



Disentangling practitioners' understandings of child sexual exploitation: The risks of assuming otherwise?

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journals.sagepub.com/home/crj**Samantha Weston** 

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Abstract

This article reports findings from a qualitative study investigating the efficacy and the effects of a child sexual exploitation awareness raising intervention with young people. Drawing on in-depth interviews with members of a multi-agency team set up to prevent child sexual exploitation, we elucidate the way in which practitioners communicate the problem of child sexual exploitation and how risk registers are deployed to assess the dangerousness of young people's behaviours. In examining practitioners' understandings of child sexual exploitation, we illuminate the ways in which educative interventions in this domain are informed by a confluence of policy guidelines and personal/experiential perceptions. Unravelling the tensions arising between these two frames of interpretation, we illustrate that – despite routine recourse to embedded professional knowledge – underlying moral and cultural assumptions alongside anxieties about childhood sexuality influence practitioners' understandings of the nature of risk, who is at risk and the context in which risks manifest themselves.

Keywords

Child sexual exploitation, childhood sexuality, police interventions, risk prevention, young people

Introduction

While decisions within the criminal justice system about the identification and prediction of 'risk' are often informed by a combination of clinical and actuarial methods, the suggestion that such assessments are based entirely on these methods is erroneous (Kemshall, 2011;

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O'Malley, 2004). As Walklate and Mythen (2011) assert, relying on such 'objective' methods alone denies the 'lived reality of risk assessment practices, in other words what it is that criminal justice professionals actually do: how they *judge* risk' (p. 104). Echoing this observation, within the context of parole decision-making and border security, studies have shown that actuarial information can be rendered secondary to both accumulated vocational expertise and moral judgement (Degenhardt and Bourne, 2018; Werth, 2017). Similarly, in identifying partner violence, the use of intuitive experiential knowledge has been advocated by caveat in the guidance attached to the use of risk assessment tools: 'please pay particular attention to a practitioner's professional judgement in all cases. The results from the checklist are not a definitive assessment of risk' (CAADA: 1, cited by Walklate and Mythen, 2011: 107). Within such contexts, it is tacitly acknowledged that 'knowing otherwise' often supplements – and sometimes supplants – the use of professional risk registers and, further, that tacit knowledge may enable a more considered appreciation of the everyday experiences of marginalised individuals (Walklate and Mythen, 2011). Drawing on data from a situated empirical study, we illumine below the ways in which the use of experiential knowledge and moral values among practitioners may lead to inconsistencies in identifying who is 'at risk', from whom and under what circumstances.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with members of a multi-agency team – co-located within a police headquarters and established to prevent child sexual exploitation (CSE) – this article examines the ways in which practitioners both professionally and experientially construct understandings of risk and subsequently attribute these risks to young people. We illustrate that, while practitioners are able to articulate very clearly their formal understandings of CSE through the lens of policy and guidance, they nevertheless frequently construct the risks associated with CSE through informal means with reference to personal experiences and pre-conceived notions of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. The (dis) articulation of these competing frameworks of 'knowledge' means that decisions about who is at 'risk' become based on a series of unknowns and uncertainties that are translated into tangible causes for suspicion. Importantly, what is palpably absent in this operational context is young people's capacity for both responsibility and agency. Furthermore, we posit that negating young people's exploration of alternative sexual experiences that may not align with dominant normative frameworks can lead to the reproduction of false 'red flags' that obscure rather than expose vulnerability to exploitation.

We begin by situating the study within the context of broader CSE policy developments, before outlining our methodological approach. From here, we present the data substantiating the assertions made above. We conclude by rendering explicit the wider implications of our findings for professionals interfacing with young people in child protection. In toto, we assert that in order to address the problem of CSE, there is a palpable need for practitioners to be afforded spaces to reflect on the constituents of their own frames of understanding and also how these understandings are translated into and impact in practice.

Context and methods: Situating the study

Following the charges brought against organised 'gang' members targeting girls and young women in Rochdale, Derby and Oxford, CSE has been subject to significant national media attention in recent years. These cases prompted widespread political and

public debate about the problem of ‘grooming’, whereby children and young people are encouraged into abusive sexual relationships by predatory males. At the level of law and policy-making, there has been a marked proliferation of official inquiries, inspections and case reviews over the last decade. Specifically, concerns have been raised about a lack of awareness among professionals about the vulnerabilities that young people may have and the risks that they may be exposed to. Assorted reports, such as *The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997–2003* (Jay, 2014) and the Ofsted (2014) report into CSE, have highlighted gaps in identifying risk and failures to respond to complaints made. Serious case reviews (SCRs) have identified similar problems, suggesting that misunderstandings among professionals about what constitutes consent affected decisions about whether to refer and how referrals were received (Bedford, 2015).

