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Place-based understandings of 'risk' and 'danger' through a gendered lens – experiences of sexual violence in a deprived coastal town in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Foregrounding the voices of young women in a deprived coastal context in the UK, this paper explores the intersection of place, class, gender and marginalisation. Drawing upon participatory qualitative research, the paper focuses on the following key themes: (1) how young women navigate perceptions of 'risk' through the everyday realities of the locale, (2) experiences of sexual violence and abuse (3) and finally, how normative depictions of 'risky behaviour' correspond to the accounts of women's (sexual) agency. By rooting the analysis of place-based inequalities through a gendered lens, the findings help illuminate the complex relationship between structural context and the regulation of gender and sexuality. The paper also draws attention to the structural factors that reproduce class-based stigma for people who are deemed 'at risk' in places that are characterised as 'left behind'. In doing so, the paper provides alternative agendas for policy and practice that aim to support young women who experience place-based marginalisation.

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Introduction

In the UK, there is a long tradition of research that explores the relationship between indices of deprivation and the specific characteristics of people and places (Cartmel and Furlong 2000; Lupton, Obolenskaya, and Fitzgerald 2016; Shucksmith 2004). More recently, contemporary geographical inequalities have revived interest in the urban/rural divide, including concerns surrounding deprived coastal towns that form an important context to this paper. Politically, there has also been a resurgence of interest surrounding the politics of place, including a policy agenda that seeks to respond to 'places in crisis' via a 'levelling up agenda'.

Despite increasing interest in geographical inequality, young people's experiences of spatial marginality have not only been excluded from policy and political debates, but also the broader theoretical frameworks within youth studies that help us understand

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contemporary young lives. Drawing upon novel data from a qualitative study into how young women navigate 'risk' and 'danger' in a highly deprived coastal town, this article aims to fill this gap by examining some of the mechanisms through which geographical inequalities unfold. Through centring the experiences of young women, we foreground how such inequalities are subjectively felt and explained, and the consequences they hold for young women's lives. It is within this context that the article will raise important questions around the gendered impact of dominant policy and practice depictions of 'risky behaviour' that often individualise risk.

Following a brief overview of the current research that outlines the specific features, drivers and outcomes of deprivation that are concentrated in UK coastal towns, we discuss current political responses to tackling such place-based inequalities. We situate this within the international youth studies literature that examines how the spatial concentration of inequalities impact on the experience of youth and the patterning of youth transitions. The paper then turns to a more focused review of research on the gendered experiences of growing up in deprived and rural locales, including how material and social inequalities can 'thin' young women's agency. It is within this section that we critically appraise dominant discourses that problematise young working-class women including the individualisation of 'risky behaviour'. After outlining our methodological approach, we present findings on (1) how young women navigate perceptions of 'risk' through the everyday realities of the locale, (2) experiences of sexual violence and abuse (3) and finally, how normative depictions of 'risky behaviour' correspond to the accounts of women's (sexual) agency. Considering the key themes that arise from the data, we argue for greater attentiveness to the significance of gender when trying to understand how young people navigate the structural conditions of place and how *place* shapes risk and vulnerability. These findings speak powerfully to contemporary issues on the politics of place and geographies of exclusion that have value for local, national and international audiences interested in contemporary geographical divisions.

Place-based inequalities: deprived coastal towns in the UK

Deprivation is a persistent yet historically under-examined feature of many coastal towns in the UK (Smith 2012; Agarwal et al. 2018). However, the shifting socioeconomic climate over recent years has stimulated research and policy examination of the distinct challenges facing coastal communities (CMO 2021; Emmins et al. 2023). A number of studies have highlighted the greater prevalence of socioeconomic deprivation in a range of coastal locales (Beatty, Fothergill, and Wilson 2011; ONS 2020; Emmins et al. 2023). Agarwal et al. (2018) go further in exploring the nature of multiple deprivation in English coastal towns; their analysis demonstrates that clusters of deprivation are spatially configured, intractable, and sustained by a complex and interrelated set of drivers. These include: disinvestment in local economies that are reliant on a diminished and inconsistent tourist trade; the prevalence of low-paid and fluctuating employment; underdeveloped education and training infrastructure; transient and 'vulnerable' populations who are more likely to experience poor health; low-quality, unaffordable housing with an over-representation of multi-tenancy dwellings; and the isolated, poorly connected nature of many coastal towns, particularly those situated within rural hinterlands.

