Young persons as epistemological agents in social work assessment and intervention

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A B S T R A C T

Summary: Literature debates whether young persons' participation in social work decisions is tokenistic in nature or it empowers them to shape their world. By and large, young persons deemed at risk remain the targets of intervention. This paper aims to underscore the need to move beyond soliciting young persons' voice merely in order to corroborate information provided by adults and professionals in social work assessment and intervention. Instead, it explicates the philosophical foundation for social workers to treat young persons as knowledgeable agents capable of contributing to professional knowledge.

Findings: Through reinterpretation of a published case study on children of sex worker mothers in India, this paper highlights how young persons are active agents of their own lives even in extreme dire situations. These children of sex worker mothers were capable of advocating for their own rights as well as that of their mothers. Through the secondary analysis of data, we illustrated the dynamic process of knowledge construction by young persons.

Application: By paying attention to the young persons' capacity as knowledgeable agents we propose social workers to intentionally incorporate their knowledge in their practice.

1. Introduction

While a burgeoning albeit small body of research can be seen in the "voice" (e.g. Aubrey & Dahl, 2006) and participation (e.g. Gallagher et al., 2012; Franklin & Sloper, 2006; Morrow, 1999) of young persons in social work decision making, debates in the literature remain as to whether children's and young persons' participation serves the needs of welfare organizations or empowers them to shape their world (Gunn, 2008), or whether what is described is one-off participation or the inclusion of young persons in meaningful, effective and sustainable ways (Sinclair, 2004). In protecting vulnerable children and young persons, empirical evidence on social workers' assessments reveals that children and young persons' views are still routinely absent in decision-making that concerns them directly. Social workers appear to have an ambivalent attitude about the worth of young persons' opinions in contributing towards decision-making (Holland, 2001; Aubrey & Dahl, 2006).

The concept of children and young persons' participation stems from the philosophical position that children, despite their age and lack of adult status with its responsibilities, are agentic beings. Agency is viewed as the universal given whereby children and young persons

have the capacity to be actors rather than reactors (Goh, 2011). According to social relational theory, the three integral dimensions of an agent are motivation (maintaining autonomy), cognition (making sense of their environment, interpreting or constructing knowledge) and action (resisting, negotiating and accommodating to achieve goals) (Kuczynski and De Mol, 2015).

In this paper, we focus on young persons' capacity as epistemological (i.e., reasonable and knowledgeable) agents (Baruch, 2006), and on reasons for social workers to consider their knowledge in the conceptualization of assessment and intervention. Despite the increase in children and young persons' participation in contemporary life, early research found that their agency is largely enacted at home and with friends while power still lies with professionals such as doctors, social workers, health visitors, teachers and lawyers (Mayall, 2002). Interviews with children suggest that they have general awareness of social workers' roles in keeping children safe, but there is little evidence of vulnerable children having influence on the decisions about them being made by social service agencies (Munro, 2001; Cashmore, 2002; Leeson, 2007; Bessell, 2011; Gallagher et al., 2012). Children and young persons recognize that they are not generally understood as having the relevant knowledge to contribute to modifying their own

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and other's lives (Aubrey & Dahl, 2006). These views of vulnerable children and young persons are corroborated by the statements of some social workers that their participation does not mean they have an influence on the decision-making process; rather their participation is seen as a way of gathering information (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Vis & Thomas, 2009).

In their state-of-the-art review of children's and young people's participation within child welfare and child protection services, Bijleveld et al. (2015) underscored the need for social workers to view young persons less from the perspective of protection and more as knowledgeable social actors. The review, however, did not elaborate on why and how children are knowledgeable actors. In this paper, we advance these claims by first explicating the rationale for re-conceptualization of young persons as active agents in social work and proposing a philosophical account of the basis of them as epistemological agents. Following this, we detail the methods used to identify empirical evidence of young persons' knowledge by performing secondary data analysis on a published article (Sircar & Dutta, 2011) and a documentary film ("We are foot soldiers" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bfm06qBo4c4) of a group of children of female sex workers (FSW) in India to illustrate the construct of young persons as epistemological agents. We conclude the paper by drawing out practice implications for active incorporation of young persons' knowledge in working with them.

1.1. Rationale for conceptualizing young persons as active agents

The value and mission of social work according to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is to 'empower and liberate people to enhance well-being based on the fundamental principles of human rights and social justice' (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). Similarly, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in the United States considers upholding social justice as the bedrock of the profession, and advocacy as the cornerstone on which social work is built (Clark, 2009). It is no surprise that many social work activities for vulnerable young persons take one of three orientations: rescue, rehabilitation and medical services (Bissell et al., 2008). Undeniably, in some situations young persons suffer at the hands of adults and of an unjust environment, and require protection. However, how service users − that is, young persons − are being conceptualized in service design, development and delivery may need to be addressed.

