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Mythen, Gabe; Weston, Samantha

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Educating Young People about Vulnerability to Sexual Exploitation: Safeguarding Practitioners' Standpoints at the Intersections of Gender, Sexuality and Risk

Gabe Mythen [1,2,*] and Samantha Weston[3]

[1] *Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK*
[2] *School of Law and Social Justice, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK*
[3] *Department of Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology, School of Social Policy, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK*

*Correspondence to G. Mythen, Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, School of Law and Social Justice Building, University of Liverpool, Chatham Street, Liverpool, UK. E-mail: *g.mythen@liverpool.ac.uk*

Abstract

This article discusses findings from a qualitative study designed to evaluate the effectiveness of a Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) awareness-raising programme targeted at young people. Drawing on data from in-depth interviews with practitioners involved in a multi-agency team established to reduce vulnerability to CSE, we elucidate that, in addition to being directed by professional codes, practitioners' perceptions and judgements were also influenced by gendered assumptions and underlying anxieties about childhood sexuality. The empirical data presented suggest that attitudes towards young people and intervention decisions are partially steered by cultural values that connect not only to personal morals but also influence decisions made in conjunction with professional risk analytic frameworks. Our analysis indicates that broader investigation of the commingling of personal and professional values in safeguarding contexts is required, alongside the creation of protected spaces for professional reflection and dialogue amongst practitioners to support decision-making.

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Introduction

In this article, we focus on the perceptions of practitioners involved in delivering educative programmes designed to raise awareness amongst young people about the risks of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE). Drawing on a qualitative study, we explore how practitioners' perceptions are conditioned not only by professional codes and modes of risk assessment but also by cultural values and attitudes towards gender, childhood and sexuality. We seek to illumine the ways in which personal assumptions influence the professional conduct of practitioners in terms of monitoring, risk assessment and intervention. Insofar as it is important to be sensitive to the difficulties faced by professionals involved in safeguarding, draw attention to the connections between societal gendered assumptions—more explicitly, the difference between what constitutes acceptable as opposed to 'risky' behaviour for boys and girls—and how these assumptions impact on the process of risk assessment for practitioners supporting young people. Using empirical data, we aver that a concentrated focus on the activities of girls and young women in particular—relating to self-presentation, body weight, use of make-up, sartorial choices, relationships and friendship groups—may lead to the magnification of anxieties that transcend the ambit of professional modes of assessment. Aside from the implications of this for assessment frameworks designed to identify vulnerability to CSE, we also consider the potentially iatrogenic effects of risk-based decision-making for young people impacted by interventions. If subjective culturally conditioned assumptions about gender are impacting the ways in which practitioners involved in safeguarding young people from CSE make decisions about safety and safeguarding, it is important to raise questions about how these assumptions may structure and orient the nature of work that they are doing. Our contribution supports previous observations that emphasise the need to move away from campaigns and initiatives that responsibilise teenage girls for preventing sexual harms (Ricciardelli and Adorjan, 2019; Naezer and van Oosterhout, 2021). Our findings indicate that the creation and/or maintenance of resourced professional spaces for reflection amongst child protection practitioners regarding engrained gender assumptions may facilitate greater understanding of the ways in which professional and moral codes intertwine.

Context setting: addressing the problem of child sexual exploitation

In recent years, the extent of the problem of CSE in Britain has been illuminated by cases of organised abuse across the country in a range of locales, including Derby, Rochdale, Rotherham, Oxford, Swansea and Telford. The public exposure of these cases has highlighted the scale of the problem of CSE whilst revealing the shortcomings of various institutions and agencies involved in child protection. In Rochdale, the Special Case Review (SCR) reported that the severity of the problem of child sexual abuse was strikingly under-acknowledged by senior managers working within child welfare and social care (Easton, 2020). Further, at an operational level, the police service dismissed complaints made by young people without sufficient investigative diligence and of failing to treat the abuse that victims suffered as criminal offences. Other SCRs have identified similar problems, criticising practitioners' misperceptions of young people's behaviour and flaws in the strategic decision-making of senior officials. In Oxford, the SCR reported misunderstandings amongst professionals about what constitutes consent affected decisions about whether to refer and also how referrals were assessed, with 'earlier sexualisation of children, the age of perceived self-determination and ability to consent creeping lower' (Bedford, 2015, p. 105), making it more difficult for professionals to intervene. In Telford, both the police service and social workers responsible for safeguarding children admitted failures to take 'seriously enough' the sexual exploitation of young people (Cobain, 2018, p. 4).

