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## Review of *Child Sexual Exploitation: Why Theory Matters*

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## ***Book Review: Child Sexual Exploitation: Why Theory Matters***

J. Pearce (Ed.). (2019). *Child sexual exploitation: Why theory matters*. Policy Press. 263 pp. \$39.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4473-5143-6.

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Scholars from multiple disciplines have recently drawn attention to the theoretical and empirical silences on child sexual exploitation. Why have feminist scholars and social workers tended to avoid theorizing about child sexual violence, especially given the ideals underpinning feminist practice and praxis? Child sexual victimization has always been a political battleground wherein struggles over definitions, prevention, intervention, expertise, and claims to knowledge lie. Social workers on the frontlines know well the institutional disincentives to challenge the child welfare system's own assumptions and knowledge sets. They also know that practice is theory, and both are socially constructed and inform each other. It is thus foundational to reflect actively on the theoretical

commitments underpinning the evidence base for prevention and intervention to child sexual exploitation.

*Child Sexual Exploitation* is a significant contribution to social work education, research, and practice because it invites practitioners and academics to critically (re)think why they are engaged in their work. What motivates us to work with children affected by sexual exploitation? What principles, assumptions, or approaches underpin this work? *Why does theory matter?*

In this edited collection, Pearce presents these questions for discussion and self-reflection, curating a wide range of authors to explore how theory impacts social work. Drawing on a variety of theoretical traditions and insights, each author challenges the assumption that theory is irrelevant to practice. In fact, a central organizing theme of this work—and one of its major contributions—is a critique of the relationship between victimhood and agency. The opening chapters address assumed and accepted truths about child sexual exploitation, critiquing the outdated and damaging binary between agency and victimhood. Such a critique is essential because it provides space to question power/knowledge: to ask, whose voices are excluded and whose interests are served, and to interrogate agencies of social control that privilege some interventions and resist others. This binary is recalled throughout, as authors challenge dominant discourses of child sexual violence in, for example, their descriptions of youth as “reflexive knowledgeable agents” (Beckett); in critiques of the discursive erasure of youth prostitution (Phoenix); in the ideology of cyberlibertarianism (Hanson); and in how a developing sense of self can inform young people’s feelings of sexual agency, control, vulnerability, and risk-taking (Coleman; Luxmoore). Not surprisingly, our desire to protect (some) young people from sexual exploitation has resulted in a collective under-theorized and under-researched presumptive body of knowledge that ultimately erases children’s lived experiences.

This edited collection provokes a return to feminist ideals grounded in reflection to discern how social work is embedded in systems of power and privilege. Central to that aim, it also speaks to the multiple inequalities and oppressions faced by many young people. While only one chapter explicitly names intersectionality (Bernard), it bears noting that many authors address structural oppressions and marginalized identities. It is absolutely essential, however, to use an intersectional approach at all levels of theorizing and empiricism, not as an additive-based model but as a way to attend to the complex terrain that shapes children’s lives and their meaning-making of sexual violence. So too, is it essential not to assume that because young people face marginalization that it equally impacts their experiences. “...Not all individuals react in the same way to the same circumstances, or end up with the same outcomes, a fact that illustrates the capacity for individual action even within severely constrained circumstances” (Beckett, p. 34).

Together, the authors provide us with thought-provoking work that illuminates the necessity of consistently returning to the ideals of feminist reflection and collaboration in social work in order to challenge taken-for-granted knowledges that too easily creep into writing and practice. In this way, this collection provides entrée into clear, essential discussions about the role of theory in social work. Perhaps from here, we can move toward a more explicit decolonialization of theory, method, and representation.

It is quite likely that the voices of children and youth would disrupt and transform the dominant paradigms and practices in social work, creating alternative possibilities and transformational interventions. Children are rarely regarded as experts or authorities of their own lives, and so their voices should be front and center in theory, in methodological developments, and in policy and practice.