These models of rescue and rehabilitation social work services have been criticized for failing to acknowledge that young persons are valuable contributors to their own protection and to society (Bissell et al., 2008). Strands of burgeoning literature (Chee, Goh, & Kuczynski, 2014; Praimkumara & Goh, 2015; Katz, 2014, 2015) documents how young persons are not only part of but contribute to finding the solutions to problems. Studies by Katz (2014, 2015) in particular show how children from violent families may be agents in supporting the emotional and moral recovery of both their mothers and themselves after the perpetrator has left the family environment. The agency of young persons documented by Katz pertains to how they enhance the mother-child relationship contexts that are pivotal for recovery. Challenging the conventional pathological views of "parentification" of children, Chee et al. (2014) posited that children from low-income families are capable of negotiating their "parentified" roles while providing care for their younger siblings and single mothers. Another study documents children of sex worker mothers strengthening their mothers' resolve to leave the streets (Praimkumara & Goh, 2015).

The question of whether young persons possess credible knowledge that is trustworthy and deserves serious consideration as solutions will be addressed in this paper, using a framework to identify the types of knowledge and explicate the dynamic process of knowledge constructions by young persons in examining two sources of published secondary data. But before we elaborate on this framework, we give a philosophical basis for considering young persons' knowledge as valid.

1.2. Young persons as epistemological agents

If the concept of agency refers to the capacity to initiate an action through one's free will (Kuczynski and De Mol, 2015), as well as being based on the discourse of young persons' rights, then it is quite reasonable to regard them as agents. To regard young persons as epistemological agents, however, posts an additional challenge, that of cognitive maturity. One of the major obstacles to ascribing young persons as epistemological agents is the widespread idea that they lack mature reasoning and abstract (scientific) knowledge. As manifested in Kant's elaborated formulation of agency, probably the most influential during the modern age, "dare to be wise" and hence "dare to know" are regarded as necessary for "the human being's emergence from his (sic) self-incurred immaturity" (Kant, 1996, 8:35) to genuine adult agency. The UK philosopher Locke and the French philosopher Rousseau (1979), the two major philosophers of education in the modern era, maintained that after the period of childhood (approximately between the ages of 12 to 15) young persons are capable of beginning to develop independent reasoning (Locke, 1975 [1689]; Locke, 1996[1693]) or "intellectual (or human) reason" (Rousseau (1979, 125) and thus shifting from practical and sensual knowledge to abstract and theoretical knowledge.

Attentive to these deep gaps between practical and theoretical (abstract) knowledge as reflecting gaps between young persons and adults, Dewey was perhaps the most prominent philosopher to encompass both the theoretical and practical dimensions of knowledge in society and community and to establish adolescents' epistemological agency *in* community and society (Dewey, 1954[1916]). He rejected the quest for certain knowledge and embraced experimental, reflective and conjectural knowledge (Dewey, 1988[1920]; Dewey, 1960[1929]; Dewey, 2007[1933]). Gaps between young persons and adults, which he does not deny, were in his view commonly exaggerated. Dewey, however, suggested that young persons' immaturity also has advantages, as there is potential for growth and accordingly for being open-minded and flexible, while maturity implies that growth has been accomplished (Dewey, 1954, p. 49).

Dewey's empiricist approach may have current relevance to the viewing of young persons as epistemological agents both in areas of knowing *how* (to do something) and knowing *that* (such and such is the case). Young persons know more than they can tell. For both Dewey (Dewey 1954, pp. 313 & 391; Dewey, 2007[1933]) and Popper (1972, p. 47; Popper, 1979, pp. 24–25; 1999, pp. 45–46, pp. 70–71), learning proceeds by problem solving and by a reflective process of trial and error; thus in their epistemological theories young persons' learning is basically agentic. In this paper we suggest that the idea of young persons as epistemological agents *in* society could be explained by both Dewey's and Popper's views (Baruch 2006, 2013).

To add to this, based on Dewey's and Popper's epistemologies that advancing knowledge is a cooperative engagement (Dewey, 1954, 2007 [1933]; Popper, 1972, 1979, 1999) follow the general idea that when young persons do engage in constructing knowledge within a given organization, it is produced as a "network of knowledge" which is primarily interpersonal and cooperative between different ages and groups and partly intra-personal.

