

# Pathways through Sex Work: Childhood Experiences and Adult Identities

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## Abstract

Drawing on a qualitative study exploring the stories of twenty-four women involved in sex work in the UK, this paper discusses whether it is possible to identify key risk and protective factors influencing involvement. It argues that, although age at first involvement is an important factor in influencing outcome, so also are experiences of childhood and adult adversity. Early damaging experiences, which may increase the likelihood of involvement, also affect the ability to deal with the experience of sex work and simultaneously 'manage' other life experiences. What is crucial in identifying who is likely to be the most vulnerable are the accumulation of risk factors in early childhood and the personal and ecological resources available to individuals across the lifespan to manage that pathway. How these factors are managed determines the degree of victimhood or agency, vulnerability or resilience individuals perceive they have and the route taken through sex work as a consequence. The study identified three different groups of women who reported different pathways, reflecting different sources of support and coping strategies. This analysis suggests that there is a need to facilitate the provision of 'secure base' interventions for women involved in sex work, whatever their age, which have meaning for them.

**Keywords:** Sex work, sexual exploitation, resilience, risk and protective factors, agency/choice

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## Introduction

Due to its hidden nature, the numbers of children and adults involved in selling sex in the UK can only be estimated (Home Office, 2006). What is clear is that those involved are a largely 'stigmatised marginalised and criminalised group' (Shaw and Butler, 1998, p. 190). Recurrent, often polarised, themes of victimhood and agency are evident in the perception and treatment of children and adults involved in sexual exploitation and sex work, and are debated in the literature (O'Connell Davidson, 1998; Phoenix, 1999; Sanders, 2005a, 2005b; Brooks-Gordon, 2005; Sanders *et al.*, 2009; Pearce, 2009). Society holds contradictory perspectives, perceiving those involved as 'sad' or 'bad', 'victim' or 'criminal'. Legal and moral responses are often based on those perceptions, not on an understanding of the structural disadvantages affecting many who become involved in selling sex, nor on childhood experiences of adversity and maltreatment which impact on identity and choice.

Although there have been positive developments in recent legislative and policy changes (DCSF, 2009) in terms of perceiving and treating sexually exploited young people as victims of abuse, there remains a need, across agencies, for a more coherent, 'joined up approach' (Pearce, 2009). In relation to adult sex workers, the notion of justice reflected in *The Co-ordinated Prostitution Strategy* (Home Office, 2006) is largely based on a continuing perception of sex work as a crime against morality (Sanders *et al.*, 2009, p. 127) perpetuating polarised public perceptions of those involved as either deserving victim or undeserving criminal.

Sex workers' narratives indicate a more complex picture, in which there is a differing balance of agency and victimhood throughout their life pathways, from the impact of childhood experiences to the experiences, relationships and wider structural factors impacting on them as adults. Notions of victimhood and agency in the context of involvement in sex work have different meanings and levels of appropriateness at different life stages (Phoenix, 1999; Pearce, 2009). Taking too polarised a position by, for example, only seeing those involved as victims risks denying the possibility of self-determination to such a degree that women's voices are ignored or silenced in the debate about effective ways forward.

However, the issues are complex. As Pearce *et al.* (2002) note, involvement at an early age negates the possibility of sex work being, in any way, an informed choice. Similarly, as the study reported here indicates, some women entering sex work as adults have experienced such unresolved trauma in childhood that, in terms of emotional development, they, too, may remain unable to make informed decisions. Other women develop more effective coping strategies, have a stronger sense of self and feel that their involvement in sex work is a choice for them to make.

The study from which this paper draws explored the impact on sex workers' lives of the meanings given by them to a diversity of experiences. Different coping strategies are relevant in terms of building resilience (Rutter, 1985). Greater understanding of these factors may lead to interventions that move away from perceptions of those involved as victims or criminals and towards services that promote resilience and more effectively and holistically address their needs.

