

# Sexual Exploitation and Its Impact on Developing Sexualities and Sexual Relationships: The Need for Contextual Social Work Interventions

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## Abstract

This article considers how young people's developing sexualities are influenced by extra-familial social and cultural contexts, particularly in relation to experiences of sexual violence. It draws upon young people's voices to illustrate the choices they make when they encounter, or engage with, exploitative contexts. Utilising the cumulative evidence base of our studies into sexual exploitation, trafficking and violence over the past ten years, we employ Bourdieu's theory of the interplay between structure and agency to elucidate the relationship between young people's choices and abusive social environments. When navigating or engaging with exploitative contexts, young people's sexualities can be distorted through abusive normalising processes; coercive practices; professional attitudes which condone abuse; and/or structural inequalities that call for survivalist behaviours amongst young people. In exploring this social model of consent, we highlight the need to move beyond one to one (1:1) social work practices to engage with situations, contexts and relationships that disrupt young people's developing sexualities. Such an adaptation of social work practice would adopt principles of 'contextual safeguarding' and we conclude by offering illustrations of interventions that have begun to explore this developmental pathway.

**Keywords:** Exploitation, consent, safeguarding, context, agency

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## Introduction

A child's progression into sexual activity and becoming a sexual being contributes to their transition to adulthood (Moore and Rosenthal, 2006). As they move through time and place, young people navigate behaviours, attitudes and environments which may impact upon the extent to which they develop safe and healthy sexual identities and sexual relationships. For some, this will result in experiences of sexual abuse, defined as 'Forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening' (HM Government, 2015, p. 93).

When their transition is abused, ridiculed or undermined through such an encounter, a child's developing confidence in their sexuality may be traumatised. Finkelhor and Browne (1985) note that sexual trauma has four dynamics: the trauma of physical attack, of betrayal, of powerlessness and stigmatisation. Combined, these traumas may undermine a child's understanding of sexual identity and their confident transition into adulthood.

The aforementioned definition of child sexual abuse includes child sexual exploitation (CSE). While all forms of abuse are invariably interconnected and harmful to childhood development, our specific focus here is the impact of CSE on adolescents' developing sexuality. Although the CSE definition is currently under review by the Westminster government, research into this sub-category of sexual violence has built upon the following policy definition:

Sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 is defined as involving: exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive 'something' (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities . . . . In all cases, those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child or young person's limited availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and/or emotional vulnerability (DCSF, 2009, p. 9).

Drawing upon a cumulative research evidence base, this article presents the social and cultural contexts in which young people's developing sexualities may be disrupted and the interplay between these contexts which may limit choices available to young people. Throughout this account, we highlight four distinct ways that young people's engagement in, or navigation of, harmful contexts can result in sexual exploitation: structural inequalities that require survivalist behaviours from those who

are abused; environments in which abusive behaviours are normalised; processes through which young people are coerced; and professional practices that condone abusive behaviours. We simultaneously highlight the need to reconcile the associated constraints placed on young people's choices, with an acknowledgement of adolescent agency in experiences of sexual exploitation and consider consequences for social work practice.

Subsequently, this article proposes the need for a contextual approach to both assessment and intervention with young people who have experienced CSE. We argue for social work practice to address: the public as well as private spatial contexts within which young people experience, understand and enact CSE; the individual and structural components of exploitation; and the specific nature of developing adolescent sexuality. Offering examples of social work teams who are testing contextual approaches, we conclude by recommending further piloting and evaluation of such practices.

## Methodology

The findings presented in this article are taken from our cumulative body of work into young people's experiences of sexual violence and exploitation developed over the past ten years. Since 2011, we have drawn upon [Bourdieu's \(1990\)](#) social theory of a reflexive interplay between structure (context) and agency (individual) to investigate CSE and the sufficiency of related safeguarding responses. According to [Bourdieu \(1990\)](#), individuals engage reflexively with a range of social fields (contexts), each of which has its own rules. The rules in each field are constructed by and construct individual 'habitus' (an individual's feeling for the rules). Engagement with this process creates hierarchies of status between individuals. Building on the work of Anastasia [Powell \(2010\)](#), who used Bourdieu to explore the unwritten, and often social, rules of consent, we have sought to create an evidence base that recognises both the social and cultural contexts (and the rules within them) that facilitate CSE and young people's interaction with these environments.

