Moments of choice, agency and decision making in the narratives of childhood sexual exploitation survivors

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Submitted to the University of Hertfordshire in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctorate in Clinical Psychology
June 2026

Word count: 29,926 (31,825 after amendments)
(excluding acknowledgements, abstract, tables, figures, references, footnotes and appendices)

The study's ethical position

This thesis is written from the ethical and legal position that responsibility for exploitation lies solely with perpetrators and enabling systems. Recognising moments of choice, agency and decision-making within constrained contexts does not imply consent, nor does it shift responsibility onto those who have been exploited.

Acknowledgements

Gloria Deo, pax hominibus

Psalm 13:6

There are so many people that I owe thanks and gratitude to for the journey I've been on, not just to complete this project, but for my education and professional journey from a high school dropout to where I am now. I would never be able to name them all, but there are a few that cannot go unmentioned.

To my project participants -

Ali, your participation has been a blessing beyond what you bring to the project. You have supported my growth as a researcher, psychologist, and person, and I am grateful beyond measure to have had the opportunity to get to know you.

Sarah, thank you for being so willing to spend time with me and share your experiences. Your commitment to supporting other women and girls really stands out.

Alice, your strength and fortitude have been a privilege to be able to witness. I thank you for being so willing to share so openly with me.

Jelly, you are a rainbow in all things. Your utter focus and commitment to seeing the joy in life is a gift to all who meet you.

Dee, you're the ally woman need, regardless of the challenges you have faced, your willingness to stand strong on your principles despite the cost to yourself. I am so grateful for your willingness to share your journey with me.

Ollie, thank you for sharing so openly with me and being such an advocate for this project. I have been enriched by my opportunity to get to know you and for the ways that you have challenged how I think about myself as a person and practitioner.

To my colleagues and friends -

Emma, you have been a blessing beyond any measure. I am left in awe of your willingness to generously share your time, knowledge, and passion for supporting young people. You have no idea just how important you are to the people and communities you serve. I owe you an unrepayable debt of gratitude.

Dawood, thank you for listening and thinking with me about this project. Your willingness to support with your understanding, knowledge, and connections has been a gift I can only seek to repay.

Raven, your patience with all the techy stuff, and making Word do what I wanted it to, has been a huge help.

Brit, you are a dream. I cannot express how grateful I am for you being in my life; you are the epitome of a hype girl. You have a way of soothing my doubts about myself, my literacy, and my work. So very glad that two random, totally different Aussie women would end up in the same YJS in Coventry, of all places. Can't wait to see you in the homeland.

Vanessa, you were the first person who told me I should just apply, and even after I explained my scattered education and professional journey, you told me to do it anyway. I'm not sure you will ever understand how much that one conversation really got me looking seriously into things.

Camoie, your utter confidence in the fact that I should apply to complete the doctorate was so affirming. I will be so happy if I grow to be half the clinician that you are.

Helena, your willingness to offer your time to me and this project has been a gift. I'm grateful to have had you, offer an outside view.

To the people I have been blessed to meet on the doctorate -

To C23, I am thankful for you all, for your generosity in sharing your knowledge with me.

Candices who will I voice note now?

Shakira and Eleni, for being the 'MRP same but different' space, I needed to think about my project. Your time as the second reviewer for my SLR has been invaluable.

Analisia, Lauran, Em, Robin and Harry, your time spent with me putting the world to rights and having a laugh at the pub on a Friday made this whole journey feel manageable. I will never forget Harry's hot takes.

Krish, thank you for being the kind, supportive and loving person that you are and for your hanky, it lives in my work jacket, you never know when I might be needed.

Lara, when I met you, who would have thought that your openness to sharing your experiences of interviewing for the DClin would become such an important part of my life. Between thinking about the value of community work and our view of the world, and thinking about swapping hometowns, I have felt encouraged, inspired and challenged by you. I'm not sure I will ever be able to articulate what a blessing you have been to me, and I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to know you. See you in the homeland.

Liam, where do I begin? You are a total joy to know, and I am so grateful to have met you. It has been a blessing to be able to think with you, laugh with you, and cry a little with you. You really are one of a kind, and you're stuck with me for life, like it or not.

Sheeva, what do I say, your willingness to meet with and support the random person who contacted you on LinkedIn because your name kept coming up in conversation, it was so very generous. Your willingness to devote hours to reading my poorly written drafts has been such a blessing. I will find a way to pass it on.

Abigail, thank you so much for all your support and encouragement. You have been such a containing space, while also allowing me to take full ownership of this project and run with my own timelines and areas of exploration. Thank you for your passion for the thesis topic and project.

To my family -

Aunty Jan, I cannot thank you enough. Not only did you save me from the craziness of the London rental market, but you also share your time, space and home so openly with me. Jonathan and I owe you a debt of gratitude. Who am I going to eat curry and watch Bake Off with now?

To the Damhuis, Boogers, Cockrill, Al-Kilonje and Gilham's, thank you. I am who I am because of all of you, and I'm grateful for the big, messy family I get to be a part of.

Jonathan, thank you for all of it and more. There are no words enough to thank you for your sacrifices, patience and support, alongside your unwavering belief in my abilities. You are the greatest blessing in my life. What will our next adventure be?

We are made of stories, not atoms; Some we tell. Some we inherit. Some, we are still trying to find words for.

(Muriel Rukeyser)

Abstract

Background - This study explores how individuals with lived experiences of child sexual exploitation (CSE) narrate choices, decision-making, and agency within experiences shaped by coercion, vulnerability and broader structural pressures. Dominant frameworks, and some strands of the literature, have approached CSE through relatively fixed binary categories of victimhood, where young people are positioned either as passive victims or as complicit in their own exploitation. While these categories have increasingly been challenged in research and practice, there remains a limited understanding of the complexities of constrained decision-making in CSE contexts. A preceding systematic literature review identified a particular lack of research exploring how agency and decision-making are narratively constructed and understood within lived experiences of CSE.

Methodology - A qualitative narrative methodology was utilised using dialectical narrative analysis (DNA). Semi-structured narrative interviews were completed with six participants who identified as having lived experiences of CSE. The analysis focused on tension, positioning, contradictions and the ways in which participants assigned meaning to their experiences over time. Attention was also paid to how narratives moved between past and present understandings of exploitation, responsibility, survival, and identity.

Findings - Across the narratives, five recurring dialectical tensions emerged: choice and constraint; resistance and compliance; belonging and harm; past and present self; moral identity and stigma. Participants' narratives noted that decision-making was shaped by coercion, fear, structural and cultural expectations, and attempts to develop survival strategies. Actions were at times framed externally as 'choices'; these appeared to function as attempts to reduce harm, maintain one's moral position, and regain some sense of control. Agency across the narratives was rarely described as unrestricted freedom. Rather, it was intertwined with accounts of vulnerability, coercion, survival strategies and retrospective meaning-making.

Conclusions - Overall, the narratives in the study suggest that within CSE, agency may be more complex than binary framings of either unfettered choices or complete victimhood suggest. Rather, the research participants' accounts narrated agency as something that was shaped by relationships, social factors, the need to survive and retrospective meaning-making. Participants' narratives highlight how attempts to survive and maintain one's own moral position could later be reinterpreted through the lenses of shame, resistance, protection, cultural and gendered expectations, and resilience. The findings support the importance of contextually sensitive and survivor-informed understandings of CSE that can allow space for contradictions and complexity without reducing lived experiences to a simplistic narrative of passivity or blame. [1]

[1] **Disclaimer:** Please note that all features of the Grammarly Premium software have been used for this project in accordance with the University's guidelines on the responsible use of such tools. My use of Grammarly is supported by my Study Needs Agreement, which falls under the provisions outlined by the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) for academic support and Access to Work for assistive technology to improve accessibility and support my studies. I confirm that I have adhered to the conditions of these agreements, ensuring that the software was only used to check for grammatical errors, punctuation, syntax, structure, and clarity, and not to generate new content. Grammarly incorporates AI-driven features, which were used for the purposes mentioned above.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Approximately 500,000 children and young people experience child sexual exploitation (CSE) annually in the United Kingdom (National Audit on Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, 2025; NSA, 2025). CSE is shaped by power imbalances, coercion, and systemic inequalities (Oram et al., 2012). However, dominant victimhood narratives can fail to reflect the complex decision-making processes of survivors, perpetuating a binary of passivity versus complicity (Horning, 2012; Le & Halkitis, 2018).

A key concern is the potential for misinterpretation of survival strategies as evidence of unfettered choice or consent. Young people's attempts to mitigate harm within exploitative contexts can be interpreted as willingness, troublemaking or autonomy, rather than constrained responses informed by threats, grooming, a need for belonging and limited options (Carey et al., 2009). This thesis explores how survivors narrate moments of choice, agency, and decision-making, including behaviours such as harm reduction and strategies developed under dangerous conditions. When actions are stripped of their context, responsibility is shifted to young people, reinforcing narratives of blame and allows the structural conditions that enable exploitation to thrive (Pasko & Chesney-Lind, 2016; Smith & Woodiwiss, 2016; Woodiwiss, 2022).

In this chapter, I present the context surrounding the research, the epistemological position, define key terms and explain the rationale behind their selection. I will review the empirical and theoretical literature that informs the study and introduce the rationale for the SLR that follows.

1.1 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As a qualitative researcher, my subjective perspective is intertwined with qualitative research processes (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). For me, this research is not merely academic, but deeply personal. My professional journey, personal narrative, and ethical principles shape what I observe, how I interpret it, and the stories I choose to tell.

My position can best be described as insider-outsider. I am familiar with CSE through my work, advocacy, social networks and relationships; however, I have not personally experienced it. My first-person writing reflects this involvement. I do not claim neutrality. I am neither fully inside nor outside the lives of those I seek to learn from. This space, between familiarity and difference, requires care and reflexivity, which I have endeavoured to bring to this research (Asselin, 2003; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

My professional life has focused on working with adolescents affected by exploitation, trauma, and systemic intervention. I have supported individuals to navigate criminalisation, care systems, and institutional responses that often compound their harm. Their stories were

complex, nuanced, and often contradictory. These experiences have profoundly shaped this research.

I come from a childhood where higher education was not highly regarded, where girls' worth was often tied to virginity and motherhood. I had limited literacy until adulthood and was later diagnosed with dyslexia. The shame of being treated as, and feeling "stupid", has remained with me, and shaped how I engage with stories of individuals who are dismissed, misunderstood, unheard or punished for the ways they survive.

I am the first in my family to attend university. While I navigate academic and professional spaces, I remain conscious of how exclusion, particularly regarding literacy, has shaped my relationship to power and voice. As a white, English-speaking immigrant from a Western country, I am also afforded forms of privilege that are not always available to those whose experiences are central to this research.

My appearance, including tattoos, piercings, and vivid hair, does not always convey traditional ideas of academic or professional authority. This has heightened my awareness of how perception influences access, credibility, and power, especially for those who do not, or cannot, conform to institutional norms. To remain attentive to these dynamics, I engaged in reflexive journaling, supervision, and collaboration with an expert by experience (EbE) who contributed to the development of the study (Tracy, 2010).

At times, I found myself wanting to protect participants, other times, I was tempted to oversimplify. Revisiting my assumptions helped me stay true to what was shared, rather than what I expected to hear. Reflexivity has not eradicated bias, but has made it visible and accountable (Charmaz, 2006). Some of the stories are fragmented or unresolved. I have needed to resist the urge to impose clarity where it does not exist. Real life rarely offers neat conclusions. Silence, ambiguity, and contradiction are not analytical flaws; they are aspects of lived experience.

1.2 Epistemological Position and Analytic Framework

This research adopts a moderate social constructionist approach (Harper, 2011), combining a social constructionist epistemology with a critical realist ontology. This view proposes that reality is not fixed or singular, but constructed through discourse, interaction, and cultural context (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Esin et al., 2014). It also recognises that these meanings emerge within material and structural conditions.

Critical realism asserts that although meaning is socially constructed, experiences are influenced by material conditions such as poverty, inequality, ableism, and gendered violence (Lawani, 2021; Willis, 2023). Participants' stories are understood as socially situated interpretations of lived experiences, not reality itself. This position supports examining how individuals who experienced CSE make meaning of their experiences within broader

sociopolitical discourse. It also provides space to recognise agency and resistance, not as binary states but as contextually negotiated survival strategies. The critical realist frame holds that agency is real but always exists within material, relational and structural constraints (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Bhaskar, 2013).

This position acknowledges that power relations shape which CSE narratives are legitimised or silenced. Socioeconomic inequality, racism, institutional neglect, and cultural scripts surrounding victimhood and recovery also shape how stories are understood (Harper, 2011).

My epistemological stance asserts that knowledge is co-created by the researcher and participant (Gergen, 2009). As an insider-outsider researcher, I do not stand outside this process; it has informed both the questions asked and the interpretation made. These interpretations are further shaped by my training, experiences, and values (Charmaz, 2006). I strive to remain accountable for these influences.

1.3 Relevant Empirical and Theoretical Literature

This section reviews the empirical and theoretical literature that informs this thesis.

1.3.1 Conceptualising Child Sexual Exploitation within Research and Policy

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) involves any act in which a child or young person, regardless of gender, is used for sexual gain (Department for Education, 2017; Laird et al., 2023). Such acts may be physical or non-contact, in person, via technology, or both. Coercion, manipulation, or grooming are often involved, with or without violence, and abuse may occur without the child's full awareness, such as through the online sharing of explicit images (Department for Education, 2017; Laird et al., 2023). CSA is characterised by a fundamental power imbalance between child and the perpetrator, rooted in age, gender, cognitive ability, physical strength, social status, or access to economic and emotional resources (Department for Education, 2017; Laird et al., 2023).

CSE is a specific form of harm within CSA that includes exchange. This exchange may involve tangible gains, such as money, drugs, food, or gifts, or intangible rewards, including affection, status, protection, or belonging (Beckett & Pearce, 2017; Department for Education, 2017; Laird et al., 2023). Often overlooked in formal definitions is that some young people may engage in such exchanges to minimise harm and ensure safety. This behaviour may be misread as consent, when it reflects survival under coercion (Firmin et al., 2016; Pearce, 2017).

Prior to 2009, areas of risk and concern now recognised as CSE were present in some local authority procedures, policies, and risk assessments. However, UK guidance at the time predominantly referred to 'children involved in prostitution' (Safeguarding Children Involved in Prostitution, 2010). Over the years, CSE has undergone significant development in policy

and practice (Dodsworth, 2014). Government inquiries and advocacy work shifted this perspective towards a safeguarding-oriented approach. Influenced by works such as Pearce (2017) and the Jay Report (2014) into the Rotherham scandal, discourse moved from criminality towards vulnerability, coercion, and grooming. Nonetheless, this change has not been without resistance, as CSE has at times become almost synonymous with grooming by unknown adult men. This risks narrowing understanding and obscuring contextual and structural factors, as well as familiar, and peer, grooming and exploitation (Hallett, 2016). Despite this progress, inconsistencies persist across international and disciplinary boundaries, often resulting in fragmented responses.

1.3.1.1 Terminology and Key Concepts

Language holds power and can never be neutral (Esin et al., 2014; Foucault, 1980). In CSE research, policies, and support systems, the words we choose can either honour survivors' experiences or perpetuate harmful narratives, restricting access to judicial and support services (Ricciardelli et al., 2021; Woodiwiss, 2018).

There is a multitude of terminology utilised across disciplines, policies, and public discourse for CSE, including but not limited to: *domestic minor sex trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation of youth, juvenile prostitution, underage sex work, sexual slavery, child sex tourism,* and *child prostitution* (Laird et al., 2023; Miller, 2011). Many of these terms are problematic or limiting in how CSE is conceptualised.

Prostitution and sex work are defined as when a person (A) who, on at least one occasion, offers or provides sexual services to another person (B) in return for payment or a promise of payment to person (A) or a third person (C). Within the UK, prostitution can only be engaged in by those over the age of 18 (City of London Police, 2025; CPS, 2022; Sexual Offences Act 2003, Section 54, 2015). As such, terms like “juvenile prostitution”, “underage sex work”, and “child prostitution” are not legally accurate, as those under 18 are not able to participate in prostitution or sex work, as it is defined by law as ‘abuse’. Additionally, these terms carry implications of choice or agency. These terms have historically been used to criminalise or blame vulnerable children rather than to offer protection and support (Cusick, 2002; Thorburn, 2016). This is particularly relevant for those marginalised by race, class, care status, poverty, or gender identity (Cusick, 2002; Thorburn, 2016).

“Commercial sexual exploitation of youth/children” centres tangible transactional elements, such as money and goods (Department for Education, 2017; Laird et al., 2023). Thus, they risk missing the more relational, emotional, and psychological dynamics that characterise many young people’s experiences of exploitation (Beckett & Pearce, 2017). These terms struggle to capture situations where children are groomed by parents/carers, peers, exploited within their neighbourhoods, care settings, or harmed by ‘trusted’ adults (Berelowitz et al., 2013). These terms can also overlook the ambiguity, attachment, and

survival strategies described by many survivors (Coy, 2009). Likewise, sensationalist terms such as “child sexual slavery” or “child sex tourism” risk reinforcing the idea that exploitation is something extreme or foreign (Kempadoo, 2004; Miller, 2011). In some circumstances, these terms can be accurate; however, they risk implying that harm happens “elsewhere” or only under particularly shocking conditions (Kempadoo, 2004) leaving aside more everyday forms of coercion, manipulation, and vulnerability that many young people face. As such, they can obscure the prevalence of CSE and the reality that it can exist across all communities. The project’s EbE shared that they wonder if these terms allow people not to have to ‘look in their own backyard’. The term CSE is ethically rooted in UK safeguarding policies (Beckett & Pearce, 2017; Department for Education, 2017) and was selected after consultation with the project’s EbE. Terms that do not align with the current understanding of CSE, the author's ethical stance, or the guidance offered by the project EbE will still be present, where relevant, to reference the existing literature. Terms such as 'young person,' 'girl,' 'boy,' and 'child/children' will be used in line with the context from which the information was gathered. However, I will use ‘young person/people’.

Agency, choice, decision-making, and resilience are central to this research. These are not fixed concepts, but are shaped by context and by how individuals make sense of their exploitation.

Agency: In this study, agency refers to the ability or perceived ability to influence one’s life circumstances through moments of choice and decision-making within constrained contexts. It is not treated as absolute freedom but as shaped by context, constraints and perceived safety. Hitlin and Elder (2007) emphasise that agency is embedded within social structures, cultural expectations, and lived histories. This aligns with Woodiwiss (2018), who notes that young people act within exploitative settings, where endurance may be intertwined with attempts to maintain relationships or reduce harm. This framing recognises intention and survival, even under significant constraint (Baxter & Chazal, 2022; Firmin et al., 2016), without minimising the coercion or harm experienced.

Choice: In this study, ‘choice’ refers to selection between options that were made available (Definition of CHOICE, 2025; Lefevre et al., 2018; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). These are not free choices in the conventional sense, as they occurred within contexts shaped by coercion, fear, manipulation, and survival. To recognise these moments as choices is not to deny exploitation; it is to understand that, even under threat, we act in whatever way offers the greatest safety, or control (Baxter & Chazal, 2022; Carey et al., 2009; Firmin et al., 2016). This study honours those stories without mistaking constrained choices for freedom or consent.

Decision-Making: Decision-making is understood here as the process of weighing what was known, felt, or feared at the time, and responding accordingly (Crivelli et al., 2024; Garrigan et al., 2018). Within exploitation, decisions are often made quickly, under pressure, and in spaces where consequences were high. This study seeks to understand those decisions

on the survivor's terms, to learn how people made sense of risk, connection, and survival in impossible situations (Crivelli et al., 2024; Garrigan et al., 2018).

1.3.2 Historical and Cultural Evolution of CSE Narratives

Young people's experience of sexual exploitation has been understood through varying models shaped by broader cultural, social, economic, and technological changes (Berelowitz et al., 2013). The lack of clear definitions and boundaries has sparked debates over what constitutes CSE, thereby influencing how exploitation is identified and responded to in practice and policy (Berelowitz et al., 2013; Reisel, 2017). Earlier portrayals in public discourse and policy depicted exploited young people as 'deviant' or complicit actors, especially within the framework of 'child prostitution' (Dodsworth, 2014; Pearce, 2017). This language mirrored broader social anxieties and moral panics about youth sexuality and control (Lefevre et al., 2018; Lloyd, 2022). Over time, as inquiries and advocacy challenged this narrative, understanding shifted towards a relational and structural perspective that recognised grooming, manipulation, and coercion as key mechanisms.

Beckett and Pearce (2017) identify two dominant models that have shaped both public discourse and professional understandings of CSE: the Romance Model (also referred to in the literature as the Boyfriend Model) and the Puppet on a String Model. Whilst these models have made an important contribution to recognising and conceptualising CSE, they have also been critiqued for presenting experiences of exploitation in ways that may not fully reflect the relational, contextual and fluid nature of young people's experiences (Cusick, 2002; Lloyd, 2022; Roache & McSherry, 2021; Woodiwiss, 2014).

The Romance Model conceptualises exploitation as occurring within the context of a seemingly caring or intimate relationship, where emotional attachment, trust and grooming are used to facilitate abuse (Cusick, 2002). During the grooming process, abusive behaviours are often reframed as expressions of love, care or commitment, which may obscure coercion and make abusive behaviours more difficult for both young people and professionals to recognise (Roache & McSherry, 2021). However, this conceptualisation may underrepresent the complexity of some young people's experiences. As discussed throughout this thesis, some young people may recognise aspects of coercion or exploitation whilst simultaneously describing feelings of attachment, belonging or care within these relationships (Hallett, 2016; Shaw et al., 2024). For some young people, remaining within an exploitative relationship does not necessarily indicate an absence of awareness, but may instead reflect the extent to which important emotional, relational or practical needs continue to be met despite the presence of abuse (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2016; Roache & McSherry, 2021; Shaw et al., 2024).

This understanding also shares conceptual similarities with the domestic abuse literature, particularly theories of coercive control, where manipulation, dependency and

abuse develop gradually within relationships that outwardly appear caring or supportive (Cusick, 2002; McKibbin & Humphreys, 2019; Shaw et al., 2024). Recognising these similarities may support practitioners to understand why some young people continue to describe feelings of care, attachment or loyalty within exploitative relationships, without diminishing the coercive nature of the abuse (Hallett, 2016; Roache & McSherry, 2021).

In contrast, the Puppet on a String Model foregrounds more overt forms of coercion and control, emphasising violence, intimidation, threats, financial dependence, gift-giving, and the exchange of resources as mechanisms by which exploitation is maintained (Barnardo's, 2011). Whilst this model provides an important framework for recognising more overt forms of exploitation, it may also simplify experiences that are often more dynamic and relational than either model alone suggests (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2016; Roache & McSherry, 2021). Young people's experiences may move between, and beyond, these conceptualisations, with coercion, attachment, agency, and survival often coexisting. Rather than representing discrete categories, these models are perhaps best understood as complementary conceptual frameworks that illuminate different aspects of exploitation whilst inevitably simplifying the complexity of lived experience. Consequently, young people's experiences may not always conform neatly to either model, reinforcing the importance of moving beyond binary understandings of exploitation.

1.3.3 The Construction of Victimhood and the "Ideal Victim"

While awareness has grown within professional and public discourse, dominant social, professional, and institutional discourses often appear to rely on a binary understanding of young people's exploitation. Within this binary, young people may be positioned as either passive, innocent victims or autonomous, blameworthy participants (Horning, 2012; Pearce, 2017). A cornerstone of this tension is the concept of the 'ideal victim', which implies passivity, sexual innocence, compliance and dependency (Christie, 1986). In relation to CSE, there is also an assumption of being young, white, female, and submissive (Christie, 1986; Woodiwiss, 2018). Dominant narratives often rely on middle-class standards of respectability and vulnerability. When young people deviate from these identity markers or demonstrate resilience, strategic decision-making, or agency, they are seen as being outside of this ideal, resulting in their experiences often being met with doubt, reinterpretation, or dismissal (Christie, 1986; Hallett, 2016; Woodiwiss, 2018). Those individuals whose survival strategies involve "street smart" and the pursuit of unattainable material items are often judged against the standards, leading to their exploitation being dismissed as a lifestyle choice rather than a constrained response to poverty (Dodsworth, 2014; McMahon-Howard, 2017).

Survivors who show agency, choices, resistance or relational ties to perpetrators may fall outside this archetype, leading to potential disbelief, blame or exclusion from support services (Cuppini, 2024; Ricciardelli et al., 2021).

As noted earlier, victimhood and agency are negotiated within context. However, in many sectors, such as law, social work, and the media, this binary thinking persists. Lefevre et al. (2018) draw on Orwell's concept of *doublethink* as a metaphor for the challenge practitioners face in holding apparently contradictory understandings of young people as both agentic and victims of exploitation. Professional Double Think describes practitioners' capacity to simultaneously hold these apparently contradictory understandings without reducing young people's experiences to either victimhood or agency alone. It recognises that exploitation is often characterised by complexity, where coercion, vulnerability, attachment and agency may coexist within the same experience. The 'ideal victim' framing, with its significant consequences for survivors' access to justice and support, reflects society's discomfort with the complexities of victimhood.

1.3.4 Agency, Choice, and Decision-Making: Empirical Perspectives

Empirical studies demonstrate that young people often describe moments of decision-making and constrained choice used to manage or maintain some control within exploitative relationships (Baxter & Chazal, 2022; Beckett & Pearce, 2017). For example, Dodsworth (2014), Smith (2011), and Smith & Woodiwiss (2016) propose that what professionals often see as poor decision-making may be harm-reduction strategies or acts of resistance.

While concepts of agency, decision-making and choice are complex, people are never just passive receivers of what life throws at them: there are always points of resistance (Carey et al., 2009; Foucault, 1980). However, when agency and decision-making are equated with blame, these moments of resistance, felt agency, and decision-making are denied their full place in collective narratives. Recognising this allows space for narratives of agency and resilience without equating agency with blame (Carey et al., 2009). This conceptual foundation aligns with the theoretical perspective outlined earlier, which adopts a moderate social constructionist and critical realist framework that considers both social meaning and structural constraints.

1.3.5 Structural and Intersectional Determinants

Socioeconomic inequality, racism, institutional neglect, and gendered violence fundamentally influence both vulnerability to exploitation and the narratives that arise from it (Lawani, 2021; Willis, 2023).

Empirical evidence shows that young people from marginalised backgrounds, especially those in care, living in poverty, or belonging to minoritised ethnic groups, face a

higher risk of exploitation (Beckett & Pearce, 2017; Cockbain et al., 2014; Firmin et al., 2016). These structural inequalities also dictate which stories are recognised. Levfevre et al. (2018) acknowledge limited robust information regarding who is experiencing exploitation, noting that males, members of the LGBTQAI + community, disabled young people and individuals from more affluent socio-economic circumstances are less likely to be classified as at risk. Care status and gender norms often influence how professionals and the public respond, maintaining exclusion; furthermore, Levfevre et al. (2018) highlights that heteronormative ideals shape professionals' assessment and judgment of the threshold between young males' same-sex experimentation and exploitation.

1.3.6 Theoretical Models Informing CSE Understanding

Several theoretical traditions inform the literature on CSE. Feminist and post-structural perspectives highlight how gender, power, and patriarchy shape exploitation and the social control of female sexuality (Coy, 2009; Walklate, 2016). Social constructionist and critical realist approaches bridge individual meaning-making with material context, providing a nuanced lens for understanding how survivors narrate experiences within systems of inequality. Trauma and resilience theories further contribute by illuminating the psychological processes underlying recovery and adaptation (Shwaikh, 2023; Southwick et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, these frameworks can also hide complexity when used rigidly. Feminist and trauma paradigms sometimes risk making survivor experiences appear uniform or presenting women solely as victims (Coy, 2009; Walklate, 2016). Critical realism and social constructionism provide balance by recognising that meaning is both created and limited (Amineh & Asl, 2015; D. Harper, 2011). This theoretical combination underpins the conceptual basis for the dialectical narrative analysis (DNA) used in this study. Meaning is understood as constructed through discourse and interaction, but always situated within the material realities of poverty, inequality, ableism, and gendered violence (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Lawani, 2021; Willis, 2023).

1.3.7 Professional and Institutional Responses as Narrative Filters

Professional and institutional frameworks deeply influence how survivors' experiences are understood and legitimised (Cuppini, 2024). Support and judicial services often dissect and view these choices with a dichotomous approach (Cuppini, 2024; Dodsworth, 2014; Ricciardelli et al., 2021; M. Smith & Woodiwiss, 2016; Woodiwiss, 2018, 2022): expressions of agency are frequently interpreted as evidence of choice or defiance, rather than as survival strategies. For example, Jay (2014) highlighted that in Rochdale, when young people went back to places/situations where they were being exploited, professionals viewed them as troublemakers, promiscuous and in some cases as prostitutes. As a result, risk assessment models, safeguarding thresholds, and criminal justice procedures can function as narrative

filters, determining which stories are deemed credible. Horning (2012) highlights that, by being perceived as putting themselves at risk, young people are seen as needing protection through control and discipline, exemplified by the removal of preferences, goods, privacy, and liberty. Additionally, Horning (2012) also notes that sensationalist terms can obscure the reality of constrained agency and survival strategies, often relying on 'folk devils' that generate public alarm and 'moral panic' rather than providing a nuanced understanding of the survivor's context.

Empirical studies further show that practitioners operate within institutional pressures that constrain nuanced understanding. Hallett (2016) found that professional decision-making often defaults to moral or bureaucratic binaries, oversimplifying complex narratives for case management. These dynamics reinforce structural injustice by prioritising certain types of victimhood over others, echoing broader critiques of institutional victim hierarchies (Christie, 1986; Hallett, 2016).

1.3.8 Meaning-Making, Resistance, and Narrative Identity

This research considers narrative both as a method and a focus, recognising storytelling as a co-constructed, performative process shaped by language, and context (Esin et al., 2014). Narrative approaches emphasise that survivors' accounts are not fixed memories but dynamic re-interpretations of experience that develop over time. Variations in storytelling are not inconsistencies but meaningful expressions of growth, survival, and reflexive reinterpretation.

This study views resilience as dynamic, situated, and survivor-defined. It may manifest in enduring, resisting, or choosing silence (Shwaikh, 2023; Southwick et al., 2014; Theisen-Womersley, 2021). Shwaikh (2023) acknowledges that some survivors may reject the term resilience altogether, highlighting the importance of allowing resilience to be survivor-defined rather than shaped by research or institutional discourses. As such, this research does not aim to measure resilience, but rather to examine how individuals narrate it, where it appears in their stories, and how they understand it in their own terms (Shwaikh, 2023; Southwick et al., 2014).

Narrative approaches, therefore, allow attention to how survivors participate in meaning-making and subtle acts of resistance, even within significant constraint (Carey et al., 2009; Foucault, 1980). They also allow attention to the often conflicting and shifting ways survivors may describe harm, resilience, silence, speech, agency and vulnerability within their accounts. These meaning-making processes appeared closely tied to resilience and identity reconstruction following exploitation.

1.3.9 Narrative research and why it is rigorous

This thesis employs principles from narrative research, treating stories not as analytical evidence but as rich data shaped by social, cultural, gendered, and systemic factors. Rigour is achieved through careful attention to how stories are constructed, what is told, and what is left unspoken, centring voices that have been silenced or marginalised, allowing storytelling to be recognised as a form of meaning-making and resistance.

Narratives are not just a method in this study; they are the focus. Narrative is a co-constructed process, shaped by the interaction between the storyteller, their audience, and the broader cultural and institutional discourses available (Esin et al., 2014). This complicates distinction between individual and socially constructed meaning, as accounts are produced through interaction rather than in isolation (Gergen, 2009). It is not treated as a transparent window into the past, but as a performed and evolving account, influenced by power, memory, language, and context (Esin et al., 2014). Survivors may recount their stories differently at different times and with different people; these variations are treated as meaningful rather than inconsistent (Charmaz, 2006). This study uses narrative to gather information and honour how individuals represent themselves and resist dominant scripts that may have silenced or misrepresented them (Carey et al., 2009; Foucault, 1980).

This research is not merely about gathering knowledge. It is about co-creating meaning with those whose lives have been influenced by harm, resilience, and survival. It explores how stories are shaped, who has the right to tell them, and what those stories accomplish in the world.

1.4 Gaps and Limitations in the Empirical Landscape

Despite extensive literature on CSE, gaps exist. Much of the current research depends heavily on practitioner perspectives rather than survivor-led accounts (Cockbain E et al., 2014). Longitudinal and intersectional studies are rare, as are works that focus on digital and peer-facilitated forms of exploitation. Studies that use dialectical or narrative longitudinal approaches to understand how self-awareness and resilience develop over time are scarce. Few studies genuinely involve EbEs as co-producers, despite increasing acknowledgement of their significance in generating ethical and authentic knowledge. Current research has begun to address this by involving survivors in study design and term definition, such as Knight and Yoon's (2024) collaborative work on survivor-defined resilience and Godoy et al.'s (2020) narrative exploration of 'fierce autonomy'. Collectively, these limitations suggest not only gaps in the evidence base, but also limited clarity in how agency, decision-making, and resilience are conceptualised and connected across qualitative CSE research. While these concepts are frequently referenced, they are rarely examined in relation to one another or situated within the broader narrative and structural contexts that shape lived experience, thereby highlighting

the need for a more systematic and integrated examination of how these constructs are represented.

1.5 Transition to Systematic Literature Review

The oversimplification in the models discussed in 1.3.2 highlights the importance of systematically examining how qualitative research navigates these binaries. The Systematic Literature Review (SLR) below thus assesses how agency, decision-making, and resilience are portrayed in qualitative studies of CSE, identifying points of agreement, contradiction, and conceptual change. In doing so, it builds the foundation for the analytical and epistemological approach adopted by this study.

Chapter 2: Systematic Literature Review: A systematic literature review of Agency, decision-making and resilience in childhood sexual exploitation

Concepts of agency and decision-making, alongside resilience, are becoming more prevalent in research regarding CSE (McKibbin & Humphreys, 2019; Roache & McSherry, 2021). There is, however, an inconsistency in definition, the reasoning and positioning in the existing literature which risks oversimplifying the lived experiences of sexually exploited individuals.

This SLR explores qualitative research on decision-making, agency, and resilience in individuals who are survivors of sexual exploitation. By drawing together existing studies, this review examines how these key concepts have been constructed, narrated, and understood within the literature, and what these representations mean for practice, policy, and research.

The inclusion of resilience in the SLR was carefully considered, given the contested nature of the concept (Shwaikh, 2023; Southwick et al., 2014). Concerns exist that resilience can place emphasis on individual recovery rather than the wider relational, social and structural contexts in which adversity is experienced (Shwaikh, 2023; Theisen-Womersley, 2021). However, resilience was already present within the literature exploring survivors' experiences of CSE (Dodsworth, 2014; McMahon-Howard, 2017; Roache & McSherry, 2021) and was therefore considered important to retain within the search. Its inclusion was not intended to determine whether survivors were, or should be considered, resilient. Rather, it was included to explore how the concept was being understood and represented within the existing literature.

The question the review aims to answer is: How are agency, decision-making, and resilience represented within qualitative research on child sexual exploitation (CSE)? This review will not assess the prevalence of agency, decision-making or resilience in CSE but rather explore how these concepts are represented, constructed, and theorised within the qualitative literature. This framing will inform both the inclusion criteria and the interpretive approach to synthesis.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 2.1 outlines the methodology, including the search strategy, screening and selection process, data extraction and analysis, and a critical appraisal of the included research. Section 2.2 provides the synthesis method, and Section 2.3 offers the synthesis of findings, covering three key themes. Section 2.4 offers the discussion and recommendation. Section 2.5 presents a personal reflection on this process, Section 2.6 considers the limitations of the review, and Section 2.7 provides the rationale for the current study and the research question.

This SLR employed the PICOS framework (Population, Intervention, Comparator, Outcome, Study Characteristics) to guide the development of the eligibility criteria (see Appendix B for the full PICOS table). Studies were included where they used qualitative methods to explore experiences or understandings of CSE and addressed agency, decision-making and/or resilience. This included survivor perspectives, alongside practitioner, researcher, and broader qualitative accounts, where they contributed to the understanding of CSE experiences or concepts relevant to the review. Studies were excluded where they focused solely on CSA without an exploitation or exchange element, consensual adult sex work without a relevant history of childhood exploitation, or offender and policing perspectives that did not address CSE experiences or the concepts relevant to the review. Studies that did not meet the qualitative or conceptual focus of the review were also excluded. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) was also an essential component in directing the inclusion criteria, ensuring that only high-quality studies are included in the review. These frameworks play a vital role in ensuring that the studies included in the synthesis are high-quality, transparent, and relevant, thereby sustaining the credibility of the research. They also accommodate the interpretive and sometimes contradictory nature of qualitative evidence.

2.1 Review Methodology

2.1.1 Search Strategy

This SLR was conducted between April and September of 2025. It was registered with Prospero under the working title, Perceived Decision-Making and Choice in the Experiences of Sexually Exploited Individuals (CRD420251038280). The following databases were searched: PsycArticles, PubMed, Cinahl Plus and Scopus, covering psychological, health, legal, and social care literature. A search of Cochrane and Prospero databases was conducted to ensure no similar literature reviews were in progress at the time. The search returned three potentially relevant review records. Only one appeared partially similar: titled “Factors Influencing Legal Professionals' Decision-Making in Child Sexual Abuse Cases: A Systematic Review” (CRD42025630984), published on 17 January 2025. This review differed from the present SLR in three key ways: it focused on legal professionals’ decision-making, examined CSA more broadly rather than specifically on CSE, and did not centre agency, resilience, or survivor meaning-making.

Studies published from 2010 onwards were included. This was to reflect the introduction of supplementary CSE safeguarding guidance in 2009, which established the first statutory definition of CSE and marked an important shift towards understanding sexually exploited children within a safeguarding and protection framework (Casey, 2025; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009). The 2010 cut-off, therefore, allowed the review to capture literature published following this shift in the understanding of CSE, whilst retaining literature from the early stages of this shift.

This review was conducted within an interpretative and constructive framework, recognising that meaning is co-produced and shaped by context, rather than assuming a single objective truth can be identified.

Search terms were organised into three conceptual domains: population, agency/decision-making, and resilience. The population domain was required in all searches and was combined with at least one of the other domains. Table 1 summarises the search structure, with full search strings provided in Appendix A.

