

Narratives of Ambivalence

The Ethics of Vulnerability and Agency in Research with Girls in the Sex Trade

Alexandra Ricard-Guay and Myriam Denov



Abstract

In this article, we examine the ethical realities that emerged from a qualitative study with adolescent girls on sexual exploitation. We outline and articulate the importance of moving beyond the inclusion of girls' voices in research to discussing the ethical and practical implications of doing so. We consider the notions of power, victimization, and agency and highlight the ethical dilemma of doing research with girls in the sex trade, particularly in a context in which participants' narratives are characterized by profound ambivalence, as seen in their frequent oscillation between narratives of victimization on the one hand, and of agency and power on the other. The nexus between girlhood studies and ethics provides us with a valuable opportunity to analyze, and thus highlight, the importance of social context in understanding these adolescent girls' narratives and self-representations.

Keywords

adolescence, life stories, research ethics, sexual exploitation, victimization, power



Introduction

Given the growing public, political, and media attention to the phenomenon of the sexual exploitation of young people, particularly adolescent girls, in Canada and internationally, and the level of renewed interest in this topic, an increasing amount of research is being conducted in this area. Despite a burgeoning literature, alongside an acknowledgement on the part of researchers of the importance of including young people's direct perspectives, few studies have included the voices of adolescent girls (see Beckett and Schubotz 2014; Dank 2011; Kidd and Liborio 2011). Additionally, there is very little discussion on how this inclusion can best be achieved, and on the ethical and practical implications of doing so.



The choice of language that frames this topic constitutes, in itself, a point of ethical questioning. Current research has tended to portray the phenomenon of sexual exploitation of girls as being one-dimensional, focused mainly on their experiences of victimization. While it is important to acknowledge the abuses committed against minors in the sex trade, this one-dimensional narrative may come into opposition with how the girls themselves perceive their experiences, and may actually hinder an understanding of the complexity and plurality of these girls' own sense of self (Ricard-Guay 2015). Thus, it becomes central to include girls' voices in order to explore not only their vulnerabilities, but also their agency, strength, resilience, and coping strategies (Saewyc et al. 2013; Williams 2010; Dodsworth 2014). Failing to consider their agency may deny "their sense of positive self-image in finding survival strategy" (Dodsworth 2014: 186).

Drawing on the concepts of language, power, victimization, and agency, we have, in this article, several goals. First, we build on key contributions from critical childhood studies in reflecting on the ethics of research on sensitive topics. In particular, scholars (see Dorner 2015; Graham et al. 2015; Komulainen 2007; Meloni et al. 2015; Spyrou 2011) have emphasized the importance of moving the discussion on the inclusion of the voices of children and young people a step further by questioning how these voices are brought into and dealt with in social research in ethical ways. This article seeks first to advance these discussions by examining the ethics of doing research with children, and girls in particular. Second, it reflects on the ethical challenges that emerged from a qualitative study, conducted in Montreal, on girls' experiences in the sex trade. A key finding arising from the study was the profound ambivalence that marked girls' narrative accounts of their experiences of sexual exploitation that often vacillated between a sense of agency and an underscoring of their experiences of victimization. As researchers, we are confronted with balancing the tension between recognizing girls' sense of agency and ensuring their rights and their protection from exploitation so how do we navigate and integrate participants' seemingly contradictory views of themselves as being simultaneously victims, agents, and even perpetrators (recruiters of other girls) in the sex trade?

After presenting the study, its objectives, and the context within which the research took place we then discuss the ethics of language in the context of research with girls in the sex trade, and we highlight our ethical dilemmas regarding their claims of agency and vulnerability. In particular, we engage critically with the realities of giving voice to participants. Ultimately, we

focus on the importance of looking beyond the inclusion of girls' voices, in order to consider what Dorner (2015) has framed as the post-practice ethics. Once data collection is completed the ways in which narratives are analyzed and shared—particularly when the topic under study rests on, and articulates a thin line between abuse and violence on the one hand, and agency and power on the other—are of key importance. Within this context, the connection between girlhood and ethics constitutes an opportunity for analysis that underscores the importance of the social context in shaping adolescent girls' narratives and self-representations.

