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Labour pains: some considerations on the difficulties of researching juvenile prostitution

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This paper reflects on an empirical, retrospective study of juvenile prostitution. It aims to explore the ways in which the practical constraints, practical difficulties and ethical considerations that are inevitably encountered in a 'sensitive' area of research, such as young people who are exploited through prostitution, are intrinsically linked to choice of methods and the process of the research. It argues that in such research pragmatism in choice of methods is necessary to achieve the epistemological aims, of allowing the voices of disadvantaged young people who are exploited through their involvement in prostitution to be heard, while maintaining ethical integrity. In addition the paper reflects on the emotional impact of research such as this on researchers and suggests ways in which research design and the collaborative efforts of research teams may minimise potentially negative impacts on researchers. The author suggests that by anticipating problems posed by research into young people who are sexually exploited through prostitution, ethical and practical difficulties might be negotiated to enable research in this field to be taken forward in the future.

Introduction

This paper reflects on my personal experience of conducting sensitive research with people who had become involved in prostitution as juveniles. It describes the study (Melrose *et al.* 1999), explores what we mean by 'prostitution' when it is juveniles with whom we are concerned and considers what it is that renders such research 'sensitive'. The paper then goes on to examine the ways in which practical constraints and difficulties and ethical considerations shape the research process. In the final section of the paper, I consider the ways in which such research impacts on the researcher. The emotional labour and 'labour pains' I experienced while researching this topic are explored. The paper concludes that the emotional costs associated with research of this type may be reduced or aggravated by the practical constraints within which the research is located.

The study

The research upon which this paper is based was a small-scale retrospective study of people who had become involved in prostitution when

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they were juveniles. In this paper 'juveniles' and 'young people' are defined in terms of the Children Act (1989), section 105, to mean anyone under the age of 18. The study was conducted over a four month period and primarily involved in-depth, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 50 people from six different locations across England and Wales—from the north east to the south west (and excluding London). At the time of the interviews, the majority of participants were over 18, although a small proportion (6) were under 18 years of age. Eighteen participants were no longer involved in prostitution—eight of these were under 25 and ten were over 25.

The study was essentially qualitative in nature although it combined qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis. Its aims, which were to investigate the phenomenon of prostitution from the point of view of those who had been involved as juveniles, set the project quite squarely within the qualitative/interpretative tradition. It sought to 'learn from' (Reinharz 1992) those who were, or had been, involved in prostitution as juveniles in the hope that such qualitative insights would provide an empirical basis from which to inform policy developments and practical solutions for supporting such vulnerable young people.

By using conventional coding techniques and subjecting the data obtained to analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) the research was able to generate quantified background data (such as age of entry to prostitution, 'route' of entry, incidence of previous abuse and so on). Additionally, a qualitative approach provided insights that could be contextualized within evidence from previous research.

The techniques employed have enabled the production of some useful insights into the factors that lead young people into prostitution as well as illuminating those elements that make exit difficult once a young person has become involved (Melrose *et al*. 1999). The research has produced an understanding of the micro-level practices of young people who are sexually exploited through prostitution within the context of macro-level processes of inequalities of class, gender and age. It is hoped that the impact of this knowledge will influence policy agendas in relation to this vulnerable and disadvantaged group of young people.

Aims and structure of the paper

In the first section of the paper, conceptual definitions of 'prostitution' are discussed and in the next part, the nature of the sensitivity involved in researching a topic such as child prostitution is examined. The discussion continues by demonstrating the ways in which practical constraints, practical difficulties and ethical considerations, which are inevitably encountered in such a sensitive topic, are inextricably linked to choice of methods. In the next section the emotional impact of such research on the researcher is examined through reflecting on researchers' responses to handling unpleasant and disturbing data. It explores the 'emotional labour' involved and describes the 'labour pains' of such research. The paper concludes that these 'labour pains' can be exacerbated or reduced by the practical constraints

(funding context and timescale) within which the research is located and suggests that in order to take research in this area forward, funding agencies and research managers need to be sensitive to this.

Conceptual definitions of prostitution

'Prostitution' refers to a cluster of activities that 'are performed under different terms and conditions' (O'Connell-Davidson 1995). Underpinning female prostitution is 'men's access to money for the purchase of commodities in the capitalist market place and women's lack of access to it' (Scambler and Scambler 1997: xiv). Prostitution is therefore an institution that relies on a very particular set of social relations and which cannot be separated from the political, social, economic, legal and historical conditions that give rise to it (O'Neill 1997). The bottom line is that in prostitution the body is treated as an asset, 'as a means to seek subsistence' (Sangera 1997). In the study being discussed here, the definition offered by Green (1992: 5) was adopted. That is:

> 'Prostitution' is usually understood to mean the provision of sexual services in exchange for some kind of payment such as money, drink, drugs and other consumer goods, or even a roof over one's head for the night.(p. 5)

Shaw and Butler (1998) have argued that this definition tends to be adopted by street level workers and young people themselves.

