Understanding young women's sexual relationship experiences:

the nature and role of vulnerability

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Abstract

This paper seeks to operationalise the concept of social 'vulnerability' and explore its usefulness as a framework for understanding sexual relationships. Data from thirty vulnerable and less vulnerable young women in one UK city were collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups. An analysis of differences and similarities in participants' sexual relationships suggested that differences between the two groups of young women could be due to the divergent social contexts they lived in. Similarities in accounts offered, however, indicated that beyond vulnerability due to differences in socio-economic status, gender and other factors are crucial to any model for understanding young people's sexual relationships. The centrality of social context in differentiating between the experiences of different groups of young women, and the protection offered by environments that promote educational attainment and which are characterised by relatively high levels of adult supervision, is illustrated by two case studies of less vulnerable young women.

Introduction

In the UK, national policy since the late 1990s has focused on improving the life chances of young people commonly described as being 'at risk', 'socially excluded', or 'vulnerable'. National targets, for example, have been set for local authorities aimed at improving outcomes for teenage parents, young people in public care and young offenders (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999, 2003; Connexions Service National Unit and The Youth Justice Board, 2001). 'Vulnerability' also appears in international discourses surrounding young people's sexual and reproductive health, where it is most often used to imply that by virtue of economic, political and social factors some young people find themselves excluded from the means by which to protect and promote their sexual health (Aggleton et al., 2004).

This paper aims to explore how useful the concept of vulnerability is in providing a framework for understanding contemporary differences in young women's sexual relationships. The sexual relationship attitudes and experiences of a diverse group of 30 young women (average age of 18 years) were investigated to examine the extent to which these differed according to young women's vulnerability backgrounds. Young women in one UK city were recruited to form what might be described as a vulnerable (N=17) and a less vulnerable (N=13) sample. Agencies were approached who worked with young women from opposite ends of the 'social exclusion' spectrum[1]. Vulnerability for the purposes of the study was defined by level of educational attainment; history of substance misuse; experiences of youth offending; homelessness; teenage parenthood; and current levels of adult support and supervision [1]. Young women's narratives from in-depth interviews (N=22) and focus group discussions (2 focus groups, with 11 participants in total, three of whom also took part in an interview) were analysed to explore similarities and differences between the vulnerable and

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[1] Social exclusion and vulnerability are terms often used interchangeably within UK policy frameworks.

less vulnerable groups across a number of domains of relevance to sexual relationships. These domains included, among others, gender role attitudes; expectations of relationships; attitudes to sex; and experiences of coercion.

Following a more detailed review of the concept of vulnerability, vulnerable and less vulnerable study participants' sexual relationships will be analysed to identify differences and similarities in attitudes and experiences. This will be followed by two short case studies of less vulnerable young women which will allow a more in-depth exploration of possible reasons for the differences and similarities found amongst participants. The paper concludes by assessing how useful vulnerability is as a framework for understanding young people's sexual relationships.

Definitions of vulnerability

Two of the most significant and recently published government policies laying the foundations for the development of children and young people's services in the UK are *Every Child Matters* (HM Treasury, 2003) and *Youth Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2005). Both documents make reference to 'vulnerable children/young people', but do not provide a definition for the term vulnerable as defined within this context.

In *Every Child Matters* (figure 1, page 20) vulnerable children are identified as a separate category to 'children in need'[2]. Vulnerable children are therefore presented as being less 'in need' or 'at risk' than certain others, as it is estimated in this same source that children in need account for only ten percent of the total number of vulnerable children in England and Wales.

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[2] Children in need is a statutorily defined category set out under section 17 of the Children Act, 1989.

While individual children and young people are described as being vulnerable in current policy[3], so are whole groups and communities. In the recently published *Every Child Matters: Next Steps* report (Department for Education and Skills, 2004) some concrete examples are given of who such vulnerable children/young people might be. They include 'children on the child protection register, looked after children, young carers, disabled children, the children of asylum seekers or of prisoners' (p. 26), but such categorisation is not supported by an explanation of why these groups could be considered vulnerable.

Similarly, the Social Exclusion Unit's report *Tackling Social Exclusion: taking stock and looking to the future* (2004) suggests that both individual people and whole communities can experience social exclusion because they 'suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown' (p. 4). Arguably, the use of the concept vulnerability in current policy discussions confuses two distinct theoretical ways of explaining why inequality outcomes occur. On the one hand, some policy positions suggest that vulnerability can be explained by social context, while at the same time casting vulnerability in terms of the individual propensity to risk.