The Objectives and Context of the Study

This article is based on a qualitative study conducted in the greater regions of Montreal, Canada, between 2013 and 2014 that relied on interviews with two groups of participants, adolescent girls and young women between the ages of 16 and 25 who had experienced sexual exploitation in the sex trade (n=8), and service providers and practitioners (n=30) working with this population.¹

The research had two objectives. The first was to better understand the adolescent girls' perceptions of their experiences, and their views of the services provided to them. The second was to contrast these perspectives with those of the practitioners and service providers working with them. In this article, we offer a reflection on the fieldwork conducted with eight girl participants, all of whom had been involved in the sex trade as minors.² Among these, six were still minors at the time of being interviewed.

Fieldwork

The participants were recruited through Youth Protection Centers (n=6), of whom four were in rehabilitation residential facilities when they were interviewed, and through local community organizations (n=2). Ethical approval was obtained through McGill University and the Youth Protection Agencies. Each participant signed a consent form, as did the parents of those who were under 18 years of age. Interviews were conducted in the Youth Protection Agencies. Participation was voluntary and none of the girls' parents refused their daughter's participation. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the population under study, great attention was given to maintaining the adolescents' and young women's safety and confidentiality.

New Language for an Old Phenomenon

The ways in which sexual exploitation has been understood and approached in theoretical and practice circles has evolved significantly over time. The current context is one characterized by a reformulation of this social problem. While previously referred to as juvenile prostitution, the issue has now been reframed and is commonly referred to as sexual exploitation or the commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) of children/minors. At times, the issue has also been described as a new form of trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation or sexual slavery (Melrose and Pearce 2013; Ricard-Guay 2015).

CSE is defined as any situation in which a child or an adolescent under the age of 18 is involved in a sexual act in exchange for a benefit that might be in cash or in kind (material, such as food, cigarettes, drugs or non-material, such as a roof for the night or protection) for the child or for one or more third parties (International Labour Organization 2008). CSE may include a wide range of activities such as sex trafficking, forcing children and adolescents to engage in survival sex, procuring them for prostitution, sex tourism, exotic dancing clubs, and using them in sex shows (public or private) as well as luring them on the internet (Estes and Weiner 2001; International Labor Organization (ILO) 2008).

The language used to refer to the involvement of young people in the sex trade is not without contention (Pearce 2009). The shift in the conceptualization of young people engaging in prostitution as a form of sexual exploitation constitutes an advancement in the protection of children's and adolescents' rights, including girls' rights, since it acknowledges the abuses committed against them. Yet, some scholars highlight the potential limitations of this reframing. The emphasis on victimization and abuse may conceal the diversity of young people's experiences, and may ultimately restrict the acknowledgement of their sense of agency, and the various degrees of control they may attempt to exercise over their lives (Dodsworth 2014; Melrose 2013a; Pearce 2009). Another way to refer to this issue is to use the terms *youth involvement* or *engagement in the sex trade* which takes into account young people's perspectives since they may not perceive their situations as being exploitative (Melrose 2013b).

For this article, we use the term sexual exploitation, thus recognizing that girls' involvement in the sex trade is a form of exploitation. Yet we use this term cautiously in order not to fall into a dichotomous agent/victim framework. In addition, in the context of this study, we gave participants a chance to reflect on their own terms and definitions in relation to their experiences.

