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Adam Crawford & Xavier L'Hoiry

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Boundary crossing: networked policing and emergent ‘communities of practice’ in safeguarding children

Adam Crawford^a and Xavier L’Hoiry^b

^aCentre for Criminal Justice Studies, School of Law, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK; ^bDepartment of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT

Child safeguarding has come to the forefront of public debate in the UK in the aftermath of a series of highly publicised incidents of child sexual exploitation and abuse. These have exposed the inadequacies and failings of inter-organisational relations between police and key partners. While the discourse of policing partnerships is now accepted wisdom, progress has been distinctly hesitant. This paper contributes to understanding both the challenges and opportunities presented through working across organisational boundaries in the context of safeguarding children. It draws on a study of relations within one of the largest Safeguarding Children partnerships in England, developing insights from Etienne Wenger regarding the potential of ‘communities of practice’ that innovate on the basis of everyday learning through ‘boundary work’. We demonstrate how such networked approaches expose the differential power relations and sites of conflict between organisations but also provide possibilities to challenge introspective cultures and foster organisational learning. We argue that crucial in cultivating effective ‘communities of practice’ are: shared commitment and purpose; relations of trust; balanced exchange of information and resources; mutual respect for difference; and an open and mature dialogue over possible conflicts. Boundary crossing can open opportunities to foster increased reflexivity among policing professionals, prompting critical self-reflection on values, ongoing reassessment of assumptions and questioning of terminology. Yet, there is an inherent tension in that the learning and innovative potential afforded by emergent ‘communities of practice’ derives from the coexistence and interplay between both the depth of knowledge within practices and active boundaries across practices.

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Introduction

Risks to children and young people posed by adults have multiple, often inter-related, causes, while conceptions of the nature of child maltreatment are themselves historically relative and subject to the shifts across time, place and culture. In recent years, child protection has become increasingly politicised, notably in England (Parton 2014), often as a proxy for a range of debates about the efficacy of health, welfare and policing professionals; their expertise, specialisation and interdependent relations. Safeguarding children against contemporary risks and harms cuts across the responsibilities, competencies and expertise of diverse organisations. It involves the police working closely with partner agencies – in health, education, social care and youth services *inter alia* – with

CONTACT Adam Crawford  a.crawford@leeds.ac.uk

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contrasting cultures, priorities and practices. Safeguarding children constitutes an exemplary ‘wicked problem’ as formulated by Rittel and Webber (1973) to highlight social or cultural issues that are difficult or impossible to solve due to incomplete or contradictory knowledge, have innumerable causes, do not necessarily have a right answer and are the subject of fragmentation under the contemporary division of professional labour. They elaborate: ‘The information needed to *understand* the problem depends upon one’s idea for *solving* it ... to *describe* a wicked problem in sufficient detail, one has to develop an exhaustive inventory of all conceivable *solutions* ahead of time’ (Rittel and Webber 1973, p. 161, emphasis in original). Yet, the contemporary ‘conceivable solutions’ are themselves all refracted through differing professional and organisational lenses; they tend to be bureaucracy-premised rather than problem-oriented – myopic and differentiated rather than holistic and joined up (Crawford 2001). Fragmentation suggests a condition in which those people and organisations involved see themselves as more separate than united, and in which information and knowledge are chaotic and scattered. The complex institutional division of labour that surrounds safeguarding children and young people exhibits diverse disciplinary perspectives, epistemologies and methodologies, as well as organisational and cultural barriers. The challenge for contemporary organisations when addressing such ‘wicked’ issues is how to combine effectively the contributions of different knowledgeable and competent actors towards a clear understanding of the problems and generate professional confidence in delivering appropriate interventions.

This paper contributes to understanding both the barriers and opportunities presented through working across organisational boundaries for contemporary policing through a study of relations within one of the largest Safeguarding Children partnerships in the UK; with a reputation for constructive partnership relations in a challenging national context. It develops insights from Wenger (1998) regarding ‘communities of practice’ that innovate on the basis of everyday learning and advances a concept of ‘boundary work’. We demonstrate how such networked approaches at the confluence of organisations expose the differential power relations and sites of conflict between organisations but also provide possibilities to foster organisational learning and challenge introspective cultures. We argue that crucial in cultivating emergent trans-disciplinary ‘communities of practice’ are five features: shared commitment and purpose; trust relations; balanced exchange of information and resources; mutual respect for difference; and an open and mature dialogue over possible conflicts. Each of these is considered, in turn, and illustrated through fieldwork examples. We explore the ways in which ‘boundary work’ can open up opportunities to foster increased reflexivity among policing professionals, prompting critical self-reflection on values, ongoing reassessment of assumptions and questioning of terminology. As such, the paper seeks to prompt new explorations of the possibilities for organisational learning and innovation that arise among ‘communities of practice’ through boundary work at the interface between distinct professionals with very different cultural assumptions and practices.

The paper proceeds first by highlighting the centrality of partnerships in contemporary policing and the challenges of police organisational culture therein, before going on to sketch the conceptual contours of ‘communities of practice’ as a framework for analysing what we call ‘boundary work’. By way of context, we then outline key recent developments in child protection in the UK that have prompted a ‘politics of outrage’ (Parton 2014). We go on to explore insights from the research case study regarding boundary crossing and working relations between professionals delivering child safeguarding. These are organised around five core features of communities of practice that emerged from the empirical findings. We conclude with some reflections on the future and the implications for creative trans-professional practices.

Police organisational change

Given the complex and interdependent causes of crime and disorder, by necessity contemporary policing is embedded in a constellation of inter-agency partnerships. Hence, various commentators have highlighted the need to open up policing and crime control through inter-institutional and inter-disciplinary collaborations with other public, private and third sector providers to encompass

holistic approaches to 'security governance' (Johnston and Shearing 2003) through networks, alliances and partnerships (Fleming 2006, Bratton and Tumin 2012). These novel approaches recognise that the levers and causes of crime lie far from the traditional reach of the police, let alone the criminal justice system. Crucially, there is no single agency solution to crime, given the multi-faceted nature of its causes and effects. Analogous notions of 'plural policing' (Crawford *et al.* 2005) and 'nodal governance' (Wood and Shearing 2007) allude to the multi-dimensional and cross-cutting competencies and capabilities of diverse actors in responding to crime-related harms and their prevention. Central to all is the challenge of effectively harnessing the diverse contributions of different actors and agencies in ways that contribute to desirable community safety outcomes.

While the discourse of policing partnerships is now generally accepted wisdom, and institutional frameworks exist to coordinate collective responses and pursue collaborative delivery, nevertheless, progress has been hesitant, uneven and constrained (Crawford and Cunningham 2015). Despite several decades of innovations in practice and research into partnership in community safety, many of the obstacles highlighted in the early years (Sampson *et al.* 1988, Crawford 1994, 1997) remain stubbornly persistent today. Consequently, much research analysis has centred on the barriers to effective partnership working and the causes of 'collaborative inertia' which, for Vangen and Huxham (2003, p. 62), 'relates to the often-pertaining actual outcome, in which the collaboration makes only hard fought or negligible progress'. Less attention has been given to the creative opportunities for organisational innovation and learning that collaborative working afford. Similarly, less regard has been given to the importance of practitioners' self-identity, commitment, values and motivation in fostering (or resisting) change and the role of boundary crossing therein.

Policing scholars have highlighted the stubbornness of police culture in the face of intentional organisational transformations (see Reiner 2010). Some time ago, Chan noted how change in policing is frequently resisted if it

challenges existing definitions of the problems, if it makes officers feel more vulnerable and their work less predictable, if it deviates from the accepted methods of how their work is to be accomplished, if it does not accord with 'commonsense', if it violates their collective values. (1997, p. 235)

Here, culture is understood as the everyday collective mentalities and sensibilities through which experiences, expectations and behaviour are interpreted and given meaning and by means of which people 'communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and their attitudes toward life' (Geertz 1973, p. 89). This translates into 'how officers learn the craft of the job, use their time and interact with different people' (Loftus 2010, p. 1). As a dynamic force, this comes close to an understanding of culture as a product of social learning (Wenger 1998). Forged in everyday interactions, police culture can take different forms and expressions among discrete units and sub-groups within the organisation engaged in distinct activities, external relationships and encounters with the public. Regardless, anchoring change in frontline organisational culture, demands working with the intrinsic motivations, values, commitments, beliefs and everyday social practices of those charged with delivering change on the ground. Evidently, organisational cultures can serve both as impediments to, and facilitators of, strategic change, particularly when located at the interface of differing organisations.

However, police culture is often understood as both overly homogenous (with less attention to differences between hierarchies and specialist sub-teams within the organisation) and in a negative light as constraining innovations and change. While culture can be a conservative force of tradition, it can also be a vibrant source of everyday coping and learning (Loftus 2010). Similarly, insufficient attention has been given to aspects of organisational cultures that unite practitioners working in different professions. There are, of course, important common cultural characteristics that cut across occupational boundaries (Nash and Walker 2009). Charman (2013) usefully highlights the role of humour and banter by police and ambulance staff as a means of making sense of what can be unpleasant, unpredictable and stressful situations. She shows the ways in which: 'The humour of exclusion and the humour of superiority are used to good effect to create shared cultural

understandings, reinforce group values and strengthen the bonds between organisations' (2013, p. 162). These bonds of solidarity and camaraderie are borne of a shared environment, common street-work and common exposure to difficult emergency situations.

As such, it is instructive to consider partnership working not simply from the viewpoint of institutional fault-lines and structural dynamics – as important as these are – but also from the perspective of professional practices, especially where these are situated in novel inter-institutional spaces at the edges of organisations and in emergent configurations. Hence, in this paper, we draw attention to the everyday experiences, activities and expectations of those engaged in what we term 'boundary work', notably where this involves co-location; those who negotiate and creatively seek to manage the problems they encounter within the wider structural and institutional constraints that frame their work across organisational boundaries. Through an understanding those engaged in everyday 'boundary crossing' and their practices, we can gain insights into the transformative potential, as well as knowledge and learning that such work generates. An approach that explores situated learning in a context in which it is shaped by and in turn shapes everyday practices offers particular relevance for policing; where the prevalence of an occupational culture rooted in 'craft', practitioner intuition and on-the-job tacit knowledge is foundational in making sense of police work (Manning 1977).

Communities of practice

Etienne Wenger and colleagues – working in the field of education – have provided some useful lines of enquiry with regard to the potential for developing 'communities of practice'. To this end, Lave and Wenger (1991) distinguish learning from intentional instruction (i.e. formal education and training). They argue that learning is necessarily situated, a process of participation in communities of practice. In ways that closely echo long-standing sociological insights into police learning of skills 'on-the-job' (Bayley and Bittner 1984), Lave and Wenger argue that newcomers join such communities via a process of 'legitimate peripheral participation'; namely learning by immersion in the new community and absorbing its modes of action and meaning as a part of the process of becoming a community member. The mastery of knowledge requires newcomers to move towards full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community, in ways that resemble police knowledge as a 'craft'. Thus, conceived learning is social and comes largely from experiences of participating in daily life alongside others engaged in similar practices. Communities of practice are 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger and Wenger-Trayner 2015, p. 1). They can exist within an institution or stretch across organisational boundaries that develop in mutual engagement on a joint enterprise.

These insights have implications for practitioners working in diverse fields, especially where inter-organisational partnerships of practice are concerned, such as community safety (Henry 2012). Communities of practice are as diverse as the situations that give rise to them. Some communities of practice are deliberately designed (Wenger 1998, p. 244) – they are institutionally intended – while others have an emergent quality, forged through interaction and negotiation. For Wenger *et al.* (2002, pp. 23–41), despite taking various forms, all 'communities of practice' share a basic structure that includes three interlocking and mutually constitutive elements of: domain, community and practice. The domain is the shared enterprise that a community is engaged in; it denotes the topic that the community focuses on and is committed to and hence the community's identity. As such, membership implies a commitment to the domain, and a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. The community refers to those who are engaged in the shared enterprise articulated by the domain. Members engage in joint activities and build relationships that enable them to learn from and help each other. Finally, the practice is a shared repertoire of resources; 'a set of frameworks, ideas, tools, information, styles' (Wenger *et al.* 2002, p. 29) and ways of addressing recurring problems. It constitutes the specific knowledge – through language, stories and documents – that the members share. It is by developing these three elements in parallel that a community of practice is cultivated.

Within communities of practice, learning is viewed as a reflexive engagement through dialogue in an attempt to make sense of, and create meaning from, experience. It is at the interface between professions that new learning resources can flourish. Hence, communities of practice exhibit distinct network-like qualities. For Wenger (2010, p. 191), communities and networks are two types of structuring processes whereby the former emphasises identity and the latter stresses connectivity. Consequently, networks and bureaucracies have very different mechanisms of governance and logics of accountability (Fleming and Rhodes 2005). The *intra*-organisational focus of bureaucracies affords scant regard to the more complex process of negotiating shared purposes, particularly where there is no hierarchy of control. As such, communities of practice cannot be 'managed' in the traditional control-oriented manner but need to be cultivated through more arms-length processes that accord greater sway to interdependencies.

Inter-organisational teams, clusters and networks may constitute *emergent* communities of practice in the sense that they are fluid and dynamic over time, involve greater uncertainty, rely more evidently on informal relations and, hence, are often harder to control than more stable or fixed groupings (Juriado and Gustafsson 2007). Wenger recognises not only that boundaries exist between communities of practice, as an unavoidable outcome of any depth of knowledge particularly as these become more highly specialised, but also that 'boundaries are interesting places' as a source of learning in that the 'meetings of perspectives can be rich in new insights and radical innovations' (Wenger 2010, p. 183). So too, boundaries can become 'places of potential misunderstanding arising from different enterprises, commitments, values, repertoires, and perspectives' (Wenger 2010, p. 183). Consequently, it is at the intersections and boundaries between communities of practice that productive dynamics can be forged, as innovations and ideas produced in one domain are translated and feed into others. It is here that 'knowledge brokers' (Wenger *et al.* 2002, p. 154), with membership in multiple communities, can act as 'translators' between communities, combining knowledge. As such, they have an important role in spurring innovation. But there is a profound paradox at the heart of learning within a 'system of practices' that constitute a field or domain – such as safeguarding children – namely, the learning and innovative potential of the whole system derives from the co-existence and interplay between depth of knowledge within practices and active boundaries across practices.

For Wenger, the concept of 'community of practice' also implies an ethic with regard to how practitioners invest and utilise their identities as they travel through the landscape of boundaries and practice-based communities. This prompts ethical questions about how practitioners contribute to learning as 'brokers' using multi-membership as a bridge across practices and how they exploit their unique position 'to see the need for a community with the legitimacy to call it into being and becoming conveners' (Wenger 2010, p. 197). This ethic infers that practitioners utilise their position as 'learning citizens' to challenge misunderstandings, innovate and disrupt unreflexive assumptions entrenched in historic practices.

Safeguarding children in the UK

It has long been recognised that the challenges in delivering effective safeguarding services for children and young people demand cross-agency working and robust inter-organisational partnerships. In the recommendations of her *Report of the inquiry into child abuse in Cleveland 1987*, Butler-Sloss (1988, pp. 248–251) prominently highlighted the need for improved inter-agency coordination in dealing with child abuse cases of the future. Whilst much has changed in the subsequent 30 years to facilitate and embed partnership working, the obstacles to delivering genuinely joined-up and effective responses to child abuse and sexual exploitation remain stubborn. The Children Act 1989, introduced soon after the Cleveland inquiry, gave every child the right to protection from abuse and exploitation. Under section 47 of the 1989 Act, the police, working with partner agencies – children's Social Care, Health and Education services – are responsible for making enquiries to safeguard the welfare of any child in the area who is suffering (or likely to suffer) significant harm. The police are

under a duty to refer to the local authority those 'children in need' and the local authority is under a general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are believed to be in need (s. 17 of the 1989 Act). The intervening years, however, have seen a series of high profile cases that have exposed deep faults in safeguarding children services, much of the blame for which has been placed at the door of inadequate communications between intervening organisations.

While each successive safeguarding scandal has prompted wide-ranging reviews, lengthy inquiries, profound public debate and policy responses, there have been significant similarities in the failings of key public services. The Laming Report (2003) into the death of Victoria Climbié in early 2000 found that health, police and social services missed 12 opportunities to prevent Victoria's death from severe child abuse and neglect. The Report prompted the 2004 Children's Act which mandated that each local authority appointed a Children's Director and that statutory Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) replaced erstwhile Area Child Protection Committees. LSCBs assumed responsibility for overseeing and coordinating a multi-agency response to child sexual abuse and exploitation and to ensure their effectiveness in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children in its area. Government guidance entitled *Working Together* (first published in 1999) sets out how organisations and individuals should work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people in accordance with the Children Acts 1989 and 2004. It includes the advice that 'every LSCB should play a strong role in supporting information sharing between and within organisations and addressing any barriers to information sharing' which 'should include ensuring that a culture of information sharing is developed' (HM Government 2015, p. 71).

Nonetheless, tragic cases have continued to expose the fault-lines. Notably, 'Baby P', a 17-month-old boy (Peter Connelly) who died in August 2007 at home in north London, after months of abuse having suffered more than 50 injuries, and having been visited some 60 times by the authorities in the 8 months before his death. A serious case review revealed extensive incompetence on the part of social workers, doctors, lawyers and police (Jones 2010). Similar issues have come to the fore following a number of highly publicised incidents of child sexual exploitation (CSE) in which the police and local authorities failed to protect vulnerable children. In November 2010, five men were convicted of sexual offences against under-aged girls in Rotherham. A subsequent independent inquiry into the handling of the cases claimed that, as a 'conservative estimate', some 1400 children had been abused in and around Rotherham during the period between 1997 and 2013 (Jay 2014, p. 1). The report was highly critical of the local authority and the police's role in handling child sexual abuse investigations, accusing them of blatant collective failures. Further allegations have arisen in which similar patterns of sexual abuse against under-aged girls have been reported in as many other towns and cities in the UK.

Added to this, historic child sex abuse offences by a string of well-known public figures in the UK have emerged since the launch of the Metropolitan Police's Operation Yewtree in October 2012. The investigation explored allegations made by over 200 complainants spread across 14 police force areas spanning a period of four decades. The investigation was described by one Police Commander as 'a watershed moment for child abuse investigations' (Dodd 2012). Given the tide of scandals, a currently ongoing Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse was established and placed on a statutory footing in early 2015. Scheduled for completion by 2020, its terms of reference are to 'consider the extent to which state and non-state institutions have failed in their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation'. While plagued by controversies – the first three Chairs (Lady Butler-Sloss, Dame Fiona Woolf and Dame Lowell Goddard) all resigned – the scale and duration of the inquiry are unprecedented.

Meanwhile, in a letter to the Chief Inspector of Constabulary in 2016, the head of Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills which inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people in the UK) criticised police forces for failing to take child protection matters seriously. He referred to the fact that more than half of Ofsted's 42 inspections of local authority children's services in the previous year had identified serious weaknesses in the police's contribution to safeguarding children. Inspectors had found that police forces were failing to share

information about domestic abuse cases in a timely way and were not notifying social workers quickly enough when children went missing.

Evidently, the problem of child sexual abuse and the inadequate organisational responses to it have become something of a national trauma in the UK. This has resulted in what Parton (2014, p. 11) refers to as a growing 'politics of outrage', directed not solely at the perpetrators of crime but also at the professionals responsible for the various cases of institutional failure and the operation of the child protection system itself. Undoubtedly, this reflects not only the nature of the harm caused, its apparent widespread pervasiveness and institutional failures to recognise or address the vulnerabilities to which children have been (and are) exposed, but also the unquestionable 'wickedness' of the problem itself – in the sense that Rittel and Webber (1973) deploy the term – in that it exhibits both social complexity and institutional fragmentation.

Leeds safeguarding children

Against this bleak national backdrop, safeguarding children services in the city of Leeds have drawn considerable praise and recognition in recent years (Ofsted 2015). Services are coordinated by the LSCB which provides leadership, management and governance to partnerships delivering child protection. They sit nested within a wider commitment by Leeds City Council to bring organisations, businesses and individuals together to make Leeds a 'child-friendly city' across all services, sectors and fields of social life. The LSCB consists of senior representatives for the principal agencies involved in delivering and promoting the welfare of children in the city. Their task is to co-ordinate the actions of agencies represented on the Safeguarding Board and to ensure their effectiveness in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children in its area. The LSCB provides oversight of the Children's Trust Board which consists of key multi-agency stakeholders from health, schools, children's services, youth justice and police. The Children's Social Work department assesses and supports children and young people. The council's Integrated Safeguarding Unit brings together a variety of services including education and healthcare to deal with child safeguarding matters in collaboration with partner agencies, including the police.

At an operational level, the focal point in Leeds is the 'front door' Safeguarding Hub; an integrated and co-located unit that brings together partners from a range of organisations, including police, children's social work, probation, local authority anti-social behaviour team, housing, education, health and youth offending services. The 'front door' provides early and targeted services to families, children and young people in relation to safeguarding concerns and domestic violence incidents involving children. It provides opportunities to gather, share and exploit information and intelligence. Within the 'front door', the police have embedded a dedicated Partnership Vulnerability Unit which seeks to enable early assessment and information sharing, as well as operational decision-making. The 'front door' is supported by the restructuring of social work services into a locality model based around 25 multi-agency 'clusters' across the city. Each cluster is coordinated by a Targeted Services Leader and brings together a range of locally based agencies including (but not limited to) schools, social workers, healthcare workers, youth justice, housing, police and third sector organisations. Alongside the dedicated Partnership Vulnerability Unit, West Yorkshire Police have a number of specialist units within their safeguarding structure whose remit includes child protection, notably a CSE and Missing Persons Unit and a Public Protection Unit, both of which operate out of police headquarters in Leeds.

Daily partnership meetings focus on high-risk cases, allowing information sharing and the development of action plans relating to victims, perpetrators and children. The purpose is to enable the management of risk, facilitate the coordination of support and reduce duplication and multiple contacts with victims. In recent years, there has been an investment in, and commitment to, early intervention and the use of 'restorative practices' – notably family group conferencing – in line with the ambition for Leeds to become a 'Restorative City' (Leeds City Council 2015). Significant funding from the UK Government's Innovation Programme has enabled professional staff across multiple agencies

(such as the health service, police, schools, voluntary and community organisations) and Leeds City Council to receive training in restorative approaches. The subsequent Ofsted inspection report found 'clear evidence of continuous strengthening of partnerships between schools, police, health and the voluntary sector, supported by the children's social work service' (2015, p. 15, para 38).¹ This is reflected in a general commitment to engage in a 'professional conversation' between agencies to explore concerns about child protection and safeguarding 'wherever and whenever' these arise. According to Ofsted, this openness and 'assured professional response ... enhances the confidence of these agencies in working with families significantly reducing any barriers between professional boundaries' (2015, p. 15, para 42).

While the Ofsted inspection report in 2015 provided a favourable review of safeguarding services in Leeds, an earlier inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) of West Yorkshire Police's engagement with child protection found that: 'some multi-agency teams were less developed, for example in Leeds, and this led to inconsistencies in practices across the force area' (HMIC 2015, p. 11). It also raised concerns about 'how little the police were involved in longer-term plans for children who were most at risk'. Police attendance at case conferences where there may have been a need for a child protection plan was found to be both limited and uneven. The HMIC concluded that the police did not always fulfil its responsibilities under the statutory guidance to attend initial case conferences when required to do so thus highlighting potential areas for improvement in partnership relations and boundary working.

Research study

The independent study sought to explore the views of actors engaged across the spectrum of delivering safeguarding children services in Leeds. Specifically, it was designed to capture the reflections of both individuals with managerial and strategic responsibilities as well as 'frontline' staff delivering services and seeing the practical implications of partnership working or lack thereof. Two principal elements of data collection were undertaken. First, face-to-face interviews were carried out with six senior managers working within the partnership framework of child safeguarding in Leeds. Second, 9 focus groups were conducted with a total of 50 frontline staff drawn from key organisations involved in child safeguarding activities in Leeds (see Table 1). These organisations were: social work (20), the police (15), health (7), youth services (5) and third sector organisations (3). The three social work focus groups were drawn from across the three different districts that make up Leeds. The three police focus groups included one comprising specialist staff in the Police's Adult and Child Safeguarding Unit, one from the Partnership Vulnerability Unit and one drawn from specialist officers focusing specifically upon CSE and Missing Persons. Table 1 provides a breakdown of participants in each focus

Table 1. FG participants.

FG No.	FG	No. of participants	Participants
1	Social work	7	Social work managers (×3) and social workers (×4)
2	Social work	7	Social workers (×7)
3	Social work	6	Social work manager and social workers (×5)
4	Police (adult & child safeguarding unit)	6	Detective sergeants (×2), constables (×3) and trainee investigator
5	Police (CSE & missing persons unit)	5	Detective sergeant, constables (×3) and trainee investigator
6	Police (partnership vulnerability unit)	4	Detective sergeants (×2) and constables (×2)
7	Youth service	5	Youth service team leaders (×2), youth workers (×3)
8	Health care	7	Safeguarding nurses (hospital-based) (×2), school nurses (×2), specialist nurse for looked after young people and health visitors (×2)
9	Third sector	3	Family intervention service team leader, families first team leader and housing support worker

group (FG), their professional expertise and their roles within the framework of safeguarding children services.

Fieldwork was conducted between May and August 2015. Interviews and focus groups all lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed with each participant assigned an anonymous unique identifier.² As the second largest Children's Safeguarding Board in England with a considerable caseload, Leeds provides an interesting case study in which to explore both the prospects for and challenges of delivering inter-organisational policing partnerships in the context of child protection. The relatively recent organisational changes enabled possibilities for boundary work to establish itself in innovative ways, but there also exist familiar stubborn inter-organisational obstacles that have stymied progress.

Boundary work

In what follows, we explore the empirical findings organised around key attributes of safeguarding partnerships that our research suggests foster and help cultivate forms of creative boundary crossing. In so doing, we draw upon insights from conceptions of 'communities of practice' and highlight the evident possibilities of 'boundary work' for organisational learning, critical reflexivity and innovations in practice.

Shared commitment and purpose

A shared sense of commitment and purpose is a prerequisite for effective partnership working across organisational boundaries. Fleming and Rhodes (2005, p. 195) note: 'Shared values and norms and an appreciation of divergent organisational cultures are the glue which holds the complex set of relationships together'. This necessitates crafting a mutual understanding about the problem and collective commitment to possible solutions. Practitioners in the focus groups felt that much progress had been made over the preceding years – despite the fluctuating national backdrop and distinctly different organisational priorities – in fostering shared commitment and purpose across agency boundaries. Strong leadership was noted as a major factor in driving this improvement by providing strategic direction that professionals felt a mutual commitment towards. In interview, a Social Care manager, reflecting the views of others, commented:

We've got senior police officers now who are up for it as well. It's senior management in the police who see that, actually, we can't do this alone ... so that's the big difference. They can't work in isolation anymore, they've done it in the past but the only way that it can work now is [if] we all work together. (Social Care Manager #1)

This was reiterated in the focus groups:

It's coming from the top and that's been one of the priorities to link in with senior management in the police and it's working ... There's a clear vision and obviously that's so embedded now and we see the benefits. (Social Worker FG1#1)

This was also perceived to be apparent not just at management levels within the participating organisations but also by those working at the frontline:

[The strategic direction] filters down nicely. Sometimes [in the past] you could have people at the top having a different vision but it's not filtering down to the bottom. But [now] it does, it comes down and works for us [at the frontline]. (Third Sector FG9#3)

Nonetheless, there was little evidence of a consistent or unproblematic cascading of the operation of partnership relations from managerial to frontline staff. In essence, managerial and frontline staff experience partnership relations differently. So too, the cultural barriers between managers of different organisations are less evident as they share similar lived experiences of managing (large) public sector organisations and workforce. As a consequence, relationships between partners tend to be more easily established and consistent at managerial levels. However, shared experiences by frontline

personnel of imposed organisational change and managerial reform (notably in the light of austerity measures) provided interesting sites of shared appreciation and empathy.

Equally, however, within the broad strategic vision, divergences in ways of achieving a common purpose inevitably act as inhibitors to productive boundary work. Professionals from partner agencies have differing, and sometimes incompatible, tacit assumptions about the problem and ways of working. The destination may be shared but the means of getting to it frequently diverge. Each group of professionals often believes that their understandings are complete and shared by (or should be shared by) all others. In particular, the emphasis on evidence gathering and prosecutorial zeal of the police were perceived by many participants from across all non-police agencies to sit at odds with the processes and values of partner agencies:

The agenda is always going to be different. So they [police] are always going to be looking for a criminal investigation. We always have to manage what's happened within the family. So as long as you've got two different outcomes, potentially there'll always be issues in how you work together because the agenda at the beginning is different. (Social Worker FG3#6)

Likewise, this was also recognised from a police perspective:

You'd like to think that we're all working to the same aim, to protect children and vulnerable people that need safeguarding. But from a police point of view we're very much focused on 'has a criminal offence occurred?' (Police FG4#4)

In interview, an education manager articulated much the same tension regarding the place of criminal prosecutions within the wider problem of safeguarding and securing the protection of children:

There's a huge world of safeguarding outside that legislative process that the police would not be involved in. And it is around prevention, it's around investigation, it's about children building up that resilience, it's about understanding, it's about working with families. (Education Manager #2)

Highlighted here are the ways in which organisational priorities and structural conflicts that arise from the different functions performed by diverse professionals – reflected in distinct cultural norms and social practices – express themselves in and through routinised social action and the everyday practices to which they give rise.

In safeguarding children, these structural tensions often express themselves in what is seen as a clash between the police's perceived narrow focus on crime and criminalisation and other agencies' longer-term goals, as the following healthcare professional articulated:

I think the police are just concentrating on 'is there a crime? Is there evidence?' We appreciate that but, from a school nursing point of view, there's a big emotional health thing, so we're very much about that. (Healthcare FG8#4)

Building a case to establish whether a crime has been committed or not can result in prioritising certain responses over and above others, as a police officer acknowledged:

In child protection, you may be investigating a crime so our outcome is the investigation of that crime, to detect it. That can be to find information that assists the prosecution but also undermines it, which can sometimes mean questioning people, and asking difficult questions about information and what people have said. Whereas Social Care can be frustrated by that [approach]. (Police FG5#1)

These tensions can play out in interactions with members of the public, as the following social worker explained:

I think it's hard when you're going [to do a joint visit] with other professionals because you're looking for different things. So you're asking different questions and it can become a bit confusing [for the family] what the nature or the purpose of the visit is. (Social Worker FG2#5)

In some cases, differing priorities and approaches can lead professionals to be reluctant to get the police involved in the first place, particularly where the involvement of the criminal process is

perceived to be counter-productive. Echoing the views of other FG participants, one-third sector worker suggested in relation to a recent case with a problematic young person:

The last thing we had in our minds was to make the police phone call because we didn't want to criminalise the young person. I was thinking why are we making a police call when in theory that could be dealt with via the social work system or mental health for young people? (Third Sector FG9#3)

Some professionals saw this tension as, in part, a temporal clash between the more immediate short-term needs for protection and longer-term demands of safeguarding through engagement, prevention, education and relationship building. Given demands on police time, it was frequently suggested that if the police see no obvious criminal prosecution then the justification for their continued involvement in the case fades.

For the police the law is very black and white and they've got to work within that legal framework and if they can't make a conviction then they'll just pull out and that's their involvement ended. Obviously, we have to carry on and things are a bit more grey for us, we've got to look at other factors and not just what's within the law. We've got to look at how that affects the child as well. (Social Worker FG2#2)

Hence, police involvement can be seen as intermittent and primarily prosecution-focused, which may not serve the long-term aims of safeguarding. Furthermore, relations between partners, at times, can be undermined by perceived imbalances in authority and power. There was also noted a perception on behalf of members of the public that the police are the key decision-makers, which can impact adversely on the work of others:

Families view the police as the more powerful agency. So if the police don't take further action, it makes a mockery of what we're doing – like our work has to stop because the police work has. (Social Worker FG2#2)

These 'latent' structural differences in organisational role and authority present real challenges for professionals seeking to develop new 'communities of practice' and are particularly acute in the context (and shadow) of the criminal justice process (Sampson *et al.* 1988, Crawford 1997). As Rutherford noted, some time ago, this leaves criminal justice personnel and partners faced by a perennial challenge of 'how to work creatively with the inherent tensions, affording legitimacy to both independence and interdependence' (1993, p. 126).

Relations of trust: relative stability and co-location

Whilst the vertical chains within and between departments and agencies in any one field are strong, the horizontal links tend to be weak or non-existent. Emergent 'communities of practice', therefore, require movement away from working in and through hierarchies – the traditional structure of bureaucracies (most evident in 'command and control' type organisations like the police) – to working through networks (Wenger *et al.* 2002). These networks are characterised by diplomacy, trust and reciprocity rather than the hierarchical authority and rules of bureaucracies (Fleming and Rhodes 2005). One way in which inter-agency tensions express themselves is in 'distrust' and mutual suspicion between personnel from differing organisations. Mary Douglas (1986) correctly noted how 'writing about co-operation and solidarity means writing at the same time about rejection and mistrust' (1986, p. 1). Developing trust across organisational and cultural boundaries is hugely difficult, particularly where there is a history of mistrust or misunderstanding. One police officer noted: 'When we work with other agencies, I think it's a [lack of] understanding of what each other's role is – I think that's what makes us at loggerheads' (FG5#3).

Hence, overcoming misunderstanding about the role, aims, values and limitations of other professionals through building meaningful and sustainable relations of trust are vital:

When we first started working in the [Safeguarding] Team, we didn't know those [police] officers ... at the start I think the police were quite paranoid ... But now, and it's to do with relationships, we have very open discussions and we are open with them and they are open with us. It's that trust, building that trust and having those relationships over a period of time that counts. (Social Worker FG1#1)

Trust is facilitated by the relative stability in interpersonal relations between partners which fosters greater mutual understanding and reciprocity. The following police officer echoed the views of the majority of other professionals:

It's more or less the same people [that we work with every day] ... and that's good because we build up a relationship with them and an understanding of how we work – coming from different angles ... You know who to go to, you know who to contact and you know how they work ... You know your expectations as well ... It's understanding each other's process and procedures ... We all have difficult jobs for different reasons ... So it's about the realisation of the strengths and weaknesses of both your roles. (Police FG6#1)

Maintaining stable relationships, however, is subject to a range of practical obstacles, notably different patterns of working, particularly around weekends. This difficulty was highlighted by a number of non-police professionals:

When [police] work different shifts to us as well that can be difficult. I had one a few weeks ago and they said, 'well he's not on until the weekend' and I don't work a weekend. (Social Worker FG2#7)

From a police perspective, this prompts complaints that other partners 'go home at weekends' and that 'child abuse doesn't happen Monday to Friday, 9 till 5 and that's frustrating for us' (Police FG4#3). Another police officer elaborated:

You could go three or four weeks without having a chance to speak to a social worker because of your shifts, rest days, working lates and nights. So you can't go on joint visits, you can't speak to schools, you can't do any of that ... It also means that those officers can't attend strategy meetings, they can't attend professionals' meetings because if you start work at 4 or 5pm in the afternoon, then all the other [partners'] officers have gone home. (Police FG5#5)

In addition, the turnover of key staff out of particular teams or localities severely disrupts relationships that have built up over time. This was especially evident within the police as one social care manager commented reiterating the frustrations of many others:

One of the challenges with police is that they move people around. I understand the reason for doing that but in my career I feel like I've so often built a relationship with somebody – it's taken me several years – and then they move on and it feels like you're starting again. (Social Care manager #2)

This 'churn' of personnel was also recognised by police as particularly problematic in terms of the loss of human capital through expertise and skills that are built up in safeguarding as a specialism.

We don't always help ourselves with moving people around: 'You've already done so long so you can go somewhere else and get some expertise'. [Safeguarding children] is a specialism that requires an in-depth knowledge of how it works and what everybody's doing from the other agencies, the third sector and everybody else. (Police FG5#1)

Bringing multi-agency teams together in the same physical location – often jointly managed – serves as a means of forging emergent communities of practice. Whilst co-location is not essential for effective boundary crossing and partnership working, co-located teams help to foster dynamics in which 'communities of practice' can flourish. Sometimes this is met with an initial reluctance on the part of the affected staff which can be overcome by the practical benefits of day-to-day interactions (Crawford and Cunningham 2015). Co-location and cluster working was identified by staff working in safeguarding as a key mechanism of building interpersonal trust relations between colleagues from different agencies.

The big difference in our role in the [Safeguarding] Team and social work teams in the area is that we are so fortunate that we have police at hand and they have us at hand as well, so it works both ways. It's changed our job significantly for the better that we've got that two way process and constant dialogue and constant discussion with police officers, and they're there [in the same office] and they're very accessible. (Social Worker FG1#1)

Correspondingly, a police manager identified the importance of the multi-agency safeguarding 'front door' for building collaborative relations on mutual understanding at the outset of cases:

Having been involved now for a few years, the earliest point when you can have a discussion with a partner is vital ... In the past, we have shared emails and shared conversations and reports with Children's Social Care and other partners, and they have not been as beneficial as that initial face-to-face conversation. (Police Manager #1)

Conversely, a police officer working outside of the co-located clusters commented on the different experience of cross-boundary working for those not co-located.

Down at the Partnership Vulnerability Unit they've got good relations because they work in the same office and they know who to go to if it's a particular area they need to speak to somebody in. With us, it's a different social worker depending on where the child lives so we don't necessarily build up those relationships unless it's a long enquiry that we're dealing with together. (Police FG4#5)

The majority of participants agreed that getting to know people can help forge collective team identities and erode stereotypical (mis)perceptions. The following is illustrative of many:

I think the clusters are brilliant ... Because you are in your own little bubble, you do get to know everybody ... So even if you don't know directly who you're going to go to, you'll know how to get to somebody who will know. (Social Worker FG2#3)

Furthermore, close-knit teams foster relationships that enable members to learn from each other about ways of addressing recurring problems. They provide shared knowledge – through shared stories and documents.

Barriers have been broken because we go in in the morning and sit there and we leave at night and we leave together. So it's about personal relationships as well and because of that we have banter with them, we have a joke with them and we go out for a drink with them and that actually really helps to break down those barriers and form relationships. So it's easy to challenge [each other] isn't it? If you can work with somebody then you can challenge them and say; well, actually I don't agree with that, why can't you do a joint visit? It is a lot about those face-to-face relationships and we are very fortunate. Other teams ... won't have that luxury. (Social Worker FG1#2)

As such, close working relations can foster changes in attitudes and behaviours. Reflecting the views of many, one youth worker acknowledged: 'The clusters have been a major [force of] cultural change' (Youth Service FG7#3). In part, this arises as interpersonal connections afford rich social capital via the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them (Putnam 2000). In many cases of boundary work, these will constitute 'weak ties' serving instrumental goals that do not rely to the same extent on shared values. Here, they constitute a form of social lubricant that allows people to get along, without feeling the need to share too much in terms of identity, interdependency or shared commitment. Where trans-organisational team identity is more developed and resilient, however, these relations may constitute 'strong ties' that exhibit a greater normative sway through dense networks of reciprocal social relations, a common purpose and joint commitment, enabling frontline workers to go beyond their traditional roles and forge new communities of practice. Here, interpersonal trust relations and the norms that accompany them constitute the social glue that binds people together in a shared sense of belonging and identity.

Exchange of information and resources

A key dimension of reciprocity in partnership working around safeguarding is the balanced exchange of information and resources. Among professionals working closely together in multi-disciplinary safeguarding teams the flow and exchange of information and resources was seen as pivotal to ensure good working relations, as the following police officer attested reflecting a view shared by many:

We are pretty good at sharing information because we can't moan about we're supposed to work together but then not do it ourselves. So within the guidelines of data protection, we are quite free in what kind of information we give which is relevant. (Police FG4#1)

Again, trust plays a crucial role both as a precursor for information exchange and as a product of its exchange. Trust circulates in and accelerates norms of reciprocity in potentially virtuous cycles: 'I think as trust builds up between partners and agencies, that information sharing gets better' (Youth Service FG7#1). Trust becomes reinforced as information flows improve and reciprocal relations become denser. The following interviewee expressed the commonly held view that information exchange had deepened as relations had become more embedded and mature:

Information sharing has improved massively with the clusters coming along ... For me it's about trust, credibility, worth and value for agencies of them sharing information. Where we've made progress over the last couple of years is we've shown other agencies the value of them sharing information with us and we've built that trust. (Youth Service FG7#4)

While information exchange through interpersonal relations, fluid team exchanges and informal working practices can provide a valuable basis for communication and negotiation, so too, it can provide opportunities that endanger important confidentiality and might sometimes constitute threats to privacy or civil liberties. Hence, balanced information exchange also demands mutual understanding of the limits and legal constraints. There are also implications for professionals' relations with children, young people and their families.

I think Social Care are getting better [at sharing information with the police]. There's a little bit of a fear with Social Care and partner agencies that work with children. Sometimes they don't want to share particular disclosures with us because then the child is aware that they've disclosed something to us and that can break down a relationship. They could have spent months working with somebody, building trust, this child discloses something, then they tell us and bang, it's gone. So I can completely understand the mind-set that they're coming from. (Police FG5#3)

Consequently, learning is not always an inevitable by-product of partnerships as information exchange itself can be a source of conflict particularly in the context of crime control where information sharing is governed by complex rules and laws relating to sensitive data and privacy, as well as the non-interoperability of much data across different organisational systems for data management. Similarly, learning may be hindered by risks associated with disclosing too much information to partners. Nonetheless, a balanced exchange of information and resources that flows in reciprocal circuits within emergent communities of practice can constitute the basis to contribute to new forms of knowledge production that are genuinely 'trans-disciplinary' (Nowotny 2015), in that they are forged at the intersections between professional boundaries. Boundary workers thus also constitute 'knowledge brokers' (Wenger *et al.* 2002, p. 154) that can serve as 'translators' between different organisation, combining knowledge and generating new insights. These can be assets with which to challenge introspective cultures, foster organisational learning and prompt critical reflexivity.

Mutual respect for difference

The existence of latent structural tensions and power differentials places great emphasis upon the manner in which these are managed in routine social practices. A crucial element in this is making partners aware of roles and responsibilities as well as the limitations of their own and other organisations' contribution, so that they neither try to 'do it all' (something that the police are particularly prone to do), nor do they have unrealistic expectations of what others can deliver.

Integration is key, but it's also key that your roles are clearly defined and so nobody is under any misconception: the police are here for a reason, to detect crime. Social Care are there for a different reason and it's about how different relationships intertwine and support each other. (Police FG6#1)

Fundamentally, though, there is a need for mutual respect for different types of contributions. Shared understanding does not mean that all the partners necessarily agree on the problem or hold the same view of it. Rather, it demands that the partners understand each other's positions well enough to have meaningful dialogue about the different interpretations of the problem, and to exercise collective intelligence about how best to seek to resolve it.

It's about being open and honest about your role. We have policies and procedures that we have to follow, it's not a choice. As part of our assessment for child safeguarding matters we take into consideration the child's voice, what does the child want and this is all fed into the decision-making on whether it's in the public interest to prosecute the family members because a lot of the stuff we deal with is intra-familial. So it's about that open, honest and transparent – 'cards on the table' – discussion with your partners about what you see these pathways it can go down. (Police FG6#2)

This acknowledgement and celebration of difference, in terms of the skills and expertise it contributes to a more holistic approach was also recognised by most participants:

I think it's good to be different. That's why other agencies are involved because you're drawing on other people's expertise and backgrounds and they'll see things differently. Just because I see things differently to you, as long as you communicate that then you can see things differently and you're going to get the same outcome. You learn from others. (Third Sector FG9#2)

Hence, boundary work not only provides different insights but can challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and cultural practices in ways that can offer opportunities for organisational learning. It is, here, at the intersections and nexus between organisations that productive spaces for learning and change can be forged. Through 'boundary work' new ideas and practices can be generated and translated from one context to another.

Conflict management

The constructive management of conflict was identified by almost all participants as a hallmark of a mature child safeguarding partnership. In Leeds, this was reflected in the explicit commitment to what was referred to as a 'professional conversation' whereby practitioners at all levels are encouraged to discuss difficult issues through frank and open dialogue between partners as a means to resolving problems. In interview, a social care manager explained what this means in practice and its implications:

The common thread is that we have shared behaviour which is if there are issues we talk about them. We find solutions. We don't blame each other; we work together. We have 'good' rows – and I mean that positively because actually tough complex things sometimes need tough complex discussions. Where we're unhappy with each other, we tell each other. We're very good at sharing responsibility for those things. (Social Care Manager #1)

Moreover, there was some evidence that a mature *inter*-organisational dialogue between partners can also encourage greater *intra*-organisational communication, 'voice' and organisational justice, as managers listen to and engage with concerns of frontline staff. For example, a police manager highlighted the ways in which challenges from external partners can constructively improve the ways in which supervisors and frontline staff seek to assess and solve problems.

We've got to a place now where challenge is accepted and quite often there's regular strong discussions taking place between professionals and the police and professionals within partners to look at plans. I've been delighted with the response from people at my level in the partnership who will go back [to their own staff] and challenge the assessments and say: 'I'm not happy with that plan, you need to look at that'. It's more robust and manages the risk. (Police Manager #1)

This trans-professional sharing of learning can prompt an ongoing reassessment of assumptions, critical self-reflection on values and questioning of terminology. So too, the individuals engaged in such boundary work practices can become 'knowledge brokers' as they move between communities of practice. As Wenger (2010, p. 183) notes 'boundaries are interesting places' that generate new learning, insights and innovations in practice. Disagreement and challenge as a reflexive engagement through dialogue can form the basis for learning within 'communities of practice' that filters outwards, downwards and upwards. In an organisation like the police, where introspective cultures of defensiveness, suspicion of outsiders and a hierarchical 'command and control' model of decision-making apply, the opportunities for organisational learning are simultaneously most challenging but also possibly most rewarding.

Such practices of boundary work, nevertheless, raise vexed questions about responsibility and accountability, given the complex interdependencies in decision-making and multiple layers of authority that are entailed. Joint and negotiated decisions frequently tie the various parties into outcomes but can fail to identify lines of responsibility. As authority is 'shared', it becomes difficult to disentangle. Hence, clarifying lines of responsibility in this complex context becomes crucial.

Because of the professionalism that's involved nowadays, I don't think [partners] hold grudges. Those in Social Care that we work with closely, we might disagree but that's it, and you put it down to 'your priorities are different to ours'. As long as you can understand that – and don't get me wrong, there are other officers who get quite upset about some of the decisions – but actually, you have to put it in that box of: 'whose responsibility is this to make that decision?' You might not agree with it but ... you understand that it's their responsibility. I've said at meetings: 'I understand it's your responsibility but please make a note in the minutes that I don't agree with that'. (Police FG5#4)

In some instances of boundary work, institutional complexity can serve to obscure further who is accountable to whom and for what. This gives rise to what Rhodes (1996, p. 663) identified as, "the problem of many hands", where so many people contribute that no one contribution can be identified'. This returns us to the challenges for working within the creative tensions between independence and interdependence in boundary work.

Future challenges

The current period of austerity in public sector funding in the UK has resulted in unprecedented reductions in police budgets and police officer numbers as well as severe cuts to local authority resource. This presents critical challenges for the future of inter-organisational networks and emergent 'communities of practice'. The ways in which public sector organisations have and are responding to these fiscal challenges can have ambiguous implications for cross-boundary working. On the one hand, organisations (including the police) might retreat increasingly into their own professional 'silos'; retracting from inter-organisational collaborations and commitments, while redrawing their boundaries to focus on core objectives off-loading responsibilities to others, wherever possible. Short-term cost savings may be prioritised at the expense of partnership commitments, particularly where key individuals, posts or teams are lost to early retirements or workforce reorganisations. Similarly, the pressures on workloads – given reductions in staff numbers – can leave little time for boundary work as practitioners withdraw from engagement to focus on core tasks. There is growing evidence that this scenario is playing itself out across community safety partnerships (Crawford and Evans 2017). It was also reflected in the safeguarding context:

Because they're cutting some of the funding for the cluster services, they're looking at social workers to do the work. I see our job, unfortunately, now as a case manager. We don't actually do any practical work, well, we don't do as much as needs to be done. So in any meetings where we have with other professionals, especially family support workers, if we say; 'yes, we're becoming involved and we're putting the children on a plan', they say; 'oh, well there's no need for us anymore'. And they pull out ... [Consequently] we set these families unrealistic expectations with no actual help. (Social Worker FG2#5)

Similar views were expressed by other frontline professionals under analogous pressures of fiscal constraint.

On the other hand, austerity has also posed some quite fundamental questions about organisational purpose, expertise, responsiveness and effective service delivery. Such radical rethinking can (and does) prompt public sector managers to look for collaborative advantages that might be gained through partnership working, as a means of attaining longer-term cost efficiencies.

Partnership working has improved because there has been a need to work together because of limited resourcing ... It has improved because you've got to draw on other resources from other agencies because everyone is getting cut somewhere. (Third Sector FG9#1)

The possibility for such collaborative advantage rests largely on drawing synergy from the differences – in resources and expertise – between organisations.

I think also the economic situation has helped. It's very interesting because we are all feeling the effects of cuts and lack of money but what it has done is actually help to think of new ways of working across partnerships, because the police have been cut as well. So instead of saying 'we're struggling and they're struggling', people have come together to think 'how can we work together in a better way within the current economic climate?' (Social Worker FG1#4)

Such quests for collaborative advantages can also prompt investments in 'up-stream' preventive solutions to crime problems; away from the traditional reactive fire-fighting approach to much criminal prosecution. However, the extent to which either, or a combination of both, of these consequences prevails; only time will tell. The reality is that successful inter-organisational partnerships do not arise spontaneously. They need to be forged, nurtured and supported at all levels by people committed to realising the benefits of collaborative working and exploiting the opportunities for innovation that boundary crossing provides. How these tensions play out in the future will depend on the extent to which commitments to long-term benefits that derive from inter-agency teams are protected and secured. Inevitably, therefore, boundary work of the type outlined here remains highly precarious.

Conclusion

As we have shown, the cluster model, co-located 'front door' and mature networked relations of trust and open conflict management on which safeguarding children in Leeds is grounded have all played important roles in engendering opportunities for critical reflection on practices and possibilities for cultural transformation to effect change. They have helped cultivate and enabled spaces for creative 'boundary work' rooted in shared experiences of participating in daily life alongside others from different professional backgrounds with divergent cultural assumptions engaged in similar practices at the interface between organisations. The research reveals the manner in which boundary crossing can open opportunities to foster increased reflexivity within policing and to develop more systematic organisational cultures of learning as knowledge reservoirs that facilitate the transfer of good practice. Boundary crossing can be both an essential and dynamic element within networked approaches to safeguarding children; prompting ongoing reassessment of assumptions, critical self-reflection on values and questioning of terminology. The study of 'boundary work', we content, should prompt novel explorations of the possibilities for organisational learning, reflexivity and innovation that arise among 'communities of practice' and their implications for trans-disciplinary knowledge creation and its application.

However, these networks rest precariously on an inherent tension in that the productive capacities of boundary crossing, in large part, derive from the existence and depth of the specialist knowledge, expertise and professional organisational frames that constitute the very boundaries across which the 'knowledge brokers' of emergent communities of practice must operate. Consequently, practitioners walk a learning tightrope, striking a delicate balance between, on the one hand, interacting with perspectives beyond their boundaries as a rich source of self-reflection and innovation, and on the other hand, respecting the history, values, practice and accepted organisational wisdom from within the professions to which they belong. The extent to which such knowledge brokers are themselves able to rise to the ethical challenge to utilise their unique positions to contest inter-organisational misunderstandings, build resources, innovate and disrupt unreflexive assumptions rooted in traditional ways of working, however, remains largely untapped and uncharted.

Notes

1. Ofsted rated the 'leadership, management and governance' of Leeds Children's Services as 'outstanding' – the highest rating possible – and the work of the LSCB as 'good'.

2. Focus groups contributors are identified by profession, FG number and reference number within the group (i.e. Police FG4#2).

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