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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Interrogating the deployment of ‘risk’ and ‘vulnerability’ in the context of early intervention initiatives to prevent child sexual exploitation

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Abstract

This article draws on data collected from a qualitative study designed to assess the effectiveness of an early intervention programme aimed to raise awareness of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) among young people. The programme was implemented by a large police force area, referred to as Shireland. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with practitioners implementing safeguarding policies within the police service, youth and social welfare work designed to support young people, we focus on the mobilisation of perceptions of risk and vulnerability as they translate in professional practice via a specific preventative initiative. More specifically, we wish to examine the extent to which blurring occurs between constructions of ‘risk’ and ‘vulnerability’ in relation to practitioners’ understandings of the dangerousness of young people’s behaviour. In our analysis, we draw attention to a palpable tension apparent in the interview narratives of those involved in delivering the programme, between expressed understandings which on the one hand universalise vulnerability and, on the other, extricate specific risk factors.

Keywords: Child sexual exploitation; pre-emptive strategies; risk; vulnerability

Introduction

In the United Kingdom, responsibility for the protection and safeguarding of children has historically fallen within the vocational remit of social workers. However, over the last two decades, as caseloads within the profession have increased in line with rising demands, the boundaries of social care provision have expanded. Social work interfaces with a range of adjunct agencies – including the police service – have proliferated in areas of safeguarding, with multi-agency partnerships designed to protect those ‘at risk’ and/or ‘vulnerable’ in various domains becoming commonplace.

One such example, which constitutes the focus of this article, has been the way in which agencies protect and safeguard those thought to be ‘at risk’ and/or ‘vulnerable’ to

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CSE. 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. The Independent Inquiry into the cases in Rotherham catalogued a range of individual and institutional failures (Jay, 2014) and raised concerns about a lack of awareness amongst professionals about the vulnerabilities that young people may have and the risks that they may be exposed to. Not only did these cases highlight the gaps in identifying risk, alongside failures to respond to complaints made, they also prompted political and public debate about the widespread nature of the problem of ‘grooming’, whereby children and young people are encouraged into abusive sexual relationships by predatory adults, predominantly male.

Concern and anxiety about the behaviour of young people has become an increasingly prevalent feature in media and policy discourses surrounding young people’s use of online technology, which has been indexed to various ‘risk-taking behaviours’, including sexual promiscuity, gambling and the glorification of acts of violence. (Bellis et al., 2000; Sharland, 2006). The online space for young people within popular narratives is commonly depicted as one where various character flaws and traits – such as recklessness, nihilism and irresponsible decision-making – are both exhibited and exploited. Despite contrary evidence regarding the positive learning experiences that can be accrued through internet engagement (see, K. Brown, 2011; O’Keefe et al., 2011), organisations such as the NSPCC (2019), National Crime Agency (2017), and Know About CSE (2015) have defined the technological environment as a milieu which is saturated with risks, from internet trolls and radicalisers to opportunistic paedophiles. Such expressed anxieties – coupled with the exposure of high-profile cases of CSE and transmuting sexual practices amongst young people – have placed risk regulating institutions and agencies under increasing pressure to develop pre-emptive safeguarding strategies. The Police Service in particular have been identified as one of the leading agencies to head up and deliver safeguarding initiatives. Following the publication of the Jay Report (2014) noted above, the then Prime Minister David Cameron categorised CSE as a ‘national threat’, directing police forces to collaborate more effectively across regional boundaries in order to better protect children (see, HM Government, 2015). To this end, policing agencies have taken on an increasingly prominent role across a wide range of social and welfare demand associated with protecting vulnerable people (see, NPCC, 2018; Walley and Adams, 2019) with some going as far as suggesting that the portfolio of the police service has broadened ‘to fill the gaps that other agencies cannot’ (HMIC, 2017, p. 9).

This trend notwithstanding, the way in which concepts of ‘risk’ and ‘vulnerability’ are operationalised within these types of social work spaces is ill defined and requires examination. In this article we wish to elucidate some of the key dilemmas and conundrums that those involved in delivering social work in one particular context face in their day-to-day professional lives. It is our primary intention to excavate and problematise the mobilisation of discourses of risk and vulnerability in a particular area of safeguarding, CSE. The primary data that we draw upon suggests a need for deeper reflection on the ways in which practitioners working within what have traditionally been regarded as social work spaces navigate the boundaries of safeguarding youth in milieus in which there is a gravitational pull towards deploying modes of social control as an integral component of risk prevention strategies.

Amidst the myriad discourses that cluster around CSE, concepts of ‘risk’ and ‘vulnerability’ loom large. Moreover, as we will go on to discuss, these concepts are frequently used interchangeably with distinction(s) between the two being, at best,

oblique. While criminal justice agencies routinely use the term vulnerability to refer to the elevated risks that young people face, the concept is also associated with those inclined to engage in 'risky' behaviours (see, K. Brown, 2011). Although individual circumstances may demand that the concepts of 'risk' and 'vulnerability' are applied interchangeably, drawing on evidence from a specific environ, we argue that a lack of consensus about the definitions of such terms can lead to practitioners imposing them in a way that either aligns with normative understandings of 'risky' behaviour on the one hand, or universalises risk on the other. As we will go on to illustrate, a knock-on consequence of the stretchiness with which concepts of risk and vulnerability are applied and mobilised may potentially lead to those who may be most likely to be victimised being overlooked.

