for young women, it offers sustained key worker support to young men through open access and clear referral protocols, using assertive outreach techniques, offering consistent attention, and support through advocacy for young men to receive additional services from other agencies. The project provided support to 42 young men from April 2005 to March 2006, and to 31 from April 2004 to March 2005. The average length of time young men have contact with the service is six months, but some receive support for much longer, in some cases for several years. The project is voluntary and service users can choose not to receive social work support.
The material below is also presented in the context of the national research evaluation that Barnardo’s has completed to examine the impact of its service provision and how it affects improved outcomes for sexually exploited young people (Scott and Skidmore, 2006). This evaluation included a sample of 54 young men whose outcomes were monitored over a two-year period.

**Young Men Are Not Seen as At Risk**

As Palmer (2001, p. 33) commented, ‘the extent of the problem regarding boys abused through prostitution remains hidden’. This is due to a culture where young men still feel they are expected to be strong and in control, know everything about sex and know how to ‘look after’ themselves. This leads to young men finding it hard to access services, to admit inexperience and to talk about their emotions (Trust for the Study of Adolescence, 1999), and also, in the experience of Barnardo’s practitioners, to professionals who are unable to see beyond a young man’s aggression and risk taking to the cry for help that this behaviour may mask.

Abused children can also be threatened and coerced into not telling others about their abuse, which isolates them from potential support. They are further isolated from help, as being paid or ‘rewarded’ for sex can feel like a big improvement on the sexual abuse they may have previously experienced. This payment or reward and being sexually desired by an older man can also cause a young man to feel he has some power in his life, perhaps for the first time ever. These threats, rewards and feelings of power may deter sexually exploited young people from actively seeking help.

**Shifting Sites for Abuse**

Barnardo’s anti-sexual exploitation projects based across the UK have seen a reduction in visible sexual exploitation of young people on the streets. This may be attributable to police tactics in tackling prostitution on the street or to the work of some agencies such as BYMP (Metropolitan Police Juveniles at Risk Team, 2006). However, project staff have found that the internet and mobile phones are increasingly being used to sexually exploit young men. Young men are sexually exploited via the internet in a range of ways (Palmer with Stacey, 2004). The Young Men’s Project has worked with a number of clients who have been sexually exploited via the
internet, these include: a young man who was stripped, shaved and photographed by a friend of his so-called older ‘boyfriend’; a 15 year old client who was groomed over the internet by a man in his thirties; and a young man whose photograph was placed on a website where men sell sex.

One young man we worked with was given ten mobile phones over a one-year period. Giving mobiles is now a common grooming technique experienced by the young men we work with. It means that a young man can be contacted at any time and place by a child sex offender. This includes at a foster carer’s or children’s residential home where they have been placed for their own protection. The new technology of ‘3G’ phones also means that the images of sexual abuse of a child can now almost instantly be placed on the internet and the implications of such developments have been clearly drawn by others (see Carr, 2004; O’Connell, 2004; Quayle and Taylor, 2005). Ways of providing ‘virtual outreach’ services on the internet are being explored by the Young Men’s Project and other Barnardo’s anti-sexual exploitation projects. However, this is not a simple process as the net has no borders and staff could be communicating with a person who appears to be a vulnerable 14 year old, but is in fact a 40 year old man.

Sex—Don’t Talk About It!

We live in a society that is happy to sell everything from cars to toothpaste using sex, and graphic sexual images are available at the press of a button. But ironically our society appears unable to talk openly about sex, especially sex that does not fit neatly into dominant heterosexual understandings. The Out On My Own study found that none of the 44 lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered young people questioned had received sex or relationship education at school which was inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) experience (Cull et al., 2006). This results in an inability to educate many children and young people in how to keep themselves safe from sexual abuse, sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies. Having sexual feelings or thoughts about other boys is a common experience for many boys and research suggests that lesbian, gay and bisexual people constitute between 5–7% of the population’ (DTI, 2004). However, without an accepting environment to talk about these feelings, young men remain at an increased risk of sexual exploitation.

In this context, many boys do not feel comfortable in talking about their feelings at school or at home.
for Peter (not his real name), the first young man to walk through the Young Men’s Project doors, after its re-launch in 1999. As he told the project worker:

‘I went to the toilets on the common because I thought I was gay and it was the only place I knew that I could meet gay men.’