Words and Language Matter: Ethics in Relation to Defining the Topic

As noted above, the term sexual exploitation may connote vulnerability, powerlessness, and coercion, while the formulation of youth involvement in the sex trade may foster the idea that, despite potential risk and abuse, a young person may have made a conscious choice to engage in the sex trade. The legal or research categories that have been developed by the academic and legal communities hold inherent limitations. These two categories not only define the topic in terms of fixed parameters, but also may not always correspond to the ways in which the participants define their own lives and experiences. Girls may not always view themselves as victims in these experiences (Ricard-Guay 2015). Yet, to include such views can be complex and challenging. A key ethical issue when one is designing studies on this topic is the choice of language to be used at every stage of the research process—in the consent form, in the presentation of the research, and during interviews. Terminology forms a vital part of the interaction with research participants, and may influence their willingness to engage in the research. Thus, for this study, practitioners working with girls were consulted in order to develop the interview guide and help inform the choice of language. Some concerns were raised and these included whether or not the use of the term sexual exploitation would foster reluctance in the potential participants to engage in the research. On the advice of the practitioners, the term prostitution was avoided since none of the adolescent girls were said to refer to their experiences in this manner. Instead, the girls were said to have referred to themselves as escorts and as having worked in strip clubs, massage parlors, or in on-line escort services. The term sexual exploitation was chosen given that the participants' experiences had already been named and defined as exploitation by their social workers prior to the research interviews.

The question of language and associated categories is closely related to the issues of sampling. How one defines sexual exploitation will determine who to count in. The identification and naming of the experience is actually a joint process—the adolescent girl reveals her experience, and the practitioner defines it as exploitation. However, the adolescent may not herself endorse this position or definition. This discussion about words and language highlights the fact that research is framed by, and embedded in a social, cultural, and political context. Ethically, researchers need to be aware of the choices they make, and importantly, how participants' narratives may be in opposition to the language chosen by the researcher.

In order to open up the discussion about language, participants were asked during interviews to comment and reflect on the notion of sexual exploitation and what the term meant to them. The girls' perspectives varied. Some participants³ viewed the sex trade as a means to achieve independence and autonomy. They also perceived the sex trade as a means to accessing a luxurious lifestyle in which girls were perceived as beautiful and as being in financial control.

It's almost seen as something good in society. The girl, she works, she does it well, she has a lot of money, she is beautiful, she is young. That's what society wants from girls. It's society and the images of the women that put you the idea in your head that women have to be beautiful, she has to be attractive, she must be perfect. . . . You know, it was like a dream life [the sex trade]. I always had problems conforming to rules, at school, at home, with curfews. So, for me, it was complete liberty, it was me who had control on everything. (Angela)

The participants acknowledged the influence of the current culture that often fuels a positive image of girls' involvement in the sex trade, and that tends to glamorize, normalize or render banal the act of selling one's own body. In that sense, the portrayal of selling sex influenced their positive expectations with regard to their engagement in the sex trade. However, being involved in the sex trade was also simultaneously viewed as a trap from which it was difficult to escape. When Angela, who had reported feelings of power and control over her situation, was asked what she would say to another adolescent who expressed a desire to enter the sex trade, she said, "I would tell her don't start. Because there is no going back. You get trapped." Participants also perceived the sex trade as a milieu in which abuse was prevalent. They saw it as representing a life in which most recruiters, pimps, and traffickers exploit and make money at the girls' expense. Janice said, "So many guys tried to recruit me. I mean it seems like all the guys just want that."

These differing reflections from these participants illustrate the complexity of meaning that surrounds the sex trade, particularly as it relates to power, agency, and victimization. Ethically, this highlights the importance of allowing participants to articulate their own views so as to inform research.

Ethical Concerns Regarding Vulnerability and Agency of Girls in the Sex Trade

While ethical issues and considerations are unquestionably pertinent to research with both children and adults, issues of power in the researcher-

participant relationship may present themselves more sharply when study participants are children and/or young people (Morrow 2008). The main differences are related to the perceived vulnerability of children and youth and their capabilities, or lack of them, to influence and make decisions about their lives (Morrow and Richards 1996). The issue of power in a research relationship may be further intensified by the nature of the research. A sensitive topic is defined as being potentially “intimate, discreditable or incriminating” (Lee 1993: ix). The issue of girls’ involvement in the sex trade meets these three criteria, which may overlap. Research on girls in the sex trade may also be potentially incriminating since disclosing at-risk behaviors may require child welfare professionals to enforce safeguarding measures even though they may be viewed and/or experienced by adolescent girls as sanctions and/or punitive measures. In addition to recognizing this as being a sensitive topic we need to recognize, too, the vulnerability of the population under study. Liamputtong considers so-called vulnerable populations as being hidden, hard to reach, silent, invisible, and marginalized individuals who are subject to discrimination and stigma and who may be more at risk of harm, or coercive influence (2007). People from these so-called vulnerable social groups can be difficult to reach and reluctant to disclose their experiences. A common methodology chosen to reach participants is to rely on gatekeepers and to resort to institutional recruitment through service providers. This, however, may greatly limit access to a diversity and multiplicity of voices, particularly those of individuals who are not in contact with service providers. As is apparent, power issues that have to do with who is counted in are not limited to the researcher-participant relationship but also extend to relations between participants and institutional gatekeepers.

