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Work in Progress

Longing to Belong:
Relational Risks and
Resilience of
Commercially
Sexually Exploited
Children in the U.S.
Wellesley Centers for Women

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Longing to Belong: Relational Risks and Resilience of Commercially Sexually Exploited Children in the U.S.

Kate Price, MA

About the author

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Abstract

Prostituted children, like all people, require nurturing relationships and belonging, yet they are vulnerable to exploitation because of their lack of secure relationships and histories of betrayal. This paper explores how a lack of secure relationships can create a dynamic for children to become trapped in prostitution, how current cultural assumptions reinforce the crisis, and where hope lies in a culture that is ready to disregard and incriminate children who do not fit the innocence mold.

Introduction

Central to my analysis of child prostitution in the United States is that the biological necessity for human relationships is a fundamental location of both risk and resilience in promoting prostituted children's health, healing, and agency. As Jean Baker Miller, M.D. wrote in her landmark book *Toward a new psychology of women* (1976) relationships are a human necessity as much as food, air, and water. Robust neuroscience findings confirm this assertion (Banks, 2010).

Without strong connections human beings face a myriad of physical and emotional dangers such as depression, somatic pain, and anxiety (Felitti and Anda, p 245). For exploited children, however, a relational history of violence and manipulation makes

getting to this place of necessary, healthy relationships seem nearly impossible.

Furthermore, our culture demands that childhood is a time of innocence. Therefore, when children behave outside of the "innocence" script, particularly sexually, they are often perceived as willing participants and "bad kids." Such discrimination perpetuates shaming and isolation of sexually exploited children, further reinforcing cycles of violence and betrayal rather than offering the hope and relational skills necessary for all children to thrive.

Relational Risks

A common thread that runs through most accounts of child sexual exploitation is childhood sexual abuse and familial neglect. In their landmark article, "Sexual Child Abuse as an Antecedent to Prostitution," Mimi Silbert and Ayala Pines cite that at least 60 percent of exploited children are sexual abuse survivors. Furthermore, 70 percent of the two hundred juvenile and adult prostitutes that they interviewed stated the child sexual abuse that they endured "definitely affected their decision to become a prostitute." An even larger percentage of exploited children run away due to neglect (1989, pp. 409-410). (A side note: I am not saying that all prostituted people – children and adult – were sexually abused, however, the incidence has historically shown a strong link.)

Abuse and Neglect

Therefore, children engulfed in child sexual exploitation are already operating with a relational blueprint based on betrayal, isolation, and often physical and sexual violence. Studies indicate 90 percent of sexually abused children are molested by parents, relatives or people the children know (Abel, 2002). The nuclear family structure is based on the cultural assumption that adults will protect children.

The proprietary nature of the private family ensures the abuse and neglect can be concealed and kept as a “family secret.” Adults can utilize this supposition of protection to veil the harming of children they are presumed to be nurturing.

If a child cannot get nurturance or even safety at home, children can become dependent on external sources for safety, love and protection. Even then, social services replicate the private family structure, allowing for the potential of further, concealed abuse. And manipulative adults are abundant. Numerous interviews with pedophiles and pimps reveal that children who are abandoned and starving for attention are often key targets (Pryor, 1996). Armed only with the determination of enduring abuse, relationships for sexually abused children are predicated on the centrality of control and sex as a relational foundation, rather than a healthy expression of intimacy and choice. These abusive histories conflate connection, trauma, and deception, inscribing an insecure relational map.

Manipulating a child into making him/her think the pimp can provide the love children are missing at home is a pimp’s primary tool to lure children into prostitution. “He was the first one to come to me,” explains Cassie, about how she met her pimp. She continues, “He looked nice, you know...the way they sweet-talk you, it’s pathetic. I know now that it’s pathetic, but then...they can make things look so good. You’re so down...you’re alone...and you don’t have any money, you know...you feel like hanging on to them” (Sereny, 1985, p. 60).

Discrimination

Unfortunately such manipulative adults are often the only ones vying for abandoned children’s attention. As a culture we demand that childhood is a time of innocence and children who do not fulfill that picture of purity, such as by exhibiting symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and rage at betrayal, can face discrimination and ostracism.

A 2011 report authored by Shared Hope, international anti-trafficking organization, offers a perfect illustration of our current directive. The title, *The Protected Innocence Challenge*, sits below an image of the American flag, and is awash in patriotic red, white, and blue. No pictures of children are shown, and only the subtitle includes the mandate of “Protection for the Nation’s Children.” Innocence is the first directive, and then actual children come last.

Furthermore, the question of “Protection from what?” is not explored. Our current proprietary mode of relationship, particularly for prostituted children,

is based on securing protection. As professor and political theorist Carole Pateman (1988, pp. 208-209) states, “I have argued that contracts about property in persons takes the form of an exchange of obedience for protection.” Therefore, even protection from such well-meaning organizations may come with the price of expectations in behavior and image: again, safety is exchanged for obligation and duty in maintaining an image that traumatized children cannot fulfill due to their abusive and violent histories.

