The Concept of Vulnerability and its Use in the Care and Control of Young People

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Abstract

The idea of 'vulnerability' shapes the ways that individuals and groups are managed and classified, from benefits claims to criminal prosecutions and child protection. Yet as a concept, it is little-understood. This thesis is an exploration of how the notion of 'vulnerability' is influential in contemporary social policy. The research focuses on young people in particular, in order to give detailed attention to the ways in which ideas about vulnerability affect welfare and disciplinary systems. Official understandings of 'vulnerability' are examined and influential constructions of the concept are reviewed. The study also reports from an empirical investigation into the 'operationalisation' of vulnerability in service interventions with 'vulnerable' young people. This empirical element involved analysis of the perspectives and practices of professionals working with 'vulnerable' young people in a large northern city in England, as well as consideration of the views and experiences of 'vulnerable' young people themselves.

Findings highlight that vulnerability is a powerful conceptual mechanism which underpins the delivery of service interventions for certain groups, with various practical effects. The notion helps to assist groups and individuals who may be dealing with significant problems and difficulties. At the same time, due to links with 'deservingness', discourses of vulnerability are shown to subtly but pervasively serve wider policy mechanisms which establish what is appropriate and 'correct' behaviour, and that discipline individuals where they fail to conform. This thesis seeks to generate insights into 'vulnerable' young people's social worlds, as well as the systems and processes which govern their lives. It makes a contribution towards developing understandings of the conceptual dimensions of 'vulnerability' and also of lived experiences of being 'vulnerable'.

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Abbreviations

ASB	Anti-Social Behaviour
ASBO	Anti-Social Behaviour Order
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CPR	Child Protection Register
CYP	Children and Young People
EMA	Education Maintenance Allowance
ECM	Every Child Matters
FIP	Family Intervention Project
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
VCG	Vulnerable Children Grant
YJB	Youth Justice Board
YJS	Youth Justice System
YOI	Youth Offending Institution
YOS	Youth Offending Service

Chapter 1: The 'Problem' of 'Vulnerable' Young People

The identification and management of 'vulnerability' is now a significant feature of welfare systems in the UK. This thesis is an exploration of the implications of the use of 'vulnerability' in social policy and in service interventions. It focuses on young people as a case study group through which to consider how notions of 'vulnerability' might influence how services are received by those who are supposedly 'vulnerable'. There are several perspectives from which 'vulnerability' is considered. 'Official' understandings of 'vulnerability' are examined, alongside key constructions of the concept in the academic literature. The perceptions of practitioners who provided services for 'vulnerable' groups are included, as well as the experiences and views of 'vulnerable' young people. It is hoped that the various findings of the thesis contribute towards developing understandings of the conceptual dimensions of 'vulnerability' and also of lived experiences of being 'vulnerable'.

This opening chapter sets out the context for the research and summarises the structure, orientation and key findings of the thesis. It begins by outlining why young people's vulnerability was of particular interest to me as a researcher (1.1), and moves on to summarise some of the pertinent background to the research area (1.2). A brief overview is then given of some of the principal developments in the landscape of contemporary social policy which serve as an important back-drop against which the influence of notions of vulnerability might best be viewed (1.3). The questions which the research sought to answer and the main aims of the project are then presented (1.4), along with a summary of the main research methods which were used in the study (1.5). Finally, an outline of the content of each chapter is provided (1.6) and some of the key research findings are highlighted (1.7).

1.1 Motivations and background

My interest in 'vulnerability' developed gradually, through a mixture of experiences working in the voluntary sector with so-called vulnerable people, and later

returning to University to learn more about social approaches to such groups. In my first job as a support worker for women and children who sold sex, I often invoked the term 'vulnerable' when advocating for those I considered to be experiencing a particularly difficult set of circumstances. I regularly attended 'case conference' meetings where teams of professionals would agree on interventions that should be put in place, and would often find myself defending the behaviour of the people I was supporting on the basis that they were 'vulnerable'. Later, in management roles at a young people's drugs service and at Women's Aid, I frequently made the case to funding bodies that they should finance my particular agency because we were involved in supporting some of the 'most vulnerable' people in society. Research has shown that taking this approach to describing and classifying service users is not uncommon (Warner, 2008; Mulcahy, 2004; Appleton, 1999).

Despite my reliance on the concept of vulnerability, I was left feeling uneasy about this from my work with young people who sold sex. In my experience, young people involved in the sex industry could be difficult to work with; they were sometimes resistant to attempts to support them, frequently failed to turn up for appointments, and could be volatile in their responses to certain interventions or practitioners. Yet policy and guidance in this area paid little attention to such challenges, focussing instead on the 'vulnerability' of the young people (see Department of Heath, 2000). Although at first this seemed a sensible strategy to 'protect' young people, as time went on I felt that it could also be unhelpful. Some professionals seemed to perceive the more 'difficult' young people as less vulnerable and more in control of (and culpable for) their actions. I went on to work in a policy and campaigning role with young people involved in the sex industry, where one young woman who had been involved in prostitution and drug use since the age of 12 said to me, "some kids get left out of being seen as victims. They don't seem vulnerable, but just because they don't seem vulnerable, doesn't mean they aren't" (Brown, 2004: 19). Her comment resonated with my key concerns at the time; 'vulnerability' appeared to some extent to be conditional on 'good' behaviour.

Notions of 'deservingness' continued to intrigue me as I went on to work as a manager. I returned to University on a part-time basis to study for an MA in Social

Research alongside my work. Studying for the Masters sensitised me to the more subtle ways that 'support' services could also be part of systems which seek to regulate the behaviour of people who are considered 'problematic' (cf Harrison and Sanders, 2006). Having studied Humanities for my first degree, these academic ideas were very new to me and I was keen to explore them further. As part of my MA I undertook a small empirical study of young people's experiences of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) (Brown, 2011a). It struck me that although young people who were served with ASBOs had much in common with the young people I had supported who sold sex, 'official' views of their vulnerability were very different; whilst the 'anti-social' young men were seen as deviant and rebellious, the young women were positioned as 'vulnerable victims' of exploitation. This crystallised my interest in 'vulnerability' and the idea to pursue a study in this area took shape. I wanted to explore the policy literature related to vulnerability in more detail, and also examine more empirical trends related to welfare for supposedly 'vulnerable' groups of young people.

1.2 'Vulnerability' as a contested terrain

Despite the popularity of describing and classifying certain groups or individuals as 'vulnerable', the implications of a focus on vulnerability would appear to be a relatively under-explored area of social policy. This lack of consideration is perhaps surprising given that systems of welfare which aim to support or protect 'the vulnerable' affect those whom it is generally considered we have special moral obligations to assist and support. Vulnerability is often presented in academic and 'official' writings as an objective and uncontroversial notion. Closer scrutiny reveals that this is not the case. Many commentators have noted difficulties in defining what is meant by 'vulnerability' (Chambers, 1989; Appleton, 1999; Levine *et al*, 2004). Where the concept has been given academic attention, wide divergences of opinion and usage are evident. A glimpse of some current ideas about vulnerability in academic writings reveals a contested intellectual terrain.