In the case of girls in the sex trade, the sensitive nature of the research, as well as the power and positionality of the researcher and gatekeepers affects every stage of the research process, from design to implementation and dissemination. Given these ethical realities, researchers have sought to address these challenges by attempting to give voice to marginalized research populations. In the course of interviews, all the girls who were in Youth Protection programs told the researcher that the interview was an opportunity to take a break from their daily activities. They saw it as a space in which they could freely discuss their perceptions (and frustrations) concerning their life’s experiences and also as a way of presenting to a neutral person (that is, the researcher who stood outside of their intervention plan) their own version of their story.

The Complexity of Giving Voice: Ethics as Embedded in Social Interaction

One way in which researchers have sought to counter ethical dilemmas inherent to sensitive research has been to give voice to research participants. In relation to child participants, over the last 20 years there has been increased acknowledgement of the importance of integrating children's views and experiences in research (Ireland and Holloway 2007; Komulainen 2007; Meloni et al. 2015; Morrow 2008; Morrow and Richards 1996). This has been in response to the reality that girls and boys who have been caught up in circumstances of severe disadvantage and prolonged violence rarely have opportunities to publicly articulate their own perspectives, knowledge, concerns, and needs. Reflecting conventional notions of power and what is regarded as expert knowledge, children have tended to be talked about by scholars, rather than talked to. In parallel, critical discussions about the theorization of childhood and its implications for research with young people has developed in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and geography (Meloni et al. 2015; Morrow 2008; Morrow and Richards 1996). In the realm of what have become known as the new childhood studies, children and adolescents are viewed as social agents able to influence their immediate contexts. Children and adolescents are described as possessing knowledge and perceptions of their environment that are valid; their voices must be considered and articulated in research (Morrow and Richards 1996; Morrow 2008). However, a limitation of much of this work is that it has tended to treat categories such as childhood and youth as gender-neutral. However, including the participation of young people is only a first step in providing them with an opportunity to articulate their gendered voices. Enabling voice, in fact, raises new ethical questions (Meloni et al. 2015). It is also important to question critically how these voices are produced and shared (Meloni et al. 2015; Komulainen 2007). Furthermore, it is not sufficient to re-conceive of children and adolescents as merely autonomous agents. Particularly in relation to marginalized youth, the interconnectedness, complexity, and integration of both agency and vulnerability must also be considered. Furthermore, while "taking people's accounts of their experiences is a necessary element of knowledge of gendered lives and actual power relations," it is impossible to treat "experiential knowledge as simply true" (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002: 127). The ways in which narratives are constructed need to be accounted for in research. The narratives are influenced by many factors stemming from the context in which both researcher

and participant are situated—the socio-political contexts, as well as the institutional contexts. Narratives are shaped and embedded in social interactions: “the notion of ‘voice’ is understood as a multidimensional social construction, which is subject to change” (Komulainen 2007: 11).

Meloni et al. propose to redefine ethics as being reflexive and as a relational space of intersubjectivity. Ethics embraces much more than the institutional rules, requirements, and guidelines of conduct, and constitutes a continuum as well as a process, and in that sense a relational and interactional process. By conceiving of ethics as a “performative practice of intersubjectivity” (2015: 108), in relation to girls in the sex trade, this process emphasizes the delicate tension between protection and safeguarding, and listening to and integrating the views of adolescent girls.