Reference to vulnerability is found in research literature as well – in the fields of medicine, psychiatry, economic and environmental development, and in some sexual health and HIV/AIDS studies. Health behaviour models used to explain sexual risk-taking sometimes employ the concept of 'perceived vulnerability' (Gerrard et al., 1996). These and other (non-

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[3] Therefore requiring 'individualised, client-focused and more flexible [intervention] approaches' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004: 24).

psychological) studies appear to suggest that being vulnerable is synonymous with the degree to which people are at risk of negative health outcomes and experiences.

Delor & Hubert (2000) and Aggleton et al. (2004), on the other hand, have offered more comprehensive definitions of vulnerability, within the sexual health field at least, linking these to the context within which sexual relationships occur. Delor & Hubert (2000), for example, suggest that a person's vulnerability to HIV during a sexual encounter is determined by three sets of variables: their position on the social trajectory (for instance, their age, degree of social mobility and perception of the future); their interaction with the other person(s) within the sexual encounter (and the intersection of two social trajectories at that point in time); and finally, the social context and the way this shapes the other two factors. Delor & Hubert (2000) stress that a person's vulnerability will change over time, across different environments, and with different sexual partners.

Aggleton et al. (2004), on the other hand, draw an important distinction between concepts of risk and vulnerability. Risk can be defined as the probability that someone will acquire a sexually transmitted infection, while vulnerability is best described as the collection of factors that increase the likelihood of someone engaging in behaviours that put them at risk. Group or subculture membership, the quality and coverage of support and health services available, and broader societal and environmental influences (such as age, gender, sexuality, poverty) have all been argued to determine a person's vulnerability.

Both Delor & Hubert (2000) and Aggleton et al. (2004) therefore present multi-tiered descriptions of vulnerability. Common to both approaches is first, the influence of broader societal factors (degree of inequitable distribution of wealth, young people's access to health

and support services, cultural norms related to the acceptability of young people's sexuality) and second, the specific social context in which someone lives or occupied by the 'group' to which they are affiliated. For instance, young people who are homeless, young lesbians, bisexuals and gay men, and young migrants all constitute different groups who are usually connected through a common experience of discrimination or who face economic and social barriers to participation in mainstream society. Often within these groups sub-cultures develop that influence norms and sexual practices.

Delor & Hubert (2000) introduce a third tier to the framework of vulnerability by suggesting that the interaction of partners in a sexual encounter and the individual resources each person brings to the dyad adds a crucial dimension to informing an understanding of what transpires during an encounter. While Aggleton et al. (2004) agree that this third tier is an important adjunct to any framework for understanding young people's sexual relationships, they see it as more closely linked to individual risk (and the statistical likelihood of infection) rather than social vulnerability, an important theoretical distinction.

Only a few studies have sought to operationalise the concept of vulnerability and explore whether and in what way sexual relationships are distinct across different groups of young people. Pawlby et al. (1997) compared two groups of young women from the same socio-economically deprived area of London, and found differences in attitudes and experiences between young women who had been in contact with social services and those who had not. Hughes (1999) used a wider range of factors to recruit comparative groups. Vulnerable young people (recruited to this group if they lived in a disadvantaged socio-economic community, had experience of offending, had had an abortion or had become a teenage parent) were found to have more partners, more 'opportunistic' attitudes to sex, be less likely

to use contraception, and were more likely to adhere to gender-differentiated norms than others.

The findings reported on in this research match those of other studies (e.g. Rosenthal et al., 1994; Corlyon & McGuire, 1999) that have not directly used the concept of vulnerability in their work, but have undertaken a comparative investigation of young people living in very different social contexts, with arguably very different life opportunities ahead of them. Rosenthal et al. (1994) compared a group of homeless young people with a group who were living at home and attending secondary school. The study revealed differences between the homeless and non-homeless groups but also gender-differentiated sexual relationship attitudes among the homeless participants. The young homeless women in Rosenthal et al.'s work described very similar romantic relationship attitudes to the young women known to social services in Pawlby et al. (1997). Hey (1997) and Thomson (2000) focused on socio-economic class differences in sexual relationships and suggested that young people in deprived communities had different 'economies of value' (Thomson, 2000, p. 424) with regard to sex and relationships compared to those from middle-class families.

Although empirical research to date has tended to adopt a limited and/or poorly defined notion of what it means to be vulnerable, it would appear that certain groups of young people have distinct experiences that are influenced by their current social context (being homeless, living in a socio-economically deprived community – Rosenthal et al., 1994; Thomson, 2000), by their past experiences (being in the care of social services – Pawlby et al., 1997; Corlyon & McGuire, 1999) or by their gender (many studies have reported differences in attitudes and experiences between young men and women - Rosenthal et al., 1994; Holland et al., 1998; Hillier et al., 1999; Frosh et al., 2002 – and many argue young women are more vulnerable in

heterosexual interactions, see especially Holland et al., 1998). Social context and the way past experiences influence the current environment occupied, and a person's gender, appear to be crucial in providing a framework for understanding sexual relationships. This paper focuses in on these concerns to explore the various ways in which social context and gender interact to influence young women's sexual relationship attitudes and experiences.