A relatively small number of somewhat disparate writers from across the social sciences are highly critical of how notions of vulnerability play out in society. That 'vulnerable' people's own opinions about their care are sometimes overridden by

decision-makers on the basis of their 'vulnerability' has been a particular focus for concern (see Hasler, 2004; Dunn *et al*, 2008; McLaughlin, 2012). Criticisms of the concept's utility often draw attention to the way in which presumed 'inherent' vulnerability can function as an excuse for failing to tackle over-arching 'structures'[1] and social processes which shape the difficulties experienced by certain groups or individuals (Hollomotz, 2011; Lansdown, 1994; Wishart, 2003). Much less attention seems to have been given in such general commentaries to instances where vulnerability classifications might be beneficial to supposedly 'vulnerable' groups.

Yet a small number of writers in the fields of sociology, philosophy and ethics have argued that 'vulnerability' offers a conceptual basis on which to reorganise society in a more 'just' way. In this form, interest in vulnerability connects to the moral weight and emphasis on social obligations which the concept carries (Goodin, 1985; Mackenzie, 2009). Indeed, the ethical implications of the notion may well be one reason why vulnerability is so commonly drawn upon in the language of policy, practice and research. Emphasising human interdependence, several writers who advance the use of 'vulnerability' in academic work see the state of vulnerability as something which all humans share, and therefore as a potentially unifying and transformative notion, able to offer a powerful model for a reorganisation of the relationship between citizen and state (Turner, 2006; Fineman, 2008; Butler, 2004; Kittay, 1999; Beckett, 2006). These writings are mainly conceptual, with limited attention given to practical matters.

Notions of vulnerability would seem to be particularly complicated when applied to the governance of the lives of 'young people'[2]. In contemporary society, 'children' have tended to be seen as innately vulnerable and generally unaccountable for their lives and actions (James and Prout, 1997). 'Adults' are usually assumed to

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[1] Borrowing from Harrison (2001), the term 'structure' here denotes the institutional factors and forces which shape the choices, views and lives of individuals and which persist over time. Understood in this way, the interpretation of structure links it to political, economic, cultural or ideological power, whilst still acknowledging the 'possibilities of change' through human action (p.4).

[2] The subjective nature of 'youth' is well documented (Muncie, 1999; Lee, 2001), with official policy documents tending to draw on varying ideas of where 'youth' begins and ends. For the purposes of this study, 'young people' are taken to be those aged 12-18. The reasoning behind this strategy is detailed in Chapter 4.

have full independence and a complete set of citizenship responsibilities, but 'young people' do not fall neatly into either social category. Although children's vulnerability is generally seen to decrease with age, ideas about how far young people exercise human agency are fraught with fault lines. Growing public animosity towards some young people and the perceived increase in deviance amongst this social group adds extra complexity to how their 'vulnerability' is seen (see Squires and Stephen, 2005; Brown, 2005; Kelly, 2003).

One example which highlights some of the problems that older children can pose to social systems is the case of Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, who, in 1993 at the age of ten, killed two year old James Bulger in Liverpool. This event deeply divided the country. Changes were made to the legal system in order to deal with the boys more punitively and they were tried in an adult court (see Fionda, 1998). Whilst the *Daily Star* responded to the guilty verdicts with the headline 'How do You Feel Now You Little Bastards' (25th November, 1993), some people felt that the boys should have been afforded special allowances within the criminal process due to their age, 'competency' and status as 'children'. What the appropriate course of intervention should have been for Robert Thompson and Jon Venables remains an unresolved issue. The contentiousness of the case highlights the ambiguity which underpins the governance of young people's lives.

Where young people are classified as 'vulnerable', such ambiguities would appear to take on further complexity, with the implication being that they are exceptional in some way and require or deserve extra support or assistance. In contemporary society and in academic research, as well as children ordinarily being seen as innately vulnerable, concerns also frequently appear that some groups of children have additional 'vulnerabilities' which require action to address. Policies now target specific groups of children seen to be at elevated risk of vulnerability because of adverse circumstances (Daniel, 2010). Popular commentary regularly draws attention to the 'most vulnerable' children and young people. The concept of 'vulnerability' also plays a central role in the child protection system, as well as being heavily utilised in the then government's landmark policy guidance on children and young people, *Every Child Matters* (ECM) (Department for Education

and Skills, 2003). 'Vulnerability' classifications are embedded in the governance and delivery of welfare services for those under the age of 18. However, many of the young people whose lives are governed by such policies are also deemed as 'difficult', 'non-compliant' or criminal (see Goldson, 2002a). In such instances, ambiguities about how young people should be treated in welfare and disciplinary systems would appear to be even more significant.

Although the concept of vulnerability has been of great interest to selected writers in a number of fields of study, it is rarely brought to centre stage in social policy analysis. Where 'vulnerability' has been explored in more depth from policy-based perspectives, consideration has tended to focus on the implications of classifications for disabled people and adults with learning difficulties (Beckett, 2006; Hollomotz, 2011; Hasler, 2004; Wishart, 2003). Little seems to be known about 'grass roots' perceptions and understandings of 'vulnerability', especially in terms of the meanings this notion may carry and how practitioners may operationalise the concept. Additionally, those who are classified as 'vulnerable' seem in some instances to be seen as 'transgressive'[3] because of their challenging behaviour. Consideration is rarely given to complexities which might arise in terms of establishing appropriate interventions or courses of action in such instances. How notions of vulnerability influence service interventions for young people also seems to be an under-developed area in research.

1.3 Vulnerability in the context of behavioural regulation

Beckett (2006) argues that the concept of vulnerability has particular relevance for notions of citizenship[4]. Indeed, ideas about vulnerability seem to shape justifications of state intervention in citizens' lives, influence the allocation of resources and play a role in defining social obligations. Distinguishing individuals as 'vulnerable' implies something about a person's degree of 'choice' or human

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[3] For the purposes of this study, the word 'transgressive' is used to describe young people who are seen as deviant in terms of 'anti-social', 'problematic' or criminal behaviours.
[4] 'Citizenship' is a contested concept, but for the purposes of this study refers to 'basic notions of the individual and community and the different ways they are conceived' (Dwyer, 2010: 1). It is taken to be socially constructed, but also constituted differentially in material ways.

agency in their circumstances, and the responsibility and ethical duty of the state to assist them. Thus 'vulnerability' might be expected to inform the ways in which people are managed and classified in 'official' systems and processes. The 'vulnerability' of individuals or groups is closely connected with governance arrangements, support offered through welfare systems, and conceptualisations of relationships between the citizen and the state.

It has been widely chronicled that in 'advanced' liberal democracies, changes in the nature of governance have taken place which have remodelled relationships between state and citizen based on notions of subjects as 'active', self-regulating and responsible for their own life outcomes (Rose, 1999; Flint, 2006a; Clarke, 2005). As neo-liberal social policy has gathered pace, individuals have increasingly come to be imagined as free, rational actors, largely unbound by structural constraints. These shifting conceptualisations of citizenship have had particular implications for welfare and disciplinary mechanisms. Where individuals are imagined as free, rational actors, it follows that they must also be fully responsible for instances of transgression (see Squires, 2008a). Such perspectives have cultivated and informed the development of what has been called a 'new governance of conduct' in contemporary society (Flint, 2006a). In the UK, certain 'problem' groups have found themselves subject to increasingly punitive sanctions where they have failed to conform to acceptable notions of the 'active' and self-regulating citizen[5].