Within the context of the trends and patterns delineated above, we posit that discourses of 'risk' and 'vulnerability' have become overused currencies (see, J. Green, 2009). As the data we draw upon suggests, the safeguarding mechanisms that discourses of risk and vulnerability activate within the reimagined and mutable boundaries of social work practice can serve to ease state intervention into the lives of young people in instances whereby it may be unwarranted and/or liable to produce iatrogenic effects. While the early intervention and prevention techniques deployed by practitioners that we interacted with indubitably aim to be supportive and are developed under the auspices of protection, the way in which they are operationalised in practice can serve to problematise behaviours and, in some instances, may unduly expose individuals to the criminal justice system. The retraction of social care via repeated funding cuts within the sector – at a time when need appears to be spiralling – means that those that are vulnerable are increasingly being ushered towards alternative agencies, such as the police force, that may not always be equipped, trained or resourced to meet the taxing demands of social service provision. In such a turbulent context, the danger is that those traditionally considered in need of safeguarding and protection become party to manifold forms of securitisation, surveillance and social control.

Deployments of risk and vulnerability at the interface of social work and criminal justice practice

In recent years, the term 'vulnerability' has been popularly adopted by law enforcement agencies to refer to the elevated risks that vulnerable people face. As far back as 2016, the UK Home Secretary designated it as a 'priority area for the police and the National Police Chiefs' positing that 'recognising and responding to vulnerability is everyone's business' (NPCC, 2020). Concomitantly, public health approaches to policing have been identified as supportive of the Policing Vision 2025 which focuses on preventative activity, working alongside partners to problem-solve, addressing vulnerability, building cohesive communities, improving data sharing and developing whole systems approaches (see, Christmas & Srivastava, 2019). In October 2018, the then Home Secretary announced a consultation process intended to inform a new legal duty underpinned by a public health approach to tackle serious violence (Home Office & Javid, 2018). In line with these general undercurrents, consecutive UK Government Action Plans to tackle CSE have encouraged adoption of risk-focused preventative interventions that are consistent with the public health approach and channelled towards raising awareness of the risk among young people, parents, carers and potential perpetrators.

Within these public health and harm reduction frameworks, the prevention, identification, and reduction of risk and vulnerability have become key objectives.

The increasing use of the term ‘vulnerability’ has also been recently noted within social work and youth justice practice literatures (see, Bui & Deakin, 2021; Virokannas et al., 2020). Examining a range of studies within the youth crime field, Bui and Deakin (2021) found that the use of vulnerability increased with each passing decade, with 84.2% of studies examined written within the decade commencing 2010. Although similar trends have been identified in the past, they have nevertheless had a transformative effect on the way that practitioners work (Parton, 2010). In accounting for the motion in prevailing discourse from dangerousness to risk, Castel (1991, p. 287) noted that this movement directs practitioners’ attention away from trying to identify and contain individuals, to spotting a combination of abstract factors which render more or less probable the occurrence of undesirable modes of behaviour. More recently, others have observed a turn towards ‘pre-crime’ logics of security, which encourages concentration on crimes that have not yet transpired and, indeed, may never do so (see, Walklate & Mythen, 2015; Zedner, 2007). Much has been said about the problems associated with this shift in the context of counter terrorism regulation, in terms of undermining civil liberties and facilitating the introduction of pre-emptive intrusive coercive measures. It has been noted too that pre-crime measures – such as preventive detention and imprisonment – have been legitimised in this environ under the auspices of public protection (Zedner, 2010).

There are clear parallels to be drawn – and further explored – between conceptions of ‘risk’ and ‘vulnerability’ in terms of deployments in different areas of violence reduction, many of which are targeted at diverting young people away from future harm. Within cognate areas of safeguarding geared towards prevention in the UK, pre-emptive modes of early intervention have been utilised. The use of a ‘Vulnerability Assessment Framework’ (VAF) nested within the Channel strand of the UK’s counter radicalisation PREVENT strategy is one such example (see, Mythen & Baillergeau, 2021; Webster et al., 2017). The VAF is a risk assessment tool designed to assist assorted experts sitting on Channel panels in determining (potential) vulnerability to radicalisation. The framework itself is underpinned by UK Government approved *Extremism Risk Guidance*, known colloquially as ERG 22 + . Involving a model designed by Lloyd and Dean (2015) which was initially advanced to assess risk amongst offenders convicted of extremism (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2017), the VAF was scaled up from a small sample of prisoners convicted for terrorism related offences for population level use within PREVENT. The VAF measures 22 factors that may indicate individuals at risk of or exhibiting signs of radicalisation. These 22 factors are clustered into three groups of measures: engagement with a group cause or ideology; capability to cause harm and intent. Aside from issues with the transferral of findings from one small scale prison-based study to a mechanism for measuring vulnerability to radicalisation amongst the general population, the utilisation of the VAF has been criticised for a range of shortcomings, including a tendency to produce false positives, propensity for over-referral without justification, unclear and unbalanced assessment mechanisms and the identification of factors common in adolescence – such as identity exploration, a search for belonging and excitement seeking – as risk indicators (see, CAGE, 2018; Grierson, 2019; Khaleeli, 2015; Mythen, 2020).

