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Relationship-based practice and contextual safeguarding: Approaches to working with young people experiencing extra-familial risk and harm

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Abstract

This article explores the synergies between relationship-based practice and contextual safeguarding when working with young people experiencing extra-familial risk and harm (EFRH). The article draws on data from interviews, observations, policy reviews and case files from two sites in England who are testing contextual safeguarding approaches to EFRH, including a children and families social work department and a voluntary and community sector organisation. The findings evidence how relationship-based practice in contextual safeguarding facilitates practitioners' understanding of places and their peers. The discussion draws on the theory of social defences to evidence that despite willingness and commitment to relationship-based practice, without systemic and cultural organisational support to respond to EFRH, efforts to do so may undermine and cause harm to practitioners engaging in this work.

KEYWORDS

adolescents, contextual safeguarding, extra-familial harm, peers, relationship-based practice, social defences

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the synergies between relationship-based practice and contextual safeguarding when working with young people experiencing extra-familial risk and harm (EFRH) and the organisational conditions required for this work. EFRH includes harm that happens to children outside of their families, such as at school or within their peer group, and can include harm such as child sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, harmful sexual behaviour and violence (HM Government, 2018). We draw on research with one children and families social care department and one voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisation who are using contextual safeguarding as an innovative approach to addressing EFRH. The findings have particular relevance to UK social workers who are now being tasked with providing contextual responses to adolescents that are harmed beyond their families.

Providing safeguarding approaches to children experiencing EFRH has risen in prominence in UK safeguarding practice and policy in recent years (HM Government, 2018). EFRH is increasingly understood as a safeguarding issue, rather than requiring a criminally framed sanction or an issue for community safety through the tackling of 'anti-social' behaviour. Alongside this is an authorising policy environment that acknowledges the need for ecological (as opposed to individual) approaches to harm, leading to an increase in the prominence of contextual approaches to EFRH. One approach gaining traction is contextual safeguarding (Firmin, 2020), a framework designed to address the ecological aspects of harm faced by children in contexts beyond their homes. Parallel to this development, within social work practice and research more broadly, is relationship-based practice, inspired by psychosocial theories, developed as a means to explore how relationships can help practitioners and organisations understand the role of emotional safety (Ruch, 2005). In this paper, we explore the synergies between these two approaches drawing initially upon relationship-based approaches in direct practice with young people and then subsequently, on its contribution to thinking about emotions within organisational systems (Ruch, 2011). We argue that uniting relationship-based practice and theory with contextual safeguarding supports practitioners to develop better understandings of the places and peer groups that young people spend time in and can also provide a richer understanding of what is required of organisations wishing to promote this way of working.

CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING

Contextual safeguarding was first developed as an approach to address challenges in how EFRH was responded to by safeguarding systems (Firmin, 2020). While forms of extra-familial harm often feature harm and abuse that involve children experiencing 'significant harm' (where a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm in the form of physical, sexual, emotional abuse or neglect, (Children Act, 1989)) these cases did not often meet a threshold for a child protection response or the response they received was inadequate (Lloyd & Firmin, 2020). This is because, in the UK, the child protection system is predominately designed to respond to harm within families (intra-familial harm) or a parent's capacity to safeguard their child from harm. Several other gaps were acknowledged, for example in cases of EFRH, harm would often be from a child's peers (not adults), within groups (rather than to individual children) and in places and spaces that parents had little control over (Firmin, 2018). In response, the contextual safeguarding framework was developed to support safeguarding partners (primarily social workers) to address harm beyond the home (Firmin et al., 2016).

This framework places emphasis on the need to understand and address contextual elements of harm that young people experience. For example, those seeking to create safety should be able to address harm in contexts beyond the home by targeting the social conditions of abuse. This involves recognising how contexts such as a young person's peer group, or the places where they spend time, can be contexts that provide safety but also can increase harm.

In 2018, statutory safeguarding guidance in England was updated to place emphasis on the need for safeguarding professionals to understand and address 'environments', 'contexts' and 'peer groups' where young people experience harm (HM Government, 2018). Since 2018 over 65 social care departments across these three nations have reported to the contextual safeguarding programme that they are using the framework to address the issue of EFRH. While contextual safeguarding remains a relatively new term within child protection policy and practice in the UK, emerging research on its application indicates its synergies with relationship-based practice (Owens et al., 2020). Recognition of young people's relationships (particularly peers and friends) has been a key feature of contextual safeguarding research (Firmin et al., 2022; Latimer et al., 2020; Owens et al., 2020). However, to date the emphasis has been on systems change where relationships between young people and the practitioners working to keep them safe has been an assumed, although not explicit, feature of work within contextual safeguarding.

