

The Balancing Act: Reflections From Three Projects on Negotiating Participation and Protection in Doing Research With Children and Young People on Violence and Abuse

International Journal of Qualitative Methods

Volume 24: 1–14

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DOI: 10.1177/16094069251323626

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Abstract

The interplay between participation and protection often sits in tension in research with children and young people (CYP), especially on topics related to violence and abuse. Drawing upon our three doctoral research projects, which involved different contexts and participatory approaches (Consultative, Co-produced, and Co-research), we acknowledge the imperative balance between participation and protection as mutually reinforcing rather than a hierarchy. The first, a Consultative participatory project with young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour, explored their perspectives of safety, risk, and rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ($n = 4$, 13–18 years). The second, a Co-produced approach, through a series of participatory workshops, engaged CYP in co-creating knowledge, understanding and recommendations on addressing sexual violence ($n = 29$, 13–18 years). The third, a participatory action research project with LGBTQ + young co-researchers, explored domestic abuse help-seeking through shared decision-making, co-designing, and co-analysis of the research ($n = 12$, 16–25 years). We reflect on the differences and intersections within our approaches to balancing protection and participation, particularly in embedding ongoing consent, co-creating safety, and promoting young people-led understanding instead of adult-centric views. We argue for participatory methods to reflect a balancing act between fulfilling rights to participation and protection.

Keywords

consultative, co-produced, co-research, children and young people, child rights protection and participation, domestic abuse helpseeking with LGBTQ+ young people, sexual violence prevention with young people, young people who displayed harmful sexual behaviours, research with children and young people on violence and abuse, participatory approaches to research

Background

Commitment to fulfilling children's rights to be heard and express their views through their participation in research has been increasing in the past three decades following the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Camevale, 2020; Cody, Bovarnick, & Soares, 2024; Coyne & Carter, 2024; Morrison, 2023). However, child-centred understandings and perspectives on addressing violence in their lives are often missing (Ritterbusch et al., 2023). Children and young people (CYP) have historically been excluded from participating in research or decisions related to their lives due to concerns about their risks, vulnerability, and potential for harm

(Whittington, 2019b; Ellis, Hickle, & Warrington, 2023; Morrison, 2023). Participatory research (PR) is an effective methodology and approach to promoting CYP's meaningful participation in research. PR with CYP involves representing their voices and promoting their agency and capacity following strengths-based perspectives (Coyne & Carter, 2024). Engaging

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CYP in research on violence and abuse contributes to a CYP-informed understanding in contrast to adult-centric interpretations dominating academic literature and practice (Hackett, 2017; Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020; Roth, 2023). Research with young people on sexual violence reveals that they found the experience beneficial, such as improved awareness of the issue and feelings of empowerment (Cody et al., 2024; Hamilton et al., 2019; Warrington et al., 2024). Thus, PR can potentially create new knowledge, forms of meaningful participation, and transformative experiences for CYP.

In this paper, we use the term children and young people (CYP) to include children under eighteen, given our interest in children as rights holders under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and young people above eighteen. It is important to highlight that human rights do not cease beyond eighteen, and ‘young people’ can be defined up to age twenty-four (World Health Organization, 2011). Traditional constructions of childhood may affect how children are treated in the research process as a conceptual ‘other’ compared to adults. These constructions are often grounded in philosophies of exclusion and control (Woodgate et al., 2017) and adultism, meaning systems that privilege adult views and subordinate children (Morrison, 2023; Cody et al., 2024). Key aspects of the social constructions of children and childhoods often rest in opposing binaries such as innocent or knowing, deserving or undeserving, and at or at risk (Robinson, 2008, p. 16).

Ethical guidelines for research with children are premised on constructions of childhood, such as their vulnerability. CYP may be excluded from research if they are perceived by adults as unable to engage in the participatory process due to their age, ability, or personal circumstances. However, we argue that excluding CYP from the research process can be less ethical since their exclusion from participation can be considered unethical (Pickles, 2020). Scholars suggest addressing ethical dilemmas that occur at the moment and responding to CYP involved in an empathetic manner (Whittington, 2019a; Ellis et al., 2023) and following an ethics of care. Our projects illustrate the possibilities of involving CYP in research on violence and abuse. We seek to reiterate rights to participation and protection as complementary and reinforcing not opposing. This constant balancing of tensions, which cannot be separated from and simultaneously strengthen each other, underscores the rationale of using participatory methods within our three distinct research projects and how we navigated participation and protection depending on our project’s situational and contextual nature.

At times, Hart’s (2008) influential ladder of participation has been mistaken to imply that the higher levels on the ladder are better forms of participation (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2024). Other non-hierarchical models of participation have been proposed, such as Lundy’s model, which proposes four elements of Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence. These models demonstrate CYP’s varying levels of involvement in the research process, which should not be considered in a hierarchical manner of ‘more’ or ‘less.’. These interactions require greater and

constant attention to the balance between participation and protection rights in research on sensitive topics.

The Balancing Act

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 12, is widely regarded as a fundamental principle and a means through which other rights are realised’ (Lansdown, 2011, p. 3). Children’s rights are interdependent and indivisible from one another (UNCRC, 1989). There is a growing recognition of CYP’s participation as being fundamental to upholding collective rights of other CYP (Mitchell et al., 2023). The responsibility of ensuring that harm and risk is minimised and CYP are protected lies with the researcher including ethical implications of silencing CYP through their exclusion from participation (ESRC, 2024). Equally, Daley (2015, p. 122) problematises the ‘heavy focus on protection’ in research with CYP ‘without due consideration to enabling participation’. Protection must not be distinct from participation: recognising the latter (information, expression and influence) as a necessary component of protection (Warrington & Larkin, 2020).

Our vision of a balancing act captures the experience of walking a metaphorical tightrope through the process of participating in research on these sensitive topics. This act involves constant tiny repositions, multidimensional motion, and developing skills to do fast and slow rebalances depending on the situation with the CYP engaged in the research. As we grappled with balancing CYP’s right to participation and ensuring their protection, we found ourselves performing our balancing acts: walking the tightrope between different methodological and ethical considerations in conducting PR with CYP. Our collective experiences shed light on the intricacies of this balancing act, offering valuable insights and strategies which help us maintain or, at times regain, our footing through our research projects. We consider the differences in striving to fulfill participation and protection rights in the context of research into violence and abuse across a continuum of participation - Consultative, Co-produced and Co-research. Our shared interest in CYP’s participation in research related to violence and abuse stems from our doctoral research projects and their connections. We share a curiosity about the meanings and experiences of CYP that can challenge, complement, and expand adult-centric understandings of complex and often distressing social issues (Figure 1).