Alongside the design and implementation of campaigns to recognise that young people involved in the exchange of sex for money or gifts are victims of abuse (Warrington, 2010), the outcomes of these inquiries have drawn attention to the problems faced by vulnerable young people. Acknowledging the diverse means by which children are sexually exploited (Beckett et al., 2012; Dodsworth, 2014; Firmin, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2012), a report by the children’s charity, Barnardo’s (2017), suggests that children may experience multiple modes of exploitation. A salient issue that is emphasised consistently within the guidance is that perpetrators can be male or female, from any background, age group or ethnicity, and that sexual exploitation can happen between young people within and across peer groups (Children’s Society, 2019; Safe & Sound, 2019).

Although potentially progressive in terms of recognising the range of CSE, these types of communications broaden the pool of young people identified as being ‘at risk’ and petition for intensified adult control. They also infer that intensified surveillance of young people is necessary to mitigate against reckless and/or ill-judged decision-making. As Thompson (1998) points out, ‘no age group is more associated with risk in the public imagination than that of “youth”’ (p. 43). Indeed, political anxieties around unruly and feckless youth have been a prominent feature of British society for several hundred years (see Pearson, 1983). Nevertheless, in recent years, through the advancement and use of online digital technology, concerns about the naivety and vulnerability of children and young people have become a prominent feature of media discourse. What Palfrey and Gasser (2008) describe as ‘a culture of fear . . . around the online environment’ (p. 18) has consolidated, with the Internet being presented as a risk prone environment for young people. This is despite evidence presented in several empirical studies documenting the considered responsibility taken for personal safety by young people online (Weston and Mythen, 2020), as well as the positive learning experiences that can result from Internet engagement (see Brown et al., 2009; O’Keeffe et al., 2011).

Castling back to the 19th century, but chiming with similar types of concerns about child protection, Clapton et al., (2012) observe a distinctly moral undertone to the responses of social workers in particular. They allude to a ‘lengthy continuity of a deep normalizing belief . . . of a right way to behave and wrong way to behave – what will be tolerated and what will not’ (Cree and Smith, 2013: 20). Although the lexicon differs in contemporary times, an examination of Serious Case Reviews (SRAs) reveals persistent references to the ‘decaying morals of British society’ as an explanation for sexual

exploitation (Wells, 2017). As Wells notes, an overly relaxed attitude to young people's right to make their own decisions about sexual preferences has been flagged as both a failure in previous sex education policy and also a factor in placing children at future risk of harm from sexual abuse. While Beesley (2018) has criticised these assertions, it would be naïve to presume that practitioners working within this area are not influenced – knowingly or unknowingly – by either dominant media and government discourses or widely expressed public fears about young people's sexuality.

The perceptions of practitioners working with young people have come under scrutiny in recent times in relation to producing problems and inconsistencies in safeguarding practices (Reisel, 2016). Smeaton (2013), for example, warns that the assumptions some practitioners hold regarding young gay men's exploration of their sexuality prevent them from reasonably assessing whether the relationships in which they are involved are abusive. Similarly, Bovarnick (2010) found that professionals adopting a 'child-centred' approach routinely viewed trafficked young people as in need of protection, whereas those who adopted an 'immigration-centred' approach were more likely to view them as opportunists who were abusing the system. In cases such as these, the evidence suggests that professional judgements and, moreover, consequential forms of intervention, are influenced by personal views and cultural perspectives that emerge – and are cultivated – largely outside the ambit of professional training. Perhaps understandably, SCRs have consistently suggested that practitioners are less sensitive to the exploitation of older people than younger people (Myers and Carmi, 2016; Reisel, 2016). Nevertheless, as an ensemble, these studies give cause for concern about the impact of child protection practitioners' perceptions on their day-to-day professional interactions with young people.

It is important to note that the issues and concerns raised above extend beyond the social care profession. CSE has also been designated as a strategic policing priority (HM Government, 2015). Through effective risk communication and identification, the police service has become key actors in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people. Emphasising the role of local authorities and agencies – including the police – national guidance for practitioners directs that an effective response to CSE is one that

Educates all children and young people about the nature and risks of child sexual exploitation and other forms of related harm (both online and offline) and how to access support; promotes the resilience of children and young people and their families and strengthen the protective factors around them; and provides complementary messages to parents and carers about risks to their children (online and offline) and how to access support if they have concerns. (Department for Education, 2017: 18)

Consistent with this guidance, prevention and early intervention initiatives have been implemented across the United Kingdom that make use of universal education and prevention, and targeted prevention and support for potential victims and offenders. Notable examples include Project Phoenix in Greater Manchester, SafeSkills in Merseyside and Engage in Blackburn. One such initiative, led and implemented by the police service in an area we refer hitherto to as 'Shireland', forms the basis of the following analysis. The initiative in Shireland was designed to bring together professionals from different agencies to be co-located within the existing police service area CSE team. The primary aim was to raise awareness of CSE among young people, parents, carers and potential

perpetrators. Using age-appropriate content, adapted from materials designed by child protection charities and agencies such as Barnados and Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP), the multi-agency CSE team delivered universal education and prevention across a variety of settings including schools, colleges and alternative educational providers. Large group presentations in schools, focusing on how to be safe online and to raise awareness among potential victims of CSE, were combined with more targeted work with smaller groups of young people identified as 'at risk' of becoming victims or perpetrators of CSE.