Shame

In not being capable of fitting the “innocence” mold that our culture demands children possess to be “worthy” of protection and sympathy, prostituted children in the United States can experience shame to their very core. Maureen Walker, Ph.D. explains in her article written with Jean Baker Miller, M.D., *Racial Images and Relational Possibilities* (2004, p. 133), “People who do not have the means to perpetrate invisible violence are more easily seen, more easily scapegoated.” Instead of being looked after by the adults our culture entrusts to defend them, sexually exploited children are treated as criminals, furthering their shame. When in actuality, those charged with caring for children are the ones committing the crimes and offloading their own shame on children who may think the violence is their fault.

Such criminalization can be particularly exacerbated for girls and boys of color, LBGTQ youth, and poor children who are even further outside of the white, middle/upper-middle class, heterosexual mainstream ideal. Their diminished location of power is further affected by cultural assumptions and discrimination. In her book *The skin we’re in: Teaching children to be emotionally strong, socially smart, and spiritually connected*, social scientist Janie Ward (2002, p. xi) talks about prejudice, specifically racism that “was once individualized is now institutionalized as a system of privilege and control...Sometimes the perpetrator is not a person at all, but a company, the police department, or a financial institution.” Occupying the bottom of the social ladder presents a major relational obstacle in even believing one matters and is worthy of relationship.

Sexualizing Children

Children with sexual knowledge are also suspect. Never mind that they most likely initially gained such sexual knowledge by being assaulted at the hands of someone they knew and trusted, these children can still be seen as tainted. Furthermore, children born in the United States, this land of

freedom, opportunity, and meritocracy, must have chosen prostitution. Child prostitution only happens in poor countries “over there” - this is not Thailand. A prostituted child in the United States must be to blame, no matter at what age or under what circumstance.

Yet, our culture is saturated with the sexualization of children which “encourages these dangerous attitudes and makes it seem normal to look upon children as sex objects,” state Diane Levin and Jean Kilbourne (2008, p. 9) in their book *So sexy so soon: The new sexualized childhood and what parents can do to protect their kids*. (I wish all parents wanted to protect their kids.) When prostitute and pimp Halloween

In Newsweek Magazine
The John Next Door
 Jul 16, 2011 1:00 AM EDT
 The men who buy sex are your neighbors and colleagues. A new study reveals how the burgeoning demand for porn and prostitutes is warping personal relationships and endangering women and girls.

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Men of all ages, races, religions, and backgrounds do it. Rich men do it, and poor men do it, in forms so varied and ubiquitous that they can be summoned at a moment's notice.

And yet surprisingly little is known about the age-old practice of buying sex, long assumed to be inevitable. No one even knows what proportion of the male population does it; estimates range from 16 percent to 80 percent. “Ninety-nine percent of the research in this field has been done on prostitutes, and 1 percent has been done on johns,” says Melissa Farley, director of Prostitution Research and Education, a nonprofit organization that is a project of San Francisco Women’s Centers.

costumes for children are readily available, we are, in fact, indirectly promoting that children emulate sexual abuse survivors.

The media, too, cannot keep its eyes away from exploited children, even when discussing how to stop this crisis. *Newsweek* recently illustrated this point when running an informative article, “The john next door” (Bennetts, 2011, p. 60). Even though

the article focused on an insightful new study about men who purchase sex versus those who do not, the accompanying picture is of what we have come to see as the stereotypical young female prostitute walking by herself on a dark street. All of the circumstances that got (and keep) her here, seemingly alone –systemic violence, domination, abandonment, judgment, and betrayal—are all disappeared by the current cultural narrative that her own agency has her walking that street by choice. No man is in the picture. (Photo credit: Paul Popper, Getty Images).

The conversation around the article would completely change if a photo of the “typical man” who does buy sex, 40 years-old, Caucasian, heterosexual, middle - to upper-middle class, usually in a relationship, accompanied the article. Here is a photo of that very man pictured with his unsuspecting partner. Yet, we truly do not want to talk about “the john next door.”



Isolation

What I find most ironic about the first picture is that even though the girl is walking alone, numerous people and forces have surrounded her not only in getting her there, but also keeping her there. As feminist Karen Lang states, “Isolation is the glue that holds oppression in place” (Jordan, 2010b). This girl, and all sexually exploited children, has been, quite literally, repeatedly and systemically stripped of her relational capacities, choices, and agency so that escape is not an option.

Their own internal shame and feelings of degradation often lead to what Jean Baker Miller called “condemned isolation,” or the sense a person feels that something is wrong with him or her personally, and is not worthy of relationship on any level (1997, p. 72). Miller created this phrase “to capture the experience of isolation and aloneness that leaves one feeling shut out of the human community” (Jordan, 2010a, p. 102).

