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Researching Sensitive Topics With Children and Young People: Ethical Practice and Blurry Boundaries

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Abstract

Despite representing a vast and global concern, the narratives of children who experience child sexual exploitation (CSE) and access associated services are marginalised within research. As an outcome, relatively little is known about how children cope with the impact and consequences of their experiences. This paper draws together methodological insights from researchers reflecting upon three distinct pieces of qualitative fieldwork conducted with children and young people considered 'vulnerable' to, and 'at risk of', CSE. In doing so, we seek to recognise the challenges encountered when conducting research with vulnerable populations and explore the 'blurry boundaries' that researchers tread in order to balance competing power dynamics. This paper will discuss potential safeguarding concerns that arise when conducting sensitive research and will share our experiences of supporting young people to take part in research around child sexual exploitation. We will reflect upon the research process to highlight some of the strategies adopted to enable young people to engage in data collection safely. We consider the dynamic ethical practices that take place in the moment of research encounters, alongside the framework of procedural ethics, to conclude that both are fundamental to enable meaningful participation in research.

Keywords

ethical inquiry, focus groups, methods in qualitative inquiry, social, justice, mixed methods, ethnography

Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a term used to describe a range of sexual offenses perpetrated against minors, who are legally unable to consent (World Health Organization, 2003). While child sexual abuse represents a global concern, occurrences are often hidden and its prevalence is largely unknown (McClain & Amar, 2013). UK government statistics suggest that as many as 1 in 20 children experience some kind of sexual abuse between the ages of 11 and 17, equating to around 220,000 children nationally, at any one time (HM Government, 2017). Estimates in the United States range from 1 in 4 to 1 in 13 (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; Finkelhor, et al., 2014) and the Council of Europe estimates as many as one in five children experience sexual abuse or violence (European Commission, 2020). Yet most cases of sexual abuse remain unreported (Silverio et al., 2021) and less than 10% of cases are reported to someone in authority (Radford et al., 2011). Despite representing a vast and global concern, relatively little is known about how victims of child sexual abuse cope with the impact and consequences of their experiences (Palmer & Foley, 2017) and young victim narratives often remain marginalised within research (McClain & Amar, 2013; Silverio et al., 2021).

This paper draws together methodological insights from researchers reflecting upon three distinct pieces of qualitative fieldwork conducted with children and young people who had been victim of, or were considered to be 'at risk of', child sexual exploitation (CSE), a particular form of child sexual

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abuse (Beckett & Walker, 2017). We will consider the potential challenges of including the perspectives of child sexual abuse victims in research and explore the institutional challenges for researchers that are presented by focusing on this cohort of participants. In addition, we will contemplate the role of the researcher in minimising risk, whilst at the same time supporting potentially vulnerable participants to share their experiences and perspectives. This paper explores the realities of doing research with children and young people that upholds their best interests - while recognising that the concept of 'best interests' is itself not straightforward and that is sometimes used by professionals when overruling children's own wishes (Daniel, 2010; James & James, 2004). We highlight the need to better recognise the dynamic and relational practice of research and to foreground the ethical dilemmas that arise 'in the moment' but yet are rarely documented or accounted for in institutional ethical processes. In doing so, this paper considers the ethics involved in collecting informed consent, explores some of the methods that are appropriate to traverse unequal power relationships and contemplates the blurry boundaries that are walked by researchers who explore sensitive topics with children and young people.

Research Ethics

Academic research is strictly bound by ethical guidelines arising from the Nuremberg Code and the Helsinki Declaration (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Moriña, 2021). These guidelines continue to shape research practice with a continuing legacy purporting that research should do 'no harm' (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Melrose, 2011). In this context, formal ethical guidelines and checklists are engineered to support researchers to plan and undertake research in line with the principles of their institution and the norms of the wider social research community. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) refer to these formal processes of seeking approval for research as 'procedural ethics'. However, there are substantial differences between procedural ethics and the realities of behaving ethically in practice. While 'checklists' are helpful in encouraging researchers to consider potential harms that might arise from the research and the minimum requirements of ethical research practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), they are not exhaustive and cannot pre-empt every potential ethical dilemma that might occur (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). Our experience has shown, that in practice, unforeseen ethical issues emerge and present complex dilemmas, which researchers must react to in the moment and as the need arises (Graham et al., 2015).

The ethics of research with vulnerable children

Historically children have been excluded from research, with the views of professionals, practitioners and parents called to account for particular issues that may affect the everyday experiences of children (Christensen & James, 2017; Gilligan, 2016; Graham et al., 2015). The formulation of UNCRC (1989), and particularly Article 12, which details that children have the right to be heard about the issues that most affect them, paved the way for an increase in research around the experiences of children and young people. Subsequently a body of research has both aimed to further understanding about children's everyday lives (Hilppö et al., 2016) and been used to formulate more inclusive policy and practice (Brady et al., 2018; Ellis & Johnston, 2019; Mannay, 2015).

