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From behaviour-based to ecological: Multi-agency partnership responses to extra-familial harm

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Abstract

● *Summary:* In the United Kingdom (UK), inquiries into the abuse of adolescents harmed in contexts beyond their families frequently document failures in multi-agency arrangements. Forms of extra-familial harm, such as criminal and sexual exploitation, often feature near-fatal violence and serious abuse. UK welfare policy has shifted towards place-based approaches to harm, leading to safeguarding partnerships forming between welfare agencies and neighbourhood crime reduction agencies. However, forming partnerships between those who have differing epistemological underpinnings raises challenges. This article explores these by drawing on a research project implementing contextual safeguarding theory and practice within five child welfare social care departments in England and Wales. Data is presented from 10 pilots (33 focus groups, 24 interviews, 59 meeting observations, 36 reviews of cases, review of 100 documents).
● *Findings:* Multi-agency partnerships prioritise safeguarding practice that targets behaviour, over addressing the social conditions of abuse. Assumptions that partnerships will automatically align means that there is little space for negotiating a shared conceptual/ideological approach. Particularly in high-risk situations, welfare agencies defer to policing methods that target individuals rather than environments. Where ecological approaches are utilised, this is experienced as 'against the grain' and requiring support.
● *Applications:* To advance contextual approaches to safeguarding young people, multi-agency partnerships must go beyond altering the behaviour of those who are harmed. Partnerships that engage in reflective discussion about their conceptual approach are more likely to build the awareness and trust required for ecological methods to succeed. Enhancing ecological social work leadership within partnerships responding to extra-familial harm is a key factor.

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Introduction

It is difficult to find a serious case review or safeguarding inquiry into harm to children and young people in the United Kingdom (UK) that does not document the failures of multi-agency arrangements and recommends the strengthening of these (Cheminais, 2008). Failures, or gaps, in multi-agency arrangements have formed the recommendations of inquiries into extra-familial harm such as child criminal exploitation (Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020), child sexual exploitation (CSE) (Jay, 2014), harmful sexual behaviour (NSPCC, 2017), serious youth violence (Brent LSCB, 2020) and teenage relationship abuse (Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Board, 2016). These reviews often document gaps in multi-agency arrangements regarding information-sharing and coordination (Brayley & Cockbain, 2014; Pearce, 2014). When the stakes are so high, and the losses so great, it appears logical then to facilitate greater multi-agency working. Yet bringing together agencies with differing priorities, values, histories and epistemological underpinnings can raise several practical, ethical and philosophical challenges. These are the subject of this article, where we focus on multi-agency arrangements in response to extra-familial harm.

The growing emphasis on multi-agency working in safeguarding (a term to describe a broad range of activities to protect the welfare of children) sits alongside a prioritisation of policy and practice on the need to offer children experiencing extra-familial harm safeguarding led responses as opposed to purely crime prevention (Department for Education, 2018; Stanley, 2020). Alongside this, greater emphasis is placed on social workers undertaking their statutory safeguarding duties in partnership with other agencies (Department for Education, 2018). In many ways, this is common sense. When young people experience harm that is *extra*-familial it is often in locations that do not traditionally fall within the remit of child protection responses (Firmin, 2017a) but *are* within the remit of other organisations and partners, for example, the police, Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations, schools, businesses, and other community members. It seems reasonable therefore to strengthen such partnerships to facilitate the reach of child welfare responses into those contexts.

The paramountcy principle in the Children Act 1989 (the UK's primary child protection and welfare legislation) provides the foundation for safeguarding responses to prioritise the welfare interests of the child. However, questions remain about whether this is sufficient to unite those agencies whose relationships to young people differ. Little attention has been paid to how those trained within different professions might collectively address significant high-risk abuse of young people, despite considerable emphasis within legalisation and guidance for them to do so. England's inter-agency guidance on safeguarding *Working together to safeguard children* (2018) places responsibility on social work to be the lead safeguarding agency, and, with its interdisciplinary roots

(Bronstein, 2003), it is well placed to facilitate collaborative arrangements with other professions. However, this fact alone may not be enough to overcome differing perspectives on the nature of the harm and routes to creating safety. How are such differences addressed and negotiated in practice, particularly if they reveal conflicting value systems and conceptual orientations?