The less pejorative term 'sex worker' is often preferred to that of 'prostitute' by researchers working in this field. It is argued that the former term 'acknowledges that prostitution can be seen as a form of work' and 'serves to link prostitutes politically with workers in other parts of the sex industry' (Barrett 1997: 6). This study, however, was concerned with children and young people who had become involved in prostitution, and as Pitts (1997: 152) has argued, the use of the euphemism 'workers in the sex industry' in this context:

> Merely serves to obscure the enormity of the violation. It suggests that their work is freely chosen whereas it is better seen as powerfully determined by negative experiences and reduced circumstances which constrain young people to act in ways that are inimical to their best interests.

The need to distinguish between child and adult prostitution is now officially acknowledged (Department of Health 2000). The terminology in which we discuss the involvement of the former must, therefore, necessarily differ from the language and terminology employed to discuss the involvement of the latter. It is increasingly accepted that young people who become involved in prostitution are victims of sexual abuse (Department of Health 2000). Therefore, rather than applying the term 'prostitute' or 'sex worker' to children and young people, young people involved in prostitution are now more commonly referred to as 'young people who are sexually exploited through their involvement in prostitution' (Pearce *et al.* 2000a, 2000b).

When children and young people are involved in prostitution, it is a system of exchange that takes place within the context of fundamental

social inequalities based on class, gender and age. As a result of their economic dependence and powerlessness in relation to adults, children and young people who are involved in prostitution are 'necessarily more vulnerable' than adults who are similarly involved (O'Connell-Davidson 1998). Young people involved in prostitution are sought by 'clients' who are usually older, affluent men, who are able and willing to pay for the privilege of using poor, emotionally vulnerable young women and/or men for the purpose of sexual gratification. The inequalities of power and status between these young people and their 'clients' therefore have several structural bases which are located within the context of economic inequalities, gender inequalities and 'senarchy', that is, the institutionalized disparity of power and status between adults and children (McMullen 1987, Hearn 1988).

Child prostitution and sensitivity

This section considers the ways in which child prostitution might be considered a 'sensitive' area of research. When the nature of that sensitivity is examined, it becomes clear that it operates at a number of different levels: the socio-political, the ethical-legal and the emotional. These different levels of sensitivity are examined below.

Firstly, researching child prostitution is sensitive at the socio-political level because it might produce information which, in investigating a 'taboo' area of experience, illuminates a 'dark side' of human experience (Farberow 1963) and produces evidence that threatens society's image of itself as nurturing of, and considerate to, its children. Likewise, knowledge of young people's involvement in prostitution threatens to undermine historically and culturally dominant discourses of 'childhood' and 'children'. These dicourses define children and young people as sexually innocent, or 'asexual' (Pilcher 1996). It has been argued that these constructions 'render the coupling of sex and children morally inappropriate' (*cf.* Jackson 1982, Ennew 1986, O'Connell-Davidson and Sanchez-Taylor 1996, Pilcher 1996: 78, Ayre and Barrett 2000). These dominant definitions of 'children' make discussion and research of childhood sexuality and sexual practices even more 'taboo' than questions surrounding adult sexuality. This is especially the case when we are talking about young people who are involved in prostitution.

Researching juvenile prostitution has the potential to illuminate relations of domination and subordination that constitute the status quo between adults and children, and therefore may be used to challenge such relations. Such research is therefore 'intrinsically' political (Lee 1993). Likewise, participants in such a study may reveal information that is incriminating and/or stigmatizing. These factors render such research socially and politically sensitive.

Secondly, such research may be legally and morally problematic. In English law, the status of 'prostitution' is ambiguous. 'Prostitution' *per se* is not illegal but, under the Street Offences Act 1959, the activities that constitute prostitution, that is 'loitering' and 'soliciting', are prescribed.

The law, however, does not distinguish between adults and children and it is therefore absurdly possible for young women who cannot legally consent to sex until they are 16 to be charged with attempting to sell sex from the age of ten (Aitchison and O'Brien 1997, Edwards 1998, Melrose and Brodie 1999, Melrose *et al.* 1999). On the other hand, the law does distinguish between males and females and rules that 'a common prostitute can only be female' (Aitchison and O'Brien 1997: 34, q.v. Scambler and Scambler 1997). This legal 'fact' was upheld by a High Court Ruling in 1994 that 'only women can be charged with loitering under the Street Offences Act 1959' (Scambler and Scambler 1997: 180). For men and young boys involved in prostitution the Sexual Offences Act 1956 or the Sexual Offences Act 1967 is applied (Aitchison and O'Brien 1997, Edgington 1997). Under the Law, therefore, the activities of girls and young women working as street prostitutes are circumscribed in different ways to men and boys and to those involved in other parts of the sex industry (Edwards 1997).

