Guest editorial

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From recognition to response: the challenging journey to developing contextual responses to violence impacting children and young people

Setting the scene: a contextual evidence-base, underapplied

The idea that "context matters" to our wellbeing, safety and development is nothing new. As a person develops, a range of social contexts shape their experiences (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and numerous structural forces shape those contexts (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Crenshaw, 2017). Far from being one-way traffic, individuals also shape the contexts that shape them. Working in academia for over a decade, contextual opportunities and limitations in the sector have influenced our career trajectories (and the impact of our work); and the actions we have taken have also shaped the teams, departments and institutions of which we have been a part. When it come to the issue of violence and abuse, when a young person is physically assaulted on their way to school, by other young people who they see on a regular basis, their peer and community contexts shape how they make sense of their experience and move forward. How they behave from that point on will also shape those same peer and community contexts.

From Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), through to Bourdieu's theory of social field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) and Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017), we have been offered a range of frameworks to make sense of this reality. Through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory we begin to understand how an individual is situated within different environments that are directly or indirectly influential, illuminating the complex ways that individuals are influenced by, and reciprocally influence the contexts in which they are embedded (Payne, 2005). In turn, Bourdieu's theory of social field details how individuals embody the rules of the social fields of which they are a part, and draw upon their capital (social, cultural, economic and symbolic) to play the rules of those social fields and achieve status. Crenshaw's work draws attention to the intersectional structural barriers and opportunities that are reinforced/ challenged within those systems/fields; highlights how the same contexts may be experienced by individuals differently dependent on a range of characteristics including gender, race and sexuality. For all these theorists it is impossible to understand an individual's experiences, choices, behaviours or feelings without understanding the nature of the contexts in which those experiences, choices, behaviours or feelings develop.

These frameworks help us to see that the norms/rules within a given context inform human behaviour. In turn, research evidence from disciplines as diverse as environmental criminology shows us how attending to contextual factors can reduce problem behaviours and enhance safety (Clarke and Eck, 2005). Likewise, proponents of social and structural models of social work centre the environmental and structural sources of harm, such as poverty and inequality (Featherstone et al., 2018). A range of interventions have been built, and evaluated, on the evidence base that contextual safety impacts individual behaviours. A range of interventions in schools for example, have sought to create changes in peer and school cultures, to reduce individual young people's experiences of partner violence during adolescence (Fagan and Catalano, 2013; Foshee et al., 2014; Miller, 2013). Efforts have also been made to reduce individual experiences of harm by building protective communities,

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including community guardianship; particularly in respect of reducing violence between young people and the targeting of young people in public places for the purposes of trafficking and exploitation (D'Arcy and Thomas, 2016; Perdue *et al.*, 2012).

Despite these points of progress, and the theoretical foundations for work in this area, most measures for violence and abuse prevention programme remain squarely focused on individual outcomes (Owens and Lloyd, 2022, Youth Endowment Fund, 2022): does the intervention reduce the extent to which individuals go missing from home, are absent from education, commit offences, etc. (all abstracted from the contexts in which those behaviours may change or not). For example, a mapping exercise of violence reduction interventions by the Youth Endowment Fund in the UK was dominated by evaluations of individual interventions. Despite this persistent focus on individual interventions, historical evidence indicates that contextual interventions have been successfully trialled but never mainstreamed. For example, reflecting on efforts to provide community-focused social work interventions, Jack and Gill (2010) described the contextual impacts of patch-based community social workers working on an estate in England in the 1990s, which build community supports to reduce individual referrals into children's social care. They argued that despite the value of community development methods for safeguarding being clearly evidenced in projects such as this, they often failed to be mainstreamed into safeguarding systems. The persistence of behaviour focused interventions, and individual outcome measures to value their impact, fail to engage with the contextual dynamics of human behaviour and violence.

As such we find ourselves at a crossroads. The influence of context is long established in theories that explain how and why humans interact with their environments; the evidence from evaluations of interventions with young people experiencing or at risk of harm also indicates the need for understanding contexts in which young people live and move. Despite this evidence, interventions to safeguard young people from violence and abuse are often devoid of context, and the importance of context is often not foregrounded in policies that shape the commissioning landscape and the delivery of services that directly impact young people's lives.

Articles in this edition

The articles in this edition both illuminate the value of contextual thought and practice in response to abuse in adolescence, as well as suggest far more work is required for this to be a consistent feature of research or interventions. Despite the evidence base outlined in this editorial, much contextual work within child welfare services (including education, social work and psychology) remains in its infancy, and a more concerted effort is required for this to become a consistent feature of the children's services and systems.

Papers by both Barlow *et al.* and Nyathi illustrate the theoretical implications of adopting a contextual lens to understand abuse in adolescence. Nyathi demonstrates that the idea of contextual safeguarding can be well integrated into existing theories of child protection and safeguarding; and that such integration was critical to developing a social work workforce capable of intervening in contexts where young people come to harm. Seeing theories as discrete and siloed from each other risks severely limiting this potential. Extending these theoretical considerations, Barlow *et al.* integrate contextual safeguarding and rational choice theory to examine the situational and individual drivers of exploitation.