Sexually exploited children often feel at fault for their circumstances, which is reinforced by their abusers telling them that they deserve such violence, and by a culture that neither knows nor prioritizes learning how to honor their experience and to help them heal from so many violations. Only children who feel connected are at less risk for multiple physical, emotional, and behavioral injuries than children without such relational supports. An oft-cited study, “Protecting adolescents from harm: Findings from the national study on adolescent health,” by psychologist Michael Resnick emphasized that “perceived caring and connectedness to others is important in understanding the health of young people today” (1997, p. 830).

Trauma

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder for exploited children is another relational risk that can be a major obstacle to potentially solidifying that one supportive relationship. In her invaluable guide, *Post-Traumatic stress disorder: Relationships and brain chemistry*, JBMTI director of advanced study and therapist Amy Banks, M.D. (2001, p. 2) outlines current understandings of how violence changes brain function and how “the destruction of relationships can often be the biggest obstacle in healing...the potential for closeness physically triggers the feeling of violation even where there is an intellectual understanding that little threat exists.” The brain literally registers *all* human connection as dangerous, which is problematic (to say the least) when navigating the world.

Enter strategies of disconnection. In Relational-Cultural Theory, strategies of disconnection are “methods people develop to stay out of relationship in order to prevent wounding or violation. Also known as strategies of survival, these evolve out of a person’s attempt to find some way to make or preserve whatever connection is possible” (Jordan, 2010, p. 108). Lies and manipulation are perfect examples of these strategies in that the deceptions require a relationship, even though the connection is then utilized to distance each participant. The key here is that there is relationship present, even though the conditions are not ideal. We are missing the point if we keep the focus on the deception: a person is making a connection, and to someone who is overwhelmed by intimacy, such contact is profound, even if the connection is not conducive to sustaining growth-fostering relationships. That is actually the point—appearing to be in relationship while keeping an escape hatch open.

Addiction is another common strategy of disconnection. Tian Dayton (2000, p. 59) states in *Trauma and addiction: Ending the cycles of pain through emotional literacy*, “This chronic pattern of disconnection becomes a relationship strategy...these patterns of disconnection come along, so that part of our connection includes built-in disconnection.” Drugs offer a relational escape route in that one can appear present, but still completely checked out, demolishing any chance for mutual connection, which are the exact conditions necessary to quell the yearning for connection, but not being capable to truly be present with and for another.

Gendered Ideals

A further location of discrimination, particularly for girls, in receiving help is being turned away from services if they do not conform to codes of our culture’s feminine ideal: being nice, silent, sexy but not sexual, and holding in one’s anger. In a recent phone interview Lisa Goldblatt Grace (personal communication, August 4, 2011), founder of the Boston-based prostitution prevention and outreach program My Life, My Choice, told me a wonderful story of a program participant who kept telling a well-intentioned adult to “F*** off”—and rightfully so, in my estimation. Coming from a place where adults lie, harm, and exploit and systems are set up to shame and incriminate, why should this girl trust someone she didn’t know, despite the other’s best intentions? I have definitely been on the receiving end of shakes of the head that imply, “She’s just so out of control. How can you expect a girl like that to get better?”

Angry girls are dangerous. Lyn Mikel Brown (2005, p. 73), author of *Girlfighting: Rejection and betrayal among girls* and *Hardy Girls, Healthy Women* co-founder states, “When ‘normal’ for girls is defined as not fighting or ‘causing a ruckus,’ but being ‘nice’ and ‘making everything better and stuff,’ signs of meanness or anger or strong feelings get girls in trouble with the authorities.” And yet, that anger and vitality has kept them alive, even in the face of those who cannot empathize and honor such rage.

This point was illustrated when the *New York Times* reported the story of Nicolette R., a twelve-year-old arrested for prostitution in the Bronx (Kaufman, 2004). Her case took a year in Family Court, “drawing in prosecutors, judges, dueling therapists, court-appointed lawyers, child welfare authorities, a representative of the state’s juvenile jails, and a private organization that provides housing for troubled adolescents.” Nicolette testified her father had “sexually molested and physically abused her,” then abandoned her at his sister’s house. (Nicolette’s mother had sent her to live with her father.) She continued to live with her aunt and the aunt’s boyfriend, where both “beat her with a belt, made her sleep on the floor, and called her demeaning names.” (The aunt never answered the court’s subpoena to refute these allegations). At ten, Nicolette began running away, and ended in a shelter for runaway youth, where she met her pimp, beginning her time as a prostitute.

Nicolette was sentenced to a secure juvenile detention center. The family court judge stated the girl, “needed to get ‘proper moral principles.’” During family court the prosecutors argued Nicolette was a “hardened” child who would return to the streets if not placed in prison. A psychologist articulated while Nicolette still sucked her thumb on occasion, she also carried razors, and agreed she should be incarcerated. The defense maintained she was too young to consent to sex, and should be seen as a victim of exploitation who needs to heal so she will not return to the streets. After winning an appeal, reportedly a “highly unusual occurrence” Nicolette was transferred to a residential treatment center for “emotionally disturbed children.” Despite initial fears Nicolette would flee the treatment facility, she did not run away.