Moves to 'responsibilise' citizens tend to be associated with the rise of 'conditionality' in welfare in the UK (Dwyer, 2004 and 2010). Conditional approaches to welfare centre on the idea of a contract between the state and the individual, where in order to draw down their 'rights', citizens must fulfil their 'responsibilities' (Dwyer, 2004 and 2010; Deacon and Patrick, 2011). According to this view, conduct is linked with entitlement. This model of citizenship was utilised

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[5] This has been chronicled extensively across various policy arenas including housing (Flint, 2006a and 2009; Fitzpatrick and Jones, 2005), sex work (Phoenix and Oerton, 2005; Scoular and O'Neill, 2007; Phoenix, 2008), 'anti-social behaviour' (Squires, 2008b; Flint and Nixon, 2006), unemployment (Dwyer, 2010; Wright, 2009), drug use (Monaghan, 2011) and criminal justice more generally (Crawford, 2003; Rodger, 2008; Garland, 2001).

by the neo-conservative right in the 1980s, but is generally understood to have become further embedded in governance arrangements during the New Labour era (Clarke, 2005), and is enduring under the Coalition government (Harrison and Sanders, forthcoming). Since 1997 especially, governments have invested in programmes which are deemed to 'support' certain 'problem' groups, on the premise that where those who are targeted fail to respond in the 'appropriate' way, stronger disciplinary mechanisms should be implemented. Although using welfare as a means of regulating the behaviours of 'problematic' populations is by no means new (see Squires 1990; Flint, 2006a), this form of governmental regulation has intensified over recent decades.

A complex interplay of welfare support and coercive sanctions now dominates much of contemporary social welfare (see Harrison and Sanders, 2006; Phoenix, 2008; Flint, 2009 and 2012). Commentary on welfare conditionality often emphasises that this has had the effect of further marginalising populations who were already facing considerable difficulties (Squires, 2008b; Dwyer, 2004; Patrick, 2011). Yet despite being delivered within a context of coercion, for some welfare recipients the intensive support which can accompany more conditional interventions can be experienced as beneficial (see Flint, 2012). Flint (2012; 252) highlights that agency and resistance are still present within coercive contexts, albeit in '(limited) spaces of manoeuvre'. Balances of 'care' and 'control' have become increasingly significant as the policy landscape has changed and developed over recent decades, and as welfare systems have become more selective.

Such context provides an important backdrop for this thesis, as many of the groups who are subject to increased behavioural sanctions via coercive welfare strategies are those often positioned as 'vulnerable' (cf Harrison and Sanders, 2006). 'Vulnerability' discourses appear to be associated with moves to look beyond blaming a particular individual for their problems, leaving unanswered questions about how far 'vulnerable' people might be subject to or exempt from conditional welfare arrangements. Where people are assumed to be 'vulnerable', there would appear to be implications in terms of how far they are able to achieve 'active citizenship' (cf Campbell, 1991), raising interesting issues about how far this might

affect their entitlements. If we understand there to be 'spaces' for resistance to and/or acceptance of conditionality amongst welfare recipients, how 'vulnerability' might inform such dynamics would seem to be an area worthy of investigation.

It is generally argued that wider policy developments related to neo-liberalism have had particular ramifications for young people, and are linked with a 'punitive turn' in youth policy (see Goldson, 2002a and 2000, Goldson and Muncie, 2006; Muncie, 2006, Hopkins Burke, 2008). In the New Labour era, welfare responses continued to define social obligations to those under the age of 18, as enshrined within legislation such as the *Children Act 1989* (updated in 2004). Welfare arrangements intensified during this period, as the government issued a raft of new policies designed to address child poverty and disadvantage and 'prevent' problems occurring later in childhood (Parton, 2006 and 2007; Lloyd, 2008). However, at the same time, increasingly punitive policies characterised responses to youth crime, informed by moves towards 'responsbilisation' (Goldson, 2002a; Goldson, 2000; Muncie, 2006; Goldson and Muncie, 2006). This was perhaps most obvious in the *No More Excuses* agenda (Home Office, 1997), which advised that stricter punishment was the best way to deal with problematic young people.

Critics of the 'punitive turn' thesis have emphasised that processes did not necessarily all move in one direction (Matthews, 2005). Indeed, practitioner implementation of youth justice policy might better be seen as a complex web of mixed messages and contradictory practices, where welfare and disciplinary responses mingle together with complex outcomes (Muncie, 2009; Bateman, 2012a). Nevertheless, there is broad consensus that the period between the early 1990s and late 2000s saw a substantial increase in the criminalisation of young people. More recent developments are less easy to judge. Despite tough rhetoric since the Conservative – Liberal Democrat Coalition came to power in 2010, child imprisonment has fallen, perhaps reflecting that economic concerns are over-riding political ones (Bateman, 2012a). The current picture is further complicated by the response to the riots of August 2011, which resulted in a spike in the criminalisation of young people due to the atypically harsh enforcement strategies pursued for offences committed during the riots (Stone, 2012). Overall trends are therefore

difficult to discern. However, when seen in a context as far back as the 1970s, contemporary youth policy is considerably more punitive, with no significant reversal of this trend seeming likely (Bateman, 2011 and 2012a). One other key development to note relates to the 'softer' systems underpinning official processes. The Coalition seem to be pushing to increase the discretionary powers of front-line professionals within the youth justice system (Bateman, 2012b and Ministry of Justice, 2010), which may be significant in terms of the way in which judgements about 'vulnerability' influence policy and practice for 'young offenders'.

Wider developments in relation to youth and social policy produced inevitable tensions between child welfare and criminal justice (Muncie, 2006), which Goldson (2002a and 2004) suggests resulted in a 'deserving-undeserving schism'. Such tensions are an important foundation from which to build understandings of young people's 'vulnerability'. Where disadvantaged children behave in ways which disturb moral sensibilities, the structural context in which they are viewed shifts from one of poverty and inequality into one of agency and individual responsibility. As Goldson notes:

> The 'child in need' construct, which is so evident in respect of the social justice agenda, is substituted within criminal justice by a 'responsibilised' and 'adulterised' 'young offender' […] the very fact that troubled and troublesome children are invariably one in the same is disregarded. (Goldson, 2002a; 690)

Goldson's (2000; 256) earlier work also notes that during the New Labour period, distinctions between the care and control mechanisms which were applied to young people became especially 'finely balanced, if not strained'. The vulnerability of children has been a longstanding policy focus, informed by normative ideas about the 'frailty' of children and 'human development' approaches to childhood (see Bynner, 2001; Malin *et al*, 2002; Daniel, 2010). Yet inconsistencies and complexities arise where such ideas clash with the increasingly prevalent view that those under 18 should be held to account for their transgressions.

At policy level, it would seem that young people are either constructed as 'vulnerable victims' or as 'dangerous wrong-doers' with full responsibilities in situations where they transgress behavioural norms (Such and Walker, 2005; Fionda, 2005; Goldson, 2002a and 2004). The implications of this pattern would appear to be receiving more attention within policy arenas. A recent parliamentary committee review of the child protection system indicated concern over the safety and well-being of 'older children' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2012). The committee's investigators reached the conclusion that those aged 14 and above were one of the two 'most vulnerable' populations of children (the other being babies under one year old). The reason for the particular 'vulnerability' of teenagers was seen as related to 'behavioural issues':

> Older children in need often present as 'badly behaved'; whether in trouble with the criminal justice system, abusing drugs or alcohol, going missing, truanting, self-harming, or in other ways [….] this can *mask their vulnerability*, and lead professionals to 'blame' or judge children (House of Commons Education Committee, 2012: 34, emphasis added)

Although the configuration of vulnerability and 'bad behaviour' seems to be appearing on the policy horizon, little attention has been given to this inter-relationship in the academic literature. The concept of 'vulnerability' within the context of youth policy remains largely un-interrogated, both in terms of 'caring' interventions and those which are more 'disciplinary' in nature.