The studies that we draw upon utilise various methodologies but share a focus on qualitative data and analysis and applied research, and are broadly informed by action research and participatory principles. While most of the work undertaken by our research centre is referenced here, studies selected for more detailed inclusion are led by the authors and primarily focus on building contextual and social accounts of exploitation with reference to young people's agency. They comprise case file reviews, action learning through practitioner training, focus groups with young people and practitioners, and interviews. Specifically:

- a contextual review of: research into CSE, teenage relationship abuse, serious youth violence and young people with harmful sexual behaviour (Firmin, 2013); and safeguarding responses to nine cases of peer-on-peer abuse and exploitation (Firmin, 2015a);
- qualitative research and participatory projects with children and young people affected by sexual violence exploring experiences of disclosure and service responses (Beckett *et al.*, 2013; Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Warrington, 2013a);
- a thematic review of case studies and interview data with children and young people from three studies into CSE (Pearce, 2009), trafficking (Pearce *et al.*, 2013) and gang-related violence (Beckett *et al.*, 2013);
- a three-year action research study in eleven sites (local authorities) to contextualise their response to peer-on-peer abuse (Firmin, 2016);
- monitoring the activity of eleven multi-agency partnerships seeking to contextualise their response to peer-on-peer abuse (Firmin, 2016).

All studies drew upon a range of contextual theories (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Powell, 2010) recognising the interplay between individual action and social norms, and the contribution of professionals, the public and young people in creating social spaces, to provide a consistently social account of CSE. In addition, they:

- took an integrated and holistic approach to adolescent vulnerability, recognising the overlaps and intersections between a range of issues such as trafficking, missing and gang association that research has shown to be siloed in most policy and practice (Beckett, 2011);
- recognised and promoted the rights and potential of young people to participate in decision making about their own individual care and collectively in service and policy development including through research (Pearce, 2009; Warrington, 2013a);
- promoted models of inter-agency working which includes contribution from voluntary and statutory organisations (Harris *et al.*, 2015);
- explored and tested what is meant by ‘contextual’ in relation to policy development, assessment, intervention and outcomes measurement (Firmin, 2013, 2015b);
- recognised online spaces as interacting with offline contexts—such as peer interaction being both offline and online—rather than studying it as a distinct context (Firmin, 2015a); while research by others provides a helpful primary focus on online spaces (i.e. Ringrose *et al.*, 2011), this is not an approach that we have adopted.

All studies went through a two-stage university ethical review process, in addition to external review where required. For studies involving children and young people's direct participation, we worked with a range of services (primarily specialist missing, CSE, CSA services and increasingly youth justice and school exclusion systems) to facilitate engagement, respond to related support needs and promote safety. In all our research, children's consent to participate is viewed as an ongoing process and participants are supported to make informed choices about their representation within the research. Participatory work with young people is guided by an ethical framework developed by the International Centre, which addresses issues of anonymity, confidentiality, representation, inclusion, support needs and ownership, among others (Warrington, 2016). We continually review our ethics policies, and ensure that we consider the impact of our work on us as researchers as well as those with whom we engaged.

Through the work outlined above, we have developed a significant evidence base on CSE in the UK, but recognise that gaps in knowledge remain. For example, despite a commitment to addressing diversity within our work, particular groups of children and young people remain under-represented. This reflects both a practice base which poorly meets the needs of some groups and related misconceptions about young people who are not vulnerable to sexual abuse (e.g. boys, minority ethnic young people, disabled young people and young people involved in offending etc.) (Franklin *et al.*, 2015; Gohir, 2013; McNaughton-Nicholls *et al.*, 2014; Phoenix, 2012).

## Findings

Findings from our research will be presented in three thematic sections before being discussed with reference to social work practice. First, we present the contextual nature of sexual exploitation through: a synthesised account of research into exploitation and adolescence; two theoretical frameworks for exploring the aforementioned research; and a detailed presentation of four ways in which exploitative contexts can constrain individual choices. Second, we present our research evidence supporting contextual approaches to safeguarding. Finally, we explore the concept of young people's agency in developing sexual identities and relationships, and the extent to which this requires practitioners to view young people as partners in safeguarding. Taken together, these three sections demonstrate current limitations of social work practice for addressing extra-familial and socially informed significant harm and make recommendations for developing practice to better engage with the lived experiences of young people's developing sexualities.

