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Binaries and Blurred Lines: The Ethical Stress of Child Protection Social Work in the Grey of Extra-Familial Harm

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ABSTRACT

Social care responses to extra-familial harm require social workers to work across the binaries of welfare and justice, victim and perpetrator, parent and professional, risk and protection. This paper examines the ethical consequences of working in this manner, through qualitative data (focus groups, interviews, observations, case file analysis and documentary review) from three children's social care organisations in England who trialled new child protection pathways for significant harm outside of family homes/relationships. The extent to which these pathways created five conditions for a welfare response to extra-familial harm are considered, before these results are brought into conversation with Bourdieu's meta theory of capital, habitus and doxa, and Fenton's practice theory of ethical stress. The challenges identified evidence of the importance foregrounding social work values in the pursuit of welfare-based response to extra-familial harm. They also offer a rationale for studying theories of care ethics in social work in the context of interagency practice.

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Introduction

Western child protection systems deal in moral and practical binaries. They protect *children/victims* from harm caused by *caregivers/perpetrators*. They reduce *risk* and increase *protection*. They enable *professional* intervention into the lives of *families*. But when these systems are used in response to extra-familial harm these binaries blur. The system encounters young people who are both victimised and victimising (Cockbain and Brayley 2012; Turner, Belcher, and Pona 2019). What appears a risk may also be a young person's source of protection, and vice versa (Lefevre, Hickle, and Luckock 2018). And families may instigate safeguarding interventions rather than be the subject of them (Pike and Langham 2019).

In this paper I explore the fallout of operating in this grey; examining qualitative data gathered from a study to pilot alternative child protection pathways (assessments, meetings and intervention plans) for situations of 'risk outside of the family home' (ROTH).

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These pilots, and the associated research, were funded by central government, as a first attempt to scale a standardised child protection response to significant extra-familial harm. As the lead researcher on both an action-research project in which the first pilot was co-designed, and on the study to scale learning across three new pilot sites, I examine the extent to which these pathways created the conditions for a welfare response to extra-familial harm (Lloyd, Manister, and Wroe 2023) and bring the results into conversation with Bourdieu's meta theory of field, capital, habitus and doxa, and Fenton's practice theory of ethical stress. I use the data I primarily collected to primarily identify shared features, opportunities and challenges of alternative child protection pathways (Firmin 2024) to name the difficulties of building ethical social work responses to extra-familial harm and locate these difficulties in both structural binaries and practical blurred lines. In doing so I recommend foregrounding social work values in the pursuit of welfare-based response to extra-familial harm and extending theories of ethical stress (Fenton 2016) to social work in interagency settings.

Background

Child protection social work and extra-familial harm

It is oxymoronic to suggest that children are responsible for the abuse they endure. Yet state responses to young people abused in extra-familial contexts have historically held this implication (Firmin 2020; Fong and Cardoso 2010; McKibbin and Humphreys 2019). For example, the designers of the UK's child protection systems intended to reserve it for children abused by caregivers and not those who came to harm through exploitation, street-based and/or peer-violence, or other extra-familial, interpersonal, abuses. In 1989 they separated out proceedings for:

> delinquent or naughty children – those who were out of control, falling into bad associations or in moral danger – rather than proceedings in respect of children who were suffering or at risk of suffering neglect or abuse (Hale 2019:2)

This UK policy position reflects the design of most child protection systems in Europe, North America and Australia (Merkel-Holguin, Fluke, and Krugman 2019). They authorise state intervention into *family life* when *(in)action from caregivers* poses a risk of harm to children. Other forms of harm are managed via youth/juvenile justice systems and/or responded to via voluntary/NGO/youth work provision that exists beyond the purview of child protection social work.

Growing social and political recognition that exploitation, and other forms of extra-familial harm, also constitute child abuse suggests that the water between children who are 'abused and neglected' and those harmed because they are 'falling into bad associations or in moral danger' is far from clear. Calls for social work responses to extra-familial harm have emerged in the murkiness (Fong and Cardoso 2010; Hanson and Holmes 2014). In the US this has involved using specialised 'trauma-informed' courts to develop plans within welfare rather than justice frameworks for young people who have been exploited (Musto 2022). In the UK it has resulted in all forms of extra-familial harm being demarcated as child protection issues in statutory safeguarding guidance (Firmin and Lloyd 2022; HM Government 2018). These efforts signal an intention to

Table 1. Conditions that facilitate welfare responses to extra-familial harm (Lloyd, Manister, and Wroe 2023).