RELATIONSHIP-BASED PRACTICE

Social support is crucial to buffering stress, coping with adversity (Dolan & McGregor, 2019), and enduring traumatic experiences across the life course (Herman, 2015). Supportive relationships can facilitate safety from feelings of shame and judgement, and provide the means for facing difficult experiences (Van der Kolk, 2014). The importance of supportive relationships underlies core social work values (British Association of Social Workers, 2021) and have shaped our understanding of social work practice throughout the world (International Federation for Social Workers, 2018). The term 'relationship-based practice' has been particularly influential in social work practice with children and families within the UK (Ruch, 2005; Trevithick, 2003; Winter et al., 2017). Drawing on psychosocial concepts such as emotional containment (Bion, 1962), the relationships 'turn' focussed on the quality of relationships and rejected proceduralised practice (Trevithick, 2003). Within this approach, the complexity of individuals' experiences are understood as existing within conscious and unconscious dimensions which are reflected in their present behaviours and capacity to form relationships (Owens et al., 2020). This facilitates an understanding of the relationship as an important source of information about an individual or family's needs and an intervention itself (Ruch, 2005).

Social work has a long history of foregrounding the social worker-client/service user relationship (Trevithick, 2003) and relationships are described within policy as essential to effective social work practice (Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016; Munro, 2010). However, remaining both emotionally open and practically available for direct work with children and families that enable trusting relationships to form is increasingly challenging (Ferguson, 2017). Analysing relationship-based social work practice in the context of austerity, Hingley-Jones and Ruch (2016) describe the need to acknowledge professional anxiety resulting from decreased time due to bureaucratic demands alongside increased caseloads and the complexity of needs. This anxiety, experienced by professionals working within a socio-political context that facilitates a pre-occupation with risk, can result in defensive, risk-adverse practice that undermines relationships. While it is possible to still engage in relational work within a professional climate that is relationally austere, it requires

the development of new reflective and relational spaces that are both containing and allow social workers to face the intractable social problems they are presented with (Coulter et al., 2020; Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016) and create a 'holding relationship' (Ferguson et al., 2022) that is emotionally safe and practically useful for young people.

By drawing on psychosocial concepts, the contemporary turn to relationship-based practice has opened a way to conceptualise what happens at the direct practice levels as inextricably linked to the context in which it takes place (Menzies Lyth, 1960). For example, writing about familial harm, Ruch (2011) argues that providing emotional containment for managers can facilitate relationship-based work at the practice level due to how unconscious processes—like anxiety and defences—are connected through a complex field of emotions within organisational systems. While the literature shows that the political context can fracture or even prevent relationship-based practices, there are some key features of safeguarding adolescents from harms outside their family environments, and some key elements of the policy environment linked to this, that require particular consideration. We will analyse what happens at the direct practice level within extra-familial relationship-based work below, then return to these concepts in the discussion to explore its implications for contextual safeguarding systems.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING EXTRA-FAMILIAL RISK OR HARM

Research on child sexual exploitation indicates the primacy of relational work in facilitating safety for young people who experience EFRH (Gilligan, 2016; Lefevre et al., 2019). Professionals and young people have described how trusting relationships that facilitate safety are characterised by persistence (Jago et al., 2011), flexibility, reliability and a non-judgemental approach (Berelowitz, et al., 2013; Gilligan, 2016; Hallett, 2017) that considers young people's rights to both safety and participation in decision-making about their lives (Warrington et al., 2016; Warrington & Larkins, 2019). These characteristics generally align with understandings of relationship-based work across social work practice contexts. However, social workers and other professionals often face insurmountable challenges in forming trusting relationships with young people (Mason-Jones & Loggie, 2020). These arise from working within the political context of austerity described above and from the poor fit between the structure of safeguarding systems and the nature of EFRH.