## Research and policy context

Although prevalence in the UK is unclear, sex work and sexual exploitation exist in most towns and cities (Home Office, 2004, p. 14). Historically, society's view that 'they' are 'unlike us' has determined how sexually exploited children and young people and adult sex workers have been perceived, treated and perceived themselves. Three themes on sex work have reverberated across the last two centuries: the condemnation and control of those involved in selling sex, whatever their age; the more philanthropic perception of them as victims in need of rescue (although also arguably a form of control); and denial of its existence. Consideration is rarely given to the structural factors, which interact with individual vulnerabilities and are the context in which many become involved in sex work (Lee and O'Brien, 1995; Barrett, 1997; Self, 2003; Pearce, 2009; Sanders *et al.*, 2009).

There is a complex interaction between a range of 'push' factors including poverty, neglect and abuse, and 'pull' factors including drugs, money and a sense of 'power', and between individual and environmental factors that appear to be predisposing and contributory to young people's involvement in selling sex, both in the UK (Barrett, 1997; Melrose, 2004; Pearce, 2009) and internationally (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001; Barrett, 2000). Whilst none of these factors can individually be argued to be directly causal, they increase vulnerability and, as Pearce *et al.* (2002) note, are useful early warning signs of risk of involvement. Models of 'drift', in which young people are indirectly 'pushed' by life circumstances into selling sex, incorporate individual, social *and* situational factors, but also recognise a degree of agency as a factor in involvement (Pearce *et al.*, 2002; Melrose, 2004), and models of 'grooming' in which predatory grooming techniques are employed to sexually exploit young people (Barnados, 1998) also provide frameworks for understanding involvement.

Whilst all young people may be at risk of involvement, some are especially vulnerable, particularly those in or leaving care, those running away from home or care, those involved in gangs and trafficked and asylum-seeking children (Campbell and O'Neill, 2006; Coy, 2008; Pearce, 2009). As these vulnerable young people become adults, the interaction between personal and environmental factors, which are rooted in their childhood

experiences, influences pathways taken and perceptions of choice (or the lack of it) about engaging in selling sex.

Age of entry is clearly a *critical moment* on the pathways of those who become involved in sex work. Research among adult sex workers in Britain consistently shows a majority were under the age of consent (sixteen in the UK) when first involved (Cusick, 2002). Some suggest the figure may be as high as 70 per cent (Home Office, 2004, p. 5). However, what is also crucial in identifying who may be most vulnerable is the accumulation of risk factors in early childhood, and the personal and ecological resources, or lack of them, available to young people to manage their perceived choices and sense of identity having taken that pathway.

As research indicates (Pearce, 2009; Sanders *et al.*, 2009), there are a variety of pathways into, through and, for some women, out of sex work that are determined by the interconnection of a wide range of individual, familial and wider environmental factors such as personal capacity for active coping, supportive or rejecting families and the impact of poverty. Increasing our understanding of the interaction between resilience, agency, victimhood and the development of identity may inform the facilitation of more effective person-centred and holistic multi-agency services that address different stages of the pathways of those involved in selling sex whatever their age.

## Using a psycho-social framework

A psycho-social framework was used to consider why women with very similar early background histories appear to take different pathways in relation to sex work. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) provides a framework to understand why relationships in childhood and adulthood are at the forefront of coping strategies. Theories of resilience (Rutter, 1985, 1999; Sroufe, 1997) indicate that interconnected and cumulative risk and protective factors have a significant impact on the ability of individuals to manage risk and build resilience. Both theories highlight the role of adaptation in order to survive and are useful theoretical frameworks to make sense of the different developmental pathways of those who have experienced early adversity.

Many young people in the face of extreme adversity and maltreatment do not become involved in selling sex. Some, if involved, cope, survive and, on occasion, exit, whilst others are unable to see any alternative to continued involvement (Pearce, 2009). The management of identity for those who do become involved in sex work appears to be intrinsically bound up with their perception of the 'prostitute identity', which is seen by many of those involved, but crucially not all, as a 'spoilt identity' (Goffman, 1963). How a sense of identity is managed appears to be interlinked with the place of sex work in one's life, and the balance achieved between inner and outer

identities for each individual. Positive views of self appear to grant the individual a degree of psychological resilience to be drawn on in facing adversity (Howe, 2005). This may explain why some young people are 'self-righting' (Schofield, 1998) in their ability to adapt constructively to challenge in exiting sexual exploitation, or in surviving continued involvement, whereas others founder, becoming physically and mentally at risk.