This judgment of Nicolette and exploited children in the United States (and everywhere) disappears the lack of social capital necessary to be seen as a “normal child,” such as stability and protection from family of origin, education, access to adequate health care, and financial resources, to name a few. In our culture that holds dear the myth of meritocracy where everyone

is deemed to possess the same opportunities and choices, if a child is prostituted, then of course it must be by choice. And who, other than “bad kids” would choose that, particularly now that girls are given so many opportunities? The “perfect storm” of abuse, abandonment by family and society, predatory adults, and numerous others are deemed irrelevant.

Relational Resilience

Fortunately, it is always darkest before the dawn, and possibilities to rebuild these negated relational templates exist in abundance. As RCT states and neuroscience continues to prove, human beings are born biologically hardwired to connect and to thrive in growth-fostering relationships.

However, before sexually exploited children can even begin to heal, we must honor their wariness and mistrust, starting from scratch to build a positive relational foundation. As Judith V. Jordan states in her paper, *Relational resilience*:

[I]n instances of trauma involving violation by another person, we lose our trust in the goodness of others; we do not see another human being who responds to us in an empathic, responsive, and caring way. With chronic abuse and secrecy, we lose even our hope that there can ever again be a fully empathic, loving relationship with another person. It is not simply that what they do is beyond our control. It violates our most basic need to be cared about and responded to in a valuing, loving way. In abuse, there is a profound disconnection, a violation of human relatedness and meaningfulness in relationship that cuts deep. Finding ways to reestablish the caring connection or the belief in the possibility of love as a response to vulnerability is essential (1992, p. 7).

Yearning for Connection

For instance, researchers in California discovered data that allowed them to posit Social Pain Overlap Theory, or SPOT Theory, which found that the human brain uses the exact same neural pathways to transmit social pain and isolation to the identical part of the brain that registers physical pain (Banks, 2010 pp. 2-3). The body cannot differentiate whether a person is experiencing shame and isolation or if he is touching a hot stove. This finding is profound, not to mention crucial in recognizing the impact of social pain, particularly in terms of exclusion and discrimination of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism. We are hurting as individuals and as a culture.

Within that isolation, though, exploited children long for, deserve, and hold within them the capacity

to participate in healthy and mutual connection, no matter what they have endured prior. Trauma pioneer Bessel van der Kolk (1989) expounds on the necessity of getting people who have experienced trauma into relationship and out of isolation in his landmark article *The compulsion to repeat the trauma*:

Compulsive repetition of the trauma usually is an unconscious process that, although it may provide a temporary sense of mastery, or even pleasure, ultimately perpetuates chronic feelings of helplessness and a subjective sense of being bad and out of control. Gaining control over one's current life, rather than repeating the trauma in action, mood, or somatic states, is the goal of treatment...the trauma can only be worked through after a secure bond is established with another person. The presence of an attachment figure provides people with the security necessary to explore their life experiences and to interrupt the inner or social isolation that keeps people in repetitive patterns.

The need for a healthy “attachment figure” is the perfect place for mentors. Mentoring offers those very supports in a community or program-based context to keep kids connected. Goldblatt Grace (personal communication, August 4, 2011) also spoke of the importance of mentors at My Life, My Choice, who are often previously prostituted girls themselves. As previously mentioned, mentors are a vital resource for healing in exploited children. These partnerships are a safe space where both connections and disconnections can occur without fear of persecution. Mistakes can be made, fears expressed, and trust built. The prospect of making oneself vulnerable to anyone is a risky endeavor. Mentors create the baseline need of safety necessary to move toward growth-fostering relationship and imagining a life of mutuality.

Mentors can also help navigate and “translate” new experiences, systems, and relationships intended to protect, not harm. For instance, the mentor to the participant who told her therapist “f*** you” was able to create a buffer so the girl could get the care she needed. I say buffer and not “correct” because a crucial distinction is to not attempt to fix these strategies of disconnection—be it telling someone to “f*** off,” to lie, or to get high—when someone attempts to get close to an exploited child. These are the very tools that have kept them alive through, literally, living hell. The need to honor and not shame these tactics is a key step in providing a sense of safety for a child to build trust and to feel proud of his ability to succeed. This is not the same as condoning.

In *Betrayal trauma: Relational models of harm and healing*, Pamela Birrell and Jennifer Freyd (2006, p.

57) articulate, "This relationship is the only way to healing for those who have suffered betrayal. The fragmentation caused by the violence of human bonds can only be healed by new and healing human bonds." The complex road to recovery requires an entire restructuring of how an exploited child understands relationship: you are worthy of relationship exactly how you are. Relationships are not predicated on lies or control or empty promises.