Table 1:
Search Terms and Strategy

Conceptual Domain	Illustrative Search Terms	Role in Search
Population	'Child sexual exploitation'; 'CSE'; 'commercial sexual exploitation'; 'child prostitution'	At least one term required in all searches; combined using OR
Agency and decision-making	'agency'; 'autonomy'; 'decision-making'; 'choices'	Combined using OR; included where present
Resilience	'resilience'; 'coping'; 'resistance'; 'adaption'	Combined using OR; included where present
Final search structure	(Population terms) AND (Agency OR Resilience terms); UK/US spelling	Population mandatory; at least one conceptual domain required

2.1.2 Screening and Selection Process

The search produced 1126 papers. Using the PRISMA framework (Page et al., 2021), studies were screened and managed in Covidence, which removed 268 duplicates. The steps are outlined in Table 2 resulting in a final 14 papers, shown in Figure 1.

Table 2:
Screening Stages

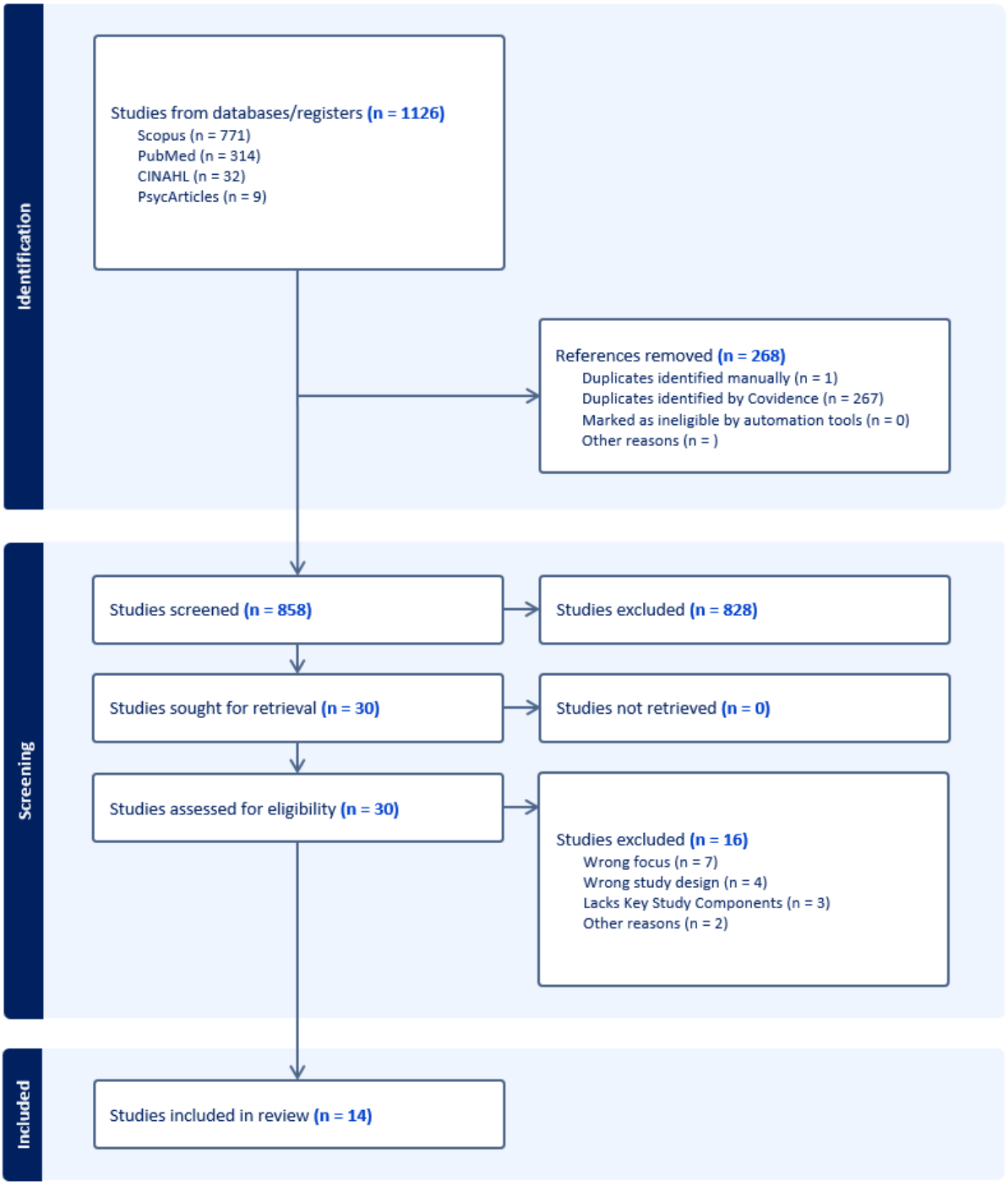
Stage	Description
1. Title and Abstract Screening	Initial exclusion of irrelevant studies.
2. Full-Text Screening	Full-text review completed with a rationale provided for inclusion or exclusion.
3. Second Screening	Secondary review of full-text papers was completed by Trainee Clinical Psychologist Shakira Johnson, to cross-validate inclusion/exclusion decisions and enhance reliability (Oram et al., 2012).

The majority of exclusions reflected studies that did not meet the population, methodological or conceptual focus of the review. Common reasons for exclusion included

quantitative methodologies, studies primarily focused on perpetrators, research concerning adult sexual exploitation, sex work or trafficking without a childhood exploitation focus, and studies concerned primarily with criminal rather than sexual exploitation.

14 empirical studies were identified for inclusion in the synthesis, and additional theoretical and conceptual literature was considered in the discussion to aid interpretation of the findings. These resources are not part of the review dataset.

Figure 1:
Systematic Literature Review PRISMA flowchart



2.1.3 Data Extraction and Analysis

Table 3 below provides a summary of the studies that were included in the SLR.

Table 3:
Summary of Studies included in the SLR

Authors (Year)	Title (Country)	Participants/Sampling	Research Methodology	Summary of Study and Relevant Findings	Strengths and Limitations	Consideration of decolonisation/inclusive research
Dodsworth (2013)	Sexual Exploitation, Selling and Swapping Sex: Victimhood and Agency England, UK)	12 adult women 18–51) with CSE experience under 18 9 White British, 2 dual heritage, 1 Black British); specialist projects and snowball sampling.	Qualitative; semi-structured interviews; grounded theory	Women reflected on early involvement in selling sex, weighing elements of choice, coercion, and pressure. Stable, trusting relationships were crucial to coping and moving forward.	Strengths: lived experience focus, ethics.	Advocates for explicitly centring the voices and expertise of young people involved in sexual exploitation to inform effective policy and service provision.
				Agency: negotiated involvement and resisting simplified victimhood. **Decision-making:** entry pathways shaped by relationships. **Resilience:** support from secure relationships.	Limitations: small sample, retrospective narratives.	
Hallett (2015)	'An Uncomfortable Comfortableness': Child Protection and CSE UK)	9 youth 14–17) with CSE and statutory care involvement; purposive sampling South-east Wales).	Qualitative; semi-structured interviews; thematic and comparative analysis	Young people often saw care as punitive and as a form of surveillance, mistrusting professionals and sometimes turning to exploitative relationships to meet emotional needs. Suggested co-produced safeguarding as a better way forward.	Strengths: dual perspective; gender lens; theoretical depth.	Stresses the empowerment of youth as active agents in shaping the terms of their own support, challenging care responses that disregard young people's perspectives or exacerbate their vulnerability.
				Agency: meeting needs through chosen relationships. **Decision-making:** engaging with care vs peers. **Resilience:** influencing services through co-production.	Limitations: limited youth sample, gender imbalance.	
Ijahi-Maghsoodi et al. (2018)	Commercially sexually exploited youths' health care experiences, barriers, and recommendations USA)	18 CSE-affected girls 12–19) in Southern California group homes 9 Black, 5 Hispanic, 3 White, 1 other); convenience sampling.	Qualitative: focus groups and interviews; thematic analysis using Dedoose software	CSE-affected girls valued self-reliance and sought sexual health care to protect themselves, but faced judgment, mistrust, and poor mental health support.	Strengths: youth-focused data/findings.	Underlines the necessity of non-judgmental support for commercially sexually exploited youth, respecting their rejection of the 'victim' label and reliance on 'street smarts'.
				Agency: rejecting victim label. **Decision-making:** proactive health choices. **Resilience:** protecting themselves despite barriers, supported by peers.	Limitations: gender- and region-specific.	
Lefevre et al. (2018)	'Both/And' Not 'Either/Or': Rights to Protection and Participation in CSE Work England, UK)	28 professionals and 17 young people from a national safeguarding evaluation; secondary analysis of multi-site data.	Secondary analysis; thematic analysis with NVivo	Professionals found it hard to balance young people's autonomy and safety, often prioritising protection. Promoted 'both/and' thinking and relationship-based practice.	Strengths: data through diverse methods, practical guidance.	Identify the reconciliation of young people's rights to participation and protection as a critical professional "threshold concept," advocating for integrated "both/and" thinking to move beyond dichotomised responses that often alienate youth.
				Agency: seeing young people as vulnerable and agentic. **Decision-making:** balancing autonomy with safety. **Resilience** built through supportive relationships and supervision.	Limitations: In this paper, the focus is more on the professional, not the youth voice.	

Authors (Year)	Title (Country)	Participants/Sampling	Research Methodology	Summary of Study and Relevant Findings	Strengths and Limitations	Consideration of decolonisation/inclusive research
Lloyd (2022)	'She doesn't have to get in the car…': Social workers' understandings of sexually exploited girls as agents and choice-makers UK)	18 social workers from three English local authorities; convenience sampling.	Qualitative; interviews with vignettes; post-structural feminist analysis	Social workers' views on girls' agency varied, with CSE more often linked to choice than CSA. Discomfort with the victim–agency balance shaped responses. **Agency:** varied interpretations of choice. **Decision-making:** influenced by personal and professional values, including equating assertiveness with risk. **Resilience:** not directly addressed.	Strengths: detailed insights, novel methods. Limitations: small regional sample; excludes direct youth perspectives.	Explores how social workers invalidate the choices girls make to enter exploitation to avoid blaming them, demonstrating a professional struggle to detach agency from blame, which negatively shapes the safeguarding response girls receive.
McKibbin & Humphreys (2019)	The Perceptions of Australian Workers about Caring for Sexually Exploited Children in Residential Care Australia)	17 residential carers and case managers from three group homes; purposive sampling.	Qualitative; 4 focus groups; constructivist grounded theory	Residential care staff struggled to identify CSE, manage missing episodes, and police engagement. Stressed the need for preventative, gender-aware responses. **Agency:** recognising how youth see themselves. **Decision-making:** managing safety and autonomy. **Resilience:** supported through prevention-focused work.	Strengths: practice-based insight, grounded approach. Limitations: small sample, UK literature framing may reduce Australian specificity.	Utilise an inclusive methodology by approaching residential carers and case managers as "experts in their own practice" and highlight the need for interventions to reconcile the victim/agent dichotomy in children.
McMahon-Howard (2017)	Youth Involved in Prostitution YIP): Changes in Police and Social Service Interaction Post-TVPRA USA)	26 former prostituted youth sic) 19–53; 90% Black; 18 female, 7 male, 1 transgender); targeted snowball sampling..	Qualitative; in-depth semi-structured interviews; grounded theory approach	Participants reported little change in how services treated them after policy reforms, often rejecting the victim label and seeing sex work as a survival option. **Agency:** self-defined identity. **Decision-making:** choosing whether to engage with services and law enforcement. **Resilience:** survival strategies in challenging conditions.	Strengths: rich narratives, diverse sample incl. males and LGBTQ youth. Limitations: regional sample, recall bias	Notes the legal shift toward viewing youth involved in prostitution YIP) as trafficking victims, but finds that YIP overwhelmingly reject the victim label, emphasising their own narratives of "survival" and "choice" for better intervention strategies.
Miller (2011)	Beach boys or sexually exploited children? Competing narratives of sex tourism and their impact on young men in Sri Lanka's informal tourist economy Sri Lanka)	61 participants 26 "beach boys", 5 brokers, 8 women sex workers, 15 tourism workers, 6 NGO/government officials, mostly males 15–38); snowball sampling.	Qualitative ethnographic study 1999–2001); 61 in-depth interviews, observations, and informal conversations. Interviews in Sinhala, translated into English. Snowball sampling.	Male youth in sex tourism framed their involvement as economic survival or opportunity, challenging Western victim/perpetrator narratives. Critiqued rescue approaches as harmful. **Agency:** framing work as economic choice. **Decision-making:** continuing or leaving relationships, financial constraints. **Resilience:** demonstrating remarkable strength in sustaining livelihoods under constraints.	Strengths: Rich, localised insight; broad participant base; nuanced challenge to dominant narratives; strong translation ethics. Limitations: No direct interviews with active child sex workers; retrospective accounts; pre-tsunami context; researcher–participant power imbalance.	Explicitly critiques Western/moralistic anti-CSEC narratives for obscuring the global economic and political structural inequalities that compel marginalised young men in the Global South to engage in transactional sex for survival.
Reisel (2017)	Practitioners' Perceptions and Decision-Making Regarding Child Sexual Exploitation – A Qualitative Vignette Study UK)	10 inter-disciplinary practitioners social work, youth justice, etc.) from inner London; purposive sampling.	Qualitative; interviews with vignettes; thematic and discourse analysis	Practitioners' decisions were influenced by age and perceptions of choice, with older teens seen as more responsible. Supervision and reflection sometimes shifted these views. **Agency:** shaped by practitioner interpretation. **Decision-making:** setting thresholds for concern influenced by organisational culture. **Resilience:** reflection improving practice.	Strengths: Highlights decision-making influences and rigorous methodology. Limitations: Small sample, vignette use, and not fully reflective of the real world.	Demonstrates the need for more nuanced and reflective practice to counter biases against older youth, which are often shaped by initial, and sometimes prejudicial, assumptions about age and choice.

Authors (Year)	Title (Country)	Participants/Sampling	Research Methodology	Summary of Study and Relevant Findings	Strengths and Limitations	Consideration of decolonisation/inclusive research
Roache & McSherry (2021)	Understanding and Addressing CSE in Residential Care in Northern Ireland – A Qualitative Case Study Northern Ireland)	6 residential social care workers across six sites; purposive and convenience sampling.	Qualitative; semi-structured Zoom interviews; reflexive thematic analysis	Staff highlighted risks linked to placement, unmet needs, and the emotional toll of supporting young people in care. Called for better psychological support for workers.	Strength: with practical implications, providing a roadmap for intervention.	Aims to provide a nuanced understanding of exploitation driven by intrinsic factors in vulnerable children, but notes the difficulty of avoiding "pathologisation" when focusing on the young person's "own role".
				Agency: recognising coping strategies in youth. **Decision-making:** responding to identified risks. **Resilience:** sustaining care despite challenges, using self-care strategies.	Limitations: small sample, single-coder thematic analysis.	
Shaw & Greenhow (2020)	Children in Care: Exploitation, Offending and Denial of Victimhood England)	36 professionals social work, police, health) from NW England; purposive and snowball sampling.	Qualitative; 6 focus groups + interviews; thematic analysis	Professionals described a pathway from care to exploitation, with a justice-led culture overshadowing safeguarding. Placement decisions often ignore risk.	Strengths: multi-agency lens, detailed systemic critique.	Calls for a significant shift away from a "prosecution-led" culture toward prioritising the victim status and vulnerability of exploited children in care, criticising the systemic deficiency of criminalising victims.
				Agency: constrained by institutional framing. **Decision-making:** prioritising justice or welfare. **Resilience:** largely absent in current approach.	Limitations: professionals only, regional scope, no youth voice.	
Shaw et al. (2024)	The Exploitation of Girls in Care: An Ongoing Struggle for Recognition England)	7 care-experienced girls/women and 21 professionals N=28); purposive sampling.	Qualitative; interviews; thematic analysis using NVivo	Girls in care faced stigma, gendered and racialised views, and patchy support. Professionals voiced frustration at inconsistent responses.	Strengths: multi-perspective, significant users set source.	Directly addresses intersectional oppression by showing how stigma, gendered expectations, and racialised judgments like adultification) deny care-experienced girls, particularly Black girls, recognition as "ideal" victims.
				Agency: challenging imposed labels.**Decision-making:** navigating unsafe systems. **Resilience:** persisting despite systemic bias, often drawing on peers.	Limitations: small subset from larger study; limited male perspectives.	
Van Bavel (2017)	Beyond exploitation: Adolescent sex workers' agency Tanzania)	19 adolescent female sex workers, 12 key informants, 8 peer educators; peer-educator and snowball recruitment.	Qualitative; in-depth interviews; grounded theory analysis	Adolescent sex workers acted within tight constraints, while collective organising improved access to health care. Critiqued simple victim/agent divides.	Strengths: triangulation, depth.	Critiques Western discourses that construct women in the global South as homogenous, agentless victims, emphasising the urgent need to acknowledge the varying degrees of agency, intentionality, and rationality possessed by adolescent female sex workers in constraining circumstances.
				Agency: negotiating under constraint. **Decision-making:** survival strategies. **Resilience:** strengthened through peer networks.	Limitations: recall bias, cultural/power dynamics, sampling bias in Morogoro.	
Woodiwiss (2018)	From One Girl to 'Three Girls': Separating Agency from Blame in CSA Narratives UK)	16 adult women CSA survivors focus on one participant "Jay"); newsletter recruitment.	Qualitative; interviews and written accounts; thematic reflection	Critiqued innocence-only victim narratives, showing that harm and agency can co-exist. Advocated separating the agency from blame to improve protection.	Strengths: critical theoretical lens, narrative depth.	Argues for a "new sexual abuse narrative" that radically separates agency and choice from blame, criticising the dominant Western/idealised victim narrative that fails those, especially girls, whose experiences deviate from sexual innocence and passivity.
				Agency: reframing self-narratives. **Decision-making:** choosing what to disclose. **Resilience:** resisting limiting stereotypes through narrative resistance.	Limitations: retrospective adult focus, mostly theoretical, undated.	

2.1.4 Critical Appraisal of Included Research

Assessing the quality of studies is an integral component of completing an SLR (Shaw, 2011). The CASP (2018) checklist was chosen for this appraisal due to its user friendliness for novice researchers, and its evidence-based and standardised structured approach (Aveyard, 2014; Long et al., 2020). In line with the interpretative position of the methodological rigour, it was not the only factor considered; conceptual contribution, analytic depth, and novel factors were also taken into account. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines suggest that at least 10% of studies should be screened independently by two reviewers (NICE, 2014). Shakira Johnson, a trainee clinical psychologist, supported with the second screening all studies included[2].

Some studies, such as Dodsworth (2014) and Lloyd (2022) demonstrated methodological transparency, thick descriptions and reflective engagements, whereas conceptually innovative work like Woodiwiss (2018) and Van Bavel (2017) were included even when their methodologies were less detailed, because of their theoretical contributions. Practitioner-focused studies, such as McKibbin and Humphreys (2019) were appraised as offering systematic insights but were noted for a limited understanding of survivors' voices. Balancing these different positions helps ensure the SLR papers represented methodological rigour and conceptual breadth.

[2] Note from reflective diary – 'well this is a lot 😟 I know that the system is broken and that social workers don't always make the differences hoped, the research doesn't talk about hard they work and give of who they are in ways that I don't know, change you…. Thank goodness for Shakira, just chatted about what's coming up for me and what I need her to be mindful of in my second screening… it helped create some distance from my own stuff

Table 4:
CASP Quality Appraisal for Included Studies

Paper	Clear Aims	Method	Design	Recruitment	Data Collection	Relationship	Ethics	Data Analysis	Findings	Value
Dodsworth (2014)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Cannot tell; Minimal reflexive commentary on power relations or researcher stance.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Offers nuanced insights into victimhood, agency and resilience over time.
Hallett (2015)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Cannot tell; No extended reflexive discussion on insider/outsider status or influence.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Challenges conventional care responses; emphasises co-production.
Ijahi-Maghsoodi et al. (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Cannot tell; No reflexive account of moderator influence.	Yes	Partly; Themes plausible; limited detail on coding reliability or member-checking.	Yes	Informs trauma-informed healthcare for CSE youth in group care.
Lefevre et al. (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes Partially	Cannot tell; Limited reflexive content given secondary analysis focus.	Yes Partially	Yes	Yes	Provides a useful conceptual tool for balancing protection and participation
Lloyd (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partly; Sampling strategy not fully described; possible self-selection bias	Yes	Cannot tell; No explicit discussion of positionality or researcher influence.	Cannot tell; Ethical clearance not visible in excerpt.	Partly; Findings supported with quotes; limited procedural transparency on coding.	Yes	Challenges denial of girls' agency in extra-familial CSE safeguarding.
McKibbin & Humphreys (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Cannot tell; No detailed reflexivity statement.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Valuable for informing staff training and prevention in residential care.
McMahon-Howard (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partly; Snowball sampling is defensible for hidden populations but may be biased towards service-connected participants.	Yes	Cannot tell; No reflexive analysis of researcher influence.	Yes	Cannot tell; Themes are rich, but coding and validation processes are sparsely described.	Yes	Examines policy impact and exposes ongoing failures in service recognition of CSE victims

Paper	Clear Aims	Method	Design	Recruitment	Data Collection	Relationship	Ethics	Data Analysis	Findings	Value
Miller (2011)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partly; Participant selection through field networks; the breadth is limited in scope.	Yes	Cannot tell; Minimal positionality discussion in available text.	Cannot tell; Ethics procedures not clearly outlined.	Partly; Strong descriptive depth; less detail on analytic systematics.	Yes	Challenges moral narratives; highlights economic drivers of boy exploitation.
Reisel (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partly; Purposive sampling of practitioners across agencies is justified, but representation from certain sectors appears limited.	Yes	Cannot tell; Reflexive positioning of the researcher and possible influence on participant responses is not discussed in depth.	Yes	Partly; Thematic coding described; limited discussion of coder agreement or validation processes.	Yes	Sheds light on practitioner biases and decision-making dynamics.
Roache & McSherry (2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partly; Six participants purposively sampled; justified, but limits diversity.	Yes	Partly; Some acknowledgement of insider risk; reflexivity limited.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Adds insight into intrinsic risk factors in NI residential settings.
Shaw & Greenhow (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Cannot tell; Reflexive position not described.	Yes	Partly; procedural details minimal.	Yes	Exposes prosecution-led bias in safeguarding care-experienced youth.
Shaw et al. (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Cannot tell; Reflexivity limited; potential influence on participant disclosure not fully addressed.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Explores stigma and systemic failure in identifying girls' exploitation.
Van Bavel (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partly; Some process detail but limited on reflexivity	Yes	Yes	Yes	Reframes adolescent sex work through agency and constraint lenses.
Woodiwiss (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Partly; Feminist positioning noted; procedural reflexivity limited.	Yes	Partly; analysis described; limited audit trail detail	Yes	Deconstructs dominant CSA narratives; offers critical, feminist insights.

3

[3] Reflective journal entry - surprised how spread out the papers are. I expected, even though I put in 2010 as a cutoff point, I expected more of them to be in the last few years. Is that because this isn't being researched anymore? I wonder if people... like it's not the flavour of the month. Does this have something to do with the political climate at the moment? I remember back in the day, CSE was a hot topic. Have things changed? Curiouser and curiouser.

2.2 Synthesis Method

This review utilised a thematic synthesis as offered by Thomas and Harden (2008) and Pope et al., (2008), compared to other review methods, as it allows the amalgamation of the 14 studies and the identification of patterns, recurring themes, and ideas across them.

The process commenced with coding the findings, followed by organising the codes into descriptive themes. These were then developed into analytic themes, which moved beyond description to generate interpretive insights across the included studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008), and subsequently into dialectical themes, which reflected an approach that drew meaning from contradictions across studies rather than resolving them (Frank, 2012). Contradictions, such as agency being framed simultaneously as constraint and strategy, were treated as generative, producing deeper insights rather than being smoothed away.

The synthesis included quotes from research participants alongside interpretations offered by the authors of the included studies. This reflected the review question, which sought to understand how agency, decision-making, and resilience were represented in the qualitative literature as a whole, rather than privileging either participant or researcher perspectives. Where a participant's quotes captured the meaning subsequently interpreted by the article's authors, preference was given to the participant's own words. Where the authors' interpretation added an additional analytic layer or offered further context to the participant's account, this was retained, and in some instances, both were presented. This allowed participants' voices to remain visible within the synthesis whilst also recognising that authors' interpretations were part of how these concepts were represented in the literature.

Thematic synthesis enabled descriptive mapping; deeper interpretation was necessary when exploring complex constructs, such as agency, resilience and decision-making within CSE.

As I completed the qualitative synthesis, I utilised memo writing throughout the process to capture reflections, thoughts, and notes. This process was often visual and iterative, using brief written prompts and the physical organisation of notes to explore emerging ideas. These were also utilised to build both descriptive and analytical themes. An example of this mapping is available in Appendix C. Whilst these themes were then refined into overarching categories, consensus was not sought, but rather different perspectives that could illuminate and enhance one another (Braun & Clarke, 2014).

2.3 Synthesis of Findings

The 14 studies yield significant findings on how agency, decision-making, and resilience are represented in qualitative research on CSE. The complex interweaving of these concepts, serving as survival strategies, the way professionals categorise them, and social and cultural narratives are well demonstrated. The thematic synthesis demonstrates the

complexity of these constructs, emphasising their interdependent relationships. The studies highlight three overarching themes: the complex and contested nature of agency and victimhood in CSE; Professional Decision-Making, Systemic Challenges and Intervention Strategies; and Resilience and Coping Mechanisms.

Table 5:
Themes Identified Through Thematic Synthesis

Theme	Subthemes
1. The complex and contested nature of agency and victimhood in CSE	1A. Young People's Assertion of Agency and Rejection of the "Victim" Label 1B. Professional Interpretations and the "Ideal Victim" Narrative. 1C. Age, Gender, and Systemic Influences on Agency Perception
2. Professional decision-making, systemic challenges, and intervention strategies	2A. Flaws and Inconsistencies in Professional Decision-Making 2B. Systemic and Organisational Barriers to Effective Response 2C. Recommendations for Improved Practice and Integrated Approaches
3. Resilience and coping mechanisms	3A. Resilience as Dynamic Adaptation and Problematic Coping 3B. Key Determinants and Mechanisms of Resilience 3C. Challenges in Recognising and Fostering Resilience

2.3.1 Theme 1: The Complex and Contested Nature of Agency and Victimhood in CSE

This theme explores the central tension in the research: the movement between viewing young people involved in CSE as passive victims and recognising their active (though often constrained) agency (Hallett, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2018; Lloyd, 2022; McKibbin & Humphreys, 2019; McMahon-Howard, 2017; Miller, 2011; Reisel, 2017; Roache & McSherry, 2021; Shaw & Greenhow, 2020). This dichotomy shapes how young people see themselves and how professionals decide when and how to intervene (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2016; Shaw et al., 2024; Woodiwiss, 2018).

Young People's Assertion of Agency and Rejection of the "Victim" Label.

The refusal to be seen as a victim motivates many young people to assert their agency and decision-making, often declaring themselves as ‘willing participants’ and vehemently resisting the victim label (Dodsworth, 2014; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018; Lloyd, 2022; McKibbin & Humphreys, 2019; McMahon-Howard, 2017; Shaw et al., 2024). Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al. (2018) highlight that the participants in their study actively rejected the idea that they

had no control over their circumstances and did not want healthcare providers to perceive them as victims (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018). Others, particularly young women involved in sex work, argued that they were not victims but had demonstrated resilience and agency in choosing, albeit within narrow constraints, to exchange sex for money or other resources (Dodsworth, 2014).

This is mirrored in many professional accounts found within the research, where professionals working alongside young people experiencing CSE report that young people participate in 'survival-focused coping' (developing a tough exterior) and describe themselves as 'survivors,' in direct challenge to the victim label, sometimes using 'techniques of neutralisation' (justifying their actions by claiming they had no other choice) to downplay victimisation (McMahon-Howard, 2017, pp. 122, 139). Shaw et al. (2024) similarly note that many girls would describe themselves as willing participants, independent, strong and capable even in adverse circumstances, rather than describe or see themselves as vulnerable, passive victims (Shaw et al., 2024). Lloyd (2022) records that some research participants outright stated that they chose to remain in exploitative situations (Lloyd, 2022). This resistance to the 'victim' label, also reported by professionals, reflects both young people's self-perception and their response to narratives shaped by professionals and other external perceptions (McKibbin & Humphreys, 2019). Understanding the 'least worst option' concept is crucial, as it reflects the difficult choices young people in CSE face. Often, what is framed as 'choice' is better understood as a survival strategy shaped by poverty, lack of opportunity, or unmet emotional needs (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2018; McMahon-Howard, 2017; Miller, 2011; Roache & McSherry, 2021; Van Bavel, 2017). McMahon-Howard (2017) further highlights that when manipulation and physical aggression are key factors, some young people still resist the victim label, instead using self-blaming language like being ‘young and dumb’ (McMahon-Howard, 2017, p. 132). This also allows the point of existing CSE to be labelled as their own choices and a byproduct of their own agency. This concept refers to the difficult choices young people in CSE face, often having to choose between various harmful options.

This is perhaps best highlighted in McMahon and Howard (2017) where a young participant is quoted as stating that:

> selling myself for nice things, money, clothes, all this stuff… I needed money or whatever… I guess it was the thing with me feeling dependent, not asking my mother for anything… I don’t like asking other people for things, but I feel like I work for it (McMahon-Howard, 2017, p. 135).

This highlights the distancing from the 'victim' label and offers a statement of self-reliance, coupled with the acknowledgement that seeking care/resources from caregivers is not always an option. These concepts of “*self-reliance*” and “street smarts” are therefore best understood as survival strategies deeply embedded in the context of their lives (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018, p. 338). Miller (2011), highlights that recognising decision-making or survival strategies

does not change the fact that young people are experiencing CSE, instead emphasising that insinuations of innocence and lack of decision-making capacity have excluded many young people from being recognised as victims. Additionally, this highlights how young people can understand agency as a form of 'work' that grants independence and supports the rejection of the victim label, with 'self-reliance' and 'street smarts' functioning as survival strategies (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018).

Van Bavel (2017) likewise stresses that, for adolescents, involvement in prostitution is often not a free choice but a decision made out of necessity. This aligns with Lefevre's (2018) similarly describe how exchanges involving money, affection, shelter, drugs, food, or protection can occur within contexts of severely limited options. "Making the exploiter pay" or seeing goods as "pay-back" or "a bonus" is described by some young people as a way of "getting" something out of it and reclaiming some of their agency (McKibbin & Humphreys, 2019, p. 426). McKibbin and Humphreys (2019) note that professionals sometimes interpret these accounts differently, framing the receipt or reporting of items as tactical or manipulative behaviour. This illustrates how attempts to reduce harm or gain something from exploitative situations can complicate whether young people are recognised within dominant constructions of the 'ideal victim'. 'Self-reliance' and 'street smarts' are actions developed to survive and are closely aligned with these strategies (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018). Roache and McSherry (2021) highlight that, in a system where many young people's decisions go through a social worker, this can strengthen young people's resolve to take back control.

When young people view themselves in this way, they are highlighting their street smarts and survival strategies. Often this is in direct contrast to some of the 'main discourse' that positions young people only as victims of abuse, limiting recognition of them as agents capable of decision-making (Dodsworth, 2014, p. 186). Dodsworth (2014) pushes back on these narratives, highlighting through the voice of a research participant that "*people think everyone is in it for the same reason… some might not be…you have got to have a realistic view…whether they are victims…whether they are making an informed choice…each person is an individual*" (Dodsworth, 2014, p. 197).

Despite policy changes, such as the United States Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) (2005), which sought to name youth as victims, many young people's own perceptions appear unchanged, highlighting a persistent disconnect (McMahon-Howard, 2017). Miller (2011) notes that 'moral crusaders' have often stripped those in the sex industry of any recognised capacity for agency, while Van Bavel (2017) cautions that framing adolescents as 'mere victims' risks disregarding the complexity of their agency.

Professional Interpretations and the "Ideal Victim" Narrative.

The broader discourse of CSA/CSE can promote the figure of the "ideal victim": innocent, passive, and devoid of agency (Woodiwiss, 2018). The notion of being seen as a child, a victim and therefore deserving of protection is noted by Woodiwiss (2018) as being at

risk if a young person shows sexual knowledge or uses agency to manage their experiences (Woodiwiss, 2018). Jay's story starkly illustrates this, because she took an active role that contradicted the 'ideal victim' expectation of passivity; she was "silenced and left without a story [of sexual abuse] to tell" (Woodiwiss, 2018, p. 154).

Miller (2011) and Shaw et al. (2024) similarly found that individuals who deviate from the stereotype of passive, innocent victims are more readily blamed for their own exploitation; this is particularly applied to girls in the foster care system. Shaw and Greenhow (2020) note that under the Modern Slavery Act (2015), a girl's recognition as a victim may hinge on whether she committed the "right" kind of offence, regardless of her circumstances, leaving many excluded from victim status altogether.

Contextual factors, such as where and by whom exploitation is instigated, impact professional judgments and change how much agency is attributed to the young person (Lloyd, 2022). Girls exploited outside the home are often assumed to have had more choice, delaying safeguarding, while those abused within the home are seen as having none, which prompts faster protection (Lloyd, 2022). This can create a dangerous stand-off, in which safeguarding responses are effectively directed by practitioners' unconscious bias and perceptions of choices rather than procedures (Lloyd, 2022). Young people being recognised as able to exist as victims and agentic simultaneously requires real change that separates "choice" from "blame" (Lloyd, 2022; McKibbin & Humphreys, 2019; Woodiwiss, 2018). Woodiwiss (2018) notes that moving toward a more comprehensive understanding and new narrative stems from the "need to separate sexual innocence from childhood, to separate harm from wrongfulness and to separate agency and choice from blame" (Woodiwiss, 2018, p. 154). An often drawn upon comparator is that of family and domestic violence, whereby victims are understood as still capable of making the best possible decisions for themselves and their children in any given moment (McKibbin & Humphreys, 2019). This is stressed by Lloyd (2022), who states, "We must reject as axiomatic the idea that any mention of victim agency equals victim blaming" (Lloyd, 2022, p. 543).

Age, Gender, and Systemic Influences on Agency Perception

Age is often firmly linked with agency concepts in professional decision-making (Reisel, 2017). Thus, safeguarding tends to focus more on younger children, leading to the needs of older adolescents, particularly those aged 16–18, being often neglected; the legal age of consent being used as a marker plays a significant role in this (Dodsworth, 2014; Reisel, 2017). This produces a contradiction as legally, those under 18 cannot participate in sex for money or resources, nor can a child consent to their own exploitation. Thus, they must be recognised as not being able to consent, yet in practice, they are often treated as complicit and less in need of help (Lefevre et al., 2018; Reisel, 2017). Van Bavel (2017) similarly notes that although adolescents' agency is compromised, it still exists and should not be dismissed.

Gender is also a factor in how perceptions of agency are shaped. Reisel (2017) highlights that concepts of 'choice' are more freely applied to males; in their research vignettes describing a 15-year-old male (Craig) and a 16-year-old female (Asha) who were both reliant on significantly older men to escape difficult home environments, practitioners more readily perceived the young male as choosing his circumstances than that of the young female. McKibbin and Humphreys (2019) further raise concerns that gendered assumptions reach into interventions where there is a clouding of how issues of consent and agency are addressed. Miller (2011) suggests that gendered assumptions regarding consent and agency pertaining to boys and young males can lead to them being excluded from the "innocent victim" category, whereby they are often categorised more readily as being a nuisance, unruly and criminal. Further highlighting that where adolescent boys fail to fit the innocent/ideal victim mold, they risk instead being misunderstood as part of the problem, being seen as 'thugs' and 'criminals', where their exploitation is backseated or altogether dismissed (Miller, 2011). This is further compounded by racial bias, whereby black and brown children are more readily adultified and are described as more responsible for their own exploitation (Shaw et al., 2024). Lloyd (2022) summaries how professions consider context in shaping perceived consent, noting one participant who stated: with "CSA, it's almost like umm, for me it's more there was no consent at all […] whereas with CSE well, she must have consented to something, maybe she consented and it went too far…" (Lloyd, 2022, p. 541). This highlights how assumptions about 'choice' can shape professional responses to exploitation.

Thematic synthesis

This theme highlights the deeply enmeshed nature of agency and victimhood in CSE, whereby young people often resist victim labels and are willing to frame and focus their involvement in constrained choice with regard to survival strategies. In contrast, professionals utilise the ideal victim narrative, which can exclude many young people from recognition or protection.

2.3.2 Theme 2: Professional Decision-Making, Systemic Challenges, and Intervention Strategies

This theme explores how professionals identify and respond to CSE, showing how internal dilemmas and external pressures shape practice. The quality of safeguarding depends not only on what practitioners see, but also on the systems and structures around them. This theme recognises that professional decision-making is shaped by institutional narratives, policy, morals, and emotions, and can never be viewed as neutral. In its own way, this mirrors young people narratives, in that practitioners must narrate their reasoning, and these narratives reflect broader systemic issues of risk protection and blame.

Flaws and Inconsistencies in Professional Decision-Making

Practitioners' decisions often turn on their interpretations of 'choice' and 'age' (Lloyd, 2022; Reisel, 2017). This means two young people in similar situations can receive very different responses (Lloyd, 2022; Reisel, 2017). Professionals often grapple with this tension, sometimes blurring the line between 'choice' and genuine consent, which can then slide into blame (Lloyd, 2022; Reisel, 2017). This leads to what Pearce (2010, as cited in Reisel, 2017) calls "unconscious or negligent condoned consent," where exploitation is overlooked and young people are held responsible for "consenting" or for "getting themselves into" risky situations. Thus, professionals may treat them as less at risk or more responsible for their circumstances if, in practice, a young person is seen as a "willing participant" (Pearce, 2010, as cited in Reisel, 2017). Lloyd (2022) demonstrates how social workers, in trying to ease their own sense of blame, can invalidate the choices they believe girls have made that still leave them exploited. Reisel (2017) indicates that other key factors further impact this, where black and minority ethnic backgrounds are less likely to be identified as being exploited, and boys are seen as beyond the remit of CSE services. This is further exacerbated by the application of a heteronormative lens where young gay males are seen as 'exploring their sexuality' rather than as victims of CSE (Reisel, 2017). The balance between protection versus respecting young people's autonomy is an ongoing and complex challenge. This is further complicated when young people and professionals do not have a shared view of their circumstances, nor recognise them as exploitation (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2018; Reisel, 2017; Roache & McSherry, 2021; Shaw et al., 2024; Shaw & Greenhow, 2020).