The drive to include the perspectives of children and young people has been embraced by researchers globally, across disciplines, including health (Birch et al., 2007; Lees et al., 2017), social work (Ellis, 2018; Hickle, 2020; Moore et al., 2018; Warrington et al., 2016), youth justice (Phoenix & Kelly, 2013; Sharpe, 2012; Smithson et al., 2021), politics (Hadfield-Hill & Christensen, 2021) and education (Buchanan et al., 2022; Forde et al., 2018; Mayall, 2002). While these examples evidence the commitment of researchers to capture and share the views and experiences of children, it is also important to acknowledge the positionality of researchers within the wider structure of knowledge. As Beazley et al. (2009) explain, 'the researcher is not the knower of truth, but rather the recorder and interpreter of multiple 'other' social subjectivities' (p. 369). In this, we acknowledge that research is filtered and controlled by adults who take on the decision about whose voice to share and in which contexts (Faldet & Nes, 2021; James, 2007).

While research frequently aims to be inclusive, access to vulnerable populations is often tightly controlled by gatekeepers (such as headteachers, clinicians, social work managers), who may decline research participation on behalf of others (Gilligan, 2016; Hasking et al., 2023). However, while purported as being a protective act, to ensure the 'best interests' of vulnerable populations, gatekeeping research access can enable the silencing of those who may go on to share something uncomfortable, from a service point of view. Indeed, the perspectives of those who are not shared are often those who could be considered to have the most to say, albeit perhaps providing difficult information to hear.

The studies explored in this paper sought to highlight the perspectives of young people who have been noticeably absent within public debates around CSE. Our work aimed to address this gap in knowledge by sharing the perspectives of children and young people who had experienced abuse. In doing so, we sought to engage in research processes that minimised the 'filtering' or controlling of the narratives of children and young people (James, 2007) with the aim of shifting the understanding of CSE so that future support might be better targeted to meet the needs of those most affected. Although the commitment to researching experiences of those classed as 'extremely vulnerable' is well established as valuable (Pearce, 2009), their inclusion in research still catalyses significant ethical tensions (Hackett, 2017). Central to these tensions is the fact that participants are approached and invited to participate in studies that cannot be assumed to directly (or obviously) benefit them (Gullimen, 2004), and that as research participants they are primarily serving the needs of researchers, funders and wider practice and policy audiences. This is coupled with one of the most pertinent risks when working with children affected by sexual abuse, that participating may re-surface traumatic memories that cause additional psychological harm. Though it is hoped that research will generate awareness and potentially improve services for similar and future children, it is true that the primary benefits of research will not usually affect research participants directly, and that the time lag between research publication and impact is known to be protracted. Despite some exceptions (Bovarnick & Cody, 2021; Ellis, 2019; Warrington et al., 2016) these tensions go part way to explain the paucity of children and young people's views in debates around child sexual abuse and exploitation (Gilligan, 2016). Yet, enabling the participation of young people in a research context offers an important and unique opportunity to ensure that their perspectives are recorded and heard, even when competing voices continue to dominate (Jessiman et al., 2017).

While we assert the importance of listening to those who are considered vulnerable, we also acknowledge that the experiences and perspectives of children and young people impacted by trauma can make for uncomfortable listening. However, by not including their voices, and instead relying on professionals or practitioners to share their views instead, we risk further marginalising the first hand experiences of children and young people (Ellis, 2018, 2019; Jessiman et al., 2017). In addition, when received sensitively and empathetically, narrative retelling is noted to offer a potentially cathartic experience for victims of trauma (Kearney, 2007; McClain & Amar, 2013). Yet caution must be taken, for while retelling previous trauma may be cathartic, it is also emotionally demanding for both parties (Silvario et al., 2021), and can at times mean that the researcher is balancing competing ethical priorities, which we will explore further in more detail.

This paper will consider the tensions present in the context of each of our related fieldwork experiences to challenge the absence of methodological accounts which capture the lived realities of negotiating ethical research dilemmas with children and young people impacted by trauma. We seek to identify the approaches and decision-making we have employed to address questions of inclusion, consent and the power dynamics that are especially apparent when conducting research with children who have experienced child sexual exploitation. We will share examples of practical methods adopted to navigate research in these contested ethical spaces, exploring both the feasibility and ethical incentive to support children to share their views on sensitive subjects safely. In considering the issues raised above, we will explore the ways in which researchers can carefully balance ethical considerations to demonstrate the importance of listening to children at the margins and to explore some of the potential ethical challenges that can be safely traversed along the way.