Similarly, programmes and initiatives to prevent gang related violence amongst young people in inner city areas in the UK have also involved experimentation with

and implementation of various pre-emptive measures, intended to educate young people, build resilience skills and encourage awareness around the dangers of involvement in gang culture (see, O'Connor & Waddell, 2015). As with the PREVENT strategy, such interventions have been subject to criticism along several axes, including underplaying the material and structural factors that affect inclination towards violence (Grimshaw & Ford, 2018) and overlooking the significance of generating meaning – or ‘mattering’ – amongst young people via group involvement and bonding (see, Billingham & Irwin-Rogers, 2021).

Notwithstanding the specific contexts of application, within the parameters of social work and criminal justice practice, ‘risk’ remains a much debated and contested concept in academic realms (see, Mythen & Walklate, 2006, p. 1; Briggs, 2013). Across various disciplines, risk has commonly been associated with known and/or unknown probabilities, distributed across specific events and pertaining to the probability of negative outcomes (see, Alwang et al., 2001; Mythen, 2014; Twigg, 2014). In social policy, care and criminal justice, the negative outcome that may eventuate in cases of inadequate risk management is harm and the goal of avoiding or mitigating against harm has led to multiple modes of professional assessment designed ‘to identify, measure and prioritise risk’ (Fawcett, 2009, p. 475).

As flagged above, it is common for definitions of vulnerability to be coupled to risk, with some researchers going as far as to suggest that risk is a critical factor in understanding evolving interpretations of vulnerability (see, McLaughlin & Dietz, 2008, p. 100; Brown & Sanders, 2017, p. 425). As Stanford (2012) posits, to speak about an individual being ‘vulnerable’ implies that they are necessarily ‘at risk’ in some way. Being described as a ‘vulnerable’ person suggests a fragile identity and/or being at risk of victimisation. Yet the label of vulnerability has also been attached to those inclined to actively engage in behaviours which are considered risky (Baillergeau, 2016; K. Brown, 2011). While Fineman (2010) refers to vulnerability as a universal concept that is inherent in all people, others have posited that placing people in categories of vulnerability elides the structural conditions within which it emerges (S. Green, 2007). Inclining towards the latter view, Chakraborti and Garland (2012) reason that overlooking structural factors can lead to the creation of artificial constructs and erroneously imposes inherent weaknesses to specific population groups. Aside from the impacts of being ascribed as vulnerable, it should be remembered that those so labelled, by the State or otherwise, may challenge the label as they normalise, overcome or learn to live with their apparent ‘vulnerability’.

Within these parameters, neither ‘risk’ nor ‘vulnerability’ can be referred to as neutral, since both are imbued with cultural notions of legitimacy, responsibility, choice and blame (K. Brown, 2011, p. 319). Thus, assessments of risk and vulnerability are often made on the basis of ‘value-laden assumptions’ whereby risk is simultaneously ‘both inevitable and non-negotiable’, ‘everywhere and nowhere’ (Sibley, 2018) and ‘constructed within a logic of norms and values that are felt’ (Walklate & Mythen, 2011, p. 108). As we have argued previously (Weston & Mythen, 2021), 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 may conflict with them. Although practitioners are frequently encouraged to draw on their experiential knowledge to make assessments about risk and vulnerability (see, Degenhardt & Bourne, 2018; Walklate & Mythen, 2011; Werth, 2017), a lack of

consensus about the definitions of such terms raises troubling questions about how they are applied within practitioner settings. Research by Fawcett (2009, p. 277), for instance, shows that social workers may tend to stress a client's vulnerability to paint a more intimate biography of the client as an individual, in order to reduce the perception that the said client constitutes a 'risk'. Yet in criminal justice settings, the use of particular vulnerabilities – for instance, when an individual is identified as being more susceptible to offending than others and therefore in need of further assistance – has invariably induced responses that intensify monitoring, supervision and discipline (see, Brown & Sanders, 2017; Mythen & Baillergeau, 2021). The variegated nature of applications of 'risk' and 'vulnerability' is important, especially given recent shifts towards public health approaches and practitioner spaces where health, social work and criminal justice intersect. For example, the introduction of a prohibition against parental physical punishment in Sweden led to differing responses from within social work, with some practitioners more willing to report and inclined to act 'reactively' when receiving information about child abuse of any kind and others inclined to favour a more 'proactive' approach, prioritising family support and voluntary engagement (Leviner & Sardiello, 2018). Whose agendas and definitions of 'risk' and 'vulnerability' are then prioritised and subsequently operationalised across the various contexts of social work and criminal justice practice is ripe for further exploration. Before taking some steps in this direction, it is first necessary to provide a brief overview of the study undertaken and the methods of investigation.

