

Article

# Trust and Distrust: Listening to Children about Their Relationships with Professionals

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Received: 13 June 2019; Accepted: 26 August 2019; Published: 3 September 2019



**Abstract:** This article explores trust in children’s relationships with professionals in the context of safeguarding concerns. With exception, existing research with children about trust in professionals often fails to unpick trust. Using sociological conceptualisations of trust, most often considered in relation to adults, this article unravels this complex concept. It arrives at a conception of trust as socially situated, an attribute of relationships, and a combination of interpretation (knowledge and experience) and faith. This conceptualization of trust is examined in the context of interview accounts from children that were aged 8–10 in an English primary school. Interviews invited their perspectives on three fictional vignettes about peer conflict, domestic abuse, and child sexual abuse. My analysis, although small-scale, argues that focusing on the process of trust in children’s professional relationships and the social, cultural, political, and relational contexts that shape this process, is a lucrative way to gain enhanced understandings of how trust is generated and what facilitates and undermines trust. It sheds light on children’s interpretations of existing relationships and imagined interactions with professionals, revealing the knowledge that they hold and what they do not yet, or cannot know, and how this knowledge (or lack of) influences their trust. This analysis is socially situated attending to children’s biographies, which offers insights that provide good grounds for improving children’s relationships with professionals.

**Keywords:** children; trust; distrust; professional relationships; safeguarding; biographies

## 1. Introduction

Trust is important in policy discussions about the professional safeguarding of children. It is assumed that trust must be present in professional relationships for children to disclose abuse and harm (see Berelowitz et al. 2013; Lefevre et al. 2017). Schools are considered to play an integral role in this agenda with an international policy focus on training teachers and school staff to recognise and identify abuse (Brown 2008; Radford et al. 2011, p. 14; OCC (2017); Vanderfaeillie et al. 2018). Children’s disclosures offer the most compelling evidence of abuse and legitimate professional intervention, but this makes schools, other institutions, and professionals heavily reliant upon children’s disclosures (OCC 2017, p. 4). A UK report entitled *Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: the role of schools* advocates that schools ‘create opportunities for a child to seek help and disclose abuse’ in order that appropriate action can be taken (OCC 2017, p. 4).

In discussions regarding children’s safety (Moore and McArthur 2017) and their trust in safeguarding professionals (Gallagher et al. 2012; Jobe and Gorin 2013), trust is treated as tacit; where trust is examined, lists of attributes of trusted professionals are compiled by professionals, children, and young people (Cossar et al. 2016; Lefevre et al. 2017). Yet, these typologies of trust risk reducing trust to a rational process (Möllering 2001, p. 413). Such attributes may be more or less significant when we consider the process of trust and the ways in which the child’s relationship with professionals is mediated by close others (Cossar et al. 2016; Jobe and Gorin 2013). Whilst these

studies may not explore trust, per se, they demonstrate the value of good quality relationships between children and safeguarding professionals in the process of disclosure (Jobe and Gorin 2013).

In recent years, safeguarding and child protection practices and policy have placed significant onus on professionals generating trusting relationships with children and young people to create co-operative relations that encourage disclosures. A functional approach that focuses on ‘disclosure’, rather than ‘trust’ as an important quality of relationships, overlooks the wider significance of trust for children’s current and future relationships (Grosse and Warming 2013), and the importance of trust beyond their relationships with professionals. A concern with trust’s ‘functional consequences’—the outcome of trust—also overlooks how trust is produced (Möllering 2001, p. 404), limiting the understandings of, and professionals’ ability to, enhance trust in relationships with children and young people.

This article draws on sociological conceptualisations of ‘trust’ in attending to the wider array of relationships, identities, and experiences of children, which I refer to here as children’s ‘trust biographies’, which shape the process of trust and the degree to which children perceive and receive support for problems that they encounter. This article aims to develop a relational and contextual understanding of the process of trust and distrust in children’s relationships. I draw on sociological and social work literature on trust, personal life and childhood studies, and policy discussions relating to trust. I consider these discussions in relation to children’s accounts from a project entitled *Keeping Each Other Safe*. This examined children’s responses to three fictional vignettes about: peer conflict, domestic abuse, and child sexual abuse. Building on research that documents the reasons that inhibit children’s disclosures (Butler and Williamson 1994; Jobe and Gorin 2013), I argue that examining children’s information gathering and anticipations of trust in professionals in this broader relational context is important for understanding how trust is developed, invested, and undermined.

## 2. What is Trust?

Trust is often regarded as a precursor to co-operation, action (Simmel 1950; Luhmann 1979), or participation (Warming 2013), a ‘complex relational practice’ and an ‘outcome of social activities’ (Brownlie and Howson 2005, p. 222). Trust is the feeling that a person or institution is sufficiently trustworthy for social action to occur. Trust is inherently relational, existing between individuals or individuals and institutions, rather than resting within the individual (Lewis and Weigert 1985). In significant research with children about their trust in professionals, the lens has been narrowly focused upon the child and the professional, often without sufficient consideration of the broader context in which the child is located and the other important relationships that have a bearing on trust relations. Developing relational thinking around trust and focusing on children’s biographical experiences, I borrow Möllering’s conceptualisation of trust to consider the impact of children’s family and community relationships and contexts on their trust relations.