More focused analysis has highlighted how specific facets of deprivation manifest in UK coastal communities. Recent statistics have pointed to the problems associated with high levels of substance misuse, showing that some seaside towns in England and Wales have the highest rates of death in the country from misuse of heroin/morphine (ONS 2018). Relatedly, seaside towns have featured prominently in the criminal exploitation of children and vulnerable adults, via the transience of 'gang' members from major cities to rural/coastal towns to expand drug trade (HM Government 2018). Attention has also been placed upon the outcomes of young people as they make key educational and employment transitions, with research showing that in rural and coastal areas there tends to be few, if any, higher education providers. Where providers are available, there are limited learning options and below average teaching and employment outcomes (SMC 2017, 70). For children who live in coastal towns, poor educational outcomes are more pronounced than for similarly disadvantaged children in urban settings (Emmins et al. 2023). As one Social Mobility Commission report asserted: 'Isolated rural and coastal areas are dire for youth social mobility outcomes' (SMC 2017, 55), and 'disadvantaged young people in isolated areas are often trapped – they cannot afford to move out, but have inadequate opportunities available locally' (SMC 2017, 73). With coastal towns being home to some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK (Agarwal et al. 2018; Beatty, Fothergill, and Wilson 2011; ONS 2020), recent policy debates have reinforced the urgency for national action in addressing the health and well-being of population who have been 'long neglected and overlooked' (CMO 2021, 3). This research has shown that those living in deprived coastal towns have some of the worst health and well-being outcomes in England, including higher rates of mental ill-health and poorer health outcomes such as lower life expectancy (Corfe 2017; CMO 2021).

The need to address such place-based inequalities has been recognised in the UK political system, with the creation in 2019 of an All Party Parliamentary Group for Coastal Communities and a recent House of Lords Committee report making a range of recommendations to regenerate coastal towns and communities (HoL 2019). Materially, the UK Government's creation of the Coastal Communities Fund (2012–2022) has resulted in the investment of £187 million for regeneration projects in coastal areas. This fund has now segued into the Government's broader 'levelling up fund', aimed at stimulating social mobility through targeting investment to specific places, most notably ex-industrial areas, deprived towns and coastal communities (HM Treasury 2021). It is notable that a report commissioned by the Coastal Communities Alliance showed significant disparities when comparing the performance of UK regions against coastal towns across the Government's 'levelling up' metrics (Emmins et al. 2023).

Whilst this body of research and policy focuses on the features, drivers and outcomes of deprivation that is concentrated in UK coastal towns, there continues to be limited recognition of the lived experience of deprivation in such contexts (Telford 2022). For young people in particular, a few qualitative studies have drawn attention to experiences of growing up in deprived coastal towns. These studies have explored how young people perceive and navigate constrained opportunities for employment and education (Wenham 2020; 2022); experiences of overcrowded and difficult home lives (Ward 2015); and the negative material and psychological impact of living in places geared towards tourists (Wenham 2020). This literature also highlights how the structural features of 'place' can not only limit the choices available to young people but also be important

sources of cultural identity. Young people in these studies describe a complex dynamic between their desire for escape and the relational and topophilic bonds they hold with their communities. The process of geographic 'disembedding' (Corbett 2009) for young people in coastal towns is therefore influenced not only by a lack of material and social capital but also by a strong sense of belonging to people and place.

These studies resonate with a longstanding body of international research which examines how the spatial concentration of inequalities impacts on the experience of youth and the patterning of youth transitions (Coles, 1995; Farrugia 2014; MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Shucksmith 2004). Research has drawn attention to the key differences between the urban and rural contexts that impact upon access to education and transitions into employment and training, as well as how young people make sense of, and respond to, markedly different opportunity structures. Centring analysis on the spatial processes between the rural and the urban is therefore integral for helping us understand the re-shaping of young people's lives, including the production of new forms of geographical inequalities. Reflecting upon over thirty years of research into young people growing up in marginalised and rural localities, MacDonald (2022, 248) encapsulates the importance of this:

> Where we are from – home and origins – still matters in defining who we are, and what we become and do. The small 'locales' of home of the sort that I uncovered in rural North Yorkshire in the 1980s, can set our class identities, worldviews and imagined futures in ways that are far from small in their repercussions.

Taking this further, young people's sense of belonging and identity in such communities is underpinned by an interplay between class and other aspects of identity, including gender (Thomson and Taylor 2005). It is this dynamic to which we now turn.

Gendered experiences of deprived coastal towns

The contemporary research and policy narrative surrounding the structural context of coastal towns in the UK tends to homogenise young people's experiences of growing up within such contexts. Where gender is more explicitly addressed, the focus has been on masculinities, and in particular, the ways in which young men navigate precarity within local labour markets (McDowell and Bonner-Thompson 2020; Simpson et al. 2021). Young women's experiences of traversing early adulthood within the particular milieu of a deprived coastal town are underexplored. However, we know from place-based research across a range of countries and settings, that marginalised young women experience distinct challenges and agentic dilemmas throughout their transitions into adulthood which are strongly related to spatialised features, relationships, resources and barriers.