Honoring Strategies of Disconnection

While trust is being built within these new growth-fostering relationships, strategies of disconnection will still come up as limits and intentions are tested. The most important point, though, is to focus on the fact that a child's need and yearning for connection is driving these dissociating compulsions. Without self-medication, a person with PTSD may not be able to even stand in line behind someone at the grocery store, let alone be in authentic relationship. Baby steps are key.

Jean Baker Miller, M.D. and Irene Stiver, Ph.D. elaborate on the importance of developing these strategies in the face of an absolute absence of healthy connection:

We want to emphasize, too, that these strategies were ways for staying out of connection because the only relationships that had been available were in some fundamental way disconnecting and violating. In many instances, they were deeply destructive. There was good reason to develop these strategies (1994, p. 9).

And even when healthy, supportive relationships are available to commercially sexually exploited children, any tendency to "rescue" or help these "poor, unfortunate children" will most likely be met with deep resentment. The intelligence and savvy of exploited children necessary to negotiate and survive all they have been through provides a keen internal radar and filter finely tuned for inauthenticity. Any attempt to change or control, even well-intended, will most likely be dodged. Whereas, honoring a child's strength and courage while working toward authenticity builds trust.

Relational Perseverance

Sexually exploited children also need to be rewarded for their courage in remaining in connection, even when they fall back into old patterns or strategies of disconnection. Emphasis must be placed on their commitment to staying in relationship at even the most basic level. As relationships become safer, sexually exploited children may regress in order to

gain the nurturing they haven't received until now.

Developing age-appropriate romantic relationships may prove particularly difficult. Sexually exploited children have interrupted experience with particular components of intimate relationships, particularly trust and sex, thus making fumbling through stages of relationships with non-exploited peers nearly impossible. As summed up in the song "Jane Says," written about an addict and prostitute (Avery and Farrell, 1988):

*Jane says I ain't never been in love
I don't know what it is
She only knows if someone wants her
I want 'em if they want me
I only know they want me*

Relational Development

As relationships stabilize, shame begins to heal, and isolation dissipates, sexually exploited children can really begin to flourish and find ease in life that may not have been possible previously. Baselines of safety are now met; old patterns have been interrupted; and growth-fostering relational templates have become the "new normal."

Transform Relational Intent

Furthermore, relationship in our culture is based on fear, control, and manipulation, not mutuality. The heterosexual directive for women's worth in her ability to "catch a man" and for boys to grow up to be a "stud," then a "good provider" undergirds relational messages early on, absconding the intent of relationship for the sake of mutual growth to jockeying for status and "security" in a power-over culture. In her book, *Dilemmas of desire: Teenage girls talk about sexuality*, author Deborah Tolman (2002) conveys the story of a father she encountered at a party.

A man I had not met before began bragging about how his teenage son showed every sign of being a "ladies man"...His pleasure that his son was a heartbreaker was evident...Later in the evening, this same man spoke about his fifteen-year old daughter. A different picture of the terrain of adolescent sexuality came to the fore. On the one hand, he was clearly proud that his daughter was considered an attractive and desirable date by her male peers; on the other hand, he was uncomfortable that she actually went out with them (p. 4).

Yes, this father is relegating the obvious double standard to his children, but my primary point is that the son is expected to have multiple relationships with many girls without any long-term attachment. However the daughter's perceived "desirability" is more important than her relational capacity, which is also engulfed in maintaining chastity and controlling her sexual desire.

In addition, the only sexual agency the children are allowed to possess is in maintaining the heterosexual norm. Tolman continues, "In many circles, if a boy reached mid-adolescence without having shown any perceptible interest in girls, those around him may become concerned about his masculinity and sexual orientation" (p. 5). Girls' sexual power comes from consuming provocative clothing, to be sexy, but not sexual. As exemplified by the winning slogan of a recent Candies Foundation and *Seventeen* magazine t-shirt contest, "I'm Sexy Enough...to keep you waiting" (2009).

Self-Esteem and Relational Confidence

In shifting children's confidence, particularly girls', from sexual objectification to total health, much emphasis has been placed on raising self-esteem. A solid and positive sense of self that includes the whole person, and not just the body, is crucial for children's wellbeing. However, we also must expand the picture of health to include relational competencies. Particularly with children whose relational templates are based on betrayal and violence, to have the skills to identify when a person is trying to manipulate or deceive them is essential in ending cycles of harm.

As Judith Jordan states, "Confidence in a relationship depends on mutual trust in the empathic response of the other and commitment to one another and to the relationship; it also grows from reliability, a shared purpose of making the relationship mutually enhancing for both people, and a determination to honor and respect one another" (1992, p. 5). As one feels increasingly worthy of healthy relationship and mutuality skills increase, relational confidence will build, reinforcing a strong sense of worth and robust relational deservedness.