1.4 Aims of the study and research questions

The overarching question that underpinned this research related to how understandings of 'vulnerability' are operationalised in the care and control of young people. There were several sub-questions which were as follows:

- How is the concept of vulnerability constructed in selected policy domains where it appears highly significant?
- What can a case study tell us about how far young people defined as vulnerable may share practitioners' and policy-makers' understandings of 'vulnerability'?

- How are the concept of vulnerability and its practical effects received and perceived by young people, and what are their responses to vulnerability-based notions/interventions?

- Where young people are deemed 'vulnerable' but also as needing to be socially controlled, how does this affect interventions and inform understandings?

- How do 'vulnerable' young people understand their own life-stories?

As the work developed, tensions between young people's perceived vulnerability and anxieties about their potential to be transgressive seemed increasingly significant. How such complexities played out on a daily basis in service interventions for young people was an area of particular interest.

A more general concern related to the growing perception in contemporary society about young people as a 'social problem' (Squires and Stephen, 2005; France, 2007; Kelly, 2003). Although anxieties about moral decline related to 'youth' are not new (Pearson, 1983 and 2009; Cohen, 1972), the idea of young people's 'dangerousness' remains a pervasive influence on social policy. Reactions to rioting in towns and cities across the UK in August 2011 brought contemporary concerns about young people into focus (see Flint and Powell, 2012). Focussing on the lives of those from large, inner city areas, this thesis seeks to contribute something to understandings of the social worlds of young people who are seen as 'problematic' in some way. This is perhaps significant at a time where many young people feel alienated from policy agendas due to what they perceive as a lack of respect for their own concerns and negative portrayals of them (Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2008; UK Children's Commissioner's Report, 2008; Youth Net and British Youth Council, 2006).

1.5 Methods overview

A number of constructs recur in this thesis, reflecting a certain theoretical emphasis. Ideas about 'social control', 'governance', and the 'regulation of behaviour' appear frequently. Such concerns stem from a view that social policy is increasingly used as a tool for monitoring and reviewing people's actions as well as supporting and

assisting those who are 'in need', a trend sometimes referred to as 'behaviourism' (Harrison, 2010; Harrison and Sanders, forthcoming). I have found various works useful which have drawn upon Foucault's (1980; 142) view that 'there are no relations of power without resistances'. The approach was taken that in order to make sense of public policy it is necessary to appreciate the ways in which policies and daily practices are shaped or conditioned by those who receive and deliver services, who 'interpret and re-interpret' policy according to their particular 'values, identities and commitments' (Barnes and Prior, 2009; 1). Throughout this thesis, 'processed' is often used as a summarising term to refer to the ways in which people are managed and classified in welfare systems in a dynamic way.

The thesis focuses particularly on young people as a case study group through which to explore notions of vulnerability, so it is useful to outline the understanding of 'youth' which underpinned the study. Rather than using developmental psychology traditions which position those under 18 as in a state of continuous progression towards eventual adulthood and 'full' competency, a standpoint known as the 'social construction of childhood' or the 'sociology of childhood' informed the approach taken (Mayall, 1994; Jenks, 1982; James and Prout, 1997; Moran-Ellis, 2010). The present study sought to value children and young people's social worlds as having meaning in their own right, rather than as 'trivial', partial imitations of the adult state of being. I found useful insights in writings from the 'sociology of childhood' tradition; particularly that in order to understand how childhood and youth might be experienced, attention must be given to the ways in which children and young people are marginalised within social and economic structures and processes (see also 4.1.3). More generally, what seems to have been referred to as a 'post-positivist' understanding of 'social reality' underpins the methodological approach, where research is seen as providing one view of a particular phenomenon which may be subject to multiple interpretations and perspectives (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Denzin and Lincoln; 2005).

The investigation employed a mixture of qualitative methods. The three inter-linked research components were:

- A literature review and thematic documentary analysis
- A general review of national policy trends related to 'vulnerability', and
- A geographically-based case study of providers and users of services for 'vulnerable' young people

Following the 'thread' of 'vulnerability' through the official and academic literature was the first stage of the research, which then led into and informed the empirical case study exploration of the 'operationalisation' of the concept. The case study focussed on a large northern city and included interviews with 'vulnerable' young people, interviews with practitioners and policy-makers involved in services supporting 'vulnerable' young people, and more informal immersion in practitioner worlds through meetings, conversations and interactions. The sample of young people interviewed for the case study involved a range of participants from different groups who tend to be classified as 'vulnerable' within policy and practice. Young people who were considered to be 'transgressive' as well as 'vulnerable' were deliberately included, in order to explore inter-relationships between care, control and 'vulnerability'. The interviews with young people made use of distinctive 'task-based' techniques, where interviewees undertook a series of semi-structured activities together with the researcher, talking as the tasks were completed. The aim of using this method was to elicit richer data from a group who are sometimes considered to be 'difficult to reach' or 'hard to engage'. The tools were developed in the light of previous experiences which had taught me that 'vulnerable' young people could often be shy or tentative in interview situations (see Brown, 2011a).

One of the aims of the study was to investigate and further develop understanding about the concept of vulnerability. However, for the purposes of the fieldwork and earlier desk-based investigative work it was useful to employ a working definition of the concept that could be revised and refined as the study progressed. Borrowing from Watts and Bohle's (1993: 45) 'three co-ordinates of vulnerability', the term 'vulnerability' was initially understood as referring to:

The presence of a high risk of exposure to crises, stress and shocks, inadequate capacity to cope with these and the risk of severe consequences arising from them

This definition was utilised as required, but with the understanding that 'vulnerability' seemed to vary in meaning depending on the context in which it was deployed. Detailed consideration of the research methods used in the study appears later in the thesis (see Chapter 4), with attention given to issues such as the ethical implications of working with young people and the sampling strategies which were employed.

1.6 Structure of the thesis

Chapters 2 and 3 report from the desk-based elements of the study. Influential constructions of the concept of vulnerability in the academic and official literature are set out in **Chapter 2**. As well as highlighting how 'vulnerability' does not rest on well-developed theory, the chapter analyses the main ways in which notions of vulnerability tend to be understood. **Chapter 3** then focuses on vulnerability as a concept in social policy. It charts the influence of ideas about vulnerability in the main policy arenas in which it appears most influential, such as the governance of children's services, welfare arrangements for adults who are seen to lack the capacity to protect themselves, housing, and crime and disorder. The implications of the rise of what might be called a 'vulnerability rationale' in social policy are also considered. Whilst the thesis was in progress, initial ideas were published in short papers which reported mainly from these chapters (Brown, 2011b; Brown, 2012).

