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## **Gavin Turnbull**

### *The dynamic nature of risk practice: A study of youth practitioners' accounts of risk in work with young people*

#### **ABSTRACT**

The concept of risk has played an increasingly dominant role in policy and practice around children and young people over the past twenty-five years. From risk-factor based 'prevention', 'early intervention' and surveillance, to the identification of young people as 'vulnerable', 'at-risk' or 'risky', risk has become central to the planning, management and delivery of youth practice. This has taken place in a changing organisational and professional context, where neo-liberal managerialism has led to confidence-based standardised bureaucratic systems, while notions of risk-management, blame, and mistrust have displaced trust in organisations and in professionals. The research that informs this thesis draws upon semi-structured interviews with twenty-eight front-line youth practitioners from across England in order to explore how those working with young people in informal youth contexts engage with 'risk' and risk discourses on a day-to-day basis. The study finds that practice is infused with different risk-based decisions and actions, and that practitioners employ complex 'situational practices' in order to navigate this 'risk-world', balancing the needs of young people, the organisation and their own interests and safety. Their decisions are multi-faceted, informed by bureaucratic processes, the perceived interests of young people, notions of humane practice and personal experiences and drivers. The study also identifies that, with organisational risk- and responsibility-aversion and a retreat from practice, the front-line practitioner is often expected to operate in a responsibilised grey area in order to respond to young people, potentially subject to individual blame or personal harm if problems arise. Young people's risk construction is also malleable in the context of situational rationalities and, particularly with austerity-driven service cuts and risk-based prioritisation, practitioners are faced with amplifying (and at times attenuating) young people's risk biographies in an attempt to meet needs. This, it is argued, leads to a commodification of young people, and youth in general.

**The dynamic nature of risk practice:  
A study of youth practitioners' accounts of  
risk in work with young people**

Gavin John Turnbull

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Applied Social Sciences  
Durham University  
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADHD	Attention Deficit, Hyperactivity Disorder
ANT	Actor Network Theory
ASSET	Youth Justice Board Assessment System (Offending)
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
BNIM	Biographical Narrative Interview Method
CAF	Common Assessment Framework
CFOS	Children First, Offender Second
CRB	Criminal Records Bureau (background checking)
CSE	Child Sexual Exploitation
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DCLG	Department for Communities and Local Government
DfE	Department for Education
DofE	Duke of Edinburgh (award scheme)
FE	Further Education
HR	Human Resources
ICAP	Integrated Cognitive Antisocial Potential
LGA	Local Government Association
NAO	National Audit Office
NCS	National Citizens' Service
NEF	New Economics Foundation
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
ONSET	Youth Justice Board Assessment System (Prevention)
MP	Member of Parliament
NPM	New Public Management
RA	Risk Assessment
RFA	Risk Factor Analysis
RFPP	Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm
RFR	Risk Factor Research
SARF	Social Amplification of Risk Framework
SCR	Serious Case Review
SEU	Social Exclusion Unit
YOT	Youth Offending Team

## **DECLARATION**

I declare that this is my own work and has not been submitted for the award of a higher degree anywhere else.

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The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*The thesis explores the concept of risk in work with young people in England through the perspectives and experiences of practitioners working directly with young people. This chapter provides an overview of the PhD thesis, its purpose, central research themes, motivation for the study and the processes involved in conducting the research. It also provides an overview of the structure of the thesis, and identifies its original contribution to the field of risk, young people and practice.*

### **1.1 Background: Risk, Young People and the Youth Practitioner**

Over the past two decades, the concept of risk has become a central element of 'human services' policy and practice (Kemshall et al, 1997, Kemshall, 2002), particularly in the sphere of children and young people (Goldson, 2000; Armstrong, 2004; Kemshall, 2008; Turnbull and Spence, 2011). This reflects the emergence of 'risk' as a central discourse of late-modernity, articulated most explicitly through Beck's 'Risk Society' thesis (Beck, 1992). The late-modern period is associated with the erosion of traditional social networks, increasingly flexible work patterns and under-employment, and a fragility of trust between individuals, experts and political bodies (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). As structural foundations based upon, for example, family, class, race, gender and notions of reliable occupational roles are eroded (de-traditionalisation), individuals become more affected by risk calculation and negotiation (Beck, 1992; Peterson, 1996), and consequently by their ability and (perceived) success in navigating risk in their lives.

Whilst the risk society thesis is subject to critique, for example with regard to the extent to which dis-embedding from social structures has taken place (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007), the impact of risk on social policy over the last 20 years has been significant. New Right and Third Way neo-liberalism, underpinned by political systems intended to create favourable conditions for the 'free market', and in turn 'labour market flexibility' (Standing, 2011), has led to the emergence of risk-based welfare models that focus on the risk choices of individuals, where the individual or social sub-group is increasingly to blame for their circumstances (Kemshall, 2002), what Rodger (2000:3) identified as a '*privatisation of responsibility*'. Alongside this, organisational processes have increasingly focussed on risk-management and the selection of interventions, preventative or otherwise, based upon 'at-risk' individuals and populations (France, 2008; Kelly, 2000). This has been particularly prevalent in the fields of youth offending (Case and Haines, 2009; O'Mahoney, 2009; Sutherland,

2009), mental health services (Nolan and Quinn, 2012; Warner and Gabe, 2004; Kemshall, 2002), social work and probation services (Kemshall, 2010, 2002; Webb, 2006) and, increasingly, in work with young people in other settings such as youth work and education (Turnbull and Spence, 2011).

As is the case with 'risk', 'youth' is a dynamic and contested concept. From a biological and psychological perspective, youth and adolescence is a time of development and transition to adulthood typified by identity confusion and 'storm and stress' (Erikson, 1968). Recent neuroscience-based 'teen-brain' studies have legitimised this perspective, suggesting that experimentation and risk-taking in young people are part of adolescent brain development processes (Sercombe and Paus, 2009). From a sociological perspective, 'youth' is a social construct, "*the social organisation of an age group*" (Frith, 1984:2), the meaning of which is shaped by social and cultural systems and structures. Often this has focussed on youth as a period of social and cultural transition. However there is academic debate about the relevance of this frame of analysis, particularly given risk society analyses that suggest an erosion of traditional trajectories into employment and financial independence (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Woodman, 2009).

Concepts of 'youth' and 'risk' combine in complex ways in a social, political and cultural environment where young people are, often simultaneously, identified as 'at-risk' and 'risky', responsible for and vulnerable to their own risk choices. Whilst young people have often been regarded as a subject of social concern (the 'youth problem'), discourses of risk have created a new terrain wherein there is increased responsibility on individuals and families to manage behaviour in order to prevent future harm (Kelly, 2007), often in terms of factors affecting educational outcomes, criminal justice, employment prospects and, in turn, the financial impact on the future welfare state.

A preliminary study as part of this PhD highlighted the proliferation of risk-based terminology across youth policy between 1996 and 2009/10 (Turnbull and Spence, 2011). Emerging from youth justice, the risk factor analysis (RFA) model, or Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm (RFPP), expanded across youth policy to a point where the list of risks and risk factors became lengthy and intertwined, with almost every behaviour and group of young people framed in terms of risk in some way (Turnbull and Spence, 2011; Kelly, 2006). By 2007 'being a teenager' was identified as a risk factor in and of itself (DCSF, 2007; HM Government/DCSF, 2007). Whilst the change to a coalition government in 2010 saw a reduction in the amount of policy

reports and initiatives relating to young people, risk remained a dominant discourse in its over-arching youth policy, 'Positive for Youth' (HM Government, 2011).

This policy terrain also legitimised a range of interventions based upon the identification of risk-based target groups and assessments. Despite concerns about the validity and reliability of the RFA approach (O'Mahoney, 2009; Case and Haines, 2009), prevention and early intervention models based upon the identification of at-risk (or most at-risk) young people became a central tool in managing and delivering services to young people. Thus, risk-based discourses not only created a new language for the traditional 'youth problem' but provided greater opportunity for surveillance and intervention around groups and individuals identified as having a future increased probability (possibility) of a 'negative outcome', rather than those identified as dangerous or a problem through current or previous actions (Castel, 1991).

Webb (2006) suggested that for those working in social work contexts the professionals' role of building trust had shifted over time towards risk-based classification, assessment and intervention. Concerns for risk within organisations have also resulted in instrumental approaches; increased managerialism and risk-management, with the focus on regulatory systems and routines intended to standardise practice and reduce (or eradicate) the organisational risks inherent in uncertain contexts, interventions and individual approaches (Houston, 2013). This, in turn, has reduced the role and agency of the practitioner as decision-maker and diverted practice away from relational trust-building towards more mechanised models of risk management, surveillance and control.

This thesis examines the interface between the 'youth practitioner' and risk within this context. The research involved forty interviews with twenty-eight practitioners from across England operating in and around non-formal contexts with young people, and examined their experiences and perceptions of risk in relation to young people, their own practice, personal perspectives on risk and the interface with their organisation.

## **1.2 Research Questions and Purpose**

The primary purpose of this thesis is to explore the question:

*How do practitioners working with young people in informal contexts engage with*

*'risk' and risk discourses and how does this impact on how they understand and deliver interventions with children and young people?*

Informed by an initial review of literature, subsidiary questions have included:

1. *Is there a dominant 'risk discourse' in relation to those working with young people in non-formal contexts / settings? To what extent do practitioners' descriptions of practice reflect actuarial, victim-based, criminological, risk-taking, risk-management or other aspects of risk-oriented practice?*
2. *Is a process of essentialisation of 'youth' as the 'risky other' apparent either in practitioners' discourse or in their articulation of practice?*
3. *What are the factors involved in practitioners' perspectives on and approaches to risk and young people (e.g. training, professional identity and socialisation, organisation, personal, setting, type of provision (open / targeted etc.))?*
4. *How is the current social policy context relating to risk, young people and prevention reflected in practitioners' narratives of practice?*
5. *How does managerial risk assessment impact on practitioners' ability to engage with young people?*
6. *Do practitioners identify tensions in relation to practice interventions, risk and young people? And, if so, how are such tensions dealt with, or mediated, by practitioners – what is the extent of professional 'agency' and how does this take place?*

From early in the research process it became apparent that the *'current social policy context'* was an increasingly dynamic and insecure environment for those working in the field of children and young people. The shift to a Conservative-led coalition government in the UK saw a concerted *'deficit-reduction'* agenda that resulted in year-on-year cuts to public services from 2010 onwards. In most areas of England this meant significant reduction in non-statutory services to young people. Underpinned by a shifting ideological position about the state, public services and welfare, youth provision became increasingly *'commissioned out'* to voluntary and private sector providers. Youth practitioners, including many of those interviewed within this study, were subject to occupational uncertainty, shifting roles and

priorities, and in some cases the threat or reality of redundancy or early retirement. Risk narratives within the study provide a record of this and additional questions, often led by interviewees themselves, emerged as a consequence. The study therefore also explores *the extent to which personal and occupational risk and insecurity impact on practitioners' confidence and ability to deliver their work and take risks in the interests of young people*. It also examines *the role that risk, risk-management and risk-factor analysis (RFA) play in the rationing of resources within this context*.

### **1.3 Youth, the 'Youth Practitioner' and 'Non-formal Contexts': An Explanation of Terms**

In recruiting participants to the study, the term 'youth' was not defined, thereby allowing prospective participants to define themselves and those with whom they worked in a broad way. This also avoided entering a contested environment of youth definitions which could exclude certain participants or marginalise those who identified as working in the youth field, but outside the parameters of the definition. The intention was to adopt a broad, inclusive approach to youth practice, which held the potential for a diverse mix of perspectives and youth / risk discourses.

For the purpose of the study, 'youth practitioners' are those who work in full or in part directly with young people in a full-time or substantive role. The identification of the 'youth practitioner' within the study was an intentionally broad descriptive category in order to include qualified and unqualified staff and those who might not identify (either by role or profession) with the term 'youth worker'.

'Non-formal' contexts are those outside local authority social work and school-based teaching roles, and participants include youth workers, sexual health workers, substance misuse practitioners, personal advisers, volunteer coordinators, those working in residential projects and other similar contexts. The term 'non-formal context' is also intentionally broad in order to include practitioners working in diverse settings with young people, whilst focussing primarily on those outside school and formal social services settings where more formal roles and regulatory frameworks might exist.

### **1.4 Motivation for Study of Risk, Young People and Practice**

As a former youth and community worker, I often worked with young people



described as 'vulnerable', 'at-risk' or 'risky' and was aware of how my own practice, and the description of my practice to others, was shaped by these terms. The use of language, and increasingly the language of risk, was central to getting services for young people and also to acquiring funding for initiatives, through grant applications, local authority bids or charity marketing to donors. I became aware of how young people and practice appeared to be constructed in different ways in relation to risk, either in terms of risk-taking, vulnerability (at-risk) or the delivery of 'risky' practice.

Whilst coordinator of a young person's sexual health service, I became aware of differences between some practitioners who were comfortable working with young people as they presented to them, and others who, whilst comfortable with policies and practice relating to clinical risk, were much more uncomfortable working with (or even discussing) young people's broader, associated social issues. Indeed some avoided this work as it was seen to be too risky. During this time the UK Government's Teenage Pregnancy Initiative was also operating, with an emphasis on reducing teenage conception rates, in part through increased and improved services to young people. Paradoxically, this was also accompanied by what appeared to be increasing regulation of the practitioner's role which, according to colleagues, made building relationships with young people at-risk of pregnancy more difficult.

In subsequent roles as a youth researcher and organisational lead around the UK's 'Every Child Matters' policy strands, I witnessed the tensions between meeting the needs of and supporting young people who could be identified as 'at-risk' or involved in risk-behaviours, enabling those young people to make informed decisions and take control of their lives, and enabling practitioners and organisations to operate in an external environment that appeared intent on changing and improving 'outcomes' for young people whilst simultaneously being risk-averse and intolerant or fearful of mistakes.

For me, therefore, engaging in professional relationships with young people carries (or is seen to carry) risk to practitioners, organisations and young people. The role of building relationships with young people alongside providing appropriate and effective support, education or development can be a significant challenge in itself. This challenge is perhaps made more complex when working with additional external demands for surveillance, risk-management and assessment, particularly if the organisational context is risk averse. With these potentially conflicting

perspectives and agendas operating within the practice environment, I am interested in how the practitioner constructs the young person within such a context and how they manage the interface between policy, the organisation and young people with whom they work.

The study is also informed by academic reading in the area of risk and an interest in how macro-level sociological perspectives on risk are operationalised at a local level in people's lives, and, in the case of this study, in the lives of young people and those who seek to work with them. Tulloch and Lupton's (2003) focus on the experiences of 'risk society' and 'risk modernity' in everyday lives, and the identification that how risk discourses may be resisted or negotiated at the personal level is an under-investigated area (Lupton, 1999a), influenced the initial formulation of the research question and methodological approach.

## **1.5 Research Approach**

The PhD study commenced with a preliminary piece of work analysing UK youth-related policy during the Labour Government period (1997-2010). This highlighted a proliferation of risk terminology during this period (Turnbull and Spence, 2011) and helped to inform the development of the main body of research with youth practitioners.

The main PhD research interviewed twenty-eight youth practitioners over a period of two and a half years (April 2011 to November 2013). Participants were drawn from across England and recruited primarily through open invitations via local authorities, charities and practitioner networks.

With a focus on the views of youth practitioners in relation to risk, young people and their work, a method of investigation was chosen that provided the opportunity to explore the subjective meanings of participants' lived experiences. In-depth semi-structured interviews focussed on exploring participants' narratives of practice in relation to different dimensions of risk as it applied to them in their work. Interviews avoided pre-definition of risk themes in order to allow space for participants to identify if, and how, risk impacted upon their practice. Personal philosophy with regard to work, young people and risk was also explored. Consequently, personal biography became intertwined with practice, providing illuminative accounts of the relationship between the personal and professional. Follow-up interviews were conducted with eleven participants in order to explore emerging themes in more

detail, identify changes over time, and further develop biographical elements of the study. These interviews also highlighted how perspectives on risk changed over time in response to specific events, personal circumstances and the work context.

Interview transcripts were analysed using a qualitative research tool (QSR Nvivo) to code and identify emerging themes. Alongside this approach, individual case studies were developed in order to present complete narratives of participants that highlighted inter-connected aspects of risk, the personal, and practice perspectives and experiences. This thesis includes both elements in the presentation of findings.

## **1.6 Structure of Thesis**

The thesis is structured in two parts. Part One (Chapters Two to Four) provides an overview of the research and analysis of key literature relating to risk, young people and risk-related practice in the youth field:

*Chapter Two* reviews key literature in relation to risk and young people, primarily from socio-cultural perspectives. The chapter draws upon cultural theories (Douglas, 1992), late-modernity oriented analyses including risk society theses (Beck, 1992; Beck, 1994; Giddens 1991; Bauman, 2001, 2007), governmentality perspectives on risk (Castel, 1991) and socio-cultural perspectives that seek to explore individual meaning from within risk-oriented social processes (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003).

*Chapter Three* explores the relationship of risk to young people and concepts of youth in late-modern western society (particularly the UK). Alongside broadly macro-level sociological analyses of risk, the chapter draws on the large body of literature locating risk in youth spheres (for example, Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; France, 2008; Kemshall, 2008; Woodman, 2009; Kelly, 2006), as well as examining the challenging construction of 'youth' itself (Woodman and Threadgold, 2011; Jeffs and Smith, 1999).

*Chapter Four* reviews literature relating to the practice of work with young people and risk. The role of the practitioner in decision-making (Broadhurst et al, 2010), trust and mistrust of professionals and experts (Webb, 2006; Butler and Drakeford, 2005), managerialism, bureaucratisation and the impact of regulatory risk frameworks (Horlick-Jones, 2005a, 2005b; Kelly, 2003) and recent neo-liberal austerity measures on youth practice are explored in the context of risk.

Part Two of the thesis (chapters six to nine) focuses on research methodology, findings, conclusions and new areas of knowledge emerging from the study. Chapters include both analysis of themes and individual practice narratives, reflecting a research approach based upon the significance of whole, intact narratives as well as emerging themes and categories. Initial chapters provide a 'first-level' discussion of findings, whilst later chapters adopt a more abstract analysis exploring higher-level emergent themes linked back to key literature.

*Chapter Five* provides the rationale for the research and detailed explanation of methodological choices. The chapter details the development of the research question and locates the research in a social constructivist epistemology where the focus is on the active creation of meaning by social actors (in this case youth practitioners). The focus on semi-structured, narrative-based practitioner interviews is discussed within this context. The chapter also provides rationales for interview sampling and selection, ethical decision-making and data analysis, as well as descriptions of the participant cohort, and data collection, collation and analysis techniques.

*Chapter Six* explores research findings relating to risk and young people. The chapter identifies the significance of risk as a tool for targeting and selecting young people, and explores practitioners' perspectives and experiences of how this is operationalised in their day to day practice. Utilisation of categories of 'at risk', 'risk-taking' and 'risky' are explored, together with practitioners' and organisations' flexible interpretation and application of risk as a means of securing or limiting interventions with young people.

*Chapter Seven* examines the role of the practitioner in relation to risk and interventions with young people. The complexity of forces acting upon practice and the practitioners' agency in their work and their choices relating to risk are explored in detail. Risk-management, managerialism, the impact of cuts and contracted services, support systems, personal circumstances, negative experiences of risk-taking, fear and the philosophy to risk-taking in practice and personal lives emerge as inter-related aspects that influence practice.

*Chapter Eight* explores tensions between organisations, practitioners and young people's needs. The chapter draws on research findings and literature from governmental and risk-society perspectives to develop the argument that despite good intentions, risk-management and managerial approaches can often result in a

retreat from practice, and from meeting the needs of 'at-risk' or vulnerable young people. This organisational and practice retreat also contributes to the increased responsabilisation of practice and the practitioner.

*Chapter Nine* explores the emerging concept of 'risk malleability' in practice with young people, discussing the extent to which risk has become a malleable tool with which to manage resources, gate-keep service provision and gain funding. Drawing on sociological risk literature, the implications of the interventionist gaze and the construction of young people in terms of 'risk biographies' is explored, with the suggestion that young people may become 'risk-based commodities' through such processes.

*Chapter Ten* presents a concluding discussion, highlighting key themes and contributions to knowledge, potential policy and practice that have emerged from the study. The chapter also identifies strengths and weakness of the study together with areas of potential future research.

## **1.7 Thesis Contribution**

The preliminary study of UK Government policy between 1997-2011 provided evidence of the extent to which risk and risk factor analysis (RFA) had proliferated across the child and youth field over this period, beyond the field of criminology from which it emerged. The study also highlighted the ambiguous nature of risk in UK youth policy and the wide-ranging role of risk as a tool to justify intervention and surveillance. Findings were published in the *Journal of Youth Studies* (Turnbull and Spence, 2011).

The main body of the thesis contributes to the body of knowledge regarding youth and risk in several ways:

Firstly, the thesis combines literature from criminology, social work, youth work and education, as well as from sociological and social policy perspectives in order to explore wider concerns about youth in society. From literature, it was apparent that such cross-professional, interdisciplinary analysis is relatively rare. This approach highlighted the proliferation of risk-dominated practice across the youth sector, expanding from formal, crisis-oriented services to areas such as youth work and education.

The thesis introduces the concept of 'risk malleability' in the context of youth risk research and practice. Young people's risk, either individually or collectively, is intentionally shaped in order to secure or limit resources or to gain access to risk-based interventions. This highlights the subjective nature of risk assessments and the role of practitioners, delivery organisations, commissioners and at times young people themselves in playing the 'risk game'. Risk malleability is also considered in relation to the implications for young people as they become commodities through the process of risk-based interventions, objects to be valued or traded in terms of their level of risk. Findings relating to risk malleability, and the commodification of youth as a consequence, appeared in the *Journal of Youth Studies* (Turnbull, 2016).

The thesis also contributes to knowledge about how risk-management approaches in the field manifest themselves through the lens of practitioners. It identifies the tensions in meeting young people's needs in risk-aware and often risk-averse settings, describing a 'retreat from practice' centred around organisational and individual concerns about risk and risk-taking. This retreat can paradoxically increase the vulnerability of, and risks to, young people, with organisations unwilling or unable to operate where young people need them most. Those practitioners who seek (or are compelled) to operate in the middle ground between organisational risk positions and the perceived needs of the young person face their own 'risks', both personal (stress, burnout, assaults) and professional (accusations, threats, reputation, 'failure', and blame).

Finally, the thesis contributes to understanding about how personal and professional risk positions inter-relate and change over time. The experiences and emotions of individual practitioners, organisational responses to incidents, management support in risk decision-making and notions of personal and professional trust and security (including job security) are all dynamic factors that influence decisions about risks to self and to young people.

## PART ONE

### CHAPTER TWO: RISK AND SOCIETY

The concept of 'risk' has become an almost ubiquitous presence within contemporary western society over the past thirty years (Lupton, 1999a; Kemshall, 2002; Garland, 2003; Mythen, 2008). Whilst being a dynamic and contested concept, risk has become a dominant discourse across social, political, personal and organisational spheres (Power, 2004), an “*ever expanding pre-occupation*” across society (Furedi, 2002:15). Risk behaviours, health risks, 'at-risk' populations, risk-assessments, risk factors, health and safety, risk registers, and risk management are all commonly used terms in the everyday operation of social organisation, from central government policy to the private sector, charities and community groups.

This chapter sets the context of the thesis through a literature review of theoretical underpinnings of 'risk' within society. The chapter focuses primarily on sociological and cultural perspectives on risk since they form the critical backdrop to this study, and to the situation of risk as a social, cultural and moral force in contemporary society. Technological and scientific positions are also briefly considered within the review, as their influence is apparent within risk-based approaches to youth. Whilst the chapter critically discusses key concepts relating to risk, it is important to acknowledge the vast scale of the academic terrain of risk (Stalker, 2003). Because of this, theoretical discussions are limited to those considered to be of central concern and relevance to the overall thesis, a jumping off point for the study rather than a complete exegesis of risk theories.

Ulrich Beck's (1992) 'Risk Society' thesis has become a major influence on sociological thought about risk in late-modern society and this, together with supporting developments and critiques, form the starting point for this review. Concepts of 'reflexivity', 'reflexive modernisation', 'individualisation', 'ontological security' and trust are discussed in relation to their influence on the social, political and personal domains.

Cultural and anthropological perspectives, from the work of Mary Douglas (1992) to positions that incorporate cultural dimensions within 'risk society' thinking (Lash, 2000), are then examined. This is followed by an exploration of Foucault-influenced governmentality perspectives on risk, and how the concept of risk (rather than, for

example, dangerousness) has provided new opportunities for the government, and self-government ('technologies of the self'), of populations (Castel, 1991).

Socio-cultural perspectives shift the focus of risk research from the macro to the level of lived experience. The work of Lupton and Tulloch (2001, 2002a, 2002b; Lupton, 1999b) heavily influences both theoretical and methodological approaches within the thesis, and their work, among that of others, is considered in relation to how risk is understood and engaged with at the personal (and professional) level.

The chapter also briefly explores other risk positions. Realist techno-scientific approaches focusing on probabilistic calculation seek to render risks knowable and thereby, manageable. Tackling risk perceptions of populations in this context becomes a challenge of risk communication. The influence of this approach, and the extension of technological risk assumptions into areas such as youth policy and practice, where risks and dangers are less 'knowable', is discussed. 'Edgework' (Lyng, 1990), examines the nature of voluntary risk taking, whilst Luhmann's (1993) systems theory approach and Actor Network Theory (ANT) (see Latour, 2005) also offer different perspectives on risk and decision-making.

Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion about the potential for managing the epistemological and ontological tensions of these different approaches towards a coherent understanding of risk.

## **2.1 What Do We Mean by Risk?**

The term 'risk' is difficult to define, "*fraught with confusion and controversy*" (Fischhoff, Watson and Hope, 1984: 123), largely because of the different and often competing perspectives about the concept.

*"Today's accounts of risk are remarkable for their multiplicity and for the variety of senses they give to the term. Risk is calculation. Risk is a commodity. Risk is a capital. Risk is a technique of government. Risk is objective and scientifically knowable. Risk is subjective and socially constructed. Risk is a problem, a threat, a source of insecurity. Risk is a pleasure, a thrill, a source of profit and freedom. Risk is the means whereby we colonize and control the future. 'Risk society' is our late modern world spinning out of control."* (Garland 2003:49)

Illustrating the challenges of definition, Adams (1995) cited a 1983 report by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents which defined 'actual risk' (as opposed to perceived risks by non-experts) in technological, realist terms, with a



focus on objective, measurable probabilities of danger or negative consequences:

*“the probability that a particular adverse event occurs during a stated period of time, or results from a particular challenge. As a probability in the sense of statistical theory, risk obeys all the formal laws of combining probabilities.” (Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, 1983 in Adams, 1995:8)*

By 1992 the separation between objective risk and subjective, perceived risk was becoming problematic, highlighting epistemological tensions between physical scientists and social scientists (Adams, 1995). In a later article, Adams himself suggested a simpler, more inclusive, albeit negatively framed, definition: *“Risk is a word that refers to the possibility of something nasty happening in our future”* (Adams, 2006:28).

Fischhoff, Watson and Hope (1984) suggested that risk is not solely about the objective, measurable probability of hazard, but is a political act where definitions *“affect the outcome of policy debates, the allocation of resources among safety measures, and the distribution of political power in society”* (1984: 124). Similarly, for Beck (1998:11), risks are *“man-made hybrids”*, combining political, mathematical, ethical and cultural dimensions. Concepts of risk therefore vary from realist perspectives based upon the objective measurement of hazard or danger, albeit potentially subject to interpretation and bias, to constructivist perspectives where risks are socio-culturally mediated or constructed (Zinn, 2008a; Lupton, 1999a; Mythen, 2008). Indeed, as is the case with Beck (1999; 2000) and, to a different degree, Slovic (1999), some approaches have simultaneously attempted to occupy both realist and constructivist positions. Beck, for example, suggested that rather than ‘swearing allegiance’ to one perspective, pragmatism was in order, a matter of *“choosing the appropriate means for achieving a desired goal”* (Beck, 2000: 211). No doubt due to these various and complex risk positions, Fischher, Watson and Hope (1984) avoided a global definition by advocating a ‘highly flexible’ framework for risk within policy implementation in order to avoid conflict, miscommunication and confusion.

Despite these varying and conflicting perspectives, there are similarities between risk definitions and perspectives. They have all contended with the challenge of anticipating the future, predictable, measurable or otherwise (Zinn, 2008a), or as Furedi puts it, *“the distinction between reality and possibility”* (2002:17):

*“The relationship between the present and the future depends on how society feels about itself today. Fears about the future are linked to anxieties about problems today. And, if the future is feared, then reaction to risk is more likely to emphasize the probability of adverse outcomes. As a result, the very meaning of risk is shaped by how society regards its ability to manage change and deal with the future.” (Furedi, 2002:18)*

Risk is not the same as danger, rather risks “*are estimates [or calculations] of the likely impact of dangers*” (Garland, 2003). In line with Furedi’s observations, however, there has been an increasing trend from the end of the twentieth century to focus on negative risks, where the terms ‘risk’ and ‘danger’ become conflated and risks are seen in and of themselves as threats or hazards (Lupton 1999a). This is arguably evident across the domain of youth policy, where risks to and from young people are almost exclusively regarded as negative.

Ultimately, the pursuit of a single, unifying definition of risk may be unhelpful, or perhaps impossible, given the dynamic nature of the term (Furedi, 2002) and the suggestion that “*definitions only serve to delimit, not adequately to describe (let alone explain) the object under investigation*” (Luhmann, 1993:7). The challenge, therefore, is to understand competing risk discourses, or at least perspectives in tension, and to critically navigate a path accordingly.

## **2.2 The Origins of Risk**

The English word ‘risk’ is said to derive from the French ‘risque’ and Italian ‘risco’ (Zinn, 2008a), the latter a root of the Latin verb ‘risicare’, meaning to run into danger (Mythen, 2008). Some commentators, however, have suggested that the term risk is Arabic (Luhmann, 1993) or Greek in origin, assimilated into the English language through its usage by Spanish and Portuguese sailors who used it to refer to sailing in dangerous or uncharted waters (Mythen, 2008; Denney, 2005). According to Zinn (2008a) ‘risk’ was used in many domains by the end of the seventeenth century and, in Germany at least, the term ‘risiko’ was part of everyday language by the eighteenth century. Reflecting its maritime origins, Ewald (1993) suggested that risk as a concept emerged at the end of the Middle Ages when initially used to identify natural dangers at sea that could not be attributed to wrongful (human) fault or conduct. Prior to this point, such events were regarded as fate or divine providence (Luhmann, 1993; Green, D., 2007). Thus, even from early usage, risk has been associated with human choice, responsibility and fault (or blame).

The early nineteenth century saw the early institutionalisation of risk practices and risk control with the emergence of insurance practices, actuarial measures of risk, and theories of expected loss (Ewald, 1993; Luhman, 1991; Damodaran, 2008). Insurance practice was initially focused on 'Acts of God'; however during the nineteenth century the concept of risk became social, extending from natural events to the "*collective mode of human beings in society*", their conduct, relationships and liberty (Ewald, 1993:226-7). The development of what Ewald termed the 'insurance society', together with this shift from natural hazards to a mixture of nature and human action, was a measure of the transition to modernity (Ewald, 1986; Zinn, 2008a), and "*new attitudes towards the control of the future and the possibility of a life relatively secure from the disruptions of chance.*" (Daston, 1995:164). Probabilistic reasoning, actuarial risk approaches, and insurance practices led a drive towards objective scientific calculation and prediction (Lupton, 1999a), replaced fate with human agency (Kemshall, 2002), and paved the way for "*the universalization of risk that characterizes the twentieth century*" (Ewald, 1993:227).

By the mid twentieth century risk techniques based on probability and actuarial approaches were in operation across Western society (Kemshall, 2002; Zinn, 2008a). In the UK, the National Health Service and the welfare state are predicated on (increasingly strained) insurance models of cost and benefit – population wide calculations based on broadly predictable, and therefore insurable, demographic patterns of mortality, morbidity and unemployment (Giddens, 1988; Kemshall, 2002). Public health interventions in disease prevention and control, childhood accidents, obesity, and other areas are made on the basis of actuarial calculations and probabilistic reasoning (Rothstein, 2008), whilst social care and criminal justice services utilise actuarial risk approaches in decision making about the surveillance and management of 'clients', offenders, and increasingly, those deemed 'at-risk' of offending (Feeley and Simon, 1992,1994; Smith, R., 2006). Social work, education, and youth work are, therefore, also influenced, informed, and increasingly driven by such risk-based approaches (Kemshall, 1997, 2002; Te Reile, 2006; Turnbull and Spence, 2011).

Organisations across all sectors have focused on operational risk and risk management processes, resulting in the proliferation of risk assessment and the emergence of new categories such as 'reputational risk', seeking to control, offload or limit organisational or managerial risks. This context, and the environment of fear that surrounds it, has led to what Michael Power described as the 'risk management of everything' - "*a potentially catastrophic downward spiral in which expert*

*judgement shrinks to an empty form of defensible compliance” (Power 2004:42).*

As observed in debates around risk definition, different perspectives have challenged, and partially re-shaped the ‘myths’ of calculability, control and objectivity which attempted to overcome uncertainty in modernity (Reddy, 2006:237). Beck, Giddens, Bauman and others have highlighted the global risks and uncertainty created by modernity and the processes of risk management itself. Socio-cultural theorists have demonstrated the impact of the social and cultural construction and mediation of risk upon groups and individuals, whilst governmentalsists such as Castel (1991), Rose (1988) and O’Malley (2008, 2010) have exposed processes of control and power within risk discourses.

Whilst etymology alone offers few concrete answers (Luhmann, 1993), a deeper understanding of the emergence of risk as a social entity enables deeper critical engagement with this dynamic concept. The more recent development of Beck’s (1992) Risk Society thesis, together with the work of Giddens, Douglas, and others across different risk domains, appears to have again re-framed social risk and strengthened its centrality as a social concept. In spite of the wealth of critiques and alternative perspectives about the subjectivities of risk processes and the role of social systems in creating risks, modernist notions of control and the hegemony of technical risk in the hands of ‘experts’ still dominate thinking and practice, thus far managing to co-opt critical arguments *“without fundamentally questioning the forms of power or social control involved.”* (Lash and Wynne, 1992:4). Where, and how, practitioners (and young people) encounter and navigate this environment is central to this thesis.

## **2.3 The Risk Society**

Ulrich Beck’s (1992) risk society thesis has arguably provided the most prominent sociological frame for discussing risk over the last 30 years. Whilst subject to critique, competing, and parallel perspectives, Beck’s work has tended to form a focus for risk thinking (O’Malley, 2000). Beck’s thesis has been clarified and developed since its initial publication in response to critiques and contributions from collaborators (for example, Giddens, 1998; Lash, 2000; Bauman, 2001, 2007; Beck, 1999, 2000). Beck also expanded the body of risk society knowledge to examine related areas such as gender relations (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), political changes (Beck, 1997), and globalisation (Beck, 1999). Consequently ‘risk society’ in itself has become a dynamic concept, changing or being clarified over time, and

must be read accordingly.

As with Ewald (1993), Beck identified a fundamental shift from pre-industrial, pre-modern (European) society ('pre-modernity'), where hazards were seen as unavoidable, usually natural acts, to classical industrial ('simple') modernity, where these hazards are supplemented, and indeed impacted upon, by hazards caused by humans. For Beck, 'risk' is a defining feature of modernity, and of human action and intervention. Whilst acknowledging that dangers, usually personal or localised, had always existed, Beck suggested that, towards late modernity, risks became globalised products of human technology, modernisation and the social production of wealth – *"the unholy marriage of capitalism and technology"* (O'Malley, 2010:11). The technological modernisation process has resulted in the potential for global catastrophic risks to humankind, plants and animals, from nuclear reactor meltdowns to genetic modification and global pollution, that cannot be contained by nation states or by the public or private bodies initially responsible. These global risks and 'manufactured uncertainties' (Beck, 2009) are generated and grow faster than can be regulated or controlled, and *"typically escape perception and are localized in the sphere of physical and chemical formulas"* such as toxins or radioactive threats (Beck, 1992:21). Such hazards have implications not only for the present, but for future generations. Traditional insurance models collapse in such circumstances, since they are unable to deal with the scale, complexity and *"incalculability of their consequences"* (1992:22).

This results in a second fundamental shift to 'risk society' in late-, advanced-, second- or 'reflexive' modernity, whereby modernisation has become a problem for itself, confidence in social structures and expert systems is lost or diminished due to disenchantment and a multiplicity of competing perspectives, and society shifts from a focus on social 'goods' to the avoidance of 'bads' (Beck, 1992: 45; Mythen, 2008) and the management of uncertainties:

*"Simple modernization becomes reflexive modernization to the extent that it disenchantments and then dissolves its own taken-for-granted premises. Eventually this leads to the undermining of every aspect of the nation-state: the welfare state; the power of the legal system; the national economy; the corporatist systems that connected one with the other; and the parliamentary democracy that governed the whole. A parallel process undermines the social institutions that buttressed this state and were supported by it in turn. The normal family, the normal career and the normal life history are all suddenly called into question and have to be renegotiated." (Beck in Slater and Ritzer, 2001: 267).*

Thus, 'reflexive modernization', whereby society becomes increasingly self-aware that mastery and control is not possible, is tied to 'individualisation' whereby traditional social categories of order (such as the family, class, gender, ethnic groups) no longer determine individual or collective life courses. Political, organisational, and personal life becomes lived out in terms of uncertainty and risk decisions, rather than in predictable, controllable, trajectories and outcomes.

Whilst acknowledging the influence of postmodernism, Beck rejected the postmodern positioning of society, and with it what he described as an "*end of everything attitude*", instead emphasising that reflexive modernity, the risk society, is a second phase of modernity, "*something new in the air... a beginning, a restructuring*" (Beck in Slater and Ritzer, 2001:262). As such, he described risk society as optimistic, calling for "*a Second Enlightenment which opens up our minds, eyes and institutions to the self-afflicted endangerment of industrial civilization*" (1998: 20-21). For him, risk society, underpinned by self-criticism and doubt rather than "*false and fragile clarities and pseudo-certainties*" offers the hope of a new modernity, a 'radicalisation of rationality', "*more tentative, personal, colourful and open to social learning.*" (1994:33).

### **2.3.1 Reflexive Modernisation, Trust and Self-Identity**

'Reflexive modernisation' refers to society recognising its technological limitations, and the global hazards and local impacts it creates, "*its own excesses and vicious spiral of destructive subjugation (of inner, outer and social nature)*" (Lash, 1994:112). Through reflexive modernisation, risk society becomes 'self-critical' (Beck, 1994:11) or 'self-confrontational' (Beck, 1996: 28).

*"Industrial society, the civil social order and, particularly, the welfare state and the insurance state are subject to the demand to make human living situations controllable by instrumental rationality, manufacturable, available and (individually and legally) accountable. On the other hand, in risk society, the unforeseeable side and after-effects of this demand for control, in turn, lead to what had been considered overcome, the realm of the uncertain, of ambivalence, in short, of alienation. Now, however, this is also the basis of a multiple-voiced self-criticism of society."* (Beck, 1994:10)

This societal 'reflexive modernisation' does not mean that people lead a more conscious, or reflective, life: "*reflexive signifies **not** an increase of mastery and consciousness, but a heightened awareness that mastery is **impossible***" (Beck in Slater and Ritzer, 2001:267). Whilst risks become increasingly complex and cross social, national, geographic, and disciplinary boundaries, knowledge about risks,

scientific or otherwise, is fragmented into often-competing disciplines and sub-disciplines (Zinn, 2008a). The myth of control is eroded, giving way to the “*return of uncertainty*” (Beck, 1994:8). Expertise becomes parochial and increasingly specialised (Giddens, 1994a), with different experts disagreeing and undermining one another (Beck, 1994). The distinction between the expert and lay member of society is dissolved, with trust in traditional expertise and other knowledge systems diminished. Whereas Beck focused on distrust of expert groups and systems, Giddens examined notions of trust (Lupton, 1999a:82), arguing that whilst trust in people and things was diminishing, the “*multiplicity of abstract systems*” within Western society were dependent upon “*potentially volatile mechanisms of trust*” (Giddens, 1994a:90). Giddens recalled Erikson’s notion of ‘basic trust’, “*an essential trustfulness of others as well as a fundamental sense of one’s own trustworthiness*” (1968/1994:96), a form of “*emotional inoculation*” (Giddens, 1991:39) that enabled people to live with everyday uncertainties and risks. This trust is a vital part of ‘ontological security’, a confidence and security in people’s self-identity and the world around them.

As Giddens argued, such trust is fragile, since it is often based upon ‘unreality’, rather than a firm belief in security, and can therefore be pierced, or broken, by negative events, difficult decisions, or ‘fateful moments’ (Giddens, 1991:112). Consequently, ontological security can break down or be disrupted, albeit often being reconfigured. Increased reflexivity, both socially and individually, can threaten security since it demands individuals to look more critically at their lives, inherent risks, and uncertainty. For some, reflexivity can lead to reskilling and empowerment and improved confidence in navigating uncertain social terrains. For others it can lead to increased ontological insecurity, the suspension of trust in systems or the retreat to more traditional systems, such as religion or other institutions (Giddens, 1991:142).

### **2.3.2 Individualisation**

The concept of individualisation is also central to the risk society thesis, examining the changing relationship of individuals to society. For Beck, the global, boundaryless risks and uncertainty of risk society lead to de-traditionalisation, with modern categories of social order, particularly social class but also ‘households’, ‘the family’, ‘full employment’ and other categories becoming redundant due to their inability to capture the complex, dynamic and unpredictable nature of social relationships.

Beck emphasised that individualisation is not the same as either individuation, the psychological process of becoming an autonomous individual, nor is it the individualism of Thatcherite Britain (Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 2002). In an attempt towards a consensus definition, he suggested that:

*“Individualization’ means, first, the disembedding and, second, the re-embedding of industrial society ways of life by new ones, in which the individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves.” (Beck, 1994:14)*

Thus, Beck argued, individualisation removes, or ‘liberates’, people from the outdated categories of modern, *industrial* society and locates them in a (capitalist) second modernity where individual life and biographies are determined by risk choices rather than by *“traditional contexts of dominance and support”* (Beck, 1992:128) (for example social class, race, gender, religion or family roles)<sup>1</sup>. Industrial systems of social production and reproduction such as the nuclear family, notions of ‘stay-at-home mothers’, full employment, class systems and constraints, and perhaps, ‘youth’, become ‘zombie categories’, and are no longer effective in understanding social order, irrelevant and ‘dead’ but still in use (Beck in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:28). For Beck, *“class is too soft a category to capture the explosiveness of social inequality in world risk society”* (Beck, 2013:65).

However, such processes are not necessarily liberating or emancipatory for all: freedom from traditional structures does not equate to individual freedom, and re-embedding focuses on, and serves the interests and demands of late (capitalist) modernity and its institutions, including, for example, flexible working and underemployment (part time work, zero-hours contracts) and new pressures and demands on family ties and support systems (Beck, 1992). Beck rejected the notion that individualisation necessarily leads to isolation or a breakdown of the social, although acknowledges that this may be a consequence (Beck, 2002:97).

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<sup>1</sup> Beck highlighted that individualisation was not solely a feature of second modernity (1992; 2002), but *“a concept which describes a structural, sociological transformation of social institutions and the relationship of the individual to society.”* (Beck in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 203). Individualisation can also be identified in the Renaissance, in the Middle Ages and during the loosening of family ties in the nineteenth centuries.



Choice, within the risk society, is compulsory – “we have no choice but to choose how to be and how to act” (Giddens, 1994a:75). Choices are made on the basis of risk decisions relating to life, health, work, the family, and the social world. However, choice is fundamentally a matter of power, and “options are very often bounded by factors out of the hands of the individual or individuals they affect” (1994a:75). Risk choices depend upon the resources available to make decisions: access to knowledge and information, the ability to navigate competing information, material and emotional resources. Decisions are therefore necessarily influenced and shaped by pre-existing power relations (Giddens, 1994a), including those forged from zombie categories and / or their late-modern iterations.

The risk biography, framed in uncertainty, is a precarious one with, it seems, fewer social guarantees of safety, or, at least, traditional structures to ‘fit in’ to:

*“The do-it-yourself biography is always a ‘risk biography’, indeed a ‘tightrope biography’, a state of permanent (partly overt, partly concealed) endangerment. The facade of prosperity, consumption, glitter can often mask the nearby precipice. The wrong choice of career or just the wrong field, compounded by the downward spiral of private misfortune, divorce, illness, the repossessed home -- all this is merely called bad luck. Such cases bring into the open what was always secretly on the cards: the do-it-yourself biography can swiftly become the breakdown biography.” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 22).*

Not only this, but choices are ‘responsibilised’ – social circumstances become viewed less in terms of structural factors, for example poverty, and more about poor individual choices. The ‘losers’ in the individualised risk society, increasingly defined by large scale unemployment or precarious (Standing, 2011), insecure or under-employment (Beck, 1992: 139), become personally responsible for their ‘poor choices’, economically, socially and in their work choices:

*“If [people] fall ill, it is because they were not resolute or industrious enough in following a health regime. If they stay unemployed, it is because they failed to learn the skills of winning an interview or because they did not try hard enough to find a job or because they are, purely and simply, work-shy. If they are not sure about their career prospects and agonize about their future, it is because they are not good enough at winning friends and influencing people and have failed to learn as they should the arts of self-expression and impressing others. This is, at any rate, what they are told and what they have come to believe.” (Bauman, 1999 in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: xvii).*

Bauman suggested that individualisation in ‘liquid-modernity’ differs from previous individualisation processes throughout history. The dissolution (or perhaps masking)

of class and gender categories and norms has, he claimed, meant that there is no secure, certain re-embedding process in reflexive modernity:

*“No ‘beds’ are left to ‘re-embed’ -- not for long at any rate. There are instead ‘musical chairs’ of various sizes and styles as well as of changing numbers and positions, forcing men and women to be constantly on the move and promising no rest and no satisfaction on ‘arrival’, no comfort on reaching the destination where one can disarm, relax and stop worrying. There is no ‘re-embeddedment’ prospect at the end of the road taken by (now chronically) disembedded individuals.” (Bauman, 1999 in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: xvii).*

### **2.3.3 Risk Society Critiques and Responses**

‘Risk Society’ has been the subject of significant critique since its publication. Some critiques of Beck highlight epistemological differences between risk positions; indeed the risk society thesis is in many ways an overt challenge to constructivist postmodern theorists in its situation as part of late modernity and criticism of ‘end of everything’ thinking (Slater and Ritzer, 2001; Beck, 2000). Lupton (1999a) argued that Beck’s position was one of epistemologically inconsistent weak constructionism, given his realist focus on physical hazards but mentions of constructionism. However, as previously noted, Beck refuted the need for division between epistemological and ideological frames, arguing instead for a pragmatic and situational position in relation to the sociological analysis of risk (Beck, 2000).

The macro-sociological ‘grand theorising’ presented through ‘risk society’ can be read as being too simplistic, speculative and generalised to be applicable in specific contexts, lacking a firm grounding in empirical research to support its claims (Lupton, 1999a; 2006; Mythen, 2004, 2005a; O’Malley, 2010). Indeed, Kemshall (2011) argued that empirical studies in the area of criminal justice contested ‘grand’ claims of risk theorising, advocating more nuanced, grounded approaches. Zinn (2008b) however, identified that such criticisms were common in macro-level theorising, with local studies being equally criticised for not being sufficiently able to generalise, and that ‘general theories’ could often lead to further research and development. Indeed, Beck’s Risk Society thesis appears almost unashamedly bold in its claims, inviting falsification, critique and re-configuration as ways of furthering debate.

Mythen (2004, 2005a) argued that Beck has “*crudely amalgamated*” global risks (2005:6) without accounting for nuance and diversity. Catastrophic global risks had become the focus, “*analogous with the totality of risk*” (Mythen, 2005a:6; Curran, 2013, Scott, 2000), with different risks, risks levels, predictability, impacts and

effects homogenised. Consequently, Mythen (2004:51) suggested that this obfuscated the “*wanting*” argument of a separation between natural risks and manufactured risks, identified by Beck as a fundamental point of social change. Elliot also argued that Beck’s position was both “*reductionist and excessivist*” (2002:312), simplifying and reducing the social conceptualisation of risk and diminishing interpersonal and cultural factors, whilst at the same time over-emphasising ‘risk’ as a dominant social driving force.

Beck’s risk society thesis has also been considered too Western-focused, Eurocentric and Germanic in its claims, even though its language claims universality, with significant differences noted in how risk and individualisation are experienced across continents and diverse nation states (Zinn, 2008b; Scott, 2000; Mythen, 2005b). Beck himself acknowledged the German background to risk society and the potential for cultural differences (Beck, 2000), but still asserted that risks can no longer be contained by nation states, and that, in this sense, risk society was global.

Perhaps the most relevant critiques for this thesis relate to issues of individualisation, and in particular the extent to which social classifications have dissolved in late modern risk society (Zinn, 2008b; Elliot, 2002; Mythen, 2004; 2005a; Culpitt, 1999; Threadgold and Nilan, 2009; Threadgold, 2011). Furlong and Cartmel asserted that young people’s lives, whilst changing, “*continue to be shaped by class and gender*” (2007:8), as well the constructed category of race. Similarly, Mythen argued that “*the notional attempt to equalise patterns of distribution is exposed by the recurrent flow of risk through the locks of class, gender, age and ethnicity*” (2004: 181), with risks more likely to reinforce existing inequality:

*“It must be remembered that affluent and powerful groups are still able to buy their way out of risk situations, whilst the poor have no such option.” (Mythen, 2005a:8)*

Curran (2013) argued that rather than outright rejection of the dissolution of class within Beck’s thesis, there was the opportunity for a focus on the changing shape of class in an emerging risk society, where wealth differences and class relations are central to the distribution of ‘bads’ and risk throughout society since they have the potential to minimise exposure to, or reduce the risk of, ‘bads’ more effectively:

*“Contrary to class relations in the first modernity, in which there was the possibility that class conflict due to inequalities of wealth could be assuaged by processes that generated more goods for all (Beck,*

1995:151), in the risk society, inequalities in themselves become the means of exacerbating exposure to hazard and risk" (Curran, 2013:53).

Beck (2013), despite some critical concerns about a focus on individual risk rather than global catastrophic, cross-national hazards, welcomed attempts at re-framing, returning to his concerns about sociology's continued focus on what he challengingly regarded as "obsolete categories" (2013:72; 2000:224; Atkinson, 2007). This is in some ways reflected in the work of Bourdieu (1998) and Standing (2011) in relation to 'precarity' and the 'Precariat', a re-framing of class structures based upon under-employment and 'precarious' and uncertain lives caused by neoliberal socio-economic reforms that privilege the marketplace (see Harvey, 2005). Whilst not explicitly referencing risk society, or suggesting that risk is the dominant social force, 'precarity' can, at least in individual employment and life terms, be seen as being synonymous with 'risk'. The challenge for risk society thinking may, therefore, be less about whether changes to society and social structures are taking place and more about whether 'risk' is the central dominant feature of emerging late-modern society, subsuming old (zombie) and emerging categories.

Because of questions about the role traditional structures still play in society and people's lives, individualisation has also been criticised in relation to questions of structure and agency, and the ability of individuals to shape their individual 'risk biographies'. If, for example, social inequalities still form primarily around social strata in Western society (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Zinn, 2008b; Mythen, 2004; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012), to what extent does the individual, particularly the individual experiencing poverty and disadvantage, have the 'freedom' to make lifestyle choices or become "*the planning office with respect to his / her own biographies, abilities, orientations, relationships and so on*" (Beck, 1992: 135). As Zinn observed, "*[i]n risk society, the normatively demanded self-ascription of individuals' fate competes with the counter-factual experiences of a lack of controllability*" (2008b: 47). Hence individuals are re-embedded (or not) into social positions that are pre-defined by social conditions, and subsequently held responsible for their limited choices and circumstances. However, Woodman (2009) disputed this criticism of Beck, suggesting that the 'choice biography' reading of Beck with a structure / agency context was a 'caricature' and that Beck's focus was on the macro-level breakdown and irrelevance of traditional social categories whilst, at the same time attempting to understand how inequalities still existed. Reflexivity was not necessarily, therefore, about freedom and choice, but about being conscious of uncertainty:

*“There is no ‘choice biography’. Beck is arguing that reflexive modernisation changes the dynamics of modernity, and that to understand this, sociology needs to overthrow concepts that emerged with first modernity and are no longer up to the task.” (Woodman, 2009:253)*

As Culpitt suggested, *“neo-liberalism has used the anxiety about risk society for its own political ends”* (1999:113) and irrespective of nuances within Beck’s thesis, the reading (or misreading) of ‘risk society’ and individualisation has legitimised neo-liberal individualism and the responsabilisation of individuals, young people, families and communities on the basis of ‘bad choices’. In some senses, therefore, the influential and iconic nature of the risk society thesis has become orthodoxy, an article of dogmatic faith, that has not only reflected but also directed social policy in relation to society and risk.

Wynne (1996) challenged Giddens’ notion of the extent to which ‘social reflexivity’, how the individual selects and filters information relevant to his or her life (Giddens, 1994b), was a defining feature of this new period of modernity, suggesting that the perceived unqualified trust of modernity has never been the case. Aspects of reflexivity have always existed and the reflexive shift has therefore been over-dramatised (Culpitt, 1999: 120). Culpitt (1999) contended that Giddens’ reflexivity was based on a rational-choice model and failed to fully engage with the complex interaction of individual choice, cultural processes and alternative discourses. As Lupton put it, both *“Beck and Giddens’ representations of modernity are simplistic, not acknowledging the complexity of responses to expert knowledges.”* (1999a: 82).

The risk society thesis has simultaneously been criticised for being too negative, *“a dystopic account of risk as a universally negative phenomena”* (Mythen, 2004:145) and too positive (Bauman in Beck, 1994). Beck also received criticism for not being historical enough (Culpitt, 1999) and only projecting trends into the future (Dryzek, 1995; Zinn, 2008b). In some senses, risk society has become a victim of its ambition and scale – its grand claims being open to criticisms about detail, much in the same way that global maps are simplified representations, failing to capture the intricate detail of terrain, or indeed the cultural life of those living there. Beck’s work was, however, bold, and in this way it has challenged sociologists, and wider society, to consider risk and social change in different ways, particularly in relation to the fallacy of certainty and control, and to entrenched social categories and epistemological positions. Thus, rather than asking *‘do we live in a risk society?’* (Boyne, 2003), it is perhaps more relevant to ask what risk society discourse says about our current and future world.

Despite its wide-ranging critiques, commentators recognise the value and influence of the risk society thesis (Culpitt, 1999; Lupton, 1999a) and its “*visionary quality*” (Mythen, 2004:183), which has stepped beyond the realms of sociological tradition and empirical precision to paint a picture that challenges thinking about the present and the near future:

*“The risk society perspective is best treated as an heuristic device which allows us to observe and probe the peculiarities and perils of modern life. Of course, the risk society thesis is littered with faults, but these faults have generated the very dialogue through which academic and social knowledge has been advanced.” (Mythen, 2004: 184).*

Risk society forms a socio-political backdrop to this thesis, particularly in relation to the individualisation, the management of bads, uncertainty and notions of trust. It is, however, by no means the dominant perspective. The cultural dimensions of risk that Beck arguably pays only passing reference to are central to the work of others, and provide insights into how and why certain social and environmental risks are prioritised. They also help to explain a cultural, rather than structural, context of ‘youth’ in contemporary society: one which is often constructed in terms of fear, anxiety and danger.

## **2.4 Risk and Blame: Cultural Perspectives on Risk**

Informed by Douglas (1966/2002; 1985; 1992; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982), Lupton (1993; 1999a; 1999b), Tulloch (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003; Lupton and Tulloch, 2002a; 2002b), Boholm (2003) and Lash (2000), cultural perspectives explore the role risk plays within and across different cultures, and how it is constructed, prioritised and utilised in society, social groups and amongst groups of individuals.

The work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas is generally considered to be the starting point for the cultural study of risk (Lupton, 1999a). Douglas (1992) suggested a shift in contemporary society, where the term ‘risk’, rather than being neutral, now became synonymous with negative risks and imminent danger, albeit carrying “*the aura of science*”, the “*pretension of a possible precise calculation*” (1992:25):

*“The language of danger, now turned into the language of risk, often makes a spurious claim to be scientific. But the matter is not just about linguistic style. The possibility of a scientifically objective*

*decision to exposure to danger is part of the new complex of ideas. Disputes about risk have become endemic and self-generating. Every institution is now aware of its liability to prosecution for exposing its employees to risk.” (Douglas, 1992:14).*

Emerging from anthropological work studying different societies', cultures' and tribes' use of taboo and purity to protect themselves from change and those that transgress against norms, Douglas identified the centrality of culture, moralising aspects, and politics in the generation, selection, prioritisation and application of risk across societies. Douglas did not suggest that all dangers or risks are entirely constructed. For her *“the argument is not about the reality of dangers, but about how they are politicized.”* (Douglas, 1992:29).

Douglas examined how cultures have utilised risk to manage social and community boundaries through rituals, myths and the use of stigmatisation and blame as tools to identify, create or maintain the 'other' – those who might pose a threat to the social order. Thus, those deemed risky, or 'at risk' have become the modern, Western versions of sin or taboo, *“a prophecy, a prediction of trouble”* (1992:27):

*“As a community reaches for cultural homogeneity, it begins to signpost the major moments of choice with dangers... A climate of disapproval grounds the belief that certain deeds are dangerous... Danger in the context of taboo is used in a rhetoric of accusation and retribution that ties the individual tightly into community bonds and scores on his mind the invisible fences and paths by which the community co-ordinates its life in common.”* (Douglas, 1992: 27-8).

Particularly at times of uncertainty, change and precarity, it is those who are socially, politically, and physically most vulnerable (such as people with HIV, immigrants, and young people) who tend to be constructed as risky others. Their attitudes, behaviour, or simply their presence, simultaneously reinforces and threatens the perceived moralistic purity of the centre group, whose sense of being 'good' is dependent on the otherising of those deemed 'bad' (Joffe, 1999).

Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) identified a typology of how cultural biases influence risk decision making: the grid / group approach. The 'grid' dimension related to the extent to which risk choices are based upon social position, whilst the group dimension referred to the extent to which cohesion exists within society. Douglas and Wildavsky identified four types of cultural bias. 'Individualists' (low group and grid) see risk as potentially positive, requiring individual management. 'Egalitarians' (low grid, high group) attribute blame for risk to outsiders. 'Hierarchists' (high grid and group) conform to rules and rely on organisations to manage risks. 'Isolates', or

'fatalists' (high grid, low group) feel little control over risks, attributing outcomes to fate. Subsequent work by Dake (Wildavsky and Dake, 1990) suggested that the above positions did not dictate overall, global approaches to risk per se, but that "*perception of danger is selective; it varies with the object of attention*" (1990: 51). The risk typologies did, however predict the sorts of risks individuals regarded as concerns (or fears), since they reflected political positions about trust in social institutions, competition, corporations, regulation, technology and social compliance.

Douglas and Wildavsky's work offers a different perspective on risk that enables the consideration of how risks may be prioritised across cultures, and how certain groups of people in society become the subject of fear and stigmatisation on the basis of, at least in part, notions of risk and hazard (see also Joffe, 1999). Their approach was primarily observational, and they did not openly advocate for a desirable social position (Mythen, 2008), albeit suggesting that the 'plurality of rationalities' was a societal strength rather than a weakness (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Tansey and O'Riorden, 1999). Douglas did, however, highlight a concerning societal shift towards individualism over protection of social groups in her later work, suggesting that risk and danger were increasingly being utilised to protect individuals rather than communities or cultures:

*"The modern risk concept, parsed now as danger, is invoked to protect individuals against the encroachments of others. It is part of the system of thought that upholds the individualist culture, which sustains an expanding industrial system. The dialogue about risk plays the role equivalent to taboo or sin, but the slope is tilted in the reverse direction, away from protecting the community and in favour of protecting the individual."* (Douglas, 1992:28)

Maxine Green (2007) suggested that Douglas' work had particular salience to youth and youth work, particularly in the context of social control and the perception of young people as a threat to the "*normal functioning of the social body*" (2007:81), with constructed risk and risk assessment processes playing important roles in "*legitimising moral principles*" (Douglas, 1985:60; Green, M. 2007:84). Young people are regarded as a risk to social order, the embodiment of social (adult) fears about the future, ageing, death and the unknown (and unknowable). This takes place both in terms of general constructions of 'youth as risk' and within other constructed and prioritised risks, including risky sexual activity, drug and alcohol use and anti-social behaviour. Green, M. (2007:83-84) also suggested that, through adherence to unquestioned risk frameworks and assessment processes, youth workers were complicit in this process, potentially 'seduced' and 'blinded' by "*the*



*ulterior message of control*" and *"moralistic principles"* that construct young people as dangerous or risky.

The 'cultural theory of risk' has been subject to significant critique. The grid / group typology can be regarded as overly structural and static, failing to account for processes of change or mobility across the typology (Tansey and O'Riorden, 1999; Mythen, 2008; Lupton, 1999). Douglas' approach has also been criticised for being culturally deterministic, disregarding individual agency and choice (Tansey and O'Riorden, 1999). Indeed, Douglas was resistant to the integration of individual, psychometric decision-making approaches ('methodological individualism') to the cultural theory model (1992:11; Tansey and O'Riorden, 1999), perhaps not a surprise given her resistance to individualistically dominated realist positions (Lupton, 1999:56). Boholm, however, was critical of the simplistic assumption that *"ideas about risks and the management of risks (like everything else) are inextricably linked to culture"* (Boholm, 2003:162), and argued for a more integrated approach combining realist perspective, psychometrics about individual decision-making and cultural influences.

Douglas' work has also been criticised for taking a functional, conservative standpoint (Lupton, 1999; Tulloch, 2008; Lash, 2000). With *"a bias towards the centre"* (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982:198), the work can be read as focusing on the security of the centre groups, with those on or outside the borders ('sects') threatening the strength of the central society. Rather than offering the liberating position identified by Green, M. (2007), Douglas' work could, therefore, be read in a way that legitimises the othering of some or all young people (and other social groups), since such processes maintain the sense of security, normality and control of the adult 'centre' in the face of increased uncertainty and precarity.

Despite critiques, Douglas's work has been influential in placing cultural factors, and a cultural framing of risk, in the wider lens of traditional realist or individualist approaches to risk. Beck subsequently incorporated cultural elements into his work (1999), as have some 'risk perception' authors whose traditional focus was on individual choice (Slovic, 1999). The work has also influenced sociocultural theorists who examine the nuances of risk positions in everyday life (Lupton, 1999b; Tulloch and Lupton, 2003).

Drawing on the work of Douglas and Beck / Giddens, whilst being critical of both perspectives, Scott Lash (2000) advocated 'risk culture', a theoretical fusion of risk

society and cultural factors influenced by structural and economic change, reflexive modernity and neo-liberalism. As part of this he identified 'risk cultures' - reflexive, dynamic and often temporary non- or anti- institutional sub-political spaces, "*sects in the best sense of the word*" (2000:50). Suggesting, perhaps a 'bias to the edge' (or an avoidance of bias to the centre), Lash argued that risk culture, situated in reflexive modernity, is, or should be, one of "*a politics of value and the good life*" (2000:60) rather than public and institutional norms:

*"The sort of sociations that make up the critical risk cultures of reflexive modernity are not normative but value groupings that operate in the margins, in the third space, the boundary that separates private and public life. They are cultures and not institutions in the sense that they operate in the media of values not norms. But they are characteristically risk cultures... in that there is a chronic uncertainty, a continual questioning, an openness to innovation built into them. They deal with risk, with identity-risks and ecological risks, not so much through rational calculation or normative subsumption, but through symbolic practices and especially through symbolic innovation."* (Lash 2000: 60)

Hence, Lash attempted to reconcile the realist slant of risk society and the constructivist dimensions of Douglas's cultural theory through a positioning of reflexive, individualised, dynamic (and often multiple) risk cultures. Whilst his position has been open to critique in relation to the extent to which reflexive modernity is actually shifting to values over norms, away from institutional structures, it has offered the potential for analysis that takes into account social shifts in late modernity whilst also recognising the role of culture in risk choice, decision making and blame processes.

## **2.5 Risk and Governmentality**

Whilst risk society and cultural theories of risk form the major theoretical backdrop for risk in contemporary society, they say little about mechanics, dynamics, and technologies of power and knowledge, and how risk is, or might be, utilised in the way people are governed, and how we govern ourselves.

Governmentality perspectives on risk have been influenced by Michel Foucault's work on power and knowledge (Foucault, 1977/1991a, 1991b; Rose, O'Malley and Valverde, 2009; O'Malley, 2008). Foucault (1977/1991a) identified a development between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries whereby the disciplinary authority of the sovereign (with command over the death of subjects) was complemented, and to a degree displaced, by the "*art of government*" of the population (1977/1991a:96).

This was based upon the disciplines of the body and the self on the one hand, and, on the other, management of the population through supervision and regulatory controls of the conditions that affect lives – a “*bio-politics of the population*” (Foucault, in Rabinow, 1991:262). The notion of ‘population’, underpinned by the ability statistically to measure and analyse demographics, consumption patterns and wealth distribution, provided the backdrop for a range of interventions intended to shape life at the personal and population levels (for example, schooling, promotion of marriage, vaccinations), with the increasing intent towards incorporation into (emerging) capitalist production mechanisms.

Thus, ‘governmentality’ is the diverse means by which others, and ourselves, are governed, and indeed govern ourselves. Governmentality involves a balance between command, obedience and regulatory power and the harnessing of self-regulating capacities of individuals (‘technologies of the self’) and the broader population (O’Malley, 2008:55). Governmentality refers not only to the state and its intervention practices, but to all means of shaping conduct, from how young people are managed in shopping centres and social spaces (O’Malley, 2010:14) to how individuals act prudently (or not) in relation to their own risk behaviours.

Governmentality as an analytical approach focuses on the act of governing, its underlying ‘*mentality*’ – or ‘*government rationality*’ (O’Malley, 2008:56) - the role of power and knowledge, language and the discourses that are employed to categorise groups and justify actions, how social norms are produced and re-produced (‘normalisation’), and the disciplinary technologies employed in pursuit of its goals (O’Malley, 2008; Lupton, 1999).

Whilst Foucault did not refer directly to risk (Denney, 2005; Lupton, 1999), followers identified it as a key part of governmental approaches (Dean, 1999; Denney, 2005; Ewald, 1991; 1993; Lupton, 1999). Reflecting the strong constructivism and post-structuralist positioning of governmentality analysis (Lupton, 1999), Dean (1999) argued that risk is a ‘calculative rationality’ rather than a real entity:

*“Risk is a way – or rather a set of different ways – of ordering reality, of rendering it into a calculable form. It is a way of representing events so that they might be made governable.” (Dean, 1999:131)*

This is not, however, to suggest that problems, danger or hazards are not real, but that risk is a mediated construction and it is how these risks are constructed, prioritised and utilised as a ‘technology of government’ that is of primary interest

(O'Malley, 2008).