We explore this question here, by exploring the competing value systems and conceptual orientations within multi-agency safeguarding discussions and planning. We look at safeguarding responses to extra-familial harm within five local authorities' implementation of contextual safeguarding in the UK. Contextual safeguarding has developed as a framework for responding to young people's experiences of harm in extra-familial contexts (Firmin, 2017b). Looking at the discussion and plans emanating from these responses, we consider the extent to which these represent behaviour-based or broadly ecological understandings of social change, arguing that behaviour-based approaches dominate, even when the (inferred) intention may be ecological. Since contextual safeguarding is a distinctly ecological approach (Firmin, 2020) it affords the opportunity to examine how conceptual orientations play out in multi-agency safeguarding situations. Such an examination will enhance contextual responses to extra-familial harm in the UK and beyond (Peace, 2021) – and increase awareness of the influence of (often implicit) conceptual orientations on multi-agency discussion and decisions.

Multi-agency arrangements and extra-familial harm

Over the last three decades, multi-agency arrangements have been at the heart of UK responses to child abuse. Following the death of Victoria Climbié, the Laming Report (2003) raised concerns about inter-agency communication and coordination (Cheminais, 2008). This led to the strengthening of multi-agency arrangements set out in the Children Act 1989 and then later further defined in the Children Act 2004 and the Children and Social Work Act 2017. Within youth justice, multi-agency working was crystallised through the Crime and Disorder Act, 1998, leading to Youth Offending Teams which drew together social workers, police, health, probation and others (Souhami, 2012). Since then, several multi-agency arrangements have developed in response to child safeguarding. These are fundamental to England's current guidance which requires 'partner organisations and agencies [to] collaborate, share and co-own the vision for how to achieve improved outcomes for vulnerable children' (Department for Education, 2018, p. 76).

Extra-familial harm has risen in prominence in the UK as a safeguarding issue following high profile cases of CSE and 'county lines' child drug trafficking (Stanley, 2020). Correspondingly, new multi-agency responses have been developed, including a range of panels and processes within social care. Such arrangements have also been strengthened in guidance, with changes to *Working Together* reflecting increasing requirements of social care to conduct multi-agency assessments into extra-familial harm (Department for Education, 2018). In 2020, Ofsted – the government agency responsible for standards in Education and Children's Services in England – released a statement on responding to extra-familial harm which emphasised the need for 'prompt multi-agency planning

discussions' (Stanley, 2020, p. Online). Researchers and practitioners have also empha-
sised the need for strengthened multi-agency responses to extra-familial harm in relation
to child exploitation (Racher & Brodie, 2020), criminal exploitation (Olver & Cockbain,
2021), CSE (Firmin & Beckett, 2014; Hill, 2016) and transitional safeguarding (Cocker
et al., 2021).

However, research has also evidenced the challenges of bringing together agencies
with divergent values and agendas (Turner & Colombo, 2007). Concerning increased
and encouraged collaboration between police and social care specifically, the 'blurring'
of agency roles could be seen as the 'evaporation' of the social work role, aligned to
the social and economic relationships within neo-liberal societies (Garrett, 2004;
Thomas, 1988). Collaboration can be further undermined if the undervaluing of child
protection leads to the police being viewed as the chief partner (Westwood, 2012).
Pertinent to these discussions are conflicting priorities and information-sharing. Whilst
the need for seamless information-sharing across agencies has been identified in numerous
investigations into extra-familial harm (Brent LSCB, 2020; Jay, 2014; Waltham Forest
Safeguarding Children Board, 2020), many highlight the ethical and practical challenges
of this. Bellamy et al. (2008, p. 757) noted that multi-agency information-sharing arrange-
ments are inhibited by 'significant [and] possibly unresolvable differences in the aims and
values of some agencies'. For example, Wroe (2021) evidenced the overrepresentation of
black young people in 'county lines' drug trafficking interventions (Williams & Clarke,
2016), highlighting how children's social care could be replicating practices of surveillance
and disruption, more closely associated to policing practices.

Contextual safeguarding and multi-agency approaches

In 2017, contextual safeguarding theory was developed into a practice framework that
could be applied to organisations (Firmin, 2017a). Since then, although still relatively
new, it has exercised considerable influence over practice and policymaking (Hayes,
2021). The framework outlines that to *do* contextual safeguarding an organisation
needs to meet, or work towards, four key domains, and this article is one of several emer-
ging from the current study exploring their relevance for practice. The four domains
require a system to:

- Identify, assess and intervene with the social conditions of abuse (domain one)
- Incorporate extra-familial contexts into child protection frameworks (domain two)
- Develop partnerships with sectors/individuals who are responsible for the nature of
  extra-familial contexts (domain three)
- Monitor outcomes of success with contextual, as well as individual, change (domain four)

The domains are fundamental to contextual safeguarding because they outline the theoret-
ical basis of the approach and situate responses within a welfare framing. Epistemologically,
contextual safeguarding is located within a broadly systemic theoretical tradition, integrat-
ing Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework and sociological perspectives drawing
on Bourdieu's (1984) social theory.