In particular, the work of Ravn (2022) has shown the importance of how young women in deprived and rural locales use micro-geographical distinctions as a discursive and performative strategy, drawing attention to the need for some young women to distance themselves from 'other' 'problem' families or neighbourhoods in order to manage the stigma attached to place. The study also foregrounds the prioritisation of family and social relations for future life, redefining '"aspirations" to be social and familial rather than individualistic' (Ravn 2022, 1244). Similarly, Thomson and Taylor (2005, 337) highlight how young women engage in 'gendered projects of self "which are" resourced by the family, community and surrounding culture'. This sense of being relationally and

geographically contained is also present in accounts of how marginalised young women perceive and encounter various forms of risk in their lives, which are often profoundly gendered. In terms of young women's navigation of local spaces, geographical research into sexual violence has pointed to their strong awareness of 'unsafe' aspects of their neighbourhoods (Bows and Fileborn 2022). Further, Cense (2019) frames young womens' navigation of 'risky' places and people in terms of 'bonded agency', whereby agency is not conceptualised as an individual concern, but instead constituted and expressed through social relationships. The interplay between localised spaces, sociality and agency is also central to Firmin, Warrington, and Pearce's (2016) analysis of context in sexual violence and exploitation. As they state, recognising the role of contextual factors in constraining choice and heightening risk does not negate young people's 'recursive role in both informing and being informed by the social contexts in which their sexual identities emerge' (Firmin, Warrington, and Pearce 2016, 2330). More broadly as Bay-Cheng (2019, 471) notes, social and material inequalities 'thin' young womens' situational sexual agency, 'channeling it into acts including compromise, compliance and sacrifice'. Agency is therefore conceptualised not as a performative attribute of young women making 'positive' choices, but instead as a range of situated responses which meet the diversity of young women's needs for safety, stability and attaining longer-term goals (Bay-Cheng 2019).

These accounts share a recognition that marginalised young womens' ways of negotiating risk need to be understood within spatial, social and structural bounds. In this sense, they resonate with Harris and Dobson's (2015, 154) call to move away from a 'structure/agency' dichotomy and instead cast young women as 'suffering actors', neither 'pure' victims nor agents. This contrasts with individualised discourses of risk, whereby young women are constructed as responsibilised individuals, while simultaneously made subject to classist categorisations of 'vulnerability' (Bay-Cheng 2015). As Harris (2004, 35) comments

> The construction of the at-risk category serves to house a diversity of marginalized youth whose problems are rarely named as structural. It suggests that failure is both a matter of personal choice and at the same time the unintended consequence of an unfortunate individual biography

The consequences of such an explanatory framework of risk being dominant in policy and practice are that behavioural interventions applied to individual young women in relation to sexual exploitation and violence are often disconnected from the everyday realities of their lives (Firmin, Warrington, and Pearce 2016).

Indeed, the problematisation of young women who are rendered 'at risk', often as a consequence of their circumstances (i.e. entrenched poverty), can result in an intensification of surveillance, where young women are 'targeted' by public agencies and made subject to statutory and sometimes coercive interventions which can be blame-focused, do not meet young women's needs and can compound harm (Jump et al. 2023). For young women in deprived coastal towns, this is magnified due to the particular ways risk manifests in such settings. For instance, research by Radcliffe et al. (2020) noted the heightened risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE) in deprived coastal towns, drawing attention to the constellation of risk factors for CSE which are present in such localities, including poverty, experiences of discrimination, lack of opportunities, lack of support

from the local community, and the confluence of perpetrators**.** As Radcliffe et al. (2020) also describe, care-experienced young people are more likely to experience CSE, and this group is overrepresented in deprived seaside towns due to the combination of relatively cheap housing and the UK model of market-based provision in children's social care accommodation. Furthermore, despite critical appraisal of discourses that problematise young working-class women's sexual activity and childbearing choices (Arai 2009; Wenham 2016), mainstream policy and research have driven forward numerous interventions (DfES 2006) into the persistent and significant variation in the rate of teenage pregnancy both between and within local areas in the UK (ONS 2020), including a focus on young parenthood in rural and seaside areas (Bell et al. 2004; Geddes and Wenham 2023). Both teenage pregnancy and CSE are therefore powerful examples of how multiple risk factors can interlink and overlap in complex ways to form place-based and gendered inequalities, which in turn, impact upon the experiences and outcomes of young women. Importantly, this includes the increased likelihood of being subject to intervention/s that might not necessarily correspond to the lived reality of women rendered 'at risk'.