## The contextual nature of sexual exploitation

Research into CSE specifically, and adolescent development more broadly, indicates that young people develop sexualities and encounter abusive norms in public and social, as well as private, environments. Synthesising and building upon this evidence base, we have developed theoretical frameworks for further exploring environmental dynamics of CSE and implications of context for understanding consent and a child's sense of choice, self and sexuality. Each of these stages (synthesising the evidence base, introducing theoretical frameworks and illuminating social nature of choice in cases of exploitation) is detailed in this subsection. Although the exact number of young people likely to experience CSE at any time is unclear, research indicates that young people are sexually exploited in every area of the UK, and that the full scale of those affected remains hidden (Barter *et al.*, 2009; Beckett, 2011; CEOP, 2013; HM Government, 2015; Jago *et al.*, 2011; Jay, 2014; Melrose and Pearce, 2013). A range of 'models' are identified in our research, including (but not limited to): commercial exploitation by individuals or organised crime groups; exploitation by urban street gangs, sole perpetrators or peers and opportunistic acts—all of which may be facilitated by both online and offline contact (Barnardo's, 2011b; Beckett, 2011b; Beckett *et al.*, 2013; Coffey, 2014; D'Arcy *et al.*, 2015; Shuker, 2013; Smeaton, 2013).

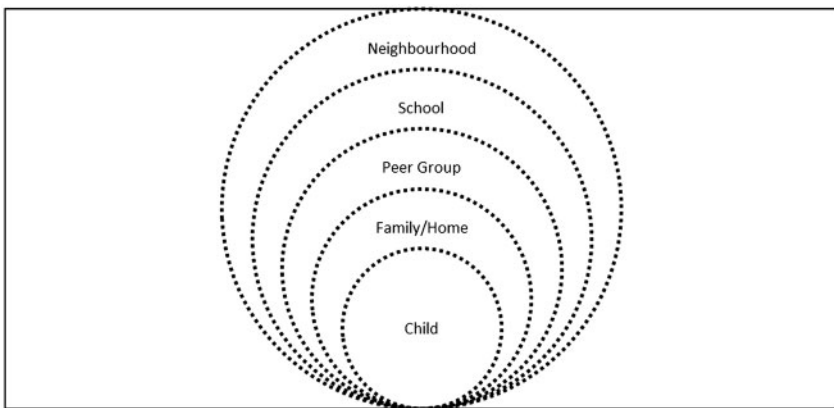
For the most part (though not invariably), sexual exploitation occurs independently of a child's immediate family environment (Barter *et al.*, 2009; Beckett, 2011; Coffey, 2014; D'Arcy *et al.*, 2015; Messerschmidt, 2012). Research into childhood development demonstrates that, as young people move through their adolescence, they are informed by the extra-familial contexts (social and cultural environments) where they increasingly spend time (Coleman, 2011). Peer groups play a particularly significant role (Barter *et al.*, 2009; Messerschmidt, 2012) as do school environments and other public sites of socialisation (Frosh *et al.*, 2002). This in and of itself is not problematic—adolescence is recognised as a time for transitions involving healthy engagement with social and economic life outside the family. Arguably, if young people are engaged with safe peer, school and neighbourhood environments, this supports opportunities for developing safe and healthy sexualities. However, when young people are sexually exploited within these extra-familial environments, the environments themselves need to form part of the narratives of risk and response alongside accounts of the individual and familial characteristics of those affected.

Reflecting this wider evidence base on adolescent development, CSE is known to occur in, and be facilitated by, the interactions young people have with peer groups (Barter *et al.*, 2009; Beckett *et al.*, 2013; Firmin,

2015a; Messerschmidt, 2012). A range of public spaces feature in accounts from practitioners and young people, including parks, disused houses and garages, high streets, transport hubs and stairwells (Coffey, 2014; D’Arcy *et al.*, 2015; Firmin, 2015a; Smeaton, 2013) and children’s residential units are well-known ‘targets’ for sexual exploitation (Beckett, 2011; Jay, 2014). In addition, although perceived as safe and protected environments, our work has documented examples of young people being drawn into, and experiencing, CSE within educational establishments (Barter *et al.*, 2009; Firmin, 2015a; Frosh *et al.*, 2002; Pearce, 2009; Ringrose *et al.*, 2011).