Category (Primary node)	Conditions that facilitate welfare (Child node 1)	Conditions that undermine welfare (Child node 2)
Legal rights promoted	Best interest	Risk aversion
Harm reduction prioritised	Children's needs	Crime prevention
Language underpinned by	Caring intention	'Facts' and 'intelligence'
System harm is	Recognise and addressed	Reproduced
Knowledge comes from	Resourcing that facilitates relationships	Data held in agency systems

safeguard young people abused beyond their families and require social workers to conflate or rework multiple binaries, using welfare-based frameworks to: support young people previously viewed through a justice lens (Cockbain and Brayley 2012; Lloyd and Firmin 2019; Pullman 2020); recognise parents/carers as a key source of protection, in a system that would have previously viewed them as a key source of harm (Musto 2022; Pike and Langham 2019); and respond to harms that are conceptualised as criminal offences (Koch, Williams, and Wroe 2023; Musto 2022).

Scholars have cast doubt over whether social work values can be maintained, and welfare prioritised, in criminal justice contexts. Akin to US critiques of 'carceral social work' (Detlaff 2022), criminal justice social work sees the profession engaged with preoccupations, cultures and language of policing, therefore, oppressing those it is charged with protecting (Fenton 2014; Koch, Williams, and Wroe 2023).

Lloyd, Manister, and Wroe (2023) explored this tension in the responses of two social care organisations to extra-familial harm. Their data illustrated that social work responses to young people impacted by criminal exploitation and serious violence did not necessitate that welfare was prioritised over criminal justice objectives. For the authors, 'legal, policy, cultural and systemic' challenges (2022, 14) meant that social workers were often practicing in dual policy contexts that both promoted a safeguarding response to extra-familial harm and framed such harm (and the young people involved) as a criminal justice concern. As such they outline five service conditions that could facilitate a welfare approach (Table 1); conditions necessary for social workers to safeguard children impacted by extra-familial harm in a manner aligned with their ethical code.

The 'ethics' of social work

According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2018) the nine principles of social work include the promotion of social justice; treating people as whole persons; and professional integrity. These principles provide a universal value basis for the social work profession and are used as an ethical barometer against which to measure social work practices (Banks 2012; Fenton 2016).

The IFSW define social justice as 'challenging discrimination and institutional oppression, respect for diversity, access to equitable resources, challenging unjust policies and practices, and building solidarity' (IFSW 2018). The extent to which state social workers can be agents of social justice has been scrutinised (Banks 2012); particularly in neoliberal policy contexts characterised by reduced welfare state intervention, individual responsibility and managerialism (Featherstone et al. 2018; Fenton 2016; Parton 1997). Some scholars have applied Bourdieu's macro-theory to surface and challenge the

absence of social justice social work in neoliberal systems (Gray and Webb 2013; Lawler 2013). His concepts offer a language through which to explore the relationship between the governing 'rules' of child protection (doxa), how individual practitioners embody those rules and display their knowledge of them (habitus), and the resources (economic, social and cultural capital) they draw upon in the process. As an example, the Doxa of England's child protection system reflects a neoliberal framework of individual responsibility and reduced state intervention and therefore requires that parents are responsible for meetings the needs of, and protecting, their children; the state intervenes when parental (in)action falls short of meeting that responsibility; the states responsibility, enacted through social work, is to build an individual's capacity to meet their own needs, or those of their children (Parton 1997; Rogowski 2014)

Social workers embody this Doxa and display their understanding of it, their habitus, through their behaviour. They may, for example, assess and impact parental behaviour to protect children, rather than change the (structural and social) conditions in which parents behave. Advocates of social justice argue that such an approach is unjust, and positions child protection systems as sites of institutional oppression (Featherstone et al. 2018; Koch, Williams, and Wroe 2023).

Maintaining a social justice ethos appears acutely challenging for child protection social work in criminal justice or pre-crime spaces. The Doxa of these practice contexts prioritise risk (over need) and frame justice as being for those who are at risk from people being supported by social workers, and not those who social workers support (Fenton 2014). Moreover, justice systems have been found to reproduce, and exacerbate, inequalities; disproportionately punishing those who are impoverished or racially minoritised (Koch, Williams, and Wroe 2023; Pullman 2020; Rogowski 2014).

Social work scholars have promoted an ethic of care (Gilligan 1982; Tronto 1993) as a tool for mitigating the consequences of neoliberal policies on the social work profession (Lloyd 2010; Bozalek and Banks 2013; Fenton 2014). For them an ethic of care invites practitioners to practice through relationships of care rather than as a matter of legal duty and procedure; and as a result, critically reflect on, and critique, oppressive contexts in which they provide support (Fenton 2016). By centreing care, social workers can avoid the ontological guilt (Taylor 2007) or ethical stress (Fenton 2014, 2016) of knowing they are acting against their value base; and instead manage the ontological anxiety (Taylor 2007) they may feel of working outwith procedure by taking ethical action (Fenton 2016) through their caring practice.