The current UK child protection system was developed to support intervention when a child is at risk of harm resulting from actions (or inactions) by parents or carers (Firmin, 2020; Radford et al., 2017) and thus the system response is designed to target 'parenting inadequacies' or needs within the child's home environment (Firmin et al., 2022). For young people experiencing harm outside their homes or families, an intervention with this singular focus is insufficient, even when the family circumstances are challenging or also require some level of intervention. This can be particularly true for young people whose agentic experiences of harms such as criminal exploitation transgress the binaries created by forcing either a welfare or a criminal justice response. Instead of facilitating relational, physical and psychological safety (Shuker, 2013) for the young people and peers/others who may be at risk of harm from them, safeguarding responses can often irreparably stymie the formation of safe, trusting relationships with young people who feel ignored, experience having confidentiality breached and their social lives and sexual behaviour policed by adults as part of assessments and interventions designed to keep them safe (Dodsworth, 2014; Hallett, 2017; Lefevre et al., 2019; Wroe & Lloyd, 2020). When the system creates barriers to facilitating trusting professional relationships, young people can be placed in a complex and terrifying

situation in which they are caught between a multitude of contexts that demand different things for them to stay safe (Hickle et al., Forthcoming), for example weapon carrying for protection.

In considering the reparative capacity of safe relationships, we can see how the presence of a safe and trusted professional both mitigates the impact of trauma experienced via EFRH while also foreshortening the duration of these experiences, as young people begin to feel relationally safe in a way that enables the terrifying circumstances they are caught within to hold less power in their lives (Van der Kolk, 2014). For example, when professionals prioritise relational working with criminally exploited young people, they feel better able to take advantage of critical moments when young people are open to exploring other ways of getting their needs met (Hickle et al., Forthcoming). When sexually exploited young people felt cared for and supported by a trusting professional relationship, they were able to feel a sense of stability and a source of 'security through which change had been possible' (Hallett, 2017, 112); when everything felt unstable, they were able to feel there was someone 'solid and immovable in a world of turmoil' (p.111).

Despite evidence suggesting the importance of relationship-based practice in adolescence, professionals can utilise victim blaming narratives where young people's agency is overemphasised and their vulnerability or 'victimhood' minimised (Davis & Marsh, 2022; Williams & Clarke, 2016). Internationally, professionals struggle to balance protecting young people's rights to safety and protection alongside their rights to autonomy and voice (Firmin et al., 2022). The risks to young people who experience EFRH can be significant, including extreme violence and death (Firmin, 2018). It is possible to understand why professionals might avoid relationships with young people facing these risks, especially if they are working in risk averse and pressured organisational contexts, despite the possibilities that relationship-based practice might open up in terms of allowing young people to imagine their futures in new ways (Hickle & Hallett, 2016).

The concept of 'social suffering' presented by Frost and Hoggett (2015) is also useful here in considering how social disadvantage is related to the geographic, economic, racial, and gendered inequalities young people at risk of EFRH often face. When these disadvantages result in state intervention (Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016), trusting relationships are undermined by increased surveillance (Wroe & Lloyd, 2020). To address the myriad challenges professionals face when trying to safeguard young people from EFRH, a response that more directly acknowledges and addresses contexts of harm is required.

METHODOLOGY

This paper draws upon data from the Innovate Project, a four-year Economic and Social Research Council-funded project exploring how new practice systems and interventions are developed for young people exposed to EFRH in the UK. Contextual safeguarding is one of the three innovative responses to EFRH examined within the study (along with Trauma-Informed Practice and Transitional Safeguarding). This paper considers how contextual safeguarding is interpreted by professionals partaking in this process of innovation. We explore the following research questions:

- In what ways does relationship-based practice facilitate contextual safeguarding approaches to EFRH?
- How does relational working provide practitioners with a greater understanding of young people's experiences of *places*?
- How does relational working provide practitioners with a greater understanding of young people's *peers*?

Although relationship-based practice was not an explicit feature that informed the data collection stage, it nonetheless emerged out of initial analysis.

Research sites

Data were captured within two research sites who had interpreted and operationalised contextual safeguarding as an approach to responding to EFRH. These included:

- Site one: a statutory children and families social care department in the south of England. Practitioners in this site work with children experiencing EFRH via statutory child protection processes and voluntary Early Help services.
- Site two: a VCS organisation in the south-east of England working with children experiencing criminal and sexual exploitation.