2. Methods

Children of female sex workers (FSW) are one of the most hidden and least studied groups of vulnerable children (Beard et al., 2010). A survey of the 11 articles found using Proquest data base search with key words "children of female sex workers" revealed that "risk" was the dominant discourse (*N* = 9). They include children's health risk owing to mothers' drug use, tuberculosis and HIV infections (Rolon et al., 2013; Duff et al., 2014; Chiang et al., 2015; Schwartz et al., 2017; Servin et al., 2015; Willis, Onda, & Stoklosa, 2016); and transmission of intergenerational abandonment (Dalla, 2010). Two papers examined

mother-child relationships of FSW in a neutral light (Pardeshi & Bhattacharya, 2006; Praimkumara & Goh, 2015). One paper (Sircar & Dutta, 2011), stood out by paying close attention to children of FSW as proactive social actors. We selected this article for secondary analysis in this paper for the purposes of highlighting children of FSW as episemological agents, because it presents findings that heighten the young persons' agentic qualities and challenges other studies treating them as vulnerable, invisible, marginalized, oppressed and stigmatized because of the nature of their mothers' livelihood (e.g. Beard et al., 2010).

Sircar and Dutta's (2011) work aimed to demystify the culture of fear associated with the lives of children living with their mothers in red-light districts (areas of high prostitution), and criticized compassion-driven ways of protecting children by removing them from such 'hell holes' without guaranteeing child rights and respecting sex worker mothers' choice of livelihood (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 335). "Beyond compassion" stemmed from a three-year project documenting the work of a group called Amra Padatik (We are foot soldiers - in short as "AP"), formed and run by children of FSW of Kolkata's Sonagachi red-light district. A documentary film 'We are foot soldiers' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bfm06qBo4c4) directed by Sircar and Dutta was produced in 2009. "Beyond compassion" emerged from the authors' interviews with children and interactions with them in making the film, and their observations of the research site over three years. Sircar and Dutta reported that they had attempted to represent the children's vision of themselves, being ethical witnesses of the emotional and political lives of these children rather than remaining purely objective spectators (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 335).

Rationales for the choice of "Beyond compassion" for this paper are threefold: alignment exists between our goals and those of the authors in treating young persons as agentic beings; published data in a reputable journal indicates that the work has withstood rigorous peer scrutiny and hence scholarly quality assurance; and Sircar and Dutta's long-term immersion in the research site has produced rich, contextualized and trustworthy data. We extracted the verbatim from the direct quotations of participants in the paper "Beyond Compassion" (114 lines of verbatim) and expressions by participants paraphrased by the writers (36 lines) to form the basis of data analysis. In addition, to supplement the data source, we transcribed the 26 min documentary film "We are foot soldiers" which featured the experience of five AP members who are children of FSW and activists for the rights of their members (236 lines of verbatim transcripts).

We acknowledge our limitations in not having access to the primary data, and that our goal, while in line with that of the authors, is not identical. This limitation is less critical because our goal is to conduct a "supra analysis" of the published data – that is, to transcend the primary study which focused on actions (activism) of children of FSW – in order to illustrate the presence of knowledge which enables us to posit "young persons as epistemological agents" in the conceptualization of interventions in social work rather than to reverify and corroborate primary analyses of data sets.

We co-constructed a framework for text analysis. The first author is a social work scholar with over a decade's experience of frontline work with disadvantaged children, and the second author a philosopher with over 30 years' teaching experience in teachers' training and five years' experience of teaching 13 to 18 year-olds. We operationalized the abstract concept of "epistemological agent", acknowledging that it is not an authoritative framework but a heuristic guide for our careful reading and re-reading of the published text and verbatim of the documentary film.

Utilizing this heuristic framework the authors carefully analyzed these secondary data in order to unpack the practical and theoretical aspects of knowledge as well as to demonstrate the dynamic process of knowledge construction, with two interactive axes, namely **intra-personal versus interpersonal knowledge** and the **developmental timeline** (childhood ↔ adolescent ↔ teenage ↔ young adulthood) to illustrate knowledge accumulation and construction. This heuristic
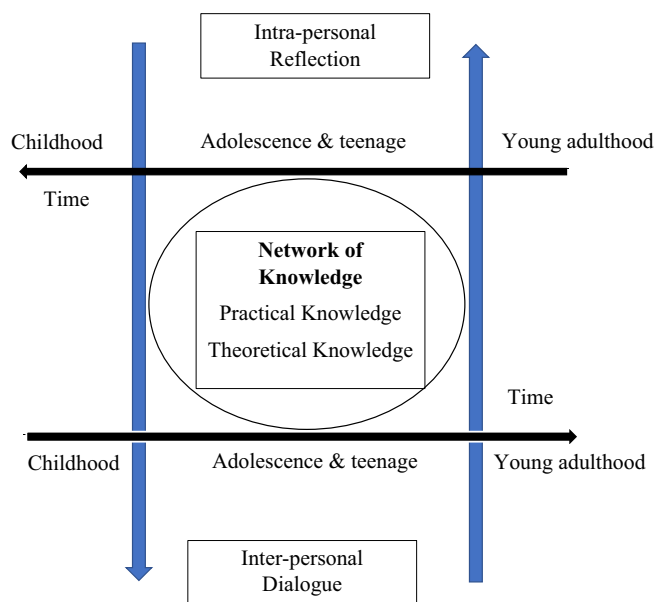