These cases make clear that assumptions about children and their sexual behaviour have, at best, clouded social worker and police judgement and, in the worst instances, led to neglect of professional duty. Research conducted by organisations supporting parents and carers of children impacted by CSE—such as Parents Against Child Exploitation—raises further concerns about interactions between social care workers and parents of exploited children. In a study involving thirty-two parents (Pike *et al.*, 2019), virtually all of the participants said that they felt that social workers had an inadequate understanding of the nature of CSE. The study also reports that parents/carers of abused children felt that social workers frequently minimised or dismissed the physical and mental harm their children were being subjected to by abusers. A long list of issues and grievances were raised by the participants, including lengthy delays prior to intervention, concerns about not being properly listened to by social workers, a lack of emotional and practical support for children and a negative climate of suspicion towards parents (see Pike *et al.*, 2019).

Disquiet about the impact of discourses around the normative sexual behaviour of young people has not been limited to those working with exploited children. Prevention and early intervention activities involving discussions with youth about their sexual behaviour have been criticised for attending exclusively to potential dangers associated with teenage sex and for defining 'normal' teenage sex as heterosexual and coital (see Bay-Cheng, 2010). Furthermore, recognition of young people's experimentation around sexual pleasure—and acknowledgement of their desire for shared intimacy—is often strikingly absent from sexual health promotion literature (see Beasley, 2008; Byron, 2016). As Bourke (2019, p. 1) suggests, the very intimation that children or young people 'might assert sexual agency elicits fear—if not outright panic—in most adults'. In addition to 'troubling' the sexual preferences of young people, parents and guardians have, in Western countries, been exhorted by the State, politicians and the media to monitor and survey children's activities (Angelides, 2019). Furedi (2018) posits that a pervasive 'culture of fear' has been institutionally cultivated around the vulnerability of children, promoting forms of 'paranoid parenting'.

Historically, anxieties about young people's sexual behaviour can be understood within the broader context of general perceptions of the unruliness of young people projected by elder generations. Concerns about reckless and feckless youth have been a prominent feature of British society for several hundred years. As Pearson (1983) observes, 'respectable fears' have historically been reproduced via a process of looking back through rose-tinted spectacles to an era of innocence and safety, contrasted with a contemporary age marked by risk and insecurity.

In 2017, in an attempt to circumvent accusations of victim blaming, the UK Department of Health shifted its definition of young victims from 'children involved in prostitution' to a more offender-centred interpretation that acknowledges that CSE is an organised form of abuse:

> It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of online activity. (Department for Education, 2017, p. 5)