Children’s rights offer an ‘essential theoretical framework to advocate for children’s and young people’s role at the centre of addressing sexual violence’ (Warrington et al., 2024, p. 352). This paper seeks to explore how rights to participation can be made ‘real’ with CYP in research around socially sensitive subjects including violence, harm and abuse. We argue for participatory methods in violence and abuse research with CYP to be viewed as a balancing act between fulfilling rights to participation and protection. We draw on this metaphor to contextualise our argument and shared reflections illustrating our

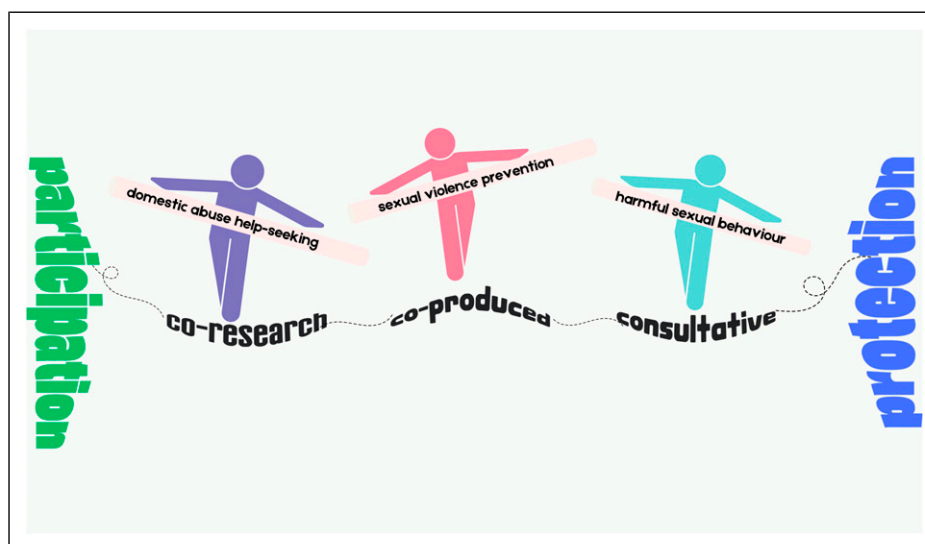


Figure 1. Balancing Act (adapted from the continuum of Bradbury-Jones, Isham, & Taylor, 2018).

commitment to the ongoing navigation of participatory processes with CYP. Drawing upon practical ways that we negotiated the ongoing balancing act offering as a contribution towards making ‘real’ what can often rest in theoretical discussions.

Thematic Reflections of Our Three Balancing Acts

Depending on the research topic and the experiences of the CYP we worked with, our three projects adopted different balancing acts of embedding protection and participation. Drawing on our shared participatory ethos and commitment to the rights framework in our projects, we took part in collective reflective conversations around balancing these tensions leading us to key commonalities and differences in our PR processes. These reflections may help support future researchers engaging in PR with CYP on violence and abuse topics to perform their balancing acts of supporting CYP’s participation with sensitive and ongoing attention to safety.

Theme One: Embedded and Ongoing Consent. We argue that the dynamics of the balancing act are inextricably connected to initial and ongoing consent and flexibility through the research process (Ellis et al., 2023; Warrington et al., 2024; Whittington, 2019a). Some CYP may have experienced their consent being breached so consent at every stage, conversation and activity during the research process was vitally important. Like other scholars, we viewed consent as embedded, ongoing, and constantly negotiated, contrasting with traditional and regulatory ethical frameworks that prioritise gaining informed consent at the start of the project alongside the right to withdraw from the project (Whittington, 2019b; Ellis et al., 2023).

Theme two: Sharing decision-making when co-creating and maintaining safety. The balancing act involves ensuring

CYP’s safety from harm while not constraining spaces for participation. This theme connects to the ethical guidance on balancing considerations that the benefits of CYP’s participation outweigh potential risks and harms of being involved in violence and abuse research (Ellis et al., 2023; Graham et al., 2013; Roth, 2023). Across all three projects, the research processes promoted safety for and with CYP but not at the expense of enabling opportunities for participation. Involving CYP in collaborative safety planning entails an expansive and inclusive approach to participation (Warrington et al., 2024). We highlight the importance of building relationships and shared decision-making to assist safety practices within PR. It sheds light on the crossover of protection (e.g. shared rules and agreements) and participation (e.g. being involved in creating these shared agreements). Like prior studies, all three projects applied the co-creation of visual safety agreements to set expectations between the researcher and CYP to provide spaces for conversations around safety (Furman, Sing, Wilson, Alessandro, & Miller, 2019; Doucet et al., 2022).

Theme three: mapping CYP-centred understandings and disrupting adult-led narratives. PR is characterised by shared meanings and co-construction of knowledge (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2024). It involves giving CYP more opportunities to influence and direct the research process toward promoting more equitable and CYP-centered research relationships that values CYP-centered understandings (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019). Our three projects used mapping in distinct ways to transform the narratives of complex concepts that disrupted adult-centric understandings. The role of mapping as a method demonstrates a balancing act of participation by amplifying CYP’s perspectives using visual and creative methods like maps as vehicles for their understandings and experiences to be presented (Ergler & Freeman, 2020).

Our Three Balancing Acts

To illustrate our individual and collective balancing acts, we discuss our three doctoral research projects that engaged with CYP around issues of violence and abuse. Our three projects performed balancing acts at differing points of a continuum of participation (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018) ranging from Consultative (Lynne), Co-produced (Janelle) and Co-research (Cait). Building on the continuum concept, we drew upon our project's common characteristics and values as we move within and across a continuum. These include our commitment to practising embedded and ongoing consent, promoting shared safety, and valuing young people-centric perspectives. Through our explorations and dialogue between each project, we seek to challenge any implicit hierarchy or 'better' way of doing PR. We do not envision the continuum as a scale of increasing participation in which each project is statically placed but rather illustrate the different balancing acts between protection and participation that relate to the contexts of our three projects.