In addition to the ambiguous legal position of prostitution, past evidence has documented an overlap between the world of hard drugs, and other serious criminal activity, and the world of prostitution (see for example Blom and Van den Berg 1989, O'Neill *et al.* 1995, Curran and Sinclair 1998, Crosby and Barrett 1999, May *et al.* 2000). Researching such clandestine and illegal activities may therefore lead researchers into dubious moral territory and, additionally, may present the researcher with 'anonymous' dangers because the researcher is present in an otherwise avoidable, potentially dangerous, situation (Lee 1993).

The legality and morality of such research endeavours becomes all the more problematic when the research is conducted amongst juveniles rather than adults. Given the illegal and clandestine nature of the subject being examined, it is essential to guarantee confidentiality to participants. Confidentiality is a prerequisite with few exceptions. However, as professionals working with young people, in research or any other context, we have a duty to protect them and to inform relevant authorities when we consider them to be at risk of 'significant harm' (Home Office/Department of Health 1998). Conducting research with young people involved in prostitution will, therefore, inevitably produce conflicts when such a duty will be opposed to the researcher's duty to maintain the confidentiality of her participants. In circumstances in which a young person may be in a life-threatening situation or in which on-going abuse is discovered, for example, the researcher would be forced to breach her guarantees of confidentiality. Later in this article, I shall explore the means by which these potential conflicts were minimized in the research being discussed here.

In addition to its social, political and legal sensitivity, research into child prostitution is an emotionally sensitive area to investigate. When conducting research of this kind, researchers may be entering an emotionally charged experience where anxiety levels are unpredictable and this level of sensitivity makes it a potentially threatening excursion for both researchers and researched.

Given the social-political, ethical-legal and emotional sensitivity of the terrain they are entering researchers may be in a heightened emotional state

as they begin fieldwork. They might be anticipating danger and experiencing fear or uncertainty on a number of levels despite meticulous planning for researcher safety. This emotional state is further heightened by what becomes 'regularized', that is, harrowing evidence that has already established that young people's entry into prostitution is inextricably linked to experiences of poverty, neighbourhood decline, abuse and violence, family breakdown, local authority residential care and educational disaffection (Green 1992, Jesson 1993, O'Neill *et al.* 1995, Pitts 1997, Crosby and Barrett 1999, Melrose 2000a, Melrose 2000b). In the study being discussed here over two-thirds of participants had experienced family conflict in their early lives and half of these reported that they had been sexually abused in their families (Melrose *et al.* 1999).

Our capacity to explore such potentially traumatic events in the interview situation is as yet underdeveloped (Wyatt *et al.* 1993) and there has been little specific advice about 'question strategies' in sensitive research (Lee 1993: 102). This may leave researchers feeling methodologically vulnerable, verging on the distressingly incapable, because of emotional and anxiety challenges, and thus ill equipped to deal with some of the issues that may arise in this context. On the other hand, it can be distressing for participants to talk about such events and they are rendered vulnerable by being asked to do so.

It may be as a result of these sensitivities that a certain amount of 'chilling' (Sieber and Stanley 1988) appears to have occurred around the topic of child prostitution (Dean and Barrett 1996). That is, 'the conservative tendencies of funding agencies' and 'standards of political correctness' within 'the ''liberal'' academic establishment' have tended to discourage researchers from investigating this topic (Dean and Barrett 1996: 32). As a consequence, the voices of young people involved are relatively absent from the literature that discusses the phenomenon (O'Neill *et al.* 1995, Shaw and Butler 1998). It may be that the sensitivities discussed above, combined with the fear of what Kirby and Corzine (1981) have described as 'stigma contagion' and the practical, ethical and methodological problems associated with conducting this type of research, make it a topic which many researchers would prefer not to investigate or which have led researchers to rely on small-scale, local agency populations in the past (Shaw and Butler 1998).

This section has demonstrated that the sensitivity of research into juvenile prostitution operates at a number of different levels. Firstly, research into prostitution is itself culturally taboo, exploring traditionally private realms of experience that may reveal and challenge relations of domination and subordination. Such research is all the more sensitive when it is children's and young people's sexual exploitation through prostitution which is the subject of enquiry (morally inappropriate, threatening to the self identity of 'civilized' society and dominant definitions of childhood as a period of innocence). Research in this area may be emotionally challenging to both researched and researchers and may present both with threats at the level of personal safety and well being. This inevitably presents researchers with practical difficulties and ethical considerations that must be negotiated within the practical constraints that frame the research.

Practical constraints, practical difficulties and ethical considerations in the research process

This section distinguishes between practical constraints and practical difficulties in the research process, and considers the ways in which each bears on research activity, before going on to discuss the ways in which ethical considerations shape decisions in the course of research. Practical constraints are externally imposed and determined by such things as the time scale and funding context within which the research is conducted. Practical difficulties, on the other hand, are imposed by the sensitive nature of the research topic itself.