Drawing on qualitative data from a study designed to assess the feasibility and effectiveness of prevention techniques used within a specific CSE prevention programme implemented by Shireland police, we will now go on to examine the extent to which practitioners delivering the programme engaged with and constructed the risks associated with CSE. We consider how, alongside professional guidelines, practitioners' personal frames of reference – fuelled by their own lived experiences and moral moorings – were used to both interpret young people's behaviours and to make predictions about the 'riskiness' of their activities. As we will illustrate, the ideational frames of understanding adopted by practitioners involve particular opinions about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. What is more, we aver that such ideational frames inhibit purposive discussion about the cultural interchanges, relationships and sexual choices of young people.

In the round, data were collected during the study via semi-structured interviews with practitioners, field observations and focus groups with young people engaging with the programme. The analysis which follows draws specifically on the semi-structured interviews conducted with practitioners designing and delivering the universal education and prevention sessions. All 17 of these participants were interviewed, comprising 9 members of the multi-agency team and 8 members of the steering group. Co-located within the existing CSE team at Shireland police, the multi-agency team brought together four police officers, a family support worker, a children's residential care worker, a qualified teacher and two youth workers. Members of the steering group committee were from diverse contexts and included senior police chiefs, county and city-wide safeguarding leads and commissioners for children's services.

All participants were interviewed within 6 months of the programme's implementation and again 12 months later. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured topic guide about the CSE initiative and the participant's role within it. Interviews were conducted at either the office of the interviewer or interviewees. Ethical principles established in the code for research endorsed by the British Society of Criminology were adhered to and formal approval for the study was granted by the home University committee.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed post data gathering. The broad principles of grounded theory were followed throughout the process of data analysis (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Post transcription, the first phase of data analysis involved the researchers independently becoming familiar with the content of the data set and scanning to identify emergent patterns and themes. Initial codes were attached to the interview transcriptions to organise and structure the data. In a second phase of analysis, key themes and sub-themes were identified and the data were coded

accordingly. The third phase of the process involved the researchers comparing and contrasting the themes identified independently. Coalescences and anomalies were discussed dialogically and dominant themes established. Following the principles of grounded theory, axial encoding was conducted during all three phases of research, enabling iterative and dynamic data analysis (see Ralph et al., 2015).

Thematic analysis: When the formal and informal collide

Having discussed the context in which the study was conducted and provided a capsule account of the methods deployed, we wish now to illumine some of the key issues and challenges that practitioners were grappled with when delivering programmes designed to raise awareness of CSE. At the level of professional practice, our data affirm that practitioners largely adhered to the guidance drawn up in policy and this palpably manifested itself in their formal ‘front-stage’ understandings of CSE. However, the insights shared by practitioners in interviews also illustrate the ways in which wider cultural and experiential frameworks inform ‘back-stage’ perceptions and judgements. In reflecting on their day-to-day work – and the groups with whom they interface – it is apparent that practitioners were markedly influenced by their own personal experiences, moral codes and social values. As our data show, a confluence of professional guidelines and personal perspectives become factored into the perceptions of practitioners and are played out in the ‘doing of risk’.

Practitioners’ formal understandings of CSE and the value of ‘knowing otherwise’

In our discussions with practitioners about their understandings of the risk of CSE, two responses were commonplace. First, a strong current of adherence to formal protocol, with practitioners universally expressing alignment with extant regulatory frameworks. Second, and somewhat juxtaposed, the majority of practitioners articulated the need for considering anomalous, extraneous factors and the value of flexibility in making judgements about the vulnerability of young people.