Systemic and Organisational Barriers to Effective Response

Truly child-centred and relationally-based practices are often restricted by overstretched services, large caseloads, high levels of staff turnover and burnout, alongside bureaucratic and organisational demands (Hallett, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2018; Shaw et al., 2024; Shaw & Greenhow, 2020). Young people and their wishes can often be dismissed when a 'protection at all costs' approach is utilised; this can negatively impact how young people relate to services (Lefevre et al., 2018). Likewise, opportunities for early intervention are often missed, with clear signs of exploitation not acted upon (Shaw et al., 2024). This is emphasised by some young people who describe themselves as feeling invisible, objectified, or overly policed in choices and relationships by professionals, which drives them further away from support (Hallett, 2016). In this way, the systems designed to protect can deepen the harms they aim to prevent (Hallett, 2016).

A lack of knowledge and training remains a recurring obstacle. Social workers may not always be clear on what counts as CSE (Shaw & Greenhow, 2020), while frontline police may fail to connect repeated 'missing' episodes with possible exploitation (McKibbin & Humphreys, 2019). This produces inconsistency across agencies and makes joint safeguarding more fragile (Shaw & Greenhow, 2020). Lloyd (2022) highlights the complexity where safeguarding creates conflict between adhering to formal procedures and being shaped by the choices attributed to girls, which can result in responsibility being implicitly shifted to them or

their experiences being framed as consensual rather than exploitative. This is further expanded by inconsistency across services and professional disciplines. Shaw and Greenhow (2020, p. 1560) capture this tension in a dialogue between practitioners:

> I'm saying, 'Yes, but he's a child,' and [the] police officer: 'Yes, but it's still a crime for the police.' It's whether you could be that forward-thinking in that we wouldn't even think of it as a crime because we know the situation… It would be a huge shift then.

This example of disagreements between agencies, especially between police and social services, highlights how responses are slowed and captures the inconsistency between safeguarding approaches and justice-based approaches, which reinforces inconsistency in considering exploited youths' decision-making (Shaw & Greenhow, 2020). Likewise, McKibbin and Humphreys (2019) highlight professional accounts that demonstrate recurring concerns with language use that may diminish or minimise harm and obscure responsibility, for example, describing exploitation as 'getting favours' rather than 'being sexually exploited' or referring to adult male abusers as 'gentlemen' rather than 'perpetrators'. Legal reforms designed to redefine youth as victims, such as the TVPRA (US Congress, 2005), did little to change day-to-day police and social service practices (McMahon-Howard, 2017). McMahon-Howard (2017) further states that, in order to make meaningful change to police and social services practices, more than legal reform is required to alter the experiences of young people affected by CSE. The reality of current practice is that there can often be a shortfall, which is constrained by bias, training gaps, under-staffing and resource pressures, despite improvement and new national policy guidance that encourages child-centred and nuanced approaches (Lefevre et al., 2018; Lloyd, 2022; Reisel, 2017; Shaw & Greenhow, 2020). Miller (2011) adds that 'moral crusader' narratives, which focus narrowly on sexual slavery or individual deviance, distract attention from more profound structural inequalities[4]. This underscores the need for systemic reform, which can bring about significant change and improve the situation. Hallett (2016), suggests:

> Try and work on the issues that make them vulnerable to it, and then as their life becomes a bit more stable, hopefully they should be able to withdraw from what is making them turn towards that… sometimes I think they try to deal with sexual exploitation on its own, and I think that… the underlying issue needs to be dealt with as well otherwise they might just come back to it (Hallett, 2016, p. 2145).

Recommendations for Improved Practice and Integrated Approaches

Developing an understanding of the nuance of consent and agency, and recognising how choices can be shaped, constrained, or manipulated, is noted to be a key area of required research (Dodsworth, 2014; Lefevre et al., 2018; Reisel, 2017; Van Bavel, 2017; Woodiwiss,

[4] Reflective diary entry – this kind makes me think about…like all the current anti-abortion/purity/Trans/immigration discussions, but no/little focus on how the system is not working and letting people down

2018). Practitioners need a reflective space, through supervision and ongoing learning, to revisit their initial judgments. This reflective practice is not just a requirement, but a valuable tool for professional growth and learning (Lefevre et al., 2018; Reisel, 2017). Policies and services should be rooted in young people's perspectives, valuing their agency, insights, and expertise, and shaped by approaches that are trust-based, respectful, relational, solution-focused, and strengths-based (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2016; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018). This means creating meaningful opportunities for young people to influence decisions about their lives and contribute to policy (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2016; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018; Lefevre et al., 2018).

A "both/and" stance is essential, in which young people can be both vulnerable and agentic, have factors that cause struggle and harm alongside self and relational resilience, and both be exploited and make choices; these can occur concurrently and in parallel. This means that young people can be in situations of exploitation while still having the ability to make choices and demonstrate resilience. McKibbin and Humphreys (2019) make a similar point, suggesting that prevention work can frame children as victims and as possessing agency simultaneously. Examples such as supporting police to see 'missing' episodes beyond 'just' youthful misbehaviour, but rather as potential exploitation, require stronger multi-agency collaboration and targeted training (McKibbin & Humphreys, 2019; Reisel, 2017; Roache & McSherry, 2021; Shaw & Greenhow, 2020). The need for timely therapeutic and psychological support not only for young people but also for the teams around them is highlighted, and a need for assurance that this has a trauma-informed practice stance (Roache & McSherry, 2021; Shaw et al., 2024). Hallett (2016) argues that genuinely therapeutic and supportive relationships can make a transformative difference.

Thematic synthesis

The literature reviewed demonstrates how systemic barriers intensify inconsistencies in decision-making. Individual practitioners' judgement focuses on safeguarding, as well as structural factors such as caseload, training, and multi-agency working.

2.3.3 Theme 3: Resilience and Coping Mechanisms

Resilience in the context of CSE is not a linear journey. Instead, it emerges as a complex and uneven process, both helping young people survive and involving coping mechanisms that carry long-term risks (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2016). This theme examines how resilience is developed, expressed, and challenged in exploitative contexts, highlighting the importance of a nuanced understanding of this complex issue (Woodiwiss, 2018). It recognises that resilience is not an inherent character quality but rather a constructed and co-constructed process where factors such as attachment relationships and environment support the building of meaning. This nuanced understanding of resilience, which goes beyond the surface and delves into the deeper layers, is crucial for those working with and experiencing CSE. It is essential to

hold a reflective stance to avoid over-romanticising survival and to ensure acknowledgement of the cost embedded in many coping strategies. This conceptual position aligns with feminist and constructivist understanding of resilience, which is held as a relational endurance rather than an individual strength (Lloyd, 2022; Van Bavel, 2017; Woodiwiss, 2018).

Resilience as Dynamic Adaptation and Problematic Coping

Dodsworth (2014) highlights that resilience is not static; rather, it can be understood as a "dynamic process of successful adaptation to trauma, stress, negative life events and other forms of risk" (Dodsworth, 2014, p. 187). It shifts and changes, based on the context the individual has been raised in and currently finds themselves in; additionally, personal qualities and temperament play a role (Dodsworth, 2014; Roache & McSherry, 2021). Endeavouring to survive difficult situations often indicates the importance of self-reliance and being "street smart" (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018, p. 334). One of Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al.'s (2018) participants highlighted how survival surpassed even the risk of immediate physical injury, noting, "*Just because I have a busted lip, doesn't mean I wasn't gonna go make my money. Carmex, ice, it's not the end of the world*" (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018, p. 338).

For some young people, this means adopting a "survivor" identity, drawing on survival-focused coping rather than passive victimhood (McMahon-Howard, 2017). Similarly, Miller (2011) showcases how young men tried to make sense of their experiences and economic struggles through transactional sex. The systemic, structural and external conditions that increase vulnerability and restrict choices are not limited to age and gender, but include broader systemic factors like poverty, unstable homes, unemployment, and lack of emotional support. These factors increase vulnerability, facilitate grooming models available to perpetrators and push young people towards exploitative exchanges as a means of survival (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2016; Miller, 2011; Roache & McSherry, 2021; Van Bavel, 2017). Heightened restriction and surveillance, alongside often intense and highly visible professional involvement with young people under the guise of professional boundaries within the care system, can be experienced as cold and harsh, potentially exacerbating risk rather than reducing it (Hallett, 2016). These factors are acknowledged by Reisel's (2017) research participants, where it is noted that:

> if someone believes that they have given their consent and they believe they are striking a deal and they're getting something in exchange for something, it's not the same as someone just, to me anyway, just taking something from you. It doesn't feel the same, you feel you do have a little bit of power… you're not being a complete victim (Reisel, 2017, p. 1297).

The feeling of helplessness is commonly described by young people in care settings, particularly residential ones (Hallett, 2016; Roache & McSherry, 2021; Shaw et al., 2024). In contrast, the inherently risky and often long-term traumatic nature of exploitation can, for some young people, be experienced as a means of regaining a sense of control, or of meeting

unmet needs for affection and belonging (Hallett, 2016; Roache & McSherry, 2021; Shaw et al., 2024). One young person participating in Roache and McSherry's (2021) research reflected:

> Every single decision made has to go through social workers, and every single element of their life is written down… it could be getting back at staff members, I sometimes find that it's, they're not doing it because they want to, they're nearly doing it out of defiance" (Roache & McSherry, 2021, p. 6).

Nevertheless, coping strategies can also become problematic, particularly when they appear to offer immediate benefit to the young person. Hallett (2016) describes this as a 'solution of sorts' or a form of 'uncomfortable comfortableness' for young people who lack genuine care (Hallett, 2016). For example, Hallett (2016) highlights that one participant described their experiences of exchanging sex as a viable option, with the 'uncomfortable comfortableness' of the exchange reflecting how, to some extent, this met unmet emotional needs in the absence of consistent care. Finding a form of 'uncomfortable comfortableness' in exploitation, as illustrated in these exchanges, may support an immediate or short-term feeling of safety, but can also create circumstances associated with longer-term risks (Hallett, 2016). McKibbin and Humphreys (2019) similarly suggest that this can also be about finding a 'solution of sorts' and/or seeking control by "making the exploiter pay" (McKibbin & Humphreys, 2019). Roache and McSherry (2021) link these strategies to trauma histories/impact and a desire to regain power. Roache and McSherry (2021) link these strategies to trauma histories/impact and a desire to regain power, where defiance and control are understood as a means of coping within restrictive care environments.

Van Bavel (2017) also highlights the ways adolescents develop coping strategies within their constrained circumstances, sometimes collectively, as a "self-empowering and dynamic process" (Van Bavel, 2017, p. 88). Shaw et al. (2024) report that some girls do not see themselves as "victims" at all, with components of their exploitative circumstances meeting unmet needs of care and belonging, thus leading them to consider themselves as willing participants who can thrive even under adversity.

Key Determinants and Mechanisms of Resilience

A consistent, secure base relationship being present is repeatedly described as essential (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2016; Roache & McSherry, 2021). It builds self-worth, strengthens self-efficacy, and fosters the belief that alternatives are possible (Dodsworth, 2014). Dodsworth (2014) further notes that "The overarching key determinant of pathway outcome was whether individuals experienced the availability of a secure base relationship, whatever form it took."

The meanings young people give to risks and protective factors, individual, familial, or environmental, play a crucial role in shaping resilience and perceptions of victimhood and agency (Dodsworth, 2014). Roache and McSherry (2021) stressed that an individual's lived

experience firmly affects and interconnects with their resilience and meaning-making. The search for affection and approval can result in a trajectory that is either despairing, leading downwards, or renewed determination, leading upwards (Dodsworth, 2014). Examples of resilience include adaptive coping, reflection, and planning skills that support positive choices and outcomes (Dodsworth, 2014).

Challenges in Recognising and Fostering Resilience

Young people's understanding of their personal need or not for support can sometimes create barriers, as their self-reliance leads them to the understanding that they do not need outside support (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018). This makes it vital for services to adopt strengths-based approaches that validate existing skills and build trust (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018; Van Bavel, 2017). Ideal victim narratives risk dismissing or ignoring resilience in young people, particularly when these acts of resilience present as risky or problematic coping behaviours (Lloyd, 2022; Miller, 2011; Woodiwiss, 2018). Woodiwiss (2018) stresses the importance of avoiding the conflation of choice with blame, advocating for a broader understanding of resilience in exploitation contexts.

The role of intrinsic motivation can shape young people's involvement, which can complicate professional responses if they focus narrowly on elements of exchange, coercion and intimidation (Roache & McSherry, 2021). Some coping strategies, such as using exploitation to regain a sense of control or meet emotional needs that are lacking in other areas of a young person's life, may demonstrate resilience but also cause harm and create dilemmas for intervention (Hallett, 2016; McKibbin & Humphreys, 2019; Roache & McSherry, 2021; Shaw et al., 2024). This complexity is also reflected in how some young people articulate strategies of harm reduction within exploitative contexts. Van Bavel (2017) demonstrates how youth articulate their concepts of harm reduction in the context of CSE: "They should make it a routine process to go and get their health checked in a hospital, and they should be much more careful in doing the prostitution business" (Van Bavel, 2017, p. 88). Van Bavel (2017) argues strongly that interventions must be grounded in young people's lived realities, aspirations, and needs, rather than assuming they are agentless victims (Van Bavel, 2017).

Thematic synthesis

Within this theme, resilience in a CSE context can be understood as a dual process in which young people rely on relationships that foster resilience and meaning-making to navigate their lives. At the same time, these coping strategies can also expose them to further risk.

2.4 Discussion and Recommendations

This review explored how agency, decision-making, and resilience are represented within qualitative research on CSE. Drawing on the conceptual framing established throughout

Section 1.3, the synthesis suggests that these constructs are not fixed traits but dynamic processes shaped by the constraints of care, control, and systemic structures. How young people experiencing exploitation draw on constrained choice, resistance and self-preservation is highlighted throughout the studies reviewed. At the same time, professionals interpret these same actions through institutional and cultural lenses that can either support understanding or risk reinforcing misunderstanding.

Across the literature, agency and victimhood are repeatedly shown to be in tension. The patterns of narrative resistance identified in the 14 papers challenge dominant explanatory models such as the 'Puppet on a String' and 'Boyfriend' models, suggesting that these models may not fully capture how young people negotiate agency within constrained contexts. Agency in the CSE context can be understood as being shaped by necessity and survival rather than unfettered freedom, resulting in strategic action within constrained circumstances (Lefevre et al., 2018; Woodiwiss, 2018). A striking consistency across the studies is the robust rejection of the 'ideal victim/victim' label by survivors. The findings appear to reinforce concerns that professional reliance on 'Ideal Victim' narratives can risk misreading expressions of self-determination as defiance or complicity (Christie, 1986; Lefevre et al., 2018). This may allow professionals to see young people not as passive recipients of harm but as individuals actively negotiating unsafe worlds in the only ways they can.

This tension is a core element of safeguarding practices. Recognising limited agency in exploitation contexts should enhance, not reduce, protection. Understanding agency, its contextual limits, and its survival-driven nature may enable practitioners to fulfil safeguarding responsibilities while also respecting young people's voices and sense of self (Hallett, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2018). This aligns with relational autonomy, where young people's position is self-asserted, not as a means to reject vulnerability, but as a moral negotiation within constraints (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Building on this, young people's 'choices' are not seen as contradictions but as deeply relational acts of survival, aligning with feminist theories that emphasise how selfhood is shaped through social and structural constraints within lived context (Freeman, 2011; Watermeyer & Swartz, 2016). By acknowledging this fluidity, professionals may need to become less focused on categorisation and more on listening to how young people make sense of coexisting agency and vulnerability (Lucas, 2016).

Decision-making is similarly complex. The systemic inconsistencies identified in the synthesis suggest that practitioners operate within layers of risk management and bureaucratic restraint, making each decision a balancing act. These conditions can produce a pattern of inconsistency and moral tension, where what might seem like individual judgment is, in fact, a reflection of systemic constraint. To address the 'moral distress' identified in the literature, there appears to be a need for reflective and trauma-informed spaces. These reflective spaces are not a luxury but, arguably, a necessity for practitioners to feel supported and understood in their roles (Bhagwagar, 2026). In practice, this requires reflective, trauma-

informed, and collaborative practice across multiple agencies, ensuring that the focus is on the young person's needs and experiences rather than on the system's requirements.

Decisions, therefore, are rarely neutral; instead, they are situated within discourses of protection, blame, stigma, silence and morality. Recognising this may enable practitioners and researchers alike to engage more carefully with the power inherent in interpretation. Reflexive supervision, therefore, is not only a professional safeguard but also an epistemic one, protecting against the uncritical reproduction of systemic narratives. Building on the analysis of professional responses as 'narrative filters' (Section 1.3.7), the synthesis suggests that professional inconsistency is often a symptom of systemic 'moral distress' rather than individual failure (Bhagwagar, 2026). In this sense, professional practice can be understood as a context-dependent ethical negotiation and perspective that aligns with relational and trauma-informed models of supporting young people.

Similar to agency and decision-making, resilience is also a dynamic, adaptive, interactional and relational process. It is not just about recovery or strength, but a journey that evolves over time and in response to circumstances. The synthesised literature indicates that resilience emerges as both protective and problematic, enabling survivors to endure while potentially masking ongoing trauma (Knight & Yoon, 2024; Woodiwiss, 2014). Professionals may overlook these less visible or unconventional forms of resilience because they do not fit traditional notions of recovery or 'appropriate' coping mechanisms (Lloyd, 2022; Miller, 2011). Understanding resilience as relational and context-driven, rather than a fixed personal trait, may make it possible to support young people in ways that honour the strengths they already use. This resilience is not just a coping mechanism, but a source of inspiration and hope.

Resilience should be understood as context-dependent, dynamic, and deserving of recognition, even when it may not align with conventional expectations. This aligns with the trauma-informed concepts and post-structural perspectives, which interpret resilience as a psychological and relational practice (Carey et al., 2009; Lucas, 2016). In this sense, resilience, agency, and decision-making can be tentatively understood as a triadic process, each influencing and sustaining the others. Decision-making expresses agency; agency is enabled through resilience, and resilience is continually reconstituted through the decisions young people make to survive and maintain dignity. Taken together, these positions and constructs are not static categories but evolving, interdependent processes shaped by context and meaning.

Agency, decision-making, and resilience are not separate or static; they are complex and interconnected, continually shaping and reshaping one another. To work effectively with survivors, practice must move beyond the binary thinking, particularly models that position young people as either passive victims or with full autonomy, and instead adopt "both/and" position where these can co-exist (Lefevre et al., 2018). In the synthesis, reflective supervision appeared to be important for practitioners navigating these tensions. These spaces function

not only as a forum for case management but may act as ‘epistemic safeguards’, allowing practitioners to reflect upon and question their interpretations and how they may be shaped by wider discourses regarding risk, blame, choices and age (Lefevre et al., 2018; Reisel, 2017). Multi-agency collaboration may also benefit from shared reflective spaces that are trauma-informed and relationship-based, where the focus is on shared understanding rather than procedure.

Policy must evolve to be inclusive of the diverse ways exploitation is lived and recognised, particularly the experiences of boys, young men, LGBTQ+ youth, and racially minoritised groups whose voices remain underrepresented. This requirement is underscored by the gaps identified in current literature regarding the ‘adultification’ of Black girls (Shaw et al., 2024) and the exclusion of exploited males from ‘ideal victim’ archetypes (Miller, 2011). Without these, there is a risk that policy and procedures will maintain a simple, narrow understanding of exploitation and limit individuals' access to a full judicial and support process.

Research must continue to amplify survivor narratives through participatory and longitudinal work, tracing how meaning-making and resilience unfold over time. In particular, there is a need for research that attends to how young people’s narratives shift across different contexts and relationships, rather than treating accounts as fixed or stable representations of experience (Riessman, 2008). Conceptually, this invites a shift towards a relational-resilience framework, which sees survival and agency as ethically significant acts rather than deviations from normative recovery (Knight & Yoon, 2024; Lucas, 2016; Woodiwiss, 2014).

As discussed earlier in the rationale for the study, survivors are not merely subjects of protection but active meaning-makers navigating systems that may often misunderstand them. When agency, decision-making, and resilience are understood not as endpoints but as processes of survival and sense-making, responses can shift from ‘doing to’ young people to ‘doing with’ them. This shift may feel subtle in language; however, it has meaningful implications for practices, particularly in how professionals engage with young people's accounts, choices, and expressions of resistance.

Ultimately, this discussion highlights the ethical responsibility of researchers and practitioners to ensure that their work does not perpetuate harm through language or silence (Reisel, 2017; Shaw & Greenhow, 2020). The act of recognising agency within exploitation is, in itself, a moral stance that acknowledges young people’s humanity within contexts of constraint (Dodsworth, 2014; Lloyd, 2022). Within this acknowledgement, the seeds of recovery, and perhaps justice, begin to grow.

2.5 Reflections

My positionality as an 'insider-outsider' (Section 1.1) required a reflective stance during the SLR to ensure that professional safeguarding instincts did not overshadow the data

being synthesised. I utilised my reflective journal and supervision to consider when my professional lens may be influencing the SLR's findings. As professionals, it is easy to fall into a “protect or fix” mindset. Recognising the tensions was essential to avoid reproducing professional mis-framing of the literature during the synthesis of the included papers. This reflective stance ensured that the synthesis remained grounded in the literature rather than my own professional expectations.

2.6 Limitations of Review

One limitation of this SLR is its geographic bias. Compared to the global South, the heavy representation of the United Kingdom and the United States of America limits our understanding of CSE (Dell et al., 2017). This is, however, not just a matter of coverage; the findings of the review are largely in a Western context, and it should not be assumed that the understanding of CSE is shared across different cultural and socio-political locations. As such, future research could benefit from exploring a wider range of geographical contexts, not only to broaden representation but to examine whether similar themes emerge or whether different forms of meaning-making are present. This also raises questions about the extent to which findings from Western contexts can be applied elsewhere.

Additionally, several of the studies included were conducted over a decade ago. While they remain conceptually important, they may not fully reflect changes in policy, practice, and social understandings of CSE, which may affect their transferability.

Similarly, the boys/young males and LGBTQ+ communities were underrepresented, potentially adding to the silence of these young people in research, support agencies and identification of CSE. This underrepresentation is not just a concern but highlights how CSE continues to be seen as a female issue, reinforcing stereotypes around gender and sexuality that women are feeble, sexually innocent, and vulnerable compared with males, and that males do not need protection**.**

Finally, the limited inclusion of survivor voices in research reduces understanding of how systems frame the concept of agency and resilience, which are not always aligned with survivors' own accounts. Taken together, these limitations also suggest caution in how findings are used, particularly when research based on relatively narrow samples is treated as broadly applicable.

2.7 Rationale for the current study

Although contemporary CSE policies and research increasingly recognise coercion, constrained agency and contextual vulnerability, binary assumptions around victimhood can still impact professional, legal and social responses. Residual dominant narrative surrounding CSE often portrays victims as 'true' victims, always innocent and lacking in agency or decision-

making, shaping how survivors' experiences are understood and responded to. However, this framing can contribute to the misunderstanding of CSE and the blaming or shaming of victims who do not fit this mould (Woodiwiss, 2018). Woodiwiss et al. (2018) further notes that the ways individuals share their stories can affect access to services and influence judicial process.

Given the constraints imposed by dominant narratives, there is a need to amplify diverse voices. Survivors of CSE are often not free to tell any story; instead, they are often constrained by those in the current circulation. By recognising and promoting diverse survivor narratives, researchers can significantly broaden the understanding and approach to addressing CSE, making the research more comprehensive and impactful (Carey et al., 2009; Woodiwiss, 2018). However, there remains limited research examining how survivors construct these narratives themselves, particularly in relation to how they describe agency and choice, and how these are negotiated within their accounts.

The findings from this SLR reveal that lived experience cannot be captured through binary victim/agent categories and that current practice and research often fail to accommodate the fluidity of survivors' self-understandings. Thus, individuals who do not fit these frameworks of 'true victimhood' are unable to tell their own story, or at least to have that story heard and their voices listened to (Woodiwiss, 2018). This suggests a gap between existing frameworks and the ways survivors appear to make sense of their experiences.

The SLR results underscore the need for research that examines how survivors of CSE narrate their experiences, focusing on moments of choice, agency, and decision-making. In light of this, the current study seeks to explore how these narratives are constructed and how they may shift over time, rather than assuming fixed categories of victimhood or agency. In doing so, it focuses on how survivors make sense of their experiences in their own terms, addressing a gap within the existing literature.

2.7.1 Research Question

"How do individuals with lived experience of CSE draw upon and narrate their moments of choices, agency and decision-making, and how do these evolving narratives support their resilience, self-understanding, and meaning-making over time?"

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the methodology and design of the study, describe the research design, and provide the rationale for using DNA, including its theoretical underpinnings and epistemological relevance. The recruitment and data collection process will be outlined in detail, and my rationale for the choices will be provided. Ethical considerations and an outline of the consultation with an EbE is also covered in this section.

3.2 Design

I opted for a qualitative methodology to allow an exploratory approach to my research question and to provide space for a deeper understanding of motivation, details and meaning that cannot be fully captured in numbers (Esin et al., 2014). This reflects an interest in how participants make sense of their experiences. At the same time, it seems important to consider that these meanings may not emerge in isolation but could be shaped through the social and institutional contexts within which participants have lived and been supported.

3.2.1 Dialectical Narrative Analysis

As the central aim of this research is to understand how survivors narrate moments of choice, agency and decision-making within prevailing discourse around CSE, DNA provides a methodological framework for examining how these narratives evolve, interact with societal structures, and shape individual meaning-making, as well as how experiences are narrated and shared (Barrera, 2019; Frank, 2012; Frank, 2005; Riessman, 2022). In this sense, the analysis is not only concerned with individual meaning-making, but also with how these accounts are shaped through engagement with wider discursive and organisational narratives. It becomes difficult to separate personal interpretations from the social contexts in which they are produced. DNA selects stories for focused attention on the basis of discernment and the practical wisdom and cultivated capacity of the analyst to hear stories that 'call out' as needing to be written about, rather than following a rigid, step-by-step procedure (Barrera, 2019; Frank, 2005). Stories selected for focused analysis were those that illuminated key tensions relevant to the research questions and were identified through a reflexive and theoretically informed analytic process.

3.2.2 Epistemological Position of Dialectical Narrative Analysis

DNA aligns with the study's social constructionist epistemology and critical realist ontology. Social constructionism suggests that meaning is shaped through language and social interaction (Bruner, 1990; Foucault, 1980), whereas critical realism draws attention to the material and structural conditions influencing experience, including socioeconomic inequality and institutional power (Bhaskar, 2013). DNA is useful here because it allows the analysis to consider how participants construct meaning through narrative, whilst also recognising that these accounts do not emerge in isolation from wider social conditions. This creates space to examine both the personal significance of experience and the broader contexts through which those experiences are understood.

I have intentionally chosen to frame this study as 'Dialectical' rather than using the more common 'Dialogical' Narrative Analysis found in much of the existing literature (Frank, 2012). While dialogical approaches focus on how different voices interact, a dialectical lens allows me to attend more directly to the tensions within and between individual survivor accounts and dominant societal discourses around CSE (Kuo & Gilbreath, 2024; Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2015; Schwarz & Shahar, 2017). This approach helps me identify where participants' narratives align with, resist, or are shaped by broader institutional and cultural assumptions.

My epistemological position shapes my use of DNA. This approach allows me to explore how participants narrate their experiences as adults reflecting on CSE, and how their stories draw upon, resist, or reshape dominant cultural and institutional discourses. Retrospective qualitative accounts are sometimes criticised for issues of memory distortion and inconsistency (Miller, 2011). However, within this study, this is not considered a methodological weakness. Participants are invited to share how they narrate their experiences over time, which is analytically meaningful and offers insight into how exploitation, agency, and survival are understood.

DNA aligns with my commitment to understanding meaning as co-constructed through language, context, and power (Riessman, 2008, 2022). Rather than treating narratives as transparent reflections of experience, I conceptualise them as situated performances shaped by personal history and wider relations of power. This is particularly pertinent within CSE research and practice, where survivors' accounts have historically been understood through narrow and binary frameworks of victimhood, constraining how expressions of agency and choice are interpreted and legitimised within professional practice.

This perspective foregrounds both discursive patterns within stories and the structural forces, such as gender, class, and system involvement, that shape how individuals speak about their past. Narratives are therefore understood as sites where structure and agency are negotiated.

3.2.3 Consideration of alternative methods

As illustrated in Table 6, several qualitative methodological approaches were considered during the research design process. While considering alternative qualitative methodologies such as Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2014; Willig & Rogers, 2017), Content Analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), IPA (Creswell et al., 2021) and Grounded Theory (Chun Tie et al., 2019), it was concluded that these approaches were less suitable for the present study.

Table 6:
Alternative analysis methods

Methodology	Qualitative / Quantitative	Primary Focus	Strengths	Limitations for the Current Study
Thematic Analysis	Qualitative	Identifying patterns and themes across datasets	Flexible and accessible approach for organising and interpreting qualitative data	Limited focus on contradiction, power relations, and the discursive construction of narratives
Grounded Theory	Qualitative	Generating theory inductively from data	Strong framework for theory development and conceptual modelling	The present study does not aim to generate a novel theoretical framework
Content Analysis	Qualitative / Quantitative	Categorising and analysing textual content	Useful for identifying recurring categories and patterns within data	Less suited to examining narrative complexity, contradiction, and meaning-making processes
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	Qualitative	Exploring lived experience and subjective meaning	Provides detailed insight into personal experience and interpretation	Less emphasis on broader social discourse and narrative interaction

DNA provides a methodological framework for examining contradictions, tensions and competing meanings through storytelling (Barrera, 2019; Frank, 2012; Frank, 2005; Riessman, 2022). DNA's capacity to interrogate contradictions makes it particularly suited to this study (Berniker & McNabb, 2015; Rowland-Coomber et al., 2025). This approach does not seek resolution, but rather to hold competing meanings in tension.

3.3 Ethics

Due to the nature of this research project, it would be remiss to consider that there would be no distress risk to participants. Therefore, various supports were built into the recruitment, participation, and post-participation processes. This included an individual distress management protocol (Appendix J) (Draucker et al., 2009; Whitney & Evered, 2022).

3.3.1 Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Hertfordshire Ethics Committee. As participants were recruited via non-NHS routes, the University of Hertfordshire Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee was the Delegated Authority (protocol number: 0654 2025 Mar HSET). A copy of the ethics approval letter is included in Appendix D, highlighting that it met the criteria for the School of Life and Medical Sciences risk assessment and adheres to the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014).

3.3.2 Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations and participation were viewed as an ongoing, relational process for this research. Two individuals who expressed interest in participating were signposted to appropriate support services during the pre-interview meeting, collaboratively, as it was determined that participation was not suitable or in the best interest of the individuals.

Therapeutic skills such as warmth, compassion, positive regard, and minimal encouragement were used, boundaries between research and clinical practice were clearly maintained.

3.3.2.1 Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing during the pre-interview stage and was reiterated verbally at the start of each interview. Written consent was obtained via a signed consent form (Appendix H). The participant information sheet in Appendix G covered the nature of the project, confidentiality, procedures, purpose, and the right to withdraw. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study without consequences up to two weeks after the interview. After this point, withdrawal would not be possible as data would have been anonymised, and analysis commenced. Additionally, participants were invited to review and offer reflection on the analysis after the draft.

3.3.2.2 Confidentiality

Confidentiality procedures were clearly explained to all participants. Pseudonyms were used for all participants, and identifying details, such as place names and other individuals, were removed during transcription. Likewise, transcripts did not include information about accent, speech patterns, or language background. Participants were made aware that others who are closely aware of their experiences may be able to identify components of their story in the write-up of the final research study. Participants were also advised of the limits to confidentiality and the processes that would need to be undertaken in the event of disclosure of current unlawful activity or a risk to minors and vulnerable adults. See Appendix K for the safeguarding protocol, no safeguarding escalation was required during this study.

Because this project was completed both online and in person, additional considerations were needed for the online space. The importance of having a private space for the interview was discussed and agreed upon by the participants. Likewise, as the researcher, I ensured my space was private and offered for participants to see it if they wanted to.

3.3.2.3 Participants' well-being and/or distress

To support the management of any potential distress, each participant during the pre-interview meeting was assisted in developing a distress management protocol (Draucker et al., 2009). These plans were individualised to meet the participant's specific needs. This included considering the personal signs of distress, actions, and how they best received support, as well as the contact details of their support person, who has knowledge of their lived experiences.

Participants' wellbeing was monitored throughout the interviews (Caddick et al., 2015). During one interview, the participant showed signs of distress, prompting a pause; as such, a break was taken. Another participant shared that they were ready to end the interview early, and a debriefing was undertaken together to support their well-being. Another participant and I undertook a mindfulness exercise during debriefing, as this was a strategy identified as supportive.

All participants were offered a post-interview check-in one week after the interview. Five of the six participants agreed to this; the check-in was conducted by phone, and no concerns were identified.

3.3.2.4 Data protection

In line with GDPR (European Parliament & Council, 2016), the British Psychological Society code of human research ethics (2014), and the University of Hertfordshire's policies, all data were treated as confidential and stored securely. Confidentiality was outlined in the participant information sheet and discussed again before interviews took place. Contact details, consent forms, interview recordings, anonymised transcripts, and demographic information were stored on the University of Hertfordshire's encrypted OneDrive, with access restricted to the researcher only. Transcripts were anonymised using participant pseudonyms. Within the original ethics protocol, audio and audiovisual recordings were to be deleted following transcription. A later ethics amendment allowed recordings to be retained beyond transcription, but this applied only to interviews conducted after the amendment was approved. Anonymised transcripts and demographic information will be securely retained for five years before destruction.

3.3.2.5 Appreciation

Each project participant was offered a £20 voucher as a token of appreciation for their time, emotional labour, and expertise. This was not in place to incentivise participation, but

rather to ensure that the individual's time, effort, labour, and expertise were acknowledged and remunerated. Refreshment was provided for those who undertook in-person interviews.

3.4 Consultation with an Expert by Experience

An EbE consultant kindly gave their time and knowledge to advise on this study. Having an individual with experiences directly linked to the phenomenon being researched was important in strengthening the research process and to ensuring that the interests and well-being of research participants were central. I connected with this EbE through my previous employment. They were willing to serve as a consultant because they identified as having experienced periods of CSE.

Their consultation was not limited to CSE but encompassed all aspects of the study, including recruitment materials, interview questions, well-being processes, ethical considerations, and terminology choices. This was achieved through collaborative review of the research material, reflecting a participatory approaches while remaining attentive to the risks of tokenism (Brady et al., 2012; Knight & Yoon, 2024; Larkin et al., 2006).

An example of their contribution was the support with terminology were the EbE reflected that they supported the uses of the term CSE as alternative labels such as “underage sex work” risk implying consent and reducing exploitation to a commercial exchange, stating: “so many of the other terms like underage sex work imply that we could ‘consent’ and make the exchange sound tangible, forgetting that there are many other factors that impact our experience.” They further described CSE as “the most robust” term because it “does not play moral stuff, and does not let people ignore their own backyard”.

3.5 Participants and Recruitment

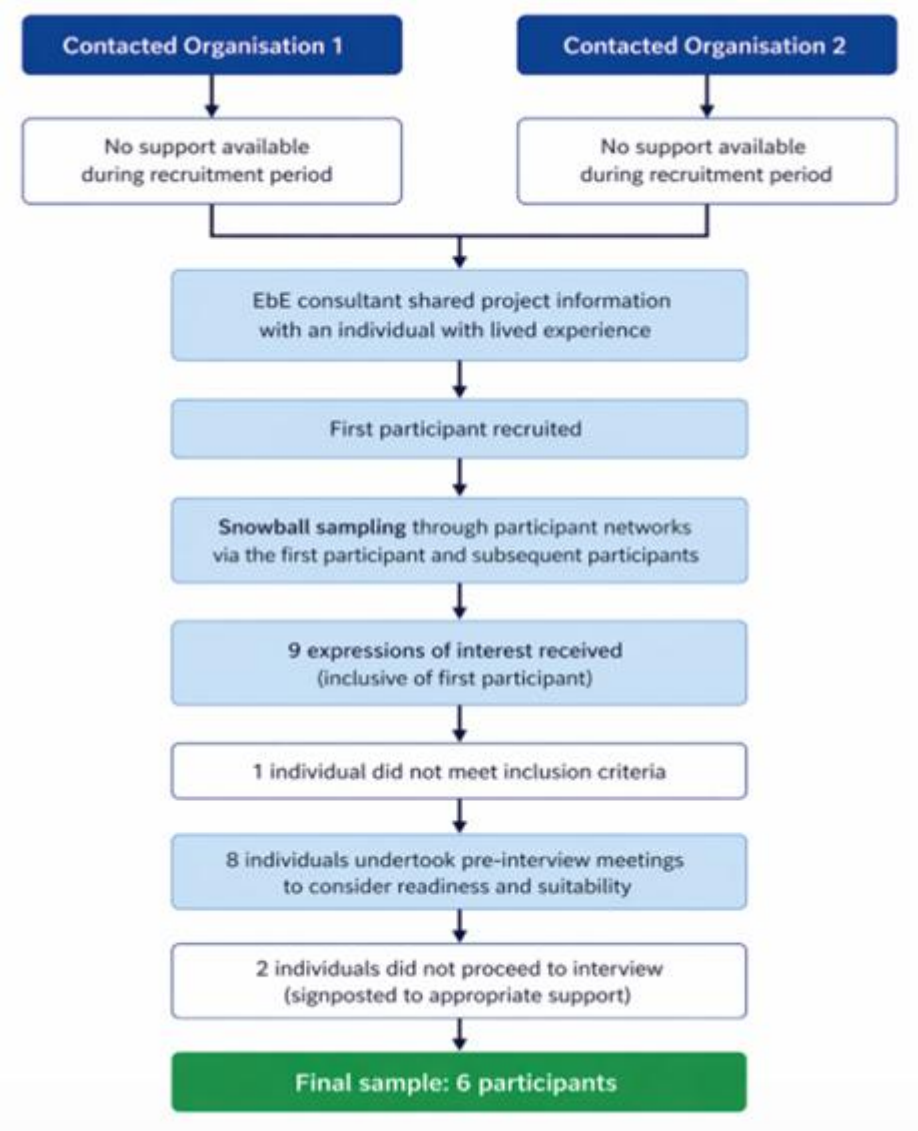
The present study utilised purposive and snowball sampling methods (Creswell, 2013) to recruit individuals with previous experiences of sexual exploitation who were now living in relative safety.