Practical constraints

Most contemporary social research is undertaken within temporal and financial constraints that result from the highly competitive funding context in which it takes place (Brannen 1992, Callender 1996). The study being reported here was conducted in just such a context. There was four months in which to complete the fieldwork and a minimum sample size of 50 was required. Qualitative insights into the experiences of participants were needed but it was anticipated that there might be difficulties with accessing subjects for the research and further difficulties with obtaining consent to record data generated by the interviews. It was further anticipated that there would be little time in which to transcribe the data obtained. The project, however, was considered to be extremely worthwhile and a decision to proceed with it was taken despite these practical constraints. It was considered that pragmatic decisions about how participants should be accessed, and what methods should be employed to achieve the research aims, would enable the research to achieve its goals in spite of these constraints.

Given the time constraints that framed the research, the research team decided that relying on agencies that were already in touch with those involved in the sex trade would most quickly facilitate access to participants. This decision, however, was informed as much by practical difficulties and ethical considerations as by practical constraints of time. These practical difficulties and ethical considerations are discussed more fully below.

To overcome the difficulties imposed by temporal constraints on the research, a semi-structured interview schedule was combined with a 'checklist' for each interviewee. These 'checklists' allowed pre-coded questions, such as age of entry to prostitution, previous experience of abuse, age at time of interview and details of the participant's current situation (such as partner, children and housing tenure) to be completed at the time of the interview. This enabled key aspects of the data to be coded at the same time as it was collected, thus saving time at the data analysis stage. The checklists also provided space for extensive notes to be completed at the time of the interview or immediately after it. Combining 'checklists' with the interview schedule enabled the amount of data that could be obtained in the shortest possible time to be maximized.

Practical difficulties

There is no clear understanding of the extent of young people's involvement in prostitution (McNeish 1998, Shaw and Butler 1998, Barrett 1999, Ayre and Barrett 2000) and differences in estimates of prevalence may reflect different definitions of what constitutes 'prostitution' (Shaw and Butler 1998). The 'hidden' and unknown quality of the population engaged in prostitution presents obvious practical difficulties for those wishing to research this area.

Official statistics of young people's caution and conviction rates can offer some indication of the scale of their involvement in prostitution but, as we have already seen, the law is not applied equally to young men and women involved in prostitution and it should be borne in mind that official statistics reflect the concerns and priorities of local police forces as much as the behaviour they claim to measure (Lee 1993). Further, as Lee (1993) has argued, official statistics are notorious for underestimating the extent of deviant activities and because of the inequitable application of the law, this is certainly the case with the involvement of young boys and men in prostitution. The consequence is that official knowledge of boy's and men's involvement in prostitution is severely limited in comparison to that of girls and women (Aitchison and O'Brien 1997). In addition, the relative mobility of the population involved in prostitution might provide some grounds for doubting the reliability of such statistics (Melrose *et al.* 1999).

As a result of the 'unknown' quality of the population being studied, fieldworkers were faced with three choices in terms of accessing participants. On the one hand, the possibility of 'networking', that is, contacting agencies and outreach services that were already in touch with people involved in prostitution and using them as gatekeepers, was available. On the other hand, it may have been possible to employ 'outcropping' techniques, that is, 'hanging around' in sites where potential participants might be expected to be found and approaching them there (Lee 1993). Alternatively, it may have been possible to combine these two approaches and to 'snowball' from key informants or gatekeepers. Practical constraints of time, the practical difficulty of accessing an unknown and potentially hard to reach group in a very limited time span, as well as ethical concerns about the personal safety of fieldworkers and research participants, however, meant that 'outcropping' and 'snowballing' were rejected in favour of 'networking'. As we shall see below, however, this decision was informed as much by ethical considerations as by practical difficulties and constraints.

As a result of the decision to employ 'networking' techniques, voluntary and statutory sector projects providing sexual health and other services to people in the sex industry were approached and their co-operation in the research was sought. Securing such co-operation, however, was not a straightforward task. In some instances, as a result of political, social or economic considerations, co-operation in the research was flatly refused. Concerns about publicly identifying the area in which they worked with the child sex industry, and/or worries about the apparent 'over researching' of this topic, despite the shortage of knowledge in this field, led some projects

to refuse to co-operate in the research. Some projects that were contacted felt they did not have the resources required to devote to the research, others felt that the chaotic and disorganized nature of the lives of many of those involved in the sex trade would make negotiating and arranging interviews impractical. Other projects, not totally unjustifiably, were overly protective of the young people they were in contact with and refused participation in the research. Eventually six projects across England and Wales (and excluding London) agreed to co-operate in the study. Only one of these projects specifically targeted its services for young people. With the co-operation of these projects, a sample of 50 people was achieved.

Ethical considerations

Having considered the ways in which practical constraints and difficulties inform the research process, this section considers the ways in which ethical considerations, which sensitive topics of research inevitably require, bear on the conduct of research. Ethical decisions are made within the context of the practical constraints and difficulties that have already been discussed and, in sensitive research of this kind, it is these ethical considerations that may have a greater bearing on the conduct of the research than either practical constraints or difficulties.