Evaluating an educative CSE Project: overview and trajectory

The analysis presented below involves data drawn from semi-structured interviews conducted with members of a multi-agency team responsible for designing and delivering a programme of early intervention initiatives to prevent CSE. In line with national guidance, the purpose of the programme was to raise awareness of CSE among young people, parents and potential perpetrators. This general objective was pursued via 'primary' measures (including universal education), 'secondary' measures (including targeted prevention for those identified as 'at risk') and support for victims and offenders. In total, 17 participants were interviewed, comprising nine members of the multi-agency team and eight members of the steering group. Co-located within the existing CSE team with 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 recruited from diverse contexts and included senior police chiefs, county and city-wide safeguarding leads and commissioners for children's services. The work of the multi-agency team was to use age-appropriate content, adapted from materials designed by child protection charities and agencies, such as Barnados and the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command (CEOP), to deliver universal education and prevention across a variety of settings, including schools, colleges and alternative educational settings. Large group presentations – focusing on how to maintain safety 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. Participants were interviewed within six months of the programme's implementation and again twelve months later. Interviews lasted between 45–90 minutes and were oriented by a general semi-structured topic guide about the CSE initiative and

the participant's role within it. Interviews were conducted either at the working premises of the interviewers or those of the interviewees. Research standards mandated in the British Society of Criminology's professional code were adhered to and formal approval for the study was granted via the ethical approval process at Keele University.

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 & Strauss, 2017; Strauss & 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 issues. Initial codes were attached to the interview transcriptions to organise and structure the data. In a second phase of data 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 themes previously identified independently. Coalescences and anomalies between the researchers were discussed and prominent themes agreed. Following the tenets of grounded theory, axial encoding was conducted during all three phases of research, enabling a process of iterative and dynamic data analysis (see, Ralph et al., 2015).

In the section that follows, drawing on our interview data, we set out the ways in which concepts of 'risk' and 'vulnerability' were articulated and mobilised by practitioners forming the multi-agency team tasked with delivering the programme of early intervention initiatives to prevent CSE.

Findings

Unravelling Practitioner Notions of 'Risk' and 'Vulnerability': Paradoxical Narratives of Universality and Particularity

Thus far, we have extrapolated the context in which shifting notions of risk and vulnerability are constructed and applied and also provided a summary of the methods deployed in the study. We now wish to travel on to discuss a salient tension which emerged from the thematic analysis, which we dub the universalising/particularising paradox.

During the course of interviews, many of the practitioners we spoke to expressed the view that assessing risk and identifying vulnerability was a challenging process, affected by a range of complex contextual factors. Historically the term 'vulnerability' has been used to identify certain individuals or groups of people at risk of suffering harm, in particular those that have been subjected to specific problematic circumstances or experiences (Brown & Sanders, 2017; Herring, 2020). To this end, a disrupted familial background, being victimised or harassed at school, suffering physical isolation, having poor self-esteem or having a learning difficulty were variously identified by the social care members of the team as potential predictors of vulnerability:

"Sometimes you can view the children with more vulnerable factors. They are from broken homes, you know? Poor self-esteem, bullied at school. Those factors can make them more vulnerable. Because it can lead them on to ... and then all of a sudden this lovely person pops up, paying them lots of lovely attention" (Carol, Prevent CSE Worker, previously Social Care).

"From the file audits we've done, children with learning difficulties is a risk factor which really, really makes this difficult for these girls and boys to resist, it seems. So, I'm not talking severe learning difficulties, but the kind of kids who end up in moderate learning difficulty establishments and a few school refusers, are highly over-represented in this

group of young people and appear particularly vulnerable to this [CSE] ... There are also groups of primarily young men who have learnt who the vulnerable kids are. Say the kids who've got poor relationships with the mum, who are out of school, who have got generally neglectful childhoods" (Jane, Safeguarding Lead, Social Care).

During other conversations, social disadvantage was identified as a predictor of vulnerability:

"It tends to be geographically as well, where there's vulnerabilities, things like poverty and everything, we tend to have a lot of intervention in some schools just by the nature of where they actually placed the school" (Carol, Prevent CSE Worker, previously Social Care).

Conversely, the police officer team members were more inclined to use recourse to previous professional experience and relying on a 'hunch' in decision making:

"It might not just be for CSE, they might be vulnerable for other reasons ... I think that is something that you get with experience and dealing with ... you just get a hunch. Sometimes it's just by the family that they come from and you know that that family has got issues that might make them vulnerable. Or that their association might make them vulnerable, or the siblings might have been involved in CSE. There's just loads of stuff" (Sadia, Prevent CSE Worker, previously Police Officer).

Despite articulating specific contextual factors that may amplify vulnerability, the practitioners that we interviewed – regardless of prior experience – were keen to stress the general risk of CSE to young people:

"I think anybody can be at risk and we are very mindful of that when we do the presentations at school ... although we have triggers and we have people who are more vulnerable. So, like your people that have got issues going on at home, if they're from a family you know, if there's mental health issues, if they're running away from home or having missing episodes. So, they are the people that we know can be vulnerable to CSE ... but we've also had them who've come from a lovely 2.4 family, don't go without, parents are lovely, no safeguarding issues, but they've been exploited and they've become vulnerable. So, I think it's about being mindful that anybody can be at risk" (Amanda, Prevent CSE Worker, previously Police Officer).

Similarly, Carol also flagged up the pervasiveness of the threat, expressing the view that CSE affects all children:

"And certainly we still believe that children as young as primary school age, year five and six need to be given insight. Different message obviously, but they need to be educated on the risk. Because it is there. And it is everywhere. There is no getting away from it and I can guarantee that".