Ethics, Girlhood, and Narratives of Ambivalence

In keeping with the approach of the new childhood studies, this study began from the standpoint that girl participants are key actors in the construction of knowledge about their experiences, and that they hold unique ways of thinking and understanding their environments and needs (Morrow 2008). However, if, as noted above, ethical processes are considered interactive, relational, and if they question the ways in which the voices of young people are brought into research, girlhood and gendered realities must also be considered. This is particularly important given that the social construction of girls and girlhood affects the construction of participant narratives and also the context within which research is framed. Indeed, adolescent girls’ experiences moving into and out of the sex trade are strongly embedded in social representations of girlhood, which is linked to notions of identity, sexuality, and femininity.

As proposed by Aapola et al. (2005) there are two key competing discourses regarding girlhood, one embodied by girl power and the other by the notion of the girl-at-risk. These opposing representations of girlhood are well reflected in the discourses of girls in the sex trade, located between the sense of autonomy and the lived experiences of abuse and violence. In fact, the very notion of sexual exploitation is conveyed typically through images of an adolescent girl, rather than a boy. Moreover, within the discourses of vulnerability, girls may be depicted as the easy prey of unscrupulous pimps and traffickers who entice them, manipulate them, or force them into the sex trade. In the vulnerability discourse, girls are often perceived from the standpoint of double vulnerability as both minor and girl.

In light of these representations of girlhood, we suggest that the study of sexual exploitation constitutes an important arena in which to interrogate the relationship between girlhood and ethics. The intertwined notions of vulnerability and agency are socially constructed by gender norms and expectations. In turn, this can shape the narratives of the adolescent girls themselves with regard to their experiences. In fact, a key point that emerged from this study was related to the ambivalence expressed and experienced by participants; as already mentioned, narratives of both victimization and agency were evident. Many participants reported experiencing various forms of victimization, with associated feelings of shame, guilt and self-blame.

... I really did it on purpose to let that world enter my life. I'm really guilty, because, you know, I was hanging with those people, but I knew they were bad people, bad boys. But you know, the status was 'oh, she hangs out with them'. [N]ow when I think of it, I am ashamed of myself (Janice)

Their guilt was also linked to previous experiences of sexual violence that had had a negative effect on their self-esteem. Two girls expressed how they perceived their involvement in the sex trade as being linked to their own negative self-image and lack of self-worth, as well as being linked to previous experiences of sexual violence.

When I was sixteen, I was raped by many guys. So it kind of destroyed my reputation, because afterward everyone viewed me as a whore. (Janice)

It has been a long time that I feel like... I mean even before I was escort, I was with different guys, never stable. My reputation before, like when I was 12 years old, it was like I was almost like I was a whore already. (Sophie)

At other points of their narratives, girls also appeared to challenge actively their victimhood status. During interviews, participants often presented themselves in direct contrast to the stereotypical image of themselves as powerless girls in the sex trade. They did so by reinforcing their self-representation as that of being in control, and being strong, wise, and able to navigate difficult and risky situations.

You know, I really knew how it worked, this is what let me do things by myself, without having someone who controls me all the time. I think that is what protected me.

I was posting my picture by myself, receiving calls on my phone, and screening the clients. I was controlling all of it. (Angela)

These narratives demonstrate these girls' complex and ambivalent views of their involvement in the sex trade. In fact, while some participants (five out of the eight) reported a sense of agency and control in relation to their choice

to engage in the sex trade, at other moments during interviews their narratives were characterized by a strong ambivalence toward their involvement. The following extract from the interview with Angela provides an illustration of such narratives of ambivalence. At the beginning of the interview, she emphasized her sense of being in control. However, as the interview progressed, she gradually shifted her narrative to reveal her distress and even disgust at the reality of her being in the sex trade. At the beginning of the interview she said, “You know, it’s me who decided to work in that [sex trade]. You know I wanted to do that for a long time.” Further on in the interview she said,

It’s my body, I don’t really like it to sleep with anybody. It’s a bit disgusting. When I do it, I try to shut one part of my mind, to disconnect from my body. I say to myself, OK, it is just for the money. I do it, and after it is over. Sometimes it works well that I do that ... but, I mean, I wished it would always work that way, but... .