Managing PTSD

With a strong foundation of safety secure, the next task is the long-term management of PTSD symptoms. Trauma is a long-term, chronic state that can only be managed, not "cured": the path to recovery is non-linear, requiring patience and perseverance. Understanding one's personal triggers is crucial in minimizing trauma reactivity, as is "retraining" one's

body to stay present and not dissociating. Enrolling in self-defense classes and participating in calming exercise such as yoga can help the body heal from trauma, providing relief (Emerson, 2011).

With these supports, the brain and body undergo major changes as increasing amounts of growth-fostering relationships are interwoven into the fabric of everyday life. For instance, the brain also has its own strategy of disconnection that can be lessened over time. Psychologist Daniel Goleman (1996, pp. 13-29) coined the term "amygdala hijack" to describe the unconscious response of the amygdala, which is part of the brain in charge of processing memories of emotional reactions, when intimacy feels too dangerous.

The hijack takes over when any feelings of closeness are overwhelming, even if a person is not facing immediate physical threat. Intimacy triggers memories of betrayal trauma and abuse. Learning to anticipate this "amygdala hijack" reaction can help trauma survivors understand that as relationship gets easier, particularly as they form increasingly healthy relationships, these reactions will come up.

Relational Paradox and Healing Shame

A next step to mutuality is unlearning those pesky strategies of disconnection. In crisis, these tactics save lives; however, once the crisis has past, they can dampen authentic connection. As you can imagine, survivors have a profound fear of relinquishing these strategies. People feel dangerous. Yet, continuing to employ them is counterproductive to solidifying the very relationships for which one yearns. A primary strategy of disconnection that needs to be undone is the relational paradox. Jean Baker Miller, M.D. defines this process as "keeping your true feelings out of relationship to maintain some semblance or remnant of relationship," (Robb, 2006, p. 307) which is incredibly important in order to keep the human biological necessity for relationship while simultaneously disconnecting to avoid triggers. "People develop strategies of trying to stay connected by keeping important parts out of connection," explained Miller.

Unlearning Obedience

A key element of the relational paradox specifically for exploited children and sexual abuse survivors is the proclivity for obedience to their perpetrators. In a second edition of her landmark book, *Father-daughter incest*, trauma pioneer Judith Herman (2000, p. 242) utilizes an illuminating quote from Robert Kluff's article, "On the apparent

invisibility of incest,” of a pimp describing the “ideal” prostitute:

Beauty, yes. Sexual expertise, somewhat. That can be taught easier than you think. What is important above all is obedience. And how do you get obedience? You get obedience if you get women who have had sex with their fathers, their uncles, their brothers—you know, someone they love and fear to lose so you do not dare to defy.

Re-writing that script of subservience can take a lifetime. Unlearning the trigger of equating pleasing others to the fear of being beaten or abandoned is no easy task. A fear of losing what relationships one does have, even if these relationships are based on subservient-dominant dynamics, can hold unhealthy relational dynamics in place. Stating one's needs can lead to shaming. “[I]n an unequal power situation or where mutual empathy is absent, shaming others becomes a means to control them” (Jordan, 1989, p. 6). Speaking up and consciously choosing to move out of a controlling relationship is profoundly courageous.

Waging Good Conflict

The next to last skill necessary for relational development is reclaiming conflict. As mentioned previously, our culture experiences angry children, particularly angry girls as dangerous. As Lyn Mikel Brown (2005, p. 186) states, “The problem is that girls’ legitimate anger has been co-opted as either erotic, trivial, or pathological, and separated from its real source.” However, as Jean Baker Miller states, conflict is inevitable in relationships, and is actually a sign of growth and deepening connection. Miller coined the phrase “waging good conflict” to explain this process in which people can authentically share their experiences, even when uncomfortable and opposed to another’s viewpoint (1986, p. 132). The commitment is to the relationship, rather than getting one’s own way or being right.

Reclaiming conflict is not, however, a free pass to tell people off at will. Teaching relational development without including cultural context and understanding of power dynamics would be like teaching a child to be an Olympic swimmer, only hold the race in a toxic cesspool. Taking into account power differentiations within relationships is crucial in understanding how power and privilege affect relationships. The message is not to limit children to a culturally assigned station as much as to respectfully educate them about how governing institutions such as schools and law enforcement and organizations such as direct-service providers and agencies currently operate in a “power-over” culture.

New Communities

Work towards health and authenticity may not be welcomed among “old playmates,” a term coined by prostitution expert Rochelle Dalla. In her landmark article “You can’t hustle all your life: An exploratory investigation of the exit process among street-level prostituted women,” Dalla writes about women leaving prostitution, “In addition to describing efforts to maintain and strengthen relationships with certain network members (i.e., family, partners, children) these... women also described distancing themselves from others—namely, old playmates” (2000, p. 282).