Shifting attention to clinical practice, Rayment-McHugh, Adams and McKillop attend to the application of contextual frameworks to clinical assessment and intervention, evidencing the utility of contextual practice with young people who sexually harm. They discuss ways that a contextual approach broadens the focus of clinical assessment, enhancing understanding of behaviour, and in turn, link this with new targets for clinical intervention, and to broader

practice benefits. Importantly, through use of a case study, they provide examples of this contextual practice which benefit practitioners in related fields.

The value of intervening in specific social contexts is also demonstrated, with particular attention to school settings. Focusing on social workers in schools, Rafter acknowledges the key role that schools play in the lives of young people, and thus their potential to play an equally central role in safeguarding practice. Noting inconsistent understandings of social workers in schools across time and place, Rafter discusses the potential of social workers in schools to reach at-risk youth in these settings, and their somewhat under-recognised ability to also have a contextual impact.

Continuing a focus on safeguarding practice, Wilson, Diaz and Usubillaga turn attention to the implementation of contextual safeguarding in one local authority area. Using interviews with practitioners, they identify several barriers to implementation, largely associated with necessary changes from traditional safeguarding practice, including conflicting views and buy-in to contextual approaches, and insufficient funding support. This raises questions about the extent to which children's services systems are equipped to hold these types of interventions in a way to leverage contextual impact remains in question, providing insight into the cultural shifts and policy support needed to promote practice change of this nature.

Where next?

In various ways all five papers suggest points of consideration that will likely be central to the future design and implementation of contextual interventions within child welfare systems. As a group of editors, we identify three to signal where research and practice may need to go next in response to young people's experiences of violence and abuse.

Continuing to evidence the benefits of contextual approaches. All five papers evidence the interest and commitment to thinking contextually and developing contextual approaches to safeguarding young people. Whilst the appetite for policy change at a systemic level varies, for those papers that represent the UK context, a growing appetite for contextual approaches within local and national policy is clear. Statutory safeguarding guidance in England, Wales and Scotland, were each updated between 2018 and 2021 to recommend contextual responses to young people who came to harm beyond their family homes (HM Government, 2018; Welsh Government, 2021; Scottish Government, 2021), and therefore the need to continue developing the evidence base that guides, supports and challenges any policy change is urgent. In the absence of this there is a risk that support of contextual approaches will be interpreted using an individualised lens – for example, commissioning interventions to work with individuals in a range of contexts, as opposed to changing the social rules or norms of those contexts themselves (Owens and Lloyd, 2022; Wroe and Lloyd, 2020). To an extent, the evidence for contextual interventions is more established in some countries outside of the UK – for example, in North America – where peer and school interventions to reduce violence perpetration have been the subject of randomised control trials (Foshee *et al.*, 2014). However, a recent study on the developing response to child sexual abuse in the UK (Shawar *et al.*, 2022) illustrated that the rapid policy changes seen here have not been reflected in many other countries who also have concerns about the exploitation and abuse of young people. As such we have some countries in which the evidence of contextual interventions has been established but the policy framework to hold and sustain them is under-developed; in the UK the opposite is the case. Growing the evidence base on contextual interventions is therefore a key requirement in the UK; developing policy to promote such interventions may be a greater priority elsewhere.

Valuing community networks to sustain contextual interventions. The papers suggest that the development of contextual interventions will falter if they are viewed as a purely statutory exercise. State services, particularly in psychology and social work, have some way to go to be able to consistently adopt a contextual approach to safeguarding young people.

Individualist frameworks are embedded in the structures of statutory child welfare systems, and cultural as well as structural changes will likely be required for meaningful change (Firmin and Lloyd, 2022). For social workers to develop contextual approaches they will require access to, and relationships with, community networks. School contexts are an important community hub through which contextual impacts can be created. Contextual practices are also far more likely to characterise existing community approaches to harm reduction; and there will be merit in learning from community responses when seeking to contextualise statutory systems.

Redressing the balance. Finally, there is an ongoing need to critically examine the degree to which a focus on individual child and/or family undermines any progress or potential for integrating contextual interventions into child protection systems. At present, the balance is such that individually focused interventions, and outcome measures, dominate the safeguarding landscape, reducing the space to understand and promote the safety that can be created through contextual change. Papers in this special edition highlight how child protection systems that remain squarely focused on behaviour change with parents (to create safety for young people beyond the family home), or use social worker in school roles to work with individuals in schools, rather than impact school communities, close windows of contextual opportunity. It is important to redress this balance so that the contribution of such approaches to working with individuals is considered alongside (not instead of) the changes such interventions make to the contexts where individuals are at risk of harm.

A final word. When we issued the call for papers for this special issue we were hoping to spotlight a range of contextual interventions that were being trialled to safeguard young people. What we received were papers that demonstrated the potential of contextual responses in various child welfare settings, and the challenges of seeking to implement them. Despite the progress in developing contextual interventions in some part of the world, it seems that the evidence base is far behind the practice. Those who evaluate interventions, and those who fund them, have a critical role to play in shifting this status quo; as do researchers more widely to ensure that the vulnerabilities and antecedents of violence are discussed in a contextual, as well as individual manner. We hope that concerted efforts in this direction will mean that in 5–10 years' time a special issue on the implementation and impact of contextual approaches will be feasible – and not one that solely makes a case for the existence (and measurement) of contextual interventions in the future.

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