**Working with and negotiating ‘risk’: Examining the effects of awareness raising interventions designed to prevent Child Sexual Exploitation**

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**Introduction**

Public health approaches to crime prevention are currently being applied across a range of criminological areas of concern. Harm reduction methods rooted in a public health model (Newcombe, 1992; Stimson, 1992), became popular during the 1980s for adults with substance abuse problems and have been effective in reducing morbidity and mortality among these populations (Stimson, 1995; Stevens and Hughes, 2010). More recently, harm reduction initiatives have been successfully applied to street markets in an attempt to keep sex workers safe and to reduce the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases (Cusick, 2006). It is perhaps of no surprise then that harm reduction strategies informed by the public health model are now being used to address issues such as youth violence, radicalisation and child sexual exploitation (see Levy, 2007; Bhui, et al. 2012; Public Health England, 2017). In October 2018, the UK Home Secretary announced a consultation process intended to inform a new legal duty underpinned by a public health approach to tackling serious violence (Home Office and Javid, 2018). Similarly, consecutive UK Government Action Plans to tackle child sexual exploitation (CSE) have encouraged adoption of risk-focused preventative interventions that are consistent with the public health approach and channelled toward raising awareness of the risk of CSE among young people, parents, carers and potential perpetrators. A number of positive outcomes deriving from these types of interventions have been documented. Focusing on the outcomes of an educational initiative, Berry et al., (2017) present evidence of increased self-esteem, prosocial behaviours and a reduction in risk-taking behaviours. Yet studies of awareness raising initiatives oriented towards preventing CSE but geared toward the sharing of sexual images specifically, suggest that such interventions may overlook the distinct relationship issues experienced by young people in general (Jørgensen, et al., 2018) and the particular sociocultural landscapes that shape young women’s interpersonal experiences in particular (Setty, 2018). Similarly, the focus in educational raising awareness sessions on how to deal with peer pressure and coercion to prevent image sharing does not appear to reflect the motivations for consensual sharing of images among some young people, the latter having been identified as an enjoyable aspect of contemporary intimate relationships (Lee and Crofts, 2015).

In order to contribute toward this growing body of knowledge, this article focuses on the effects of a targeted intervention designed to reduce the risk of exploitation amongst young people. Considering processes of *engagement* with narratives of risk, the *relevance* of the strategyadopted by the CSE team to those targeted by the intervention and the *impacts* in terms of the perspectives of young people involved in the initiative, this paper identifies both connections and caesura between these mutually constituting elements. Drawing on qualitative empirical data - including field observations, in-depth interviews with members of a multi-agency team and focus groups with young people involved in the CSE awareness raising initiatives - we posit that the interplay between these three elements should be taken into account in the design and delivery of future risk-based awareness initiatives aimed at informing and influencing the behaviour of young people. It will be argued that, whilst intending to inform young people about the harms of CSE, such initiatives can reinforce dominant - but erroneous - understandings of the nature and sources of ‘risk’. On the basis of our findings, we further contend that risk-focused, deterrence-based educational interventions such as the one under examination are set within a hermeneutic framework that simultaneously prescribes and proscribes acceptable sexual practices. Our critical assessment of the strategies and techniques used by the multi-agency CSE team revolves around three salient axes of analysis. First, we contend that dominant narratives and (re)presentations of CSE that underpin such preventative interventions may inadvertently reproduce a victim-centred discourse. Not only does this discourse both responsibilise and individualise young people, it also reduces the emphasis placed on perpetrators of sexual abuse and mutes the role of the State in managing the behaviour of offenders. Second, it will be demonstrated that ambiguity amongst practitioners regarding the scope and boundaries of delivery impacts upon the depth and effectiveness of preventative intervention. Third, we argue that moralising respectable fears about young people’s sexual behaviour can promote inflexible boundary demarcation that unduly reduces the complexity of intimate relationships and designs out significant ambiguities that young people routinely grapple with in making decisions about their relationships.

In sum, we aver that current approaches derived from successive UK Government Action Plans may promote forms of dramaturgical governance that obscure the underlying conditions that give rise to CSE. Further, we maintain that such modes of governance are symptomatic of a state of intransigence in relation to stimulating a progressive discussion about contemporary sexual practices that could inform the development a more apposite legislative framework. As we will elucidate, the mobilisation of contestable risk indicators in policy and practice reinforces rigid binaries between appropriate and inappropriate sexual conduct that include and exclude, such that only young people strictly adhering to advice are included, while those who do not are effectively silenced. As we shall see, the closing off of dialogue about sexuality and physical pleasure harnesses the agency of young people and negates consideration of alternative sexual experiences that do not align with the prevailing normative framework. Finally, we extrapolate from the example of awareness raising interventions designed to prevent CSE, offering insights into the complexities of implementing public health approaches in areas of criminological concern. In so doing, we argue that attention must be paid to the crucial role of social structures and networks in shaping behaviour and action.

**Contextualising the Study**

Fuelled by a series of historical revelations and subsequent prosecutions, in the UK there has recently been a spike in regulatory activity addressing CSE and a series of policy imperatives promoting pre-emptive action. The Independent Inquiry into multiple CSE cases in Rotherham catalogued a range of individual and institutional failures (Jay, 2014). Despite growing evidence from youth workers and those working in residential care that child sexual exploitation was a serious problem in Rotherham, the police service and local council failed to act on vital information and did not respond appropriately to safeguard young people. The scale and seriousness of the problem was also underplayed by senior managers in care and welfare services.