As well as being relational, trust is a reflexive process (Giddens 1990; Möllering 2001); it necessarily requires a person to decipher whether or not to invest trust, to assess and interpret prior interactions with a person/institution, and to imagine and anticipate a person/institution’s future actions (Khodayakov 2007). This process of anticipation or imagining acknowledges that trust involves partial knowledge; ‘the person who knows completely need not trust’ (Simmel 1950, p. 318). Therefore, trust is only required in situations of uncertainty where complete knowledge is unattainable (Luhmann 1979; Giddens 1990; Möllering 2001), and it then serves as a way of navigating uncertainty (Luhmann 1979).

Attempting to develop Simmel’s theory of trust, Möllering (2001, p. 412) argues that trust is comprised of three concepts: expectation, interpretation, and suspension. ‘Trust ... begins with interpretation’ and this is my starting point (Möllering 2001, p. 415). Möllering uses a metaphor to describe these three concepts. Firstly, the land of interpretation constitutes the information or knowledge available to a person when interpreting and making decisions about trust. Information is essential to those who are attempting to imagine or anticipate another person’s actions; this information facilitates assessments of whether or not they can trust that person (Khodayakov 2007, p. 126). During

this process, individuals look for 'good reasons' (Möllering 2001, p. 403) to invest trust, based on positive previous experiences or recommendations from others.

Secondly, the land of expectation assumes that those that are investing trust will not be party to full information and that there will be unknowns in any decision around trust. Therefore, a 'leap of faith' (suspension) from what we know (land of interpretation) to the land of expectation is required (Möllering 2001). In making this leap, individuals will arrive at favourable (trust) or unfavourable (distrust) expectations. Möllering suggests that current trust research is focused around the 'land of interpretation', while assuming that if 'good reasons' to trust others are identified, this will inevitably produce trust without a leap of faith (Möllering 2001, p. 412). However, for Möllering, trust involves 'leaping-enabled by suspension-across the gorge of the unknowable from the land of interpretation into the land of expectation' (Möllering 2001, p. 412). This approach has provided good grounds for sociologically informed analyses that invite questions regarding the context (social, relational, economic, cultural and political context, and knowledge-base) from which individuals are leaping (Brownlie and Howson 2005), which enable researchers to illuminate these important influences on trust. It may be the case that these contextual factors not only shape access to information, but also impact the faith that individuals are able to hold when making trust decisions.

For Möllering, and others, faith is central to the trust process. Assuming a role for faith makes trust irreducible to a rational process of decision-making, and instead casts it as an affective or emotional process (Lewis and Weigert 1985; Giddens 1990; Misztal 1996). Trust, then, is 'a mix of feeling and rational thinking' (Lewis and Weigert 1985, p. 972). To accept that trust is partly emotional, recognises its complexity and unpredictability; it also complicates this notion regarding trust within children's relationships with professionals.

#### *Theorizing Trust between Children and Professionals*

Möllering's theory of trust requires consideration in its application to children's relationships with professionals. Children most often reside within families and these families, and wider personal communities, are 'key sites for the transmission of social values', such as trust (Jamieson and Milne 2012, p. 265). For children growing up in families and communities subject to professional surveillance, their suspicions of social workers (Davies 2015) and of being removed from their families (Jobe and Gorin 2013) inevitably shape their trust relations. Developing a propensity to trust someone and assessing the associated risks (Luhmann 1979) involves considering whether the person in question has shared aims and goals. Research with children shows them to be reflexive actors (James 2013; Davies 2015) who are able to interpret and evaluate people's actions (Mason and Tipper 2008). Children are shown to undertake risk assessments (Christensen and Mikkelsen 2008) if opportunities for interpreting professionals' actions are available to them, and to offer or withhold information depending on their assessments (Hutchby 2002, p. 149). Yet, in disadvantaged communities with considerable contact with social workers, the aims and goals of families and professionals are frequently perceived to be at odds (Parton 2008), which undermines trust relations between professionals and these communities. For children (and young people), professionals' aims and goals (Luhmann 1979) are not always transparent and children are inconsistently offered information on professional processes, both by professionals and family members (Cossar et al. 2016) which make them differently positioned in trust relations to adults.

Contact with professionals constitutes biographical experiences (children's and parents) that will shape children's current and future trust relations (Cossar et al. 2016). Whilst it is somewhat rare to consider children's biographies and past experiences (Cross 2011; James 2013; Davies 2015), trust research illuminates the value of past experience for informing trust relations (Khodayakov 2007). In the context of serious relational problems, children's pasts are shown to be highly formative of the present and future trust relations and worthy of consideration (Warming 2013).