Held (2010) argues that a care ethic can be maintained in responses to violence, if legal sanctions are deployed in relationships more widely characterised by professional care (and recognition of the social/structural drivers of violence). For extra-familial harm, and child protection social work in criminal justice spaces, therefore, a social worker could engage the law (and legal justice) to address isolated matters of harm/violence in which a young person was involved, while also (to apply Tronto's 1993 categories of caring practice) finding out that young person's views, taking responsibility for their care, and taking action where possible to increase their safety, including through recognition of the drivers of the violence they display. However, Fenton's work on criminal justice social work suggests it is challenging to remain focused on a person's needs, in a system asking you to prioritise the risks they pose (Fenton 2014).

Attempts to create child protection social work responses to extra-familial harm provide opportunities to explore the tensions outlined. Do they create conditions in which social workers can practice an ethic of care, aligned with social justice values, when responding to harms considered crimes? Do the methods used in designing child protection responses to extra-familial harm, particularly ones that magnify the contexts in which harm occurs, create an opening for ethical social work to emerge? And if it achieves this, does it do so in spite of, or through a transformation of, the neoliberal Doxa of child protection? For me, and my colleagues, these questions have become increasingly pressing; forcing us to consider whether reforms we are facilitating and documenting are addressing or exacerbating moral dilemmas of social work.

Methodology

Project overview

From November 2022 to April 2023 three children's social care departments in England (referred to as sites hereafter) trialled a 'risk outside of the home' (ROTH) child protection pathway, built on an approach I co-designed with local authorities through an action research project to implement Contextual Safeguarding (Firmin and Manister 2023). The pathway (detailed in Figure 1) was based on s.47 of the Children Act 1989 and reserved for young people who were at risk of *significant* harm that was principally or solely *extra-familial*. On a ROTH pathway, social workers assess a child's needs. If the aforementioned threshold is evidenced, a multi-agency meeting, referred to as 'child protection conference', is convened and independently chaired to agree a plan. The plan should increase a young person's safety and decrease the risks they face.

Given the extra-familial nature of the concerns, the assessment, meeting and planning phases of a ROTH Pathway focus on where a young person is safe or unsafe, and who poses a risk or provides protection in those contexts. A young person's parents/carers participate in the pathway alongside professionals, rather than being the subject of it. The pilots were funded by the UK Government as part of their response to a national review of children's social care which recommended a statutory social work pathway for extra-familial harm (McAllister 2022).

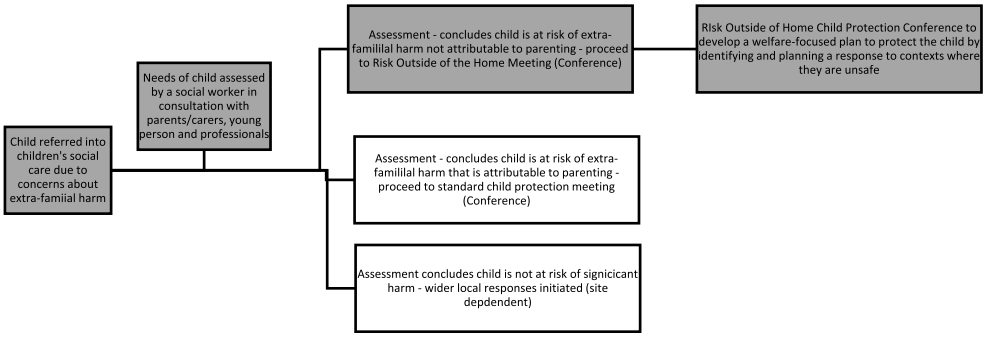

Figure 1. Stages to risk outside of the home child protection pathway (in grey).

Table 2. Number of interviews and focus groups by participant.

Participant	Focus Group (*n*)	Interview (*n*)
Children's social care practitioners	2	1
Multi-agency partners (not social care)	3	0
Young people	1*	2
Parents		8
Children's social care managers	2	0
Chairs of ROTH conferences	3	0
Total focus groups and interviews	11	11

*One focus group that had a young person and parent in it together.

Table 3 . Number of documents reviewed by type.

Document type	
Guidance document	3
Pre-conference assessment	7
Conference minutes and plan	9

Data collection and dataset

A team of three researchers (including and led by me) collected data from sites using online, qualitative, methods: interviews and focus groups with professionals, parents/carers and young people with experience of the pathway (Table 2); a sample of written documents including guidance documents for the pathway, assessments of, and plans for, young people supported via the pathway (Table 3); and observations of ROTH conferences ($n = 9$). Most conferences were in person, with a researcher observing via an online connection, however some were hybrid ($n = 3$) or online ($n = 1$).

In total, the research team collected 50 items of data for analysis.

Analysis

All data were initially collected to identify the common features, opportunities and challenges of ROTH pathways, to assist any future scaling and/or independent evaluation that may be conducted (Firmin 2024). For this secondary study, to inform our commitment to the ethical development of Contextual Safeguarding, I analysed the dataset over three stages to explore whether a ROTH pathway:

(a) Created the conditions for a welfare-based response to extra-familial harm?
(b) Enabled ethical social work practice?
(c) Required/enabled a change in the Doxa (rules) of child protection to be practiced?