In our discussions, practitioners commonly drew on guidance enshrined in national frameworks and replicated in policy documents. Identifying the ways in which young people might be ‘groomed’, the views of practitioners commonly echoed models defined in Barnado’s ‘Puppet on a String’ report (2011):

From the perpetrator’s point of view, it’s where they’re enticing a young person to participate in a sexual act or indecent activity. They can entice that young person with gifts. They could use different models such as the befriending model, the gang model, the boyfriend model. From the victim’s point of view, they don’t actually know they’ve been groomed. They have then participated in something which they might have thought they’ve given consent to, but actually they didn’t. (Debbie, Prevent CSE worker)

Chiming with the recognised national guidance (see National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), 2019), practitioners such as Carol additionally acknowledged that targeted behaviour is often present when a young person is being exploited:

The term child sexual exploitation is a targeted behaviour of an individual that specifically goes out there for vulnerable children in the context of wanting to groom them and ultimately move on to exploit them. So the term child sexual exploitation refers to young people who are vulnerable and who are at risk of being groomed. (Carol, Prevent CSE worker)

Receiving gifts and being showered with attention was also included in several practitioners' observations regarding patterns of behaviour frequently apparent in cases of CSE:

From what I know, it's when a child is perhaps groomed initially. They strike up a relationship, or the perpetrator tries to strike up a relationship with them. They develop their trust through things like giving them gifts, giving them a place to stay. But then, obviously, as the relationship develops, then they expect something in return and they're coerced or forced to perform sexual acts, or be involved in sexual activity. Sort of, in payment, if you like, for what the child has already received . . . there's lots of ways that children are drawn in . . . it could be peer to peer, through friend groups . . . for example, someone they know at school who may be involved in CSE activity already, and then they try and draw others into it as well. (Susan, Prevent CSE worker)

The extracts above indicate that practitioners' understandings of CSE, and patterns of behaviour associated with it, are closely aligned with current policy and guidance. Consistent with government aims to challenge the myths about who is perpetrating and being victimised, some practitioners' definitions of CSE also acknowledged that perpetrators and victims could be either male or female:

There's what they call the typical, the older male or female who contacts either online or in person and grooms the child. I've seen personally . . . the gang, where they might have to perform sexual acts as part of an initiation into the gang . . . There's a party model where there's organized parties now that perpetrators are setting up specifically to attract young people to come and attend. They might be given drugs and alcohol once they're at the party. And then in return for that forced to perform sexual acts. So yes, it's not just your normal, sort of what everyone thinks is a perpetrator. (Susan, Prevent CSE worker)

What is reinforced above is the extent to which policy models of grooming informed practitioners' assessment of behaviour. Furthermore, the identification of (a)typical offenders also characterised responses to defining CSE in our conversations. When compared with the content and delivery of the programme which we observed in practice, what was striking here was the presence of the risks of online grooming in the awareness raising activities and its relative absence as a discussion point in interviews. We will return to flesh out the significance of this apparent anomaly in due course.

While discussions with practitioners demonstrated remarkable consistency in relation to the nature of CSE, the need for rational discussions and progressive ideas – including the need to inform young people about sexual choices and variable personal thresholds – were present in the reflections of several practitioners, such as Cathy:

Somebody asked me the question this morning about how you draw a line in the sand and tell young people what's acceptable and what's not. This is very difficult to do. Everyone's got their own things that they're comfortable with and not comfortable with. We kind of all know what

makes us comfortable and what doesn't. But actually, that could be different from one person to the next, depending on experiences. So it's not always about talking about the consequences, but just making sure that the young person feels they've got a choice. (Cathy, Prevent CSE worker)

This focus on informed choice frequently appeared in the discourse of practitioners. However, as we will show, this itself dredges to the surface a tension between the 'lines in the sand' stipulated in the formal policy guidance designed for practitioner application and their implicit and intuitive understandings of the everyday lifeworlds and sexual experiences of young people. The strategic leads were very clear about the need to coach young people on identifying 'unhealthy relationships', acknowledging that an age gap between a couple in a relationship is not necessarily indicative of abuse:

Prevention has to be about what's a healthy relationship and what isn't a healthy relationship. How do you recognise what isn't? And consciousness raising that, if these things happen to you, that's abuse and it's not okay . . . We have come across 15 and 16 year-olds in relationships with 22, 23, 24, year-old men, I might not want that for my daughter, but that age gap may not be indicative of child sexual exploitation. If you've got a very young, immature 22 year-old lad and a quite mature 15, 16 year-old girl, who can say yes and can say no, and is listened to when they say yes or no. Again, I might not choose that for my daughter – and, actually, it might even be illegal for the 15 year-old – but does that make it the same as a young person being groomed by an adult for the purposes of sexually exploiting them? No, it doesn't. (Jane, Safeguarding Lead)