### 3. Study Design

This paper explores the perspectives on trust of a relatively young sample of children (aged 8–10), whom are often overlooked in this type of research (Cossar et al. 2016). Accounts are drawn from the project *Keeping Each Other Safe (2010–2011)*, a qualitative study about who children would trust to help them, and the strategies they would use, when faced with three fictional problems. The problems were presented in vignettes on: peer conflict at school, domestic abuse, and child sexual abuse in the family home. The vignettes comprised two parts and they were accompanied by a series of questions. The aim was to understand how children interpreted the problems. Children were interviewed in pairs, and invited to consider how they imagined the child protagonist could, or should, respond to the problem, who they might tell, and to discuss how they, themselves, would respond and who they might tell. Interviews lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and discussions generated rich data on children's relative support, isolation, agency, knowledge or gaps in knowledge, and positive or negative expectations of support.

The use of vignettes is often met with questions regarding the 'problem of interpretation', specifically, how to disentangle and understand from which perspective participants are speaking e.g., is this their own view or the view they imagine the fictional character(s) will take, or is it a normative interpretation of what others might think is, or should be happening? (O'Dell et al. 2012). The vignette questions acknowledged that each child might have multiple views. The vignettes were designed to capture these different perspectives. For example, the bullying vignette included a 'bully' (also a victim) and a bullied child, and the children were invited to interpret the situation from both of the characters' perspectives, as well as being asked 'what would you do in this situation?', an additional perspective.

Vignettes are also considered to be limited to shedding light on what a person imagines, rather than what they will actually do in a given situation (Barter and Renold 2000). The children's accounts analysed here are read and interpreted as children sharing with the researcher the possibilities for action that exist in their relationships and local communities (Barter and Renold 2000; Jenkins et al. 2010), rather than indicators of children's behaviours in these situations. Research shows that children bring their own social, relational, and cultural contexts and circumstances to the interpretations of vignettes. Vignettes are one way of inviting children to describe the conditions, norms, and values that inform their responses to these problems (Jenkins et al. 2010, pp. 180–81). Participating children often assumed that the vignette's protagonists had similar relationships and home and school lives to themselves, but they were open to the characters experiencing different circumstances also. Vignettes are highly appropriate for trust research, because part of the process of trust involves imagining and anticipating their own and others' future actions (Möllering 2001), and therefore discussions of trust necessarily ask the child to consider what will or could happen. As such, researchers can use vignettes to gain important insights into how children believe scenarios would unfold in their own lives.

Whilst vignettes are used internationally to broach sensitive research topics with children and young people (Giglio et al. 2011), they require careful researcher consideration, particularly when vignettes concern serious and sensitive issues, including sexual and domestic abuse. Firstly, the vignettes deliberately deployed subtlety to avoid upsetting participants. Secondly, it is suggested that discussing fictional scenarios using a one person removed approach enables children to reveal what feels comfortable for them (Barter and Renold 2000). A couple of children responded to my questions by saying that there were issues they did not want to mention, which I read as a sign of children's agency to refuse participation, to withhold information, and to manage what they shared (Hutchby 2002).

Children were invited to opt into the study (Alderson 1995, p. 31), and they were informed about the study via a verbal explanation offered in school, and through a child-friendly leaflet that was sent home with them. The leaflet encouraged parents to discuss the project with their child and to only offer consent for their child's participation if the child wanted to participate. The children were additionally

asked prior to the interview whether they were content to participate. All of the children were told that they could halt the interview at any point or refuse any questions without consequence.

As in all research with children, there are limitations to confidentiality that were discussed with the children prior to the interview (Williamson et al. 2005). This was especially important, as I could not guarantee friends keeping confidential one another's accounts. Whilst this may represent a limitation to what children revealed, most importantly, paired interviews increased children's comfort in interviews (Davies 2015).

Data were first thematically analysed, in the context of each vignette, examining and identifying themes across the sample that illuminated the process of 'trust'. However, each child's responses to the vignettes was analysed alongside the thematic accounts in order to take a biographical approach to these accounts, building up a picture of the children as individuals with biographical contexts and experiences that they brought to their interpretations.

### *Sample*

The project involved interviewing fifteen girls, five boys and four school staff (three teachers; one learning mentor), and producing accompanying field notes over the duration of the project (approximately four months). Halestone primary,<sup>1</sup> London, where the research was conducted was located in an ethnically diverse area with children having diverse heritages: Black African or Afro-Caribbean (9); British (6); Northern European (3); Middle Eastern (1); and, South American (1). Halestone children and families spoke 52 different languages and large numbers of the children had English as an additional language.

The school was selected because of the socio-economic disadvantages that characterized the area. Teachers had concerns regarding children's social and emotional wellbeing—the children were growing up in a context of poverty and disadvantage—and these biographical and socio-economic experiences are an important context for interpreting the data. A local government report designated the area surrounding the school as the 14th most deprived district in England. There were large numbers of children on the 'at risk' and 'children in need' registers that were held by the local authority. Each week the school experienced approximately two referrals to social services. Therefore children's capacity to stay safe and safeguarding practice was a high priority for the school.

The 'contexts' of children's lives, their previous 'experiences' and potential vulnerabilities' are especially important in undertaking research into sensitive topics with children (Powell et al. 2018, p. 657). Schools hold vital knowledge about children's contexts, experiences, and vulnerabilities, and these concerns were discussed with teachers prior to the research commencing. Children that were involved in my research had not, to the knowledge of the school or myself, experienced first-hand sexual or domestic abuse, although they all had some experience of peer conflict. Research that involves 'vulnerable children' necessarily requires 'an appropriate balance between protection and participation' and following ethical procedures around anonymity, privacy, confidentiality, consent, and withdrawal, this research has sought to achieve this (Aldridge 2012, p. 56).