Stage 1: I used Nvivo 14 to code all 50 items against the five conditions of the welfare/crime framework, introduced by Lloyd, Manister, and Wroe (2023) (Table 1), to identify whether ROTH pathways created, or undermined, the conditions for welfare-based social work responses to extra-familial harm.

Stage 2: I viewed the Stage 1 results through the lens of 'ethical stress' (Fenton 2016), discussing whether social work practice on a ROTH pathway exhibited an ethic of care (Tronto 1993) supported by or at odds with organisational and partnership expectations.

Fenton's disaggregation of practical stress vs. ethical stress invited consideration of whether ROTH addressed practical challenges without a social justice value-base, or whether ethical challenges were resolved.

Stage 3: I brought the Stage 1 and 2 results into conversation with Bourdieusian macro theory to understand the ethical stress that was alleviated or persisted in reference to*:* the 'Doxa' of the child protection and interagency fields in which ROTH pathways were piloted; the forms of capital such pathways provided; and the impact of both on the social justice orientation of social worker habitus.

Ethics and limitations

This study was approved by the ethics panel of Durham University Sociology Department. Informed consent, anonymity and participant/researcher welfare were all considered. Focus group and interview participants gave opt-in consent: professionals liaised directly with researchers; young people and parents first completed consent forms with their social worker, after which they confirmed consent with researchers prior to interviews. Young people and parents/caregivers gave opt-in consent for observations; professionals were asked for opt-out consent (i.e. to state if they did not want their contributions documented by an observing researcher). Findings are shared thematically to anonymise which sites data are reported from, given their participation is on public record.

The research team did not have capacity to review all plans/assessments produced and/or observe all conferences undertaken during the pilot. As such, it is possible that some practise in sites differed from that which was subject to analysis. Focus groups and interviews mitigated this limitation; providing participants an opportunity to share experiences that diverged from what was identified in plans, assessments and observations. While geographical variation, we cannot assume the practises observed in sites reflect that which might be found in other social care departments in the country or the UK more widely. As such the results are discussed with reference to wider knowledge on social work responses to extra-familial harm and ethical social work practice.

Results: Do ROTH pathways create the conditions for welfare-based social work responses to extra-familial harm?

A ROTH pathway created three of the five conditions for a welfare-based approach to extra-familial harm. Social workers on a ROTH pathway demonstrated a **caring intention**, prioritised **young people's best interests** and routinely named (and sought to change) **system harms**. ROTH pathways did not create conditions in which social workers could prioritise meeting children's needs over crime prevention, nor preference knowledge secured through relationships over that held on agency systems; and in these ways undermined welfare-based responses to extra-familial harm.

Conditions that facilitated a welfare-based approach

On a ROTH Pathway social workers used language underpinned by a '**caring intention'**. In assessments they described who children were and what they needed (beyond the risks they faced):

- [Young person's mum] described [XXX] as being a lovely young lad who is funny.

- She said when he got into secondary school he changed.

- He enjoys biking and boxing.

- She said that sometimes he can challenge boundaries and become disrespectful (CF10, Social Worker Assessment)

School staff are actively exploring ways to support you to develop positive relationships with adults, so that you feel safe and secure and to support your engagement in school and experience positive relationships with your peers. (CF09, Social Worker Assessment)

As did those chairing child protection conferences where those assessments were discussed:

Chair – tell us what type of person XXX is

Grandad – He was a lovely kid (Grandad getting emotional) he's just got mixed up with wrong crowd, don't want to give it as an excuse, can't defend it, but don't know if it's him or them …

Social worker – he loved to draw didn't he

Grandad – he loved running, was so good at it, but stopped doing it (Observation 05, Researcher Notes)

Chair opens the conference: This type of conference is also about learning, and remembering the appropriateness of the language that we use, very important that they are framed as a child and kindly … (Observation O9, Researcher Notes)

Chairs asks conference participants: Tell us a little bit about [XXX]: how would you describe him

Youth Justice worker: Outspoken, strong willed, cheeky (people laugh), is that a strength they say – can be a bit of both. Finds himself very funny (Observation 07, Researcher Notes)

In both assessments and conferences social workers supported parents/carers by emphasising the challenging conditions in which they were raising children:

Chair: [it's] very difficult to disrupt what's happening. In the meantime, you are having to hold that risk as a family …

Mum: … We ground him and the second he's not grounded he's out doing the same stuff. (Mum seems really defeated)

Chair: make sure she has out of hours number, you need to ensure you have emotional support as this is really difficult (Observation 04, Researcher Notes)

Chair acknowledges what [mum] is doing to work with a long list of professionals alongside multi-systemic therapy and alongside running a household. (Observation 08, Researcher Notes)

This caring tone was not lost on parents/carers:

… I was really worried, I thought oh no, like we've got a social worker, that's what I'm … you know, this is not what I wanted; what have I done wrong? … but then as I was introduced to all of this, it sort of came to my attention that actually people really trust me as a parent and

> they're just looking at what's going on for my boys outside and how they can help (Parent Interview, I30)

> [They were saying] We want to make this work so you can have the best life. We're not here to take you away … not … telling us how stupid she is or what horrible mistakes she's making. And it's all her fault, and she should know better. We haven't had any of that this time. It's been very understanding, very calm. (Parent Interview, I25)

And was bolstered by guidance documents that stressed the focus of a ROTH pathway was on the collective capacity of a partnership to safeguard young people, rather than solely their parents:

> A Risk Outside the Home Conference will be held when:
>
> Following a Strategy Discussion and Child Protection Enquiry under Section 47, concerns of significant harm are substantiated, and the child or young person is judged to be suffering or likely to suffer significant harm.
>
> AND
>
> The primary risks for the child or young person are outside of the family home (Guidance document, D7)

> It is intended that by the end of the meeting the child and their family will feel motivated and optimistic about what we can change together**.** (Guidance document, D27)

On a ROTH pathway, social workers 'prioritised and promoted the best interests of children' over risk averse decision-making. A ROTH pathway was itself a 'risk'. It removed the 'safety net' of a policy framework that, although it bore no relevance to extra-familial harm, had been used by social workers to guide/defend decisions:

> You don't deviate from [the traditional pathway] because it protects the children we think. It protects you as a worker, so it's really trying to come out of that comfort zone and think a little bit differently and it's left us feeling quite vulnerable at times (Senior Managers, Focus Group 9)

Permission to risk-take, and work outside of the prescribed framework, meant that social workers could ask whether plans, and approaches to information sharing, were in young people's best interest:

> … we need tailored assessments, and we need that process to feed into- with their voice being present all the way through and we tried that, all the way through, obviously of course we did, we're very child cantered but we want them to lead this- these things and have that and the follow on the same and that takes time, doesn't it? (ROTH Chairs, Focus Group 5)

> … And I think the tricky one in, in ours was the police have been saying to social care, umm, we know this, we know this, we know this, but you can't tell mom. Umm, and she said, you know, in the meeting as well and she has said, 'Well, how can I protect my child if I don't know … ' (ROTH Chairs, Focus Group 6)

They also demonstrated a particular concern for ensuring young people's rights to access education, and to do so safely, including in situations that put them in direct disagreement with schools:

> **Chair**: given the schools knowledge and relationship with the young person and support they can offer and resilience. Given this, is there no way of doing restorative work with the young person and teacher?
>
> **School:** we have a duty of care for our staff. [A] staff member went on the sick. [We had to have] a union meeting- staff aren't feeling safe as a result of this. A restorative conversation cannot just take place- something needs to be done. That is why we are offering an alternative place. A School C placement can offer support- they are smaller …
>
> **Chair**: Placing him in a School C will massively increase the risk to him (Researcher notes, Observation, O1)

Finally, social workers used a ROTH pathway to 'recognise and address system harms'. The pathway itself was recognition of a system harm; one that had held parents, particularly mothers, accountable for risks that were beyond their control:

> I've worked in Child Protection for a long time now and run Child Protection … and the focus of them is always about the responsibility of the parents, but what are you going to do to change it? So it's important, as we said there, to recognise actually, they're not responsible for changing anything, they could be doing absolutely everything right, and the influences are not within their control. So to recognise that, to accept that and to acknowledge it, I think is absolutely vital. And, the mother in the meeting that I attended … I think she appreciates that. (Multi-agency partners, focus group11)
>
> … me and my manager kind of had the battle of do we take this to child protection, but that feels unfair on mum, because she's you know, acting protectively and stuff, we definitely recognise that there's a gap for risks outside of the home, cos a child protection route … it goes against mum and we're blaming mum and – and [a ROTH pathway] just felt like mum was a part of the group and it really felt like we were all trying to share ideas and we were just all on the same page rather than looking at mum (Social worker focus group 3)

ROTH pathways also provided a context in which professionals could hold each other accountable. Researchers observed social workers discussing the negative impacts that education and police services had on children's welfare, and supported parents and/or young people to do likewise:

> Discussion regarding [the] approach of the police. [They concluded a young person was in] breach of bail, arrested [him] at home, etc. and were not supportive of his mum when they arrived [Social workers argued for] improved communication from the police. Turning up at [a young person's] doorstep in a high-profile area, [meaning] others will know he has had the police over [creates a risk]. (Observation O7, Researcher notes)
>
> Mum [states] I don't feel that there is any risk while he is at School A and that they completely meet his needs, I do feel they are risks to him while he is at School B, [they] don't know who he is meeting there as it is across the border and they don't seem to make any effort to engage him in school or to meet his needs from an autistic perspective (Observation O8, Researcher Notes)
>
> The young person had said that he didn't feel safe at school following [an] incident with [a] dinner lady – and so was out of school and had more time in the local community where he was being targeted by adults (Observation O6, Researcher Notes)