Balancing act One: Consultative Project with Young People Who Have Displayed Harmful Sexual Behaviour

The motivation for Lynne's doctoral research originates from her extensive experience as a social worker in Scotland, spanning more than two decades, including over thirteen years as a Senior Practitioner working with CYP who have experienced abuse and/or engaged in Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB). HSB can be understood as:

Sexual behaviours by children and young people, under the age of 18, that are developmentally inappropriate, harmful towards self and others, or abusive towards another child, young person or adult (Hackett et al., 2019).

In the UK, it is estimated that around one-third of sexual abuse of a child is committed by another child under 18 (Hackett et al., 2019; 2019). Balfé et al. (2019, p. 189) highlight the 'shockingly wide catalogue of trauma and harm' saturating the highly disrupted 'sociological worlds' of CYP who displayed HSB, many of whom have experienced high levels of violence, neglect, deprivation, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. These CYP often navigate fragmented, intersecting systems of welfare and justice, and much of the research focuses on individual risk factors rather than the broader social and ecological contexts of their lives. Lynne's project sought to address this gap through a consultative participatory study with teenage boys who have displayed HSB. The aim was to learn from their experiences of safety, risk, and rights to understand more about the social and spatial dynamics of safety and risk. This study challenges the prevailing tendency to individualise HSB, instead situating the issue within the broader sociological contexts of CYP's lives.

The study was carefully designed to be safe, sensitive, and rights-respecting, focusing on both protection and participation. After receiving university ethical approval from the Department of Sociology, Durham University, Lynne sought approval from ten welfare and justice agencies, securing consent from six. A key aspect of this sensitive research was the inclusion of a "Research Supporter" for each participant who was an adult with an established relationship with the young person to ensure safety and support throughout the process. They were also a point of contact should the participant disclose the risk of significant harm to themselves or someone else. The key aspects of their role were to support the young person through the research process, including support should they become distressed through taking part and, importantly, if they decided to withdraw consent at any point. Three potential participants were excluded before any direct engagement due to concerns about their emotional safety. Through paced initial engagement, four young people consented to participate, meeting between 3–5 times.

A 'research toolbox' was developed to give participants multiple ways to share their experiences, ensuring choice and control throughout the process. The 'toolbox' included material such as writing, drawing, Lego, clay, and the option of exploring physical spaces they spend time in. The most used medium for exploring everyday social worlds in the research toolbox was the Meta Quest 2 Virtual Reality (VR) headset that allowed the participants to explore places via the virtual environment accessed through the Meta Wander app that uses data from Google Street View navigated using two touch handheld controllers. The virtual environment can be understood as a computer-generated space where the movements of the user are tracked in different ways which then digitally render the surroundings through visual, audio, haptic and tactile feedback, with the headset and handheld controllers, creating an interactive digital environment that aims to replace the cues of the real environment (Fox et al., 2009).

Fostering and sustaining relationships with gatekeepers, often over long periods, proved very important in ensuring that safety and sensitivity was in place before, during and after the research process. Often, these key relationships progressed into the 'Research Supporter' role. This was discussed as part of the engagement and formed part of the 'Safe and Sensitive Doing Research Plan' designed to attend to the greater balance of protection required in the research process of this project. Within a 'legacy of distorted consent' (Hackett, 2017, p. 129) consent and/or assent in a research situation can leave CYP with uncertainty around meaningfully dissenting or withdrawing consent, faith in adults hearing their views and trust in adults to keep them safe. No payment or compensation was offered for participation. Given the significant social stigma around HSB, it was very important to fully anonymise participants' identities and places explored at every point of the research process and outputs. Lynne drew upon the Lundy Model of Participation so two specific national level policy 'audiences' were negotiated at the beginning of the research process who will respond to

creative research briefing and write to participants to acknowledge their contributions and reflect on key findings.

Reflections on Theme One: Embedded and Ongoing Consent. The ‘Research Supporter’ role helped to create space for the young person to understand what taking part would involve ensuring enough time to think this through and ask questions so they could make informed decisions about taking part or not. It was important that participants understood throughout that even if

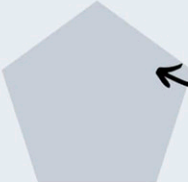
consent was given it could be withdrawn without explanation or any consequences, directly or through their Research Supporter. Daley (2015) acknowledges that it can be easier for CYP to decline to participate with a familiar adult rather than directly with the researcher. An ‘About Me’ form (Figure 2) was designed to capture aspects of the sample such as questions about themselves and the context of the HSB but participants were encouraged to consider if and how they would want to complete this form with their Research Supporter. Some declined, one

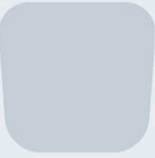
ABOUT ME

IT HELPS ME TO KNOW A BIT ABOUT THE BOYS WHO TAKE PART BUT I WILL NEVER TELL ANYONE ANYTHING THAT MEANS THEY WOULD KNOW WHO YOU ARE. THIS SHEET WON'T EVEN HAVE YOUR NAME ON IT.

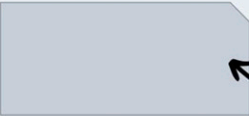
Remember it is your choice what and if you answer. You can also ask someone else to fill this in.

Your age





What you would say your ethnicity is?



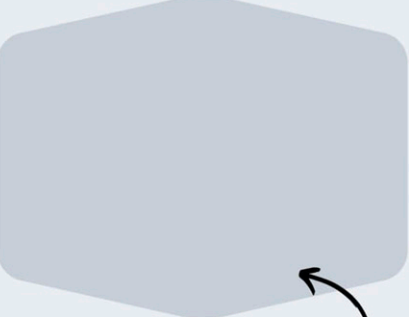
Would you say you have any disability or neurodevelopment condition?

A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR...IF THERE HAVE BEEN A FEW DIFFERENT BEHAVIOURS YOU COULD USE THE OTHER SHEETS

Where would you say it happened?
(such as inside, outside or a particular place)



Were you on your own, with someone else or a group?



If it happened with someone else: what was your relationship to them? Could you say their age?