The research

The content of this paper is drawn from three separate qualitative studies conducted by the authors in distinct settings which provided support to young people who had been identified as at risk of, or the victim of, child sexual abuse and exploitation. While diverse in their focus, the studies all shared a commitment to foreground the perspectives of young people considered to be marginalised. Children and young people engaged in each of the research settings were mostly known to social services, and because of their exploitation, were receiving interventions from multiple welfare professionals. Despite the commonalities between the young people receiving services, there were important differences between each of the research settings. For example, while the services referred to in projects two and three encouraged voluntary engagement from young people, young people's service engagement in the setting of project one was mandatory. In each setting, the professional welfare contexts informed the tone and expected power dynamics for these young people when engaging with professionals. Specifically, the presence of ongoing 'safeguarding concerns' meant participants in all three studies were required to tread careful boundaries with professionals and demonstrate heightened awareness about types of disclosure or information that would trigger safeguarding responses.

Additional project information is detailed below:

Project one was conducted with girls in a local authority secure children's home (LASCH) by Katie Ellis, who conducted ethnographic research over a period of 12 months. Ellis conducted three life history interviews with fifteen of the girls living in the home at that time. Participants were aged between 13-16 years old. Although young people's perspectives were centred in the research, Ellis also gained consent to access individual case files so that she could explore the ways in which young people's voices were described by professionals working with them. Further findings from this project can be found in Ellis, 2016, 2018; 2021.

Project two is an ongoing project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council conducted by Kristine Hickle and Camille Warrington with girls and young women (age 13–25) accessing services provided for young people victimised by sexual abuse and sexual and criminal exploitation. The project involved the use of participatory photography and creative methods to understand experiences of individual and collective resistance to interpersonal violence and related forms of institutional harm. Participants were involved in a series of workshops in which they engaged in creative activities including image making and poetry. Ethnographic methods were also used, including participant observation. Hickle and Warrington gained consent to use some of the participants' images and voice recordings alongside transcriptions of their discussions and individual interviews.

Project three was a doctoral study conducted by Camille Warrington. The study involved in-depth qualitative interviews with twenty children and young people (age 14–29) through seven different voluntary sector specialist sexual exploitation services across the UK, alongside ten practitioner interviews. Interviews with young people were undertaken both individually and in small groups and explored children and young people's experiences of participation rights and involvement in decision making in welfare services after sexual exploitation. The project sought to understand the meaning of participation rights in the context of day-to-day service provision and support. Further details of the methods and findings can be found in Warrington (2013).

Children's researchers cite using a range of research methods to include children and young people in research (Greene & Hogan, 2005; Groundwater-Smith, et al., 2014; Mannay, 2015). Christensen and James (2017) assert that rather than being 'child friendly' researchers should be 'participant friendly' and mindful to create methods 'appropriate for the people involved in the study [….] and for the kinds of research questions that are being posed' (p. 15). In this way, our studies sought to be 'participant friendly' and were designed with the intention of being sensitive and appropriate to *all* of our participants, regardless of their age.

Each of the research sites presented above offered different specialist services to children and young people in need of support. Specialisms included: support for gang-associated young women; young people affected by exploitation; young people at risk of going missing; and young people who had been deprived of their liberty for their own protection. In choosing to undertake research in each of these sites, our work was borne from a shared commitment to the value and ethical necessity of including children and young people affected by sexual abuse and exploitation in research. Despite differences between the studies, this shared commitment required each of us to engage with risk in ways which we found little sufficient ethical guidance or procedures. Instead, across these studies we shared the experience of responding to unanticipated ethical challenges 'in the moment' and coming to understand research ethics as a dynamic and relational practice. In the section below, we explore a number of examples from this practice. These examples highlight issues around consent and privilege; the power dynamics that are omnipresent and informed by institutional contexts when conducting research with populations considered vulnerable; and the blurry boundaries that we, and other researchers, must carefully tread when working in contested spaces.

Procedural Ethics and Informed Consent

University governance procedures are fundamentally responsible for protecting the reputations of research institutions, which may sometimes place them at odds with researchers seeking to empower participation from those whose voices may otherwise be marginalised or silenced (Whittington, 2019). Unsurprisingly, and due to the fact that the research focused on the sensitive topic of child sexual abuse, ethics procedures for each of the studies discussed here were lengthy and involved submitting examples of carefully crafted information sheets, consent forms and the details of additional support available for participants. The construction of these documents created practical tensions around meeting the requirements of an ethics committee whilst simultaneously being accessible to young people. For instance, although university systems require that strict protocols are followed, the protocols usually seen in these documents may not align with the needs of participants who are, 1) diverse in their literacy skills; 2) have prior exposure to multiple forms being handed to them by professionals and 3) are being asked to engage in participatory methods that evolve with the research. For example, some participatory methods intentionally allow space for participants to help shape the research design and make key decisions regarding modes of data production (Mannay, 2015). Participatory and other creative or group based research can therefore often necessitate a more fluid approach to research consent than traditional ethical approval processes were designed to accommodate and can instead require flexibility about the research methods being proposed, a variety of mechanisms to share information and an increased value on continuously negotiating informed consent.