Differences between vulnerable and less vulnerable young women

Five key differences between the two groups of young women stood out from their narratives: the sexual relationship pathways they described experiencing during their youth; the degree to which they had developed clear expectations for their heterosexual relationships; the priority given to such relationships within their lives; their attitudes to sex; and the type and extent of coercion they described in their relationships. Vulnerable young women in the study reported having embarked on sexual and romantic relationships on average two to three years earlier and having a larger number of partners than their less vulnerable peers. Vulnerable young women also appeared to experience serial relationships, having spent little or no time out of a heterosexual relationship since their early youth.

> *'It's like every time I split with a bloke, it is only like one or two weeks then I am with someone else, and it's not like, I don't want to be single, but it just comes before you know it you are in another relationship.'*
> (Lucy, aged 19, vulnerable, homeless drop-in project)

Unlike vulnerable young women, many in the less vulnerable group seemed to follow a much longer time-scale and sequence when embarking on romantic relationships. If less vulnerable young women met a potential partner, as suggested by Lea in the following account, they

tended to prioritise developing a non-sexual friendship first, before determining whether to commit to a romantic relationship:

> *'You should become lovers from best friends probably; or [perhaps] not best friends, but [you should] really get to know each other as deep friends first.'*
> (Lea, aged 19, less vulnerable, boarding school)

Many less vulnerable young women described a lengthy process (taking often a few months) of getting to know a partner through telephone conversations, spending time together in a group of friends, establishing they were a couple and only then, after intentions and emotions around sexual intercourse were discussed or hinted at, would sex occur.

> *'Having sex was…something you built up to…'*
> (Jen, aged 18, less vulnerable, boarding school)

Vulnerable young women's relationships often became sexually intimate almost immediately, although in some cases, as indicated by Sarah and Joanne, young women preferred to wait a few weeks to ensure their partner was really interested in embarking on a relationship with them, rather than just having 'casual' sex.

> *Interviewer: 'How come it took two weeks before you had sex for the first time?'*
> *Sarah: 'Because of me…coz he wanted it basically, from the moment that he'd seen me he wanted it (laughs)…but I wanted to check that he was for real first…[also] because I knew him a little bit more than what you normally would when you get into bed with someone…[that made] it a little bit scary…'*

(Sarah, aged 23, vulnerable, supported accommodation unit 1)

Joanne: 'I don't like doing it on the first night, it's horrible. It makes you feel dirty…we did it like two weeks later.'

Interviewer: 'And what made you feel ready two weeks later?'

Joanne: 'I felt that um, I don't know, I just felt ready.'

(Joanne, aged 19, vulnerable, supported accommodation unit 2)

Differences in the age at which young women commenced sexual relationships and the speed at which relationships were formed also seemed to influence the degree to which young women articulated and embedded relationship expectations into their experiences. Less vulnerable young women, perhaps because they embarked on romantic relationships later, seemed to have developed their expectations well before they started such experiences. Vulnerable young women, however, seemed only to have begun articulating expectations for relationships at the time of the study, when the majority of vulnerable participants were aged 18 or over. The vulnerable young women demonstrated a degree of reflexivity about their relationships that they suggested was new to them. Many overtly discussed their intention of setting out certain requirements for future relationships (such as not accepting domestic violence), which they had not felt able to do in early and middle adolescence.

'In my next relationship…I want us to both be off drugs and I want it to be a proper relationship… one where he doesn't hit you and stuff like that like.'

(Chloe, aged 21, vulnerable, supported accommodation unit 2)

Vulnerable young women were more likely to prioritise their relationships over the other areas of their lives. Four of the young women were already engaged and many others described future aspirations of settling down and starting a family. Some less vulnerable young women expected to get married later on, but were all initially committed to pursuing their education and a career. For some, relationships were seen as unnecessarily distracting them from achieving this goal (see also Hillier et al., 1999; Thomson & Holland, 2002), while others felt a little more able to manage both.

'I hope to be married at 28; but I want to be a doctor and I don't think I can handle getting married at such an early age. I think it is important to experience the different types of relationships because some of us don't have that much experience. People who are getting married at our age, I am thinking – how can you be sure he is the one? How can you know that you want to spend the rest of your life with this guy, if you don't know what other guys are like?…'
(Less vulnerable young woman, aged 17, in focus group at the boarding school)

'A relationship does require a lot of time and effort and I didn't quite have that combination at the time…that's why I didn't do very well in my [previous - GCSE] exams…[since then] I've had plenty of opportunities to have relationships but I have always moved away from them, because I know that somewhere down the line, I'd get distracted and I don't want to get distracted now…'
(Lindsey, aged 19, less vulnerable, boarding school)