In order to explore the association between context and exploitation further, we have developed a theoretical framework that recognises relationships between the public, social and private environments that young people inhabit. It supports us to explore young people’s engagement in, and movement through, each in the escalation towards abusive incidents (see Figure 1) (Firmin, 2013).

The framework recognises all of the social environments associated with CSE and uses dotted lines to depict the interacting boundaries of influence between each context. ‘Online’ is not included as an explicit context, as each environment in the framework can be both online and offline—for example, young people interact with peers online and offline and school communities may be reproduced online. The framework supports the user to explicitly document characteristics of these different social contexts, the child’s interactions with these and the interplay between them—as well as capturing the contexts of professional intervention. Using this framework, we reviewed literature, conducted case reviews and audited local practice (using focus groups, interviews and practice observations) (Firmin, 2013, 2015b, 2016) to highlight:



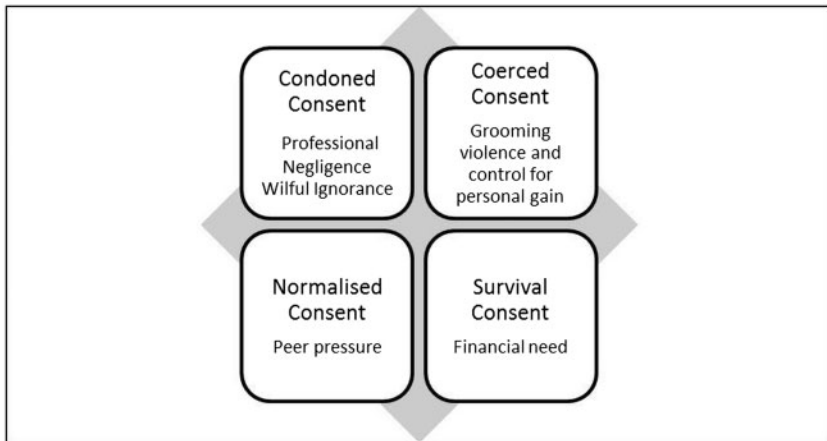
**Figure 1** Contextual Framework for Exploring Exploitation b) the extent to which assessm

1. contextual influences on incidents of sexual exploitation and the interplay between different contexts; and
2. the extent to which child protection and other multi-agency forms of safeguarding assessment and intervention engages with public/social contexts associated with sexual exploitation.

In addition, our work has theorised ways in which these environments can constrain young people’s choices. This latter work (‘a social model of consent’; [Pearce, 2013](#)) has identified four ways in which the nature of social, cultural and structural contexts compromise choices made by young people and disrupt the pathways upon which they develop healthy and safe sexualities (see [Figure 2](#)). Bringing these two frameworks together (a contextual account of exploitation and social model of consent) provides the architecture upon which to hang our research evidence on the nature of CSE. Using the four categories of consent introduced in [Figure 2](#), the remainder of this sub-section will detail the contextual nature of CSE.

*Normalised*

A range of our studies, including those concerned with gang-related sexual violence ([Beckett et al., 2013](#)) and peer-on-peer exploitation ([Firmin, 2015a](#)), identify ways in which young people’s social networks normalise their experiences of sexual violence. In these studies, routine exposure to rumours, and actual experiences, of abuse created a level of expectation in relation to abusive practices amongst young people:



**Figure 2** Social Model of Consent the nature of social, cultural



Sometimes you can know the person and like the girl could say no or whatever and they still go ahead, or like there's been girls who've been under the influence of like weed or alcohol and they don't really have enough willpower. Yeah, like they might be saying no but they don't have the power to push them off and I think sometimes a lot of the guys don't realize in their minds that it is actually rape (Participant A3, nineteen years old, in [Beckett et al., 2013](#), p. 23).