In social work, these types of reflections have been commonly taken as indicative of practitioners failing to acknowledge and identify CSE among older cohorts of young people. In particular, SCRs have repeatedly emphasised that practitioners are much less attuned to the exploitation of older young people (Myers and Carmi, 2016). This point notwithstanding, Jane's observations bring to the surface a zone of ambiguity which is worthy of further exploration. While there are multiple challenges in delivering CSE awareness raising programmes, the mutable boundaries inferred in the reflections above indicate the need for suitable appreciation of the nuances involved in sexual relationships and the need to avoid a 'one size fits all' approach. The ambiguities present suggest that it is preferable for due differentiation to be applied in determining whether an intervention is necessary. This is precisely the terrain in which 'knowing otherwise' is not just defensible for practitioners but also, in certain contexts, desirable. In making tacit, subtle judgements – that may well go against the grain of law and formal professional guidance – practitioners may use their repertoires of knowledge and experience to identify anomalous cases that require sensitive handling. However, deviating from the prescribed models and guidelines – and embedded risk indicators therein – inevitably produces pressures for practitioners in terms of their professional safeguarding responsibilities and simultaneously exposes them to the risk of malpractice or negligence. The protection of young people is enshrined within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 34). Yet the very same convention also instructs that the views of the child are given due weight according to their age and maturity (Article 12). Herein lies the contradiction in liberal discourse between the demands for protection, on the one hand, and respecting the perspectives and sexual choices of young people, on the other. Following on from acknowledging the complexities of identifying risk in this context – and in order to form a contrast with the expressed adherence to professionally

oriented codes discussed previously – we discuss below the ways in which practitioners are also influenced by personal frameworks of knowledge which are constituted by an amalgam of lived experiences, cultural values and embedded moral codes. As we will illustrate, these examples of ‘knowing otherwise’ can be problematic when making decisions about and predicting risk.

Risk work in practice: Troubling the value of ‘knowing otherwise’?

Despite expressing well-defined understandings of the various situations in which CSE might occur – and accenting the need to have open and rational discussions with young people about their relationships – during the course of interviews with practitioners it became apparent that their personal ideational landscapes influenced delivery of educational interventions. Such ideational landscapes were based not only on past experiences but also personal views, especially those concerning acceptable and unacceptable conduct and the sexual preferences of young people. In the discussion below, we first provide vignettes in which practitioners draw on their own personal reflections to inform judgements about the risks that young people are exposed to. Not only are these reflections somewhat removed from the everyday lives of the young people engaged in the programme, they demonstrate how personal opinions about how young people should behave seep into professional assessment and decision-making. As suggested in the instances discussed below, such opinions are frequently based on generational comparisons that contrast a benign period of adolescence in the past with a risky context of the present. Second, we illustrate how informal understandings about what constitutes ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ behaviour overshadow the very distinct understandings of CSE formally expressed by practitioners, preventing rather than facilitating purposive discussion about the everyday lives of young people and the nature of their relationships.

Back to the future? Using the past as a predictor for the present

A recurrent factor in the reflections of practitioners was a sense that cultural and technological transformations have engendered deleterious impacts on young people. A commonly expressed viewpoint was that the present social context was not just different but ‘riskier’ for young people in comparison with that experienced by previous generations. A lingering sense of moral decay underscored such observations, as the musings of Mark and Sadia below illustrate:

It’s gone from, get behind the bike sheds, you show me mine, I’ll show you yours, to now, I’m going to show you on a SnapChat and you’re going to screenshot it and then send it to all your mates. (Mark. Prevent CSE team leader)

In general, and obviously when I was like 13 and 14, I was still playing poppy kiss chase on the playground. Where if you go into schools now it’s just completely changed. (Sadia, Prevent CSE worker, previously police officer)

There is much to unpack in these observations. In effect, practitioners such as Mark and Sadia are using their own past experiences and referents as comparative compasses against which to measure exposure to risk for young people in contemporary society. Both express discomfort about the sexual behaviour of young people, contrasting a relatively innocent past with a frivolous and promiscuous present. While Sadia infers that there has been a general sexual acceleration within culture, Mark raises specific concerns about the ways in which new technologies – in this case mobile phone applications – expose young people to risks of being reputationally compromised.

These types of concerns have been relatively widespread in the media and in policy circles, with the effects of ‘sexting’ by young people being a subject of controversy. While not constituting a full-blown ‘moral panic’ in Cohen’s (1972) terms, sexting has indubitably become a contemporary meme attaching to a range of anxieties and fears that appear to have some influence over the way in which practitioners identify CSE and its associated risks. Over-reacting to what is perceived as a dangerous crisis, of course, is nothing new. As Hall et al. (1978) posited, there are no shortage of examples of moral introspection throughout time – many of which have involved scrutiny of the troubling behaviours of young people – from mods and rockers, to rave culture and ‘necknominations’ (see Burgess et al., 2017; Cohen, 1972; Thompson and Greek, 2012). Building on the work of Cohen (1972) and Hall et al. (1978), as Pearson (1983) observed, we can trace a ‘history of respectable fears’ involving adopting a position of righteous indignation and casting back to an imagined ‘golden age’ which occurred ‘before the rot set in’. This imagined golden age is invariably 20 years hence, providing sufficient time for memories to fade and rose-tinted spectacles to be donned. Aligning to erroneous ideas that ‘bad behaviour’ is rife and responses to it are ineffectual, ‘respectable fears’ vector anxieties about a society whose once secure, stable moral core is perceived to be increasingly under threat. Those presumed to most threaten this core are invariably unruly and feckless youth (see Pearson, 1983). Considering the pervasiveness of these fears in a context in which discourses of sexual victimisation are prescient may, arguably, lead to public perceptions of the risk of CSE being out of kilter with its prevalence (see Jackson, 2006).