Peter was 14 when this happened and he was given £10 after having sex for the first time in his life. However, luckily for Peter, he had two things on his side that meant this was the first and last time he was sexually exploited. Firstly, and most importantly, Peter was an empowered young man who was able to recognise he had been sexually exploited and did not want it to happen again. Secondly, he was able to talk to someone whom he felt would not judge him negatively. Peter had a number of sessions with a project worker to talk about what had happened and what he wanted from future relationships. He brought his mother to the last of his sessions and he started attending his local lesbian, gay and bisexual youth centre.

Past Sexual Abuse

Scott and Skidmore (2006) found that in five of the seven male case histories they collected the young men had been sexually abused prior to their sexual exploitation; the same number had parents with alcohol problems and all but one had substantial periods of being looked after. These and the other risk indicators highlighted in this research suggest that many young men do not have the awareness necessary to keep themselves safe. Due to the sexualised way in which many of the young men that the project works with relate to others, it is suspected that a high percentage of them have also suffered some form of sexual abuse prior to being sexually exploited. However, only a small number are at a point in their recovery where they are able to talk about this abuse. Sex with adults can become almost ‘normalised’ for young men who have been sexually abused. They are therefore much more vulnerable to future sexual exploitation than a child who has not been abused.

Culture and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities

In 2005, 42% of the project’s clients were from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities thereby closely reflecting the demographic composition of several of the London
boroughts from which the project receives referrals. As work continues with these clients, it is clear that once a young man is referred, race is rarely a block in his engagement with the project. Sexual exploitation can happen to a young man of any ethnic group, from any culture. However, cultural and language differences are likely to affect how BME young men are sexually exploited and therefore if they are identified and receive a service. An example of this is a residential manager talking about a specific BME community, who said, ‘They normally take care of their own, don’t they?’

Some of the clients Barnardo’s works with have been seeking asylum, talking to us of their experience of facing cultural and language barriers as well as barriers to free and open speech about their sexual exploitation. Indeed, the trauma and financial situation of many asylum seekers in this country is likely to increase their vulnerability to sexual exploitation (see Harper and Scott, 2005).

**Being Looked After**

The current emphasis on the use of foster care rather than residential units appears positive for the children concerned. However, a side effect of this policy is to leave children who are deemed ‘too chaotic’ to be fostered or adopted, placed together in residential units, where they are especially vulnerable to being targeted by adult perpetrators of sexual exploitation (Munro, 2004).

Twelve of the 31 young men BYMP worked with in 2004–05 were currently, or had previously been, in residential care. Many of these young men had experience of sexual exploitation, including in some cases, obvious targeting of the unit by older men, but these indicators were often unrecognised by unit staff. This highlights a lack of training and support for residential workers, that can result in a failure to identify sexual exploitation of male and female children (Munro, 2004).

The project finds that, when they are identified, the multi-agency response required is rarely found. Residential social workers need their local Safeguarding Children Board to be rigorously adopting the joint guidance, *Safeguarding Children Involved in Prostitution* (Department of Health, Home Office, Department for Education and Employment, National Assembly of Wales, 2000) which states that they should:

> ‘actively enquire into the extent to which children are involved in prostitution; develop a local protocol on children involved in prostitution,
and to monitor and review the operation of the protocol; provide a local resource and source of expertise for those who have concerns that a child may be at risk of being drawn into prostitution or is being abused through prostitution.’ (paragraph 5.5)

**Conclusion**

History and practice have in the past suggested that boys and young men are at no, or low, risk of sexual exploitation. We would argue it is not possible to conclude this from such a weak knowledge base concerning the extent and nature of sexual exploitation of male children in the UK. Very slowly, the issue is being recognised by practitioners and more services are expanding their provision to ensure support and facilities are also open to boys and young men at risk, as well as girls and young women. For example, within Barnardo’s over the last four years, provision has grown from initially three specialist services, to an additional seven services that are working to identify, intervene and support boys and young men at risk of sexual exploitation, at locations throughout the UK. It is absolutely crucial that far from being complacent about such provision we see this as only the start of reducing and preventing sexual exploitation of male children, a point reinforced by Harper and Scott (2005) who suggest the need to improve the identification of child sexual exploitation generally.

‘Is this young man being sexually exploited?’ is what all professionals working with vulnerable young men need to be asking themselves. Until this happens sexually exploited young men are going to remain hidden and unsupported. It is the experience of Barnardo’s service providers that, given the wrong set of circumstances, any young man could become sexually exploited. However, it is extremely vulnerable boys and young men, the majority of whom, crucially, social and youth workers or youth justice professionals are already working with, who are significantly more likely to be targeted by an abusive adult, and whom we should be protecting more effectively.

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