Chapter 4 is then a stand-alone chapter, which details the research methods which were used for the study. The interviews with 'vulnerable' young people are given particular attention, as the techniques used constituted one of the most unusual aspects of the work undertaken for the thesis. Consideration is also given in Chapter 4 to how the researcher's experiences working in services for 'vulnerable' groups of young people may have influenced or affected the research process. Empirical findings from the geographically-based case study then form the focus for Chapters 5-8. **Chapter 5** reports from the interviews with those working in service

provision for groups of vulnerable young people. This chapter highlights the importance of vulnerability in welfare and disciplinary systems for young people, examining the main practical applications of the notion. It illuminates the subtle relationship which vulnerability has with ideas about 'deservingness' and 'appropriate' behaviour. Gender also emerges as an important dimension in how vulnerability tends to be understood and applied in practice, a theme which is further developed later in the thesis.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 then report from the interviews with young people. **Chapter 6** considers the life stories of 'vulnerable' young people, revealing this group as having encountered a range of substantive difficulties and challenges in their lives. It also explores how young people 'imagined' their futures, offering distinctive insights into the social worlds of 'vulnerable' young people. **Chapter 7** moves on to consider how young people viewed 'vulnerability'. Their views of their own vulnerability are outlined, as well as their responses to being classified in this way. This chapter also explores the factors and interventions which young people considered to have augmented or reduced their levels of vulnerability, so particularly addresses the question of how 'vulnerable' young people receive welfare and disciplinary services. **Chapter 8** then locates young people's lives within a broader context. It looks beyond the young people's immediate biographies towards their experiences and perceptions of the systems, processes and structures within which their life events took place. Finally, **Chapter 9** brings together the findings from the various strands of the research, focussing on what seemed to be the most significant themes and insights to emerge from the thesis. Contributions which the thesis makes to developing understandings of the conceptual dimensions of 'vulnerability' are presented, and some tentative suggestions are also included in terms of how the findings might be drawn upon to develop policy and practice.

1.7 Findings overview

In terms of the more 'applied' findings of the study, this thesis highlights that where vulnerability was utilised in services for young people, both caring and controlling forces came into play. The notion was often drawn upon with an implicit connotation that a 'vulnerable' young person could also be a 'problem' in some way,

and needed to be controlled or dealt with. Young people's behaviours and demeanour emerged as highly significant in judgements about their vulnerability, perhaps more than tended to be officially acknowledged. To some extent, gendered patterns also become apparent in how vulnerability was operationalised. For young women, concerns about their 'vulnerability' focussed on their lack of adherence to sexual norms, whilst with young men, views of vulnerability tended to centre more on the 'risk' they pose to others. Most significantly though, it would appear that dichotomous conceptualisations of young people as either 'transgressive' or 'vulnerable' were pervasive and problematic in the governance of young people's lives, and not necessarily well-matched with the complexities of young people's social worlds.

More 'conceptual' insights indicated that vulnerability is a notion which means different things to different people, and is constructed in relation to social norms and the effects of categorisation. It is proposed in this thesis that rather than vulnerability being seen as 'innate', it may more usefully be understood as constructed and reaffirmed by broader social and economic systems and processes which influence the life of an individual. Furthermore, due to links with 'deservingness', discourses of vulnerability subtly but pervasively serve wider policy mechanisms which establish what is appropriate and 'correct' behaviour, and which subject people to sanctions should they fail to conform. Although 'vulnerability' is a notion which helps some individuals to avoid blame for their difficulties, vulnerability discourses also act as a platform from which to emphasise personal accountability for the difficulties experienced by individuals, diverting attention from 'structural' issues. Within the context of neo-liberal social policy, targeting resources at 'the vulnerable' can unintentionally help justify overall reductions in entitlements to welfare. The thesis suggests that preoccupations with vulnerability are more closely connected with 'behaviour' than they may at first seem. Findings indicated that vulnerability discourses seem connected with increasingly selective welfare systems which undermine universal citizenship rights.

Chapter 2: Influential Notions of 'Vulnerability'

It is widely held that societies have special moral and legal obligations to people or groups that are identified as 'vulnerable'. Yet despite the powerful ethical connotations attached to vulnerability, much of the literature indicates the notion is characterised by vagueness (see Daniel, 2010; Chambers, 1989; Mackenzie, 2009). There is a substantial literature in the human sciences that refers to vulnerability in relation to hazards or disasters (Adger, 2006; Blackie *et al*, 1994; Bankoff *et al*, 2004; Schiller *et al*, 2001), and in critical debates over the bounds of 'health risks' (Peterson and Wilkinson, 2008: 3). Another body of literature similarly relates vulnerability to poverty, famine and 'natural' disasters (Chambers, 1989; Watts and Boyle, 1993; Downing, 1991; Lindley *et al*, 2011). Within the field of ethics and philosophy, a number of writers seem passionate about the potentiality of the concept in terms of social justice (see Goodin, 1985; Turner, 2006; Anderson and Honneth, 2009; Kittay, 1999). The concept has also been utilised in social research (see Emmel and Hughes, 2010; Warner, 2008; Hollomotz, 2011) and in more policy-based commentaries (see McLaughlin, 2012; Daniel, 2010; Beckett, 2006; Furedi, 2008). Within this literature, the 'vulnerability' of individuals and groups is constructed in relation to a range of factors (Fawcett, 2009) and the various meanings the term takes on are shaped by the historical and political context in which it is used. There are many different respects in which a person or group can be identified as vulnerable and, unsurprisingly, a wide variety of notions of vulnerability are present within the literature.

This chapter summarises the main uses of the concept of 'vulnerability' within the academic and official literature, and considers some of the ways in which the concept has been theorised. Commonalities and differences in the way the term 'vulnerability' is used and viewed are identified and explored. From the analysis of documentation related to vulnerability, four different if overlapping themes have

emerged as its principal manifestations[6], which are considered in turn during the chapter:

- the construction of vulnerability as 'innate' or 'universal'; that is, determined by physical and personal factors, sometimes associated with certain points of the life course (2.1);
- ideas of 'situational' vulnerability; referring to situations or transgressions which develop that can include the input of a third party or structural force, but which also may involve human agency, usually to a contested extent (2.2);
- the notion of 'vulnerable groups', where individuals are delineated as sharing common circumstances or shared life experiences which requires that they should receive special attention or recognition (2.3); and
- 'vulnerability' as related to 'risk' (2.4).

Particular attention is given to instances where notions of vulnerability relate to children and young people. During more general reviewing of the literature on vulnerability it emerged that interventions or policies relating to 'the vulnerable' were also significant. The broader review of the academic and official literature therefore led to a national review of vulnerability and social policy based on more thematic documentary analysis, which is reported in Chapter 3. There were inevitable overlaps between influential constructions of vulnerability and the ways it is significant in policy, so this chapter contains selected introductory comments on policy where these are pertinent. Themes highlighted in this chapter are then taken on and developed further in Chapter 3[7].

2.1 Innate vulnerability

Natural or 'innate' vulnerabilities tend to position individuals as 'at risk' in a way that can be modified by action, but where some risk will always remain. Notions of innate vulnerability are often connected with the states of childhood, older age, and physical or sensory impairment, or linked to an individual's mental health.

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[6] These were arrived at after an initial review of the literature was charted on a 'mind map'.
[7] The research methods for the literature review are set out in 4.2, which further describes the relationship between findings presented in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3.