Robert Castel (1991), examining risk in the context of psychiatric services in the US and France, suggested that risk technologies “*dissolve the notion of the subject or a concrete individual, and put in its place a combinatory of factors, the factors of risk*” (Castel, 1991:281). Decisions are made on the basis of actuarial calculations of risk rather than expert assessment, with practitioners subordinate to managerial policy. The disciplinary approach adopted therefore simultaneously renders the person as a set of personal attributes or deficiencies and de-humanises through categorisation and collective management (Rose, 1988). Castel also identified a shift over the last century from identification and intervention on the basis of dangerousness to one of *risk*, whereby evidence of danger, or the likelihood of it, does not need to be apparent:

*“A risk does not arise from the presence of particular precise danger embodied in a concrete individual or group. It is the effect of a combination of abstract factors which render more or less probable the occurrence of undesirable modes of behaviour.” (Castel, 1991: 287)*

This shift from dangerousness to risk has legitimised a “*potentially infinite multiplication of the possibilities for intervention*” and preventative surveillance – ‘*systematic pre-detection*’ (Castel, 1991:288-9) across a much wider possible population than those originally identified as being dangerous.

When considering the extent to which risk, and specifically risk factors, have been central to policy and practice in the youth field over the past thirty years (Turnbull and Spence, 2011; Bessant, Hil and Watts, 2003), Castel’s work has had considerable salience. The construction of young people, and youth sub-groups, has historically been subject to different categorisations of danger, delinquency and deviancy (Davies, 1986; Bessant, 2001; Furedi, 2002; Smith, Stainton Rogers and Tucker, 2007), yet it has been the emergence of the language of ‘youth at-risk’ and ‘risky youth’, often underpinned by abstract risk factors, that has legitimised large-scale surveillance, ‘prevention’ and intervention focused on young people (Kelly, 2000; Turnbull and Spence, 2011; Tait, 1995), its potential “*far exceeding the scope of older practices informed by deviancy theory*” (Bessant, 2001:41).

Risk governmentality has also examined ‘new prudentialism’ - the function of the individual, family, community and organisation as autonomous prudent social citizens – responsible for the security of themselves, their property and finances

(Rose, 2000; Miller and Rose, 2008). Those who do not exercise prudence in their decisions are responsabilised, at fault either for acting irrationally, making poor choices, or not being sufficiently insured against negative consequences (Lupton, 1999; Kemshall, 2010; Miller and Rose, 2008). Being over-weight, unfit, taking illegal substances, being unemployed or homeless is viewed as the result of poor decisions rather than consequences of structural inequalities. Both the family and the young person have become responsible for their education, health, or employment outcomes. Prudentialism has also justified precautionary 'preventative interventions', with the intent of re-educating the population towards becoming entrepreneurial risk managers (Kemshall, 2010; see also HM Government, 2007:22), and has manifested itself in the presentation and communication of social problems and the language of neo-liberal social welfare in terms of audit, performance and risk-management (Webb, 2006:135). For Miller and Rose, prudentialism and responsabilisation have served the demands of neo-liberal market economics, *"maximising the entrepreneurial comportment of the individual"* (2008:98).

Governmentality critics have pointed to the universal generalisations of Foucauldian positions and historical epochs (Larner, 2000), the extent to which they fail to represent difference between social groups (gender, age, ethnicity) and, as is the case with other macro-social analyses, the focus on grand discourse over the everyday lives of people (Lupton, 1999:102). Mythen (2004:179) argued that governmentality has overplayed disciplinary functions of institutions and underplayed human agency. The strong constructionist, post-structuralist perspective has also been criticised on ontological and epistemological grounds by those occupying realist perspectives. Pitts (2012), in relation to gangs, for example, argued that the post-modern ('left idealist') focus on discourse (together with constructionist cultural criminology), had failed to take into account the 'reality' of life (gangs) and its consequences (violence), whilst also creating a questionable construction of 'bad guys', the state, and those who label young people. Whilst it may be impossible to bridge such differences, as evident in O'Malley (2008), it is an over-simplification to claim that the governmental examination of mediating social tiers negates all presence of material, physical hazard, or that governmentality assumes a single malevolent state actor. Governmental technologies, and technologies of risk, are multi-layered, operating through formal state-adopted policies and interventions, management practices of audit and benchmarking, and through media representation, social, cultural, and individual practice norms and behaviours (Rose, O'Malley and Valverde, 2009). Rather than a monolithic, coordinated body, the state might better be considered as Bourdieu's 'bureaucratic

field' (Bourdieu, 1993/1994), "*a splintered space of forces vying over the definition and distribution of public goods*" (Wacquant, 2009:289). In this context, youth provision and its practitioners can be seen as part of the complex web of government, with an at times subtle role in managing and reinforcing social categories, boundaries, behaviour, and services.

Governmentality provides a critical frame through which to analyse risk in relation to power relationships and how people are governed and, indeed, govern themselves and one another (for example through practice with young people). Its analytical lens enables the adoption of a forensic, problematising approach to risk and how it is operationalised across society, as well as raising questions about who it serves, and which groups lose out.

## **2.6 Sociocultural Approaches**

In contrast to the grand theorising of Beck, and Douglas, sociocultural approaches focus on understanding risk in the context of lived experiences. This approach is a response to calls for a shift from macro- to micro-sociological risk research (Lash and Wynne, 1992; Boyne, 2003: 108), and how "*risk logics are produced and operate at the level of situated experience*" (Lupton, 1999b:6). The sociocultural approaches of Lupton, Tulloch and others (Lupton, 1999b; Lupton and Tulloch, 2001, 2002a; 2002b; Tulloch and Lupton, 2003; Jackson and Scott, 1999) adopted a social constructionist position whereby risk epistemologies are seen to be "*inevitably mediated through social and cultural frameworks of understanding and are therefore dynamic, contextual and historical*" (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003:12). Sociocultural risk analysis therefore entails the examination of multiple risk perspectives and contexts, social and cultural, macro- and micro- sociological.

Lupton and Tulloch drew on predominantly qualitative interviews with individuals intended to explore "*views and experiences of risk in the context of their individual biographies, so as to contextualise risk in their everyday life*" (Lupton and Tulloch, 2001). Diverse narratives and biographies of individual experiences regarding risk were examined in their social context, highlighting supporting evidence, differences, contradictions, tensions and other emergent themes. Their work shifted the focus from grand theory to the 'glocal' (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003), exploring the impact of global issues at a situated, local level and, at the same time, considering implications of the local in terms of global, meta-theoretical positions. Thus, the work opened up the possibility of the detailed examination of people's responses to

risk, their risk choices, the role of the media and other social messages, and the effects (or absence) of structuring factors such as class, gender, and ethnicity on risk decisions and practices (Lupton, 1999b:7).

In their studies of everyday lives, Lupton and Tulloch (2001, 2002a, 2002b; Tulloch and Lupton, 2003) supported Lash's (Lash, 1993; Lash and Wynne, 1992) observations about the multi-layered, contradictory, ambivalent and complex 'private reflexivity' of risk, stating that Beck's generalisations about 'risk modernity' "*need considerable refinement in terms of situated research*" (Lupton and Tulloch, 2001:7.5). Some aspects of 'risk society', including the centrality of risk, the "*fearful and reflexive subject*" (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002b) and elements of individualised approaches were evident in the lives of those interviewed. However, they also found that responses were shaped by structural factors such as gender, age, occupation and sexuality (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002b: 332). Risks could also be constructed as positive, and voluntary risk taking was a feature of individual choice (2002a), in some cases in response to a sense that risk-taking had been removed from daily life (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003:72). Risk positions and perspectives were also temporal and dynamic, shifting and changing in relation to changing priorities, over lifetimes and even day-to-day (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002:331b):

*"Identity is constantly built and re-built through social contact and the appropriation and consumption of cultural artefacts such as technology, the media, mass-produced commodities and expert knowledges. It is also constructed through the cultural processes of which Douglas writes, including the maintenance of symbolic boundaries which outline what and who are considered to be 'dangerous' and 'Other' and thus potentially risky" (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003:133).*

Macro-theoretical risk discourses are evident at the local level in nuanced and ever-changing ways. As Tulloch and Lupton have highlighted, this presents opportunities for further research in order to "*identify the nature of the shifting and multiple 'risk culture' that make up 'risk modernity'*" (2003:134), as well as generating challenges in effectively capturing and describing and understanding dynamic and complex risk positions at the local (individual, subcultural, community, or group) level.

## **2.7 Techno-scientific Risk and Risk Perception**

Despite the range of sociological, anthropological and cultural risk perspectives, realist risk positions still dominate a wide range of fields, most strongly evidenced

through probabilistic risk-assessments and actuarial approaches to populations (Zinn, 2008a:5). As will be explored in Chapter Three, this underpinning assumption of measurable risk remains a key element of youth policy and practice, utilised in the targeting of, and interventions with, individuals and groups (Case and Haines, 2009; Turnbull and Spence, 2011).

In the techno-scientific risk paradigm, risk is calculable, the measure of the threat of a hazard taking place, whereby a hazard is a threat to people and the things they value (Kates and Kasperson, 1983; Cutter, 1993). Within the 'calculative paradigm', risk calculations are arrived at in a mathematically disciplined manner, usually by "technical experts" (Kasperson et al, 1988). Risks are quantifiable, though precise outcomes remain unknown – their specific predictive ability is limited (Boyne, 2003).

In a social context of multiple, inter-related, dynamic and difficult-to-measure variables, risk is calculated, at best, on the basis of estimated aggregated (historical) data, with ever-decreasing predictive reliability. In areas such as criminal justice, health, education and youth unemployment, risk factors based upon weak associations and "vague, inadequate proxies for putative causal processes" (O'Mahoney, 2009:106; Case and Haines, 2009) have driven decision-making and intervention planning. The language of techno-scientific risk can also obfuscate objective risk calculations, confusing relative and actual risk and generating oversimplistic pseudo-scientific assumptions and predictions about individual behaviour based upon contestable aggregated data, categories, and tentative causation (O'Mahoney, 2009; Case and Haines, 2009; Denney, 2005).

*"Although the actuarial language of risk assessment has objective and scientific credibility, the technologies of risk assessment are quite imprecise in predicting hazard and form a weak basis for professional intervention. The values underlying risk assessments are concealed in a veil of scientific mystery, unknown to those whose risk is being assessed." (Denney, 2005:53)*

Even when variables are fixed or at least reliably consistent, extrinsic factors, negative or unexpected outcomes outside the calculative framework, are rarely dealt with (Boyne, 2003:12). Risk calculations about technological developments such as fracking, or the reduction in welfare benefits, for example, have often failed to take into account the wide range of potential impact on individuals, communities, social and environmental worlds, since the costs are outside the calculative frame of reference, and the impact displaced onto others.



In the 'second realist' context of risk assessment (Zinn, 2008a), variations and outlying behaviours have been identified as problems of risk communication and interpretation: risks are objective and calculable but are 'subjectively biased' (2008a:5). Individuals are regarded as rational actors but influenced firstly by problems in communicating risks and secondly by personal or cultural biases, which need to be overcome in order to ensure risks are acted upon in a manner that generates the best decision, usually rational risk-avoidance (Lupton, 1999). These biases can result in the amplification or attenuation of risk perception, resulting in disproportionate public responses (Kasperson et al, 1988). Issues such as obesity, substance abuse, or unprotected sex have therefore been seen as challenges of communicating the risks of behaviour and overcoming personal biases and perceptions towards a rational decision.

Psychometric and risk perception approaches have therefore shifted technoscientific realist positions towards the recognition of social actors as a mediating force in risk decisions, with the integration of aspects of emotional and cultural factors (Kasperson et al, 1988; Slovic, 1999). The central concern, however, has remained towards objective, scientific notions of risk (however limited this may be) and how this can effectively be 'risk-managed': communicated and acted upon by assumed rational actors, individually and collectively. Lash and Wynne (1992:4), in criticism, have argued that despite the appearance of "*critical, pluralist debate*", the paradigm has remained unreflective, with technical experts still controlling agendas and "*imposing bounding premises a priori on risk discourses*". For Reddy (2006:248), reflecting Beck (1992), Castel (1991) and others, the emperor of probabilistic risk has no clothes and needs to give way to a more democratic approach to dealing with uncertainty in late modernity.

## **2.8 Edgework – The Action of Voluntary Risk Taking**

A number of other theories contribute to the complex and ever-expanding terrain of risk. Of these, Lyng's (1990) 'edgework' is perhaps the most relevant to the exploration of young people and youth practitioners as risk actors. Drawing on social psychological perspectives (including Mead and Goffman), structural perspectives of Marx and Weber (in relation to work and labour), and latterly Beck and Giddens, Lyng (1990; 2008) examined the nature of 'voluntary risk taking' by individuals within society. Whilst many risk models have focused on the premise that rational actors will choose risk averse options, or at least avoid hazards,

edgework studies have sought to understand the motivations of those who choose to act (in life decisions, sports, job roles etc.) at the 'edge', the "*boundary line*" of "*life versus death, consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity, and ordered sense of self and environment versus a disordered self and environment*" (Lyng, 1990:857). Lyng's early studies focused on (predominantly masculine) engagement with dangerous sports (1990), as well as substance misuse<sup>2</sup>. In subsequent work Lyng (2008) suggested that 'edgework' provided a theoretical frame for a wide range of "high-risk" occupational, personal, criminal, leisure and relationship choices.

Similarly to Lupton and Tulloch (who identified strands of edgework within their own research (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003)), Lyng emphasised the importance of understanding the 'foreground' of risk choices through "*rich ethnographic descriptions of lived experience on the edge*" set within a social context (Lyng, 2008:115):

*"The edgework approach views human actors not as calculators of risks and rewards, but as symbolic beings transacting with the material relations of their physical and social environments. In this framework, a search for the motives behind any course of action must begin with a detailed examination of the actor's lived experience and attend to the embodied emotions, sensations, emergent human capacities, and humanly constituted objects of the actor's environment."* (Lyng, 2008:115)

Lyng's edgework thesis has changed significantly since its inception (Arnoldi, 2009). From his original focus on Marx and Mead, and on the act of risk taking as a wilful response to alienation, consumption, the loss of ego, and removal of individual choice (Lyng, 1990), Lyng incorporated risk society perspectives, suggesting that edgework activity reflected "*a broad desire to explore and refine a form of agency demanded by the risk society*" (2008:131) and was part of the self-reflexive project of individualised risk biography. Thus edgework has increasingly become 'centre-work', a necessary function of risk society choice and action (Lyng, 2005; Arnoldi, 2009), simultaneously transgressing a 'culture of control', surveillance, and safety (Garland, 2001; Hayward, 2002) and fulfilling the risk society demands of the reflexive, risk managing self. Such a shift raises questions about the 'choice' aspect of risk-taking that are relevant to practitioners' risk decisions. When edgework, and the need to act in precarious uncertainty, becomes the expected 'centre' activity, is it really 'voluntary'? And, if this is the case, to what extent does it re-shape

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<sup>2</sup> The term edgework was derived from Hunter S. Thompson's drug-infused book 'Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas' (1971).

transgressive boundaries?

Young people have frequently been associated with increased voluntary risk taking, and 'risk behaviours' have often been described in relation to adolescent development (Jessor, 1991; 1998; Arnett, 1992), and increasingly, neuro-scientific 'teen brain' processes (Reyna and Farley, 2006; Bessant, 2008; Steinberg, 2008; Sercombe and Paus, 2009, Sercombe, 2014) (see Chapter Three). Edgework provides alternative insights into voluntary risk taking, emphasising a starting point of lived experience, rather than statistical inference, generalised psychological theory or teenagers' brain scans. It also suggests that such activity can be both transgressive and a central part of sense-making, personal biography formulation.

Particularly relevant to young people, Lyng (2008) also warned of narrow methodological interpretation of voluntary risk taking on the basis of distorted risk perceptions and biases rather than actual danger. For example, edgework might be identified in bungee jumping but not driving a car, despite the latter being more dangerous (Lyng, 2008:113), or similarly in ecstasy use rather than horse riding (Nutt, 2009). Edgework exploration therefore needs to consider wide ranging activity, both leisure and occupational, as well as gender, race, class, and age biases (e.g. Lyng and Matthews, 2007). Thus edgework, and 'voluntary risk taking' are as significant to the personal and occupational choices of practitioners within this thesis as they are in relation to young people's risk taking.

## **2.9 Other Risk Perspectives**

Several other perspectives have offered alternative framings of risk and danger, and of the relationship between objective hazard and perceived risks:

Luhmann's systems theory approach identified social systems as being underpinned by communication flow and processes, every social contact operating to reduce widespread complexity, contingency and uncertainty of the future through decision-making processes (Arnoldi, 2009; Luhmann, 1995). For Luhmann, risks "*are aspects of the observation of decisions*" (1993:104) relating to complex and uncertain futures. Dangers are externally attributable, the implications of events where there is no agency or potential for decision-making. What is a risk for one person or organisation (the decision maker) is a danger for others (those without agency in decision-making). Social filters impact on decision-making and, when questioned, lead to increased complexity, social insecurity, fear and conflict

(Holmström, 2007). Thus, with the dilution of modern social structures and expectations, trust becomes central in the mediation of social relations (Holmström, 2007; Luhmann, 1995).

Arnoldi (2009) identified Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT) (2005) as influential to risk thinking. Reflecting aspects of Beck, but rejecting notions of late modernity, Latour saw significant recent social shifts towards technology, interconnectedness and complexity leading to uncertainty and risk. ANT described the interaction between humans, objects and nature, which create hybrid entities that are dynamic and are often conflated with reality. Latour thereby rejected purely constructivist or realist positions: for him risk is neither about individual or social decisions, or concerns, nor objective scientific objects but "*arises from the interactions between them and is performed by the complex ensembles they constitute.*" (Healy, 2010:284-5). Thus, risks should be analysed, or framed (Callon, 1998) in relation to the complex, dynamic and potentially volatile hybrid of actor-networks (Arnoldi, 2009).

Finally, Boholm and Corvellec (2010), drawing on Hilgartner (1992) and Latour's ANT, set out a constructivist 'relational theory of risk'. They identified three components to risk: the 'risk object' (something that is identified as dangerous), 'objects at risk' (something or someone of value and in need of protection), and 'relationships of risk' (the socially constructed "*semantic association between objects... that must be imagined, crafted, and established*" (Boholm and Corvellec, 2010:180)). These components are causal and contingent, emerging and shifting simultaneously in relation to each other – objects are not risky in themselves, but only in relation to objects at risk, and this relationship changes according to social and cultural framing and re-framing. Risk objects are variable and can simultaneously be objects at risk, depending on differing perspectives and causal relationships. A young offender might, for example, be simultaneously a risk object in relation to some members of society or a local community, whilst also being an object at risk in relation to abusive relationships, peers, stigmatising behaviour of community and society and, potentially, the criminal justice and social care systems.

Whilst these risk perspectives are not central to the thesis, they assist in understanding and problematising youth risk in different ways. The examination of 'youth crime', 'anti-social behaviour', 'youth unemployment', 'adolescent risk-taking', and 'substance misuse' through these theoretical frames offers different insights into risk and how it plays out in relation to young people at meso- and macro-levels,

whether as socially filtered communication networks, complex and volatile 'hybrid' entities or shifting relational constructs.

## 2.10 Towards a Coherent Understanding of Risk?

The different, and at times competing, risk epistemologies illuminate individual and societal approaches to risk in different ways. Their strengths, weaknesses and external critiques demonstrate the futility of attempting to find a grand unifying theory to explain the different dimensions of risk operating in late modern Western society. For example, whilst Beck provides useful macro-sociological insight into risk, how risk is played out at a local social and cultural level, or how institutions utilise risk processes as means of population management, is limited to the margins. Similarly, Douglas' cultural frame speaks little of new global dangers and the dynamic context of late modern social changes in Western society. Governmentality allows the analysis of the relation between risk and power in ways that other approaches do not. Socio-cultural approaches, and Lyng's edgework, focus on foregrounding lived experiences of risk in their wider social and theoretical context.

Understanding how risk operates in young people's and practitioners' social, cultural, professional and personal lives demands a multi-dimensional reading of risk discourses. This requires taking into account macro-sociological contexts, emergent social trends and movements, the social and cultural situation of risk (and how stigma and blame impact on the lives of those on the borders), the role of risk as a controlling and regulatory technology, and how people make personal and professional risk choices in their everyday lives. Whilst for some this may be seen as epistemologically confused or compromising (Douglas, 1992), this approach, reflects a necessary pragmatism or cross-fertilisation in risk theorising (Beck, 2000; Lupton, 1999b:6), with different positions providing an analytical toolkit in much the same way as Foucault described his work (Foucault, 1994/1974; Culpitt, 1999:22). As Mythen and Walklate (2006) suggested:

*"By cherry picking the fruits of the risk society, governmentality and cultural / symbolic approaches we can gain a decent vantage point on the current socio-cultural context and how this itself shapes and conditions responses to risk." (2006:235).*

By looking through different lenses on risk, we can also identify emergent trends or themes that operate at both macro and micro-levels. Changing social contexts, particularly in relation to individualism, individualisation and neo-liberalism, emerge as themes across many sociological and cultural theories. Similarly trust,

particularly in relation to the dissolution or shifting of trust relationships in changing socio-economic times, cuts through discourses of risk, both in terms of individuals and society, and in the role played by 'experts' and 'professionals'. Focusing on the relationship between practitioner and young person, notions of trust and risk are recurrent themes within this thesis:

*"If we no longer trust scientists or industry or media as "experts", and at the same time lose many of the traditional authority structures such as class and "one-job-for-life," we are thrown increasingly onto ourselves in constructing our own narratives by way of local and mediated cultural representations." (Tulloch, 2008: 148)*

The thesis, therefore, draws on a range of risk positions in attempting to better understand risk in the lives of young people and the practitioners who work with them. Techno-scientific risk positions form the backdrop for risk-assessment and dominant risk factor paradigms that currently drive policy and practice. Risk society, individualisation and reflexive modernity inform the social positioning of youth and practice in the contemporary world. Cultural theory and risk cultures provide insights into the construction of youth in relation to fear and blame. Governmentality, and particularly the work of Castel (1991), plays a significant role in the analyses of institutional and societal power and how 'risky youth' (and practitioners themselves) are subject to increasing surveillance, control and intervention. Perhaps most significantly, socio-cultural approaches (Lupton, 1999b; Lupton and Tulloch, 2002a; 2002b; Tulloch and Lupton, 2003) are utilised both theoretically and methodologically, in order to explore the personal and professional 'risk-worlds' of practitioners on a day-to-day basis.

## CHAPTER THREE: RISK, 'YOUTH' AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people are in many ways the embodiment of risk, fear and uncertainty in late modernity. Often the *"repository of anger about the present and the harbinger of a better tomorrow"* (Standing, 2011:66), young people represent uncertainty and the fear of potential dystopian futures, of seemingly unpredictable and uncontrollable life courses, technologies, and social and natural events. The oft-used optimism of *"young people are our future"* becomes understood differently when the future is feared, or is regarded as increasingly precarious by many in society.

Whilst concerns about youth and young people are nothing new, risk discourses have provided new tools through which to construct young people's past, present and future. 'Young people at risk', 'adolescent risk behaviours', risk factors, risk assessment and management, the role of parents as risk managers (for example, HM Government / DCSF, 2007:22) and general constructions of youth 'as risk' locate the narrative of risk at the heart of theory, policy, practice and the representation of 'youth', young people, and adolescence in contemporary Western society.

This chapter examines the context of young people in relation to risk and the operationalisation of risk thinking in youth policy and practice. The chapter draws upon global perspectives on youth, though, where possible, this is grounded in the United Kingdom as the site of the empirical study within the thesis. As with risk theories in the previous chapter, the field of youth studies is wide-ranging and many themes (such as transitions, generational approaches, and 'emerging adulthood') are acknowledged herein in relation to youth risk rather than examined in detail.

In the first half of the chapter, concepts of youth and adolescence are examined in relation to how they shape, and are shaped by, risk discourses. The chapter goes on to explore specific aspects of 'youth risk discourses', examining the construction of young people 'as risk' in terms of being a social problem, troublesome, dangerous and, latterly, 'risky'. Following this, different dimensions of risk are explored, from risk-taking and risk behaviours to narratives of young people 'at risk', often simultaneously vulnerable and threatening, victims and (potential) perpetrators.

In the second half, risk is examined in the context of public policy. The section draws upon a preliminary study undertaken as part of this thesis highlighting the proliferation of risk across youth policy in England during the New Labour Government (Turnbull and Spence, 2011). Over this period, both the domains of

youth risk (criminal justice, education, youth work) and the range of stated risks expand to a point whereby, it is argued, 'youth' becomes regarded as a risk in and of itself. Young people, both individually and collectively, have become subject to a range of risk-based surveillance, early intervention and risk-management practices which are intended to shape or control possible future 'negative outcomes'. 'Risk Factor Analysis' (RFA), and the 'Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm' (RFPP) have played a significant role in this process of risk proliferation and its application, and the assumptions that underpin it are examined through critiques emerging from both governmental and techno-scientific perspectives (for example, Case and Haines, 2009; O'Mahoney, 2009; Webster, MacDonald and Simpson, 2006).

Finally, the chapter considers alternatives to the dominant Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm and the focus on youth as a problem, as the embodiment of feared dystopian futures. Emerging possibilities in youth justice (Haines and Case, 2015), education (te Reile, 2010), social work (Banks, 2011; Bilson and Martin, 2016) and youth work (de St Croix, 2013) are considered, albeit set against a backdrop of diminishing resources, neoliberal individualism and responsabilisation.

### **3.1 Youth and Adolescence**

Whilst notions of age-based states appear to have existed in pre-modern times, with social and economic divisions of labour, training, and learning reflecting levels of capacity and maturity (Davis, 1990; France, 2007), the social category of 'youth' as we understand it is generally regarded to have emerged, as inscribed within legislation and social policy, in the nineteenth century (Mizen, 2004; Bradford, 2012). This notion of 'youth' was defined not only with reference to human growth and capacity but also through numerical age categorisation in line with the needs of modernity and the embedding of individuals and families into capitalist industrial employment (France, 2007; Spence, 2005; Tebbutt, 2016). Industrialisation ruptured generational patterns of place-time continuity and the previous relationships between family and employment (disembedding), particularly in the middle and working classes. This led to new anxieties about young people, both in terms of their vulnerability to adult work demands and in relation to their unregulated presence on urban streets, implying juvenile delinquency and, for young women in particular, 'moral danger' (France, 2007:12). Such anxieties were caused, at least in part, by the weakening of traditional (family and community) modes of regulation and control in expanding urban and industrial centres, as individuals became incorporated into industrial production processes and paid labour. The expectations



of smooth transitions to gendered adult roles and responsibilities were threatened by these processes and 'youth' became unshackled from previous modes of apprenticeship and family-based learning.

As working class girls and women entered the waged labour market alongside boys and men, gendered and classed expectations of children's transitions to work or family roles became a significant issue in the development of law, policy and the practice of voluntary, charitable organisations (Spence, 2005). State institutions, particularly schooling, were designed to direct and control the socialisation, institutionalisation and leisure time of (particularly working class, urban) children and young people, resulting in youth becoming a firmly established category defining a life course transition in which other social divisions were inscribed (France, 2007; Tebbutt, 2016). By the early twentieth century young male unemployment and 'unruly' behaviour, together with concerns about young women's relationship to employment and the family, their sexual and criminal behaviour, the rise of feminism and the identification of 'adolescence' as a particularly problematic psychological moment in the life course (Hall, 1904), led to gendered notions of 'the problem of youth' that appeared to be located in the realities of natural human development and maturity. This 'problem of youth' created a moralistic framework for addressing the social problem(s) of particularly working class young people, whose families could not be relied upon, or did not have the means to control, educate, or socialise their young. This was tackled, at least in part, through charitable societies (and in later post-war periods through a partnership of statutory and voluntary youth services) (France and Wiles, 1997), but also provided the mechanism for turning attention away from state failures, responsabilising unruly, immoral and dangerous youth (France, 2007:14).

Through on-going shaping, 'youth' has been constructed as a category of 'other', a liminal, transitional state defined in relation to adulthood, a deficit position of becoming something, or someone, else: the socially ideal powerful, responsible, independent and conformist adult acting in a considered, prudent manner (Wyn and White, 1997). Despite these generalising assumptions, youth is not a global state that can explain being young in any given situation (Spence, 2005). It is situated within social and cultural contexts and remains framed by class, economic status, gender, location, sexuality and race (Wyn and White, 1997; Mizzen, 2004)<sup>3</sup>. As Wyn

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of 'framing' suggests that people see situations and problems, and subsequently make risk decisions, on the basis on of their own 'mental framework', a simplified and partial position informed by their own viewpoint and biases, rather than by 'rational choice' (Tversky and Kahneman, 1986; Russo and Shoemaker,

and White (1997:15) have highlighted, there is a tension between seeing youth as a common, unifying social status and regarding it as a diffuse category segmented by other differences. Indeed, questions of how youth should best be constructed and analysed, dominate the youth studies field. Debates have highlighted the problematic notion of becoming an adult in a late modern context (Roberts, Dench and Richardson, 1987; Furlong et al, 2003; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Bynner, 2005; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007), with some arguing for the identification of a new 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2000, 2006; Tanner and Arnett, 2009; Bynner, 2005) and others advocating a shift to a generational paradigm rather than one based upon age-based transition (Wyn and Woodman, 2006; Woodman and Wyn, 2013, 2015). Within these debates, Beck's work has continued to inform arguments about individualisation, structure, agency, the choice (versus 'normal') biography, and the extent to which class in particular continues to impact young people's lives (Shildrick, Blackman and MacDonald, 2009; Woodman, 2009; Threadgold, 2011; Roberts, 2012).

These debates reflect questions about the 'problem of youth' and the transition to adulthood in a late modern neoliberal context increasingly defined by a 'churning' between precarious employment, unemployment and under-employment (Shildrick et al, 2012). 'Transition' becomes problematic since traditional markers of adulthood in Western economies, such as stable, full-time employment, are unattainable, or take longer to achieve, for a large number of young adults, particularly those from lower class backgrounds (Furlong et al, 2003; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007; Shildrick, Blackman and MacDonald, 2009). This perhaps suggests that 'youth' is itself a 'zombie category' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) in so far as it no longer effectively describes a general social group or predictable, linear social processes. It also suggests the need for further problematisation of adulthood itself, since it pre-defines the intended end-point of the youth transition. Given full-time employment, independent living, marriage and other markers are both protracted and increasingly precarious and temporary, then arguably more attention should be paid to the social construction of 'adulthood', rather than solely

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1992; Tallant and Strachan, 1995; Strachan and Tallant, 1997). This psychological approach tends to focus on the (biased) frame of the individual (practitioner) rather than on any social, structural or organisational 'framing' present in decision-making structures purporting to be objective and based on rationality. In some senses framing may be better reflected by Heidegger's concept of 'mood' ('*stimmung*') (Heidegger, 1927/2010), "*irremovable lenses*" which are a consequence of 'being-in-the-world' (Elpidorou and Freeman, 2015:663), and shape how we both understand the world and engage with it. The concept of 'framing' itself does, however, offer some value in the consideration of practitioners' constructions of their 'risk-world' and their motivations towards young people and practice.

its younger 'other', youth.

Despite these difficulties in operationalising 'youth' in the context of protracted and problematic transitions, notions of youth and age remain central to social and political governance:

*"From the schooling of students, labour market participation and the boundaries of parental responsibility through to the operation of youth justice and the administration of social welfare, the political importance of age and youth is as never before." (Mizen, 2004:186)*

UK social policy enshrines the liminality of youth in statute, with gradual responsibility and legal independence granted from the age of 10 (criminal responsibility in England and Wales), young people able to work from the age of 14, get married at 16, drive a car at 17 and vote at 18. UK Government minimum wage rates differentiate based upon age, with the full rate for workers only available to those aged 21 and over. The current UK Government's policy to abolish housing benefits for under-25s (Shrubsole, 2014) not only makes transition to adulthood and independence more difficult, but further establishes young people's liminal status as denizens, not entitled to full, equitable citizenship in society.<sup>4</sup> Changes to social conditions over the twentieth century, for example with the rise of consumerism and pop culture in the 1950s and 1960s, recreational drug use, changing attitudes towards gender roles, the family and sexuality have contributed to a shifting understanding of young people and, paradoxically, the reinforcement of assumptions about the nature of youth. 'Moral panics' (Cohen, 2002) ranging from fears about hooliganism, gangs, and knife crime to rap music, raves, video games and 'happy slapping', together with subcultural delineations such as punk, 'chav', 'emo', and 'goth' have functioned as effective means of 'otherising' groups of young people, often casting sub-group identities into negative representations of youth and creating moral boundaries that delineate youth / adult, deviant / normal behaviour and that legitimise blame.

Without significant problematising of the construct of adulthood (which may also encompass many of the traits associated with youth), 'youth' is often framed in terms of rebellion, dependence, insecurity and of course, risk-taking. Davis (1990:20) identified the conflation of the terms 'teenager' and 'delinquent' in the 1950s and 1960s, with all youth seen as potentially delinquent. He suggested that a

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<sup>4</sup> Standing (2011) uses the term denizen to refer to social groups other than youth who occupy a space between citizen and alien other. Whilst this may be a permanent state for many of these groups (travellers etc.), this is arguably equally the case for young people during young adulthood.

duality existed from this point until the 1970s, characterised by the 'cult of youth', whereby young people embodied both an idealised innocence full of future potential – *“the new vanguard of social change”* (France, 2007:17; Musgrove, 1964) and a possible delinquent dystopia. The 1970s onward, however, saw a *“downward trend in the image of youth”* (Davis, 1990:212), typified by the increased visibility of working class subcultures amidst the climate of economic recession. The 'youth question' (France, 2007) became bound up with labour market change, youth unemployment, and crime, with young people (and their parents) increasingly blamed for their circumstances (France, 2007; Davies, 1986).

Neoliberal policies, firstly from Thatcherite and conservative governments and later New Labour in the re-formulated Third Way, have sought to stigmatise or demonise those who do not conform or did not fit the demands of neoliberal capitalism (Bell, 2011) – particularly the unemployed 'underclass', *“people at the bottom of the social heap, structurally separate and culturally distinct from traditional patterns of ‘decent’ working class life”* (MacDonald, 1997:1). Charles Murray's moralistic analysis, and the fear of the 'New Rabble' (Murray, 1994), re-charged the concept of the underclass, influencing both the Conservative Right and New Labour, who regarded those who experienced social exclusion as doing so through their own culture, behaviour, and detachment from 'mainstream values' (Blair, 1997 in Bell, 2011:94). Reflecting Douglas' (1966) work on purity and danger, stigma and disgust have become tools to render the (often urban) precarious lower classes as social others, as Tyler (2013) put it 'revolting subjects', exposed to 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1992) and dehumanizing treatment as, for example, the unemployed or long-term sick are re-defined 'welfare scroungers' or 'parasites' (Tyler, 2013) and certain neighbourhoods are defined 'no go areas', 'sink estates', 'ghettos' or worse (Wacquant, 2008, Wacquant, Slater and Pereira, 2014).

For young people, whose *“supposedly parlous condition”* formed the sub-text to underclass debate in the UK (MacDonald, 1997:18) this meant a victim-blaming *“moral crusade”*, and *“an inherent belief that many of the social problems of the young are caused by individual failings and problems”* (France, 2007:65). Though language and context may have changed, societal understandings and fears of youth have, in some senses at least, returned to reflect the moral danger that dominated the emergence of the category 'youth' in the early twentieth century. Thus, despite periods of romanticisation, the construct of youth arose from, and has returned to, the problem that young people (particularly poor young people) pose to social order through crime, unemployment, and behaviour that is judged as immoral

by wider (adult, middle class) society.

Whilst notions of 'youth' have tended towards the socio-cultural (re-)presentation and study of young people, references to 'adolescence' have tended to focus on the psychological (and to a lesser degree physiological) development of young people from puberty into adulthood (Choudhury, 2010). That said, they are far from mutually exclusive terms, and social constructions of youth have drawn upon various theories of adolescence over the years in order to justify social positions, particularly when social blaming has involved the pathologisation and responsabilisation of particular aspects of behaviour (France, 2007:25).

Adolescence has been regarded as a period of both biological and psychological change, from the early adolescence of puberty through to (the presumed-to-be-complete state of) adulthood. Modern notions of adolescence emerged with Stanley Hall's (1904) work describing adolescence as a time of 'storm and stress', and subsequently elaborated on by psychoanalysts Erikson (1968/1994) and Marcia (1966), with their focus on identity diffusion / confusion, self-concept and conflict. Despite empirical studies suggesting that conflict and crisis are not global facets of adolescent development (Coleman, 2011:15; Siddique and D'Arcy, 1984), the view of adolescence as a period of storm, stress, and identity crisis has endured (Coleman, 2011; Holmbeck and Hill, 1988):

*"There still remains a powerful belief among the general public that the adolescent years bring with them trouble and strife for many families. Of all the 'popular' views of adolescence, it is undoubtedly the storm and stress model that is most familiar and most accepted among the general public." (Coleman, 2011:15)*

Despite acknowledgement that *"most young people do not expose themselves to major risks"* (Plant and Plant, 1992), the narrative of risky adolescence has become normative (Foster and Spencer, 2011; Cooper, 2009). Adolescence has been defined by many as a *"turbulent period"* (Plant and Plant, 1992), a time of rapid change, conflict, trouble, uncertainty, experimentation and risk. The explicit study of adolescent risk-taking and decision-making (as opposed to 'delinquency' and 'problem behaviours') emerged in the late 1980's (Bell and Bell, 1993). Despite little evidence, adolescent unprotected sex, drug use, reckless driving and other risk behaviour was ascribed to cognitive immaturity: ego-centricity, a sense of invulnerability and inaccurate risk perception (Millstein, 1993). Millstein's examination of perceptual biases in risk decision-making, suggested that adolescents may have different levels of bias than adults. However, rather than

framing this as cognitive immaturity she questioned whether adult bias should really be *“held up as the gold standard against which one would want to compare adolescents”* (1993:62).

By the late 1990s the *“early dispositional simplifications”* of risk-behaviour research had been supplanted by models examining the interplay between risk behaviour and factors underpinning risk outcomes (Jessor, 1998), both psychological and socio-cultural. Risk factor-based research, policy and practice became a dominant feature of the adolescence and youth fields, with the emergence of the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm (RFPP) (Farrington, 1996, 2000; France and Utting, 2005), a wealth of publications focussing on ‘at-risk’ youth (for example McWhirter et al, 2013; Carr, 2002; Ungar, 2006), and an increasing drive towards risk-based intervention approaches across youth policy spheres (Haines and Case, 2015; Turnbull and Spence, 2011). This approach has continued to dominate youth policy and practice in the UK (Haines and Case, 2015) (see Section 3.4).

The emergence of ‘developmental cognitive neuroscience’ in the late 1990s provided new impetus for the notion that risk-taking in adolescence is pathological (Bessant, 2008), with ‘teen brains’ subject to increased plasticity, different to adults in neural processes, and capacities (Sercombe and Paus, 2009). Casey, Jones and Somerville (2011) framed adolescent risk-taking as being caused by *“different developmental trajectories of subcortical motivational and cortical control regions”* (2011:29), with rational decision-making a tension between different parts of the brain and variations in risk-taking being due to differences in neural responses. Despite significant concerns about the scientific limitations of neuroscience, the ‘leap’ it has made between brain patterns and behaviour (Bessant, 2008; Kelly, 2012; Bessant, Hil and Watts, 2012), and the prejudicial assumptions about young people as problems (Bessant, 2008; Choudhury, McKinney and Merten, 2012; Sercombe, 2014), the neuroscientific ‘adolescent brain’ model has gained discursive power. As Choudhury, McKinney and Merten have argued, the model is *“inscribed with a construct of adolescence that is heavily gendered and racialised, [and] persists to present teens as universally adrift on turbulent seas, and in need of adult direction and guidance.”* (2012:572).

From G. Stanley Hall and Erikson to modern neuroscience, adolescence and youth have tended to be constructed through the adult lens with young people as ‘problematic others’. Issues have been framed, samples selected, and findings reported on the basis of perceived problems, with subsequent constructions of both

youth and adolescence being based upon ‘deviant’ behaviour. This has led to a generalisation of young people as risky or problematic across the whole youth population – all young people have become the embodiment of feared deviance and delinquency (though some more than others). This has been reflected not only in popular media but amongst some youth theorists, who have appeared quick to report the normalisation of ‘new levels’ of risk taking amongst young people (France, 2007:150). Recent reports of ‘Generation Yawn’ (Dove, 2014; The Economist, 2014) as more prudent, risk averse young people, the “*slow and steady decline*” in risk behaviour and outcomes (Cabinet Office, 2014:2), reductions in negative indicators such as alcohol use (HSCIC, 2014), overall frequent drug use (Home Office, 2014), under 18 conception rates (ONS, 2015), and youth crime (Youth Justice Board / Ministry of Justice, 2015) have recently posed a significant challenge to such constructions, particularly those based solely on biological assumptions about adolescence.

With negative constructions of youth and adolescence enduring despite the majority of young people having and giving no major problems during this period, it is legitimate to question who the youth risk narrative serves. Drawing upon Douglas, do problem-oriented constructions of youth reinforce the ‘normality’ and ontological security of adulthood amidst a precarious social and economic context? Does the ‘problem of youth’ benefit too many people: selling newspapers, supporting services, organisations and jobs, and funding research? Or are there fundamental questions about youth which demand examination, and, if so, how can these be examined without recourse to stereotyping, blame, and stigmatisation?

### **3.2 From Dangerousness to Risk**

Since its emergence as a socio-cultural term, ‘youth’ has been framed in relation to a series of labels. ‘Delinquent’, ‘irresponsible’, and ‘deviant’ youth (Davis, 1990: 72; Frith, 1984; Wilkins, 1960; Milson, 1972; MacDonald, 1997) have always been at the forefront of theoretical analysis and study. Particularly in times of austerity and high unemployment (Davis, 1990), such ‘dangerous youth’ have been tied to concerns about the underclass (MacDonald, 1997:19). As Davis (1990) highlights:

*“from the 1970s onwards the youth spectacle has been dominated by images of working class and/or ethnic minority problem adolescents or young people, often cast as folk devils in relation to some semi-mythical form of deviance and all set against a backdrop of generalised youth unemployment” (1990:211)*

Thus young people are regarded as both troubled and trouble, 'threatening' and 'dangerous' to themselves and to others, feared not only because of their perceived current actions, but also because of their uncertain futures and the threat they may pose to a future social order.

The risk-framing of young people that emerged from the 1990s (Kelly, 2000; France, 2007; Bessant, 2001; Bessant, Hil and Watts, 2003) may appear simply to be an extension of this historical negative labelling of young people: another term in the increasing vocabulary of deviant youth. The shift towards 'risk', and 'at risk', 'risk-taking behaviour' (e.g. Plant and Plant, 1992; Bell and Bell, 1993; Jessor, 1991, 1998) or 'risky' youth, however, has not solely been one of semantics. As Kelly (2000) suggested, the 'youth-at-risk' (YAR) discourse is dangerous, "*mobilized to regulate the dangers, the uncertainties and the contingencies of an age of "manufactured uncertainty"*" (2000:464) through increasingly sophisticated surveillance and control measures.

Distinctions have been made historically between 'adolescent risk-taking', 'risk behaviours' and young people being 'at risk' and vulnerable. The former terms have tended to focus on psychological and developmental aspects of adolescence, whilst, particularly in the case of child protection, the child 'at risk' has been one vulnerable to outside forces of neglect and abuse, both by people (family and others) and structural / socio-economic forces (poverty). More recently, however, notions of 'at risk' and 'risky', structural and personal, have become conflated and the young person has been viewed as simultaneously vulnerable, at-risk and risky (teReile, 2015:25), threatened and threatening, subject to factors that place them at heightened risk yet responsible for their (often constrained) actions.

Kelly's argument about the youth-at-risk discourse reflects the shift 'from dangerousness to risk' (Castel, 1991): whilst the identification of dangerous, deviant or delinquent young people requires evidence of problematic behaviour, the at-risk discourse only requires the potential of a problem (for or about the young person) sometime in the future. As Tait (1995) has highlighted, "*since risk can be legitimately found anywhere, there is therefore no one who is not at risk of something*" (1995:128). Thus all young people in some way have become 'at-risk' (Bessant, 2001; Withers and Batten, 1995), and subsequently subject to a range of potential 'surveillance', 'prevention' and 'early intervention' technologies justified on the basis of the need to manage risk, and the uncertainty (and fear) of youth. At-risk



discourses, with their utilisation of notions of probability and calculation, have presented a sense of scientific objectivity and legitimacy, yet the construction, prioritisation and communication of risk knowledge remains a political and moral process (Bessant, 2001: 33).

*“The discourse of youth-at-risk mobilizes a form of probabilistic thinking about certain preferred or ideal futures and the present behaviours and dispositions of youth. This sort of probabilistic thinking attempts to construct statistically valid, causal relationships between these different configurations of time and space, between these different constructions of adolescent and adult. These possible futures, as additional artefacts of the activities of expertise, are fundamentally normative. There is a strong sense here that there are preferred futures awaiting these populations in transition. The narrative of risk provokes this normative epistemology. These preferred futures, whatever they might be, are placed at-risk through the present behaviours and dispositions of certain populations of youth and, importantly, their families.” (Kelly, 2000:468)*

Thus, the at-risk discourse enables the identification of all young people as potentially at-risk and subject to surveillance or intervention – ‘widening the net’ (Cohen, 1985) from a small population of ‘dangerous’ or ‘troublesome’ young people to a much larger pool with the potential for ‘negative outcomes’ (McAra and McVie, 2007). It also allows for the identification and targeting of specific groups, sub-groups, communities and families on the basis of a (perceived or actual) higher level of risk, underpinned by normative moral and political positions about society, adulthood, and young people.

The youth at-risk discourse reflects a narrative underpinned by individualisation. Structural factors such as class, gender and race are displaced by a series of behaviour, risk factors, and correlates linked to ‘negative outcomes’, from unemployment to teenage pregnancy and crime. Any explicit links to poverty, the imposition of “*the middle class gaze*” (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012:487) on working (or precarious) classes (Kelly, 2007), or problems with social systems such as schooling (teReile, 2006) are rendered invisible amidst apparently quantifiable factors. Risk behaviour and risk factors prompt analysis of youth and the ‘youth problem’ at the individual level: young people and their families, become responsible for their current and future life chances (Bessant, Hil and Watts, 2003; Kelly, 2000; Wyn and White, 1997). This responsibilised, ‘DIY Self’ (Kelly, 2007) demands that young people (and their families) become risk managers of the self, acting in a responsible, prudent manner to make rational, calculated decisions that do not jeopardise future outcomes (O’Malley, 2000; Kelly, 2007; Case, 2006; Brown et al, 2013). Unemployment, educational failure, crime, substance use, pregnancy,

obesity, homelessness, and other 'negative outcomes' are thus regarded as consequences of poor decisions and actions by young people and / or their parents, with the young person insufficiently resilient to overcome factors counting against them (Wyn and White, 1997).

Despite its implied position, the individualisation and responsabilisation discourse at play in relation to at-risk youth is far from free of the influence of traditional structures. As Furlong and Cartmel (2007:9) highlighted, there have been minimal changes in the social distribution of risks, and marginalised groups and social classes become subject to risk surveillance and behaviour change interventions, whilst the more privileged avoid the governmental lens (Brown, 2014). Assumptions about who is and who isn't prudent are, therefore, still infused by traditional class, gender and other distinctions. In the case of young people, there is a paradoxical expectation of the responsible, prudent, rational decision-maker in a context of adolescent development, 'becoming' (Kelly, 2011:433), immaturity and relative powerlessness (Case, 2006). Therefore, the 'dangerousness' of the at-risk discourse for young people lies in its role in increasing young people's "*risk of labelling, stigmatization, marginalization and invasive intervention by adult agencies*" (Case, 2006:173; teReile, 2006; Creaney, 2013).

The influence of the youth at-risk discourse, and the individualisation and responsabilisation narrative that accompanies it, has been significant. Furlong and Cartmel (2007) identified tensions between the vulnerability and powerlessness of young people and increasing pressures of responsibility and accountability. Individualisation processes themselves, they argued, have led to new risks to young people, evident in an increase in stress and mental health problems. Moreover, 'young people at risk' has become the dominant paradigm of youth policy in the UK and beyond (France and Utting, 2005; France, 2008; France, Freiberg and Homel, 2010; Kemshall et al, 1997; Kemshall, 2002).

Young people's liminal and, at least in terms of perceptions, increasingly risky status perpetuates and intensifies social and governmental fear of the future. As Kelly suggested, this has resulted in an "*institutionalised mistrust of youth*" (2003:165), an environment where children and young people are constructed as "*permanent suspects*" (Mcara and Mcvie, 2005:5), essentialised risk-takers (Shoveller and Johnson, 2006) with the potential to do harm to themselves, others, or society at any time. This mistrust has arguably become a key facet in this risk-based approach to young people, reflected too in low levels of trust and belonging reported amongst

young people (NEF, 2009; Cooper, 2009).

### **3.3 Risk, Young People and Public Policy**

Reflecting the wider social welfare field (Kemshall, 2002:30), the youth at risk discourse has shifted the narrative of vulnerable or socially disadvantaged young people from one of welfare and need to one of individualised risk. Kemshall (2002:40) argued that, amidst a backdrop of New Right 'commodification of welfare' and the political and economic challenge to universal entitlement, the 'welfare society' of the 1970s gave way to 'risk society', and with it a shift from universal to residual welfare provision, 'no fault exposure to risk' to the 'prudential citizen':

*"Risk-led social policy accepts risk as a fact of late modern life, a source of opportunity as well as threat... The principle of social engineering in 'advanced liberal' social policy is one of residual state care, encouragement of individual risk management as social responsibility and obligation, and reduction of personal hardship and attendant need through the labour market." (Kemshall, 2002:40-41)*

Given that labour market security may be a distant prospect for many young people, policy must focus on the perceived antecedents of, and barriers to future labour market integration. In this context, youth policy tackles areas such as education, criminal justice, teenage pregnancy and substance misuse, not solely because of immediate presenting need, but because of their attendant risks to future labour market participation and in turn, fiscal independence. Not only is the intention, therefore, to intervene in presenting issues and concerns, but to prevent any behaviour and circumstances that might impact negatively on a young person's effective embedding into labour market mechanisms.

In order to identify the nature and extent of 'risk' and the at-risk discourse within UK (particularly English) youth policy, a preliminary study was undertaken as part of this thesis (Turnbull and Spence, 2011). The study involved the analysis of twenty-four key UK policy documents relating to children and young people during, and just prior to the New Labour government (1996-2009). A systematic keyword analysis identified the use of the term 'risk' and co-located phrases. A register of risks and risk factors was then compiled (see Appendix One), and the use of the term risk was analysed to identify types of hazard being referred or alluded to, and the child or youth population targeted.

The proliferation of risk and the youth at risk discourse across youth policy in England can be identified from the 1990s, where it emerged from the criminal and youth justice fields. Based on Farrington's (Farrington, 1996; Farrington and West, 1990) longitudinal studies of youth offending and the association with risk factors, the Audit Commission's 'Misspent Youth' (1996, 1998), the Home Office's 'Tackling the Causes of Crime' (1996) (see Pitts, 2007), and its subsequent 'No More Excuses' (1997), signalled a visible shift in youth policy and practice towards risk-based notions of prevention and early intervention, or, using Castel's terminology, 'systematic pre-detection' (Castel, 1991:288).

With the introduction of New Labour's Social Exclusion Unit at the end of the 1990s, the framing of youth as both risky and at-risk began to permeate throughout child and youth policy. Risk Factor Analysis (RFA), and the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm (RFPP) were applied to young people's behaviour, educational underachievement, socio-economic circumstances, mental health problems, disaffection, and transitions to post-16 education, employment and training (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999a, 1999b, 2000). The Social Exclusion Unit's (2000) report on young people included 108 occurrences of the term risk within its 134 pages. Use of the term risk became increasingly wide-spread and complex, describing a range of problems or hazards, with large multi-dimensional aspects such as poverty and social exclusion being both risks and risk factors. Perhaps informed by the work of Giddens, a significant influence in the New Labour approach, the report also reflected aspects of Beck's 'risk society' and individualisation thesis, with "new risks" emerging from social changes and the breakdown of traditional structures:

*"Many of the changes experienced by young people have been positive... However, there are also changes – particularly in the nature of the labour market, family relationships and social structures – that mean young people face new risks and challenges." (Social Exclusion Unit, 2000:13)*

The murder of Victoria Climbié in February 2000, and the subsequent inquiry into service responses to the case (Laming, 2003), led to an increased impetus around children at risk, with the subsequent child and youth policy stream 'Every Child Matters'. Couched in the language of child abuse and family violence, then Prime Minister Tony Blair laid out the intentions of Every Child Matters:

*"Sadly, nothing can ever absolutely guarantee that no child will ever be at risk again from abuse and violence from within their own family. But we all desperately want to see people, practices and policies in place to make sure that the risk is as small as is humanly possible" (Tony Blair, foreword, HM Government, 2004:2)*

Every Child Matters was only partly about protection from risks of abuse, violence or neglect, however. The policy stream also laid out wide-ranging proposals to tackle young people 'at-risk' of other problems, from education and crime to sexual behaviour and substance use. Parton (2006:163) identified the "*complex genealogy*" of Every Child Matters, arguing that it was rooted less in preventing child abuse and the findings of the Laming Inquiry than in the broader risk agenda underpinning previous reports. Parton highlighted, for example, the influence of the 2002 Comprehensive Spending Review's 'Children and Risk' chapter with its focus on societal costs of "*poor outcomes in terms of educational achievement, employment, health and anti-social behaviour*" and on the development of preventative identification, referral, and tracking regimes (HM Treasury, 2002:153). This argument is supported by the analysis of policy documents: in over half the articles analysed, 'abuse' is rarely or never used (or only used in the context of substance abuse), with a significantly greater focus on the "negative" outcomes of poor educational attainment, crime, risky sexual behaviour (read teenage parenthood), or substance use.

By 2007 the Children's Plan (DCSF, 2007) and Staying Safe Consultation (HM Government / DCSF, 2007), which had 147 references to risk in its 77 pages, saw a significantly expanded risk terrain, with identified risks to children and young people including 'traditional' concerns of crime and educational failure together with road safety, fire risks, e-safety, and accidental injury. Thus, reflecting Tait (1995) the notion of risk provided a context in which almost all youth activity was framed as risky and, thereby, with 'youth at risk' becoming a universal given, all young people could be identified as being at risk in some way and, in turn, potentially subject to preventative intervention or surveillance. Subsequent policies, for example in relation to youth justice (HM Government, 2008), discussed degrees of risk, using terminology of 'most at risk', 'high risk' or 'greatest risk' to delineate the youth at risk population. This was reflected in, for example, the 'Scaled Approach' to youth justice in England, where risk-based assessment was refined in order to direct proportionate resources to those assessed as 'most at risk' (Sutherland, 2009; Paylor, 2010; Haines and Case, 2012), and through the prominence of targeted youth services (alongside or replacing 'universal' youth provision) focussing interventions around those identified by risk factors (DfES, 2007a; Davies, 2010a). The 2007 Staying Safe Consultation also saw young people being encouraged to be 'risk managers', with the role of parents being to "*help children and young people understand how to manage risks*" (HM Government / DCSF, 2007:27). The 'choice

biography' therefore became a component of policy – young people and their families needed to manage their risks. Childhood and youth became a process of developing agency in relation to (individualised) risk management.

Whilst the intervening period has seen divergent practice in parts of Wales, with its alternative 'Children First' approach to youth justice (Haines and Case, 2012, 2015; Case and Haines, 2015), youth policy (and in turn practice) in England has continued to be driven by a risk-based approach to prevention and intervention. The Conservative / Liberal Democrat coalition government's *Positive for Youth* (HM Government, 2011a) intensified this approach to targeted intervention and the responsabilisation of young people and their families:

*"We need to do more to help many young people who [are] at risk of dropping out of society to develop a much stronger, clearer sense of responsibility and respect for others and real aspirations and pride for themselves" – Tim Loughton, MP, Ministerial Foreword to Positive for Youth (HM Government, 2011a)*

*Positive for Youth's* focus on targeted intervention, risk behaviours, risk factors, and *"the principle of promoting personal responsibility"* (2011a:88) amongst young people, parents, and communities highlighted what could be argued to be the completion of a policy shift from structural factors (e.g. poverty, inequality and disadvantage) towards an individualised, responsabilised and risk-managed approach to young people and families. Once again, this demand for young people to become responsible in making the 'right' choices sat in tension with the notion that *"the teenage years can be a complex, transitional period of continuous change as young people grow, mature and develop"* (2011a:7). Whilst Tim Loughton MP in his foreword stated that he *"rejects negative stereotypes of teenagers"*, comments about the 99% *"responsible and hardworking"* within the document reinforced individualised assumptions of a minority of young people as feckless and irresponsible, a *"persistent educational underclass"* (HM Government, 2011a:4). De St Croix's (2012) analysis of the evaluation of the National Citizen Service (NatCen Social Research, 2012, 2013) supported this critique, with one of the evaluation's outcome measures being an 'encouraging' rise in young people agreeing that *"if someone is not a success in life it's their own fault"* (NatCen Social Research, 2012:37).

David Cameron's response to the 2011 riots, in which *"irresponsibility"*, *"children without fathers"*, *"schools without discipline"*, *"twisted moral codes"* and a *"risk-free ground of moral neutrality"* caused a *"broken society"* (Cameron, 2011), offered

another indication of the stigmatising responsabilisation process (see also Tyler, 2013) and what Levitas (2005) identified as the 'Moral Underclass Discourse', with its emphasis on *"the imputed behavioural or moral deficiencies of 'problem' groups"* (Levitas, 2006:125, 2005; Bennett, 2013). Notions of 'at-risk' and 'high-risk' young people were again central to the coalition government's response to the riots, *'Ending Gang and Youth Violence'* (HM Government, 2011b), with the identification, intervention, surveillance and prevention of potentially violent young people and gang members determined by a series of (often vague) risk factors ranging from family mental health problems and unstable family situations to being a victim of violence, parental neglect (including having *"little food or clothing"* (2011b:17)) and poor schooling (see Fraser, 2015).

Whilst apparent within New Labour government policy (Levitas, 2006), the morality-driven responsabilisation discourse arguably intensified with the coalition government, particularly through the 'troubled families' programme and its focus on 120,000 families deemed to be in trouble because of youth crime, unemployment, children not in school and the fact that they *"cause high costs to the public purse"* (DCLG, 2012:3; Davies, 2013). With the 'troubled families' rationale emerging from the previous government's Social Exclusion Task Force's (2007) *'Families at Risk'* report (see Crossley, 2015), and Gordon Brown's identification of 50,000 of the *"most chaotic families"* (Brown, 2009), risk and young people were central to the articulation of the 'problem', and the justification for surveillance and intervention (Garside, 2009).

In an example of the net-widening effects of risk policy, June 2013 saw an expansion of the programme to an identified 400,000 "high risk" families (DCLG, 2013), though criteria for the expanded terrain were only forthcoming over a year later, and were accompanied by some local authorities struggling to identify the numbers of 'troubled families' allocated (Crossley, 2015). Reviewing programme evaluation data, Crossley (2015:5) highlighted that the majority of 'troubled families' within the programme did not fit the stereotype of *"hardened criminal families who terrorise their neighbourhoods with children never at school and parents who have never worked"*, with the majority being white, not in work, living in social housing and having a household member with poor health or a disability. Poverty and disadvantage were conflated and re-framed as trouble (Crossley, 2015), as Levitas puts it, *"a discursive strategy... successful in feeding vindictive attitudes to the poor"* (2012:8). Thus, risk, together with the spectre of young people manifesting social ills passed down through generations by 'poor parenting', provided the frame

through which poverty and disadvantage was converted into a morality-infused narrative of fear and (potential) trouble.

The coalition government of 2010 continued the risk-based approach to young people and families, whilst attempting to scale back New Labour's perceived state authoritarianism, 'freeing' individuals from 'big government' (Bell, 2015). Youth provision increasingly became set within a corporate-friendly market context, with a sizeable contraction of state youth provision and the 'commissioning' of services to third sector charities and private companies (Davies, 2013). Thus, youth provision became subject to market forces; third sector and private sector 'providers' competed for government contracts, and were bound to local or central government conditions for delivering work. Organisations became hybridised (Billis, 2010), potentially with both charitable and private sector trading arms involved in the delivery of wholly public-sector contracted provision. Outcome and impact frameworks demanded increasing evidence of effective targeting of resource and changing behaviour, with, for example, 'payment by results' contracts in troubled families, substance misuse, and prison provision only awarding payment on the basis of identified and sustained 'success'. As Yates (2012) and Creaney and Smith (2014) have observed, demands to generate profit, or limit loss in such systems have the potential to lead to 'gaming activities' amongst organisations, 'creaming' or selecting 'low hanging fruit' - the easiest to intervene with, and 'parking' (or perhaps out-sourcing or 'laying off') the more difficult to engage or to evidence positive outcomes for (see also Allen, 2011).

The 'austerity' agenda, underpinned by conservative neoliberalism has continued to impact negatively on services for children and young people through significant service cuts and closures. Government funding to local authorities reduced by an estimated 37% in real terms from 2010-11 to 2015-16 (NAO, 2014). Council expenditure on services for young people reduced by 43% since 2010 (LGA, 2014) and there is the potential for further cuts of a similar proportion in coming years (LGA, 2014; Sparrow, 2015). The at-risk paradigm, and a focus on targeting those 'most at-risk', appeals to policymakers and commissioners in a time of austerity and limited resources, offering an apparently scientific and systematic tool for prioritising resources and managing service demand. Whilst, therefore, 'youth at risk' can encompass all young people for the purposes of surveillance and intervention, scaling and targeting towards those described as 'most at risk' potentially serves to limit provision, justify cuts, or restrict resource when necessary.



### 3.4 The Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm (RFPP)

*“Risk as a technology of governing youth reduces the socially situated complexities in young people’s lives, so often tied to large-scale social changes and structural inequality, to localised individual characteristics in a personalised calculus of ‘at risk status’” (Woodman and Wyn, 2013:271)*

The construction of youth ‘at-risk’ and ‘as-risk’ that has been dominant in UK policy (and elsewhere) over the past two to three decades is underpinned by the Risk Factor (or Focused) Prevention Paradigm (RFPP) (Farrington, 2000; France and Utting, 2005). RFPP is based on the identification of explanatory or predictive risk factors (and later ‘protective’ factors) that are said to determine, or at least influence, ‘poor outcomes’ such as educational underachievement, unemployment, and criminal behaviour. Understanding the background of risk factor research, its influence and its limitations, is key to a critical understanding of how risk discourses have come to dominate child and youth policy and practice.

The RFPP emerged from the public health sphere and the identification of factors impacting on morbidity and mortality (Farrington, 2000). Its origins in criminology and juvenile delinquency can be traced to the 1930s (Glueck, 1930; Case and Haines, 2009), but it came to prominence through Hawkins and Catalano (1992) and Farrington (1996; 2000), with the longitudinal Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development (West and Farrington, 1973; Farrington and West, 1990). Complemented by the psycho-social risk and resilience work of Rutter (1985, 1987; Rutter et al, 1998), Graham and Bowling (1995), and others (e.g. Utting, 1999, 2009; Bynner, 2001), the paradigm gained widespread acceptance within and beyond youth justice from the late 1990s onwards. The risk factor approach is more than a tool of practice: it is a paradigm predicated on a view that future outcomes can be predicted by the presence of key variables (‘systematic pre-detection’) and that prevention (usually through ‘early intervention’) can re-shape undesirable possible trajectories:

*“The basic idea of this paradigm is very simple: Identify the key risks for offending and implement prevention methods designed to counteract them. There is often a related attempt to identify key protective factors against offending and to implement prevention methods designed to enhance them. Longitudinal studies are used to advance knowledge about risk and protective factors, and experiments are used to evaluate the impact of prevention and intervention programs [sic]. Thus, the risk factor prevention paradigm links explanation and prevention, links fundamental and applied research, and links scholars, policy makers, and practitioners.” (Farrington, 2000: 1-2)*

The Cambridge Study of Delinquent Development commenced in 1961 and drew upon a sample of 411 eight to nine-year-old (predominantly white) males in a working class area of London, *“because of the prior expectation of a high prevalence of convictions”* (Farrington, 1994/1999). The study found that being ‘troublesome’ at school was *“the single best predictor of official delinquency”* (Farrington, 1997:56). Of the 65 males convicted for violent crimes within the cohort, 3% had no identified risk factors whilst 31% had four identified risk factors (low family income, large family size, low IQ and poor parenting behaviour) (see Hawkins et al, 2000). Drawing upon the Cambridge study and others, a group of 22 international risk researchers (Hawkins et al, 2000) identified a range of common predictors across individual, family, school, peer and community domains and including factors such as ‘hyperactivity and restlessness’, ‘beliefs and attitudes favourable to deviant or antisocial behaviour’, lack of social ties, parental criminality, ‘poor family management’, truancy and academic failure, delinquent peers and siblings, poverty, and substance use. The US Department of Justice-supported study concluded that *“targeting identification of shared predictors and constellations of risk factors may be more effective in preventing violence than those that target single risk factors”* (Hawkins et al, 2000:8). When reviewing the Cambridge study later, Farrington identified six categories of predictors of criminal behaviour: *antisocial behaviour in childhood, hyperactivity-impulsivity-attention deficit, low intelligence and low school achievement, family criminality, family poverty, and poor parenting* (Farrington, 2003; Haines and Case, 2009). Other ‘important factors’ he cited in later work included *“low empathy”, “large family size”, “parental conflict”* and ‘environmental factors’ such as *“growing up in a low socioeconomic status household”* and *“living in deprived areas”* (Farrington and Welsh, 2007:4).

From the early to mid 2000s, the notion of ‘protective factors’ complemented the risk factor approach (Bynner, 2001; Beinart et al, 2002; YJB, 2005). Protective factors signified *“the opposite or absence of risk”* (YJB, 2005a:23), or as an earlier Australian report suggested, *“mechanisms that are likely to inhibit the development of anti-social behaviour and divert children to the pathways that lead to positive outcomes”* (NCP, 1999:11). Protective factors attempt to explain why some young people do not get involved in, or are ‘resilient’ to, criminal activity whilst others committed offences. A Youth Justice Board study (Sutherland et al, 2005) reflected Rutter’s (1990) observations that risk and protection exist on a continuum, they were not fixed states, and that *“nascent protective factors exist in those with numerous risk factors”* (2005:141). With protective factors and resilience arguably focused on

strengths rather than deficits (Zolkoski and Bullock, 2012), and offering greater possibilities of change and intervention, “*even with young people at very high risk of offending*” (Sutherland et al, 2005), the concepts have added another dimension to RFPP-oriented research, policy and practice (e.g. Logan-Green et al, 2011; Zolkoski and Bullock, 2012, Schofield et al, 2015). As Bynner (2001) highlighted, protective factors (and resilience) also open up additional avenues for targeted intervention:

*“The counter to vulnerability is breaking the cycle through protection. But this involves more than just countering those factors identified with risk. Risk factors point to children where intervention may be needed. Protective factors suggest the form that intervention needs to take.” (Bynner, 2001:293)*

Bynner suggested that “*to understand the dynamics of risk and protection we need to observe their operation in all domains of children’s lives – at home, at school and at play – longitudinally*” (2001:287). Thus the shifting states of risk and protection not only justify preventative interventions, but also legitimise increased surveillance of young people and their families.

As Case and Haines (2009) identified in their account of its history and operation, risk factor research has been “*deeply riven with complementary, competing and even contradictory theories and models*” (2009:92). The paradigm has adapted to reconcile divisions and has integrated subsequent theories, from protective factors and resilience to Farrington’s ‘Integrated Cognitive Antisocial Potential (ICAP) theory’, exploring the potential to become ‘antisocial’, (Farrington, 2005) and Wikström’s ‘Developmental Ecological Action Theory of Crime Involvement’, examining causal mechanisms linking risk to offending (Wikström, 2008) (see Case and Haines, 2009). In many senses, the paradigm has itself become an adaptable and resilient driving force in the field of children and young people, albeit in the face of increasing academic critique.

The RFPP has been subject to discussion and critique on methodological theoretical and philosophical grounds (Case, 2006, 2007; Haines and Case, Case and Haines, 2009, 2010; O’Mahoney, 2009; Armstrong, 2004, 2006a,2006b; Pitts, 2007; Foster and Spencer, 2011; Smith, R., 2006; Garside, 2009; Goldson, 2010; Kelly, 2000; Bessant, 2001; France, 2008; Tait, 1995). Case and Haines’ work has provided the most comprehensive analysis of methodological aspects of risk factor research (Haines and Case, 2009), highlighting a wide range of problems with the research itself, its interpretation and its application. Traditional longitudinal risk factor studies

(for example the Cambridge Delinquency Study), Case and Haines argued, have favoured individualised, psycho-social risk factors. Whilst subsequent studies have provided development of RFPP, most have failed to challenge taken-for-granted validity and bias, *“perpetuating a deterministic understanding of the stable and enduring influence of risk factors on offending”* (2009:100-101). Furthermore, ‘risk factors’ are difficult to operationalise (Case 2007): they are often conceptually vague, attempt to quantify ‘soft’ information such as perceptions of attitudes and behaviour (for example, being ‘troublesome’ and ‘poor parenting’) and are not used consistently (Smith, R., 2006). Many measures are also questionable and, O’Mahoney (2009:108) argued, whilst some may be central to offending, *“others are unlikely to have any meaningful, causal role whatsoever”*.

Haines and Case have also argued that cross-sectional risk studies (research utilising often-large statistically representative samples) have been similarly flawed, since among other criticisms, they had a taken-for-granted validity, privileging psychosocial factors over socio-structural ones, leading to a reductionist approach to risk, failing to explore temporal aspects of risk, reaching erroneous conclusions, and driven by an *“overriding slavishness to the government policy focus”* (2009:190-191).

Constructionist risk research, which has challenged deterministic, psychosocial risk models, has been conducted into pathways into offending, young people’s agency, and socio-structural factors (e.g. Hine, 2006; MacDonald, 2007). However, these studies have tended to be over-looked, have been drawn into assumptions about present day constructions of risk, or have not been regarded as sufficiently generalisable amongst a field based upon a veneer of scientific credibility (Haines and Case, 2009).

Critics of RFPP have also pointed to the unreliability of risk factor research in what has arguably been its central appeal to policymakers – its predictive ability. Garside (2009:7) re-asserted the point that increased probability is different from prediction, highlighting the high level of ‘false positive errors’ (86.6%) in the prediction of homicide offenders in a study which, among others, included Farrington (Loeber et al, 2005). Whilst some domains have celebrated high levels of predictive ability (e.g. Sutherland et al, 2005), Smith, R. (2006) highlighted that, even then, there was still likely to be a high level of ‘false positives’ (Baker et al, 2004), young people incorrectly predicted to offend or re-offend and, as a consequence, subjected to intervention and surveillance:

*“Actuarial imperatives, ‘risk’-based technologies and interventionist zeal have precipitated a multitude of early (and earlier) intervention strategies, directed not only towards convicted ‘offenders’ but also children who are deemed to be ‘latent offenders’, ‘near criminal’, ‘possibly criminal’, ‘sub-criminal’, ‘anti-social’, ‘disorderly’ or ‘potentially problematic’ in some way or another.” (Goldson, 2010:169)*

Whilst Farrington (2000) and other RFPP proponents acknowledged that questions of prediction and causation were problematic, they suggested that such questions could be avoided due to the empirical nature of the studies. The policy context, however, has often downplayed ambiguities and methodological problems in its reporting of risk factor research. Even though caveats have been included in some reports (e.g. Social Exclusion Unit, 2000; Audit Commission, 1996), ambitious predictive claims and the potential for screening have been favoured over uncertainty and methodological fallibility (Garside, 2009; Armstrong, 2006b; O’Mahoney, 2009).

As Goldson (above) highlighted, RFPP, and the concept of ‘actuarial justice’ (Feeley and Simon, 1992; 1994; Smith, R., 2006), have also been subject to critique on theoretical and moral grounds, and in relation to how they have been operationalised as a technology of social control. Brown (2005:101-2) referred to *“Farrington’s frighteningly totalitarian world”* to describe the risk / prevention approach, *“a case of asserting an obvious continuity between techno-science and policy with utter disregard for matters of social justice or human rights discourses”*. Whilst perhaps missing Farrington’s intention to ‘save children from a life of crime’ rather than incarcerate them (Farrington and Welsh, 2007), Brown’s comments highlighted RFPP as an ideological model of technological surveillance, control and intervention, supporting, as Roger Smith put it, the exercise of power *“grounded in the disciplinary gaze, which constitutes its own objects, diagnoses the problem and prescribes the form of intervention to be taken”* (2010:7).

Other governmentality-influenced critiques of RFPP have pointed to how the risk factor approach legitimises the perception of all young people as potentially dangerous, requiring regulation and control (Armstrong, 2006b). O’Mahoney (2009) argued that the approach fails to take into account a host of cultural, group, and situational factors promoting *“intrusive, coercive and potentially criminalising interventions”* (2009:113) and promising *“potentially endless justifications for the surveillance of populations of youth”* (Kelly, 2000: 469). Young people have become increasingly subject to stigmatisation and marginalisation (Case, 2006), the ‘permanent suspects’ of society (Mcara and McVie, 2005), viewed by researchers

and policymakers through the lens of pre-determined risk factors (or alternatively resilience / protective factors), a stigmatising language which “*commits a form of symbolic violence against young people whose lives are presumably captured and finalised by this language*” (Foster and Spencer, 2011:125) (see also Bourdieu, 1992; Cooper, 2012).

Finally, a frequent critique worth re-emphasising has been the grounding of RFPP in psycho-social factors and assumptions about the child and youth life course as a predetermined, developmental stage (France, Freiberg and Homel, 2010), rather than as a complex process influenced by cultural, structural, economic, and political factors (Webster, MacDonald and Simpson, 2006, MacDonald, 2007). Thus, risk factor research has systematically reinforced individualised and responsibilised notions of young people, providing a techno-scientific veneer that has been difficult to penetrate. For some, it might present the ideal tool for obfuscating and legitimising ideological actions, whilst for others it might offer managerial tools to simplify practice. However, for the youth practitioner, social worker, or welfare professional it may create tensions between person-centred approaches and enacting inhuman, risk-based probabilistic targeting and intervention.

Underpinned by RFPP and closely bound to risk factor research, ‘protective factors’ and resilience have been regarded, even by advocates, as similarly problematic and conceptually vague (Walklate, McGarry and Mythen, 2014; Ungar, 2007; Zolkoski and Bullock, 2012). Although these terms have appealed to those favouring a positive approach to young people, O’Malley (2001:100) has suggested that they are ‘invented’ extensions of RFPP, extending governmental reach and making RFPP governance techniques more amenable to those who favour welfare and needs based approaches. Thus, rather than offering a more positive future, the language of protective factors and resilience has remained grounded in deficit-oriented risk and therefore has offered little in terms of reconstructing young people in a more positive way.

RFPP has had a major impact on UK policy, from crime prevention to unemployment, education, health and general safety (France and Utting, 2005; Turnbull and Spence, 2011). In addition to broad policy initiatives such as ‘Troubled Families’, risk and protective factors have been enshrined within (and have come to dominate) assessment, referral and resource identification systems, often conflating needs with risks (Kemshall, 2008). The youth justice ASSET system is the prime example of such an approach (Smith, R., 2006; Kemshall, 2008; Haines and Case,

2009; Paylor, 2010). However, the approach has been reflected in frameworks across all children's services (often framed within 'continuum of need' processes - see, for example Young London Matters / GOL, 2009; Lancashire County Council, 2013).

Although the risk factor approach has extended far beyond its criminological origins in UK child and youth policy, its rationale and much of its evidence source has remained rooted in the work of Farrington and colleagues. The 'constellation' of risk factors identified as originally contributing to offending and violence have been extended to unemployment, teenage pregnancy, and a range of other 'negative outcomes' impacting on young people and society. Hence, the RFPP's domain has proliferated well beyond the prevention of youth offending, legitimising surveillance, screening, and 'early intervention' across the child, youth and family sphere (Turnbull and Spence, 2011). This has resulted in widespread acceptance of risk models in the youth field, and of the construction of young people as risk objects, with risk inscribed within the realities of lives and social biographies.

Despite this, much of the critique, and indeed general critical engagement with RFPP, has remained within the youth justice, probation and social work spheres. With several exceptions (e.g. Kelly, 2000, 2003; Bessant, 2001; Duncan, 2007), there has appeared to be an almost taken-for-granted acceptance of risk factor research in wider youth fields. Therefore, whilst there has been an increasing challenge to risk factor research and the broader paradigm that this 'science of risk' (Bessant, 2001) justifies, more needs to be done to highlight the limitations and problematic elements of the approach across children and young people's services in their entirety.

### **3.5 Moving Beyond Risk?**

The technology of risk and the RFPP, set within a neoliberal context of individualisation and responsabilisation, have created not only a deficit and problem-focused view of 'youth' within which young people and their families are seen as responsible for their social and economic circumstances (Cooper, 2009), actions and inaction, but also an increasingly diffuse market environment where private, public, and voluntary services have become driven by risk factors, assessments and decisions. As we have seen from Haines and Case's (2009) analysis of risk factors, the foundations upon which risk assumptions are based are problematic, with their influence extending well beyond their intended scope and their methodological

validity.

Given the extent of risk-infused policy and practice, especially in England, it is perhaps difficult to identify alternative approaches, particularly in a current context of limited resources and shrinking services. As Case (2006; 2007) suggested, a complete rejection of risk would be akin to ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’, and it is not the intention here to suggest that conceptions of risk should form no part of policy and practice for young people. Children and young people are subject to hazards and danger, some more so than others, and these risks have psychological, social, cultural, and structural elements. The question, therefore, is: how can services and interventions support vulnerable young people, ensure their safety, and reduce the likelihood of future negative effects, whilst avoiding counter-productive stigmatisation, blame, pathologisation, and the labelling of large parts of the youth population as having the propensity for danger or failure? As Foster and Spencer (2011) have highlighted:

*“[H]ow can we account for young peoples’ past and futures, rather than privileging the latter as many studies of young people do? How can we make room for both structural barriers and the propensity of individuals to live unique lives which are not pre-determined? How can we attribute individual successes to individual determination without also blaming individuals for individual failures? Finally, are there ways of looking into research subjects’ futures in order to identify, plan and make positive changes, without unwittingly cloaking the same notions of risk in different verbiage?” (2011:128)*

What is arguably required is a re-examination of youth, whereby categories of youth and risk are problematized and greater attention is paid to policy and research language, intentions and practical applications. As part of this, ‘risk’ should no longer be the dominant paradigm, but complement a range of approaches in support of wider hopes and intentions for young people. Levitas (2000:203) suggested that risk society had given rise to a “(negative) *utopia of safety*”, with society aspiring only to be safe from danger (an impossible hope) rather than for a more positive, equitable future vision. In many senses the same negative utopia is present in today’s construction of young people, and in the assumptions that provide the foundation for RFPP. There is a focus on preventing young people from doing ‘bad’ things, making poor decisions, or failing to achieve socially functional life outcomes. A successful ‘youth’ life-phase is one defined by staying safe and avoiding pitfalls (an approach exemplified in the New Labour ‘Staying Safe’ report (HM Government, 2007)).

For Akom, Ginwright and Cammarota (2008), re-framing critical youth studies



involves challenging this negative utopia through the creation of asset-based “*formal and informal... educational spaces that produce pedagogies of love, resistance, resiliency, hope and healing*”, or, as they have described them, “*Youthtopias*” (2008:25). teReile (2010), though cautious of idealism, has similarly supported a conceptualisation of “*robust, attainable, sound*” hope and possibility for young people, grounded in an analysis of current conditions such as poverty, discrimination, and disadvantage (2010:45). Whilst there may be a danger in such approaches of romanticising youth, or simply constructing young people as different, as-yet unfulfilled, futures, rather than people in their own right (Foster and Spencer, 2011), problematisation of our current risk- and safety- dominated negative utopia of youth has become increasingly important, as has consideration of what possible alternative visions, or utopias, could look like. At a time of difficult and protracted transitions, under-employment, and the responsabilisation of young people, this definitional and conceptual ‘youth problem’ (Jeffer and Smith, 1999; Cooper, 2009; Hughes et al, 2014) is as pressing as ever.

There are examples of emerging policy and practice that are based on alternative views of young people, particularly in the field of youth justice (see Smith, R., 2014; Creaney, 2013). Haines and Case’s partnership work in youth offending in Swansea, Wales (Haines, 2009; Haines and Case, 2015; Case and Haines, 2014) reflected notions of ‘principled youth justice’ (Goldson and Muncie, 2006) underpinned by a balanced approach to rights, welfare, participation (Smith, R., 2014; Creaney and Smith, 2014), and universal provision for all young people, and with interventions based upon young people’s experiences and aspirations (Smith, R., 2006). The approach advocates a clear philosophy for youth justice based upon a ‘whole child, child friendly’ perspective situating prevention and ‘diversion’ outside the stigmatising context of the youth justice system, recognising the responsibility of adults towards ‘children’ (purposefully used to denote child rights) – rather than responsabilising children - and taking a long-term perspective on issues (Haines and Case, 2015).

Such practices offer some hope. However, they have come at a time when universal child and youth provision has been scaled back or removed as a consequence of neo-liberal ‘austerity’ measures (Creaney and Smith, 2014; Davies, 2013; Mason, 2015). Youth services delivering universal provision are rare, with much of what remains based on risk-paradigm targeted prevention and early intervention. In many senses the ‘fractures’ that Goldson and Muncie (2006:223) suggested existed between the welfare rhetoric of ‘Every Child Matters’ and the

punitive 'No More Excuses' have arguably lessened, unfortunately in favour of the latter, with broader youth policy increasingly 'criminalised' (Rodger, 2008; Cooper, 2009). The increasing neoliberal marketisation of services also has led to a focus on short-term results and fiscal efficiency, neither of which favour philosophically driven practice and the pursuit of long-term benefits that cannot easily be evidenced or monetised in a context of short-term funding, contracts, and results-based commissions. This makes the embedding of approaches such as Children First into mainstream wider youth policy (Drakeford, 2010; Haines and Case, 2015) a challenge, particularly in England (as opposed to Wales) where young people's responsabilisation dominates.

This is not to say, however, that Children First and other approaches are necessarily condemned to fail. Whilst, as teReile (2010) has noted, practitioners (and indeed individual projects and organisations) can sometimes feel that they themselves are marginalised and lacking agency, alternative approaches highlight the potential for localised practice and non-normative risk cultures (Lash, 2000) to innovate and enact change at individual, organisational, and structural levels. 'Learned hopefulness' (2010:40), 'values beyond value' (Skeggs, 2014), 'a situated ethics of social justice' (Banks, 2011), non-blaming revisions to paradigms of help (Bilson and Martin, 2016), and local, emergent practice may enable new constructions of young people, together with practice based upon the possibilities of non-deterministic futures, hope, cooperation, and participation, rather than risk, prevention and pre-emptive intervention.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RISK, PRACTICE AND THE YOUTH PRACTITIONER**

The 'youth practitioner' operates at the policy / practice interface of youth risk discourse. Practitioners are charged, at least in part, with intervening to prevent, limit or protect the young person from 'negative outcomes', developmental, social, educational or judicial. Whether teachers, social workers, youth workers, or one of the myriad of para-professional or quasi-professionals, practitioners look into the eyes of the young person and engage in a dynamic, interpersonal transaction. Consequently, they must balance their personal interventions, organisational demands and requirements, risks, resources and the needs and concerns of the young person on an ongoing basis.

In addition to the notion of young people 'at-risk', many practitioners face a range of other risk dimensions involving their professional and personal selves, from concerns about assault and false accusations, to the implications of making 'poor' decisions and endangering lives. As highlighted by the Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly ('Baby P') inquiries (Laming, 2003,2009; Jones, 2014), and by the collapse of the Kid's Company youth organisation in 2015 (Bright, 2015; Gibb, 2015), the work operates within a sensitive institutional, bureaucratic context, with organisational risks to reputation and finances leading to caution, control or risk averse policy or practice.

This chapter examines the role of the youth practitioner in relation to risk. Whilst this study focuses primarily on practitioners outside formal social work, youth justice and education fields, due to relatively limited research in the wider arena of youth practice, and the relevance of other domains. The chapter draws on a wide range of formal and informal settings to set the broad context of youth practice in relation to risk.

Firstly, the notion of the 'youth practitioner' is examined, specifically in relation to this study. This wide area, involving different professional and non-professional groups, part- and full-time practitioners and an array of agencies across different sectors (Wood and Hine, 2009) is discussed and some of the specific challenges of youth practitioners in non-formal settings are highlighted.

The second section explores the organisational and bureaucratic dimension of practice. It draws upon shifting notions of the 'professional' in the context of

neoliberal managerialism and bureaucracy within children and young people's services in the UK (Banks, 2004; Webb, 2006; Parton, 2006). The role of the youth practitioner, professional or otherwise, is in many senses one of 'street level bureaucrat' (Lipsky, 2010), mediating formal knowledge and power systems, albeit with some potential for pragmatic action.

The third section examines the practitioner's role in engaging young people, making decisions and assessing and working with risk. 'Risk assessments', risk management (with categories of people), and other 'technologies of risk' intended to standardise practice, prioritise cases and ensure accountability have become embedded in most social care and youth contexts (Kemshall, et al, 1997, Kemshall, 2002), forming the centralising "*core morality*" of governmentalised approaches to child protection and youth welfare (Cradock, 2004:324). Their impact on young people, particularly in the context of targeted provision, prevention and early intervention, is significant. Questions of practitioner agency and resistance are also explored, as well as the '*informal logics*' (Broadhurst et al, 2010:1047), '*situated*' (Kemshall, 2010) and '*emergent practices*' (Horlick-Jones, 2005:304-305) that enable practitioners to navigate everyday practice.

Section four explores the role of trust in practice and risk. Risk society, as Beck (1994) and Giddens (1991) have suggested, together with neoliberal managerialism and responsabilisation have led to an erosion of trust in expert knowledge systems and the role of professions (Banks, 2004; Webb, 2006; Furedi, 2002). However, youth work, and other informal practice with young people, is, however, often said to be predicated upon authentic, mutually trusting relationships (Spence, Devanny and Noonan, 2006; Spence, 2007; Smith, H. 2010; Davies, 2010b, 2011a; McKee, 2011; Hughes et al, 2014). The challenges facing youth practice that is underpinned by notions of trust in a context of increasing mistrust, suspicion and blame are critically discussed.

Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion about the considerable changes to practice that have taken place since this study commenced. Austerity and 'cuts' have reduced services, and many practitioners have seen their own or others' posts disappear through repeated 'efficiency savings'. This, together with increased outsourcing and contracting, has meant that many of those remaining in the field face increasingly precarious futures themselves.

## 4.1 Practice and the ‘Youth Practitioner’

Work with young people takes place across a vast range of settings, including youth work, youth justice, social work and social care, formal education, guidance and mentoring, substance misuse and sexual health contexts, homelessness and housing, to name but a few. The work may be underpinned by different principles and purposes, from education and empowerment to care, punishment, protection, and rehabilitation. Practice is diverse, its only common feature being the client group of ‘youth’ as a definitional tool (Jefferis and Smith, 1988:4), and normative assumptions of youth as a developmental or transitional state, or in need of direction, protection, correction, and improvement (Wood and Hine, 2009:2).

Youth practice also takes place across diverse organisational contexts, from local authority departments and services to voluntary and private sector organisations, both large and small. The New Labour government oversaw expansion and re-shaping of this ‘youth sector’ through new policy interventions (such as ‘Every Child Matters’) and increasing marketisation (Wood and Hine, 2009; Davies, 2014), with the commissioning of services (and outcomes or results) to charities and private providers. It also saw, with the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act, the emergence of Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), bringing together practitioners from police, probation, social services, health, and education services to deliver multi-disciplinary, risk-factor based youth justice provision (Muncie, 1999; Souhami, 2012). YOTs were ultimately accountable to the Home Office rather than child Health or Education Departments, signalling, as Goldson and Muncie (2006:215) argued, a “*fundamental shift ... away from statutory child-welfare structures*”. Whilst the youth sector expanded its range over this period, traditional youth services and other universal provision began to see contraction and an increasing focus on “*individualised work and targeted groups who threaten to be ‘socially disruptive’*” (Jefferis and Smith, 2010:12). Since the 2008 global recession, and subsequent ‘austerity’-focused coalition and Conservative governments, youth provision outside formal education (which received protection) has been subject to significant cuts, with some local authorities withdrawing from youth service provision (Unison, 2014). The current practice context of work with young people is, therefore, one of competition for limited resources: diverse yet often dependent on (reducing) government funding.

‘Youth work’, through both local authority youth services and the voluntary sector, has traditionally been the element of children and young people’s provision that offers ‘informal education’ opportunities for young people. Such opportunities are

based around conversation and the cultivation of settings where young people, learn to build relationships, values, and ways of being through experiences, understanding, and democracy (Jefferies and Smith, 1996/2005:25). As Spence (2007) emphasised, informal education of this sort recognises *“that young people are social agents, not just individuals inhabiting a particular moment in the lifespan, and that the educational perspective of youth work involves invoking a set of ideals which transcend personal ‘needs’”* (2007:8) or, indeed, risks. Youth work has traditionally been founded on voluntary engagement with young people (Young, 2006; Spence, 2007), with relationships based upon *“accepting and valuing young people”, “trust”, “honesty”, “respect”, and “reciprocity”* (Young, 2006:77-78). Through professionally and vocationally trained practitioners, part-time staff, and volunteers across local authority services and the community / voluntary sectors, youth work offered the type of universal, non-stigmatising developmental and *“diversionary”* activities championed by Haines and Case (2015) in their vision for re-addressing the risk-focussed justice, prevention and early intervention agenda.

In the context of overwhelming adherence to the RFPP policy agenda across children and youth services, increasing demands for evidencing outcomes and impact, and high levels of ‘austerity’ measures, youth work after the mid 1990s saw a shift towards risk-infused outcome-focused targeted provision. ‘Universal’, or ‘open-access’ provision, although always problematic in terms of the extent to which it reached all young people, was diminished and, in some areas, abandoned: services were cut and staff made redundant (Davies and Merton, 2010; De St Croix, 2012). This not only limited the potential for non-stigmatising ‘intervention’, but also for trust, care, respect, and elements of the voluntary relationship, with more provision being driven by assessment, selection, and referral processes and, at times, young people being compelled, coerced, or incentivised to participate through conditions linked to education, training, benefits, accommodation, or criminal justice processes (Hughes et al, 2014; Davies and Merton, 2010; Mason, 2015). In many areas, targeted youth work became part of multi-disciplinary prevention teams within ‘generic’ child and young person’s services, working with troubled families, young offenders, or undertaking ‘pre-threshold’ case-work with children ‘at-risk’ or ‘in need’ (see, for example, Davies and Merton, 2010; Davies, 2010c; De St Croix, 2012).

In the community and voluntary sector, reductions in, or withdrawal of local authority grant funding in favour of out-sourced provision and commissioned work meant that many voluntary organisations were either contractually tied to outcome- and risk-based targeted work, or had to seek external grant funding to maintain their services.

Increased commissioning-based marketization and competition also led to economies of scale being applied, with small local providers often needing to form consortia in order to survive and bid for contracts against large “*empire building*” charities and private companies (Davies, 2013). Thus, practice and management became increasingly subject to the bureaucratising demands of commissioners. Time-limited contracts also meant that service providers could change frequently, with practitioners being regularly at risk of redundancy or being transferred from one organisation to another.

Whilst the youth sector, particularly youth work, has always tended to be a diffuse area of practice, operating across different domains, in different settings and with a wide range of practitioners, this diffusion has arguably increased, albeit within the context of overall shrinking provision. Paradoxically, whilst practice operates across different settings, cross-sectoral commissioning, or as Davies (2013:14) puts it “*the colonisation of the voluntary youth sector by the state*”, has assisted in extending the governmental reach (and the bureaucratic field) of target-led and risk-based policy and regulatory practice well beyond the public sector. This, in turn has led to a closing down of space for flexibility and interpretation in practice (Spence, Devaney and Noonan, 2006).

Youth work, particularly in the voluntary sector, has always involved unpaid and paid part-time practitioners in its practice, indeed their training and management was part of the move towards the development of professional training in the 1960s (Davies, 2014). Since 2010, with Coalition and Conservative Governments, ‘austerity’ politics, the scaling back of the public sector, and the drive to obtain ‘more for less’, there has been both a contraction of youth services (and associated funding streams) and an accelerated de-professionalisation. In attempts to be competitively efficient (and in the case of private companies, profitable), organisations have relied on unqualified, low paid staff or volunteers to deliver contracted services, whilst at the same time being bound by national or local government demands, ideologies and managerial expectations (Rochester, 2013).

As is evident from the above analysis, ‘youth practitioners’ are not a homogenous occupational or professional group, and they operate across different organisations, settings and cultures. They may have received different professional training and education (for example social work, youth work, teaching, or the non-professional ‘work with children and young people’ qualifications), or be unqualified practitioners. Whilst traditional notions may have assumed that professionally trained social

workers or youth workers were to be found predominantly in public sector social and youth services, many actually work in voluntary sector organisations or with private providers delivering provision that may not be described as traditional social work or youth work. Conversely, requirements for qualified staff within youth services (Davies, 2013), education settings (Mulholland, 2012), and areas of social work have reduced, with the employment of 'para-professionals' as a cheaper alternative (McGregor, 2011; Carson, 2011).

This context highlights the complexity of youth practice and the environment of the youth practitioner, who may be professionally trained or unqualified, full-time or part time, operating within and across a range of sectors and hybrid organisations. This study focuses on the perspectives and actions of those youth practitioners working in non-formal youth contexts (that is, not in school education, social work or local authority youth justice services) since these groups have rarely been subject to research in relation to risk and risk-decision-making, and operate in diverse and perhaps 'grey' areas of policy and practice with young people (as opposed to formal education, legalistic, or assessment-driven contexts). At the same time, as we have seen, they may be untrained or, for some at least, inexperienced whilst also being expected to deliver the bulk of face-to-face work with young people in environments targeting young people who are deemed 'at-risk' or 'risky'.

## **4.2 Organisation, Bureaucracy and Practice**

The youth practitioner operates principally within an organisational context. Organisational structures, management approaches and cultures shape the practice environment with the intention of operationalising the values and goals of the organisation itself and / or the local, regional or national policies and directives it is expected or contracted to deliver. Whilst some small community and voluntary sector organisations are 'organic' in nature, evolving in relation to local issues and needs, most provision is bureaucratic and managerial, based upon hierarchies; standardised, regulated practices (or 'rules') - systems and processes intended to manage practice; and administrative tasks, 'files', or 'paperwork' (Weber, 1968:957).

Whilst bureaucracies have changed since Weber's post-war context, many of these core components have remained central, with those working within them ('officials') undertaking tasks on behalf of the governance system and its strategic objectives. 'Business' is primarily undertaken according to "*calculable rules and 'without regard for persons'*" (Weber, 1968:975), with technical specialists, or 'experts', expected to



discharge impersonal, 'objective' duties. Even though there may be some scope for unregulated 'creative' activity, Weber, argued that, in bureaucratic organisations, the rational pursuit of objective purpose is the norm of conduct (1968:979):

*"The individual bureaucrat cannot squirm out of the apparatus into which he has been harnessed... the professional bureaucrat is chained to his activity in his entire economic and ideological existence. In the great majority of cases he is only a small cog in a ceaselessly moving mechanism which prescribes to him an essentially fixed route of march... The individual bureaucrat is, above all, forged to the common interest of all the functionaries in the perpetuation of the apparatus and the persistence of its rationally organised domination." (Weber 1968:988).*

Thus, objective rules, such as those employed through the RFPP, operate as bureaucratic tools of standardisation and control. At the macro-level, organisational control mechanisms have increasingly sought to employ risk management techniques to limit exposure to unpredictable or uncontrollable threats. Power (2004) suggested that this has resulted in a 'risk management explosion' whereby attempts are made to protect the organisation from an increasing range of risks: financial, legal, and, increasingly, reputational risks that can threaten the success of the organisation, or even its existence. 'Risk management of everything' has, in part, emerged from a culture of *"growing individualisation of modern society"* (Power, 2004:41), a 'blame culture' where someone must be made responsible when things go wrong (Furedi, 2002:10-12). This has combined with rising consumer-rights, a 'compensation' culture, and a mistrust of expert authority to create an environment of fear of uncertainty, and, subsequently, attempts to control the uncontrollable through regulation and increased bureaucratic rules. Echoing Weber's concerns about technical rationality and Argyris' (1998) observations of organisational practice, Dekker (2012) highlighted how such rational systems can produce irrational and unjust outcomes, particularly for those individuals who get blamed for what may often be accidents, unpredictable events, or wider systemic failures.

Power also argued that risk management processes generate their own risks. In this context, governments and organisations seek to offload risk onto other parties:

*"Coupled to institutional assumptions and myths about the manageability of risks, there is an intensification of strategies to avoid blame when things go wrong... The risk management of everything reflects the efforts of organisational agents previously engaged in the collectivisation and pooling of social and economic risks, to off-load and re-individualise their own personal risk. The result is a potentially catastrophic downward spiral in which expert judgement shrinks to an empty form of defensible compliance". (Power, 2004: 42).*

The field of child and youth services has provided numerous instances where ‘individualised’ blame, a ‘climate of litigation’ (Harrison, 1997) and the ‘criminalisation of human error’ (Dekker, 2012) have been prominent features of reporting and policy / practice responses (Kemshall, 2002). This was perhaps most evident in the reporting of the deaths of both Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly (‘Baby P’), where individual social workers and managers were subject to public naming and shaming, and were sacked as a consequence of alleged action and inaction. This response has often taken place in spite of a range of systemic factors hindering workers’ ability to practice effectively, including lack of support, inadequate administration and information systems, insufficient resources, high caseloads, physical threat, and over-work (Calder, 2011; Laming, 2003, 2009).

School trips and outdoor education activities are similarly subject to scrutiny. The Lyme Regis canoe tragedy in 1993 led to the first criminal conviction for corporate manslaughter in the UK (Dore, 1994), and was followed by increased licensing and regulation (and possible over-bureaucratisation) of educational visits across schools and youth services (Smithers, 2000). This was further strengthened in 2001 following subsequent accidents (Lewis, 2001; Revell, 2001; Revell, 2002), leading at the time to some teachers’ associations advising members not to lead trips (NASUWT, 2001) because teachers had become too exposed to litigation (Revell, 2001; Hunter-Jones and Hunter-Jones, 2007). Fatal accidents have continued since this time, with some teachers and other staff at times facing prosecution for negligent practice (see, for example, Paton, 2007; Carter, 2005; Wright and Leatherdale, 2015). As the Health and Safety Executive has highlighted on its website (HSE, 2015), fears of prosecution “*have been grossly inflated and are unwarranted*”, with only two prosecutions between 2005 and 2010. However, the culture of fear, combined with increased bureaucracy (Hunter-Jones and Hunter-Jones, 2007), has led to some schools and staff avoiding educational visits (Johnston, 2015):

*“Trips have become risky for schools who need to demonstrate that they have taken all reasonable steps to ensure the safety of pupils. Even if such trips are not curtailed (schools cannot easily ‘exit’ from this activity), the climate in which they are undertaken has created a risk management issue both to protect the pupils, but also to protect the school’s name and that of staff, the secondary risk.” (Power, 2004:42)*

Most recently, issues emerging in the wake of the collapse of the children’s charity Kid’s Company in August 2015, with accusations of financial mis-management (due

in part to external concerns about how the charity was financially supporting families), and safeguarding failures, have highlighted the dangers of practice in this area, both for organisations and staff. In the space of months, Kids Company went from being “idealised” and “immune from public criticism” (Kemp, 2015), “too famous” (Goslett, 2015), to being publicly destroyed before inquiries into its finances or practices were completed (Kemp, 2015). The charity’s director, Camila Batmanghelidjh, shifted from being seen as a charismatic, cult figure championed by politicians (including Prime Minister David Cameron (Goslett, 2015)), media, and others due to her ‘non-standardised’ approach to children (Kemp, 2015), to someone accused of “verbal ectoplasm” and “psychobabble” by MPs (Chakelian, 2015; Dodd, Butler and Gayle, 2015), blackmailing politicians, falsifying numbers (Hope and Hughes, 2015; Goslett, 2015), driving forward dubious neuro-scientific research (Bingham, 2015), failing to report abuse (Dodd, Butler and Gayle, 2015), and mismanaging finances (NAO, 2015; House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, 2016). Whatever the seemingly numerous concerns about the charity, the case has highlighted how organisations, and those who work within them, rise and fall by risk decisions; financial, legal, and reputational. It has also demonstrated how, as in the case of Peter Connelly (Jones, 2014), organisations and senior figures (in this case those who advocated for, promoted, and funded the organisation to the tune of over £46million of government money) off-set responsibility and protect their own decisions (Payne, 2015).

Work with young people in the public, private, and voluntary sectors is a challenging balance between meeting young people’s needs, protecting them, serving the interests of the organisation and paying due regard to self-protection (emotionally, physically, and in terms of reputation). The risk management of everything in this politically sensitive litigation climate can lead to “webs of overcautious surveillance”, bureaucracy, and defensive practices (Harrison, 1997:37) – a ‘cover your back’ mentality where organisations and individuals fear being sued or losing their jobs (Titterton, 2005; Whittaker and Havard, 2015). As Adams (2006) pointed out, institutional pressures lead those responsible for risk management to disregard rewards of risk-taking in order to avoid compromising their judgements about what is safe or dangerous. This is particularly acute in contexts where high levels of uncertainty exist:

*“Risk managers given the task of controlling or directing uncertainty are understandably risk averse. How, if you do not know the odds, or the rules of the game, or the name of the game, or whether your game is part of someone else’s much bigger game (unknown unknowns) can you be expected to control or direct it ... whatever it might turn out to be?” (Adams, 2006:5)*

The growth of managerialism from the 1980s onwards contributed to, and served as a mechanism for the rise of risk management. In the UK, the emergence of Thatcherism and 'New Right' government witnessed a reconfiguration of public services away from paternal welfare systems, professionals, and administrators, towards market-driven 'new managerialism' or 'new public management' (NPM) (Pollitt, 1990; Clarke and Newman, 1997; Newman, 2000; Banks, 2004). NPM was based upon "*a new language of welfare delivery which emphasises efficiency and value for money, competition and markets, consumerism and customer care*" (Butcher, 1995:161). Clarke, Gewertz and McLoughlin (2000:8-9) suggested that managerialism was a "*normative system concerning what counts as valuable knowledge, who knows it, and who is empowered to act*". Managerialism, they argued, "*has tended to subordinate other principles of judgement to the managerial calculus of economy and efficiency*" (2000:10). Thus, public services and those who operated within them were subject to mistrust and accusations of poor management and inefficiency, particularly where the interpersonal, unpredictable, and unmeasurable were large parts of everyday practice. Rather than operating through decision-making of professionals and individual managers, processes of 'managerialisation' led to relationships, processes, and decisions increasingly being subject to control, regulation and standardisation (Clarke, Gewertz and McLaughlin, 2000; Banks, 2011). Whilst New Labour's public sector 'modernisation' agenda arguably re-shaped managerialism somewhat towards a less adversarial stakeholder model, the focus on performance, targets, outputs and efficiency continued (Newman, 2000) and indeed, intensified (Banks, 2011).

Power suggested that "*the risk management of everything is closely related to an ambition to measure everything*" and a "*wider cultural 'trust in numbers'*" (2004:53). As such, technologies of risk and risk management contributed significantly to the reconfiguration of the welfare state, offering alluring and apparently systematic, measurable and standardised regulatory regimes for controlling organisational behaviour, practice processes, resources, and clients (or customers / stakeholders) (Humphrey, 2003; Webb, 2006). Risk management strategies, risk registers, wide-ranging risk assessments, action plans, audits, and risk reporting became integral elements in public sector planning and management (Webb, 2006). In the social welfare and youth sectors, particularly social work and youth offending, this led to a focus on managing risk and 'adverse outcomes' (Calder, 2011:202), a proliferation of audit and inspection, and increasingly complex technicised frameworks of practice (Webb, 2006; Munro, 2004, 2010b):

*“The saturation of social care agencies with risk regulation regimes leads to conservatism and risk aversion by public sector managers and front-line practitioners alike. This kind of management conservatism involves a preference for erring on the side of overstating as opposed to understating risk under conditions of uncertainty.” (Webb, 2006:190)*

Intertwined with this narrative of organisational bureaucracy, managerialism and the ‘risk management of everything’, is the changing role of the professional. Whilst acknowledging that not all youth practitioners are professionally trained, qualified or part of professional communities of practice, the increasing mistrust in social welfare services, and in professionals and ‘expert’ voices (Clarke, Gewertz and McLaughlin, 2000; Banks, 2004; Webb, 2006), has contributed to, and been impacted upon by neoliberalism and the rise of managerialism. Understandings of, and attitudes towards, professions and ‘professionals’ has shifted significantly since the post-war period’s general representation of professionals as *“honoured servants of public need”* serving *“through the schooled application of their unusually esoteric and complex knowledge and skill”* (Friedson, 1986:28). By the 1960s, commentators were becoming increasingly concerned both by what was regarded as an excessive monopolistic power of a professional technocratic elite, and by the bureaucratising (rather than liberating) role of professions (Johnson, 1972). As newer professions such as social work and youth work were emerging or becoming established, there was a sense of increasing mistrust of professionals and expert power (Banks, 2004), reflected by some youth practitioners who saw professionalisation as the pursuance of power and money, favouring the ‘powerful’ rather than siding with the weak and dispossessed (Davies, 1988). Banks (2004) identified managerial drives towards making professional judgement subservient to standardised practices, which led some commentators to suggest that (as some professions were establishing) a process of ‘deprofessionalisation’ was taking place, whilst others argued that a ‘new professionalism’ might be emerging (see, for example, Hugman, 1998, O’Sullivan, 2011). It remains to be seen whether such a model of professional practice is driven by emancipatory approaches and democratic relationships with service users (O’Sullivan, 2011:37; Hugman, 1998:223-4), by a more negative approach whereby ‘responsibilised’ *“professionals act prudentially and innovatively to protect and further the interests of their organisation”* (Ball, 2008:66), or by some pragmatic hybrid of both approaches. The current context of managerialism and marketization perhaps favour Ball’s image of bureau-professional regimes where, rather than deliberation and judgement, *“survival in the marketplace or achievement of targets are the new basis of professional responsibility”* (2008:67).

In youth work, service rationalisation and efficiency drives, coupled with standardisation and instrumentalisation of work practices and processes, have led to a decline in the status of the profession in recent years, with reductions in numbers of professional workers (Unison, 2014) and plans to assimilate terms, conditions, and negotiating rights of professional workers into generic local authority services (see Taylor, 2015). Youth work itself has come under threat due to the inherent tension between its approach and bureaucratic rationality:

*“The dynamic, responsive characteristics of youth work, which is manifest to a large extent in the personalities of workers, do not reflect the static and bureaucratic rationality of organisations, even if the aims of workers and organisational policy are fully in harmony. In order to maintain their ability to work with young people in their everyday realities, youth workers must firstly deal with the present. They recognise that there are times when young people are at their most productive and engaged when they are allowed to pursue their legitimate interests and desires, in whatever order they wish, and in a space of time to be determined by the young people themselves” (Spence, Devanney and Noonan, 2006:33)*

Whilst regulation and standardisation of practice do not necessarily lead to deprofessionalisation per se, in a climate of austerity and the continued pursuit of ‘more for less’ they do provide the conditions for replacing costly professionals with workers who are able to follow simplified procedures. This does, however, presuppose that practice can be simplified and standardised, eliminating complexity, uncertainty, emergent decision-making, and the often sophisticated ‘soft skills’ of relationship building – potentially re-shaping and redefining ‘youth work’ (or ‘work with young people’) as instrumentalist, deterministic, and linear activity.

However, Banks (2011) has suggested that ever-increasing rationalisation of services and drives to further reduce bureaucracy hold some potential for creating new spaces for professional autonomy, decision-making and, reflecting Hugman’s (1998) notion of new professionalism, a progressive *“situated ethics of social justice”* (2011:19). Whilst the removal of some bureaucratic constraints may create space to practice, the context of mistrust and blame is likely to remain and with it, the continued responsabilisation of practice and practitioners working in complex and unpredictable situations.

What is clear from this picture is that practice, and youth practitioners, whether they be ‘professionals’ or otherwise, have been profoundly affected by bureaucratisation, managerialism, and risk management practices over the last 30 years. In Spence, Devanney and Noonan’s (2006) research into the voices of youth work practice,

practitioners highlighted the burden of “paperwork” required to monitor practice and justify funding. This had an observable impact on practitioners’ capacity to undertake face-to-face work, and, whilst the need for accountability was recognised, paperwork was seen to be excessive and, for some at least, less about “*improving practice in its own terms, but rather intended for monitoring and surveillance of both young people and youth workers*” (2006:116). The study also found that all those interviewed experienced some level of dissonance between their working practices and values and externally imposed systems of measurement and accountability. Practitioners were seen to be relatively powerless to influence constraining and “*unsympathetic*” managerial systems amidst the dynamic nature of practice:

*“[T]he processes of youth work involve responsiveness to immediate, sometimes unpredictable circumstances as much as to premeditated and planned objectives, while ongoing negotiation with young people is necessary to secure and maintain their participation. In this situation congruence between organisational presuppositions, intentions and rationality cannot always be maintained. Rather than simply applying systems and recording practice using standardised forms, youth workers are more often put into a position where they must actively manage systems in order to prevent them undermining their actual work.” (Spence, Devanney and Noonan, 2006:117)*

Banks (2004), through interviews with a range of experienced practitioners in social work and youth and community work, identified a ‘new accountability’ based on increased procedures, regulation and audit that served to “*restrict the space for the exercise of professional discretion and the autonomy of professional decision-making*” (2004:149). One interviewee’s comments brought into sharp focus the impact of bureaucracy, accountability, and blame in the practice domain:

*“One of my clients hung himself in the garage, yesterday afternoon. The first thing I was asked was ‘Is the file up to date?’ Because it’s so important that the file is up to date and nobody can be held responsible. (Senior social worker)” (in Banks, 2004:151)*

Banks highlighted that ‘professional autonomy’ could be used to refer to both the decision-making freedom by the individual practitioner and to that of a professional body that may prescribe principles, standards or behaviours for individual members. Banks (2004) suggested that these professional regulatory elements have been increasing, perhaps as a consequence of the reducing confidence and trust in both welfare and professionals (Banks, 2004; Langan, 2000; Webb, 2006). The increase in professional regulatory tools indicates that standardised, bureaucratic mechanisms have the potential to operate both as managerial instruments and as means of professional governance and accountability. Thus, professional workers

may be subject to both organisational and professional expectations and requirements, sometimes working in tandem, sometimes in tension. It is, however, worth noting that Banks identified that whilst procedures were often regarded as too numerous and prescriptive, some practitioners felt there was considerable scope for professional agency, in their application (2004:157).

As Spence, Devaney and Noonan (2006:112) highlighted, many youth workers within their study were also designated as 'managers' rather than 'youth workers', although they continued to reference their face-to-face role and responsibility. This was also reflected in Bank's (2004) interviews, with 'practitioner-managers' or 'hybrids' (Clarke, 1998) performing both face-to-face practice roles and management functions "*where the tensions between the 'service' and 'corporate' concerns and professional and organisational commitments are keenly felt*" (2004:184). In such a context, there is, perhaps, a thin line between taking on management 'responsibilities' and becoming increasingly responsabilised for making poor decisions, particularly those made outside the realms of constraining standardised procedure. The managerial-practitioner role may also serve as a means of extending the reach of self-governing managerialism, with 'Janus-faced' workers (Spence, Devaney and Noonan, 2006:112) expected to balance their practitioner-oriented 'ethic of care', commitment to justice, and caring relationships with 'detached' and 'impartial' management practice (Banks, 2004:185).

Through managerial attempts to control 'supercomplexity' (Barnett, 2008) and unpredictability, both in terms of practice and in competing voices and truths about the work, youth practitioners are required to operate in the space between measurable, ordered and standardised administrative processes and outcomes, and the sometimes planned, but often emergent nature of day to day practice. When practice does not fit standardised procedures, or the one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work in the field, the practitioner is faced with the challenge of whether to curtail their practice, function in a risk-averse (or at least risk cautious) manner, or to operate in the responsabilised, risky, 'grey area', where 'poor outcomes' may be blamed on 'poor decisions' made by individuals. In the blame context of welfare practice, neither action nor inaction are safe options.

### **4.3 From Risk Management to Risk Assessment**

There are several perspectives about the differences of and relationships between risk management and risk assessment. Webb (2006:71) has suggested that risk



management is concerned with categories of people, whilst risk assessment is concerned with individuals. Though this may be predominantly the case in social work (where most risk assessment research around children and young people is situated) and other environments where individual casework is the primary mode of practice, risk assessments are multifaceted (Baker and Kelly, 2011). They constitute a central feature in planning practice interventions (for example, groupwork, detached work, lone-working, or home visits), organising trips and residential opportunities, and in identifying and assessing safe practice settings. For some practitioners, therefore, 'risks assessment' is a multi-layered aspect of practice, needing to be undertaken for practice locations, modes of work, groups, and the individuals with whom they are working.

Carson and Bain (2008:50) have argued that risk assessment and risk management are *"interactive and iterative"*, with assessments identifying risks and potential remedies, and risk management practices functioning to make decisions about reducing these risks and managing resources. Webb's and Carson and Bain's definitions, whilst slightly different, highlight the inter-play between assessment and management, both at the level of the individual and of populations. Risk assessment and management practices are located in political and actuarial discourses about certain populations and in organisational contexts of resource and accountability, all of which are inscribed with social bias. Risk assessment serves a dual purpose: an accountability tool for monitoring practice and a rationing and case-prioritisation device, particularly in times of low resource and high demand when there is a managerial drive to restrict services to certain groups or the population in general (Kemshall, 2002; Webb, 2006):

*"Risk assessment has the effect of sealing the destiny of service users by determining whether or not an intervention or resource is required. In this sense it is a normalising process in that risk assessment decides issues about resource entitlement." (Webb, 2006:74)*

Political, social and organisational drivers (which are infused with inequality, prejudice and power) are bound into the assessment process, at whatever level they take place in practice. Thus, risk assessment processes are, at least in part, about managing the perceived risks of 'clients', practitioners and practice to the organisation itself, as well as attempting to serve the best interests of, or reduce the perceived risks facing, the young person. Because of these different demands and perspectives, risk assessment practice varies across sectors and organisations, even when using standard tools or frameworks (Baker and Kelly, 2011).

In its simplified form, risk assessment is *“the process of estimating and evaluating risk, understood as the possibility of beneficial and harmful outcomes and the likelihood of their occurrence in a stated timescale”* (Titterton, 2005:83). This definition does not, in and of itself, prescribe a negative connotation to risk assessment. It offers the potential for positive risk taking in order to support growth and development (Titterton, 2011, Kemshall, 2013) and, with it, the opportunity for reflection on the relationship between positive and negatives, costs and benefits, in risk decision-making. The positive aspects of risk assessment and risk decisions are, however, often overlooked in favour of risk avoidance (Kemshall, Wilkinson and Baker 2013; Kemshall, 2014). This is perhaps unsurprising due to the high level of scrutiny (and blame) in relation to risk and risk decisions in social and welfare services, and society in general (Kemshall, Wilkinson and Baker, 2013:10; Titterton, 2005).

As Titterton’s definition infers, risk assessments should identify the likelihood of an event taking place and the extent of harm or benefit involved (Carson and Bain, 2008; Kemshall, Wilkinson and Baker, 2013), together with some notion of timescale. In a predominantly negative risk framework, this tends to be conceived in terms of a ‘harm’ (severity) and likelihood matrix or scoring system. Interventions are then identified in order to reduce the severity of harm (harm reduction) or, more likely, to reduce the likelihood of a harmful event occurring. Power argued that in risk-averse environments there was a tendency to attempt to manage out harmful events, even when they have a very low likelihood of occurring (Power, 2007:154). In a blame culture, even the most unlikely of events is feared on the basis of its impact on those involved: young people, practitioners, and the organisation. In most cases, risk – the probability of a harmful event taking place – cannot be eliminated or prevented, merely reduced (Hope and Sparks, 2000).

Despite the apparently straightforward, objective process of assessment of harm (severity) versus likelihood, degrees of risk and risk calculations in complex social fields are rarely quantifiable in a straightforward way and do not offer the certainty or precision that is assumed or claimed (Titterton, 2005; Parton, 1996). As evidenced in the analysis of RFR, the predictive powers of risk factor research and, in turn, the implied certainty of risk assessment processes, are often poor or over-inflated (Wynne, 1982; Kemshall, 2002, 2009; Horlick-Jones, 2005b; Maden, 2007). Whilst some tools do report *“well above chance”* prediction levels, there remain concerns about the impact of interventions with considerable false-positives (Sargent, 1999)

and false-negatives (e.g. Vaswani and Merone, 2014). Horlick-Jones (2005b), highlighted the limitations of 'canonical rationality', or as Webb (2006) put it, the dependence on a "*rational-linear model of reality*" (2006:74), arguing for a more balanced understanding of "*the real world character of risk in human experience*" (2005b:256) and the recognition that, as Kemshall, (2009) termed it, "*risk trajectories are social processes that have multiple causes*" (2009:159).

The application of standardised 'check-box' approaches to risk assessment can also impact upon aims of building trusting worker-young person relationships, particularly if, as is often the case, the approach is overly personal or intense, or applied insensitively, inappropriately, or in the early stages of contact (Baker and Kelly, 2011; Yates, 2009). This could lead to increased mistrust, withdrawal or avoidance for those young people who might be regarded as most vulnerable or difficult to engage.

By virtue of its underlying assumptions, risk assessment "*is coloured by subjective judgement at every stage of the process*" (Webb, 2006, 76), ignoring difference, reinforcing power inequalities, and holding the potential for discriminatory and oppressive practice (Smith, R., 2010). The language of risk factors obfuscates inequality, representing gendered and racial stereotyping and discrimination as probabilistic calculation, from young women's perceived sexually risky behaviour to the targeting of young Black (particularly African-Caribbean) males 'at risk' from gang involvement (Aldridge and Medina, 2007; Ralphs, Medina and Aldridge, 2009; Fitch, 2009) and young Muslims 'at risk' from violent extremism (Mogra, 2006; Cressey, 2006; Horgan, 2008). Assessments may be highly subjective, with ambiguous scales (for example, 'high concern' - 'low concern'), be unspecific in terms of statistical calculations of likelihood of the event occurring, and be ambiguous in terms of definitions of risk areas (for example, 'troublesome', 'harmful behaviour') (see Milner, Myers and O'Byrne, 2015; Webb, 2006:76). There is, therefore, considerable emphasis on effective 'risk judgement' (Titterton, 2015; Kemshall, Wilkinson and Baker, 2013) and consistency of approach (Corby, 1996): the paradox of being told to apply 'reliable', standardised tools yet also exercise case-by-case judgement (Kemshall, 2002:84).

RFPP has led to greater complexity of assessment, with different risk factors identified and scored through risk assessment processes. In examples such as the Youth Offending Team ASSET and ONSET assessments, a range of risk and protective factors are scored in relation to their perceived impact on the young person's criminal behaviour and likely recidivism. This score is then used to indicate

the level of resourcing and intervention required (a 'Scaled Approach'). As Haines and Case (2015) have argued, the questionable predictability and reliability of RFR, combined with the subjective frame of the assessor, makes the process more "*programme fetishism*" than effective practice (see also Almond, 2012):

*"Asset measures (practitioner perceptions of) a child's exposure to risk factors in 'psychosocial' (psychological and immediate social) risk domains and pursues an integrity of (risk-based) programme delivery that is frequently lacking in a robust evidence base or detailed, long-term evaluation outcomes... These assessments shape subsequent interventions, which are taken from an off-the-shelf menu of (largely pseudo-psychological) accredited 'what works' programmes" (Haines and Case, 2015:66-67)*

Standardised assessments have become increasingly common across the children and youth field in the UK (Baker and Kelly, 2011; Peckover et al, 2011), from specialist tools to predict recidivism, sexual violence, or mental health issues to more wide-ranging 'Children in Need' assessment frameworks and the 'Common Assessment Framework' (CAF), the generic assessment tool for children in need across England, used across all sectors and many services. Whilst many of these assessment tools are focused on specialist services in formal contexts (for example, youth justice, social services, and mental health assessments), individual risk assessment tools have permeated the practice of those working in non-formal youth settings, particularly in areas where individual or 'preventative' interventions are informed by risk factor metrics, or where the young person might be seen as a risk to staff, the service or other young people (for example, 'targeted' youth work, homelessness, substance use and harm reduction services, youth training and employment provision).

Assessments of need have either been supplanted by risk or conflate risk and need (Briggs, 2013; Kemshall, 2002, 2008; Kemshall et al, 1997). Risk assessments dominate, whilst those described as 'needs assessments' are underpinned by risk factor-based categorisation and framing. White, Hall and Peckover (2009), for example, suggested that the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) sought to create "*a common evidence-based language of need*" (2009:1213). Since this evidence base is predominantly risk-factor focused, need becomes defined in terms of risk and risk factors, and by a "*top down governance of practice*" (2009:1214) rather than by professional or young person-framed needs. In the case of youth offending, Briggs (2013) identified that ASSET assessments subjugated needs under an offending related risk frame, with practitioners 'repackaging' needs as risks in order to support intervention. Therefore, whilst the drive for meeting the welfare

needs of children and young people may remain strong in many practitioners, the conflated language and standardised assessments of 'risk' and 'need' obfuscate this and in most cases, retain the operational frame of risk and risk factor-based managerial practice.

Standardised risk assessment processes do serve a useful function in terms of insulating the organisation from uncertainty. Regulatory risk assessments project the impression of effective governance informed by 'objective', techno-scientific models that a) identify those requiring intervention, b) prescribe courses of action, and c) standardise practice and the practitioner. All three of these areas are highly problematic. However, whilst the veneer of this approach is maintained, policymakers and organisations can avoid (or partially protect themselves from) the challenge of dealing with complexity and uncertainty. Practitioners, at least those whose role is to help, support, educate, or build relationships, are the responsabilised others – managing uncertainty and grey areas of practice on a day to day basis.

Risk assessments are often described as 'tools' (e.g. Loxton, Shirran and Hothersall, 2010; Baker and Kelly, 2011). This requires further problematisation. Risk assessments that are frequently intended to subjugate and standardise professional decision-making (Kemshall, 2002; Smith, R., 2010; Peckover et al, 2011; Littlechild, 2008) have the potential to increase risks to the children and young people they purport to support through routinisation and uniformity of processes, disaggregation of information and net-widening over-intervention (Smith, R., 2010; Peckover et al, 2011; Baker and Kelly, 2011). It is therefore necessary to continue to ask whose interests the 'tool' serves, how it operates, and the extent to which it helps or hinders the practitioner in pursuit of safe and effective practice. As Horlick-Jones (2005b), Smith, R. (2010), White, Hall and Peckover (2009) and Baker and Kelly (2011) have suggested, there is a need to rebalance risk assessment away from top-down governance, the veneer of pseudo-scientific certainty, and the perception of errors due to the biases of practitioners, towards "*relational*" (Smith, R., 2010), "*welfare plus rights*" (Smith, R., 2014:299) approaches that value the voices, biographies and opinions of children, young people, practitioners, and others, and where risk assessment is a tool in support of practice rather than one of managerial control and protection. At a systemic level, this is likely to require a considerable re-framing of risk and need, a re-appraisal of the relationship between organisational systems and the practitioner, and a more acute analysis of how and where organisational risk and responsibility lines are drawn and managed (Dekker, 2012). There may, however,

be scope for pro-active professional agency and decision-making in some areas, with practitioners operating within and around risk systems and navigating the “*informal logics of practice*” (Horlick-Jones, 2005b) in the interests of young people.

#### **4.4 Practice, Risk and Decision-Making**

Risk is essentially about choice and decision-making (Carson and Bain, 2008): without the potential for change and for affecting or mitigating different potential futures, there is little point considering risk. Practitioners are required to make a wide range of decisions on a day to day basis, in some cases involving risk, where there is the potential for both positive outcomes (for young people, themselves, or the organisation) and negative ones, including choices about intervention or non-intervention that may expose young people, themselves, colleagues, or the organisation to increased danger (in terms of physical or mental wellbeing, or legal, financial or reputational consequences).

Whilst there are evidently managerial and bureaucratic constraints to practitioner risk decision-making, the limited amount of creative discretion within bureaucratic organisations suggested by Weber (1968) may be somewhat underplayed or, at least, more complex than initially appears. Techno-rational aspirations of ‘practitioner-proof’ modes of practice (Dunne, 2011) may not yet have been fully realised. Argyris’ (1957, 1973, 1974, 1993/1964) Personality and Organisation Theory, suggested that the goals of organisations and the needs, predispositions, and motivations of individuals are in tension, particularly when there is incongruence between the distrusting, controlling demands and standardising practices of the organisation and individual desires for control over their role. This can lead to demotivation and practitioners leaving in search of a work context that is more aligned to their personal / psychological needs (Argyris, 1973). Those working within organisations adapt to such conditions through the addition of an ‘unintended structure’ constituted of ‘informal activities’ that generate psychological returns (Argyris, 1993/1964). This unintended structure is both antagonistic to, and dovetails with the formal organisational structure and bureaucratic demands. For Argyris, the challenge was to bridge this antagonistic divide and develop organisations that were both effective and positive for individuals’ mental health (Argyris, 1993/1964).

Building upon this, Argyris’ subsequently introduced concepts of ‘theory of action’ – the explicit, communicated approach to decisions, interventions and action, and

'theory in action' (or 'theory in use') – the often tacit approach to actions that are used in day to day practice in order to negotiate relationships and maintain personal (and professional) boundaries (Argyris and Schön, 1974; Argyris, 1998). Argyris and Schön proposed two approaches to individual and organisational learning: single-loop learning ('Model I'), whereby underlying assumptions and processes are not recognised or unquestioned, and double-loop learning ('Model II'), where underpinning values, goals, assumptions and processes undergo iterative questioning and review. Organisational cultures and individual practices typified by single-loop learning are based on top-down, unilateral control and, whilst potentially appropriate for issues that require little or no questioning, the often-common application in more complex decision-making environments can lead to people being unaware of errors in approach and defensive routines with *"little additional problem-solving, low openness and trust, and high conformity and covering up of threatening issues"* (Argyris, 1998/1990:345). Practice errors tend to be camouflaged with *"such protective activities as 'just in case the superior asks' files"* (1998/1990:346), leading to deception and risk avoidance.

Thus, despite the illusion of reliability and 'organisational pseudo-effectiveness' (Argyris, 1993/1964), highly hierarchical, controlling, and standardising organisational contexts can lead to ineffective and potentially dangerous decision-making outside espoused theories (whilst such potentially problematic theories of action go unchallenged) – a sub-culture of contingent practice decision-making and reporting that exists alongside and in tandem with formal structures. Whilst Argyris' theories are, by his own admission, highly generalised (Argyris, 1973), they highlight how practitioners may, within a context of managerial control and professional distrust, construct systems and processes for action and decisions outside espoused, organisationally endorsed, formal systems. If, for example, espoused models of risk factor determinism, risk assessment, and resource decision-making are perceived as being dissonant to personal or professional values or the commitment to individuals' welfare needs, it is possible to understand how pragmatic sub-structures might be created in order to reconcile tensions whilst at the same time presenting 'just in case the superior asks' files to comply with organisational demands.

Lipsky (2010), in his 1980 study of public service workers in the US, suggested that 'street level bureaucrats', those working at the front-line between the organisation and the client or customer, exercised considerable discretionary authority. This, he argued, led to significant differences between government or organisational policy

intentions and actual outcomes of practice interventions. Lipsky suggested that, whilst there were drives to increase bureaucratic accountability, discretionary authority was essential for 'street level bureaucrats' and, without it, the quality of public services might decrease:

*"Street-level bureaucrats have discretion because of the nature of service provision calls for human judgement that cannot be programmed and for which machines cannot substitute. Street-level bureaucrats have responsibility for making unique and fully appropriate responses to individual clients and their situations. It is the nature of what we call human services that the unique aspects of people and their situations will be apprehended by public service workers and translated into courses of action responsive to each case within (more or less broad) limits imposed by their agencies. They will not, in fact, dispose of every case in unique fashion. The limitations on possible responses are often circumscribed... However, street-level bureaucrats still have the responsibility to at least be open to the possibility that each client presents special circumstances and opportunities that may require fresh thinking and flexible action."*  
(Lipsky, 2010:161)

Lipsky (2010:81-83) argued that street-level bureaucrats tended to work in resource-limited contexts and, as Webb (2006) and Kemshall (2002) suggested in terms of risk assessment, had a responsibility for determining who could, and who could not, benefit from a service. This, together with differences between practitioners' perceived purpose and their desire 'to do a good job', and organisational objectives that can rarely be challenged or altered, creates tensions for the practitioner. Practitioners, therefore, sought out 'satisfactory' rather than 'optimal' decision-making, mental, and organisational processes in order to manage these tensions.

*"To understand street-level bureaucracy one must study the routines and subjective responses street-level bureaucrats develop in order to cope with the difficulties and ambiguities of their jobs."* (2010:82)

Lipsky went on to suggest a number of responses adopted in order to make work manageable, primarily through routines intended to simplify and structure the context of the work. These routines might be different to, and divergent from organisational systems attempting to impose simplified processes, regulation, and bureaucratic accountability. Firstly, Lipsky argued, practitioners organise their work to enable solutions within the limited resources available. This involves limiting demand and controlling clients in ways that manage and limit the parameters of the relationship. Secondly, they lower or restrict objectives in order to reduce any gap between resource and objectives (the same could perhaps be said for organisations seeking to maximise contract profits). Objectives are therefore re-imagined or filtered in order to make them more achievable. Thirdly, they *"modify their concept*



*of the raw materials with which they work – their clients – so as to make much more acceptable the gap between accomplishments and objects” (2010:83). ‘Clients’, ‘service users’ or in the case of youth practitioners, young people, are constructed and re-presented in ways that enable objectives to be met and routines to be simplified. Modified concepts of the client can justify notions of worthy or unworthy clients, lead to a focus on cooperative clients (in order to rationalise ‘doing good’) and help to externalise failures as the result of the client or their context (2010:153). These constructions can be based upon ‘unsanctioned bias’ and the treatment of a label rather than an individual:*

*“When clients are presented with or accompanied by labels that predict the treatment they will receive; they do not obtain a response to the case at hand but rather to the stereotype their label evokes. Thus the “troublemaker” in school, the “drunk” in the emergency room, and the “rotten apple” in juvenile court receive responses to their labels and not to the behaviour or circumstances that brought them into association with public agencies in the first place. (2010:131)*

Lipsky’s work has been criticised for its *“covert ethical assessment of front-line practice from a top-down perspective”* (Evans, 2015:287) which situates the street-level bureaucrat as the sole arbiter of ‘pristine’ policy at the boundary of the organisation, rather than as part of a more complex web of contingent and imprecise practices within it. The separation of managers and street-level bureaucrats into antagonistic categories (Evans, 2011) is both simplistic and fails to explain the complexity of the practitioner-manager function in modern practice. Hupe and Hill (2007:291) also suggested that street-level bureaucrats are accountable to a *“multi-dimensional micro-network of relations (web)”* of co-workers, professional institutions, and those from other agencies, as well as to clients. The analysis tends to view practice roles as generally homogenous and does not readily explain the complexity of, for example, youth practice, with its different professional (and quasi- or non-professional) roles, overlapping codes of ethical conduct, cultures, philosophies, and practices. Furthermore, Lipsky implied that the street-level bureaucrat is driven by a pragmatic coping strategy of simplification which leaves little room for altruism (for example in the desire to meet a young person’s needs) or stress management (Hupe, Hill and Buffat, 2015). Indeed, discretionary actions can also be influenced by professional understanding and analysis, and by commitments, principles and concerns (Evans and Hardy, 2010; Evans, 2011, 2015), with practitioners attempting to resolve demotivating ‘professional dissonance’ between managerial demands and professional values (James, 1994; Kemshall, 2000). These tensions are reflective of the ‘moral distress’ described in nursing, whereby practitioners feel blocked from doing the ‘right thing’ by institutional systems and

management constraints (Jameton, 1984; Corley, 2002; Corley et al, 2005; Weinberg, 2009). Baldrige (2014:440) highlighted similar tensions in a study of an organisation working with Black young people in the US, where youth workers attempted to *“reimagine Black youth in humanizing ways despite pressures to frame them as broken and in need of fixing”* in the face of neoliberal youth practices driven by *“narrow measures of success”* oriented towards resolving deficits rather than broader notions of education and empowerment. Such value-based conflicts, according to Horlick-Jones (2005b:253), differ significantly from interest-based motivations since they are *“rooted in normative beliefs, and, as such, are very much more difficult to resolve”*.

Whilst Lipsky’s analysis is heavily based on generalisation, it highlights some of the possible pragmatic responses of practitioners to the conflict between addressing organisational objectives, meeting the needs of young people and deriving purpose and value from their work. Spence, Devaney and Noonan, for example, highlighted how youth practitioners manage being responsive to emerging themes on an ‘everyday’ level whilst, simultaneously managing the *“colonisation by more formal, structured organisational agendas”*, requiring personal qualities of patience, humour, and optimism (2006:34-5). Whilst the ‘personal’ is often addressed in general terms within literature, personal dimensions and qualities, such as those outlined above, appear to be downplayed in both management practice and academic discussions, where rational, instrumental models of professional and personal choice dominate. Whilst Banks and Williams’ (2005) exploration of ethical dilemmas, Chamberlayne’s (2004) biographical study of homelessness practitioners and Boudens’ (2005) workplace study demonstrated the extent to which emotions impact on everyday practice, conceptions and the wellbeing of the practitioner, there has been little consideration of this in broader risk-decision-making literature.

Further understanding of personal strengths, fears, anxieties, and how emotions interact with practice is likely to be as important to the development of knowledge about decision-making, and about supporting practitioners to continue to deliver good practice with young people, as the exploration of decision-making systems and processes. Lupton (2012, 2013) in her more recent work on risk, identified the under-researched area of *“emotion-risk assemblage”*, recognising *“that people’s responses to and assessments of risk are inevitably imbued with emotion”* (2012:2). In this argument, rather than being constructed as a binary of rationality (objective, reasoned, disembodied assessments) and irrationality (emotional, instinctive, and embodied responses), or, as Haidt (2001) suggested, an emotional dog of moral

intuition wagging a rational tail, Lupton argued that this is a false, perhaps impossible dichotomy and risk responses *“are always subjective and constructed through culture”* (2012:7), intertwining rationality, cognition, and emotion, as well as gendered and ethnocentric assumptions and biases.

The rather stark appraisal of practitioners' modification of the 'client' within Lipsky's work is, however, a reminder that practitioner heuristics for making risky decisions manageable are subject to bias (or culturally-influenced subjectivity) in much the same way that risk factor methodologies and tools can be (Tversky and Kahneman, 1986; Strachan and Tallant, 1997; Baker and Wilkinson, 2011). Indeed, practitioners (and people in general) are subject to a range of biases, including representative bias, making assumptions on the basis of similarly encountered situations; 'availability bias', where more memorable incidents lead to inaccurate risk perception, and 'confirmatory bias', searching for information that confirms initial assumptions or decisions already made whilst ignoring other evidence (Strachan and Tallant, 1997). Practitioners, according to Webb (2006:160), when using evidence to explain decisions, are primarily interested in justifying their practice as *“the right, reasonable, correct and prudent thing to do”*, even when evidence has suggested otherwise. Within the context of such biases, and Lipsky's analysis of the street-level bureaucrat, it is perhaps not difficult to see how constructions of youth as 'problem', 'at risk' or 'as risk', or simply as a dehumanised 'client', can become enshrined as an everyday mechanism of practice.

In specific relation to risk decision-making, Horlick-Jones (2005a, 2005b) in a study of practitioner decisions around a street carnival, suggested that technical discourse, and its accompanying accountable management practices, offers the appearance of control which *“masks an underlying tapestry of emergent and diverse situated practices”* (2005b:258). These diverse micro-political contingent and informal practices – or *“informal logics of risk”* (2005a) exist in a *“sphere of situationally specific interaction patterns”* that require further understanding and exploration (2005b:269). Similarly, in an earlier study in education, Ball (1987) also drew upon micro-political theory to highlight the sub-textual nature of organisational life. Beneath organisational surface rationality, he argued, there exists what Morley (2008:101) described as *“a mass of conflicts, tensions, resentments, competing interests and power imbalances that influenced everyday transactions in organisations”*, with micropolitical activity based upon *“relationships rather than structures, informal knowledge rather than formal knowledge, identities rather than roles, skills rather than designated organisational positions and, most importantly,*

*talk rather than paper*" (Morley, 2008:102). Significantly, rather than there being a single coherent imperative, Ball (1987:19) regarded organisations – in his case schools – as *"arenas of struggle"*, poorly co-ordinated and ideologically diverse. Conflicts and tensions rarely play out through dispute, but through a focus on 'survival' and contingent acts based on day to day practical necessity.

'Informal logics of practice' were also reflected in Broadhurst et al's (2010) study of social workers, where, despite (and perhaps because of) the proliferation of standardised risk-management tools, a 'multiplicity of risk rationalities' operated. Whilst *"formal risk-management all too often erases the agency of the service user"* and can *"deadens the living environment"* that is central to practice (2010:1060-61), practice existed in a sensitive situational context and worker strategies were contingent and case-specific.

Kemshall (2010) described the normative policy position of individuals and practitioners as prudent, rational actors as a 'rationality mistake', with both service users and practitioners utilising 'situated rationalities'; they are adaptable social actors *"mediating social and personal constraints on their choices"* where decisions are *"embedded in place, time and network"* (2010:1249). Rather than, as is implied by the media and politicians, acting irrationally, negligently, and without integrity, many practitioners act *"authentically according to their value base"* (2010:1256) in the face of inadequate and failing formal risk systems. Reflecting similar concerns to Argyris, she suggested that this dissonant position could lead to risk avoidance, defensive practice and ultimately departure from the profession.

Briggs' (2013) study within the Youth Offending Service in England and Wales found that practitioners engaged with discourses of risk, but were uncomfortable with doing so. They remained driven by a welfare-oriented professional value base. Discretionary practice reconciled the risk-based ASSET assessment (which prioritises offending risks) with the welfare value base by circumventing assessment guidance in order to address perceived needs.

*"Discretionary practice and subversion of national policies has allowed some practitioners to place the welfare needs of children and young people back on the agenda. Although managerialism is alive and well, through discretionary practice principles of welfarism are still bubbling under the surface."* (2013:27)

Similarly, Stanford (2010:1065) found that Australian social workers were able to 'speak back to fear' within interventions, *"undermining the conservative impetus of*

*risk within their practice*". Such resistance has also been advocated by Hughes et al (2014) in the youth work field. Whilst Briggs implied that such discretionary, resistant activity was positive, he warned that *"discretion is not the panacea for a more enlightened justice"*: there was potential for bias and discrimination, and past discretionary approaches were *"rife with attitudinal institutional sexism and racism"* (2010:27). Indeed, as Baldrige's (2014:467) study suggested, any resistance to neoliberal systems of practice also requires fundamental ideological revision (or reimagining) of the *"damage-centred"* and *"deficient framing"* of youth that labels and discriminates against Black young people and others.

Although such scope for discretionary authority and decision-making complexity has declined in many areas, for example social work assessment (White, 2011; Evans, 2011), even in these areas the 'death of discretion' has been somewhat exaggerated, with increased policy *"used as much to obfuscate as to clarify"* (Evans and Harris, 2004:892; Evans, 2011), thereby creating new areas of discretionary (or perhaps individualised and responsabilised) decision-making. Whilst their sphere of practice has been somewhat eroded by austerity measures, youth practitioners, by virtue of their level of contact with young people and their tendency to work outside formal office and appointment structures, are still required to make decisions in uncertain, emergent and dynamic contexts. From detached youth work with young people under the influence of substances to conflict in and around youth groups, and from lone work in homelessness provision to residential activity with groups who have never before met, youth practitioners face challenges of risk decisions in circumstances where recall to a prescriptive manual is not possible, or is highly impractical.

If neither top-down bureaucratic processes nor 'unfettered' professional discretion and judgement are effective in navigating complex risk decision environments, how might risks and needs, organisational objectives, and practitioner values be reconciled in risk practice that also reasonably protects the 'client', practitioner, and organisation from dangers? As a means of advancing (but not necessarily solving) this, Kemshall (1998a) proposed 'defensible practice', whereby, in a recognised context of complexity and assessments based upon contingent knowledge, practitioners aim for practice that *"intertwines aspects of professionalism (e.g. using knowledge and skills) with issues of procedural compliance"* (Baker and Wilkinson, 2011:15). Decisions are 'testable' on the basis of the following criteria:

- *Appropriate levels of knowledge and skill*
- *Responding to new information and events*

- *Adopting inquisitorial attitudes to cases and avoiding complacency*
- *Appropriate use of information*
- *Communication with relevant others, seeking others' opinions*
- *Risk assessment grounded in evidence*
- *Risk management plan linked to risks and risk level*
- *All reasonable steps taken*
- *Information collected and thoroughly evaluated*
- *Clear recording*

*(drawn from Kemshall, 1997, 1998b)*

As is apparent from the list, defensible practice lends itself better to structured, prepared and often formal assessment contexts than to the dynamic and emergent environments often encountered in non-formal youth practice. Whilst some potential risks, circumstances, and decisions can be anticipated, in-the-moment decisions may rarely be underpinned by all the above factors. As Power stated:

*"Most decisions are actually made in the absence of calculable probabilities and under conditions of enormous emergent complexity, ...although they may be presented as if they were mechanical." (Power, 2007:14)*

The challenge of defensible practice in such conditions is, therefore, to make best use of what resources are available in a rapidly changing context and, where possible, to seek to ensure that systems support rather than hinder difficult decisions. This can require considerable skill of practitioners, some of whom may be new to the work, unqualified, or part-time staff. Defensible practice may therefore be a significant challenge for many 'front-line' youth practitioners, particularly in settings where organisational systems may be distant from or unsupportive of day-to-day practice.

Given these potential complexities, it is unsurprising that the language and mechanics of 'defensible decisions', rather than enabling risk decision making, can lead to defensive practice (Titterton, 2005; Carson and Bain, 2008; Kemshall, 2010; Trevithick, 2011; Whittaker and Havard, 2015) and avoidance or delay in making decisions, with perceptions of risk and practice as a battleground to be avoided (Baker and Wilkinson, 2011; Beckett, McKeigue and Taylor, 2007; Stalker, 2003). Indeed, Parton (1998) suggested that making a defensible decision had become more important than making the right one. Similar concerns were raised in the UK's Munro Review of Child Protection (Munro, 2004), which identified that:

*“Many of the problems of current practice seem to arise from the defensive ways in which professionals are expected to manage that uncertainty” (2004:6)*

Whittaker and Havard’s (2015:3) recent study suggested that such defensive practice based on fear of blame and error and underpinned by acts of commission and omission was social work’s “open secret”. Given the media treatment of practitioners in prominent cases of apparent individual and organisational failure (for example, in the case of Baby P – see Jones, 2014), even robust defensible practice is likely to be insufficient to protect practitioners from pre-court or pre-inquiry public judgements and reputational damage. Avoiding difficult work is perhaps the only way for the practitioner to avoid risks in a responsibilised blame environment.

This is not to say that all practice is equally subject to unavoidable hazards. Supportive, rather than debilitating tools, systems, and management approaches and *“practice cultures that facilitate adaptation and revision of judgements”* (Baker and Wilkinson, 2011: 20) can enable practitioners to be both reflective, learning through analysing experience (Titterton, 2005; Schön, 1983), and reflexive, analysing their own emotional and cognitive processes and biases (Taylor and White, 2006; O’Sullivan, 2011). Such an approach, combined with a ‘practical wisdom’ or phronesis, exercising discerning judgement between standard and non-standard cases and contexts (Dunne, 2011:17, O’Sullivan, 2011), can help in the delivery of principled, confidently articulated, reasoned, and non-defensive risk decisions (Baker and Wilkinson, 2011). For Titterton (2011:33) effective practice is also underpinned by a positive re-framing of risk and a commitment to ‘positive risk taking’ with empowerment, diversity, joint learning, and the co-production of knowledge and welfare practices. This, Titterton suggested, requires the fostering and nourishment of ‘risk literacy’ based on the above notions of reflection and reflexivity. It is apparent that drives towards decision making based on ‘humane judgement’ (Taylor and White, 2006) and an overall cultural approach to risk that is just, and not based on blame or criminalisation (Dekker, 2012), are central to the delivery of quality, non-discriminatory practice. However, this remains a considerable challenge in an overall culture of continued mistrust of professionals and practitioners, with its accompanying dependency on standardised, managerial procedural compliance.

What is apparent from decision making literature is the importance of understanding the *“interpretive repertoires”* of practice: the language, terminology, and metaphors used to describe risks and risk decisions in practice (Baker and Wilkinson, 2011:22).

In a complex environment with organisational, professional, personal, and day-to-day tensions, gaining insight into such repertoires, together with an understanding of 'informal logics' and 'contingent practices', are key to illuminating how risk operates in the day to day work of the youth practitioner and, in turn, how young people are constructed in relation to risk as they encounter youth services.

#### **4.5 The Challenge of Trust**

As is evident throughout the last three chapters, notions of trust cut through almost every dimension of risk, and, indeed, concepts of youth and youth practice. The impact of this ranges from the recognition of the erosion of trust in expert knowledge systems through risk society (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), the institutionalised mistrust of young people both socially and through risk factor mechanisms (Kelly, 2003; Stephen and Squires, 2004), to the increasing lack of trust in professional practice (Webb, 2006; Banks, 2004). For 'front-line' practitioners, the development of a trusting relationship is often a core component of the work. This is particularly the case for youth work and similar work with young people, where practice tends to be underpinned by an investment in 'being there' (Spence, Devanney and Noonan, 2006:36): developing ongoing, iterative, and dynamic relationships with young people built up over time (Young, 2006; Jeffs and Smith, 1996/2005, Davies, 2011a; Davies and Merton, 2009; Spence, Devanney and Noonan, 2006), with practitioners caring about young people on both a professional and personal level (Spence, 2007).

*"[I]nformal educators are expected to be fair, truthful, punctilious about fulfilling obligations, and thoughtful and unselfish in their conduct. However great the temptation to go with the moral flow is we have no choice. We must aspire to embody such values because our right 'to be listened to' largely flows from this. It does not necessarily come from our having superior knowledge... Gradually, we may come to be seen as people who can be trusted, have integrity and are wise. It is qualities such as this that allow us to play a part in people's lives." (Jeffs and Smith, 2005:98)*

Any erosion of trust, therefore, jeopardises workers' ability to engage with and respond to young people in an effective way. Mistrust, or at least diminished trust, may be evident in a number of ways. In the light of reported cases in the media, young people, parents, and the general public may be increasingly suspicious of the motivations and competence of those who work with young people (the fear of potential abuse, exploitation, or malpractice). As a response, organisations may be more likely to implement regulatory mechanisms in order to address both material and reputational risks. Whilst it is essential to seek to ensure the wellbeing of all



young people, safeguarding systems, good governance, and effective practice do not, however, always act in the interests of young people. Restrictive policies can have the dual effect of limiting work (potentially failing to reach those most in need of support) and, as witnessed in the previous section, creating spaces of resistance, where practitioners may hide mistakes or high risk practice, operating outside formal organisational processes in order to meet what they regard as the needs of the young person.

With mistrust in, or suspicion of, practitioners' discretionary decision-making within the emergent spaces of 'everyday' practice leading to such spaces being closed down or 'colonised' by organisational and bureaucratic agendas (Spence, Devanney and Noonan, 2006), young people are likely to face increasingly standardised approaches based upon generalised assumptions about behaviour and social circumstances. Thus, trust, or the lack of it, fuels not only the construction of the 'professional' (or simply the 'practitioner'), but also that of the young person: mistrust assumes, and legislates for, the worst case scenario: the unreliable or abusive practitioner, the dangerous young person, and, in the case of organisations, the inefficient and 'rotten' public sector organisation or the incompetent charity. Yet, paradoxically, there appears to be (amongst some policymakers and managers at least) a continued trust in bureaucratic systems, including burgeoning commissioning processes, in the face of evidence that such processes are themselves biased, fallible, and potentially dangerous (for example, Case and Haines, 2009; Power, 2004; Smith, R., 2010).

Acknowledging the complexities of defining trust (Seligman, 1997), Tonkiss and Passey's (1999) analysis of third sector organisations in Britain suggested that trust in voluntary organisations, in much the same way as in youth work, is premised on voluntary association, agency and shared values. The problem, they argued, is that due to their engagement with market forces and a contract culture, trust is supplanted by 'confidence', *"relations which are secured by contract or other regulatory forms, and which proceed on the basis of rational expectations"* (1999:258) – linked to a shift from 'doing good' to 'doing well'. They warned that a greater focus on confidence could lead to reducing an organisation's *"resources of trust"* (1999:272), despite analysis of public opinion (The Henley Centre, 1997a, 1997b) that showed *"a generalised decline in confidence in institutions"* but *"higher levels of trust in individuals within them"* (1999:261). There are parallels here in relation to the field of youth practice, whereby confidence, rather than trust, is the driving force of regulatory systems. Since Tonkiss and Passey's article, the

marketplace within youth services has become more contract-based, and practice increasingly driven by confidence-based targets, outcomes, and performance measures.

Informed by social worker interviews, Banks (2004) suggested that in the context of confidence and increasingly rigorous and systematic institutional frameworks and processes, mistrust operates in both directions – practitioners are unable to trust service users, operating defensively and over-reacting, whilst service users become increasingly distrustful of practitioners and their (potentially over-zealous) interventions. This can create inherent conflicts for practitioners who see their role as both building trust and being trustworthy whilst at the same time, having responsibilities around child protection. In this context, it is, perhaps important to identify where trust exists and how it operates at a local level: do practitioners, for example, in the absence of organisational trust systems, create space for trust within contingent ‘everyday’ practices? That is, is the maintenance of trust a personal activity that exists alongside, within, or even in spite of organisations, employers and professional bodies – negotiated with young people, their families and others at a local level?

As Giddens (1991) argued, trust underlies a host of day-to-day decisions and is therefore central to social functioning. Directly connected “*to the psychological security of individuals and groups*”, trust, risk, security, and danger go hand in hand (1991:19). To at least some degree therefore, trust, operating in the spaces and relationships between state, organisation, manager, practitioner, community and young people / service users, is essential in effective, authentic decision-making and interventions. Without it, defensive or concealed practices and ineffective, mechanistic, confidence-oriented systems are likely to combine with suspicious young people and communities to exacerbate inequalities and increase risks to young people, through both inadequate practice and an absence of practice caused by retreating, distrusting practitioners, organisations, and communities. Whilst unconditional (‘blind’) trust should be cautioned against, the ‘distrust of trust’ itself is, perhaps, a significant crisis for practice based upon relationships and voluntary engagement, and for practitioners who are required to make decisions in uncertain and dynamic practice environments.

#### **4.6 Austerity Practice: Risk and Responsibilisation**

If notions of trust cut through all aspects of this thesis, ‘austerity’ forms its backdrop.

The study took place following the fiscal and political fallout of the 2008 financial crisis, and the utilisation of this event to accelerate the neo-liberal 'project of austerity' that had commenced prior to this time (Bhattacharyya, 2015). The austerity 'project' in the UK brought with it increasing 'cuts' to and marketization of public services, deregulated, flexible labour markets, and a further re-focusing on 'punitive welfare', whereby state entitlements become conditional on a certain range of desired behaviours. As has been previously observed, young people, already subject to precarious and protracted social labour market transitions, have fared particularly poorly in this environment. Under-employment, zero-hours contracts, low wages, welfare penalties and restrictions, and the withdrawal of support services have all impacted disproportionately on young people (Shildrick, MacDonald and Antonucci, 2015; NPI, 2015).

At a time of acute challenges for young people, who might have benefited from support, youth work and other non-statutory youth provision have been major casualties of this austerity project. As potential need has increased, expectations have been diminished, leading to what Bhattacharyya (2015:30) describes as an 'institutionalisation of despair'. With the closure of youth provision across the country, youth practitioners in the public sector have faced near-constant service reviews, restructuring and redundancies. Outsourcing, or commissioning, has also led to a reduction of directly delivered services and for some, transfer to other (private or third sector) service providers delivering contracts on behalf of local authorities. For those transferred to, or already working within commissioned services, this has tended to mean temporary contracts and increased drives to comply with competitive contractual demands that may not be aligned to young people's needs or to previous ways of working (Davies and Merton, 2010; Davies, 2011b, 2013, 2014; Rochester, 2013). In whatever sector, youth practitioners' roles have become increasingly precarious, or, to use another more apt synonym, risky, subject to continuous review in relation to their value and effectiveness in the delivery of organisational goals and targets. In such a context, it is perhaps inevitable that 'defensible' practice decision-making takes into account personal risks to employment and income alongside other professional, moral and bureaucratic influences. Precarious employment conditions in a context of distrust place increasing pressure on practitioners to act in a risk averse fashion and comply (or give the impression of compliance) with organisational or contractual demands. For some practitioners, organisational 'cuts' have been both financially and emotionally scarring – resulting in loss of work or work colleagues, different and often increased workloads, or additional pressure to 'perform' in a resource-starved

environment.

In terms of broader notions of risk and austerity, it has been suggested that risk has become less of a priority within austerity, with resource limitations 'trumping' risk considerations (see, for example, Matthew's (2015) online practitioner blog). The raising of social work and other service thresholds (Pemberton, 2013; Gainsbury and Neville, 2015), suggest, however, that rather than risk considerations being supplanted by cost, risk processes and tools have increasingly become the means by which access to resources are controlled and restricted (Kemshall, 2002).

Neo-liberal marketisation of public services through service commissioning also holds the potential for 'laying off' risk and the possibility of blame through the responsabilisation of third party, arm's-length providers. In addition to services themselves being outsourced, financial and reputational risks may also, to a degree, become externalised. Contracted organisations, and in turn their staff, become responsible for the delivery of provision, and for any errors, failures or problems emerging as a result of practice. A commissioner may be able to insulate themselves from reputational or financial damage, de-commissioning provision that is regarded as ineffective, receives complaints, or suffers reputational harm. Furthermore, due to limitations of Freedom of Information in the private and third sectors, practice may be subject to less external scrutiny, enabling greater potential for practices to be concealed.

As is apparent throughout this chapter, contemporary practice in the human services, and specifically with young people, is highly precarious, its future uncertain and the risks both to and from practice often unpredictable. Within this environment, the youth practitioner must balance organisational objectives, regulatory controls, professional requirements, ethical and moral considerations, risks to, and needs of young people, and personal risks relating to their job, threats, accusations, and blame whilst seeking to deliver 'good work'. This takes place in an increasingly responsabilised context, underpinned by mistrust and blame. Yet, at the same time, youth practitioners continue to carve out positive spaces and good practice with young people. This study is the exploration of how practitioners reconcile these tensions in attempting to do this.

## **PART TWO**

### **CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGY**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a detailed explanation and examination of the empirical study informing the thesis – forty interviews with twenty-eight youth practitioners in England on the subject of risk and how it impacts on their work. Following a discussion about primary and secondary research questions, a brief overview of the preliminary study of social policy documents, which informed the main research, is provided, explaining its purpose and method.

The bulk of the chapter critically explores the interpretive underpinning of the study: improving understanding of the experiences and perspectives of practitioners as they make sense of their practice world, risks, and the young people with whom they work. This exploration of 'professional knowledge landscapes' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) is undertaken through practitioner interviews, designed in part to elicit narratives of practice situated in a personal / professional biographical context. The role of both practitioner narratives and biographies are explored as useful ways of comparing and contrasting different levels of meaning (Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou, 2008) and also of locating the personal actor within practice and the risk construction and decision-making context.

Following the methodological overview, the chapter provides more detailed explanation of methods and approaches utilised within the study. Subsequent sections critically discuss the approach to the chosen method of data collection - practitioner interviews - and the benefits, limitations, and methodological considerations emerging from their use. Section 5.5 focusses on research reflexivity, critically examining the role of the researcher within the research process, whilst 'Participant Recruitment' (Section 5.6) discusses the challenges of operationalising the term 'youth practitioner' as a population for study and explains how interviewees were identified, recruited, and selected. Section 5.7 explores the interviewing technique itself, drawing upon biographical and narrative approaches. 'Ethical Considerations' (Section 5.8) examines the ethical challenges faced through the study, both those anticipated and addressed as part of planning and those that emerged during the research process itself. 'Analysis of data' (Section 5.9) contains an explanation of data analysis techniques and a critical appraisal of the importance

of balancing a thematic analysis, what Polkinghorne (1995) described as 'analysis of narratives' (1995:12), with a more biographical approach, 'narrative analysis' that tells situated stories and examines more holistic facets of individuals' experiences over time and in shifting contexts. Finally, an (anonymised) overview of participants is provided in Section 5.10, giving context to subsequent presentation of findings.

## **5.2 Research Purpose and Objectives**

The primary purpose of this thesis is to explore the question established at an early stage of the study:

***How do practitioners working with young people in informal contexts engage with 'risk' and risk discourses, and how does this impact on how they understand and deliver interventions with children and young people?***

Upon further consideration of this question, informed by reviews of literature and the preliminary analysis of child and youth policy documents, a number of supplementary questions were identified:

1. *Is there a dominant 'risk discourse' in relation to those working with young people in non-formal contexts / settings? To what extent do practitioners' descriptions of practice reflect actuarial, victim-based, criminological, risk-taking, risk-management or other aspects of risk-oriented practice?*
2. *Is a process of essentialisation of 'youth' as the 'risky other' apparent either in practitioners' discourse or in their articulation of practice?*
3. *What are the factors involved in practitioners' perspectives on, and approaches to risk and young people (for example, training, professional identity and socialisation, organisation, personal motivations and attributes, setting, type of provision)?*
4. *How is the current social policy context relating to risk, young people, and prevention reflected in practitioners' narratives of practice?*
5. *How does managerial risk assessment impact on practitioners' ability to engage with young people?*
6. *Do practitioners identify tensions in relation to practice interventions, risk and young people? And, if so, how are such tensions dealt with, or mediated, by practitioners – what is the extent of professional 'agency' and how does this take place?*

The main aim of the thesis is to generate knowledge about how risk practices are informed and shaped by practitioners, organisations, and discourses of youth. It is also hoped that findings will contribute to the development of policy, practice, and management, through a more nuanced understanding of the impact and application of policy and managerial practice in the field, and through increased reflective and critical consideration of the role of the practitioner in training, education, and other practice development spheres. Thus, as Denzin (2003:487) reminds us, the study is *“committed not just to describing the world, but to changing it”* and, whilst its commentary might portray critical, and potentially negative insights into organisations and practice, the intention is to frame this in the context of hope based upon notions of potential positive futures, and a sense of ‘soft utopianism’ (Standing, 2011; Denzin, 2003; Levitas, 2013).

The questions initially formulated have been further developed during the course of the study and, as outlined briefly in the thesis introduction, in response to a changing social context. Austerity measures, service restructuring, and increasing occupational precarity meant that many of those interviewed during the study were subject to the threat or actuality of redundancy, enforced early retirement, contract termination, changing job roles, moving jobs, and general uncertainty about their work, now and in the future. Of the twenty-eight interviewed as part of the study, the occupational situation of fourteen was known at the end of the data collection period. Of these, only three worked in the same job after two years of research, though the functions of these jobs had changed and two had faced redundancy threat. Three people had left the field (due to redundancy, sickness, and by choice) and others had obtained other jobs, either by choice or as a consequence of redundancy or restructuring. ‘Restructuring’ was, particularly for those in public sector organisations, an ongoing, repeated process of role justification and redundancy risk, creating an almost continuously precarious state underpinned by fear of unemployment. Given this context, a further question could be added to the study:

*To what extent do personal and occupational risk and insecurity impact on practitioners’ confidence and ability to deliver their work and take risks in the interests of young people?*

In light of questions within literature (and emerging from interviews) about the role of risk in managing or rationing resource within the context of austerity (Kemshall, 2010; Rogowski, 2012), the study, building on questions 4 and 5 (above), also

*sought to examine the role that risk, risk-management, and risk-factor analysis (RFA) plays in the rationing of resources within the context of 'austerity' deficit-reduction and public-sector cuts.*

These research questions are addressed during the thesis. It was not, however, the intention to restrict the study to a rigid series of pre-defined questions – potentially placing hypothetico-deductivist constraints on an exploratory study. Thus, the questions formed both a 'jumping off' and continuous reference point (for example, in relation to establishing interview frameworks), but emergent themes and challenging counter-points from data collection outside these questions were welcomed and incorporated into analysis.

### **5.3 Preliminary Study: Policy Analysis**

The thesis is predicated on the position that concepts of risk impact upon those working within the field of children and young people in a variety of ways. As evidenced in Chapter Three, there is a wealth of recent work identifying the centrality of risk discourses to 'youth'. However, much of this has tended to be either theoretical in nature or limited to individual policy areas (particularly youth justice). There appeared to be little to establish the extent to which discourses of risk had permeated broader youth policy / practice domains in the UK. In order, therefore, to establish a rationale for researching risk across youth workers and other youth practice, it was important to generate coherent, sound evidence relating to risk and young people across current and recent UK policy.

A preliminary study was devised to examine youth policy primarily during the New Labour period (1997-2010). The study took place between November 2008 and July 2010 and examined documents from just prior to, up to the end of, the Labour Government. Key documents published between 1996 and 2009 relating to children and young people were identified in three main ways:

1. Documents identified by other authors (Bessant et al, 2003; Davies, 2008)
2. Documents identified by child and youth organisations or policy sites (for example, Every Child Matters, Department for Schools and Families, Home Office, and Youth Justice Board websites)
3. Emerging policy at the time of analysis (for example, Laming, 2009)

Twenty-four documents were analysed covering a range of policy domains, including green and white papers, guidance, and consultation documents (see



Appendix One for a full overview). Policy documents primarily related to England (and in some cases Wales): due to devolution other countries possessed different levels of devolved policymaking powers and it was not the intention to undertake a cross-UK comparison. In addition to government policy documents, the study also included several texts identified as being relevant to policy development in relation to risk-based youth justice (Audit Commission, 1996, 1998) and through the inquiries into the deaths of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly (Laming, 2003, 2009): the stated rationale for the Every Child Matters policy stream.

Documents relating to 'children' (as opposed to solely 'youth') were included for several reasons. Firstly, application of the terms 'child' and 'youth' vary in meaning across policy domains and whilst youth justice and youth work domains identify with the latter term, those of the same age may be described in other documents as children (which is in part reflective of the construction of youth already discussed). Secondly, many child-related documents were situated in an overall context that regarded the child as a site of prevention in order to avoid future youth problems (crime, anti-social behaviour, truancy, pregnancy, and unemployment). Thirdly, linked to the last point, analysis of both child and youth documents provided a coherent overview of the UK Government's approach to the child and young person life-course, and to the assumptions that underpinned it. Focusing solely on youth would have omitted significant documents.

A systematic keyword analysis was undertaken to examine the frequency and use of 'risk' and co-located terminology (Seale, Ziebland and Charteris-Black, 2006, Seale, 2008; Seale and Tonkiss, 2012). The analysis also searched for comparative terms such as 'harm', 'abuse', 'danger', 'hazard', and 'neglect'. Reports were firstly analysed as whole documents in order to gain an overall understanding of their purpose before extracting risk (and other) terminology in a matrix. A register of risks was developed to identify the type of risk or hazard being described, who was at risk, and what other underlying assumptions might have been at play (See Appendix One). At times this proved a challenge, since there was ambiguity in a number of documents relating to what the hazards were and who exactly was at risk. This in itself formed a significant finding (as reported in Turnbull and Spence, 2011). Where ambiguity occurred, the use of risk terminology was noted without attempt to infer meaning.

The preliminary study identified a 'proliferation' of risk-based (and risk-inflected) policy across child and youth domains in England and as such, informed the future

direction of the main study. Findings from the keyword analysis are included within this thesis, as well as being published in more detail separately (Turnbull and Spence, 2011).

## 5.4 Methodological Approach

The overall study is interpretivist in its philosophy and approach, concerned with exploring the *“situated meanings of the social life-world”* (Crotty, 1998:67). An interpretivist, phenomenological focus enables an exploration of how people locally generate meanings based upon their experiences of ‘being in the world’ (Heidegger, 1962), situated socially, geographically and temporally (Griffin and May, 2012). This approach is consistent with a study intended to explore individual but potentially shared, experiences relating to risk and practice in the world of work with young people. In a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm, human beings construct reality through meaning systems – they are *“active creators of their world”* (Sarantakos, 2005:41). As in the case of studies around decision-making and ‘situated rationalities’ explored in the previous chapter (Horlick-Jones, 2005a, 2005b; Broadhurst, 2010; Kemshall, 2010), the ways in which practitioners understand, construct, interact with, shape, and feel that they have agency in their work environment is a central element of the thesis, and is key to developing a greater understanding of contemporary ‘front-line’ practice in what is an often-complex and dynamic context.

The interpretivist position also reflects socio-cultural studies relating to ‘lay people’s’ approach to risk (Tulloch and Lupton, 2001, 2003; Henwood et al, 2010; Zinn, 2005, 2010b), emphasising that:

*“[A]ll risk epistemologies are socially constructed, including those of experts. Rather than drawing a distinction between ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ (or ‘accurate and ‘biased’) risk assessments, we prefer to concentrate on the meanings that are imputed to risk and how these meanings operate as part of people’s notion of subjectivity and their social relations... Identifying the dominant discourses that inhere around risk in the talk of ‘experts’ and lay people and give it its meaning, is a way of gaining access to the social and cultural frameworks in which we are interested.” (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003:12).*

As with Tulloch and Lupton, Zinn and Henwood et al’s research in relation to risk, and Spence, Devanney and Noonan’s (2006) and others’ work around aspects of professional practice (see Chamberlayne et al, 2004a), the study was influenced by the ‘narrative turn’ in social sciences (Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993;

Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004; Elliot, 2005, Goodson and Gill, 2011) and with it, informed by both feminist and post-modernist perspectives, the search for untold stories and experiences, alternatives to grand narratives and dominant institutional ‘truths’ (Hyvärinen, 2008). Narrative research involves a ‘conversational space’ (in the case of this study, the interview) whereby the ‘teller’ interacts with the listener (or audience), who is a co-participant in the narrative process (Elliot, 2005:10). People’s lives, both individually and collectively, are considered in a temporal, spatial and contextual framework – with meanings changing in response to time and changing circumstances (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000):

*“When we see an event, we think of it not as a thing happening at that moment but as an expression of something happening over time”  
(Clandinin and Connelly, 2000:29)*

Thus, practitioner accounts are shaped by time and context: they are retrospective representations (or interpretations) of past events – *“the point of view of the historically and culturally situated individual”* (Denzin, 2003:487) - taking place in dialogue with the researcher, who in turn interprets (or re-interprets) and re-presents the narrative. This temporal dimension to inquiry was evident within the study, whereby repeat interviews with participants highlighted how changes over both time and context contributed to very different attitudes and emotions toward the workplace, practice, young people, and themselves.

The narrative becomes a means of locating lived experience in the historical, political, and cultural context of social change (Chamberlayne, 2004b) – identifying in this study, practitioner responses to austerity, neo-liberal managerialism, and target-based work; individualised, responsibilised, and defensible practice; trust, mistrust, and blame; the ‘at-risk’ and risky young person; and an environment of potentially precarious employment. Through the voices of some practitioners, the narrative also speaks of another time, possibly infused with nostalgic recollection, where practice was seen to be different – more free and creative, but possibly less safe.

Rather than pursuing a solely biographical interview method, the research pursued a more thematic approach (exploring opinions and views of ‘youth’ and ‘risk’ rather than eliciting full biographical, or highly chronological narratives), with the incorporation of stimulated narratives (Witzel, 2000) about self and practice

providing the opportunity for the exploration of participants' means of *"conveying socio-cultural configurations of meanings and personal gestalts lost by questioning that is directive, overlaying the expert/researcher's agenda upon participants' own meaning frames."* (Henwood et al, 2010). During data collection, it became evident that, even when exploring opinions and constructions of youth and risk, practitioners' positions were, perhaps unsurprisingly, underpinned by personal and professional experiences and accounts of practice that influenced attitudes, behaviours, and emotions. As such, the biographical, narrative dimension of the study became more significant. As Woodman and Wyn (2015:112) identified in relation to youth research, 'biographical' approaches enable a more holistic understanding of people's lives, framed within a cultural and historical context, rather than reductionist analysis of specific situations. Whilst retaining its thematic focus, the research also explored broader narratives. Rather than, for example, solely exploring risk assessment or referral processes, interviews encouraged practitioners to talk about broader experiences and emotions relating to risk and their work. Indeed, often practitioners led this process themselves, locating their current practice (and their approaches to risk and young people) in its own personal, biographical context.

Narrative and biographical aspects of risk remain under-researched (Zinn, 2010b). As Zinn (2010a) suggested, traditional technological and psychological approaches to risk tend to lack *"understanding of how perception and responses to risk are embedded in complex and often contradictory interpretation patterns of biographical identities"* (2010a:15). Exploring practitioner stories and biographies, located both 'in the world' and in practice, led to sometimes unpredictable avenues of exploration and the excavation of deeper meanings relating to personal and professional dimensions of risk.

Henwood et al (2010), in their study of the risk perceptions of those living close to nuclear power stations, also found that biographical and narrative research approaches stimulated self-reflection about the participant's views and experiences:

*"We have found that asking people to narrate about risk in and through the changing time and place coordinates of their lives has helped to produce data on people's biographical framing and how this can provide them with a way of showing their awareness of risk, their concerns about it, and ways of approaching risk issues as they ebb and flow dynamically through place and time" (Henwood et al, 2010:17)*

In the case of this study, narratives of practice, and the subsequent discussions around them, provided a means of illuminating and reflecting upon potential tensions

and reconciliations between what Argyris (1974) termed 'theories in use' and 'theories of action', or 'espoused theories'. Whilst not apparent with all participants, there was evidence of some practitioners re-evaluating aspects of their risk practice upon recollection and appraisal of their 'situated practices' and decision-making processes. Thus, narratives, and their examination, provided the potential for meta-cognitive reflection and 'double-loop' learning (Argyris, 1974).

A common criticism of interpretivism, and of narrative approaches, particularly by positivistic (and techno-bureaucratic) perspectives, is that qualitative accounts are highly individualised and subjective, 'anecdotal', with little or no ability to be generalised (Silverman, 2011; Williams, 2002). Biographical and narrative accounts access a different kind of specific data that can be a considerable challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy of generalising, regulatory, 'evidence-based' policy (Chamberlayne, 2004b:25), particularly evident in the RFPF. This is reflective of what Crotty (1998:14-15) termed 'the great divide' between objectivist / positivist and constructionist / subjectivist research. Positivist approaches to research validity and reliability have, until relatively recently, framed what is regarded as the highest quality, 'gold standard' research in the field of policy-making. Whilst many of these debates and criticisms are still present, 'qualitative research', or perhaps more accurately constructionist / subjectivist / interpretivist research, has increasingly sought to develop other quality frames that are not defined by the positivist lens, stressing the importance of trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability, authenticity, and reflexivity over traditional criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013).

The research approach is not intended to examine practice interactions or observed events, but focusses on retrospective situated accounts of individuals' practice. As Banks and Williams have highlighted, these are not "*unproblematic reflections of what really happened*" (2005:1007) and carry a subjective meaning influenced by time, place and the context of re-telling. They do, however, provide important insights into practitioners' 'risk-worlds' and the meanings they give to events and practice processes.

The exploration of subjective meaning does not necessarily lead to 'absolute relativism' whereby all perspectives are regarded as equally valid (or invalid), legitimate only as individual, personally-subjective life-worlds. Whilst broad, population-wide, 'total generalisation' (Williams, 2003:135) and causal explanation may be problematic in interpretivist inquiry (Silverman, 2011; Bryman, 1988;

Williams, 2003), individual accounts do not preclude broader associations or wider generalisation. As Denzin (2003) suggested, qualitative researchers work “*outward from their own biographies to the worlds of experience that surround them*” (2003:487), identifying shared meanings and experiences within and across different contexts. Thus, personal accounts of domestic violence, child abuse, or in the case of this study, experiences of risk, organisations, management, and practice, become compared and collectivised – speaking of commonalities and shared conditions shaped by, but not confined to, local context, moving from the personal to the political (Denzin, 2003; Plummer, 2001; Squire, 2008; Ledwith, 2005). As Acker, Barry and Esveld (1983) identified in their feminist research practice:

*“Although we view people as active agents in their own lives and as such constructors of their own social worlds, we do not see that activity as isolated and subjective. Rather, we locate individual experience in society and history, embedded within a set of social relations which produce both the possibilities and limitations of that experience. What is at issue is not just everyday experience but the relations which underlie it and the connections between the two... This is a method of exploration and discovery, a way to begin to search for understandings that may contribute to the goals of liberation.” (Acker et al, 1983:425)*

Thus, a greater understanding of the individual and collective experiences and stories of practitioners, supported by a clearly articulated explanation of research processes and well-communicated findings, provides the opportunity for wider associations and ‘theoretical resonance’ (Mason, 1996:24) across planes of practice and policy. In turn, these narratives, and the shared concerns, or ‘intersubjective meanings’ (Elliot, 2005:29) emerging from them, are able to speak to contexts of power, culture and historical moments, providing the potential for personal, organisational, and social change.

## **5.5 Situating the ‘Researcher’: Reflexivity**

In interpretivist research, just as the interviewee applies an interpretive lens on their biography and selects what and how to present, so the researcher is an active listener (Wengraf, 2004), interpreter, and narrator of the story for a wider audience. The narrative cannot easily be separated from the dialogical action of the narrative interview and the relationship between researched (initial storyteller) and researcher (interviewer), who are both involved in meaning-making (Andrews, 2008; Elliot, 2005). As positivist, objectivist research attempts to distance and remove the influence of the researcher from the scientific study (or perhaps at times, hide their presence and influence in the construction of the research question, experiment,

and conclusions), constructivist, interpretivist research attempts to illuminate the active role of the researcher and their methods in 'crafting realities' through reflexivity (Law, 2004:153).

Within the risk society, reflexivity is identified as society becoming more self-confrontational (Beck, 1996:28) and self-critical (Beck, 1994:11) about its role in and impact on the world, and, at the individual level, personally conscious of the continuous shaping of personal biography (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). In research terms, reflexivity can be seen as *"the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher"* (Lincoln and Guba, 2000:183). However, it is not a passive reflective process, but a dynamic one of ongoing self-confrontation and awareness of the role of self within the research at all times:

*"Reflexivity forces us to come to terms not only with our choice of research problem and with those with whom we engage in the research process, but with our selves and with the multiple identities that represent the fluid self in the research setting." (2000:183)*

Mindful of Elliot's (2005:155) warnings about 'unfettered reflexivity' diverting attention from research subjects and subject matter (the intention here is to bring forward the voices of participants, not to conduct an auto-ethnography), I feel that it is important to locate myself, and my interpretive lens, within the research in order to make transparent strengths and limitations of the research process. As Elliot has highlighted, the aim of reflexivity is to:

*"produce an analytical discussion of how their own theoretical and biographical perspective might impact on their relationships with research subjects, their interpretation of research evidence, and the form in which research is presented" (2005:155)*

As a former (professionally trained) youth worker, I have a strong affiliation with the challenges of day-to-day practice with young people. Indeed, my interest in the topic area emerged whilst I was a practitioner-manager within a sexual health service, faced with supporting staff grappling with the challenges of complex risk situations, a desire to meet the needs of the young person in front of them, and organisational policies that seemed at times to be either organisationally risk-averse or inadequate in enabling practice. Having worked with young people both I and others have described as at-risk in a number of contexts, I felt able to build empathy with interviewed practitioners. This was particularly the case for those youth workers who were experiencing challenges to their professional role and identity, who often asked if I was a qualified youth worker. Whilst I avoided telling my own

'stories', I often introduced myself as a former practitioner in order to attempt to overcome surface-level descriptions of practice (the performing face of the practitioner speaking to those outside the work).

I was, however, also conscious of the need to recognise differences, and had to be careful about the assumptions I made about commonality of experience between participants and myself. My own front-line practice was some years earlier, having moved into service management and then into Higher Education teaching, professional training, and evaluation. Whilst helpful in looking at multi-level (organisational, managerial, policy, and theoretical) dimensions of practice, there was perhaps a danger of imposing these lenses on interviewees' narratives. It was also clear that, in the intervening period, the practice context had changed considerably, particularly in relation to increased bureaucracy, managerialism, the increasing contract culture within (and public sector colonisation of) the voluntary sector and, most recently, the impact of austerity measures. Whilst framing practice through my own lens was perhaps unavoidable, I attempted to ensure resonance with the research participant by clarifying my own understanding and 'checking out' interpretations by reflecting them back, both during interviews and in recaps at the beginning of second or third meetings. I was also conscious that a significant number of those interviewed were not youth workers or youth work trained and had different frames of reference for their practice. Thus, whilst always welcoming multi-disciplinary, diverse practice, I had to confront professional assumptions about notions of 'unqualified workers' and about the agendas and contexts of different public, private and voluntary organisations.

I am also aware of my impact as a middle-aged, white male on the research field and process, both in terms of participant recruitment and interactions with interviewees. Decisions and interpretations can be framed in racialised or gendered ways. In the event, it is possible that my visible identity as a white male, with a history of practice located in predominantly white settings, negatively impacted upon the representation of ethnic minority practitioners in the study. Meanwhile, in the research process, my position as an 'insider' or 'outsider' (binary terms that personally cause me some discomfort) in relation to relational social power, practice and knowledge positions was fluid and contingent, shifting according to different relationships between interviewees (Court and Abbas, 2013; Hellowell, 2006; Galam, 2015; Merton, 1972). In interactions with participants it is not possible, nor authentic, to hide these factors (or ignore them). However, I was conscious not to collude with or unintentionally reinforce gendered, racialised or overly masculine attitudes to



practice. These factors were apparent, for example, when initiating conversations with several male research participants, where it felt that there was something of a masculine attempt to 'display' practice and a demand to 'prove' authenticity in relation to doing challenging front-line work. Whilst this provided some immediate challenges in terms of building rapport with the individual, the positioning of myself as an empathic individual trying to understand the 'expert' in their own lives rather than as someone who has been there and done it themselves was important. In this way, there was an attempt to overcome masculine concerns about showing weakness or vulnerability – an important dimension of risk practice. This also impacts on interpretation and analysis: it might, for example, be easy to conclude that emotionality in biographical accounts is gendered, with women appearing more reflective and forthcoming about themselves and their practice (indeed, the most detailed biographical accounts were those of female practitioners). It is, however, important to note that this may be an aspect of the narrative relationship itself, and of the gendered, masculine dimension therein.

Similarly, a number of younger interviewees spoke of a nostalgic past where practitioners could take risks in their work and had more control. These appeared authentic comments, though I was also aware that my own position as an older former practitioner might influence their presentation of this issue (would they, for example, be as inclined to be highly critical of the questionable practices of previous generations?). Again, positioning the individual as the expert teller of their lives, together with clarifying both my own and their meanings and, where appropriate, making explicit possible gendered, racial, sexuality or age-based interpretations, was essential in building an understanding and, at least partially, shared meaning of their lived experiences.

I aimed to increase the transparency of my role as researcher in a number of ways. In addition to the brief statement above outlining my own critically reflexive position in interpreting practitioner narratives, I have attempted to qualify concerns about interpretation or areas where it is most apparent that there may be multiple interpretations within the reporting of findings. In addition to 'listening carefully to participants' (Squire, 2008:59) and utilising reflective tools within interviews to clarify interpretations, I have also been in contact with a number of research participants in the formulation of findings (particularly published articles) to ensure that their voice is represented effectively. Whilst, therefore, accounts of practice are inevitably framed by my own critical interpretation, the presence of some resonance relating to both interpretations of personal narrative and intersubjective meanings has been

reassuring. Ultimately, however, the relevance and transferability of the piece rests with the audience's reading of the study, its data (voices), methods and findings.

## **5.6 Participant Recruitment**

The identification and recruitment of a range of participants who would offer breadth and depth of risk biography whilst also providing opportunities for comparison of emerging themes and shared issues, posed a challenge.

As already discussed in Chapter Four, 'Youth work', both conceptually and operationally, is contested and shifting. Youth work functions across public, private, and voluntary sectors, operates across a wide range of settings and contexts, and is delivered through professionally qualified and unqualified full- and part-time staff and volunteers. Furthermore, there are individuals who identify as youth workers, or state that they are undertaking youth work, who may not be identified as a youth worker within their job title or by their employing organisation. Consequently, a bounded population of 'youth workers', which can be readily accessed does not exist. Rather than entering into complex debates about qualified or unqualified workers, or whether youth workers were defined by personal / professional identity or current role, I chose to focus on the more inclusive term 'youth practitioner'. This allowed for a broader range of work with young people and also extended the scope to practice on the edges of or outside 'traditional' youth work, including homeless provision, sexual health and young people's drug services.

'Youth practitioners' were sought who were working full-time in informal or non-formal youth settings, where their primary role was face-to-face work, or 'front-line' practice. The informal or 'non-formal' context was intended to avoid participants from formal social work or education (school or FE) settings where I felt there was likely to be more formal, regulatory risk functions – I was primarily interested in how those working in (relatively) unregulated or diverse youth practice and youth work environments experienced risk, since this was significantly under-researched in literature (compared to social work, for example). The focus on full-time staff was introduced as a means of limiting the population to those whose substantive working life was oriented towards youth practice, and therefore, those who were potentially more immersed in the field. Given the large number of volunteers and sessional staff within the workforce, particularly in the delivery of solely face-to-face work, there may be scope to explore and compare these perspectives in the future. With the research focus on the 'front-line', 'street-level' practitioner, recruitment also

sought those involved in direct work with young people. Due to the common role of the 'practitioner-manager' (see Chapter Four), this did not preclude those with some aspect of managerial responsibility (including team or unit leaders), but managers with limited contact with young people were not interviewed.

The study focused on those working in England. Whilst there are many similarities in work with young people across the UK, countries operate different policy frameworks (and cultures) and in some cases legislative systems for young people, and different professional training paths for practitioners. The focus on England therefore enabled consistency of policy and the general context and language of practice.

Given the diffuse and diverse nature of youth practice (and the absence of a rigid 'population'), the study did not follow formal (positivistic) random or stratified sampling processes, nor were these seen as relevant to an interpretive, narrative study that did not intend to make formal claims of generalisation. It was, however, the intention to gain a wide cross-section of youth practitioners from across the country to contribute to the study. The target was to interview approximately twenty-five practitioners in order to gain sufficient data to ensure both diversity and comparable themes. To this end, participants were sought by mixed strategies based on purposive, targeted recruitment through a range of organisations and forums linked to youth practice. This included:

- Local authority youth services
- Regional branches of national youth charities
- Cross-sector practitioner forums (for example, the Federation of Detached Youth Workers)
- Voluntary sector representative youth bodies
- Higher education training providers in youth work and work with young people (with links to the field)
- Social media invitations through youth-related sites

Organisations and forums were asked to extend the invitation to take part in the study to relevant staff members (see Appendix Two) and an accompanying Participant Information Sheet (Appendix Three) was circulated to organisations and all those interested in taking part. Three participants were also recruited through 'snowball sampling', or 'chain referral' (Atkinson and Flint, 2001), having been suggested by other research participants involved in the study.

Whilst it was tempting to pursue known contacts, who I felt might be interested in taking part, or to focus solely on local or regional youth provision (convenience sampling), this was actively avoided since I was keen to obtain a range of diverse experiences and be unfettered by previous relationships and a priori knowledge of practitioners. Out of the twenty-eight practitioners interviewed, two were known to the researcher (one some fifteen years previously) and both enquired about the study via independent recruitment means.

Eighteen research participants were male and eleven female. Whilst neither ethnic origin nor age were formally recorded, the cohort was almost entirely White British. Ages ranged from early career practitioners in their early 20s to those who had recently retired (early 60s). Participants were from a range of different sectors and practice contexts. At the time of first interview eleven were employed in the public sector (local authorities or other government services), three were in private sector children's services, and fourteen were in the voluntary, not-for-profit sector. Practitioners were youth workers, social care practitioners, and youth advisors working in homelessness provision, substance misuse services, sexual health, 'generic' or 'universal' youth and children's work, family intervention services and youth participation.

Perhaps due to the strength of links in the North of England, the study is weighted towards that area. Of the forty-three people expressing an interest in the study, thirty-one of them (72%) were from the North of England (six were from the Midlands, and six from the South). Of the twenty-eight interviewed (those who responded to follow-ups, met the above inclusion criteria, and turned up to be interviewed), twenty-one (75%) were from the North, five (18%) the Midlands and two (7%) the South of the country. Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) practitioners, and practice with BME young people, are under-represented in the study. Mindful of these disparities, additional invitations to participate were targeted at practice groups, training providers and youth organisations in the South of England and the Midlands, particularly in large multicultural conurbations. BME practice forums and multicultural projects were also contacted. Whilst some of these projects and communities in the North of England were included, it is disappointing that the perspectives of BME practitioners could not be adequately explored in the study. This may reflect a number of factors, such as suspicion of research amongst BME groups, and, perhaps, concerns that risk research might further stigmatise marginalised BME communities. It could also be a consequence of the researcher being a white male from northern England or, perhaps as likely, weaker practice

links in those communities and locales.

## **5.7 Practitioner Interviews**

Forty face-to-face interviews were conducted between 2011 and 2013 with the twenty-eight participants who agreed to take part. I selected a semi-structured depth interviewing approach (Wengraf, 2001:61) to initial interviewing with the intention of exploring research questions linked to the underlying research purpose and theoretical questions of the thesis. This approach also provided the scope for both participant narratives and their own identification and prioritisation of relevant themes. In the semi-structured interview framework (Appendix Four), open and relatively unstructured conversation and explorations of narrative were blended with more standardised interview questions and follow-ups. This framework formed more of a guide to conversation than a formal protocol to be executed rigidly (Roulston, 2010:183).

In the process of arranging interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study (“to explore their views and experiences of risk in relation to their work”) and that their participation was voluntary. Participants were sent the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix Three) in advance of interviews. All participants agreed to the conditions of the interview, but three did not respond to further contact, did not attend the scheduled meeting or cancelled due to other circumstances.

Prior to the interview itself, the purpose and intended outcomes of the study were again clarified, together with further explanation of how the interview was to be conducted and recorded. Issues of confidentiality, anonymity, and disclosure were also addressed. Participants at this point signed a consent form, formally agreeing to participation (Appendix Five). They were aware that they could choose not to participate in, or withdraw from, some or all aspects of the study at any time. Whilst this did not happen, one participant chose not to continue with further stages of interviewing due to having changed job and being too busy.

Balancing a priori research questions and the desire for practitioners to construct their own ‘life-worlds’, or ‘risk-worlds’, and narratives around risk and practice proved to be a challenge. To avoid the imposition of risk and risk themes on those interviewed, as with Lupton and Tulloch’s (2002) studies, explicit questions about risk were initially avoided. Instead, general questions about the participant’s work with young people, how and why the work was undertaken and whether the work

had changed over time were intended to provide a context for the interview and encourage the development of biographical narratives of practice and the practitioner. This also served to identify the extent to which risk played an implicit or explicit part of initial practice narratives. In the majority of cases (n=20), risk was mentioned by participants in this initial phase of interviewing. Of course, despite risk not featuring in questions, participants were aware of the purpose of the research.

Specific structured questions around the area of risk were relatively minimal. I was concerned that, given the different dimensions of possible workplace risk (for example risk construction of young people, risks to practitioners, risk taking, risk assessment processes), I might impose my own priorities on the interview. Thus, questions initially explored whether and how 'risk' affected or informed the work and what some of the challenges might be. Secondary questions and 'funnels' (Gorden, 1975; Wengraf, 2001) facilitated greater depth of response (asking for examples or exploring how mechanisms were operating in practice) and later, encouraged participants to consider other potential areas of risk in their work. Interviews were also in part, conversational, involving active listening, clarification, reflection and the building of rapport intended to "*stimulate the interviewee's interpretive capacities*" (Elliot, 2005:22), and "*activating narrative production*" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995:39), as well as developing an authentic and trusting researcher / participant relationship:

*"The active interviewer sets the general parameters for responses, constraining as well as provoking answers that are germane to the researcher's interest. He or she does not tell respondents what to say, but offers them pertinent ways of conceptualizing issues and making connections, pertinence being partly defined by the research topic and partly by the substantive horizons of ongoing responses."*  
(Holstein and Gubrium, 1995:39)

Whilst the primary focus was on practice (rather than personal) narratives, as is apparent in research literature (Chapter Four), the practitioner is not an instrumental part of the mechanism of practice, and personal drives and emotions affect practice responses. Much of this was explored during the conversations with participants, who often linked personal and professional aspects. A frequent final question (not initially included in the interview framework) also involved asking participants whether (without necessarily asking for specific behaviours) they described themselves as 'risky' or 'risk takers'. This provided a useful way of encouraging further personal reflection and enabled comparisons between different practitioners and the personal risk-frames applied to young people.

Influenced by Wengraf's Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (2001; 2010), second, and in one case third, '*lightly structured depth interviews*' (Wengraf, 2001:60, 2010) with eleven participants provided the opportunity for the exploration of emergent themes from initial interview, as well as reflecting historically upon the previous interview (Squire, 2008:49) and encouraging further narratives or practice examples. The initial intention was to use theoretical sampling to identify ten participants for further in-depth study based on research questions and emergent themes. However, after excluding the minority of participants who had exhausted their discussions in the first interview (some of which were long and covered the topic in considerable detail), attempts were made to contact, and interview, most other participants after between six and eighteen months (with the sole exception of those only recently interviewed for the first time). In a number of cases the process of contacting was problematic, since many practitioners had left employment, and sometimes, the field. Given that contact details provided (to the researcher) tended to be linked to employment (a learning point for future studies), some participants were lost to the study.

Upon commencing follow-up interviews, the dynamic nature of practice and of practitioners' experiences was apparent; for some there had been significant changes to the work, and to perceptions of young people and practice. The temporal dimension of interviews proved to be an important methodological feature of the study, and, with the benefit of hindsight, would have been incorporated further. The significance of changing perceptions, decisions, and emotions over time suggests that longitudinal studies are likely to be important in order to develop further understanding of practitioner perspectives on risk and professional practice.

Interviews themselves were estimated to last between 1 to 1 ½ hours in order to enable practitioners to allocate time. I felt, however, that, whilst being mindful of participants' own time constraints, it was important to allow interviews to last as long as the interviewee was comfortable to talk. Thus, interviews were actually between 40 minutes (where the interviewee rarely engaged with narratives or examples of practice) and just over 2 ½ hours. With the prior written consent of all participants, interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder in order to facilitate subsequent analysis.

## **5.8 Ethical Considerations**

Prior to commencement, the study received ethical approval from the Durham

University School of Applied Social Sciences Ethics Committee. Information sheets, consent forms, risk assessments, confidentiality, interview frameworks, and data storage were approved as part of this process. Whilst an essential step in the research process, many formal research ethics processes focus on what researchers do 'to' research subjects rather than the "*wider moral and social responsibilities of simply being a researcher*" (de Laine, 2000:4). Thus, in addition to more standardised aspects of the research process, ethical research practice also asks questions of reciprocity, honesty and being "*accountable to relationships they write about*" (2000:13). Furthermore, as Clandinin and Connelly highlight, ethical matters are not solely an issue to be dealt with at research approval but "*need to be narrated over the entire narrative inquiry process*" (2000:170). In response to this, whilst the study could not be described as co-operative or participatory, efforts to maintain authenticity and accountability went beyond consent and interviewing processes. If they wished, participants could receive updates about the study, and, provided contact details were still valid, all obtained copies of research outputs. Many had the opportunity to comment on the use of their words in publications, and about anonymity, often suggesting the pseudonyms to be used.

In terms of more 'structural' ethical concerns, participants were, as much as was possible, fully informed about the purpose and nature of the research, and how its findings might be communicated, both in terms of the thesis and other possible publications. Much of the potential of research and its utilisation is unknown at the time of data collection and it is not possible to speak specifically of future audiences; however, the chance of further dissemination in order to contribute to knowledge and future practice was, importantly, discussed as part of the consent process. Since participants were adult practitioners in the field, there was little concern about individuals' legal capacity to consent. This is not to say, however, that understanding research processes and possible outcomes should be assumed (Kent, 2000a) and ensuring not only an understanding but a willingness to be part of the research process based on voluntary participation was an important feature of the pre-interview discussion. This was particularly significant in cases of 'snowball sampling' whereby participants had engaged in the study through a third party.

Confidentiality was assured to participants, with 'raw' audio and interview transcripts only accessible to the researcher, the participant, and the confidential transcription service used. Whilst this perhaps raised concerns about the potential for future re-analysis or the increasing use of publicly available data, it was seen as an important element in building trust and confidence in the research process and enabling



practitioners to speak openly about their practice. A caveat about serious disclosures that posed an imminent danger to others' lives was included in confidentiality discussions with participants (see Kent, 2000b:65). This was in order to avoid, or at least reduce, the unlikely chance of a grey area about dealing with a disclosure where there could be serious and immediate danger to the participant, their colleagues, young people, or myself as researcher. I was keen to stress that this didn't mean that mistakes, concerns, risky- or mal- practice by themselves or others should not be discussed, and that in all other circumstances information would not be shared with employers or others outside the research except in anonymous form in the dissemination of findings. Practitioners appeared comfortable with this, and mirrors similar practice employed in their work with young people. Whilst there were a number of discussions about practice which operated outside organisational policy, and potentially the law, at no time were there concerns about the need to breach confidentiality.

The names of participants (and those of young people who featured in their accounts) have been anonymised, and personal information which might identify them has been withheld from narratives. Where it was possible to re-contact participants, they were offered the opportunity to identify a pseudonym of their choice. Digital audio recordings and anonymised interview transcripts were kept in a digitally secure, password-protected environment and were only available to the researcher.

In broader ethical terms, I have sought to adopt a research approach that respects research participants as agents and experts in their lives, is truthful about its intentions (veracity), and maintains the privacy of those involved, whilst at the same time highlighting aspects that challenge some elements of practice (see Kent, 2000b). In the relatively brief window of contact with participants, notions of trust and authenticity shaped the intended interview approach, not only as a means of eliciting quality 'data', but as an ethical end in itself. Whilst the overall research approach could not be considered to be co-created and participatory, there was a commitment to reciprocal, rapport-based research conversations that were *"personal, disciplined and sensitive to differences"* (de Laine, 2000:134). As de Laine (2000) and Ryen (2011) have highlighted however, this commitment, combined with management of anonymity and confidentiality, make the professional-private relationship between the researcher and participant a complex one, exploring emotional incidents whilst at the same time being mindful of a wider research audience as well as a broader responsibility to the participant. Discussions

about areas such as personal illness, vulnerability, and fear raised concerns about 'boundary violations', where, though relevant to the study, the participant may not necessarily be comfortable with the "*uncensored public viewing*" of aspects of their lives (de Laine, 2000:134). In instances such as this it was important to re-affirm the research process and purpose and where necessary to explicitly check out with participants what was acceptable to share and how. This was also the case with certain sensitive workplace examples, where there was greater emphasis on not being identified since it might impact on employment. This involved negotiating with participants whether, and if so, how, examples could be more widely communicated whilst ensuring anonymity. In most cases, my own sensitivity to this issue exceeded that of the participant, who was confident in their presentation to a wider research audience. On the occasional instance where examples were 'not for wider sharing' due to current sensitivity, re-appraisal of the situation at a later date made anonymous dissemination possible.

Another unexpected ethical feature of the study related to challenges of 'leaving the field' (de Laine, 2000:141), and achieving 'narrative closure' (Elliot, 2005:11). It goes without saying that people's lives are continuous streams, into which the researcher appears and disappears at certain intervals. These periods may not coincide with convenient narratives, which we associate with having beginnings, middles and, importantly, endings, through which we construct the meaning of the narrative (Elliot, 2005:11). Whilst some of those interviewed had left the field by the time of the final contact, for the majority their personal and professional narratives were still playing out in youth practice on a daily basis. In some cases, critical parts of the personal and practice narrative were current and unresolved at the point of final interviews. This is both a problem and an inevitability with time-limited studies. However, where there were ongoing concerns, there was both a desire to 'find out how things went' and a concern for the individual. In one case this led to a third interview, since the second interview took place at a time of considerable personal and professional flux. Whilst not spending long periods of immersion in participants' worlds, repeated narrative interviewing takes both researcher and participant on a journey, and it is therefore important to be critically reflective about how endings are signalled and managed. As part of this process, and with a commitment to reciprocity and benefit beyond the interview itself, participants were informed about the next stages of the research process and were offered the opportunity to receive updates on the progress of the study and any subsequent publications.

Throughout all aspects of the study, from recruitment to analysis and reporting,

narrative research raises complex questions of power and control. Questions relating to who owns the narrative and how it is constructed are ethical as much as they are about validity and reliability. Though participants were offered the opportunity to see transcripts (once completed) and in some cases were involved in discussion about the use of their words and stories, the study did not pursue formal 'respondent validity' processes or auto-ethnographically informed strategies where texts are iteratively framed and re-framed through the lens of the researcher and the researched. The approach focused more on principles of being transparent and reflexive about, and accountable to, the narratives, relationships, and participants within the study. Rather than using fixed ethical statements requiring compliance, a constant 'wakefulness' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Clandinin et al, 2009) and 'vigilance' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009:160) is required about the narrative approach, and about issues of meaning, power, interpretation, and representation throughout the research process.

## 5.9 Data Analysis

*"In our discussion of the interview data here, we are primarily interested in each person's personal 'biography of risk': the ways that they describe risks as having affected them across the time/space coordinates of their lifespan... What are the narratives, epistemologies, discourses, rhetorical moves, choices of 'rational arguments' and courses of action which people use to organise 'risk' as a cultural concept (or concepts)? The 'private reflexivity' of lay people may be multi-layered ... but what principles of coherence, counterpoint, blurring or contradiction do people draw on in order to 'go on' with risk in their everyday lives?" (Lupton and Tulloch, 2001:unspecified).*

The analytical purpose of Lupton and Tulloch's above-cited study reflects many of the same intentions of this research, albeit without a specific focus on the person as practitioner in the youth context. Analysis processes were designed in order to examine two main threads. Firstly, analysis needed to examine a priori research questions and identify emergent themes (and inter-subjectivities) across different experiences and practitioner narratives. In the case of research that is exclusively narrative in its focus, Polkinghorne (1985:5), in his development of Bruner's (1985) work, called this 'analysis of narratives', with analysis by typology or categorisation. Secondly, 'narrative analysis' (Polkinghorne, 1985:6) – the analysis of "*sequential and meaningful stories of personal experience*" (Squire, 2008:42) was important in order to situate narratives within the personal, cultural, emotional and temporal context in which they were experienced and recalled.

The 'analysis of narratives' was informed by the 'Framework' approach to data analysis (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994; Ritchie, Spencer and O'Connor, 2003). This approach is underpinned by a process of 'data familiarisation', where initial themes and concepts are noted, a thematic framework is generated (based on identified questions and initial themes), and text passages are first labelled, or coded, then later sorted, thematically. Descriptive accounts are then generated from these themes, followed by more abstract explanatory accounts. This technique was chosen because it blends both a priori themes (research questions) with those that emerge from the data – a practice more problematic in relation to, for example, Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory, where a priori knowledge tends to be disregarded. I had also used the process in previous research and found it useful, particularly in the way it emphasised the importance of data familiarisation. Although I had completed all interviews personally (but not transcribed them), re-familiarisation, through reading, listening and undertaking initial coding enabled a greater intimacy with the data.

Transcribed interviews were entered into the qualitative analysis software QSR NVivo where they were coded. A relatively simple initial thematic framework became more complex as emergent themes were identified (through what grounded theorists might describe as 'open coding') and added to a priori ones (Appendix Six), thereby expanding dimensions for analysis (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996:30). Most of the coded themes in Appendix Six might be considered first or second order coding, in that they are relatively descriptive categories. Others represent more abstract concepts emerging during and after the initial coding process (for example, 'risk malleability' and 'retreat from practice'). This method is described by Coffey and Atkinson (1996:30) as mixing data reduction and data complication. Many of the themes within the study link to other themes (for example risk taking in practice and professional and organisation trust) and exploring links such as this (considered 'axial coding' in grounded theory) was central to the development of first descriptive, and then more abstract, explanatory accounts within the thesis.

Following the coding analysis process, which disaggregated interviews into thematic sections, a re-reading of each participant's interview was accompanied by the development of individual case histories, incorporating biographical components, historic / temporal aspects of participants' stories and the social, organisational and political context in which they took place. After considerable focus on 'knowing' the 'data' thematically, this 'narrative analysis' enabled a re-personalisation of the research, regaining sight of the interview as situated narrative rather than solely

'chopped up', decontextualised coded segments (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996:52; Mason, 1994:95). It also provided the opportunity for moving between themes and narrative accounts in order to improve understanding of the situational context of experiences, decisions, emotions and practice 'rationalities'.

The reporting of findings attempts to blend these two analysis techniques, illuminating inter-subjective themes with more in-depth personal and professional accounts. The reporting of practice narratives can sometimes lead to a prioritisation of extreme or critical cases. Practitioner accounts within this thesis present individual narratives that are simultaneously unique and have a wealth of shared themes and similar experiences. Some may be more intense than others, but I attempted to avoid the elevation of 'extreme' or critical cases per se. Where examples may appear to be 'outliers' – unusual examples of more common themes – this is discussed.

## **5.10 Interview Participants – Practitioner Profiles**

The thesis attempts to bring forward the voices of twenty-eight practitioners, all of whom are, or had recently been, committed to working with or for young people in different ways. The practitioners participating in the study came from a range of different personal and professional backgrounds. It is not possible within the constraints of the thesis to provide full biographical accounts of those taking part, but brief illustrative information about participants is provided below. Pseudonyms are used to protect identities and personally identifying features have been withheld.

**Joanne** (female) is a qualified youth worker, and has undertaken a range of youth work roles in different parts of the country. This has meant working in large public sector and small voluntary organisations, as well as being a volunteer at her local faith group. During the course of interviews, Joanne switched job due to being made redundant when the previous service lost its contract.

**Mike** (male) works in residential social care as a practitioner and deputy manager. In Mike's work, risk and accountability go hand in hand: bureaucratic functions that tend to be in the interest of "covering yourself" rather than serving young people. As a male in a residential setting, Mike is conscious of risks from accusations by young people. He has been subject to previous (unsubstantiated / false) accusations and these have impacted upon him and his work.

**Rachel** (female) is a qualified youth worker and has worked in a number of youth settings and both small and large organisations. She currently works as a practitioner-manager in a project that is part of a large charity. Keen to work with the 'riskiest' young people, she has sought an organisational setting that enables this, effectively balancing being safe in practice whilst at the same time being able to take risks in order to meet young people's needs.

**Mark** (male) is a practitioner-manager in a community-based children's centre. He has seen significant changes as a practitioner, particularly towards risk assessment, safety and prescriptive work. He sees the challenge of practice as creating opportunities whilst ensuring the safety of those involved, and much of this depends on the judgement and experience of practitioners.

**Terry** (male) has worked in a number of youth work settings, and at the time of interview had spent a number of years as a young person's sexual health worker. This sensitive field raises interesting challenges for Terry around risk. There are regularly issues of managing honesty and self-disclosure and of the politics of talking to young people about sex and relationships. Shortly after the interviews, Terry was made redundant and he no longer works in the youth field.

**Rob** (male) is a qualified youth worker who has worked in a range of organisations and settings including detached (street-based) work and residential homeless provision. He identifies strongly as a youth worker, but is concerned about the removal of the voluntary nature of his role amidst organisational changes and a shift towards case-work approaches. Rob describes a work context of diminishing resources and increasing risks to practitioners and young people, with high workloads, sickness and personal / professional tensions.

**Samuel** (male) works with young people around their participation and voice. At first interview, risk, particularly risk assessment, was an important part of his practice, negotiating with different organisations around events and youth activities. Over time, however, he felt this had changed, with resource decisions now dominating. By the second interview Samuel had left this role to become self-employed in youth work consultancy, framing this as a risk-reward decision.

**Annabel** (female) is a former youth work manager who now works with young people in a social enterprise organisation. For her, the work is inherently risky due to its unpredictability, with the potential to 'come unstuck'. She talks about how

there are tensions between wanting to be creative in practice, her passion for the work, and the increasingly risk averse nature of organisations.

**Liam** (male) works as a youth club manager whilst undertaking professional (youth work) training. He is confident in his position and is comfortable taking risks, both in his work and his career in general. He believes that risk is central to every part of us and talks of the importance of taking control of situations, and making risk decisions in the moment. He does not, however, frame the world solely as risky, and believes that universal approaches, notions of community, and a more positive approach to young people should be the focus of practice.

**Alex** (male) is a practitioner-manager with a wide range of experience in youth work. He has seen significant changes over the years, particularly, he says, in relation to a shift from building relationships towards accreditation and outputs. Risk is a common feature of his work, from organisational risk assessments to risks associated with the loss of contracts and potential loss of work. For Alex, critical thinking is a key part of risk decision making and the ability to make decisions in the moment, being 'on your toes' is part of the attraction of the work.

**Nick** (male) is an outreach worker in a small to medium sized charity. He works with young people on the streets to reduce harm from alcohol and other substances. His work involves targeting areas, which do not always reflect areas of most substance use or need, but are determined by young people's visibility or perceived nuisance level. Risk assessment is central to his work in order to identify ways of mitigating potential problems, though he is critical of some organisations for using these processes to deny services.

**Nigel** (male) is a recently retired youth and community worker, in his words "a dinosaur, an old fashioned youth worker". He is critical of professionalisation, managerialism, and the mechanisation of practice over recent years. He regards himself as a risk taker, willing to bend or break organisational directions in the interests of young people and recalls times when he acted to safeguard staff, young people or himself and was criticised by management. He also recalls examples of when management decisions placed young people, or staff at greater risk of harm.

**Nicola** (female) works in an education and rehabilitation setting with young offenders. For Nicola, risk features in how she relates to young people in a way which is based on mutual respect, less about mitigating risks than creating an "open

door attitude and an acceptance". She does, however, feel that it is important to develop strategies for conflict and to 'draw a line in the sand' when staff or young people are threatened.

**Roger** (male) is an experienced youth practitioner currently working in the area of housing support. He believes that we all have different comfort zones in relation to risk and work with young people, and that his prior experience of work with offenders and substance users enables him to work more comfortably with young people at risk than colleagues. He regards risk assessment as important in reducing or "eliminating" risks to workers and young people.

**Tony** (male) is a youth worker with experience in substance use and sexual health fields. For Tony, taking risks and delivering effective work are dependent on good managers who understand operating in grey areas of practice and are open to reasoned argument. He places value in risk assessments, but also highlights the importance of trusting capable practitioners to make good decisions in the moment. Between first and second interview Tony ceased working directly with young people, entering the area of commissioning and contract management.

**Mari** (female) is an experienced youth worker, particularly in the areas of work with young women, sexual health and well-being. Her approach to practice is based upon a moral commitment to young people, and she describes this as an "emotional reflective journey". The area of sexual health has generated 'thorny issues' of relevance to young people, which have been uncomfortable for some organisations and practitioners. For Mari, this has meant challenges, both personally and professionally, when management support for an issue has evaporated amidst external resistance.

**Natalie** (female) has a background in creative therapies and, at first interview, worked with young people who had recently left residential social care. At first interview Natalie was passionate about her work, keen to go above and beyond in order to meet the needs of young people. By the second interview a personal threat and day-to-day frustrations about limited resources and the lack of visible outcomes for young people had led to a desire to leave the work. By the third and final interview Natalie was no longer working in the field.

**Stephen** (male) is a detached youth worker with a previous background in play-work with younger children. Risk assessment is a key part of his work, affecting the type



and amount of work he is able to do, since some trips are deemed too risky. He is sensitive to personal and professional risks of being a male worker (accusation and stigma), adopting increased caution, which can affect how he relates to young people.

**Martin** (male) works with young people in an urban voluntary sector youth project. For Martin, risk is part and parcel of life and work, though he chooses to frame his approach as 'trust-taker' rather than 'risk-taker', starting from a point of trusting people. His "trust-based" approach isn't, he says, maverick or ignorant of risk, but framed in an approach of being human and humane, though this is not always recognised by external commissioners, who often favour procedural mechanisms.

**Richard** (male) has worked across different organisations and has had contrasting experiences about organisational approaches to risk and safety, and attitudes to what is 'normal' or 'risky' behaviour by both young people and staff. At first interview Richard worked within local authority youth provision, but moved to a voluntary sector organisation during the interview process, reducing his direct contact with young people.

**Victoria** (female) is studying for a youth work qualification after 20 years of work in the field. At time of interview, Victoria worked with young people who were not in education, employment or training ('NEETs'). She enjoys working with young people who are risky or at risk since it "keeps you on your toes", making her think about what she is doing and why. She believes that a "humane" approach and rapport with young people can reduce risks and risky behaviour, but has also experienced incidents where she felt isolated when needing to take 'in the moment' risk decision.

**Ian** (male) works in a local authority youth service with a focus on outdoor education. Prior to this he worked in voluntary sector youth provision. Ian has seen "massive changes" over 15 years of practice, particularly in the level of paperwork and planning involved. He is regularly required to undertake risk assessments in outdoor work, but says that this is often a bureaucratic exercise, with decisions based upon his expertise and judgement rather than the contents of an assessment. He says that whilst risk is in many ways important to consider, it shouldn't get in the way of practice, though for some it does.

**Lauren** (female) is a practitioner-manager in private residential social care working

with three different organisations during the course of the study. She talks of a strong personal commitment to young people being safe and happy, and this sometimes conflicts with inspection requirements and 'tick-box measures'. Risk management is central to her work, both in terms of young people and the organisation. She also tells of how risk has become "a platform to fight about money", driving resources and decisions.

**Nathan** (male) is relatively new to practice. At the time of first interview his main post was as an overnight support worker in homelessness youth provision, and he was also working at a children's home. These settings held different risks for Nathan: with the predictable likelihood of conflict and threat of assault at the homelessness project (where there were few support mechanisms) to the care home where the work is less predictable, there are more risks of accusations, yet it has more policy and procedural support. When making contact for a second interview, Nathan had left these posts and was undertaking other full-time work in the field.

**Peter** (male) works as a youth development practitioner in the voluntary sector, having undertaken a wide range of jobs in different contexts. For Peter, risk "permeates everything we do" and risk taking in practice is essential. Supporting young people to take risks, with capable and confident practitioners is, for him, central to positive experiences. He believes that the language of 'service users' and 'young person' allows some practitioners and organisations to create a separation between their ('normal') behaviour and others' ('risky') behaviour.

**Naomi** (female) has worked with young people in a variety of contexts, as a youth worker, training provider and guidance officer. Naomi frames much of her work in relation to the risks posed to her in practice, based, at least in part, on several negative experiences where she felt unsupported by her organisation in threatening or dangerous circumstances. This has shaped her choice of work and workplace, and her trust in individual managers. At the point of second interview, following restructuring, new management, and different expectation, Naomi had left the workplace (and the field) following a period of prolonged ill health.

**Luke** (male) works as a practitioner-manager in a service supporting supervised family visits with children in care. Prior to this he worked in a family support setting. For Luke, the context is significant in relation to risk. His previous role allowed for some flexibility. However the responsibilities and risks (to both staff and children)

within the current work have demanded a greater level of risk management. Luke is concerned that cost-cutting measures mean that it may not be possible to deliver safe provision in the future and this is a point of personal and professional tension.

**Sharon** (female) currently works in armed forces youth provision, having experience of a range of youth and outdoor activity settings. Sharon believes that bureaucratic demands of risk assessments can stifle ad hoc activities with groups, failing to reflect the realities of practice. For her, trust, both between worker and young people, and with parents and other organisations is a central part of practice and risk. Trust, workers' skills and experience are important factors in reducing risks, yet are often omitted from risk assessment processes.

## **5.11 Conclusion**

The methodological approach chosen for this study reflects an understanding of young people, risk and youth practice that is complex, comprised of multiple 'situated rationalities', and infused by social, cultural and personal meaning. It also recognises the practitioner as a human being, with emotions, experiences, and motivations that are core to their views and actions. The 'voice' of the front-line practitioner is central to the further understanding of how 'risk' operates in the day-to-day context of practice. Whilst acknowledging challenges of the retrospective lens on practice, (re-)constructed accounts (Banks and Williams, 2005), and possible limitations on 'total generalisation' (Williams, 2002), the voices of those involved in the study speak not only of their own important and highly valid experiences, but resonate much broader concerns about youth practice.

## **CHAPTER SIX: PRACTITIONERS' PERCEPTIONS OF RISK AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores practitioners' views, experiences and understanding of risk in relation to their work and, specifically, to young people. It centres on how respondents frame their work and consequently, how they 'construct' young people in relation to risk. As such, the chapter is intended as a critical backdrop to the themes explored in future chapters. It also signposts findings that are of significance, and of potential future research interest, but are not central to the scope of this study.

Firstly, the chapter provides an overview of 'risk talk': how respondents framed risks in their work and what aspects of risk were prioritised or initially presented during the interview process. The next section examines in more detail the discourses of youth risk surrounding practitioners and their work, the extent to which these are shared, or reflected by respondents, and the tensions of working around themes in practice. The conflation of risk and need, or welfare, is also discussed, both in terms of respondent accounts and in the systems and structures they encounter in their work.

Following this, there is an exploration of participants' accounts of how interested others, such as different communities, individuals, organisations and practitioners, play a role in shaping, and distorting, the interventionist gaze of risk-based policy and practice. Participants' views highlight how risk-driven prevention and problem-identification can, as Smith, R. (2010) argued, both amplify and obfuscate social inequalities and prejudice, as well as demonstrating that their own views are infused with the distortions of power relations and inequality, including class, gender and race-based assumptions and stereotypes. The next section in the chapter explores participants' experiences of working with risk assessments and referral documents in the face of a presenting young person with whom they aim to build a working relationship. These experiences bring into sharp focus questions relating to the function of risk assessments, organisational 'risk biographies' of young people, and trust, both between the young person and the practitioner, and between different practitioners and organisations.

Next, the chapter critically examines the impact of risk on the lives of young people who enter the 'risk-world' of practice and intervention. It draws links between literature on risk and welfare, and the experiences and views of respondents, raising

important questions about the extent to which risk-based practice serves the interests of, or possibly endangers, young people through their (mis)representation in the interventionist gaze. It also questions the potential impact of negative risk biographies constructed through risk assessments and the practice risk-world over the medium to long-term, identifying concerns about young people's agency to respond to or challenge (or even find out about) what biographical information is held and shared about them.

## **6.2 'Risk Talk' - Risk in the Workplace**

Of the twenty-eight practitioners interviewed, twenty spoke about aspects of risk in their practice prior to being asked specifically. Whilst it is important to acknowledge that 'risk' was a foregrounded aspect of the research, and therefore was in the minds of those who volunteered to be interviewed, nevertheless, for all respondents, risk was already a significant feature of practice:

*"[Risk] permeates everything we do... Risk is possibly the most important thing when you have to think about any project now. Not so much the enjoyment; not so much the cost; not so much the people who are involved, how many people are getting involved in a project – but more importantly now people are expected to think about risk." - Peter*

The nature and type of risk initially mentioned in interviews varied. Twelve participants first spoke of risks in relation to young people, both in terms of their being vulnerable and 'at risk' and in terms of risky behaviours that either placed themselves or others in potential danger. Eight participants first mentioned risk assessments, highlighting their widespread use, both as a means of assessing practice situations and increasingly, as a way of assessing individuals. Two practitioners focussed on risks to themselves and other practitioners in practice, either from young people or from organisation practices, including 'risky situations' they had faced. Six practitioners spoke more generally about the multiplicity of risks encountered as a practitioner, including wider risk management practices, risk-taking in their work, and the designation of 'high risk' cases.

The above dimensions of risk were explored in further detail during all interviews, and the experiences of practitioners across these areas are examined over the coming chapters. Participants' initial framing of risk does, however, highlight both the extent to which notions of risk permeate, and possibly dominate, everyday practice, and the wide ranging scope of risk-thinking in the practice environment.

The language of risk defines the young person, provides case and resource prioritisation tools, regulates practice, creates a context through which young people and the practitioner are purportedly protected, offers the hope of positive risk-taking, and articulates the fear of risky situations.

This multi-dimensional risk-world presents a series of tensions for the practitioner, including the desire to see themselves, their work, and importantly, young people as more than risk objects. As Peter states:

*"We work with people who are at risk; at risk of one thing or another. But I don't want to think that everybody that comes into this building, I don't want to see them as a risk; I want to see them as a human being who might be on the edge of risky behaviour, might be doing this and it's risky. They are people; they are a sum of all their parts and not just one element or a few elements of another."*

Attempts to avoid seeing everyone and everything in terms of risk and to deliver engaging and relevant practice, whilst at the same time protecting themselves and others, posed significant challenges for many of those interviewed. Whilst being mindful of risk, issues of trust and authenticity, or as Victoria puts it, 'being human and humane', were central to many practitioners' intentions:

*"I like to think that what people see of me at work is who I am. I wear a professional head, but also I wear a humane head, and I don't think they are my children, because they're not, but I treat them as I would treat my own children in terms of the expectations and the boundaries, and I'm human and that's what they get, there's no front, I am who I am." - Victoria*

The dissonance between a humane response and the social construction of at-risk or risky youth is apparent in both the general narrative of practice, and in risk-averse bureaucratic risk systems. Martin highlighted what he saw as the potential costs of putting such processes before a sense of humanity underpinned by trust:

*"All of us want to manage risk. We cannot do it at the expense of that aspect of humanity, which is to be trusted and to be allowed to exercise your abilities and your skills in that situation which might require trust and to expose yourself to risk... What is the point of having them things without being able to exercise them at the expense of failing?... I would say I'm a trust taker and I prefer to trust people. I'm disappointed regularly to be honest. I prefer to believe people. I think I'm a bit of a believer in naivety, it's useful. You'd never do anything if you were anxious and suspicious. It's not the best side of our human nature." - Martin*

A sense of personal purpose was apparent in all those interviewed, usually

underpinned by a 'traditional' welfare and needs-led orientation towards young people and the work, somewhat at odds with conflated need/risk constructions (White, Hall and Peckover, 2009; Briggs, 2013; Kemshall, et al, 1997). That is not to say that attitudes to trust, young people or risk systems were shared. An array of positions existed regarding the 'risk starting point' with young people: from practice such as Martin's, an open-door policy and apparent unconditional trust, through to perspectives driven by individual and practice risk assessment and documentation, and by a view of both practice and the young person as sites of potential imminent danger, where any risk was too great:

*"Nobody should have to be putting themselves at risk. We know the people we are working with so you should take account of that and make sure you're safe – and for the young people as well. You know, if you put yourself in a position where they are able to put you at risk they are going to get into trouble as well so you owe it to them to stay safe." - Naomi*

Positions were influenced by the context of the work and, importantly, by previous experiences (for example, previous risk taking successes or failures, assaults, threats, or accusations) that had shaped their attitudes and approaches. Naomi, for example, had been subject to several incidents that had placed her in physical and emotional danger, within which she felt her employers had let her down. Whilst, she actively avoided blaming young people for these situations, these experiences shaped her view of both young people and practice. She was always conscious of potential dangers and looked to the organisation, management, and policies to protect her.

Most interviewees attempted to adopt a balanced approach to trust and risk, trying to look beyond risk assessments and enabling relationships, and trust, to evolve:

*"I can't go with a rigid plan and a rigid risk assessment and a rigid idea of who they're going to be and who I'm going to be because we don't know that yet... So, yes, I don't trust them implicitly at the beginning and I don't expect them to trust me implicitly. If they make a mistake I need them to own it, if I make a mistake I need to let them see that I'm owning it, and we're both in the risks together sometimes. It's just part and parcel of being in their life, and part and parcel of being in the world." - Natalie*

Whilst actual risks to young people and practitioners were recognised as being very real, and may have increased, or at least changed over time, there was a widespread view that bureaucratic risk management processes had become far

more prominent in recent years. For a minority of practitioners, more “robust” systems and “proper procedures” to protect staff were wholeheartedly positive. For a large majority, however, whilst recognising the importance of systems intended to protect both young people and practitioners (and, indeed, the organisation), these processes were often an administrative burden and, in worst cases, a means of preventing practice, due to their bureaucratic and time-consuming nature or their risk-averse position to practice:

*“In the current context you’ve got small margins to be creative and small margins to take risks in order to deliver the service... I think that in order to connect with young people, sometimes you need to be more creative” - Rachel*

This situation led to nostalgia for some interviewees, with reflection about times when, as a practitioner, “you just did stuff”:

*“We used to open up the boys’ group, and if it was a nice sunny evening, everybody would get in the boys’ group minibus and we’d go swimming on the beach for the evening instead of the centre, and 20 years ago that worked great. Now, when I think of all the forms, all the consents, all the risk assessments we’d need, just to get on the mini bus, and that’s before we’d get to the beach and go swimming!” - Mark*

For newer practitioners like Joanne, there was a perhaps romanticised view of former practice whereby skilled practitioners had the scope to make independent, in the moment, judgements in favour of creative practice that provided positive and exciting opportunities for young people.

*“Youth workers who would have been around for a long time who will have done things that yeah are possibly risky, and done sleepovers in the youth club or young people doing projects for the homeless and said you know what? We’re going to build some cardboard boxes and we’re going to sleep in them tonight... Those skills that they had of being able to in their head think right are there any risks involved in this?... How you get new youth workers to be able to have those skills so they’re not lost rather than being too reliant on a piece of paper and about this person being CRB’d... Making sure that young people get to have positive experiences is one of the key things, ... it would be a real shame that if we decided things were too risky and stopped doing them.” - Joanne*

For Joanne there was a recognition that some activities “weren’t necessarily good practice” but were trusted by parents and the community and “made sense”. A current professional context, with “slightly more of the blame culture and slightly more people willing to sue” has meant a stronger focus on safety and, with it, a de-skilling of practitioners in relation to balanced risk decisions. This safety concern



was increasingly exacerbated by the potential threat to employment, either through public mistakes and blame, or through being seen to be maverick or non-compliant in a context of job cuts:

*"We have to make the culture move towards a place where we're not so worried about the risks that we take. We're not so worried about, you know, being stifled for what we do. We're not so worried about, you know, if you get it wrong you lose your job." - Liam*

There was some suggestion that alternative environments with different 'risk cultures' existed, such as within local faith or small independent youth provision, where trust in and between the staff, volunteers, and parents was a strong feature. Joanne, for example, reflected on how her voluntary church youth work was far more flexible than her paid work. Though concerns about the potential for accidents, abuse, or blame remained, and there were steps taken to minimise these elements, the sense of a trusting 'church family' remained stronger than bureaucratic confidence-based systems. This was also apparent in some smaller voluntary organisations. However, as Tonkiss and Passey (1999) have argued, providing evidence of confidence-based systems rather than trust based approaches was often a condition of public sector commissioning, meaning that projects had to comply or risk losing funding.

The risk terrain for practitioners is clearly a complex one, involving a range of concerns that impact not only on the practice, or professional domain, but on the person, in terms of their moral position, fears about safety and reputation, and financial security. Within this terrain, practitioners face tensions between adopting a 'humane' approach to young people and their construction as risky or potentially dangerous, between having a trusting, open door approach and protection (of both young people and themselves), and between managing organisational demands, the needs of young people, and their own personal needs.

### **6.3 Youth Risk in Practice: At Risk, Risky, Vulnerable and in Need**

Rather than there being a single dominant discourse of 'youth', practitioners spoke of young people in a range of different, inter-related and sometimes conflicting ways. In the majority of cases, constructions of youth were based on notions of vulnerability and need: explicit labelling of young people as at-risk or risky was often resisted. Being 'at risk' (and vulnerable), involved in (or vulnerable to) risk behaviours and being in need of services did, however, tend, as Kemshall (2002, 2008) and teReile (2015) suggested, to be conflated in the course of describing

practice:

*“We always say when we’re talking about the target group ‘but every young person is vulnerable, every young person is at risk’.” - Richard*

Some practitioners and work contexts were more likely to foreground the language of risk, either directly within their work or in the practice interface with other organisations. This was not to say that other practitioners were unaware of ‘risk’, and a wealth of identified risks, from sexual health and substance use to homelessness, abuse, unemployment, and violence (as victim and perpetrator) were mentioned.

Rachel identified ideological differences in how she, and the different organisations she had worked for, chose to describe young people. Interestingly, she described using the language of ‘at risk’ to “soften” explanations about the individual, suggesting that risk language not only served to widen the intervention net, but also reduced, or obfuscated, present dangers to risks (possibilities).

*“In the detached work setting we would never use that [risk] terminology, but that again plugs into the ideology of that project. So they’re not at risk, they’re young people and whatever, they’re in the circumstance they’re in. But in my current role we use that [risk language] on a day to day basis, definitely... Those terms are quite useful when you’re working with other agencies, particularly statutory agencies I think because it’s a way to sum up the fact that they’re in need because I think there’s a lot of judgements made... If I’m putting in a CAF [Common Assessment Form] and I write, ‘Young person’s a heavy drug user involved with gangs’ or whatever then they would look at that and they’d make judgements. Whereas if you use the term a young person at risk or involved in risk taking behaviour, that’s a more accepted way of saying it, rightly or wrongly, but I definitely find it a much more helpful way of flagging them up with other services because in its terminology it softens what’s going on.”*

For Mark (within a family centre), the individual’s life is framed in relation to risk rather than, it seems, need: they are at risk from their environment, family, and themselves, as well as posing a risk to others. Difficulties or problems are also framed, not necessarily as concerns in themselves, but in relation to the risks they pose:

*“Some young people, we talk about them in terms of being at risk from themselves and their behaviour, and, to an extent, the place where they’re at the time, in terms of emotionally rather than physical environment. So if you get a young person who is in a place where they’re very angry or someone who’s very down and depressed, they pose risks of their own. Some of them pose risks to each other, and we talk about how you include them and make services accessible to them, whilst making sure it’s still accessible and safe for peers.*

*Some young people are at risk in terms of their environment and how they spend their non-structured time and the activities they get up to, and the lack of or the over-strictness of boundaries that are in place. A significant number of the young people we work with are at risk from home, in one form or another.”*

The relationship between risk, vulnerability, and need in the practice context is complex and concepts of risk, need, and vulnerability are not always coterminous. Some participants described structural and contextual factors making young people vulnerable to risks and risk taking. Natalie, for example, explained how social factors impacted on those with whom she worked to create individual vulnerabilities and, in turn, exposure to risks:

*“The vulnerability, the risk that they take is very directly linked to the vulnerabilities that they have... They’re just living, because of their background, because of their experiences, because of what they’ve not had, and because of what they still don’t have they are vulnerable, a lot of them are vulnerable. They don’t have the network of support, they don’t have the money, they don’t have the bricks around them, they don’t have the mental health, they don’t have the self-esteem, they don’t have the education, they don’t have the opportunity, they don’t have the, not just the mental health, they don’t have the physical health sometimes as well, that the rest of us might take for granted. And that just leads them into all sorts of different circumstances that other young people might not find themselves in because older people around them would prevent that from happening, and older people around them in their more formative years have instilled in them something different. They just don’t, a lot of them just don’t have it. They’re not tough enough, you know... so they’re vulnerable and therefore they take risky decisions or they put themselves in risky situations, or they find themselves in risky situations.”*

In many senses, Natalie’s comments, based on reflections about young people who have been in local authority care, support risk factor based paradigms – risky behaviours resulting from social and environmental factors. Tony explained how, over the course of his practice career, different terminology, including risk, has focused on ‘doing something’ about children in poverty, and particularly those engaged in behaviour deemed by wider society to be a problem:

*“Well, most of my work, really has been aimed at kind of young people... ‘in trouble’, young people in ‘crisis’, ‘marginalised’, ‘socially excluded’, we’d use all those kinds of words. Poor children usually. And usually young people that have been involved in a particular activity that’s deemed to be risky. So, I mean, I spent 10 years of my working life working around substance use and misuse, so around drugs and alcohol. So that’s seen as inherently dangerous, I think, by the wider population... which is why we get money to do that kind of work really.”*

Natalie, Tony and others often avoided identifying young people as being

responsible, or to blame for their behaviour, pointing to social and structural failings. The notion of the individualised, responsabilised risk choice-maker is, tacitly at least, recognised as ‘epistemological fallacy’ (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007) amidst a host of structural constraints to individual agency. The challenge for many practitioners relates to their attempts to adopt compassionate, humane responses to young people and their needs, recognising wide ranging social, structural, and financial factors, and avoiding blaming individuals or labelling them as, for example, being “at risk” or part of “troubled families”, in a broader context whereby this is the language and approach through which resources are secured.

However, this needs-based welfare approach rarely, however, led to what could be described as an idealised notion of young person solely as ‘victim’. Though language around vulnerability used by participants tended to be passive (vulnerable people needing a service) there was recognition of young people’s risk-taking and potentially dangerous behaviour, located within a socio-structural context where choice was limited.

For a small minority, the dangerous potential of young people was a dominant feature of their construction of young people. For Naomi, previous experiences of assault and threats in the workplace meant that much one-to-one work or other potentially isolated practice with young people was regarded as being too dangerous. Speaking about co-workers transporting people in their cars, she links the vulnerability of some young people to the threat they pose to the worker:

*“They could accuse you of anything if you are in that situation and it’s just not worth the risk. You know, we’re dealing with vulnerable young people, a lot of them are troubled; it’s not worth the risk.”*

Similar caution is expressed in a number of interviews, with practitioners balancing the potential hazards of work, safeguarded in part by good practice and (at least in some cases) supportive organisational systems, with a belief in the value of young people and in their own potential to support them. Even Naomi, who presented the most cautious approach to young people, did not frame them solely in terms of being dangerous, or in need of control, and retained a welfare-driven commitment to helping young people.

Whilst many operated pragmatically within the language of youth risk, several of those interviewed viewed the whole construction of young people as-risk or at-risk as problematic. For Liam, having entered the youth work environment recently, the

language of youth risk was incomprehensible:

*"I have never once looked at a young person, or a person, as I refer to them and said, "He's at risk", "She's at risk". I've never done that. Not one time. It doesn't work within my vocabulary. Not because of choice... But realistically what – really, though, at risk of what? At risk of lightning hitting them? At risk of being run over in the street? At risk of living the real life that they live?"*

Liam went on to describe his first experience of 'risk talk' in work, in which a manager who was new to an existing activities programme was explaining the conditions of the funded programme:

*"He said, 'Right, guys. We've been given just under £6,000. About £1,000 a week to run the projects and programmes'... And his next line, I could not fathom. I could not believe. To this day I still don't understand it. He said, 'But we can only use it on people that are at risk or who are known to the local police'. My crap detector went off, and I just said to him, 'Are you for real?'. Some of the other workers who said, 'Well, what are we going to do, then? The people that are not at risk or not known to the police? We're going to give them draw [cannabis] and tell them to go over the block and smoke until the police come?' Because we're not going to tell them to go away. So how do we do this? And it pulled up the first time that I really saw ... the management side of things."*

For Liam, the construction of young people as being 'at risk' was purely related to managerial practice, about setting young people apart as different: 'exiling' them because they are young. This suggestion of risk as a morally defined imposition 'otherising' young people (reflecting Douglas, 1992; Green, M., 2007; Tulloch and Lupton, 2003; Cohen, 2002; Joffe, 1999) was also identified by a number of workers, particularly in relation to areas of sexual health and substance use, where adult (and class, gender, and race-based) moral positions were perhaps more apparent:

*"In reality the terminology is, it's just around, it becomes a moral statement. What they're just saying is 'that's wrong' and 'this is right' and it loses all the subtleties, ... it's a very blanket sort of risky behaviour which if you analysed it closely really just means something that adults think is wrong." - Samuel*

Thus, the language of youth risk is used by most practitioners in their work, but its use and meaning varies from practitioner to practitioner and context to context. Whilst it has increasingly become a standard organisational frame for practice, notions of welfare, need, and vulnerability frame most practitioners' narratives and motivations, supporting other studies around risk assessment (Kemshall, 2002, 2008; Briggs, 2013). The interviews highlight that this narrative of welfare is not simply an ideological difference in the mode of practice, but also in relation to the

desire for humane and compassionate approaches to people, something that is not readily apparent in the instrumental construction of people within risk factor discourses. Within this context, identifying young people as ‘at risk’ or ‘vulnerable’ offers to many practitioners what could be described as a moral compromise between risk and welfare positions. In many ways, this position reflects O’Malley’s (2001) concerns about how RFPP becomes more palatable to those favouring welfare approaches to practice through softened language and the ‘invented extensions’ of ‘resilience’ and ‘protective factors’.

## **6.4 Some Are More Suspect Than Others: The Shaping of Risk Priorities**

The interviews highlighted how, through the lens of at least some participants, risk-based targeting of provision was driven by class, race, gender, sexuality and, of course, age-based assumptions, moral prioritisation, and local political factors.

In addition to the general moralisation of behaviour discussed above, some participants recalled occasions when the identification of risky behaviour, and the interpretation of whether such behaviour exposed young people to increased risk, was driven by what they saw to as reflecting predominantly white, male, middle-class frames of ‘normality’ and acceptability. For some, like Annabel, whilst targeted approaches enabled some work with young people from across the social spectrum, provided that they had “*fallen off the track*” and had come to the attention of services, the majority of the focus was on poorer areas, “*the most dire housing locales that there are*”. Whilst there may be legitimate arguments for targeting limited resources towards those most at risk or in need, there were concerns that in addition to the potential social and cultural biases inherent in risk factor approaches (Millstein, 1993; Haines and Case, 2009; O’Mahoney, 2009; Smith, R., 2006) the lens of surveillance and intervention applied to young people was moralising, stigmatising, and discriminatory. This results in, as Shildrick, Blackman and Macdonald (2009: 461) described in the example of labelling young people as gang-involved, “*a pincer movement of (mis)labelling and harassment*” in young people’s lives “*already constrained by the disadvantages of class, place and ‘race’*”.

Nick worked as a substance misuse worker, sent to ‘hotspots’ to educate, inform, and offer support to young people around alcohol and drug use. These hotspots, he felt, targeted the risk behaviour of those in deprived areas, underpinned both by issues of visibility and class-based assumptions, whilst ignoring similar behaviour in

more affluent areas.

*“99% of my work is in deprived areas...I’ll be sent to a housing estate or a road that is causing trouble or something like that. That is very stereotypical in where I’m sent to and I suppose there is that risk of, they are being labelled straight away... I go to an area where you think, you know, I don’t need to be here... Just down the road there I know they are in that park drinking and absolutely mashed out of their heads on drugs and alcohol but they don’t want me working in that area because they are unseen.”*

Whilst this could be put down to tactics of visibility (some people are better at going unseen), the situation was infused with structural and socio-cultural factors. More affluent young people may have greater means through which to hide their behaviour or operate in rural or suburban areas where there is less likelihood of being subject to the interventionist or surveillance gaze. Perhaps most significantly, the intervention and surveillance lens, given further legitimacy through RFPP, lends itself to stereotypical application, focusing on those deemed to be more likely to be problematic – a self-fulfilling probabilistic prophecy. Thus, hot-spotting and risk-based approaches serve as instruments of class-based and at times racialized ‘territorial stigmatisation’, where lower class (and migrant) areas are subject to stigma and demonization, in turn legitimising state responses (Wacquant, 2007, 2008; Wacquant, Slater and Pereira, 2014; Hancock and Mooney, 2013).

Nick found the stereotypical identification of problems challenging, particularly when faced with, for example, known heroin use amongst more affluent young people, whom he was not tasked to work with, whilst having to tackle relatively low level drinking by young people in a park. He contrasted this with what he described as *“university and young students just getting hammered on alcohol... in A&E getting their stomach pumped”*. Nick’s position here appears to both challenge the underlying, class-based framing of urban poor young people’s behaviour and perhaps, demonstrates his own potential for bias and stereotyping. Thus, what is observed is the practitioner’s lens on the community’s lens on groups of young people, with different and conflicting ‘truths’.

Rob, talking about detached youth work, was also critical of targeting work on the basis of local politicians’ views, assumptions and agendas. This, he argued, was framed by middle class normative assumptions - “the middle-class gaze” (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012:487) - that were mapped, or imposed, on to other neighbourhoods and failed to take into account ‘different cultures’.

*“Everybody’s life is a prism of their own experiences and they*

*perceive the world through their own experiences. But for someone from, say, a middle class background, from quite an educated background going into that environment, they see that as a very base level and they see that as no aspirations, ... their perception of risk is very low, they're letting the kids out. So there's this cultural perception which is very, very different... So they're going to go into that area, or ask us to go into that area with preconceived ideas of what is a risk and the fear of those young people. And it's a fear of more than it is if they're a genuine risk. So there is kind of a socio-political agenda there that you have to be aware of."*

Rob's account highlighted the complex interplay of place, class and race in risk identification and the targeting of groups. He was critical of how a middle class morality was projected onto migrant communities in one particular area, particularly where residents' behaviour was regarded as different and therefore a problem demanding intervention. He described how a growing population of Eastern European migrants taking up low-paid unskilled labour at the local factory had moved into an area populated by the South Asian community (who were gradually migrating to lower density housing areas). Due to the visibility of adults drinking alcohol and socialising on the streets (a contrast to the previously quiet and tolerated Asian community), the area became a target for intervention, despite little or no evidence of young people being the source of the perceived problem. Similarly, he spoke of urban white areas where he was expected to target young people's behaviour, despite what he saw as the problems actually being related to endemic long-term unemployment and social disadvantage.

Rob contrasted this targeted approach with summer work in more affluent suburban areas, where, although 'hanging about' might still be regarded as undesirable, there were different assumptions about risk behaviour that was similar, or indeed identical to that seen as being a problem in less affluent areas. When young people from more affluent backgrounds did experience similar problems, for example in relation to crime, Annabel suggested that there was a greater capacity – perhaps as 'reflexive risk managers' - to act in a 'protective' manner and avoid prolonged intervention:

*"I think some of the more middle class families felt they could deal with it in house. Actually yes, their young person had committed a misdemeanour but actually it wasn't a pattern of behaviour and they weren't used to having other people interfere in their lives so if it were a choice not to have that then they would choose not to."*

The use of the language of risk and fear could also be mobilised to direct attention, fear or resource. Rob gave a specific example of one local politician who, he said,



was highly adept at gaining resources to tackle 'problems'.

*"I think because he uses the word 'risk' and 'young people' and 'alcohol' and 'drugs' people listen to him. Because he uses it more often in more sentences than anyone else, so per capita he's got a louder voice and he uses the key words that are linked to safety... so people go 'oh, my god, let's just give him loads of money and make sure it prevents it'. But it doesn't actually mean it's preventing anything."*

The language of risk can, therefore, be shaped by local agendas as well as existing structural inequalities, prejudices and cultural biases. Class, gender, race, and age inequality and discrimination can lead to disproportionate surveillance and intervention that in turn legitimise and reinforce risk factor discourses. The politically silent voices of communities and young people become further framed in terms defined by the 'moral majority'. Thus, as Furlong and Cartmel (2007) highlighted, structural factors remain central features, albeit masked in a language of 'risk'. Identical behaviour by different social groups can be rationalised in terms of the social risks they pose, with the behaviour seen as less problematic for those in affluent areas due to the 'protective factors' of (assumed) good parenting, education and higher income. The same behaviour evident in poorer areas may be regarded as more problematic and therefore more prone to (punitive) intervention and control.

Accounts also highlight how problems and risks, framed through a white, middle class gaze are defined in terms of their visibility or inconvenience to the majority. As with historic concerns about delinquent males, the 'moral danger' attaching to young women (France, 2007), and the "deficit rhetoric" of Black youth (Baldrige, 2014), visible behaviour based upon, for example, alcohol use in public or group socialisation may be more likely to attract attention, leading to the continued (gendered and racialised) construction of problem youth, as well as the under-resourcing of support for vulnerable groups who are less visible.

For Samuel, whilst what he describes as "moral statements" of risk behaviour might reflect a "genuine concern" for young people, this was "a mask for paternalism" that was at odds with what he regarded youth work to be about:

*"What practitioners end up doing is not questioning the fact that you're working on a certain agenda to change young peoples' behaviour in a certain sort of way and that, for me is quite a compromise for youth work's values."*

Similarly, Rob calls for greater efforts to understand young people's lives,

suggesting that others' fears and perceptions about young people get in the way of what he describes as 'objective' practice:

*"I think it's only fair to try to create a better way of understanding what's happening in young people's lives because it's very hit and miss at the moment and I think it's because it's so laden by local community perception of their own risk and the risk to their young people... [This] is marring the objectivity that should really be applied to youth work."*

What is apparent from these accounts, and others within the study, is that the application of risk, and risk factors, has done little to challenge assumptions about young people. Indeed, in the examples shown here, risk has become another tool for re-constructing existing arguments between communities, politicians, and 'experts' about who the problem is; targeting and stigmatising groups of individuals, avoiding politically sensitive areas, and masking structural inequalities in the language of risk factors and prevention. Whilst, therefore, all young people may have become 'permanent suspects' in society (Mcara and McVie, 2005), some are clearly still more suspect than others.

## **6.5 Risk Assessment**

Consonant with Banks' (2004) and Spence, Devanney and Noonan's (2006) studies, those who had worked in the youth field for some time spoke of the considerable rise in bureaucracy and, in particular, use of risk assessments. Risk assessments within the field of youth practice now cover a wide range of different practices, from assessing venues, activities, trips and different types of work and setting (for example, lone-working or street-based, detached work), to the increasingly common individual assessment of young people, the risks they face and the risks they pose. Given the breadth and depth of risk assessment, and the amount it features in respondents' accounts of organisational accountability, it would be possible to focus solely on this area within this thesis. The study seeks, however, to examine the overall context of risk, young people, and practice and, whilst risk assessments are an important technology in the organisational management of risk and practice, sole focus on this layer is likely to miss the broader context of everyday 'situated practices' of workers. This section, therefore, considers some of the key features of participants' engagement with risk assessments, but, whilst rigorous in its analysis, should not be regarded as an exhaustive account of the many issues raised within the data relating to this area.

For most practitioners, risk assessments are the primary interface between themselves and the organisation in terms of risks to young people, themselves and to the organisation.

*"I think that although the paperwork protects the organisation, I think it also protects the kids to the extent that you've thought about what you're going out to do. There will always be unforeseeable / uncontrollable stuff, but if you've thought about the key elements and you've thought about when you've written your risk assessment how you're going to manage things and what you're putting in place and almost what the backup plan is, those kids have got to be safer than if you just get in a bus and go down the road. Ultimately they've got to be safer because of this thought process." - Sharon*

Sharon identified the value of practice (rather than individual) risk assessment processes that encourage anticipation of potential hazards in the planning of activities. For her, therefore, risk assessments were tools to support practice and, whilst she wouldn't rule out cancelling activities that were unsafe, they provided a means of navigating (rather than avoiding), and explaining actions within unpredictable situations. This view was reflected by many of those interviewed, who recognised the value in processes intended to ensure the safety of both young people and themselves.

However, the majority of respondents identified significant problems with risk assessments. Some spoke of how risk assessments of activities, venues, and practices were often ritualistic, 'copied and pasted' templates:

*"We needed them for the sessions but what I found from organisation to organisation it's like, oh, we'll just use the old one, put a new date on it, I'll sign that. It's just a paper-based exercise, which is why I haven't got much at all to say about risk assessments, because they're fairly meaningless a lot of the time in practice." – Richard*

Ian was an experienced outdoor education worker who described being faced with a "mind-blowing amount of paperwork" in comparison to when he started, so risk assessments were "a bit of a formality":

*"If we're doing a trip out for navigation training or something, we have to fill out a request form... which is ridiculously long. Saying exactly where we're going, what time we're starting off, what time we're coming back, who your emergency base contact is, who are the senior members of staff on duty, and attach a risk assessment to that about the risks that we're going out and doing. Now myself, I'm a summer mountain leader... So I can take anybody anywhere in the country. My colleague also doing DofE, he's also a summer mountain leader... Between us, our knowledge is quite vast. But we have to fill out this risk assessment each time we want to go out on a trip. Except I don't. I've read it once... And I change the date on the*

*top of it if I can remember. And it's a formality me asking to do this. Because the person I'm sending it to assessed me to be a mountain leader."*

It appeared that Ian felt that his professional skills and specialisms were not fully recognised by the bureaucracy and this resulted in unnecessary paperwork. Trust was not a formal process between him and the organisation based on his skills and abilities, but only existed informally between him and his manager (or the person who approved his assessments). And this was a trust he knew might not be maintained if something were to go wrong. Whilst critical of unnecessary risk assessments in his area of expertise, Ian did, however, emphasise their importance when undertaking unfamiliar work, where such processes can support planning around safe practice. This suggests that risk assessment systems around practice disregard any expertise on behalf of the practitioner within the given context, despite, as several participants pointed out, the individual practitioner being central to the delivery of safe and effective work.

A large minority of practitioners expressed concerns that risk assessment processes were stifling their work with young people, who were denied opportunities due to what Samuel described as a "*position of mass hysteria about risk assessment*". This had led to the abandonment of trips and activities that used to take place but were now deemed 'too risky' to engage in. Examples of such practices included swimming, political demonstrations with young people, ice skating, residentials, or going to the park. Some of these examples were based on the perceived risk of the activity itself. However, many 'everyday' activities also required risk assessment approvals between two and six weeks in advance, eliminating the possibility of spontaneous practice. The paperwork, and the fear of not filling in an assessment correctly could be enough for practitioners to avoid such processes and activities altogether:

*"I think someone wanted to go to [an indoor snow and ski centre] and do that Luge thing, but the risk assessment was just so over the top, there was no point in doing it really because you'd spend so much time doing the risk assessment. You'd need to be so on tenterhooks watching absolutely everything you do, there'd be no fun in the activity because you'd be so stressed out about like, 'Oh you're going to die!'" - Rachel*

Practitioners also spoke of how risk assessments served little purpose in the dynamic context of practice: at the very times of crisis when they might be needed it was neither practical nor safe to check policies and the risk assessment to identify

agreed practices. In this sense, risk assessments were as much about post-incident defensible practice for the organisation as they were about planning and intervention. They do, however, have a continuing ubiquitous influence in practice, providing a bureaucratic means of restricting difficult practice or protecting both the organisation and, potentially, the practitioner from negative outcomes.

Whilst risk assessment around practice settings and activities provides a context of potential risk aversion and the reduction of provision to all those engaged in services, individual risk assessments present the possibility to grant, limit, or withhold services to individuals entering or already within provision. Individual risk assessments were not completed by all practitioners, but had become a more frequent aspect of practice, particularly where targeted criteria, referrals, casework and residential accommodation services were provided. Supporting Kemshall's (2008) comments about a conflation of risk and need in risk assessments, several of those undertaking personalised assessments identified how risk assessments had replaced more qualitative assessments of needs. In voluntary sector housing provision, Rachel, told of the gradual shift towards risk processes:

*"We started off using a referral form... sorry, an interview form... with lots of questions and you'd write all the story etc. And then there were risk assessment tags into that. But because of the nature of the cases that we were getting, it is all about risk management and whether or not a person is at that tipping point of being eligible or not eligible. So we actually ended up using the risk assessment instead of using the interview, but we kind of changed it so that, say, if it's about self-injury it might be saying, 'do you have issues around this...' It's done in a more interview format but it's still using the risk assessment instead."*

Nathan, in a different housing support setting, described how young people were 'risk assessed' in order to identify suitability for accommodation. Needs were mentioned, but only in passing before risk minimisation again became the focus:

*"The risk assessment we'll do for a young person, we'll sit them down... and they just go through a booklet of previous behaviour, the background of that person, to see what the underlying issues are, what the risks involved are, so they do ask questions, such as criminal convictions, 'What are your criminal convictions for? When were they?' Ask about arson, ask about self-harm, mental health issues, and that will all be part of that young person's risk assessment, which is kept in their file. And obviously they'll assess their needs and they'll try and put a plan in place to reduce the risk, if it's a high risk, before taking them in." - Nathan*

For Lauren, a practitioner-manager working in a residential social care context, risk assessment of individuals was central to how young people were referred and

engaged in the provision:

*“A lot of authorities use a Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3, Tier 3 being the worst. That’s the first labelling of risk that comes to me and lands on my desk. The second label of risk is what I assess them to be, which is risk to staff, risk to themselves, risk to the community, which is then assessed on how often and how severe. There’s that sort of level of risk. I then get a worker that comes to mine, they read a risk assessment or I say this young person is very high risk of males turning up to the unit in cars and driving away and absconding/abduction, CSE [child sexual exploitation], alcohol substance misuse, being plied with alcohol. I say that to my staff, who are immediately... thinking, ‘How am I going to keep these kids out of [trouble]?’”*

For Lauren and her staff the challenge was looking beyond these risk categories in order to still see, and work with the child or young person. She questions whether it is possible to avoid stigmatisation whilst also flagging potential hazards and concerns:

*“It reinforces that message that they’re a behaviour and not a young person. It’s always labelled a behaviour not the child. But labelling behaviour is the same thing to me because they still see it as something that they do, whatever that’s happened to them manifests in these high risk behaviours. I’ve had kids that speak the same lingo back to me because they’ve read so many reports about themselves that they’ll use words that only professionals would use, myself and others. I do think the labelling of risk is stigmatising, but if it’s not recognised it can’t be managed, can it?”*

In addition to individual risk assessment examples above, some local authorities increasingly use risk-based assessment tools to identify whether an individual meets the threshold for a service. Tony, explained the emerging model of practice within his area, describing the experiences of one young woman:

*“There’s a young woman that we wanted to refer. She’s quite an interesting character, really. She’s quite controlling and manipulative. She’s 16. So one of the things she’s recognised is that she’s got quite a lot of anger issues... [but] she doesn’t fit any classic mental health mould.”*

Tony explained how she would ideally have been able to access a low-level mental health intervention around anger management, but whilst her need was quite apparent to him, and fitted with the commissioned provision available, she did not meet the threshold criteria to make a referral:

*“They’ve got high risk tick boxes and lower risk tick boxes. And you need either two of the high ones, or one of the high ones and two or three of the low ones, in order to qualify to put a referral through.*

*Now the young woman has one tick. Which is around her anger management... She wouldn't tick any of those other risk factors, because she didn't think she had them. And to be fair I think she was probably right... So she didn't get a service."*

For Tony, this made little sense, particularly since the assessment criteria appeared subjective:

*"One of the problems I've got is trying to assess and understand what a young person's entitled to and what they should get, because it's so relatively arbitrary. You know? It depends on who's ticked the box, doesn't it? It depends who's done those, they're not even assessments, you know? We're talking about, if it was in drug treatment you'd call it a basic screening tool. A couple of sides of A4, really. It's not very thorough."*

As resources diminish within the sector, risk-based thresholds of service are increasing and with them, concerns about the increasing gap between practitioner identified need and risk thresholds. The role of the practitioner in attempting to bridge that gap, and exploit the subjectivity of risk processes, both individual and collective, is discussed further in Chapter Nine. This shift to risk assessment raises a number of significant concerns (see Chapters Three and Four). As Samuel highlighted, both practice-wide and individual risk assessments are based on *"worse case rather than assessments of needs"*, encouraging practitioners to consider terrible events over opportunities and particularly in the case of individual young people, to generate 'risk-biographies' – collections of documented worst moments. These risk biographies may not only frame how young people are viewed in the present, but net-widening surveillance processes, risk assessments, and information sharing frameworks, could, with their focus on documenting (and sharing) often subjective negative risk biographies, could negatively impact on future opportunities for young people.

## **6.6 The Same Young Person? Conflicts Between Risk Biographies and the Presenting Young Person**

*"Behind every single young person and their risk assessment is a whole lifetime's worth, a catalogue of moments that have created that risk. But it is just one little word, isn't it?" - Natalie*

Given the increasing focus on 'paperwork', case-recordings, and the utilisation of risk assessments throughout practice domains, it is unsurprising that young people's records, shared within and across services, become risk-infused, or risk-dominated.

*“The service has become more and more focused. The things that we were looking around are risk factors. So those are going to be the things that are written about in case files. Do you know what I mean? So we are, you know, by dint of the fact that we’re working with those young people, they are being pathologised. They are individuals. What gets recorded is a negative. It’s not the positive.” - Tony*

A context of defensible (and defensive) practice, where omitting something that sometime in the future, could become a problem (both for the practitioner and the young person), contributes to the production of ‘risk biographies’: the negative aspects of an individual’s life, risk factors and risk behaviours. Whilst Tony, following on from the comment above, highlighted an intention to include positive outcomes since that is the practitioner’s goal, negative, risk-based framing of the young person outweighed intentions to construct young people in a positive light. As Kelly (2007:47), citing Beck and Giddens, highlighted, *“institutionalised processes of expert knowledge production”* produce biographies that facilitate the *“emergence of an apparently increasingly risky stage of the life course called youth”*. In case recordings, young people, and in turn the concept of ‘youth’, are constructed as risk objects – events are no longer just that but are bound to, or visited upon, the individual (Kelly, 2007). Selective identification of risk events and circumstances serve to create individualised indicators of future harm or danger, offering the prospect of organisational risk management, regulation, intervention, control or, in the case of referrals, avoidance.

Young people are held personally responsible for their risk biographies, yet rarely able to correct or redefine them. Indeed, in some cases, young people were unaware of what information was being stored or shared. Several participants spoke of ‘special indicators’ or ‘hidden screens’ where sensitive information was kept without the knowledge of the individual. This was explained as either being *“for the sake of the client”* who might not wish to see personal information, particularly with parents or others around, or due to the fact the information is owned by a ‘third party’ and may not be authorised for sharing. Whilst there are clearly worries about information sharing, the agency of the young person in accessing or challenging this information is not evident in participant responses. This is particularly concerning given the potential for subjectivity, cultural bias, discrimination and prejudice in risk judgements:

*“I don’t think people have had adequate training around how you record things. I’ve read some unbelievable things in some of the case files! You know, you think potentially defamation, slander.” - Mari*



The majority of those interviewed spoke of tensions with reading referrals or risk assessments (often the two were the same or linked) about young people and delivering what they saw as the central tenets of practice:

*“Part of youth work is about trying to be non-judgemental which is very hard to do if you’re told this young person’s done this and this and this and this, it’s hard not to be judgemental. You still want them to come and to take part but you’re going to be watching them a bit more and things and then I wonder if that young person would then feel like they’re always being watched and then won’t feel comfortable and won’t want to open up?” - Joanne*

Joanne’s conflict was shared by others, like Rachel, who spoke of it being “foolish” or “stupid” to completely ignore risk assessments and solely make her own judgement, yet at the same time regarding them with uncertainty, frustration and suspicion. Assessments offered potential warnings about individuals and how to respond to them whilst at the same time potentially getting in the way of, or distorting, an authentic view of, and relationship with the young person. Risk assessments or referrals from other agencies in particular were rarely trusted and, instead of using them to determine an intervention or approach, they were regarded as something to have in the back of the mind. Rachel identified how, in a residential project she worked at, referrals from agencies bore little or no resemblance to the individual young person: information was often either overly high-risk or, she felt, had been withheld in order to enable access to the service:

*“All the time we were getting risk assessments through, they were just completely off the wall. So we’d have some which were like horrendous and they turn out to be the most amazing, placid young people and then we’d have other ones where they looked like they were absolute angels, they’d get in and they’d be horrendous and we were like, “Where on earth have they devised this from?” And with all sorts of issues that had not been flagged up because they were concerned that we wouldn’t have offered a service.”*

Some practitioners, like Roger, who also worked within a residential housing project, distrusted other organisations’ referrals, but not the risk assessment process itself, placing faith in their own risk assessment processes and an initial starting point of distrust, or “*airing on the side of risk*”. However, Roger was open to this view of the young person shifting, with his view appearing to be shaped by both the behaviour of the young person and a greater understanding of the social and structural impacts upon their life:

*“The risk assessment that you get to the person that you see – and that’s common in all my jobs – the person that you see on paper is*

*not the person you see physically. Not when you're communicating one-to-one. Because once you start getting to know them they've had horrendous backgrounds." - Roger*

Roger's account also highlighted the enduring nature of risk assessments, and the risk biography. He described how, even when working with a young person for months without incident, the assessment always provided a *"warning signal that you always expect the unexpected"*. When the young person moved from the service, he also described how the biography was transmitted onwards, built on the previous referring agency and the risk reports of his service, a process that *"covers both sides"*, perhaps a reflection of Kemshall's (1997, 1998a) defensible practice. Roger highlighted that this process was agreed with the young person, albeit with some disagreement:

*"We'll chat about it and we'll say, 'We'll refer you onto them, this is what they said there, so what I'm going to put here but I'm also going to add that you have in the past done that'. And some of them will challenge you, 'I'm not like that now'. 'Yeah, but I need to put that down to make the people that you're going to work with at the next stage to carry on with your progress, so they're aware just in case'. As long as you put it across to them that way they're happy to go along with it. But it's got to be agreed. It's just my opinion so we're saying something about them so we would agree that. Again it's the safety network and making people always aware that this could happen, even if now they're great and doing really well."*

Thus, risk-based narratives of individuals become reproduced across organisations, generated records that are often dissonant to the presenting face of the young person and reflecting themes, risks and behaviours that are difficult for the young person to expunge, even when events do not involve criminality. These 'risk biographies' are not therefore, in a straightforward way at least, the 'elective' or 'choice' biographies of Beck's individualised risk society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) where individuals must navigate their own career and lifestyle directions (France, 2007:61), but are forged and reproduced by risk-based intervention systems that disproportionately target poorer classes, certain gendered, racialised and sexualised behaviour, and those less able to avoid the gaze of surveillance.

Whilst it was not possible to explore the impact of these risk biographies in full within the parameters of this study, the potential consequences of risk-dominated assessment, referral, and intervention processes on the medium and long-term risk biographies may be a significant area of future study. Several participants highlighted concerns about this, providing examples where case recording, intervention and labelling processes posed potential or actual impediments to young

people's futures. Rob, for example, explained how colleagues were employed through a Mental Health Trust, receiving referrals from education services. Young people attending their service to socialise and possibly talk to workers about any problems were subject to any reported issues being placed on their medical record:

*"If they've got a folder saying they've got a mental health issue, because they're accessing our services, then that will live with them for the rest of their lives, that will be on their medical data, when all they really want to do is come in and play a bit of pool and talk about a problem they've got and they're feeling a bit down. It's disproportionate."*

In other examples, incidents in childhood became risks management 'markers', remaining with the young person as they made the transition to adulthood and preventing them from accessing services. Rachel gave the example of how having arson on a child's record could affect life chances:

*"We worked with someone who had on the risk assessment that they were an arsonist. Now at the age of eight he'd done something that was linked to the reason he was homeless. I wouldn't say he was an arsonist, but yet that followed him around everywhere and it meant that he was not allowed to access certain services, he was prohibited from places that he could go."*

Lauren also highlighted how being in a children's home increased the interventionist gaze upon a young person, both from police and from the social care organisation. She pointed to the disproportionately high levels of those in care with criminal convictions (despite only 2% entering care because of what is described 'socially unacceptable behaviour' – DfE, 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2014). Lauren gave an example of how "inexperienced staff" and their response to conflict led to a young woman becoming agitated and criminalised, which in turn impacted negatively on her future prospects:

*"She was restrained by carers in a children's home that then rang the Police because she'd done some minor criminal damage in the home to a door... You've got a company that's worth £50m that can't repair a door or paint a radiator without the kid going to court and getting charged and getting criminal compensation. Also because she's had [cannabis] on her, which was a minor amount, she's now got a drugs charge as well. She's 15. She's got to get a job in two/three years when she leaves."*

Lauren's example highlights the potential of practice to harm long-term prospects for young people. Those subject to greater surveillance and intervention may be more likely to have their bad moments recorded and reported, resulting in a documented risk that constructs them in the eyes of police and other services as what Lauren

describes as “*complete perpetrators*”, with no concept of other factors in their lives:

*“That kid to them, that looked after child at 14 or whatever, has got such a record now or he’s so well known to them or he’s so well known to the beat bobbies, that they’re just done with it: ‘If we carry on down this track we’ll get a custodial for him; They’re a prolific offender’. They have no concept of what it is to be a victim. And they’re such minor crimes.”*

The above examples demonstrate how ‘risk biographies’ become shaped by organisational structures, practitioners and perceptions of future events. ‘Bad days’ and solitary incidents can become markers of likely problematic behaviour, potential dangers in need of mitigating risk management for unspecified future periods. Risk assessments passed from organisation to organisation legitimise this, with an organisation’s defensive need to ‘cover itself’ leading to the construction of negative biographies based upon actual or perceived risks. As seen above, both criminal and non-criminal concerns shared between agencies can have a significant bearing on a young person’s future employment, housing, health, and other prospects. In such a context, being a ‘reflexive risk manager’ demands not only constant prudent behaviour (Miller and Rose, 2008; Webb, 2006; Kemshall, 2010) but also the means to avoid an interventionist gaze capable of creating, or at least contributing to a self-fulfilling prophecy of ‘negative outcomes’. It is not, therefore, the significance of the ‘active shaping’ of biography (Woodman and Wyn, 2015), but the ability to avoid it being negatively shaped by others. Given that this is affected by a range of structural and cultural factors including class, gender, and race inequalities, Furlong and Cartmel’s (2007:144) ‘epistemological fallacy’ again highlights how, whilst individually blamed for their failures, young people, particularly those from certain social groups and (lower / poorer) classes, are subject to “*powerful chains of interdependency*” beyond their control, and often beyond their sight.

## **6.7 Conclusion: The Young Person and the Risk-world of Practice**

This chapter highlights the dominant force of ‘risk’ in contemporary youth practice, from the vulnerable and at-risk young person, to the dangers they pose to practice, communities, and others. The risk factor prevention paradigm is not formally evident in practice narratives, but its underpinning assumptions of risk-based early intervention and prevention are, and organisational narratives reflect the dangers of risk as a form of symbolic violence (Foster and Spencer, 2011), whereby young people are viewed almost entirely in terms of pre-determined risk factors. Most practitioners appear, as in Briggs’ (2013) study, actively to avoid the explicit labelling

of young people as 'at-risk' or 'risky'. There is, however, evidence that in a similar way to O'Malley's (2001) discussion about the use of protective factors and resilience, 'youth' encountered in practice are essentialised as vulnerable and 'at-risk' as a pragmatic way of reconciling the needs-based welfare value system of the practitioner with the 'harder' edge of RFPP-based 'at-risk' and 'risk behaviour' discourses. As with Briggs (2013) there is, however, no single consensus of risk, either in terms of young people, or in relation to the broader context of practice per se.

The chapter also demonstrates how, as with the macro-level analysis present in reviewed literature, risk is subject to meso-level, local policy, community, and political-level framing based upon structural inequalities, discriminatory practices, biased assumptions, and political agendas. Young people, particularly those in areas of deprivation and urban visibility, are more likely to be targets in risk-based prioritisation and intervention (territorial stigmatisation), whilst others may have the means to hide, or be hidden from the interventionist gaze. Whilst this area is not a central aspect of this study, it warrants further exploration. The role of practitioners in this context is an interesting one in terms of their own lens on others (and their reflexivity about this), and their agency and potential roles as 'experts' within this context to challenge perceptions and assumptions, or, alternatively, to reinforce categorisation and stigmatisation. In a number of examples participants appeared to be passive recipients of local policy directives, perhaps suggesting that professional agency, and trust, is limited.

Risk assessments clearly play a considerable role in youth practice, both in terms of the assessment of safe working practices and, increasingly in terms of individual assessments about young people, where levels of assessed risk determine access to service provision: having the 'right kind' of risk (but perhaps not too much) becomes the key to unlocking scarce resources. Whilst not the focus of this thesis, the role of risk assessments as a means of shaping practice interactions and guiding opinions and judgements over time and place, is highly significant. There is, no doubt, more to explore about the mechanisms of risk assessment practice itself, but risk assessments form only part of a much broader practice risk and risk-decision framework, much of which takes places through informal practices. It is in this broader context that risk assessments are explored in future chapters.

Finally, the chapter highlights a particular concern about how young people's 'risk biographies' may become shaped and transmitted through shared information, risk

assessments, and referrals. These accounts are rarely regarded as being reflective of the young person, yet play a role in practitioner and organisational protection. The potential negative impact of these organisationally constructed biographies reflect the 'mesh tightening' impact of risk for those who enter the interventionist gaze (Cohen, 1985), and their impact on young people's futures may be significant. Nor is it clear whether or how young people can address, or seek re-dress regarding, their recorded biographies. The impact of these constructed risk biographies is considered in later chapters in relation to practitioners' 'malleable' use of risk. However, this area demands future research outwith this study.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: THE RISK-WORLD OF THE YOUTH PRACTITIONER**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter focuses in more detail on the factors impacting on how practitioners understand and navigate the youth / practice risk context. It critically examines the often complex and dynamic forces that influence practitioners' relationships with young people, their attitudes to the work and the risks they face, and indeed take, in order to fulfil their moral and occupational obligations to young people and the organisations for whom they work.

This complex, dynamic context of risk, practice, and decision-making is initially highlighted through the presentation of two practice biographies. These biographical narratives provide accounts of how different factors 'play out' in the lives of the practitioner, blending personal and professional dimensions in a practice perception and approach that shifts over time. First, Natalie provides an account of how perceptions of practice, young people and risk are shaped and re-shaped throughout the practice career by circumstances, experiences, and contexts. Whilst Natalie's experiences are not representative of all those interviewed, many of the underlying themes identified within her story are in some way evident in most, if not all interviews. Following this, Naomi's story highlights how experiences of risky, or dangerous situations, and how they are dealt with, can have profound and enduring effects on the person, and upon how they shape their careers and their encounters with young people.

In the second half of the chapter, the underlying themes emerging from these biographical accounts are examined in more detail. The accounts of Natalie, Naomi and other participants highlight how aspects such as personal philosophy and circumstances, the practice context, bureaucratic processes, organisational and manager support (or lack thereof), and experiences of conflict impact on practitioners at both an emotional and 'operational', 'rational' level. The analysis demonstrates how practitioner risk positions are personal, emotional, situational, and temporal – factors rarely considered in analyses of practice risk decision-making, even in studies exploring complex situated practices (e.g. Strachan and Tallant, 1997; Horlick-Jones, 2005a, 2005b; Broadhurst et al, 2010; Briggs, 2013). The chapter goes on to explore other emergent themes from practitioner accounts, including gender variations in research responses and experiences, personal costs of taking risks, defensible practice, and the role of the organisation and managers.

The chapter concludes by emphasising the importance of the personal dimension of youth practice, suggesting that the increasing instrumentalisation of the practice domain ignores, rather than eliminates, the personal and inter-personal dimensions of work with young people and of risk-taking and risk-decision-making in this environment.

## 7.2 Natalie

Natalie worked with young people who had experienced local authority care (had been 'looked after'), providing support and guidance as they transitioned from care towards independence and adulthood. At the time of first interview Natalie had been in her post for two years, having previously worked with adults with learning disabilities, children in care or deemed 'in need', and in prisons with offenders. She had trained in creative arts and psychotherapeutic approaches, and, in her words, this coloured everything she did in relation to young people. Natalie expressed concerns about the young people she worked with "*constantly doing risky things*", either as a conscious choice or because their circumstances meant that they had no choice: taking risks was about both being vulnerable to situations and others' influence, and about survival - getting by in difficult circumstances. This also, she said, meant increased risks to her in her work with them. She recognised that young people could pose a risk or danger but, due to the "*therapist bit in me*" didn't want to jump to conclusions:

*"I need to approach them from my place and I need a clean sheet with them and I want them to have a clean sheet with me. A lot of these young people, you know, they've have loads of social workers, loads of people in their lives... everybody coming to this conclusion about this person. Everybody with their own little idea and they all put their two pennies in. By the time you meet the 17-year-old you've had this massive file. You know, if you let all of that come into you, you're going to have this massive idea of who you think they are and if you're not careful with that it will totally influence and prejudice you potentially against that person. So it's helpful but you need to take it quite cautiously I think."*

She described an instance when she first arrived in her current post and was given a case from a colleague. When trying to make contact with the young woman, another colleague advised her not to, telling Natalie that she was "a nightmare", "gobby" and "abusive".

*"[I] go and see her, and knock on this crumby flat door, and I am imagining a 7-foot monster woman to answer the door. And I remember when she answered I was like looking up and she was this like teeny, tiny dot of a girl... And she was lovely... I was willing to give*



*the best of myself and she was willing to give the best of herself. But over time I saw the, you know, when she gets frightened or something, I've been on the receiving end of her wrath several times, and I've had her talk to me in certain ways and with that look on her face as well. So I see what my colleagues have meant but that's not all she is, that's not what defined her."*

Natalie gave examples of being in tense or threatening situations with family members or going into squats, hostels, and other 'risky' settings where there may be poor hygiene, used syringes, or other threats, in order to engage with young people. She highlighted how some other colleagues were more risk-averse, or at least less inclined to take additional risks for young people. She made a distinction between expectations and choices within the workplace:

*"And there's risks in terms of the job and what you have to do and then I think there are additional risks in terms of what you choose to do. You know I will assess different situations and I think that I will do some things that some of my colleagues would think I was quite mad to do."*

In the most vivid example, Natalie recalled how a young woman with whom she worked got into trouble in the area where she had a council flat and had to flee with her baby. The woman discovered that the council were going to evict her and change the locks the next day – meaning that all her (minimal) life possessions, including the baby's things and family photos, would be lost. After trying unsuccessfully to access resources from her organisation and social services for a van and driver, Natalie, concerned about the young woman losing all her possessions, took it upon herself to find a solution:

*"I managed to get a little bit of money and I borrowed a van off my dad's friend, he had a van... There is no back seat for these people, there's no seatbelt for them. So I'm like 'I have to make the best of what I've got here'. Because if I don't get them back to the estate and get their stuff today it's all gone... We drive to this estate... We get there at like, I don't know, it's like quarter past 8 in the morning and I say to them 'right, you have got half an hour ... I'm going to keep the door open, I'm going to keep the engine running and I'm going to keep, stay in here with the baby'. If there is a whiff of trouble'... Because I thought 'if this girl finds out that she's back on the estate' ... 'if they come back, they see you and anything happens, ... I'm driving out of here with the baby and I'll phone you in a few hours' time'"*

Natalie described balancing the needs of the young person, with whom she had both a professional relationship and towards whom she felt a personal moral duty, with the possible implications for herself, personally and professionally. This reasoning was also influenced by her own identified position of privilege – she was

in a position to be able to help another person, who themselves, were powerless. In such circumstances, for some at least, institutional and professional constructions of, and boundaries between client and practitioner become challenged by a personal drive towards being 'humane', and doing 'the right thing'.

*"It's about going above and beyond really, and taking risks, managing risks, not just managing risks but taking additional risks, because actually sometimes if you don't then your young person might lose everything that they've really got, and I don't want that to happen. I'm in a position to get a van, I'm in a position to get money to put petrol in that van, I'm in position to even drive that van because I've got a license. You know, that's what I can do. Okay, and so you're in the back and you've not got a seatbelt on. And if we get busted it's on my license it's not yours... And it was quite scary really because I was like, you know, what am I going to do if the police pull us over, what will I say, and what would my managers say if they knew, because, you know, it's all policies and procedures."*

Natalie's position was a considered one, weighing up personal and professional costs and benefits. She had considered potential hazards and consequences both to herself and others. Significantly, however, this risk-decision-making process that she employed transcended traditional assumptions about the disembodied rational practitioner (albeit subject to bias) protecting themselves and the organisation. Natalie's analysis involved balancing 'the right thing', benefits, and personal costs well beyond structural and bureaucratic workplace risk assessment:

*"I don't have children of my own to feed, do you know what I mean? If I lose my job tomorrow it would be a bitch but I've got my mum and dad there... It might be a very different story if I had other people that I'm responsible for, but I don't. I'm responsible for myself and the young people that I work with. So you know you just never know do you, you never can say. If I was a single parent with two children on my own to feed I don't think I would be so casual about the risk assessments. It's not casual but, you know. Yeah, you've got to weigh it up, what have you got to gain? What have you got to lose? What have I got to gain? What have I got to lose? What I could potentially lose is less in my head than what you've got to gain so therefore you're gain trumps, and off we go. But that's just in this moment."*

Natalie did not tell her colleagues about the incident, believing that some would "say that I was a bloody idiot". She was critical of practitioners who hid behind paperwork or used bureaucracy to avoid engaging with young people. She spoke of how she understood colleagues "wanting to keep them [young people] at bay" because of the emotional impact of working with young people who had experienced, or were still experiencing, trauma and tragedy, but felt it was important to avoid "the safety and comfort in your schedule and your paperwork and your risk assessment and your

*bureaucracy, because it's a big, bloody messy, shitty situation sometimes that you have to go and try and deal with".*

By the time of the second interview over a year later, Natalie's perspective on the work had changed. After a general recap of the previous discussion and questions about what had changed, the intention had been to examine things that made Natalie able to sustain the position of being 'out there' with and for the young person. However, pressures of organisational caseloads, the exhausting and frustrating nature of continuous cycles of crisis, structural barriers, young peoples' unwillingness to take advice, and the observation of few positive changes with or for young people had impacted on her outlook and wellbeing:

*"I think a lot can happen in 15 months, especially in this kind of job. Since we last met I've handed in my notice and had to retract that because I didn't have anywhere else to go... Because this job takes its toll, and the need of the young people that we work with and the lack of any kind of success really just really takes its toll. And that impacts on whether you can keep going back and whether or not you are resilient enough to just keep relentlessly, tenaciously just returning for more. I still do that, purely because my conscience wouldn't let me not. But my heart isn't in it anymore, if you know what I mean. I feel like it's been drummed out of me almost... It doesn't mean that I don't believe in this task and I don't believe in the young people that I work with; but I just can't keep going back for more. That resilience I think has dwindled. But I do it, I still do it; but I'm doing it because I have to do it, I know I have to do it. And I don't want to do it anymore."*

Another reflection of, and possible factor in, Natalie's 'dwindled resilience' related to an incident where she was subject to a serious physical threat by a young male she had been working with for several years and knew well. She reflected on how she had needed to draw a line in order to protect herself, and identified that there were boundaries, or no-go zones, to work (something she had previously resisted):

*"I draw the line ... when a six-foot young man threatens to punch me in the face because I won't give him a fiver, for which he doesn't deserve it... Before I wouldn't have done and I would have worked with it; and now I'm just not even working with that – even though I know him so well... I'm not paid enough. So, there is a line and he crossed it. I think I would have been more willing to mess with that line back in the day, but not anymore."*

In response to the threat, her managers acted immediately, preventing the young man from accessing the building, re-allocating him away from her case-load, and offering support. In the circumstances she was happy that they acted promptly, and made the decision for her, and *"gave [her] some confidence to feel supported and*

*protected”.*

In light of the dwindling resilience and this threat, Natalie reflected on the previously discussed role of colleagues in relation to the work. She empathised with colleagues who might protect themselves through action (or inaction), such as avoiding young people through bureaucracy or not taking phone calls. For Natalie, however, this presented too much of a moral compromise, or perhaps ‘moral distress’ (Jameton, 1984; Weinberg, 2009), whereby it was impossible to reconcile her principles and moral commitment to young people with day-to-day organisational demands and emotional pressures:

*“I still can’t write ‘no calls’ on the board; I still wouldn’t not go down to somebody if they turned up. I’d just do it with a heavy heart; but I still can’t do that. That’s not going to ever be how I operate, I don’t think. But the consequence of that is of course you get very stressed out and you don’t really have the desire to do the job anymore.”*

On a number of occasions, Natalie mentioned working in a caring organisation with supportive managers committed to the work and to staff welfare. However, constant pressures to meet the needs and demands of young people, difficulties in tackling structural barriers or supporting behaviour change, workload demands, and the drive to evidence outcomes and deliver the contract, all increased pressure on staff. In Natalie’s view this increased risks to the practitioner, the organisation and, ultimately, the young person.

*“You do get to a point where you are going to take some risks or do some things that are going to get you in trouble. And I’ve seen that with my colleagues here. One lady who’s been on long-term sick she did a few daft things: she was stressed out and got suspended and there was an investigation. So, we work in that kind of culture as well: do this, do this, do this, we’re going to pile it on, pile it on, respond to all of these really chaotic people, but watch your back; are you in the union – that kind of culture as well – but we care about you. There are so many contradictions and conflicting messages... I think the risks for me will increase the longer I stay here because I’m going to make rasher decisions, I’m going to make more careless decisions because I’m going to be more frustrated and more despondent and more cynical.”*

Towards the end of the second interview Natalie suggested that the only way to address the seemingly irreconcilable tensions of meeting young people’s needs, meeting the organisation’s needs, grappling with largely immovable structural factors, and protecting her own well-being was to do something different:

*“I’d like to do a happier job; I’d like to spend my day doing a happier task. I don’t want to scrap with teenagers all day every day. I don’t*

*want to have to beg and plead for a fiver to save someone from starving today. Do you know what I mean? I don't want to have all of this risk, management of this risk, and what if, what if – not just for them but what if for me – kind of stuff. I don't want that anymore.”*

Given the uncertain, precarious state of Natalie's role at the end of the second interview, a third interview was arranged in order to see how things had gone – whether the tensions could be reconciled over time or whether she had managed to leave. Another year later, Natalie had been out of work for six months, choosing to leave without taking another job. From this position she adopted a reflective lens on the work and her approach to it, removed from the structurally and emotionally immersed position of the second interview. She highlighted the complexity of sustaining practice that was personally and emotionally demanding, as well as being surrounded by often unmanageable risks, both in relation to the young people and organisationally. This all took place under “*various spotlights and magnifying glasses*” including contract reviews and audits, Ofsted inspections and Serious Case Reviews (multi-agency inquests into serious incidents with children), and resulted in “*more and more paperwork exercises*” and “*some new fandangled way of doing something when the old way wasn't really that broken*”.

On a personal level, leaving work with nothing to go to was a risk, but one that was necessary:

*“For me the thought of staying was worse than the thought of going out into the unknown at that point... So, it has been a risky move, and it remains a risky move because I don't know what the hell I'm going to do... I think I'm quite good at risk taking. I'm not that fearful. And I'd rather go and not know what the hell I'm going to do than stay because I'm afraid of taking some sort of chance. It's only me that's going to feel the consequences.”*

Whilst the work clearly impacted upon Natalie's emotions and attitudes, she emphasised that the personal moral and philosophical commitment to being humane, and upholding young people's rights, remained throughout:

*“What has remained the same is my own beliefs about the rights of children and my beliefs about when you see all these cases on the TV about all these little ones, the serious ones. That same kind of absolute rage and frustration is still there within me and I still feel that. So, that doesn't really change at all I think, your core beliefs about what is right and what is wrong and about the rights of children. That doesn't shift; that's kind of not changing at all. I think what has changed is my desire to be exposed to that every day and my willingness to try to do anything about it in the face of what seems to be very little changing consequences irrespective of what I try and do.”*

Natalie's experiences highlight the complex ways in which 'risk' operates at the nexus of youth practice. Factors such as personal morality, emotions, safety, and circumstances interact with organisational demands of purpose, method, management and bureaucracy, and young people's needs, experiences, circumstances, and demands in ways that continually shape and re-shape the practitioner on a day-to-day basis. Experiences of risk taking, both positive and negative, as well as the unmanageable risks inherent in much practice affect how the practitioner engages with their work and young people, and, indeed, how they manage themselves and their own safety.

### 7.3 Naomi

Naomi had worked in young people's services for almost fifteen years, spending time in youth work, youth training, and careers guidance. From the outset of the first interview, Naomi's perspective on young people and risk was dominated by notions of personal safety and "*risky situations*". She said that, due to the systems in place within her current employment, she had "*never felt as safe as I do now*":

*"We've got buttons under the desk; there are always people out front; there is an alarm system upstairs to alert anybody upstairs if there is an incident downstairs. We don't go out home visiting on our own, there have always got to be two of us and it just feels – I mean I know two people could be in a bad situation but that, it doesn't seem to happen... so there are all the policies and procedures and everything that we've got; they are designed to protect us and they do if we stick to them."*

Naomi's view of the practice context, and the young people within it, as risky and potentially dangerous, was influenced by negative experiences over the course of her career. Whilst working with young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties, she recalled attempting to intervene to stop a fight between two young males, resulting in her receiving a dislocated shoulder and other injuries. This incident had an evident impact upon her, though she was keen to not blame the young person, who himself had been badly injured by another young person. In discussing the incident, Naomi highlighted the tensions between personal safety and the moral duty to intervene, suggesting that it was the natural, 'right' thing to intervene in order to help someone. This moral commitment was, however, tempered with an expectancy upon the organisation, through management and organisational policies, to create a safe environment for work. She recalled how, once recovered, she returned to the same workplace, but deemed it too unsafe to remain:

*"I went back there and they were still throwing chairs at each other and all sorts of things, and leaning over me to get at each other, and so I left there. Then I went to another school where it was very calm and... there were good procedures there to protect people".*

In another example Naomi was a tutor with a group where *"there were a lot of volatile people"* when a young male became aggressive and, after seeking help from other staff, physically threatening to her. This resulted in his removal from the building and her being escorted to her car. Naomi had wanted to call the police due to feeling *"really threatened"*, but her employers refused because *"it would have made them look bad"*. Because she *"broke the golden rule"* of leaving a classroom unattended in going to seek help, she *"lost face in the organisation"*, resulting in her leaving the job *"as soon as possible"*.

In many senses, Naomi epitomised the defensive practitioner described negatively in Natalie's account, and cautioned against by Baker and Wilkinson (2010). Her defensive approach is not, however, always deliberate but, as Whittaker and Havard (2015:14) suggest, part of *"a subtler and less conscious process"*, informed by an underpinning 'mood' (Heidegger, 1927/2010) or culture of fear reinforced by negative experiences. For Naomi, systems and policies provided an insulation against the risks of engaging with young people, informed by her own experiences of threats and violence. Whilst risk dominated her practice-world, the construction of young people was still infused with the notion of vulnerability: she actively avoided blaming young people for their behaviour. This enabled her to continue practising, and to justify to herself that the benefits of her work outweighed potential risks:

*"I wouldn't have come into it and carried on doing it if I'd been so completely traumatised by what has happened in the past. I mean I can rationalise why it's happened and why these things have happened and realise actually it isn't the young people's fault that these things have happened. You know the lad who had a chunk hanging off his face I can understand why he saw red. He didn't know who he was throwing about or who he was hitting because he was in pain. And that other young man..., I'd previously had a really good relationship with him and I sort of rationalised it by the fact that he was definitely on something that was making him high; either amphetamines or coke. So I rationalised to myself that it was the drugs that made him like that."*

Naomi's approach to young people remained welfare and need oriented, but her 'starting point' was based on caution, and a commitment to risk management processes and individual risk assessments. These were relied upon despite the acknowledgement that assessments were *"subjective"* and young people were *"so different to what has been actually written about them"*. Balancing some of the

“quite scary” stuff contained within reports with attempts to avoid prejudice and getting to know the young person directly was a challenge. She did, however, identify personal boundaries which prevented her from working with some young people, recognising that others were better placed:

*“I have decided that I wouldn’t be working with certain young people and I’ve always been able to back it up why, but somebody has to work with them. So they would generally go to somebody else then within the organisation who has to work with them. I don’t like working with sex offenders and I will not under any circumstances work with anybody who has been cruel to animals... That young person wouldn’t get the best out of me because I couldn’t rationalise why they’ve done what they’ve done. I have to be able to rationalise it but if I can’t they are not going to get the best from me so I am not the best person to work with them.”*

For Naomi, organisational policy, procedures, colleagues and management played a pivotal part in her sense of safety and, as evidenced in the examples above, her pursuit of a safe working environment. Naomi criticised those who worked outside procedures, suggesting that her experiences highlighted that, even when there was a good relationship with a young person, circumstances were unpredictable and risks should not be taken. Those who did not follow procedure had a false sense of “invincibility”, and “get caught up in their own importance in somebody’s life”.

Because of her own experience, and the subsequent framing of risk and safety, Naomi was equally concerned about practices of other organisations which, despite being procedurally acceptable, were regarded as dangerous. She recalled how a community midwife colleague transported young people and undertook home-visits on her own as a matter of course, something she saw as “not worth the risk”. This suggests that her position was not solely about procedural compliance, but an organisational context that was aligned to, or at least accommodating of her own fears and concerns about being safe. The search for this supportive environment ran throughout her practice biography. It appeared to stem from another incident early in her career when, as a worker in a youth club, she intervened to help a young man from a traveller community who had been in a fight with a local community member that had taken place outside the club. Despite trying to stop the fight and phoning the police, the young male from the traveller community returned, having been stabbed.

*“I agreed to go to court as a witness on his behalf, you can’t not. I’d seen what happened. I’d seen the build-up. I didn’t actually see him get stabbed but I saw him collapse at my feet and the state he was in and, this is one of the reasons I think why I left the Youth Service. I didn’t get any support. When the local people, the local young people,*



*found out that I was going to court they wanted me not to. I had people come to my house to warn me in a friendly way not to go out and do any line ups or any IDs. I had my car tyres slashed, wing mirrors knocked off, scratched – that was at my own home and at the youth centre.”*

For Naomi, it wasn't necessarily the actions of the young people or even the community that was the greatest concern (although this was disturbing), but the lack of management support for actions that she saw as being human, the right thing to do:

*“I was told by somebody who... was quite high up, and he said: ‘It was on the car park you shouldn't have intervened. It wasn't in the building; it was on the car park.’ ... If you saw two people fighting on the street you wouldn't just walk past. You'd intervene wouldn't you especially if you could see them pouring with blood. So I'd have done, whether I was a youth worker or not, as a human I would have intervened... The bottom line was, ‘You shouldn't have got involved, you brought it on yourself.’”*

This resulted in what she described as a 'loss of faith' in that organisation, who, from her perspective, did not support her to do what was morally and ethically, but perhaps not strictly procedurally, the 'right thing' to do. The impact of this, and of her other experiences, on Naomi's professional identity, career choices, risk decisions, and encounters with young people should not be underestimated. A safe working environment, where work with young people takes place amidst a range of controls and managerial support aligned to her view of young people and personal safety, was central to her being able to sustain her work role and, to a degree, her sense of self. Naomi believed that a good manager, whom she could trust, was key to this, a point reinforced by a second visit to Naomi almost eighteen months later. By this time Naomi had left the organisation after a period of prolonged illness. Looking back, she recalled:

*“I did feel really good in that job at that time, because he [her manager] did trust me and my judgements... But yet, if I had a problem, or a problem arose or anything like that, and I went to speak to him, he would sort it out, and I trusted him to do that.”*

Service cuts and mergers resulted in significant changes and with them a new manager who, rather than offering support, “made life hell” for those who worked for her, with Naomi feeling “very vulnerable” and being told that her job had to change. Whilst Naomi did not attribute her illness directly to work, she did identify workplace stress as a trigger. She ultimately saw the personal risks of returning to the workplace to be too great, particularly in light of the management and organisational

changes that, in her view, “crushed” the service, so she took a redundancy package.

Whilst Naomi’s account was dissimilar to Natalie’s in terms of how they situated themselves in relation to their work and young people, underlying issues of personal philosophy and morality, organisational risk systems, management practices, trust (in both young people and managers), and personal risk boundaries are evident across both examples. Naomi’s account also underlines how previous negative experiences of either risk-taking in the interests of young people or unpredictable hazards occurring in practice have a significant impact on the practitioner, their decision-making, and future career choices. These issues are compounded when the employing organisation is seen to be unsupportive or distant from the sometimes complex and difficult in-the-moment risk decisions demanded in practice.

#### **7.4 Personal Dimensions of the Practice Risk-World**

As the accounts of Natalie and Naomi demonstrate, risk and risk-decision-making within the context of youth practice are complex, shaped by a range of factors, both personal and organisational. This wide terrain of ‘situated practices’ and ‘informal logics’ (Horlick-Jones, 2005b; Broadhurst et al, 2010) is rarely considered in accounts of risk decision-making, which tend to focus too closely on the mechanisms of the decision or subjective biases. In this type of analysis practitioners are at risk of being seen solely as organisational instruments, either as executors of instrumental, bureaucratic risk processes that enable ‘governing from a distance’ (Webb, 2006:153; Cradock, 2004:324; see also Foucault, 1991b) or as professional risk decision-makers, expected to execute consistent, defensible, risk-judgements on a case-by-case basis through professional, ethical, and conceptual governance frameworks (Kemshall, 1997, 1998a; Baker and Wilkinson, 2011). Both of these positions infer, in different ways, a disembodied practitioner, subjugating personal circumstances, emotions and principles in the interest of the organisation, the profession, or young people.

The above accounts highlight that risk decisions in and around practice reflect a range of considerations that transcend traditional organisational risk criteria. These considerations are not simply the irrational responses of Haidt’s (2001) ‘emotional dog’, nor are they solely tensions between managerial demands and professional values (James, 1994; Kemshall, 2000) (though these are also present), or even pragmatic attempts to simplify their work or pursue self-interest (Lipsky, 2010). They reflect often considered (or possibly rationalised) positions in relation to the

practitioner's own values and principles (not necessarily consistent with a professional framework), experiences, trust in young people and the organisation and assessments of physical, psychological, financial, and reputational security. These positions intertwine rationality, cognition, and emotion (Lupton, 2012, 2013; Chamberlayne, 2004a; Whittaker and Havard, 2015; Banks and Williams, 2005; Stanford, 2010) and highlight the complexity of undertaking 'front-line' practice amidst uncertainty and, at times emotional stress.

Whilst Natalie and Naomi's accounts were untypical, in that they were in a minority of those who had left the youth field, the personal risk dimension, and its different effects on practitioners and practice, was evident in most interviews. Concerns about safety and 'doing the right thing', both in terms of young people and the organisation, within a context of unpredictability, permeated all practice accounts in some way. Unpredictability meant that almost all practice carried risks, often with the most important assessments and decisions taking place in-the-moment:

*"We live our lives based on the choices we make there and then at that moment in time. And we don't always get the chance to sit down and assess risk. We just kind of respond to the situations we're in and if we're clever and we get what's going on I think we factor that in big time into our decision-making process." - Liam*

The existence of demands on the practitioner to do the 'right thing' in this dynamic and uncertain context was not something that could be eliminated or completely controlled by bureaucratic 'paperwork' processes. Indeed, the more instrumental the approach, the more likely practitioners were to feel isolated, professionally disempowered, or personally compromised in uncertain situations.

## **7.5 Gendered Variations in Accounts and Experiences**

The personal dimension of risk decision-making in practice settings was evident across all participants. However, there were some variations between the accounts and experiences of male and female respondents. Perhaps due in part to methodological factors (for example, a male interviewer and issues of male disclosure) rather than variations between sexes, female participants tended to make more in-depth links between the personal, professional, and emotional dimensions of practice. Whilst there was by no means a consensus, a higher proportion of male interviewees appeared to regard aggression and conflict as something to be confronted in their work, several recalling the frequency of fights they had broken up.

In addition to general safety concerns expressed by both male and female interviewees, the majority of male participants identified fears about negative perceptions of male workers working with children (underpinned by sexist societal assumptions about the role of women as carers), the threat of false accusations, and issues of personal contact with young people. Terry, for example, was acutely aware of his gender in relation to his work, and the risks of accusation and reputation that arose from it:

*“As a worker, and particularly as a male worker, the risk for me is talking to young females about sexual health. Sometimes the risk comes from the parents, ‘Why is a man talking to my daughter about sex?’, and all that kind of thing.”*

Stephen, working in a family centre, expressed similar concerns about how as a male worker he was perceived by the wider public, suggesting that this in turn impacted on how he related to young people, “making you cautious of what you say and do with them”:

*“So risk, I sometimes have in my mind I’ve got to be careful of how the public might perceive what I’m doing and things like that, you sometimes restrict yourself from being you, almost, for the sake of how somebody might judge you... This is the kind of profession that a lot of people are perceived to be guilty until proven innocent. And even then it still sticks, I think you’d be stuck with it for a long time.”*

Mike, working in residential care, had been subject to two false accusations, apparently not unusual in the residential care setting. He acknowledged the importance of due process to protect children whilst highlighting how accusations, and the consequent processes of suspension and investigation, caused significant emotional damage:

*“Oh yeah, it can destroy you. Last time I seriously considered never working in this industry again. But obviously it is my calling and it’s what I do. It’s horrible, you’ve seen me go through it. But at the same time I’m very aware that it needs to be that way because there are so many people out there that do exploit young people and do abuse young people.”*

Interestingly, despite the emotional damage caused by accusations, Mike still felt ‘called’ to work with young people, though this calling was clearly challenged. Rob, a youth worker, suggested that declining trust, coupled with the reduction of young people on the streets, led to greater risks of practitioners being regarded as suspicious, potential paedophiles. Whilst this was true of both male and female

practitioners, this was amplified in the case of males, resulting in a reluctance of many to enter the field:

*“Parents don't want their child to engage with you because you're a white, middle-aged man, for instance, myself. That's their perception of risk and you're not going to get over that... it's just like 'Look, I don't trust you'. 'Why would a 36-year-old man want to spend the time with my 14-year-old lad unless he was a paedophile?' So it's those types of risks that people don't get... People don't want to join the youth service anymore because the perception of their own risk is massive.”*  
- Rob

These accounts emphasise the emotional impact of both actual accusations and the fear of accusation on practitioners. They also highlight how both fear and negative experiences of risk-taking, or simply of the consequences of everyday unpredictable practice, impact on future practice decisions and behaviour, as well as on careers. Specific emotional fear of incidents (based on negative experiences) can, it appears, lead to what could be described as a more general attunement (or mood) of fear (Heidegger, 1927/2010), permeating all practice (and potentially life) interactions and decisions.

## **7.6 Personal Costs of Risk-Taking in Practice**

Reputational concerns were not solely gendered, nor were they just about the perceptions of the wider public. Mari's work with young women around sexual health involved tackling what she described as “*prickly issues*” about sexuality that, though important to tackle, could be regarded as sensitive or uncomfortable for practitioners and managers from other services and contexts. Mari recalled an example when, advocating work with young people (and particularly young women) around an area relating to young people's sexualisation, she believed she had the support of colleagues only to find that this had ceased to be the case. The feeling of being isolated in a sensitive area, with a tacit implication of wrongdoing and perhaps even unethical or immoral practice, led to significant reputational and emotional harm:

*“I think I beat myself up because what I tend to do is kind of think 'look at me it's my fault', and then I need to deal with that and realise that actually it's not about fault and it wasn't my fault... it was about these are young people's issues, we can't ignore them, and that was where I was working from, a good heart.”*

Mari highlighted the tension of trying to respond to young people's issues and needs amidst an adult-oriented organisational environment dissonant to her own vision for

young people and what they were experiencing. As with Natalie, Naomi, and indeed Mike, the experience affected how she practised, and led, for a time at least, to what she described as “a very cautious” approach to risk, something that conflicted with her perspective on the work:

*“One of the things I believe very much about is risk taking; and if we’re not prepared to take a risk in tackling thorny issues in order to serve young people best, how on earth can we expect young people to take a risk in actually coming forward to you in the first place? There has got to be some parallel process going on. And that means people like me sticking their head above the parapet occasionally. I got shot once; but I’m hoping it won’t stop me doing it again.”*

For Mari and Mike, the commitment to a broader philosophy and purpose overcame, for the time being at least, the emotional impact of negative experiences of practice. Mari encapsulated the challenge of this process in a comment that emphasised a personal commitment transcending organisational demands. For her, the work was about human rights and a belief in what young people are and will become, underpinned by practice that she articulated as being informed by emotion:

*“For me my resilience is emotionally driven around process and making peace, I kind of wade through the middle of whatever becomes hard and come out the other side, I’m not one to skirt round the edges. So if it’s thorny issues in youth work, yes I would expect to do them, always have and I like to believe I always will. If I just say that there shouldn’t be thorny issues, if I think it’s about young people’s human rights to have the best possible support for them to grow into fabulous adults, that will give me the drive once I recover from whatever when things have hit the fan. But I think resilience has many forms, there’s the maverick type, but for me it’s that emotional reflective journey and just recovering and deciding how best to approach from a different angle.”*

The ‘maverick resilience’ spoken of by Mari was also evident in several accounts of practice, not least in Liam’s analysis of taking risks in practice. Again underpinned by what he identified as a commitment to the work and to young people beyond the job and the organisation, Liam described how he intervened physically to subdue a violent young male in the youth club:

*“I knew that whatever happened, even if I did end up probably attacking him, I would have been able to justify it, because ... I would have been afraid for my own safety. But I would have then known at that point that I would have contravened certain, you know, organisational policies and it may have cost me my job. It may have meant that I would have had to move my roles... There were lots of risks associated with what I was doing. But I was very, very confident... that I was going to be able to deal with the situation no problem. Because within me it’s not just the job. It sounds clichéd, but it’s what I’m going to do for the rest of my life. It’s going to be who*

*I am. What defines me as a person.”*

Whilst this confidence might be suggestive of the perceived invincibility warned against by Naomi, this was borne of a personal, as well as professional, belief in the work. It was not simply the desire to be the ‘gung-ho maverick’, or as Natalie described it “*kamikaze*”, but, as Lyng’s edgework analysis points to, it represents a reflection of the practitioner’s lived experience, personal commitment, and the desire to enact a form of agency in the risk-world of practice (Lyng, 1990; 2008). Liam went on to describe how the job was only part of his “*personal journey*”, not vital, in and of itself, to his commitment to young people or himself:

*“If I lost my job tomorrow, I don’t care. And I mean that in terms of my own personal journey... I’ve always had food on the table, food in my belly, clothes on my back, and a purpose in my life. Always. And I think that as long as I stick with the principles and the work that I do right now, and stick with that and don’t veer from that, I’ll always fall on my feet. So I’m not afraid to make decisions that may cost me what in other people’s worlds would be big things. I’m not afraid of that.”*

## **7.7 Defensible Practice and ‘Being Human’**

What we see from many of these accounts is a notion of defensible practice different to the professional, institutional, and legal one described by Kemshall (1998a) and Baker and Wilkinson (2011). Whilst interviewees such as Naomi, Roger, and several others operated strictly to organisational policies and procedures, Natalie, Liam, and Mari appear to value a different form of defensible practice whereby, though it might involve personal cost, they sought to justify their actions in terms of what was, for them, morally defensible, rather than what might be defensible in terms of policy or the law. For them the ‘moral stance’ (Webb, 2006:204), as with Stanford’s (2010) study of social workers, was core to their identity as “*moral agents in their interventions*” (2010:1075). This was not to suggest that practitioners sought to operate outside organisational or legal boundaries (indeed that was invariably not the case), but they recognised a dissonance between these territories and their own value system and attitudes to young people. Often this ‘speaking back to fear’ (Stanford, 2010) created tension, ‘moral distress’ (Jameton, 1984; Weinberg, 2009), or as Chamberlayne’s study (2004a) identified, the “*emotional distress*” of “*really caring*” and taking risks or “*messing up*”, something, according to one of Chamberlayne’s participants, that is inevitable “*if you give a shit*” (2004a:343).

The value system driving these practitioners’ motivation may be informed by, but is

rarely coterminous with, professional ethical or value systems. Whilst practitioners such as Natalie, Mari, and Rob refer to the influence of their training or professional background, which forms part of their identity, other interviewees were not professionally trained, or were in the early stages of their professional development. Yet, for many, as indicated in the previous chapter, notions of being human and humane, often in the face of dehumanising systems, practices, and contexts were what drove their practice. This disjuncture between personal motivation and professional value systems was highlighted by Nigel, a recently retired professionally qualified youth worker who, perhaps reflecting Davies' (1988) analysis, located professionalism as part of the dehumanising, bureaucratising process rather than a reflection or reinforcement of his commitment to young people. From his perspective, this personal commitment was increasingly regarded by organisations as an undesirable element in the instrumental delivery of youth practice:

*"I never classed myself as a professional. I classed myself as a Youth and Community Worker ... and I think I did a good job with young people in my communities all my working life. I've enjoyed it and I've been committed to it and I don't think that's there any more. I think that is not just about the people that come into it. I think that is about the system not wanting that and blocking that. They are blocking people from being committed because they don't want that. They don't want commitment; they want you do a job that they tell you to do." - Nigel*

As Naomi's, Roger's, and others' accounts demonstrate, some practitioners were able to reconcile their commitment to young people and their organisation's bureaucratic demands, often within a framework that understood risk management and risk assessment systems as being mutually protective of both practitioner and young person, even if these systems restricted or inhibited practice. From this perspective, trust shifts from relationships and interactions to systems. Those working outside, or on the boundaries of these systems are regarded as endangering themselves and others. Assumptions about risk, risk-taking, and trust are central to understanding these different practice rationales. For some, being human and humane involved being willing, albeit sometimes reluctantly, to step outside systems and expose themselves to risks in order to offer authentic practice with young people, whilst for others (and to differing degrees) there was a focus on, as Roger put it, 'eliminating' risk, or reducing exposure to it as much as possible. Martin expressed this tension within the uncertain context of youth practice:

*"All of us want to manage risk. We cannot do it at the expense of that aspect of humanity, which is to be trusted and to be allowed to exercise your abilities and your skills in that situation which might require trust and to expose yourself to risk... What is the point of*



*having them things without being able to exercise them at the expense of failing? Human development is based on failure not success. That is an absolute irony of the wonderful world isn't it?" - Martin*

His comments suggest that, as well as the compassion and empathy evident in others' accounts of being human and humane practitioners, fallibility and risk exposure are also important aspects of the human condition. This, of course, creates challenges for those who seek to control, or manage out, risk and danger. As observed in many accounts, this risk exposure can come at a personal cost, and as Roger pointed out, practitioners have different "comfort zones" in relation to their exposure to risk in the workplace. These comfort zones are affected by the practice context, organisational systems and processes, and by the many personal factors outlined above, including previous experiences of risk exposure, values and motivations, and the perceived risks or consequences of losing job or reputation.

## **7.8 The 'Organisation'**

Organisations varied widely, and large public sector and charitable bodies, private organisations, and small charities all had their own risk cultures, systems, and processes. For some small charities, such as the one Martin worked for, there was what he described as a principle, value, and trust-based, open-door approach with few bureaucratic restrictions on practice and decision-making. Martin described how this was at odds with the policy and practice "dominated by fear and anxiety" of local authorities and large charities. This could, perhaps, be regarded as an example of Lash's (2000) anti-institutional sub-political 'risk culture' with a 'bias to the edge' rather than the centre in operational at the level of a small voluntary organisation. For Martin, however, funding (or commissioning) of such projects was driven by overly bureaucratic demands for policy, risk management, control, and targets, forcing small organisations (who might be regarded as the problem rather than the solution) to change their approach or to go out of business:

*"People like us will disappear. You've got to remember that the local neighbourhoods like this aren't trusted and believed they can be good. That's my feeling. So I think small voluntary projects, which are run by small, local management committees, I think they'll disappear." - Martin*

Whilst for those practitioners grappling with the tensions of meeting young people's needs in bureaucratic contexts, such an environment could appear liberating, a relatively unregulated context did not suit everyone. Rachel described how, with a

desire to work with the “riskiest” young people, she went to work in a small project working with groups, or “gangs” of aggressive young people. The project operated in a relatively unregulated space with few policies and procedures. For Rachel, this, felt “dangerous” both for practitioners and young people, and also led to what she regarded as the project condoning the threatening behaviour of young people. Rachel left the project for a larger organisation, a decision made on the basis of trying to balance her personal commitment to young people with considerations of safety. However, she initially found the bureaucratic approach and compromises within the new organisation highly restrictive:

*“When I left them I was ‘I just want to go somewhere with an HR [Human Resources] team’... It had nothing to do with HR but I knew that I didn’t feel safe there. And what I would say is I feel safe here, whether or not it’s because of the combination of management I don’t know, maybe it would change if I was somewhere else... But initially, when I first moved ... it was a real culture shock and I was like, ‘I hate this’.”*

In time she reached accommodation with the new context and, whilst still questioning the balance between risk-taking and over-cautious practice, felt supported by the organisation and its systems. This sense of security was reinforced by experiences of Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) where systems and processes enabled her to evidence defensible practice in difficult circumstances. Therefore, whilst such organisational contexts may restrict practice, they can offer practitioner security within contexts of blame.

This was not the experience of all those in large organisations. Nathan worked part-time in a youth homeless project, providing lone cover for a hostel over weekends, as well as undertaking relief work in residential care. In the hostel, a context he identified as involving predictable conflict, he lone-worked, isolated in an environment where he regularly had to intervene in, and was subject to conflict and aggression.

*“[I’m] the only member of staff in that building, so I don’t have any back up, I don’t have any great security net around, I’m just there and I’ve got to deal with it. I would say I am in a risky environment because I’m open to allegations, I’m open to assaults... and I’d class myself as being quite lucky to never have been properly assaulted and just been threatened.”*

Despite the hostel being part of a larger housing association, Nathan’s contact with organisational policies and systems tended to be post-incident, involving bureaucratic form filling which, in his opinion, changed little:

*"I filled about six reports in on the same incident, because you've got to duplicate that many bits of paperwork, and there's still no clear guidance as to if there's physical violence happening right in front of you, whether to intervene, walk away, no one will give any clear guidance on it. All we're told is: 'Don't put yourself in danger,' but obviously you've got a duty of care towards the residents who we look after, so it's a grey area. About three years ago I asked for a violence and aggression policy, I asked for a self-defence policy, which they wouldn't give... And they still won't, and I bring it up with my line management every six weeks, and three years down the line, we're still waiting on that policy to come out."*

For Nathan, the ambiguous void of policy and procedural advice was frustrating, with the 'grey area' one of potential personal danger. Over time, Nathan says that this had resulted in him being *"more reluctant to put myself at any risk"*, a position that he believed may be good for the organisation and himself but not for young people, who may be in more danger. He was more reluctant to leave the relative safety of the office to attempt to resolve conflict or support distressed young people since these encounters generated physical, reputation, and occupational risks for him. He compared this role to his relief work in a residential home, where there were more staff, policies, and procedures. He found this context to be more unpredictable and unstructured, *"a massive rollercoaster"* of managing conflict and relationships that was physically draining. Despite this, due to the presence of a procedural framework in the residential home, Nathan felt better supported to make interventions in conflict situations:

*"I think I'd rather be assaulted at the kids' home than [at the hostel], because I think I know where I stand at the kids' home, but [at the hostel], I still think there would be a bit of a grey area as to what happened and what goes on, so it's not the best."*

As with Rachel, Nathan sought a context where he could work in sensitive and potentially volatile situations, confident and able to act in a 'comfort zone', with policies supporting decision-making in uncertain and emergent situations. When making contact for a second interview (which was declined due to him being too busy), Nathan had moved to other full-time employment in the field. Nathan's experiences reflected those of other new practitioners interviewed as part of this study, who, despite their relative lack of experience, undertook relatively low paid, part-time work that involved high levels of face-to-face contact with young people. Interviews with Liam, Victoria and Nathan, all unqualified practitioners new to the field, provided examples where they were expected to act in situations such as conflict intervention on or near the premises where, if policies did exist, they were ineffective or inaccessible in supporting in-the-moment decision-making. This again

emphasises how risk assessments and procedures in themselves offer little help in dynamic risk contexts. Of particular concern, however, is the apparent exposure of those with the least skills and experience to such practice situations, and to the emergent decision-making demands that, it is arguably assumed, should be expected of established professionals, rather than those new to the field.

## 7.9 The Manager and Managerial Support

The role of the manager was of considerable importance in terms of how interviewees interacted with their organisation and were supported (or not) to make decisions in practice. In many senses, managers acted as the trust broker, or gatekeeper, between the organisation and the practitioner.

Joanne, reflecting on different workplace experiences, explained the manager trust relationship in terms of being “backed up” for decisions made with good intent. She gave one example in a small voluntary organisation with a “laid back” manager and a board that *“if you’d written the risk assessment and you’d tried as best as you could to make it safe... would step up and make sure that they sued the organisation and didn’t sue you personally”*. This was contrasted with work in a local authority where though she thought her line manager would support her, but there was suspicion of managers above her due to the large-scale bureaucracy and *“the political dimension of things”*. This point was supported by Annabel, who talked of the *“nightmare”* levels of risk aversion within local authorities and large organisations, suggesting that there was pressure only to pursue activities that had a high likelihood, or a guarantee, of being successful. Joanne’s current line-manager balanced the need to ‘do something’ in the ‘inherently indeterminate’ (Erickson, 2004) yet risk-averse context by only sharing positive outcomes with management (and thereby, potentially contributing to a distorted managerial view of practice). Similarly, as Nick observed, management support was potentially conditional on maintaining a positive narrative of practice:

*“Overall the line management... are very supportive of what we do and I suppose that support is always there all the time they hear good reports. When they don’t hear good reports that’s when I’m going to suffer. But at the moment they just get good reports so they are very, ‘Carry on with what you are doing Nick,’ and they just sit back and let you get on with it... But if I make a mistake one day I will be the scapegoat, so that’s the risk I take in my work.” - Nick*

In the risk-averse, uncertain, and outcome-driven managerial environment it is easy to see how both practitioners and managers are tempted to suppress issues,

concerns and negative events in order to maintain the practice narrative of certainty and positive outcomes (Harrison, 1997; Titterton, 2005). This is, perhaps, also reflective of concerns about Kids Company in 2015, where evangelical fervour coupled with a marketable narrative of near-miraculous practice arguably fuelled large-scale funding and, as organisational practices became subject to further scrutiny, resulted in the organisation's demise. The implications for practitioners within such contexts are considered further in the next chapter.

In the sensitive area of sexual health, Terry explained how he had scope for decision-making and could make the case to an understanding line-manager, but there was always some uncertainty about how far this support would go:

*"I tend to make my own decisions on it to be honest. I think if I needed support around it, it would be there. Line management is pretty good in that way. We have been blocked a couple of times from doing different events because there were going to be young children there or old people there. You kind of argue that point sometimes and say sex is universal and sexual health is something that everyone needs to know at some point. So yeah, probably the support is there to a point... But having been in jobs previously where you're not always supported you have to tread carefully sometimes."*

Whilst Terry's comments suggested room for practitioner agency and debate, in other examples management practices reflected the enforcement of organisational bureaucratic practices. Tony recalled experiences where managers' sole focus had been on organisational accountability rather than supporting the member of staff, identifying the 'right thing to do', or improving learning:

*"I've had managers in the past who ... when you've gone to them, they've said 'Have you recorded all this?', almost before your first sentence. 'I've got a really chaotic client I'm really worried about', 'Have you recorded everything? Is it all in order?'... And that needs to be asked but not right at the beginning ... You're thinking then about yourself and have you recorded it properly rather than where that client is and how do we move this client on, what do we do? Do we need to make a breach here? Do we need to do that?" - Tony*

For Tony, these managers were overly focused on procedures and organisational compliance rather than the importance of practice processes:

*"Hardly anyone wants to talk about a process around anything. They just want to talk about outcomes and outputs and risk and stuff. And without seeing that the actual work itself is about processes." - Tony*

Managers' commitment to young people, their ability to understand the context, purpose and unpredictability of the work, to consider consequences, and their

support for taking (considered) risks were all factors identified as being important in supporting practitioners in their work. Recent organisational changes meant that some youth practitioners had found that they were being managed by staff from other parts of the organisation with no knowledge of their work and with more managerial approaches. Rob experienced such as shift which, he argued, meant much of the youth work practice previously undertaken was no longer possible:

*"If you're talking to someone who's a youth work manager they'll go 'fuck it, take the risk, but don't tell me and if I don't know, I don't know'. But if you're managed by someone like a Connexions Officer [careers] or managed from another service like Youth Offending... their perception of risk is so high, they're going 'you're not going to touch that with a bargepole', and it prevents you from doing any of the decent youth work." - Rob*

The different interpretations of the manager's role in balancing practitioner trust, service to the young person, and organisational control, were also evident in comments by practitioner-managers, who often evidenced divided loyalties between practice and the organisation:

*"I was with a group of managers recently and some of them were saying, 'What I want is for everybody to work to where I am right now'. And I just thought, 'That is the last thing that I want'... I just think this whole thing of 'I must control and this is what's going to happen. This is what practice looks like', I just think that's horrendous, horrible." - Rachel*

Rachel spoke about a desire to empower and support practitioners to make difficult decisions. Such an approach was based on having scope to support staff learning and development and for dialogue vertically though the organisation: being able to make arguments in support of decisions with managers. Some organisations, or indeed individual managers, did not share such an approach, reverting to reliance on a "paper exercise" in the face of complexity:

*"The managing it... is as difficult as engaging with young people, because quite a lot of the time you are risk-assessing face-to-face worker engagement and you are risk-assessing it for the young people involved and yourself... And when you're managing it, you're doing that, but you're having to risk assess it in terms of the organisation you work for and your responsibilities to the organisation and its policies and practices, governing bodies as well, so you put another layer on top of your risk assessment in doing that. And also, the variables and the unknowns are greater, so you're not risk assessing it in terms of your understanding of your competency and your practice, but you're having to make assumptions about somebody else's competency or practice, or take their word for that, and risk assess on that... And then you can't work so much on experience, you really need to go through the paper exercise then, because I think that is what makes it safe." - Mark*

Narratives of practice emphasised that changes in managerial practices, either individually or as part of wider organisation processes, had a significant impact on practitioners. The practitioner-manager interface and its relationship to both the organisation and to young people is a complex one, driven by notions of trust (or lack thereof), accountability and support (being 'backed up'). Practitioners spoke of the positives of good managers in terms of a (conditionally) trusting relationship, whilst negative accounts referred to transactional relationships driven by compliance to bureaucratic demands, and as identified in Calder's analysis of organisationally dangerous practice, the stifling of creativity, erosion of 'professional judgement' and the devaluing of individual skills (Calder, 2011:206). Changes in management approach not only influenced the extent to which practitioners felt supported or accountable but for some at least, reflected deeper questioning of their purpose as a practitioner and the value of the work they were doing.

## **7.10 Increasing Workplace Precarity**

Since 2009, austerity measures and the increase of service mergers and outsourcing have led to an increasingly precarious workplace. Almost all research participants faced change to their working conditions, with some experiencing the threat or actuality of redundancy on one or more occasions. For those in the public sector, this often meant multiple, almost continuous, reorganisation and threats to budget and job, whilst many of those in the voluntary or private sector were dependent upon the uncertainty of short-term funding and commissioned services.

The continuously precarious nature of the workplace impacted on how practitioners viewed their work and the extent to which they were willing to take risks to meet the needs of young people. Particularly for those with family or other financial commitments, this meant an increased likelihood of risk avoidance or defensive practice:

*"It's that thing of not knowing how safe your job is... do you want to be the person who takes risk in the job? I think that can sometimes be that you don't want to upset the balance, I won't say anything, because then when they do decide to make cuts you'll be the one they point the finger at." – Joanne*

Ian also described the seemingly constant "fight" for his job and how this might directly link to risk and risk avoidance. In his outdoor activity work this could mean avoiding some activities that would benefit young people but due to their

unpredictability or the chance of accident, might be regarded as too risky in the context of blame:

*"I don't want to give my management any excuse not to keep me. So doing stupid activities, or doing an activity where there is a bit of a risk involved and I get an injury or something going on. I want people to look at my work and trust that there's a safe pair of hands there. Not to look at my work and kind of think, 'Phew, he's a bit of a risk'... I'm not going to go out and take stupid risks which might mean that people start looking at the practice. Because I've got to fight for my job, basically."*

Service cuts had also impacted on the level of resources and staffing for activities. For example, Joanne's work involved taking groups away on residential activities as part of the National Citizens' Service (NCS). The project hadn't previously met the young people and Joanne expressed concern about this, and about how what had in previous work been regarded as risky was now considered standard practice due to cuts and, in the case of NCS, poorly resourced commissioned contracts:

*"[When] we used to do residential we'd take away maybe about 15 or 16 to sort of 20 young people and we'd probably take about five or six staff. Whereas [now] there's 12 young people to one paid [staff] and one volunteer... You think of things like a young person gets drunk or has a massive fight, and they need to be sent home for bad behaviour. But also things like a young person gets really upset and is homesick or has broken up with her boyfriend or something, and you have to then sit and talk to them, but 11 young people are then left... There isn't that capacity in the staffing."*

Not only had cuts led to staff reductions, they had fuelled the further deprofessionalisation of youth work and the replacement of experienced or qualified staff across the youth field with lower paid sessional workers, or as Nick described, "cheap labour". Annabel explained how, for example, large charities were keen to employ people with little training, leading, she argued, to mechanised, procedural practice. As well as this employment context being increasingly precarious, with reductions in resources and increased expectations on less experienced staff, the practice context itself had become riskier. For Samuel the obsessive focus on operational risk had been supplanted by resource management demands. He suggested that, since the cuts, larger organisations had become less stringent about risk assessments and staffing levels in support of activities, inevitably leading to pressure on practitioners to lone-work or otherwise occupy responsibilised risk positions in order to respond to young people's needs. This was not to say, however, that risk bureaucracy was reduced, but that the "willingness" of frontline staff, coupled with an increasingly ambivalent organisation, enabled work to continue:



*“The people planning the activities just took them and no one challenged them above them. Whereas before if you’d done a lone working trip, someone above you would have said, ‘Hang on, stop that, you can’t do that, our policy says no lone working.’ It was more like people would just go, ‘We’ll just do it with one worker then,’ put the paperwork in and that was fine! Maybe no one was even reading the paperwork at the other end.” - Samuel*

Whilst there may be some suggestion that the notion of resource limitations has ‘trumped risk considerations’ (Matthews, 2015), there is also evidence to suggest that risk-based targeting of young people remains a key feature of assessment practice, providing a flexible means of rationing interventions, support and other services depending upon different risk factors or variables, whilst risk assessments of practice provide the rationale for non-intervention or inaction. Thus, risk has arguably been re-shaped and re-formulated as an institutional mechanism of resource management, and a means of responsabilising practitioners who seek to continue working with young people (see Chapter Eight). For the practitioner, and indeed the young person, austerity has therefore brought with it increasing precarity in the youth field, with fewer and less secure services and potentially higher risks within and around the workplace.

### **7.11 Conclusion: The Dynamic Risk / Practice Context**

Interviews illustrate the highly dynamic nature of risk perception and risk decision-making in the practice context. ‘Informal logics’ and ‘situated practices’ were not solely based upon the micro-political factors in and around the workplace, but were influenced by a range of wider personal, professional and financial factors, from previous experiences of danger, management support, and workloads to the practitioner’s personal commitments to young people, emotions about risk taking, reputational fears, views of authority, and assessments of the personal costs of losing a job, or a career. Thus, whilst there was no suggestion of practitioners explicitly acting in self-interest when making assessments about young people, these multiple and inter-connected factors formed the backdrop to decision-making. They also influenced how far practitioners were prepared to go to meet the needs of the young person, or indeed, to apply bureaucratic procedures to enable or avoid practice interventions. This study highlights that an understanding of this often-ignored broader context of risk decision-making is central to understanding the situated practices of youth practitioners.

This context informs what could be considered an ‘ontological security’ (or insecurity)

within the workplace (Giddens, 1991). When disrupted by organisation or managerial mistrust, threatening incidents or workplace precarity, ontological security, and one's ability to live with uncertainty and risk, becomes threatened. As Giddens (1991:142) suggested, for some this can lead to improved confidence in navigating uncertainty, whilst for other it leads to retreat. The narrative accounts of Natalie, Naomi, Mari, Rachel, Terry and others highlight how considerations of risk, and this workplace ontological security are dynamic, with multiple variables shifting temporally and spatially (in terms of organisational and delivery contexts). Changes to personal circumstances and management, experiences of conflict, or shifting trust in the organisation can lead to significant changes to an individual's attitude to the work, young people, risk and risk-taking, sometimes leading to work or occupational change as 'comfort zones' shift or the practice context becomes too emotionally or morally distressing to work within. Sometimes, as with Mari, experiences lead in time to a renewed approach, however, the study shows that there are often personal costs in trying to balance the needs of young people with the demands of organisations in an increasingly precarious work context.

Ultimately, the challenge for good quality youth practice lies, as Lauren articulated, in enabling the human and humane practitioner to operate in a creative yet accountable manner, within the organisational context, yet retaining the needs of young people at their heart.

*"I think there does have to be that person that does invest that little bit more; who will take those professional risks; who will look outside the box when it comes to risk and being creative. I think if you lose that person then you've just got a machine, and a machine will always protect itself and its cogs. So, you do need that person that has got the authority to make those decisions; who's got the balls and the judgement to make them and not make the wrong one... I would say from my limited experience I suppose that that key person is crucial in the impact that risk can have on young people and how we manage it in those services." - Lauren*

This challenge does, however, require a fertile organisational environment, offering trust and support to enable practitioners to make secure, considered risk-decisions in the interests of young people (Calder, 2011; Stanford, 2010). This also requires acknowledgement that well-considered risk decisions sometimes lead to unintended or undesirable outcomes. Without this, an organisation, and potentially the practitioner within it, is likely to be condemned to "defensive but ineffective realignment" (Smith, R., 2010), protecting itself and its cogs through deterministic, bureaucratic mechanisms and blame systems that are inadequate if the intention is to support high quality practice for young people in a dynamic context of emergent

complexity (Power, 2007:14) and uncertainty.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: RISK, RETREAT AND THE RESPONSIBILISATION OF PRACTICE**

### **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines the role of, and relationship between the organisation and the practitioner in relation to risk management and practice with young people. Set against the context of risk decision-making outlined in Chapters Six and Seven, interviews highlight how, particularly within large public and voluntary sector provision, the managerial drive towards safe, controllable and (organisationally) defensible practice has led to changes in how certain activities are perceived and managed. This has contributed to a 'retreat from practice': a reduction in the range and extent of practice undertaken with young people, primarily due to increased regulation, risk assessment and other risk management practices. Such 'risk retreat' is effected not only by prohibitive risk-averse policies and management practice per se, but by the dissuasive or prohibitive levels of 'paperwork' and bureaucratic process required in order to undertake activities or interventions.

The chapter identifies how practitioners are faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of young people whilst operating in and around a restrictive, operationally risk-averse context. As identified in Chapter Seven, practitioners' positioning in relation to this challenge are informed by a range of personal, professional and other factors, shifting over time. The analysis of interviews in this chapter suggests that, irrespective of what position is adopted, there is a high level of 'risk responsabilisation' towards the practitioner, who is held increasingly accountable, and to blame, for both action and inaction if either leads to young people not being helped, 'negative outcomes', or if the end results are regarded to have increased danger to young people. Thus, mechanistic and managerial risk management attempts mean, in some cases, that effective practice with young people becomes problematic, if not impossible, with policies and procedures inadequate in supporting complex situations faced by practitioners. In such cases the 'responsibilised practitioner' must operate in grey areas with little or no support, and the threat of being blamed if things go awry, in order to meet the needs of young people and indeed, the espoused aims of the organisation.

The first part of the chapter draws upon practitioner accounts to illuminate different aspects of this 'risk retreat from practice', from prohibitive organisational risk assessments and processes to paperwork requirements that deter practitioners from engaging with 'risky' clients or undertaking 'risky' activities or interventions, or that

provide the excuse for not doing so. The section also considers how these processes become the objective of practice in and of themselves, rather than the care or safety of young people. Practitioners' views of the retreat and demise of positive risk taking in practice are also explored, together with concerns about new practitioners being inadequately prepared or supported to work with risk and grey areas of practice.

The second part of the chapter examines the 'responsibilisation of practice', whereby the practitioner is increasingly held individually responsible for work in the grey areas of organisational policy and management. The section explores this in terms of the 'dilemma of practice': the extent to which practitioners are personally and professionally willing and able to operate in areas of uncertainty and, potentially, individualised blame. It also considers whether practitioners themselves retreat behind organisational policy and risk technologies in order to ensure their own safety, in turn running risks that interventions are less effective and consequently, their jobs more precarious.

The chapter then goes on to discuss the impact of this environment for both youth practitioners and, importantly, for young people involved in youth services.

## **8.2 The Risk Retreat from Practice**

The increasing proliferation of risk and the risk-averse context has led to what could be described as a 'risk retreat from practice'. Risk aversion and the 'risk management of everything' (Power, 2004), from guarantees about young people's safety and litigation fear to organisational reputation management, have resulted in regular activities and interventions being regarded as risky because of their unpredictability. Risk assessments, the primary technology of the risk management of practice, are perhaps inevitably driven by 'worst case scenarios'.

*"That kind of thinking has come from this post Climbié fear... It started off around protection from abuse and then became much more, you know you started risk assessing everything properly and ... it was all done on a worst case scenario and that sort of reached these very illogical conclusions really... I think there's probably something specific to the youth sector, which is those sorts of risk assessment process were perhaps originally around the Outward Bound stuff and they get applied to day to day stuff." - Terry*

Other interviewees also spoke of this post-Climbié and Every Child Matters fear, a point where youth organisations increasingly identified not just the risks to young

people, but the risks of young people to the organisation, with fear of blame or litigation resulting in what Samuel described as a “*vast bureaucratic risk assessment process that has nothing to do with people keeping safe and becomes massively limiting on what you’re allowed to do or allowed to encourage young people to do.*”

As is apparent in accounts of individual risk positions, this context was not seen negatively by all interviewees. Mark, for example, saw the changes as ultimately protecting young people, with the view that their safety is paramount, even if it does mean that “*certain things you don’t do anymore*”:

*“First and foremost our first response really is the safety of children and young people, and that’s where we start from and build the work on top of that. So with that, you’ve got to go along with it, and if you ask me which is more important to me, the young people being safe, or them having the opportunity to do some risky, challenging activities, I think them being safe is where we start from.”*

He did, however, also feel that the pursuit of a position that in many ways reflected Levitas’ (2000) ‘negative utopia of safety’ had gone too far in some cases, leading to an overly sanitised practice environment:

*“I know colleagues who won’t have things like conkers in the youth club. I was talking to one colleague the other day that’s just taken their table tennis out, because of the risk of table tennis balls flying!”*

Interviewees spoke of many activities ceasing or being curtailed as a consequence of risk-aversion and risk assessment processes. Examples included taking young people swimming, visiting other youth provision, going paintballing, ice-skating or to the cinema, or even going across the road to the park to play football. Interviewees also spoke of craft activities being stopped due to the risk of sewing needles or glue, and cookery sessions due to the presence of knives. Some accounts appeared to reflect health and safety folk-stories, possibly based on hearsay and reproduced by a culture of fear:

*“We weren’t allowed to take kids paintballing. I think there’d been an incident where someone had damaged their eye when they were paintballing. So you get the atypical suddenly becomes the typical. Which means you can’t do it. It’s too risky. So you don’t do that activity anymore. Rather than thinking about, you know, ‘What do we need to do to make it safer? To make the risk acceptable?’” - Tony*

In some cases, it was not the activity itself that was deemed to be too risky. Bureaucratic demands to remove uncertainty, pre-planning activities weeks in advance and providing all details about participants, travel arrangements and full

risk assessments of venues meant that it was not possible to provide sufficient information or guarantees in order to satisfy managerial demands for 'safe practice'. Sharon gave an example of how a seemingly straightforward visit to another youth group became problematic:

*"We wanted to take the kids to see another youth club and I couldn't be specific about what transport we were going to take because I didn't know how many kids we were going to take, but I was going to take two members of staff and no more than four kids so it doesn't matter how we get there. They wanted to know the activities that we were doing when we got there, and I was like, 'This is about us taking them there and managing four kids between two of us'. So I just pulled it, we didn't go."*

For Sharon, the inability to be spontaneous and responsive to young people's wishes was a central problem. 'Off-site' trips, anything from going to the nearby park, going to the cinema or an outdoor-bound residential, required individual risk assessments and management approval, a process taking up to four weeks. She regarded this process as being little to do with protecting young people:

*"I think all organisations make out that it's in the kids' interest, so it's in our interest and stuff, but ultimately it's the organisation protecting itself. In all the organisations I've worked for I've felt that that's what the policies are there for, to protect them and to make sure that we don't do anything particularly daft. We could submit whatever we want and then when you're out there you can still do something particularly daft. I suppose it comes back to that audit trail... If something happened as frontline workers it would be our fault."*

Similar experiences were evident across a range of organisational contexts, particularly in large public sector services, charities, and private providers where activities or interventions, 'educational visits', needed approval prior to going. Whilst some, such as Ian, a qualified outdoor instructor, could navigate bureaucratic risk assessment processes (see Chapter Six) and, indeed, undertake what could be considered as risky activities, many others found them, as Joanne put it, *"too much of a headache to think about"*:

*"There have been certain things I've looked to do as a project or an activity with children, and then I've started doing the risk assessment or just thought in my head about what I would need to put on the risk assessment, and then I've just kind of gone, 'No'. We were thinking of taking the children swimming to a local leisure centre. I know a lot of schools do it and things, but the more I thought I'd just think... it just kind of ended up not going ahead with it because the thought of children, a pool, and water, and, I don't know, it just kind of threw me off the idea, so to speak." - Stephen*

The days of 'just jumping in the minibus' to go somewhere were seen to be over, and with them the spontaneous practitioner. Consequently, interviewees reported a decline in the number of residential programmes and other activities delivered as a combined consequence of their perceived risks and the bureaucratic demands thereof. This arguably enables a situation where risks, hazards and mitigating actions are subsumed by high levels of bureaucratic deterrent which masks risk-averse reputational or litigation fears.

It was not just off-site trips and activities that were affected by this risk retreat from practice. Interviewees reported that risk assessments about staffing levels meant that some day-to-day work ceased if there was not staffing to support it. Whilst it is clearly important to ensure that activities are sufficiently staffed, there were considerable variations in what was regarded as safe practice across different organisations (as evidenced in Nathan's account in Section 7.8, p.192-193). There were also several examples of how, with the onset of austerity and service cuts, bureaucratic demands and risk-assessed staffing levels changed, with organisations seemingly happier to allow lone-working or staffing levels previously dismissed as being risky.

Samuel worked with a number of different youth organisations, coordinating shared meetings of young people across a region to discuss issues affecting them. This required acquiring or undertaking risk assessments of all venues where young people were meeting, including publicly accessible venues. In one instance, he recalled a local authority insisting on him undertaking a risk assessment of their town hall prior to a meeting. Authorities were also concerned about young people travelling to venues on their own, even if they were older and made the same or similar journeys independently at other times. He suggested this was due to practitioners and organisations believing that they had a liability if they were encouraging young people's participation. This overly cautious approach was most apparent at residential, where organisational risk management did not recognise staff from other organisations' ability to safeguard 'their' young people:

*"Authorities will need to send one member of staff with one young person and some will even need to send two because they'll have the approach where they risk assess that lone-working isn't acceptable, and that risk assessment will be based on a very different scenario of a young person who poses severe risks or the fear of abuse: that if you leave a worker alone individually with a young person that they're open to abuse and allegations as well, and that fear really drives a lot of things. So the reality of that is ... we're taking all the young people on this residential and there must be 20 young people and 20 staff ... people are coming together from separate authority areas so you've*



*got to have your own member of staff with you. We offered to hire two freelancers and take everyone, and people sort of went 'Ooh risk assessment, no'".*

Samuel reflected that the underlying assumption in these risk assessments was not only the fear of the 'worst case', but also of low capability or competence and high potential danger of or to young people. Rarely were considerations about the independence or capacity of young people (or staff) factored into considerations. This approach also led to young people being denied opportunities to attend events because there were insufficient resources to accompany them, even when they were capable of travelling independently. This is particularly interesting in the context of organisations' duty of care and notions of 'in loco parentis', where, in some circumstances, practitioners adopt the role of a 'reasonable parent', based on the age and maturity of the individual. In many cases however, subjective 'reasonableness' and assessments of maturity and competence appeared to be ignored in favour of a defensive lowest-common-denominator approach. Risk assessment thereby became a tool of defensive practice and extreme reputational risk management.

When Samuel reflected on this in a subsequent interview, having left the organisation, he believed that a subsequent shift had taken place as a consequence of service cuts, with resource considerations trumping bureaucratic risk processes:

*"All the emails I used to get from authorities, saying, 'No, we've not had the risk assessment off you,' and now they didn't seem to notice so much if you didn't send it off because they've just got a lot of other things going on.... There was probably a willingness from the very frontline staff just to say, 'This is the only way we can keep this activity going so that's the way it has to be'."*

This is not to suggest, however, that risk management evaporated in light of austerity measures, and there were numerous examples of risk-averse bureaucratic processes resulting in the restriction of certain provision or delivery to certain groups. Indeed, whilst Samuel faced challenges in working with young people who had been confidently engaged in positive youth provision for some time, the most concerning aspects of the risk retreat concerned assessments which concluded that individuals or particular groups of young people were deemed to be too risky to work with.

Nick, working in a charity addressing substance use and anti-social behaviour, talked about the difficulties in working with other organisations, particularly local authority youth provision, in these terms. He was critical of services that described

their practice in terms of working with young people at-risk or in need, yet had systems and practices that did not enable such work to take place. Put simply, “*you can’t be a drugs worker and not talk to someone who is doing drugs*”. He described a project with “*young men causing anti-social behaviour*” from a local housing estate. The original intention was to work with the local youth service, but concerns about the nature of the group combined with bureaucratic risk management meant this would unacceptably delay the work:

*“If you’ve got young people who are causing trouble around anti-social behaviour or drink, drugs and alcohol you need to work there and then, not risk assess it, wait twelve weeks for it all to come through. The paperwork is ticked by your manager and that manager has got to tick it and that manager has got to tick it... When we first started doing this project we had Youth and Community involved with it and it was like, ‘Well it takes twelve weeks for that to do our risk assessment.’ And it was like, ‘Well we’re going in two weeks’ time. So you are not with us then’.”*

Interviewees described how concerns about risks to and from groups such as young people in care, young carers, those with backgrounds of alcohol use, substance use or anti-social behaviour, and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups meant that organisations and practitioners had become more cautious about undertaking activities and trips, opting for easier, less risky options, or alternatively avoiding trips altogether. Processes such as parental consent forms also favoured those young people and families who were more literate, could communicate in English, and were happier to engage in formal provision. Rob described a situation where his project had been funded to undertake a trip for targeted young people, yet he was faced with what he described as a ‘catch 22’ situation where targeted young people (those who the project needed to work with to obtain funding) did not present the required forms, while those from more “stable” family backgrounds (but not the target for intervention) did. Previously there was management support to enable loose interpretation of procedures, but this flexibility had ceased:

*“The young people you wanted to come because their background was too chaotic, if you did get the parents to sign it was always the wrong bloody parent, you know, and you ended up kind of pulling your hair out. But if you had a manager, a youth work manager, who understood that situation, he or she would support you in that.. Occasionally, but not always because you put other safety precautions in place, it was questioned. You’d go ‘As far as we understood it was the right course of action’. You got away with a lot. You can’t get away with that any more. You have to be cleaner than clean, but that prevents us doing the work with people we should be doing.”*

At an individual level, despite agencies being increasingly focused towards at-risk

young people, there remained certain types of behaviour, conditions, or case histories that meant they would refuse to work with some young people. Whilst perhaps understandable when young people displayed a high level of violence towards staff, it appeared that for some organisations at least, there was little room for taking steps to mitigate risks: the simplest thing was to not offer a service, or in some cases, restrict available provision. For Terry, youth work was about reaching young people in need, yet at times policies and individual practitioners turned away those, he felt, they needed to work with, seemingly on the basis on service, rather than young person, risks:

*"We've got a mobile unit that goes out and the young people will get on the mobile unit even if they've had a few to drink. Whereas one point if you were drunk you'd be turned away, you wouldn't be allowed anywhere near a centre or anything. To me, is that really efficient youth work? If a young person is at risk, do we turn them away?"*

Rachel described attempting to work with a young person with learning disabilities and mental health problems in a multi-agency context:

*"He came in the other day and tried to throw himself off the balcony... Different people and the higher management were like, 'Right he can't come into the building'... I understand that clearly he can't be throwing himself off stuff and we need to manage that risk, but does that mean that he just isn't allowed to access our service? And that whole thing is really, really difficult to manage because somebody else is just thinking, 'Right, law suit'. And this is what I was saying about managing the tension of being a manager and being someone who's passionate about young people because clearly it's not appropriate for him not to be offered a service, but at the same time, yeah of course we need to protect and not provide an environment where he could basically hurt himself or whatever... I don't think it's okay to just say, 'He's too high risk for us. We're just not going to meet his need.'"*

In the above example, Rachel and other staff sought to continue working with the young man on lower floors where the specific suicide risk, and the potential litigation risk for the organisation was reduced. In other examples, young people under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and those with histories of violence or arson, were either deemed too risky to work with or had constraints imposed that were unworkable because they were based not on the young person's lived experience but on organisational and staff fears. As Rachel highlighted in another example around the challenges of working with a young woman around self-harm:

*"That's our anxiety, those are our fears. And I think 'This young person has been doing this for years and years. Yeah it's not great. We'll work around that, but if we take control over it, how are we ever*

*going to move him or her through this?”*

These examples highlight a paradox in contemporary practice: whilst policy and resource-driven youth practice increasingly targets funding and services towards those young people regarded as high-risk, many organisations continue to operate in a culture of fear of blame and risk-aversion. This tension has several implications for practice, which are explored in the latter stages of this Chapter and in Chapter Nine.

For some interviewees, bureaucratic risk systems had become ends in themselves, disconnected from practice. Intentionally or otherwise, they were seen to run counterproductive to the espoused work of the organisation:

*“They talk about accountability but it is all on paper... They try to draw you away from working with problematic young people, they want you to come away from there because it’s too intense and it needs money and it needs staff directing that all the time. So they don’t want you to do that, they want you to do, you know, quick hits, quick wins.” - Natalie*

Indeed, formal risk management and accountability processes were regarded as being more about the veneer, or the presenting face, of control and governance, than they were about young people. As Lauren suggested, this appeared to be reinforced by external regulatory frameworks and audit systems:

*“I pretty much say that my job is solely to get paperwork together for Ofsted, and they come two days a year. It’s unbelievable the amount of work that goes into just that as opposed to the care of the young people and actually managing risk, rather than just pretending that you’re managing risk.”*

Thus, whilst still offering the potential for enabling ‘reasonable’ risk decisions in support of practice and those who deliver it, risk management’s attempt to “colonize the future” and its inevitable failure to cope with indefinite uncertainty (Beck, 2000:216; 2009) have generated further risks and uncertainties. These have, in some circumstances at least, contributed to the exposure of the most vulnerable, in need, or at-risk young people to fear-driven practice “bordering on paranoia and hyper-defensiveness” (Power, 2004:47), avoidance, retreat or inaction, albeit masked by a (thin) veneer of control, predictability and accountability.

### 8.3 The Retreating Practitioner?

As is implicit in some of the above accounts, and some within the previous chapter, whilst the bureaucratic organisation forms the context of practice, practitioners themselves are often active agents in risk-decisions. Influenced by the complex factors previously outlined, they make decisions about what practice is worth pursuing and which young people are worth working with, in the face of, as Joanne put it, the “*headache*” of potentially high bureaucratic barriers, and unpredictable personal and occupational risks.

For some practitioners, organisational processes offered a retreat in themselves, with, as Tony described, a greater focus on the ‘veneer’ of accountability than on the work itself:

*“There’s increasingly been a massive amount of arse covering with lots of our work... People are very conscious, and seem to be quite desperate, to make sure they’ve recorded, they’re seen to have recorded, and acted appropriately... I’ve seen it over the last 15 years, that people are more and more concerned about making sure that they’ve crossed the t’s and dotted the i’s in terms of all the recording stuff. Things should be recorded, but they’re more concerned, the weight seems to be more about justifying what you’ve done rather than what you’ve actually done.”*

Other interviewees went further in their criticism of the retreat from practice amongst some colleagues. They suggested that bureaucratic risk management and assessment processes provided the mechanism and justification for practitioners’ own retreat from practice:

*“It’s not that you’re meeting frontline practitioners who are saying ‘I can’t believe those people above us are making us do all this paperwork’, they want it just as much as the people above them really. I’ve always been very sceptical about that, and, you know, they’ll start to use it as a tool for not doing things and not wanting to do things.” - Samuel*

Several practitioners were critical of other colleagues within the work who appeared to actively avoid contact with young people or, as Annabel put it, “*just couldn’t wait to stop dealing with the sticky end*”. Nigel described this as “*immoral*” practice and a “*lack of moral fibre*”, where practitioners and organisations took funding under the auspices of delivering work with young people at-risk yet had “*no intention of doing the job but taking the money*”:

*“We build our service round the needs of the staff as opposed to young people. The staff don’t like putting themselves on the line so*

*they don't. But they need to say they are else we don't get the funding."*

Nigel saw this retreat from practice as a symptom of professionalisation, "where people see themselves as managers in an office without ever getting their hands dirty and they think that's okay for people that aren't experienced and aren't qualified to do that". He talked of how the work had transformed into "meetings about young people" rather than the "actual work". What was taking place was, in his view, directed towards the wrong people and "stifling", both for practitioners and for young people:

*"It's a joke because the people we should be working with, we should want to attract, don't attend places like that. They are not interested in things like that. They want to roam the streets, they want to occasionally get picked up in a mini-bus and taken somewhere, go off and do a bit of camping or do whatever and, you know, take a few risks with life as opposed to – if things can be tied down so tight, and young people want risk. I did when I was a kid. I still do but we are stifling them, we are stifling that natural desire."*

Ian similarly suggested that practitioners used risk assessment tools as "an excuse", a means to avoid, as Annabel described it, "the sticky end". Whilst for him risk-assessments served as a means of encouraging risk-based planning and hazard mitigation, he believed that some colleagues had a tendency to claim "we can't do that because a risk assessment wouldn't allow us". He did acknowledge, however, that such processes were stressful and, particularly in dynamic situations in the field, there was constant pressure on actively managing risks in line with what was on the assessment. Making in-the-moment decisions in a dynamic context, whilst remembering what the contents of risk assessment, protocols, and procedures demanded, required considerable skill and experience.

As was apparent from Natalie's account (Section 7.2, p.174-180) and from Nigel, Liam, Peter, Martin, Mari and others, although a retreat from practice amongst practitioners was evident, this was far from an inevitability, and many practitioners engaged with 'higher risk' young people, settings, and activities. The variation in both risk-regulation regimes (also highlighted by Power, 2004) and locally situated micro-political practices (Ball, 1987; Horlick-Jones, 2005b) emphasises the subjective nature of risk as applied to practice with young people. It also demonstrates the role and agency of the practitioner to affect the practice-world around them, albeit in a 'bounded' way shaped by the barriers and contexts of organisational, professional, and personal domains.

## 8.4 Responsibilisation, Retreat and the Dilemma of Practice

For many, everyday practice and the practice decisions demanded are precarious in and of themselves. The youth practitioner must choose to intervene or not intervene, report or withhold information in an uncertain and unknowable context whilst at the same time, maintaining the organisational veneer of control and predictability of 'outcomes'. Practitioners thus become the equivalent of 'Schrodinger's Cat' (Schrödinger, 1935), probabilistically both 'alive and dead', successful and unsuccessful in relation to their decisions and their indecision.<sup>5</sup> The next act of commission or omission could potentially lead to accusation, disciplinary action, or formal inquiry if resulting in a negative outcome.

The practitioner is, therefore, not only at the 'front line' of policy and practice, but sits in the space between modernist notions of control and predictability and the indeterminacy of complex late-modern decision-making. No amount of individual reflexivity can counter this position if organisations and other social structures maintain, and seek to reinforce the myth of control and the effectiveness of central policy. With an increased 'blame culture', underpinned not only by organisational and managerial risk aversion, but by what Power (2004) describes as 'responsibility aversion' (see also Leonhardt, Keller and Pechmann, 2011), practitioners are often held individually and personally responsible for any negative consequences of practice (Webb, 2006:70).

This increasing 'responsibilisation' of (as opposed to trust in) front-line practice and the practitioner, is evident across interviewee's accounts. When combined with organisational risk- and responsibility-aversion (or externalisation) in the face of the grey areas of practice, the practitioner faces the choice of whether, and how far, to retreat towards defensive practices (Whittaker and Havard, 2015) or to operate in grey areas where they may be more vulnerable to blame. To do the latter they are increasingly reliant on notions of both operational and moral defensibility, their sense of "humane" purpose and moral agency (see Banks and Williams, 2005:1006), and the often fragile trust in individual managers, young people, and their own practice. Despite their underpinning belief in risk assessments, both Ian and Tony were clear about the implication of something negative happening in their practice

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<sup>5</sup> This analogy could similarly be applied to young people. Whereas managerial risk-based systems construct the young person at-risk in terms of abstract indeterminate probabilities, the practitioner observes the young person 'as they are'. Reconciling these two positions becomes a challenge for the practitioner.

contexts:

*“Sometimes organisations become less tolerant of mistakes. It’s less a learning point and more a blame game. So they will look for a scapegoat to try and protect the organisation, rather than saying, ‘Well, there is inherently risk in everything we do’.” - Tony*

*“I don’t think the [local authority] is a particularly caring organisation that will look after every single person in its organisation, if it came to it, and it was their reputation versus an individual’s reputation. The individual’s getting hung out to dry.” - Ian*

Examples of responsabilisation are evident in a wide range of interviewee accounts. Natalie is regarded as a good practitioner as she builds strong relationships with vulnerable at-risk young people, but if this results in her getting hurt or being caught without being fully insured to take clients in a van, the responsibility is hers. Liam is regarded as being great because he runs a popular youth club, accommodating ‘high risk’ young people, but if he is accused of assault when subduing a fight he is a dangerous maverick. Ian is a well-trusted instructor delivering popular outdoor activities, but if a young person hurts themselves and the authority faces litigation, he’s on his own. Nathan’s lone-working in the hostel at night is an example of efficient practice, but if he is subject to accusation or assault he must justify his actions. Mari and Terry’s work with young people around sensitive topics such as sexting (sending sexualised text messages and images), pornography, and sexual violence is regarded as important, yet if an aggrieved parent, school, or partner organisation complains about the topic or the language used, they must personally defend themselves against accusations of being unprofessional or immoral. This is the world of the responsabilised practitioner: an increasingly essential part of service delivery to young people in a risk-managed and ‘responsibility-averse’ era. The day-to-day dilemma of balancing risk aversion against the needs of young people is reflected in an example by Terry, where safe, non-intervention places the young person at increased risk:

*“If you are working a centre and you are one or two lone male workers you don’t let groups of young women in on their own... As a male worker if a group of young women came to the door and I was the only person in the building and they said, ‘We need some condoms’, I’m not going to turn them away because I am putting them at risk.”*

For some interviewees, this sort of practice would be regarded as unsafe, or a sign of a practitioner being maverick, unaware of boundaries or even having an inflated sense of their role and importance. Terry, in the moment, must choose to expose himself to increased risk in order to provide a service (and reduce sexual health



risks to young women), or withhold a service, keeping him safer (and the young women potentially safe from him), but restricting their access to contraception.

Natalie, recalling her experience after receiving the physical threat from a young male, articulated the limits of the organisation, the bureaucratic veneer of support systems and her own raised awareness of responsibilised practice:

*“You're on your own really, I think. That's how I feel anyway. I don't know how my colleagues feel. After the incident... it was 'oh come in and fill in a serious incident form'... It's filling in a form so that we can audit the high risk level of stuff [and] evidence what we're doing for the big people that make the big decisions... I understand that the organisation has to do these things, because if it doesn't we don't keep the contract and there is no organisation... But that's just not what I'm needing as a worker, as an individual on the front-line being exposed to those sorts of situations. I don't need a serious incident form, I need my manager or someone to take me one side and have a conversation with me. That didn't happen, so, you know it leaves you quite sort of 'Okay, that's how it is then. Right, I'm on my own, okay'”.*

In Natalie's account, not only did the bureaucratic administrative approach take precedence over her well-being, but the incident itself was 'positive' for the project, since it supported their evidence of working with the 'most at risk'.

Management support of front-line practitioners was, however, complex and varied from individual to individual and setting to setting, with some claiming to back the practitioner regardless, responsibilising their own position, whilst others adopted stronger managerial positions. Luke, a practitioner-manager, suggested that flexible management of 'grey areas' was situational. In discussing his move from community-based provision (*“the positive side”*) to more formal social care provision, as a manager in the community setting he was happier to take risks to support practice in grey areas whereas, in the more formal context where trust was limited (*“you were perceived almost as part of the enemy forces”*) this was not the case:

*“If you were working with a child... and they said, 'The next time, can we go on the ferry, or can we go to [a local resort]?' the worker would, in theory, have to fill a form in, but I would be saying, 'No, just do it. It's on my shoulders and I will accept the bollocking when the bollocking comes,' because otherwise you're never going to achieve anything. So that was me shouldering risk, and I was lucky it never backfired on me, but I wouldn't dream of doing that in this job because risk management is so much more important in this job.”*

However, as Rob highlighted, however, increasing cuts and re-organisation had led in many places to fewer managers being familiar with the complexity of practice and

more reliant on bureaucratic systems of regulation and control. As managers from more risk- and responsibility-averse contexts have taken on roles in informal and community-based provision (and as that provision has become more targeted), management practices increasingly have reflected bureaucratic, defensive, responsabilising, managerial cultures.

Some practitioners appeared comfortable with, or at least reconciled to working in this 'responsibilised domain', where responsibility for action, inaction or problems was likely to be 'on their head', and the potential for blame was always close by. Martin discussed the dilemma facing practitioners, and the situation of feeling "*compelled to act*":

*"That creates a sort of frustration in the practitioner because they want to do something, they want to demonstrate care or they want to actually be supportive. I mean I suppose it is quite regulated, youth work, even in informal education and small voluntary projects where you'll get workers who'll say, 'Well there's nothing I can do here because I can't work with you on my own.' If somebody wants a lift or something else because they think, 'Well it's too high risk to be on your own with the person because whatever it is I could get sued, I could have this, I could have that.'"*

Martin saw the retreat as both a choice and a result of "training", which he regarded as being about compliance:

*"Workers know there's another way and what they do is they comply. It brings you back to the issue of immaturity. You're trained not to question, but to trust a system, which should be supporting our ability to question and be critical in life and decisive and mature enough to take responsibility for them decisions so there's a counterproductive thing. People just comply."*

Whilst accounts of experiences, emotions and personal circumstances outlined in Chapter Seven suggest that individual practitioners are more complex than this, Martin's point raises questions about the relationship between responsabilised practice and notions of the professional. In one sense, those operating in grey areas on or outside organisational policy / practice boundaries might be said to be exercising more professional judgement. The responsabilised risk position is, however, very different from, and in many ways opposite to the notion of a trusted professional decision-maker. The position is underpinned by a notion of mistrust (Power, 1997:143; Webb, 2006:185), blame, and as Ian suggested, the potential disposability of the practitioner in question. Martin's suggestion (supported by comments from Nigel) that professionalisation processes lead to increased defensive positions and bureaucratic compliance is more reflective of Ball's (2008)

concerns about new, prudent professionals' protection of the interests of their organisation.

It is perhaps significant that interviewees reporting the most examples of, or concerns about practice tensions and risks were unqualified, in-training, or newly qualified, from Liam breaking up fights and lone-worker Nathan, to Victoria, trying to balance the tensions of prescriptive policy and day-to-day practice in the youth club. Whilst qualified professional staff were often more experienced, and at times more confident in navigating risks in their work, they were arguably also more adept at self-protection and personal risk avoidance and retreat through practitioner-manager functions and their ability to navigate bureaucratic processes, protecting themselves and the organisation. Thus, those who were unqualified or inexperienced tended to be the most exposed to the grey areas of responsabilised risk practice.

Responsibilised practice is not just a reality for those who choose to operate in grey areas of practice on the margins of organisational procedure. Those who adopt defensive, cautious, or risk averse positions are also responsible for their position and its consequences. As Lyng (2008) suggested about edgework, responsabilised practice has become 'centre-work', an involuntary aspect of the managerially risk-averse context. In a context demanding outcomes and results, this rubric is applied to individual practitioners through managerial demands to 'deliver'. Results, or perhaps the presentation of results, become central, and if practitioners are unable to demonstrate these, services, contracts, and jobs are threatened. Practitioner retreat, if it results in fewer numbers of, or a reduced ability to engage with, 'targeted' young people, is threatening to organisations. It is the practitioner who is responsible for inaction and must change, as evidenced by the demands of Naomi's last manager, who appeared to place increasing pressure on her to adapt her practice. As, Simon highlighted, with organisations becoming more commercially driven to deliver 'results' with larger numbers of 'targeted' young people, there is likely to be a greater drive towards risk-taking in practice:

*"Organisations are realising, certainly with the onset of the Big Society and how we're having to become more business like to attract our clientele, that we are going to have to become more attractive. So, we are going to have to offer more interesting opportunities and we are going to have to be more exciting in our delivery and innovative in our delivery. And alongside of that comes risk because people like risky things. People like bonfire night; people like fireworks; people like bikes; people like climbing – people like doing things that take them out of their everyday."- Simon*

Whilst Simon optimistically saw this as a potential end to what he termed "litigious

society”, this scenario may be as likely to lead to greater responsabilisation of practitioners, and greater pressures to deliver results in uncertain and potentially volatile contexts in which practice risks (to young people and practitioners) are underwritten by the front-line worker. As Joanne stated:

*“You do need some of the youth workers who will take those risks and go away and will work in areas where other youth workers don’t want to work and who will actually go into places where you’d think ‘I don’t know if I could cope with doing that’. You hope that you don’t produce loads of clinical people who want to ring up the insurance company and make sure everything’s fine before they do anything, because the end result is then young people would miss out.”*

Whilst the term ‘front-line practice’ is an uncomfortable one, conjuring militaristic images where young people (and their families) are constructed as the enemy, the metaphor does appear to be reflective of a tacit disposability of face-to-face, often new or unqualified practitioners in the responsabilised domain of commercial youth provision. These ‘front-line’ practitioners risk becoming the ‘cannon fodder’ of neo-liberal human services, grappling with uncertainty and, in some cases, volatile situations, navigating the everyday risks of practice whilst being subject to increasingly precarious working conditions and the constant threat of being blamed if something goes wrong. In many senses, practitioners’ positions in relation to responsabilised practice reflect Douglas’ (1992) notions of the culturally and politically constructed other. As well as young people, practitioners too are subjected to being seen as ‘risky others’, playing a functional blame role in order to maintain the (perceived) purity of institutions and their systems.

Practitioners’ accounts demonstrate that the responsabilised domain, and the precarity that it contributes to, can be a stressful place. In addition to Natalie and Naomi, other interviewees spoke of what could be described as fatigue and the ‘moral distress’ (Jameton, 1984; Weinberg, 2009) of balancing face to face work with bureaucratic management demands and risk-management. Terry, for example, spoke of the dilemma of being exposed to physical threats, potential accusations, and working in a context whereby voluntary attendance had given way to targeted work where *“we are almost forcing them to work with us”*, whilst also recognising that there was still some opportunity at least to make a positive difference. After one incident, where he was threatened, Terry reflected on his career:

*“Until that point I had quite a good relationship with young people, that is one of the things I do quite well. It was like maybe this isn’t for me anymore. I thought about it for a good few weeks about trying to get out of youth work and trying, you know, I’ve had enough and I don’t need to put myself through this.”*

Terry at that point found enough motivation to stay, partly because of the positives he could still identify in the work, but also because of the scarcity of jobs. He did, however, talk of becoming “*a bit harsher*”, “*one step back*” from where he was before in order to protect himself and attempt to exert more control over situations. Both Rachel, with a workplace that reflected her ‘comfort zone’, and Richard, who sought to avoid “relentless” evenings that were stressful and exhausting, found a middle-ground between young people’s needs, practice retreat, and responsabilised work that enabled them to continue working the field, even if the ‘sticky end’ was avoided. For some, the only real choice was to leave the responsabilised risk decision-making domain, either through entering the relative certainty of bureaucratic managerialism themselves, or by leaving the profession. Others, however, embraced the grey area, albeit sometimes reluctantly. For Mari, her commitment to young people and their rights enabled her to “*recover from whatever once things have hit the fan*” and to re-enter the realm of “*thorny issues*” and responsabilised practice. For Martin there was little compromise, his commitment to humane responses and trust in relationships with young people and families in the community forming a resistance to what could be described as the absurdity of risk-based bureaucracy:

*Why be inhuman for the sake of a piece of paper? So if that leaves me unprotected, I personally don't think the parent would sue us if we crashed. That's belief isn't it?"*

Thus, whilst practitioners responded in different ways to dynamic and variable practice settings, organisational approaches, management and personal factors, the precarious context of responsabilised practice and the potential for blame was rarely far away from their risk-decisions, and from decisions about whether to retreat, adopt defensive practices or operate in unprotected grey areas to better meet young people’s needs.

## **8.5 The Cost of Risk Averse, Responsibilised Practice**

The risk retreat by organisations (and some practitioners), and the void that is subsequently filled by the responsabilised practitioner, impact upon young people and practitioners in a range of ways.

Interviewees spoke of how risk averse organisational contexts deprived young people of opportunities to take risks and, in turn, gain learning:

*“The interventions that we're making have got so little risk involved in them that they're actually no risk to young people at all, because it's not challenging them at all.” - Rob*

Lauren described this as a tendency for “cotton woolling”, the systemic creation of risk- and responsibility- aversion where every day experiences that would take place in family and other settings become professionalised and problematic, subject to stringent demands that prevent positive work taking place or, alternatively, become tools of blame:

*“I've got staff that could be taking kids to [a local tourist area] where they're in maybe four foot of water in the summer, but it'll take them an hour and a half to complete a risk assessment before they do. And when Ofsted come and I don't have that risk assessment in place, they'll say, 'Your staff member's not a lifeguard, why have they been near open water with young people?'. I don't have children, but did you have to be a lifeguard to take your children? You don't, do you? That could actually affect my Ofsted rating that they stay safe... If I get satisfactory I can't get any higher than that, that's my whole grade, just because of a risk assessment that I placed them in four foot of open water... They're pushing us to cotton wool kids because we can't put those risks on the table.”*

Some interviewees mourned the loss of the practitioner who was able to act intuitively in the moment, be spontaneous with activities and take risks in a less bureaucratic context. Whilst acknowledging that sometimes this position might be romanticised, and that the work may not always have been the best or the safest, a majority of interviewees were concerned that organisational risk aversion had gone too far.

*“It's not saying that we don't need [risk management processes] because we can't get away from them, but it's streamlining all the processes so that it's not such a chore to take the kids away. And we can be more reactive, because ultimately we're meant to be a youth or community led service.” - Sharon*

Several interviewees also suggested that risk-management in some cases increased the risks to young people. Nick, for example, mentioned services which would no longer take young people paintballing “because it's too high a risk”:

*“So what do [young people] do? They go and buy themselves cheap paint ball guns from a shop and play the games themselves out in the street. So you are trying to protect them by saying that the paint ball is a bit hard for them, they will be out there with no mask, no instructors doing it themselves.”*

In Rachel's work, risk assessments also had the potential to result in prohibiting

someone from accessing a service, something that for her was rarely acceptable. She also saw organisational and practitioner efforts to control potential behaviour through risk assessments as futile, suggesting that the approach was counter-productive towards supporting young people to be independent and (appropriately) responsible agents in their own actions:

*"I would much rather a risk assessment doesn't prohibit an activity or prohibit someone accessing a service and I also think it creates dependency and can often feed into their needs negatively. If you're so driven to be, "I am going to be solely responsible if this person hurts themselves." So how is that sustainable, healthy or going to actually move them forward in a positive way? It's not."*

Thus, retreating from practice through restricting or denying service provision might remove risks to the organisation whilst increasing risks to young people. This is particularly ironic amidst the social policy rhetoric of targeted services, prevention, and early intervention, whereby youth services promote their purpose as increasingly being oriented around those most 'at-risk'. Furthermore, as Rob points out, risk assessments themselves become bureaucratic devices designed to limit liability, mechanisms of mistrust that potentially obfuscate meaningful assessments of risks and hazards:

*"It's not that people don't have the information, it's that people are so mistrusting of other people that they will have their own documents, and it gets lost. And all this information gets lost in the reams of information and you can't see the woods for the trees, literally. You can't see the risk for the amount of risk assessments you have to do!"*

This context also has profound effects for practice that impact upon both practitioner and young person. Reflecting Munro's (2011) concerns, and other interviewees' accounts, Luke observed that defensive practice created new dangers, with interventions either not happening or practice being increasingly hidden from view:

*"It doesn't protect them, it just means they don't do things and if they do do things, they don't tell people."*

In this responsibilised and commercialised environment, organisations are increasingly concerned about outcomes or results rather than processes, focussing on performance management and audit over professional supervision and support (Webb, 2006:185). It arguably becomes in the organisation's interests not to ask too many questions about 'how' practitioners achieve results, provided that they do. This can mean that, as with Natalie's example of collecting the young woman's possessions in the van (p.175), actual practice, both good and bad is concealed.

Not only, as we have seen, can this impact upon the long-term well-being of the practitioner, but it can also result in the withdrawal of supervisory functions that can aid the practitioner in reflecting upon, and being personally reflexive about, young people, their practice, and their personal biases. Without this, the scope for double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1974), reflective practice, and risk reflexivity (Schön, 1983; Titterton, 2005) is reduced considerably, and there is limited opportunity for practitioners to step back from the work to consider their personal commitments to young people, justice, and being humane moral agents in their dynamic practice context. Without this, there is the possibility that good intention may mask practice that is dangerous to young people or themselves, or, as we shall explore in the next chapter, constructs the young person in ways that may reinforce structural inequality and the stigmatisation of young people.

## **8.6 Conclusion**

Whilst neither organisational risk-aversion nor responsibilised practice are new concepts in and of themselves (see Power, 2004; Kemshall, 2010; Webb, 2006; Stanford, 2010; Munro, 2004; Ayre, 2001; Carson and Bain, 2008; Titterton, 2005), particularly in the social work field, this chapter emphasises how fear-based risk / practice culture has proliferated, with the concerns expressed by Munro (2010a; 2011) about child protection services also reflecting wider practice with young people. It also illuminates the relationship between risk-averse organisational approaches, responsibilisation, defensive practice, and risk-taking, and how practitioners differently negotiate, or survive this terrain.

As concerns about danger have been replaced by much broader concern and fear about risks (Castel, 1991), the risk management of everything (Power, 2004) has resulted in an organisational retreat from practice, reflected in risk assessments, protocols, and complex bureaucratic processes intended to restrict activity and secure the safety of the organisation (and potentially those who commission their services) from the dangers of uncertainty. In the field of youth work this has led to the reduction of activities, services, and opportunities for young people and the further exposure of practitioners, and potentially young people, to risk.

Against the backdrop of risk retreat, practitioners seek to make sense of their practice, serve the perceived needs of young people and secure their own physical, psychological, and financial security in an environment where they are likely to be blamed for poor decisions, poor outcomes, or lack of results. In a youth policy



context driven, at least on the surface, by targeted work focused on the most at-risk, it is often the practitioner who must occupy the grey area between organisations' espoused target group and the day-to-day realities and uncertainties of engaging and working alongside young people.

Practitioners are not without choice in how they navigated this context, and accounts of interviewees emphasised how they adopted different, often pragmatic, positions in order to reconcile tensions between the organisation, young people and their own purpose, needs and security. This agency was, however, bounded by the overall context of fear, blame, institutional mistrust, responsabilisation and of course, notions of risk. Some practitioners 'retreated' to organisational compliance and bureaucratic 'safety', or used organisational systems to avoid aspects of practice and ultimately, young people. This position of 'defensive practice' (Kemshall, 2010; Trevithick, 2011), when seen in a broader context of interviewees' professional biographies, was often a result of previous (negative) experiences of threat, blame, and isolation. Whilst social work-related studies have focused on the notion of defensive practice and responsabilisation (e.g. Trevithick, 2011, 2014; Whittaker and Havard, 2015; Webb, 2006; Parton, 1996; Parton et al, 1997; Dean, 1999), few have located these positions in the broader personal and professional risk decision-making world of the practitioner as outlined here and in the previous chapter. Without this, such accounts arguably further individualise and responsabilise the actions of the practitioner, implying the problem to be one of practice culture or training deficiency rather than part of underlying systemic issues (Whittaker and Havard, 2015). Indeed, in the broad field of youth services, interviews indicate that practitioner 'retreat from practice' was not only reflected in 'defensive' practice, but at times by the avoidance of practice altogether, either through seeking management or quasi-management positions that reduced risk exposure or through leaving the field entirely, with practitioners unable to reconcile the tensions between the moral imperative of young people's needs and safe, accountable, defensible practice.

Rather than defensive practice being the norm, the majority of those interviewed operated in different ways in or around the responsabilised 'grey area' of practice. For many this was the inevitable result of seeking to work with young people in a context of uncertainty that was neither recognised nor accommodated by demands for organisational certainty. It was rarely, therefore, the empowered and co-produced 'positive risk taking' advocated by Titterton (2011). Pragmatic 'street-level bureaucracy' (Lipsky, 2010), informal logics, and situated practices (Horlick-Jones, 2005b), often hidden in or from bureaucratic managerial concerns, enabled

practitioners to operate at the edges of vague policies or ritualised assessments whilst at the same time knowing that they might be exposed to danger and blame from both young people and from their organisation if a decision backfired. Whilst the majority attempted to negotiate the dilemmas of practice 'safely' and thus restrict the terms of their practice interventions, a minority chose to actively resist the 'inhuman' approaches of institutional risk management processes, 'speaking back to fear' (Stanford, 2010:1065) by explicit resistance and challenge to bureaucratic processes. As with Stanford's observation of some social workers, moral defensibility (the human and humane thing to do), trust, and a commitment to 'doing good' overrode managerial demands.

Whether through pragmatic navigation or explicit resistance, there were costs to responsibilised practice. Ultimately, the risk-averse, responsibility-averse, individualising, and responsibilising context described by interviewees in this study resulted in 'front-line' casualties: young people who were deemed too risky to work with are unable to be supported by appropriate interventions, and practitioners who bore the emotional, financial and sometimes physical scars of attempting to respond to the needs of young people in neo-liberal managerial contexts based upon risk management and fear.

Austerity measures and large-scale cuts in provision have led to significant changes to youth services in recent years with further risk-based targeting of resources and, in some cases at least, a more flexible interpretation of risks and risk assessment. This does not, however, appear to reflect organisations embracing uncertainty and risk, re-balancing risk management towards relational approaches (Smith, R., 2010), 'advancing' towards increased responsibility, the nourishment of reflexive 'risk literacy' (Titterton, 2011) or support for 'humane' judgements and 'practical wisdom' (Taylor and White, 2006; Dunne, 2011; O'Sullivan, 2011). Instead, it is an extension of the role of the responsibilised practitioner, 'on their own' as they work with young people in an increasingly resource-starved and occupationally precarious context.

## **CHAPTER NINE: THE COMMODIFICATION OF YOUTH THROUGH MALLEABLE RISK PRACTICES**

### **9.1 Introduction**

This final findings chapter returns to the interface of practice and the young person. Within the context of complex decision-making and organisationally risk-averse and responsibilised practice outlined in previous chapters, this chapter explores how practitioners' 'situated rationalities' (Kemshall, 2010) and 'informal logics' (Broadhurst et al, 2010) operate in relation to risk and the young person. Risks become malleable – able to be shaped by practitioner narratives and by assessment and referral processes in order pragmatically to meet needs, obtain resources, or balance tensions between organisational demands and frontline practice. This malleability results in the amplification, and in some cases the attenuation, of young people's risk, both individually and in terms of the broader youth risk narrative.

Subject to neo-liberal marketisation of public services, limited resources, and increased risk-factor-based targeting of provision, it is argued that young people become commodified risk objects in a resource trading game. Practitioners (and indeed young people) navigate this environment on an ongoing basis through their attempts to gain services for groups and individuals, and to secure their own positions and that of the organisation in an increasingly precarious environment. In doing so, pragmatic, contingent acts (Lipsky, 2010; Ball, 1987; Broadhurst et al, 2010) are employed in order to reconcile the espoused 'human' and 'humane' approaches of practitioners, perceived needs of young people, and broader institutional demands.

The first section examines risk malleability in the practice context. It examines how risks to and from young people are both amplified and attenuated through formal and informal practice processes in order to access services. These processes are apparent both to practitioners and to young people and families, who also attempt to navigate them in order to obtain services. The section examines the tensions inherent in these processes and highlights issues of trust and mistrust between agencies and individual practitioners as a consequence of malleable risk assessments, referrals, and biographies.

The second section examines how malleable notions of at-risk, risky, and risk-taking youth are driven by resource demands, and how the abstract influence of risk factor research (RFR) informs practice. Individuals' access to resource-limited services is

dependent upon their risk-value. Similarly, the shift towards targeted services means an increasing demand to frame those young people engaged with as being at-risk in some way. The section examines a number of practitioner examples of such practice, highlighting how individuals, groups and arguably, the overall narrative of youth become malleable risk commodities.

The third section of the chapter contains a brief analysis of a phenomenon discussed by some interviewees whereby practice with or around at-risk or risky young people is amplified (or at least emphasised) in order, it appears, to elevate the significance of their role or identify. Whilst this area requires further exploration beyond the study, it demonstrates another dimension of how young people, and youth in general, can be subject to risk amplification, both from practitioners and from the policy / research field in general, who may regard work with those who can be described as high-risk or risky as an aspect of 'edgework' (Lyng, 1990), exciting practice that may be regarded as dangerous through its association with young people's risk behaviours.

The fourth section discusses how malleable risk construction, neo-liberal commercialised management, and pragmatic individual and organisational practices lead to the 'risk commodification' of young people. 'At-risk' young people, both individually and collectively, become tradeable risk commodities, exchanged on the basis of risk factors. Potential medium and long term implications for young people are explored.

Finally, the chapter summarises the key arguments presented and expresses concern about how RFPP-dominated youth policy and practice has led to malleable risk processes that commodify young people and amplify the overall presentation of youth as risky and dangerous. It also raises questions about how youth, policy, practice, and research might reform in order to meet the needs of young people more effectively.<sup>6</sup>

## **9.2 Risk malleability in practice**

Interviews highlighted the extent to which complex 'informal logics' (Broadhurst et al, 2010) of risk play out across a wide range of youth settings, organisations, and

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<sup>6</sup> Note: Elements of this chapter have been previously published in Turnbull (2016). Some passages have been quoted verbatim from the originally submitted manuscript of this article.

interventions, constructing and re-constructing young people's risk positions. The young person as-risk / at-risk becomes a malleable subject, with risks being amplified or attenuated according to individual needs (of the young person, parent, or practitioner) and organisational demands.

'Risk malleability', 'risk amplification' and 'risk attenuation' are not new concepts. They have, however, tended to be limited to the field of risk communication, with its focus on the presentation of 'objective' hazards and risks to the public (Slovic 1999), as evidenced by Kasperson et al's (1988) 'Social Amplification of Risk Framework' (SARF). In this context, risk identification, selection, assessment, and response processes can result in an amplification or attenuation of risk, whereby perceptions are higher or lower than calculated risk-events (Kasperson et al 1988; Kemshall 1997). Such perceptions are influenced by a range of factors, including personal experiences, social and cognitive biases, the dramatic communication of risks, how risk is constructed within social groups, and the role of stigmatisation (Kasperson et al 1988). The risk malleability identified within this study is not, however, solely about the difference between objective risks and their perception. It is an active, often conscious process, whereby risk is amplified ('played up') or attenuated ('played down') in order to secure (or potentially limit) services and resources. This malleability is evident in bidding and contract acquisition processes, in the entrance of young people into youth services, and in the referral of young people between services, and can take place amongst parents, practitioners, managers, and young people themselves.

Upon engagement with services, risk may either be amplified or attenuated depending upon perceived criteria. Mark explained how parents enhanced risks in order to access a service that they thought would help their child:

*"Parents have heard about the group and think, 'My lad sounds as if he's got the same sort of difficulties as that'... and then they ring up and say they've got a problem with this and a problem with that, and then it's a lot more difficult then, because some parents identify the young people in the group as perhaps getting more opportunities and advantages that some of the other young people don't get. So they have an interest in sending their children just because they want access to the services provided. Some parents have an unrealistic expectation of how their children should behave or the young people's difficulties, so they report them as they're really quite bad; and they're not."*

The use of risk-related framing was also evident in relation to young people themselves. Tony spoke of several incidents where he was aware of young people

using risk-based language in order to present their case in pursuit of a service. This was either explicit, where they “*present saying ‘I am at risk of..’*” or more subtle, as illustrated by an example when he overheard a group of young men discussing how to access activities:

*“I distinctly heard two of the young people who were on our [positive activities programme] talking to a mate of theirs and they were saying ... ‘you’re doing this trip... why are you going on all the residential?’... And my two lads said ‘well all you’ve got to do is just say, you know, you’re not very happy, you’re really pissed off or you’re going to do something bad, and they get worried about it and then they put you on this’. They didn’t say risk but that’s what they meant. What they were saying was play up to their expectations and you get to go on loads of trips.”*

For those aware of the rules of engagement, presenting the appropriate level of risk to services and practitioners was a central part of the ‘game’ – an effective self-advocacy in order to access desirable services, whilst also seeking to avoid undesirable intervention or surveillance. They may not, however, always be aware that such information is recorded and shared with others, with potentially negative consequences in the future. For those young people less able (or with fewer resources) to navigate, or ‘risk-manage’ the practice context and present themselves appropriately as risk objects, there may be implications in terms of the services they receive:

*“It’s not necessarily a conscious thing and you don’t want to be being snide, but it happens because we’ve got the skills to be able to adapt the way we talk or the way we portray stuff. Young people don’t always have that. So they just say it as it is, which sometimes means that they do get prevented from accessing support.” - Rachel*

As Rachel’s comment suggests, evidence of risks being amplified or attenuated was most apparent in the practitioner domain, particularly in relation to referrals of young people to and from services. For organisations receiving referrals, there was often mistrust about the information provided by other agencies and the extent to which risks were omitted, concealed, or played down in referrals. Sharon, for example, talked about concerns relating to Social Services departments, who were commonly viewed with suspicion by practitioners:

*“We worked with Social Services, and again that disclosure thing doesn’t work between agencies, it’s not just parents, it doesn’t work. There were a couple of times where they didn’t disclose information to us, and that’s just as important.”*

Mistrust was not, however, solely reserved for statutory services. As Roger

highlighted, many organisations, practitioners, and indeed young people were seen to withhold information from referral documents and risk assessments in order to access services:

*"I have been in roles where certain people have been moving [young people] from one service to another, especially in the supported housing side/supported units, that haven't divulged the information. There was a big scare where they had to be made aware because they avoided putting on [to the referral document / risk assessment] certain things because they knew they wouldn't be considered for accommodation." – Roger*

Interviewees themselves reported playing down or withholding information about the young person and the risks they posed. Rachel explained how 'informal logics of practice' (Broadhurst et al, 2010) enabled the subversion of formal risk assessment processes in order to access services for young people:

*"There are skills to writing a risk assessment, I guess, and to shape it to benefit you or... (laughter). No-one can get around the fact that they do that to try to enable someone to access a service... it's not about hiding risk or masking risk but giving young people the opportunity to at least get to a face to face interview to discuss what those things mean."*

Those interviewed were often aware of the paradoxical nature of complaining about insufficient or withheld risk information from others, yet doing the same themselves. The attenuation of risk information when referring young people was linked to a combination of mistrust of organisations, whom they feared may unreasonably prevent the young person accessing the service, and an implied dissonance between the 'risk biography' of the individual present in documentation and the person they had grown to know and understand.

*"Maybe I use that trick as well... because genuinely young people are labelled and I don't mean to be really offensive because they're just doing their job, but some organisations perhaps their culture is to look for faults in young people." – Rachel*

'Shaping' biographies, narrative, and perceptions was not solely limited to formal risk processes. In some circumstances the role of the practitioner seeking to secure a service for a young person was to appeal to individuals' and services' compassionate side, amplifying hazards and vulnerability whilst simultaneously attempting to allay fears about the risks of the individual to the organisation and staff. Natalie described how, in addition to attenuating aspects of risk when making referrals, it also was common practice to amplify other aspects of individual and collective accounts of young people in order to access other provision:

*“Obviously yes, I’m trying to make this sound as bad as possible to get her that service. I’m not lying; but I’m selective about what I’m going to exaggerate. I’m exaggerating to this woman in the most honest definition of the term.”*

As Natalie indicated, there was a potential impact upon the individual, who may be present when risk and behaviour amplification was playing out:

*“You’d embellish and you’d throw everything at it: this person is completely rubbish! And of course this young person, fair enough, is standing there going, ‘I’m not completely rubbish’.”*

Whilst such activity was regarded as commonplace, almost essential in the resource-limited, risk-based (rather than needs-based) service context, it emphasises how individual and collective risk biographies and narratives become disconnected from lived experiences through intervention and referral processes. Whilst subjective to begin with, such accounts become increasingly infused with organisational and inter-organisation micro-politics, arguably to a point where they are more of a reflection of the technologies and politics of practice than they are of young people and their circumstances. Thus young people’s narratives become comprised of tropes and concepts that are recognised and accepted organisationally, and resonate with the policy drivers of the state, rather than reflecting the lived reality of the individual.

Interviews also highlighted tensions between formal systems based, on the one hand, upon documented risk and assumptions about individual young people being responsible for their circumstances, choices, and behaviour (Kelly, 2000, 2001, 2006; Liebenberg, Ungar and Ikeda, 2015), and on the other hand, perspectives of young people influenced by social context and personal risk decisions in adverse situations. Practitioners received and interpreted risk assessments differently depending upon their personal and professional perspectives in relation to young people (see also Section 6.6). Tony described attempts to be conscious of, yet at the same time suspend, received risk knowledge in order to work with the presenting young person:

*“A referral’s come in or a telephone call from a community-based nurse or social worker saying, ‘We want this young person to come in. They’ve got all these risk factors’... Now, you kind of listen to that, but I try and work with a young person as they walk through the door. And I’ll work with them and react to them based on their behaviour, really.”*

Some interviewees spoke of how too much information about an individual could



lead to unreasonable prejudice, or stigmatisation, which in turn impacted negatively upon practice. Joanne recalled an example where, had she been in possession of the full background, she would not have worked with the young person in the same way:

*“We took a young person away on a residential who was lovely and great fun and engaged with some other females and they kind of took her under their wing and she was like their little sister and things and she loved it... Social Services referred her to us and then when we got back they told us about these criminal convictions and her anti-social behaviour and just all the things that she had done that we didn’t know about... I wonder whether we would have treated her differently, whether we would have been expecting her to misbehave and to mess around.”*

The everyday practice of writing (risk-focused) case notes could create a negative framing of young people that then became a biographical feature, informing or legitimising subsequent interventions. Thus, case notes and risk assessments were not simply inanimate, selective, and distorted representations of the individual that were dissonant to a person’s ‘actual self’, but they shaped the way young people were classified, understood, intervened with and represented to others. Similarly to Tony, Natalie rejected the negative framing in constructed biographies of young people:

*“People don’t write and remember all the good stuff. I’ve had quite a few of those now, young people that are really challenging, that have a reputation... and I refuse to believe in that really. I’ll take it on board but I will not let that be all that there is... We see all these labels you know, you see all these risk words... ‘care leaver’ ... ‘been in prison’, ‘pot [cannabis] smoker’, and ‘fighter’ and, you know, ‘liar’... People hold on to those things and they let that be the thing, that’s who you are.”*

For Natalie, this process was not solely bureaucratic, but reflected an attitude of detachment among fellow practitioners, possibly as a means of self-protection:

*“That’s who you are, that’s all I see, and therefore that’s how I will be with you, I will be distant, I will be aloof, I’m not emotionally available for you, and I will be short, and I will be..’, you know, ‘just keep up this, right, overly professional façade and I will not let you in and I will not, no, no, no”.*

Risk assessments, case notes and referrals, therefore, had become tools of the work – risk biographies managed by practitioners in order to enable young people to access, or occasionally prevent access to, services - yet were rarely trusted accounts of the ‘real’ person. As such, risk-based policy and micro-political practice

has resulted in a distorted practice risk-world that obfuscates rather than illuminates the dangers, needs, and concerns facing young people (and practitioners).

### 9.3 Risk and resources

The amplification (or, less frequently, attenuation) of young people's risks in order to maintain services or acquire additional funding was apparent across a wide range of interviews.

Lauren provided the starkest example of monetised risk 'malleability', where amplifying or attenuating risk was part of the bartering process between service commissioner and organisation, with funding and staff resources determined by subjective risk that becomes open to negotiation. She highlighted the potential for amplification of risk based upon key concerns and phrases in order to secure additional funding:

*"People who are under pressure from their line managers, they might turn around and say, 'Let's go for two-to-one [staff:client ratio] because we've got some keywords here: we think she's involved in some CSE [child sexual exploitation], she's gone missing every night, she's trying to lash out at staff'... So, you've got these key things and they [say], 'She's £2,800 now. Let's get her up to one-to-one or two-to-one; let's push her onto the next bracket'"*

Conversely, those commissioning services sought to attenuate reported risks in order to limit costs:

*"[Commissioners] will play anything down. They'll avoid using the key one, which is probably the worst, 'violence and aggression to staff, violence and aggression to other people'. Because ... if you see [that] on a referral you're going to say, 'It's going to be one- to-one then; it has to be because we need to protect other young people'. And they won't go for a single occupancy placement because it's £5,000 or £6,000 a week for three kids to live on their own. So, yeah, they will always play it down. The non-ethical side of the private sector will always play it up."*

In other interviews, the utilisation of 'risk', or 'at-risk' terminology as a means to target resources had led to the amplification of common (normal?) youth behaviour being described as increasingly risky and problematic. Nigel recalled the impact of the shift towards more targeted work on the construction of a group of young people as risky:

*"[Colleagues] would put in an application for money saying they work with young people who have drug and drink problems, who engage in*

*sexual relationships at an early age, are experiencing problems in their relationships with parents – you know, the whole gamut, throw it all out there...”*

Upon discussing these concerns with the young people concerned, Nigel found what to him, appeared to be relatively low risk, regular adolescent behaviour:

*“I said..*

*[Nigel]:‘Right I understand that there’s an issue around alcohol and drugs?’...*

*[YP]:‘What do you mean an issue?’*

*[Nigel]:‘Well, you know, that people are experimenting with quite..’*

*[YP]:‘Well no, we smoke a bit of dope and have a drink at weekends only in each other’s houses so it’s quite safe.’”*

Thus, occasional or low-level risk behaviour provides the potential for amplification and the leverage of funds to support ‘targeted’ early interventions. As in this example, risk amplification may also be gendered, with young women’s sexual exploration prompting fear and risk categorisation, particularly when they are socially visible.

In an increasingly limited resource context intervention ‘thresholds’ have increased across child and youth services (see Stephenson, 2015; Eastman, 2014) with both organisational funding and individuals’ access to services allocated on the basis of risk-based targeting. Practitioners were faced with labelling and amplifying behaviours, or not being able to deliver a service to those with whom they sought to work. Whilst aiming to “*work with people where they are*”, Tony highlighted tensions between needs- and risk-based resource management within his organisation. In one example, a young woman needed support for anger issues, but because she neither had a diagnosed mental health problem, nor had been arrested, she was not entitled to assistance. The reductionist ‘tick-box’ approach to risk assessment and resource allocation led to the temptation to elevate risk in order to access support. Tony saw many of the ‘tick box’ risk-factors identified in his work as arbitrary (see Section 6.5, p.164-5), and often associated with whether a young person had already been in contact with services. If they were “*unsuccessful risk-takers*”, “*in the wrong place at the wrong time*” or “*the ones that get caught*” they were more likely to be able to access (or be subjected to) other services and interventions, whilst those who had previously avoided the ‘mesh-tightening’ interventionist gaze were likely to struggle to meet restrictive risk-based thresholds for referral and support when they sought it out. Speaking of a specific example with a young woman, Tony identified

the dilemma of whether to elevate risk levels in order to get what he saw as an essential service for the young person, something he had a “*big problem with*” as he regarded it as dishonest:

*“You’re almost massaging the tick boxes in order to get her a service... But in that situation I would have been happy to be a little bit generous with ticking things. Which I know is a bit of a problem, because I think she needs it, but she won’t get that support unless she gets it from there, and she can’t get in unless she’s got – it’s about rationing - unless she’s got extra ticks.”*

In Rob’s work around early intervention and prevention, young people needed to have a completed (voluntary) common assessment (CAF) prior to being referred for support – an additional means of gatekeeping provision. He described how practitioners were reluctant to subject some young people or their families to this level of assessment and scrutiny in order to access support:

*“Unless they’ve got a CAF we can’t help them. So they’re either going to have to wait until that person’s gone to crisis, or they’re going to have to make it up, and a lot of times we’re getting ones that are deliberately – and falsify is probably a strong word, but elaborate on the truth so they can get a CAF. So when we go and assess them, they’re actually not as bad as they say they are, so we go ‘they’re not that bad, we’re closing them.’”*

Although necessary in order to meet a young person’s needs, this type of activity amplified the individual’s recorded risks, increasing dissonance between them as living persons and their reported biography. It also had the potential to lead to negative labelling and potential stigmatisation of the person in the future.

Such action in the interests of ‘getting a service’ was not limited to individual cases. Organisations and practitioners negatively amplified the collective youth narrative in order to acquire funding for services:

*“It is sad, young people say it as well, and you often hear practitioners say about how it keeps them off the streets and out of trouble as though if young people aren’t in a youth club then they’ll be out causing trouble and there must be something in between the two. It’s sad that we do seem to criminalise a lot of young people. One of my students put in a funding bid about how if they’re not coming to youth club they’re out on the streets causing trouble... Part of it was to try and make the council recognise that ‘no, you need to provide a youth service’ but it’s a shame that that seems to be the alternative. – Joanne*

Similarly, Alex spoke of the drive towards negatively representing young people or neighbourhoods within funding applications in order to secure resources in a

competitive context:

*“We would take the worst stats possible when we were doing the funding application. “You look at the ‘Oh, that looks a particularly good stat. Maybe we won’t include that’, or, ‘Perhaps we’ll cloak it up in another way to show that it’s negative’. Because lies, damn lies and statistics. And it’s just that might be quite good, actually, but nationally we’re below average or something... I was looking at the forms and we were doing that whole analysis of need and you’ve got to big up how bad your area is so that you can try and get as much money in as possible to make you seem more deserving than the neighbouring community association or whoever else is applying for that money in another town. And we were all probably deserving of it. But the pot’s finite.”*

Terry explained how his organisation was less successful, compared to other ‘less scrupulous’ organisations, because they were “*too honest*” and tried to challenge the labelling and amplification of young people’s risk rather than “*bump[ing] it up a bit*” in order to pursue additional resources for services. Whilst he claimed that, in contrast to others, his service didn’t explicitly pursue stigmatising constructions of dangerous or risky youth to gain funding, the use of fear about, and the dangers and risks from young people formed a backdrop to service delivery, policy, and the allocation of resources. His own service had, for example, been “*saved*” from significant cuts and possible closure due to riots and a recent murder in the area,<sup>7</sup> where the increased concern about ‘youths’ led to continued political support and funding:

*“You know the riots, and there was a murder just down the road... It kind of saved us as a service a little bit, which sounds awful but it was young people that needed to be worked with and we were the service that was working with them.”*

The majority of those interviewed recognised tensions between the young person in front of them; the risk biographies contained within organisational risk assessments; and the constructions of young people, both individual and collective, for other audiences. Narratives of young people based upon individualisation and blame, where the young person was seen as wholly responsible for their own actions and circumstances, were often resisted by interviewees. Despite this, practitioners were

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<sup>7</sup> Accounts of the 2011 riots in a number of English cities highlighted the ambiguity and malleability of the term ‘youth’ within the policy context. The BBC focused on the riot-prone nature of those aged between 10-17 (BBC News, 2011), a group not significantly over-represented in rioting (compared to those aged 18-20 or those from ethnic minorities aged 18-39)(see Ministry of Justice, 2012), whilst a Cabinet Office commissioned study into ‘understanding the involvement of young people’ also exercised ambiguity of terms, with almost half of participants aged ‘18 and over’ (and 94% of under 18s not involved in the riots) (Morrell et al, 2011). This in itself demonstrates how ‘youth’ is flexibly constructed as risk and danger (and other factors are obfuscated), serving as a tool to responsabilise young people and justify increased attention, surveillance and intervention, whilst underlying socio-economic factors are ignored (see Newburn, 2012; Lambie, 2013).

faced with reconciling the needs of the young person and the demands of the organisation, amplifying the risks of those with whom they worked in order to gain funding or deliver a service, or attenuating them in order for individuals to access services they felt were needed. This tended to be reconciled as being in the interests of young people (who otherwise would not benefit from the service) or just part of the 'game' that played out across the youth services sector. Some interviewees did, however, question whom this actually served. Whilst most, if not all, of those interviewed spoke of acting in the interests of the young person, this was not always seen to be the case when discussing the motives of colleagues or other services, whose actions were at times viewed negatively. The suggestion was that practitioners did not solely manage the dissonant position between organisation and young person (Kemshall, 2000) but also acted, perhaps unsurprisingly, in their own interests, whether to maintain status, job, or personal safety in vulnerable situations. Rob explained how practitioners and managers operated around vague, malleable terms of risk and descriptions of young people in order to, as he described it, legitimise their work:

*"If you're providing a project for young carers, how do you define young carers?... If their parent has got a disability, they're a young carer, so that's how they got a lot of people in... They [funders] said 'if you want to do some work with young people who might have predisposition of getting pregnant', so you could get money for that. They'd up the risk factor to get the money for it, to legitimise their job, to legitimise the project. So, 'these young girls are definitely going to get pregnant', 'no they're not', you know. But they were the only ones that turned up at the centre, so if they don't do that they're not going to get the money to actually provide any activity for them."*

At times this resulted in what could be regarded as the optimum position for, as Lauren put it, "*non-ethical*" organisations (and perhaps practitioners) operating in a risk-averse managerial context: delivery of practice to 'low-risk' groups who can be presented as higher risk to funders seeking to support targeted provision.

*"What I'm seeing now with working with unemployed people is kind of seeing the vulnerable ones who weren't necessarily the risk-takers, just the ones who went under the radar or the ones who didn't have massively developed social skills, they seem to be coming through our programmes."*

In such a context, not only the net-widening effects of practice are evident (including lower risk young people under the surveillance and intervention gaze) (Smith, R., 2010; Peckover et al, 2011; Baker and Kelly, 2011), but also there are dangers that those in higher levels of crisis or danger, and who are more difficult (and costly) for an organisation to engage, work with, and demonstrate change, may be ignored or

missed.

In addition to the tendency to elevate young people's risks, there was also a suggestion that some organisations intentionally 'cherry-picked' those at the lower end of the 'at-risk' spectrum (Yates, 2012; Creaney and Smith, 2014) in order to arrive at an optimum position whereby they received funding for targeted work, but could deliver it in as risk-managed and efficient a way as possible. Samuel pointed to an example where a large-scale provider, commissioned on a payment-by-results basis, selected lower-risk, higher-success cases, whilst sub-contracting small voluntary sector groups to work, often with little return, with those identified as higher risk, having more intractable problems. This illustrates the interplay between managerialism, resources, and risk-management, whereby organisational risks (in this case where financial return on investment is considered to be low) and responsibilities are 'laid-off' or 'externalised' where possible, perhaps part of what Kennett et al (2015), in their study of local government, described as 'the great risk shift' of devolved risk and responsibility. Such an approach favours larger managerial organisations over smaller, 'hands-on' community-based initiatives, whose 'human' practices and alternative risk cultures may be regarded as inefficient or irrational. This type of risk management, for many an organisation, is first and foremost about its own governance (and possibly profitability), rather than the interests of young people, or arguably, broader social concerns. It also raises significant questions about the extent to which malleable risk-based targeting masks issues and dangers, whilst those most in need are missed, or present too much of a challenge and cost, to work with in an increasingly commercial environment.

#### **9.4 Risky Practice with Risky Young People**

In several interviews, practitioners expressed concerns about how some services and individual practitioners amplified the risky aspects of those with whom they worked, or the hazardous nature of their work. This was seen as a means of increasing individual status or elevating the work in the eyes of others.

Rachel recalled a previous project working with gangs, where a young person with marginal links to the service was shot. She described how her colleagues, keen to portray their work as dangerous, 'played up' their role to those outside the service and amplified their engagement with risk and those young people:

*"There is such kudos attached to working with the hardest and the grittiest and I just think, who is this about, you or them? I've come*

*across things which I've felt like you really should not be saying that or doing that as a practitioner with these young people because it's not about challenging that young person or bringing out their potential, it's about you wallowing in the glory of gang culture... I just don't believe that the only way you can work with those young people is to say, 'Right, I'm going to now pretend that I'm like some kind of gangster'."*

In Rachel's account, the practitioners mentioned appear to demonstrate elements of 'edgework' (Lyng, 1990, 2008), where there is a determination to operate (or to say they are operating) at the dangerous edges of practice. More than this, however, she described incidents where practitioners were keen to highlight to others their proximity to danger, often exaggerating both incidents and their role in them. At first analysis this 'edgework' analysis, whereby excitement and association with danger and risk are appealing, resonates strongly with the projection of this 'maverick', risky practice. There was, however, evidence in several interviewees' comments that it was the presentation of the risk context and those young people within it, rather than risky practice itself, that was central to this narrative. Joanne, for example, spoke of the need for some practitioners to work with "the hardest" young people, but also expressed some concerns about how this was presented:

*"I remember when I was at university one of the youth workers that I [knew] worked with the hardest young people ever, they worked with young people who were sex offenders and you thought well, you know, someone needs to do that job, I don't necessarily feel she needed to tell us how she works with the hardest young people and things."*

Samuel suggested that the communication of working with 'risky' and at-risk young people had a positive dimension, since it promoted the importance of inclusive work with young people:

*"It's almost a mark of pride to say you're working with people who are at risk of this or at risk of that. Which is good in a way because it really does drive inclusion and what's under that is people saying that they've got a real commitment to equality there."*

Such practice could be regarded as a form of what has been awkwardly termed in recent press as 'virtue signalling' (Bartholomew, 2015; Peters, 2015; Shariatmadari, 2016) – promoting virtuous positions often through doing little or nothing. Alternatively, given the apparent links to aggressive behaviour, it could be a reflection of a masculinised approach to practice based on grittiness or toughness of the practice and practitioner. Whilst there is insufficient evidence to make generalised claims, findings suggest that there may be differently gendered 'edges'



of dangerous practice. For example, as appeared the case in Natalie's account, feminine notions of edgework may reflect altruistic (or even sacrificial) action in the face of threat. The projected notion of dangerous practice, however, perhaps best reflects accounts of 'atrocious stories' in social work settings (White and Featherstone, 2005; Westwood, 2012), whereby stories of clients, catastrophe, and crisis are accompanied by reports of other organisations' incompetence in order to bolster their own credibility, and perhaps, sense of identity and importance.

Perhaps the greatest concern in such accounts is not so much the presentation of the practitioner's role (though clearly questions should be asked about such motivations), but about the way young people, and broader notions of youth are constructed in these exchanges. The presentation of edgy, dangerous practice contexts is dependent upon a construction of young people as the dangerous, or risky other. Thus, as with the construction of young people through funding mechanisms designed around risk-based targeting, there is a tendency to amplify, and communicate, risky dimensions of youth and youth practice.

Returning to Rachel's specific example of gangs – a sensitive arena of practice and academic study – it is possible to see how practitioners, policymakers and others have a mutual interest in, or at least a tendency towards, constructing young people as visible, dangerous others, thereby generating a population that can be subject to concern, intervention, and study. Liam suggested that the notion of gangs was constructed in this manner:

*"I grew up around drugs, violence and all those other things, and 'gangs'. We had no gangs. We had people that wanted to make money, and people that didn't. It was that simple for us... And because I knew a lot of people you might think we were in a gang together. It's rubbish. That label was put onto young people and they realised they could make money from using it."*

Such statements reflect both the pragmatic malleability of risk in practice and recent debates around gang construction (Pitts 2012; Hallsworth 2014; Fraser, 2015). Whilst it is not the intention here to undertake a critical analysis of gang construction and the universality of the term across different contexts, the issue, and the comments by Liam, Rachel, Terry, and others, raise further questions about the overall construction of youth as a marketable commodity by practitioners, organisations, policy-makers and academics.

## 9.5 The Price of Youth: Risk Malleability and Commodification

Notions of risk not only frame practitioners' assessment of, and interventions with young people, but also play a central role in the extent to which their work is funded and validated in a resource-limited environment. Interviews highlight the *'informal logics of risk'* (Horlick Jones, 2005a; 2005b) operating in informal youth contexts: the diverse, complex, and sometimes contradictory ways practitioners operate in relation to young people and risk. As in previous chapters, contingent, case-specific approaches to risk, underpinned by multiple situated rationalities (Broadhurst et al 2010; Kemshall 2010), are evident in practitioner responses, as are *'discretionary practice and subversion'* practices intended to promote young people's welfare (Briggs 2013, 27).

Practitioners often operated pragmatically to secure what they perceived to be the best for young people, their projects, themselves and / or their organisation. Processes of acquiring funding, contract negotiation, reporting, making and receiving referrals, and the general presentation of practice resulted in high levels of 'risk malleability', where the risks to, from, and of young people were amplified or attenuated according to situational needs. Findings reflect Goddard's observation that, rather than being neutral and objective, risk factor policy and practice is *"predicated upon a mixture of political, cultural, institutional and person factors"* (2014:18). As well as practitioners, some young people and their parents also learn to shape risk narratives in order to obtain services. This high malleability of young people's risk biographies means that trust in received information, and in those from different organisations, is often low.

Interviews suggest that both formal assessments and informal intervention and referral processes are subjective, and, to different degrees, malleable. They do, however, require adherence to a discourse of individual responsibility and blame, and to the *'outward appearance of control and efficiency'* (Horlick-Jones, 2005a) of assessment processes, both of which conflict with practitioners' construction of the young person in front of them as vulnerable or in need (see Chapter Six). Formal and informal risk processes are therefore sites of conflicting subjectivities (or at least different subjectivities in tension) rather than the objective / subjective dichotomy that is often portrayed (Slovic, 1999). The centrality of malleable risk constructions in service targeting also highlights the unreliability of risk-factor based approaches to intervention and prevention (Case and Haines 2009, 2014; O'Mahoney 2009; Goddard 2014). This risk-based service context represents more a measure of social anxiety, fear, and an 'institutionalised mistrust' of young people (Kelly 2003)

than an objective measure of young people's risks, *'driven less by a distribution of real, or imagined, ills in society, than by a changing distribution of ills in governance'* (Rothstein, 2006:215). Briggs (2013:26-27) has suggested that the *"reconfiguration"* of assessment processes can represent the subversion of neo-liberal policies, a way of placing welfare and needs back on the agenda at a practice level. Whilst there is evidence here that practitioners are able to subvert processes in order to pursue the needs of young people, their actions continue to exist within, and indeed may contribute to, the negative construction of 'risky youth' seemingly inherent in RFPP-driven policy and practice.

Through pragmatic processes of risk amplification and attenuation, the young person becomes a commodity in a market where being risky or 'at risk' is valuable currency amidst scarce resources allocated by risk-based targeting. Risk values determine if and how individuals are able to access (or avoid) services, what projects and services are funded, and ultimately what organisations and jobs survive in a resource-limited risk-based targeting environment. It can therefore be in the short-term interests of organisations, practitioners, and the young people themselves to amplify risk in order to secure funding.

The medium- to long-term consequences for young people may be less positive, however, with the potential for distorted 'risk biographies' and increased labelling, stigmatisation, surveillance, and intervention. Moreover, the risk-based model of resource allocation and intervention fuels a social context where the constructions and representations of youth as both 'at risk' and risky are ultimately amplified whilst structural factors of inequality such as class, race, and gender are hidden. Young people's agency is further diminished, with little or no control over how their individual or collective risk biographies are constructed - *'enforced choice biographies'* (Woodman and Wyn, 2015:47), shaped, or represented within and across institutional knowledge systems. Furthermore, 'youth' (particularly 'at-risk youth') becomes a commodified term in itself, with the amplification and presentation of young people as the 'risky others' benefiting those who seek to maintain or defend their jobs, services, organisation or profession through constructing themselves as the solution to the 'problem' of youth at risk. This presents a significant tension for practitioners, who become increasingly bound into the very risk- and danger- oriented narratives of 'youth' that they purportedly seek to challenge in their day to day 'human' and 'humane' work with young people.

## 9.6 Conclusion

This chapter highlights the complex role of practitioners in the risk construction of young people, both collectively and individually. The dominant risk-based approach to services for young people, exacerbated by austerity measures, service cuts, and neoliberal public sector practices, creates an environment where practitioners must balance what they regard as the needs of the young person with organisational demands, the volatile funding environment, and the often precarious nature of their employment. This results in pragmatism and simplification in order to reconcile moral and practical tensions (Lipsky 2010), though, as the previous two chapters indicate, this pragmatism cannot simply be attributed to the pursuit of personal interests (nor conversely, solely to altruism). Pragmatic practice in order to support services for young people also leads to the shaping of both formal and informal processes: risk assessments, referrals, funding bids, and service promotion, in ways that amplify or attenuate the risks of young people. 'Risk' is malleable, moulded according to situational needs, with young people becoming commodities: bartered, sold, and transferred on the basis on their risk value. Individual biographies, reflected in case notes that are shared across services, become subject to this pragmatism, and to market forces.

Risk-based systems intended to regulate and standardise practice have paradoxically created a complex web of more deeply obscured multiple subjectivities that rarely reflect the situation of the young person, nor are they trusted by other practitioners. Whilst still offering a thin veneer of objectivity, part of what could perhaps be considered part of the uncritical, 'idle talk' (Heidegger, 1927/2010:162) of the RFPP, the positive contribution of these systems to the lives of young people is highly questionable. Rather than solely creating '*more "noise" but little constructive change*' (Kemshall 2010, 1258), risk systems may themselves increase the long-term 'risks' to young people, with negatively amplified risk biographies potentially leading to increased labelling and intervention. Furthermore, the underpinning distrust of professional decision-making that drives the regulatory risk-based approach (Webb 2006; Butler & Drakeford 2005; Kemshall 2002) is displaced by distrust of both risk processes and the practitioners who navigate them. This subservience to risk-dominated policy and practice leads to ineffective practice and a distorted view of young people. A shift towards a more considered approach is needed, with an appreciation of risk supporting, rather than dominating, accountable, trusted professional decision-making.

Risk malleability is not limited to individual cases. Resource management systems

lead to the amplification of the risks facing, or posed by, groups of young people and 'youth' in general. Driven by a desire to meet needs and provide services, practitioners face the tension of promoting the risky and threatening nature of 'youth' in order to acquire funding, whilst also attempting to challenge negative constructions of young people. The practice context may not be alone in operating within this paradoxical position, with similar concerns arguably apparent in youth policy and academic domains (such as, for example, gangs and possibly the contemporary moral panic of child sexual exploitation) whereby there may be a tendency *"to seek out evidence of the new and the different"* (Shildrick, Blackman and MacDonald 2009:462), the risky and threatening, ultimately fuelling anxiety and fear of youth.

There is, therefore, a need to be more reflexive about how policy, practice, and research construct, commodify, and exploit 'youth' and 'risk', leveraging the 'fear of the future' in order to gain resources and reputation in the present. Whilst such a context is, at least in part, the result of neo-liberal individualisation, responsabilisation, and managerialism, collective 'speaking back' (Stanford, 2010), resistance, and refusal, rather than the reinforcement of flawed, stigmatising risk processes, is likely to be key to the furtherance of effective, authentic services for young people. This is not likely to be easy for the many practitioners attempting to navigate this complex context as best they can on a day-to-day basis. Practitioners, managers, and organisations require information, professional support systems, and new models of practice in order to challenge current risk-orthodoxy. Case and Haines' (2014) notion of 'positive youth justice' termed 'CFOS' (Children First, Offender Second), offers one possible alternative, with its rejection of negative, stigmatising risk-focused practice in favour of *"a modern economic-normative paradigm driven by a series of principles that sustain and promote child-friendly and child-appropriate policy and practice"* (2014:283). Approaches such as this, together with teReile's (2010) hope-based model, Bilson and Martin's (2016) suggested paradigm of 'help not blame' in social work, Hughes et al's (2014) call for the reinstatement of 'caring', and Davies' (2015) recognition that at least some youth work (and youth practitioners) orientate work towards the potentiality of, and respect for 'youth' and young people, suggest that there is still potential to redefine youth policy and practice in the interests of young people, and at the same time reconcile the *'professional dissonance'* (Kemshall, 2000) between practitioners' intentions and the bureaucratic, pragmatic actions they must undertake in the field.

## CHAPTER TEN: FINAL CONCLUSIONS

The primary research aim of this thesis was to explore the question:

*How do practitioners working with young people in informal contexts engage with 'risk' and risk discourses and how does this impact on how they understand and deliver interventions with children and young people?*

The study illuminates how practitioners make sense of their work, the organisational context in which it takes place, and their interactions with young people, and in doing so makes a significant contribution to the in-depth understanding of how youth practitioners construct and engage with often competing discourses of risk and young people in their work. The narrative, biographical accounts, rich in both detail and reflexivity, are vital to understanding the micro-politics and 'situated rationalities' of practice, and to gaining further insights into how practice is a site of tension where the often-conflicting needs of young people, organisational demands, and personal factors are negotiated. Practitioners have a pivotal role in mediating policy drivers and managerial demands. As the primary interface between young people and increasingly limited services and resources, how practitioners interpret their professional role and navigate the complex context, framed by both political influences and organisational policy, has significant consequences that affect both young people and practitioners themselves. Thus, practitioner perspectives and voices not only offer useful insights into the general context of practice, but are central to understanding how the practice field is mediated, and how risk biographies and constructions of youth are shaped and co-created in this complex and dynamic environment. The exploration of this practitioner lens, based on reflections on practice experiences, and the personal / professional issues that arise from them, illuminates the considerable tensions and competing discourses of risk and youth within the framework of professional decision-making and action, highlighting the pressures that practitioners face in reconciling their decisions in relation to individual needs, organisational and bureaucratic / managerial demands, and personal interest or safety.

In addition to bringing forward the detailed narratives, experiences and emotions of practitioners, the thesis makes three significant and original contributions to the body of knowledge around young people, risk and the practice context: a) an exploration of the concept of the dynamic risk-world of practice; b) developing an

understanding of how organisational risk- and responsibility aversion- impacts on practitioners; and c) demonstrating how risk becomes malleable through organisational processes and practitioners' actions and interactions. I will discuss each of these in turn.

## **10.1 The Risk-World of the Youth Practitioner**

Firstly, the in-depth exploration highlights a dynamic practice risk-world (reflecting aspects of Heidegger's (1927/2010) and Husserl's (1936/1970) notions of 'umwelt' and 'lifeworld'), where decision-making is both technical/rational and simultaneously influenced by emotional, personal, and moral/philosophical factors. The shaping of decisions within and around the practitioner 'risk-world' transcends explanations of decision-making as simply bureaucratic simplification (Lipsky, 2010), altruistic endeavour, the enacting of professional ethical guidelines, or defensible practice based on solely work- or profession-based modes of rationality (Kemshall, 1998a; Baker and Wilkinson, 2011). Studies of practitioner decision-making have tended to construct 'the practitioner' as a disembodied deliverer of services, either operating to organisational instruction or normative professional codes and systems (Webb, 2006). Where research has considered broader perspectives of human decision-making, including, for example, emotions, experiences, or personal morality, often these factors have been either regarded as problematic bias (Kasperson et al, 1988) or have tended to remain located only at the practice level – focused on the field and the practitioners' interaction with it (for example Chamberlayne, 2004; Banks and Williams, 2005; Horlick-Jones, 2006; Taylor and White, 2006; Broadhurst, 2010).

Practitioners' views and decision-making about their work, their employer, and young people are shaped by a wide range of factors, both professional and personal. The practitioner locates decisions about what work to undertake, whom they seek to work for and how, or even whether to intervene based on a 360-degree risk-world that considers their personal philosophy about young people and the work (for example in relation to trust); young people's (perceived or actual) needs; organisational demands; physical, emotional, reputational, and financial risks; previous experiences; and an array of personal factors. Thus, choosing whether to take young people on a trip, rent a van to help an individual, enter a derelict building to meet someone, intervene in a fight, or even whether to carry on in the work often involved complex multi-dimensional processes that transcended traditional notions of professional rational and defensible decision-making (Kemshall, 1998a; Baker and Wilkinson, 2011). The extent to which the practitioner goes above and beyond

organisational policy is, therefore, not only informed by the perceived costs or benefits of the intervention itself, or by adherence to professional codes, but by previous experiences of taking risks, the potential impact of job loss (on self and family), and by their understanding and approach to young people, their needs, and issues of trust. For some practitioners, doing the right, human and humane thing (as a moral position) was more important than doing things 'right' by adhering to organisational policy. In such cases 'defensible practice' appeared to be more about whether practitioners were able to reconcile their actions within a personal moral framework than about compliance with organisational, professional or legal positions per se. Decisions were also influenced by previous experiences, with some practitioners continuing to be affected by historical experiences where they had felt let down by either young people or, more commonly, their managers and the organisation when faced with potentially volatile situations. Because of the dynamic nature of these inter-related factors, personal positions around practice and risk shift, sometimes relatively rapidly, as the balance of benefits and costs - fears, physical threat, emotional well-being, reputational or financial risk - re-align as a consequence of events, organisational or managerial changes, or personal circumstances.

These findings have considerable implications for our understanding not only for youth, but also for broader human services practice. Practitioners are not, nor should they be treated as, disembodied instrumental service deliverers operating solely to organisational protocols or other regulatory mechanisms. Of course practitioners are mindful of, and for the most part operate within, such frameworks, however the very strength of the youth practitioner, including the extent to which they might succeed in meeting the expectations of public policy, arguably lies in their ability to empathise, engage with, and effectively respond to the young person in an authentic and appropriate manner. This inevitably involves the "human and humane" processes mentioned by several of those interviewed. However, this is not easy to reconcile with the confidence-based (as opposed to trust-based) (Tonkiss and Passey, 1999) regulation and reductionism of public sector managerial approaches.

There is a danger that these findings could be interpreted in a manner that leads to psychometric profiling of practitioners (see, for example, Hartje, 2007; Hartje et al, 2008), with the intention to recruit more compliant workers and eliminate (or reduce) autonomous practice risks to the organisation. Whilst such an interpretation might be consistent with bureaucratic managerialism and the drive for instrumental service delivery (Clarke, Gewertz and McLaughlin, 2000; Webb, 2006; Parton, 2006;



Broadhurst et al, 2010; Houston, 2013), it would be wrong to interpret findings in this way for several reasons. Many of the negative factors that impact upon the practitioner's risk-world originate from the organisational context, with past experiences of negative, ambivalent, over-bureaucratic, inhuman or risk-averse management practices considerably affecting practitioners' long-term outlook about their work. Organisations might, therefore, more effectively examine how to engage with staff in the complexity of practice situations, offer appropriate management and support in relation to problematic incidents, and ensure that espoused human and humane approaches to young people (and staff) are reflected in practice throughout, and at every level of, the organisation (see Dekker, 2012). Furthermore, findings in this thesis highlight that passion for and commitment to work with young people for their benefit is an undervalued yet delicate resource, often vital in effectively engaging young people with social organisations. Rather than stifling this in confidence-based bureaucracy or eliminating it in the search for managerially compliant individuals, this passion and commitment should be fostered and channelled in the interests of young people and the organisations and systems who claim to serve them. This demands a shift in thinking away from the RFPP-driven construction of young people as potential problems to be managed (Haines and Case, 2008; 2015), and risk-, responsibility-, and blame-averse practice dominated primarily by compliance and targets (Webb, 2006). Instead, there is a pressing need to re-discover the 'human and humane' in human services, both in terms of how the young person is constructed, and how staff are managed and supported in their often difficult and sometimes risky work.

## **10.2 Risk, Retreat and the Responsibilised Grey Area of Practice**

The second area of original contribution explores how organisational risk- and responsibility-aversion impacts on practitioners themselves. Not only are young people subject to responsabilisation and blame for their action or inactions (including by services that purport to support them) (France, 2007; Liebenberg, Ungar and Ikeda, 2013), but practitioners face similar processes within the workplace (Harrison, 1997; Kemshall, 2002). The bureaucratic 'risk management of everything' (Power, 2007), creates operational environments where risk processes (for example assessments, risk thresholds, and referral procedures) assume notions of rational decision-making in a predictable, controlled environment. Through such mechanisms, the practitioner is regarded in terms of a professional bureaucrat (Weber, 1968), expected to enact technicist approaches intended to standardise practice (and thus limit, remove or responsabilise independent professional decision-

making). If, as is the case in interviewees' accounts, practice operates in complex situations that are either unpredictable, or are (intentionally or otherwise) outside organisational policy and procedure, the practitioner faces a tension of working in the responsabilised 'grey area' of practice between the organisation and the needs of the client, or retreating behind bureaucratic processes which limit their (and their organisation's) exposure to risks, but obstruct the effective work with young people that might be necessary to fulfil the objectives of the organisation.

Practitioners respond to this responsabilised grey area in different ways, depending upon the dynamic risk-world they experience, and their personal attunement to safety, risk, and young people. Whilst this complex and shifting risk-world makes a fixed typology of responses problematic, it is possible to identify a range of positions practitioners occupy, though not always by choice. For some, balancing idealism and pragmatism means navigating this responsabilised grey area on a regular basis, either as (seemingly rare) 'mavericks' doing what they regard as 'the right thing' in spite of organisational policy (Stanford, 2010), or more commonly as reluctant 'edge-workers' (Lyng, 2008), seeking to act in the best interests of young people whilst also managing organisational demands. This sometimes means bending procedures, or not disclosing aspects of risky practice to managers where it could be regarded as 'morally defensible' in the interests of the young person. Other practitioners seek organisational and practice 'comfort zones' that allow them some personal and professional security through support from and compliance with management and policy, yet feel able to be pragmatic in the interests of young people. This may involve 'playing the game', attempting to shape policies, procedures and services to meet their, and the young person's, needs. Finally, some practitioners retreat with the organisation, or sometimes further, to risk-averse positions that offer a greater sense of security for the individual. This can be observed through inflexible, formal and highly bureaucratised working that leads to reduced contact with young people, and through the utilisation of policies and procedures solely to insulate the practitioner from harm. With the least experienced practitioners within the study often operating in riskier grey areas, there is also a suggestion that, for some at least, professionalisation and career progression towards practitioner-manager or outright management positions may also represent a retreat from the uncertainties (and 'risks') of face-to-face work to seemingly safer bureaucratic managerialism.

All these positions present potential hazards to the practitioner (and indeed to the organisation). In the responsabilised grey areas, practitioners must rely on the

fragility of reductionist and bureaucratic defensible practice (Kemshall, 1998a; Baker and Wilkinson, 2011) to justify their actions, potentially subject to blame, physical harm or the loss of a job or career if things go wrong (Kemshall, 2002; Jones, 2014). It can also be an emotionally difficult and isolating area (Weinberg, 2009), requiring what one interviewee described as 'moral resilience'. This relationship between practitioner and organisation generates its own risks, with the potential for poor or dangerous practice to flourish unchecked to the detriment of young people. Alternatively, if 'retreating' behind risk-averse bureaucratic firewalls, there is the danger that practice becomes 'defensive' and remote (Harrison, 1997; Whitaker and Havard, 2015; Trevithick, 2011, Kemshall, 2010), unable to reach those young people deemed to be at-risk or risky, the very people services have been increasingly required to focus on. This in turn can lead to employment risks and organisational failure. These risk / retreat positions can rarely be ascribed simply to the pursuit of self-interest (Lipsky, 2010), or solely to organisational or professional culture (Whitaker and Havard, 2015), but are influenced by social and organisational contexts, management approaches, experiences of risk and risk-taking in practice, levels of trust and mistrust (in the organisation, young people and colleagues), and by personal values, circumstances and attitudes to risk-taking. As longitudinal interviews showed, these positions are dynamic, sensitive to situational changes and to the long-term pressures of responsibilised practice. For some, this context leads to 'professional dissonance' (James, 1994; Kemshall, 2000) or 'moral distress' (Jameton, 1984; Weinberg, 2009), where the personal drive to meet young people's need is in direct conflict with the bureaucratic managerialism and risk-aversion of their organisation and / or colleagues. There is also evidence of casualties of this situation, where, over time, the only safe retreat for the practitioner has been to leave the workplace, or the field entirely.

The extent to which fears and concerns about blame have led to risk- and responsibility- aversion across organisations, management, and practice are apparent throughout the study. Perhaps unsurprisingly in hierarchical bureaucratic contexts, it is front-line practitioners, and often those least experienced or well paid, who bear many of the consequences of this risk/blame context. The increased neo-liberal marketisation of public services, austerity measures, and targeted provision (Davies, 2013, 2014; Davies and Merton, 2010; Rogowski, 2012) appear only to have exacerbated these tensions, with further risk- and responsibility-averse managerial practice combining with a precarious employment context to place further pressure on those expected to meet young people's needs, and to deliver 'results' for the organisation. Whilst, therefore, there is much to be said for attempts

to revise risk-based practice and procedures, particularly in youth justice domains (see Haines and Case, 2015; Smith, R., 2014), findings within this study highlight that procedural changes may not go far enough and changing the risk / blame world of children and youth services requires not only a reconfiguration of assessment and operational procedures, but a much broader approach to all youth practice underpinned by notions of a 'just culture' (Dekker, 2012) for both young people and those working with them. Bridging the gap between the practitioner and the organisation demands an explicit re-affirmation of, and shared commitment to, the underlying purpose of practice, and a focus on facilitating dialogue, decision-making, reflection and transparency with 'individuals *in* systems' (Dekker, 2012:80) rather than on the regulation of individuals *by* bureaucratic systems designed to 'deliver' the technical demands of public policy.

### **10.3 Risk Malleability**

Finally, the thesis makes a distinctive and original contribution to understanding how risk becomes malleable through organisational processes and practitioners' actions and interactions, resulting in the shaping of organisationally manufactured risk-biographies and the commodification of young people as risk objects. Efforts to balance young people's needs, organisational demands, and personal risks lead to pragmatic 'informal logics' (Horlick Jones, 2005a, 2005b), 'situated rationalities' (Broadhurst et al, 2010), 'gaming' practices (Creaney and Smith, 2014; Yates, 2012), and contingent acts (Lipsky, 2010; Ball, 1987; Broadhurst et al, 2010). Risk-based systems, referral processes, case notes, and practice dialogue become sites of deeply obscured subjective realities that rarely reflect the lived realities or identities of the young person with whom the organisation is working. Through organisational processes, 'risk' becomes malleable, moulded according to situational needs, with practitioners (and organisations) amplifying or attenuating risks in order to enable individuals to access provision, demonstrate effective targeting of practice, or access funding. The amplification of youth as risky and threatening in particular extends to the overall presentation of practice to potential funders and to the public in general. This highlights the paradoxical and dissonant nature of much youth practice: advocating the positive aspects of youth and young people whilst simultaneously constructing youth as risky in order to provide the rationale for continued resources in a particular policy environment.

As a consequence of the dominant RFPP discourse that proliferates across youth policy and practice, and of the malleable risk practices employed in order to

navigate this practice environment, young people, and 'youth' in general, become risk commodities, their value measured in terms of risk factors and the opportunities and risks they may pose to organisations. Findings show that this 'risk commodification of youth' is at times explicit, with young people allocated a financial value to services based upon the risks they are reported to evidence. At other times it is more tacit, yet possibly more pervasive, with young people's circumstances, behaviour and aspects of their identity constructed and re-presented in terms of risk, being 'risky' or 'at-risk', in order to acquire services or gain resources. Such actions, though often sitting uncomfortably with practitioners (contributing to further dissonance and moral distress for some), are part of the 'game', where limited resources are increasingly targeted towards those able to evidence (or at least present) work with young people deemed 'at-risk'.

This context of risk malleability and commodification brings to mind Beck's (1992) macro-level risk society analysis:

*The market-expanding exploitation of risks favours a general to and fro between revealing and concealing risks – with the effect that ultimately no one quite knows whether the 'problem' might not be the 'solution' and vice versa, who profits from what, where responsibilities for creation are being covered up or concealed through causal speculations, and whether the whole talk about risk is not the expression of a displaced political drama, which in reality intends something quite different. (Beck 1992:47).*

The 'displaced political drama' of youth services takes place at the expense of young people who, despite the best efforts of many of those within the field, continue to be subject to selective, negative, stigmatising accounts of their lives and of youth in general. Indeed, in a neo-liberal market context of targeted rather than universal services (Davies, 2013), it is this negative construction of youth that justifies interventions, wins contracts, generates funds, and pays salaries.

## **10.4 Future Research**

The thesis highlights numerous areas for future research. Decision-making and the practitioner risk-world outlined in this study could be explored further, particularly with a view to examining how race, gender, and other aspects of power and identity shape the experiences of practitioners and the decisions they make. There are also opportunities to study this complex, situated risk decision-making further in the

context of morality, practical wisdom, and virtue ethics (see, for example, Kinsella and Pitman, 2012), as well as developing a greater understanding of how experience and personal value systems dynamically interact with notions of professional values on a day-to-day basis.

The notion of the 'responsibilised zone' of practice raises many questions about the operation of both practitioner and organisations, and how reputational, financial, personal, and professional risks might be avoided or displaced onto others. Organisational and managerial contexts clearly play a significant part in practitioners' responses to risk and there is potential to explore how different types of organisational structure and management approaches support or hinder practitioners to work effectively and accountably in challenging areas. Given the extent of risk- and responsibility-aversion discussed by Power (2004; 2007) and examples of blame in social work and beyond (for example, Jones, 2014), a greater understanding of this responsibilised zone, and of how individuals (managers and front-line practitioners) respond within such a context, may be of significant value to human service and organisational development.

The thesis raises questions about how young people, both individually and collectively, are dynamically constructed in the current policy / practice context. The processes by which young people's documented biographies of risk are created by and shared across organisations demands considerable and urgent attention. Findings highlight how such accounts are rarely seen by practitioners to represent the young person appropriately – reflecting a collection of historical 'bad moments', amplified accounts and perceived negative possibilities for those subjected to the interventionist gaze. Retained in 'hidden pages' of confidential databases and shared across organisations when making referrals, these accounts can have an enduring effect on the services young people receive and how practitioners engage with them. Individual young people themselves may have little recourse to challenge such accounts, if they are aware of them at all. There is, therefore, a pressing need to examine this aspect of organisational practice and the impact it has on individual young people's lives. There may also be potential to examine how these constructed narratives of young people's risk and behaviour relate to both practitioners' experiences of young people and young people's own 'risk biographies' (Kelly, 2007). Furthermore, the dynamic interplay and co-production between discourses of youth and social, political, and policy responses to young people in general demands further problematisation, particularly in relation to risk constructions (Wyn and White, 1997; Kelly, 2000; Woodman and Threadgold, 2011).

Within this context, specific risk areas impact on young people in different and inter-related ways. The thesis has highlighted how themes such as 'young carers' and 'Child Sexual Exploitation' (CSE), whilst representing areas of real concern, can be utilised almost as moral panics, amplifying the extent of concerns and fear to secure resources. As with Castel's (1991) analysis of mental health, the utilisation of the 'at risk' prefix can serve to subject larger numbers of young people to intervention or surveillance, which may not always be justified or serve the interests of the person. The potential stigmatising effects of such approaches appear, for example, rarely to be considered. Furthermore, through the utilisation of risk factor analysis, many of these areas are linked, so a young carer, for example, may automatically be considered at-risk from CSE (see, for example, College of Policing, 2013). There is further potential to explore how specific concerns become mobilised in policy and practice, and how, through organisations, professional groups, and practitioners, risk-based modes of operation serve to amplify concerns, widen surveillance and intervention nets, and potentially obfuscate the real needs of certain groups of young people.

The very question of the 'interventionist gaze' raises another area of potential research. Several practitioners within the study reported risks as being culturally and socially mediated, with certain populations of young people (BME groups and the urban poor) more likely to be subject to intervention and surveillance than others. Whilst this is far from surprising (see for example, Henman and Marston, 2008; Meara and McVie, 2005, Monahan, 2008; Wrennall, 2010), several accounts also highlighted how other communities, particularly those with greater social capital, were able to render themselves invisible, or at least less visible, to public service agencies, despite, practitioners believed, having similar (or at times worse) problems. This appears to happen in part due to the gaze being focussed on stigmatised groups. However, the more affluent are also able to access informal or off-the-record support through existing networks and private provision that is rarely available to others. Thus, the predominantly white middle-classes are able to avoid or more effectively navigate social provision without being subject to high levels of surveillance or stigmatisation. The question of how different social groups are rendered visible whilst others retain institutional invisibility is an important part of understanding how risks (and risk factors) are socially constructed and reinforced. This also forms part of the mechanics through which social inequality is reproduced across different groups within society, and its mechanisms of operation deserve further attention.

## 10.5 Beyond Risk?

The Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm has had a profound impact on practice across the spectrum of services for children and young people. Despite growing criticism of the approach (for example, O'Malley, 2001; Bessant, 2001; Armstrong, 2006b; Case, 2006; O'Mahoney, 2009; Haines and Case, 2009; Kelly, 2000; Foster and Spencer, 2011), and pockets of emerging alternative practice in areas such as youth justice (Haines and Case, 2015; Smith, R., 2014), many young people continue to be constructed, by both society and the practice domains that seek to help them, as risk objects, subject to surveillance, intervention, and commodification by their perceived risk value or threat. Moreover, the sprawling 'risk management of everything' (Power, 2004) and the subsequent risk-averse retreat from practice, together with the combination of neo-liberal marketisation, target-based bureaucratic managerialism, and cuts to public services (Davies, 2013) have served to create an increasing risk-focus to youth practice. This has led not only to the reinforcement of a stigmatising narrative of young people as problem, risk or trouble, but also to a policy and practice context that feeds upon the construction and amplification of young people at-risk and as-risk. In some senses, youth policy, practice and much of the research that informs it, is a greater indication of adult fear of young people and the future than it is of the social condition of, and problems facing, young people themselves. Issues of risk and precarity clearly do impact on young people, however, an adult lens that is rarely reflexive and fails to problematise itself in relation to these issues serves only to otherise young people, reinforcing notions of problematic, risky, and precarious transitions to a romanticised fixed state of (secure) adulthood that does not exist for many.

This thesis has highlighted that for those working with young people, the challenges of reconciling these different constructions of young people, organisational demands, and their own drive to be 'human and humane' create personal and professional tensions on a regular basis. Whilst the short-term needs of young people, practitioners and organisations might be met by the contingent and pragmatic practices intend to reconcile these tensions, in the longer term this practice risk-world serves neither young people, whose manufactured individual and collective biographies become risk-inflated or subject to further construction as the fearful other, nor practitioners, who are rarely comfortable with their role in the continued presentation of risky young people, or in the responsabilised, risk-averse, mistrusting and blame-focused practice domain. Ultimately, whilst blame does appear to play



an ever-increasing social function, this approach does not serve the needs of either public policy or organisations, since, constructed on weak foundations, it leads to contradictory outcomes and threatens long-term policy failure.

With risk-framed systems generating their own hazards by exaggerating dangers and stigmatising young people, we must ask the question of how we move beyond this risk-dominated practice context towards an approach that avoids negative constructions of youth and more effectively reconciles some of the tensions faced by the practitioner. The thesis demonstrates that such change must go well beyond revisions to assessment processes and risk factor metrics. It needs to challenge the underlying paradigm of RFPP, and the broader risk assumptions that govern our organisational and individual decisions in the field of work with young people. There is an opportunity to build on emerging alternative approaches based on hope and representational justice (Te Reile, 2010, 2015), the promotion of positive behaviour and outcomes (Case and Haines 2014), young people's agency, voice and rights, and the potentiality of, and respect for, youth reflected in some youth work theory and practice (Davies, 2015), as well as the ongoing work to shift away from RFPP in youth justice and elsewhere. This is a challenge for practice, policy-making, and academic theory and research. It demands further scrutiny of the impact of negative constructions of youth underpinned by a risk-focused 'negative utopia of safety' (Levitas, 2000:203), and a re-imagining of youth studies as a positive force for social change (Woodman and Threadgold, 2011; Akom, Ginwright and Cammarota, 2008; Kelly, 2011b). Youth practice needs to be both human and humane, and practitioners should be supported, and trusted, to make informed, reflective decisions in a complex context where the best interests of young people in both the medium and long-term are not obfuscated by all-encompassing, ambiguous risk-processes or distorted by competing organisational interests and by the societal and institutional fear of young people.

There is, of course, the danger that such positions can appear 'too utopian', removed from those in day-to-day practice settings, and unlikely to have any practical impact, particularly given the imposing and seemingly immovable forces of neo-liberal public sector reform. This thesis highlights, however, that despite the many challenges, there remain committed practitioners and managers willing to 'go the extra mile' in the interests of young people, to challenge negative constructions of young people in their work and 'speak back' to fear (Stanford, 2010). Spaces can and do exist for alternative approaches, and these should be fostered rather than marginalised by bureaucratic and risk-averse systems and funding regimes.

Alongside the need for clear and consistent positive messages about youth, there is a pressing need for more supportive and reflexive environments (organisationally, managerially, and through professional and occupational associations). If they are to truly foster practice which meets young people's needs, working environments must recognise the complex risk-worlds of both organisations and individuals, and enable practitioners to deliver passionate, human and humane practice in a risk-aware rather than risk-dominated and risk-averse decision-making context.

## Appendix One: Collated Overview of 'Risk' within UK Government Policy Documents 1996-2009

Collated Overview of 'Risk' within UK Government Policy Documents 1996-2009						
Document	Date	Risk frequency	Other terms	Risks	Risk factors	Risk formulation
Misspent Youth: Young People and Crime (Audit Commission)	Nov 1996	69 (123 pages) "At risk"	Harm – 3 poverty – 1 neglect - 1  abuse 9 – 5 substance abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Offending</li> <li>○ family breakdown</li> <li>○ school exclusion</li> <li>○ (with some ambiguous referrals)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ gender, with boys more likely to offend than girls;</li> <li>○ inadequate parenting;</li> <li>○ aggressive and hyperactive behaviour in early childhood;</li> <li>○ truancy and exclusion from school;</li> <li>○ peer group pressure to offend;</li> <li>○ unstable living conditions;</li> <li>○ lack of training and employment; and</li> <li>○ drug and alcohol abuse</li> <li>○ link to low birthweight,</li> <li>○ low IQ at 3,</li> <li>○ problems shortly after birth</li> <li>○ Neglect by parents,</li> <li>○ poor maternal and domestic care before the age of five years,</li> <li>○ insecure attachment,</li> <li>○ family conflict</li> <li>○ the absence of a good relationship with either parent</li> <li>○ harsh punishment,</li> <li>○ cruelty and abuse,</li> <li>○ family crime,</li> <li>○ stepchildren,</li> <li>○ lone parent families,</li> </ul>	<p>At risk – as a term meaning 'with a probability of offending'</p> <p>At risk becomes a perpetrator term, little or no links to abuse, harm, neglect etc.</p> <p>"high risk areas" - geographically based risk assessment – proposes targeting statistically high risk (areas with high risk factor prevalence) neighbourhoods</p> <p>RFA</p> <p>Risk / resilience</p> <p>Emergence of prevention: "Steps can be taken by a wide range of agencies to address such problems by intervening before those at risk start to offend." (from exec summary report)</p>

Collated Overview of 'Risk' within UK Government Policy Documents 1996-2009						
Document	Date	Risk frequency	Other terms	Risks	Risk factors	Risk formulation
					○ absence of male authority figure	
No More Excuses: A new approach to tackling youth crime in England and Wales - White Paper	Nov 1997	18 (web doc, no. of pages unknown)  "At risk" "Risk" "risk reduction"	Neglect – 1, danger, abuse – no occurrence  Harm 5 – ABH, harm caused by yp, self-harm	○ To public from criminal young people ○ Offending ○ Involvement in crime ○ Escalation of offending ○ Victims of offending ○ Acting anti-socially ○ some organisation risk	○ "psychological, family, social, economic, cultural, opportunity." ○ truancy ○ youth unemployment ○ drug or alcohol misuse ○ school or home problems	At risk – as term focussed on probability / risk of offending  RFA  Risk / resilience introduced  Addressing truancy and unemployment is a crime reduction strategy: "They are also ways of helping to tackle the roots of juvenile crime. Action to address the causes of truancy and youth unemployment, for example, should also reduce the risk of youngsters becoming involved in crime"  "criminalisation" of services
Misspent Youth '98: The Challenge for Youth Justice (Audit Commission)	June 1998	12 (8 pages) predominantly 'at risk' or 'at greatest risk'	Harm, poverty, neglect – no occurrence  abuse 1 – substance abuse	○ Offending ○ Re-offending ○ + some ambiguous references (assumed offending)	○ "inadequate parenting", ○ "drug and alcohol abuse", ○ "aggressive, hyperactive behaviour", ○ "truancy and exclusions", ○ "peer group pressure", ○ "unstable living conditions", ○ "lack of training and	Strengthening of prevention / early intervention: "The best way to reduce crime by young people is to prevent them from offending in the first place through co-

Collated Overview of 'Risk' within UK Government Policy Documents 1996-2009						
Document	Date	Risk frequency	Other terms	Risks	Risk factors	Risk formulation
					employment” (as misspent youth 96)	ordinated strategies. Criminalisation of services
Teenage Pregnancy (SEU)	June 1999	77 (139 pages)  Risk, at risk, special risk, risk factor, multiple risk factors, risk taking behaviour, high risk populations	Danger: 4 (sex, pregnancy, complications)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “adverse outcomes” (social)</li> <li>○ Social exclusion (due to pregnancy)</li> <li>○ poor health</li> <li>○ reproductive problems</li> <li>○ teen parenthood</li> <li>○ STIs</li> <li>○ poverty</li> <li>○ low qualifications</li> <li>○ increased likelihood of divorce</li> <li>○ being benefit recipients</li> <li>○ having large families</li> <li>○ infant mortality</li> <li>○ dropping out of learning</li> <li>○ children becoming teen parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Teen parents (as factor for children to be teen parents)</li> <li>○ poverty</li> <li>○ disadvantage (history of)</li> <li>○ poor educational attainment</li> <li>○ In / leaving care</li> <li>○ social class (low)</li> <li>○ Truancy / school exclusion</li> <li>○ In trouble with police / crime</li> <li>○ Multiple risk factors</li> <li>○ Emotional problems at 7 or 16</li> <li>○ preference for being a young mother</li> <li>○ families who experience financial adversity with child aged 7 or 16</li> <li>○ Some ethnic minority groups</li> <li>○ Ignorance about sex</li> <li>○ peer pressure</li> <li>○ vulnerability (yp who are vulnerable)</li> <li>○ Not using contraception</li> <li>○ Risk taking behaviour</li> <li>○ offenders</li> <li>○ sisters of teen mums</li> <li>○ NEETS</li> <li>○ sexual abuse</li> </ul>	<p>Strong emergence of risk factor analysis in non-criminological environments (albeit semi-epidemiological one).</p> <p>Multiple risk factors</p> <p>Geographical risk identification – TP hot spots on basis of RFA</p> <p>Risk taking behaviour named</p> <p>Emergence of targeting</p>
Bridging the Gap	July 1999	39 (123 pages)	Danger: 3 (of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Underachievement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Educational</li> </ul>	Risk factor analysis –

Collated Overview of 'Risk' within UK Government Policy Documents 1996-2009						
Document	Date	Risk frequency	Other terms	Risks	Risk factors	Risk formulation
(SEU)		at risk, at particular risk, high risk, risk factors, at risk groups	dropping out / becoming disaffected)  Abuse: 2 (1 physical, 1 substance abuse)  No neglect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ disaffection</li> <li>○ non-participation in learning</li> <li>○ social exclusion</li> <li>○ NEET</li> <li>○ Truancy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ underachievement</li> <li>○ educational disaffection</li> <li>○ family disadvantage</li> <li>○ poverty</li> <li>○ ethnic minorities</li> <li>○ carers</li> <li>○ looked after young people</li> <li>○ homeless</li> <li>○ yp with learning disability / other disability</li> <li>○ those with mental illness</li> <li>○ teenage parents</li> <li>○ those misusing drugs and alcohol</li> </ul>	<p>primary risk identified as underachievement / disaffection.</p> <p>Patterns of risks / risk factors emerging.</p>
PAT 12: Young People (SEU)	March 2000	108 (134 pages)  at risk, multiple risk factors, new risks, most acute risks, at risk groups, risk factors, risky activities, risk and protective factors, taking risks		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>Ambiguity in identifying risk</b></li> <li>○ social exclusion</li> <li>○ drug abuse</li> <li>○ youth crime</li> <li>○ school age parenthood / teenage pregnancy</li> <li>○ school failure</li> <li>○ mental health problems (incl. Self harm &amp; eating disorders)</li> <li>○ homelessness</li> <li>○ delinquency</li> <li>○ re-offending</li> <li>○ “drugs, sex and crime”</li> <li>○ running away</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Poor parenting</li> <li>○ family conflict</li> <li>○ low income and poor housing</li> <li>○ in care</li> <li>○ low achievement</li> <li>○ truancy</li> <li>○ exclusion</li> <li>○ disadvantaged neighbourhood</li> <li>○ friends condoning or involved in risky behaviour</li> <li>○ gender (girls more at risk in some domains)</li> <li>○ young people from re-constituted families (runaway risk)</li> <li>○ delinquent siblings</li> </ul>	<p>Mention of 'new approach' to youth at risk.</p> <p>Real solidification of risk &amp; introduction of protective dimension.</p> <p>“The PAT believes that at the root of these problems lies a structural weakness – the failure of existing structures to provide a coherent national approach to young people at risk.”</p> <p>YP become synonymous with risk.</p> <p>Acknowledgement that RFA is not exact</p>

Collated Overview of 'Risk' within UK Government Policy Documents 1996-2009						
Document	Date	Risk frequency	Other terms	Risks	Risk factors	Risk formulation
						<p>science (but no more said)</p> <p>Development of 'risk society' – new developments bring new risks.</p> <p>Risks are not specified early in document</p>
Connexions: The Best Start in Life for Every Young Person	Jan 2000	17 (63 pages) at risk..., risk factors	Abuse: 3 (drug abuse) Neglect: 0 Harm: 0 Danger: 2 poverty: 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ disadvantage</li> <li>○ Dropping out of learning / education</li> <li>○ excluding themselves from other opportunities</li> <li>○ youth crime</li> <li>○ Depression</li> <li>○ poor physical health</li> <li>○ disaffection</li> <li>○ not participating effectively in education or training</li> <li>○ disengagement from education</li> <li>○ social exclusion</li> <li>○ underachievement</li> <li>○ becoming disconnected from learning or work</li> <li>○</li> <li>○</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ NEET</li> <li>○ Drug and substance abuse</li> <li>○ looked after young people</li> <li>○ teenage mothers</li> <li>○ those in neighbourhoods with low levels of participation</li> <li>○ low aspirations not reflecting ability</li> <li>○ those who do not attend school regularly</li> <li>○ learning and other disabilities</li> <li>○ those unlikely to achieve as they should</li> <li>○ NEETs</li> </ul>	RFA approach to employability and education / training. Almost explicitly reflecting YOT RFA model
Transforming Youth Work	Mar 2001	5 (34 pages) at risk	1 abuse – substance abuse 1 danger - drugs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Social exclusion</li> <li>○ disadvantage</li> <li>○ dropping out of college, employment or warm, safe accommodation</li> </ul>		Risk marginal in this document, though does set ground for more interventionist approach:

Collated Overview of 'Risk' within UK Government Policy Documents 1996-2009						
Document	Date	Risk frequency	Other terms	Risks	Risk factors	Risk formulation
						“We want to encourage more interventionist action to help young people address the difficulties in their lives through multi - disciplinary teams working together to support young people. Youth workers are well placed, particularly through their outreach and detached work, to develop relationships with young people at risk.”
Children at Risk – Comprehensive Spending Review Chapter	July 2002	11 (4 pages)  children at risk. Risk factors, greatest risk	Harm, danger, abuse, neglect: 0 occurrences poverty: 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Ambiguous</li> <li>○ offending</li> <li>○ perpetuation of poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Poor parenting</li> <li>○ disability</li> <li>○ poverty</li> </ul>	<p>Emergence of ECM threads re. Achieving economic well being etc.</p> <p>Risk framed as perpetuation of social exclusion, offending etc. - no mention of abuse.</p>
The Victoria Climbié Inquiry	Jan 2003	66 (427 pages)  at risk, highest risk, degree of risk, risk assessment, risk scale, risk factors	Harm: 203 Abuse: 116 Neglect: 56 Danger: 32	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Serious harm</li> <li>○ serious abuse</li> <li>○ safety / harm / abuse</li> <li>○ significant harm</li> <li>○ infection (scabies)</li> <li>○ systemic risks: a)losing children in system, b) inability to deliver duties, c) use of junior staff</li> <li>○ deliberate harm</li> <li>○ legal risk – unlawful disclosure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Scalding (injury)</li> </ul>	<p>Focusses very strongly on risk of abuse. This document is strikingly different in the child is constructed and in the use of the term risk.</p>



Collated Overview of 'Risk' within UK Government Policy Documents 1996-2009						
Document	Date	Risk frequency	Other terms	Risks	Risk factors	Risk formulation
Every Child Matters (White Paper)	Sept 2003	42 (107 pages) at risk, risk factors, risk groups	Danger: 2 abuse: 12 neglect: 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Some ambiguous use</li> <li>○ Harm / neglect</li> <li>○ negative outcomes</li> <li>○ educational failure</li> <li>○ offending</li> <li>○ anti-social behaviour</li> <li>○ ill-health</li> <li>○ teenage parenthood</li> <li>○ substance misuse</li> <li>○ truanting</li> <li>○ victims of crime</li> <li>○ managerial risks – service duplication</li> <li>○ becoming aggressive</li> <li>○ disaffection</li> <li>○ isolation</li> <li>○ depression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ low income and parental unemployment</li> <li>○ homelessness</li> <li>○ poor parenting</li> <li>○ poor schooling</li> <li>○ post-natal depression among mothers</li> <li>○ low birth weight</li> <li>○ substance misuse</li> <li>○ individual characteristics such as intelligence</li> <li>○ living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood</li> </ul>	<p>Emergence of term 'negative outcomes' to encapsulate broad risks</p> <p>Ambiguity of 'risk' develops</p> <p>Contrast between this and Laming (more similar to PAT 12)</p> <p>Organisational requirements to develop RFA approach / staff awareness</p>
Youth Justice: Next Steps	Sept 2003	3 (12 pages) risk reduction, risk of harm to public		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Harm (from violent or sexual offenders)</li> <li>○ harm to public (from yp)</li> </ul>	○	
Every Child Matters: Next Steps	February 2004	3 (44 pages)	Abuse: 2 Neglect: 4	○ Ambiguous	○ Domestic violence	
Every Child Matters: Change for Children	Nov 2004	5 (32 pages) minimise risk / at risk	Danger: 1 Neglect: 1 Abuse: 0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Ambiguous</li> <li>○ obesity</li> <li>○ negative health outcomes</li> <li>○ substance misuse</li> <li>○ adult practitioners / unsuitable staff</li> </ul>		Continuing development of ambiguous use of risk / at risk
14-19 Education and Skills White Paper	Feb 2005	6 (96 pages) risks, at risk, risk factors	Abuse: 2 (drug) Neglect: 0 Harm: 0 Danger: 0 Poverty: 0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Disengagement (from education)</li> <li>○ NEET</li> <li>○ disaffection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Low attainment</li> <li>○ lower socio-economic group</li> <li>○ persistent truants at Yr 11</li> <li>○ teenage mothers</li> </ul>	
Youth Matters	July 2005	29 (84 pages)	Abuse: 3 (2 substance)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Poor outcomes</li> <li>○ Negative outcomes</li> </ul>	○ Interplays: literacy and crime; single parenthood	Risk framed as a part of adolescent

Collated Overview of 'Risk' within UK Government Policy Documents 1996-2009						
Document	Date	Risk frequency	Other terms	Risks	Risk factors	Risk formulation
		at risk, most a t risk, risk factors, risk taking, risk behaviour, risk and protective factors	abuse) Harm: 1 (alcohol)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ serious problems</li> <li>○ some ambiguity again</li> <li>○ NEET</li> <li>○ offending / crime</li> <li>○ being victims of crime</li> <li>○ teenage conception</li> <li>○ substance misuse</li> <li>○ being missed by agencies</li> <li>○ social exclusion</li> <li>○ anti-social behaviour</li> <li>○ truancy</li> <li>○ exclusion (school)</li> <li>○ risk behaviour – sexual activity, drug use and underachievement</li> <li>○ smoking</li> <li>○ binge drinking</li> </ul>	and mental health; offending and drug use, NEET and offending	development.  Strengthening of prevention agenda (on basis of risk and RFA)  References to risk and protective factors linked to offending – criminalisation of services
Youth Matters: Next Steps	Mar 2006	10 (42 pages)  at risk, risk taking	Abuse: 1 Neglect, harm, danger: 0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Ambiguity in definitions (lack of)</li> <li>○ Dropping out of learning</li> <li>○ isolation</li> <li>○ abuse</li> <li>○ managerial risk – fragmented services</li> <li>○ exclusion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Homelessness</li> <li>○ temporary accommodation</li> <li>○ vulnerability</li> </ul>	
Care Matters: Time for Change	June 2007	39 (144 pages)  risk, at risk, risk & protective factors, at particular risk / most at risk, risky behaviour, risk based assessments & inspections	Abuse: 5 Neglect: 11 Danger: 1 Harm: 8 Poverty: 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Educational underachievement</li> <li>○ entering care</li> <li>○ marginalisation</li> <li>○ managerial risks</li> <li>○ family life</li> <li>○ pregnancy</li> <li>○ negative outcomes</li> <li>○ going missing from care</li> <li>○ exclusion from school</li> <li>○ unspecified risky behaviours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Yp in care</li> <li>○ no parental support</li> <li>○ disabled children</li> <li>○ those with communication difficulties</li> <li>○ poor sexual health</li> <li>○ adolescence / experimentation</li> </ul>	Continuation of multiple risks and risk factors.  Some acknowledgement of risk as everyday experience (1 instance)

Collated Overview of 'Risk' within UK Government Policy Documents 1996-2009						
Document	Date	Risk frequency	Other terms	Risks	Risk factors	Risk formulation
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ sexual activity</li> <li>○ social exclusion</li> <li>○ developing anti-social behaviour</li> <li>○ stigmatisation (due to being in care)</li> <li>○ involvement in exploitative and abusive relationships</li> <li>○ homelessness</li> <li>○ unemployment</li> <li>○ crime</li> </ul>		
Aiming High for Young People	July 2007	42 (87 pages)  risks of..., taking risks, risk behaviour, at risk, risk factors	Abuse: 0 Neglect: 0 Danger: 1 poverty: 2 harm: 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ At risk – not always clearly defined</li> <li>○ Experimenting with drugs</li> <li>○ Drug problems</li> <li>○ anti-social behaviour</li> <li>○ crime</li> <li>○ teenage pregnancy</li> <li>○ poor outcomes: labour market problems, crime, teen pregnancies</li> <li>○ risk behaviours – substance misuse, underage alcohol consumption, early sex</li> <li>○ poor outcomes (general)</li> <li>○ risks with health</li> <li>○ negative outcomes</li> <li>○ stigmatisation</li> <li>○ social exclusion</li> <li>○ victim of crime</li> <li>○ more serious offending</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Poorer backgrounds</li> <li>○ struggling at school</li> <li>○ don't participate in constructive activities in their leisure time</li> <li>○ poor housing</li> <li>○ lack of parental interest</li> <li>○ irregular school attendance</li> <li>○ poor physical or mental health</li> <li>○ <b>? those who attend unstructured youth club provision – most at risk</b></li> <li>○ vulnerability</li> <li>○ social exclusion</li> <li>○ victim of crime (increased risk of being perpetrator)</li> </ul>	<p>Reinforcement of RFA priority:</p> <p>“Understanding the impact of risk on children and young people’s lives, and the protective influences which counteract them, has been a key priority for the Government in recent years.”</p> <p>Risks being created by societal change:</p> <p>“The influences described above are reshaping the nature of adolescence and the transition to adulthood, creating greater, and more varied, opportunities and risks”</p> <p>Further emergence of</p>

Collated Overview of 'Risk' within UK Government Policy Documents 1996-2009						
Document	Date	Risk frequency	Other terms	Risks	Risk factors	Risk formulation
						<p>individual risk management:</p> <p>“It is becoming increasingly important that young people develop the skills which will enable them to take advantage of these opportunities, and to manage and respond to risks and challenges as they emerge.”</p> <p>Does acknowledge RF is not deterministic – due to resilience</p>
Staying Safe: consultation	July 2007	147 (77 pages) risk, at risk, risk / resilience, managing risks	Abuse: 123 Harm: 109 Neglect: 40 Danger: 3 Poverty: 0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ New risks: New family structures, diverse communities, new technologies</li> <li>○ Abuse</li> <li>○ Neglect</li> <li>○ roads</li> <li>○ internet</li> <li>○ violence</li> <li>○ gangs</li> <li>○ death from abuse</li> <li>○ bullying</li> <li>○ range of accidents</li> <li>○ crime / criminal convictions</li> <li>○ Victims of crime / anti-social behaviour</li> <li>○ serious injury</li> <li>○ online abuse / harm</li> <li>○ accidents in home</li> <li>○ poor outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Maltreatment (risk: bullying)</li> <li>○ parental unemployment</li> <li>○ deprivation</li> <li>○ male (increased risk of accidents)</li> <li>○ Being bully (risk of later crime)</li> <li>○ Carrying mobile phone</li> <li>○ Carrying knife</li> <li>○ problem parents</li> <li>○ low socio-economic groups</li> <li>○ young people in care</li> <li>○ disability</li> <li>○ disadvantaged communities</li> <li>○ Asylum seekers</li> </ul>	<p>Emergence of risk management and risk communication as specific approaches – yp, parents and practitioners as risk managers</p> <p>Perceptions that risks have increased</p> <p>Risks of almost everything explored.</p> <p>Abuse / Neglect present but amongst all sorts of other risks – clear construction of everyday life as risk?</p>

Collated Overview of 'Risk' within UK Government Policy Documents 1996-2009						
Document	Date	Risk frequency	Other terms	Risks	Risk factors	Risk formulation
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ fire</li> <li>○ dangers of cycling</li> <li>○ abuse by workers / trusted adults</li> <li>○ harm from mobile internet technologies</li> <li>○ educational underachievement</li> <li>○ exploitation and trafficking</li> <li>○ running away</li> <li>○ homelessness</li> <li>○ harm from domestic violence</li> <li>○ sexual exploitation / sex offenders</li> </ul>		
The Children's Plan	Dec 2007	97 (168 pages)  at risk, risk, risky behaviours, managing risks, taking risks	Abuse: 7 Neglect: 4 Danger: 1 Harm: 36 Poverty: 38	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Internet</li> <li>○ video games</li> <li>○ underachievement</li> <li>○ alcohol misuse</li> <li>○ risk behaviours</li> <li>○ sexual activity</li> <li>○ obesity</li> <li>○ "falling behind" (school)</li> <li>○ influence of media</li> <li>○ harm / abuse</li> <li>○ running away</li> <li>○ unintentional injury</li> <li>○ social exclusion</li> <li>○ managerial - school failure</li> <li>○ dropping out (school / FE)</li> <li>○ NEET</li> <li>○ Offending</li> <li>○ substance misuse</li> <li>○ overdose</li> <li>○ future drug dependency</li> <li>○ significant harm / abuse</li> <li>○ anti-social behaviour</li> <li>○ crime</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Being a teenager / adolescent</li> <li>○ Family lifestyle</li> <li>○ child poverty</li> <li>○ social class</li> <li>○ disabled children with communication difficulties</li> <li>○ children in care</li> <li>○ running away</li> <li>○ experimentation</li> <li>○ persistent truants are nearly ten times more likely to be NEET at 16 and four times more likely to be NEET at 18</li> <li>○ young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties are four times more likely to use illicit drugs;</li> <li>○ three in five excluded young people report having offended</li> </ul>	<p>Very strong risk management / risk communication focus – yp, organisations, parents, govt.</p> <p>Re-emergence of poverty as issue</p> <p>Paradox of individualisation &amp; social (poverty) dimension</p> <p>Acknowledgement of possible positive dimension of risk taking – caution not aversion</p> <p>RFA still apparent</p>

Collated Overview of 'Risk' within UK Government Policy Documents 1996-2009						
Document	Date	Risk frequency	Other terms	Risks	Risk factors	Risk formulation
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ re-offending</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ 71 per cent of young women who are NEET for six months or more between 16–18 years</li> <li>○ of age are parents by 21</li> <li>○ parental alcohol misuse</li> </ul>	
Youth Taskforce Action Plan	Mar 2008	70 (81 pages)  at risk, most at risk, high risk families, risk assessment	Abuse: 2 Harm: 9 Danger: 9 poverty:1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Offending</li> <li>○ anti-social behaviour</li> <li>○ being (at risk) on streets</li> <li>○ prolific offending</li> <li>○ re-offending</li> <li>○ negative outcomes</li> <li>○ poor outcomes</li> <li>○ harm (unspecified)</li> <li>○ “a life of crime”</li> <li>○ offending in later life</li> <li>○ knife crime</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Temperament</li> <li>○ maltreatment</li> <li>○ mother has low IQ</li> <li>○ child has low IQ</li> <li>○ parent convicted</li> <li>○ ADHD diagnosis</li> <li>○ low socio-economic status</li> <li>○ parent in custody</li> <li>○ parental high harm drug use</li> </ul>	<p>Strong risk / RFA focus</p> <p>Risk assessment, communication and risk factor analysis come through strongly.</p> <p>Emphasis (strong) on risk of offending but little else on other risks.</p> <p>Criminalisation of services evident in comments about role of nursing &amp; education in preventing offending.</p>
The Children's Plan: One Year On	Dec 2008	65 (234 pages)  at risk, manage the risks	Abuse: 13 Harm: 33 Poverty: 36 Danger: 1 Neglect: 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ “All sorts”</li> <li>○ traffic accidents</li> <li>○ bullying</li> <li>○ poor outcomes</li> <li>○ social networking</li> <li>○ sexual awareness</li> <li>○ new technologies</li> <li>○ anxieties of becoming a teenager</li> <li>○ alcohol</li> <li>○ substance misuse</li> <li>○ sexual behaviour</li> <li>○ crime / offending</li> <li>○ anti-social behaviour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Adolescence</li> <li>○ obesity</li> <li>○ parental poverty, substance misuse and offending</li> <li>○ prolific offending</li> <li>○ exclusion from school</li> </ul>	<p>Strong focus on risk management – providing risk management opportunities (e.g. through play)</p> <p>Risk taking as part of growing up</p>

Collated Overview of 'Risk' within UK Government Policy Documents 1996-2009						
Document	Date	Risk frequency	Other terms	Risks	Risk factors	Risk formulation
				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ obesity</li> <li>○ diabetes</li> <li>○ heart &amp; liver disease</li> <li>○ neglect</li> <li>○ abuse</li> <li>○ professionals (unsuitable staff)</li> <li>○ media</li> <li>○ commercial world</li> <li>○ accidents in home</li> <li>○ school exclusion</li> <li>○ failure to achieve “full potential”</li> <li>○ risk behaviours</li> <li>○ “other damaging activity”</li> </ul>		
The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report	Mar 2009	50 (102 pages)  at risk of harm / significant harm assessment of risk risk factors	Abuse: 23 Neglect:16 Harm:49 Danger:7 Poverty:1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Harm</li> <li>○ Significant harm</li> <li>○ Abuse</li> <li>○ Neglect</li> <li>○ Deliberate harm</li> <li>○ domestic abuse</li> <li>○ violence (victim)</li> <li>○ operational and managerial risks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Domestic abuse</li> <li>○ Domestic violence</li> <li>○ School non-attendance</li> <li>○ Organisational factors: low morale, bureaucracy, retention &amp; recruitment problems, high caseloads</li> <li>○ Risk averse environment</li> </ul>	Risk framed in terms of harm, abuse and neglect. Prevention / early intervention focused in these areas.  Children constructed as victim (not perpetrator)

## Appendix Two: Sample Participant Invitation Letter / Email

Dear.....

### Invitation to take part in PHD Study about Risk, Young People and Practice

I am a former youth and community worker and lecturer who is currently studying a PhD at Durham University.

My area of study relates to how 'risk' affects youth practitioners, their work and young people. This could, for example, be about 'at-risk' young people, risk behaviours, risk assessments, risk taking in practice or other areas relating to 'risk' that are significant to practitioners.

#### **Invitation to Take Part**

As part of my study I am interested to hear about the views and experiences of a range of practitioners across England.

I would therefore like to invite interested full-time practitioners who work directly with young people in youth work or other informal settings with young people to take part in the study. This would involve a recorded interview (in a convenient venue) lasting about 1-2 hours (depending on how much you wish to talk about), where we chat about how 'risk' relates to your work (and even if it does). Interviews will be confidential and your views / comments will be anonymous.

With your consent, I may also get back in touch to explore any themes or issues in more depth at a later date. Participants will, if interested, also have the opportunity to be kept up to date on any emerging themes or findings of the study.

A further information sheet about the study is available at <http://www.turnbullconsultancy.com/#My%20Research>

If you are interested in finding out more, or wish to take part in the study, please don't hesitate to contact me, letting me know the best way I can get in touch with you. My contact details are:

email: [gavin@turnbullconsultancy.com](mailto:gavin@turnbullconsultancy.com)  
tel. 01772 712124  
mob. 07850 329714

Kind Regards,  
Gavin Turnbull



## Appendix Three: Participant Information Sheet



### Information Sheet for Interview Participants

#### Researching Risk, Young People and Professional Practice

Researcher: Gavin Turnbull

*You are being invited to take part in a research study. The following information explains the purpose of the research and what your participation will involve. Please read carefully before deciding whether to participate.*

#### **About Me and the Study**

I am a former youth and community worker and lecturer who now works as a part-time freelance researcher whilst also undertaking a PhD at Durham University within the Youth and Community Work Section. The PhD is considering the issue of Risk in relation to young people and youth work practice.

#### **Interviews**

I hope to discover more about the topic of risk through interviews with approximately 25 full-time youth workers, or those who work in informal settings with young people. I am particularly interested in hearing experiences, viewpoints and stories about how “risk” affects what you do, and how it impacts upon young people and the organisation you work for.

These interviews will encourage you to talk about the things that are important to you about 'risk', young people and your practice. The interview should last for about 1 to 1 ½ hours and can be arranged at a time and venue to suit you. With your consent, each interview will be recorded – this helps to ensure your views and comments are understood properly.

A second, and perhaps third, follow-up interview at a later date may, with your consent, also take place so that certain themes or events can be clarified or explored in more depth.

#### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

What you say within the interview will be treated as confidential (subject to legal limitations). Recordings will be kept by the researcher electronically in password-protected encrypted storage. Your views and comments will be analysed and used anonymously and the researcher will make every effort to ensure that individuals cannot easily be identified in the final report / dissertation. Non-anonymised data will not be shared with others.

You can decide to stop participation at any time or to not answer or discuss anything you do not wish to.

#### **How Will the Information Be Used?**

Collated data from all interviews will be analysed and will form part of my PhD submission. I also hope to be able to publish findings to a broader audience through journals. In addition to this I intend to send an overview of findings to anyone who takes part in the study and will also be setting up an online forum to discuss the topic

and my findings once they have been analysed. As a research participant you will be invited to access this if you wish.

I hope that the findings of the study will be useful for practitioners and managers in the field of youth work and work with young people when working around areas of 'risk'. Hopefully a greater understanding of how risk affects young people and practitioners will help to improve the commissioning, management and delivery of practice in this area.

This is an independent piece of research and is not funded by any particular organisation.

### **Taking Part**

If you would like to take part in the study please contact me (Gavin Turnbull) by email at [gavin.turnbull@o2.co.uk](mailto:gavin.turnbull@o2.co.uk) or telephone 01772 712124 (mob: 07850 329714). I will then take your details and contact you to discuss the study further and, if appropriate, arrange an interview.

### **How Do I Find Out More?**

You can find out more about the study at any time by contacting me, Gavin Turnbull, at [gavin.turnbull@o2.co.uk](mailto:gavin.turnbull@o2.co.uk). I can also be reached by telephone on 01772 712124. I'll also be posting information about the study on my website at [www.turnbullconsultancy.com](http://www.turnbullconsultancy.com).

If you have any concerns or complaints about this study, or if you wish to verify that the study is an approved piece of student research via Durham University, please contact Jean Spence (Doctoral Supervisor) at [jean.spence@durham.ac.uk](mailto:jean.spence@durham.ac.uk).

## Appendix Four: Initial Interview Framework



### Initial Interview Framework Researching Risk, Young People and Professional Practice Researcher: Gavin Turnbull

#### Pre-interview checklist

- *Read information form*
- *Opportunity for clarification / questions*
- *Reiterate confidentiality / anonymity*
- *Consent form completion (and assessment of capacity to consent)*
- *Ensure privacy (physical environment)*
- *clarify time available*
- *Explain audio recorder and set up*

#### Main Questions

- Firstly, please tell me about your work...
  - What work do you do with young people?
  - How do you do this work?
  - *Purpose: to establish context and biographical background*
- *(possible) Why do you work with young people?*
- Has this work with young people changed? How?
- (Possibly) How has your work adapted to deal with changes?
  - *To provide further professional biographical information and to examine whether risk plays an implicit or explicit role in this professional narrative. Potential to explore chronology of risk changes*
- Can we talk a bit about 'risk'?...
- Has the term 'risk' come up in your work? How? / Why? / By whom?
- How does 'risk' affect your work with young people?
  - *Explicit exploration of risk, though without seeking to define the concept*
- What are the challenges for you and your work in relation to risk?
  - *Exploration of practice tensions*

*(if clarification about what is meant by risk is requested: risk means different things to different people and that's what this study is interested in. It could, for example, mean young people being 'at-risk', risk behaviours, or be to do with risks to workers, risk-assessments and health and safety)*

#### Secondary Questioning

- Exploration of depth and narratives:

- Could you tell me more about that?...
- Can you give me some examples [of how that works in practice]?

### **Potential Funnels**

- Would you describe your work as 'risky'?
- To what extent within your work are young people described in relation to risk (for example being 'at-risk' or 'risk takers')?
  - How does this take place? (e.g. by whom, for what purpose)
  - *Explicit examination of perceptions re. young people and risk*
- *What are your experiences of working with young people who might be described as being 'at risk', 'risky' or 'risk takers'?*
- Does your organisation or manager share the same approach to risk as you?
  - Are there any tensions between young people, staff and the organisation in relation to risk?
  - *Examines organisational context and possible role re. managerialism, risk-assessments, risk-aversion etc.*

### **Post-Interview Checklist**

- *Thank participant*
- *Clarify what happens next*
- *Check consent for follow-up*
- *Any final questions*

## Appendix Five: Participant Consent Form



### Researching Risk, Young People and Professional Practice

#### Consent Form for Interview Participants

*This form provides a record of consent for those taking part in the study into 'risk' and how it impacts on youth work and work with young people in informal settings. For further information about the study itself please see the 'Information Sheet for Interview Participants', contact me, Gavin Turnbull, or visit my website at [www.turnbullconsultancy.com](http://www.turnbullconsultancy.com).*

In order to consent to take part in the study, please complete and sign below:

	Please tick
I agree to take part in the study and to be interviewed.	
I confirm that I have read and understood the 'Information Sheet for Interview Participants' dated 15 <sup>th</sup> December 2010 for the above study.	
I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my involvement is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time.	
I agree to the interview being recorded and for the recording to be stored securely in electronic format.	
I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications.	
I would like to be contacted about the findings of the study, once they are available.	
I consent to my personal data (interviews and written consent) being stored and used for the purpose of this study.	

Are you willing to be contacted again for a further interview?	YES / NO
--	----------

<b>Name of Interview Participant</b>	
<b>Contact Information</b>	
<b>Signature</b>	
<b>Date</b>	

For further information about the interview, or any part of the study, please contact Gavin Turnbull at [gavin@turnbullconsultancy.com](mailto:gavin@turnbullconsultancy.com) or telephone 01772 712124.

***May I take this opportunity to thank you for taking part in the study. Your views***

*and experiences are really important to me.*

## Appendix Six: Final Thematic Framework (NVivo Data Analysis)

- At risk YP language
- Cuts, resources, rationing
  - Changes to risk parameters
  - Increased risk to practitioners
  - Increased risk to yp
- Examples of practice
- Great quotes
- Limits of work due to risks
- Made me think
- Methodology
- Needs assessments
- Organisation
  - Bureaucratic processes
  - Contracts
  - Information sharing
  - Management
  - Organisational risk aversion
  - Policies
- Personal and professional risk
  - Appropriate contact
  - Calculated risk taking
  - Changes over time
  - Comfort zones
  - Personal and professional alignment
  - Personal and professional difference
  - Personal risk aversion
  - Personal risk taking
- Risk to worker
  - Accusation
  - Assault
  - Burnout and stress
  - Disclosures
  - Home visits
  - Job threat
  - Reputation, stigma, perception
- Retreat from practice
- Risks and needs
- Risk Assessment (RA)
  - Absence of risk assessment
  - Changing or revising RAs
  - In the moment RAs
  - Levels of risk
  - Negatives of RA
  - Personal assessments
  - Positives of RA
  - RA as indication or warning
  - RA prevents practice
  - RA variance with presenting YP
  - Resistance to RA
  - RA as bureaucracy
  - Risk assessment examples

- Subjectivity in assessment
- Risk biographies
- Risk decision making
- Risk dissonance
- Risk Factor Analysis (RFA)
  - Early intervention
  - Resilience
  - RFA as practice belief
  - RFA critiques or problems
  - RFA in practice
- Risk malleability generic
- Risk taking in practice
  - Different risk positions
  - Examples of risk taking
  - Factors preventing risk taking
  - Factors supporting risk taking
  - Risk aversion
  - Risk taking as negative
  - Risk taking as positive
  - Unavoidable or unpredictable risk taking
- Risks to YP from practice
- Role of practice in YP risk
  - Changing perspectives of YP
  - Implications of intervening
  - Role of colleagues in YP risk
  - Role of interviewees in YP risk
  - Systems increase risks
- Selection of risks
  - Age based perspectives
  - Contextual factors
  - Cultural risk selection
  - Gendered risk selection
  - Political risk selection
- Trust
  - Organisational trust
  - Starting from mistrust
  - Starting from trust
  - Trust in practitioners
  - Trusting YP
- YP Risk amplification
  - Amp to access services
  - Amp to elevate role
  - Amp to elevate service
  - Amp to gain resources
- YP Risk attenuation
  - Attn. to access services
  - Attn to improve YP outcomes
  - Attn to limit or manage resource
- YP Risks
  - Adults and practitioners
  - Child abuse
  - Crime and ASB
  - Domestic violence
  - Education failure risk
  - Employment risks



- Exclusion
- Family setting
- General safety
- Generic or ambiguous risk
- Homelessness
- Mental health risk
- Not engaging with services
- Physical health
- Poverty
- Risks to self
- Sex and Sexual health
- Substance use
- Systems and structural risks
- Violent YP
- YP as abuser

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