Domain one asks practitioners to not only understand the broader context of a young person's life, but to intervene in the social conditions driving harm by considering the relationship between the 'rules at play' in certain environments and young people's experiences of harm. Young people's behaviour – rather than being the focus of intervention – is seen as an expression of their habitus (their embodiment of the rules at play), which is determined by their access to different forms of capital. For example, if harm happening to a child in school derived from harmful school cultures (like sexist norms) then the school, not just the child, would be the target of intervention.

Domain three required such safeguarding responses, that focus on changing the social conditions of harm, to be facilitated through multi-agency partnerships, thus seeking to make 'safeguarding everybody's business' by extending the role of statutory partners and engaging non-traditional partners to create safety within extra-familial contexts. Although this extends contemporary safeguarding practice, it also builds on a tradition of radical and critical social work rooted in community building and participation of the post-war era (Featherstone et al., 2018). Contextual safeguarding therefore sits alongside other revivals of these traditions, for example, the Social Model of Child Protection (Featherstone et al., 2018), which critiques the absence of structural explanations for social problems within contemporary child protection. Contextual safeguarding also aligns with relational and systemic turns in social work (Owens, et al. 2020), which critiques the neo-liberal case-work model and emphasises the dynamic relationship between children and family and wider social systems.

Competing epistemological positions

Despite the requirement to alter the social conditions of harm, as this article explores, contextual safeguarding practice interpretations often feature multi-agency partnerships preoccupied with targeting locations outside the home (i.e., focussing on *where* an intervention should happen), whilst retaining a largely behaviour-based intervention methodology (i.e., ignoring questions of *how* such interventions should happen). This methodological blind-spot can be traced to the long-standing practice, across services, in seeing social problems through a behaviouralist lens. Since the 1950s (Murtonen et al., 2017) behaviourist learning theory – rooted in Skinnerian assumptions (Irby & Clough, 2015) and applied originally within educational settings – has influenced social policy, including social work, youth and voluntary services and criminal justice (Carey & Foster, 2013). Behavioural learning theory posits that change can be brought about through reinforcement and punishment, which are used to form associations between behaviours and their consequences. Such an approach can be seen within educational policy, from 'star charts' to 'zero tolerance' approaches to harmful behaviour (Irby & Clough, 2015).

From the 1980s onwards psychological behavioural theory was deployed in a range of treatments aimed at helping individuals with managing thoughts and beliefs in the present (Gillies et al., 2017). Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) claimed a strong positivist scientific base and aligned with a policy context looking for brief, technical approaches to solving psycho-social problems (Sykes Wylie & Turner, 2011) within a Neo-liberal

politics concerned with individual choice and responsibility (Harris, 2014). CBT, along with Motivational Interviewing, has underpinned a wide range of adapted welfare interventions for young people, including young parents (Channon et al., 2016), welfare-involved families in child protection processes (Forrester et al., 2018) and young people on youth offending orders (Swirak, 2016) – thereby influencing not only mental health but also welfare, education and criminal services for young people.

In this article we use 'behaviour-based' to describe interventions which draw on both behaviour learning theory and/or psychological behavioural theory. Whilst there are important differences between these strands of theory and practice, the argument made in this article is that these nuances are overlooked in practice in favour of a ubiquitous and uncritical commitment to interventions that draw variously on each, and which unite around a desire to change the behaviour of individuals, be it through rewards and punishment and/or changing the way that they think. Critics of behaviour-based interventions draw attention to their: 'wide use of the risk-factor prevention paradigm, the responsibilisation of young people as active and independent agents of their behaviours, as well as interventions which focus on the individual psychology (the "new behaviourism")' (Swirak, 2016, para. 10). A behaviour-based epistemology contrasts with contextual safeguarding in terms of how social problems are constructed and solutions framed. In contextual safeguarding, whilst young people and parents, are engaged with, changing their behaviour is not seen as way to create safety. In contrast, behaviour-based approaches include working on the consequential thinking (Stallard, 2019) of individuals, trying to work on their motivation, or by punishing unwanted behaviour through sanctions. An example might be breaking up a friendship group, rather than working with peer group dynamics (e.g., Dixon et al., 2004). Similarly, whilst behaviour-based approaches might seek to alter 'harmful choices' and behaviour via discussion and/or conditioning, a contextual safeguarding response would seek to enhance the relationship between young people and safe adults in a context. This article is driven by a curiosity about how these differences manifest and impact multi-agency safeguarding practice.