Technology as a social bad? The Internet, pornography and social media

One common source of concern for practitioners, apropos influencing the perceptions and behaviours of young people, was pornography. Many of the professionals we interviewed perceived contemporary pornographic material as being more accessible and violent than that which historically preceded it:

Some of that has come down to the element of how children are sexually educating themselves nowadays. So, with the world-wide web, children are now starting to do it for themselves, but the trouble is there’s no . . . you know, if you type in ‘sex education’ it doesn’t come up with something like a love story, that shows you the sensitive side of a relationship and how people consent and how people have feelings for one another in that position. What it comes up with is hardcore pornography. It comes up with those scenarios where everything’s got to be faster,

harder, heavier and there's violence involved . . . and so children and young people think, that's how it is then, that's what sex is, that's how it should be. (Karen, CSE lead)

Aside from overlooking the diverse ways in pornography might be used in relationships, there is an assumption here regarding the power of pornography in shaping the behaviour of young people. What is being tacitly assumed is that young people are akin to sponges, passively and uncritically absorbing mediated images. Aside from reproducing an outdated hypodermic model of media effects, such assumptions of young people's susceptibility simultaneously negate their critical capacity for interpretation and sense-making. As Mark's comments below show, the comparative dimensions and assumptions around moral degeneration are again tangible, with technology being seen as an enabler of risk. It would seem that such underlying moral assumptions were steering some practitioners towards a resolute position that young people today are living in a high-risk climate:

Talk about pornography, when I was younger . . . if you saw a pornographic magazine, that would blow your mind. You couldn't really understand what was going on or you didn't know any more of the context or anything. It was just a man and a woman. Whereas now, you can look at pornography on a mobile phone on the internet. And the whole world is opened up to you, where it's kind of crazy stuff is getting on there, which then at 14 you're thinking, oh, so this is what goes on then. (Mark, Prevent CSE team leader)

As we have previously shown, young people are not only very much aware of the risks of social media, moreover, they are engaged in active and grounded forms of regulation in this regard (Weston and Mythen, 2020). While our previously reported research – and that of others (see Lee and Crofts, 2015; Lee et al., 2015) – suggests that many young people are capable of exhibiting maturity and sophistication in managing their online interactions, young people were frequently described as 'at risk' as a consequence of their potential naivety. To this end, practitioners consistently emphasised the dangers of the Internet and the gullibility of young people in engaging with social media:

I think social networking and the internet is another area where it has been made so easy to be able to talk to people who you think they're a 15-year-old boy and they're not. And children's naivety around this person says they're 15 years old, so they're 15. But never coming into their minds, actually, that person might not be 15. (Clare, Prevent CSE worker)

I've realised it's a much bigger issue. It's a massive issue with the explosion of the internet, it's just massive. But it isn't just organised stuff it's peer to peer, it's the stuff that goes on between . . . in schools and colleges, sending of images and Apps and Snapchats and parties. (Sadia, Prevent CSE worker, previously a police officer)

While the risks to young people in particular contexts are palpable and need to be taken seriously, in addition to general assumptions being made about young people's gullibility, we can detect in the observations of Clare and Sadia above, a discomfort with the potentialities of media technologies and a view that such technologies have an exclusively negative impact on young people's perceptions and understandings of intimate relationships.

Assumptions and presumptions about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour

In analysing the data, a recurrent pattern related to distinct sets of expectations expressed by practitioners about the behaviour of children. Echoing the findings of Karaian (2014), some practitioners suggested that young women and girls, in particular, should be cautious in their actions and behave in ways that adhere to acceptable sexual conduct. As has been remarked on before in the context of child welfare, the sexually active girl is 'cast in the role of the non-virtuous woman' (Ericsson, 1998: 457) who is reckless in conducting herself in ways that are inappropriate:

I think girls . . . and I say girls, it does happen to boys, but 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, 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)

Clare's suggestion that some – albeit vulnerable – girls are 'easy' and have 'lower morals' is mirrored by Amanda's view that engaging in oral sex with a same age peer as a teenager may pave the way for exploitation by an elder:

And it's happening more and more . . . we're getting young people who are having oral sex like they're kissing behind the bike shed. I know that might be a society thing and it might be how times have changed. But that's not right for a 13-year old to be giving someone a blow-job in wherever . . . a bedroom at a party or in the back of a car or behind the back shed. The more young people you speak to, that's the norm, they're all doing it. So that to me is a concern, it shows it's a big problem. And although that might not be child sexual exploitation, it's still not right to be doing those type of things at that age. And if they are with someone of their own age, would they readily do it to somebody older? (Amanda, Prevent CSE worker)

Amanda's understanding of CSE is implicitly indexed to a sense in which 'girls' are increasingly promiscuous and reckless in relation to their self-regulation of sexual activity. In effect, engaging in oral sex at the age of 13 may act as an indicator of vulnerability to being manipulated or sexual exploited in future by elder peers or adults. The categorical assumptions made here situate males as manipulators and elide the position of boys and young men as victims of CSE. While this may be the case in specific incidents and circumstances, drawing blanket assumptions about the motivations of boys/men and girls/women not only hyper-responsibilizes girls for their own safety (Karaian, 2014), it also runs the double risk of simultaneously producing false positives and missing cases that deviate from the dominant paradigm.

Concluding discussion

Our findings illustrate that the process by which CSE policy becomes translated into practice is both interrupted and influenced by practitioners' personal experiential knowledge. Those raising awareness about the problem were palpably aware that CSE manifests itself

in various and complex forms. While the professional work of the practitioners we spoke with was partially governed by their adherence to policy and guidance and a strong commitment and concern for young people and their safety, their interpretations were also vectored through personal viewpoints and biographical narratives, producing amalgamated forms of risk ‘knowledge’.

Our findings arise from a small scale, local(ised) study and are thus not generalisable. Nevertheless, further research is required to ascertain whether the merging of risk knowledges is a common feature in other risk-focused occupations, especially those where magnitude of harm is prescient and a strong responsibility for institutional protection is coupled with a welfare duty to intervene. In this regard, our findings raise to the surface some wider challenges for practitioners interfacing with young people that are at once ideational and material. While Radcliffe et al. (2020) rightly acknowledge that new technologies and social media have provided opportunities for online spaces to be used for exploitative means, they also suggest that a response to these risks requires a sophisticated ‘balance of safeguarding and recognition that risk-taking is an inevitable part of youth transitions’ (p. 14). Indeed, the dangers of overlooking behaviours and practices that may render young people vulnerable are palpable in acute contexts such as those discussed in this article. Nonetheless, there are also perils in undue net broadening. These perils manifest themselves at opposite ends of the scale, from rigidity in defining risky subjects/groups to potentially missing those palpably close to physical harm. In this regard, the observations of Walklate and Mythen (2011) tap into the double-edged nature of the professional lifeworld and judgements that practitioners at once create and grapple with: ‘those deemed at risk are not forensically measured at all: they are constructed within a logic of norms and values that are felt’ (p. 108).

Our findings show the iterative and symbiotic relationship between forms of risk knowledge that sometime align and sometimes collide. Aligning with studies in other areas of risk-based intervention (see Hebberecht and Baillergeau, 2012; Tylka et al., 2014), we do not wish to devalue the application of experiential knowledge. Furthermore, we concur that reference to experiential knowledge can facilitate the inclusion of the needs and perspectives of less powerful subjects in specific contexts (see Walklate and Mythen, 2011). However, complex situations, which are sometimes riven with ambiguity, do not easily accommodate – nor are they conducive to – either/or decisions governed by experiential or professional knowledge, even supposing that clear lines between the two could be discerned. Not all experiential knowledge is reliable and, indeed, some should be regarded as ‘plain wrong’ (Prior, 2003: 45). While these contrary observations may seem to lead us into as opposed to out of the murk, let us end by collecting up the less labile and more stable pointers from the study. Our findings indicate that the assumptions held by practitioners around who or what constitutes a risky subject and who is defined as a vulnerable (potential) victim are undergirded by engrained cultural and moral values, some of which reflect current policy trajectories and approaches and others of which conflict with them. This assertion invites us to ask what sorts of experiential knowledge should be used, by whom, under which circumstances and for which objectives?