When discussing sex and sexual pleasure, the more vulnerable young women were clearly distinguishable from their less vulnerable counterparts. The former group had a more

assertive attitude to their sexual needs and discussed, as Sarah and Joanne do here, sexual

pleasure experiences:

> *'It was first time nerves [during the first experience of sex in her current relationship] but…as soon as that was over, it was give me more, give me more…I've hit the jackpot you know what I mean.'*
> (Sarah, aged 23, vulnerable, supported accommodation unit 1)

> '*Oral sex…makes your hair explode.'*
> (Joanne, aged 19, vulnerable, supported accommodation unit 2)

The majority of less vulnerable young women, maybe because they were on the whole much

less experienced, rarely mentioned sexual desire or experiences of pleasure and orgasm. They

tended to see their sexuality as something precious, and the decision to '*give him my virginity*'

(Lea, aged 19, less vulnerable, boarding school) or to have sex in a new relationship was not

to be taken lightly (see also Luker, 1996 and White, 1999).

> '*I'll [have to] be sure the person is somebody I want to give it [my virginity] to…he has to be…at least the kind of person I could marry.'*
> (Angela, aged 17, less vulnerable, boarding school)

Many of these young women identified that their sexuality had some power over young men,

but nonetheless, as Shelley comments here, saw it as something that had to be 'controlled':

> *'I have come off the pill now, because I know I am not going to be having sex – that's another way I control myself to not sleep with people, by not taking it, so I don't have the advantage.'*
>
> (Shelley, aged 17, less vulnerable, boarding school)

Although sex was taking an increasingly important place in their life, less vulnerable young women often seemed to find it confusing and scary and saw it as a development that would increase the probability of experiencing non-negotiated outcomes with young men (Tolman, 1994).

Both groups of young women described negative experiences within their relationships, including sexual pressure (discussed further below) and infidelities by partners. However, vulnerable young women described far more serious incidents of violence and psychological control in their relationships. These accounts typify many of the experiences shared by the vulnerable young women in this study:

> *'I have been hit in every relationship I have been in…I've been hit black and blue, black eyes and everything, battered/whipped round the face, whipped round the face with the end of an umbrella and everything…'*
>
> (Vulnerable young woman, aged 17, in focus group at supported accommodation unit 1)

> *'I was with him for three years and he was violent throughout the whole of those three years, minus the first three months…I got um, regular beatings and slaps for not going out and nicking stuff [stealing to fund their heroin habits], and not doing what I was*

> *told and for being dirty and being a heroin addict...I got slaps for when like I would*
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> *go upstairs and see someone for five minutes, I'd come back downstairs and he'd go*
>
> *"Oh you was doing smack [heroin] with him upstairs while I'm sitting down here with*
>
> *nothing" and it's like "Well no, I'm not really, I went upstairs to get a cigarette and I*
>
> *came downstairs to give it to you"...'*

(Caro, aged 21, vulnerable, supported accommodation unit 1)

High levels of drug and alcohol use among this group of young women and those around

them ('*when he's been drinking he gets like a bit violent*' – Lucy, aged 19, vulnerable,

homeless drop-in project), but also the fact that they were likely to have cohabited with a

partner (Magdol et al., 1998) from an early age may help to explain this difference in

relationship violence noted amongst the two groups of study participants.

Overall, the differences in the social context in which the two groups of young women in the

study lived can at least partially explain the variety of sexual relationship experiences

observed. Vulnerable young women described worlds where they had left home during early

to mid-youth, where they were involved in peer groups who misused substances and

offended, where violence and sexual activity were the norm, and future aspirations were

limited by the lack of opportunities available to them due to curtailed education, addiction

problems, homelessness and so forth. Less vulnerable young women, while still sharing some

experiences of family breakdown or mental health difficulties, were on the whole far more

sheltered from such environments which might explain for instance the slower onset of sexual

relationship involvement.

Maxwell, C. (2006) 'Understanding young women's sexual relationship experiences: the nature and role of vulnerability', Journal of Youth Studies, 9(2): 141-158.

Similarities between vulnerable and less vulnerable young women

Despite some considerable differences between the two groups of young women in their sexual relationship experiences, there also emerged a number of themes that appeared to be common to both groups. While the differences between the vulnerable and less vulnerable young women could be understood in relation to the social contexts they lived in, similarities across the two groups appeared to stem from their almost unanimous adherence to traditional gender role norms, including: condemnation of casual sex; seeing emotional connectedness as a necessary condition for sexual pleasure; and positioning men as the initiators in sexual relationships. Young women from across both groups described relationship experiences where partners had been possessive, pressured them into sex and where young women expected to do the bulk of the 'emotion work' (Duncombe & Marsden, 1998).