The ethical principles involved in this project were numerous. The research involved talking to people who had been sexually abused and/or exploited through their involvement in prostitution as juveniles. Acknowledging this meant that it was necessary on ethical and professional grounds, to ensure that the research was 'underpinned by a service delivery that could provide support and intervention if desired or applicable' (Pearce *et al*. 2000a: 15). As Pearce and colleagues (2000a: 15) have argued:

> Taking a questionnaire into a situation where vulnerable young women were being exploited, undertaking the research and then exiting without provision of follow up would be unethical and professionally inept.

It was felt that the best way to ensure such services were available to participants was to work through agencies and professionals who already had working relationships with the people concerned.

Participants were being asked to discuss potentially traumatic experiences in the interview situation and for this reason it was important to secure their 'informed consent' to participate in the research. This involved more than simply seeking their permission to take part in an interview and meant that participants were informed in advance of what they would be asked to discuss with the fieldworker. Their participation in the research was secured on a 'negative consent' basis; that is, participants were approached by agency workers and their agreement to participate in the research was secured before they were introduced to fieldworkers. In practice, the negotiation of consent was an on-going process in the course of the interview. Participants were told that if there were any questions they did not wish to answer they had only to say so, and, equally, that if they wanted to stop the interview at any point they should tell the interviewer.

Given the nature of the activities being investigated, it was also important to guarantee confidentiality to participants. The research team anticipated, however, that there may be extreme cases where there was an immediate risk to the life or safety of participants and understood that, in these circumstances, confidentiality could not be maintained. Participants were therefore informed in advance of the conditions under which confidentiality would be breached.

Ethical considerations differ depending on whether one is talking to children about their experiences or adults about their experiences as children. It was considered that by accessing participants through agencies, and by relying on retrospective, rather than contemporary, accounts of juvenile entry into prostitution, fieldworkers would be able to avoid potential conflicts arising between assurances of confidentiality and their duty to inform where young people were considered to be 'at risk'. In this project, all participants had become involved in prostitution before they were 18 years of age, in fact approximately half became involved at 14 or younger (Melrose *et al.* 1999). Their reasons for becoming involved, the circumstances in which, and the age at which, they had done so were explored retrospectively. For some participants, this involved talking about the distant past, for others it involved talking about a few years previously while in some cases it involved talking about a few months previously. In the event, six of the 50 participants were juveniles (under 18) at the time of the interviews but because they were already in touch with agencies, fieldworkers were satisfied that appropriate courses of action were being pursued and that the relevant authorities were aware of their situation.

It has previously been suggested that retrospective accounts of entry into prostitution are unsatisfactory because they rely on memory that may be 'vague' or even distorted (Shaw and Butler 1998). In this project, however, this approach was considered to offer a number of advantages. Firstly, it minimized the risk that the project might come into contact with young people who were currently involved in prostitution and thus reduced the likelihood that conflicts would arise between maintaining confidentiality and a duty to inform the relevant authorities. Secondly, retrospective accounts meant that time would have elapsed between the initial, potentially traumatic event of entry into prostitution, and the participants' recollection of it. Participants may then have been able to achieve some emotional distance from the event itself and would therefore find it easier to talk about. Retrospective techniques have previously proved fruitful in exploring issues of childhood sexual abuse (Wyatt *et al.* 1993). Additionally, parental consent might be required for a juvenile's participation in a research project. It was felt that being able to avoid the need for such consent would be particularly important in circumstances where the participant had suffered abuse at the hands of a parent or step-parent (Alderson 1999).

It was also recognized that the research might entail risks at the level of personal safety for both researched and researchers. The worry that 'pimps' might be present in the lives of some participants and/or that participants may be involved in both drug and prostitution markets was considered a potential threat to personal safety of both researched and researchers. In

order to minimize such risks, interviews were conducted in the safety of agency premises where possible. When this was not possible, and interviews were conducted at other premises, the researcher was accompanied by a professional worker from the agency that had arranged for the interview to take place. In the event, just ten out of 50 participants said that they had been forced into prostitution by a 'pimp' and most insisted that they did not work for a 'pimp'. In hindsight, the anticipated dangers associated with research in this field were perhaps exaggerated as a result of negative or ambivalent cultural stereotypes through which knowledge of those involved in prostitution is mediated. However, this author would argue that such dangers should not be underestimated. It is preferable to over-anticipate such dangers, and be pro-active, because it is better to be safe than sorry.

Researchers have a duty to ensure that no harm comes to their subjects, whatever their age, as a result of their agreement to participate in research. If we cannot guarantee that such participation may improve their lives, we must ensure, at least, that our scrutiny of them does not leave them worse off (Taylor 1991). In order to protect their identities, ensure confidentiality and defend our participants from unwanted attention from the media, or those who might specifically seek out their services, all participants were given pseudonyms and the research sites in which they were contacted anonymized. These considerations additionally obliged the research team to ensure that findings were disseminated sensitively so that sensationalist media coverage, for example, was successfully avoided.