Initial purposive recruitment involved contact with two organisations supporting women and girls affected by sexual exploitation and related forms of violence. Although initial meetings took place with service management, wider organisational difficulties during the recruitment period meant that neither organisation was able to support recruitment to the study. Recruitment, therefore, proceeded through snowball sampling. The EbE shared the project information with an individual with lived experience of CSE, after which the study information was shared through participant networks. See Figure 2 for details of the recruitment process.

Pre-interview meetings were held with individuals who expressed interest in participating to assess their readiness and suitability for the interview collaboratively. See pre-interview schedule in Appendix L. Participants were offered either online or in-person

sessions. This decision reflected personal preference, though for one participant it was primarily influenced by logistical considerations.

Figure 2:
Recruitment Process



5

3.5.1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed with particular consideration given to ethical, safe, and meaningful participation. For example, individuals who had recently engaged in self-harm or suicidal behaviours, or who were seeking participation as a means of

[5] Diary entry, regarding recruitment – oh my stars, they (organisation 1) have said that they can't help anymore, their building has not been renewed, and they are scrambling, WTF do I do now? How will I recruit? How do I ensure that people have support available? Oh my goodness, does that mean (organisation 2) is out as well, their operation is tied to the other

accessing therapy, were excluded in order to maintain appropriate boundaries between research and clinical support and to minimise potential harm.

Table 7:
Inclusion and Exclusion criteria table

Inclusion criteria	Minimum of eighteen years of age
	If you identify as having experienced sexual exploitation
	You are now living in safety
	Have an identifiable support person or network
	A conversational level of English is required
Exclusion criteria	Any person under the age of eighteen
	If you have, over the past six months, made attempts to significantly harm yourself or end your life
	Seek to take part as a way of accessing therapy
	Experiences of exploitation have been solely criminal: CSE elements are required due to the focus of this project
	Persons who are currently participating in open police investigations in relation to their CSE. In order to remove any concerns or potential for tainting of testimony or suggestion of coaching

3.5.2 Rationale for sample size

Estimating an adequate sample size for narrative inquiry is complex and unclear. Cresswell (2013) notes that as few as two participants can be utilised if depth and richness can be achieved. Due to the purpose of this study being a deep understanding of individuals' stories rather than a broader generalisation, I aimed to complete 5-8 interviews in line with research recommendations (Caine et al., 2013; Creswell, 2013; Earthy & Cronin, 2008). The final number of interviews completed was six, which is appropriate for narrative inquiry and allowed sustained engagement with individual accounts while attending to both shared and divergent elements across participants' narratives (Riessman, 2008). As with all qualitative research, the analysis was not to be a generalised representation but rather to develop a rich and nuanced understanding of how participants narrate their experiences in relation to dominant discourses surrounding CSE.

3.5.3 Demographics

Demographic information was collected from all participants during their pre-interview meeting using a brief demographics information form. Participants were made aware that they did not have to provide any information they did not want to. The key information they were invited to provide was age, gender, and ethnicity, as well as the opportunity to discuss other aspects of their identity they wanted to share or felt were

important to the study. The intention of this was to support an understanding of the context in which the different participants' intersectional identities exist.

Please see the table below for the participants' demographics.

Table 8:
Demographics Table

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Any other important identity factors
1 – Ali	Male	British Pakistani	31	- Working class - Muslim - Neurodiverse (dyslexia)
2- Alice	Female	Mixed Asian White	25	- Was in care
3 - Dee	Male	White	32	- Girl Dad
4 – Oli	Male	Mixed Race	39	- Father - Working class - Care leaver
5- Jelly	Nonbinary (they/them)	Black	30	- Disabled - ADHD/ASD - Care Leaver
6- Sarah	Female	White	not shared	- Working class - Was homeless - Parent

6

3.6 Data Collection

Data was collected through individual narrative interviews. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, a pre-interview meeting was held with each participant prior to data collection. These meetings lasted approximately 25–45 minutes and were conducted via Microsoft Teams. The purpose of the pre-interview meeting was to discuss the interview process, address any questions or concerns, and assess readiness to participate. These meetings also allowed logistical considerations, such as interview format and location, to be agreed in advance.

Interviews were conducted either online via Microsoft Teams or in person, depending on participant preference and practical considerations such as distance. Three interviews were conducted in person, and three were conducted online. In-person interviews took place in neutral, private settings that were appropriate and convenient for participants. For online

[6] Reflective diary entry regarding demographics (pre interviews) – 'oh my star 3 men now, I never thought I'd have one. This is exciting and makes me feel a bit sick at the same time, how did this happen? It's good. Would of this happened if the recruitment had stayed with (organisation 1). This might change what comes up. I wonder what it will feel like talking to a woman about their SE'

Reflective diary entry regarding demographics (post interviews)– 'I wonder how that feels for Jelly, I wish I'd ask, like they talk about the past using the pronouns that were theirs at the time (she/her) but talk about now as who they are (they/them). Did I need to ask? Would that affect what I see of is that my curiosity? We did agree to use they/them in the write-up, what did it do to the conversation the movement'

interviews, participants were asked to ensure they were in a private space and to keep their camera switched on to support wellbeing monitoring throughout the interview.

All interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams' recording feature. For in-person interviews, an audio-only recording was used. For online interviews, audio and visual recordings were enabled with participants' consent to allow the researcher to monitor non-verbal indicators of distress.

Interviews were conducted with an opening invitation to share a story (Appendix I), follow-up prompts, and questions, all delivered flexibly in keeping with a narrative approach. Participants were encouraged to guide the conversation and share their experiences in ways that felt most meaningful to them. Follow-up questions were used selectively to support clarification, elaboration, or reflection, rather than to impose a fixed structure.

Interviews ranged in duration from approximately 35 minutes to 1 hour. The interview schedule provided an initial framework, the pacing and depth of discussion were responsive to participants' comfort levels, emotional state, and preferences.

3.7 Data analysis

The application of DNA in this study involves closely examining the contradictions within and between participants' narratives and dominant societal narratives. The analysis will focus on identifying points of tension, negotiation, and transformation within these narratives, allowing for a richer understanding of how survivors construct and communicate their experiences. This will involve analysis, noting areas where participants' stories align with, resist, or subvert different dominant societal understandings of CSE.

3.7.1 Interview to transcript

I transcribed all interviews verbatim myself. Transcription was seen as more than a necessary data preparation process step, but rather the first stage of the interpretive process. As highlighted by Riessman (2008, 2022) transcriptions are always selective representations of the research interaction. Transcription was seen as both a required part of the study and an opportunity to immerse myself in the data and consider the participants' narratives. While verbatim transcriptions were done electronically, they also included hand-annotated pauses, false starts, consideration of uses of silence, and what my response allowed or shut down, as this is a more meaningful way for me to engage due to my dyslexia. Riessman (2008) highlights the need to preserve utterances from both the participant and the researcher to support the transcripts in order to reflect the conversational dynamic of the interview and the way in which meaning was developed through the interaction.

Close attention was paid to pauses, hesitations, shifts in tone, and changes in hand and body position, as these factors are considered components of how stories are told and helped give thought to the meaning the participants were sharing (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002).

Smoothing out contradictions, incomplete sentences and ideas, alongside moments of uncertainty, was not undertaken, as it is acknowledged that the narrations are not a reflection of a concrete fact or 'truth' and that all narration is shaped by interaction.

3.8 Stages of Analysis

The stages of analysis below were developed through engagement with narrative analytic literature (Bright & Preez, 2023; Caddick et al., 2015; Frank, 2012). Rather than follow a structured framework, the stages evolved throughout the research process in response to the narratives and the epistemological and ontological position of the study. The stages are presented separately for clarity, although in practice the analysis moved backwards and forwards between them, with insights from later stages often reshaping earlier interpretations. Across the analysis, these stages helped keep attention on narrative meaning, contradiction, positioning, and wider structural conditions.

3.8.1 Co-creating

Interviews and subsequent transcripts were regarded as co-constructed interactions where meaning was created through engagement (Gergen, 2009). My own reflexive diaries and notes were used during the interview and transcription processes to aid consideration of relational factors, participant and researcher positioning, and moments when assumptions or blind spots were active. Participant narratives were viewed as contextual stories shaped by interaction and broader circumstances, rather than as objective mirrors of their experiences. My reflective notes were revisited throughout all the stages of the analysis process and supported the development of and transparency of the analysis.

3.8.2 Immersion

All transcripts were read multiple times, often referred to as in dwelling, supported to development of a holistic sense of the participant's story (Barrera, 2019). This initial sense of coherence often became more unsettled as the analysis moved towards tension, contradiction, and repositioning. I attended to how participants positioned themselves. This included both childhood and adulthood perspectives. Attention was also given to flow, emotional expression, time framing and context. In practice, this involved listening and returning to interviews multiple times. Listening. Watching. Reading again. Not to extract meaning too quickly, but to develop a sensitivity to how each story was told. I noted my observations and reflections in the transcript margins. Somewhere immediate. Others were added upon returning to the transcripts, example of which is in Appendix M.

3.8.3 Narrative components

The transcripts were examined to identify narrative components. This process drew attention to how participants assembled moments of agency, resistance, and reflection within their accounts. This included moments of choice, agency and decision-making, action or inaction, time, reflection, and resistance. These components were not just complete full segments; some were small stories within the larger component, others were fragmented,

and some contradicted each other during the interview, aligning with Barrera's (2019) movement of thought. In practice, during this stage, narrative segments were noted in the margins of the transcripts alongside a flow document, both of which were handwritten. Additionally, notes were made about the concepts surrounding agency, relationship dynamics, and why these particular narrative components may have appeared analytically significant to retain.

3.8.4 Dialectical Analysis

Components were then reviewed for dialectical tensions, which drew attention to how participants named and held seemingly conflicting positions, such as that of choices versus constraint or agency and coercion. In line with Frank's (2012; 2005) guidance, the analysis focused on what brought these tensions together rather than trying to create a resolution or explain them away. In practice, these moments were identified, and small excerpts or descriptions were documented in the ongoing analysis flow document Appendix N.

3.8.5 Positioning and discursive resources

The analysis examined how the participants identified and positioned themselves, other persons, and how judgment and moral language were used within the narratives, informed by (Schoenau et al., 2024). Alongside this, I undertook further analytical notes at this stage, with transcripts reviewed again to identify the position and narrative resources (Schoenau et al., 2024); these were also included in the individual's analysis flow document.

3.8.6 Linking narrative meaning to material conditions

My critical realist ontology requires that participants' narratives were analysed alongside material conditions, such as legal and safeguarding practices, socio-economic context, and the different forms of power (Sayer, 2000). This focus assumes that meaning is created through language, although it may also be shaped in ways that are less visible within the narratives themselves. This again draws attention to the potential interplay between individual meaning-making and wider structural conditions, where what can be said and how it is understood may not be entirely within the control of the individual narrator. Here, I examined how narrative meaning was constructed, and positioned alongside structural conditions, although this relationship was not always clear-cut. At this stage, I reflected on where structural conditions appeared within the transcripts and considered how narrative meaning related to these contextual constraints and possibilities was given.

3.8.7 Collective Stories

The final stage involved examining patterns across the participants' narratives. This was not straightforward, and patterns did not always sit neatly. This was to develop collective stories. These stories highlighted shared narrative tensions and dilemmas (Caddick et al., 2015) rather than create themes in a thematic sense. In practice, to support this stage, the preceding stages were marked onto a large flow document for each participant (Appendix N) to offer the opportunity to explore overlaps between participants' narratives and consider

how or if this tension appeared across different interviews. To support this stage further, key tensions, phrases, ideas and additional process notes were transferred onto individual cards. These cards were repeatedly sorted and rearranged. This created space to explore how tensions appeared across the accounts. These notes acted as anchors within the transcript. They were not codes. Through this process, clusters of related cross-over tensions began to emerge; this process is depicted in Appendix O.

Differences and contradictions were retained. They remained visible, as they were considered to add depth to the analysis. Although not all tensions were easily interpretable, they remained visible, as they were considered to add meaning and depth to the analysis (Caddick et al., 2015).

Once the analysis was complete, participants were invited to participate in a member reflection. The decision to use member reflections, rather than member checking, reflected the epistemological position underpinning this study and an understanding that narratives continue to evolve and be reinterpreted over time, rather than representing fixed accounts that can be verified (Urry et al., 2024). Participants were therefore invited to meet with the researcher to discuss the five narrative tensions identified through the analysis and to reflect on how these resonated with, challenged, or extended their current understanding of their experiences. The purpose of these conversations was not to establish the accuracy of the analysis, but to explore participants' ongoing meaning-making and to consider their reflections as an additional interpretive layer within the research process (Fritz Horzella, 2017; Theisen-Womersley, 2021; Urry et al., 2024).

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents the findings of the DNA, emphasising how individuals with lived experience of CSE narrate moments of choice, agency, and decision-making. It will also show how these narratives reveal interpretive tensions that evolve within broader processes of meaning-making and resilience.

In narrative research, results and discussion can either be presented together or as separate chapters. Wengraf (2004) reiterated that the decision largely sits with the researcher and should reflect what best fits the study. In this thesis, the results and discussion are presented separately in order to distinguish the analytic presentation of participants' narratives from later engagement with wider literature and implications. Because narrative analysis is interpretive, some overlap is inevitable.

Rather than presenting the findings participant by participant, the chapter is organised around the shared narrative tensions that run across accounts. This reflects an understanding of narratives as interpretive rather than purely factual, in which contradiction, ambiguity and ambivalence are continually negotiated as participants make sense of their experiences over time. Presenting the findings as collective accounts makes these recurring sites of negotiation visible across participants' narratives, whilst still recognising that each individual's experiences remain unique. Individual quotations are therefore used to illustrate how these tensions are negotiated within different stories, rather than to construct discrete case accounts. In doing so, the analysis remains focused on the processes through which participants narrated, negotiated and reinterpreted the meaning of their experiences over time.

Although the chapter is organised around shared narrative tensions rather than individual case accounts, each participant narrative was initially analysed holistically before comparisons were made across interviews. Extracts are therefore interpreted in relation to participants' wider narratives, biographies, and evolving meaning-making processes, rather than treated as isolated thematic fragments. Organising the findings through collective tensions allowed recurring interpretive patterns to be explored while maintaining attention to the contextual and relational specificity of individual experiences.

Participants narrated moments as personal choices. This included entering, stripping, or navigating criminal networks. Participants often narrated actions that appeared, both to themselves at the time and to others around them, to be voluntary choices, but which were later framed as survival strategies within the constraints of their circumstances. However, these narrative moments were still framed within contextual constraints like poverty, institutional instability, gendered expectations, grooming, and racial marginalisation, which shaped their decision-making processes. Participants' narratives complicate some simpler

binary understandings often used to frame young people's experiences of CSE, whereby they are either passive victims or complicit participants. This suggests that agency and victimhood are not opposing states, but are co-constituted within shifting structural and relational constraints.

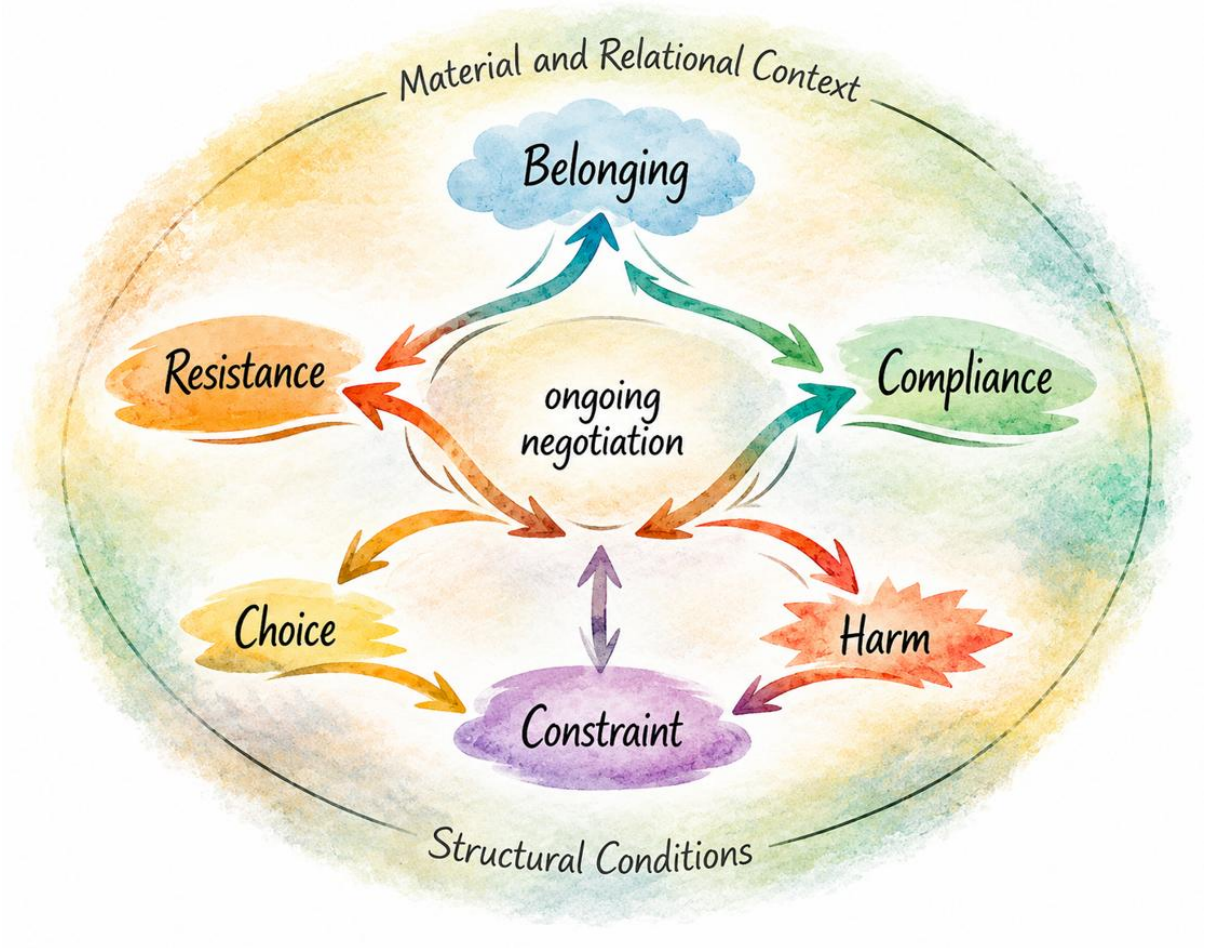
Recurring dialectical tensions were revealed throughout the analysis, shaping how participants discussed their experiences. These tensions are not presented as contradictions requiring resolution but as interpretive positions that participants move between when making sense of their experiences. A decision might be described simultaneously as a choice and as the result of limited alternatives.

Five collective tensions were especially evident throughout the dataset; these tensions emerge through the collective stories mapping outlined in section 3.8.7, where narrative segments were iteratively compared to identify recurring points of tension across participants. These five tensions were:

- choice and constraint in narrating decision-making,
- resistance and compliance in managing exploitative circumstances,
- belonging and harm in the pursuit of identity, acceptance, and recognition,
- past and present self in the reinterpretation of experiences,
- moral identity and stigma in positioning the self.

Figure 3 provides a conceptual overview of these tensions and their relationships. The tensions do not stand alone but represent interconnected aspects of how participants narrated and made sense of agency. Rather than asking whether choice, constraint, resistance, compliance, belonging or harm were present or absent, the findings highlight the ongoing negotiation of meaning between and across these positions. The tensions can therefore be understood as recurring narrative sites of negotiation, where participants moved between, held together, and revisited seemingly contradictory positions as they made sense of their experiences over time. Questions of belonging, moral identity, and survival were closely linked to moments of decision-making. Retrospective interpretation allowed participants to reassess earlier actions, accounting for adult knowledge and shifting social discourses, highlighting the layered nature of these narratives. Figure 3 illustrates this ongoing process of negotiation within the wider relational and structural contexts in which participants' narratives were situated.

Figure 3:
A conceptual illustration of narrative tensions



[7]

4.1 Choice and Constraint

Across the participants' interviews, participants frequently described moments of choice and decision-making using statements such as “I chose”, “I went” or “I decided”, thus appearing to have control over the decision made. Alice reflected, “I chose to be homeless”, while Dee described “the choice that I had to make” in relation to criminal exploitation however, these decisions were narrated within complex environments that highlighted survival strategies, thinking, negotiation, and resilience.

While participants described historical actions as choices, the stories also highlighted how their circumstances and available choices were limited, shaped, and framed by the exploitative contexts in which they lived. Their narration, therefore, maintains attention to the balance between personal choice and agency and the constraints that influence those choices. Dee highlighted the binary nature of his options by stating, "that was the choice that I had to make... I chose doing the drugs... because... I didn't want to get the other girls". Similarly, Ali

[7] Please be aware that the figure was created with the support of AI. A hand drawn sketch was uploaded and made into a more legible aesthetic version.

described attempting to endure exploitation through strategies that reduced the likelihood of further violence. Alice also framed her exit from the care system as a deliberate act of reclaiming autonomy, explaining, "I chose to be homeless. OK, I think that was me taking control". In analysing these accounts, I interpreted decision-making as a narrative site through which participants negotiated how to position their younger selves within constrained and exploitative environments, rather than as evidence of unfettered choice and autonomy.

Choice within normalised environments

Participants described decision-making within environments where exploitation has become increasingly normalised. Sarah recalled older men regularly approaching girls at a taxi rank and offering them lifts, recalling that her peers would often “just go. Just do it”. Reflecting on her responses, she shared conflict, stating that “part of me did want to go”, while also recognising that “this isn't right", and trying to “find an excuse to not go”.

Sarah's account positioned agency as contingent and situational rather than absent. Sarah noted her decisions were made within an environment where exploitation appeared largely unchallenged by adults responsible for safeguarding her and her peers. She stated that "no one ever reported me missing", and that staff "knew this was happening... and they did nothing about it", despite girls leaving with older men and us "not staying there for two or three days at a time".

Economic decision-making within structural constraint

Participants narrated occasions where they positioned themselves as exercising agency to make an economic decision in the context of vulnerable financial circumstances where there were limited alternatives. Jelly, similarly, described making decisions in the context of economic vulnerability. Reflecting on entering stripping and later, performing sexual “extras”, they described these decisions as emerging from pragmatism about their financial circumstances while also recognising that **“**I was probably more vulnerable back then”.

Jelly positioned these decisions as offering a greater sense of agency than their earlier experiences of exploitation, noting that in the club “I get to choose who I’m like, ummm getting paid by” and that “there can be elements of stripping that you feel better because you're in charge of it”. This stood in contrast to previous experiences where control felt more limited.

Jelly, therefore, positions themselves as exercising agency in the context of vulnerable financial circumstances with limited alternatives, while also describing entering strip clubs “just to get that validation as a sex worker”, linking economic survival with recognition, identity, and self-worth. Rather than narrating stripping and extras as straightforward free choice, Jelly held together survival, pragmatism, vulnerability, and the attempt to regain control. Agency here appears partial and negotiated rather than wholly autonomous.

Decision-making in the search for belonging

Participants narrated decision-making as closely tied to belonging and peer acceptance. Ollie shared that decisions were linked to belonging and recognition. He described running away from his care placement as an attempt to experience autonomy and belonging within a peer group. At the time, he assigned the meanings of rebellion and autonomy, and “taking a bit of power from that” to these behaviours stating, “rather than a social worker making choices or the carers, it was me making choices for myself... there wasn't always the best choices, but it was my choice”.

He recalled that running away to be part of a group was motivated by a desire “to sort of feel like it was a part of something”. Retrospectively**,** Ollie recognises that the grooming components, peer dynamics and pressure shaped his perception of agency, reflecting that he “didn’t have the control (he) thought (he) had”. He observes that “I was being exploited. I was being groomed and manipulated, whereas just at the time it would be a case of just for my friends”.

Ollie demonstrates that the decisions he once believed were self-directed were, in fact, shaped by a deeper, more mature understanding of exploitation and peer influence. What he once understood as seeking freedom and rebellion is now understood as taking place within emotional need, belonging, identity and grooming dynamics.

Decisions to escape institutional harm

Participants also described decision-making as shaped by attempts to escape institutional harm and regain a sense of control. Alice described a decision-making process she once understood as self-driven but now appeared steeped in contextual constraints. Reflecting on persistent exploitation within her care placement, she explained that she chose homelessness and “sleeping rough” as a means of escape and control. She framed this decision as one that outsiders often fail to comprehend, stating, "I feel like people that haven't walked through my shoes wouldn't understand why... it feels like there's bit of a stigma barrier to being out of that conversation".

Alice was able to share that while homelessness brought its own set of risks and concerns, this decision was a strategic attempt to escape the environment where she felt controlled and unsafe:

> I felt like if I was by myself and I didn't have no house, then no one could exploit me and come in my house and try and ruin my house. So, I thought if I'm homeless, then I've got nothing that no one wants (Alice).

Alice’s narrative demonstrates the decision to be homeless is not narrated as evidence of freedom, but as a least-worst, and perhaps least harmful, option within contexts of institutional harm, control, and exploitation within contexts of CSE. This reflects the tension between choice and constraint, as will be drawn together in Figure 3.

Sustaining the tension between choice and constraint

Participants did not solely narrate agency or choices through large or dramatic acts of resistance or defiance. Agency often emerged through small acts of negotiation, endurance, silence, avoidance and survival. These actions complicate straightforward distinctions between resistance and submission. Ali described remaining silent during his experiences as a strategic, and perhaps calculated, attempt to minimise violence and endure what he felt he could not change at the time. Across the accounts, participants often narrated exercising agency as occurring within constrained circumstances rather than outside them.

Thus, the issue of choice and constraint remains unresolved throughout the interviews. Participants move between recognising the contexts that shaped the choices available to them and resisting narratives that portray them as wholly passive victims.

4.2 Resistance and Compliance

Participants narrated resistance and compliance as intertwined strategies, reflecting their resilience and ability to adapt in circumstances of power imbalance. Resistance is not complete but partial, embodied, relational, and situational. Likewise, compliance was not to be confused with consent but narrated as a means of minimising harm, enduring risk, or retaining some elements of control.

Ali provides a significant example of this when describing his reaction to being exploited, stating, "what I decided to do at that point in time was stay silent". He described this as a repeated survival strategy rather than passive acceptance. In a separate instance of exploitation, he explicitly used compliance to facilitate his escape, deciding, "I'm going to have to give what they want here so that I can get out". Similarly, Ollie described a form of social compliance where he would "do what didn't feel right... just to be a part of the group rather than sort of being left out".

In analysing these narratives, I observed that resistance often occurs through small acts of negotiation rather than large displays of defiance. This shifts analysis away from binary assumptions that equate resistance solely with refusal and compliance solely with passivity. This positioning can be understood in relation to a wider set of tensions, as will be illustrated in Figure 3

Silence and nonaction are constrained resistance

Ali perhaps offered the clearest demonstration of this when explaining how he responded when one of his exploiters during some of his earlier experiences would seek “payment”. He described pretending to be asleep as a way of minimising future violence and enduring what was inescapable, recalling that he “just kept basically trying to tell myself, go to sleep, go to sleep, because that's the only way I could get through this”.

As such, in this circumstance, silence was an action and functioned as a form of constrained agency rather than passive submission. This reflected his perspective that "the

lack of a choice makes not making a choice is also a choice". The absence of action did not signal consent; it reflected strategic responses, fear, and limited alternatives.

Ali's account disrupts frameworks that equate resistance solely with overt refusal. Instead, Ali's narrative positioned silence as an adaptive response within circumstances experienced as threatening and unavoidable.

Hesitation, excuses, and staying on the edge

Sarah similarly described moving between compliance and resistance while trying to navigate situations that were unsafe. Sarah noted acts of resistance within exploitation, describing how she negotiated when to resist and when to comply. She shared that she sometimes entered cars with older males, while also describing moments when she hesitated, making excuses or attempting to remain on the periphery of situations she recognised as potentially harmful, explaining that while her friends "would just just go," Sarah described trying to remain on the edge of these situations, often delaying or avoiding involvement where she could. She recalled attempting to "not going up there or trying... to avoid it as much as I could", which allowed her to "distance myself and keep myself on the edge of it". While these actions did not prevent exploitation entirely, they represented attempts to negotiate risk and retain some control within environments where exploitation had become normalised.

Her narrative demonstrates how resistance may emerge through hesitation, delay, withdrawal, or partial disengagement rather than through complete escape from exploitative circumstances, "not as much as some of my friends did".

Embodied coping as resistance

Jelly, described more embodied strategies that supported them in coping with exploitative circumstances. Reflecting on their experiences within strip clubs, they explained that alcohol enabled them to distance themselves emotionally from what they were experiencing, "it helped me disassociate".

Jelly acknowledged that they could have refused, admitting that although they could have asked for a 'soft drink' or 'lemonade,' they 'didn't even try'. At the same time, refusing alcohol was narrated as carrying possible economic consequences, as it could "affect the amount of dances he went for". Alcohol functioned as an embodied coping strategy that enabled endurance within exploitative circumstances.

Moral resistance within criminal exploitation

Narratives regarding the capacity to maintain one's own moral boundaries within exploitative contexts also represented resistance. Dee described complying with drug running while refusing pressure to recruit girls into sexual exploitation, positioning this as a moral boundary within exploitative circumstances. He further reflected that "I didn't want to put them in, you know, in the same situation I was in" and wanted to spare them "from going through what I wanted to go through". Dee, in constructing this narrative, highlighted that his

decision to comply with criminal activity coexisted with resistance against sexual exploitation. It illuminates how agency can be exercised through yielding to selective forms of compliance rather than outright refusal.

4.3 Belonging and Harm

Belonging and recognition emerged repeatedly across the interviews in relation to exploitative relationships. Participants position themselves as navigating complex social contexts while endeavouring to make sense of the choices available to them rather than narrating their experiences through narratives of victimhood or blame. These narratives illuminate how participants hold their moments of decision-making within relational and social contexts that shape the options available to them and the ways they feel safest.

Belonging emerges as being situated both as a source of connection and as a context through which exploitative relationships became possible. This dual positioning can also be understood in relation to the wider set of tensions brought together in Figure 3. Participants describe the offer of and desire for belonging, recognition, and acceptance as drawing them towards individuals, groups, or environments that they later reflect on as exposing them to harm. When sharing these experiences, participants' narratives of early moments of choice sit within evolving narratives that emphasise resilience, survival, and a greater understanding of self. Ollie describes being driven by "potentially peer pressure wanting to fit in, not wanting to be sort of excluded or ostracised" because he "wanted to be sort of a part of the crowd and like everybody else". He reflected that he was "wanting to be a man... the big strong man... and kind of ensure that I didn't look... weak or... like a gay boy". Similarly, Sarah shared that she felt she “never really felt like anyone cared about me or that I belonged anywhere really" and was "so desperate to be loved or like wanted" that she felt driven to make difficult decisions.

Seeking belonging in contexts of exclusion

Feelings of exclusion, surveillance, disconnection, cultural disconnection or scrutiny, led several participants to seek out environments where they felt they belonged, but where their exploitation unfolded.

Ollie describes his childhood as one of living between foster homes with largely white carers and professionals surrounding him[8], leaving him to feel disconnected from his cultural and racial identity. While he acknowledged that his carers were “lovely people”, he reflected on the cultural distance he experienced growing up, recalling that as a “young mixed-race man” surrounded by “predominantly white carers”, he found himself “seeking to be around

[8] Reflective diary entry - What did it mean for Ollie that I was a white professional? Did this change how he chose to share these experiences? What am I seeing or not seeing because of our different GGGRRAACCCEESSS? Maybe I need to think about this with Abigail and Sheeva, am I connecting to the bits of the narrative that make sense to me and missing other parts

people that sort of look like me". He often wondered, "Do these white carers sort of know me? Do they understand me?". This led him to remain close to peers even when situations felt uncomfortable, partly because returning to carers who he felt did not understand him also carried its own sense of exclusion. While at first there was a sense of belonging, recognition, and understanding, the same people and networks later became the sources of his sexual exploitation. Ollie further reflected that, at the time, responding to messages, attending certain locations, and participating in peer activities felt like ordinary social choices. In adulthood, however, he reconsidered these actions as part of a wider grooming process that shaped what choices appeared available to him. He recalled that "it'd be a case of maybe back then it was through mobile phones, text messages... you get sort of pins and messages to sort of be in certain places at certain times... for if I was meeting my sort of at the time my friends needs or making them happy, it would keep me a part of the group".

Sarah shared a similar circumstance as she attempted to move away from her childhood home, steeped in control and religious practice, towards environments she felt offered a greater sense of being "grown", mature and independent. She described the shift from a "very like in a very controlling sort of environment" to "having all this choice and this freedom when I when I got kicked out", where "at the time, if you feel like you're grown up and that you're mature and you can make your own decisions or fuck you, no one's making decisions for me". Retrospectively, however, she recognised that the same contexts increased her vulnerability to exploitation.

Across these accounts, participants narrated making choices in contexts that appeared to offer acceptance and connection at moments when their emotional and relational needs were otherwise unmet.

Gendered expectations and the regulation of vulnerability

It was also evident in participants' narratives that gendered expectations shaped how they felt they could navigate exploitative contexts and how they understood their own behaviour within them. Across several interviews, participants shared that they managed their responses to pressure, fear, and coercion in ways that aligned with the forms of masculinity, strength and emotional control they felt expected to perform.

For two of the male participants, gendered expectations surrounding masculinity dictated how they felt vulnerability could be expressed. Ali, in particular, acknowledged the pressure to present himself as strong and in control within his cultural context, "You can't look weak… just wasn't an option". As such, this narrative highlighted self-protective silence as a way to hold on to identity components aligned with his understanding of masculine norms. Speaking out, showing fear, or asking for help risked undermining the identities he believed he needed to demonstrate.

Likewise, Ollie explained how expectations of "toughness" determined his reaction to uncomfortable and unsafe circumstances: "If you back out or show you are scared, people

would say you are soft" as he recalled, At the time, he associated masculinity with appearing physically strong, emotionally controlled, and accepted by peers. Reflecting back, however, Ollie described how his understanding of masculinity had shifted significantly in adulthood. He explained that strength is no longer defined by peer approval, noting, "now we understand. You know, men come in or different shapes and sizes, but then it's not. Not even the. What makes me a man now is not to do with physicality".

Masculinity shaped both participants' behaviour and their later interpretations of it. Participants, when reflecting on their younger selves, offer narratives that grapple with these expectations. Ollie reflected that his adult understanding of strength has shifted, noting, "It's actually, you know, I work hard, look after my family. I love my children", and that regardless of physical size, "that doesn't make me less of a man". Similarly, Ali reflected on the damage caused by judging his younger self through expectations of masculine strength and control. These narratives highlight the impact of identity frameworks and expectations on decisions participants believed were available to them at the time, such as resistance, silence, or continued participation in unsafe environments.

Re-authoring the self after exploitation

Narratives of belonging and identity pressure frequently shaped how participants described past experiences; several also described how their identity was reconstructed in adulthood. While early narratives of choice were often shaped by vulnerability, they were later reinterpreted through frameworks of survival, resiliency, and self-understanding.

Sarah later described reconnecting with her body and strength through sport, which she framed as part of regaining control after earlier experiences where choice had felt limited. Jelly similarly described entering strip clubs partly as an attempt to regain control over experiences that had previously felt coercive and violating. Although they recognised the vulnerabilities surrounding these decisions, they also framed aspects of the work as allowing greater choice than earlier exploitative experiences. Reflecting on this, Jelly explained, "You get to change the narrative of what happened to you, and you get to just have new memories". They also described seeking validation through the work following earlier experiences that had left them feeling "ugly" and "gross". Attention and payment became tied to feelings of desirability and value.

Alice, reflecting on her present identity, narrated her survival as evidence of strength and resilience, looking back on homelessness and exploitation through a narrative position of endurance rather than only harm. She noted that since her children have "grown up," she has found a new sense of resilience, "I know I can do it with nothing. I can survive. I've done it".

Participants increasingly reinterpreted earlier experiences through narratives of endurance, growth, and self-understanding, with Ollie reflecting that "the resilience comes from the experience and then the sort of the understanding that I've bounced back from it. That's my evidence that... I'm still here today". Ali similarly described his journey of recovery

as moving from a feeling of "drowning" to being "able to then come up on shore" and "build a life raft" that allowed him to speak his truth, finally.

Across these narratives, participants described navigating tensions between belonging and harm, vulnerability and agency, rather than fixed positions of victimhood or complicity. Agency was frequently narrated as relational and contextually shaped, emerging within circumstances structured by emotional need, social expectation, inequality, and survival.

4.4 Past and Present Self

Participants re-authored earlier experiences over time using new emotional, relational and discursive understandings gained in adulthood. Events once understood as chosen were reconsidered through these evolving frameworks of meaning-making. The way in which these meanings change and develop over time was central to the research analysis. Ollie demonstrated this tension between past view and present clarity, stating, “at the time it was sort of my choice, or at least I thought it was my choice. But then again, looking back... Was it all my choice? Maybe not”. Similarly, Alice reflected on how the meaning of her actions had shifted over time, now understanding experiences she once viewed as disempowering through a greater sense of survival and endurance. Sarah shared a similar re-authoring of her history, admitting, “I didn't really think about my first experience as exploitation till I was a lot older”. She recalled the duality of her awareness at the time, noting, "Even though I knew it was wrong because I was hiding it from mum from my parents... I knew like I knew it was wrong". Ali also described this process of re-evaluating his younger self with greater compassion, recognising the harm caused by years of self-blame and his difficulty in acknowledging the abuse he experienced. The reinterpretations moved between compassion, hindsight, grief, and self-critique. The dialectic between past and present selves is still at work, highlighting the ongoing process of making sense of and giving meaning to moments of choice within exploitative circumstances over time.