'Vulnerability' is also often used to refer to temporary biological states associated with elevated weakness and which inspire protective responses, such as acute illness, serious disease[8] or pregnancy. In a slightly different vein, ideas about 'universal vulnerability' are also central to the literature on innate vulnerability. This conception of vulnerability promotes the view that we are all vulnerable to some extent, and that vulnerability is intrinsic to human existence (Turner, 2006; Fineman, 2008; Goodin, 1985; Kittay, 1999; Butler, 2004). This section explores and amplifies each of these ways of seeing 'innate' vulnerability in turn.

2.1.1 The 'natural' vulnerability of children and young people

> Is there anything so weak and wretched as a child, anything so utterly at the mercy of those about it, so dependent on their pity, their care, and their affection? (Rousseau 1762, trans. by Foxley 1974: 52)

Vulnerability has long been associated with childhood. Yet since the emergence of childhood studies in the 1990s, there has been a growing academic interest in children's vulnerability to harm (James and Prout, 1997) or lack of ability to protect themselves (Malin *et al*, 2002). James and James (2008: 139) describe that children's innate vulnerability is a key concept in childhood studies, arguing that the idea of children as vulnerable is implicit in biological and physical developmentalism; a theory which advocates that because a child is not fully developed he or she is therefore vulnerable to any adverse influences that may disrupt the 'normal' completion of the 'developmental process'. Daniel (2010) argues that contemporary intervention in family life is legitimated upon the premise that children are innately vulnerable and dependent, and that it cannot be taken for granted that their parents will offer them appropriate protection.

The emergence of the sociology of childhood has called into question understandings of children as innately vulnerable. It is now widely recognised that representations of childhood vary over time (James and Prout, 1997; Lee, 2001; Pearson, 1983), and that notions of children's innate vulnerability change along with these variations. Such variances are closely associated with shifting

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[8] Especially HIV, for example (see Delor and Hubert, 2000).

understandings of what constitutes 'risk' and the need for 'protection'. James and James (2008: 138) cite differing attitudes to child labour as an example. They highlight that children can either be seen as important economic contributors in society, or, alternatively, children working can be considered to be a health risk and a danger to be avoided.

Though innate vulnerability remains a central theme in normative understandings of childhood, it can be noted that representations of children as natural, passive, incompetent and incomplete now compete and overlap with notions of children as agents in, as well as products of, the 'social process' (James and Prout, 1997). Nygard (2009) highlights the paradox inherent in contemporary political discourse of increased emphasis on children's rights on the one hand, along with a perceived need for stricter demands on the public and adult control of children on the other. How human agency is imagined where children are seen as innately vulnerable is particularly contested and complex (Piper, 2008). O'Connell Davidson (2011) notes that the innate vulnerability of children is often constructed in binary opposition to the 'full agency' of adults.

2.1.2 Disabled adults

That some adults are innately vulnerable is a central premise of the social care system in the UK. The implications of this standpoint have been critiqued extensively (see Hollomotz, 2011; McLaughlin, 2012; Dunn *et al*, 2008) and are examined in more detail in Chapter 3. By way of an overview, the definition of a 'vulnerable adult' which is most commonly used refers to the Lord Chancellor's Department consultation paper *Mental Capacity: Who Decides?* (1997: 68), which is as follows:

> Someone over the age of 18 who is or may be in need of community care services by reason of mental health or other disability, age or illness and who is or may be unable to take care of him/herself or unable to protect him/herself against significant harm or exploitation

'Vulnerability' here seems to centre on an individual's inherent characteristics and/or circumstances, given which that person might be denied 'free choice' due to

a malign third party influence or a structural force. In this definition, because of the presence of innate vulnerability, a person is thus more likely to become vulnerable situationally. The main innate vulnerabilities are associated with old age and disability, with a particular focus on adults with learning difficulties.

In relation to disability, the concept of vulnerability has divided theorists, practitioners and the receivers of policies. Some regard the identification of vulnerability as an important means of obtaining external protection (see McLaughlin, 2012 for a useful account of social movements based on vulnerability). Others argue that understandings of disabled people as innately vulnerable undermine the position and rights of the individual and the responsibility of society in the creation of the vulnerability (Hollomotz, 2011; Wishart, 2003). Beckett (2006) takes a different approach. She uses disability as a case study to highlight understandings of vulnerability associated with the experience of impairment, and how these impact on citizenship and social movement theorising. Closer to a view of vulnerability as innate, she argues that vulnerability is fundamental to human existence due to the 'fragile and contingent nature of personhood' (p. 3), concluding that we are all vulnerable in some respect and at various 'risk' at points in our lives. As well as alerting us to the concept's disempowering connotations, Beckett (2006) sees vulnerability as potentially emancipatory due to its potential to unite people in a shared understanding of their relationships to others in society. Her work demonstrates that there is a particular view of innate vulnerability which emphasises connectedness to others and uniform shared precariousness.

2.1.3 'Universal vulnerability' or the 'vulnerability thesis'

Beckett's view of vulnerability and disability can be seen as part of a broader body of work which is sometimes described as the 'vulnerability thesis' (Turner, 2006; Fineman, 2008). A group of writers from across social policy, ethics, and philosophy point to 'vulnerability' as a potentially transformative notion, able to function as a basis for achieving equality, autonomy and freedom in society (Goodin, 1989; Tuner, 2006; Fineman, 2008). Similarly to Beckett (2006), they argue that the concept alerts us all to the precariousness of human existence – a state we all share – and therefore offers the means to act as a unifying theoretical catalyst through which

society could potentially be transformed. Indeed, in the United States, Fineman is one of a number of academics who established the 'Vulnerability and the Human Condition Initiative', a research centre which advances the 'vulnerability thesis' as the starting point for meaningful social change. The website for the centre[9] quotes Fineman advocating that vulnerability is:

> … the characteristic that positions us in relation to each other as human beings and also suggests a relationship of responsibility between the state and its institutions and the individual

Viewed in a 'universal' way, 'vulnerability' is often argued to be a fundamental building block in relation to ethics and social justice (Goodin, 1985; Fineman, 2008; Dodds, 2007; Ramsay, 2008; Anderson and Honneth, 2009; Turner, 2006). Rather than seeing it as innate to particular biological states, the 'vulnerability thesis' writers conceive vulnerability as connected to the personal, economic, social and cultural circumstances within which individuals find themselves at different points in their lives. According to this view, the state of vulnerability is therefore a fundamental feature of humanity. The idea of 'universal vulnerability' is a notable theme in socio-political and moral philosophy, centred on the notion that as humans we share an 'ontological insecurity' that can unite us with others in society and be a motivator for more careful consideration and treatment of others (Turner, 2006; Goodin, 1985; Ramsay; 2008). For this reason, Turner (2006: 35) places vulnerability at the heart of social citizenship and human rights: 'The experience of vulnerability provides a norm for the assertion of a human bond across generations and culture'.

Turner's (2006: 44) belief in the importance of notions of vulnerability centres on the potential he believes the concept has to elicit sympathy; sympathy which can be cultivated in order to form a 'common moral community'. Goodin (1985) shares this view of vulnerability as a potentially transformative principle of social justice.