This section has demonstrated that means of accessing participants and data gathering techniques are determined by the practical constraints within which the research is located, the practical difficulties it has to confront and the ethical considerations it requires as much as by epistemological concerns. It has also demonstrated that ethical considerations, in conjunction with practical constraints and difficulties, shaped the decision to rely on agency populations and to employ retrospective, rather than contemporary accounts, of juvenile entry into prostitution. Below the advantages and disadvantages of relying on agency populations are briefly considered.

Advantages and disadvantages of working through agencies

Relying on agency populations enabled the research project to overcome both practical constraints and difficulties and ensure that it maintained its ethical integrity. By working with professionals who were already in touch with those involved in the sex industry, contact with an unknown and otherwise difficult to access population was facilitated relatively quickly. Further, by assuring their clients that they were able to trust the researchers, the caveat against confidentiality as outlined above was established and a degree of acceptance was secured such that the research was able to pursue some very intimate and highly sensitive issues (Melrose *et al.* 1999). Working through agencies also meant that, at the level of personal safety, risks to both researched and researcher could be

minimized. Additionally, agency workers were able to provide back-up services to participants after an interview, if they should require it. Agencies also provided the added advantage that if young people were encountered in the course of the research, fieldworkers could be assured that they were already in touch with appropriate services and the risk of conflicts arising between the researcher's duty to inform and assurances of confidentiality were minimized.

There is no denying, however, that using such techniques to access participants imposes limitations on the final sample and thus the claims that can be made for the data produced from it. For example, only those in touch with agencies can be included, and as a result, perhaps, of internal differentiation within the sex industry, not all workers are in touch with such agencies. Those working as 'street prostitutes' are thought to be at the 'bottom end' of the market and are thus the most vulnerable to exploitation (O'Connell-Davidson and Layder 1994). As a result of outreach and other 'street level' services provided by agencies, those working as 'street prostitutes' are more likely than those working from private flats, saunas or hotels to come into contact with project workers (Brain *et al*. 1998). Indeed, because participants were accessed through agencies, 'street working' prostitutes constituted the majority of those involved in this research (Melrose *et al*. 1999). Relying on agency populations will therefore, inevitably, introduce skews into the final sample. On this occasion, however, as a result of the practical constraints and difficulties that the project had to confront, and the ethical considerations that it required, it was considered preferable to accept the limitations of the data obtained from the study by relying on agency populations (Melrose 1999). That is, it was accepted that although participants might not be representative of all those who become involved in the sex industry as juveniles, the data produced would still be highly valid.

In future work of this kind it may be possible to supplement agency populations with 'snowballing techniques' and some 'outcropping' at 'off street' facilities. This would undoubtedly provide a richer mix of participants than relying solely on agency populations (Melrose 1999). When dealing with 'hidden' or 'unknown' populations, however, such techniques could never guarantee that the sample achieved would be 'representative'. Additionally, such approaches to sample construction would require time and, as we have seen above, the practical constraints within which research takes place, means that the luxury of time is not always available. It is evident, however, that the means by which research participants are accessed will determine the richness of the final sample and as the discussion above has demonstrated, the practical constraints within which the research is located, the practical difficulties it has to confront and the ethical considerations that the project requires determine these means.

Labour pains and emotional labour

This section considers the ways in which a sensitive area of research such as child prostitution impacts on the researcher and, by reflecting on my own

experiences of conducting the research, explores the ways in which such emotional impacts are managed in practice.

For various reasons, the role of emotion in research has been under-discussed (for exceptions see Kleinman and Copp 1993, Melrose 1999). This is despite a trend towards 'reflexivity' in the research process (Song and Parker 1995, Hertz 1996, Arendell 1997). Consequently, strategies for dealing with the emotional impact (or 'stress') of sensitive research have received little attention (Brannen 1988, Kleinman and Copp 1993).

As the discussion above has indicated, negative impacts, on both researchers and researched were anticipated from the outset in this project and arrangements for supporting and debriefing researchers agreed. This meant that a member of the research team was always available to discuss with the fieldworkers any personal or emotional difficulties that arose in the course of interviews. The fieldwork involved listening to women describing their experiences of abuse, neglect, and exploitation, and hearing their feelings of anger and despair, and it was difficult to avoid picking up on these feelings. Because the fieldwork sometimes required that I spend two or more nights at the research site, I was often left 'holding' these feelings (Pearce *et al.* 2000b) until I returned to the university. I often found myself distressed by the accounts I had heard that day, alone in a hotel in an unfamiliar place, struggling with my own feelings of anger and despair. In these situations, I was forced to contain these feelings in order to carry on with the fieldwork the next day. Admitting to such feelings is anyway not easy because there is a fear that they may demonstrate one's professional incompetence as a researcher (Kleinman and Copp 1993). There is therefore a self-imposed assumption that if one 'can't stand the heat' one should 'stay out of the kitchen'. I also imposed the expectation on myself that I should be able to 'manage' these feelings or at least 'switch off' from them when fieldwork for the day was completed. In some ways, this self-imposed expectation assumed that I should be able to switch between my 'working self' and my 'out of work' self. This unrealistic expectation foolishly ignored the fact that my 'working self' is intimately connected to my total sense of self and to fulfil such an expectation, therefore, I would need to be able to dissociate from other parts of myself. This is obviously not a healthy strategy to pursue.