It is the presence of multiple adverse circumstances interacting and reinforcing each other that is liable to severely undermine an individual's development and life chances (Rutter, 1999). The carrying forward of ill-effects into adult life is influenced by the chain reactions through which individuals' negative behaviour increases the likelihood that they will have further negative experiences. New experiences that provide a break from the past are needed to break negative chain reactions (Rutter, 1999). Additionally, there is a need to take a lifespan perspective, reflecting on changes that occur throughout life, in relating concepts of resilience to developmental pathways, considering interacting factors internal and external to the child, but also recognising that the interaction takes place alongside the maturation process (Schofield, 2001). Clearly, for young people at risk of sexual exploitation, the challenge of puberty, issues of sexual identity and sense of self also have an impact and are intrinsically interlinked with ecological factors and internal coping mechanisms (Pearce, 2009).

Pathways through sex work are determined by what Rutter (1999) identifies as 'resilience in the face of adversity' or 'relative resistance to psychosocial risk experiences'. Whilst, for each individual, there may be common background experiences, the study discussed in this paper indicates that what determines how involvement is defined depends on the meaning given to those, and subsequent, experiences by each individual and whether there are identifiable protective factors that nurture a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy, enabling some to survive and manage a sense of identity in situations where others cannot.

## The study

The study on which this paper draws investigated factors influencing women's involvement in sex work, and their perception of their ability to manage roles and identities. The aim was to hear participants' stories, focusing on the meaning for them of their childhood and adult experiences and pathways taken, to ensure that the research was not 'on' sex workers, but 'with' them (Hubbard, 1999, p. 23).

## The method

The central focus of the study was on understanding women's subjective experience of involvement in sex work and developing theory based on

those subjective accounts. Therefore, what appeared to fit best was an interpretive epistemology in which what is important is how people understand their worlds and create and share meanings about their lives (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 34). A qualitative grounded-theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to ensure that analysis was derived inductively from the data, capturing the expertise encapsulated in the women's narratives. Whilst a criticism of the interpretive perspective (Searle, 1998) lies in the difficulties inherent in making assumptions about the authenticity of subjective accounts, in that memory may distort what is perceived as objective fact by the interviewee, the respondent's subjectivity was less concerning here, as it was the meaning ascribed to these subjective experiences and truths that the study aimed to address.

### The data sample

The sample consisted of twenty-four women aged between eighteen and sixty-five years, from two areas of the UK. Most were recruited through specialist projects, the remainder through snowball sampling (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). Of the twenty-four participants, eighteen were white British, three dual-heritage British, one black British and two British/Polish. Most described backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage and childhood histories of abuse, neglect and rejection. Eighteen women described using/misusing drugs and/or alcohol.

Several participants had had involvement with statutory services as children, as parents or as both. Four women were in relationships, but three of these had partners in prison. Of the remaining twenty, most described previous relationships as abusive and/or coercive. Of the seventeen participants who were parents, only seven still lived with their children or retained contact. The remaining ten had no contact with their children, all of whom had been adopted, were in the care of local authorities or lived with other family members.

Age of first involvement in selling sex ranged from fourteen to thirty-one years. Half became involved prior to age eighteen. Most interviewees worked from the street, but a small number worked from home or working premises. Fifteen women were involved in sex work at the time of the interview, four were not currently involved but said they might return and five had exited with no expressed intention of returning. These variations in age and type of experience became a key iterative part of the research design and analysis.

Careful consideration of ethical issues was crucial in a study that sought to draw lessons from the often painful and always personal experiences of the women who had entrusted their stories to me. Plans were made to ensure that informed consent was obtained, anonymity and confidentiality ensured, and any debriefing necessary provided. Ethical approval was

sought and gained from the relevant sources and issues of disclosure of any child protection concerns clarified prior to commencing the interviews.

## The interviews

The aim to explore meanings ascribed by participants to experiences informed the choice of method and research instrument. In-depth interviews, after piloting, were used to encourage respondents to reflect and tell their stories. The interview schedule was devised to ensure a chronological route was taken through participants' lives. The questions were designed to elicit reflections on self in the context of relationships with others over time, from childhood, through adolescence and adulthood, and to provide opportunity for reflection on respondents' experiences of sex work and their future hopes and plans. The use of open questions and a person-centred approach enabled a degree of freedom and flexibility of interpretation by the participant. Probe and follow-up questions differed from interview to interview, ensuring that the same ground was covered, but giving scope for individual stories and their meanings to emerge. Finally, respondents were asked for their views on service provision in order to end the interview with an acknowledgement of the interviewee's expertise.