Figure 2. About Me Form for participants (project 3).

completed the partial form and another completed it all. The balancing act here reflected increased sensitivity around shame and stigma that young people can experience related to their behaviour and past experiences which can be reified through our systemic responses.

Reflections on Theme Two: Sharing decision-Making when Co-creating and Maintaining Safety. For Lynne, the ‘Safe and Sensitive ‘Doing Research’ Plan’ became a way of discussing safety in the research process with each participant. It was significant to discuss safety in the research process and space including who the participant would like the researcher to talk to should they become distressed, make a disclosure suggesting themselves or someone else was at serious risk of harm and giving clear protocols as to how this would be managed so the participant was comfortable and clear about next steps that would be taken. As such, this balancing act emphasised early and ongoing consideration and discussion with participants and their Research Supporters as part of the consultative process. Safety was maintained through clarity and transparency during these discussions.

Reflections on theme three: mapping CYP-centred understandings and disrupting adult-led narratives. The method of mapping was used to understand boys’ sociological worlds ‘as they see it’. This approach centred on young people’s experiences, meanings, and understandings in their everyday ‘life worlds’. Interestingly, despite using mapping as the method, maps as first anticipated did not emerge and the ‘research toolbox’ seemed to spark stories rather than create maps prompting an iterative turn to Narrative Inquiry which is the study of individual and social experience through the stories that people tell (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Notes serving as memory prompts, rather than maps, were made on the paper with big pens so the participant could see everything noted and Lynne would check at the end of each session if they were still giving consent for this information before making detailed notes after each data generation session. Challenging adult constructions of concepts, participants were asked to share what ‘safety’, ‘risk’ and ‘children’s rights’ means to them so, as far as possible, the research focused on their meanings rather than the researcher’s conceptual understanding. This approach proved powerful for allowing different meanings and experiences to be understood that potentially challenge and contest dominating knowledge, understanding and language within the research, policy and practice landscape of HSB.

Balancing act Two: Co-Produced Project with Young People Exploring Sexual Violence Prevention

In conducting her doctoral research project, Janelle drew on her previous practice experience in policy advocacy campaigns related to child protection in the Philippines. The study aimed to advance prior knowledge on sexual violence, its prevention, and participatory research on violence and abuse with CYP. In doing so, it strived to demonstrate the value of

integrating young people’s perspectives, thus improving the relevance and responsiveness of sexual violence prevention initiatives. The study focused on sexual violence, recognising its widespread prevalence among CYP globally. The research was timely amid the heightened attention to sexual violence among young people, globally and in the UK, among young people in schools (Horeck et al., 2023; Together for Girls, 2024). UNICEF published its global and regional estimates on the scale of sexual violence for the first time, indicating that approximately 82 million girls and 69 million boys experienced sexual violence in the last year (Together for Girls, 2024). The immediate and long-term outcomes associated with experiences of sexual violence have been reported extensively in prior research (Almuneef, 2021; Downing et al., 2021). In the UK, Everyone’s Invited Web site contained thousands of anonymous testimonies on sexual violence among young people (Donovan et al., 2023; Everyone’s Invited, 2020), prompting government reviews and policy updates (Department for Education, 2023, OFSTED, 2021, Women and Equalities Committee, 2023). These developments highlighted the massive scale of sexual violence among young people and its increasing normalisation and minimisation among them, resulting in low rates of disclosure and help-seeking (OFSTED, 2021).

Janelle’s project adopted a Co-produced approach in engaging two groups of young people ($n = 29$, 13–18 years old) from a youth club and further education (FE) institution in Northeast England. The young people involved were from the general population with no known or disclosed experience of sexual violence. Yet, it is recognised that young people are affected by various forms of sexual violence even if they did not disclose it. As such, she disseminated recruitment posters to the gatekeepers, and then the young people joined the sessions voluntarily. In both groups, the project was explained through an initial workshop so the young people could decide if they wanted to join the succeeding workshops. This informed consent process will be described in more detail within the embedded and flexible consent theme.

Janelle adopted different approaches to relationship-building depending on the group composition. The youth group entailed a prolonged engagement across a year, and they knew each other so she focused on the young people building a connection with her. The FE group did not know each other before the project so they needed more getting to know each other such as icebreaker activities. In both groups, food and games served as a bridge for deepening relationships in an enjoyable manner. Following a young people-led and flexible design, the project involved iterative participatory workshops ($n = 18$) using individual, paired, and group activities. Each workshop was approximately an hour long with an icebreaker game, main activity, and feedbacking session. Data analysis integrated young people-informed and researcher-led reflexive analysis. Data collection and analysis happened concurrently such that Janelle validated her analysis of the co-generated insights with the young people at different points of the process. After completing the workshops, she conducted reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

She conducted a reflexive workshop with the young people to discuss the findings synthesised from the thematic analysis as a collaborative and creative approach to member-checking (Ryu, 2022).

In the Co-produced project, Janelle practiced ongoing consent, indicating to the young people that they did not have to attend or take part in all the workshops. This flexible approach meant that the young people had varying levels of participation, and they could drop in and out of any workshop they preferred.

The gatekeepers of both groups confirmed that they did not need separate parental consent forms or processes. Janelle obtained ethical approval from Department of Sociology, Durham University. The ethics board sought clarification about a separate opt-out form for parents and suggested that this would be included in the young person's consent form. To address these concerns, she established a collaborative partnership with the participating youth organisations to share the accountability in safeguarding young people and assuring the parents of their safety. Instead of the opt-out provision in the young people's consent form, a general announcement/letter was sent on her behalf to all parents of young people involved in the organisation. The study followed an opt-out parental consent process meaning parents who explicitly expressed that they did not want their child to participate was followed. This strategy demonstrates the balancing act between upholding the autonomy and rights of young people to consent to their participation in the research yet responding to parental concerns when expressed and promoting their protection rights (Roth, 2023). The consent process was underpinned by the Gillick competence principle which recognises young people's competency to make their own decisions and understand the implications of those decisions. It often applies to young people aged 14 years and older in various instances, such as access to healthcare or youth work (NSPCC, 2020).