The practical constraints in which the research was located meant that a limited number of fieldworkers was available to the project and researchers were therefore sometimes required to conduct three or four interviews in one day. Entering emotionally charged territory and hearing numerous disturbing accounts in a short time span required a lot of 'emotional labour' on the part of researchers. In this sense the 'emotional labour' involved in any research (sensitive or not) can be intensified or reduced by the practical constraints that frame the whole project. Extending the period of data collection, working in pairs on site locations, for example, dividing the labour, and having a colleague present to discuss the feelings generated by the day's work, may lessen the impact of such emotional labour. This would, however, be expensive.

'Emotional labour' has been defined as 'the labour involved in dealing with other people's feelings' (James 1989: 21). In the context of the

research being discussed here, this definition might be usefully extended to include that labour which is involved in managing one's own feelings, as well as the feelings of others. A 'core component' of this labour is 'the regulation of emotion' (James 1989: 19). Regulating emotion is hard work and constitutes part of the 'labour pains' involved in this type of research. This author found that these 'labour pains' were experienced in two phases: initially in the fieldwork stage of data gathering, which has been commonly acknowledged (see for example Pearce *et al*. 2000b) and subsequently in the experience of analysing the data that has been collected when the identities of the individuals concerned are recollected vividly.

Given what is already known about young people and prostitution, researchers might anticipate that in the course of the fieldwork they will hear tales of violence, hardship and suffering and must be prepared to encounter the emotions experienced by participants when speaking about such events. Regardless, however, of the extent to which they anticipate hearing such accounts, or feel prepared to meet the emotion that accompanies them, researchers may still be 'shocked' by the amount of pain and/or extent of abuse in their participants' lives. This shock forces the researcher to confront her own vulnerabilities (Reinharz 1992). As female researchers we recognize that the exploitation and violence to which many prostitute women are subject is part of the violence and exploitation to which all women are potentially subject (O'Neill 1994). Additionally, as Pearce and colleagues (2000b) argue:

> Any feelings of abuse or exploitation, at whatever level, that may have been experienced in our own lives are brought to the surface.

This therefore makes work of this kind disturbing and strenuous for the researcher.

In many interviews participants were recounting traumatic events from their past: they told of abuse (sexual and/or physical) they had suffered at the hands of parents and/or step-parents. Frequently participants said they had not previously 'disclosed' this abuse to anyone. In addition participants often talked about the abuse they had endured at the hands of 'partners' and/or 'punters'—many had been raped and/or violently assaulted but had not reported these incidents to the police, fearing that, as 'prostitutes', they would not be taken seriously. The emotional labour involved in these interview situations was indeed 'hard work' that was 'sorrowful and difficult' (James 1989: 19). It involved dealing with the participants' feelings about 'telling' and with the feelings invoked in the researcher by 'hearing' such accounts of appalling abuse. In these situations, both researched and researcher experienced subjective distress, the former as a result of recounting their abuse and the latter because all that was possible was to 'endure and share the pain' of the participants (Lee 1993). On some occasions, such as interviewing a 14-year-old, this endurance continued long after the interview was over.

In these encounters, a range of 'labour pains' were experienced whose intensity was greater than I had ever experienced, despite having previously worked on some 'difficult' topics (see Melrose 1996, 1999). In order to continue with the interviews, on some occasions, I was forced to

suppress my anger and horror at what I was being told. I wanted to avoid 'shocking' participants with my 'shock', fearing that a horrified response would interfere with the interactional dynamics of the interview, although, almost inevitably, an element of transference would have occurred. I felt that it was necessary to regulate my emotional response to enable participants to talk about their extraordinary 'tales of suffering' in an 'ordinary' way. Through the structure of 'the interview' discussions of rape, physical assault and childhood prostitution—the extraordinary—were rendered, bizarrely, 'ordinary' (Scott 1998: 2.2).

The experience of conducting the interviews was emotionally draining and produced a wide range of emotional responses. To walk away from some of the young people after an interview was, to say the least, difficult, when one knew that they would be going out afterwards to suffer the same kinds of abuse they had just been describing. My feelings often seemed to parallel those expressed by my participants, that is, anger, guilt, powerlessness and frustration. On more than one occasion, returning to catch the train in the middle of rush hour, passing lots of men in 'grey suits', I had to suppress the desire to scream (at men) in the street and resist the temptation to see all men as potential abusers. Alternatively, when staying overnight in unfamiliar surroundings I would imagine with horror the participants out on the streets 'turning a few tricks' for the evening. On these occasions, even being able to go into a restaurant to eat (as a lone female) was a difficult task. Were men looking at me as a potential 'pick-up'? In the course of the fieldwork, the 'ordinary' life-world I had previously enjoyed (going for a meal, for example) was, again bizarrely, rendered extraordinary and sometimes felt 'unreal' (Scott 1998: 2.2). These emotional reactions quickly made me realize that 'doing research can seriously damage your health' (Marshall 1994 cited in Scott 1998: 5.14). They also made the 'whiff of the white lab coat' and the stance of the 'neutral observer' seem very appealing (Scott 1998: 4.2).