The significance of young people's peer groups has been particularly chronicled in our work as serving to normalise exploitation. For example, in keeping with a burgeoning international evidence base on peer-group influence during adolescence ([Barter et al., 2009](#); [Frosh et al., 2002](#); [Messerschmidt, 2012](#)), our work consistently identifies the desire to belong to, and be part of, peer-group experiences as contributing to experiences that normalise abuse. Interviews with young people using CSE services document how individual attempts to negotiate emerging sexualities and related risks are deeply engrained in relational patterns with peers. As Lorraine describes below, the 'pull' of 'party houses' where she is exposed to the risk of exploitation is closely tied to her need to belong:

You might go back to people's houses and have a party and you might not want to miss that ... like have a laugh—you want to get involved when people are doing stuff—like your friends. You don't want to be left out all the time ... you're thinking 'Oh, you've only got one life—why don't I just live it?'—Like do what I want—take as many risks as possible (Lorraine, fifteen, in [Warrington, 2013a](#)).

In addition, our work identifies ways in which neighbourhood and school experiences can introduce or reinforce harmful norms associated with sexuality and relationships ([Beckett et al., 2013](#); [D'Arcy et al., 2015](#); [Firmin, 2015a](#)). For example, a review of peer-on-peer abuse cases identified young people referring to stairwells and other public spaces where 'girls got raped' and school corridors where sexual harassment was anticipated and normalised ([Firmin, 2015a](#)). In such cases, it was the interplays between neighbourhood, peer group, school and individuals which normalised abusive behaviours, rather than any single context. These experiences contributed to climates in which the gravity of sexual violence was undermined and expectations of risk proliferated.

### *Survival*

While not necessarily wholly distinct from behaviours which normalise abuse, our research documents ways in which young people's experiences of exploitation are informed by their need to safely navigate, or survive, particular contexts. Studies present examples of young people who believe exchanging sex provides the only means to gain money or

goods perceived as essential for survival (Melrose, 2013; see also Smeaton, 2013). In these instances, evidence suggests that what may appear irrational choices to professionals or parents are in fact rational choices being made by young people in abusive or harmful contexts.

Furthermore, young people who feel physically vulnerable within violent or abusive neighbourhoods, schools or peer groups may exchange sex for safety, or abuse others to avoid the possibility of victimisation (Beckett *et al.*, 2013; Firmin, 2015a). The idea that young people are developing sexual identities in which sex and sexual violence are utilised to secure safety necessitates a shift in the focus of child protection: from one that focuses on identifying and protecting an individual child to one that engages with both peer groups and the economic and social contexts within which they function. For social work practitioners trained and experienced in more traditional approaches to child protection—focused on assessment and intervention of family environments (see e.g. Gilbert *et al.*, 2011; Parton 2014)—this can be challenging: ‘They’ve been sexually exploited, it’s not by somebody in the family so it’s nothing to do with social care’ (Practitioner, in Jago *et al.*, 2011, p. 65).

### *Coerced*

The most established conceptualisation of sexual exploitation, and supported both by our research and wider evidence, this describes scenarios in which young people are groomed by those who exploit them (Jay 2014; Pearce, 2009). Grooming processes serve to isolate young people from their friends and family, creating contexts in which young people are reliant upon their abuser:

I found that every time I tried to get away he made it so that I had nowhere to turn, I’d gone distant from my family, I never went out with my friends anymore, so after I went away from him I had nothing else ... no one to turn to, nothing else to do, nothing to fill my days, and so it was like he made it so that my life was empty without him, do you know what I mean? ... I would go back because I felt lonely. I felt like I had no one and that was what he’d told me so therefore I felt like he knew (What Works for Us meeting, in Jago *et al.*, 2011, p. 50).

Some of our more recent work implies that young people may be coerced or manipulated into abusing others and, in this regard, groomed choices overlap with some of the survivalist behaviours outlined above. Furthermore, grooming processes can be enabled by, and enable, normalising processes and, as such, engage with more contextual elements of sexual exploitation.

### *Condoned*

Finally, when professionals ignore, misunderstand or individualise young people's experiences of exploitation, they may condone the abuse and reinforce messages that young people have consented. Our research provides examples where professionals reference young people's behaviours abstracted from the contexts in which they occurred and, in doing so, locate risk with the 'choices' made by young people rather than the contexts and/or individuals who pose a risk to them (Firmin, 2015a; Jay, 2014; Pearce, 2009; Shuker, 2013). For example, an application of Figure 1 to police investigations into nine cases of peer-on-peer abuse involving 145 young people (nine complainants, seventy-six suspects, forty-five witnesses and twelve others) identified ways in which professionals assessed and intervened with young people who had been raped by their peers, rather than assessing or intervening with the peer groups, schools and neighbourhoods that facilitated those abusive experiences. In nearly all of these cases, young people who were sexually exploited were relocated (moved home or school), while the exploitative contexts in which young people were abused remained largely intact (Firmin, 2016).