Post high-profile enquiries outlining systematic institutional failings and a culture of denial (Coffey, 2014; Jay, 2014), CSE became designated as a strategic led by the police service, with forces across England and Wales having a duty to collaborate across county lines to safeguard the children. The National CSE Action Plan (2014)—written by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and supported by the College of Policing—states that awareness should be raised amongst young people, parents, carers and potential perpetrators. The publication of this plan triggered a range of initiatives oriented towards prevention through early intervention. One such initiative was that implemented by a police force area, referred to hereafter as Midshire. The aim of this police-led intervention was to encourage young people to reflect on and, where appropriate, modify their behaviours in order to enhance safety and decrease the risk of exposure to CSE. A range of tools and techniques were used by practitioners to inform young people about effective modes of self-regulation and ways of preventing harm. The two headline messages communicated to young people were to be cautious of strangers who make approaches online and to avoid sharing graphic images with partners, peers or strangers. Although the exact content of the awareness-raising sessions differed in accordance with the demographic of the audience, a common framework was followed. Each presentation opened with a warning that possession or sharing of an indecent image by a young person was illegal and that those possessing and/or distributing such images were committing a criminal offence. Emphasis on deterrence was reinforced by the identification of various social media sites, accompanied by a caveat that such sites can be dangerous if used inappropriately. Practitioners impressed upon young people the risks involved in sharing personal details and images on social media. In particular, the opportunities that such platforms afford for perpetrators of CSE to befriend and exploit young people were underlined. A short film was then screened, involving a real-life case of a young person subjected to exploitation. The film most frequently shown in the education awareness training was ‘Kayleigh’s Love Story’. This film focuses on a young girl who ‘friended’ a stranger that approached her on Facebook. She exchanged 2,643 messages with him over a two-week period and subsequently agreed to meet him at his home. Unbeknown to Kayleigh, the man had invited his neighbour to join them. On arrival, she was plied with alcohol and both men sexually assaulted her. As Kayleigh tried to escape, she was seized by the neighbour, who raped and murdered her. This shocking case was used by practitioners to invite the audience to reflect on the perils of social media and the need to be vigilant when approached by strangers online. Instructions were given about managing online behaviour to avoid becoming vulnerable to sexual predators. The approach adopted by practitioners was strongly oriented towards harm reduction through preventative risk focussed educational methods. Whilst consistent with government directives and indubitably well-intentioned, a pronounced focus on deterrence—via encouragement to self-monitor, regulate behaviour and be mindful of strangers—was not roundly accepted, nor well received by the audience (see Weston and Mythen, 2020). To explore further some of the reasons for this lack of engagement, we focus on the perceptions of practitioners involved in the delivery of the initiative. Specifically, we show that cultural values and subjective attitudes towards gender, childhood and sexuality continue to influence both risk-based practices and intervention decisions.

Study design and methods: evaluating a CSE intervention

Before relating the context described above to the ways in which CSE prevention initiatives are designed and implemented, it is necessary to convey the key objectives of the study. The findings discussed below are drawn from a qualitative study designed to evaluate the effectiveness of an initiative implemented by the Midshire police force. Semi-structured interviews with the multi-agency team, field observations, focus groups with young people and practitioner referral forms (RFs) were used to collect the data (see Figure 1).

In our analysis, we focus exclusively on the semi-structured interviews with the multi-agency team and strategic leads that devised and implemented the programme and the RFs subsequently completed. Two-stage interviews canvassed the perspectives of seventeen practitioners from varying backgrounds involved in delivering the programme. Included within this sample were nine members of the delivery team and eight

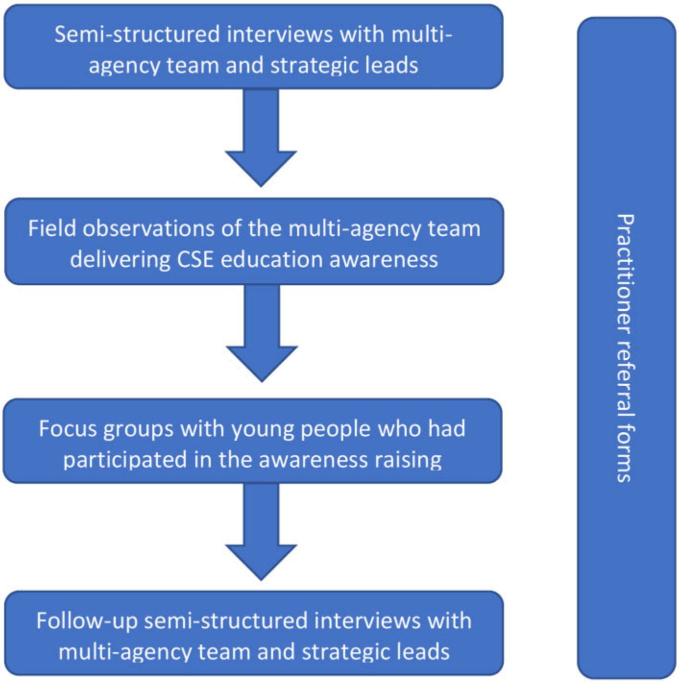
Semi-structured interviews with multi-agency team and strategic leads
Field observations of the multi-agency team delivering CSE education awareness
Focus groups with young people who had participated in the awareness raising
Follow-up semi-structured interviews with multi-agency team and strategic leads
Practitioner referral forms

Figure 1: Overview of data collection process.