These tensions are explored further in an example from study two where a group of young people (age 16–25) initially refused to read and complete project paperwork. Following a verbal explanation that directly summarised the content of the information letter, all of the young people agreed to sign a consent form, apart from Jo. Despite being reluctant to sign an official form, Jo asked if she could continue to take part in the research workshop. She was welcomed into the group and engaged in all the research activities, with the understanding that her participation would not be recorded in any way. On the second day of activities, Jo attended and contributed to all research discussions with enthusiasm. Afterwards, the researcher thanked Jo for contributing powerful opinions and asked again whether she would consider signing the consent form so that her views could be shared more widely, outside of the project. Jo agreed that she would like others to understand her perspective and so agreed to take part in the research and formally completed the consent documents required for procedural ethics.

The above example highlights what Whittington (2019) observed when she reflected on her own participatory research with young people exploring sexual consent. She noted important parallels between how sexual consent was described as 'fluid, constantly renegotiated, communicated, verbally and nonverbally, voluntary, mutual, and withdrawable' (p. 205), and how these same principles could apply to participatory research. Whilst not all qualitative research with young people utilises a participatory design, it is worth considering how the concept of consent translates across methods and requires reflexivity of the researcher as an intentional ethical research practice. In our example, Jo subsequently became one of the most engaged research participants on the project, yet her participation was only obtainable by enabling consent to be renegotiated when she understood precisely what the research process would involve, how it would feel to take part, and believed the researchers were trustworthy. Furthermore, consent given by Jo in this moment could be considered to be more 'informed' than that consent given by others previously, since Jo gave consent when she had gained a clear understanding of the research process and of the researcher's intentions and not simply upon their first meeting.

Conceptualising consent as a complex and moveable element of research is a perspective that has been called for by others (e.g. Boddy & Oliver, 2010; David et al., 2001; de St Croix & Doherty, 2022; Sonne, et al., 2013; Whittington, 2019) who criticise an overreliance on traditional informed consent procedures. In these debates, it is argued that formalised ethical procedures remain relatively static and difficult to challenge, even when participants' access and engagement with the research is possible only through embracing its complexities. In all three examples from research shared here, researchers felt compelled to rely on traditional methods of obtaining consent (i.e. written information sheet and a 'tick box' consent form) - which provided a degree of accountability, but also employed a broader conceptualisation of consent as dynamic and ongoing and a more flexible, relational approach to engaging with the form based procedures. David et al. (2001) previously questioned whether procedural ethics need to be revisited entirely. In their research on children in school settings, they noted that the mode of ascertaining consent aligned too closely with the kind of information delivery that children and young people associated with education and school settings. DeSt de St Croix and Doherty (2022) found that young people in youth work settings felt similarly, as research processes that evoked a feeling of 'school' for young people were rejected, given the negative experiences in school settings that many participants had undergone. For young people in our research, it may have echoed both experiences within educational settings and the experience of contact with safeguarding professionals who have discussed informed consent and confidentiality with them, in the context of service provision. If these experiences have been negative, then employing a process that is considered to be standard practice in relation to procedural ethics could inhibit young people from consenting to research they may actually want to engage in. Similarly while we recognise that recording consent represents an important aspect of accountability and governance to safeguard against abuse, it is rarely enough to ensure meaningful consent nor necessarily requires a form based method.

In addition to ensuring the process of informed consent remains sufficiently fluid and flexible, our practice highlights how researchers also encounter issues related to what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) refer to as 'ethics in practice'. This work queries whether there are resources to draw upon within the tradition of qualitative research for help in dealing with ethical aspects of the research or if these resources should be sought elsewhere; in research with young people, this may include multidisciplinary intervention that is ethically complex in relation to issues of both informed consent and (limited) confidentiality. For example, in a systematic review of professionals' perspectives on informed consent and confidentiality in work with young people, Thannhauser et al. (2021) found that there is widespread inconsistency in ethical decision-making amongst practitioners, sometimes related to a fundamental difference in how the concepts of confidentiality and informed consent are understood. However, when researchers fail to ensure that informed consent is understood by young people, they risk compromising potentially trusting relationships when they encounter an ethical dilemma that they feel needs to be reported. Thereby, researchers must be mindful about the decisions that they make in the moment, to ensure that the wellbeing of participants is valued and protected, and that participants are made aware of the types of information that cannot be held in confidence. We will discuss this issue, and the blurry boundary sometimes walked by researchers, later in this paper.

Considering Power Dynamics within Research

Power dynamics between an adult researcher and a child participant are always apparent, but they are especially pronounced in settings where young people are socially bound to follow the instructions of adults (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). This is true in most forms of research with children, but even more so when embarking on research with those who are considered vulnerable and may have previously experienced difficult or contentious relationships with professionals or practitioners (Ellis, 2016; Faldet & Nes, 2021).