Almost without exception, young women reported experiences of possessiveness by their male partners. As the following two young women recounted, male partners often reacted aggressively or jealously to their girlfriends receiving attention from other men:

> *'I get attention and [my current boyfriend] starts [saying] silly things [like], "Look over there, what are you looking at my missus for''…my past boyfriend would [just say], ''Yeah, I know she's nice, she's mine", and kiss me in front of everyone.'*
> (Lucy, aged 19, vulnerable, homeless drop-in project)

> *'He [current boyfriend] hates me receiving calls from my friends, [who are] guys. Even [if they are] girls. If I am with him and I get a call, he gets angry…'*
> (Holly, aged 18, less vulnerable, boarding school)

Few young women seemed to reject these experiences as wholly negative and often justified such behaviour. While most agreed it was '*horrible sometimes*' (vulnerable young woman, aged 18, in a focus group of young mothers), somehow it confirmed for them a connection to their partner. For many this type of proof of feeling was deemed worth the annoyance and restriction it caused.

> '*He's got a jealous streak in him…that does annoy me, but then I know…that it's because he doesn't want to lose me.*'
>
> (Liz, aged 16, vulnerable, supported accommodation unit 1)

> '*I think he is possessive in that you know if we go out and some guy starts talking to me, he feels not threatened but…he does feel sometimes…he is not good enough for me and stuff. Purely because he thinks I should be with some white, sort of private school boy.*'
>
> (Rachel, aged 18, less vulnerable, boarding school)

Young women in both samples were also likely to describe a willingness to work on and actively try to nurture their relationships (Wood, 1993; Duncombe & Marsden, 1998; Dear & Roberts, 2002). Young women described situations where they had tolerated negative behaviour in order to protect the emotional and time investment they had already made into a relationship. Holly expressed a common commitment that young women made to their relationships, even if the relationships were not meeting their expectations:

'I've said to myself if I agree to get into [a relationship] then there's no point in backing off because he is not what I expected, that sort of thing. I just say to myself I am going to try and make it work, I'll try my best and if it doesn't work then I'll know that in the future I won't regret [it], [I'll know]…I played my part. And so I try my best to make it work.'

(Holly, aged 18, less vulnerable, boarding school)

'A lot of time…by the time the guy shows his traits, you are trying to bend a little just for the sake of the relationship; but I think there is a time when you really, really have draw a line and say if things are not going the way I want them to, then the relationship has to end; and don't bend it for the guy.'

(Less vulnerable young woman, aged 17, in focus group at the boarding school)

Jen succinctly illustrated how the level of emotional investment in a relationship impacted on her ability to challenge her partner (see also Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997; Tschann et al., 2002). She was not enjoying sex with her partner, and while she had challenged him at the beginning of their relationship about this; once he had begun to be more controlling and possessive she quickly lost her confidence to challenge.

'At the beginning of the relationship because I knew he liked me so much, and I was sort of getting towards liking him…I kind of had the control maybe…[but later on] I guess by that stage I was kind of feeling less secure in the relationship…so I didn't really want to…push him too far really.'

(Jen, aged 18, less vulnerable, boarding school)

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The majority of young women in both groups (12 of the 17 vulnerable young women and seven of the 13 less vulnerable young women) reported experiences of sexual pressure or coercion (also supported by other studies such as White, 1999 and Abrams, 2003 to name but a few). Young women described experiences of childhood sexual abuse, (attempted) sexual assault ('*I was in my sleeping bag zipped up, I woke up and found the sleeping bag half zipped open and this guy lying next to us with a massive, big...[erection]*' – Lola, aged 23, vulnerable, supported accommodation unit 2; '*I have been like sexually assaulted on the train as well which has made me a bit more a bit more nervous I think...I mean it was in the underground in X [a foreign country] and a man just tried to pull down my trousers and tried to feel me and I was like, oh my God..., honestly [I was] quite scared – I didn't say a word...I just put a hand in front of my thighs...I was 16...around that*' – Chrissie, aged 17, less vulnerable, boarding school), and/or sexual pressure from a partner. Sarah summarised the key pressures that many young women identified when discussing sexual relationships: playing a relatively passive role within sexual encounters; feeling obliged to have sex when their male partner wanted it; feeling guilty for not wanting to satisfy their male partner's 'needs'; assigning greater importance to their partner's needs than their own; and the fear of acknowledging that a partner you care for is submitting you to a coercive experience (supported by Gavey, 1993; Lear, 1997; Holland et al., 1998; White, 1999; Impett & Peplau, 2002):

> '*If I say "No" [to sex], I feel bad because I've made a fuss...; [or if I say "No" to sex and]...he doesn't stop, then that would be rape...[so I] sort of lie there...maybe that's the [best] way of not getting hurt as much as you would be the other way...*'
> (Sarah, aged 23, vulnerable, supported accommodation unit 1)