Diagram 1. Dynamic Process of Knowledge accumulation and Construction by Young Persons.

framework was derived from the authors' survey of epistemological theories from Plato and Aristotle, through Descartes and Kant, to Dewey and Popper. We considered these two aspects of knowledge the most consistent in all these epistemologies. Popper distinguished between **practical knowledge** which relates to plans and actions in the world, and **theoretical knowledge** relating to abstract understanding and explanation of natural and social phenomena (Popper, 1972 [1963], p. 36; 1994 [1969], p. 11). In our analysis of the theoretical knowledge developed by the children of FSW we do not claim that this knowledge, albeit abstract and general and even insightful, is in any manner scientific or scientifically formed and applied. Rather we contend that it is closely and significantly reciprocally related with children's practical knowledge, and that both their practical and theoretical knowledge would be of help for the social worker's system of knowledge. This paper adds value to that of Sircar and Dutta (2011) in that it attempts to access and explicate the presence of the *knowledge* while the Sircar and Dutta (2011) focused on young persons' advocacies *actions*. In our view *knowledge*, is a more stable foundation for potential actions than young persons' activism (behavioural in nature) which could be circumstantial. More importantly, we consider theoretical and practical dimensions of knowledge as playing a major (perhaps leading) role in the Amra Padatik members' activities as political and social agents. In addition to these two types of knowledge we identify how knowledge is dynamically developed as the epistemological agents **communicate** and **interact** in search of knowledge. We examine how they **reflect** on previous and present ways of thinking through the **retrospective accounts** of older AP members on their experience. This has enabled us to access how knowledge is accumulated and constructed over time by these young persons. To avoid "cherry picking", critical cross-checking between the first and second authors was carried out throughout the process of analysis by using the heuristic framework which we developed (Diagram 1).

2.1. Evidences of young persons' knowledge

In this section we report evidence of young persons' knowledge gleaned from two sources of verbatim that focused on three AP founders: Chaitali (female; 22 years in 2010; the first president of AP when she was **17** years old), Mithu (girl; 28 years old in 2010; **23** years when AP was established) and Gobinda (boy; 18 years old in 2010; **13** years when AP was established); as well as current leaders of AP: Pinky Das

(girl; 16 years old and president of AP in 2010) and Ratan (boy; 20 years in 2010 and AP's secretary). We take into account that some material referring to their life stories was given by them in retrospect. While there may be chances that such retrospective accounts could be filtered through recent life experience and subject to memory lapse, these retrospective data were nevertheless valuable in providing glimpses of how the knowledge of these young people evolved and accumulated over time which would not be available through only cross sectional data.

2.2. Theoretical knowledge constructed through intrapersonal reflections and interpersonal dialogues

Analysis of verbatim of the AP founders (Mithu, Chaitali and Gobinda) revealed that they were addressing problems requiring abstract knowledge to answer. Contrary to the social stigma attached to prostitution, the first question of these young persons related to their views of their mothers' occupation, whether it was good or bad, and whether their mothers should have rights as sex workers –*intra-personal reflections*. The second major question related to their respect for their mothers, who provided them with money for living and for education (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 342). The first question addresses whether their mothers are good or bad mothers and, in general, what is good or bad work and what is good or bad motherhood and parenthood. How should they weigh their mothers' apparently favorable views against others' hostile views on sex work? This question addresses also the link between occupation and rights: Who is entitled to have rights and in general what are rights? In the second major question the children address other theoretical issues: What might prompt disrespect to a sex worker mother despite her care in providing her children with sex work income? Who deserves to be respected? What is human respect?

2.2.1. Theorizing sex workers' rights as mothers through interpersonal dialogue among children of FSW

As children of FSW these young persons decided to discuss these problems with other sex workers' children – interpersonal construction of knowledge. They believed the perspective of their mothers should be accounted for, not discarded. These children of FSW did not see their welfare as polarized from that of their mothers. Concerning the first question, they began by examining and then doubting the common theory that sex work is necessarily bad, i.e., that only incompetent and uncaring mothers choose such work, and are therefore not entitled to enjoy motherhood rights. Bearing on this issue Pinky, whose mother moved out with a client and later disappeared, says: "I hate my mother, but I know *jounokormi* (sex worker) mothers do care about their children" (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 345). As stated in the second question, for the children the fact that their mothers provided them with money for living and education meant that they were good and responsible mothers. This conclusion led children to modify their previous knowledge and to elaborate a new knowledge according to which their mothers as sex workers are *entitled* to their rights to motherhood.