Support services, like the ones described in this paper, are often delivered within a socio-political context of continuous uncertainty, where funding is time-limited, and service evaluations are constrained by narrow understandings of 'what works' (Boddy, 2023). Yet, in research, the relationships we make with stakeholders are key, since they are our route to ensuring the successful engagement of children and young people. When services agree to host a researcher, they also engage in a transfer of trust in which they believe that the researcher will act in the best interests of participants. It is often this trust that reassures young people that it is safe to take part in research. Our partners also provide the resources and support that helps to assess risk and to provide tailored support during the research process, and after, if required.

It is therefore important that we, as researchers, are able to maintain positive relationships within the research site. To do this, we balance competing challenges to maintain research access, often within narrowly defined research objectives, whilst simultaneously protecting young people's active participation. While different actors within the research site may have competing interests, using a strengths-based approach, like appreciative inquiry (Liebling et al., 1999), can help to identify positive aspects of practice and can give confidence to those working within complex structures and strict hierarchies. Strengths-based approaches can encourage researchers to recognise that professionals and practitioners are often working to achieve positive outcomes in particular contexts that are largely outside of their control.

While working collaboratively with stakeholders is important, maintaining distance and independence from them is key, and often vital to ensure the confidentiality of views shared by potentially vulnerable participants. There are often conflicting views about the potential of research and it is the role of the researcher to manage expectations about which information will be shared and with whom. For instance, we discovered that while managers may want research to vouch for the success of their service, practitioners sometimes want feedback around working styles and management practices, and service funders seek assurance that the programme is being delivered as originally intended. Yet the research may deliver none of these results, especially if they are in direct conflict with views put forward by young people who engage in services, sometimes against their will. Though promises about confidentiality are made to participants before they take part in research, there are examples where the actions of adult professionals who support children can challenge these agreements and relationships of trust. This can happen when adults ask researchers about responses given by individual children (Christensen & Prout, 2002) and also where adult professionals casually volunteer personal information about individual children to researchers without explicit consent to do so (Warrington, 2013). In maintaining confidentiality promised to children, it is crucial to explain very clearly when responses must be shared, for instance, if a participant discloses that abuse is being perpetrated against them or by them.

In response to the power differences that are endemic when conducting research, we, like others (Moore et al., 2018) took extra care to remind participants of their rights at multiple points. As well as revisiting consent, to ensure that participants had not changed their mind about taking part, we also offered creative ways to participate in offering consent. Using more flexible research methods can empower more meaningful consent within the research process. For instance, in place of traditional interviews, question cards can be laid out for participants to see, read and potentially discard. Similarly, collaborative visual mapping with participants to outline key themes at the outset of an interview can help participants to prioritise what they would like to talk about and to point out anything they would like to avoid (Warrington et al., 2016). These methods can also facilitate discrete ways of opting out and participants can be encouraged to look at the cards or themes in turn and to disregard those that they would prefer not to discuss.

As well as offering easy ways to opt out, and reminding participants that they can withdraw from research at any time (without sharing their reasons), researchers can also share phrases that participants can use if they are feeling uncomfortable with a particular topic, such as 'can we move on please?'. While some young people might be able to verbalise their reluctance to participate, in our research, we were especially mindful of the non-verbal cues given by participants. We previously shared the example of Jo, who wanted to take part but did not want to sign a form; in study one, the researcher experienced the opposite when she became aware in the context of an interview, that Imogen, who signed her consent form willingly, did not want to participate in the research. Although verbally presenting as willing, Imogen began her interview looking at the floor with her arms and legs tightly crossed. Again, this highlighted the limits of procedural ethics for enabling meaningful consent. Instead the researcher had to respond in the moment, and to decide how best to ethically proceed. In this case, the researcher talked again about informed consent and offered the view that participants declining to take part was an equally valuable position to take, since non-participation demonstrated that the research was absolutely voluntary and conducted ethically. Imogen decided not to take part and was thanked for her honesty, meanwhile, the researcher reiterated the voluntary nature of the research to practitioners who had been active in recruiting young people.