Methodology

We draw on data from a large multi-site project to develop contextual safeguarding child protection responses to extra-familial harm in five statutory children's services departments in England and Wales. The findings detailed in this article consider the question: *'To what extent are multi-agency partnerships able to respond to extra-familial harm through intervening with the social conditions of abuse?'*. To do so, this article reports on data drawn from ten pilot studies which ran from September 2020 until November 2021. The pilots were part of a larger study (from June 2019 to March 2022) with a team engaged in collaborative research with the sites. At the beginning of the pilots, the research team had been working alongside the sites for one and a half years. Each site ran two pilots to increase safety to young people in extra-familial settings by designing, testing and embedding a multi-agency contextual safeguarding approach to extra-familial harm.

Pilots

The research team worked alongside the sites to choose and design the focus of each pilot. Each site developed processes to address risks faced by, either specific young people (associated or potentially associated with one another), or within a location, for example, schools and neighbourhoods. Whilst all sites had existing multi-agency safeguarding forums and networks, for the pilots, new or reworked versions of these were configured, with the specific purpose of implementing a contextual safeguarding approach. These forums were social work or co-led and included representation from police, education, health, housing, community safety (partnerships formed of agencies seeking to tackle neighbourhood crime), youth work and youth justice and in some cases non-traditional partners such as residents and businesses. The pilots included:

- Alternative planning and child protection assessment, pathways and conferences (*n* = 2) that sought to understand and respond to factors beyond a child's family.
- Referral, assessment, planning meetings and intervention plans for schools, peer groups and neighbourhoods (*n* = 6) when the harm appeared to be located within a particular space, for example, sexual harm at school or exploitation in a park.
- Multi-agency extra-familial harm panels (*n* = 1) for providing oversight of contexts and not just individual children.
- Testing conference models for peer groups and locations (*n* = 1) as part of location and peer-group assessments.

Research process

The research team of eight researchers worked alongside the sites throughout the pilots, providing consultation and advice and collecting data. Research plans were tailored to each site and pilot, but each included individual aims, rationale, research questions and methods. The pilot research methods included:

- Documentary review of 100 documents pre and during the pilot such as agendas, policies, terms of reference, information and confidentiality notices;
- Case file and assessment review of 27 individual files for young people and assessments relating to contexts;
- Focus groups (n = 33) and interviews (n = 24) with practitioners and participants involved in both the design and roll-out of pilots;
- Observations of 59 meetings such as multi-agency panels, child protection conferences and individual case discussion; and
- Consultation and assistance in the design of pilots and attendance at task and finish groups.

The research methods were facilitated and informed by an embedded approach. This meant that the project team worked to a collaborative research and project agenda (McGinity & Salokangas, 2014). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers were

physically present at research sites. Throughout COVID-19 all research activities were conducted online. In addition to research with practitioners on the pilots themselves, the research programme also ran a simultaneous project engaging young people and families to understand their experiences and perspectives on the pilots.

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Bedfordshire. In addition, permission was provided by the appropriate heads of Services across the sites, usually the Director of Children and Families. Additional consent for research activities such as interviews and focus groups were sought for individual participants.

Analysis

Analysis was undertaken in two stages. At stage one, an iterative approach was undertaken with sites via discussion and sense-checking between the research lead, the primary contact in the site and other site practitioners. Data for each pilot was read and analysed by the research team who reviewed the findings together. These were coded using the four domains of the contextual safeguarding analytical framework either using Nvivo 12 or following a similar hand coded process when this better facilitated simultaneous group analysis. Emergent themes were reflected upon within pilot teams, fortnightly whole team reflective meetings and with the Principal Investigator. Finally, findings were presented to individual sites at 'system review' meetings for input from multi-agency partners.

This process highlighted an emergent theme concerning the divergent priorities and values of partners involved in the work, particularly within multi-agency settings. Therefore, at stage two, findings were re-analysed to consider the relationship between domain one and domain three. Analysis considered the overarching research question and sub-themes:

To what extent are multi-agency partnerships able to respond to extra-familial harm by intervening with the social conditions of abuse?

- Evidence of safeguarding practice targeting the individual behaviours of young people experiencing extra-familial harm
- Evidence of safeguarding targeting the social conditions of extra-familial harm

The findings of the analysis are presented below under these sub-themes.

Findings

Across the pilots, social workers, in partnership with other agencies, developed responses to a range of extra-familial harm . These included young people that were: the victims of shootings, stabbings and assault; groomed and exploited to traffic drugs across the country; sexually exploited at school and within their community; coming to notice for 'anti-social behaviour'; not in education, employment or training and thought to be 'unreachable' due to their association with a particular ethnic group; and experiencing mental-health and well-being needs.