In sum, this evidence base clearly illustrates the contextual nature of both the ways in which young people develop sexual identities and the processes through which this may be exploited or disrupted.

### **Creating safe environments: a contextual role for social work practice**

Illuminating the social, cultural and structural nature of sexual exploitation evidences the need for social work practice to recognise and engage with public, as well as private, contexts in which abuse manifests. Currently, decisions about whether abuse is taking place are invariably determined through examination of the child's capacity to consent to sexual activity. While developmental assessments of capacity are pertinent for some children and young people, particularly younger children, for many others, it is the environment within which consent is being sought that constrains choice. Until the contexts within which the child is functioning are explored and where necessary intervened with, identification of abuse will continue to rely on judgements about the child, rather than environment/s that they are in.

Since 2013, we have explored these questions through an action research programme involving eleven local authority areas (sites). Working with a multi-agency partnership in each site, we have sought to identify mechanisms through which they can identify, assess and intervene with social contexts that are constraining the ability of young

people to develop healthy and safe friendships and relationships. Split into two phases, our site work applied the [Figure 1](#) framework to:

- audit existing responses ([Firmin, 2015b](#)), using observations of multi-agency meetings, reviews of strategic documents and interviews with practitioners and young people to establish the extent to which sites were engaging with the contextual aspects of abuse and exploitation (Phase One); and
- monitor the development of contextual practice in those sites (developed following the audit process) (Phase Two).

Sites engaged in a range of multi-agency activities during this study, two of which were particularly relevant to the concerns of this article (referred to as Site A and Site B in the text that follows).

The audit of Site A identified that social workers had recognised associations between young people with whom they were working. They met and conducted a paper exercise to map these young people, identifying their connections and discussing those appearing to adopt leadership or influencing roles and those appearing as ‘followers’ within the group. Through work with the research team, social workers were encouraged to use this mapping exercise to record significant peer relationships in their assessment processes, as well as those that were familial, and to consider what this meant for their individual case work with each young person and their family. This approach gave more consistent consideration to whether peer influence was a factor in exploitation cases and provided an evidence base through which genograms could be produced which mapped peer groups as well as families. While the benefits of such an approach for children and young people warrant further study, the practice has provided a more uniform way for social workers to consider peer-group dynamics when assessing risk of significant harm.

In Site B, the audit process identified that social workers were part of a multi-agency team who visited public spaces for which there were escalating concerns about CSE. At the time, community safety analysts identified a shopping centre where young people appeared to be socialising, and adults had begun to approach them in what seemed to be early stages of grooming. In response social workers, specialist CSE workers, youth workers and the police visited the shopping centre together, and continued to do so regularly. Gradually, young people who were ‘hanging out’ in the shopping centre anticipated seeing workers and engaged with them in conversation. The initial terms of reference for this work promoted the intervention as a means of identifying young people through assertive outreach and engaging them in services. However, the research team captured evidence of how this approach challenged exploitative dynamics associated with the social nature of the shopping centre as it became a place where young people could socialise but where attempts to groom were disrupted. Supporting practitioners and

commissioners to identify the contextual, as well as individual, outcomes of this intervention provided an opportunity for strategically recognising the benefit of building relationships with environments as well as individuals.

The two examples offered demonstrate a contextual response to CSE in that they:

- identified that risks associated with CSE were located in public and/or social spaces; and
- developed interventions which sought to change the nature of those spaces rather than removing individuals from exploitative contexts while leaving the contexts unattended to—and in essence ones in which other young people could be exploited.

Such an approach to safeguarding compliments approaches to both situational crime prevention and community youth and social work (see e.g. [Jagosh et al., 2015](#); [Wortley, 1998](#)) which recognise risk and safety as located in the interaction between individuals and environments. Both examples offered from our research are at the very early stages of their development and require further investigation and testing. They do, however, serve as a helpful illustration of what contextual safeguarding may mean in practice.