Conducting research with young people who have experienced CSE can be difficult and potentially emotionally distressing for all parties. It is therefore important that researchers enter the field with relational skills which allow them to build rapport whilst being comfortable to sit with, and respond to, strong emotions. While research is not intended to be therapeutic, it can facilitate a feeling of connection and it is important that research does not contribute to deepening isolation, stigma or self-blame. Beazley et al. (2009, p. 374) caution researchers that to disregard children's own perceptions of self when describing their life circumstances is to 'violate their dignity'. However, when working with young people who are considered extremely vulnerable, it might be necessary to occasionally (and very carefully) challenge their narratives. For instance, in study one, Robyn, talks about being punished 'a lot' at home because she 'was a *really* naughty child'. Punishments cited ranged from being beaten, locked away, shouted at, and other abusive behaviours which finally triggered Robyn being taken into care. Although Robyn was nonchalant in her reporting of these incidents, admissions of being 'naughty' occurred frequently. Despite seeking to empower Robyn to tell her story, it became increasingly uncomfortable to hear a narrative of a preschool child deserving to be beaten because they were 'naughty'. As this example shows, it is not always ethical (or possible) to listen without challenging young people's accounts (albeit with care and sensitivity). In this scenario, the researcher engaged the participant in reflective listening, asking her to consider the ways in which very young children could be 'really naughty', exploring misdemeanours that young children cannot perform (e.g. armed robbery, fraud, vehicle theft, etc.). The exchange resulted in laughter, after which Robyn reconsidered her definition of 'naughty' and conceded that 'maybe it wasn't my fault' that she was beaten and placed in care. This exchange illustrates an example of Guillemin and Gillam (2004) 'ethically important moments' and it was felt that by keeping silent, the researcher would unintentionally reinforce Robyn's potentially harmful beliefs about her abuse. Such conversations occurred with regularity across all three studies and we all encountered instances in which we gently challenged young people's narratives of both self and others. Here again evidence emerges of the limits of procedural ethics, which though able to help researchers to consider some of these instances, it remains the responsibility of the researcher to be prepared to act in the moment to make snap decisions about how to respond. Such challenges are rarely simple and so while silence, neutrality or passive listening can be considered harmful, we equally need to heed caution from Rothman et al. (2018) who encourage researchers not to overstep the line, to resist taking on advocacy roles that were not intended for them and to ensure that they do not inadvertently cause harm to the support already being given by targeted services.

Behaving Ethically 'in the Moment'

Across all these examples, and their recurring demonstrations of the limits of procedural ethics and the need to consider relational dynamics, a persistent theme emerges around the difficulty of holding and applying 'absolute' ethical rules in the moment. We recognise that the firm boundaries and static 'rules' of research engagement, outlined to meet thresholds of tolerance for an ethics reviewing committee, are often impossible to hold tightly to within our lived experience of research where individual needs and contexts matter. Furthermore our experiences suggest that ethical research practice demands flexibility and responsiveness to changing circumstances, albeit within the safety of considered (and where possible shared) decision making. What this means however is that on entering a research interaction, there is no clear 'blueprint' that can sufficiently lay out 'how to behave ethically' in all scenarios. Subsequently in all of our research practices we experience a sense of 'walking blurry boundaries' and sometimes having to live with a degree of uncertainty about the 'right thing to do'.

The realities of undertaking research in the contexts we describe means that there are often competing ethical considerations, like those described above – such as the moment where a researcher steps out of a boundaried researcher role to challenge young people's narratives; or consent processes are reworked to respond to individual needs and forms of communication that are non-verbal. Further tensions arise in relation to individual versus group needs and promoting inclusion versus minimising risk. An example of this was illustrated by a scenario in study three, which centres on a group interview where three young women, with previous experience of working together, who were invited (through their CSE service) to participate. Prior to undertaking the interview, the researcher was informed that one young person, Sally, was unlikely to engage due to 'a chaotic life and some indifference to services'. At the pre-arranged time of the interview, Sally unexpectedly arrived and joined the other two with a friend (a non-service user) and her friend's baby. She also announced on arrival that she had very little time and could 'only stay for a bit'. In this initial moment, she was informed that her friend could not participate in the interview and would have to wait for her outside. Unfazed, Sally, who was sensed to hold considerable sway amongst her peers, asked the other two participants in somewhat loaded terms: 'you don't care if my friend stays here do you?' to which they unsurprisingly replied 'no'.

Within this moment, it became clear to the researcher that insisting upon a formal application of the ethical framework (i.e. no non-research participants in a group interview setting) was likely to result in this young woman leaving with her friend and that instinctively this felt problematic. In this context, the researcher represented an unfamiliar visitor, on Sally's territory, asking for her support but setting out new parameters about the terms on which she was welcome within her own project. In addition, the young woman's very presence demonstrated her commitment to participate in the research with no obvious benefits for herself. While on the one hand asking her to leave would allow adherence to ethical procedure, such a stance would also represent a rejection and an invalidation of her view, which had already been identified by the worker as hard to capture.

The subsequent decision to allow Sally to stay was complex and was based on multiple pieces of contextual information. Key among these was the project workers' surprise at her attendance and the fact that Sally was identified as representing an important perspective that might otherwise be difficult to access given her minimal contact with most services. Asking her to leave meant a risk of both silencing her important perspective and communicating a rejection of her offer to support the research. In addition, the researcher was aware of her announcement that she would shortly leave and her knowledge that all three invited participants were over 16 and had a long history of group work together.