Janelle developed a safeguarding plan that was discussed with the young people and the gatekeepers. It included the process for managing disclosures and distress while involving the young people in the decision-making. She followed the organisations' child protection protocols, including ensuring that another adult would be in the room during sessions. This collaborative approach indicates that safeguarding was a shared responsibility between her and the organisations. The young people's confidentiality and anonymity were protected by using non-identifiable information in writing up the analysis. No compensation was given to the young people. Still, she shared tokens of appreciation like food, small items, and certificates of participation as part of the relationship-building process.

Reflections on Theme One: Embedded and Ongoing Consent. In the Co-produced project, Janelle embedded the consent process in recognition of the evolving capacities of CYP to make informed decisions about their participation in the research. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, CYP may

feel unprepared or uncertain about what to expect with their involvement and pressured that they have already committed to joining the project (Ellis et al., 2023). Allowing them to try the activities in the first workshop before seeking formal consent gave them a clear option to decide independently whether they wanted to join or opt out if they did not want to continue with their participation in the project (Ellis et al., 2023). Janelle's approach involved a balancing act between following procedural ethics requirements on obtaining informed consent while allowing young people to make an informed decision. This approach is grounded in the relationship and rapport between her and the young people following an ethics of care.

Reflections on Theme Two: Sharing decision-Making when Co-creating and Maintaining Safety. The Co-produced project involved conversations between the need for safeguarding, the many potential benefits to partaking in the research, and creating safe space agreements (Warrington, 2020). The young people decided on the values and principles necessary to work together, such as respect, trust, and understanding. The young people co-created safety with Janelle concerning the ongoing consent and relationship-building process. She asked them regularly throughout the sessions if they wanted to continue, pause, or resume another time. It applied to not only individual sessions but the project itself. Enabled by the trust built with her, they felt comfortable to express when they did not want to continue due to various feelings related to the topic or their personal lives. She co-created safety with them by opening spaces for them to share their feelings about their participation and not fear her reaction. Her approach involved a balancing act between fulfilling the requirements of her doctoral research to collect sufficient data and valuing young people's feelings if they wanted to stop the session or project at any point.

Reflections on theme three: mapping CYP-centred understandings and disrupting adult-led narratives. Janelle used mapping to serve as a visual guide in discussing sensitive topics and in co-producing understanding of an issue with the young people (Ellis et al., 2023). As a powerful example, body mapping facilitated conversations with young people on dealing with and challenging shame. The collective approach of the body map served as a way for the young people to disrupt the dominant adult-led narratives of sexual violence as shameful. Collaborative concept mapping was used as a way of promoting young people-led understandings of sexual violence. Placing her answers alongside the young people's insights helped her validate if she understood the themes and concepts that were most important to the young people (Figure 3). In her balancing act, Janelle was mindful of not imposing her insights on the young people yet also not silencing her contributions by taking a purely facilitator instead of researcher role in the discussions (Wilkinson & Wilkinson, 2024).

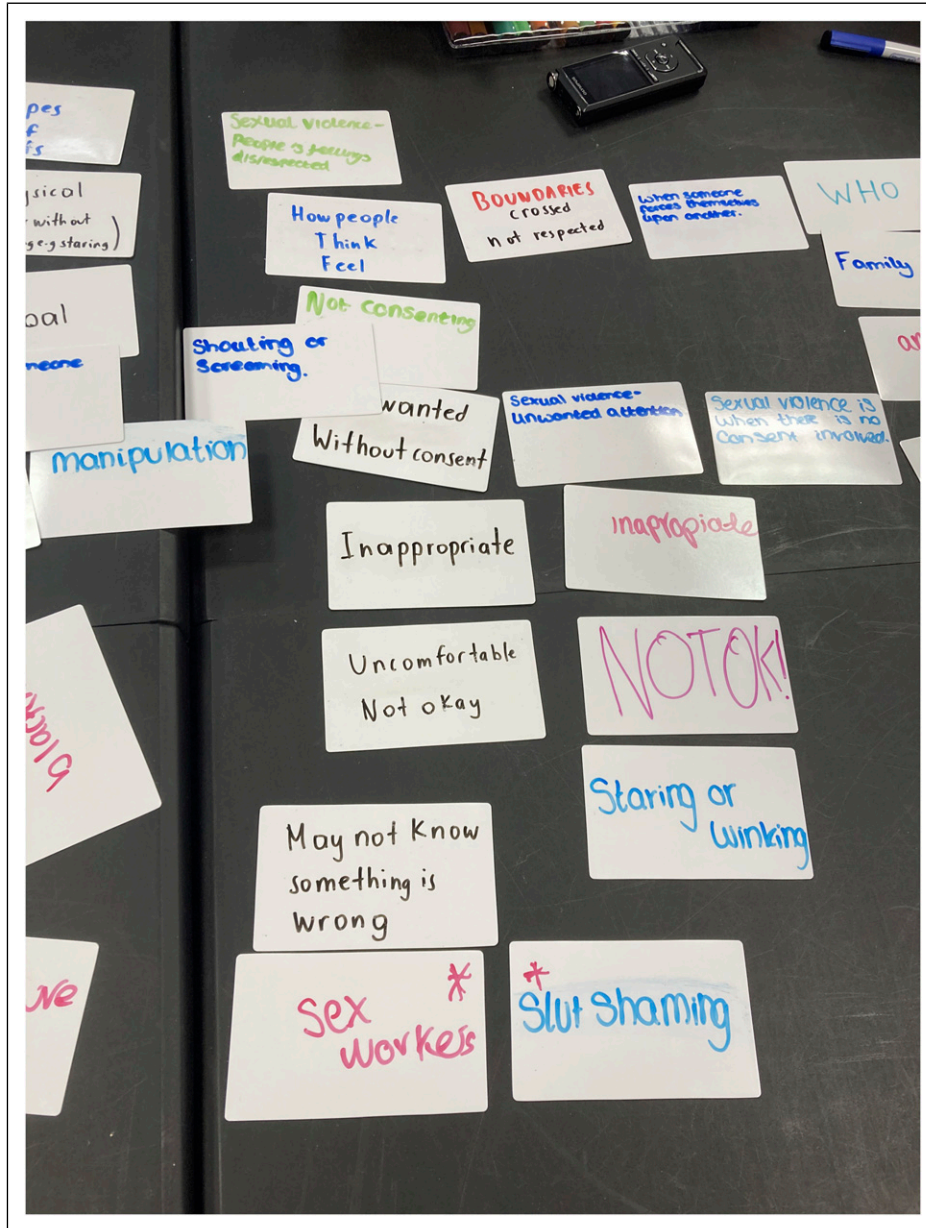


Figure 3. Collaborative concept map on understanding sexual violence. Janelle's answers are in black ink while the young people's are the colored ones. (Project 1).