#### **4. 'Good Reasons' to Dis/Trust Adults, at School and at Home**

In this section, I examine the first component of trust, children's interpretations (Möllering 2001) of teachers' and parents' actions in the context of peer conflict, which inform decisions about trust and help seeking. Children's accounts below do not specifically discuss 'trust', but they consider a range of experiences in answering my questions about who children generally and who they personally might tell and seek help from.

Children's imagined responses to peer conflict were explored through a vignette in which a 'bully' physically pushes the protagonist whilst at school. Given the context of conflict, the majority of the

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym, as are all personal and place names included in this article, with the exception of my own.

children assumed that telling a teacher or friend was logical. Children drew on their experiences (Luhmann 1979; Lewis and Weigert 1985; Misztal 1996) of peer conflict in interpreting and assessing who the protagonist and whom they might tell. These children expressed a series of experientially informed 'good reasons' not to disclose conflict to the teacher, which shed light on the process via which children gather information to inform their decision-making. For example, Zed, a nine-year-old boy, recalls his experience of requesting but not receiving help from a teacher, an account that was offered by many of the children:

... a boy has been bullying me and she [teacher] said that she's going to deal with it later, but ... she didn't.

Based on their real-life experiences, Zed, and his interview partner Abena (age 8), agreed that teachers would not help in the fictional situation. Jacintha and Camille (both age 9) also interpreted the vignette from experience. They had carefully observed when teachers intervened in conflict:

Jacintha: The teacher does nothing because it's on the playground so the teacher does nothing and mum and dad just say 'deal with it'.

Hayley: So the teacher won't do anything because this is happening in the playground?

Camille: They help if someone is getting hurt or if someone's fighting.

Jacintha: But that's it.

Jacintha's response to Camille is imbued with unmet expectation that teachers should be responsive to all, and not only physical conflict.

The children's claim that teachers were non-responsive was confirmed by Zara (teacher), who suggested that the busy school compromised teachers' capacity to respond and undermined children's trust in teachers:

I'm not sure that the children trust adults, like, the playground, there's a lot of kids out there and so much going on ... that when a child does come to you to say something has happened, by the time you've searched the playground through 250 kids for one kid, um, you know, playtime is over and you've got to get back into class. I think that sometimes children feel that nothing gets done. I sometimes get the impression that 'cause they come in and they say this happened to me in the playground. And I say 'did you tell an adult in the playground?' And they're like 'yes'. And I'm like, 'oh well that's what I've told you to do' ... I make the mistake of assuming that it's been dealt with ... but the majority of the time, I'd say nothing happens, it's not properly dealt with, unless it's quite serious. I think sometimes they think 'well I told someone and nothing happened'.

Zara's account suggests that children regularly experience teacher inaction ('the majority of the time ...'). Her view was echoed by Sue, a learning mentor:

Children don't always get listened to and that's because there's a lot going on in school, it's hectic and there isn't much time to address issues.

The children's negative expectations around teachers being responsive appears legitimate in light of Zara and Sue's comments. If we consider the process of trust, we might question whether children's positive (trust) or negative (distrust) expectations of teachers' inaction based on reports of peer conflict may well be extended to other situations and problems children encounter. The process of trust is described as one, whereby an individual gathers information about a person in whom they may want to invest trust and uses this to determine future assessments (Luhmann 1979; Misztal 1996). In such situations, apparently small events informing trust decisions take on wider significance in trust relations (Luhmann 1979, p. 28). Teachers might assume that peer conflict is an ordinary aspect of

children's experience of school or they may accept that they are unable to address all of the problems children present them with. However, we might ask whether peer conflict is one of these small events, and if children seek help and do not receive support, to what extent will they trust teachers to help with other problems?

When teachers were unsupportive of children experiencing conflict, many children viewed parents as advocates that mediate between children and teachers. Only a minority of children did not expect parental support (see Jacintha's account above). Samuel's single mother encouraged him to be self-reliant. When asked how he would deal with peer conflict, Samuel (age 9) responded:

Sometimes you don't know the people on your estate so you have to deal with it yourself 'cause if you like, tell your mum, they won't deal with it because, well like, they won't deal with it because they have more better things to do . . . Something more important like, um the bills and stuff, bills problems.

Samuel's mum's financial hardship shaped the support available to him. His account should be interpreted in the low socio-economic context in which these children were growing up. In this setting, as in many others (Connolly 2004), traditional gender stereotypes regarding boys and masculinity prevailed, and boys (and some girls) were told by parents to respond to conflict by 'hit[ting] back'. For Samuel, telling a teacher about peer conflict would position him as a 'snitch'. To tell a teacher not only risked retaliation but this act of 'telling' also challenged Samuel's and his mum's values about self-reliance. In this sense, his interpretation of the risks of asking for help or 'dealing with it' himself, happened in a broad relational context that limited Samuel's feasible options.