Subsequently Sally (with her friend and baby) were welcomed and invited to stay. So began a dynamic process of trying to navigate consent and confidentiality in an unanticipated and challenging context, in which the researcher attempted to highlight the limits of confidentiality – hoping to encourage informed decision making from participants about what they did and didn't share (Warrington, 2013). The researcher notes beginning with broad, impersonal questions which steered away from encouraging any personal revelation, whilst largely focusing questions on Sally, who spoke candidly and with passion about her experiences of services.

Perhaps most significantly she spoke of her exclusion and marginalisation and the signifiers of power and inequality she saw around her. When asked about whether she felt listened to by professionals Sally laughed and explained her experience of attending review meetings:

> There's me in me trackies and hoodie and there's all them in their proper suits.. [laughter]… All they see is some common young child – that is it. Oh it's another hoodie causes trouble… rarr rarr rarr.

As these words highlight, formal processes of listening to 'marginalised' young people have the potential to exclude as well as empower. A clear parallel exists for our research where a desire to hold too tightly to prescribed processes, conceived and approved far from lived research, can work counter to intentions. Overly narrow ideas about young people's 'best interests' easily overlook the wider (or less obvious) benefits of capturing marginalised perspectives and conversely the harms created through exclusion or 'silencing' those young people for whom our formal processes are neither meaningful or easy to engage with. Furthermore it can entrench the power dynamics between researcher and researched.

Each of the studies presented in this paper shared a commitment to creating a space for research interactions that could be accessed by diverse young people identified as marginalised by other formal service and consultation processes. Within these spaces, we sought to enable young people to share their experiences, whilst being free from judgement and disapproval, with the view to enabling research engagement to be a route for individual advocacy or influencing policy change at a broader level. In order to achieve these aims there was a need to reframe what is meant by protection within the research space. Rather than protecting young people by avoiding the discussion of 'sensitive issues', we recognise the protective benefits to young people in being able to share their perspectives safely, whilst feeling valued and listened to by wider audiences. Research has shown that providing a safe and reflective space to discuss sensitive topics can be cathartic and go some way to reduce the stigma experienced by those who are victims of CSE (McClain & Amar, 2013). In support of this, young people in all three studies reflected on the benefits of engaging in a reflective research interview or workshop. Furthermore, the potential for young people's views and experiences to influence longer-term policy and practice narratives was also recognised as potentially supportive of young people's longer-term wellbeing.

Discussion

Research that seeks to gain the views of children who have experiences that are identified as ethically sensitive, has a tendency to be flagged as 'risky', and as a consequence diverse perspectives of those with lived experience are unintentionally marginalised (Silverio et al., 2021). In these scenarios, the potential for distress and re-traumatisation is often foregrounded and yet in all of our experiences we acknowledge that alongside these risks (which are legitimate and real) we also need to recognise benefits. The act of research can provide a powerful moment of recognition and legitimation for those who have experienced harm and create opportunities for those who have been previously marginalised to contribute to generating change at both a practice and policy level. As Bovarnick & Cody (2021) note, risk in this field needs to be put into perspective. By working flexibly, creatively and inclusively, it is possible for research to centre these marginalised narratives and to ensure that knowledge is safely built on, and with, lived experience. In this way, research can play a role in contributing to tackling injustice; create opportunities to counter missing perspectives in public narratives; and thereby aid in democratising the production and dissemination of knowledge. In doing so, research makes inroads towards dismantling some of the patterns of power perpetuated by traditional patterns of knowledge production, which tends to elevate particular narratives while obscuring or missing out others. While we must be careful not to over claim the contribution of our research to redressing these relationships, how we undertake it and who we manage to include can challenge some of the injustices that are entrenched in knowledge generation, albeit in small ways.

While we concur that the inclusion of previously excluded perspectives are fundamental in creating knowledge, it is important to acknowledge the process of collecting this information can raise important ethical considerations. Alongside the importance of advance planning and ethical review processes, our experiences have taught us that researchers cannot anticipate every potential ethical scenario. Rather our collective research experience suggests a need to be prepared to engage with relational dynamics that make up the 'ethically important moments' discussed by Guillemin and Gillam (2004). While keen to share young people's voices, and herald their views as representing first-hand experience of CSE and associated services, we must also consider our own positionalities within the wider structure of knowledge. As the 'recorder' of multiple truths (Beazley et al., 2009), it is not the role of the researcher to police information put forward by participants. This matter is made altogether more complex when conducting research with participants who have previous experience of abuse, coercion and manipulation, as shared previously in relation to Robyn and her understanding of 'naughty'. Although it is not the role of a researcher to contradict participants, researchers must be mindful that they are not complicit in reinforcing harmful narratives given to children by those who may have previously harmed them.