While a general level of precaution is doubtless sagacious, the practitioners we spoke to frequently referred to the global nature of the threat to all young people and children:

"I think any young child is at risk, you know. Like there's so many quite well-known stories out there and case studies of children that have had generally perfect backgrounds. So, I think all children are at potential risk, absolutely" (Carol, Prevent CSE Worker, previously Social Care).

"Any child. Anybody. More vulnerable I would think ... whether it be you know, either they're very shy or they've got some sort of disability or they haven't got a very good home

background. But then also, you think about that, I've thought in actual fact, that's not what it is. You can't say that is why this child is a victim, because it's not always the case. It could be absolutely anybody" (Hannah, Prevent CSE Worker, previously Police Officer).

Thus, in analysing the data, a distinct duality in the narratives presented by participants in the study was evident, which oscillated between identification of specific risk factors by social care workers and a more generalised presentation of universal vulnerability by all members of the team.

"Just because a child's not got up to something risky, or that we know of, doesn't mean to say they haven't got the potential to, and actually they should have the right to that information as much as anybody else" (Cathy, Prevent CSE Worker, previously Youth Worker).

Similarly, Mark identifies distinct clusters of groups who, although involved in different leisure pursuits and cultural habits, are similarly at risk of being exposed to CSE:

"It's typically the person at home who might not have the friends to go out and socialise with and go to these parties and get, you know, K-Cider from the off-licence. So, you've got the group who are doing that, and they're still doing that. And then you've got the group who are at home who are online gaming. Or you've got all these friends on the social network, social media, and there's the risk that they, the risk to them, because they are more vulnerable that way, I suppose" (Mark, Prevent CSE Team Leader, previously Police Officer).

Many of the understandings about risk and vulnerability we encountered were grounded in assumptions associated with the accessibility and use of online digital technology, reflecting wider concerns about the naivety and vulnerability of children and young people, chiming with dominant media discourses (see, Palfrey et al., 2009). The notion of generalised risk is reflected in the observations made by Carol below:

"We are getting referrals for children that are from seemingly good homes, good backgrounds, consistent routines. Parents have good jobs, might not always be together, don't have, you know, that consistent approach to parenting. So, children who according to the media we probably wouldn't get access to because there's not a need. And actually because of their access, that they have the internet or they're using their phone it just shows that it doesn't matter anymore what sector of the community you are from, actually all children are at risk. And that has shown, most referrals that I would say that I've worked with certainly had a cluster of more vulnerable cases. But actually I've been inundated with children that have never been known to services before. There's never been any concern around CSE. Around any risk-taking behaviours, they've got good attendance at school, so that's been quite interesting as well" (Carol, Prevent CSE Worker, previously Social Care).

In addition to being commonly connected to exclusion and deprivation, vulnerability was also aligned by practitioners to the naivety of some parents who were not fully cognisant of the risks of online interaction:

"There's vulnerable parents out there as well, who have got absolutely no idea around risk. Absolutely no idea what the children are doing. So, they're vulnerable in that way, that they know nothing about CSE. It doesn't even come into their . . . it's not even on their radar. So, I suppose they are, yes, some of your vulnerable people" (Clare, Prevent CSE Worker, previously Social Care).

This sense of parental unawareness was seen by practitioners to (re)produce vulnerability for children and young adults in engaging with various media, as recounted by both Susan and Clare below:

“And I’m just keen to, sort of, you know, do as much education and awareness. Because I think a lot of parents are . . . and I know a lot of . . . well myself included, and my parent friends, don’t really understand what risks their children are at now, when they’re online. They’re just sort of given these gadgets, these mobile phones and tablets and things, and then they don’t really think about what could, you know, what risks they are, sort of, setting up for the children, I think” (Susan, Prevent CSE Worker, previously Teacher).

“But ultimately, it’s parents that have those controls. It’s parents who are saying, yes, go on Facebook and I won’t check what settings are on there. Yeah, go on YouTube and etc., etc. So, they are the key. And I say parents, I mean parents and families . . . because it could be grandparents that are carers, and they’re even more old-school, because they’ve got absolutely no, you know . . . grandparents at 60 and 70, the internet wasn’t around when they were born, so they would have no knowledge around how safe it is. And the fact that a 14-year-old granddaughter, oh, she’s safe, she’s locked in her room, she’s fine upstairs. Well, actually, is she okay up there? Because times are telling us now, she’s at more risk sitting in that bedroom in front of that computer screen than she would be if she was out front playing on the front street” (Clare, Prevent CSE Worker, previously Social Care).

This shifting technological landscape can be indexed to a heightened state of anxiety around the prevalence of CSE in society. In the event of the impossibility of being able to precisely identify who is likely to be victimised and who is likely to be a perpetrator of CSE, perceptions of ‘risk’ and ‘vulnerability’ were frequently aligned either to normative or discrete understandings. In many respects, the assumption that ‘anybody can be at risk’ chimes with what is dubbed in the literature as, ‘universal vulnerability’, whereby vulnerability is conceived as a ‘universal, inevitable, enduring aspect of the human condition’ and part of our shared humanity that we all age and ‘exist in a world full of often unpredictable material realities’ (Fineman, 2010, p. 267). As such, designating only certain individuals and groups as ‘vulnerable’ ‘transforms our shared vulnerability into a personal liability and renders the individuals so designated susceptible to alienation, stigma, or demonisation’ (Fineman, 2012, p. 1750). For Fineman (*ibid*), such a process has the simultaneous effect of suggesting ‘that the rest of us are not vulnerable’. While there were echoes of this sectorality within the testimonies of practitioners, as noted by those who had previous experience in social care, the contrary trend towards universality was also prevalent. The potential risk in adopting the latter approach, underscored by Cole (2016), is that the liberal application of vulnerability has rendered the concept so broad as to obscure the needs of specific groups and individuals, undermining its promise as a conceptual frame to understand and challenge systemic inequalities.