After dialoguing with each other, these young persons saw their mothers' rights should be valued more highly, in contrast to outside authorities' tendency to pitch children's best interest against their mothers' rights as sex workers. As Ratan's (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 344) testimony conveyed, the fact that children of sex worker mothers experience abuse in the family and in the brothel is not denied. But they have experienced abuse in shelter homes (Pinky was sent to a shelter by her mother) too, as Pinky recalled (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 345). These young persons constructed the knowledge that removing them from their sex worker mothers and be placed in a supposedly safe place did not ensure protection from abuse.

2.2.2. Young persons' collective solution to societal and self-stigmatization of their sex worker mothers

One major obstacle the young persons faced in acknowledging their

mothers' rights, and their own rights as children of FSW, was that they did not respect their mothers. As epistemological agents they challenged this view (that sex worker mothers are bad) in order to overcome it and modify their knowledge. In this respect we conjecture that the tacit and tentative prior knowledge the children had was basically connected with their natural and supportive relations with their mothers, and their ability to recover gradually from setbacks. The children asked reflectively in the second major question, *why* their interactions with their mothers involved disrespect, despite the mother's care for them. They seemed dissatisfied with partial explanation resting on the social stigma of their mother's work, which they had probably absorbed. Then, while reflecting on the problem of social stigma, they acknowledged that they too contributed to this stigma by not introducing themselves *publicly* as children of sex workers. As Mithu asserted, "We must publicly declare that we are children of sex workers. If that is the label that stigmatizes us, we should make people hear it even more". (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 342).

In the "philosophical-moral" realm, we suggest, these young persons had reconstructed a theory, albeit fragmentary, which revealed them as epistemological agents in abstract moral discourse, according to which rights, respect and public acknowledgement that they are children of sex workers are interrelated. This new theory is more insightful for them than the common belief (the dominant societal view) that the mothers' work denies them rights and respect and that dealings with the family would be better conducted outside the public discourse. This abstract theory is not disconnected. It has, as we will show in the next section, direct immediate relation to practical knowledge.

2.3. Young persons' theory on the value of staying with own "family" despite risk

In some cases, the children of FSW "theorized" by generalizing from their own experience. For example, Pinky said, in comparing her situation with parents of "normal" families: "Do you think other people living in good houses don't [use] abuse? … I know respectable people who live in good houses and [yet] ill-treat their children. Will you ask them to send their children to shelter homes?" Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 346). So for Pinky, the logic is that cases of abuse were occurring both in "normal" and other families and the generalization she extracted is that the same policy (removing children from "unsafe" families) should be implemented in both. Thus the best policy in both is that the child will stay in the family. However Pinky denied the common logic based on experience too, that *usually* the children of "normal" families are not removed from their homes while usually the children from hardship families, sex workers children included, are removed. Pinky generalized (based on her personal experience sent to a shelter by her mother) that in many shelters abuse is common and a child separated from their family is often more vulnerable. While this was her own experience when her mother sent her to a "prison-like" shelter, in her own project she now (at age 16 she houses a few teenagers) aimed to provide young girls with a "home-like" shelter (see below).

In all cases the children valued their family, which in most cases comprised a child and a mother. In some cases, as Mithu and Pinky respectively reported (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 344) they would regard their mother's close friend, usually a permanent client (*Babu*), as a "father" or "uncle" (*Kaku*), with whom they still shared a good relationship. For Mithu her reconstruction of the idea of family took another form. She said: "My father has married again and doesn't live with us anymore, but he loves me a lot. I always listen to his advice" (Sircar and Dutta, 2011). Regardless of the social context children expect to be part of a family bond, including children of FSW, and they are also capable of being active, flexible and adaptive to construct and modify their ideas what constitutes family.

Even when recalling bad childhood experiences, e.g. for Mithu, being angry with her mother because she could never tell her friends

where she lived, and for Chaitali "could not enjoy childhood", they still defended their idea of family within the context they lived in. As Sircar & Dutta (2011) commented:

"What is interesting about both Mithu and Chaitali's experiences is that while stigma is a burning reality in their life, for them the ideal childhood is about staying with their mothers and not shunning the location of the red-light area that they inhabit, unlike the logic of interventions from outside that can only imagine them having better lives outside the brothel space and away from their mothers. Many of the children we interviewed emphatically said that the very act of forcibly taking them away from the mothers in the name of 'rescue' is no different from trafficking." (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 344).

2.4. The time dimension of retrospective knowledge accumulation through young persons' individual and collective development

In the example of Mithu, who had been forced by her mother to marry young to prevent her from becoming a sex worker, we see that she abstractly theorized the idea that her own children would not be forced to marry young; rather they would be provided with education first. This retrospective theory construction was in contrast with her experience and served as a guide for future action.