In seeking to test contextual safeguarding approaches to these forms of harm, all pilots aimed to target the social conditions of abuse (domain one) by drawing on appropriate partnerships (domain 3). The extent to which this was evidenced in practice, however, varied. Whilst the emphasis across pilots remained heavily weighted towards targeting individual behaviour, the research showed emerging practice in targeting the social conditions of abuse. We begin with examples where behaviour was the focus, moving towards examples of practice that targeted the social conditions.

Safeguarding practice targeting individual behaviours

The research team collaborated with sites on the focus and resources needed for each pilot but did not influence how they were conducted, beyond providing support. Consequently, whilst practice resources were developed to identify the social conditions of abuse (e.g., a location assessment template included the question 'what is the pull for young people being in the area' – site C), how they were used, varied. One of the influencing factors, present to different degrees in all sites, was that pilots sat within systems already weighted towards behaviour-based approaches. Site D, for example, piloted 'context assessments' and made changes to practice guidance to support this. However, a lack of changes in the broader system meant that referrals for contexts and locations were received via systems with a behaviour-based focus. This is illustrated in the following extract from a Community Safety panel's Terms of Reference. Although adaptations were made for the pilot (in bold) to include extra-familial harm, the original focus on (anti-social) behaviour remains:

> *This meeting is designed to discuss those children (and siblings if relevant) that professionals are worried about, who may be involved in anti-social behaviour or showing signs that their behaviour is starting to escalate into something more serious **or there is a potential risk towards them outside of the home** (Site D, documentary review, Terms of Reference).*

Reviews of case files, observations of meetings and interviews with practitioners surfaced an ingrained focus on the behaviours of individuals. The way that practitioners discussed and wrote about young people in case notes and planning meetings highlighted how deep-rooted this was. This was perhaps most strikingly seen in the context assessments pilots, where young people thought to be displaying harmful behaviours, e.g., carrying a knife or taking drugs, were responded to with some form of education designed to encourage them to make different choices:

> *..for me, if they [young people] understand…what exploitation is or they understand the risks of carrying [a weapon], can we get them to choose differently, to look at their choices in a different way? (Site C, focus group, VCS partner)*

In this example, the behaviour-based focus of the intervention was built into the name and description of the programme. We have changed the name (underlined) to respect anonymity, but preserved its tone and focus:

> *More Heroic Decisions: A bespoke package of 1:1 interventions for young people identified as at risk of or already engaging with weapons. Sessions are designed to help young people challenge the narrative on knife crime and weapon carrying, empowering them to create a positive self-identity and make positive life choices (Anonymised site, document review, VCS service)*

Young people perceived as instigating harm received responses focussed on their behaviour as the means to safety. This was also the case however for young people who were classified more straightforwardly as victims of harm. This is demonstrated in the two following examples: the first is a quotation from a practitioner outlining the response taken to a girl who had been groomed and sexually exploited and the second are notes made in a young person's safety plan, after they have been shot: shot:

> *I did a piece of work with her around what healthy relationships look like, what's a good relationship, what's a bad relationship, what to do if you're getting yourself into situations like that (Site A, interview, School Designated Safeguarding Lead)*

> *Social worker and agencies need to work with [young person] to give him insight and understanding of criminal exploitation and the risks associated to this so that he can make informed decisions to safeguard himself (Site D, social work assessment notes)*

Perhaps the most extreme example of a behaviour-based approach was a location assessment which led to a group of sexually exploited girls being relocated from the city centre. The 'strengths' section of the assessment reads:

> *The core group of young people who were being sexually exploited have been safeguarded by being moved out of [area]. This means this group of young people are no longer spending time on [area] and no longer being exploited by adults specifically linked to [area] (Site B, multi-agency location assessment)*

A feature of the location assessments in site B was that it was run alongside a police operation. Likewise in site D, some meetings were held at the police station, where images of young people were projected on the wall, taking the style of 'mug shots'. Here, a social worker leading the pilot considers how such a collaboration might influence the response young people receive:

> *Social workers could potentially increase visits for families and young people affected by the police investigation. It would be interesting to see how this affects/is affected by engagement issues from families. Disruption work will be taking place and this could lead to more arrests for young people (Site D, social worker observation notes).*

Arresting young people, rather than changing the social conditions of harm, is an extreme example of the dominance of behaviour-based approaches seen in high-risk situations involving police action. Sometimes, however, the over-reliance was less about the nature of the harm and more about service availability. In one site, for example, the partnership relied heavily on mentoring as a response, whilst in another, there was no mentoring available. In both cases multi-agency partnerships were limited by prior strategic decisions based on resourcing and commissioning arrangements, highlighting the impact that organisational conditions have in maintaining a behaviour-based approach. Issues of resourcing can also expose differences in the direction and focus partners have, as discussed in this extract from a VCS representative:

> *It's always a difficulty because we come with our own availability on what our services can offer, the parameter, levels we work at etc. You can end up being very reactive (Site B, focus group, VCS partners)*

Despite this, multi-agency partnerships in some pilots were able to draw on ecological framings of young people's experiences of harm, which we focus on next.