Such inequalities form the context within which we explore in this paper the ways young women make sense of and respond to (sexual) risks, and articulate bounded forms of agency within the distinct locale of a deprived seaside town. Much research has rightly foregrounded place in explaining the complexity of deprivation, but this comes at the risk of underplaying the multi-faceted layering of inequalities, especially how place intersects with aspects of difference such as gender, sexuality, class and 'race'. Wider bodies of qualitative research with young women have also shown how understandings of 'risk', 'danger' and 'safety' need to be situated within particular spaces and places (Green and Singleton 2006; Pain 2000). By examining the relationship between place, gender, 'risk' and 'safety', we explore the social meanings that underpin young womens fear of violence as they navigate their everyday lives. Our analysis of young women's subjectivities adds a new perspective to the body of research on experiences of growing up in a rural and coastal setting.

Methods

This article draws upon qualitative data from a study on the transitional experiences of marginalised young people in a deprived coastal town in the UK. The fieldwork took place between 2017 and 2019, and included ethnography, participatory arts-based research and 41 semi-structured interviews with young people aged 15–25 who live in North Yorkshire, England. Thirty-one of those interviews took place in a deprived coastal town. From this sample of 31 interviews, 18 were with young women, which are the focus of analysis for this paper. The coastal town in which this study is situated has complex spatial concentrations of deprivation with average employee salaries amongst the lowest in England. Purposeful sampling focused on recruiting participants who had experienced disengagement, or were deemed 'at risk' of disengagement, from education, training or employment. All participants were drawn from neighbourhoods in the coastal town identified as 'hotspots' of severe deprivation, including high levels of poverty and long-term unemployment. The young people recruited into this study could be described as some of the most vulnerable young people in the coastal town. Symptomatic of this was their description of 'risk' factors that correspond to the

spatial clustering of deprivation and hardship in coastal towns, including substance misuse, poor mental health and experience of crime. Other indicators of poverty and deprivation that participants described included receiving free school meals or recalling previous entitlement whilst growing up. A number of the participants had also experienced hardships and trauma associated with bereavement, family substance misuse and being care experienced.

Participants were recruited through two main gatekeepers, a detached youth work project, and an education and training provider. The ethnographical component involved the research team immersing themselves into local youth provision, including regular attendance at a youth club and being involved in detached youth work. Investigating young people's relationship to the locality involved participatory arts-based methods, including walking interviews, map making and the design/production of a light installation. The research team built relationships with young people over time that facilitated a deep understanding of place-based inequalities and enabled rich interview data to be gathered. The youth club setting especially allowed for insight into the gendered dynamics of relationships, how young women navigate place, and how they make sense of and respond to 'risk' in their everyday lives.

Interviews followed a topic guide that focused upon perceptions of spatial inequalities as young people make key transitions. This included: (a) the everyday lives of young people who are at risk from, or disengaged from education and employment; (b) how young people see themselves and reflect on how they are perceived by others (c) understandings of their locality; (d) critical moments and biographical accounts that help understand routes to disengagement; and (e) hopes and aspirations for the future. Interviews lasted between 30 and 100 minutes. Individual interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and the data analysed thematically. After careful reading and re-reading of transcripts, key themes and sub-themes were developed into a framework for triangulating and organising the material (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). Ethnographic observations, including fieldnotes and materials from arts-based activities, were also coded and incorporated into the analysis. Participants received a £20 gift voucher for taking part in the research. The study received approval from the University of York's Department of Social Policy and Social Work Ethics Committee.

Findings: navigating 'risk' through the everyday realities of the locale

So far, we have seen how much research into the experiences of deprivation in UK coastal towns is either gender blind or focuses primarily on the 'struggles' of young men, particularly young men's relationship to local labour markets (McDowell and Bonner-Thompson 2022; Simpson et al. 2021). When aspects of femininity are brought into play, they tend to concern 'normative' depictions of 'risky' behaviour that centre around the pathologisation of working-class young women. These dominant representations often draw upon mainstream research and policy to problematise and regulate young women's behaviour and decision making, especially with respect to sexual activity (i.e. reducing teenage pregnancy), sexual relationships and risks of sexual exploitation and violence. Within these debates, the concept of vulnerability has grown in stature as a tool to not only explain the characteristics of 'problem groups', but also justify policy development that is targeted at young women deemed 'at risk' (Brown 2014). As previously argued, a criticism

often levelled at such developments is how they not only individualise 'risky behaviour' but minimise the significance of how young women operate within their social worlds, including cultural context and perceptions of belonging, identity and relationality (Firmin, Warrington, and Pearce 2016; Harris and Dobson 2015). A more nuanced account of placed-based inequalities needs to involve a deeper analysis of how young people navigate the locale, and how practices that might be regarded as 'risky', 'safe' or 'unsafe', are embedded within the complex intersections of difference such as gender, class and marginalisation. The findings below illustrate these intersections, and the ways in which young women feel, enact and make sense of their experiences. To begin with, we will look at how young women sought to provide meaning to everyday perceptions and experiences of risk in public spaces. The findings will then go on to explore the interface between the public and private spheres of young women's lives through an exploration of sexual violence. In doing so, we will show the importance of engaging with both the public and private places in which 'risk' manifests.