Conflicting value systems between home and school complicated children's trust relations with teachers and acted as an impediment to children involving parents or older siblings in problems in school. School staff described some of the children's families as 'dysfunctional', as experiencing poverty, overcrowded housing, unemployment, and a challenging neighbourhood. The staff interviews positioned families as the 'cultural other', regarding their values around work, children's discipline, and conflict resolution. Staff accounts were not intentionally judgmental, but they served to 'other' Halestone families, and to associate poverty with poor parenting (Dermott and Pomati 2015). This gulf between the teachers and the parents undermined collaborative home-school relations and children's confidence that parents and teachers could collaborate in making them feel safe at school.

An example of this is offered by Lilly, (age 8). She was conscious that telling family about problems at school could result in embarrassing encounters occurring between family members and teachers, as witnessed by friends and peers. Lilly said:

I wouldn't actually tell my brother (age 29) to come [to school] 'cause it would cause a lot of trouble . . . it would just make things worse so it's better to let the teachers solve the problems . . . because sometimes you tell them (family), and they come and the head teacher screams at them and it's not good to say swear words to the head teacher or sometimes bitching each other. And I feel like, why did I even tell my mum? I wouldn't tell my mum because if I tell her it would be worse because if my mum comes and talks to the head teacher, it gets worse. And . . . everybody will be saying 'your mum is so much rude, you're mum's so much everything' and I think why did I even tell my mum?

Lilly's account highlights that difficult home-school relations prevent her from telling family about conflict, leaving her relying on teachers to 'solve the problems'. For children like Lilly poor home-school relationship limited their agency and possible responses to this problem (Warming 2013). These children's experiences are just one component of the trust process that informs children's expectations of trust in teachers and family members.

## 5. Domestic Abuse: A Culture of Secrecy and Stigma

The second problem that was presented to the children was an account of a child being ‘smacked’<sup>2</sup> by their parent’s partner and witnessing violence towards their mum. Children were asked what the child protagonist, Ashley, would do in this situation and what they would do. Despite recognising the illegality of violence, only eight children imagined calling the police. Below, Justine (age 9) captures some of the concerns that children shared about calling the police:

I think that she [protagonist] would um, well, um if she was feeling confident, try and ring the police . . . if she was really really confident that she was able to call the police, if she has um, responsibility . . . and then um, the police could arrest Neil for treating people badly . . . but then, if they call the police then the policeman might ask them [Ashley] why they haven’t called before if it’s happened for a long time.

If we consider that trust is comprised of knowledge and some unknown outcomes, we can interpret Justine’s account as hinting at the uncertainty a child might feel when faced with the prospect of calling the police. For relatively young children, like Justine, calling 999 was an unknown process, involving speaking to unknown adults, which required her to describe the problem and ask for help. As many children in these communities had English as an additional language, making a phone call to a professional potentially represented a significant challenge. Whilst children may have fewer experiences of talking to unknown adults and more limited knowledge of how to do this, this particularly diverse sample of children draws attention to how refugee and migrant children may be particularly disadvantaged due to their, as yet, limited linguistic skills. Furthermore, Justine’s concern that the police might ask why she had not called previously resonates with children’s experiences of having their accounts frequently questioned, because they are assumed to be incompetent ([Moran Ellis and Sünker 2013](#)).

For the participating children, judging what situations warrant a call to the police was also difficult. An important, but unsurprising gap in Justine’s knowledge was not knowing that professional adults, including the police, would read this domestic abuse scenario in terms of the legal duty of the state to protect children and their right to protection (Article 19 UNCRC) from experiencing ([Children Act 1989](#)) or witnessing domestic abuse ([The Adoption and Children Act 2002](#)). Yet, these rights and obligations are unknown to Justine, and therefore she makes this imaginative ‘leap’ and questions whether she is sufficiently confident to call the police and whether she will be trusted. As trust is more likely to exist where there is evidence of common goals ([Luhmann 1979](#)), greater knowledge of professionals’ aims, intentions, duties, and the translation of her rights into an accessible message, would therefore lead to Justine interpreting this situation based on what is ‘known’, rather than imagining the ‘unknown’, which compromises her positive expectation of trust.

Twelve of the children were reticent regarding the possibility of them or the protagonist telling others outside of the family about family problems—including friends, teachers, social workers, and police. Their community context was characterised by a collective suspicion of professionals, which children discussed in interviews ([Davies 2015](#), p. 124). They feared the potential ramifications of information about their family problems being overheard by, or passed on to teachers and other safeguarding professionals. For example, Valerio’s maxim ‘something that happens in the house stays in the house’ was one of the many ways in which children expressed this reticence; some explained that family would view a violent incident as family ‘business’, and that telling others was likely to exacerbate this issue and lead to uncertain, but likely, deleterious consequences for the family and children. The most commonly mentioned individuals who might be told included ‘dad’, or another trusted adult in the family. As noted previously, the family is an influential context for the transmission

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<sup>2</sup> A smack is the term used to refer to the physical punishment of a child. In the UK physical or corporal punishment is permitted providing it constitutes ‘reasonable chastisement’. See [Freeman and Saunders \(2014\)](#) for a critique of this law.



of values and for the formation of or undermining of 'trust' relations. These values clearly inform children's anticipations of what may happen next if they were to disclose this incident.