At a wider level, our discussion points up the potentialities of further exploration of the foundations of knowledge deployed in different contexts of risk that underpin – and are deployed to justify – both awareness raising and pre-emptive interventions. It is clear

that risk assessment practices are fluid and reflective of a concatenation of practices and interactions. As Pickering (1995, cited in Degenhardt and Bourne, 2018: 6) posits, risk-based technologies and techniques are created through a process of fine tuning, whereby ‘the scientist and the machine interact, dancing together, each leading in turn, each revising the other, by which they become attuned’. While we might, admittedly ambitiously in the context we have discussed, parallel the dance between ‘machine’ and ‘scientist’ with the formal professional codes and the embedded life values of the human practitioner, the iterative process by which risk ‘knowledges’ are transformed in practice – alongside the consequences of this for parties and stakeholders impacted by it – is worthy of further attention. In the specific context discussed, alongside professional frameworks and codes, what is required, it would seem, is facilitation of greater dialogue and awareness among practitioners themselves about how their perspectives on generational and societal change, the use of personal media technologies and associated assumptions about appropriate sexual conduct, influence and shape their own professional conduct. The empirical evidence presented here indicates that deeper reflection on the risks of constructing generational binaries is required alongside fulfilment of more nuanced understandings of the everyday lifeworlds of young people. As we have shown previously (Weston and Mythen, 2020), if interventions to prevent CSE are to be successful, those targeted by them should be consulted in relation to how they are designed and implemented. Not only will this approach help to avoid the entrenched tendency for ‘vulnerable’ people to be ‘done to’ by policy makers (Brown, 2015), it may also lead to precisely the kind of valuable experiential knowledge that Walklate and Mythen (2011) argue in favour of preserving. While separating out ‘progressive’ from ‘regressive’ experiential knowledges – and those that may fall in between – introduces inevitable complexities, encouraging dialogue about this issue among academics, policy makers and practitioners can only be productive. Pretending otherwise – and, in so doing, equating the scientist with the machine – may be expedient for the purposes of institutional tidiness, but it negates the kind of frank and difficult conversations that are necessary if we are to better understand how positionality impacts upon both values and judgements made in professional risk work contexts.

In our view, practitioners’ knowledge and understanding, while informed by the policy and guidance that governs CSE, was also being shaped and influenced by the moral and policy landscape within which these practitioners work. As Biggs (2001) argues, social policy may create and legitimise social problems, partly through contributing ‘toward the material conditions, either through action or inaction’ (p. 304). The contradictions apparent in liberal discourse between the demands for protecting children, on the one hand, and respecting the perspectives of young people, on the other (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 34) does little to overcome the pressures placed on practitioners to identify risk while simultaneously acknowledging the nuance of children’s and young people’s development and the need to avoid a ‘one size fits all’ approach. Furthermore, the moral undertones about the recklessness of youth present in the reflections of some of our participants reflect the tenor of the models of CSE identified by Barnardo’s (2017). One prescient example of this is so-called ‘self-generated’ CSE, which refers to situations where images have been willingly shared from one person. Aside from the problematic nomenclature, fixing a young person who is being

exploited by an adult as somehow complicit in their own abuse is unacceptable. The extent to which such framing may influence or reinforce the ideational standpoint of practitioners – and the ways in which standpoints adopted are materially translated into practices that impact on young people – is as critical as it is debatable. As Philips (2019: 7) discovered in an analysis of SCRs, a flawed view of young people as somehow responsible for lax decisions they had made was not uncommon among practitioners. Consistent within the language used by practitioners were references to how the young people presented themselves and the extent to which they exhibited either ‘mature’ or ‘precocious’ behaviours. This not only echoes the petition above around the need to avoid binary thinking, it simultaneously sends out a clarion call regarding the need to better understand young people’s proclivities, practices and actions along a continuum which is not fixed nor static. Calling for a stop on the dominant age-appropriate message in news and e-safety campaigns, Ringrose et al. (2013) assert that ‘what is most problematic for young people are the pernicious and persistent discourses of gender inequity and sexual double standards around teen girls’ bodies’ (pp. 319–320). Rather, what such campaigns should do is ‘open up rather than close down questions about girls’ desires and seek to ‘disrupt the taken-for-granted sexual, moral hierarchies through which digital images are being understood in the contemporary context’.

More generally, our discussion suggests that in order to better prevent social problems such as CSE, there is an urgent need for practitioners to consider their own frames of understanding and how these might play out in practice. In addition to engaging at a deep level with the contextual lives of children and young people (Weston and Mythen, 2020), it is also necessary for practitioners to reflect on the social and political landscape within which they operate and to recognise the extent to which this context impacts on their routine knowledge and practices. In this regard, it should be pointed out that the practitioners participating in this study – while having differing professional backgrounds – were all employed by the police service, where opportunities for supervision and reflective practice are not routinely embedded within day-to-day practice (see Christopher, 2015).

In an economic and political climate in which resources are scant, the demands upon the police service and agencies associated with them are becoming more complex, multifaceted and increasingly aligned to social care practice (Weston and Trebilcock, 2020). Therefore, in considering practitioners’ understandings of CSE, we would advance the need for resourced and supportive platforms for critical reflexivity that might enable practitioners to consider, reflect on, and, if necessary, reconfigure perceptions in order to better respond to the needs of those that they engage with and assist.

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