Sircar and Dutta considered that:

"assertively taking on the identity (as children of sex workers) is a political and strategic act to reclaim the dignity of sex workers and their children; to reclaim the dignity of that very identity which ascribes indignity to every aspect of their lives" (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 343).

Mithu's example of the approach that she adopted towards her children by modifying her own mother's approach towards her, shows how modification of practical knowledge may take place across generations. As reported above, Mithu had been forced by her mother to marry at the age of 14. Now a mother (28 years old in 2010), she understood that the main reason for her mother's action was to protect her from becoming a prostitute. That is to say, in terms of practical reasoning and formation of practical knowledge she respected her mother's decision. However, she intended to let her own children complete their education and held that marriage should only come after the age of majority (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 344). In this example the plasticity of modifying knowledge through two generations is manifested: first, the mother's practical theory that marriage was the best way to protect her child from becoming a prostitute; second, Mithu's own practical theory that her children's education should be completed before marriage. The plasticity of modifying knowledge in each generation in this example is in a different context: while the option of education was very limited and perhaps non-existent for Mithu as a child, the option of preferring education for her children is available to Mithu.

In 2010 three of the five members on which this present paper draws were aged above 18: Mithu (28), Chaitalli (22) and Ratan (20). Ratan was officially active as the secretary of AP and Mithu and Chaitalli less active but involved, so parts of their stories are given retrospectively and others as current experiences and thoughts. Gobinda (18) and Pinky (16) were active in their teenage years (in India, as in most countries, childhood extends to the age of 18). So their stories reporting on current experience were more dominant than the knowledge reported retrospectively. Notwithstanding this use of retrospective data, at the point of data collection the young people were able to elaborate their knowledge of their past situations in a reflective and critical manner.

As the AP members communicated, interacted and constructed knowledge in the film they probably recounted their stories with each other and may have done so previously. This illustrates the point that knowledge was constructed as a **cooperative project in this example**, particularly that of young people (above 18) and adolescents and teenagers (13–18). Thus knowledge may be understood as a social network project of the AP, rather than something that each member (young child, teenage child and young adult) possessed individually

according to his or her stage of development.

2.5. The dynamic interactive process of practical knowledge construction

Soon after Mithu, Chaitali and Gobinda began to discuss theoretical issues with other children of sex worker mothers, they had to deal with practical problems as young persons. The impetus leading to the establishment of AP was a collective demonstration against a local school board for refusing entry to Gobinda (one of the three founders of AP and then 13 years old) because he had mentioned in a TV interview that he was a sex worker's child (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 342). Thus, the abstract knowledge of publicity concerning their identity was beginning to be embodied as a new social reality by AP members with the aim of lobbying for their rights and those of their sex worker mothers. In this case, tentatively knowing *that* (or tentatively forming an abstract theory) preceded knowing *how* (or the formation of a new practical theory). Later on, when practical theory is modified abstract theory is absorbed in it.

Another AP achievement, especially of Gobinda, was to convince the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) to start a study center in 2008 where school drop-outs over the age of 18 could enroll for free for a bridge course called the Bachelor's Preparatory Programme. Some sex worker mothers also joined the course (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 343). Like the former example (Gobinda's struggle to attend school), this example could be perceived as a practical solution based on preceding tentative abstract knowledge being combined with practical initiatives and later on absorbed in modified practical knowledge. The practical knowledge developed in opening opportunities for sex worker's children in the context of a local school board was further developed to university studies. Success in the latter effort was partial as many universities, except Indira Ghandi Open University, refused to cooperate with AP.

There are professional dilemmas about whether to send children of sex workers to shelters or not. The children demanded that the voice and agency of their mothers be respected, and no decision be forced upon them by the authorities. Pinky, who was sent by her mother to a home shelter at an early age, experienced it as an unsafe place and a jail. However, modifying her practical theory, she said: "Shelter homes are a good thing. They can be really helpful for children who are orphans or whose sex worker mothers are unable to take care of them, but they should be *nijer barir moton* (your own home) and not a jail" (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 345). Pinky, as young as she was (16), opened a home-like shelter for young teenage girls and gave them sex education in order to overcome abuse.

When Ratan's mother died, the AP members reconstructed practical political knowledge: Ratan was still in school; the young persons organized themselves to resist his eviction from the house by the landlord. Sircar and Dutta asked:

"Is 'rescue' the most effective intervention in such a grave situation? Ratan continued to stay in the red-light area, in the same house where his mother died, and is now pursuing his Master's in Social Work with the money that his mother left him." (Sircar and Dutta, 2011, p. 344).

In all examples above the advancement of knowledge was promoted by cooperative collaboration.