Balancing act Three: Co-Research Project with Young People Exploring Domestic Abuse Help-Seeking

Alongside her doctoral research, Cait's experience as a youth worker and more recently a digital youth worker, particularly with LGBTQ + young people, has supported her approach. In the context of the heteronormative, cisnormative 'public story' within the field of domestic abuse (Donovan & Barnes, 2020), young people's relationships are often viewed as naïve and unimportant (Wood, Barter & Berridge, 2010), and with little research that focuses on the intersection of sexuality and age in experiences of domestic abuse, LGBTQ + young people were

invited to be co-researchers, rather than participants, within the project. As co-researchers, they co-designed the research project from the research questions and methods to implementation, co-analysis, and dissemination of the research. The project was facilitated through over 30 meetings, most of which took place online and with four in-person full days across 15 months. Through collaboratively surveying 93 LGBTQ + young people and interviewing five service providers, the co-researchers co-analysed their findings to co-produce new knowledge and solutions for improving help-seeking for LGBTQ + young people. The aim was not only to improve services but also provide LGBTQ + young people

with opportunities to share decision-making and gain experience in researching their own lives. The work was disseminated through multiple outputs such as a zine, workshops, social media and a launch event.

A key potential of Participatory Action Research (PAR) with young people is to facilitate the recognition and critical reflection on ideas and experiences, envision improvements and see themselves as capable of fighting for social justice (Abo-Zena & Pavalow, 2016). As the project focused specifically on help-seeking including those affected by the issues, being researched is essential for improving them and enacting social change (Coyne & Carter, 2024). Cait's project involved young Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer + (LGBTQ+) people ($n = 12$, 16–23 years old) as co-researchers. Seven co-researchers identified as cis-gendered (five women and two men). Four co-researchers identified as trans* (two as trans men/ masculine, one as a trans woman and one non-binary). One co-researcher identified as non-binary but not trans. Five co-researchers identified as White, one as Indian, one as Black, one co-researcher identified as White and Asian and four co-researchers did not disclose their ethnicity. Co-researchers were recruited through LGBTQ+ and/or youth organisations, schools with an LGBT group and universities across the Northeast of England. This approach ensured that the young people already had existing support services and thus referral and safeguarding processes in place.

The PAR process was openly explained to the co-researchers during recruitment and their discussions and decision-making led to the survey and interview data that was generated and the co-analysis of their findings. Relationships were built between Cait and the co-researchers and between the co-researchers themselves which were vital to building trust and continued engagement over the 15 months of the project. All meetings were voice recorded and transcribed and outputs, including online whiteboards co-created during meetings, formed the data that was analysed as part of Cait's doctoral research.

The research gained ethical approval by the Department of Sociology's ethical committee at Durham University to start the project with the co-researchers. All co-researchers signed consent forms after receiving an information sheet and having conversations about the process. As all co-researchers were above 16, parental consent was not necessary. All co-researchers signed a confidentiality agreement in which they provided a 'trusted adult' that Cait could contact if they were at risk of harm or harming others. Once the research activities (survey and interviews) were co-designed with the co-researchers, Cait gained an amendment to the ethics application to include these activities. Anonymity was decided on a case-by-case basis. Some co-researchers wanted to receive recognition for their work and have their first name to the project during dissemination, others remained anonymous. All co-researchers were pseudonymised when writing up the research. Similarly to Janelle's co-produced project, co-researchers' ongoing consent meant meeting attendance was

flexible. As a result, some attended more meetings than others with some co-researchers not attending for a couple months and then returning to the project, but no co-researchers formally withdrew from the project. All co-researchers received vouchers at each phase of the research whether or not they attended any meeting during that phase. Though researching sensitive topics, particularly around domestic abuse, may be difficult, the co-researchers were not explicitly asked to discuss their own experiences of domestic abuse, instead, they focused on help-seeking. Throughout the research, co-researchers were signposted to support organisations and had opportunities for one-to-ones with Cait. Alongside potential risks and need for safeguarding, there were many potential benefits to partaking in the research such as gaining research experience, opportunities to meet and learn with other young people, a greater understanding of domestic abuse help-seeking and contributing to new knowledge on topics that affect them.

Reflections on Theme One: Embedded and Ongoing Consent. Co-researchers were asked to fill out a 'Tell me about you' form so that Cait was aware of their demographics, identities and preferences. All questions had open responses for co-researchers to self-identify and write as much or as little as they wanted to share with the researcher at that moment. Co-researchers were never asked explicitly whether they had themselves experienced abuse. The co-researchers all received vouchers as a token of appreciation whether they attended one or all meetings, ensuring that they were incentivized to participate due to their own interests, mutual reciprocity and enjoyment. One of the co-researchers appreciated this approach: *'our roles are designed in such a way that we can dip in and out of the project... I could easily readjust and catch up on whatever I missed and contribute as soon as I got the time.'* In this way, differing attendance at meetings was a testament to the process of flexible and ongoing consent.

Reflections on Theme Two: Sharing decision-Making when Co-creating and Maintaining Safety. Embedded within the project's PAR processes, the co-researchers had shared decision-making over different aspects such as meeting frequency, methodology, and dissemination. Cait worked with the co-researchers about expectations of themselves and the researcher by co-creating safer and braver space and working agreements (Figure 4; Murphy et al., 2021). Relationship-building with co-researchers entailed continually referring to and editing the agreements as the project continued. Cait's research took place over regular online and in-person meet-ups which sought to build trust through open and transparent communication between her and the young people in a long-term process. This highlights the importance of longer-term research projects, meaning continual contact over a period of time and not one-off or a couple of sessions. Trust can also be built by being willing to share (some) ownership through supporting decision-making regarding the trajectory of the project.