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'I would like say I don't want to do this with you, I don't want you to touch me sort of thing, but he would like say things like – that means you don't like me, that means you don't care about us – and because I was so soft and so oh well I really like him, if I let him [do] whatever he wants…'

(Amelia, aged 18, less vulnerable, boarding school)

The similarities across the sample of young women studied in terms of their experiences of romantic relationships and the roles they assumed within them were surprising, given the difference in contexts in which the two groups led their lives. It would appear, therefore, that while social context is an important factor in understanding young people's sexual relationships (as suggested by Delor & Hubert, 2000 and Aggleton et al., 2004), gender also influences attitudes and experiences. Thus, the study participants reported similar experiences because they belonged to the group of 'women'.

How vulnerable are less vulnerable young women?

A number (five out of 13) of the less vulnerable young women's narratives of their sexual experiences did not consistently conform to the broad categorisations made above. The variation in attitudes and experiences reported was much larger among this group than among the vulnerable young women. A few respondents from the less vulnerable group had become involved in sexual relationships as early as their vulnerable peers (three out of the five young women identified above) or described assertive and pleasure-focused attitudes to sex (two out of that group). Some of the less vulnerable young women, despite living in a relatively adult-supervised environment, which was arguably more likely to protect them from certain negative experiences that were described by vulnerable young women (such as high levels of

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substance misuse amongst peers or the expectation of violence between partners), described experiences that took place outside the more protective 'cocoon' provided by their social context (all five of the young women). Case studies of two of the less vulnerable young women identified above will aim to illustrate in more depth how on the one hand their sexual relationships seemed similar to their vulnerable peers, yet on the other hand, continued to be distinguishable as a result of the social context in which they lived.

Billie (aged 16) was in her penultimate year at the fee-paying boarding school. Although she was British she had mainly grown up abroad and only just arrived back in the UK because her parents wanted her to complete her secondary schooling here. Unlike most of her less vulnerable peers, Billie presented an assertive, pleasure-oriented, non-traditional attitude to her sexuality. Although very few young women made reference to their parents' attitudes to sex when discussing their own views, Billie suggested her '*liberal*' attitude may in part have come from '*my parents…they still walk around naked – ever since I have been a knee-high grass hopper*'. Billie reported having the highest number of sexual partners across both groups of young women. She enjoyed casual sex, especially with friends – '*whenever we get drunk we just do stuff…and it's really nice having friends that you can do stuff with, like in the heat of the moment, and then the next day you are still friends again*'. Only two vulnerable young women, and no other less vulnerable young women, recounted similar experiences of casual sex, outside the boundaries of a romantic relationship (Billie: '*I used to be quite promiscuous…I was just like going out with random people, people who didn't mean anything to me…I would make out with like ten or 11 guys a night when I would go out to a bar*'). Billie reported '*doing sexual stuff*' from the age of 12 and had made an active decision to lose her virginity when she was 14 years old. Attaining sexual pleasure seemed to be her key reported motivation for sex and although Billie did not always actively negotiate her

encounters, she certainly saw this as a role she, as a young woman, could assume – '*you just get fed up if they [sexual partner] are crap…[sometimes] can't be arsed to explain why they are being crap – and you are like, enough of this, I'm going home…*'. Although two other young women discussed feeling attracted to same-sex peers, only Billie had had sex with other women and labelled herself '*bi*'. '*I think I've always liked to do new things and…especially when you are horny, and you are in a place where you have never done it [had sexual intercourse] before, and it's like, ah huh, let's go…and after you have done it in a lot of strange places, a lot of different ways, positions, you know*' - only a few of the vulnerable respondents discussed sexual activities in the way Billie did. She was also the only young woman to describe an experience of a '*threesome*' or to discuss a sexual fantasy during the interview ('*I kind of have this fetish where I like guys to dress as girls and stuff*').

Billie described a significant change in her sexual relationship experiences since she had arrived at the boarding school. '*I was just like going crazy…after two weeks of not having sex when I first came here*'. Compared to the previous city in which she had lived, where '*everything…[and] everyone was completely different – the way they looked, their race, the music they listened to, you didn't feel left out…there was like older people…[and] there was easy access to alcohol…*', the change in environment had meant she had to make new friends, was no longer as free to go out to bars and clubs as she had been when living with her parents, and had not had much opportunity to meet young men. In fact, Billie suggested that the change in her surroundings had led her to focus her attention more keenly on pursuing same-sex experiences, as '*English guys just don't do anything for me…I find them very narrow minded and stuff*'.