"*It's definitely not the safest place*": Navigating Risk in Public Spaces.

While the study did not set out to document the details of navigating space and place, young women described a range of public spaces that exposed them to risks. Similar to other research (MacDonald, 238–240), distinctions were expressed through a 'micro-geographical divide' that involved young women giving granular descriptions of 'sociocultural maps of their locales'. Accounts of 'risk' and 'danger' were therefore situated within the distinctiveness of the social and cultural context, illustrative of the heightened levels of deprivation: *"I borrow off my nana a lot, and then that leads to more debt and more debt"*, crime: *"there's been a few stabbings … the Police are always around"* and drug/substance misuse that existed in the town: *"it's a small town … this is where people make the most business in small towns, they come with the drugs"*.

As young women described going about their everyday lives, navigating 'risks' associated with the locale were ever present dilemmas that needed to be managed. These findings not only address the dearth of research on young people's lived experiences within deprived coastal contexts, but when viewed through the lens of gender, demonstrate the distinct challenges that young women face. Illustrative of this was the description of particular public spaces as dangerous, including threats of sexual violence and harassment. Like other research into geographies of gender-based violence (Bows and Fileborn 2022; Pain 2000; Green and Singleton 2006), a heightened sense of risk was perpetuated by the time of day, particularly the drawing of night, and how this was then exacerbated by the isolated features of a rural setting.

> When you're walking on your way back there's not many street lights so you are walking in the dark and you just don't know who's there… apparently at one point in X [coastline location] we do get a few weirdoes and people that do camp out in the woody bits and that, and along the cinder track [a walking and biking trail], you can't really see who's there or if anybody's watching yer.

The young women often described the choices they made as they engaged with such places, including avoidance at particular times, with one participant simply stating that at night-time she *"will not go out"*. Whilst many young women talked about the fear of walking alone at night, the following quote starkly illustrates the emotions surrounding

this. Within this quote, we can see how the gendered power dynamics of the 'male gaze', and cultural constructs of sexuality (in this case the link between clothing and objectification), shape embodied experiences of risk and danger.

> Like even at my age now … If I'm gonna be out, I still have to call my mum like every hour cos she worries, and then if I'm wearing a certain outfit, if I'm walking home on my own then I do get, sometimes I get freaked out when there's somebody walking the opposite way and they're staring at yer … I always get my phone out and try and call people … sometimes you just don't know who's gonna be round the corner.

Wider discussions of certain spaces within the locale unearthed an appreciation of the scale of work involved when navigating 'risk'. This often involved an acute awareness of the distinctiveness of neighbourhoods that were described as *"rough"* or *"druggy areas"*. For instance, the quote below describes a situation where a young woman resorts to *"carrying keys"* for self-protection within a certain neighbourhood. Importantly, this quote situates the fear of crime within its spatial dimensions (the reference to a well-known 'rough' estate), but also demonstrates how such perceptions were profoundly gendered via *"stories of people getting like raped"*. This account not only illustrates the strategies that young women will employ to avoid danger, and how these strategies were distinct from the ones employed by young men, but also the spatiality of fear. In the words of Pain (2000, 369),the voices of young women can help us better understand how the fear of crime is 'multi-faceted and dynamic, an emotion which is situated in the local details of individuals' circumstances and life courses (1997)) and sensitive to spatial, temporal and social contexts':

> If I'm walking down the street … I feel more safe because there's lights everywhere, but if I was walking near [local park] I'd always carry a key cos there's quite a few things that happen down there which is unnerving because that's the outskirts of [neighbourhood] … 'I've heard stories of people getting like raped … So I always, if I'm down that area at night I'll carry a key …. It's a teenage, like female teenagers do it more cos obviously. Men … men have just got their fists really, haven't they? … But whereas us we feel like if we have something sharp in our hands we can do something … You just have to hope for the best and carry whatever makes you feel safe.