Reframing relationships and experiences

Sarah spent time sharing about a relationship that in her minority she believed was consensual; however, in adulthood, she came to recognise it as exploitative because “at the time it didn't feel like exploitation because I believed I was in a relationship with this person, but really they that group of boys were exploiting us”. She noted that during her adolescence, such dynamics were “the norm” and “accepted,” stating, “It wasn't, it wasn't... This person is a paedophile. This person is exploiting somebody. It was normal”. When she was younger, Sarah lacked the understanding and vocabulary to conceptualise and name the grooming and power imbalances she was subjected to. In adulthood, she was able to consider the same events and reframe them through safeguarding language and a more robust, critical understanding of exploitation. She observed that the concept of “exploitation didn't exist” for

her at the time, and while she “felt very much grown up and mature,” she now recognises that a “19-year-old having sex with a 14-year-old... They're a paedophile”. Reflecting on this shift in perspective, she shared, “Now we've… that's why all of these things exist is because we do recognise that exploitation exists,” which allows her to see the "wild" reality of what was previously allowed to happen. This highlights how the meaning assigned to events changes as new discursive resources become available, rather than implying that earlier interpretations were incorrect or false. Sarah noted the shock of this realisation when comparing her past to her children's lives: "When I look at it now, I just think it's wild... It's absolutely wild. I couldn't think of... I think of my own children... they have this protection".

Recognising responsibility and self-blame

Ali, much like Sarah, also shared a shift in how he made sense of responsibility, sharing that for many years he felt that he was responsible for not fighting back or being forceful in his resistance and held a harsh view of his younger self recalling how he would ask himself, “why did you do that? Why did you try to make yourself asleep if you were at least woken up and made yourself made the person aware that you were awake?”. He described how this internalised shame led to “a thought of cowardice”, as he felt he had become like the men who avoided war, noting, “that would have been me because that was who I became”. It was, however, observed during the course of the interview that much of this judgement of his younger self was accompanied by a growing compassion, in which he began to recognise that he was only a child endeavouring to manage circumstances that were threatening, scary, and felt inescapable. The narrative moves between self-critique and self-care as he reflects on the harm he caused his younger self over the years of harshness. He explained that he now feels more “confident and brave because I need to be there for that kid that wasn't able to do that”.

Re-evaluating agency in later decisions and choices

When reflecting on stripping and sex work, Jelly also engaged in retrospective re-evaluation and assessment. Whilst they continued to acknowledge elements of agency within those decisions, there was a simultaneous narrative of recognising how poverty, mental health challenges, and trauma inevitably shaped the context in which those decisions were made. Jelly reflected on this period with significant hindsight, stating, “I wish I didn't start it when I did” and “I wish I hadn't joined at that point,” because they now better recognised they vulnerabilities. They described the mixed feelings surrounding “extras,” noting that while they felt they had the choice to “say no,” the pragmatism of needing money often led them to think, “Oh, wow. I can make more money if I do this”. Alongside this, Jelly reflected that alcohol became part of how they managed the emotional impact of these choices. Agency is not rejected but repositioned within wider structural emotional constraints, with adult reflections holding both choice and vulnerability together.

Identity shifts and adulthood as an interpretive lens

Parenthood for several participants significantly changed how experiences from childhood were understood, providing a new interpretive framework from which to view and consider their exploitation, youth, vulnerability and moments of choice. Alice highlighted this shift, stating, “I think since I've had my children kind of grown up, I feel like I couldn't imagine them going through that”. Similarly, Dee described how the lens of fatherhood helped him grasp the true scale of his own vulnerability, noting, “I realise like I didn't realise how young like it was when it was all happening... think about that much older than my daughter. Do you know what I mean? Look at it in that context. As you get older, you realize just how young we were”. Ali also reflected on how his perspective has changed, explaining that he would “now tell my sons it's not OK to hit a woman, but if a woman is sexually abusing you, it's OK to push her away” because the trauma he endured while adhering to rigid masculine norms “wasn't worth this whole like male saviour thing”. Through this parental lens, actions that were once considered evidence of recklessness, rebellion, or maturity are now better understood as the child's efforts to survive physically and emotionally unsafe circumstances. Adulthood did not necessarily bring clarity, but it did allow participants to re-evaluate their younger selves from a different relational and moral perspective.

Re-authoring the self over time

There were multiple ways in which the younger self was narrated as vulnerable, resistant, naïve, and strategic; the participant’s current selves began an ongoing dialogue with these earlier positions, at times contesting and at other times affirming them. Ali views his present self as an advocate for his past self, noting, “without that choice of peace, I think I would have still been trapped underneath the war”. Similarly, Ollie looked back and saw “a scared young man just looking for love, guidance and... wanting to be a part of something,” a sharp contrast to the “rebellious” autonomy he thought he was exercising at the time. For participants, moving from ignorance to knowledge, and from blame to compassion, was not a clear or linear shift. Rather, they spoke of gradually working through complex, often conflicting understandings of responsibility, agency, and vulnerability, thereby disrupting fixed ideas of victimhood and complicity. Sarah similarly described recognising the exploitative nature of earlier experiences only later, once she had different language and adult understanding available to her. Dee also described re-evaluating his past through a more compassionate lens, noting, “I think I just tried to, you know, play. Play the cards that I was given”. For Alice, this re-authoring turned a “disempowering” memory into a source of strength, as she concluded, “now when I look back, I feel empowered because I feel like, wow, you did that. Yeah. And you survived.”

4.5 Moral identity and stigma in positioning the self

Moral identity is negotiated across much of the participants' narratives, whereby they worked to position themselves in ways that maintained their dignity and legitimacy. This was

especially visible when participants anticipated judgment, experienced stigma, or sought to distance themselves from identity positions they did not align with. Participants positioned themselves morally as well as narratively. Dee exemplified this by stating, "I don't hurt women. Like, I'm never gonna be that sort of person ever," while reflecting that he was "always" going to be "true to who I was". Similarly, Alice worked to distance herself from stereotypes of homelessness and dependency, asserting, "I wasn't homeless to be on drugs. I was homeless to empower myself" and noting that she "didn't want any" benefits or governmental support because "I didn't want bugging". Ali echoed this resistance to being defined solely by his trauma, asserting, "My biggest fear whenever I disclosed was I didn't want someone to either give me, like the sympathy eyes because I'm not broken little child". Ali emphasised his inherent nature despite his history of trauma, noting, "I'm still not an aggressive person" and "I don't believe in revenge. I believe in just peace." At the same time, Jelly asserted their individual identity by stating, "coming from a low income, you kind of just go into a survival mentality where you're like okay what's going to get me money so I can pay my bills" and "I'm still Jelly, sweet, hyper colourful nuts mostly always smiling". These narratives illuminate how meaning-making following exploitation involves not only reflecting on events themselves but also constructing a version of themselves that they can live with and is morally coherent.

Constructing moral boundaries within exploitation

Dee best illustrates how one's moral position and identity can be retained to some extent within the highly coercive context of exploitation. While sharing his involvement in criminal activity, he emphasised that he refused pressure to recruit girls into sexual exploitation and instead chose drug running despite the risks involved. He further justified this boundary by reflecting on his own moral values, noting, "I didn't want to be one of the guys that treated her like that. And I knew that if I went and got the girls, that's, you know, that's basically what would happen". His refusal was not just about not wanting others to experience the sexual exploitation he had, but also about showing himself to be someone who upheld his own morals even when in the complex circumstances of his exploitation. His narration demonstrates how moral positioning can preserve one's sense of self and engage in small acts of resistance against identification as an exploited individual. He used a striking metaphor for this compromised agency, explaining, "It's kind of that I haven't got the… I haven't got the knife, so. But I passed it. I passed the knife along".

Shame, masculinity, and the judgment of self

Grappling with the moral implications of past actions and inactions is also evident in Ali's interviews, where cultural and gendered expectations surrounding masculinity led him to feel he should have resisted more forcefully. He recalled that the "choice itself brought a lot of shame later on" and led to a persistent "thought of cowardice". He linked this to broader societal and cultural narratives, "within social context has a lot of like, male implications". He explained that he stayed in harmful situations because his trauma "wasn't worth this whole like male saviour thing. That was in my head of men need to be". This self-critique was further

influenced by his South Asian background, where he noted that the "family shame thing... is just inbred within you," leading him to fear that others would "blame my parents for bringing him into the house in the first place". He was, however, able to move towards naming and recognising the vulnerability of his younger self, rather than abandoning ideas of shame altogether; he was able to hold shame and compassion together, eventually reflecting that "being harsh on 8-year-old Ali has probably been one of the things that's been the worst thing I've ever done". He now uses his adult perspective to advocate for his past self, asserting, "I can stand there, confident and brave because... I can still stand on my 10 toes and still be brave enough to say, Salaam" This is analytically significant because it highlights the ongoing labour involved in repositioning the self against dominant scripts of masculinity, strength, responsibility, and blame.

Stigma, judgment, and resisting simplified identities

Moral complexity was also reflected in Jelly's accounts, where they acknowledged regret about some decisions while resisting simple narratives that position those involved in stripping and sex work as either fully empowered or entirely victimised. They stated, "I wouldn't say I lacked capacity at the time," while also admitting that they had been "peer pressured" when their mental health was poor. However, they now define their identity through a more nuanced lens of survival, asserting, "I am a beautiful combination of all three of my mums, so I'm soft but firm". Jelly described "extras" as morally uncomfortable, explaining that "you know it's not the best decision... you choose when and yer and you can say no" This ability to refuse was positioned as an important distinction from earlier exploitative experiences and allowed some sense of agency within circumstances they still recognised as risky. They also resisted simplistic moral judgements about sex work itself, stressing, "Absolutely support them" even while reflecting critically on some of their own experiences and decisions.

At times, Jelly resisted dominant narratives surrounding exploitation and sex work, while at other times reproducing aspects of them, particularly when distinguishing their own choices from those of their mother, whom they felt had "let her exploitation take over her, like them men totally controlled her". Their account, therefore, moved uneasily around fixed moral positioning, reflecting tensions between agency, survival, stigma, and self-understanding.

Reclaiming identity through later self-positioning

Sarah's discussion of rugby demonstrated how, for some participants, later experiences became important sites for reclaiming moral and embodied identity. Sarah positioned bodily strength and ownership as part of a wider re-authoring of self. She explained that her decision to start playing at age 31 followed an abusive relationship where she felt she had "no choice," and taking up the sport was "very much like I saw it advertised. I was like, I'm going to do it and and that sort of thing for me, it's sort of a bit bit of a like fuck you". This

participation allowed her to reclaim her body, as she reflected that the sport "does make me feel strong and empowered," particularly because it embraces diverse "women's body types" and provides a space where "there's a place for everybody". While her increased sense of power and bodily confidence did not erase her experience of exploitation, this retrospective positioning appeared to support her in placing herself within a broader moral narrative of strength, endurance, and recovery. Thus, Sarah is not reduced merely to that of a CSE survivor nor fully detached from that history. Vulnerability, survival, and reclaiming selfhood can be narratively integrated. Participants drew on and resisted cultural scripts such as the innocent victim, complicit participant, criminal, damaged subject, and strong survivor in positioning themselves.

4.6 Member Reflections

Member reflections were completed with two of the six participants. As outlined in Chapter 3, these conversations were not intended to verify the findings, but to explore how participants engaged with and reflected upon the five narrative tensions developed through the analysis. The reflections provided an additional interpretive layer, illustrating how meanings continued to be negotiated and reinterpreted over time (example notes in Appendix Q).

Table 9:
Member Reflections

Participant	Reflection	Links to findings
Ollie	Ollie shared that he thought that the findings showed that I had understood that he did not have a problem with his carers being white. But he did not feel that people understood him, which made him vulnerable to seeking belonging, exposing him to circumstances in which he experienced CSE.	This strengthens the interpretation of belonging and harm, with reference to racial disconnection and the search for identity.
Dee	Dee shared that the findings helped him think more about moral positions. As he noted at the time, this was not a fully formed thought; rather, he just knew he was trying to do the right thing.	This supported interpretations of moral identity and added nuanced thinking to the past and present self, as adult reflections give new language to decisions that were not fully conscious at the time.

Dee and Ollie's reflections support the study's analytic view that participants' accounts are not merely descriptions of past events, but evolving narratives shaped by later meaning-making, relational understanding, and changing interpretative lenses.

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has examined how individual participants narrated moments of choice, agency, and decision-making within complex, often constrained circumstances of CSE. Participants narrated ongoing negotiations among multiple tensions, including choice and

constraint, resistance and compliance, belonging and harm, past and present self, and individual agency and structural conditions, rather than simple distinctions between victimhood and choice.

Participants narrated agency within constrained relational and structural conditions. These constraints included, but were not limited to, racial marginalisation, economic vulnerability, unstable care arrangements, gendered expectations, and institutional systems that did not recognise or intervene in their exploitative experiences. Behaviours that might be described or viewed externally as compliance were often narrated as strategies of survival, preservation of dignity, and risk management in contexts where there were limited safe alternatives.

The importance of relational and structural contexts in shaping how agency is experienced and narrated is a key finding highlighted throughout the chapter. Belonging, identity and recognition were closely linked with participants' experiences of being pulled into exploitative circumstances. Participants' accounts, at the same time, frequently acknowledge that these experiences existed within structural conditions of poverty and homelessness, racism, and ineffective safeguarding systems.

The way understanding evolves over time was another key component within participants' narratives. Only retrospectively did several participants recognise the extent of the exploitative circumstances to which they were exposed, as new adult perspectives supported them to reinterpret events that in the moment had been normalised, self-initiated, or felt inevitable. Revisiting their earlier decisions and negotiating complex moral relationships with their younger selves, participants often re-balanced feelings of responsibility with compassion and recognition of vulnerability.

When considered together, these findings demonstrate that narratives surrounding moments of choice in sexual exploitation involve complex negotiations of agency within constraint. Agency and victimhood are not represented as opposing categories by participants; rather, their accounts illuminate that these positions exist simultaneously, and shift across the life course. Through storytelling, individuals reconstruct experiences of exploitation within broader narratives of identity, survival, and meaning making.

The following chapter will consider the existing literature on sexual exploitation, agency and structural vulnerability in relation to the implications of these findings. It examines how these narratives challenge simplified understandings of choice and victimhood within qualitative contexts.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Overview of the chapter

In this chapter, the tensions identified within the analysis are considered in relation to existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and the study's epistemological stance. Drawing on DNA methodology, the discussion will foreground the tensions presented within participants' accounts, rather than seeking to resolve them. This chapter examines how participants actively negotiated tensions surrounding agency, harm, responsibility, belonging, and survival within their narrative accounts. In doing so, it offers some insight into the psychological and relational aspects of lived experience.

I will begin by examining the findings in relation to the existing literature and the key tensions identified and organise this analysis accordingly. I then move to reviewing wider theoretical implications of the finding, including a rethinking of victimhood and agency beyond binary frameworks. The clinical implications will then be considered, followed by an evaluation of the research, including its methodological and epistemological stance. Finally, there will be a discussion of limitations, directions, future research, and final reflections.

5.2 Implications

This study contributes to existing discussions of CSE by examining how meaning-making and agency are negotiated within survival narratives. Instead of treating agency as fixed, the findings suggest that it is relational and continually negotiated and reshaped over time. The temporal component is particularly significant, highlighting how meaning-making evolves and reshapes participants' relationship to their sense of agency over time. The foregrounding of dialectical tensions may also challenge some simpler binary understandings of agency and victimisation by emphasising the complexity and context-dependent nature of participants' experience. These findings may contribute to psychological understanding of narrative meaning-making and how moral self-positioning is understood alongside social and safeguarding discourses. These findings may also complicate some recovery-oriented frameworks, particularly those that conceptualise meaning-making as a progressive process following adversity, by suggesting that meaning-making may remain unstable, relational and ongoing as it is revisited over time (Kau et al., 2024).

5.3 Relevance of these findings to the literature

Choice and constraint in narrating decision-making

Choice and constraint were frequently present in the participants' narratives, showing how decision-making within exploitative contexts involved both agency and restriction (Baxter & Chazal, 2022; Lloyd, 2022). This builds on the SLR's identification of tensions between agency and constraint, by demonstrating how participants actively constructed agency retrospectively, holding it in tension with structural conditions rather than resolving it. Retrospectively, participants narrated and framed decisions as often made in the face of extremely limited options, such as entering into particular forms of exchange, maintaining relationships, or attending particular situations that were the sites of their exploitation (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2016). These interpretations are based on retrospective accounts and therefore reflect how participants make sense of past experiences in the present, rather than providing direct access to decision-making at the time. This extends existing research on constrained agency by illustrating how participants retrospectively negotiated and reinterpreted moments of decision-making within contexts shaped by coercion and power imbalances (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2018). This also reflects wider sociological attempts to conceptualise bounded agency, where action is understood as shaped by, yet not fully reducible to, structural conditions, although such formulations have themselves been subject to critique (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014).

Here, an additional layer is added to the current literature by demonstrating that agency is not only enacted behaviourally but is actively constructed through narrative reinterpretation, as participants reflect on their earlier experiences, in which decisions often simultaneously become acknowledged as personal actions and are reinterpreted through an awareness of structural conditions (Esin et al., 2014; Riessman, 2008). More specifically, this study shows that participants do not merely name their earlier choices; they actively reinterpret them, consistent with narrative work on meaning making (Esin et al., 2014; Frank, 2012) with the adult understanding that they have of poverty, risk, exploitation, vulnerability and social conditions .

Frank (2012) argues that narratives frequently contain dialectical tensions, as reflected in this study, in which participants hold seemingly contradictory meanings simultaneously (see also Schoenau et al., 2024). Participants' narratives move between these tensions without resolving them, treating this movement itself as meaningful and positioning agency as relational and contingent (Van Bavel, 2017). This is a marked move away from approaches that seek to categorise action as entirely freely chosen or wholly coerced (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2016), as this study's analysis treats such movement itself as analytically meaningful (Esin et al., 2014; Riessman, 2008). These tensions surrounding choices and constraints did not emerge in isolation; they were intertwined with participants' ongoing negotiations of belonging and harm within their relations and peer networks.

Resistance and compliance in managing exploitative circumstances

Resistance and compliance emerged as a second narrative tension, which challenges more simplistic interpretations of CSE survivors' behaviours (Frank, 2012; Smith & Woodiwiss,

2016). Participants narrated moments that appeared to demonstrate compliance within the experience of CSE and its exploitative demands; however, these are retrospectively understood as strategies for risk reduction and the avoidance of additional or alternative forms of harm (Hallett, 2016; Lloyd, 2022). Hallett (2016) and Lloyd's (2022) research identifies similar patterns highlighting the survival strategies utilised by young people within exploitative relationships, such as the exchange of sex for daily needs or perceived safety (Hallett, 2016; Lloyd, 2022; Roache & McSherry, 2021). Such interpretations seem to align with research on every day and micro-level resistance, where actions that appear compliant may nonetheless function as subtle forms of negotiation within constrained and unequal power relations (Fritz Horzella, 2017; Horowitz, 2016).

Participants' reflections, however, introduce greater nuance, emphasising the personal reasoning that informed their actions (Dodsworth, 2014). As such, this project extends existing literature by showing how survivors later narrate these actions as intentional, if limited attempts to regain control and reduce harm (Van Bavel, 2017). Participants' narratives of behaviours that others may interpret as passive are framed as attempts to hold on to a degree of control in contexts of limited alternatives (Dodsworth, 2014; Woodiwiss, 2014).

Charmaz (2006) states that individuals make sense of their experiences and behaviours by interpreting them through evolving frameworks they hold about their own identity; these findings share this position (also see Schoenau et al., 2024). Participants in the present study do not only recount the details of events but also engage in a process of ongoing interpretation of their past decisions, highlighting the agency that may be experienced through subtle, quiet, strategic, and context-dependent actions, such as silence as a form of protesting and refusing to give consent, rather than overt, obvious acts of resistance (Carey et al., 2009; Frank, 2012; Riessman, 2008). This highlights how narrative approaches can support making visible forms of meaning-making and agency that, at present, are being revised in research that focuses on disclosure or behavioural observations (Esin et al., 2014).

Belonging and harm in the pursuit of identity, acceptance, and recognition

Within participants' descriptions of relationships and peer networks linked to their exploitation, the tension between belonging and harm became prevalent (Hallett, 2016; Roache & McSherry, 2021). At several points in the interviews, participants narrated experiences of attention and social inclusion coexisting alongside harm manipulation (Hallett, 2016; Roache & McSherry, 2021). Research by Dodsworth (2014) and Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al. (2018) suggests that young people's relational needs are particularly present in the context of marginalisation and prior adverse life experiences. The findings of this project resonate with these concepts. This overlap between care, attachment, and harm may also be understood through attachment-informed perspectives on abusive relationships, where early relational experiences shape the capacity to maintain connection even within harmful contexts (Capaldo & Perrella, 2018; Karakuş, 2012).

Exploitative relationships are not solely depicted as coercive; participants' narratives reveal the intertwined, complex emotional dynamics through which belonging and harm may coexist (Firmin et al., 2016; Hallett, 2016). Riessman (2008) describes the dialogical nature of storytelling, in which individuals often negotiate multiple meanings when recounting their lived experiences. From a narrative perspective, this is present in the participants' recounting, where relationships do not fall into simple positive or harmful binaries (Hallett, 2016; Lloyd, 2022). The participants showed how feelings of connection were able to coexist with an understanding of their exploitation, thus complicating some dominant explanatory models, which are contingent upon clear distinctions between coercion and consent (Beckett & Pearce, 2017; Hallett, 2016). This is of importance as it demonstrates how exploitation may be interwoven into and narrated through the desire to have recognition, safety, belonging and independence rather than through force alone (Dodsworth, 2014; Roache & McSherry, 2021). This interplay between belonging and harm further shaped participants' abilities to make sense of their past experiences as they evolved into their present selves.

Past and present self in the reinterpretation of experiences

The tension between past and present selves was demonstrated throughout the participants' narratives, reflecting how narrative reconstruction plays a role in identity development following exploitation (Riessman, 2008; Woodiwiss, 2014). A reflective stance was taken by participants when recounting earlier experiences, showing a distinction between their younger selves and their current selves' understanding of events (Woodiwiss, 2014). Participants' reinterpretation can be considered through the lens of narrative identity theory, which suggests storytelling as central to integrating one's past experiences into their evolving self-concept (Barrera, 2019; Frank, 2005).

Meaning-making appeared to evolve over time rather than remaining fixed during an experience and was evident in participants' narratives, frequently expressing compassion, curiosity, frustration, and confusion about their earlier decisions (Riessman, 2008; Solomons, 2017). This aligns with identity research (Dodsworth, 2014), but the present study offers a more specific account of how retrospective reinterpretation reshapes not only the meaning of events but also participants' understanding of their own agency within them. Throughout this process, participants' narratives served to make sense of agency, ability, and responsibility, providing a more coherent account of self (Hallett, 2016).

Thus, narrative reconstruction may be an important process through which survivors can begin to integrate their CSE experiences into broader pathways of resilience and recovery. This interpretation aligns with existing research (Dodsworth, 2014; Knight & Yoon, 2024). The findings therefore suggest that reinterpretation is not simply descriptive, a recall, but an active process of ethnical and relational self-revision.

Moral identity and stigma in positioning the self

Efforts to negotiate moral identity and stigma (Riessman, 2008; Woodiwiss, 2014) when recounting their experiences were an additional tension that was illuminated by participants' narratives. Some broader social discourses surrounding victimhood and blame were engaged with in several of the participants' narratives (Dodsworth, 2014; Wiener et al., 2024). Reclaiming one's own autonomy was at times highlighted by participants in respect to their own decision-making, and at other times, resistance to interpretations that may carry implications of accountability for their exploitation (Godoy et al., 2020; Lloyd, 2022; Reisel, 2017). These narrative negotiations reflect wider societal tensions within understandings of CSE, where expectations of the "ideal victim" can shape how experiences are recognised and validated (Lloyd, 2022; Reisel, 2017; Shaw & Greenhow, 2020). These processes may also be shaped by gendered expectations, particularly norms of masculinity that position control, emotional restraint, and self-reliance as central to how men understand themselves, which may in turn influence how participants account for agency, responsibility, and vulnerability within their narratives (O'Donnell et al., 2024).

The present study extends this by showing that moral self-positioning is not only a response to stigma, but one of the main narrative mechanisms through which participants establish credibility and show complexity, consistent with narrative approaches (Riessman, 2008). The inclusion of participants of different genders also offers some indication that these moral positioning strategies may be shaped by gendered experiences, with male participants, for example, often navigating additional layers of stigma related to both victimhood and masculinity. By moving between accounts of agency and constraint, participants resisted both stigmatising narratives that attribute blame to victims and reductive narratives that deny their capacity for action altogether (Lefevre et al., 2018; Van Bavel, 2017). In this sense, survivors' stories functioned as spaces in which dominant cultural scripts surrounding victimhood could be both reproduced and contested (Esin et al., 2014; Woodiwiss, 2014). This is significant in suggesting that survivors' narratives do not simply resist external stigma, but rather work through and negotiate with it, reframing it in the way they understand themselves (Dodsworth, 2014; Frank, 2012) which challenges approaches to CSE that treat accounts as either evidence of harm or indicators of agency, rather than as sites where both are negotiated.

Rethinking Victimhood: Beyond Passivity and Complicity

Some current public discourse regarding CSE emphasises coercion, vulnerability, and the abuse of power (Berelowitz et al., 2013; National Audit on Group-Based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, 2025; Oram et al., 2012). These framings reflect debates within critical victimology, where victimhood is understood not as an inherent condition but socially constructed, with recognition often contingent upon proximity to the ideal victim and shaped by implicit hierarchies of innocence and credibility (Christie, 1986; McEvoy & McConnachie, 2012). This, however, has not always been how this has been discussed. Historically, CSE discussions often took on victim-blaming narratives that frame young people as delinquents,

promiscuous, or complicit in their victimisation (McMahon-Howard, 2017; Woodiwiss, 2014). Bringing these ideas to the forefront has, at times, led to a simplification that identifies the young person as entirely passive, devoid of decision-making capacity or agency, as noted in subsequent critiques (Lefevre et al., 2018; Woodiwiss, 2014).

Researchers have warned against this, such as Woodiwiss (2014), who argues that dominant victim frameworks and the narrowing of who is deemed innocent ignore the complex nature of many young people's lives. This was also reflected in this study, where participants rarely positioned themselves as wholly passive or wholly responsible. Likewise, Horning (2012) offers a critique of the binary ways in which young people are either framed as vulnerable victims or blameworthy agents (see also Van Bavel, 2017). Hallett (2016) and Lefevre et al. (2018) further acknowledged a relational and contextual nature of young people's experiences within exploitative circumstances, demonstrating that agency and vulnerability can often coexist.

This argument is extended by Miller (2011), who notes that recognising young people's decision-making and survival strategies does not negate the exploitation they experienced. Rather, assumptions equating victimhood with innocence and passivity have historically excluded some young people from being recognised as victims. This is particularly relevant to the present findings, which further extend these critiques by showing that calculation, adaptation, and moments of action were constantly present across participants' narratives. More specifically, the project shows that these moments are a key component in how survivors narrate their stories, rather than being small exceptions within otherwise passive accounts (Dodsworth, 2014). Participants described choosing where to live and which peers they were going to surround themselves with, as well as choosing silence, and entering into alternative exploitative circumstances, such as stripping and drug running, for reasons that made sense within the totality of the circumstances they were facing, as reflected in related research (Dodsworth, 2014; Firmin et al., 2016; McMahon-Howard, 2017). These assertions were not merely moments of strength within otherwise wider passive accounts; they were central to how participants narrated their experiences.

These, choices, however, were not narrated as stand-alone but rather frequently in conjunction with stories of constraint. The decision to leave the carer's home is made within the context of an unstable care system and a sense of limited alternatives. The decision to remain silent was informed by fear of violence and cultural shame, and engaging in alternative exploitative circumstances emerged within the economic conditions and structures imposed by the exploiters (Baxter & Chazal, 2022; Hallett, 2016; McKibbin & Humphreys, 2019). In each case, the agency appeared alongside narratives that recognised that there were structural constraints at play (Baxter & Chazal, 2022).

Thus, participants' narratives in this project are not reductive accounts of victimhood but instead reflect its complexities. Participants resist being reduced to passive victims, while also rejecting narratives that frame them as fully autonomous or responsible for their

exploitation (Van Bavel, 2017; Woodiwiss, 2014). Instead, their accounts sit in an in-between space, where decision-making and coercion coexist, and where agency is neither absent nor complete, but shaped by constraint, as highlighted in previous work (Lefevre et al., 2018). This project contributes to current debates by showing that agency is not the opposite of victimhood, but part of how victimisation is understood and narrated.

Agency and Coercion, moving beyond binary frameworks

Coercion and consent within CSE research are often framed by legal and safeguarding structures that position children as incapable of consenting (National Audit Offices, 2017; Sexual Offences Act 2003, Section 54, 2015). These frameworks offer legal protection, safeguarding interventions, and are essential; however, they can lack the capacity to capture the complexity of how individuals' CSE experience is actually lived, understood and narrated (Beckett & Pearce, 2017). The participants in the present study and their accounts highlight this limitation, suggesting that legal and safeguarding categories do not capture the lived and narrated complexities of CSE experiences.

Participants did not always describe situations that they recognised at the time as being exploitative, sharing examples such as being invited into cars, which felt ordinary, and stripping which was described as a means of survival, a financial strategy, and a source of validation. This aligns with existing research, which demonstrates that exploitative experiences often are interpreted through need, attachment and constraint survival rather than abuse (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2018). Importantly, participants do not deny harm; they describe how meaning was made of what was happening using the interpretive resources available to them at the time.

Retrospection supported some of the participants to reinterpret their experiences as exploitative, illustrating how meaning shifts over time and can diverge from legal or institutional definitions (Lloyd, 2022; Woodiwiss, 2014). Researchers such as Woodiwiss (2018) and Lloyd (2022) acknowledge that the meaning attached to CSE is not purely shaped by what happens, but by the discursive, relational, and institutional frameworks through which it is later understood. The present study's participants frequently held to meanings and interpretations of their experience, simultaneously experiencing themselves as choosing and later recognising and identifying manipulation, structural vulnerability, and coercion.

Frank's (2012) concepts of dialogical narrative align with this narrative movement, in which people hold multiple, and at times contradictory, understandings of the same accounts. This also aligns with a constructionist approach to narrative, which considers narrative not as fixed mirrors of truth but as evolving actions of meaning development shaped by the available context, audiences and languages (Esin et al., 2014; Riessman, 2008). There is no intention to resolve these contradictions; rather, there is movement between them (Frank, 2012). This movement is also reflected in the conceptual illustration presented in Figure 3. One contribution of this study is that, rather than treating contradictions as weakness, it considers

this movement between positions as evidence that meaning is made and changed over time. This movement allowed agency not to be fixed but to be continually interpreted and reinterpreted through narrative reflections. The dialectical narrative lens is useful in these circumstances, allowing contradictory meanings to be analytically visible rather than pushing for their resolution (Frank, 2012; Riessman, 2008).

The critical realist perspective highlights the coexistence of agency and coercion, reflecting the complex constitution of people's realities (Bhaskar, 2013; Lawani, 2021; Willis, 2023). Participants experienced and narrated moments of choice and decision-making, yet these choices and decisions were made within conditions which changed what was possible. Unmet relational needs, gender, poverty, economics and institutional failures did not negate agency. They shaped the conditions in which actions took place. Likewise, how agency was expressed does not nullify their experiences of CSE. Rather, they show how exploitation may be lived through actions that, at the time, feel like choice. In this sense, agency is not equivalent to freedom. Instead, it is relational, situated, and exercised within conditions that simultaneously enable and constrain action (Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000; Willis, 2023).

This project, therefore, adds to the current theoretical understanding by reconceptualising agency not as the absence of coercion but as something negotiated within coercion. Meaning-making is particularly illuminated when participants reflect on their past as adults and reinterpret experiences that felt like choices or survival, and understand them in different ways over time, as reflected in retrospective accounts (Dodsworth, 2014; Woodiwiss, 2014). This aligns with moves away from viewing young people experiencing CSE as wholly passive victims and instead acknowledges that, some young people, even under severe constraint, engage in acts of sense-making and resistance (Carey et al., 2009). As such, agency is neither fully available nor fully restrained. Rather, it exists within circumstances of constraint and is illuminated through participatory retrospective narratives and sense-making of what their earlier actions meant at the time and what they mean now (Dodsworth, 2014).

Structural Conditions and Narrative Possibility

Material conditions such as housing, poverty, violence and the care system appeared across the narratives and shaped the contexts within which decisions were made. These conditions provided insight into how exploitative situations emerged and were sustained, as reflected in existing research (Baxter & Chazal, 2022; Hallett, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2018). This position may also be understood in relation to the concept of structural violence, in which harm is embedded within social, economic, and institutional arrangements rather than experienced only as isolated events (Flynn et al., 2018). These structural conditions were not just minor additions to the narrative but were factors that actively shaped narrative possibilities, as recognised in narrative approaches (Baxter & Chazal, 2022; Esin et al., 2014). This shaping of narrative possibility can also be understood in relation to the broader structural and relational context represented in Figure 3. This is a key factor of this project, as

it demonstrates that material conditions in which decisions became possible or necessary cannot be separated from narrated meaning-making.

Participants spoke about entering exploitative situations, considering financial insecurity or housing concerns, as reflected in related research (Dodsworth, 2014; Firmin et al., 2016). One account described choosing stripping and that this was not described as a freely chosen opportunity, but as something that followed from a very limited set of options after becoming homeless (Dodsworth, 2014; McMahon-Howard, 2017). Similarly, staying within exploitative peer networks was sometimes explained as a response to not having safer or more stable alternatives available (Firmin et al., 2016; Hallett, 2016).

These accounts align with research by Hallett (2016) and Lefevre et al. (2018) regarding how structural vulnerability can increase exposure to exploitation. Alongside this, participants' narratives demonstrate that these structural factors do not eliminate subjective experiences of decision-making; the context shapes how decisions occur. As such, this project shows not only that conditions shape actions but also how actions are later understood and narrated, bridging narrative and structural analyses.

Integrating the structural grounding with narrative analysis reflects the project's epistemological position (Esin et al., 2014). While the narratives of the participants are understood as socially constructed accounts, they are rooted in material conditions (Esin et al., 2014; Riessman, 2008). Allowing both the discourse and structure to be attended to allows the analysis to examine how meaning-making evolves within real constraints, as highlighted in existing research. (Baxter & Chazal, 2022; Esin et al., 2014).

Responsibility, shame and moral work of adulthood

When evaluating the actions of their younger selves, moral language is used across their narratives through statements such as ‘I should have known’ or ‘I should have known better’. These statements could be understood as reflections of broader cultural narratives about responsibility and individual accountability, where social expectations often frame victims within a ‘vocabulary of victimisation’ (McMahon-Howard, 2017; Woodiwiss, 2014). These statements, however, did not function as a stand-alone statement of self-blame, but rather appeared as part of a process of re-evaluation and understanding of their past from a new adult lens (Harper, 2014). Because personal narratives are not static records but selective reconstructions, individuals often revise and edit the remembered past to square with their current identities (Riessman, 2008).

These narratives form ongoing narrative work through which participants considered their younger selves and through their adult knowledge and empathy. When acknowledging the moments of decision-making, participants often reconcile the multi-part story of agency and harm coexistence, recognising that the exercise of choice does not negate their status as victims of exploitation. This narrative work demonstrates that responsibility may be

renegotiated over time as individuals move away from a ‘single damage narrative’ that constructs victims as exclusively passive or helpless (Woodiwiss, 2014).

Participants do not simply accept external blame, nor do they completely deny responsibility; rather, they hold a more complex position, acknowledging their younger selves' choices and decision-making while naming and recognising the conditions that influenced those decisions. In this way, agency within participatory narratives operates not only as a description of past behaviour but also as a moral resource through which meaningful identity is constructed in the present day. This is a contribution of this study, suggesting that agency is not only used to understand experiences but also plays an important role in how survivors come to understand themselves in ways they can live with after CSE.

5.4 Integrative Theoretical Contributions

These findings suggest that, in the context of CSE, agency cannot be understood through simple binary framing. DNA contributes to CSE research not just by producing findings, but by offering a way of working with complexity without trying to resolve it. Rather than smoothing over contradictions in the pursuit of coherence, this approach allows them to remain visible. Across participants’ accounts, agency does not come through as fixed, but as something shaped by both psychological processes and the context individuals are in. This is particularly evident in how participants revisit and reinterpret their experiences over time, often from a different standpoint. Identity, then, is not fixed, but something that is continually reworked through these processes of meaning-making.

Psychologically, these findings show how participants make sense of both harm and choices they made as part of who they are. This is not just about cognitively reinterpreting what has happened, but also attending to it emotionally and morally, particularly when reflecting from their current standpoint. In this sense, agency is not only about what people do, but how they understand and position those actions. It is always shaped by wider social, cultural, gendered, and material conditions.

5.5 Clinical implications

Drawing on these accounts, the project points to ways in which helping professions, including psychology, social care, legal services, and judicial services, might support young people experiencing CSE, particularly at moments of choice, decision-making, and agency. This would include ensuring that binary concepts of choice, decision-making, and agency do not define the individual or their access to support and judicial processes.

Within psychology, these findings highlight the importance of formulation approaches that can accommodate multiple truths, complexities, contradictions, and multiplicity within clients' narratives (Lefevre et al., 2018; Nosen & Buckholdt, 2024).

Survivors may experience themselves as both agentic and constrained (Dodsworth, 2014; Lloyd, 2022). Therapeutic formulation and intervention may need to stay open and curious to these coexisting positions without privileging one over the other (Lefevre et al., 2018; Nosen & Buckholdt, 2024). In practice, clinicians and safeguarding professionals need to move away from questions that ask, 'why they did X' and towards formulations that ask, 'what relational, material, or cultural pressures shaped the options available' (McTavish et al., 2024; Theisen-Womersley, 2021). This approach has parallels within some current trauma-informed formulation literature. Nosen and Buckholdt (2024) describe formulation as a collaborative and provisional process in which working hypotheses must remain open to revision as new information becomes available. They encourage an ongoing stance of curiosity about information that does not fit an existing formulation, rather than seeking to resolve or disregard what may appear contradictory or inconsistent (Nosen & Buckholdt, 2024). This offers a framework for the complexities identified in the present study, where contradictory positions may need to be held and explored rather than collapsed into a single story. Similarly, McTavish et al. (2024) propose a socioecological approach to formulation that considers individual experiences alongside relational, community, institutional and wider structural contexts. Such approaches provide an existing practice framework through which the relational and structural constraints identified might be incorporated into the formulation.