Charlotte (age 9): 'I wouldn't tell my friend because it's personal . . . They could like make it more big and call the police and um get like, call, tell everyone'.

Children imagined that friends or peers might gossip or tease them if news of a violent incident in their home was discussed at school. Despite many children expressing empathy for the child protagonist, who was encountering domestic abuse, they assumed that peers would show little empathy in real-life situations. There was a risk that gossip at school about domestic abuse would lead to the Head/teacher hearing about, and passing on information about the incident to whom Lilly (age 8) called 'the borough people' [social care] who would contact the child's mother. In the girls' view, this issue would get 'even bigger'. The girls appear to have a sound knowledge that teachers are responsible for acting upon concerns they have about children. For many children, the risk of sharing information about their family and the imagined consequences were sufficient deterrents from disclosure, and we could also read children's choice to remain silent as agentic (Hutchby 2002). In this scenario, children's 'leaps' are from a cultural context of distrust of professionals, across a gorge of imagined danger and risk relating to disclosure. Children were aware that disclosing domestic abuse risked retribution from the abuser, and they worried about what would happen to them if they reported the abuser. For example,

Charlotte (age 9) said: 'If he slapped you then that would be child abuse . . . you'd have to live in a [children's] home and live with the police'.

In other research, children report similar concerns about the consequences of disclosure, including the fear that they will not be taken seriously or that nothing will change (Butler and Williamson 1994; Jobe and Gorin 2013).

With Halestone school receiving two referrals to social services per week that were related to the safety of their pupils, there were 'good reasons' for these children and their families to be concerned about family information being shared at or with the school. Graham (teacher) described what he believed to be families' concerns about child protection meetings held at school:

A lot of the families here, if they had any idea or thought that social services were involved with them, they'd completely close down, they wouldn't reveal anything, or help them, or look for help, put it that way. So there are those cultural differences there. They have a fear of the state sort of thing. And they see sometimes, school as the state.

The focus on multi-agency working in the UK (Children Act 2004) makes school one agency in a multi-agency team; therefore, Halestone families were justified in viewing school as 'the state' and a real threat to their families. This wider context is important for understanding children's broader relational experiences that contextualise the child-professional encounter, and that offer children experiences for interpretation, anticipation, and ultimately leaps to trust/distrust.

## 6. Child Sexual Abuse

In the final vignette, the child protagonist, Katrina experiences uncomfortable 'hugging' and 'kissing' from her mother's partner Mike, who also enters the room whilst she is undressing. Katrina is an only child who is subject to predation by 'mum's boyfriend'. Many children recognised the conflict and isolation that this particular dynamic created for Katrina and the difficulty that she faced over who she might tell.

Some children interpreted Mike's 'hugging' and 'kissing' as over-friendliness, or fatherliness, and his behaviour as 'impolite'. Very few recognised his sinister actions; those that did called him a 'pervert' or 'child-abuser'. These mixed responses show that Mike's actions are open to interpretation. Children's readings of this vignette are discussed in more detail elsewhere (Davies 2015, p. 124), but here I focus on who children trusted to tell. Their accounts only discussed few trusted adults who

might be told of this abuse, and those adults included family members (dads, grandparents, aunts, uncles). Many children assumed that a mother who was romantically involved with the perpetrator would disbelieve their child's disclosure. Lilly (age 8) said: 'If your mum really doesn't want her boyfriend to go, she won't do nothing at all.'

This negative expectation that the mother would not listen to or act in the child's best interests is a reality reported by children in real situations (Moran Ellis and Sünker 2013). One solution for Lilly and her friend Molly was to accept Mike's actions and 'let him do it'. Lilly and Molly (age 9), discussed what they might do in this situation and who they might tell if mum did 'nothing'. Molly suggested that a child's grandma would listen, and that she would arrange a visit to her grandmother's home. Lilly responded that this solution may not be possible for all children. Lilly says:

Some of them [children] don't have nans. I don't have my nannies here, I've got all of them in Ghana and some of them have gone. I mean some of them have died. You can't go where they've died and tell them because they're gone ... my mum's dad is still alive and my dad's one is dead ... I would just tell who I know.

Lilly's response reveals how migrant children might be faced with a more limited personal network to whom they can disclose problems. For first generation migrant children with extended kin in their home countries, they often had reduced available personal networks. The age of the participating children meant that they did not independently contact extended kin abroad. Additionally, for recent migrants, limited linguistic skills posed further challenges in assessing who might be trustworthy, and in articulating problems to those who might help.

It is worthwhile collectively considering the responses to the three vignettes. Children's accounts suggested that teachers frequently did not address their concerns regarding peer conflict (drawing on experience), and children did not volunteer teachers as potential confidantes in the scenarios of domestic or sexual abuse. The children were reticent about sharing family problems outside of the family. It does not necessarily follow that children in such situations would not trust teachers. However, distrust is shown to be a product of the wider culture in which these children were growing up and both children's own and others' biographical experiences and cultural factors served to shape their trust relations. These accounts must necessarily be considered in this broader context. In this study, it is impossible to disentangle whether children's past experiences of teachers served to inform their understandings of teachers as trustworthy or not, in other real and imagined situations. However, from the data, what we do know is that some of the participating children imagined having very few professionals in whom they might invest trust and from whom they might receive support.