Acknowledging both particular and universal vulnerability to CSE, Mark identified two ways in which an individual might be at risk of CSE. The first way, which echoes with Cole’s prospect of universal vulnerability, was through a young person’s access to online digital technology, coinciding with parental lack of understanding about the risks associated with its use. The second way, what we might refer to as ‘sectoral vulnerability’ was through a young person’s particular vulnerabilities, such as parental neglect.

“Well, you could say every child is at risk, because we talked about the two ways that it can happen . . . I’ve got a colleague today whose daughter’s 12, and she’s got an iPhone, and he said to me, what can I do about it? Because she’s got to have an iPhone. Because she’s going to go mad if I don’t give her an iPhone, she’s not going to speak to me. So how can

I manage that? And he's a professional, you know, and then his daughter performs well at school and all that kind of stuff, but it doesn't mean that she ... He can just give her a phone and say, crack on and do what you want. So, as much of a cop out as it might sound, it's every kid, isn't it? It's just some kids are at risk for some types of CSE more than others are at risk of that type, I think ... okay, so I would say that your more mainstream families, whatever that means, I think would typically be more at risk, or those children would be more at risk of online type of offending, of CSE ... whether it be grooming ... yes, and social networks, social media. Because predominantly those families have got more devices for a start, so they might have, not just an iPhone or, you know, a smart phone, they can have tablets. Yes, that's it. And a computer in the bedroom, an Xbox and a PlayStation, and all that kind of stuff. Because it's not just done on a phone, you're talking on Xbox live or PlayStation, and there's a camera in there for a start ... and how do you deal with that? And in fact ... Well, they're not going out, they're not hanging around the shop, they're safe in the bedroom upstairs ... and so you've got that side of it, which will be kind of one group of children, and then the other group where they haven't got those kind of things at home, but they haven't got a Mum and Dad who give a shit. So what are they going to do? They're going to go out with their mates" (Mark, Prevent CSE Team Leader, previously Police Officer).

Reflecting the arguments made by Cole (2016), Sadia suggests that while 'anyone is at risk' and subsequently vulnerable to becoming a victim of CSE, some young people – through their particular vulnerabilities – are more vulnerable than others.

"I think everyone is. I think, every young person is [at risk]. I don't think that if you come from any particular background or whether you're male or female that you have any less of a risk than the next person to you. I think certainly ... if there are lots of issues within the households, if you come from a chaotic household ... that might just make you a bit more vulnerable. But I think anyone is at risk. And that's what concerns me. The fact that I have got like nieces who are like the age of the people that we deal with and I think it could be anyone of them who sends a snap and receives one. And I just ... I think that anyone is at risk" (Sadia, Prevent CSE Worker, previously Police Officer).

Notwithstanding the intermingling of the personal and professional in Sadia's reflections, what is brought to the surface here – and remains undeveloped in the literature – is the ways in which institutions and agencies involved in risk prevention might proactively encourage reflection on the many meanings associated with 'vulnerability' and the potential implications of differing views about this, both as a concept, a descriptor and an assumed subject position.

Acknowledging the range and complexity of vulnerabilities in the plural and exploring the interconnections between factors that might catalyse risk of sexual abuse would appear to be a useful way forward. Of course, the sources and nature of vulnerability are likely to require differing responses and forms of intervention and support. The way in which the early intervention initiative to prevent CSE, which we observed being implemented, most certainly reflected this. As Emma – a strategic lead in safeguarding – noted, the initiative was set up to provide the prevention arm of the wrap-around services already in place across Shireland to support those involved in CSE, while also working with those who presented as low risk:

"The preventing CSE team would be picking up those things that are kind of at the lower level, where they might be able to put in a quick intervention, a bit of advice, a bit of awareness, and, you know, with protective parents generally, or with a piece of work very quickly that would identify if a safeguarding referral was needed. To me, it's almost an arm of early help, but with some additional sort of specialism, resources and expertise around.

That's how I envisage it. And then I'd see the social care and other agencies, CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) or whatever, offering, you know, services sort of later on, but actually the more that we can resource the first bit, the less - hopefully - we'll have need for the second bit" (Emma, CSE Safeguarding Lead, Social Worker).

Mirroring the tenor of broader neo-liberal crime prevention approaches of the mid twentieth century (see Garland, 2000), CSE prevention comprises primary measures to stop maltreatment before it occurs, secondary interventions with individuals deemed to be vulnerable by dint of more than one risk factor associated with child maltreatment and tertiary interventions in contexts where maltreatment has previously and there is a need to reduce negative consequences and prevent recurrence.