members of the steering group. The team was co-located within Midshire police's CSE team and comprised experienced practitioners embedded within child/youth welfare-oriented positions, including police officers with twelve to twenty-five years of service, a family support worker previously employed by the local authority, a residential care support worker, a teacher, a youth worker and a voluntary sector worker, previously supporting children at risk of CSE. With the exception of one participant, who was aged between twenty-five to thirty and who had four years of experience of working within the sector, practitioners who were not police officers had between thirteen and twenty-four years of previous experience and were aged thirty to forty-five years. Members of the steering group were similarly diverse, representing senior police chiefs, county and city-wide safeguarding leads and a commissioner for children's services. In order to enable maturation of perspectives, all participants were initially interviewed within six months of the programme's implementation and in follow-up interviews twelve months later. Interviews lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes, following a semi-structured topic guide about the CSE initiative and reflections on the participant's role within it. The interviews were conducted at the offices of the interviewer or the interviewees.

Access to young people participating in the CSE awareness-raising initiative was granted through the consent of three secondary schools across Midshire. Within these schools, field observations of the team delivering the educational awareness programme were conducted, followed by focus groups with young people participating. Four focus groups were carried out with forty-three young people aged fifteen to eighteen years. These took place at the participants' educational facility and lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes. Informed consent was given by all participants involved in the study. The research adhered to the British Sociological Association's ethical protocol and received approval from the University's Ethics Committee.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed post data gathering. The principles of grounded theory were followed throughout the process of data analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Given our commitment to learning from participants and growing ideas and concepts from the 'bottom-up', grounded theory was deemed to be the most suitable approach to follow (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). During transcription, researchers became familiar with the data-set and went on to identify emergent patterns and themes. During preliminary analysis, initial open codes followed by axial codes were attached to interview and focus group transcriptions in order to advance the coding framework. The researchers subsequently convened to discuss and agree key themes and sub-themes. In the second phase of systematic analysis, interview and focus group transcripts were distributed amongst the research team for analysis along with the agreed coding framework to ensure consistency.

Following the principles of grounded theory, axial encoding was conducted during both the preliminary and systematic phases of analysis, enabling iterative and dynamic evaluation. It should be noted that the findings related below derive from a small-scale geographically specific study and are thus not generalisable. Nevertheless, we surmise that the issues highlighted may chime with the conundrums and dilemmas faced by social work practitioners engaging with young people across a range of contexts.

In the following discussion, we analyse the data from interviews with practitioners and extracts from RFs. Drawing on illustrative vignettes, we illuminate two intersecting issues that emerged through concurrence during the process of data analysis: the gendering of risk and anxieties about young people's sexuality. Alongside recourse to established risk frameworks, these processes informed practitioner perceptions, decision-making and intervention judgements.

Values, assumptions and presumptions: Gendering risk?

Interview analysis indicates that practitioners from different professional contexts had similar understandings of suitable/inappropriate forms of activity for young people. Some of these ideas were related to age, whilst others focussed specifically on sexual conduct:

> I think it can be a fine line sometimes, depending on what the age gap is like. We spoke to a girl the other day - she was 14 and she'd been seeing a 17-year-old - and she didn't think she was doing anything wrong. So, we sort of had to say, you know, he's nearly 18, you've known him 12 months and you would have been 13 when you first met him. That isn't really what we would say is an appropriate relationship. So, you sort of try and educate them that a 17 - nearly 18-year-old - male shouldn't really be interested in somebody of that age. So, although they might not be being exploited, we would go down this sort of healthy relationship type of route. (Amanda, Prevent CSE Worker, previously police officer)

> I think for a long time we looked at exploitation and said is it because of potential gain? - It can be financial or monetary - but I don't think kids are actually doing it for that. I think it's a bit of a misconception. They might have got some gifts, or some alcohol, but the thing we're dealing with now, in *Prevent* we're seeing, it's more just kids growing up and misunderstanding what's appropriate and what kind of sexual activity is appropriate and normal. (Mark, Prevent CSE team leader, previously police officer)

Whilst Amanda cites an example where an educative approach may have utility in inappropriate age-gap relationships, Mark flags comprehension of stages of sexual and ideational maturation as critical in supporting young people in making safe decisions.