Each site had decided to utilise the contextual safeguarding framework as a key strategic approach to responding EFRH. Each site was at different stages of their innovation journey and of developing the approach.

Methods and sample size

Data were collected from March 2021 until October 2021 in both sites with the exception of data collection with young people in September 2022. Table 1 outlines the data collected and Table 2 breaks down interviewees per professional role per site.

To answer the overarching research question and aims an interview schedule was developed exploring: how and why contextual safeguarding was taken-up within the site, forms of extra-familial harm in the local area, pre-existing and continuing system challenges, the sites' innovation journeys, and enablers and barriers to progress. Documentary analysis and observations of meetings were undertaken to cross-reference the extent that this progress was observable in practice and to verify if this practice aligned with the innovation framework—in this case contextual safeguarding. Observation templates facilitated the recording of free narrative observations and reflective notes both during and after the observed activity, with a particular focus on key learning about: the innovation approach employed; the research sites; innovation theory and practice; and how power and influence are deployed in relationships and systems.

TABLE 1 Overview of methods.

Method	Number	Recording	Location
Interviews	28 interviews	Audio recorded	Online
Meeting observations	23 meetings	Typed notes using observation template	Online
Documentary review	36 policy and practice documents	Documentary analysis template	Sent from sites online
Case file reviews	13 individual case files	Case file template	Sent from sites online
Observations of practice and focus group with young people	1 focus group 1 observation	Written notes	In-person

TABLE 2 Breakdown of interviewees per professional role.

Professional role	Participant (*n*)
Site 1	
Service Manager/Strategic Lead	6
Area Manager	1
Designated Safeguarding Nurse	2
Partnerships Inspector	1
Practitioner	4
Designated Safeguarding Lead	1
Site 2	
Executive leadership	1
Service Manager/Strategic Lead	8
Practitioner	4

Ethics and limitations

The study gained approval through the lead university's research ethics process. Additionally, consent was gained via the Director of Children and Families of site one and the CEO and Board of Trustees of site two. Consent for participation in interviews and focus groups were sought with individual practitioners and consent for observations was sought ahead of meetings. Participants could withdraw consent from their inclusion in the research analysis up until 2 months after the interview or observation took place. To provide anonymity to the sites, and as the findings do not aim to be comparative, findings are presented without reference to individual sites.

Several limitations are of note. First, the research was initially designed to be conducted in-person with researchers frequently visiting sites. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, these plans were adapted to the online environment. In some respects this has limited the researchers' ability to observe and participate in everyday interactions with practitioners and how they grapple with questions of innovation. However, this did facilitate more consistent participation of the research team in meetings. Second, the findings here explore emerging ideas, rather than firm conclusions on how relationship-based practice and contextual safeguarding could illuminate understandings of context. While we share promising practice of practitioners valuing these ways of working, we witnessed multiple occasions where practice did not appear to align with these approaches. Finally, while the sites were *trying* to embed contextual safeguarding approaches, they did not necessarily do so effectively or with alignment to the key principles of contextual safeguarding (Firmin, 2020). The findings provide some promising practice associated to this approach, but these examples sit within wider system challenges that undermined, rather than supported, changes being made.

Analysis

We used a hybrid deductive-inductive approach to analysis (Grunberg et al., 2022). Deductive analysis was undertaken where themes were derived from the literature, our prior research experience and using the contextual safeguarding framework. New and exploratory ideas were surfaced through the use of psychosocial research methods, including 'many minds'

group analytic processes, which involves reflection on the affective processes and symbolic communication as a way to access material 'beneath the surface' (Clarke & Hoggett, 2019). The research team met regularly (between fortnightly and monthly) to reflect on the findings. In keeping with the emphasis within relationship-based practice on both cognitive and emotional processes, members discussed descriptive observational material alongside the feelings that it generated. This group reflective thinking enabled collective "thinking minds" (Price & Cooper, 2012, p.64) to support each other to tune into those aspects of the material that might be harder to face and see. While analysis sessions were sometimes structured around themes like 'the innovation process', 'progress towards a Contextual Safeguarding system' or 'barriers and enablers', we always discussed our own feelings about what we felt was happening, alongside those of the sites, including what we thought was not always said but appeared to be felt emotionally.