My own networks of support (family, colleagues) enabled me to come to terms with my feelings. I was given space at home and work to scream and cry. At the same time, the support I received made me acutely aware of a paradox I was living for the lack of support in the lives of many of my participants made me feel quite guilty about walking away after an interview and leaving them to their 'trade'. I also felt strangely guilty about feeling so awful about the accounts I had heard when many of the participants appeared just to take such experiences in their stride, and I almost came to envy, and definitely to admire, their apparent resilience.

I understood my feelings (of anger, guilt, frustration and rage) as a 'normal', humane, reaction to many of the horror stories I was hearing. In this sense, I did not want to 'repair' these feelings. I felt, on behalf of my participants, and myself as a woman, that I was entitled to be angry, appalled and sickened. However, in order to continue with the work, these feelings often had to be suppressed since they could not be 'repaired'.

The experience of analysing the data was in many ways as disturbing as collecting it. I had to struggle constantly with my feelings at this stage, feeling that I did not want such knowledge in my consciousness and wondering, 'what does this knowledge do to you?' (Scott 1998: 5.14). As I

listened to the tapes again I began to feel reluctant about engaging with the data and as I read through transcriptions 'each interview was a personal encounter that I relived in slow replay' (Scott 1998). I could see participants' faces and would wonder if this or that one had been raped or beaten again in between the time of our meeting and my beginning analysis of the data. There was a temptation to fast-forward the tape and to collude in the denial of the abuse these young people had experienced.

In many ways, it was more difficult to 'manage' my feelings at this stage of the project than it had been during the fieldwork stage, not least, because my distress at re-visiting the data took me by surprise. I had expected that distance from the field would enable me to examine the data without the emotions that had accompanied the collection of it. Perhaps because of the difficult emotional labour involved in suppressing the feelings that I experienced during the fieldwork I had little energy left for performing this type of labour at the analysis stage of the project.

In order to complete the analysis and write up the material, I had to put my (completely appropriate) feelings of anger and so on to good use. I concentrated on what I perceived to be my responsibility to my research subjects and told myself that for their sake I had to 'get on' with the 'business' of analysis and writing up the material. I felt I owed participants at least this for having shared their experiences with me and I felt that, from my position, this was the best, and the very least, I could do for them.

Conclusions

This paper has discussed the nature of the sensitivity involved in a topic such as child prostitution and has explored the sorts of ethical considerations that such a project requires. It has argued that ethical decisions are made in the context of the practical constraints within which the research must work and in light of the practical difficulties that it must overcome. This account has shown that ethical dilemmas can be 'managed', or avoided, by taking pragmatic decisions in relation to how one's sample is accessed and the methods one employs for gathering data, for example, relying on retrospective accounts. The article has demonstrated that in sensitive research of this kind, it is ethical considerations, in conjunction with practical constraints and difficulties that determine the process of the research and the means by which its epistemological aims are achieved. This leads to the conclusion that such considerations, constraints and difficulties necessarily require a rejection of methodological 'sectarianism' or 'dogma' (Brannen 1992).

The paper has illustrated the need for ethical principles, practical constraints, practical difficulties and emotional stresses to be taken account of at the design stage of research. By 'designing in' such considerations from the outset research teams can minimize physical and emotional risks to both researchers and participants. This will guarantee that practical and emotional difficulties, which are inevitably posed by the sensitivity of the research topic, can be overcome without compromising ethical principles.

It has been further shown in this discussion that the 'costs' of sensitive research are not just financial and these 'extra' costs have been explored in

terms of the emotional impact of the research on researchers. The paper has suggested that the emotional costs of such research can be aggravated by the practical constraints within which the research is located. This is an issue which research funding agencies and research managers must take into account if they are not to compromise the health of fieldworkers. In particular, funding agencies need to take account of the stresses involved in such research and must be prepared, not only for such research to take time, but also to ensure that research teams are adequately staffed to allow fieldworkers space for 'remissions'—i.e. periods away from fieldwork—and 'reminders'—time to do other things (teach, write etc.)—which might allow them to gain some psychological distance from the stresses involved (Lee 1993: 13). This inevitably means that funding agencies must be prepared for research of this nature to be expensive.

The above discussion has attempted to demonstrate the ways in which constraints and difficulties of a practical nature, and the ethical problems to which this type of sensitive research inevitably gives rise, might be confronted productively to move research in this area forward. This is necessary if we are to provide valuable, and much needed, empirical evidence from which to develop policies to meaningfully respond to the needs of this vulnerable group of young people.

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