## 7. Discussion

### 7.1. *Trust between Children and Professionals: A Functional Approach*

Analysing children's accounts alongside the professional and policy literature on the importance of trust reveals tensions. Previously, I discussed the onus on schools and teaching staff to facilitate a culture that enables children to recognise and disclose abuse (a functional approach to trust). The children's and teachers' accounts show how pressures on schools (e.g., large pupil numbers in the playground, limited time), institutional practices that emphasise adult power (Fattore and Mason 2017), and ingrained social, economic, cultural, and linguistic inequalities that impact the children's community context all powerfully shape (and limit) the possibilities for schools like Halestone to meet this policy agenda. This is one way in which schools are, albeit inadvertently, reproducing, rather than tackling social inequalities (Francis and Mills 2012, p. 252). Since austerity began in 2008, UK schools and teachers are particularly challenged by (1) increasing poverty amongst their pupils living in and attending schools in disadvantaged areas, the need for schools to offer anti-poverty services (e.g., food banks and free breakfast clubs) and (2) by reduced school budgets (NEU/CPAG 2018, p. 9). Whilst school responses to children are limited by these circumstances, children's support networks outside of school were also limited by parents managing poverty, a small personal network, or by

poor home-school relations. Thus, children's trust in professionals should necessarily be considered as embedded in these wider personal relationships and contexts.

Adopting a childhood studies lens, a functional conceptualization of trust serves an adult professional and policy agenda that aims to bring about trust to facilitate disclosure. Whilst facilitating trust is often assumed to be a positive benign intention, children express concerns regarding trusting others with disclosures of family problems at school; without full information, children's disclosures can bring unexpected consequences (Pinkney 2013). Rather than approaching children's safety in a functional way (e.g., 'how can professionals gain children's trust to encourage disclosures and safeguard children? Or 'what qualities do professionals need to display for children to trust them?'), I propose an alternative. Considering children's biographical experiences of migration, or poverty, and taking a wider angled lens on trust would enable professionals to understand: (1) the impediments to trust particularly for children in disadvantaged communities; (2) how children's decisions about trust are made; and, (3) how to enhance trust and improve relations with children and their families.

## 7.2. Reconceptualising Trust: Bringing in Biography

Möllering's conceptualisation of trust (based on Simmel's earlier ideas) emphasises the process of trust rather than the functional outcome of trust (disclosure). This article has used conceptualizations of trust that understand it to be comprised of both experience and knowledge, as well as a series of unknowns that bring about uncertainty, and require a leap of faith (suspension). Brownlie and Howson (2005) suggest that it is important to understand from where participants are leaping (e.g., the child's social, relational and biographical contexts). These will be important for understanding interpretation of information (knowledge). I propose that this may equally help researchers to consider suspension and how a child's situated biography can shape their faith in professionals.

In research with children (Warming 2013), power has been considered central to trust relations, with particular attention to children's generational position *vis a vis* adults. The accounts above indicate that children's experiences as children are important but in intersection with other aspects of biographical experience, e.g., socio-economic position, poverty, and migrant identities (often overlapping experiences) which are shown to shape children's trust relations and help-seeking. Poverty, Ridge (2002, 2011) argues, pervades every area of children's lives and, I suggest, children's problem-solving and the availability of support is no exception. For children with limited support at home or in their wider personal network, for those children and families for whom English is not their first language, and for children who feel that they lack the vocabulary to explain or describe experiences, these identities shape the possibilities for children to 'check out' worries with others and articulate harm.

### 7.2.1. Land of Interpretation: Children's Biographical and Relational Contexts

Children's experiences of gathering information and generating knowledge are particular. Children's biographical experiences as children, as people with potentially limited access to information, without adult mediation, positions them as more reliant on others when attempting to gather information to assess risk, and to consider investing trust. When children are further marginalized by poverty and migration, their access to information is further reduced, due to limited access to resources (Wyness 2012) or language. Using Möllering's conceptualization of trust as comprised in part of knowledge and information enables a closer examination of the nuances of this first aspect of the trust process.

Children's accounts (above) show that children are both independently interpreting professionals' actions, based on first-hand experiential knowledge, and making interpretations that are shaped by the views and experiences of friends, parents, siblings, and others. Therefore, the biographical experiences of close others are a key context for children gaining information about professionals that enable them to assess who to trust. I refer to these orientations to trust as 'trust biographies', as they (1) enable us to see children as growing up in an historical, social, cultural and relational context and (2) encourage

questions about children's and families' past experiences that have shaped present and anticipated future trust orientations.