As well as recommending that systems/services needed to change to increase young people's safety:

> it's everybody's responsibility to safeguard and I just think there needs to be greater awareness, throughout [area], no matter what roles you play and whether that be parent, carers, you know, bus drivers, everybody needs to be aware, to try and keep our children and young people safe (Multi-agency partners, focus group 12)

> The social worker takes over from chair to say that they took over [supporting this young person] at end of Sept. When in care [they have had] three placements [and] each broke down. [They] went missing from school and the placement gave immediate notice and then returned [the young person to their] dad as there was no other placement [available] (Observation O5, Researcher Notes)

Some social workers commented that they had been able to apply the lens they were adopting on a ROTH pathway to their child protection work more broadly, to interrogate where harm was located:

> I think definitely the categories [of harm] and the discussions that we're having around subcategories is really opening up professional's thinking … I feel like I unpick that more in the normal child protection conference, because of the, the ROTH pathway. It's just made me very much think on a, a wider aspect. (Social worker, focus group 2)

However, they also noted that they were yet to successfully convert these intentions into plans that changed the social conditions in which extra-familial harm occurred:

> It would be really helpful … to envisage it moving beyond the individual plan and helping us get to the point where we're having community-based plans and group plans … We're kind of doing that inadvertently but there's a lot of barriers to it (ROTH chairs, focus group 5)

> I think that when it's down the normal child protection pathway, social workers very much understand that that's the bread and butter, they get, you know, dad needs to go to perpetrator group, mum needs to go to the freedom programme, the kids need to have their immunisations, those things all fit into nice little boxes and I think that social workers struggle, and partner agencies struggle with actually how, how can those things work for them (Social worker, focus group 2)

Conditions that undermined a welfare-based approach

ROTH pathways struggled to maintain conditions conducive with welfare-based responses to extra-familial harm in two, interconnected, ways. Firstly, social workers on a ROTH pathway frequently prioritised harm reduction 'via crime prevention' rather than 'via meeting children's needs', concluding that in order to reduce significant harm crimes needed to be prevented:

> Information is regularly received regarding XXX offending which is escalating in frequency. I am most worried about the influence the community has over XXX and his willingness to engage in high-risk behaviour. I worry that XXX is vulnerable to this, and exploitation is likely ongoing, meaning there are significant risks of physical and emotional harm. (Social Worker Assessment, CF23)

> Chair asks the social worker 'What would you need to see to reduce risk [of harm]'. Social worker replies: Not getting involved in crime, not getting arrested, not being involved in these behaviours. He is loyal to his friends, [I] think it's going to be really hard to disrupt those relationships and friendships (Observation O3, Researcher Notes)

When crime prevention was prioritised on a ROTH pathway, social workers often *privileged knowledge about young people that they had gained via 'data held in agency systems'* to assess harm:

> XXX is linked to a number of other young people who are open to services and also engaged in offending behaviour. XXX is linked to two adult males, to our knowledge, suspected to be perpetrators, of whom we have very little intel of … Information from the anti-social behaviour team suggests that XXX is being considered as a lead member in further recruiting young people into the current exploitation and offending behaviour. (Social Worker Assessment, CF28)

Some did this to the point that they questioned whether they could sufficiently assess what young people were experiencing without the involvement of, and information from, the police. In one conference the chair noted that they '*really need the police here*' (Observation O4, Researcher Notes).

Some social workers stated that risks to children impacted by extra-familial harm could increase in the event they spoke to professionals, hence them seeking knowledge via other means:

> … something that we need to be really mindful of, is quite often these children … may think the parents aren't sharing information and parents might be trying to get that information in a very roundabout way and I think when they're in conference together, what you don't want to do is create any trust issues between what parents are sharing and what the children are telling the parents, … so I think we've got to be kind and considerate about what we're expecting from the young people (Social Worker Focus Group 2)

> … quite often don't wanna tell you who they're hanging about with, where they're going, what they're doing … cos they want to share that information, they don't want to tell you what their friends are doing, cos they're gonna, you know, worry about, you know, sharing information (Social Work interview, I12)

In this manner, a prioritisation of 'best interests' over 'risk aversion' as outlined previously led social workers to caution against over-relying on relationships with young people to assess harm.