Understanding the importance of community is also an imperative skill for balanced relational development. Our culture’s hyperindividualized “go it alone” and “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” messages of what it means to be a “mature” and psychologically healthy human being only promote isolation (Jordan, 2010). Prostituted children need the support of caring individuals and one another to heal and to create lives away from “old playmates.” Needing to leave one community behind necessitates moving toward an even stronger, connected community dedicated to supporting growth-fostering and authentic relationship and health. Part of this support is providing the space to grieve the loss of the former communities without judgment of their unhealthy nature.

Shifting Culture

Challenging the popular notion of masculinity that equates aggression and domination with “being a real man” is also imperative. As Douglas Pryor (1996) so eloquently states:

[In regards to men he studied that raped children] There is nothing about how the men acted on a generic level that, in and of itself, is abnormal or “odd” for men per se. Offenders and their behavior are frequently seen as abnormal because defining them as such absolves non-offending men of all responsibility...this does not make what offenders do acceptable or tolerable in any way. It is not to give license to men in general to do as they please to others. Indeed it is to implicate male culture generally as problematic. It raises the question about whether men are willing to reassess their status and worldview as men.

Furthermore, as a culture, we need to support and enlarge the community of people committed to the care and healing of exploited children. We need to take a stand as a culture against the slavery of our fellow human beings. In Sweden prostitution is not illegal, but purchasing sex is (Bennetts, 2011). What a profound statement and stance taken by an entire country that distinguishes and acknowledges the gendered power differentiations driving these transactions.

In a recent MSNBC documentary (2009) a police officer was interviewed stated that his way of helping prostituted children was to arrest them if only for one night to keep them safe. While I applaud this officer's intention, the criminal record created by his effort will most likely follow this child around a long time to come, most likely inhibiting opportunities of employment, education, housing. Such is the case for Jessica, a formerly prostituted youth in Boston who was arrested. She "is taking college classes in hope of becoming a social worker. She is frustrated that her juvenile arrest record for prostitution is impeding her progress" (McKim, 2011).

Conclusion

In stating that Nicolette "needed to get 'proper moral principles'" the family court judge did not see Nicolette as a human being in need of empathy and understanding. Her life was subject to, literally, judgment. Margaret Wheatley (2001) writes in *Relying on human goodness*, "Oppression never occurs between equals. Tyranny always arises from the belief that some people are more human than others. There is no other way to justify inhumane treatment, except to assume that the pain inflicted on the oppressed is not the same as ours."

If we do not see a mutual humanity in exploited children then we can deny any responsibility for their reality, which often starts with the betrayal of children in our families and communities. Relational templates of manipulation and abuse are often the gateway to further violation and harm, and must be mended through the development of growth-fostering relationships if exploited children are to heal (see Appendix for progression of relational risks, resilience, and development).

Without acknowledging the linkage of risk factors such as child sexual abuse, neglect, and poverty and child sexual exploitation, the many efforts to combat child trafficking are moot. Pouring resources into preventing these risks and promoting healthy development for all children is the essential foundation to ending child sexual exploitation.

Finally, until all forms of child abuse are eradicated, the most profound thing you can do for abused or neglected children—or for all children—is to tell and show them that they matter. Keeping children out of isolation is the single most revolutionary act we can take in a world where shame, isolation, and disconnection cause indelible amounts of suffering in our families, neighborhoods, and around the world.