Participants were asked to choose their preferred location for the interview. Most chose outreach projects, but two people chose their homes. Information from the projects indicated that this would not present undue risk and there was a sense of privilege in being trusted by respondents to visit their homes.

There is potential for physical and psychological risks in researching in an inherently dangerous fieldwork setting (Sanders, 2005b). Whilst strategies to avoid physical danger were carefully organised, the emotional investment involved in hearing about traumatic and violent experiences was less easy to plan for. Skills of empathy were crucial, but some stories were so overwhelming in terms of the pain and despair experienced that it was impossible not to feel sad, angry and frustrated for women whose lives had been lived in such painful ways. At other times, women spoke of feeling helped by sharing painful memories with someone not involved in their lives, either personally or professionally, and, in this, there was a sense of reciprocity or 'research exchange' (Sanders, 2005b). An overriding positive in what was sometimes an emotionally draining experience was the humour and resilience of many participants.

## Findings

As the women's stories unfolded, a strong sense emerged of how their childhood experiences and the impact of risk and protective factors determined

who they felt they were, the choices they felt forced or empowered to make and the pathways through sex work they took. What became apparent was how the meaning of sex work for each woman impacted on outcomes in terms of decisions made about involvement. Whatever the age of entry into sex work, what appears to define how 'successfully' involvement and/or exiting is managed is the individual meanings ascribed by the women to their childhood and adult experiences. Early damaging experiences, which may increase the likelihood of involvement, also affect the consequent ability to deal with the experience of selling sex and simultaneously manage other life experiences. Analysis of the data indicated a need to manage both an inner and outer identity (a private and public self), given the nature of sex work, and the additional, and related, need as pathways continued into adulthood, to manage the co-existence of identities as daughter, partner, mother, friend and sex worker.

From analysis of the women's interviews and an exploration of the themes emerging from the data, three groups were identified that reflected three different psychological and behavioural strategies for managing their lives as sex workers. The groups denote the ways in which meanings given by women to often similar experiences of adversity have led them to different perceptions of choice, of 'spoiled identity' (Goffman, 1963), and of how possible it was to manage different identities. The groups provided a useful way of analysing the data to make sense of these different attitudes and strategies and the implications for future service provision.

Pseudonyms and quotes from the interviews are used in outlining the three groups to ensure that the women's voices and stories remain a central focus.

### Group One: 'Sex worker—it's who I am'

For these twelve women, involvement in sex work had become almost all consuming. They had a perception of having no choice but to stay involved. The pathway they felt destined to take began to be defined in early childhood experiences of neglect, rejection and abuse. Cindy recalled a childhood characterised by trauma, abuse and loss as 'full of anger and fear', leading to a life dependent on drugs:

I've been on drugs all my life- I put that down to my upbringing. I blame him (stepfather), because if he hadn't treated me the way he did I wouldn't have turned out the person I did and need the drugs I need to live each day to the next.

The stories of others in this group are also of fear and discontinuity characterised by memories of abandonment, betrayal, rejection, local authority care and running away to seek approval and affection. Izzie recalled:

Mum told me she wished I wasn't born and if I had any contact with them (the family) she'd stab me . . . I can't remember why they didn't want me. It ruined my life . . . the way I think of it, I must deserve all I get.

The internalisation of such high levels of unresolved loss and trauma seems likely to have left these women unable to regulate their own emotions, and to become helpless and abdicating care-givers of their children (Howe, 2005). For them, family and children were lost, rejecting or rejected. Hilda said that her daughter 'don't class me as a mother, she thinks "she's revolting; she's a prostitute"'.

These women, as children, suffered multiple adversities (Rutter, 1999), but the negative chain reaction of events seems to have led to an increasing inability to cope in the 'outer world', because most of the trauma and loss appear unresolved. It is a pattern that continued throughout their lives, into abusive relationships and the loss of children. They appear to have internalised a negative sense of 'otherness' from childhood that has led to a negative sense of self, predisposing them to further risk experiences:

Nothing's coincidence—everything you do you do for a reason. If someone tells you for so long that you're crap, then you believe you are crap (Ella).