In addition to age, a recurrent pattern prevalent amongst practitioners were related to distinct sets of gendered attitudes and expectations:

> I've worked with a couple of young girls who absolutely have got no interest in their friends when the boyfriend's there. And he's their world, he's the one thing they concentrate on. I was always worried about that. Like, what's happened? Where have your friends gone? And I think that's not how it should work. Because ultimately, he's isolated you already, whether you meant to or not, you've isolated yourself in a way. (Susan, Prevent CSE Worker)

In addition to guarding against the risks of becoming isolated from familial and friendship networks, practitioners such as Clare indicated that young females should be more cautious and adhere to socially acceptable sexual behaviours:

> I think girls generally have lower morals. I think that they have little self-confidence. I think that they have little worth of themselves. And I say girls, I'm not generalizing, obviously, all girls, but we've got particularly vulnerable girls here who are easy and who are targets for these people who want to groom them. (Clare, Prevent CSE worker, previously family support worker)

Clare's suggestion that 'vulnerable girls' are 'easy' and have 'lower morals' is mirrored in the way that young people are educated about CSE, with sharp lines being drawn between 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' relationships:

> I suppose in our presentations, we are teaching young people how to identify a healthy relationship, a positive one. So we talk about things like having sex, watching porn, talking about sexual things ... and we just explain the fact that it doesn't matter who that person is that's trying to get you to do that, whether or not it's a friend or a boyfriend or a girlfriend or a stranger, at the end of the day, that's not really what should be expected of you. (Cathy, Prevent CSE worker)

Like Susan, Cathy's perspective suggests that girls may lack agency and autonomy, whilst 'boys' seek to take advantage by either tactics of isolation in Susan's example or manipulation in Cathy's. Other practitioners were of the view that girls were becoming inured to behaving in ways that primarily served to satisfy the sexual and domestic proclivities of boys/men:

> As part of my old role, I was going to some of the youth clubs. I could see the relationships. Boys had so little respect for girls. Girls were expected to listen and obey, that's definitely where the world is heading these days. That's actually what's expected of a relationship now. Boys tell you what to do, and you do it. As a female - you do what a man says. When a man comes home, you have his tea on the table. If a man says he wants sex, you give it to him, even if you don't want to. And I

> think that's not how it should work. (Clare, Prevent CSE worker, previously family support worker)

Whilst there is much to unravel here in relation to gendered societal norms and the socialisation of young people, Clare's comments are underpinned by concern about the normalisation of a patriarchal culture in which male power is valorised and women are rendered subordinate. Notwithstanding the retrenchment of patriarchal culture in contemporary society (see Off *et al.*, 2022), what is absent here is recognition that young women, like young men, maybe—to greater or lesser degrees—making self-determined choices regarding their sexual preferences and relationship choices. Whilst patriarchy remains systemically embedded (Abraham, 2019; Pierik, 2022), there are dangers in adopting a general position on sexual relationships that casts calculating boys and men as predating on naïve and vulnerable girls. Aside from under-emphasising capacity for agency and reflexivity, the categorical assumptions made in situating males as manipulators of young females elide that boys and young men can themselves be victims of CSE, whether at the hands of female or male abusers. As Thomas (2021) posits, not only do boys experience sexual trauma and difficulties but the ways in which these may manifest behaviourally in everyday life can lead them to being dismissed as unruly or 'troublesome' behaviour. Whilst the majority of instances of CSE in the UK are instigated by adult males, drawing blanket gendered assumptions about the motivations of boys/men and girls/women runs the risk of heteronormative thinking, accelerating 'false positive' cases and overlooking cases where males are victims.

Reflecting on sex, morality and risk: the surfacing of respectable fears?

The perceptions of risk articulated by practitioners above raise prescient issues around the relative balance between professional and personal perspectives and the ways in which this feeds into decision-making regarding the circumstances in which a CSE intervention is necessary. It is understandable that practitioners working in this context are inclined towards loading the balance of risk towards precaution, with safeguarding priorities often trumping potentially damaging effects of an intervention on relationships between involved parties. The precarities associated with balancing these competing priorities are recounted by Debbie after one of the awareness-raising sessions:

> She is 14 and her boyfriend is 17, so that's one factor that's concerning. We don't know who the young lad is, he's not known. It could be a legitimate relationship. The fact that she's got no friends, that puts her at risk. The fact that - she has told me today - that she's speaking to people on Facebook she doesn't know, that's putting her at risk. So, by spending