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[9] www.web.gs.emory.edu/vulnerability/

He argues that the vulnerability of people in society should be the grounds for how moral responsibilities (both individual and group) should be generated:

> ...social responsibilities are best analyzed through a model that derives one party's responsibilities from the others' vulnerabilities (Goodin, 1985: 42)

Indeed, a common facet of literatures on universal vulnerability is a focus on interdependency, dependency and interconnectedness (Campbell, 1991; Anderson and Honneth, 2009; Ramsay, 2008; Kittay, 1999; Dodds, 2007). According to this perspective, 'vulnerability' is able to emphasise structural 'causes' of people's varying degrees of fragility and need, engendering a society-wide and blame-avoiding rationing of resources.

Butler (2004; 31) also draws upon the idea of a 'common human vulnerability' in her work responding to the September 11th terrorism attacks on the United States. For Butler (2004: 44), bodily 'human vulnerability' is inescapable and innate, but 'vulnerability' is also constituted politically and according to 'norms of recognition' (see also Butler, 2009). Butler argues that the 'vulnerability' of some goes unrecognised because of the lack of value placed on the lives of certain social groups. Using ideas about the social and political construction of vulnerability she asks questions such as 'What makes for a grievable life?' (p. 20). In a similar vein, 'theories of vulnerable autonomy' are set out by Anderson and Honneth (2009) and used as a starting point for an alternative version of liberalism; one focussed less on individualism and more on the intersubjectivity and the innate vulnerability of human existence. At the heart of every individual's ability to lead a worthwhile life, they argue, is the intersubjective process of mutual recognition of each other's worth; our 'fragile achievements' (p. 137) are presented as constantly at risk of violation, wherein lies the innate vulnerability of all human existence.

A slightly different view of innate vulnerability and autonomy is given by Campbell (1991), who argues that a fundamental problem with liberalism is that our attitudes to the vulnerable are shaped by popular desires to be rational, free, independent beings, and by a dislike of 'dependency'. He argues that if we accept that we are all vulnerable at times, 'doing one's best' for others is no longer patronising, but in fact

fosters autonomy (Campbell, 1991: 10). Anderson and Honneth (2009: 137) see recognising the threats to our 'self-trust, self-respect and self-esteem' is the starting point for individuals to be truly autonomous, rather than the right to act without constraint. Kittay (1999) and Dodds (2007) use these theories of universal vulnerability to examine the role of carers, with particular reference to feminist theories and the role and status of women within society. They view vulnerability-focussed ontology as a mechanism for making sense of and placing importance on the role of caring for dependents within society. In these works the concept of vulnerability is used as a theoretical lever or a call for action based on moral obligations. The authors advocate that the concept offers an ontological foundation for the attainment of social justice.

Ramsay (2008) makes very different use of 'theories of vulnerable autonomy'. In his defence of the use of Civil Protection Orders like ASBOs, he uses the theory as the basis for tighter social control mechanisms. Again connecting vulnerability with individualism, he argues that notions of 'autonomy related vulnerabilities' are deeply rooted across the spectrum of mainstream political theories, embedded within constructions like The Third Way, communitarianism and neo-liberalism (p. 15). Ramsay (2008) supports the notion that all members of a society have a duty to reassure others that they will not affect someone else's pursuit of their own individual well-being and security. When individuals fail to reassure one another of this, he argues, this should be taken very seriously, as without reassurance vulnerable citizens would be inhibited from going about their lawful business.

The idea of the citizen being perceived as innately vulnerable in contemporary society has been taken up by others in the sociological literature. Waiton (2008: 45), in his discussion of the political environment in which the notion of 'anti-social behaviour' came to be so significant in contemporary society, charts a 'politics of vulnerability'. He uses this term to describe New Labour's approach to order maintenance; one centred on the individualised sense of insecurity and the 'defence of the anxious and chronically vulnerable' individual (p. 48). This, for Waiton, is bound up with the increasing centrality of victim identity in criminal justice policy and a new exaggeration of crime. As specific interest groups (mainly,

he says, women, the poor and people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds) came to be seen as in need of protection, vulnerability 'increasingly became a term used for ever more groups in society and ultimately the population as a whole' (p. 78).

Some writers have focussed on the notion of innate vulnerability as paternalistic, damaging and limiting to society, sometimes linking this to a 'culture of fear' (Furedi, 2003). Furedi (2003) argues that contemporary society's emphasis on vulnerability has led to a new etiquette where fear of taking risks is central to our experiences of everyday life and where safety is enshrined as one of the main virtues of society. In later work, Furedi (2006 and 2008) condemns the way that the concept of vulnerability has 'effortlessly migrated' into the social sciences, and has become a condition that is now intrinsic to existence rather than an expression of an individuals' experiences. McLaughlin (2012) is also highly critical of the way in which (he argues) ideas of innate vulnerability have risen to the forefront of individuals' relationships with social structures. He sees the rise of 'vulnerable identities' as characterising contemporary society, and as linked with a decline in the power of collective social movements and political activism. In this work which criticises constructions of all citizens as innately vulnerable, there are certain parallels to the 'risk society' thesis (Beck, 1992) which are explored further later in the chapter (see 2.4).

2.1.4 Summary

Notions of innate vulnerability are utilised across a number of intellectual paradigms, from social care practice to political philosophy. Natural or innate vulnerabilities in a normative sense tend to position individuals as at risk of harm in a way that can be modified by action, but where some elevated level of danger always remains. This assumed precariousness is primarily associated with particular periods in the life course, states of physical weakness and physical or sensory impairment, or linked to an individual's mental health. In a slightly different vein, 'vulnerability' is also heavily drawn upon in selected writings across the ethics and philosophy literature in order to critique various social inequalities and difficulties. Although this literature also positions vulnerability as something which is 'universal',

there tends to be an implicit rejection that a state of vulnerability is 'natural'. According to the 'vulnerability thesis', vulnerability may be a state shared by all of humanity, but degrees of vulnerability are created and shaped by social arrangements. We might usefully call this idea the 'social construction of vulnerability' (see Wishart, 2003), which has obvious resonances with the social model of disability (Barnes and Mercer, 1996).

2.2 Situational vulnerability

Aside from its association with particular 'states', the concept of vulnerability is used widely to draw attention to the circumstances of people who find themselves at elevated 'fragility' or 'risk'. Situational vulnerability tends to be associated with the active input of a human third party or a structural force, though also usually involves elements of individual agency or choice. Such views of vulnerability are closely associated with 'victimhood' and the special obligations that society owes to those who are classified as victims in some way. Due to this association, some writers have argued that this type of vulnerability has a strong paternalistic quality (see Hollomotz, 2011; Wishart, 2003; Dunn *et al*, 2008). Others tend to construct vulnerability in this way in order to legitimate claims to resources, in part due to the implication that the difficult circumstances that someone who is 'vulnerable' faces are not their own fault. A central theme to emerge from this discussion, however, is that some groups can be classified as transgressive at the same time as being constructed as situationally vulnerable (cf Harrison and Sanders, 2006). This relationship between 'vulnerability' and 'transgression' adds considerable complexity to the conceptual dimensions of situational vulnerability.