Coercion and the drugs and sex-work cycle featured strongly in their narratives. Xanny, the mother of five children with whom she had no contact, recalled that involvement with a drug dealer led to selling sex to fund her heroin addiction, which became both her escape and the cyclical driver in her continued involvement:

Heroin's like armour. Nothing bothers me . . . you don't feel no emotional pain, reject or hurt. None of them emotions get through.

Whatever the route in, sex work was normalised by this group, who saw no alternative to the lives they were leading, perhaps because they did not have any children, family or other meaningful relationships to offer a balance. In considering what appears to be the inability of the women to reflect on and learn from experiences, and the consequent inability to develop a positive self-concept, it becomes easier to understand the seemingly self-destructive pathways taken by this group. Their self-perceived identity is that of victim (albeit occasionally defiant victim), not survivor. They present a sense of having little self-determination, agency or choice about what happens in their lives. Of the three groups, Group One has the most limited capacity to manage more than one role. Involvement in sex work for them appears not to be a journey, but the final destination. Sex work is no longer just work to these women. 'Sex worker' has become their only identity. It is who they feel they are.

### Group Two: 'Sex worker—it's what I do not who I am'

These eight women had a perception of having choice about whether they remained involved in or exited from sex work. For them, sex work was seen

as a job of work, a means to an end that did not define them. Whatever the route in, sex work for Group Two had not, unlike for Group One, become defining or all-consuming. These women, half of whom were not currently involved in selling sex, held the view that they could move into and out of involvement as need or inclination determined, but that it was their choice.

Family and children were not lost, rejecting or rejected to the same degree as for the previous group. Indeed, it was the existence of significant relationships, wider sources of resilience, and more successful management of their different roles that appears to have been a crucial aspect of their stronger sense of self-efficacy and belief in their right to choose the pathway they had taken. Bella's perception of the control she exercised over her life is illustrated by her robust view of 'pimps':

I've always been anti-pimp even from the early days... I used to watch other pimped women and think, are they all mad? Why don't they just cut out the middle man?

These women had not abdicated their claim to rights and duties accruing to wider social roles and status, and retained a clear notion of their identities as daughter, partner, mother and friend. There is a much clearer sense of their outer world positively informing their inner world (Schofield, 1998). Their inner working models are informed by positive relationships, reinforcing their sense of self-worth. Tina, for example, defined herself as 'just a normal everyday person' and saw her continued involvement 'as a service to others'. The women's decisions about staying involved or leaving were based on the quality of their lives lived in or out of involvement in sex work. For example, they demonstrated agency in decisions taken to finance, through sex work, a lifestyle for themselves and their children that would otherwise not be possible. There is a strong sense that this is a job of work, to support a lifestyle but not their whole life, or identity:

I have food on the table, so I don't condone or condemn it. It's enabled me to have a good life and travel (Rosie).

Whereas Group One appear to internalise and interpret negative experiences as expressions of their worth, Group Two are less prepared to accept the stigmatising and marginalising nature of sex work. They retain a stronger sense of self-efficacy and self-worth, which perhaps enables them to escape victimisation and retain a sense of choice about their life pathways (Rutter, 1985; Sroufe, 1997). This may have increased the development of resilience and, in turn, their ability to recognise their rights and strengthen their agency. The sense of self they convey is often a stronger more positive one, as a consequence perhaps of having had the opportunity to filter some of their negative experiences through memories of early positive relationships, experiences and turning points. Their narratives indicate that, despite having endured adversity and previously having made what they considered in retrospect to be unwise choices, they felt increasingly

in control of the choices they made. These choices were about who they are and with whom they were prepared to share that sense of self.

These women are on the opposite end of the spectrum from Group One, seeing themselves as managers and survivors. They did not acknowledge having a ‘spoilt identity’ (Goffman, 1963) to the same degree as the previous group. Although there is some evidence of attempting to ‘pass’ and to keep involvement in sex work secret, often for the sake of their family and to avoid what Goffman (1963) describes as ‘courtesy stigma’, there is also a strong feeling that it was their choice:

It’s about me being free to be me . . . it’s this sort of balancing act (Bella).