### Young people's agency as a safeguarding tool

One consequence of adopting frameworks that promote contextual accounts of abuse and social models of consent is a shift in explanatory models of risk, from individual young people to peer groups, communities, cultures and structural inequalities. It provides a welcome challenge to the tenacity of individualised discourses of risk and choice which solely foreground individual agency and lead to misplaced blame.

However, the need remains to align/reconcile contextual safeguarding within a child-centred approach that does not simply reject the idea of young people's own agency outright, but finds space for this within new narratives that emerge. A child-centred approach to contextual safeguarding should neither deny the impact of context and structures on individuals, nor position these contexts and structures as purely oppressive and immutable ([Bourdieu, 1990](#); [Giddens, 1984](#)). It is about working 'with the grain' of adolescence—recognising this particular time in young people's lives as one that is characteristically social, influenced by peers and likely to involve risk ([Coleman, 2011](#)). In addition, it recognises young people's own recursive role in both informing and being informed by the social contexts in which their sexual identities emerge.

All too often, in an understandable bid to counter victim blaming, simplistic counter-narratives are offered which negate any suggestion of

children's agency or resources (Warrington, 2010, 2013b). This can be seen projected in the language and imagery of third-sector awareness raising including pictures of children as 'puppets' and calls for professionals to 'cut them free' (Barnardo's, 2011b). While useful to a degree, ultimately, these accounts jar with both young people's experiences of CSE and how they present to practitioners.

When interventions are contextually informed in the manner suggested in this paper, it is possible to adopt a response which recognises young people's agency while not holding them responsible for abuse they have experienced. Our work has found that young people's own resistance to professional interventions is often underpinned by the lack of legitimacy they give to professionals who fail to recognise the contexts in which both risk and young people's emerging sexual identities are negotiated.

In a doctoral study of young people's experiences of CSE service interventions (Warrington, 2013a), young people described engaging in social spaces and activities which were simultaneously associated with excitement, affirmations of their developing sexual identities and significant risks of CSE. They described recreational contexts in which abuse could be both normalised and condoned. In addition, young people's narratives suggested that their needs were partly served by these contexts (something which may be hard for professionals to accept). This often provided points of disjuncture between a professional and service user's assessments of a situation or circumstance. Professionals' unwillingness to fully explore the role of contexts in young people's lives and on their developing sexual identities meant their responses continued to focus solely on an individual's behaviour. An example below from this study explains this situation from Justin's perspective—a young man for whom clubbing and recreational drug use provided a space in which he felt safe to express his sexuality, after recently coming out, while at the same time exposing him to sexually exploitative experiences:

The worker at [ the CSE project] she kind of got worried a lot, so I felt that if I were going to tell her the truth about what I did she were going to get scared. When I were going out [clubbing], I would get absolutely off my face and end up back at someone's house. Maybe you should be careful, like always have someone else there that you know, and don't get too off my face. I definitely was taking too many risks. I'd take too many drugs and go with anyone. . . . I won't do that now—but I still do get off my face (Justin, eighteen, in Warrington, 2013a).

Arguably, young people's own perspectives should be considered as a means of understanding their needs and they should be viewed as partners in safeguarding in relation to both their own and others' safety (Warrington, 2013b). Indeed, given the weight of peer-group influence during adolescent development, and the role young people play in

creating harmful or safe peer group, school and neighbourhood contexts, young people's agency has a key role to play in safeguarding peers. Young people themselves are often more likely to witness abuse or receive disclosures than professionals. This is evidenced by our research into peer-on-peer abuse which identifies multiple attempts made by young people to intervene and offer peers advice when they saw abuse escalating: 'I told her to get out but she was scared. I told her to go to her year head but she was scared her parents would find out. They were not good boys' (Case 8, statement of a peer, in [Firmin, 2015a](#)).

In navigating emerging social, and associated sexual, identities, often in contexts of significant risk, many young people find themselves with high levels of responsibility albeit often with low levels of protective support. In addition to highlighting the agency of individual young people (albeit constrained), the above quotes further highlight the relational (and specifically peer-associated) nature of risks taken by young people that professionals have failed to recognise and respond to. Given the importance of choice and agency in this discussion, it is evident that young people need to be recognised as key partners in (contextual) safeguarding themselves. It is also important to be clear that recognising young people's role in safeguarding does not mean that they hold responsibility for keeping themselves safe or necessarily 'know best'. Rather, it means acknowledging that the efficacy of professional interventions is determined by young people's willingness to engage, and that those services which keep young people informed and involved in decision-making processes are most likely to be valued by young people ([Beckett and Warrington, 2015](#); [Warrington, 2013a, 2013b](#)). It is therefore both a principled and a pragmatic approach.