Despite indubitably being implemented with good intentions, the way in which this structure of support was operationalised in practice connects to modes of securitisation and surveillance that are problematic. Although there was acknowledgement, particularly among those practitioners that had previous experience in social care, of the existence of 'sectoral vulnerabilities' – and, that some young people were inevitably more vulnerable than others to CSE – vulnerability was primarily understood and applied in practice in such a way that renders all young people vulnerable across the piece. While understandable in many regards, this precautionous, generalised approach introduces the potential for state intervention into the lives of *all* young people and runs the risk of introducing unwarranted surveillance and control strategies.

Given the leading role that Shireland police played in the implementation of universal education and early intervention, the use of pre-emptive strategies may serve to unduly expose some young people to the criminal justice system. As Dean and Hindess (1998) acknowledged some time ago, the problematisation of young people's sexual conduct has focused attention on both the government of conduct (for example, how sex education is taught in schools) and the conduct of government (for example, how young people govern their own sexual behaviour). To this end, surveillance and intervention techniques can be ideationally legitimised in areas of societal concern on the basis that so-called problematic behaviour is an outcome of dysfunctional individuals who need to be identified through assessment and educated and managed accordingly to ensure their safety and the safety of others (Kelly, 2001; O'Malley, 1992; Rose & Miller, 1992). As Rose (1999) has explained, this process is one in which young people become the object of governance, whilst also encouraging the growth of welfare surveillance which inclines towards working class families in particular.

Concluding discussion

It is clear from the data presented above that – amidst the permeable boundary of social work and criminal justice practice – the concepts of 'risk' and 'vulnerability' are sometimes used interchangeably and continue to be conflated. For the practitioners we engaged with, this uncertainty generated practical problems of not being able to confidently identify those in need of protection and being unable to separate out the suspicious from the non-suspicious. Despite articulating specific contextual factors that may indicate risk and/or vulnerability towards CSE, those with social work experience joined their policing counterparts in adopting a hyper-precautious approach, which conceives each individual as being at threat and thus of potentially requiring support via threat activating safeguarding mechanisms. In as much as responsibility for child protection is an unenviable burden for professionals working in safeguarding roles, pre-

emptive interventions implemented within a criminal justice context – educative or otherwise – appear to expose young people as a homogeneous group to increasing forms of securitisation. Rather than focusing on communities that are statistically most likely to include victims or perpetrators of CSE, the viewpoint commonly adopted by the multi-agency team that ‘anybody can be at risk’ effectively operationalised age as the foundation for imagining harm in the pre-criminal space. In other words, due to assumed naivety regarding their use of online technologies, young people *en bloc* were thought of as ‘at risk’ or ‘risky’, and thus in need of some degree or level of intervention.

Although not appearing in legislative discourse until the 2006 amendment of the Children’s Act of 1989, vulnerability has long since been the primary responsibility of social workers, whereby a vulnerable child is considered one that is in need of protection due to there being a ‘reasonable cause to suspect that a child who lives, or is found, in their area is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm’ or one that is in need due to being ‘unlikely to achieve a reasonable standard of health and development in the future without the provision of additional support’ (British Association of Social Work, 2017). The appearance of ‘vulnerability’ and its conflation with ‘risk’ within criminal justice discourses, however, has served to make vulnerability ‘everyone’s business, especially at first point of contact’ (NPCC, 2018) and reimaged child protection services to include an array of adjunct agencies including, but not limited to, the police. While well intended, such an approach has tended to blur the boundaries between crime, pre-crime and vulnerability, meaning that those traditionally considered in need of safeguarding and protection are becoming increasingly subjected to diffuse forms of securitisation, surveillance and control.

Following K. Brown (2011, p. 314), the danger that arises out of normative understandings of vulnerability that place emphasis on an individual’s inabilities, limitations and deficits is a process of problematisation which may exacerbate social exclusion, trigger responsibilisation and encourage ‘victim blaming’ (see, also, Wishart, 2003, p. 20). Widespread and variable usage of the concept of vulnerability in professional contexts has generated a range of problems across different spheres of safeguarding, including preventing knife and gang related violence and countering radicalisation. Further research is needed both within and across these contexts, both to identify how ‘risk’ and ‘vulnerability’ are conceived, interpreted and applied in practice. As Fawcett (2009) has noted, deploying vulnerability as a general justification for intervention can lead to unwarranted modes of social control that reinforce notions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. In addition, the twinning of risk and vulnerability in safeguarding contexts may inadvertently serve to increase State intervention into the lives of an increasing number of citizens on the basis that they may or do not know what is best for them and thus require protection (Dunn et al., 2008). One of the issues here is one of cyclical generation, through which tendencies for ‘vulnerable’ people to be ‘done to’ by policy-makers (L. Brown, 2015) become reinforced and intensified. To this end, the dangers of what Rothstein et al. (2006) refer to as ‘risk colonisation’ are palpable and produce tangible longer-term effects, at both the individual and the societal level. In this particular context, the miasma of uncertainty emerging from confusion between – and conflation of – risk and vulnerability, reproduces a tendency towards State oversight and ‘care’ for young people which ushers them under the umbrella of criminal justice infrastructures.