Likewise, the findings seem to extend and support the view that, within safeguarding practices, responses to CSE must not rely on clear distinctions between coercion and choice when assessing the presence or risk of exploitation, as the narratives presented in this project suggest that such distinctions may oversimplify the lived reality of exploitation. Practitioners may need to recognise that expressions of agency do not negate exploitation, and young people may describe their actions in ways that indicate choice, these still operate within a system characterised by grooming, constraint, risk, violence and coercion. When agency is interpreted as evidence of consent, this can risk blurring or negating structural vulnerabilities. At the same time, attending to structural vulnerability should not require practitioners to invalidate moments where young people experienced themselves as exercising choice, resistance, strength or agency. Some of this study participants described acts of compliance or decision-making as ways of surviving or protecting themselves within the constrained exploitative circumstances. Clinical and safeguarding responses may need to hold both exploitation and agency together, rather than positioning them as incompatible.

Compliance within CSE may represent a survival strategy rather than consent; as such, visible resistance should not be treated as the key indicator of victimhood. Professionals may need to attend to broader structural vulnerabilities, such as housing poverty, community safety, care experiences, and a lack of safe relational connections, rather than narrowing their focus to the individual's behaviour. Finally, practitioners may need to be alive to the fact that gendered and racial assumptions impact the recognition of CSE, including reflecting on their own bias and blind spots. This also requires considering how the practitioner's position and

identity impact this. The accounts may indicate that males and racially marginalised young people can be vulnerable to misrecognition within existing frameworks.

Within clinical practice, findings also suggest that shame, sense of self, moral injury, and processes of identity construction and reconstruction may remain active within survivors' accounts and may not lend themselves to rapid resolution. Participants demonstrate an ongoing process of reconciling past actions with present identity and understanding. In this sample, the process remains active rather than resolved, with participants continuing to rework their understanding of their past actions over time. This suggests that some participants are still actively reworking their understanding of past actions, rather than having reached a settled account, which may make it difficult to sustain approaches that assume resolution or coherence.

These findings reinforce the importance of psychology and social care working together. Psychology contributes to understanding meaning-making, identity, and agency, whilst social care draws attention to safeguarding and the structural conditions that shape people's lives. Together, these complementary perspectives may be better placed to address the complexity reflected in participants' narratives.

Taken together, these findings may suggest that safeguarding practices that rely on binary framings do not always accommodate the complexity of survivors' accounts, particularly where choice and constraint are narrated together. These findings may also have value outside academia and could support training and reflective practice in psychology, social care, safeguarding, and youth justice settings. In some areas of practice that overlap with CSE, relational and trauma-informed approaches have already been integrated into service provision. One example being Enhanced Case Management (ECM), which was developed within youth justice services, uses psychologically informed, multi-agency case formulation to develop a shared understanding of a young person's developmental, relational and social needs and to inform the sequencing of intervention (Bright, 2017; Skuse & Matthew, 2015). Formulations are collectively revisited and reviewed, with psychological consultation supporting multi-disciplinary practitioners in reflecting on engagement and adapting responses where required (Bright, 2017; Skuse & Matthew, 2015). This example highlights how psychologically informed formulation and reflective practice can be embedded beyond traditional clinical settings when working with young people experiencing trauma and wider social adversity**.** Workshop dissemination that encourages engagement with survivors' narratives and explores the tension between agency, coercion, and victimhood may similarly support practitioners to engage with these complexities.

5.6 Evaluation of the Research

I have utilised the CASP (2018) framework to evaluate this project.

Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	A clear aim guided the study: to explore how adult survivors of CSE narrate their experiences, with particular attention to meaning-making, agency, and dominant discourses. A qualitative narrative design was appropriate to achieve this aim.
Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	Yes, a qualitative methodology was appropriate for exploring how survivors narrated and made meaning of their experiences of CSE within broader social and material contexts. The study prioritised depth over generalisability.
Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Yes, DNA was appropriate, as it supports close engagement with participants' narratives and allows attention to the contradictions and tensions within the accounts.
Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	Yes, due to the nature of the study subject, Recruitment prioritised safety and suitability rather than maximising sample size. Decisions to exclude or discontinue participation were made collaboratively and treated as ethically appropriate rather than methodological shortcomings.
Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Yes, narrative interviews were appropriate for addressing the research aim because it enabled participants to share how they understood and narrated their experiences of CSE over time.
Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Yes, the co-constructed nature of narrative data was acknowledged throughout. Reflexivity was embedded throughout, with attention given to power, positioning, and the researcher's role in shaping interpretation.
Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Yes, Ethical approval was obtained, and ethical practice was treated as ongoing rather than procedural. Care was taken to minimise distress, avoid re-traumatisation, and support participants' autonomy throughout the research process.
Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Analysis followed an iterative, reflexive process through repeated engagement with the data. Attention was paid to ambiguity, contradiction, and tension within narratives, which were retained rather than resolved. I documented analytic decisions to support transparency.
Is there a clear statement of findings?	Yes, the findings were grounded in participants' accounts and considered alongside theoretical and social contexts. The study contributes to existing understandings of CSE by complicating dominant victimhood narratives and foregrounding survivor meaning-making.

Methodological choices shape what becomes visible within analysis. In this study, DNA enabled attention to contradiction and tension within participants' accounts, while potentially foregrounding some forms of narrative negotiation more than others. This reflexive position aligns with the study's moderate social constructionist epistemology and critical realist ontology.

5.7 Limitations and Future Research

It is important to acknowledge the limitations within this project. At the same time, DNA offers several strengths, though these sit alongside its reliance on interpretive analysis, which can introduce a degree of researcher subjectivity. I am aware that, as an insider-outsider who has worked extensively in exploitation contexts, I inevitably shape the interpretative lens brought to this analysis, and this cannot be fully separated or bracketed out**.** The intention of this project was not to produce a definitive account of survivor

experience, but to offer one situated and interpretative reading of how participants negotiated meaning within their narratives. This is not necessarily a limitation, but it does require reflexive consideration. The complexity of identifying dialectical tensions within narratives may also make it more difficult to generalise the findings, particularly given the relatively small, context-specific sample. This may limit how far the findings can be extended beyond this study.

There are also questions surrounding the retrospective nature of participants' accounts. These narratives are shaped by memory and by time, as well as by ongoing processes of making sense of experience. They do not function as fixed accounts of past events. Instead, they reflect how participants understand and position themselves in the present. Within a narrative approach, this is not best understood solely as a limitation. Rather, it highlights meaning-making as an active and ongoing process, suggesting that temporality is central to how survivor experiences are constructed and reconstructed.

To meet participants, I relied on self-identification, relational networks, willingness to share the project and others' willingness to engage. As such, individuals who are most marginalised, unsafe, or disconnected from personal or professional support networks are likely to be under-represented. This is not treated as a sampling failure, but as a reflection of the realities of researching experiences of CSE, where participation requires a level of safety, stability, and readiness to narrate experience (Hallett, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2018).

Further research could apply DNA to a larger, more diverse sample of survivors. Rather than seeking larger datasets solely to increase sample size, this could include research across different geographical areas and service contexts, as well as offering greater diversity in gender, ethnicity, age, and care experience. Time since CSE experiences may also be important to consider. Additional insight may be gleaned into how meaning is revisited over time, and whether understandings of choice, constraint, resistance, compliance, belonging, and harm shift as survivors make sense of their experiences from different temporal positions.

Future research could also explore whether the narrative tensions identified within this study are evident across different forms of exploitation. For example, comparing narratives where exploitation is primarily CSE or where CSE and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) are co-occurring, or when the participants have been trafficked, may provide further insight into how these tensions are negotiated.

Future research may also benefit from greater survivor involvement throughout the research process. Participatory approaches enable communities to contribute beyond data collection, including involvement in research design, interpretation, co-authoring and dissemination (Edwards et al., 2008). In CSE research, this could include survivor advisory groups helping to develop research questions and interview schedules, serving as co-

interviewers, survivors working alongside researchers to interpret emerging findings, or participating in decisions about how findings are represented and disseminated.

5.8 Final Reflections

This project began during a period where public conversations about coercion, abuse, exploitation, and powerful men seemed to re-emerge with renewed intensity. Discussions connected to Jeffrey Epstein, P-Diddy, Donald Trump, Andrew Windsor, and the testimony of Gisèle Pelicot seemed in some ways to open wider conversations about grooming, coercion, complicity, and power. However, I witnessed how quickly in some contexts those conversations collapsed back into familiar ideas about "ideal victims", personal responsibility, and disbelief. Even with all the additional public information, discussion, media attention, and apparent willingness to talk about exploitation more openly, many individuals whose experiences were complicated, contradictory, relational, or messy still seemed difficult for many to sit with. People were still drawn to sorting people into categories of believable/unbelievable, vulnerable/not vulnerable, and deserving/undeserving. This has continued to frustrate me throughout the research.

When I began, I would not have described myself as a researcher. I probably still wouldn't; rather, I would describe myself as a dirty on-the-ground social worker, more comfortable in direct practice, advocacy, intervention, and action than in academia. The role of a researcher often felt uncomfortable. There were moments where I had to stop myself from slipping into clinician mode. Sitting with people's stories without being able to offer ongoing therapeutic support, advocacy, or action felt difficult at times. I think I struggled with the boundaries of research more than I anticipated. In practice, when somebody needs something, you do something. Within research, that is not really the role, and I often found that hard to sit with.

This research mattered to me. I have worked alongside young people who felt unable to own their strength or agency because doing so might make them seem less believable or less deserving of care. At the same time, I remained very aware that these were not my stories to own. Maintaining a "doing with, not doing to" position mattered to me throughout the project, though I never felt fully confident that I had achieved it. I think there is always tension in speaking about people's experiences within academic spaces that still often seek conclusions and clean narratives from lives that are rarely experienced that way.

I have worked alongside amazing, hard-working practitioners in safeguarding, social care, advocacy, and criminal justice systems who genuinely care about the people they support. I am frustrated, though, with the system's push to streamline everything into procedures, evidence, and professional processes that often feel completely detached from the reality of people's lives. The more the research continued, the more frustrated I became with systems that can end up harming the young people they are meant to support, while also

leaving practitioners exhausted, restricted, and powerless within processes they often do not fully believe in.

Trust became one of the most significant parts of the research. Every participant I interviewed was connected to me through at least one mutual contact. Participants frequently knew people through advocacy or practice spaces, and sometimes we unexpectedly discovered additional shared connections during interviews. Those moments mattered. They reinforced for me that trust within exploitation research is relational far more than institutional. People were not trusting me because I was a "researcher". If anything, I suspect many trusted me despite academia rather than because of it.

The unexpected inclusion of several male participants gave me both more understanding and more questions. It reenforced to me how quickly boys and men can become framed through criminal exploitation whilst sexual exploitation remains minimised, ignored, or not recognised at all. It left me thinking about masculinity and shame in a different way, alongside what kinds of victimhood people are socially allowed to occupy. 'Ideal victim' ideas are so gendered.

More than anything, I hope participants feel their stories were treated with care, honesty, and respect, and that I did not flatten them into something easier to consume.

5.9 Conclusion

This project aimed to explore how individuals with lived experience of CSE draw on and narrate moments of choice, agency, and decision-making, and how these narratives evolve and support resilient self-understanding and meaning-making over time. These narratives are not clear or straightforward; they are characterised by tensions that are neither resolved nor easily smoothed over. Survivors move between experiences of choice and constraint, resilience and compliance, belonging and harm, and between past and present selves.

These tensions were treated as meaningful, rather than attempts being made to smooth them away or resolve them. It was within these points of strain that much of this sense-making took place. These tensions appeared to provide individuals with a means of negotiating identity, making sense of their moral position, and revisiting their experiences in light of who they are now and who they seek to be. In that way, the narratives are more than just descriptions of events; they are actively doing something.

This challenges binary ways of understanding agency among those experiencing CSE; rather than agency being an easily defined or fixed attribute, it is more contingent on relationships, contexts, and how stories are told and retold over time.

As for the contributions of this project, it may offer something to both theoretical and clinical conversations, as it draws attention to the importance of staying with complexity, even

when this feels uncomfortable. It also encourages a degree of caution towards interpretations that simplify too quickly. Alongside this, it highlights the importance of keeping survivors positioned as active meaning makers, rather than passive recipients of their experiences. It is hoped that dissemination through practitioner-focused training and journal publication may support a more nuanced understanding of agency, coercion, and victimhood across services supporting individuals affected by CSE.

In this sense, the project does not seek to resolve these tensions, but rather to hold them in view, and in doing so, it perhaps opens up space for more nuanced ways of listening to and working with survivor narratives.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Search Terms and Boolean Operators

Concept 1 (Population)	"Sexually exploited individuals" OR “Child Sexual exploitation” OR "Sex trafficking survivors" OR "Commercial sexual exploitation" OR "Survivors of exploitation" OR "Grooming and exploitation" OR "Forced sexual labour" OR "Child Prostitution"
Concept 2 (Agency & Decision-Making)	"Decision-making" OR "Agency" OR "Perceived choice" OR "Autonomy" OR "Self-efficacy" OR "Lived experience of agency" OR "Narrative decision-making"
Concept 3 (Resilience & Strengths)	“Resilience" OR "Coping strategies" OR "Post-traumatic growth" OR "Adaptive responses" OR "Resistance" OR "Strengths" OR "Psychosocial adaptation"

Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) were used to refine searches. UK/US spelling variants were included. Reference lists of selected papers were also manually screened.

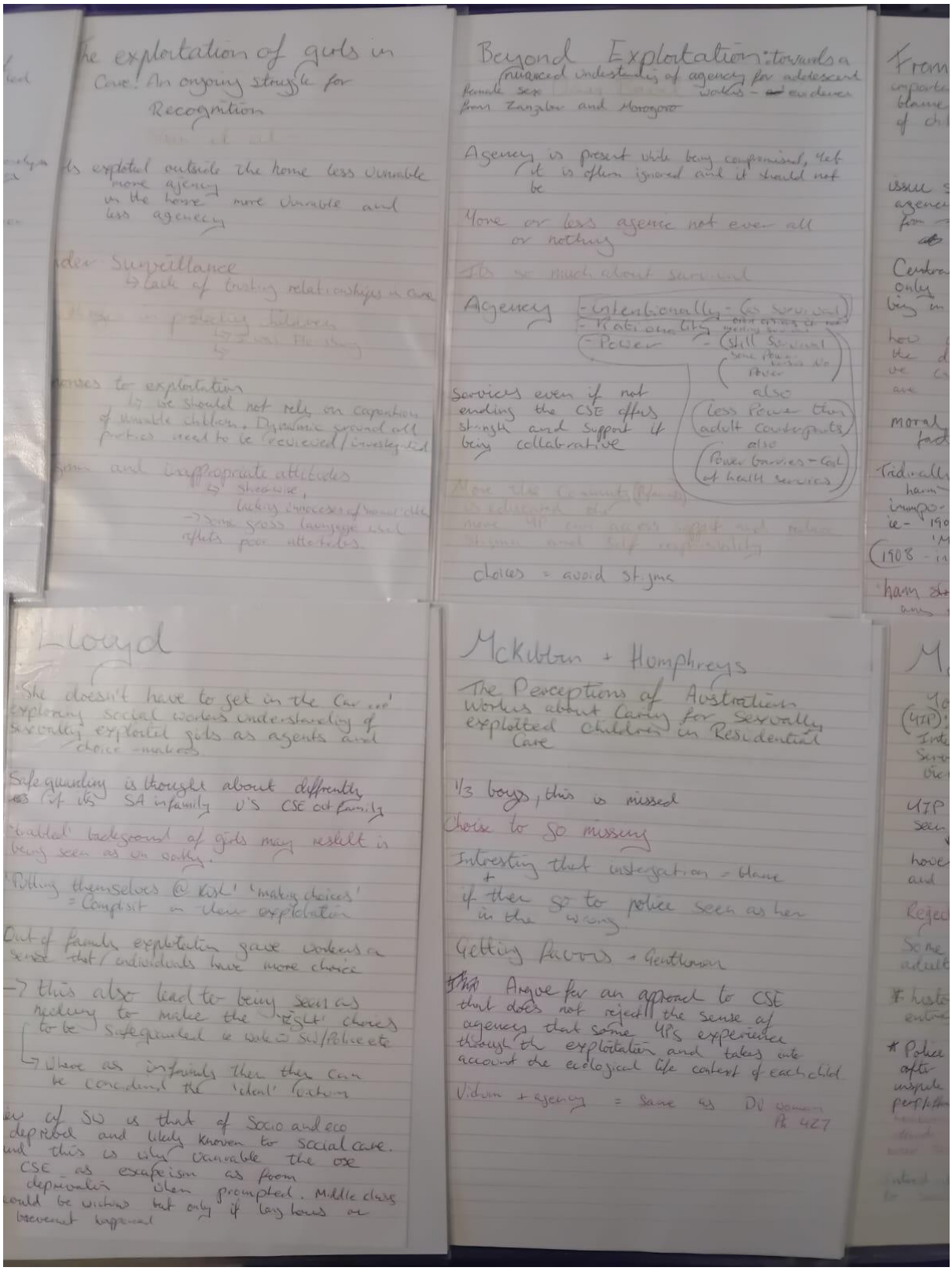
Appendix B: PICOS Framework for Study Selection

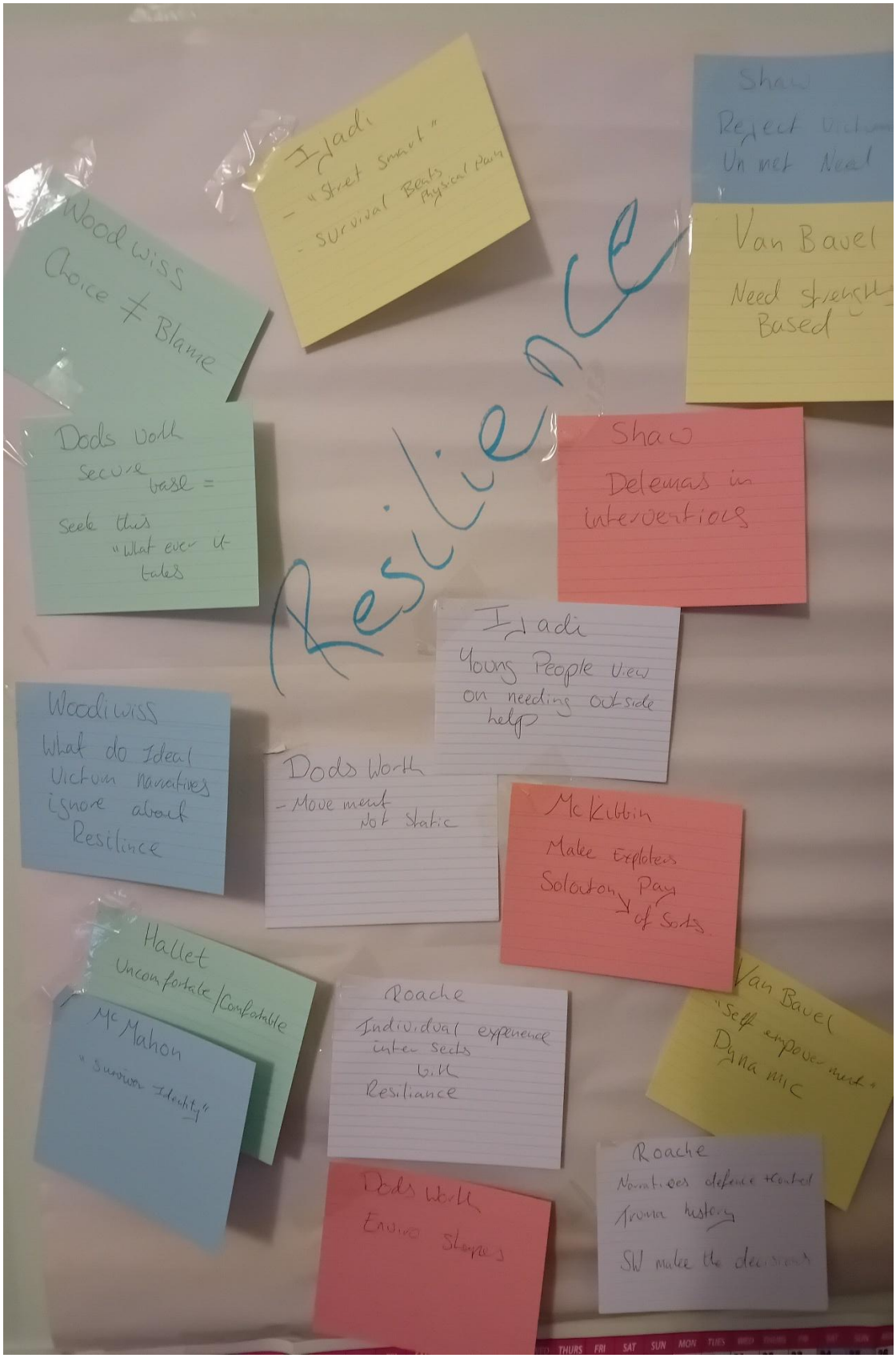
PICOS Criteria	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Justification
Population (P)	- Individuals who have experienced child sexual exploitation (CSE), including those coerced, groomed, or controlled through systemic vulnerabilities. - Studies may include survivor perspectives, practitioner/researcher perspectives, or broader qualitative accounts of CSE experiences.	- Studies focused solely on sex work, where there is no evidence of coercion or exploitation. - Studies that focus only on child sexual abuse (CSA) without an exchange element, as this review focuses on CSE. - Studies focused solely on offender/policing perspectives without addressing CSE experiences or thematic constructs.	Children cannot legally or ethically engage in sex work. CSE involves coercion, manipulation, or the exploitation of systemic vulnerabilities. Studies focusing on consensual adult sex work fall outside the scope of this review, which centres on exploitative childhood experiences.
Legal Context	Studies that examine childhood sexual exploitation in contexts of trafficking, grooming, systemic abuse, or coercion	Studies that focus on legal adult sex work (e.g., escorting, regulated brothels, independent online work).	This review focuses on child sexual exploitation, as defined by international legal frameworks such as the UN Palermo Protocol (2000) and the UK Modern Slavery Act (2015), where the presence of coercion or vulnerability is a key criterion. Consensual adult sex work is legally and ethically distinct and therefore excluded.
Grey Areas (CSE to Adult Sex Work)	Studies that explore ambiguous cases, such as individuals who entered sex work voluntarily in adulthood but were previously exploited as children.	Studies discussing sex work purely as an economic choice without themes of coercion, power imbalance, or structural vulnerability	Some individuals may transition from CSE into adult sex work. These studies are included only where they offer insight into childhood exploitation experiences, rather than

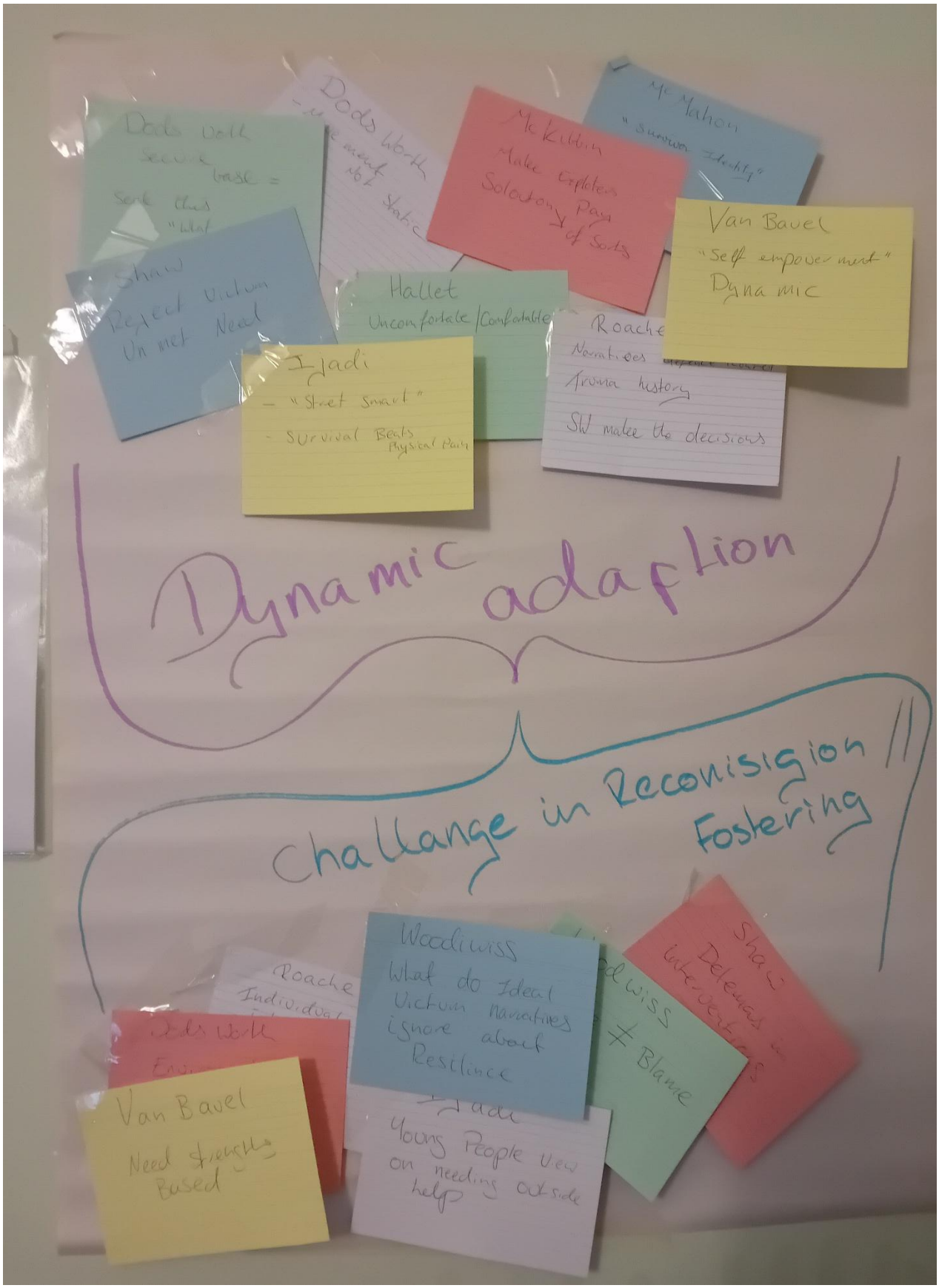
			adult sex work practices in isolation.
Intervention (I)	Not applicable – the focus is on a thematic exploration of agency, decision-making, and resilience. Includes how these concepts are discussed, framed, or theorised in the literature.	- Studies solely evaluating intervention programmes or therapeutic models. - Studies focusing solely on criminal justice responses.	Studies focusing solely on therapeutic, policy, or justice responses are excluded unless they analyse how agency, decision-making, or resilience are represented within those contexts. This ensures the review remains focused on these constructs' thematic and conceptual framing, rather than programmatic outcomes.
Comparison (C)	No direct comparison group is required, but differences in construction across studies will be analysed.	Studies that report comparisons but do not explore agency/resilience/decision-making in meaningful depth.	While no comparison group is required, comparative insights across contexts may emerge through synthesis. Studies that focus on statistical or demographic comparisons without thematic exploration of agency, decision-making, or resilience are excluded.
Outcomes (O)	How agency, decision-making, and resilience are represented in qualitative research. - How are these constructs defined, constructed, or challenged? - May include survivor experiences, professional observations, or	- Studies that only report statistical data. - Studies focused exclusively on policy or service provision without engaging with the key themes of choices, decision-making, and resilience. - Studies examining offender motivations or grooming strategies.	The review seeks to capture how agency, decision-making, and resilience are thematically represented in qualitative literature. Studies without qualitative depth, or those reporting only quantitative or policy-focused outcomes, are excluded.

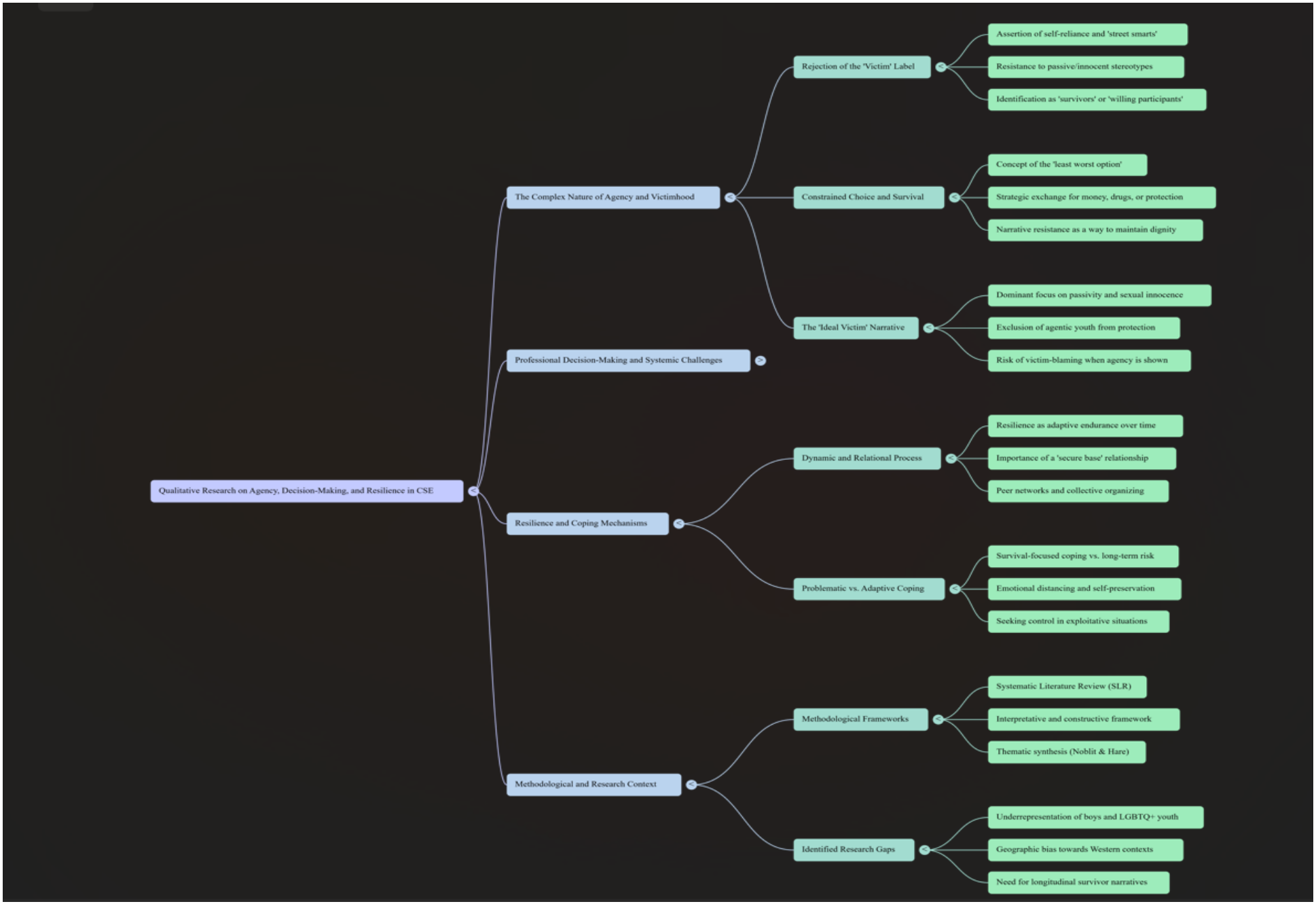
	researcher interpretations.		
Study Design (S)	- Qualitative research only – studies using narrative analysis, thematic analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), or grounded theory.	- Quantitative-only studies (e.g., prevalence rates, statistical risk factor analyses). - Systematic reviews, meta-analyses, or conceptual papers without primary qualitative data.	Qualitative designs are essential to exploring complex, context-specific representations of agency, resilience, and decision-making. Only studies offering in-depth interpretive analysis are included.

Appendix C: Thematic Code Memos for SLR




Resilience
Iqladi
- "Street Smart"
- Survival Beats Physical Pain
Shaw
Reject
Un met Need
Van Bavel
Need strength Based
Wood Wiss
Choice ≠ Blame
Dods Worth
Secure base =
Seek this
"What ever it takes
Shaw
Dilemas in interventions
Iqladi
Young People view on needing outside help
Woodiwiss
What do Ideal Victim narratives ignore about Resilince
Dods Worth
- Movement Not Static
McKibbin
Make Exploiters Solution Pay of Sorts
Hallet
Uncomfortable/Comfortable
Mc Mahon
"Survivor Identity"
Roache
Individual experience inter sects with Resiliance
Van Bavel
"Self empowerment"
Dynamic
Roache
Narratives defence trauma histories
SW make the decisions
Dods Worth
Enviro Stressors


Dynamic adaption
challange in Reconisigion
Fostering
Van Bavel
Need strengths Based
Young People view on needing outside help
Woodiwiss
What do Ideal Victum Narratives ignore about Resilince
Van Bavel
"Self empowerment"
Dyna mic
Hallet
Uncomfortale/Comfatable
Ijadi
- "Street Smart"
- Survival Beats Physical Pain
Shaw
Reject Victum
Un met Need
Roache
Trauma history
Mc Kibbin
Make Exploters Pays
Solodon of Sorts


Qualitative Research on Agency, Decision-Making, and Resilience in CSE
The Complex Nature of Agency and Victimhood
Rejection of the 'Victim' Label
Assertion of self-reliance and 'street smarts'
Resistance to passive/innocent stereotypes
Identification as 'survivors' or 'willing participants'
Constrained Choice and Survival
Concept of the 'least worst option'
Strategic exchange for money, drugs, or protection
Narrative resistance as a way to maintain dignity
The 'Ideal Victim' Narrative
Dominant focus on passivity and sexual innocence
Exclusion of agentic youth from protection
Risk of victim-blaming when agency is shown
Professional Decision-Making and Systemic Challenges
Resilience and Coping Mechanisms
Dynamic and Relational Process
Resilience as adaptive endurance over time
Importance of a 'secure base' relationship
Peer networks and collective organizing
Problematic vs. Adaptive Coping
Survival-focused coping vs. long-term risk
Emotional distancing and self-preservation
Seeking control in exploitative situations
Methodological and Research Context
Methodological Frameworks
Systematic Literature Review (SLR)
Interpretative and constructive framework
Thematic synthesis (Noblit & Hare)
Identified Research Gaps
Underrepresentation of boys and LGBTQ+ youth
Geographic bias towards Western contexts
Need for longitudinal survivor narratives

Appendix D: Ethical Approval Notification

To: Racheal Damhuis Boogers

Your application for ethics approval for the study listed below has been approved by the Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority. **Please read this letter carefully.**

Study Title: Working title - Strength in Adversity: Perceived decision-Making and Choice in the Experiences of Sexually Exploited Individuals

Your UH protocol number is:

0654 2025 Mar HSET

This reference must be quoted on all paperwork, including advertisements for participants.

If you wish to use the UH Ethics Committee logo disclaimer in your communications with participants, please find it in our UH Ethics Canvas site under 'Units - Application Forms': UH Ethics Approval (instructure.com.

This ethics approval expires on 02/01/2026

Amending your protocol

Individual protocols will normally be approved for the limited period of time noted above. Application for minor amendments (including time extensions) of a protocol, may be made for a maximum of 4 working weeks after the end date of that protocol.

It is expected that any amendments proposed via the online system will be minor. Should substantial modification be required, it would be necessary to make a fresh application for ethical approval.

Note that you must obtain approval from the relevant UH Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority **prior to implementing any changes**. Failure to do so constitutes a breach of ethics regulations (UPR RE01).

Adverse circumstances
Any adverse circumstances that may arise because of your study/activity must be reported to ethicsadmin@herts.ac.uk as soon as possible.

Permissions
Any necessary permissions for the use of premises/location and accessing participants for your study/activity must be obtained in writing prior to any data collection commencing. Failure to obtain adequate permissions may be considered a breach of this protocol.

Ethics Administration Team

ethicsadmin@herts.ac.uk

Appendix E: Consultant Agreement

Consultation and Expert by Experience Agreement:

This agreement is intended to support clarity from the outset of this project and enhance communication between researchers, the supervisory team, consultants and experts by experience.

Title of this Research Project:

Working title – Strength in Adversity: Perceived Decision making and Choice in the experiences of sexual exploitation of Individuals

Research team –

Lead researcher: Racheal DamhuisBoogers

Supervisory team: Dr A.Tawio, Dr S.Weil

Consultants:

Experts by Experience: Emma O'Loughlin

Agreement:

As the lead researcher, I agree to:

- Lead all admin processes, such as organising meetings with supervisors, consultants and experts by experience
- Send drafts in a timely manner to supervisors, consultants and experts with experience
- Provide feedback on research findings
- Consider and apply feedback where appropriate to research design, undertaking and analysis
- Ensure that consultants and experts by experience are acknowledged in write up and, if appropriate named as co-authors
- Ensure that experts by experience and consultants' well-being is held at the front of the collaboration journey

As a consultant/Expert by experience supporting this project, I am aware of the following.

- My involvement is voluntary, and I am able to pause or conclude my involvement at any stage, by notifying the lead researcher with or without an explanation
- The lead researcher will provide me with drafts of key documents to provide feedback and guidance on.
- I am aware that the lead researcher, where possible, will accommodate my feedback and suggestions. However, I understand that this may not always be possible, and research decisions may not always align with my suggestions
- I agree to, where possible, provide insight and guidance on research design, recruitment/recruitment strategy, data collection, theme development, writing -up and dissemination
- I will ensure that I raise with the lead researcher any ethical concerns or considerations
- The anonymity of the participants is of the utmost importance, and I will maintain this and all other components of confidentiality
- I will ensure that I raise any well-being concerns that this project is raising for myself and action self-care accordingly

Signatures:

Lead researcher -



Expert by Experience Consultant -



Appendix F: Research Recruitment Poster

Seeking Research Participants

Content warning – Sexual exploitation

We need your help to understand better what choice and decision-making mean to people in difficult circumstances.

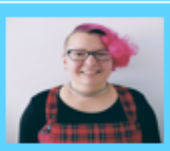
Have you experienced sexual exploitation?

We would like to hear your story.

Are you over 18 and now in a place of safety?

Then please contact me to discuss further

Who am I:



Through this research, we hope to explore how individuals make choices and decisions in difficult and often unsafe circumstances. What informs these decisions? What did this mean at the moment? Has this meaning changed over time?

My name is Racheal DamhuisBoogers, and I am a trainee Clinical Psychologist at the University of Hertfordshire. I have not personally experienced sexual exploitation. I have worked in various support roles and am passionate about individuals having the opportunity to share their own stories and inform support services.