Safeguarding practice targeting the social conditions

Emergent evidence showed some partnerships successfully engaging with the social conditions of harm. In the following extract, an Early Help families service manager, part of a multi-agency location assessment, reflected on the limitations and possibilities of working differently:

> *…there have been moments of creativity… but they've been few and far between….g[we did a] really great piece of work actually for being quite new to the contextual safeguarding thing actually, there was all sorts of really positive things about connecting, we had conversations and meetings that we wouldn't have had I think previously (Site B, focus group, Education and Early Help)*

Part of working differently involved taking an iterative approach, talking to stakeholders in the location at different times of the day and night, and developing relationships with young people and adults who spend time there:

> *We asked, who is on the ground, who knows the area, who do we need to talk to. From it has come sessions with YP and some detached youth work. [It] hasn't eradicated ASB, but [it] has really helped (Site B, focus group, VCS partners).*

In this way, youth workers sought to become part of the day-to-day activity on the street and thereby alter the 'rules at play'. However, the pilot highlights the fragility of sustaining this approach – as discussed above, 'new' and 'creative' efforts to shift

dynamics were overshadowed by the relocation of the girls who were most at risk of exploitation.

All pilots saw multi-agency forums set up to make safeguarding decisions. In some, however, the multi-agency context *itself* became the focus of efforts to alter the social conditions of harm. Site C, for example, undertook a multi-agency assessment of a park with a shelter in it, after neighbours complained about disruptive young people. Residents suggested removing the shelter, to encourage young people to go elsewhere. Here a safeguarding manager leading the pilot describes her response:

> So, I contacted [councillor] and I said to him... 'I don't think moving the shelter is the answer here... and we had a meeting and what we've agreed to do is, he is going to use some of his ward funds to move the shelter within the park away from the houses and more to the centre of the park....those types of discussions were had through [Multi-agency Panel] (Site C, interview, Senior Manager)

By advocating for the rights of these young people to socialise safely in the park, the multi-agency context was extended to include local councillors and residents, who rather than fearing and resenting young people, were invited to take a more caring attitude towards them. However, as was seen in site B, ecological responses were coupled with behaviour-based ones, that is, a substance misuse programme targeting young people's decision making, with little apparent awareness of how these juxtaposed with one another.

Site E ran the only pilot where we saw evidence of discussions about whether a response was behaviour-based or ecological. Here, family group conferencing (FGC) methods were used to run multi-agency community conferences. A referral was received by the local multi-agency safeguarding panel for a peer group belonging to a minoritised ethnic group at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation within a park. When the lead coordinators consulted young people, professionals and residents, they realised that the social conditions contributing to the harm included very limited access to education. Consequently, the coordinators convened a conference to address two issues: (i) the breakdown in the relationship between agencies responsible for providing services, and (ii) how assumptions and stereotypes about the young people's ethnicity might be playing into the lack of provision. As the lead co-ordinator explained:

> We had to mention the word race and racism because...there were some concerns from our point of view that [ethnic group] young people were being discriminated against by schools.... If you've got 20 [ethnic group] young people in your school, why are 15 of them on an hour a day timetable? (Site E, interview, FGC co-ordinator)

This response changed the social conditions for this peer group, by addressing the underlying issues preventing their access to services. For the co-ordinators, turning their attention away from the behaviour of individual young people to considering how to make the

context safer *for* young people, involved multiple discussions, in supervision and with the research team, referenced in the extract below:

> *We're working on to try to make that area a safer space for all residents of the district, for that to become a safe community space and these are the things we're doing to try and make that happen.... it shouldn't be about dispersing young people, it should be engagement of young people (Site E, interview, FGC coordinator)*

The coordinators saw their role as one of engaging the multi-agency partnership – professionals and otherwise – in how they could contribute to creating a safe environment for this peer group. In the following extract, a coordinator discussed her conversations with those adjacent to the park, showing that this process was often not straightforward:

> *[We were] trying to get the community to understand... that[this] wasn't about trying to move young people out of the area but trying to get them to engage in positive activities within their community. There were some residents that ...wanted the young people moved on... (Site E, interview, FGC coordinator).*