By the end of the interview she claimed,

You know, I don’t really like it ... I would also like it to know what it’s like to have a normal life. More I make the choice of doing that [working as an escort], more I have the impression that I don’t see anything else around anymore. I don’t know how to explain this emotion.

Despite drifting back and forth between seeing herself as victim and as agent, Angela nonetheless continued to assert that she wanted to continue in the sex trade. The shift in her unveiling of different narratives within the course of a single encounter makes clear the importance of approaching oppositional stances of vulnerability and agency with caution.

Participants’ ambivalence may stem from diverse aspects of their experience. Most of the adolescent girls reported that they had had and continued to have positive hopes and expectations in relation to the sex trade. At times, their involvement in the sex trade was also represented—in addition to the factors relating to autonomy and the earning of money as previously mentioned—as a means of increasing their self-esteem or as an essential part of their love relationships with their pimps (Ricard-Guay 2015). Involvement in the sex trade was also perceived as being a means of self-realization—being beautiful, attractive, and rich—all elements linked to power and status. Both peer pressure and the social environment appeared to foster a positive representation of the sex trade as a viable and attractive option for these girls. This representation of power and beauty appeared to contribute simultaneously to their sense of control and independence, and to their ambivalence with regard to the violence or abuse they experienced. Their

positive expectations progressively shifted toward a greater recognition of the negative outcomes on their lives.

This ambivalence is important as are the efforts of the participants to sometimes present themselves as non-victims. This not only demonstrates the multifaceted nature of their lives, but serves, too, to highlight the danger of employing dichotomous representations of girls as either victims or agents since neither is necessarily and consistently true and this, in turn, may also give rise to ethical dilemmas in how to represent the girls' contradictory views. Attempting to solve these dilemmas involves taking into consideration the power relationship intrinsic to presenting and representing girls' voices. This points to the importance of looking at the post-practice ethics (Dorner 2015). The issues of gatekeepers, access to, and recruitment of participants have been well documented as challenges to accessing the voices of adolescent boys and girls. Yet, accessing adolescents' voices represents only a starting point on the continuum of ethical consideration that extends to the possibility of researchers influencing the ways in which these voices are interpreted and represented. Indeed, researchers may, in fact, become the gatekeepers of children's voices, and this raises, in turn, key ethical dilemmas related to power, access, and responsibility.

The ambivalence that characterized the girls' narratives inevitably pushed us as researchers to examine the ethical dilemmas inherent in our data analysis and interpretation. The ways in which adolescent girls portray themselves is influenced by social interactions and by the social constructions of girls involved in the sex trade. Thus, to better understand their sense of agency and victimization, it is also important to situate their self-representations and narratives within their wider social context.

Taking into consideration girls' ambivalence gives us the opportunity to bridge and explore the oscillation between opposed emotions and behaviors particularly because ambivalence changes over time, according to multilevel interactions (Connidis 2015). The interview itself can become an interactional space. In the context of an interview, girls may be driven by a desire to oppose the portrayal of themselves as victims and may, therefore, represent themselves in their narrative as being more powerful. The interview can, in some cases, become a moment of empowerment, and an opportunity to provide their version of the events of their lives. Yet, this interpretation must be counter-balanced against the accounts of victimization that the same girls also narrate. Moreover, the concept of ambivalence sheds light on how a girl's perception of the level of acceptability of certain forms of violence may be shaped by peer influences, especially for teens (Weiss 2013). During interviews, girls indeed tended to trivialize their experiences of sexual violence.