### 7.2.2. The Gorge of Suspension

The gorge of suspension represents the unknown in any trust decision; the gorge across which children and young people are leaping when they arrive at un/favourable expectations of dis/trust. Above, I have offered examples in which children appear to occupy 'the gorge of suspension', and are dealing with the unknown and often leaping to the land of expectation and to dis/trust. When children's access to knowledge is limited, then the gorge of suspension is wide with considerable distance between the lands of interpretation and expectation, which constitute personal and familial risk. Examining what children know and what they assume points to a set of practical solutions to increase their access to information and knowledge with the aim of improving professional relations and affecting trust. We must talk with children directly to understand what children know or assume.

## 8. Implications for Practice

If we accept that trust is a combination of children's interpretations (knowledge/experience), mixed with faith around what is not yet, or cannot be known, resulting in an expectation of trust/distrust (Möllering), and that trust is one of many social cultural, economic relations, then there are a number of ways in which professionals can improve trust in their relationships with children. A reasonable aim for professionals endeavouring to build trust with children and young people would be to attempt to narrow the gorge across which children are leaping. This means that more of the decision-making about trust could occur within the land of interpretation (based on knowledge) and less would take place over the gorge of suspension (requiring faith).

Children's accounts indicated that there was limited trust in school staff to support children in peer conflict, and that many children were conditioned to keep family problems to themselves for fear of the consequences. For children growing up in situations of limited support, they were relatively isolated in their problem-solving. Their need for an adult professional whom they could trust and whom might support them was considerable. There is an important social justice argument for ensuring that all children have access to a trustworthy adult, who can help them to gather information and with whom they can potentially share problems. As school is children's primary context for contact with professional adults, and it may be children's only regular contact with non-familial adults, having trustworthy adults in school is imperative.

In order to better understand children's broad contexts in which trust relations occur, professionals might ask children: who might you talk to if you had a problem? With whom have you shared positive and/or negative experiences of 'trust/distrust'? Why? Teachers might ask themselves, where children have negative expectations, what might these be attributed to (e.g., miscommunications or clashes of social, cultural, political, or religious values)? How can miscommunications or value clashes be avoided? How might children's negative experiences be transposed to other contexts and situations? How might negative experiences be counteracted by professionals? (e.g., through dialogue with the child; a professional 'doing something differently' and restoring faith in the professional relationship). These questions take trust rather than disclosures as the aim and any disclosure as an outcome of trust.

In considering 'suspension', there were a few notable gaps in children's knowledge. The first was children's understanding of their rights and the second was children's understandings of professional aims and intentions. A key implication of this research is that Halestone children, as we might expect of other children also, did not recognize their rights to protection (UNCRC Article 19). Children's imagined tolerance of potentially abusive behaviour illuminates a need for professionals to work with children and families to consider children's right to protection in those local contexts. Without adequate knowledge of their right to be and feel safe, children are not well-placed to challenge transgressions of their rights and safety. Prior to this is a related challenge, which is to ensure that children's rights are considered and then taken seriously by professionals (Lefevre et al. 2017). Secondly, offering children

information on professionals' motives and aims around safeguarding and child protection would potentially provide an alternative account for those children who have been socialized in families and communities where there is a 'fear of the state' and of surveillance. It does not follow that children will necessarily use this information to invest trust instead of distrust, but it will ensure that they are well-informed, share more equitable relationships with professionals, and have realistic expectations of institutional and professional aims and practices around safeguarding.

The practical questions professionals might ask are: how much do children and young people understand their rights, in this case, to protection (Article 19 UNCRC), and their right to be heard (Article 12)? What do I notice or hear children or young people assuming about professionals' actions? What information do I, or others, have that might challenge misconceptions or inform children about their rights? How can I deliver information to children and young people that may be essential to their decision-making? Professionals could ask children and young people themselves regarding their decision-making and what else would they like to, or need to know in order to make informed decisions.

## 9. Conclusions

This paper involved exploring children's anticipations of how they and other children might respond to and address three fictional safeguarding problems: peer conflict, domestic abuse, and child sexual abuse. The paper adapts Möllering's conceptualisation of trust, arguing that considering the process of, rather than function of trust is important in the context of safeguarding children. A focus on the wider relational contexts of persons investing trust is essential in attempting to understand trust relations. In this case, there was a need to understand the complex relationships in which children are engaged particularly in situations whereby children's key personal relationships may be the cause of a disclosure, or close others are unavailable as a source of help if they are intimately connected to the abuser. I have argued that biographical experience, which includes the social, cultural, economic, and relational contexts that make up children's lives, is an often missing component in examinations of children's trust relations, yet powerfully shapes their trust biographies.

Whilst I acknowledge that the small scale of this project does not support empirical generalizations regarding children's trust experiences, the contribution of this article is conceptual, in that this article considers what comprises the trust process. The conceptualisation of trust, set out above, has implications for theorising trust beyond the context of school and research with children and young people and also has implications for professional practice. This notion of trust as a process of interpretation plus a leap of faith gives rise to my argument that biographical experiences (including interpretations informed by close others) are important grounds for interpretation and that reducing the 'unknowns' (the gorge), is pertinent to professional work with those who have limited access to knowledge, and it will serve to ensure that trust is less of a leap.

**Funding:** This research was funded by a postdoctoral fellowship at King's College London.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank my colleague Mike Baynham, University of Leeds, and four anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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