Shelley (aged 17) was in her final year of her GCE 'A' Levels at the fee-paying boarding school. The environment she described when recalling her early youth sounded very similar to those depicted in the vulnerable young women's narratives. At age 13, Shelley had been '*hanging out with girlfriends…drinking like straight vodka from the off-licenses, we used to go and get drunk like every Saturday*'. At age 14, she '*discovered we could get into pubs*' and '*started sleeping with guys*'. Her first sexual experience, like the majority of vulnerable young women, had been with a guy who '*was a lot older then me, he was 18/19*'. Instead of spending time in mixed-sex, same-age peer groups as most of the other less vulnerable study participants appeared to, Shelley mainly hung out with young men from a socio-economically deprived area in the city who '*you know are seen as quite bad and you're like, yeah I want to hang around with them because they have got a bad image, bad reputation…[it was great because] they had like brand-new Golf GTIs, BMWs, they'd go cruising round, music blaring up and you know…it was smooth, they have enough money to throw away…we [me and my friends] were awful because we just used to use them, we used to like say, yeah, pay for that, pay for that….and then say bye, see you later*'. The main relationship experience Shelley shared during her interview was with an older man she had met in this social context.

'*This time last year, I was drinking too much, smoking too much, I was going out clubbing…..running myself into a rut…if I broke up with a boyfriend…I'd have waited two weeks and then gone out and found someone and jumped into bed with them…and hoped everything would have been alright*'. Such experiences in mid youth and the serial nature of Shelley's relationship experiences mirrored many vulnerable young women's stories more closely than her own classmates' narratives. Shelley acknowledged '*I feel insecure about myself*' which drove her to '*flirt*' as she wanted to '*prove to myself that I can get guys, instead of my friends, because it makes me feel better about myself*', however, at the same time she

wanted to find a way for '*people [to] respect me now, because I want to respect myself'*. While feelings of low self-worth were noted in narratives across both groups of young women, Shelley's recent period of reflection on her past experiences and her decision to try and alter her approach to, and expectations of, relationships resembled those observed among the vulnerable young women.

How can Billie and Shelley's narratives and the wider variation in experiences (such as onset of sexual relationships, sexual pleasure, degree of coercion or pressure experienced) observed within the less vulnerable group be accounted for by the vulnerability framework presented at the beginning of the paper? One explanation might be that overall, less vulnerable young women had more choice about the environments they could move in. Their parents or carers had financially secured their position in the relatively protected world of the boarding school, where educational attainment was expected and a safety net was put in place through close monitoring of their activities, rules governing their clothing and leisure pursuits, and counselling provision for those who were having even minor difficulties. However, not far away from the walls of the boarding school lay a different environment young women could venture into if they chose to do so, either because they were searching for excitement, wished to rebel (Billie identified both these reasons as driving her behaviour, before arriving at the boarding school as well as at the time of the study), or they were seeking affirmation for themselves (as appeared to be the case for Shelley). It was in these less adult-regulated, more socio-economically diverse environments that Billie and Shelley experienced the sexual relationships described above, rather than within the relatively socially homogenous peer group the boarding school provided. While less vulnerable young women were able to move between both social contexts, possibly explaining the lower degree of conformity in their

sexual relationship experiences, vulnerable young women only had access to the environment they lived in at the time of the study.

While some of Shelley's and Billie's experiences and attitudes mirror those reported by the vulnerable young women, somehow the protective membrane provided by the boarding school environment and the educational pathway they were expected to pursue, seemed to extend far enough and be porous enough to catch and reel them back in when they appeared to be straying too far from the social context their socio-economic position provided. Thus, Billie's arrival at the single-sex boarding school had immediately restricted her ability to go out drinking and clubbing, the environment where most of her sexual experiences had previously occurred, due to the school rules about going off school property. Although Billie discussed rebelling against the school's authority by violating certain clothing guidelines, ultimately she was wary of curtailing her educational opportunities by mounting too strong a challenge of the boundaries set. Similarly Shelley was at the time of the study receiving counselling at the school (because '*I don't like myself...[and] my family is like really messed up*') and knew she needed to begin prioritising her study commitments in order to complete her secondary school education and pursue her dream of working in television.

Billie and Shelley's case studies introduce three other factors which future studies exploring the usefulness of vulnerability as a framework for understanding young women's experiences of sexual relationships may wish to take into consideration: the role of parental attitudes to sex; disrupted family experiences; and feelings of low self-worth. Billie suggested during her interview that her parents had very liberal attitudes to nakedness and sex. This may well have influenced her own pleasure-focused and non-traditional attitude, yet the social context she described must have played a significant role nonetheless in enabling her to pursue the