The ethical dimensions of research on such a sensitive topic is also linked to its social implications. As highlighted by some scholars, the reframing of this phenomenon in terms of sexual exploitation has led to an emphasis on one pattern of entry into the sex trade—enticement and recruitment by pimps (sometimes acting as the girl’s boyfriend) or traffickers. Yet, entry into the sex trade does not occur in cultural or social isolation; it should not be conceived of as being only the result of individual actions, whether by the supposedly vulnerable adolescent or the unscrupulous figure of the pimp. The exploitation of girls is perhaps much more easily understood when a recruiter or a trafficker is responsible for luring adolescents, but this does not always involve a pimp. It becomes more difficult to envision exploitation when an adolescent girl enters the sex trade independently, of her own volition, and when girls themselves act as recruiters of other girls (as was documented in this study). The way in which involvement in the sex trade is perceived and promoted in society, and how girls’ sexuality is socially constructed influence their beliefs, sense of self-worth, and sense of self.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the ethics of carrying out research with adolescent girls, and looked at how social context shapes their narratives and ours, and frames the language typically used in research, thus moving beyond the consideration of ethics as an issue only of consent and of institutional guidelines. As we have argued, it is crucial to include the voices of adolescent girls regarding a topic that is increasingly presented in the mediascape, and one that is often portrayed in a sensationalized way. In some cases, these popular and media portrayals may have an impact on the girls themselves and on their self-representations. It is crucial to provide an opportunity for the participants to reflect on these issues and on the ways in which research is framed, and encourage them to present their own perspectives on these. Moreover, it is essential to move beyond simply giving voice to participants; this is merely a first step in a long and complex process involving the young people themselves, the gatekeepers, and us as researchers.

It is fundamentally important to recognize that exploring the diversity and ambivalence of girls’ narratives regarding their sense of power and/or vulnerability in the sex trade is in no way the same as questioning the abuse and criminal implications of enticing minors or engaging in sexual acts with

them for material, financial or non-material rewards. Instead, such an exploration helps to better understand the young people's perspectives, their motivations, and the sources of their resilience. This, in turn, can inform relevant social practices aimed at supporting these young people. Exploring ambivalent and contradictory narratives may create a zone of discomfort for researchers and may prove destabilizing for them. Yet, these perceptions, even when they oppose or throw into question the nexus of protection/risk, vulnerability/agency, and independence/dependence must be seen to be essential data that should be informing social services and practices.

The perceived vulnerability that has characterized portrayals of girls in the sex trade may have a powerful influence on the research process; researchers may frame their work with pre-conceived ideas about the ways in which girls deal with and navigate their sexuality as potential victims, while the girls themselves may not see themselves as inherently vulnerable and exploited. In moving beyond the tension between victim and agent, sound research must integrate the multiplicity of participants' representations. Ultimately, while enabling and fostering the voices of participants represents an important and potentially empowering step, it certainly does not solve all the ethical dilemmas inherent to the research process but, at the very least, listening to the voices of girls involved in the sex trade has compelled us as researchers to reflect on the ethical issues that are raised as a result of this, and to attempt to act accordingly.



ALEXANDRA RICARD-GUAY is a Research Associate at the European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies. Her areas of research are human trafficking, gender-based violence, gender and migration, as well as girls and sexual exploitation.

MYRIAM DENOY holds the Canada Research Chair in Youth, Gender and Armed Conflict (Tier 1) in the School of Social Work at McGill University. Her interests include children and youth in adversity, and international child protection, with an emphasis on war and political violence, children in armed conflict, and gender-based violence.



Notes

1. All interviews were conducted by the first author.
2. The age of majority in Quebec, Canada, is 18.
3. All the names used are pseudonyms.

References

- Aapola, Sinikka, Marnina Gonick, and Anita Harris. 2005. *Young Femininity. Girlhood, Power and Social Change*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Beckett, Helen, and Dirk Schubotz. 2014. "Young People's Self-Reported Experiences of Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Violence: A View from Northern Ireland." *Journal of Youth Studies* 17, no 4: 430–445. doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.825708
- Connidis, Ingrid Arnet. 2015. "Exploring Ambivalence in Family Ties: Progress and Prospects." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77, no. 1: 77–95. doi:10.1111/jomf.12150.
- Dank, Meredith L. 2011. *The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children*. El Paso: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC.
- Dodsworth, Jane. 2014. "Sexual Exploitation, Selling and Swapping Sex: Victimhood and Agency." *Child Abuse Review* 23, no 3: 185–199. doi.org/10.1002/car.2282
- Dorner, Lisa M. 2015. "From Relating to (Re)Presenting Challenges and Lessons Learned From an Ethnographic Study With Young Children." *Qualitative Inquiry* 21, no 4: 354–365. doi.org/10.1177/1077800414557824
- Estes, Richard J., and Neil Alan Weiner. 2001. *The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the US, Canada and Mexico*. University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Work, Center for the Study of Youth Policy.
- Graham, Anne, Mary Ann Powell, and Nicola Taylor. 2015. "Ethical Research Involving Children: Encouraging Reflexive Engagement in Research with Children and Young People." *Children and Society* 29, no 5: 331–343. doi.org/10.1111/chso.12089
- International Labour Organization (ILO). 2008. *Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents. The ILO's Response*. International Labour Organization (ILO), International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC).
- Ireland, Lorraine, and Immy Holloway. 2007. "Qualitative Health Research with Children." *Children and Society* 10, no 2: 155–164. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.1996.tb00465.x>