However, there are further dimensions to the relationship between how harm reduction was sought (preventing crime or meeting need) and how knowledge gained (through systems or relationships). In traditional child protection processes social workers can focus on meeting needs (through relationships with families) while the police can prevent crime (by compiling knowledge gained through intelligence systems). This division of labour is aided by the fact that those who pose a risk of harm (i.e. caregivers) have been identified, and are distinct from those at risk (i.e. children). However, much about extra-familial harm is often unknown. It occurs in physical places and personal interactions far away from the desk of the social workers, and young people affected by extra-familial harm often did not recognise, or share, the concerns of professionals and their parents:

> … we don't know who's exploiting them, we don't know what they're experiencing (ROTH Chairs, Focus Group 2)

> in the cases of exploitation, they often do not see a problem. They don't understand why we're worried about them, and what, what the issue is, in a lot of cases. (Multi-agency partners, Focus Group 11)

> … it may well be that without this knowledge or insight, XXX has not recognised that he has indeed been exploited … Some of XXX's known friendships appear to be vulnerable in their own right and at risk of exploitation, resulting in ever increasing concerns for XXX even more so as he is described as a 'follower'. (Social Work assessment, CF30)

As such their assessments feature an element of information gathering that may be akin to an investigation of crime than an assessment of need. A matter is further complicated when the young people they are supporting are committing 'offences' in the context of the harm they experience:

> … if they go well police will just share their police information, they won't necessarily do anything if you go down the normal route … but in this instance, it's actually, well, these, this harm is happening whilst, while the child is committing a burglary, so how are you going to disrupt it, what are you going to do (Social worker, focus group 2)

> It is evident … that XXX has a strong sense of loyalty to his friends but in protecting them, he has impeded police enquiries which can have consequences in itself. (Social work assessment, CF30)

Knowledge from parents and young people was valued by social workers on a ROTH pathway to the extent that it helped to centre best interests, demonstrate care, or identify system harm; as distinct from (rather than interwoven with) the specific dynamics of extra-familial harm. Such knowledge was used to understand broader contexts in which extra-familial harm occurred and to challenge preconceptions about young people:

> I think that they have a wealth of knowledge and them being part of the conference and being seen as a partner if you like, rather than a parent, it gives them that empowerment to say it's okay, share this information, no-one's going to, you know, criticise me for it, I've got it, I'm going to get it out there and I'm going to see if it, it'll help, and it does (Chairs, Focus Group 2)

> Respondent 1 We'd be putting him in a dangerous position if he had information that could be used, umm, if it was shared with other people.

> Interviewer Sure.

> Respondent 1 But that he shouldn't completely be excluded from knowing people are working together to try and bring about safety for you. And we want to include your views when we're making those plans. So for example, when we're saying he'll be offered activities, we need to know what activities he'd like to be involved in. (Chairs, Focus Group 6)

> Professionals are concerned [about the young person] around stealing – potentially alcohol from shops – and stole from a number of supermarkets and have been banned from them. Young person's mum states he isn't banned from them. Anti-social behaviour worker states that he has been banned from them. (Observation, researcher notes, O8)

Whereas interpersonal extra-familial harm itself was framed in relation to crime. Interventions to address extra-familial harm, therefore, took the form of 'crime prevention' and invariably targeted young people (and the behaviours they displayed):

> Yeah. My daughter's social worker had obviously sat us down and explained what it was. So I was fully aware. If this is what she's on, it's nothing to do with you. It's all because she's not keeping herself safe, and it's got to be like completely around [young person] and not me. (Parent, Interview, I25)

A limitation noted by both young people and social workers:

> [when asked for a word to describe the process]
>
> **Respondent** It'd be like, uh, limited?
>
> **Interviewer** S- so you feel limited, or you feel like the process is limited? Or both?
>
> **Respondent** No, like me, like, maybe, in some of the stuff I can do, or s- … like, you know, me, in a, some of the … Yeah. So, I've been … I'm not allowed in [local area] or [another area]
>
> Erm, the other thing I'm interested in is … Cos it- it does still feel to me that a lot of our conversations we're having a- is about actions that relate to what we expect the child to do, or the parent to do. And I'm just – like, er, to me, all of this should be about us shifting that – that weight of responsibility on to us doing something about the context. (Social Workers, Focus Group 4)

Social work to prevent crime was built on data; social work to meet needs was built on relationships; and both existed in the grey practice space of a ROTH pathway.

Discussion: practical blurred lines and structural binaries

On a ROTH pathway, social workers provided a welfare-based response to young people impacted by extra-familial harm while simultaneously framing that harm in reference to crime; a practical blurred line in which one source of ethical stress (Fenton 2016) was alleviated and another unearthed. This blurred line was facilitated by the individualised doxa and capital (Bourdieu 1990) that characterised interagency partnerships in which ROTH pathways operated.

Practice impact: alleviating and unearthing ethical stress

ROTH pathways enabled social workers to right wrongs of their previous practice. They knew that parents were neither the primary source of harm nor protection in most cases of extra-familial harm. Yet they had practised as if this was the case, amidst mounting political pressure to respond to extra-familial harm in a system focused on parental responsibility. A ROTH pathway alleviated the ethical stress associated with this disjunction and was a container for the 'ontological anxiety' of responding out-with system expectations in order to do the 'right' thing.