For this paper, data from across two sites were re-analysed across three stages. At stage one, all data from the two sites were entered into Nvivo12 and coded by three members of the team, to consider 'innovation' within the site, alignment to the contextual safeguarding framework and evidence related to EFRH. At stage two, the results of this initial coding were re-read and discussed by the researchers and the co-investigator. From this second phase of coding, the theme of 'relational working' emerged as particularly salient. At stage three, the data under this parent code were re-coded against the overarching research question and two sub-themes: how relationship-based practice and contextual safeguarding support practitioners to understand young people's experiences of *places* and *peers*. The findings are discussed below.

FINDINGS

Understanding places

By expanding the focus of safeguarding beyond individual children and families to the contexts of their lives while drawing on relationship-based practice, understandings of places emerged in two key ways. First, when practitioners prioritised relationships with young people, they had greater access to the places and spaces where young people spent time. Second, these relationships provided greater opportunity to learn about young people's experiences of places. In the extract below, a practitioner discusses the opportunities offered by being in-situ:

> we're able to meet them where they want, in their community, in their areas of safety, so we can see how they work. Like I've worked with young people in certain shops [...] caffs [cafes], and sat in there and you can see how they're acting and it gives you an insight of what is going on for them there and then, and it starts a conversation that can lead to something else.
>
> (Practitioner interview)

While the 'something else' encompassed many things, practitioners discussed how prioritising relationship-based practice and the role of places through contextual safeguarding promoted the importance of understanding where young people felt safe. Acknowledging and respecting where young people feel safe or unsafe supported them to build trusting relationships and facilitated

engagement. Practitioners observed that, historically, they sometimes expected young people to meet with them in places where children may not have been safe:

> you know specific boroughs certain young people aren't able to go [...] we might be working with a young person say who's at risk in [place], and then when we set up a meeting to actually go and meet with them, oh yeah, oh let's meet in [place] just round the corner, I'll be alright there, I'm safe ...[...] we have those conversations.
>
> (Practitioner, interview)

Without trusting relationships young people may not want to or have the opportunity, to tell practitioners that they feel unsafe in an area.

Meeting in places facilitated creating safety in those places, either through building relationships with other safe adults there (promoted in contextual safeguarding as building guardianship capacity) or by creating safety in that moment while they were present. In the first extract below, a practitioner discusses how the organisation started to engage adults locally to build safe relationships with young people. In the second extract, young people discuss the impact of having an outreach youth service in their local park:

> It's all about relationships, all of this! And so if those young people know that, oh well if they go to that barbers, they can talk to somebody who will be looking out for them, who's got their back etc. So that's as far as we are with it.
>
> (Practitioner interview)

> [the project is about] empowering places to support young people's emotional wellbeing. And so that all of the key individuals in that place, whether they're barbers, the corner shop worker or what have you, will understand how they can support young people's emotional wellbeing and begin to recognise if things are spiralling for young people.
>
> (Young people focus group)

These findings echo similar themes explored in Ferguson (2010b)'s work on the everyday mobilities of social work practice. Ferguson's (2010a) work acknowledges the important questions of what and *where* social work practice takes place and how social work practice while walking and driving facilitated better understanding by social workers of the places and spaces where children spend time. Yet, this work is not without its risks and is hampered by an increasingly bureaucratic and neoliberal social work system that places emphasis on record keeping in the office while also maintaining the responsibility that social workers have towards being emotionally receptive and containing to young people and families (Bower, 2003). These themes were also highlighted in our own findings.

A commitment to contextual safeguarding by an organisation did not, however, inherently result in practitioners forming relationships with young people. Without emphasis on and opportunity to form trusting relationships with young people, practitioner understandings of place and young people's embodiment of the rules of those places were limited. This led to observations of young people in places that endorsed the surveillance and monitoring of young people in those places. The following extract, taken from an observation of a 'peer mapping' meeting (held to understand peer dynamics when harm was thought to be occurring in a peer group), highlighted this. In these meetings, individual young people are discussed and moved on a virtual peer map:

> As participants provided information and updates about the young people the Chair would drag them into the map and illustrate their connections with other young people by drawing lines and writing some key words next to each name, and, when known, the locations young people were seen spending time in or travelling to, occasionally asking for clarifications.
>
> (Meeting observation notes, peer mapping meeting)

Observations of this and many similar meetings suggested that practitioners knew very little about the young people's engagements with place. Instead, this approach to places and peers focussed on quantifiable data drawn from 'intelligence' such as police reports.