- Kidd, Sean, and Renata Maria Coimbra Liborio. 2011. "Sex Trade Involvement in São Paulo, Brazil and Toronto, Canada Narratives of Social Exclusion and Fragmented Identities." *Youth and Society* 43, no. 3: 982–1009. doi.org/10.1177/0044118X10379127
- Komulainen, Sirkka. 2007. "The Ambiguity of the Child's 'Voice' in Social Research." *Childhood* 14, no 1: 11–28. doi.org/10.1177/0907568207068561
- Lee, Raymond M. 1993. *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Liamputtong, Pranee. 2007. *Researching the Vulnerable. A Guide to Sensitive Research Methods*. SAGE Publications.
- Meloni, Francesca, Karine Vanthuyne, and Cécile Rousseau. 2015. "Towards a Relational Ethics: Rethinking Ethics, Agency and Dependency in Research with Children and Youth." *Anthropological Theory* 15, no 1: 106–123. doi.org/10.1177/1463499614565945
- Melrose, Margaret. 2013a. "Twenty-First Century Party People: Young People and Sexual Exploitation in the New Millennium." *Child Abuse Review* 22, no 3: 155–168.
- Melrose, Margaret. 2013b. "Young People and Sexual Exploitation: A Critical Discourse Analysis." Pp. 9–22 in *Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking*, ed. Margaret Melrose and Jenny Pearce. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Melrose, Margaret, and Jenny Pearce. 2013. *Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Morrow, Virginia. 2008. "Ethical Dilemmas in Research with Children and Young People About their Social Environments." *Children's Geographies* 6, no 1: 49–61.
- Morrow, Virginia, and Martin Richards. 1996. "The Ethics of Social Research with Children: An Overview." *Children and Society* 10, no. 2: 90–105. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.1996.tb00461.x>
- Pearce, Jenny. 2009. *Young People and Sexual Exploitation. 'It's Not Hidden, You Just Aren't Looking.'* New York: Routledge.
- Ramazanoglu, Caroline, and Janet Holland. 2002. *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices*. London: Sage Publications.
- Ricard-Guay, Alexandra. 2015. "Exploitation sexuelle d'adolescentes et jeunes femmes au Québec : perceptions et interventions. De l'ambivalence des sujets aux dilemmes d'intervention." PhD Diss., McGill University.
- Saewyc, Elizabeth, Bonnie Miller, Robert Rivers, Jennifer Matthews, Carla Hilario, and Pam Hirakata. 2013. "Competing Discourses About Youth Sexual Exploitation in Canadian News Media." *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 22, no. 2: 95–105. doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.2013.2041

- Spyrou, Spyros. 2011. "The Limits of Children's Voices: From Authenticity to Critical, Reflexive Representation." *Childhood* 18, no. 2: 151–165. doi.org/10.1177/0907568210387834
- Weiss, Karen G. 2013. "You Just Don't Report That Kind of Stuff: Investigating Teens' Ambivalence Toward Peer-Perpetrated, Unwanted Sexual Incidents." *Violence and Victims* 28, no. 2: 288–302.
- Williams, Linda M. 2010. "Harm and Resilience among Prostituted Teens: Broadening our Understanding of Victimisation and Survival." *Social Policy and Society* 9, no. 2: 243–254. doi.org/10.1017/S1474746409990376