Repositioning parents from being the 'subject of' to 'partner in' safeguarding interventions enabled social workers to foreground professional responsibility for children's welfare, and in the process demonstrate an ethic of care for young people impacted by extra-familial harm. They promoted young people's rights to education, recognised their vulnerability, sought to contextualise the behaviour they displayed, humanised them with reference to their wider likes, interests and potential, and were keen to involve them in plans. Recognition of the structural and contextual conditions of extra-familial harm (Gupta 2015; Held 2010) created space for 'non-stigmatising' practice with young people who were both at risk and posed a risk.

In this recognition a new source of ethical stress emerged. On a ROTH pathway, social workers asked partner agencies to recognise when their services/systems been harmful and identify opportunities to change contexts associated with extra-familial harm.

However, they were rarely able to convert contextual assessments of need into contextual plans of action. In righting one wrong (the focus of their assessments), a new one emerged (an inability to work in accordance with the assessment). An inability to *practise* contextually was a stress articulated across the hierarchy of social care participants. This was not, therefore, a matter of practitioners wanting to work in a manner at odds with their management (and the wider organisation in which they worked). Considering the extent to which ROTH pathways changed the systems, and system norms, in which social care organisations operated, therefore, is critical to understanding this tension.

System impact: reframing and reinforcing rules of child protection

ROTH Pathways assert an alternative child protection Doxa. One in which a wider collective are responsible for protecting children. The state intervenes, not because of parental (in)action but when harm(s) a child faces are so significant a protective response is warranted. In these situations, the state's duty, enacted through social work, is to assess the capacity of a partnership (and not solely parents) to create safety and reduce risk. In the process parents are positioned within this partnership, rather than as the subject of social work intervention. To this extent ROTH Pathways changed the rules of child protection in England.

Individualism, however, persisted. Instead of intervening with parents, social workers on a ROTH pathway targeted the behaviour of young people. The ethical approach they took by demonstrating care, identifying system harms, or prioritising best interests, were largely achieved with reference to the behaviour of individual young people, as opposed to changing the social conditions in which young people acted. Shortfalls in the capital available to social workers on a ROTH pathway reflected this limitation.

Social care organisations involved in piloting ROTH pathways did not have access to the level of economic capital required to resource social work interventions/responses to target contexts associated with extra-familial harm, despite receiving government funding to staff the pathway. In terms of social capital, a legacy of case work and managerialism left social workers with little access to (informal) extra-familial networks necessary to understand and respond to extra-familial contexts beyond policing and community safety interventions; positioning of parents as partners in safeguarding was not a sufficient substitute for this gap. And while terms such as 'collective capacity to safeguard', 'context weighting' and 'risk outside of the home' (in guidance documents, assessment and report templates) gave social workers the cultural capital avenues to locate the sources of harm for children on a ROTH Pathway, individualism dominated how success, safety and risk, were measured.

The aforementioned limitations were compounded by an interagency context, shaped significantly by criminal justice partners. Economic capital in the form of funding for desistance and behaviour-based interventions, social capital in the form of partnerships with anti-social behaviour teams and the police, and cultural capital in the form of offender management language, were all evident on the ROTH pathway.

Being led by social care organisations, ROTH pathways went a significant way in providing a Doxa, and associated capital, that social workers could embody to ethically respond to young people impacted by extra-familial harm. However, ROTH pathways were a site of interagency practise and policy. Social workers involved were therefore

working in both social care agencies where practise was returning to a welfare-ethic value-base as well as multi-agency partnerships that never had those goals to begin with. In the absence of unifying practice and policy framework, ROTH pathways remained a site of grey social work in which ethical stress was inevitable.

Conclusion

ROTH Pathways were a place where the binaries of welfare/justice, victim/perpetrator, individual/context, parent/state met. With the exception of the latter, they were not a place where those binaries were resolved. Instead, wider welfare needs were reframed contextually, as distinct from individual harms which were still framed criminally; reinforcing binaries across which social workers had to practise. This bridging work was further complicated by an interagency practice environment. They worked with children and families, as well as with the police and probation. They were advocating for young people, while sharing information about crimes they were committed. Lines blurred as they took one step towards ethical practice and two steps in the other direction.

There is a risk that dissolving of the binary between state/parent – through recognition of state responsibility to protect, and the parent as protective – is only considered *practically* helpful, unless social workers engage in a conversation about its ethical implications. Centreing ethics could illuminate the risk that social workers will shift blame from parents to young people when they respond to extra-familial harm in social care organisations that are returning to social justice values amidst interagency partnerships that are not. ROTH pathways appear to bring us closer to an ethical social work response to extra-familial harm, but responses that change the social conditions in which young people experience harm are rarely seen in the grey.

Disclosure statement

The paper author co-designed the first Risk Outside of the Home child protection pathway with a partnering local authority. Despite this involvement, their ongoing study of ROTH pathways is to explore their feasibility and to surface any opportunities and challenges that warrant further attention before making any recommendation as to their usefulness at a national or international level.

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