> this time with her she's actually telling me a lot more. For me, I think it's better to do it that way. So that's why I think this is the best way to do it. Because if I went out for an hour, like maybe the police are used to, she wouldn't want to speak to me. (Debbie, Prevent CSE worker, previously voluntary sector CSE worker)

The example shared above is illustrative of the value of awareness-building initiatives, in terms of proactive information gathering and counselling young people. Yet, there are also thorny issues to consider when specific risk factors—such as social isolation—are deployed in decision-making about whether and how to intervene, in circumstances in which practices that might otherwise be considered mundane, such as messaging on Facebook, are flagged as risky for young people. Indeed, the assessments recorded by practitioners on RFs specifically included, 'seeming to be more involved with social media than direct contact with family and friends', as a risk indicator (RF4). Risk evaluations typically identified heightened concerns about a young person's use of electronic devices: 'observed by Foster carer, who states that [young person] spends lots of time on her laptop. Foster carer supervises this, but [young person] does not seem to understand how much time she is spending on the laptop' (RF1).

Thus, various risk indicators—such as relationship age gaps, unknown partners, friendlessness, Internet use and social media messaging—were used as an indication of risk that, in turn, informed decision-making regarding further monitoring and/or precautionary intervention. Whilst professional codes steered these decisions for practitioners, otherwise unremarkable activities were also rendered suspicious. As the comments in RF1 suggest, frequent computer usage is considered as a red flag to be actively policed and investigated. Other referrals made direct reference to particular social media sites: '[Young person] has recently requested that she open a Facebook account, but has been advised not to do this by myself in order to ensure that [young person] is protected from the dangers of social media. [Young person] can be very over familiar with strangers and is likely to engage with online friendships and not understand the risk of this' (RF6).

Of course, it is not possible to judge individual levels of vulnerability extracted from context nor to speculate on proficiency in Internet safety. Nevertheless, RFs frequently expressed concern about a lack of awareness of online risks. Self-presentation of girls and young women was also often documented as a cause for concern. Some safeguarding referrals included explicitly problematic gendered references to clothing preferences and physical attributes, such as the person concerned 'wearing skimpy clothes' and 'being an attractive young lady with a great figure' (RF3). These examples are troubling and bring to the surface the role of subjective factors in the risk assessment process.

It is clear that there are instances and grounds where intervention on the basis of prevention of harm is incontrovertibly warranted:

> I mean we had a girl who was 13 who had met someone online who's 21. We had to go back two or three times to explain that that is not right. A 21-year-old should not be interested in a 13-year-old and although he wasn't doing any ... you know ... wasn't showering her with gifts, wasn't showering her with affection. He believed that, you know, that he was her boyfriend and that was it, and it was only down to the parents taking the iPad and everything off her. That meant saying, this isn't right. He was saying things to her, like that he was - he'd got a child already by somebody else - but you know, I want you to be their mum and so it was all very, yes, not great. But to try and get that across to a young 13-year-old who thinks "Oh I love him". It is difficult sometimes to get that message across to young people. (Amanda, Prevent CSE worker, previously a police officer)

The challenging nature of managing emotions and young people's mental well-being in the process of safeguarding is writ large above. This case—involving the manipulation of a younger female by an elder male—was the principal pattern of abuse discussed by practitioners in awareness-raising sessions. In contrast, cases of 'peer-to-peer' exploitation were referred to rarely and mentioned in relation to cascade cases, where peer grooming operated as an 'entrance opportunity' for elder male abusers:

> If you try and identify a perpetrator, obviously you've got the classic signs of if he's 30 and the child is 12, that's your obvious one. But for the peer-to-peer, that's harder. Because unless you're working within them young people as, like, support workers or youth workers, you can't see day-to-day what's going on. So that would be harder to spot out in the community. So, the matching age, so they could be used as the ... so they might be friends with someone the same age, but actually the other young person's also being groomed by someone older and they're being used to bring more people into the situation. So that's when it's peer-to-peer. (Debbie, Prevent CSE worker, previously voluntary sector CSE worker)

In follow-up interviews, practitioners were asked to reflect on the types of referrals they had been receiving. As can be seen in the data below, notions of 'appropriate' versus 'inappropriate' behaviour informed the referral process:

> I've had quite a few referrals that have been made via professionals who have gone out and done inputs where they want us to work with young people, wherever it be. Sometimes there've not been appropriate referrals to our team, and we've just referred them on to someone else, because sometimes it has just been like over-sexualised behaviour which isn't child sexual exploitation as per the definition. So, I've referred them on to, say, the NSPCC. They do a specific programme about over-

> sexualised behaviour, where I've had some instances where young people have been referred in because they are talking very inappropriate, but they've not sent any images, they've not received any. They've not been exploited, not been groomed and they've not done that to anyone else. So, it's just about explaining to the referrer that actually we are here as a service for CSE, and the over-sexualised behaviour can go to someone else. (Sadia, Prevent CSE worker, previously police officer)

> I had an email from a lecturer at [redacted] University a couple of weeks ago asking if I could go in and have a discussion with the Freshers, because she'd identified that they're all getting absolutely hammered having these house parties and sleeping with each other. And they haven't a clue who is going to the house party and if they're underage and they're all just sleeping together. Their attitudes to life … it isn't just about having fun. They just don't think about the careers that they potentially want to go on to and how they could ruin it. (Carol, Prevent CSE worker, previously children's residential care worker)

Aside from moral tone and inherent conjecture, these observations are poignant in terms of perceived differences between 'over-sexualised behaviour' and CSE in the first example, and porosity between the two in the second. Obviously, in instances where the actions of a young person render them vulnerable to CSE, monitoring and/or intervention is sagacious. Furthermore, it is important to be aware of the ways in which the normalisation of underage sex potentially exposes children and young people to the risk of sexual exploitation (Beesley, 2018). Nevertheless, for some safeguarding practitioners, fears about lax values and 'promiscuous' behaviours keyed in with a broader sense of contemporary moral decay, typified by young people's perceived decadence around sex and relationships. Moreover, as in the narratives presented above, the subject/object of fear is invariably female. Our discussion raises a cluster of barbed issues about expert perceptions of risk, the complexities involved in decision-making in safeguarding environments where the magnitude of harm is high and effective ways of reducing young people's vulnerability to exploitation. In this context, the balance between educating males about sexual rights, gender equality and respect for women and warning females of the dangers of inappropriate modes of conduct appears uneven. Mirroring Phillips' (2019) analysis of CSRs, what is of interest and import is the way in which young people are 'made-up' via the professional production of knowledge and discourses regarding their identities, habits and proclivities.

Discussion

In this article, we have elucidated two interconnected processes observable amongst practitioners involved in the study: first, the gendering of risk and secondly, moral anxieties about young people's sexual behaviour. In relation to the latter, we have raised concerns about a concentrated focus amongst practitioners on the (in)appropriate behaviour of girls and young women. We have excavated some of the problems and challenges that arise in making what are ostensibly risk-based judgements but connected to gendered assumptions and perceptions regarding acceptable behaviour. Whilst we have focussed on the commingling of fears with formal risk criteria in decision-making around referral and intervention, we wish to end by drawing out the wider implications of our discussion for both agencies involved in safeguarding in this area and future policy focussed research.

As the testimonies of practitioners illustrate, working within the child safeguarding and protection space is highly demanding. Recent cases of organised sexual abuse have placed practitioners under intense scrutiny. Regrettably, abuse continues to occur across various domains, including within sports, residential care, education and religious institutions. Furthermore, there is growing recognition of the diverse forms of CSE—including peer-to-peer—that exists alongside sexual abuse perpetrated by adults on children and young people (see Hackett, 2016; Allardyce and Yates, 2018). For safeguarding practitioners operating at permeable interfaces—within social work, welfare, schools, healthcare settings and youth justice—acknowledging this shift and being alert to changing patterns of CSE are crucial in adapting modes of professional risk assessment and, where necessary, developing fresh analytical tools to keep pace with a fluctuating world in which the habits and activities of young people are constantly in transition.