University of Hertfordshire UH Ethics Committee

rd23abm@herts.ac.uk

[redacted]

The University of Hertfordshire Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority.
'UH protocol number - TBC'.

Seeking Research Participants

Content warning – Sexual exploitation

We need your help to understand better what choice and decision-making mean to people in difficult circumstances.

Have you experienced sexual exploitation?

Sexual exploitation happens when someone:

- Makes you do sexual things you don't want to do
- give you things (like money, gifts, food, or somewhere to stay) in exchange for sexual acts
- makes you do sexual things to, get protection or care, keep yourself or others safe. Get attention or feel loved
- Uses power, threats, or pressure to make you do sexual thing

Are you over 18 and now in a place of safety? Then please contact me to discuss further

What is this about?

- We want to learn about choices people made during difficult times
- We want to understand what these choices meant to you
- We want to hear how you think about these choices now

Who am I:



Hello! I'm Racheal DamhuisBoogers

- I'm training to be a Clinical Psychologist
- I am studying at the University of Hertfordshire
- I have worked in sexual exploitation support services
- I have not experienced sexual exploitation myself
- I want to help services understand people's stories better

University of Hertfordshire UH Ethics Committee

rd23abm@herts.ac.uk
[redacted]

The University of Hertfordshire Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority.
'UH protocol number - TBC'.

Appendix G: Participant Information Sheet

Project Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF HERTFORDSHIRE

ETHICS COMMITTEE FOR STUDIES INVOLVING THE USE OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ('ETHICS COMMITTEE')
FORM EC6: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

1 **Title of study**

Working title – Strength in Adversity: Perceived Decision-Making and Choice in the Experiences of Sexually Exploited Individuals.

2 **Introduction**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Working title – Strength in Adversity: Perceived Decision Making and Choice in the Experiences of sexual exploitation of Individuals.

Before you decide whether you would like to take part, it is important that you understand the study that is being undertaken and what your involvement will include. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Do not hesitate to ask us anything that is unclear or for any further information you would like to help you make your decision.

Please do take your time to decide whether you wish to take part. The University's regulation, UPR RE01, 'Studies Involving the Use of Human Participants' can be accessed via this link:

https://www.herts.ac.uk/about-us/governance/university-policies-and-regulations-uprs/uprs

(after accessing this website, scroll down to Letter S, where you will find the regulation)

3 **Who am I?**

My name is Racheal DamhuisBoogers, I am a trainee Clinical Psychologist at the University of Hertfordshire. As part of my Doctoral studies, I am conducting the present research.

Dr Abigail Taiwo, Senior Lecturer at the University of Hertfordshire, and Dr Sheeva Weil are a part of the research team and will supervise this project. Additionally, an expert by experience will be consulting on all components of the project.

4 What is the purpose of this study?

Given the constraints imposed by dominant narratives around people's experiences of sexual exploitation, individuals are not free to tell any story; rather, they are constrained by those in current circulation (Carey et al., 2009; Woodiwiss, 2018). Thus, individuals who do not fit these frameworks are unable to tell their own story 'or at least to have that story heard and their voices listened to' (Woodiwiss, 2018).

The present study, therefore, aims to explore stories of perceived decision-making and choice during people's experiences of sexual exploitation.

4 Do I have to take part?

Taking part is voluntary, and it is completely up to you whether you decide to participate in this study. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

Additionally, a pre-interview session will take place to discuss the project and ensure that this is something that you want to move forward with; a review of any questions and documentation will also be undertaken, alongside the collection of demographics that you wish to share. You are free to withdraw up to two weeks after the interview without giving a reason; withdrawal isn't possible beyond this timeframe as the data would have been anonymised and analysis will have commenced.

5 Are there any age or other restrictions that may prevent me from participating?

There are some inclusions and exclusions, as noted below.

Inclusion criteria	Minimum of eighteen years of age
	If you identify as having experienced child sexual exploitation
	Have experienced moments where they felt required or able to exercise choices or decision-making during their exploitation.
	You are now living in safety
	Have an identifiable support person or network
	A conversational level of English is required
Exclusion criteria	Any persons under the age of 18.

If you have over the past 6 months made attempts to significantly harm yourself or end your life
Seek to take part as a way of accessing therapy
Experiences of exploitation have been solely criminal in nature
Persons who are currently participating in open police investigations

6 How long will my part in the study take?

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be involved in a pre-interview session of 30-60 minutes.

If it is agreed that you would like to proceed, then an interview of 60-120 minutes in total will be undertaken either in person or over MS Teams. We will plan the interview according to your availability and what works for you.

There will be the opportunity to participate in a review of the project and offer feedback and corrections to the analysis in person or over MS Teams in order to support collaboration, co-production and a shared representation of the participants and researcher of the stories and narratives told (Coolican, 2014). However, this is not a requirement for participation.

7 What will happen to me if I take part?

If you are interested in taking part in this study, you will be asked to contact me by email or telephone; I will arrange a time for a pre-interview call or meeting with you. During this, we will consider –

- purpose of research
- project eligibility
- consent and confidentiality
- how to get the best out of our time in the interview space
- complete a distress protocol to ensure that support is in place should you choose to proceed
- answer any questions
- plan the interview session

Once you have agreed to participate in the study and signed the consent forms, we will schedule the time for the interview. At this stage, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym (alias/fake name); you are welcome to use a pseudonym from the first expression of interest or it can be decided during the pre-interview discussion. This name will be utilised in writing up your interview so that no one can identify you.

Your interview can be conducted over Microsoft Teams or in person at a location of your choice where privacy can be maintained. This will need to be discussed during the pre-interview meeting/call.

You will not be asked to talk about the details of your experience of exploitation. Instead, the focus will be on moments of choice or decision-making through that period, what informed those decisions, what they meant at the moment and what they mean to you now. Additionally, you are not required to discuss any details or share any information that you are not comfortable with. Upon completion of the interview, you'll be provided with a token of appreciation as a thank you for your time This will be in voucher form and can be emailed upon conclusion of the interview.

8 Optional additional participatory role

Upon completion of the analysis with my consultant and myself, you will be offered the opportunity to participate in a private review session of the project and the analysis. This is an opportunity to provide feedback and offer corrections to the analysis in order to support having the participants and researcher working in collaboration to produce a shared representation of the stories and narratives told (Coolican, 2014). This is not a requirement for participating in the project.

Upon completion of the doctorate programme, a lay copy of this project will be made available to you should you be interested. Likewise, you would be welcomed to participate in dissemination opportunities or be alerted of publication. These points will be discussed at the pre-interview meeting.

9 What are the possible disadvantages, risks or side effects of taking part?

The questions about your experience may be distressing. However, we understand that talking about these times in your life may be upsetting, so it is important to consider carefully what you are comfortable sharing. We do not intend to cause distress or any significant risk. However, you may find that in sharing your stories, you may be upset, frustrated, or distressed. It may also be the first opportunity you have had to share elements of your story in your own words. All efforts will be made to provide a comfortable supportive space and undertake the interview in a manner that aligns with your preferences. However, if you feel upset or distressed during the interview, you are free to ask that the interview be stopped. In order to support you before, during, and after the interview, a distress protocol will be

completed in the pre interview meeting to ensure that you have meaningful support available to you.

10 What are the possible benefits of taking part?

If you choose to take part you will be contributing to the current lack of research in the area of understanding survivors narratives around choice and decision-making. However, the study may have no direct benefit for you. Participation will enable us to better understand stories of decision-making and choice during people's experiences of sexual exploitation. It is hoped that through your contribution, Police, health services, local authorities, third sector, charitable organisations and other support agencies will have a better understanding of the meaning and experience of choice during sexual exploitation. This may lead to changes to existing services, narratives and supports available to other survivors of sexual exploitation. Additionally, this project aims to support in illuminating the stories of survivors.

11 How will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

It is completely your decision who you choose to tell that you are participating in this project. All information shared with me during this interview will be treated with utmost confidentiality. Pseudonyms agreed will be used for all documentation at all times, and the transcripts will be anonymised once completed. All identifiable information will be removed or redacted. Once anonymised and analyses commenced, it will not be possible to withdraw participation as it will be difficult to identify each person’s transcript at this point.

Only you and I will be aware of your real name, which will not be shared with anyone else. Also, your demographic information (age, sex, ethnicity) will be stored separately. Any identifying markers, such as other people’s names, locations and key identifiers, will be removed or changed to protect your confidentiality.

The pre-interview, interview and review sessions will be completed at a private pre-agreed location or online. If undertaken online, I will ensure that I am in a private location so that I cannot be overheard while talking to you. You will also need a private space away from other people, and your camera will be required to be on during the interview. This is to support in recognising any nonverbal indicators of distress.

12 What will happen to the data collected within this study?

Once we have completed the interview, the recording will be transcribed and be kept on the University of Hertfordshire secure encrypted one drive. Once transcribed, the audio file will be deleted. However, the anonymised transcriptions will be kept for five years in line with the University of Hertfordshire policy. Only the researcher and other research team members will have access to the anonymised transcript, while your personal details and demographics will be stored separately and only accessible to the researcher alone.

The data will then be analysed and written up as a doctoral thesis for university submission, as well as potential publication in an academic journal. All elements will be anonymised. Direct quotes will be utilised from the interview, however, only pseudonyms will be used, and key identifying information (places, names, personal identifiers) will be removed or changed.

13 What more do I need to know?

I will retain your contact details until the completion of the doctoral program; once all the actions that you have consented to participate in post-interview have been completed, I will delete your contact information.

It is important to note that during the interview, should you make me aware of abuse of a minor or significant risk to self or others, this information may need to be passed on to the police or children's protective services. Likewise, the disclosure of unlawful activity will be escalated to the required authorities. I will ensure that this is discussed with you in detail in order to support a plan for safety.

14 Will the data be required for use in further studies?

There is no intention for this data to be used for additional studies. However, the transcriptions will be kept for five years in line with the University of Hertfordshire policy. Other researchers from the University and I may review these transcripts.

15 Who has reviewed this study?

The University of Hertfordshire Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority.

The UH protocol number is - 0654-2025-Mar-HSET

16 **Who can I contact if I have any questions?**

If you would like further information or would like to discuss any details personally, please get in touch with me by email: Racheal DamhuisBoogers (Trainee Clinical Psychologist) at rd23abm@herts.ac.uk and/or research supervisor Dr Abigail Taiwo at a.o.taiwo@herts.ac.uk

Although we hope this is not the case, if you have any complaints or concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please write to the University's Secretary and Registrar at the following address:

Secretary and Registrar
University of Hertfordshire
College Lane
Hatfield
Herts
AL10 9AB

Thank you very much for reading this information and giving consideration to taking part in this study.

Easy read Participant information sheet

Project Title

Strength in Adversity: Exploring Perceived Decision-Making and Choice in Experiences of Sexual Exploitation

What Is This Study About?

This research aims to understand the stories and decisions of individuals who have experienced sexual exploitation. It focuses on moments of choice, how decisions were made, and what they mean to participants now.

The study also seeks to challenge harmful stereotypes about victims, such as assumptions of innocence or lack of agency, and aims to amplify the voices of survivors.

Who Is Conducting This Study?

- **Lead Researcher**: Racheal DamhuisBoogers, Trainee Clinical Psychologist, University of Hertfordshire.
- **Supervisors**: Dr. Abigail Taiwo and Dr. Sheeva Weil.
- **Consultation**: An expert by experience will guide the project.

Who Can Participate?

Inclusion Criteria:

- Adults aged 18 or older.
- Identify as having experienced sexual exploitation.
- Currently living in safety with support available.
- Comfortable communicating in English.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Under 18 years old.
- Recent (within six months) significant self-harm or suicidal behaviour.
- Seeking therapy through participation.
- Exclusively criminal exploitation experiences.
- Ongoing police investigations.

What Does Participation Involve?

1. **Pre-Interview Session** (30–60 minutes):
    - Discuss the project, eligibility, and consent.
    - Ensure support systems are in place.
2. **Interview** (60–120 minutes):

    - Conducted in person or via Microsoft Teams (if on teams, cameras must remain on).
    - Focus on decision-making, not explicit details of exploitation.
    - Participation includes choosing a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. This can be used from the first expression of interest or can be decided during the pre-interview discussion.
3. **Optional Review Session**:
    - Opportunity to review and provide feedback on the analysis.

Note: You may withdraw up to two weeks after the interview.

What Are the Benefits and Risks?

Benefits:

- Contribute to better understanding of survivors' experiences.
- Help improve support systems and services.

Risks:

- Discussing experiences may be upsetting. A distress protocol will ensure support before, during, and after participation.

How Will Confidentiality Be Maintained?

- Your pseudonym will be used in all documents.
- Identifying details (e.g., names, locations) will be changed or removed.
- Data will be stored securely and only used for this study.
- Confidentiality exceptions: If there is a risk to a minor, immediate safety concerns for yourself or others and the disclosure of unlawful activity.
- All data collected in this study, including participant consent forms and recordings where relevant, will be stored in a secure, UH-supplied storage location until the end of the research/assessment process and then securely destroyed.

Contact Information

For questions or more information:

- **Racheal DamhuisBoogers**
  Email: rd23abm@herts.ac.uk

For concerns or complaints:

- **University Secretary and Registrar**
  University of Hertfordshire, College Lane, Hatfield, AL10 9AB

Thank you for considering taking part in this study!

Appendix H: Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF HERTFORDSHIRE

ETHICS COMMITTEE FOR STUDIES INVOLVING THE USE OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS

('ETHICS COMMITTEE')

FORM EC3

CONSENT FORM FOR STUDIES INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS: (UH Protocol number – 0654 2025 Mar HSET)

Consent form: "Strength in Adversity: Decision-Making and Choice in the Experiences of Sexually Exploited Individuals".

Participants Pseudonym:

Principal Researcher: Racheal DamhuisBoogers

		Tick
1	*I have read and/or talked through the information sheet for this study. I understand its contents; I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification.*	
2	*It has been explained to me, and I understand that participation is entirely my choice. I can withdraw up to 2 weeks following the interview without needing to provide any reason or explanation.*	
3	*I understand that there is an opportunity to participate in tasks and receive information post-interview, and will consider the prompts on the other side of this page.*	
4	*I am aware that the pseudonym chosen will be used for my interview and by the writer for this project. Additionally, all identifying information will be removed from transcripts and will be stored securely on the University One drive. I am aware that other University of Hertfordshire students may access these anonymised transcripts for a period of up to 5 years.*	
5	*I understand that direct quotes from an interview may be used in the write-up of this project.*	
6	*I understand that payment will not be given for participation in this project; however, a token of appreciation will be provided consisting of a £20 voucher*	
7	*I agree to take part in this project.*	

Signature of participant……..…Date……

Signature of (principal) researcher…… …Date……

Name of (principal) researcher: Racheal DamhuisBoogers

Please select your preferences below by circling your answer:

I want to be contacted to participate in a review session of the analysis undertaken.	Yes	No
I want to receive a summary of the completed report.	Yes	No
I want to know when the study has been published.	Yes	No
I want a complete version of the research report.	Yes	No

Appendix I: Interview Schedule

Interview schedule

Interview introduction:

At the commencement of the interview, participants will be welcomed, and the pseudonyms will be confirmed. The interview purpose, distress protocol, and consent forms will be reviewed. Confirmation of willingness to proceed and recognition of the interview being recorded will be undertaken, alongside revisiting safeguarding and confidentiality. Should any abuse risks to minors, significant harm to self or others, or disclosure of unlawful activity (such as details of crimes related to exploitation) be identified throughout the interview, further action may be required. Participants will be informed that if disclosures are made that suggest an ongoing risk to minors, serious harm to self or others, or any unlawful activity that requires mandatory reporting, the researcher may need to escalate this information following safeguarding protocols. Participants will be offered the opportunity for any questions, thoughts, or concerns. They will also be reminded that they are welcome to stop or pause at any point and are not required to share any information beyond what they are comfortable with. Additionally, it will be emphasised that this is the individual's story, and they can share it in any way they prefer.

To support clarity, time will be spent discussing **definitions of choice, decision-making, and agency** as they pertain to the study. The following definitions will be utilized:

- **Choice** refers to the selection between options presented by the perpetrating individual/group.
- **Decision-making** is the process of evaluating information and selecting an option based on this evaluation.
- **Agency** refers to a sense of ability to influence one's life circumstances based on information, action, and choices.

This discussion will also allow the researcher to understand how the participant personally defines and makes sense of these concepts, supporting the analysis.

Questions:

Warm-Up Question:

- Before we begin, could you tell me a little about yourself, such as things you enjoy doing or aspects of your life that are important to you?

- Can you share something that makes you feel strong or resilient in your life today?

Opening question:

- In your own words, please tell me about a time during your experience of child sexual exploitation when you made a decision, or you were given choices

Follow-up question, if required:

(These will be adapted based on the participant's communication style):

- Has your understanding of that moment changed over time? What helped that change happen?
- When you look back on that moment now, how do you think it shaped who you are today?
- Do you feel that sharing this story helps you make sense of your experiences or your strengths?
- What are the contextual factors that influenced the choices during this time?
- What was going on internally/emotionally for you at that time? Empowered/resilient/resistant or disempowered/controlled/restricted?
- What other factors, social/cultural/economic, do you think may have influenced your decision? What does this look like now?
- How did you feel about the choice you made at that point in your life?
- How do you feel now about that choice? How has this changed from when you made it? Why this change?
- Have you told this story before? If so, how is it different now?
- How has your view of that choice or moment changed over time?
- In what ways has telling your story helped you?
- Do you feel like that experience shaped how you see yourself now?
- Have there been turning points in how you understand what happened to you?
- What does resilience mean to you, and how do you see it in your own story?

Potential prompts:

- Can you tell me more about that/X? (Content)
- Can you please go into more detail about that? You mentioned… X… can you give me a little more detail about what happened? (Details)
- What happened before/after that? (Chronology/contexts)

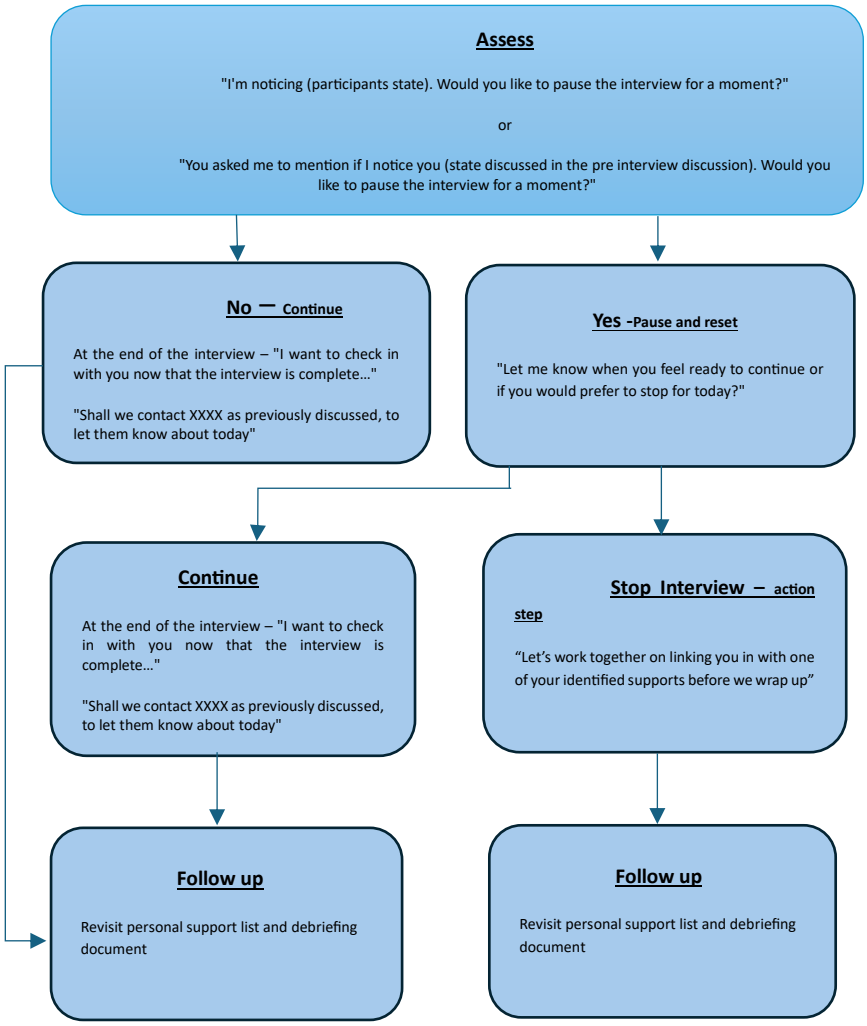
Closing:

Before concluding, the researcher will revisit the **right to withdraw**, check in on the participant's **current emotional state**, and discuss the **distress management plan** to ensure they have ongoing support if needed.

Appendix J: Distress management plan example

Distress Management Plan

Trigger Pathway



Personal Support list and distress indicators

If I feel distressed or upset during or after the interview. I will be supported to contact one of my key people.

1-
2-

I will also be supported to keep updated (key organisations).

I have informed the researcher that the following behaviours or presentations are indications that I may be becoming distressed or upset

1-
2-

All distress events that occur during interviews will be discussed with project supervisors Dr Tawio and Dr Weil

I, …….. agree with my personal distress management plan and have received a copy for my own records.

I am aware that a copy of this will be held by the lead researcher until the completion of the project.

Participant's Signature –

Lead Researcher's Signature -

Appendix K: Safeguarding Protocol

Safeguarding Process for Research Participants in the Study –

Strength in Adversity: Perceived Decision-making and Choice in the Experiences of Sexually Exploited Individuals

This safeguarding process follows the University of Hertfordshire's safeguarding policies, ensuring the safety and well-being of all individuals involved in research (University of Hertfordshire, 2024). Further details can be found at: University of Hertfordshire Safeguarding Policy.

What is Safeguarding?

Safeguarding means protecting individuals from harm, abuse, or neglect. It ensures that all participants feel safe and supported during research participation. If there are concerns about a participant's safety or well-being, the researcher is required to take action in line with ethical and legal obligations (Department for Education, 2023).

Our Commitment to Your Safety

This research follows strict ethical guidelines to ensure:

- Your privacy and confidentiality are respected.
- You have full control over what you choose to share.
- You have access to support if needed.
- Any concerns about safety are handled appropriately.

When Might We Need to Act?

While your information is treated confidentially, we are required to take action if:

1. You disclose that you or someone else is at immediate risk of harm (Children Act 1989; Care Act 2014).
2. You disclose information about ongoing abuse, exploitation, or neglect.
3. You share details of an unlawful activity that may cause serious harm (Serious Crime Act 2015).

If safeguarding action is required, the researcher will explain the steps involved and discuss available support options with you.

Safeguarding Process - What Happens If a Concern is Raised?

Step 1: Recognising a Concern

- The researcher will identify safeguarding issues based on disclosures made during the interview.

- If the participant expresses distress or provides information suggesting risk, the researcher will sensitively inquire further.
- If immediate danger is suspected, the researcher will move directly to Step 4.

Step 2: Discussion with the Participant

- The researcher will explain the concern in clear terms and why safeguarding action may be necessary.
- The participant will be given options regarding who is informed and what actions may be taken, where possible.
- Where risk is present but not immediate, the participant will be offered support options and encouraged to access relevant services.

Step 3: Consultation with Research Supervisor

- The researcher will consult their supervisor at the University of Hertfordshire to review the concern.
- Where necessary, the University's Safeguarding Lead will be informed.
- The researcher will document the discussion and any actions taken in accordance with research ethics protocols (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2021).

Step 4: Taking Action (If Necessary)

- If there is an immediate risk, the researcher will contact emergency services (999 UK).
- If the concern involves ongoing abuse, the researcher will notify the local safeguarding authority (e.g., social services (children/adults), NSPCC helpline).
- If mental health distress is evident, the participant will be supported to contact their named supports on their individual distress protocol.
- The researcher will inform the participant about what actions have been taken and ensure they understand available support.

Participant Rights & Confidentiality

- Your information will only be shared with safeguarding professionals if necessary.
- The researcher will keep you informed about any steps taken.
- You have the right to ask questions and seek support at any stage.

Who to Contact for Support?

If you have any concerns or need help, you can reach out to:

- **Researcher:** rd23abm@herts.ac.uk
- **Emergency Services (if in immediate danger):** 999 (UK)

Final Notes

This safeguarding process ensures that all research participants are treated with care, dignity, and respect. Your safety and well-being are our priority. If you have any questions or need clarification, please do not hesitate to ask.

References

- British Psychological Society. (2021). *Code of Ethics and Conduct*. https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-code-ethics-and-conduct
- Care Act 2014, c. 23. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/contents/enacted
- Children Act 1989, c. 41. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents
- Department for Education. (2023). *Keeping children safe in education 2023*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education--2
- Serious Crime Act 2015, c. 9. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/9/contents/enacted
- University of Hertfordshire. (2024). *Safeguarding Policy and Procedures*. https://www.herts.ac.uk/about-us/governance/university-policies-and-regulations-uprs/uprs

Appendix L: Pre-interview meeting schedule

Pre-Interview Meeting Schedule

Working Title of Study: Strength in Adversity: Decision-Making and Choice in the Experiences of Sexually Exploited Individuals
Researcher: Racheal DamhuisBoogers (Trainee Clinical Psychologist)
Duration: 30-40 minutes
Mode: Online (Microsoft Teams) or phone

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1. Welcome and Introduction

- Thank the participant for their time and interest in the study.
- Provide a brief overview of the purpose of the research and its aims.
- Confirm that participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time up to two weeks after the interview.
- Explain the expected structure and how to get the best out of our time in the interview space.

2. Project Eligibility

- Confirm that the participant meets the inclusion criteria:
    - Aged 18 or older.
    - Has experienced child sexual exploitation (CSE) as part of child sexual abuse.
    - Currently living in relative safety with access to support networks.
    - Has the capacity to provide informed consent.

If the participant does not meet the criteria, provide appropriate signposting to support services.

3. Consent and Confidentiality

- Review the consent form and ensure the participant understands each section.
- Explain data confidentiality (use of pseudonyms, secure data storage, removal of identifying details).
- Clarify that confidentiality is maintained except where there is a safeguarding concern (risk to self or others, ongoing abuse, unlawful activity).
- Provide a brief overview of the Safeguarding Policy and actions taken if concerns arise.
- Obtain consent before proceeding.

4. Participant Well-being and Support Plan

- Complete a distress protocol to ensure that support is in place should the participant choose to proceed.
- Discuss the participant's existing support systems (friends, family, professional support).

- Develop an individualised distress management plan (identify coping strategies, break options, and post-interview support contacts).
- Confirm that the participant has access to external support services if needed.

5. Interview Preparation and Planning

- Explain the interview structure:
    - Open-ended questions focusing on decision-making, choice, and agency during exploitation.
    - No requirement to discuss specific abuse details unless the participant chooses to.
    - Right to skip questions or stop the interview at any time.
- Discuss expected duration (60-120 minutes).
- Explain that the session will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.
- Ask the participant to choose a pseudonym for anonymisation purposes.
- Provide guidance on online interview protocols (ensuring privacy, using a quiet space, camera-on policy for safety confirmation).
- Plan the interview session by confirming logistics, timing, and preferred mode (online or in-person).

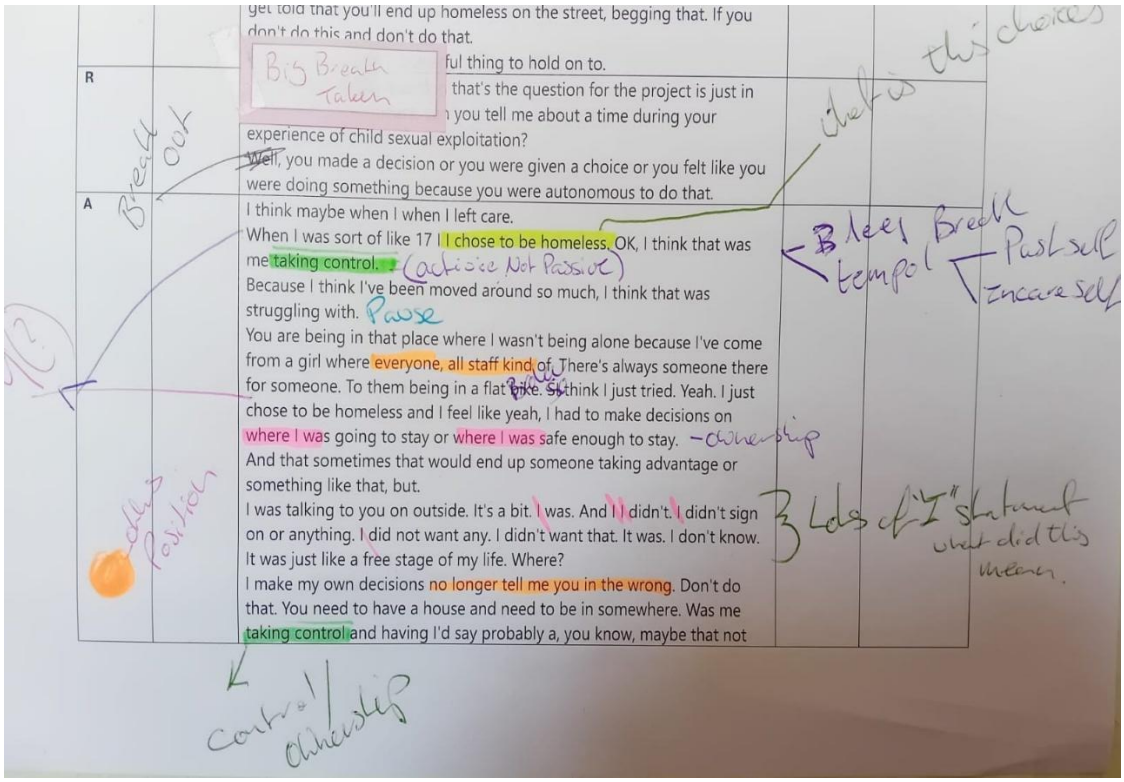
6. Answering Questions and Final Confirmation

- Address any final questions or concerns the participant may have.
- Reiterate that support is available before, during, and after the interview.
- Confirm the interview schedule (date, time, and mode of participation).
- Thank the participant and provide the researcher's contact details for follow-up queries.

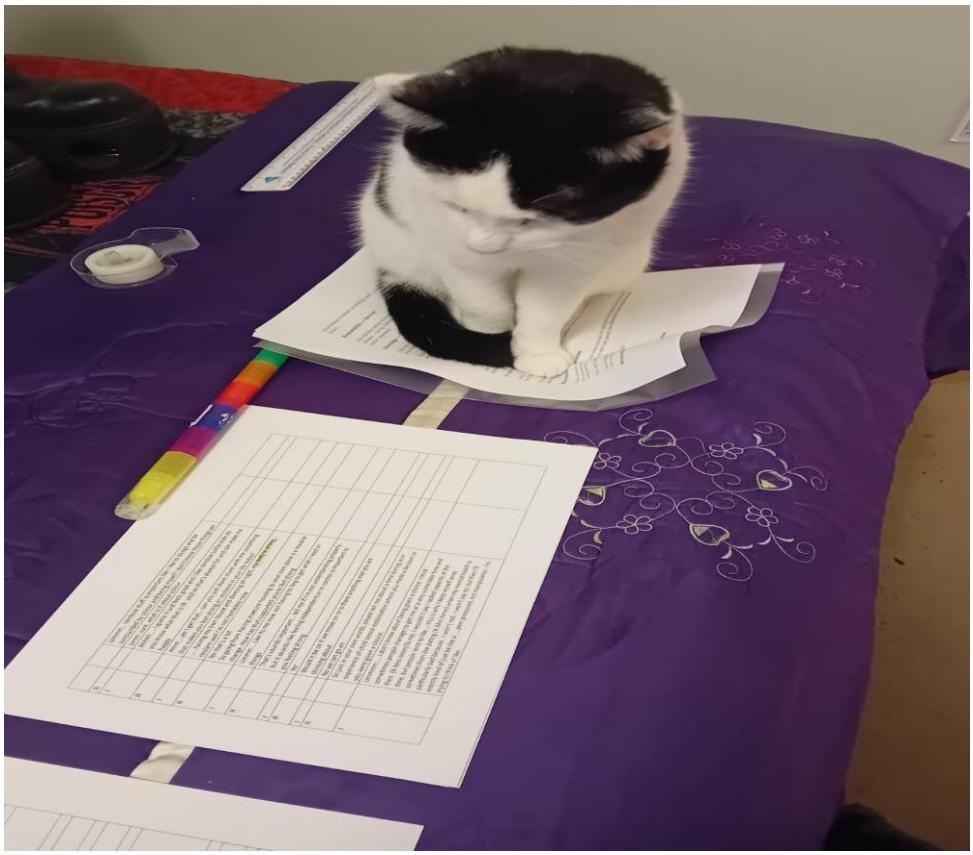
End of Pre-Interview Meeting

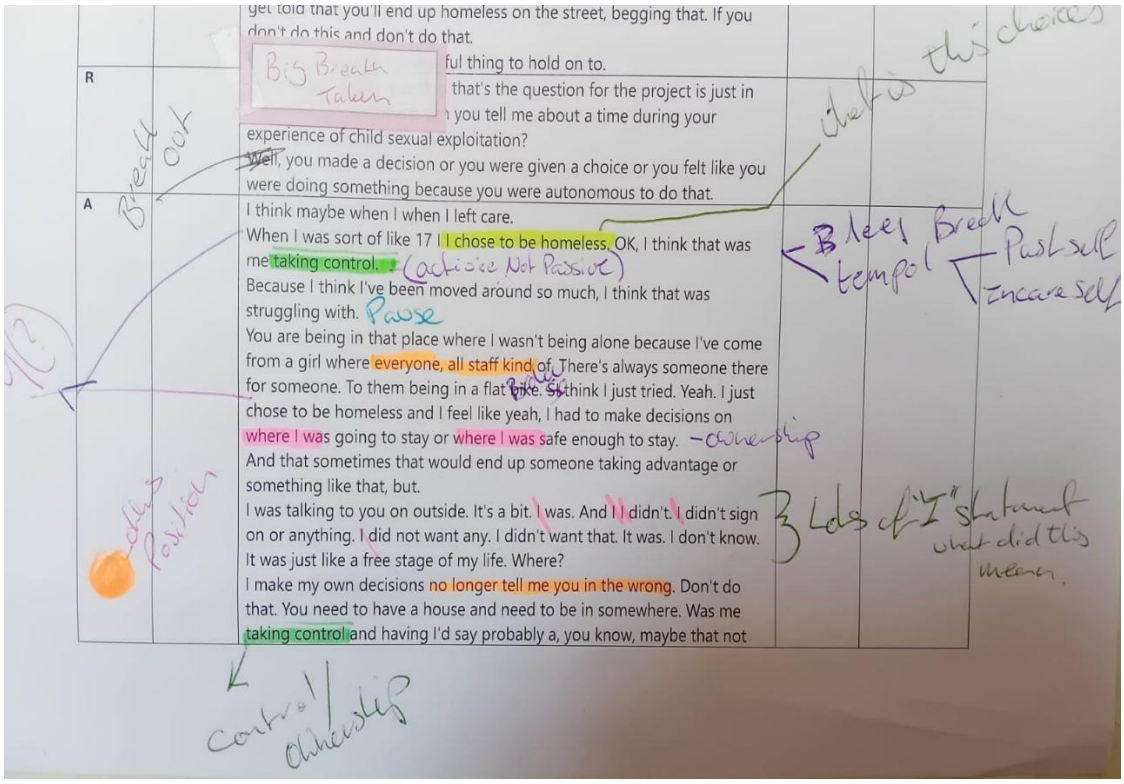
- Ensure the participant feels comfortable and is clear on the next steps.
- Document any necessary adjustments to the participant's distress management plan.
- Confirm receipt of consent before proceeding with the main interview.