When relationship-based practice and contextual safeguarding approaches did intersect, this created a unique opportunity. While learning about the places where young people feel safe may be common to traditional safeguarding work, contextual safeguarding promoted and required practitioners to create plans to make the places themselves safer. This differs from traditional safeguarding work where the focus may be on creating individual safety plans for young people or in the extreme, stopping young people (or relocating young people away from) from going to places considered unsafe. Crucially, practitioners discussed the need for plans for places to not undermine trusting relationships.

> so through the work I do, you build that relationship, you have ... understanding, you kind of know what to ask and you explore different areas, and something comes up and they mention school, then it's really down to us to kind of touch base and go ... make contact with whoever it may be at the school to see how we can ... work those ... overcome those potential risks or problems.
>
> (Practitioner interview)

> So there was one case where I had a concern around sort of honour based abuse within a church and the young person still attended this particular church and there was some real concerns around, from my end, just a kind of real pattern of red flags around location safety but also sort of treatment of young females within this particular church, which obviously is a very sensitive issue to broach with the young person and for her family. So in a situation like that, it was very useful to have ... to work, to co-work with this other professional who perhaps could approach the church as a more neutral standpoint as opposed to being connected to someone who attends, and allowed me also to kind of maintain my trust with my young person, so not that sense of I'm going to go behind their back and address something that they've shared in confidence.
>
> (Practitioner interview)

The second example highlights the importance of understanding the cultural context in which relationships are formed and maintained. Relationship-based practice has previously been criticised for its focus on the individual-level, decontextualised from the broader social contexts of people's lives (Ruch, 2005). However, this extract shows how pairing relationship-based practice with contextual safeguarding can facilitate maintaining relationships of trust while tackling the social conditions influencing that harm. The practitioners were sensitive to maintaining their relationship while having to respond to the challenges of tackling honour-based abuse in the context of sensitive cultural, religious and gendered issues. We turn now to understanding peers.

Understanding peers

The fusion between relationship-based practice and contextual safeguarding approaches was particularly exemplified in how they supported understanding peers. Where contextual safeguarding places emphasis on the need to consider peer groups (beyond individual children) as a context itself, relationship-based practice ensures practitioners recognise the importance of relationships with young people, as the work of safeguarding. When these are brought together, it can help practitioners recognise the positive influence peers can have by working contextually with young people in a way that makes sense for their everyday lives, dominated as they often are by peer relations. It can provide developmentally appropriate support for young people looking for independence, in the context of risky social situations. At very least peer engagement supports practitioners to recognise the influence and importance of young people's friends to safeguarding responses. Practitioners suggested this supported them to think about how to involve peers:

> I would like one, a minimum of one [friend] to be identified that's not a family member or a professional, so someone within their social world who they can identify, someone they can approach with their emotional needs or something like that.
>
> (Practitioner interview)

> So you know the multi-agency meetings where you know you're kind of looking at peer maps and relationships between young people, that's really, really helpful. And it's really helpful in kind of ruling out negative relationships but also kind of finding where the positive relationships are as well.
>
> (Practitioner interview)

Contextual safeguarding (with its emphasis on peer groups) encouraged practitioners to think differently about peers. For example, understanding the power and influence that friends can have and that young people may not be in a position, nor want to, end those relationships:

> In this meeting peer mapping has opened up a conversations with young people about why what is happening might be harmful. This doesn't mean that the young people would have the power to end those relationships but it is an iterative process.
>
> (Meeting observation notes)

Despite how important peer are for adolescent development, practitioners discussed how thinking about peers was a shift in how they normally tackled harm of this nature, which predominantly emphasised individual behaviour change. In the following extract, a practitioner discusses this shift:

> [previously we] had these one to one relationships with children and young people which were ... you know generally good quality relationships, and there was change happening within the context of that relationship but there wasn't a good grasp of what the kind of rest of the meaning of that young person's life was, it was kind of let's try and work with you as an individual to get you as an individual to have different aspirations or recover from trauma or ... something like that, rather than think about, well until we attend to how your peer group relates to each other, nothing's going to change, you know ... they'll just keep being at risk really.
>
> (Practitioner interview)

For practitioners involved in individual case work, this supported them to see young people in the context of their friends and think differently about a young person's positionality in contexts of harm. However, without a strategic commitment to contextual safeguarding, the ability to work with peer groups meaningfully was a challenge. While both sites had committed to contextual safeguarding approaches and working with peer group 'in theory', there were challenges of doing this in practice.