Whilst sex work is normalised as a job by this group, they felt that their lives offered alternatives to the role of sex worker. They retained strong relationships with family and children, giving them other important identities and roles and a secure base from which to flourish. Their decisions about staying involved or leaving sex work were based on the quality of their lives in or out of involvement. Of the three groups, these women had the greatest capacity to manage more than one role and identity. For Group Two, sex work remained a part of an outer or professional identity. Their view was ‘it is what I do, not who I am’.

### Group Three: ‘Sex worker—I can’t let it be who I am’

This group of women felt it was impossible to sustain and maintain significant relationships, and successfully manage other roles alongside that of sex worker. Relationships and, crucially, a continued sense of self-worth and self-efficacy were only sustainable if they rejected the identity and role of sex worker. These women are at the opposite end of the spectrum from those in Group One and, whilst they share in common with Group Two a sense of themselves as managers and survivors with self-determination and agency, they interpret and utilise that agency differently in that they do not see continued involvement in sex work as a choice for them. For this group, a ‘spoilt identity’ (Goffman, 1963) was too great a risk. Sex worker was not compatible with their sense of themselves. Fiona, for example, who previously saw sex workers as ‘the family I never had’ began to see sex work as ‘not bettering myself but killing myself’. Mary spoke of wanting ‘my daughter to have the parenting that I didn’t have’. However, to achieve this, Mary felt she had to give up sex work and saw her daughter as a catalyst to this:

I had my daughter—that’s why I stopped prostitution . . . My daughter was my wake-up call.

She argued that she did not condemn other mothers who choose to remain involved:

It doesn't make you a bad person; it doesn't make you a bad mother, at the end of the day you have got money and as long as you can look after your kids. . . . If you're doing it for a man then I don't think that's right, but if you're doing it for a better life for your family then OK.

But she found the roles and identities of mother and sex worker incompatible. Mary's narrative indicates a strong sense of her desire to build a new personal identity for herself.

The narratives of these women indicate a clear perception of their feelings that, for them, sex work was a degradation of self that undermined and threatened to destroy already fragile senses of self-worth and self-efficacy. For Fiona, for example, the degradation of not being able to talk to friends who were not sex workers about her situation because of their disapproval and the humiliation of being exposed as a sex worker following a violent attack resulted in her exiting sex work. She argued that:

We have to respect our body, and if we aren't going to respect it and we're going to sell it to anybody, nobody else is going to respect us are they? We have to respect ourselves before we can get respect back.

The sense that further rejection would result from being perceived as degraded strengthened the resolve of these women to leave the identity of sex worker behind.

Mary's story also indicated a quality of resilience in her determination to leave what she perceived as the degradation of the world of drug taking and sex work. She spoke of 'just being myself again now. I'm back to the person that I was years ago'. There is evidence of constructive and positive appraisal in all the explanations given for leaving sex work and a sense in which the women felt they were returning to the selves they really felt themselves to be.

This group's narratives indicate that what is crucial in the development of a belief in one's acceptance and a consequent ability to move forward is rebuilding the ability to trust, not always fostered in childhood for these women—that someone will be there for you and will listen in a non-judgemental, non-rejecting way. Qualities of resilience appear to have been developed by the support these women received in exiting sex work and in their own consequent, increased sense of self-esteem. This almost unconditional notion of 'being there' (Schofield and Brown, 1999) has, for these women, become the 'secure base' they only ever fleetingly or inconsistently experienced in childhood, but need in order to reduce anxiety and build feelings of self-worth, self-efficacy and resilience.

Unlike for Group One, sex work had not become central to their inner identity, but, unlike for Group Two, could not be allowed to be part of their outer identity either. For these women, it was seen not as a job, but as a degradation of self and rejected. They were not prepared to accept the stigmatising, marginalising and potentially criminalising nature of sex work and, unlike Group Two, do not want to assert a right to remain

involved. But, additionally and crucially, all four women demonstrated a flexibility of thinking enabling them to survive the transition from the secret inner world of sex work to the outer world of wider society.