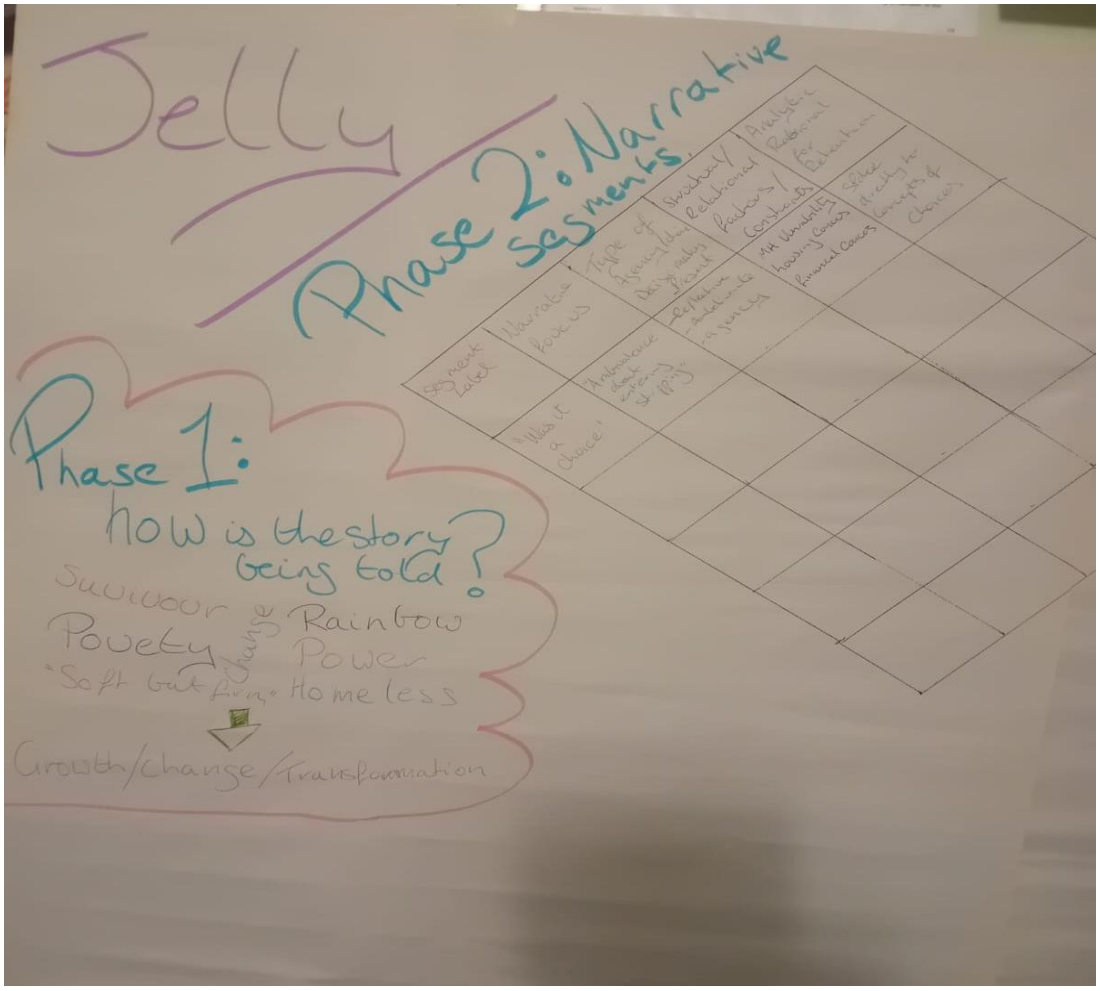
Appendix M: Immersion stage example

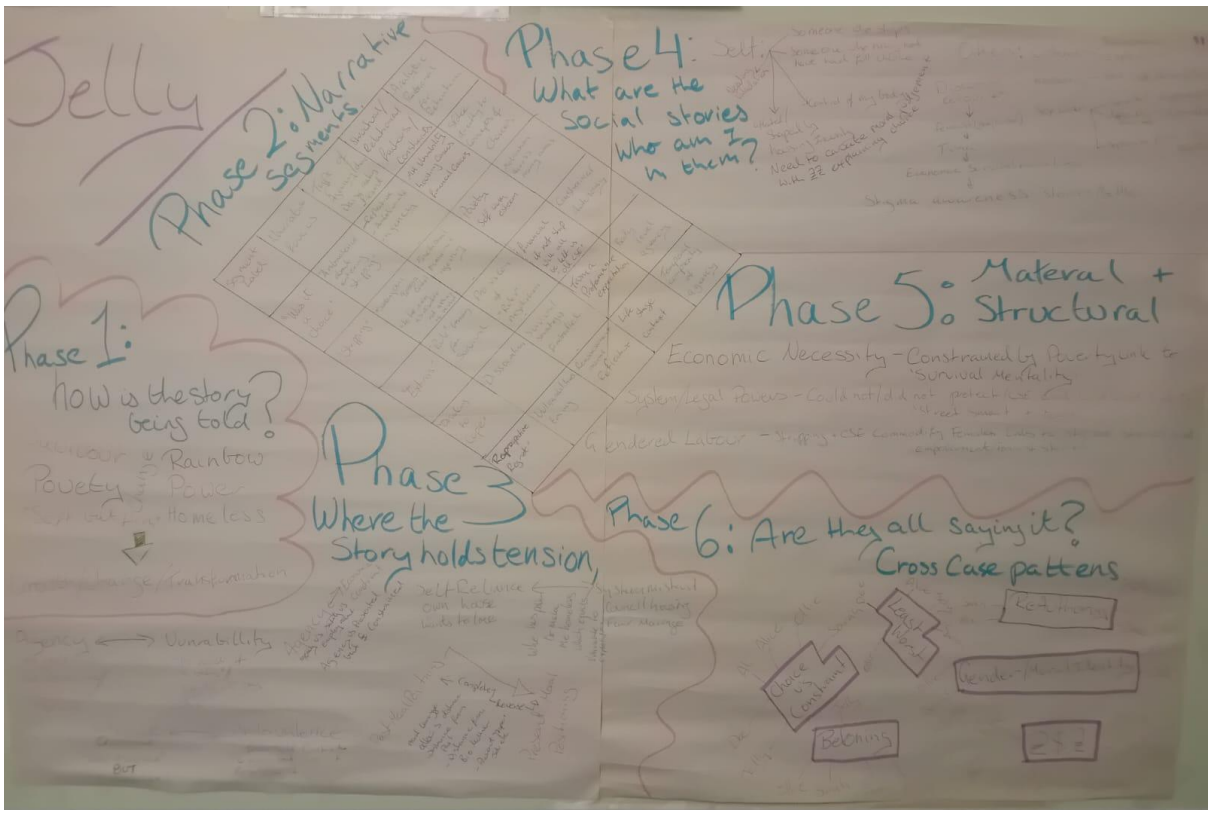


Appendix N: Analysis flow document process






Jelly
Phase 2: Narrative segments
Phase 1:
How is the story being told?
Survivor
Rainbow
Poverty
Power
Soft but firm
Homeless
Growth/change/transformation


Jelly
Phase 2: Narrative segments
Phase 4:
What are the social stories
Who am I in them?
Phase 5: Material + Structural
Economic Necessity - Constrained by Practicality
Phase 1:
How is the story being told?
Survivor
Rainbow
Poverty
Power
Homeless
Phase 3
Where the Story holds tension,
Phase 6: Are they all saying it?
Cross Case patterns
Choice vs Constraint
Belonging

Typed version for ease of reading

Participant Sarah (white, working-class, homeless, female, care leaver)

Phase one, Immersion –

The narrative is really focused on transitions, talking about growing up in a high-control, strict religious household and then moving to an uncontained environment. The participant talked about feeling grown-up and mature; however, now they reflect on it. As a period of being extremely vulnerable and neglected by the system

Phase 2 narrative components –

Some moments of choice are talked about the centre on being involving going to a taxi rank where older men would pick the girls up there is discussion of agency and action whereby the participant described herself as feeling hesitant that you'd find excuses not to go or to distance herself and to stay on the edge of what she recognised somewhat to be exploitative circumstances there is also a narrative component of resilience where she characterises her later involvement in rugby as if on cue to her history with a real sense of body autonomy and ownership

second run through –

Segment labels	narrative focus	type of agency present	structural and relational constraints	rationale for retention
Invitation	get in the car decision	situation agency	adult man hostel	grooming through ordinary choice
Hesitation avoidance	Resistance	micro-resistance	peer and adult pressure	resistance without dramatic refusal
Relationship safety	Partner reduce exposure	Relational	exploitative networks	agency through alignment
Institutional failing	staff not acting	abandonment by system	systematic neglect	personal decision within system failure
Retrospective recognition of danger	exploitation understood retrospectively	Reframing	normalisation in youth	shift in time equals awareness

Phase 3 Dialectic tensions –

Autonomy versus vulnerability – her past self asserted that no one would make decisions for her however her current self recognise the vulnerability that she was in being a child being hunted by predators who could "smell" her need for belonging

control versus neglect – participant one noted that there are childhood early childhood had "too much control whereas a late teens and experience of homelessness there was "no control". Recognising that this created a push and pull factor into risky situations.

Retrospective labelling participant one acknowledges that her first experience of exploitation she believed to be a relationship at the time any identifying as an adult that this was in fact exploitative

knowledge and innocence slow normalisation of invitation to get the car framed as ordinary (dialectic temporal) then it didn't feel dangerous now as a pattern, safeguarding language not always available to youth

Resistance and compliance – hesitation aligning with beer, compliance not equal to consent coexisting with fear and situational evaluation

Individual agency and institutional lack – staffed and intervene lack of support equals constrained choice

Phase 4 position of self or others and discursive resourcing –

self – younger self not totally innocent or fully knowledgeable. Not naïve.

Others – perpetrators – groomers rather than violent aggressors. System staff neglectful.

Discursive resource – safeguarding discourse, youth vulnerability, normalisation

Phase 5 – linking to material conditions

Systemically neglected – participant one acknowledged that she lived in a precarious situation at 16 where there would be adults using heroin and that staff "did nothing" despite witnessing young girls being picked up by taxis

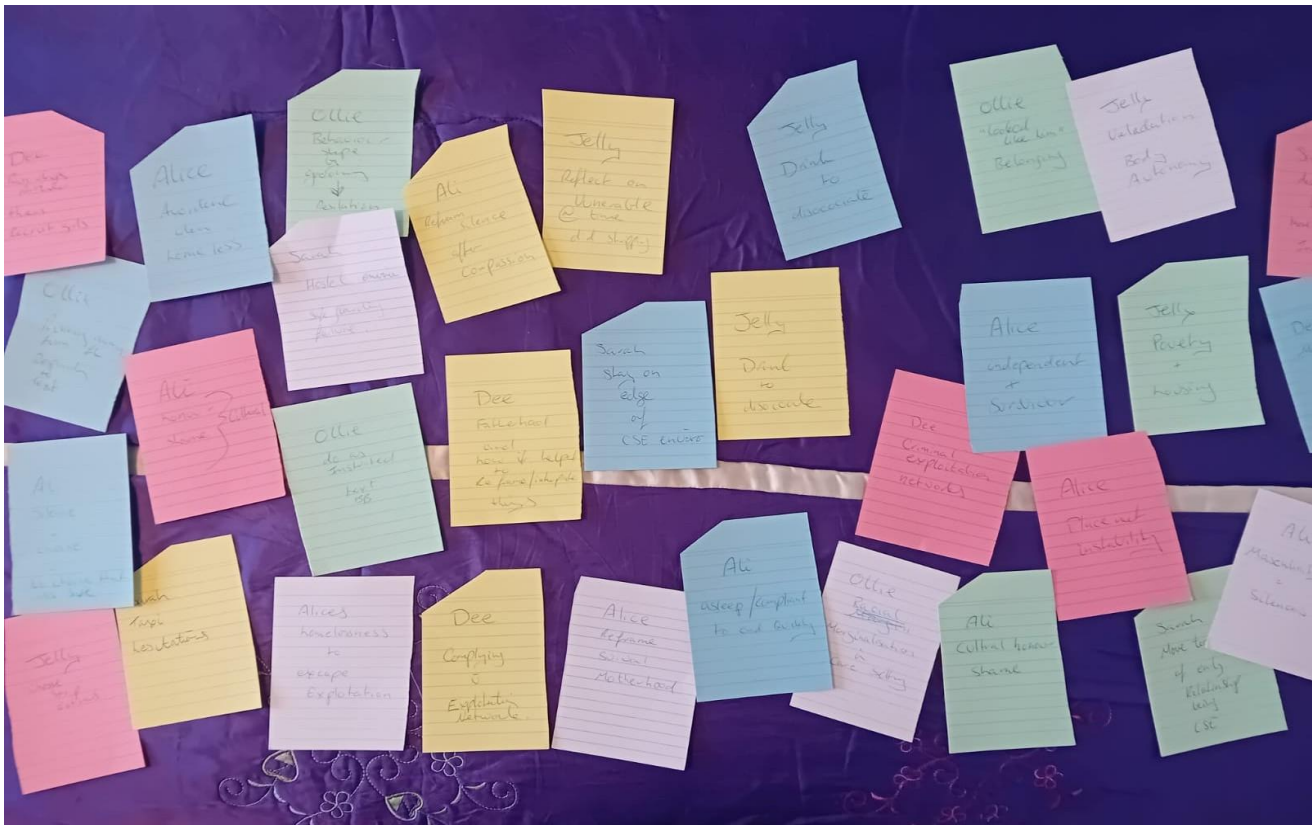
Class/religion - there was a story and a pride of being working class as well as Christian guilt influenced by her moral ideas and her feelings of making bad choices while also wanting to seek independence that she was denied in a home environment

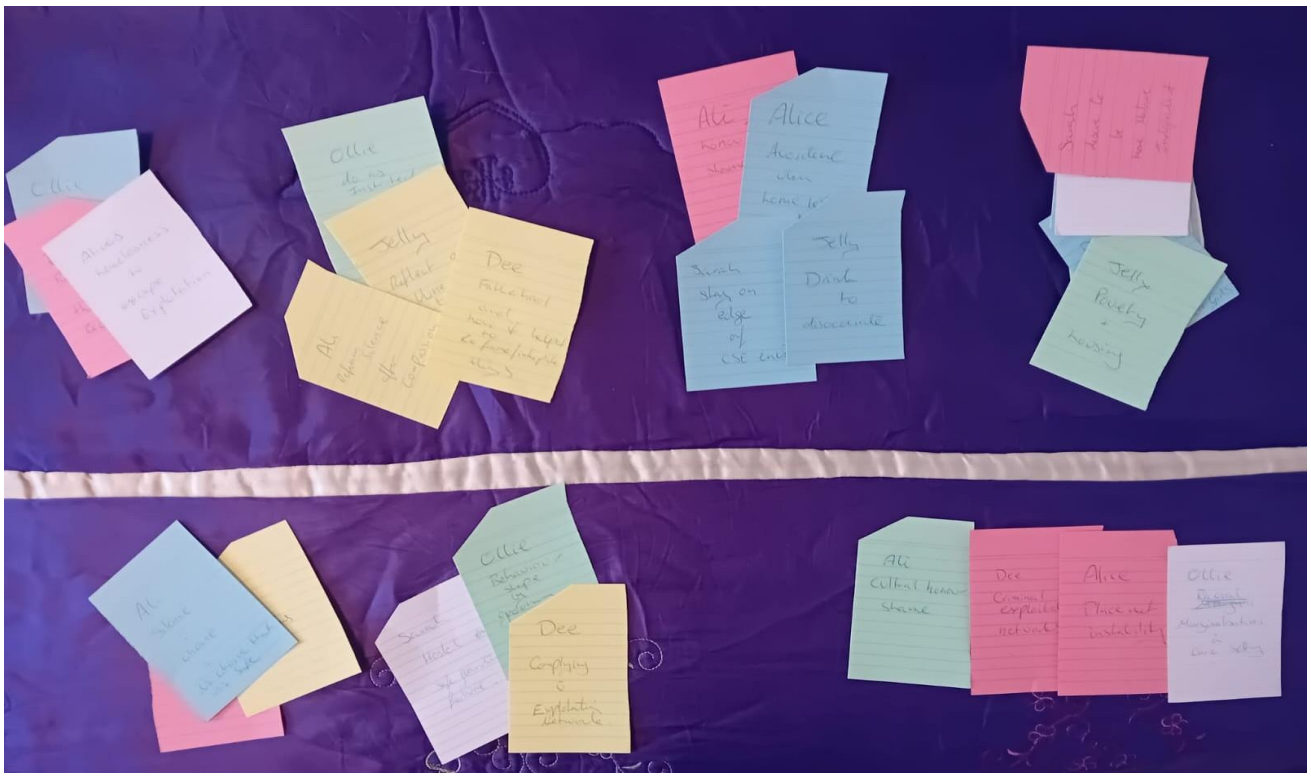
Technology – participant one feels that she was part of the "guinea pig" generation for the Internet noting that grooming was normal and accepted but not yet understood as exploitation

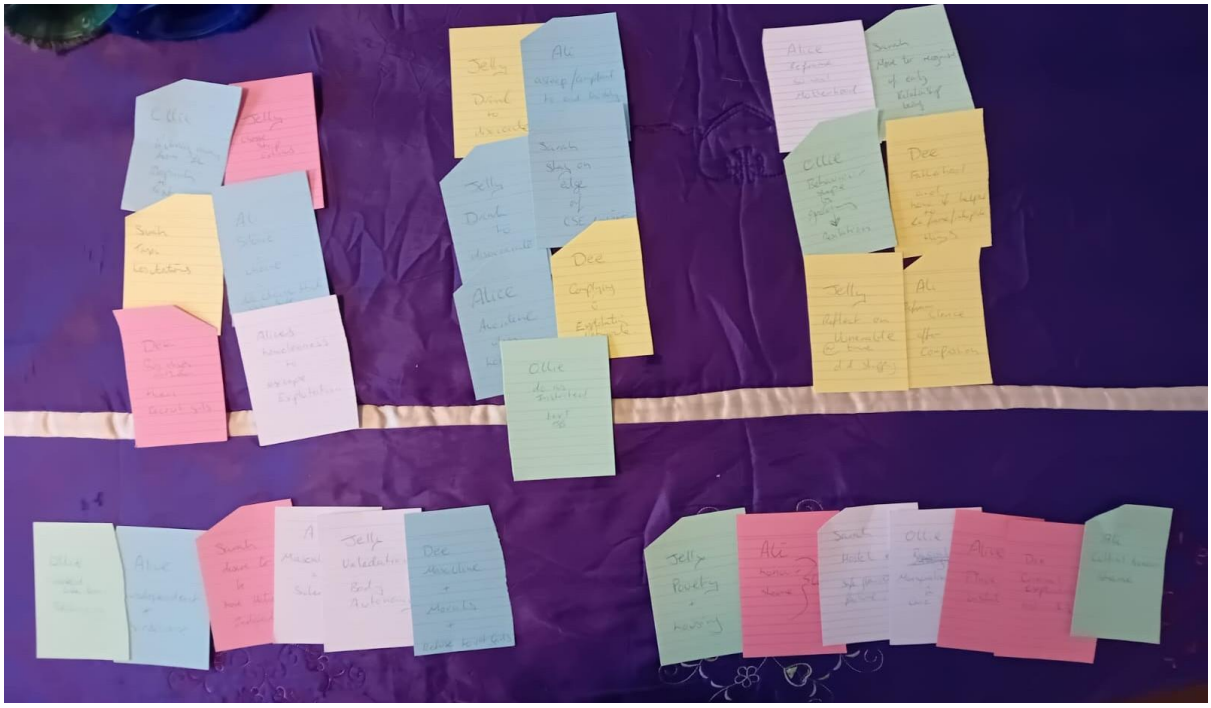
safeguarding gaps

Age of consent frameworks

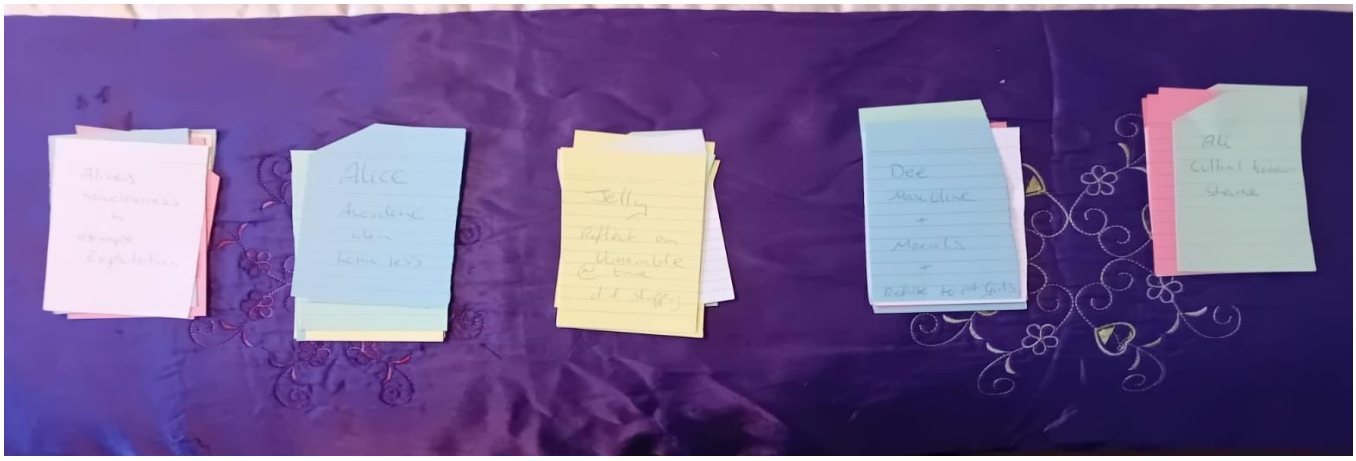
Appendix O: Sorting and review of tension grouping





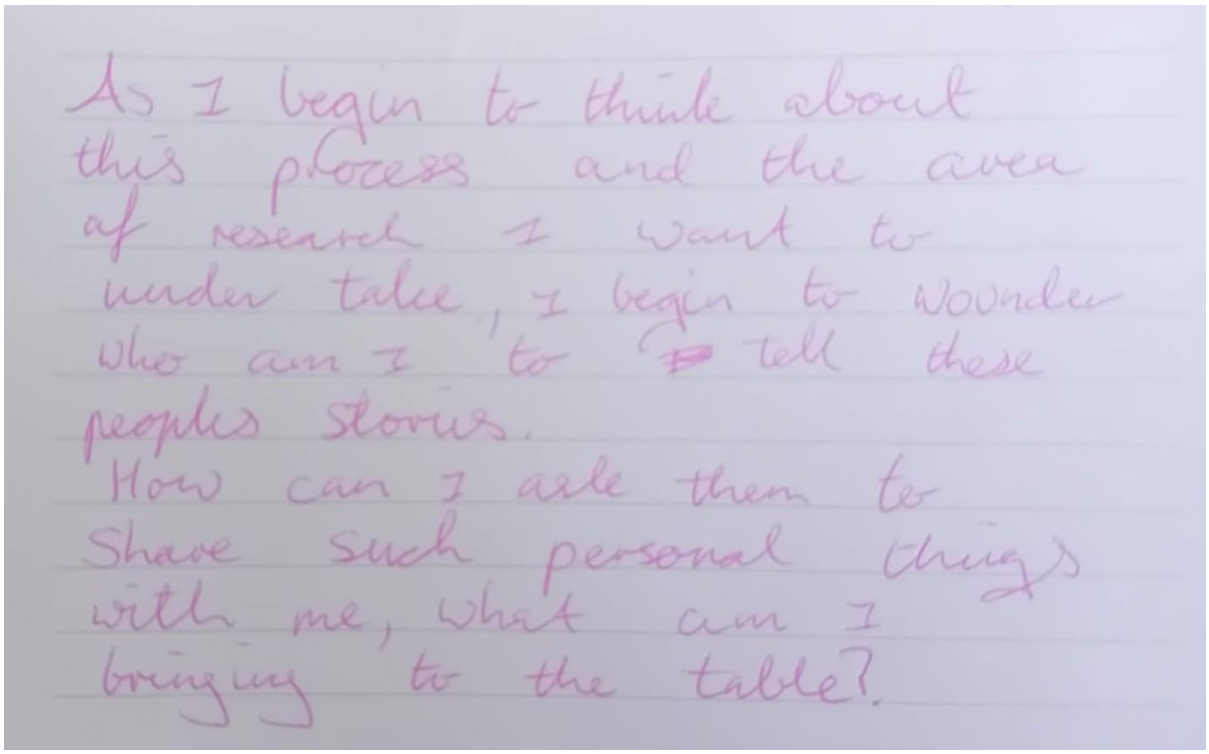

Jelly
Ollie
Ali
Alice
Dee
Sarah

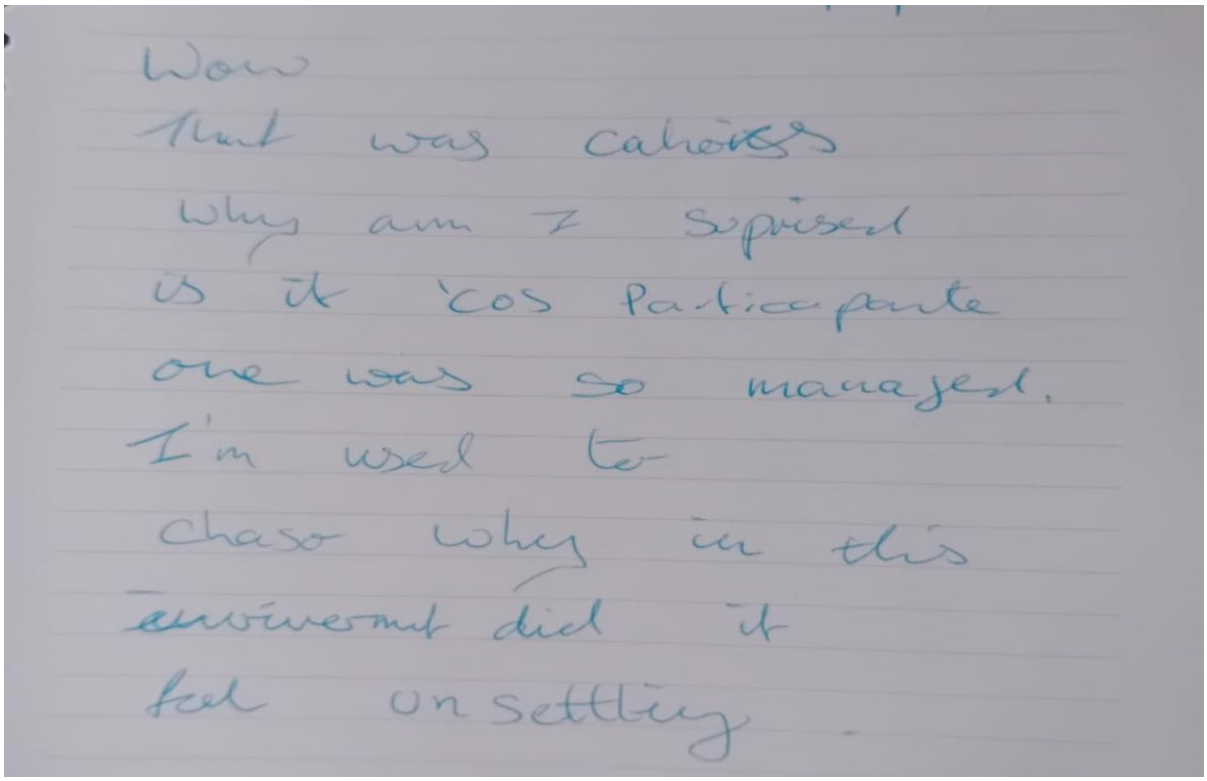

Jelly
Ollie
Ali
Alice
Dee
Sarah

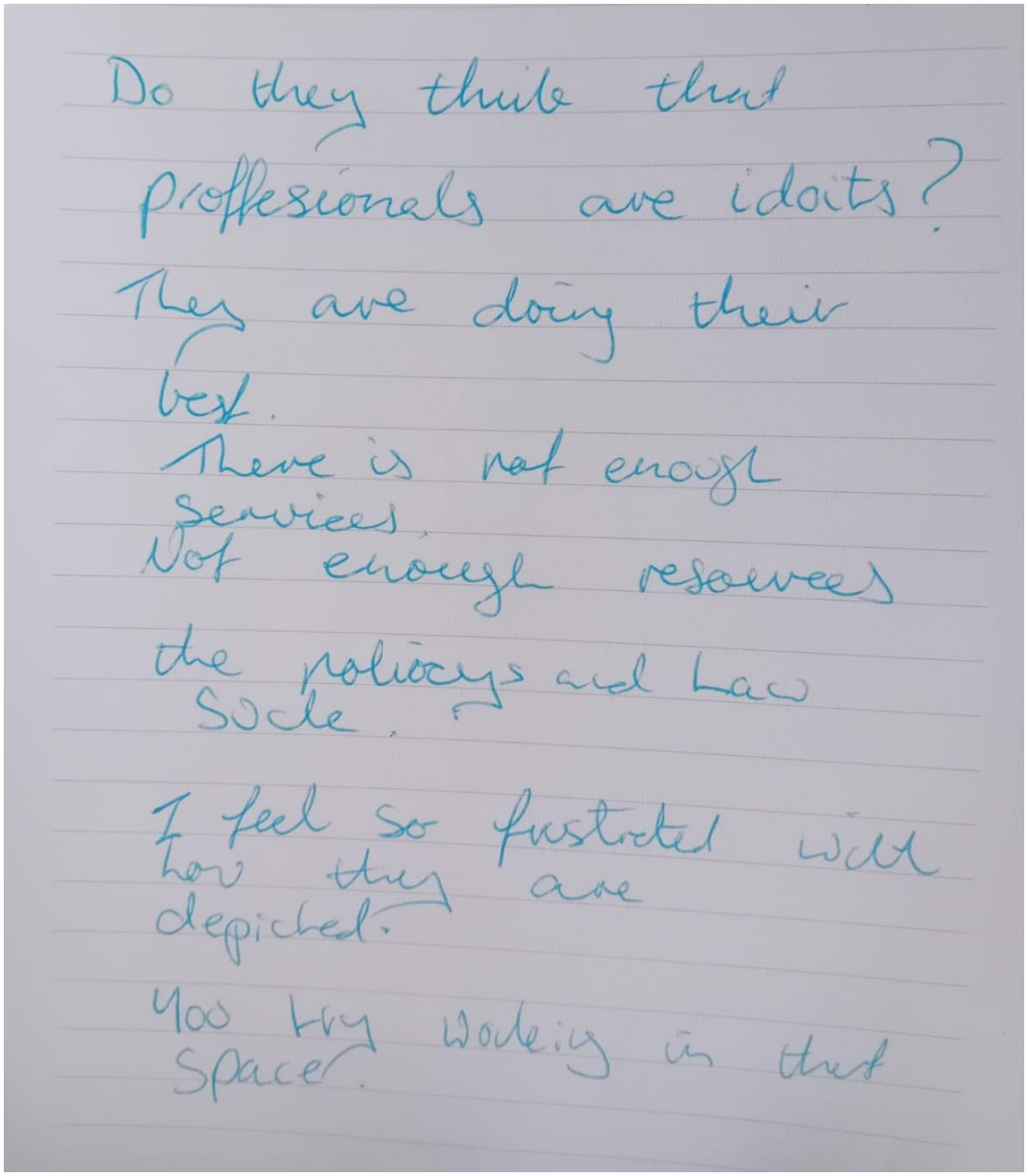

Alice
Jelly
Dee

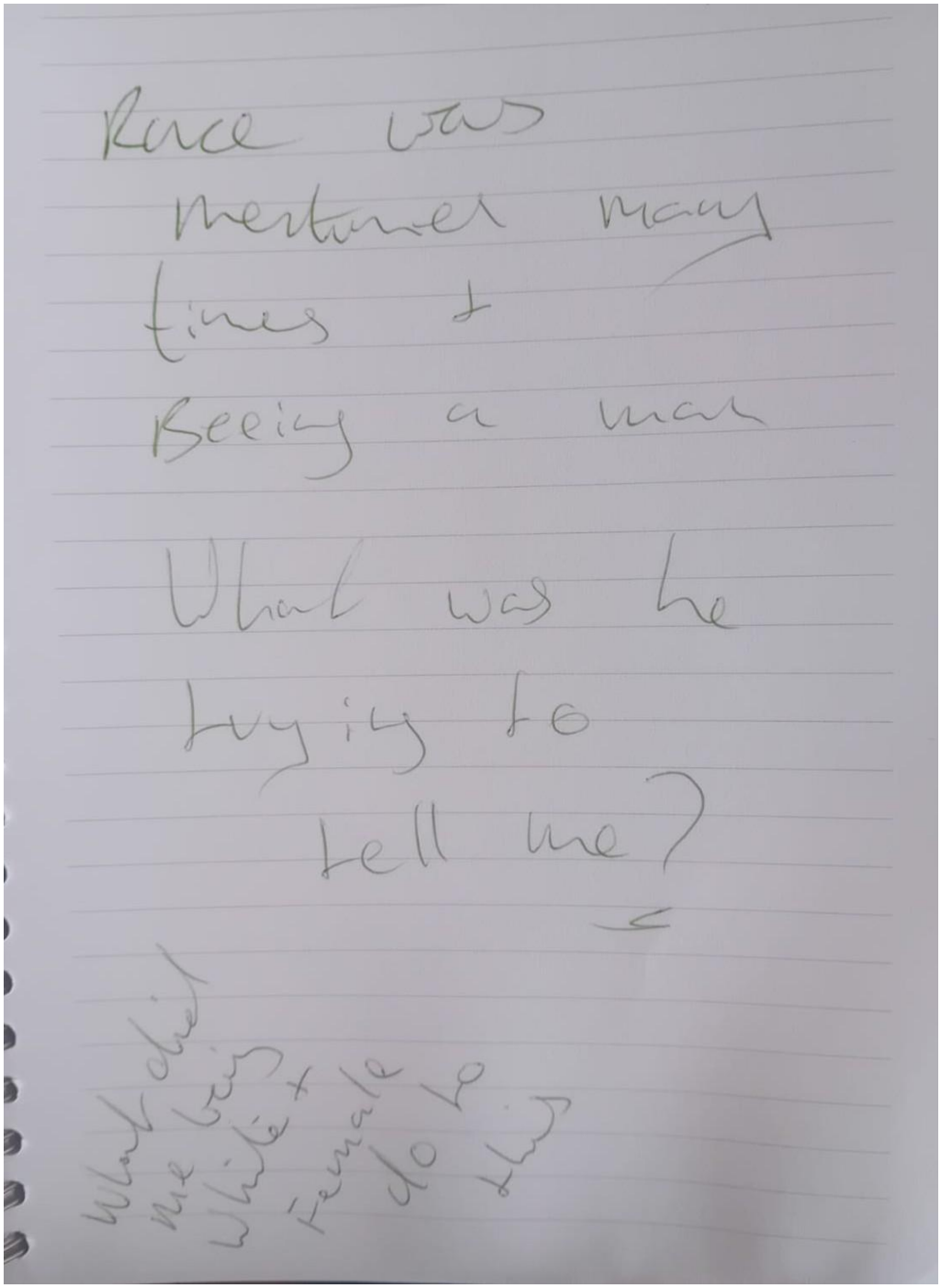

Tension 1
Tension 2
Tension 4
Tension 5

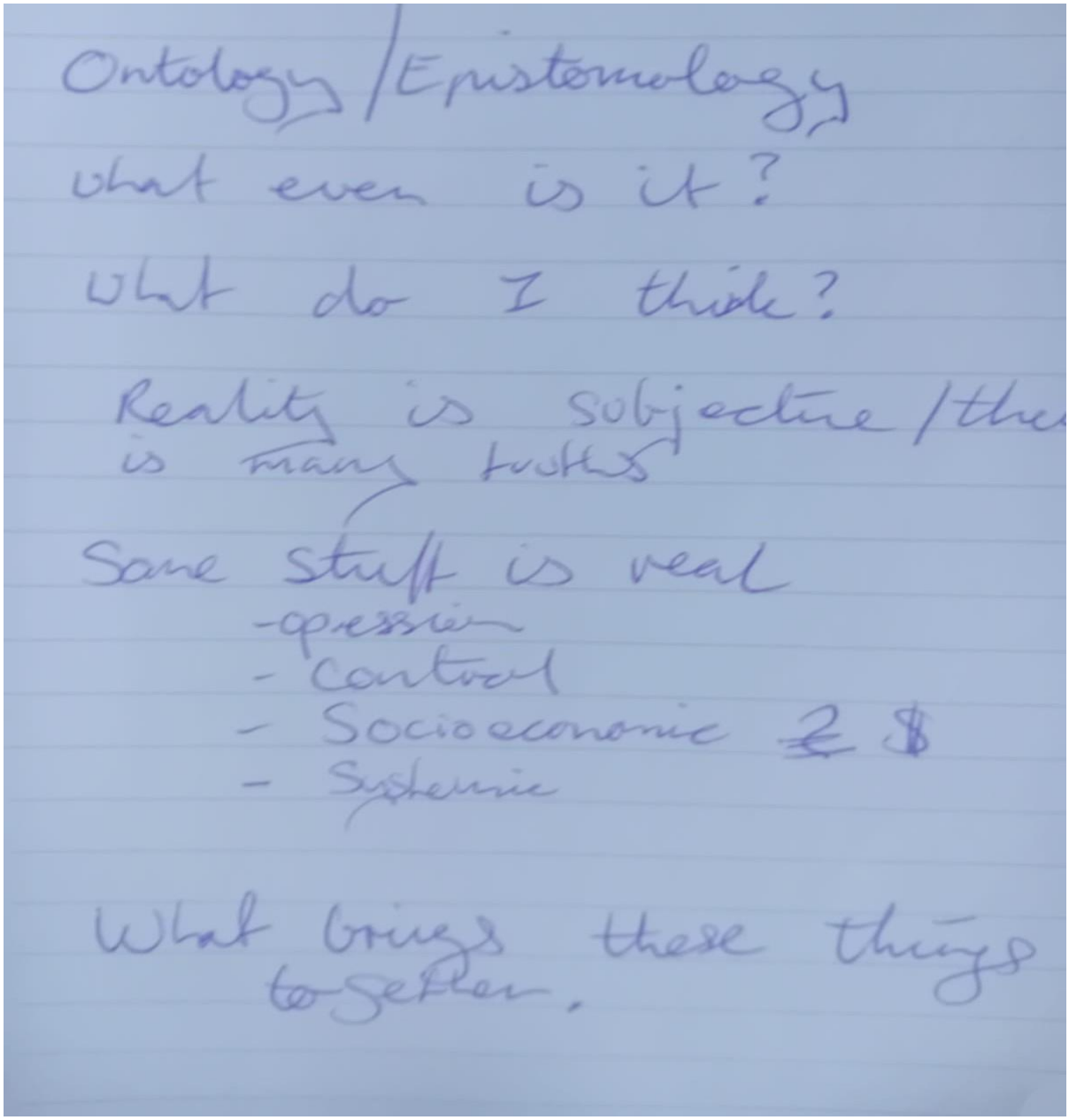
Appendix P: Extraction Reflective Journal


As I begin to think about this process and the area of research I want to undertake, I begin to wonder who am I to tell these peoples stories.
How can I ask them to share such personal things with me, what am I bringing to the table?


Wow
That was cathartic
Why am I surprised
is it 'cos Participants
one was so managed.
I'm used to
chaos why in this
environment did it
feel unsettling.


Do they think that
proffesionals are idoits?
They are doing their
best.
There is not enough
services.
Not enough resources
the policys and Law
Socle.
I feel so frustrated with
how they are
depicted.
How they working in that
space.


Race was
mentioned many
times +
Being a man
What was he
trying to
tell me?
What did it
me being
White +
female
do to
him


Ontology/Epistemology
what even is it?
what do I think?
Reality is subjective/there is many truths
Some stuff is real
-oppression
- control
- Socioeconomic £ $
- Systemic
What brings these things together.

Appendix Q: Member reflection notes

Some of my member reflection notes

(typed up for legibility)

- Member reflections completed with Dee and Ollie.
- Purpose: explore how they relate to the findings
- Remember: this is **not** member checking (not looking for agreement).
- Reflections considered how participants understood the interpretations developed
- Pay attention to the possibility that Dee and Ollie may reinterpret experiences differently
- Remember: these reflections don't replace earlier accounts/narrations
- Ollie's reflections focused particularly on belonging, racial identity, and the experience of feeling unseen within care contexts.
- Dee's reflections focused more on moral positioning and how adulthood provided a different language through which to understand earlier decisions.
- Notice how adult heights open up for new meanings that may not have been present at the time
- Reflections = additional interpretive layer, not, confirmation of findings.
- Reminder: interpretations are also narrative constructions.
- Be careful that current interpretation is not more correct/truthful than earlier
- Member reflections aligned with the wider analytic position
- Continuously re-authored over time.