The young persons' implementation of their practical and theoretical knowledge and the modification of their knowledge as epistemological agents, could be detected in their family dynamics, community life, and to some extent society. At home they learned to respect their mothers and strengthen family relations, despite outside pressures and the complicated relationship they had with their mothers. In the community, young persons learned to be organized and take cooperative action for their causes. In the societal context the young persons learned to demand their rights without concealing that they were children of sex workers. Finally, one of the outcomes of epistemological agency is to "make and remake social facts and collective identities" (Katz, 2004, 247 taken from Sircar & Dutta, 2011, 342). This is significant because

epistemological agency, as illustrated in many of the examples above, has to do both with knowing how to explore given social facts and with the making and remaking of new possible social facts.

3. Discussion

In this paper we affirm the value of social workers' professional knowledge. Our goal, nevertheless, is to underscore that vulnerable young persons' knowledge should be given the place it deserves in influencing professional practice and that respect to be accorded to young persons as knowledgeable agents. Based on the analysis of the network of knowledge constructions by children of FSW reported above, we offer two recommendations which could be of relevance to social work practice in child/young persons' protection.

3.1. Including young persons' knowledge to enhance practice validity

Woodcook (2003) questioned social workers' assessment on parenting quality [in this case sex worker mothers' competence as parents] as decisions on childcare arrangements are often based on "surface-static" notion of parenting. Parents are seen as impacting upon their children rather than being in relationships with them. This is largely due to social workers' legal responsibilities to ensure the protection of young persons from harm. A punitive ethos pervades practices with mothers constructed as prioritizing their own needs over those of their children (Featherstone, White & Morris, 2014). It is no surprise that there is resistance from service users which may result in mistrust between the professionals and the young persons whom social workers are striving to protect (Douglas & Walsh, 2009). While the assessment and interventions conducted by social workers are often evidence-base validated, Sheppard, Newstead, DiCaccavo, and Ryan (2001) proposes that social work assessment should also anchor on knowledge that has *practice validity*, that is to treat collecting data and knowledge from young persons and their mothers as an integral process of formulating a hypothesis for their work.

The assessment of risk from the perspective of young persons, when it is informed by their phenomenological experience, can be rather different from that of the professionals. The knowledge of these young persons may not be given the weight it deserves because of the socio-cultural image of vulnerable young persons that social workers have. As children of FSW living in a red-light district, these young persons may be deemed as "vulnerable" and in "need of protection", hence their opportunities to participate in decision-making are limited (Sanders & Mace, 2006; Vis et al., 2010). Members of AP resisted the common theory that sex workers are incompetent and uncaring mothers; they believed their mothers were "not bad" mothers who cared for their children. Professional knowledge should take account of this knowledge provided by young persons, and examine it closely or even put it to the test so that it can be considered and incorporated into conceptualization of intervention.

In all cases in the accounts considered in this analysis the young persons attached high value to their family, even though the construct of family may refer only to the young person and his/her mother or sometimes include their mother's permanent client. This intimate mother-child relationship context has received recent research attention as a resource for intervention. Praimkumara & Goh (2015) found that a close mother-child relationship context was the impetus for some street level sex workers to leave the trade. Katz (2015) found that the children of mothers who had survived domestic violence had more knowledge of the violence in their family than mothers thought. Children who are co-victims of domestic violence with their mothers have intimate knowledge of their mothers' suffering which enabled them to offer her support and play a part in her recovery. Hence, while high risk situations at times warrant removal of young persons from their home environment, this should be carried out with due consideration for young persons' own risk assessment and management. For instance, in the experience

of Pinky, while her mother's intention in sending her to a shelter was to protect her from the harm of the red-light district, it turned out to be a harmful and negative option for the young person.

We propose creating a space where professional assessment may engage with young persons' knowledge in a dialogical process and co-construction of assessment and intervention, which may reduce mistrust. The starting point requires social workers to suspend their professional knowledge, at least momentarily, at appropriate junctures of engagement, risk assessment and intervention, in order to open up a space for young persons' knowledge to be heard. The evidence which we analyzed in previous sections shows that the knowledge which the young persons developed may be useful for incorporation into social workers' assessment. The most useful knowledge from young persons includes their collectively evolved theoretical, practical and moral knowledge that explores new and productive solutions within a network. Such network of knowledge stemmed from the close connections with their mothers, among themselves within the children of FSW advocacy group (Amra Padatik) and with young persons in the neighborhoods. In addition, young persons have tested their collective knowledge, albeit only with partial success, by putting in actions in negotiating with institutions (such as schools, universities and the media) and with local authorities. Such knowledge would lend practice validity to social workers' formulation of assessment and intervention. Professionals should listen carefully to what young persons say about the balance between strengths and difficulties in their lives (Gill & Jack, 2007; Cashmore, 2002). In the case study of AP discussed above, young persons' knowledge, albeit conjectural, provided insights into the safety enhancing factors in their seemingly "dangerous environment". In the next section we discuss how social workers can tap into young persons' knowledge and jointly create a neighbourhood that is safer for them.