experiences she described. Shelley, like a few other less vulnerable young women, described a disrupted family background and having feelings of low self-esteem. She appeared to attribute both to her attitude towards her body, her reasons for taking drugs and drinking alcohol, and how she related to young men. Family breakdown for the vulnerable young women sample had propelled them into an environment that increased their vulnerability in sexual relationships, but they had little choice in this change of context as they could no longer live at home. Shelley's experiences of family, however, did not dislocate her social and educational trajectory in the same way, as her parents' financial position meant she could be placed at a boarding school, an alternative yet relatively 'safe' and well supervised setting. It could be argued that Shelley's family background and sense of low self-worth may have led her to search out new social contexts, where her vulnerability was increased. Yet, from the stories of other less vulnerable young women who had disrupted family histories or described low self-esteem and mental health difficulties but who were not mixing in such environments, an association between family background and increased sexual vulnerability can not be directly made for less vulnerable young women.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to give greater clarity to concepts of vulnerability drawing upon empirical research on young women's sexual relationship attitudes and experiences. Two groups of young women were recruited, who appeared to be on very different social trajectories (Delor & Hubert, 2000) and could arguably be seen to be vulnerable or less vulnerable to certain negative sexual health outcomes. The narratives elicited from these two groups of young women were compared and indicated that while certain sexual relationship attitudes and experiences did differ between vulnerable and less vulnerable groups, in other domains young women reported very similar experiences. An examination of the possible

underlying reasons for the differences and similarities noted suggested that certain aspects of sexual relationships were strongly influenced by the social context young women lived in (onset of sexual relationship experiences, extent of violence experienced, attitude to sexuality), while other domains (experiences of possessiveness and sexual pressure by male partners, assuming the 'emotion work' role within relationships) were found to be common experiences due to the wider societal gender role norms that appeared to influence young women equally across both groups.

These findings support the broader definitions of vulnerability outlined at the beginning of the paper, which emphasize social context (and its complexity) as central to understanding differences in risks to negative sexual health outcomes such as sexually transmitted infections, sexual coercion experiences and unplanned pregnancy. The study also provides further evidence to support the centrality of gender in appreciating some of the underlying influences on sexual relationships and therefore supports the suggestion that gender (i.e. being female or male) should form an integral part of any future definition of vulnerability, within the context of sexual health at least (c.f. Holland et al., 1998; Aggleton et al., 2004; Rivers et al., 2005).

Within the less vulnerable group of young women, a small number of narratives fell outside the broad findings detailed above. The young women who proved to be anomalies ('exceptions to the rule') were further investigated through the use of two case studies in order to explore whether they provided a significant challenge to the usefulness of concepts of vulnerability in understanding young people's sexual relationships. The two less vulnerable young women appeared to mirror a number of the attitudes or experiences of their vulnerable counterparts such as early onset of sexual relationships, sex in the context of high levels of

substance use, spending time in environments with little adult supervision and commitment to the pursuit of sexual pleasure.

However, unlike the vulnerable young women, they had to some extent made a choice to have these experiences. To pursue the sexual relationships they described, they had had to purposively move out of the social context provided by their relative socio-economic privilege into one that created the conditions for these experiences. The usual social context to which these two young women belonged (the single-sex, fee-paying boarding school in this study) continued to retain some control over the extent of their immersion in this new and different environment and demonstrated the capacity to pull them back into the 'refuge' provided by the expectation of educational attainment by the significant adults around them. Thus, for some young people, social context can act as a safety net, and it appears from this research that the less vulnerable young women had greater access than their more vulnerable peers to protective networks should they become involved in experiences or be in situations that potentially put them at risk of poor sexual health outcomes. The study therefore further accentuates the importance of social environments in determining sexual vulnerability among young women while at the same time illustrating how social context must be considered alongside other factors, particularly gender, if a comprehensive understanding of vulnerability is to be arrived at.

Notes

[1] Although the terms vulnerability and social exclusion are relatively recent policy constructs and therefore specific to a particular historical and cultural context, the variables used to recruit young women into a vulnerable or less vulnerable sample were based on previous research findings that had identified substance misuse, low levels of adult

monitoring, low educational attainment, and anti-social behaviour as increasing a young person's disposition to poor sexual health (measured in terms of early experience of sexual intercourse, low or inconsistent contraceptive use and experience of coercive sex) – Small & Luster (1994) and Doljanac & Zimmerman (1998). Vulnerable young women were drawn from two supported accommodation units (who supported young people to learn to live independently if they had been in the care of social services, had substance misuse problems, been involved in offending or been homeless), one young mothers' support group and a drop-in project for young homeless people. The less vulnerable young women were recruited from a fee-paying, single-sex boarding school, where all young women were preparing to take their GCE 'A' Levels (one of the highest secondary school qualifications in England). Given the cost associated with attending a fee-paying boarding school, it was assumed that all young women recruited at this research site came from middle-class backgrounds. This assumption appeared justified, as when young women mentioned their parents during the interviews and focus groups, they tended to describe them as occupying professional positions (such lawyer, doctor, businessman and so forth).

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Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements