Risk, vulnerability and complexity: transitional safeguarding as a reframing of binary perspectives

Article (Published Version)


This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/99694/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher’s version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

http://sro.sussex.ac.uk
Risk, Vulnerability and Complexity: Transitional Safeguarding as a Reframing of Binary Perspectives

Nathalie Huegler & Gillian Ruch

To cite this article: Nathalie Huegler & Gillian Ruch (2021): Risk, Vulnerability and Complexity: Transitional Safeguarding as a Reframing of Binary Perspectives, Practice, DOI: 10.1080/09503153.2021.1932787

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2021.1932787
Risk, Vulnerability and Complexity: Transitional Safeguarding as a Reframing of Binary Perspectives

Nathalie Huegler and Gillian Ruch

Transitional Safeguarding is emerging as a new concept in social work and social care, inviting us to reconsider the binary divides of existing adult and child safeguarding systems. These often fail to adequately meet the needs of young people, particularly those experiencing extra-familial risks and harm. Transitional Safeguarding acknowledges the ‘in-between’ position of young people in adolescence, relating both to their physical and psychosocial development but also to their rights to services, participation and wellbeing. As such, transitional safeguarding challenges conventional ideas about how we frame risk and vulnerability, requiring us to reconsider narrow conceptualisations of safeguarding systems and practice. From a psychosocial perspective, the splitting involved in creating binary, ‘either/or’ categories (such as who presents ‘a risk’ and who is ‘at risk’) may be a defensive response to overwhelming anxiety and complexity, a familiar characteristic of social work and social care practice. This conceptual paper is intended to help inform and underpin practice responses and is based on work from the first phase of a four year Economic and Social Research Council funded research project on how innovations in social care systems and practices can improve service experiences and outcomes for young people facing extra-familial risks and harm.

Keywords: Adolescence; psychosocial perspectives; innovation; liminality; systems change; extra-familial risks and harm

Introduction

‘Mike’ (19) has just been released from prison after severely injuring a 15 year old boy in a fight. Growing up, Mike experienced neglect and abuse from his father, and spent many years ‘in and out of care’. He was also permanently excluded from school at the age of 12 and became involved with a local gang at around the same time. He says that he was forced by leaders of this gang to attack the younger teenager as retribution for an unpaid drug debt.
‘Leila’ (20) lives in a hostel with her 9 month old baby. As a teenager, she was known to children’s social care services for frequently ‘going missing’ and it was thought that she might be being groomed by older men for sexual exploitation. She is a known drug user and has a ‘history of poor engagement’ with services offering support.

These very brief (fictional) scenarios may sound familiar to readers from practice or from reports on youth violence, criminal exploitation or sexual exploitation. They link with issues and concerns which Transitional Safeguarding approaches, emerging as diverse forms of system and practice innovation in different localities, seek to address. In this conceptual paper, which is intended to help inform and underpin these developments, our interest is in both individual reactions and those of local safeguarding systems to scenarios such as these. Where and how do we (in our various professional roles – as practitioners, managers, local leaders, policy makers, academics, etc.) see and make sense of risk and vulnerability in these situations? Is our foremost concern related to the risks posed by these young adults to others, such as the young teenager who was attacked or the young baby? Do we also think of Mike and Leila as vulnerable at these points in their lives? What responses would we expect from local systems and services that may be in contact with these young adults?

The considerations in this paper are rooted in mapping work conducted within a four year research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, exploring how innovations in social care systems and practices can improve service experiences and outcomes for young people facing extra-familial risks and harms (EFRH). The latter are situations and relationships beyond the family home which “may be associated with exploitation, abuse or criminality, and raise safeguarding concerns. Examples of EFRH include sexual and criminal exploitation, peer-on-peer abuse, gang affiliation, serious youth violence, radicalisation and violent extremism” (The Innovate Project 2021). Our research is considering three frameworks upon which new practice systems or methods may be built to address EFRH: Transitional Safeguarding, Contextual Safeguarding and Trauma-informed Practice. This article focuses on Transitional Safeguarding and draws on some of the findings from our documentary analysis, conducted in 2020, of key UK policy, guidance and thematic reports on safeguarding young people in the context of EFRH.

Our contribution to this special issue of Practice considers, particularly through psychosocial perspectives, the emergent concept of Transitional Safeguarding, and the systems- and practice-based challenges associated with local innovations based on this approach. Informed by psychoanalytic theory and practice, psychosocial perspectives invite readers to step out of what can feel like restrictive and rigid mindsets relating to how young people are categorised or services delivered, and into a more expansive and creative space, where how people are ‘labelled’ and systems are organised is unsettled and reconfigured. In order to reach this space we review the emergence of Transitional Safeguarding as an approach in policy and practice and highlight
some of its key conceptual features. Building on these ideas we introduce a number of psychosocial perspectives, informed by Kleinian object relations theory (Bower and Solomon 2018) and particularly Bion’s (1962) development of Klein’s thinking, that can help us to understand and engage with the anxieties that may be involved in the practice and systems-level challenges of Transitional Safeguarding and of innovation itself. In so doing, we argue the case for more emotionally attuned approaches to safeguarding throughout the life course, enhancing the delivery of services for young people and young adults. At the outset, we acknowledge that our approach to psychosocial thinking and concepts is not ‘purist’, recognising instead the diversity of theoretical traditions - including in this instance in particular systemic approaches (e.g. Munro and Hubbard 2011) - which are relevant for analysing professional practice and policy.

Psychoanalytic thinking is founded on the realisation that anxiety is the source of all subsequent emotional responses and behaviours, with the most fundamental source of anxiety being associated with the ultimate fear of annihilation. If denied, overlooked and left unaddressed it is inevitable that anxiety will surface in dysfunctional, unexpected and exacerbated ways. One common defensive manifestation of anxiety is splitting, namely adopting behaviours and thought processes that divide up complex experiences into simplistic binaries (Bower and Solomon 2018). As a psychological defence against the anxiety associated with complexity and uncertainty, splitting provides a false sense of certainty and simplicity; for example, something/someone is perceived as either all good or all bad. Splitting behaviours represent an inability to hold what are felt to be incompatible or contrary experiences in an integrated, mature and creative tension. Hence, at the most basic level in the context of the focus of this paper, the emergence of the children-adult services configuration can be understood in two ways: firstly, at an organisational level as a response to the historical trajectories in the development of services and underlying legislation; secondly, as a psychologically defensive response, which disaggregates the needs of children versus those of adults, conceptualising them as two discretely configured stages of the life course. While protection from risk has been a paramount consideration in children’s social care systems, in adult services a much greater focus is placed on self-determination and responsibilisation (Stevens et al. 2018). Splits of this nature prevent us having to grapple with the full complexity of our lives, in this case transitional identities and liminal spaces, involving the ‘adult in the child’ and the ‘child in the adult’.

Liminality: Adolescence and Early Adulthood as Times of ‘In-Betweenness’

The social and political context for Transitional Safeguarding is associated with an increased recognition in policy and practice, underpinned by research from different disciplines, that adolescence as a life phase bridging childhood
and adulthood has become more extensive in recent decades (Sawyer et al. 2018; Holmes and Smale 2018; Cocker, Cooper, and Holmes 2021). A range of social, developmental and neurobiological factors are at play in prompting, on the one hand, earlier exposures to experiences associated with adolescence (e.g. puberty, the growing significance of peer relationships), and on the other, delayed timings of role transitions, such as financial independence, marriage or parenthood. Transitions in adolescence also take place in a context of wide-ranging and challenging social and technological transformations, such as the embedding of digital media in the life contexts of many people, particularly those of younger generations. Sawyer et al. (2018) propose a definition of adolescence which extends from 10 to 24 years to correspond to these developmental and social realities.

An alternative but linked view is that adolescence, for many young people, does not simply lead into mature adulthood, but that the years following the attainment of legal adulthood at 18 (in most countries) and the completion of most of the physiological changes through puberty, through to the mid- (or sometimes, late) twenties, should be considered as a separate phase of life: Arnett (2000, 469) coined the term of emerging adulthood to describe this phase, describing it as a period of “relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations”, in contrast to earlier dependency during childhood and into adolescence, as well as to the responsibilities of grown adulthood. In this view, emerging adulthood is a period of in-betweenness, experimentation, diversity and instability (e.g. in relation to living contexts, relationships, or work/education paths). However, Arnett (2000; 2016) also notes that this diversity (including through factors such as gender, race, disability or socio-economic status) means that emerging adults may have very different experiences and capabilities in relation to ‘experimentation’. Significantly, life circumstances that influence how young people and emerging adults experience transitions are highly unequal across and within societies, as highlighted by recent social work research (Bywaters et al. 2020). For young people with lived experiences of adversity during childhood and adolescence, the future may resemble “not a wide open expanse of possibilities but only a succession of closed doors” (Arnett 2016, 227).

In this paper, we view these perspectives (of an extended life phase of adolescence and of the distinct challenges of emerging adulthood) as complementary and overlapping, focusing on the central significance of transitions during this stage of the life course. Adolescence and emerging adulthood involve the unsettling of independence and dependency as young people seek identity and belonging beyond the family contexts they grew up in. This time of turbulence and rapid development can rock the foundations of young people’s identity, wellbeing and sense of belonging, even more so for those growing up in vulnerable and often unstable family settings and socially impoverished contexts.

The in-betweenness associated with adolescence and emerging adulthood can be described through the concept of liminality. Originating from
anthropology, liminality describes states of being *betwixt and between* which happen during transitions, involving potential upheaval as young people may feel and be perceived as *both* growing in maturity *and* still immature; *both* capable of making decisions with far-ranging consequences *and* potentially vulnerable (Turner 1969; Warner and Gabe 2004; Holmes and Smale 2018). These liminal states during adolescence are inherently linked to risk, but this does not have to lead to negative consequences or outcomes, as in-betweenness can also bring possibilities for change and growth. Working with young people in contexts of EFRH, safeguarding professionals and services may perceive them to be simultaneously ‘at risk’ and, potentially, ‘a risk’ - to others, to themselves, or to sustaining a support intervention that may have been carefully constructed around them - only to be rejected or even seemingly ‘sabotaged’ by young people. Working in and with those contexts and during processes of transition may induce feelings of discomfort, uncertainty and anxiety, which, at times, can be experienced as overwhelming by those involved in supporting and helping young people (Waddell 2018). It is not difficult to see how then these affective dynamics associated with liminality may engender more rigid and less well-attuned professional, service and system responses. It is this affiliation of adolescence with heightened anxiety that makes the adoption of a psychoanalytic lens or mindset a helpful and generative act.

**Gaps, Cliff Edges and Revolving Doors: Transitional Safeguarding as an Emergent Response**

Our review of UK policy and practice in social care and related fields for the Innovate Project considered the relevance and influence (explicitly and implicitly) of three innovative concepts in safeguarding young people from EFRH (Contextual Safeguarding, Trauma-informed Practice and Transitional Safeguarding) in guidance, legislation and key thematic reports. The thematic analysis involved over 300 documents (focusing on the past decade but including key documents since 2000), identified mainly through key word based searches of the publications of governmental agencies, public bodies and a wide range of independent organisations. While the review overall considered developments across the UK and within its four nations, as well as selected local examples, we found that for Transitional Safeguarding (the most emergent concept among the three social care innovations considered through our project), current developments at conceptual, local systems and professional practice levels focus particularly on England (not least because of different legal and structural contexts in other UK nations, notably Scotland).

The concept of Transitional Safeguarding was originally outlined in a briefing paper by Holmes and Smale (2018) for Research in Practice (RIP) and Research in Practice for Adults (RIPfA), which highlighted the need to improve
safeguarding responses to older teenagers and young adults in a way that better recognises their developmental needs and aims to bridge the service gaps that often appear between children’s and adult social care services. Extra-familial risks and harm, along with their effects and consequences, do not stop just because a young person reaches legal adulthood at 18. However, policies, systems and services for children are designed and structured very differently from those for adults, with neither of them focusing sufficiently on the specific transitional needs of young people and young adults. As a way of addressing these issues Holmes and Smale (2018) highlight existing and emerging examples of transitional approaches to safeguarding at a local level in England, based on collaborative working across departments and agencies, that enable both more seamless service experiences for young people and their families and more creative and cost-effective pooling of resources. In its emergent formulation, Transitional Safeguarding is not simply concerned with extending protective services for children and young people into early adulthood, but also involves incorporating principles of empowerment and participation that underpin the design of adult social care frameworks.

Importantly, Transitional Safeguarding is not proposed or framed as a prescribed approach or model, but rather a local and collaborative re-formulation of structures and services with the aim of life course based ‘whole systems’ change (Holmes and Smale 2018). In this vein, Transitional Safeguarding is not only considered a way to support safety and wellbeing of young people during adolescence, but also to avoid more costly interventions (at personal and societal levels) in later stages of life, whether through specialist, statutory and health services or through the criminal justice system. This life course perspective is also important because young people experiencing risks and harm may become parents and processes of intervention by children’s services may become cyclical across generations. The Transitional Safeguarding literature thus far sets out both moral and economic arguments for considering the particular position (and potential vulnerability) of young people and for adapting systems, policies and practices to bridge and unsettle some of the artificially constructed binaries between services and provisions for children and adults (Cocker, Cooper, and Holmes 2021; Holmes and Smale 2018). At this stage in its innovation trajectory, the question of whether Transitional Safeguarding will lead to or require future changes in governmental policy or statute appears still open.

Since the introduction of the term and concept, there have been a small, but increasing, number of explicit references indicating a conceptual take-up of Transitional Safeguarding approaches in policy documents across England. This includes, notably, the annual reports of the Chief Social Workers for Adults 2019, 2020) and the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS) position paper on serious youth violence and knife crime (2019). However, concerns around transitional issues are evident across a range of social policy fields and sectors. For example, a report by the National Working
Group Exploitation Response Unit (Baguley 2018) focuses on issues of transition for young people affected by sexual exploitation, including concerns around a ‘cliff edge’ of services at 18 due to higher support thresholds in adult social care. At local level, transitional issues and practices are highlighted, for example, in the Joint Serious Case Review on sexual exploitation by Newcastle’s children’s and adult safeguarding boards (Spicer 2018). In a wider view, transitional approaches and perspectives have been developed in policy and practice for specific groups of young people over the past two decades, for example those leaving care, with disabilities or mental health needs, or young carers (Holmes and Smale 2018).

The concern with transition is not limited to social care alone, nor is it just a recent development: a 2005 report by the Social Exclusion Unit on ‘Transitions of Young Adults with Complex Needs’ recognised the cumulative impact of issues such as poor housing, homelessness, physical and mental health issues, substance misuse, poor educational experiences or long-term unemployment during transition. Meanwhile, in the criminal justice field, the Transition to Adulthood Alliance (T2A, 2009), under the auspices of the Barrow Cadbury Trust (2005), has been putting forward arguments for a distinct approach for young adults aged 18 to 25 (including in relation to prevention and diversion from offending) for well over a decade, also reflected in reports of the House of Commons Justice Committee (2016, 2018). Concerns about risks during transition, resulting in extended states of liminality across the life-course, are reflected in the metaphors of ‘cycles’ and ‘revolving doors’ of criminal justice interventions:

“On the whole, the criminal justice system fails to recognise the combined impact of trauma and poverty on the lives of young adults entering the revolving door and therefore break the cycle of crisis and crime. Numerous services withdraw support when young people are transitioning from children’s services to adult services. [...] our evidence suggests that a significant number of young adults are on the cusp of entering the revolving door. If we don’t intervene we run this risk of people cycling through the system for a decade or more. Young adulthood is the point where we need to intervene more effectively.” (Borysik 2020, 14)

In the context of EFRH, which may involve young people as victims and as potential perpetrators of exploitation, abuse or violence, as the vignettes at the outset of this paper illustrate, Transitional Safeguarding approaches not only challenge how we think of young people and young adults in transition, but also how we define concepts of safeguarding. Thus, while reports concerned with the distinct position of young adults in the criminal justice system may not use the term ‘safeguarding’ as such, ideas of reducing (re-)offending by addressing root causes at societal, community and individual level link with a broad, holistic and multi-agency understanding of the concept. If we want to both prevent young people such as Mike and Leila from being harmed and from harming others within peer, community and family contexts, ‘revolving doors’, ‘cliff edges’ and ‘gaps’ become the key concerns, the significant
liminal spaces (Warner and Gabe 2004) and the potential sites of intervention for Transitional Safeguarding.

**Risk and Vulnerability in Transitional Life Stages**

As young people transition to adulthood, the historically more paternalistically formulated child safeguarding frameworks give way to a stronger focus on independence and autonomy (but also more rationalised and limited support) within the domains of adult social care. Children may more readily be considered in need of protection on account of their developmental needs, but perspectives on risk and vulnerability become more complex as young people enter adolescence and later, adulthood (Hanson and Holmes 2014). As Sharland (2005) notes, risk can be seen as ubiquitous during transition to adulthood, both at societal and individualised levels. However, viewing risk during adolescence as exclusively negative obscures the fact that the growth and development necessary for transition are closely linked to risk-taking behaviours as part of experimentation during this phase of life.

Like risk, vulnerability may be interpreted in various ways. A prevailing view involves questioning “how far an individual’s agency is constrained by their circumstances, personally, socially and/or structurally, therefore indicating a (sometimes pressing) ethical duty for other individuals or the state to act” (Brown 2017, 669). As a result, a person considered ‘vulnerable’ may more readily be regarded as a victim; for example, the recent terminology of criminal exploitation (Home Office 2018) is applied both to children and to vulnerable adults, citing a range of factors that signify vulnerability: adverse experiences during childhood, instability in housing or economic circumstances, relationships with people involved in gang activities, alongside physical or mental health difficulties, disabilities or substance misuse. However, such factors (particularly adverse childhood experiences) are high among the adult prison population in general (see, for example, Ford et al. 2019), without affected prisoners necessarily being classified as ‘vulnerable’ within the prison context, or indeed, perceived as such within society more generally. If used as a label, vulnerability may imply diminished agency and capacity - which may be perceived particularly negatively by young people at a time when they are striving for autonomy and independence.

In the context of a society that places high values on individual freedoms, the prevailing framings of vulnerability and risk render adult safeguarding interventions as ‘exceptions’ to the general presumption of freedom from state intervention in adults’ lives (Heath-Kelly and Strausz 2018). Explicit duties to adult safeguarding are defined in the Care Act 2014 for adults at risk who, based on ‘care and support’ needs (arising from, or related to physical or mental impairment or illness) are unable to protect themselves from abuse or neglect. This may lead to potential difficulties for young people in
transition who experience EFRH: they may not be considered to fit within statutory adult safeguarding definitions on turning 18, but they may also ‘fail’ to engage with any services offered that threaten their sense of agency and autonomy. Agencies and professionals involved with young people in these contexts and situations may, on the one hand, struggle to conceive of some of them as vulnerable (particularly when faced with their seeming unwillingness to engage), and on the other hand, struggle to frame any recognised vulnerabilities in ways which open the doors to adult social care (and safeguarding) services (Baguley 2018; Holmes and Smale 2018). Faced with these complexities, Transitional Safeguarding approaches need to involve adopting nuanced understandings of risk and vulnerability, working both with and, where relevant, extending beyond current statutory definitions. For example, an alternative view of vulnerability considers this as an inherent human condition which is mediated situationally and contextually through resilience (Fineman 2013). In this perspective, lived experiences of vulnerability are diverse and characterised by inequality, as are sources and factors of resilience that might mitigate against such experiences. In the context of young people and EFRH, a more nuanced view of vulnerability as both universally constituted and uniquely influenced and experienced moves the focus away from labels of diminished agency and towards personalised approaches which consider a young person in their whole context, including the potential gaps, cliff edges and revolving doors they might face.

Reframing Binaries and Tolerating Uncertainties: Transitional Safeguarding as Innovation

Transitional Safeguarding is not only concerned with the developments, potential risks and vulnerabilities affecting young people as they move towards adulthood. It also involves transitions and states of liminality for professionals (from policy maker, systems leader or manager through to practitioner) and their organisations. Innovative practices provoke paradigm shifts and the creation of uniquely reconfigured services at local levels, with a range of ethical implications (Hampson, Goldsmith, and Lefevre 2021). From a psychosocial perspective, the emergence of Transitional Safeguarding provides an ideal (but not uncomplicated) opportunity to reframe organisational and professional mindsets and render more flexible existing system and service configurations. However, the complexities of risk affecting young people, particularly in extra-familial contexts of (potential) harm, may also induce anxiety among organisations and professionals working within them. Where this anxiety remains unacknowledged (and perhaps even suppressed), it risks infiltrating and adversely affecting both the behaviours of individual professionals in their respective roles and the collective behaviours of professionals within their organisations (Foster 2001, 2013). At the level of the individual, such
behaviours may manifest as defensive responses to the anxiety associated with transitional states, for example denial, disavowal, repression or splitting (e.g. framing young people as either ‘victims’ or ‘villains’ in the context of criminal activities). In the collective context, manifestations may appear in the emergence of social systems as defences against anxiety (Menzies-Lyth 1988), for example, restrictively interpreting service eligibility criteria; fragmented and ritualised task performance; or reductive and de-personalising approaches to working with young people which fail to provide space for meaningful relationships (Whittaker 2011). As Transitional Safeguarding, by its very nature, requires multi-agency and systems-level approaches, keeping alert to how anxiety is recognised and responded to across and within agencies and local systems is, therefore, paramount.

The concept of ‘negative capability’, initially used by the poet Keats and developed further in a variety of contexts since, including in psychoanalysis (see Bion 1970), provides a helpful perspective in contexts of uncertainty and potential anxiety which may arise in working with young people at risk of harm in the process of a transitional life stage and during the processes of undoing and re-doing involved in innovation. Negative capability, describes a response to complexity and liminality which is careful about premature judgements and about prescribed, reactive or technocratic actions (Cornish 2011). In terms of its meaning (if not its theoretical roots), negative capability also has links to Mason’s (1993) concept of ‘safe uncertainty’. It does not mean ‘doing nothing’ but instead requires a capacity to sit with ‘not knowing’ and to maintain open-mindedness and curiosity about a young person’s distinctive situation, with all its actual and potential risks, vulnerabilities and possibilities, while respecting their own ways of making sense of these contexts. As such, it opens up possibilities for rebalancing power hierarchies and moving towards approaches which recognise and work with young people’s agency. In order to reach this position, professionals themselves need supportive organisational environments, which allow them to acknowledge their own vulnerabilities and uncertainties in the context of their practice (Ruch 2014). At the level of systems and services, negative capability reminds us of the importance of tolerating uncertainty whilst engage in the processes of pausing, reconsidering and recreating, which are necessary aspects of ethical innovation (Hampson, Goldsmith, and Lefevre 2021).

Towards a More Balanced and Emotionally Attuned Approach to Safeguarding throughout the Life Course

The innovative potential of Transitional Safeguarding lies not only in its unique focus on the developmental needs of young people and young adults, but also in its invitation to embrace a broader understanding of safeguarding itself, recognising the complex nature of risk, vulnerability and agency. Present statutory concepts of safeguarding are narrowly defined both for children and for ‘adults at risk’, although the increasing recognition of extra-familial
contexts of risks and harm is expanding perspectives (see Firmin et al. 2019). One example of a broader definition formulates safeguarding as a collective responsibility to protect “a citizen’s health, wellbeing and human rights; enabling them to live free from harm, abuse and neglect” (NHS England 2021). Framing safeguarding as a broad societal responsibility to create safety nets for citizens (in an inclusive sense rather than determined by a person’s nationality) is congruent with a holistic understanding of human rights based work across the life course that extends beyond procedurally and individually framed rights to incorporating social, economic, cultural and community based rights (see Ife 2012). This requires a tolerance of uncertainty and of the liminal ‘in-betweenness’ which not just adolescence, but also processes of innovation and transformation entail. Key principles of such approaches are a focus on wellbeing, participation and co-production, along with a nuanced perspective on the complexities of risk and vulnerability. These would seem important starting points for guiding Transitional Safeguarding innovations at local levels, involving both systems-level and practice-based changes.

We argue that a starting point for drawing together resources, knowledge and skills to engage in mutual learning across agency and professional boundaries at local levels is to examine and recognise the role played by the unconscious and defences (at individual, organisational and systems levels) in anxiety-ridden contexts. Keeping alert to defensive behaviours needs to be an integral feature of the professional mindsets of practitioners, managers and policymakers engaged in the field of Transitional Safeguarding. However, anxiety and defensive responses should not, when recognised and named, be a cause for evoking shame or guilt in those implicated. Rather such responses should be understood and approached as inevitable and unavoidable features of professional conduct in the context of the transitional states which innovation endeavours represent. By recognising their pervasive presence, potency and impact, processes of innovation are more likely to be accurately attuned to the specific needs of individual young people navigating the risks and potentials involved in transitions.

In concluding this article we return to the fictional ‘scenarios’ involving Mike and Leila. What changes to professional practice would a Transitional Safeguarding approach entail in these situations? The answer is that Transitional Safeguarding does not offer a ready-made model: this would run counter to its sensitivity to the complexity and context-dependence which apply both to situations of EFRH and to the local systems involved in addressing these issues. Instead, it offers a perspective on considering the holistic human needs of young people and young adults, their vulnerabilities and capabilities, by unsettling the taken-for-granted age-related categories and boundaries of systems and services. How this takes place in each practice encounter and redesign of local offers will be diverse. Key prerequisites include a grounding in principles of human rights, a recognition that transitions involve both risks and opportunities and the systematic support of professionals’ ‘negative capability’ to tolerate and work with these complexities.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Research for the Innovate Project, on which this article draws, is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, grant no. ES/T00133X/1.

ORCID

Nathalie Huegler  http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9141-3115

References


Nathalie Huegler is a qualified social worker and Research Fellow for the Innovate Project at the Department of Social Work and Social Care, University of Sussex. Email: n.e.huegler@sussex.ac.uk

Gillian Ruch is Professor of Social Work in the Department of Social Work and Social Care at the University of Sussex.