Other aspects of identity were also germane to young womens' navigation of areas of the town that were well-known for violence. For example, the participant below explained how being in care exposed her to additional risk. At the same time, her experience highlights the importance of peer support in how young women manage risk. As Firmin, Warrington, and Pearce (2016) note, young people can act collectively in ensuring their friends are protected from potential harm, demonstrating the relational nature of agency:

> When I was in foster care that was the main issue cos that was the way I walked home. So if I was at someone's house I'd walk up the back way just up past [local park] … people'd purposefully like miss their times to go home so they could come walk me home to make sure I was all right and then they'd go a different way … friends at the time. So they used to just like walk me home just to make sure, cos obviously they've heard the stories and that.

Alongside neighbourhoods that were framed as "*not the safest"*, young women also described the significance of public spaces that held cultural and historical meanings for young people in the locale. This could involve places such as car-parks and community

green spaces that many young people would often congregate around. One participant described a particular location, referred to as "The Cage", that illustrated the risk factors associated with threats of sexual violence (i.e. exposure to alcohol/substance misuse) and the ways in which gender intersects with particular 'vulnerabilities':

> There's a place called 'The Cage' … It's near the beach area. It's like it's full of drugs, alcohol, horrible people … Like people started … basically like getting sexually active and doing stuff, and then people getting spiked [being given drugs or alcohol without knowledge and consent] and then all that … loads of fighting … got spiked once by one of my cousin's mates and then, then I got rushed into hospital to get put on the drip.

Within the wider literature, criticism is often levelled at how such experiences can be framed as a choice to engage in risky behaviour (Harris 2004; Firmin, Warrington, and Pearce 2016), in ways that underplay the contextual factors that constrain the choices available to young women. The importance of understanding a young person's biography, including their transitional and situational experiences, is drawn out when the same participant goes on to explain the circumstances that led her to *"hang out"* at 'The Cage'. In particular, the following quote explains how the role of family, and the interplay between private and public spaces created a situation where her risk of exploitation was heightened. In the words of Firmin, Warrington, and Pearce (2016, 2330), such stories challenge the 'tenacity of individualised discourses of risk and choice which solely foreground individual agency and lead to misplaced blame':

> I was staying at my cousin's house and she didn't tell me where I was going, and she took me down to 'The Cage' and then just started drinking and smoking and all that … I was about fifteen when I started hanging around with them all … I lived with her for a bit cos there was loads of trouble at home with a couple of family members staying there who I didn't get along with, they were horrible … I stopped hanging around with her when I turned sixteen.

Many of the young women also used these discussions to elucidate the temporal and historically situated nature of 'risk' and 'danger'. This involved biographical reflections on their 'younger years', their experiences of 'risky' places or situations, and how they had *"grown out of them"* or had developed an understanding of where and what to avoid. The following quotation not only illustrates the reflective biographical work that young people undergo, but the ways in which this intercepts with young women's agency and a strong desire to safeguard peers:

> I've given advice before … we had two young girls that came to one of these [youth club] sessions and she, one of 'em was really quiet, another one was really, really out there … and she was on about walking home, bearing in mind this girl was nine years old (laughs) walking home on her own and I thought no, you're not doing that… I said "Do you know what, I've got some money in my pocket, if I ring you a taxi and pay for it will you please just get in." She said "I don't want your fucking money, I don't want this, I don't want that." But I said "I'm trying to offer you help, I'm trying to give you advice." … I lost my rag … I just turned round to her, I said " … sit in a room with me … and I'll give you some advice." … So I sat, ended up sitting in the kitchen with her and she went "How do you know all this stuff?" And I was like "Well I know, I'm older than you, course I'm gonna know, I understand the world from a different perspective cos I've been there, I've done that, I've done stupid shit and I've seen where it got me and honestly it leads you nowhere." And she was going off and off, and I was like "Do you know what, right, I'm

> gonna ring you a taxi because at the end of the day there are some bad people out there, some really, really bad people out there." And "Oh how do you know, how do you know?" And I just (laughs) I just remember getting really angry and shouting "Because I've been fucking raped".

This reflection on past experience not only highlights how identities unfold over time, but also how certain experiences (sexual assault) can hold particular biographical significance. Many of the young women interviewed gave accounts of sexual violence, where the fear of violence described thus far became their reality. Out of eighteen interviews, six young women talked about experience of sexual assault, whilst the majority of participants knew of friends or acquaintances who had been subject to sexual violence. In the following section, we explore in more depth the relationship between public and private spheres and the role they play in young women's experiences of sexual violence.