The coordinators found working in this way energising and exciting, describing the process as 'revolutionary'. Here is a co-ordinator, responding to a different referral describing their experience:

> *Let's use [area], for example, which is a very, very poor area... It's renowned, it's a council estate..., you couldn't do that work in that area without it being in a contextual safeguarding way. I couldn't go in...in the way that we work our social care cases and do a piece of work in there with the local community, because it would not work (Site E, interview, FGC co-ordinator).*

Practitioners also described how working in a more ecological way required courage. This was both from those leading the work and seeking to engage others to shift their perspectives and also from those being asked to change, as is acknowledged here:

> *It was really quite brave, I think, because the education providers looked at things like their unconscious bias which was really interesting about the racial issues in school and how these younger people felt. (Site E, interview, FGC co-ordinator)*

These pilots paint a picture of emerging possibilities for multi-agency partnerships to address the social conditions of extra-familial harm. They also highlight the tensions and barriers of doing this within a wider context of welfare, educational and criminal services dominated by behaviour-based values. We turn now to the implications of these findings for multi-agency partnerships seeking to address extra-familial harm, particularly within the development of contextual safeguarding.

Discussion

Addressing the social conditions of harm is an integral part of contextual safeguarding, however, in practice, the extent to which pilots could respond to harm as environmentally driven, rather than attributable to behaviour was limited. Within multi-agency settings, rather than social work's ecological underpinnings supporting pilots to address contextual factors, a dominant behaviour focus was of greatest influence (Gitterman, 2014). Even during the introduction of an explicitly ecological framework such as contextual safeguarding, the ubiquity of behaviour-based approaches seem to render them difficult to recognise and resist. Emerging 'green shoots' of practice targeting the social conditions of abuse were evident, for example, efforts to change the perception of adolescents as 'anti-social', increasing positive activities for young people and tackling structural harm such as racism.

In the one pilot where there was conscious awareness of the need to choose between behaviour-based or ecological approaches, practitioners talked positively about the opportunities this afforded them to work more collaboratively with young people, reduce blame and focus on positive interventions. Two distinctive aspects of this pilot were the proactive engagement of the pilot leaders with the research team in considering its focus and epistemology, and their ability to draw on the ecological underpinnings of their FGC training. Interestingly, in those situations where there was some break from behaviour-based responses, this was experienced by professionals as new and experimental, requiring creativity and courage. We consider these challenges below: firstly, in relation to the dynamics of multi-agency partnerships, then in relation to extra-familial harm, and finally, implications for the development of contextual safeguarding.

The dynamics of multi-agency partnerships

The dynamics of multi-agency partnerships create challenges for those wishing to take an ecological approach to extra-familial harm. This is due to a context of complex historic rivalry and misalignment between professional roles and disciplines regarding child welfare and safety (Wright, 1999). This is exacerbated by a competitive commissioning environment that engenders performative pressures between agencies, creating a sense of survival anxiety (Milbourne & Cushman, 2013). Given this, it is not surprising that we witnessed multi-agency settings characterised by a wish for certainty and a lean towards traditional behaviour-based approaches. An essential part of learning is the 'tolerance of not-knowing for long enough to be able to…change' (Armstrong & Rustin, 2015, p. 14). Given this, it is conceivable that pressure on agencies to hold their own and be seen to know what needs to happen leaves little space for tolerating the 'not-knowing' required for creativity and critical reflection. We observed that often, the act of gathering agencies together seemed to be the end goal, rather than the starting point for further work.

Pilots where ecological approaches seemed possible, were characterised by greater inter-agency trust, openness and tolerance of 'not-knowing', allowing space for a shared vision to develop. In site E, for example, a restorative meeting was held to repair the relationships between professional agencies and between residents and

young people, before they co-created a safety plan. Similarly, in site C, and to some extent, site B, the multi-agency network moved beyond sharing information. These sites had a clearer understanding of how the functioning of the multi-agency partnership itself might directly impact young people's experiences of safety and harm and how this formed part of their efforts to alter the social conditions of harm. They stood out for their ability to have robust self-reflective discussions and thereby avoid dominant behaviour-based approaches focussing only on what young people need to do. This is all the more impressive, given the high levels of professional anxiety generated by extra-familial harm, which we will consider next.