Running in tandem with these events, the rapid expansion and adoption of online digital technologies has impacted dramatically on the way that young people interact and conduct their relationships (Lee, et al. 2015). The use of social networking sites among adolescents has risen significantly, with the internet becoming focal in teenage lifestyles and culture (see Lenhart, et al., 2010: 5). For young people, the benefits of online technologies have been widely acknowledged, in terms of expanded opportunities for communication and community involvement as well as increased exposure to a variety of views and opinions (O’Keeffe, et al., 2011). Online forums and social network sites have been identified as providing safe spaces for young people to explore sensitive questions and issues, particularly those concerning identity and sexual practices (Brown, et al. 2009). Nevertheless, despite studies reporting on the positive learning experiences associated with internet use amongst young people, organisations such as the NSPCC (2019), National Crime Agency (2017) and Know About CSE (2015), have conversely presented the technological environment as one which is saturated with risks, from internet trolls and confidence tricksters to opportunistic paedophiles. This ‘culture of fear’ around the online environment in general and social media in particular has been a common feature in political, media and public debate in recent years (Furedi, 2018: 6).

Anxieties about the risk that ‘new technologies’ pose, 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 strategies. Post the publication of the Jay Report (2014), the Prime Minister formally categorized CSE as a ‘national threat’, directing police forces to collaborate more effectively across regional boundaries in order to better safeguard children (HM Government, 2015). Following on from this, national guidance for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers was introduced to raise awareness of the consequences of CSE. Informed by a public health approach, these guidelines determine that an effective response to CSE is one that:

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

More specifically, the guidance proposes that all education and awareness raising initiatives should directly address myths and misconceptions about who is perpetrating and experiencing CSE; challenge any victim-blaming and promote the rights of all victims to protection and support (Department for Education, 2017:18). Moreover, directions to public bodies stipulate that these interventions should be delivered within a legislative framework that determines sixteen as the age of consent for any form of sexual activity (S9-13, Sexual Offences Act, 2003) and makes it an offence for a person to be in possession of an indecent image of a person under the age of eighteen (S1 Protection of Children Act, 1978). Against this backdrop, in 2016 ‘Outcome 21’ codes were introduced which enable the police to record a crime as having happened without formal criminal justice action being taken. It is proposed by the College of Policing (2016: 5) that an Outcome 21 is the ‘most appropriate resolution in youth produced sexual imagery cases where the making and sharing is considered non-abusive and there is no evidence of exploitation, grooming, profit motive, malicious intent or it being persistent behaviour’. In the following sections we will draw on empirical data to elicit how the UK Government’s statutory guidance is being translated and implemented by practitioners, as well as exploring the extent to which young people engage with education and awareness raising initiatives. Before grappling with these issues, it is first necessary to explicate the study design and methodology.

**Methodology**

The data presented below is drawn from a qualitative study involving 65 participants that evaluated the effectiveness of a CSE prevention programme implemented by a large police force area - referred to hereafter as Shireland. Rooted in a public health approach (Public Health England, 2017), the key objective of the programme was to raise awareness of CSE among young people, parents and possible perpetrators via education, targeted prevention and support for victims and offenders. Deploying age appropriate content, adapted from materials designed by CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection) and children’s charities such as the NSPCC (National Society for the Protection of Children) and Barnados, a universal education and prevention programme was delivered across a variety of settings including schools, colleges and alternative educational providers. Large group presentations were undertaken in schools, focused on keeping safe online and raising risk awareness among potential victims of CSE. These general presentations were combined with more targeted work with smaller groups of young people identified as being ‘at risk’ of becoming a victim or perpetrator of CSE. The universal and specific interventions were delivered in tandem by the multi-agency team across Shireland. The purpose of the research project was to provide an evaluation of the programme as a whole and to conduct a more detailed assessment of practice focusing on the feasibility and effectiveness of the prevention techniques used. The data was collected using semi-structured interviews, field observations of the delivery of prevention methods, and focus groups with young people engaging with the programme. To capture the dynamics of the process of implementation during the span of the programme, a longitudinal follow-up design was adopted. In total, 17 participants involved in delivering the programme were selected, comprising nine members of the multi-agency team and eight members of the steering group. All participants were interviewed within six months of the programme’s implementation and again twelve months later. Interviews lasted between 45-90 minutes and followed a semi-structured topic guide about the CSE initiative and the participant’s role within it. Interviews were conducted at either the office of the interviewer or that of the interviewees.

To assess the feasibility and effectiveness of the prevention methods used by the team, three forms of data collection were undertaken: observations, focus groups and semi-structured telephone interviews. Firstly, three secondary schools from across Shireland where universal education about CSE had been provided were approached and access was granted. Thereafter, field observations of the team delivering the education awareness were conducted. Additionally, the young people who had participated in the awareness raising session were approached and asked to participate in a focus group discussion about the advice they had received from the Preventing CSE team. As a result of this process, four focus groups comprising 43 young people aged between 15-18 were carried out. Focus groups took place at the participants’ educational facility and lasted between 45-60 minutes. Further, five semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with parents whose children had received a targeted brief intervention. Ethical principles established in the code for research endorsed by the British Society of Criminology were adhered to and formal approval for the study was granted by the home University committee.