Whilst there are unresolved issues in their lives, the sense that they felt that the decision to leave sex work was a positive step, and with continued support could be maintained, was seen by them as strengthening their foothold on a much less hazardous life path. A crucial protective factor for this group is the ability to see an alternative life as a possibility and themselves as deserving it:

I'll never turn back now because I truly love myself now. So why am I going to sell my body to someone for £30, £40? What's that going to achieve? Nothing. That's degrading myself and I've degraded myself enough in life. When I look back to that life there's no going back (Fiona).

It is in building a belief that they deserve better and developing an improved quality of life outside sex work that these women were perhaps enabled to maintain a determination to stay away. What is apparent from their narratives is that, with relationships based non-judgemental support, these women were clearly able to say who they are and that they cannot let it be sex worker.

## Identity and choice across the groups

Emerging themes from the three groups suggest that, for those women who have developed and retained a strong sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy, despite difficult early experiences, sex work is perceived as something about which they have a sense of choice. For others, often those with lower self-esteem, the choice was limited. Some felt there was no choice but to stay involved, whilst others felt there was no choice but to exit. It is in the ability to manage a sense of being 'other' and simultaneously being a person with 'mainstream' identities that appears to determine survival and choices once involved in sex work.

Each woman's narrative indicated that, over time, there had been a series of turning points and critical moments on their pathway from childhood into sex work. Outcomes appeared to be dependent not on the critical moments themselves, but on each woman's cognitive appraisal of them. For instance, for some, a violent attack was perceived, fatalistically, as to be expected, but, for others, it was the catalyst to regaining control over what was acceptable, changing the direction of their pathway. A sense of identity, agency and choice was informed, formed or reformed by the sense made of specific experiences feeding into a sense of self in which self-esteem was nurtured or starved. This, often cyclical, process impacted upon and influenced decisions about involvement, continuing or exiting sex work, and the extent to which it was possible to manage different identities and lives.

For some women, 'protection' was found not in qualities of resilience, but in maladaptive ways, such as in substance misuse to block out the intrusion of the outer world. The ability to constructively challenge, and therefore avoid, or survive and manage sex work lies in the extent to which self-esteem and self-efficacy inform empowerment to choose, which feeds back into building a positive self-concept. This virtuous circle was evident for Group Two and latterly for Group Three, but Group One had spiralled down into a vicious circle of despair and hopelessness, as they lacked qualities of resilience from which to develop self-worth and self-efficacy.

Whilst childhood experiences of abuse, neglect and rejection were common, there appeared to be key determinants of pathway outcome that transactionally intertwined, as part of an interactive process between the developing individual and their environment, with perceptions of power, agency and choice. These were: whether, and how, the search for approval and affection was resolved; whether feeling 'different' led to a sense of defeat or strengthened resolve; whether coping strategies were adaptive or maladaptive; and, crucially, whether individuals experienced the availability of a *secure base*, whatever form it took (Bowlby, 1988). The concept of a secure base in attachment theory relies on the connection between reducing anxiety with the help of supportive relationships enabling hope and exploration to flourish. For Groups Two and Three, relationships with others were far more successfully maintained than for Group One.

## Discussion

The findings indicate that the extent to which participants had been enabled to develop qualities of resilience (Rutter, 1985, 1999) was closely linked to the availability of a secure base, which impacted on their ability to manage involvement in sex work and maintain a balance between inner and outer, private and public worlds. The balance varied, depending on whether qualities of resilience had been developed through cognitive appraisal of early childhood experience that permitted the resolution of painful memories. Such qualities can be utilised to build effective coping mechanisms to deal with future experiences and maintain a clear sense of self. Alternatively, qualities may have been fostered at a later stage in life, by finding a sense of the availability of a secure base (Bowlby, 1988) from supportive relationships either with family or with the accessibility of unconditionally supportive outreach workers that nurtured fledgling feelings of self-worth. For all the women, the need for someone to *be there* for them (Schofield and Brown, 1999) was a significant factor in making sense of experiences differently and, occasionally, changing the direction of the pathway taken.