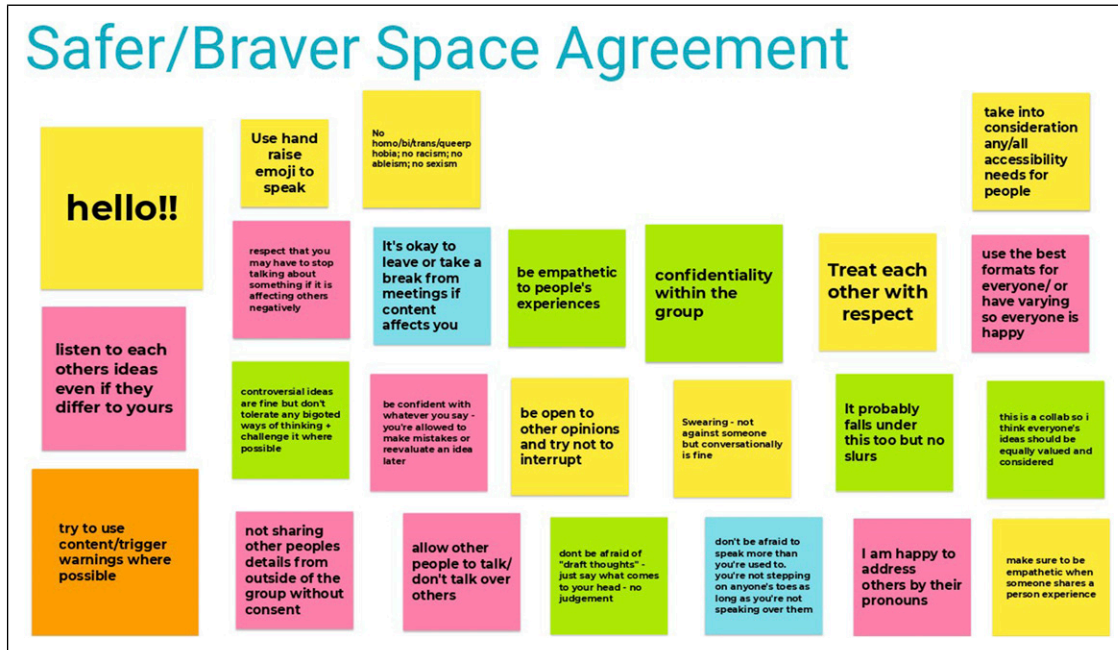


Figure 4. Safer and braver spaces agreement.

Reflections on Theme Three: Mapping CYP-Centred Understandings and Disrupting Adult-Led Narratives. Cait centred young people-led understandings through the digital mapping on online whiteboards where co-researchers could anonymously place comments, pictures or post-it notes which acted as prompts or aids for further discussion via chat or voice channels during online meetings. All co-researchers could access these whiteboards during and outside meetings and were often built upon throughout the research process. This online blank space blurs the boundaries between physical and virtual spaces (Mütterlein & Fuchs, 2019) allowing for collaborative discussions of their identities, ideas and understandings instead of relying on adult-centric definitions or concepts.

The project supported the co-researchers to define their own narratives and understandings of LGBT + identities and experiences. At times, they negotiated how their individual identities and differing understandings of those identities might affect others in the group. For example, when discussing domestic abuse, one co-researcher wrote that being LGBTQ+ 'spell(s) vulnerability' whereas another co-researcher felt there is 'nothing intrinsically that would cause LGBT + people to be more vulnerable'. The ability to map their thoughts anonymously illustrates a balancing act of protection for young people who have different levels of comfort and openness through participating within opening spaces for conflicts and synergies.

Discussion

We sought contribute to existing knowledge on PR with CYP on violence and abuse by providing practical and ethical

reflections (see Cody et al., 2024; Warrington et al., 2024). The balancing act represents an alternative model that considers CYP participation as nuanced and contextual, aligning with Coyne and Carter (2024) point on researchers' adaptability to CYP's diverse identities. Our metaphorical balancing act captures the importance of holding together rights to participation in research with ensuring safety in all that we do. This highlights that there is no single 'rule book' for making children's rights 'real' in the context of research on matters which affect them. It is an ongoing balancing act embedded in respecting CYP's contributions to knowledge and promoting their agency, and control in the participatory process (Coyne & Carter, 2024; Warrington, 2020; Whittington, 2019b).

Researching with Children's Rights

Our three doctoral projects received ethical approval through a university department institutional ethics committee with a long legacy of participatory research, likely creating a conducive context supporting our endeavours. Situating research with children's rights, positions CYP as rights holders and researchers as duty bearers which compels attention and compliance with UNCRC principles (Ranta, 2023). As novice researchers embarking on our first participatory research projects with CYP, we faced doubts about our capacity to ensure young people's safety and protection throughout the research process while promoting their participation. Nevertheless, protection and participation rights need not conflict with one another but compel varying and socially sensitive approaches depending on the context of the CYP, researcher and the subject matter. Some projects needed to embed more

protection and safeguarding mechanisms than others, but it did not make them less participatory. Therefore, our balancing acts required each researcher to assess the differing contexts of the research content and the time available before embarking on the process. It also involved carefully and comprehensively preparing safeguarding mechanisms to ensure their specific CYP's protection in the research process, and to engage young people in the co-production of the safety plans as individuals and as a group. At times, we varied the 'weight' or ways in which different CYP participated, even within the same project. Our movements or balancing acts were responsive to the requests, wants and needs of the CYP we engaged. For example, Lynne (Consultative project) changed expectations from collaborative map-making to stories of experiences, Janelle (Co-produced project) adjusted her initial plan that the young people might be co-researchers towards being collaborators in iterative workshops, and Cait's (Co-research project) limits to shared decision-making were based on co-researchers not wanting too much responsibility.

Our CYP-centred approach recognises their agency by drawing on everyday, relational ethics to work transparently yet creatively within traditional regulatory frameworks. (Carnevale, 2020; Ellis et al., 2023; Warrington et al., 2024). We argue that the day-to-day decisions made through this balancing act may be more ethically justified than those made before the research process. These decisions involve balancing consent, flexibility and safety.