Experiences of sexual violence: the interface between the public and private

In order to highlight the interface between the public and private aspects of young women's lives, we start with an examination of an individual biography. The following powerful excerpt involves a participant narrating their experience of sexual assault and its repercussions:

> I'm just gonna come out and say it … I was seeing this lad and he used to go to the same school as me … I ended up taking him round to meet my mum and dad; my mum and dad went to the shop, my sister and her friends were out and he, I ended up getting raped in my bedroom … When my mum and dad came back from the shop he'd already left and I just couldn't stop screaming … I couldn't come out and say it straightaway … it was horrible because I was going to school with him and I didn't tell people that we'd broken up … turned out I wasn't the only one … … he'd sexually assaulted my best friend who lived on my street, he'd threatened a minor, he'd also raped another girl. He'd done something else as well …
>
> I didn't want to speak about it because I didn't want to think about it because I felt disgusting … I got offered counselling by the Police, I got offered CAMHS (Mental Health Support), but the guy I had from CAMHS spent more time with his eyes closed looking at me like that than speaking to me, and I didn't like that, and obviously because he was a guy I didn't want to be around him. So I ended up going to Compass [Substance Misuse Support] as well, and Compass was all right and I finished my term with them but I still, I wasn't all right, and I ended up getting a mentor … through school, and that's how I got here [Youth Work Provision].
>
> You learn to deal with it, but, well not deal with it you learn to cope with it because at the end of the day sitting around crying isn't gonna do anything for yer, and I think the only time … I cried was a year after … because I found out that the case would be dropped because there was not enough evidence … I ended up running away, I ran to [neighbouring coastal town] and I was there for three months … I stayed with my friend … from college. But that was a whole load of shite because I ended up getting spiked with loads of drugs and taking loads of drugs and … I came back looking like a teabag; it was horrible … I was spiked with Spice a lot [a synthetic cannabinoid] … I had like a MDMA tablet put in my drink and I was off it and … I was sexually assaulted (laughs) in my friend's bed by her boyfriend, and I ended up packing my bag, ringing the Police cos the Police were looking for me … saying "I'm here, come and take me home" and they did … . And then I was seen as a severely, no, is it severe [child] at risk?

This narrative gives a rich account of a number of the themes relevant to this paper, including how sociality and the particularities of place are integrated into young women's experiences of sexual violence and how place-based 'risk' factors can intensify prescriptive practice interventions. The participant's description of the perpetrator's assaults against other local young women, points to the ways that sexual violence can occur as part of a social network, magnified by being in a small community (Bows and Fileborn 2022). Similarly, this is evident in how feelings of stigma from the private sphere play out in a public setting (the participant's school).

The participant's coping strategies also speak to the significance of localised resources, relationships and geographies, which can both help and hinder recovery from sexual violence (Firmin, Warrington, and Pearce 2016). It is local voluntary sector organisations embedded in the participant's community that she finds most supportive, rather than the help offered through more formalised, statutory routes, with their tendency towards categorisation. Friendship plays a more ambiguous part in the narrative, being both a source of support and further harm. This reflects earlier accounts (i.e. 'the Cage') and the broader literature on CSE and sexual violence where peers are seen to both protect and expose young women to risk (Radcliffe et al. 2020). The spatial context is also central, with the participant's 'escape' being to a neighbouring town with similar characteristics and risks. Underpinning the participant's coping strategies is a sense of situated agency, visible through the opportunities she takes to try and regain a sense of control. It is clear that the participant felt powerless throughout her experience of sexual assault, but we can also see the limited choices she made following it, demonstrating 'thin agency, which individuals apply to make slight manoeuvres and adjustments within narrow and rigid confines' (Bay-Cheng 2019, 469).

These themes were echoed by other participants when recounting their experiences of sexual assault. For example, these accounts of assault/abuse often also involved a complex web of relationships of people who were known to each other, with participants talking of being raped by a boyfriend's brother or how friends/family members had gone on to have a relationship with their abuser. This could mean ongoing re-traumatisation, where there was no way to cut ties with a perpetrator. One participant illustrated this when talking about her abuser:

> But hearing his voice, I heard his voice last night and I was like, ugh, I felt like proper physically sick, it was unreal. My boyfriend went to me "Well what's wrong?" I went "Your brother, hearing your brother's voice is making me physically sick.

Other participants described how the nature of the local community acted to exacerbate the blurring between private and public domains, magnifying feelings of stigma and being trapped. As this participant put it:

> It's a really small town so everyone kinda knows everything about yer … Say as if I did something it would be around by the next … as if someone had sex with someone you'd find out instantly cos no-one can keep their mouth shut round here.

Finally, many of the participants' narratives highlighted how despite encountering significant challenges, they operated with agency as a 'matter of fact' (Bay-Cheng 2019). In other words, rather than making obvious moves of autonomy, participants took small steps

towards their aims, often involving various compromises along the way. For example, participants described 'fighting back', ending abusive relationships, or moving to be away from abusers:

> I finished him while he was in the cells … saying that I don't want to be with him cos, obviously he could turn any minute, so I could have a knife pointed at me or anything. So I said 'I don't want to be with you no more'. And then I live with my mum, so yeah, I'm happy, I've got my own way with my mum now.