Like all governance philosophies, designing and delivering provision based on ‘vulnerability’ has moral implications which routinely play out through the delivery of

interventions (Bevir, 2013, p. 4). As Brown and Sanders (2017) show, intervention frameworks masquerading as ‘supportive’ and developed under auspices of ‘protection’ can serve to further marginalise and stigmatise those in receipt of such interventions and risk bringing such individuals further into the criminal justice system (Munro & Scoular, 2012). Emerging from these findings is the stark warning that the operationalisation of vulnerability has been, at times, at odds with the maintenance of human rights. As Shildrick (2002, p. 71) puts it: ‘vulnerability is figured as a shortcoming, an impending failure’ and conceived as a condition best avoided, but potentially fixable through various forms of securitisation.

Although traditionally considered the responsibility of social work, it would appear that the dominance of ‘vulnerability’ and its frequent conflation with ‘risk’ within professional and policy based discourse has led to a ‘mission creep’ that invites criminal justice agencies beyond the criminal spaces they have traditionally occupied. Whose agendas and ways of working are prioritised and subsequently operationalised within interfacing areas of social work and criminal justice practice are not only worthy of consideration, but also should be subject to critical scrutiny. As Timmermans and Gabe (2003, p. 7) noted some time ago, the question that emerges when one area of practice takes over another ‘is how the resulting social control arrangements satisfy both the inhabitants of the borderland and those at the different centres of expertise’.

For social workers, practicing within safeguarding spaces requires tact and careful negotiation. It also presents multiple ethical challenges which run parallel to those found in forensic mental health (Trebilcock & Weston, 2020), drug misuse (Weston, 2014; 2016) and youth justice (Briggs, 2013). At this interface, practitioners will be met with two quite different – and sometimes competing – paradigms of social care and criminal justice. In environs in which social workers are required to straddle both systems and serve ‘two masters’, conflicting objectives may emerge in the dual pursuit of the safety of the public and the rights and civil liberties of the person deemed vulnerable.

The iatrogenic effects that may arise in working at the intersection of health and criminal justice have been documented previously (see, Trebilcock & Weston, 2020). These may relate to the experiences of power that exist between different groups of staff, the divergence of perspectives that sometimes fall short of providing a cohesive understanding of an individual in need, the tendency for such environments to generate a blame culture – particularly in those situations where things go wrong – and failures in communication and information sharing. To be clear, we are not suggesting that criminal justice agencies should be excluded in multi-agency responses to vulnerability. Indeed, many benefits can accrue from responding to risk and vulnerability in a multi-disciplinary and collective fashion (Weston, 2014). Nevertheless, such an approach should be adopted with these cautionary notes in mind and applying mitigation where possible. At the mutable frontiers between social work and criminal justice practice, where discourses of risk and vulnerability are ubiquitous, there appears to be something of a gravitational pull towards deploying increasing mechanisms aiming at social control. In such a context, and under the auspices of crime prevention, social workers have a responsibility to guard the borderland.

The implications of our findings for social work practice are manifold. First, we would suggest that a further unpacking of the concepts of risk and vulnerability is necessary and should be supported and developed within professional settings. Rather than ushering the conceptual murkiness that undoubtedly exists between definitions and applications of risk and vulnerability into the ether, the problems and issues that arise in

utilising them as rationales for intervention needs to be interrogated and tackled. Those with social care experience, and able to draw on their own disciplinary discourses, sensibilities, ethics and practices, are key resources in driving forward those well-established indicators of risk and vulnerability rather than, as our data shows, oscillating towards all-encompassing perceptions that everybody and anybody is at risk and therefore ‘vulnerable’.

Albeit in a markedly different context, this argument chimes with Heath-Kelly’s (2013) analysis of the operation of counter-radicalisation practices. Similarly, safeguarding mechanisms that are activated based upon practitioners’ perceptions of ‘risk’ and ‘vulnerability’, operate in such a way that they endanger not only individuals considered ‘risky’ in terms of perpetrating or becoming a victim of CSE, but also those who may be ‘at risk of becoming risky’. This links directly to broader discourses and anxieties about young people’s use of the online environment, within which a general narrative that all young people are either ‘risky’ or ‘at risk of becoming risky’ prevails. Although not neatly defined nor uncontested, such a narrative is important in terms of steering precautionary perceptions. While vulnerability has been designated a policing priority in recent times (Home Office, 2016; NPCC, 2020), we would express caution about approaches that embrace a notion of universal vulnerability. Albeit in a specific context, our data suggests that pushing those ‘at risk of becoming risky’ under the risk assessment lens may result in situations where those that may be most likely to be victimised are least likely to be identified as ‘at risk’ and/or ‘vulnerable’.

Second, greater recognition is required of the nature of the balance between protecting the rights and privacy of young people and supporting their safeguarding needs. If, at an ideational level, a universal risk approach is adopted, it is invariably the case that the balance will become skewed towards the latter, rather than the former.

Third, further critical attention should be directed towards the negative consequences that a loose deployment of discourses of risk and vulnerability may have on particular groups and communities, especially in circumstances in which prevention mechanisms steer young people towards spheres of criminal justice. While acknowledging the palpable challenges involved in negotiating the boundary work of safeguarding youth in a prevention focussed context, the sizeable side effects of interventions in terms of surveillance, privacy and social control should be subjected to further scrutiny.

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