The practice of consent figured prominently across the three projects, each requiring a commitment to the balancing act. These approaches involved respecting CYP's preferred modes of participation, self-identification, and constant re-confirmation of their right to opt-out or withdraw at any point (Coyne & Carter, 2024). Respecting rights to participation and protection cannot be separated from the other but are dependent upon sensitive and respectful negotiations. The balancing acts around consent in the Co-research and Consultative projects arguably required greater sensitivity to participation and were particularly influenced by dimensions of self, social and systemic identities. Both projects used forms that respected the self-identities of CYP and did not reify static representations of selfhood. They supported CYP's choice and control over what they wanted to share as a means to provide closer attention to the balance of protection. Meanwhile, the Co-produced project valued the young people's agentic identity in making informed decisions in their participation before obtaining their formal consent.

Distinct contexts and needs of the CYP involved in the projects led to different approaches to creating and negotiating safety plans or agreements (Coyne & Carter, 2024). When managing the balancing act, each project required differing weights of focus on prior planning, relationship building and shared decision-making. Due to the nature of the Consultative project's research topic, sensitive attention to safeguarding principles was considered in partnership with participants to give them a sense of choice and control over how the researcher

can balance these protective strategies should they be used. Conversely, for the Co-research project and Co-produced project, as the young people involved did not have lived experience of the topic as part of the selection criteria, their balancing acts had less emphasis on prior planning of safety protocols. Both projects involved building trusting relationships in which an ongoing and iterative process of shared decision-making about safety can materialise.

Different Approaches to Facilitating CYP Centred-Understandings

The Co-research project differed slightly from the Co-produced and Consultative projects, as the discussion of their identities as co-researchers and LGBT + young people were more closely linked to the concepts they explored. Meanwhile, the Consultative project illustrated a child-centred research relationship wherein Lynne respected the young people's preference to communicate through narratives instead of maps (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019). It allowed CYP to exercise more power in the research process along with the flexible options of communicating via the research toolbox. Whilst Lynne observed in her Consultative project that mapping did not seem to be the best way for the boys in her project to communicate about safety and risk, the approach proved to be useful for young people in the Co-produced project. The difference in contexts, approaches, and topics for the Co-produced and Consultative projects may have influenced the usefulness of the activity, particularly the differences between individual and group-based activities. The Consultative project required higher degrees of sensitivity and protection, such as protecting the identities and anonymities of the young people, so it was not possible for them to come together and create a collaborative map or engage in group activities together. In contrast, some young people were named as contributors to the Co-research project, others were not.

Conclusion

Children and young people have valuable perspectives that situate them as critical partners and stakeholders in research striving to advance knowledge and practice around issues which affect them and others. Embedding young people's perspectives to enhance understandings of violence and abuse can inform and improve prevention programs and service provision attuned to their needs (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020; Roth, 2023). By articulating our individual and collective doctoral journeys that sought to foreground CYP's participation and perspectives with careful attention to sensitivity and safety we aim to contribute to advancing the implementation of rights-based research including sensitive topics of violence, harm and abuse. This paper builds on research in recent years on participatory research with CYP and participatory research with CYP on violence and abuse, particularly those with lived experiences of abuse (see Ellis

et al., 2023; Cody et al., 2024). This paper contributes to this growing body of work by presenting practical examples of several balancing acts on embedding participation and protection rights in research with CYP. Discussions on children's rights and the often-mentioned tension between participation and protection rights typically focus on the conceptual and theoretical aspects. Our paper takes the discussion further to show how rights to participation were made 'real' with CYP in research around socially sensitive subjects including violence, harm and abuse. Illustrating with examples, we demonstrate the continual negotiation between participation and protection taken within our distinct approaches. In doing so, we support our central argument that participatory methods in violence and abuse research with CYP must be viewed as a balancing act between fulfilling rights to participation and protection.

We propose several recommendations to researchers interested in conducting PR with CYP on violence and abuse issues. First, we urge researchers to identify the 'weight' of protection and participation needed through the research design. Practical considerations include reflecting on the identities of the CYP involved and their experiences of violence and abuse. Second, we encourage reflexivity on researcher positionality and the positionality and contexts of the CYP engaged. Like our experience, it involves reflecting upon the moment-to-moment decisions that researchers must make to balance the fulfilment of the participation and protection rights of CYP (Ellis et al., 2023). We also engaged critically in our existing assumptions and understandings of CYP, knowledge, and the field of violence and abuse.

We contribute to the discourse on CYP participation models by proposing the balancing act as a metaphor to understanding CYP's participation including violence and abuse research. We extend the discussion beyond whether the project was initiated by adults or CYP and the stages of the research process they are involved in, arguing that their participation in the project is dynamic depending on the project context, identities and context of the CYP. The balancing act requires an ongoing focus on participation and protection rights at different points of the research process. It is more pronounced in violence and abuse research with CYP due to the sensitive nature of the issues covered. We emphasise how CYP's knowledge can, in collaboration with adult understandings of such complex and sensitive issues, contribute to the field of knowledge around their experiences and understandings of violence and abuse (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020). We call for greater attention to participation beyond a methodology alone and recognise this as a way of respecting rights (particularly under article 12 of UNCRC). However, this requires careful, sensitive and ongoing attention to the balancing act as an imperative. Children and young people are not a static or singular social group and will have intersecting and unique needs, individually and collectively when being considered as potential participants in research. We have offered our interconnecting reflections on how we negotiated the balancing act as clear practical examples to advance what

can often sit within theoretical discourses. We argue that ongoing and persistent attention to the balancing act between participation and protection supports CYP's participation as a means in which protection rights can be realised.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to our respective PhD supervisors (Prof Simon Hackett, Prof Catherine Donovan, Prof Geetanjali Gangoli, Dr. Hannah King, Dr. Josie Phillips) for their incredible guidance and support. We also thank Dr. Nikki Rutter for her constructive feedback and encouragement. Finally, we thank the young people involved in our projects for their invaluable insights, time, and efforts.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)- Northern Ireland and North East Doctoral Training Partnership (Grant code ES/P000762/1).

Ethical Statement

The authors confirm that all procedures, including obtaining informed consent, were performed in compliance with relevant laws and institutional guidelines in the three projects and have been approved by the Department of Sociology, Durham University Ethics Committee.

Data availability statement

The supporting research dataset of the study of the first author is published in Durham University's data repository DOI: <http://doi.org/10.15128/r2z890rt309>. Due to ethical considerations of the sensitive nature of the research of the second and third authors, supporting data is not available.

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