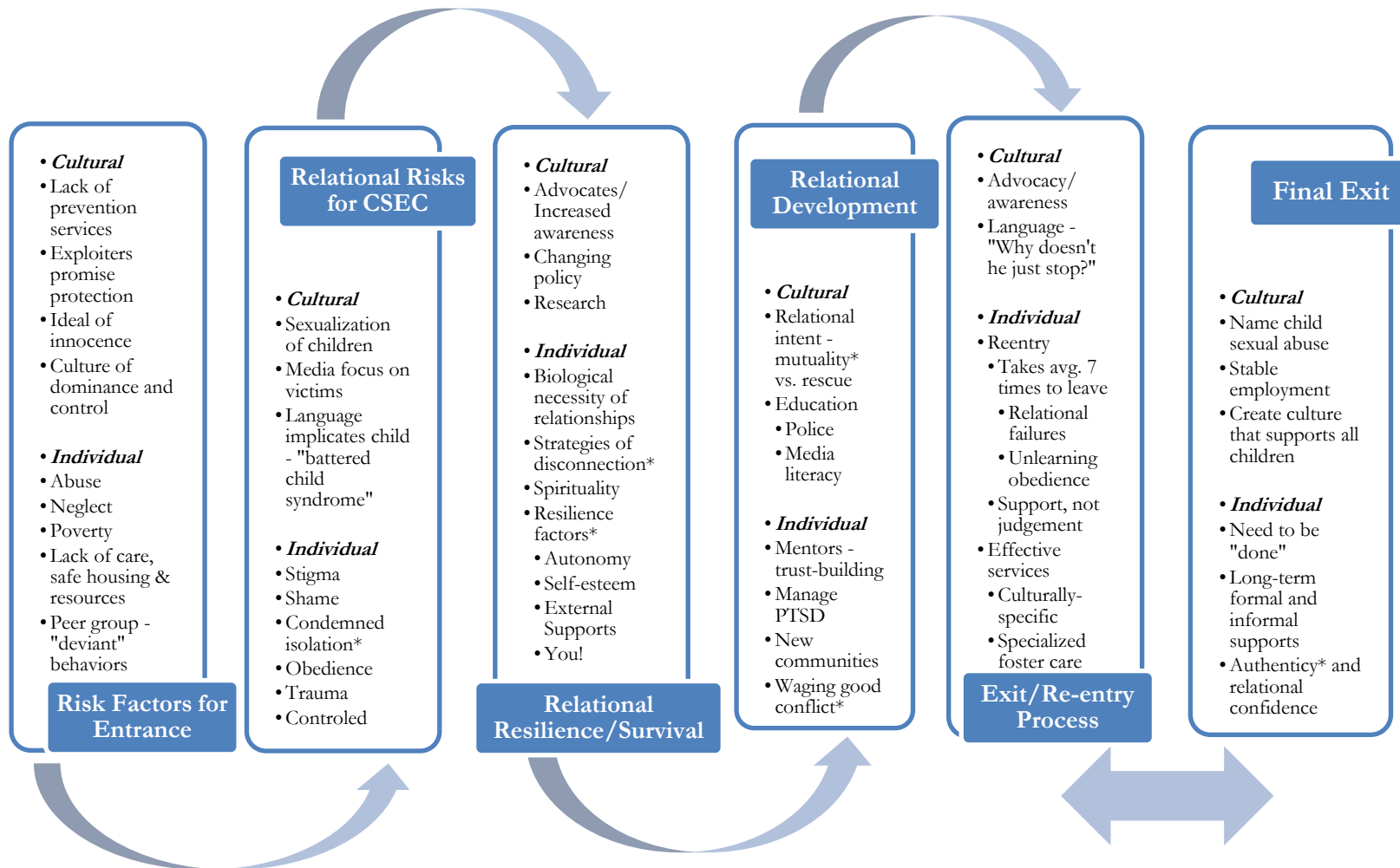
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Appendix

Progression of Relational Risks, Resilience, and Development for Sexually Exploited Children



*See reverse for definition and more information

Appendix

Progression of Relational Risks, Resilience, and Development for Sexually Exploited Children

Glossary of Terms

(adapted from *Relational-Cultural Therapy*, by Judith V. Jordan, Ph.D., American Psychological Association, 2010)

Authenticity: The capacity to bring one's real experience, feelings, and thoughts into relationship, with sensitivity and awareness to the possible impact of one's actions on others. It does not give license to total reactivity or telling the "whole truth," but rather sharing the "one true thing" that will move relationship in some positive way.

Condemned Isolation: The experience of isolation and aloneness that leaves one feeling shut out of the human community. One feels alone, immobilized regarding reconnection, and at fault for this state. This is different from the experience of "being alone" or solitude, in which one can feel deeply connected (to nature, others).

Mutuality: The concept in RCT suggesting that we grow toward an increased capacity for respect, having an impact on the other, and being open to being changed by others. Without vulnerability, real growth will probably not occur. Mutuality does not mean sameness or reciprocity; it is a way of relating where each (or all) of the people involved are participating as fully as possible.

Relational Paradox: Keeping one's true feelings out of relationship to maintain some semblance or remnant of relationship.

Strategies of Disconnection: Methods people develop to stay out of relationship in order to prevent violation. Also known as *strategies of survival*, these evolve out of one's attempt to find some way to make or preserve whatever connection is possible (i.e. lying, addiction, relational paradox).

Waging Good Conflict: The process in which people can authentically share their experiences, even when uncomfortable and opposed to another's viewpoint. Presenting differences that arise with responsive presence and commitment to relationship. Often a sign that relational growth is occurring and deepening.

The Top 5 Resilience Factors

(Vicario, M. 2012)

5. Autonomy

(What decisions can I make for my life? How do I define power and control? How do I use & how do I want to use my powers of influence?)

4. Self Esteem

Sense of Self – Personal Preferences (likes & dislikes)

Sense of Self Worth – When do you feel loved and valued?

Jean Baker Miller's "Five Good Things" from mutually enhancing relationships (Zest, Clarity, Increased sense of worth, Creativity/Productivity, Desire for more connection)

Sense of Self-efficacy – How do you affect change – what do I have power and control over – How do I make things happen?

3. External Support Systems (Can be a person, pet, fantasy)

2. Affiliation

(With a cohesive supportive group working toward a positive goal and/or recognition of your own acts that contribute to the greater good)

1. YOU!

(Positive Experiences with safe adults, esp. people in positions of authority.)

Key References (see Working Paper for full list)

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