What appear to be the key factors, enabling some women involved in sex work to adapt constructively to challenge, lie in the extent to which it has been possible for them to reflect on, and appraise, psycho-social risk

experiences in their lives in ways that enable them to build qualities of resilience from those experiences rather than internalising negative feelings, which further erodes self-worth. The aim must be to provide services that ensure the provision of a secure base from which individuals can begin to develop a belief in the availability of others and begin to trust and change the way they think and feel about themselves and others:

For not only children, it is now clear, but human beings of all ages are found to be at their happiest and to be able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they are confident that, standing behind them, there are one or more trusted adults who will come to their aid should difficulties arise. The person trusted provides a secure base from which his (or her) companion can operate (Bowlby, 1973, p. 407).

The need for a secure base begins in early childhood. The development of self-worth and self-efficacy flows from a child's confidence in the availability of a secure base (Howe, 2005, 2008; Schofield and Beek, 2006) and, for many involved in sex work, this has often been missing since early childhood. Building resilience is crucial to the well-being of those at risk of, and involved in, sex work, whether they are choosing to exit or to stay. Resilience, if not nurtured in childhood, by developing the capacity to withstand the negative effects of adversity, must be the goal of all work undertaken in supporting those involved in sex work, whatever their age. The provision of a secure base can reduce anxiety and foster the development of self-efficacy. In this way, *turning points* could more readily be recognised and used to enable women to make more informed choices about the direction of pathways.

## Implications for policy and practice

The analysis of pathways is, as Mathews (2008) suggests, helpful in formulating a differentiated and structured approach to prevention and intervention. It is evident that there is not one sex worker identity; sex workers are individuals with varying perceptions of their own agency and abilities to manage roles, and make choices. Different sex markets also bring different risks, different dilemmas and therefore different choices (Sanders, 2005b; Mathews, 2008). Different coping strategies may evolve to survive, manage and exit, but all will have varying degrees of relevance and success at different ages, stages of life and in different sex markets.

Routes into sex work vary in levels of coercion, drift and agency, but such factors are enmeshed and interact with both individual and wider structural factors (Campbell and O'Neill, 2006; Sanders *et al.*, 2009). Once involved, some women felt strongly that they had a right to make a choice to continue selling sex as a means of funding their lives, and developed practical and psychological coping strategies to enable them to do so (Sanders, 2005b). In contrast, some become so immersed in the world of sex work that they

see no way out. Others have exited sex work in order to survive. Service provision must reflect the diversity of pathways if it is to be effective.

For young people at risk of sexual exploitation, the routes in and trapping mechanisms are the same, but are exacerbated by the increased vulnerability inherent in youth and inexperience (Barrett, 1997; Pearce *et al.*, 2002; Pearce, 2009). As O'Connell Davidson (1998) noted, age is just one of the factors impacting on levels of 'unfreedom' experienced by those involved. What is crucial, whatever the age, is the development of a sense of being loved and lovable, and to have someone to rely on, which foster qualities of resilience. This must be nurtured so that individuals can develop a positive self-concept and be better able to make informed choices, whatever the choices are.

The implications for future interventions therefore are clear: effective service provision must be informed by the expertise of those involved in sex work and must fit individual needs, building on strategies that nurture qualities of resilience and self-esteem. It is crucial that service delivery is targeted effectively at the different pathway stages. There is a need for the holistic provision of multi-agency services, aimed at building on strengths, ranging from universal preventative and parenting skills services for families with young children to educative self-esteem-building, awareness-raising and relationship-based preventative interventions in adolescence, and to specific holistic harm-reduction and support strategies and outreach provision in adulthood for those who have become involved in sex work and choose to access support in continuing or in exiting. As part of a wider range of provisions, Pearce (2009) suggests that, for young people, there is a need for 'therapeutic outreach'. This provision would have benefits for all those involved in sex work, whatever their age or pathway stage.

## Conclusion

As the study from which this paper is drawn indicates, pathways and choices made about involvement in sex work vary. Some women feel it is 'what I am', for others it is 'what I do' and for others it 'cannot be me'. Whatever the pathways and perceptions of levels of agency and choice, support is more effectively delivered if we listen to what those involved have to say and develop service provision that provides a secure base and promotes resilience:

Be there for people. They're just normal human beings. The only way to find out anything is if you stop putting people in boxes and start looking at them as human beings and talk to them. . . . You've got to get past what they're doing, past the drugs they're on and find the person inside (Amy).

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