Post data gathering, all interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The broad principles of grounded theory were followed throughout the process of data analysis (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The first phase of analysis involved the researchers independently becoming familiar with the content of the data set and scanning for emergent patterns and themes. Initial codes were attached to the interview and focus group transcriptions to organise and structure the data. The second phase of data analysis consisted of a more refined analysis of the data designed to determine key themes and to cluster sub themes. The third phase of negotiation involved close collaboration between the researchers to compare and contrast prevalent themes and sub themes and to determine dominant themes. Following the principles of grounded theory, axial encoding was conducted during throughout, enabling a process of iterative and dynamic data analysis (see Ralph, Birks and Chapman, 2015).

**Thematic Analysis: Engagement, Relevance and Impact**

Having outlined the political and policy context for the study and articulated the methods utilised, in this section we elaborate three key themes which emerged in data analysis and which act as heuristic devices for the discussion below. Put simply, these themes address what the CSE team do, how they do it and what the effects of the initiative are. They relate, respectively, to processes of audience *engagement*, the *relevance* of the strategyadopted for those targeted by the intervention and the *impacts* on the perspectives of young people. To be clear from the outset, there are intersection lines between the themes above, which are reciprocally constitutive rather than free floating. Having presented the data, we wish to offer some critical reflections on current policy and practice which underline the mutually conditioning nature of the processes observed. Where extracts from interviews are presented - and consistent with ethical protocol - pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of participants. Before presenting the key themes, it is first important to narrate the broad dimensions of the forms of intervention that we witnessed in field observations.

While the precise content of the CSE awareness raising methods differed according to the locale and personnel delivering them, a common protocol was followed. Bound within the legislative guidelines, the presentations and discussions began with a caution that the distribution and possession of an indecent image of a person under the age of 18 was illegal and that those sharing and in possession of such images were committing a chargeable offence. A short presentation warning that, if used inappropriately, social media sites can be dangerous and present as opportunities for perpetrators of CSE to befriend young people and eventually exploit them. Subsequent to this, a short film involving a real-life case of a child or young person being exploited was shown. One of the films commonly used was ‘Kayleigh’s Love Story’ (KLS). It involves a young girl called Kayleigh who ‘friended’ a stranger that had approached her on Facebook. Within thirteen days, Kayleigh exchanged 2,643 messages with the man and agreed to meet him at his flat. The following day, the man who approached Kayleigh online invited his neighbour to join them. When she arrived Kayleigh was plied with alcohol and both of the men sexually assaulted her. When trying to flee, Kayleigh was seized by the neighbour who subsequently raped and murdered her. Kayleigh’s use of social media is likened to that of the audience who are advised to manage their online behaviour carefully to avoid becoming a victim in similar circumstances. As we illustrate in the sections that follow, while well intentioned, the approach deployed by the CSE team is predominantly structured around deterrence. In as much as it is understandable that such a strategy might be adopted in order to alert young people to the seriousness of the issue, as we shall see, the effectiveness of this strategy in terms of both securing engagement and aiding prevention is contestable.

*Engagement with ‘Risk’ Narratives: Strangers, Dangers and Shock Tactics*

In order to ascertain levels of engagement with the headline messages presented in awareness raising sessions, we asked young people directly what they had learnt. Participants commonly identified the necessity for adopting risk avoidance strategies, including being guarded in online conversations and cautious about making connections with strangers:

Carys: ‘To not speak to strangers online…’

Hannah: ‘To not talk to strangers online…’

Keira: ‘Don’t add people, like… that you don’t know’.

(Focus Group 3)

To this extent, KLS had served to enable the audience to reflect on some of the issues raised regarding the risk of CSE, particularly that instigated by predatory older male strangers:

Sara: ‘Was it a young man?’

Kim: ‘No, but that’s why I thought weren’t it a younger man that was messaging her for the older man and the older man was the neighbour. That I didn’t know’.

Sara: ‘I don’t know, but I think it makes it look like it’s only old men that are going to do it to girls when actually it can be anyone, like any age’.

(Focus Group 1)

Mirroring Sara and Kim’s conversation above, the focus groups were punctuated by attempts to grapple with the meaning of KLS. As this exchange shows, the story generated some confusion in terms of the narrative itself and exactly who and what young people should be on guard against. As Sara suggests, the foregrounding of this case reproduces the notion that there is a specific offender profile that young people should be alert to. This message is being clearly delivered and received, despite a longstanding body of research indicating that the majority of children who are sexually assaulted know their perpetrator (see Grubin, 1998; Thomas, 2005; Jewkes, 2012; Chenier, 2012). Consistent with young people’s responses to other public health campaigns designed to shock - such as those highlighting the risks of alcohol consumption (de Visser, et al. 2012) - our data illustrates a general distancing by the audience and a lack of purchase around the ‘stranger danger’ message. Additionally, some of the observations we listened to indicated a ‘clash of risk cultures’ (Beck, 2016: 193) whereby the messages being delivered by elders were counter-intuitive to young people’s own risk landscapes and the dangers that they and their friends routinely negotiated:

Jamie: ‘I don’t think… I think at this age, I think we shouldn’t focus on strangers as such, I think it’s more like at this age, like people going out, and like up clubs and stuff…’

Lexi: ‘Not just that, even when you were younger, and you were going to like your friend’s house, like you’ve gone round your friend’s house for a house party. How many different like guys try to get you drunk? Or you’ve got drunk, and then they tried it on with you, and think that it’s okay’.

(Focus Group 3)

The lack of fit between the narrative presented in KLS, and the lived experiences of young people negotiating situations where the potential of sexual exploitation is tangible, may serve to reduce the impact of the intervention. Despite the mandate set in national guidance to challenge myths and misconceptions about who is perpetrating and experiencing CSE, the KLS ‘horror story’ arguably ignores the everyday risks that young people face and instead prepares them for a worst-case situation that is unlikely to eventuate. It would seem that this juxtaposition arises largely because these are the types of resources which are made available for the team involved in delivery. As Janet, a Prevent CSE worker explains:

‘I think certainly the packages that we have got are very substandard in the sense of it’s kind of a one size fits all which I don’t agree with… I think that, you know, if we look at children in different geographical areas, different issues will affect them. Their risk taking behaviours or things that they might be at risk of in that area of the community might differ from another area. So I think I’m a very firm believer in adapting it to suit the needs of the areas. I’m not saying totally change it, but just sometimes we need to implement different strands in order to make it specific to their needs’.

Janet’s observations about the limits of universal awareness raising are consistent with public health guidance emphasising the need to adapt tools and techniques to enhance engagement (Public Health England, 2017). In this instance, the use of KLS as a ‘fear vignette’ was deliberately intended to shock in order to generate reflection that may stimulate modification of risky behaviours where they might exist. While the underpinning logic is consistent with preceding risk awareness campaigns - such as those around HIV/AIDS, drink driving, alcohol consumption and recreational drug taking - aside from the jarring between KLS and participants’ lifeworlds, there are issues of magnitude and balance to consider. Indeed, these issues were discussed by young people in focus groups, as the three-way exchange below illustrates:

Charlie: ‘I think sometimes the stories that you get told are not believable…’

Lucy: ‘They’re extreme cases’.

Charlie: ‘Yes, they’re very extreme, so…’

Lucy: ‘Yes, so you can’t always relate to them maybe’.

Terri: ‘Yes, so maybe if like they were made a bit more to something that would happen every single day you’d sort of think about it a bit more rather than it being like…’

Charlie: ‘It’s a bit far away from you, isn’t it?  It’s like oh, I don’t really … I can’t relate to that’.

Terri: ‘Yes, because some… it sounds a bit bad… but sometimes the stories that we get told you question whether they’re just made up to…’

Lucy: ‘To scare you or something’.

(Focus Group 1)

This discussion illustrates both a degree of self-reflexivity and risk consciousness moulded within the ambit of both personal and shared lifeworlds. At a practical level, it suggests awareness that KLS is an ‘extreme case’ and that the probability of being involved in such a dramatic episode is low. It is also appreciated that the narrative is intended to shock. Nonetheless, Charlie’s observation that the story is ‘a bit far away from you’, coupled with Terri’s concern that the appalling nature of the case may lead some to question whether it was fictional, suggest that there are limitations to the shock tactic approach adopted by practitioners. What is potentially being elided is the complexities and the dynamics of more routine forms of sexual exploitation experienced by young people and advice regarding how they might best negotiate tangible ambiguities. In as much as ‘extreme cases’ are designed to capture attention and generate reflection on personal practices, they may also produce iatrogenic effects in terms of young people expressing experiential ‘distance’ and questioning their credibility.

*‘Just Don’t Do It’: Considering the Relevance of Strategies of Deterrence to the Lifeworlds of Young People*

The utilisation of KLS as a central plank in delivering the message to the audience can be indexed to a broader strategy of deterrence, designed to discourage ‘risky practices’, through instilling fear of social and criminal consequences. While practitioners delivering activities were clearly committed to the policy aims of dispelling prevalent myths about CSE and raising awareness among young people about the nature of the problem, their communications were bound not only by the resources and materials available, but also by the strictures of legislation. To this end, the communications of practitioners were deliberately bracing in terms of spelling out the penalties for young people under the age of 18 involved in peer-to-peer practices such as sharing graphic pictures:

‘I mean certainly with the education packages when we’re talking about indecent images, we obviously make the young people aware that potentially they could be committing offences if they’re sending indecent images or receiving indecent images of themselves, which potentially could make them an offender’ (Claire, PCSO worker).

In as much as such information is consistent with current legislation, it places a clear weight of responsibility on young people to avoid ‘risky’ practices that break the law. Zara, explains her understanding of the key messages regarding circulation of unclothed images below:

‘Pictures? Don’t send them of yourself and don’t receive them. If you receive them, get rid of them because even if you see it by accident, you could still get in trouble for it’.

 (Focus Group 4)

These messages of deterrence were also communicated to parents of children found to be in possession of sexual images. As Emma explains, after reporting her daughter for sending a sexual image to a boy she knew, the communication from the police pulled no punches:

‘The police said to her: “Do you realise what you’ve done? If the image goes any further, you need to appreciate your actions”’.

As these observations show, messages regarding the deleterious consequences of being involved in the sharing of sexual images are unambiguous and, moreover, resoundingly understood. Thus, from one perspective, the ambitions of the initiative to raise consciousness around the dangers of sharing sexual images were effective. Nevertheless, the musings of young people that we spoke with indicate that further support and greater post factum details about how to practically manage tricky situations in which sexual images have been circulated would have been useful:

‘The advice they gave about sharing photos. The advice was to just not do it. But I think they should be advising you about if you had done it … for whatever reasons … how you could get around it, what you could do to stop it being spread instead of just being like: “Just don’t do it”. We should have had more information’.

 (Sara, Focus Group 1)

The strong inflection toward developing strategies of personal safeguarding and avoiding ‘risky’ practices places emphasis on the ways in which young people should take responsibility for preventing CSE through monitoring and modifying their own behaviour. For some of the young people participating in the study, the initiative was too tightly focused on internet safety and how to appropriately conduct sexual relationships with others, rather than problematizing the behaviours of offenders. As Holly, a 16 year old girl, commented:

‘It’s so wrong that like … the thing we’re being taught is to not put ourselves in situations, or speak to people that rape. Well, *they* just shouldn’t rape’.

 (Focus Group 3)

While one of the formal objectives of the CSE prevention team was to target (potential) offenders, in reality, this was a lesser part of the role. Furthermore, the approach adopted was individual-centric and oriented toward warning against future transgressions, rather than broaching some of the root causes of the problem. In particular, there was a palpable absence of discussion about the wider context in which incidents of CSE take place and the role of networks and structures - such as family life, educational experiences, material resources, mentors and peer groups - in either disinhibiting offending or enabling protective factors to guard against victimization. As such, several of the young people that we spoke to described the initiative as being abstract and remote from personal experience. There was thus a palpable disconnection between the deterrence-focused approach designed to use fear to condition behaviour and the everyday lives of young people, juggling with various decisions, risks and choices. The sequestering of context from action is apparent in the ‘intervention’ below raised by Helen, a Prevent CSE worker, involving three boys who had been asking girls to send them unclothed photographs:

‘I have done a group of work with three boys and those boys were boys that were asking girls for naked pictures. They shouldn’t have been doing it, but I went in to say to them: “This is some information around what could happen to you if you continue to do this. And do you know that this could be classed as grooming? Do you know that the law says that this isn’t right?” And I went in and did some really brief intervention around giving them more information so that some of the choices that they made were better. And certainly, the way that I delivered that was, if we have an issue where the police are called because you’ve been asking for indecent images of children, you’ve been asking for indecent images of girls, or whatever that might be, you will already know the answers because I’ve been in and delivered it to you. So in a way, you won’t be able to say, well I didn’t know, and you won’t be able to use that as an excuse because you did know, you had the intervention’.

In line with the deterrence-oriented approach, Helen’s description is underpinned by the assumption that corrective behaviour should follow a warning. Notwithstanding the efficacy of this approach, the structures and networks within which young people are socialized are elided. The blanket message received by both potential victims and potential offenders is to avoid engaging in activities that could result in a criminal conviction. In order to deliver this message, practitioners drew on legislation developed to protect children from abuse. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, this very legislation may itself be producing a ‘law of inverse consequences’, whereby the opposite of the intended effect materialises (see Walklate and Mythen, 2015). Rather than protecting young people, legislation covering the production and distribution of indecent images of children has led to convictions for a sizeable number of young people under eighteen years of age sharing images within the context of stable relationships. Holding a criminal record for such an offence may have damaging and long-term consequences on future employment prospects and the formation of interpersonal relationships. A case raised by Hatty concerning two friends who had been subject to an intervention identifies the somewhat perverse legal outcome of the sharing of sexual images between upper age teenagers within what might otherwise be described as a mature relationship:

‘My mates were both 17, just about to turn 18. One of them was in care, but they were in a relationship. So, they were sending pictures and they just thought it was all normal, just what people tend to do in relationships. It was only when the carer - because she was in care - saw it [the picture] that he ended up getting done. She was classed as a vulnerable person because she was in care and he’d just turned 18. Because it was two days after his birthday when the carers had seen it ... So, he was classed as being an adult and she was 17. There was only a month in the middle of them ... but he ended up getting done because she was in care. So, she was classed as a vulnerable child whereas he was classed as an adult, because it was two days after his eighteenth’.

 (Focus Group 4)

This example instantiates some of the contradictions and dilemmas involved in legal regulation in this area. In some cases, such as that described by Hatty, young people risk being convicted of sexual exploitation of a minor in specious circumstances. Given the stigma that holding a criminal record for a sexual offence carries and its impact on life opportunities, this illustration flags the need for greater flexibility in considering incidents of possible abuse. While the non-criminal Outcome 21 flag introduced in 2016 may be a welcome addition to the toolbox of police officers - in that it affords them greater discretion to use an ostensibly informal sanction - both the Outcome 21 and the associated investigation are recorded on the young person’s police file and this may be disclosed at a later date. As Suzanne, a Prevent CSE worker, suggests:

‘I’ve had a young boy who’s been issued with a warning for continuously asking girls for indecent images. So, the police officer said to him: “That’s your yellow card, you’ve had your warning now”. So I’ve said to him: “You remember I said, I’m writing your stuff on the system, they’re going to know you’ve received your warning and you’ve worked with me. So if you do this again they’re going to come down a lot harder on you because it’s evidence that you’ve had support”. If a young person comes in again we need to now skip preventing, straight to [a more serious institutional intervention]’.

Setting aside what might constitute ‘support’ in these kinds of incidents, it is clear that Outcome 21 codes have been widely used, particular in instances of image sharing. In recent times, the number of young people formally charged with sharing indecent images has reduced by nearly 60%, from 150 in 2014/15 to 63 in 2016/17. Concomitantly, the use of Outcome 21 has increased dramatically from 34 cases to 2079 cases (National Police Chief’s Council, 2017). The focus - rendered explicit in Suzanne’s account - on information dissemination and expectation of subsequent behavioural adaption may well be silencing discussion about the nature of modern relationships. Rather than facilitating dialogue about the underlying conditions that give rise to CSE, distinct binaries between appropriate and inappropriate conduct are reinforced, such that only young people that obey the advice provided are included and those who do not are deemed to be placing themselves at risk of criminal sanction. Although difficult to quantify exactly, estimates suggest that between one quarter to two-thirds of young people between the ages of 13-18 send and receive sexual images (see CEOP, 2013; Lee, et al. 2015). Even assuming that the lower estimate is closer to the mark, the issues raised in our study by young people regarding a lack of advice about how to manage situations where sexual images have already been shared is notable. At a wider level, our data suggests that deterrent-centric strategies, like those adopted by the CSE team, do not sufficiently key into the complexity of relationships forged by young people in the modern world nor do they speak to their immediate lifeworlds. As we shall see, a detailed understanding of the ways in which young people use and navigate technology and the modes and means by which they establish social networks is vital in shaping a more nuanced approach to engaging young people around the issue of CSE.

*Impacts: Muted Subjects and Negotiating Complexities*

As the observations of pupils and students above illustrate, the messages communicated by the CSE team were clearly received. However, in peer-to-peer conversations it was noticeable that attempts were made to contextualize and interpret the headline information offered by practitioners in relation to embedded lived experiences. During focus group discussions about the initiative, young people were striving to make sense of the information that they had received and to situate this in relation to contemporary cultural trends and their everyday lifeworlds. Here, discussion of the complexities of managing social media and the issue of representing an idealised self - both of which were largely absent in the awareness raising initiative - were brought into the spotlight. In particular, young people raised concerns about the borderlines of acceptable images and how these might be interpreted by others:

‘There’s another thing about younger children, well, even older, our age [15]. With people putting pictures on Instagram. I’m seeing this girl’s photo, just in underwear, she’s our age and she’s showing everything off. It’s like, you don’t know who you’ve got on there’ (Kim, Focus Group 4).

‘Guys are doing it as well, always topless and showing off. Even the young ones. I’ve got a little brother who’s 12. I’ve seen all his mates on his Facebook and all the guys are standing there, in shorts, showing off their muscles, with a can of beer - and they’re 12. And they think that’s cool. Then they’re adding everybody they can find on Facebook to get a little bit popular.’ (Jayden, Focus Group 4)

In these reflections, it becomes apparent that the sending of images - be they of a sexual nature or otherwise - needs to be understood within a context in which online practices of self-curation and idealised portrayals of the body/self are normalised. While there are obvious differences between the sharing of nude images and (semi) clothed images - which may be provocative but not sexually explicit - it is clear that a culture of display has become entrenched. Furthermore, this culture of display is itself indexed to modern modes of identity formation and changing forms of validation of the self by others (see Bauman, 2011). Aside from raising important questions about the changing nature of privacy and intimacy in the modern world, the identification of ambiguous grey areas of practice palpably jarred with the absolute lines drawn by practitioners. While the risks of CSE were understood and largely accepted, for some, legal codes on the sending and sharing of sexual images were out of kilter with contemporary intimate relationships:

‘I understand why you shouldn’t send [indecent images] and why it’s classed as an indecent image because even if you send it to your boyfriend you don’t know what they might do with it. But it is part of our relationships now’ (Megan, Focus group 2).

Megan’s observation highlights a disjuncture between rigid legal frameworks and fluid cultural contexts of action. This raises a conundrum not articulated by those delivering the programme around contemporary intimacy rituals and the sharing of explicit body images. For many young people ‘sexting’ has become a stage of courtship and integral to the forming of sexual relationships. As Lee and Crofts (2015: 469) suggest, there are assorted motivations for such practices amongst young people, including ‘feeling fun and flirtatious’ or ‘gifting’ a present to a partner. While the research findings of Ringrose, et al (2012) suggest that sexting predominantly arises as a consequence of coercion, thus invoking ‘new sexual risks’ (Benotsch, et al. 2013: 307), the findings of our study suggest a much more complex and varied set of dynamics are at play. Mirroring the findings of Lee and Crofts (2015), we would concur that the sharing of sexual images amongst young people can be mutually gratifying and sometimes serves as a ‘holding stage’ for those wishing to delay a physical relationship. While this was not formally acknowledged by practitioners during presentations it was, nonetheless, informally appreciated. As Audrey, a safeguarding lead, remarked:

‘Sending images can often act as a protective factor, rather than a risk factor - particularly for those who might not be ready for a sexual relationship’.

It is at this juncture that a clash occurs between a deterrence oriented-approach directed toward reducing risk and the complicated business of forming intimate relationships in a fast evolving world. We would assert that the current parameters under which practitioners must operate leads to complexity reduction and the muting of certain subjects. Our focus group discussions revealed a range of ways in which the sharing of images - sexual or otherwise - can support body confidence and enhance self-esteem. While some have suggested that body confidence and empowerment might involve choosing to participate in body display as a public exercise of sexual agency (Albury, 2015), our data revealed that body confidence can also be derived from external affirmation of shared images:

‘Yes, because I think it’s personally the idea of: “Oh, I just took a picture of myself. That’s my better-looking self. So, I’ll post that for everyone to see my better half”. So, you’re just showing the best side of you, online. Some people will like it and those people, you want to see and like your picture. It’s a confidence boost’ (Cassandra, Focus Group 4).

‘It [Instagram likes] boosts your confidence. Not mine, personally, but people that have got, what, 500 likes? They seem so much more confident than someone that’s only got 10 or something. And friends. It’s the same for friends’. (Jessica, Focus Group 4).

Despite the potentially positive and affirmative dimensions of experiences and interactions associated with image sharing, the advice of the CSE team to young people is to simply abstain from the activity. As the conversations above suggest, the inelasticity of this approach negates the complexity of young people’s relationships and their motivations for image sharing. Further, the focus on deterrence runs somewhat contrary to the harm reduction approach suggested by Lunceford (2011: 111), who proposes that education methods should teach young people ‘how to minimise the harm to themselves, as well as others, as they perform their sexuality’. While the primary objective of the initiative we evaluated was to alert young people to the risk of CSE, the post hoc dialogue between young people that we listened to indicates both self-reflexivity in terms of sexual preferences and maturity in terms of managing potential threats. The conversations we facilitated across focus groups suggests that this group of teenagers exhibited not only high levels of risk awareness, but were also involved in active and grounded forms of regulation. These forms of regulation were suggestive of sophistication in managing online interactions, such as those involving contact requests from unknown individuals, as the exchange between Cora and Jemma shows:

Cora: ‘Yes, like how many people add you from like Africa or something, and start messaging you.’

Jemma: ‘And it comes up saying, you have no mutual connections with these people, you can still …’

Cora: ‘I’m like, reject…’

Jemma: ‘I’ve got loads of them. I just ignore them all’.

 (Focus Group 3)

Further, other young people such as Ruby, gave examples of pre-emptive risk mitigation in relation to contact made online by strangers:

Ruby: ‘I’ve been on it [Facebook] before, gone on my message requests and I’ve had about five, and I’ve just deleted them all. And then there are times when I’ve had about ten messages at once and they’ve been reported and blocked’.

Interviewer: ‘So were you doing this before the session, or after’?

Ruby: ‘Before’.

(Focus Group 2)

Similarly, it would appear that many of the parents of the children we spoke to were active in monitoring internet interactions and social media accounts. Indeed, a referral made to the CSE team was a direct consequence of the account being monitored:

‘I’d been checking my daughter’s Instagram, as I do quite regularly, and I came across this and because it wasn’t a friendship I would consider - the two children have nothing in common - I decided to read the messages. As I went back, I came across some photos at the end of the messages’ (Jodie, Parent).

**Discussion: Implications for Future Policy and Practice**

The evaluation above has focussed on three interconnected processes of engagement, relevance and impact. In the context of this study, these processes need to be understood as constituting a dyadic relationship which is fluid and mutually constitutive. The data presented indicates that there is much to reflect on in the future formation of risk-based public health initiatives intended to raise awareness of sexual exploitation. While non-generalizable, the findings flag up several critical issues that should be considered in the future assembly and delivery of programmes designed to inform and influence the behaviour of young people around CSE. These issues can be indexed to the three areas of analysis we have drawn attention to, revolving, respectively, around context sensitivity (*engagement* with narratives of risk), acknowledgement of ambiguity (*relevance* of the strategy used to those receiving the intervention) and muted subjects (*impact* in terms of influencing the perspectives of young people).

In relation to the ways in which young people *engage* with educational initiatives conceived to inform behaviour, the significance of situating information and advice within an everyday context cannot be overstated. As observed in other areas of regulation, such as counter-radicalisation, in order to be effective risk-based preventative approaches need to be suitably sensitive toward and tailored to the needs of the target audience (see Mythen, Walklate and Peatfield, 2017). Here, the ambitions of a public health approach to develop and implement prevention strategies based on sound evidence and a clear understanding of the nature of the problem is pertinent. In this instance, in many ways, the techniques used and the messages communicated by the CSE team reflect the narrow epistemological framework within which they are obliged to operate. Such a constricted framework negates discussion of thorny topics which are highly salient for adolescents and this, in turn, generates something of a discursive gulf between the designers of CSE interventions and the target audience for such initiatives. Our findings signal the presence of a set of divergent risk perceptions, suggesting that consciousness raising activities around the threat of CSE might be more effective if they are better attuned to the everyday habitus in which young people learn to live and to love. Largely unidirectional communication which is overwhelmingly focused on risks perceived by young people to be relatively rare may not be the best mode of engaging with them, nor of encouraging them to modify ‘risky’ behaviours. Not only do ‘stranger danger’ messages fall short in challenging myths and misconceptions about who is perpetrating abuse, they also conflict with young people’s own risk landscapes and the undulations of their everyday lives. While well intentioned as a basis for engaging young people around the risk of CSE, intervention ‘stage plays’ such as KLS do not connect well with the lived experiences of young people. As Newis (2014) suggests, ‘stranger danger’ messages may ultimately put young people at greater risk and need to be supplanted by more context sensitive and attuned messages that can enable them to recognize and manage dangerous situations. Ultimately, and contrary to the objectives of a public health approach, messages communicated in initiatives such as this are potentially harm producing as well as harm reducing. In this case, the deterrent-oriented strategy deployed obscures apparent complexities and speaks around rather than to the dynamics of modern teenage relationships. As our young participants suggested, the techniques used by the team largely disregarded the experiential context within which online practices of self-curation and idealized portrayals of the self are normalized. In failing to address these issues, and foregrounding instead a message of deterrence, a vital opportunity to advise young people around how to identify, negotiate and manage potentially dangerous situations that may chime with them is being missed. In terms of the formation of upcoming strategy, the following exchange about social media management shows that the ‘pitch’ of the awareness raising we observed runs somewhat out of kilter with the practices of the young people engaging with it:

Sophie: ‘Fake accounts always send me friend requests, I had one last night, and I always decline them. I know it’s a fake account and sometimes they’ll message me. I don’t even bother with the mutual friends because how do you know your friends aren’t falling for it as well?