This was also reflected in how participants made sense of their past experiences and dealt with trauma, which resonated with Harris and Dobson's (2015) conception of the 'suffering actor'. Rather than positioning themselves simply as victims or conversely 'overcoming' experiences of sexual violence, participants took a more nuanced perspective on how their lives had changed over time, which reflected both the harm they had suffered and the strength they had gained. Participants did not confine themselves to dominant tropes, instead '[t]hey live and make life meaningful outside of, and beyond, the categories of "at risk" or vulnerability in which they are so often confined' (Payne 2012, 408):

> I wouldn't get rid of any of the things that happened to me. I wouldn't get rid of the abusive relationships and what-not, because at the end of the day they're mistakes and if I hadn't have gone through what I did, I'd have been a different person but all, for all the wrong reasons. Like I'd say I'm more humble, I appreciate things a lot more, I understand a lot more than what I did because at the end of the day if I hadn't have done my mistakes I (sighs) like mistakes make, they make who you are. If you had no mistakes in your life then you'd be perfect but mistakes make you.

Conclusion

With such a profound neglect of gender-based understandings of 'risk' and 'rurality', this paper provides an important contribution to our understanding of how young women navigate 'risk' and 'danger' in deprived coastal towns. The findings reinforce the importance of how notions of 'risk' and 'danger' need to be situated within spatial dimensions and account for aspects of difference such as gender and class. Like other research with marginalised young women, we have shown the importance of recognising the role of contextual factors that constrain choice when navigating 'risk', but also how young women make sense of their circumstances and what might be described as 'risky behaviour'. In this sense, the qualitative data allowed us to elucidate the complexity of young women's agency within their spatial, social and structural contexts. This drew attention to the material and social inequalities that can 'thin' young women's agency, but also how agency is manifested through social relationships. An example of the relational nature of agency was illustrated through accounts of young women providing peer support in managing risk and/or safeguarding peers.

The findings of this article also raise important questions around the impact of dominant depictions of 'risky behaviour' that not only individualise risk, but also result in the intensification of surveillance and policy/practice interventions for young women deemed 'at risk'. In this sense, our research findings corroborate the need to move away from individualised discourses of risk that negate the structural context, misunderstand agency, and rarely correspond to the realities of young women's worlds. Within the context of a deprived coastal town, we have evidenced the particular ways 'risk' manifests,

the distinct experiences and outcomes associated with this, and how as a consequence, young women are subject to particular forms of regulation and control. Ultimately, individualising 'risky behaviour' serves to minimise the significance of how young women navigate their everyday worlds, including the importance of spatial context and perceptions of belonging, identity, and relationality. By foregrounding the voices of young women, we can illuminate what is meaningful to them against a backdrop of structural inequalities and limited opportunities. For policy and practice interventions to be successful, they need to not only correspond to the lived accounts of young women, but also address the multiple forms of injustice that render them 'at risk'. In this sense, our research not only contributes to rural and youth studies, but also supports recent conceptual and practice developments in youth and social work, such as the 'social model' of protection (Featherstone et al. 2018) and 'contextual safeguarding' (Firmin 2020). These models acknowledge socioeconomic context, and combine community mobilisation with collaborative, welfare-led and rights-based responses to harm experienced by young people in their homes and neighbourhoods.

The paper also draws upon individual biographies to demonstrate how the public and private spheres of young women's lives are intrinsically bound. This included accounts of how stigma and shame, often resulting from sexual violence in a private space, can play out in the public sphere. These accounts capture the spatialised nature of the coping strategies young women employed to navigate 'risk' and 'danger' and how the spatial context, its resources, barriers and relational dimensions, can work to hinder or support recovery from sexual violence. Our findings therefore echo the calls of Firmin, Warrington, and Pearce (2016) for policy-makers and practitioners to account for the interplay between private and public spheres in developing interventions and direct work with young people. Understanding the spatial dimensions of managing 'risk' and 'danger' also draws attention to its temporal dimensions. This included the significance of critical moments in an individual biography (i.e. sexual assault), and the reflective biographical work undertaken by young women to make sense of their past, present and future sense of self. Rooting the analysis of placed-based inequalities in the stories of those most impacted by their surrounding social milieu, provides a multi-faceted understanding of how *place* shapes risk and vulnerabilities. By foregrounding young women's subjectivities, it is hoped that this paper adds a valuable contribution to how we understand the navigation of risk in a rural and deprived coastal setting.

Ethics

The research study received ethical approval from the University of York's Department of Social Policy and Social Work Ethics Committee.

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