We have argued that, despite recourse to risk-based modes of evaluation, decisions that feed into future monitoring and/or interventions cannot readily be separated from cultural values and moral concerns about young people's sexual behaviour and choices. Although it is widely acknowledged that various factors, such as poverty, family conflict, homelessness, an unsettled care history and/or episodes of running away from home, homelessness, learning and mental health difficulties and drug and alcohol abuse, are likely to increase the risk of exploitation (see Chase and Statham, 2005; Harris and Robinson, 2007; Berelowitz, et al. 2013), young people without these indicative vulnerabilities were also identified as at risk, whether it be through frequent computer and Internet use, social media and shared gaming platform activity and clothing choices. It is expectable that awareness-raising programmes focussing on CSE should highlight risks and provide advice on safety techniques. Nevertheless, attending only to the potential dangers and harms associated with (teenage) sexual practices mutes acknowledging young people's desires to explore their sexuality, whether that be through performative expression, self-presentation or shared intimacy. Whilst there may be other educative forums in which such conversations are enabled, when risk-based approaches are applied in areas of sexual health, pleasure and fulfilment are considered as antithetical to safety (see Lee and Crofts, 2015).

Our analysis resonates with research on how practitioners identify and work with children that may be at risk or engaged in harmful sexual behaviour, in contexts where they may not always be equipped with the knowledge, skills and confidence required (Clements, *et al.*, 2017). Whilst our findings align in this regard, it has been our intention to move debates on to consider the ostensibly 'extraneous' factors that might influence decision-making and professional practices. The data from our study indicate that—in addition to formal risk assessment guidelines and tacit professional knowledge—when practitioners make decisions, they also draw on implicit and culturally conditioned assumptions about gender and sexuality. There is a need, therefore, for practitioners to be supported in reflecting on and considering their own frames of understanding, how these play out in practice and the implications of this for safeguarding procedures. In addition to engaging at a deep level with the contextual lives of children and young people, resources and time for reflection on the dynamic cultural, social and political landscape within which practitioners operate is required, alongside recognition of the extent to which this context impacts routine knowledge and professional practices.

Conclusion

In this article, we have illuminated some of the problems and issues faced by practitioners when identifying young people at risk of CSE. With regards to expanding academic knowledge, there is a need to develop a more in-depth understanding of the effects of various factors that may influence risk decision-making and how these shape professional practice. Developing knowledge about the ways in which CSE prevention is enacted and implemented across different international contexts may afford not only in the identification of commonalities and differences but also, where appropriate, in importing of innovative and valuable practices. Recognition that safeguarding decisions are influenced by practitioners' knowledge and experience (Clements *et al.*, 2017), confidence and emotions (Banks, 2002) and attitudes, values and beliefs (Wilks, 2004), has led to calls for reflective practice to be embedded across organisations and agencies that have a role in identifying risk (Berelowitz *et al.*, 2013; Reisel, 2017; Weston and Mythen, 2021). We have shown that practitioners making decisions in this particular safeguarding context do so amidst the presence of 'respectable fears' about young people's behaviour and anxieties about their sexual proclivities, which may tip the balance of risk too heavily towards precaution and delimit the agency of young people in their sexual behaviour and relationship choices. As such, those supporting young people should appreciate that they, like adults, are sexual agents and not simply 'passive recipients of the adult sexualised gaze' (Bourke, 2019, p. 1). Failing to approach young people at risk of CSE as 'active agents' may compound feelings of powerlessness, trauma and neglect (Hallett, 2016). It is evident that successfully engaging young people about the dangers of CSE is contingent on the establishment of solid trusting relationships to enable them to explore behaviours, interactions and situations (Lefevre *et al.*, 2017). To encourage these, institutionally embedded spaces and places are required to facilitate frank and open conversations, geared towards empowering teenagers and encouraging them to develop responsible strategies to keep safe.

In a wider context where multi-agency approaches to crime prevention are becoming increasingly popular, our findings are prescient. As child protection services evolve and restructure to include an assortment of agencies, both the benefits and the shortcomings of such partnerships need to be continually evaluated. Although multi-agency approaches to child welfare and safeguarding promise multiple benefits, within organisations not traditionally aligned to social work, appropriate skills training is needed to equip practitioners to operate effectively in sensitive safeguarding spaces. Encouraging professional reflection and dialogue, alongside listening to the needs and experiences of young people, is necessary in order not only to improve and support decision-making but also to proactively mitigate against the influence that practitioners' personal attitudes, values and beliefs may have on the support they provide.

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