Interviewer: ‘And have you always done that’?

Sophie: ‘Yes. I still would have declined the friend request before the session’.

Jemma: ‘We’re not completely oblivious to what goes on’.

Sophie: ‘But if I was a year 8 I probably would have replied. If I didn't have a boyfriend, yeah, I would have’.

 (Focus Group 2)

These reflections suggest that it may be profitable to target younger audiences with less exposure to and experience of interactive media platforms, intimating that variations of delivery should reflect the age and ‘savvyness’ of the audience. The widespread evidence of active self-regulation by young people that we encountered gives pause for thought about the types of preventative techniques that might be developed in the future and the need for dialogic engagement with adolescents around building and maintaining healthy relationships. While acknowledging the risks of online engagement, some of our participants, such as Sophie, felt that broader awareness raising initiatives should occur at an earlier stage of maturation:

‘I think that children should be taught from a young age about respect, respecting themselves and respecting others. It’s like my little brother, he’s in year 6 at primary school, I think from that age he should be taught how to treat people with respect because there’s so many people who grow up thinking that they can touch people inappropriately’ (Focus Group 2).

As Sophie’s reflections suggest, different types of engagement might be advantageous in earlier years and these might be geared towards respect and appropriate conduct.

In addition to focussing on *engagement*, attention must be directed to the *relevance* of the strategy used and its likely *impacts* on the audience. Specifically, the muting of discussion about relevant, sensitive subjects left many young people with more questions to ask than answers to take away. In essence, the rigid legal and regulatory framework within which the CSE team are required to operate restricts the types of messages communicated and the conversations that are permitted. While the guidance clearly acknowledges the need to avoid victim-centric strategies and messages, practitioners are working within the confines of legislation that is archaic and inhibits enlightened discussion. This not only engenders unintended consequences for young people interfacing with awareness raising sessions, it also personalises the problem of CSE. The risk discourses operationalized by the team around internet safety and the sharing of images fuse discourses of individualisation and responsibilisation that place a heavy burden on young people. Warning against such approaches in a different context around prostitution, Melrose (2006: 2) counsels against reducing the problem to ‘one of recalcitrant individuals unwilling to accept offers of “help and support”’. These types of strategies run the risk of replicating the errors made in previous campaigns to prevent sexual assault that concentrate on encouraging potential victims to modify their own behaviour to avoid harm (Lawson, 2003). As Scoular and O’Neill (2007: 733) posit, such a focus ‘promotes a form of governance that individualises problems and detracts from government’s failure to tackle underlying conditions’. With regards to CSE, these conditions are likely to include child neglect, youth homelessness, low self-esteem and social isolation (see Hildyard and Wolfe, 2002; Smeaton, 2013 Cockbain and Wortley, 2015). In large part, the initiative we observed seeks to raise awareness through the promotion of a form of dramaturgical governance that sustains binaries between good and bad behaviour and appropriate and inappropriate sexual conduct. Communicating messages that prioritise legal consequences risks criminalising a generation of young people that choose to share sexual images, despite this practice being commonplace in courtship rituals amongst the adult population. As Burkett (2015) found, sexting occurs amongst young adults not only in the context of casual sexual dating and intimate relationships, but also within a non-sexual peer context with friends. In disengaging with particular topics and experiences - and instead emphasising legislation around the sharing of sexual images - the pleasures of risk in relationships are quieted. Crucially, fear of becoming criminalised may prevent young people from not only disclosing minor infringements but also those more harmful experiences they may have been exposed to. As a consequence, progressive discussions about contemporary sexual practices that may inform the development of a more appropriate legislative framework become silenced.

In conclusion, we have raised several critical questions for those developing programmes designed to prevent CSE and also sought to offer some insights into the ways in which public health approaches to crime prevention more generally might be interpreted and implemented in future practices. One of the main aims of the public health model is to develop a suite of prevention strategies and techniques that are rooted in evidence, clearly define the problem and identify solutions to it (Mercy, et al. 1993). In the case examined here, conflating the problem of CSE with attempts to deter the sharing of indecent images, served to generate confusion amongst the audience. So far as adopting a public health approach is concerned, our findings highlight the need for pre hoc user involvement, particularly in relation to programmes intended to educate young people. As our data shows, the cultural contexts and lifeworlds which young people are bound up in appear somewhat distant from and to those involved in the implementation of CSE awareness raising interventions. If public health approaches to crime prevention and cognate social problems are to be successful, those targeted by them should be involved in the early stages of design and consulted on modes of implementation in order to enhance relevance and to ensure that suitable platforms for dialogue are incorporated.

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