Empathy is a much needed skill for qualitative researchers (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009), especially when the intention of the research is to engage participants in discussions that prompt a recollection of previous traumatic experiences, which potentially renders them vulnerable (Melrose, 2011). Of course the balance of power is complex in a research setting, and it is the role of the researcher to help participants feel comfortable and engaged in research spaces. As demonstrated in the sections above, power imbalances can present in different ways, and it is important that research spaces are continually (re)negotiated, with the best interests of participants at the centre of all research decisions. For these reasons, it is important that participatory research remains fluid and able to adapt to changing circumstances (Lenette, 2022). We draw upon research scenarios in which Imogen, Jo, Robyn and Sally each presented dilemmas that were negotiated by researchers in the moment. In these examples, we demonstrate that the wellbeing of participants was granted precedence over formal procedural ethics in a way that did not contravene the parameters set by the ethical approval granted for each study. Instead, we recognised that young people have different responses and that consent has to be negotiated, individually and with sensitivity to the circumstances that young people are in at the time. A final ethical challenge for researchers, in relation to consent and confidentiality, is ensuring that young people's understanding of these constructs remain 'live' throughout the project, so that as their experience of participating in the research changes, their understanding of these constructs move with them. In this way, participants continue to have control over their participation and the information they choose to share. We thereby suggest that researchers consider building in opportunities for young people's choice and decision-making, even when research designs are not intended to be participatory. This may include intentionally applying for ethical approval in stages, so that feedback from young people regarding what feels most comfortable and accessible to them is considered as a project progresses.

Ethical boundaries are important and the formal structures that set out guidance for ethical research practice are fundamental in ensuring that there are recognised parameters on the limits of the topic being investigated; accountability of researchers; commitments to safety and best interests of participants and management of risk. However it is vital that such structures also leave space for situational idiosyncrasies and encourage the space for reflection; skills for relational practice; and mechanisms in place to enable shared consideration to address complex issues during the research process. These reflective processes help to facilitate new ways of knowing, that can arise as the research progresses (de St Croix & Doherty, 2022; Lenette, 2022). Procedural ethics cannot capture all possible scenarios and the realities of ethical practice cannot always be anticipated, we therefore urge researchers to recognise the needs of different individuals, in different spaces and to ensure that institutional ethics do not override the needs of individual research participants. Our experiences have shown that it is the application and reflection of principles rather than fixed procedures that enable ethical research practice and consider the observation by McLeod (2007:285) that 'a prerequisite for adults working with disaffected youth is sensitivity towards issues of power'. In the field of sexual violence, it remains vital for researchers to take into account the previous experiences of trauma and the marginalisation of 'vulnerable' participants and to enable young people to shape the nature of their own engagement in research.

Our research sought to platform the perspectives of those who have been previously marginalised and to thereby create a valuable and safe space for participants to share their experiences. As such, we recognise that while presented as a linear process, research can encompass a number of potentially 'sticky' situations that have to be considered 'in the moment'. While important in securing research integrity, a commitment to working ethically can impact upon the timelines of projects, and thereby has implications for funders. Yet, researchers have a duty of care towards participants, and must strive to make research engagement safe and positive by creating the conditions to ensure that young people's decisions are informed, as well as providing space and time for participants to reconsider their engagement. In this paper, we highlight the importance of building choice and control for participants into research processes, and in doing so, consider that by creating the space for participants to engage in research in meaningful ways, we must also hold and embrace the space for participants to meaningfully withdraw from research. Our approach to ethics must then be responsive and reflective, to both facilitate engagement and empower young people to act self-protectively, in their own best interests.

Conclusions

The research included in this paper sought exclusively to collect the views of young people who had experienced sexual abuse and exploitation. As such, participants in all three studies were identified in a range of professional contexts as 'vulnerable', including both the organisations providing services to them and in the context of university ethical review processes. Accessing this group of participants is incredibly important and helps to ensure that their voices are not silenced in favour of those who claim to act in their 'best interests' or by the policy and practice that shapes their experiences of support. Yet, research in this area is not straightforward and the need to balance unequal power dynamics to ensure that research creates a safe ethical space often requires careful consideration. It is therefore necessary to balance competing priorities in order to empower young people to set the scope of their participation. In this paper, we highlight some of the challenges that researchers encounter and the blurry boundaries that must be negotiated in order to maintain positive relationships with research partners whilst ensuring that research remains 'participant friendly'. While acknowledging that procedural ethics are important in ensuring that researchers carefully contemplate the potential risks associated with their research, they are not sufficient on their own, and it is thereby vital that researchers consider the wider implications and the need to behave ethically 'in the moment'.

Safe research practice, particularly in relation to unanticipated or relational ethical issues, are enhanced by structures of peer review, reflective discussion and shared decision making. Relatedly the process of coming together to write this article has further highlighted to us the value of peer support and spaces for honest reflection about the realities of research practice in this field. We thereby encourage researchers working in sensitive spaces to support one another and to be reflective in their own practice so that research continues to be a safe space in which those who are perceived to be especially vulnerable can be supported to share their experiences.

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