## Discussion and conclusion

The research presented in this article evidences that, when young people develop sexualities and sexual identities in exploitative contexts, their opportunities to consent are constrained and their agency compromised. And yet, given their developing sense of self and identity, young people's agency can be a critical tool for their protection, if professionals are equipped to address the contextual factors that are constraining their choices. In light of this evidence, the following discussion:

- summarises and supports critiques of individualised accounts of CSE;
- identifies the persisting individualised nature of responses to the issue;
- recognises the particular challenges of a child and family social work framework for recognising and addressing extra-familial risk; and

- proposes a contextual safeguarding framework for developing responses in the future.

Such a discussion concludes that, by recognising and engaging with contextual characteristics of CSE, social work practice will be better equipped to support young people in developing healthy and safe sexualities.

Over the past ten years, a number of academics have critiqued accounts of CSE that fail to recognise its social and structural nature (Dodsworth, 2014; Melrose, 2013; O'Connell Davidson, 2005). Accounts of exploitation that detail the individual and familial characteristics of those affected without an explanation of the situations, relationships and contexts associated to CSE tell us little about why some people are exploited and others are not. For example, while children in care are disproportionately affected by CSE, a more nuanced understanding is required that does not simplistically equate all care experiences with significantly increased vulnerability to these forms of sexual violence (Beckett, 2011; Shuker, 2013). If a young person is in a safe and stable placement with strong positive attachments, has safe peer associations, attends a school that engages well to safeguard their students and lives in a neighbourhood where exploitation is proactively policed, then their experience of care may offer protective opportunities rather than increasing risk. Given the wider research evidence on adolescent development in general, and the development of sexualities and sexual relationships in this regard, such a critique seems warranted. In order to avoid pathologising individuals whose developing sexual identity is disrupted by exploitation, one would be better asking in what context/situations are a young person's decisions constrained in ways that present risks to their sexual development.

While our research moves away from individual conceptualisations of risk, choice and safety that are discordant with a contextual CSE evidence base, existing approaches to assessment and intervention limit the extent to which this shift can be realised in practice. As noted earlier, child protection assessments are, in the main, focused on the welfare of children and young people within a family context (Corby *et al.*, 2012; Parton, 2014). Even some CSE assessments are primarily concerned with counting the individual risk factors that young people display, such as going missing, socialising with older people, etc. The effectiveness of interventions with sexually exploited young people is then measured in relation to their ability to impact the extent to which young people display those risk factors (Barnardo's, 2011a). It is important to note that such practices, while entrenched, are far from universal. Evidence documented in this article has illustrated emerging contextual approaches to addressing CSE.

In order to escalate a consistent social account of CSE, we propose the advancement and testing of a 'contextual safeguarding framework' in research, policy and practice. This framework explicitly recognises the interplay between public and private spaces associated with exploitation



and recommends that practitioners identify ways to assess and intervene with these environments. This conceptual approach provides a framework for developing research and practice that enables professionals to recognise the networked, public and social aspects of young people's sexual relationships and developing sexualities.

In this way, contextual safeguarding recognises and responds to the realities of young people's lives and the sexual risks they negotiate therein. As demonstrated in this article, our understanding of the need to work in a contextual way is supported by research that listens directly to young people and practitioners (Coffey, 2014; D'Arcy *et al.*, 2015; Firmin, 2015a; Shuker, 2013a; Warrington, 2013a). In doing so, it provides space for researchers to explore young people's choices in context and identify ways in which practitioners can be involved in shaping environments that enable the safe and healthy development of young people's sexualities within a safeguarding agenda. Our research conducted with young people affected by CSE highlights the interplay between their choices and active engagement with risk and the social and cultural pressures which limit consent. Ultimately, by recognising and developing contexts that promote healthy relationships, social work practice can create contexts in which young people develop healthy sexualities and make safe choices.

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