In one site, knowledge and enthusiasm for contextual safeguarding was held at middle management level but not understood or strategically embedded at senior levels. This resulted in *processes* that considered peers but there appeared to be limited opportunities to work with peers. Peer mapping meetings in this site appeared to rely on practitioners discussing individual children and 'intelligence' practitioners had, with little indication that practitioners had good quality trusting relationships with those children. In the other site, there was significant buy-in into contextual approaches and peer working across senior management and emphasis on building trusting relationships with individual children. However, in this site, observations and interviews highlighted that practitioners did not have the confidence or skills to know how to work with peer groups themselves. Practitioners in this site were more confident in building relationships via an individual case-work model. Not engaging with peer meant that practitioners were less able to work with the context of young people's lived experiences, wherein friends are often central to their psychological and social development.

DISCUSSION

The findings show how uniting relationship-based practice with contextual safeguarding can support practitioners to better understand the places young people spend time in and the peer relationships that are meaningful, valuable, and influential for them. The data from this study reveals how the distinct but complimentary frameworks facilitate interventions that are more attuned to young people's lives and therefore more likely to result in increased physical and relational safety. Because the study did not specifically focus on the synergies between the two frameworks, we were able to observe and critically analyse how practitioners made sense of the frameworks alongside one another. Contextual safeguarding facilitated trusting relationships when practitioners focussed their efforts to keep young people safe on understanding the contexts in which young people move (and experience threats to their safety) and acting in partnership with young people to improve their felt sense of safety (beyond meeting thresholds of harm established by the system). Relationship-based practice facilitated contextual safeguarding when prioritising relational work enabled young people to feel safe enough to share concerns about peers and places and helped professionals address harmful contexts in ways that did not undermine young people's trust (e.g. via overusing surveillance measures).

However, along with highlighting the affordances of relationally orientated contextual safeguarding practice, the data also illuminated some of the challenges of working in this way. For example, where we saw a good integration of relationships within contextual safeguarding work this existed at more of an aspirational level, rather than embedded into practice. While elsewhere contextual safeguarding practice was, at times, characterised by relationships of surveillance rather than of understanding, knowledge and trust between young people and professionals (Wroe & Lloyd, 2020). Across sites, practitioners struggled to use their relationships with young people to meaningfully strengthen peer groups as a means of creating safety.

What can explain these limitations? Beyond a lack of practitioner confidence, time, management support or knowledge, might there be deeper reasons to explain a reluctance to more

fully embed relational practice within contextual safeguarding? We revisit the concept of social defences against anxiety (Menzies Lyth, 1960) to consider relationship-based contextual safeguarding work within its wider organisational, political and affective context. We consider how this theoretical concept offers a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by those within our research sites who were seeking to safeguard young people outside their family setting.

Social defences against anxiety

Menzies Lyth (1960) first conceptualised social defences against anxiety through her work in hospital settings, noting the negative impact on staff when they lacked opportunities to process the emotional impact of caring for people who were in extreme suffering, Menzies Lyth observed behaviours that enabled them to avoid contact with patients and the emotional impact that direct contact could bring (e.g. referred to patients in terms of their bed number and illness). This concept has been used to help understand barriers to relationship-based practice in other social work practice contexts (Krantz, 2010; Trevithick, 2014), wherein procedures, quantitative outcome measures, and punitive approaches are used towards staff who do not meet performance metrics. This mindset shifts the focus from the behaviour of individual practitioners across the data who were not working in either contextual or relational ways, towards organisational conditions that might facilitate or inhibit the group's collective capacity to practice in a way that aligned with the frameworks.