3.2. Rethinking the young person-centric risk paradigm practice

Although AP members were adolescent or teenage children of sex workers, they were quite successful activists on behalf of their mothers as well as for themselves. By asking themselves tough but honest questions about why their mothers were stigmatized and why they had difficulty respecting them, such knowledge-seeking led to raising consciousness and spawned concrete actions of advocacy. Their assertion of their identity as children of sex workers and refusal to be ashamed of it brought these young persons together to fight discrimination, as in the case of Gobinda being denied admission to school and Ratan's eviction by the landlord after his mother's death. We see considerable measures of success among these children of sex workers. Gobinda, who was one of the founders of AP at age 13, was applying to be a teacher in at age 18. Even more impressively, Ratan continued living in the red-light district after his mother's death and by age 20 was pursuing a social work degree with the money his mother left him. Pinky, 16, despite her young age, was providing shelter and sex education for other girls. However, not all AP members achieved the same measure of success by the assessment standards of social workers. Chaitali, one of the founders of AP, continued the family history of sex work.

From this case study of AP we see the necessity of widening the professional method of safeguarding children from the child-centric risk paradigm that conceptualizes children/young persons as individuals needing protection, is *unanchored in networks* and *communities* and operates with superficial understandings of the importance of attachment, histories and legacies (Featherstone, White and Morris, 2014). Instead, we propose the need to pay attention to ecological practice, through developing advocacy in disadvantaged neighborhoods and communities (Gill & Jack, 2007; Saraw, 2010) in a way that promotes authentic participation by young persons and their sex worker mothers.

The young persons in the case study demonstrated that they were indeed experts in their own lives. They had first-hand knowledge of discrimination, risk and harmful environments. Yet, they also possessed knowledge on how to maneuver the environment in order to minimize

risk. These young persons were not only reasonable and knowledgeable agents individually, but they organized themselves as a collective to promote their own visibility and advocate for their rights and those of their mothers. Hence, their knowledge production, use and reflection became a *network of knowledge* that provided the foundation for the collaborative projects.

Young persons' knowledge deserves to hold center stage in conceptualizing intervention, as professional social workers may lack intimate knowledge of the community. That said, community workers have organizational knowledge and skills which children may not possess. Professionals come alongside the young persons as mentors, facilitators and enablers by complementing their knowledge with facts, analytical skills, advocacy tactics and linkage with community networks and resources (Yardley, 2011). Instead of treating young persons as "subjects" of protection, social workers should treat them as genuine participants and collaborators in formulating interventions to improve the social ecology (Jack, 2000, 2004), with the aim of building up their welfare and wellbeing. If the young persons are ready, as in the case of AP, they may assume leadership roles while professionals become "invisible" to enable children to take center stage in the public arena for self-advocacy (Yardley, 2011). Young persons' thoughts, views and knowledge of their own lives can hence be expressed directly and not subsumed under or filtered through adult/professional agenda or lenses.

Another practice implication of using vulnerable children's knowledge is policy advocacy to ameliorate structural inequalities. The success of AP in convincing the IGNOU to start a center in their community for children of sex workers to pursue a Bachelor Preparation Programme was an impressive achievement. However Pinky, the 16-year-old president of AP in 2010, young as she was, knew that this success was limited and lamented that the certificate from IGNOU was not recognized by other universities. Insurmountable barriers prevent children of sex workers from accumulating educational capital (Apple, 2013). In this respect, the knowledge of young persons and their agentic capacities alone were often insufficient to overcome such societal obstacles. Social workers could lend their knowledge, networks and political influence to bring this advocacy from a specific community to lobby nationally.

4. Conclusion

The authors acknowledge the limitations of generalizability of the analyzed data presented in this paper which stemmed from intentional selection of a piece of published paper and documentary film (Sircar and Dutta, 2011) that reported the agentic capacities of children of sex worker mothers after surveying published literature on this population. Nevertheless it has to be clarified that the intention of this paper is not to provide an evidential argument but an evocative and illustrative argument for social workers to recognize and consider the validity of knowledge constructed by young persons. Building on this evocative and illustrative argument that young persons are active epistemological agents, we propose that social workers need to move beyond soliciting their voices merely to corroborate information provided by adult caregivers in assessment and intervention. Even though we gave young persons' knowledge the center stage position in this paper, we affirm the value and contribution of professional knowledge. Young persons' agentic capacity alone cannot ensure their well-being. Respectful professional interventions that grant young persons' knowledge its rightful place may help in ensuring that the welfare of young persons is safeguarded by us all.

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