Extra-familial harm

Multi-agency partnerships are tasked with increasing safety when young people are exposed to serious violence, sexual assault and threats to life. The considerable anxiety that this generates in professionals can lead to systemic/organisational defences (Cooper & Leeds, 2015), limiting new ways of thinking and acting. Changing the social conditions can seem impossible when the seriousness escalates, as we saw in site D, where a plan was developed for a child who had been shot, to increase their 'insight and understanding', so that they would 'safeguard themselves' against further (potentially fatal) harm. This is perhaps an example of how behaviour-based responses can be used by partnerships to defend against the overwhelming nature of both the risk and what might be required of them if the response was to focus on the *drivers* of harm rather the young person's own actions.

   This would explain why those sites most reliant on behaviour-based approaches (D and B) were also those where risks to young people were greatest. No matter how unfair or nonsensical it might be to suggest that someone should try harder to prevent their own shooting, they seemed unable to critique this or consider alternatives. Rather, in these sites partnerships relied on the viewpoint of professions with a history of working outside the home, namely community safety and police. The deferment to these agencies meant that behaviour-based approaches were taken as more robust and dependable. Social care's historical lack of involvement with extra-familial harm seemed to have created a power dynamic such that, particularly in high-risk situations, professions viewed as having the greatest expertise in extra-familial contexts, have the most influence over the direction of the response.

Implications for contextual safeguarding

Central to contextual safeguarding is the requirement for safeguarding responses to target the context of harm. Early adopters have responded enthusiastically, designing interventions which take place within extra-familial settings. However, these pilots suggest that the conceptual requirement of contextual safeguarding to do so with an ecological lens is less well understood. This has led to safeguarding responses which target an extra-familial context but do not align with a contextual safeguarding approach. Even pilots which addressed the social conditions of harm often included behaviour-based responses,

like in site C where work to change the attitude and guardianship of local residents was coupled with a programme to encourage young people to make 'more heroic decisions' about their drug use. What was most striking about this was the lack of apparent awareness from those leading the work of the different orientations of these two interventions. What seems most likely is the intervention with the residents was not thought to be sufficiently robust as a standalone response, and/or when it came to direct work with young people familiar and available behaviour-based responses were drawn on by default. Likewise, in site B – where initial attempts to change the environment later gave way to the relocation of some young people – there was no apparent narrative within the multi-agency that this shift in orientation had taken place.

The awareness that sites had about how they drew on responses across the behaviour/ecological spectrum did not necessarily map against what they achieved. For example, the behaviour-based direct work in site C (described above) involved youth workers spending considerable time in the park, developing relationships, providing Wi-Fi, and other support. Therefore, although altering young people's views on illegal substances may have been the stated aim, the intervention delivery may have (unknowingly) altered the rules at play, and bolstered the guardianship work with residents. Thus, we see that those embedding contextual safeguarding require further support to become more consciously aware of the impact of their work and more deliberate about the orientation of their responses.

Limitations of the study

Firstly, COVID-19 significantly impacted the extent to which researchers were 'embedded' within sites, although this was mitigated by the fact that research relationships had been established face-to-face before the pandemic. Secondly, the pandemic also caused a delay in research activities, as sites prioritised their primary work, and limited the availability of resources within some sites. The pressure to offer a response in such circumstances may have impacted the extent to which sites defaulted to behaviour-based approaches rather than critiquing usual practice. Finally, the selective naming of sites, to maintain anonymity, reduces the opportunity to triangulate findings. However, this is in line with our intention to avoid individually criticising sites, and instead to support and understand practice.

Conclusion

Whilst some multi-agency contexts can provide an ecological approach, this is emergent and contingent due to the dominance of the beahviour-based paradigm within health, soical care, education and policing. For those seeking to embed contextual safeguarding, there is a need to articulate more clearly that domain one – targeting the context of harm – has both a geographical (where) and methodological (how) component. If partnerships are to move beyond defensive information-sharing which prioritises police and community safety methods, they need to be places where creativity and uncertainty are encouraged and where building trust and honesty across professional boundaries is prioritised.

This research suggests that relying on the paramountcy principle alone to galvanise multi-agency partnerships takes insufficient account of the wider inter-professional context – where there is professional anxiety, competitiveness and performativity. Partnerships need to begin by acknowledging the likelihood of differences in conceptual and ideological frameworks – between one another and between their usual approach and that required of them by contextual safeguarding – and engage in critical self-reflection, if they are to develop and realise shared aims. This study has shown that nuanced and reflective multi-agency responses to extra-familial harm are possible. However, if contextual safeguarding is to be fully realised, we need to see social care and welfare-oriented agencies leading partnerships in critically reflective practice. By drawing more intentionally and explicitly on social work's ecological underpinnings, and by being mindful of the likely pull towards behaviour-based responses, multi-agency partnerships will be in a stronger position to bring about safeguarding responses that address the social conditions of harm.

Ethics

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