Organisations are complex relational systems, where defensive feelings and behaviours pass between members. Ruch (2011) describes how a lack of attention to feelings at the managerial level directly undermines the full realisation of relationally orientated practice. Certain practice can be undermined by a lack of managerial backing—as was seen in one site—but also, when a managerial *culture* fails to embody safe and honest reflection, this can lead to anxiety being passed on to practitioners at the unconscious group level, rather than being absorbed. This could explain why, in one site, rather than practitioners developing relationships with young people at risk of harm—with all the inevitable uncertainty and unpredictability entailed—we saw a system organised in favour of professional mapping meetings based on police intelligence. The disjuncture between the willingness of practitioners and the capacity of managers to adopt contextual safeguarding may lead to a defended system, where control and stability are prioritised over relationships with young people (Owens et al., 2020). This may be a particular challenge for defended systems attempting to apply a contextual safeguarding approach, as workers might feel the pressure to make changes at the level of context, and without reflective spaces to consider the impact on relationships with young people, may do so in ways that undermine trust.

Contextual safeguarding

There is increasing expectation in the UK on safeguarding organisations to adopt contextual ways of working. However, legal, policy and governmental guidance to support organisations adopting contextual safeguarding have not kept pace with sector take up (Firmin & Knowles, 2020). Amidst the enthusiasm to adopt the approach, and in the absence of national guidance, we argue that the centrality of relationships has been overshadowed by an interest in processes. If practitioners are expected to keep young people safe within extremely risky situations and with little local knowledge about, or investment in, effective ecological responses, they may feel individually responsible

for issues that they can never address through relationships alone. This makes developing relationships with young people in such circumstances very difficult. Practitioners are potentially opening themselves up to feeling emotionally connected to, and responsible for, young people who are at risk of death, for whom safeguarding services have very few options to create protection. It is not hard to see why systems might unconsciously organise themselves to defend against these circumstances, and prioritise activities such as 'mapping' that feel safer and more predictable.

To date, contextual safeguarding methods have emphasised system change, with research focussing on referral processes, assessments and interventions. The data in this paper suggests that there is further work to be done to understand the cultural change needed to embed contextual safeguarding. Crucially, however, this is not simply at the level of articulating more explicitly the role of relationships within contextual safeguarding. It is also about having a deeper understanding of bi-directional organisational anxiety and the realisation of reflective organisational spaces. Until then, we are likely to continue to see a situation where contextual safeguarding, rather than increasing relationships, is used as a defence against relationships—that is through increasing surveillance or through some applications of peer mapping.

Relationships with young people makes contextual safeguarding more effective and via versa. However, contextual safeguarding is concerned not only with how safeguarding can be more effective, but also, more ethical, seen, for example by how shifting the focus to the context facilitates collaboration with parents—'doing with', rather 'than doing to'. As such, a relationship-based way of doing contextual safeguarding is not only more effective but also more ethical. Conversely when professionals seek to change unsafe contexts based only on police data risk losing the effective and ethical advantages of contextual safeguarding while further endangering the beating heart of the helping professions—the facilitation of humane social change.

CONCLUSION

The role of relationships as a central orientation has been underdeveloped within applications of contextual safeguarding to date. While it has been possible for some elements of relationship-based practice to be included to great advantage within contextual safeguarding work, where relationships have been absent from contextual safeguarding practice this has had profound consequences for the effectiveness and ethics of practice. We suggest however that to have meaningful relationships with young people at the practice level, simplistic responses on the level of training or mandating practitioners to engage in relationships with young people are likely to make matters worse and cause further defences and anxiety. Instead, we need to focus our energy on making explicit the links between relationship-based work and anxiety, particularly in the context of EFRH for reasons outlined above, and start to recognise how organisations have created defensive practices as a means of protection. Such discussions lift the focus from blaming practitioners onto cultural change, leading to a shared understanding of what a contextual safeguarding system that is relationally orientated would look like. At an organisational level, it would be a system with a cultural understanding of the *emotionality* of practice—from the Director/CEO level 'down'—which needs to be processed, metabolised and engaged with critically, via safe and containing supervisory and peer support spaces. The need to elevate the value of youth work skills within an organisation's ethos and culture, while promoting youth work skill development amongst practitioners is also important, given the long history of youth work's ability to facilitate flexible, multidimensional trusting relationships with young people (Rodd & Stewart, 2009). Professionals would then be better equipped to collectively and boldly articulate their need for national policy and governance frameworks that, rather than

creating anxiety, facilitate and support the complex work needed to safeguarding young people from harm in community-based contexts.

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