2.2.1 Children and young people's situational vulnerabilities

According to Daniel (2010), there are two ways in which the situational vulnerability of children and young people tends to be constructed. Children's 'vulnerability' either seems to relate to vulnerability to risk and harm as encountered in the child protection system, or to particular behaviours or victimisations which may lead to a poor future for a children or young person. Chapter 3 explores this in further detail from a policy perspective, but we can note that dominant notions of children's situational vulnerability are encapsulated within the seminal *Every Child Matters*

(*ECM*) government guidance (Department for Education and Skills, 2003, which informed the Children Act 2004). The *ECM* document is one example of the way that children's innate vulnerabilities seem to be assumed alongside situational vulnerabilities; children and young people's status as 'vulnerable' and 'most vulnerable' seems to vary according to how successfully they are nurtured and protected (or abused and exploited). Where they occur elsewhere in the literature on vulnerability, differentiations in 'wider' and 'narrower' uses of the concept of children's vulnerability tend to be tacit or implied rather than specified by the author. A number of other concepts are closely associated with vulnerability in the arena of children's well-being; most notably 'risk' and to a lesser extent 'resilience', which are interesting notions in themselves, but for the purposes of this study are considered in terms of their relationship to vulnerability.

Daniel (2010) sees the increasing prevalence of notions of children's situational vulnerabilities as connected with an expansion of the child protection system under New Labour. Instead of being seen as a designated 'safeguarding' agenda, child protection systems have increasingly drawn on the idea of children on a spectrum of vulnerability, with child protection positioned as a response to the 'most vulnerable' and with more general safeguarding systems employed to protect those children who are at some other amount of less critical vulnerability. She argues that the popularity of the concept is linked to the 'problematisation' of childhood (p. 236), and links constructions of vulnerability to surveillance and social control processes, an issue explored further in the next chapter. Other writers have argued that increasing concerns over children's health and situational vulnerability are actively damaging to children, as preoccupation with risk avoidance leads to impairment of competency development and poor coping skills (Newman and Blackburn, 2002; Waiton, 2001; Gill, 2007). Daniel (2010) develops these ideas to argue that the current use of the concept of vulnerability is woolly and needs to be refined.

2.2.2 Vulnerability in relation to poverty, famine, or disasters

A significant body of academic work utilises the concept of vulnerability in terms of lack of access to food and economic or environmental security (Watts and Bohle,

1993; Chambers, 1989; Downing, 1991; Adger, 2006). Within this literature, some of the most useful theorising on the concept of 'vulnerability' can be found (see Adger, 2006 for an overview). That 'vulnerability' is characterised by vagueness has been noted by writers in this arena. Chambers (1989: 33) argues that although being 'vulnerable' is a common idea in the lexicon of development, the use of the concept is often vague and is interchangeable with 'poverty' or 'poor'. Watts and Bohle (1993) see the concept of vulnerability as omni-present in the literature on adversity, referencing those people who are at risk of on-going lack of access to food, who are by definition vulnerable to severe hunger and starvation. However, they also note that, unlike poverty, vulnerability as a concept 'does not have a basis in well-developed theory', nor is it associated with certain indicators or methods of measurement (p. 45).

In theorising on situational vulnerability evident in this literature, Chambers' (1989) analysis of systems that give rise to vulnerability seems to have had a substantial influence. Chambers sees vulnerability as related to defencelessness, defining it as referring to 'exposure to contingencies and stress, and difficulty coping with them' (p. 33). He goes on:

> Vulnerability thus has two sides: an external side of risks, shocks and stress to which an individual or household is subject; and an internal side which is defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss (Chambers, 1989: 33)

Developing this definition, Watts and Bohle (1993) use the notion of vulnerability to help map an account of locally and historically specific configurations of poverty, hunger and famine. They outline three 'co-ordinates' of vulnerability (p. 45) that can be simplified as follows:

- the risk of exposure to crises, stress and shocks;
- the risk of inadequate capacities to cope with these; and
- the risk of severe consequences arising in these instances

The authors review the literature on hunger-related vulnerabilities in order to move towards developing a theory of vulnerability which is capable of exposing historically and socially specific realms of choice and constraint; or 'degrees of freedom' which determine exposure, coping capacity and potentiality (p. 46).

Watts and Bohle (1993) suggest 'causal' structures of vulnerability, which connect with issues including entitlement and institutions of access and control, which they label 'spaces of vulnerability'. They argue that there are three axes around which the space of vulnerability rotates; potentiality, exposure and capacity (meaning capacity to deal with adversity). More recently, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) have been utilising the concept of vulnerability to assess the social justice implications arising from climate change in the UK (Lindley *et al*, 2011). In the JRF research, vulnerability is defined simply as 'characterised by the degree to which an external event converts into losses in their well-being' (p. 2).

These theories of vulnerability alert us to the concept's link with assets or ability to cope with adversity. Used in a socio-economic sense, this is a powerful idea that has been used to develop understandings of the lived experiences of deprivation and disadvantage over time. Emmel and Hughes (2010: 171) adapt Watts and Bohle's notion of 'spaces of vulnerability' in their social exclusion research, refining the idea to analyse a longitudinal 'social space of vulnerability' which is temporal as well as dynamic. Their empirical study develops a theory of social exclusion which considers the effects of 'multiple deprivation, limited resilience and (in)appropriate service provision', and which enables a more nuanced appreciation of the lived experience of material deprivation based on vulnerability (p. 171).

The 'co-ordinates' of vulnerability set out by Emmel and Hughes (2010) develop those used by Watts and Bohle (1993) and relate to: material vulnerability in households characterised by 'making do' with limited resources for everyday basic needs; a lack of capacity to address needs in the present and plan for the future; and an uncertain reliance on welfare services to act to address crises when they happen. Central to Emmel and Hughes' theory is the idea that 'vulnerability' involves individuals and households living with a fear of future events tipping them

into further difficulties or crises. In this respect, the unrealised element of vulnerability is crucial to how deprivation or lack of resources is operationalised. Such theorising on vulnerability was formative in the development of the working definition of vulnerability adopted in the present study (see 1.4) and is later reflected upon in relation to the empirical case study (see 5.1.2).

2.2.3 Deservingness, blame, vulnerability and transgression

Certain groups or individuals are associated with vulnerability due to being seen as people who have such a degree of misfortune that this generates special obligations towards them. Examples might include; homeless people, women involved in prostitution, asylum seekers and refugees, women experiencing domestic violence, drug users, people (especially women) in prison, poor people, and sometimes more general groups like women or black and ethnic minority people. As young people are generally held as having more agency and autonomy than younger children, when situational vulnerability is applied to young people, there are sometimes contested views of agency, vulnerability, deservingness and blame. An interesting recent example was the case of several young women who were 'sexually exploited' in Rochdale which received widespread media attention in September 2012. Social Workers judged that young people had been 'making their own choices' and 'engaging in consensual sexual activity' with older men (Rochdale Borough Safeguarding Children Board, 2012: 9), whereas the Safeguarding Board saw this as a case where perpetrators of abuse had exploited vulnerable 'victims'.

Goodin (1985: 129) notes that vulnerability status transcends how much people are thought to 'have themselves to blame' for their circumstances, because of its link to moral duty. For him, this is why using vulnerability as the starting point for ethics and social justice is so powerful. At the point where an individual's opportunities of self-help have passed, and the situation is beyond their control, this is when a person is uniquely and most vulnerable. This is precisely when others may possess most power and ability to be able to take action to avert harm to them. Thus responsibilities generated from situational vulnerabilities, Goodin argues, transcend our feelings that people deserve what they get, due to the practical responsibilities arising from 'vulnerability'.

Warner's (2008) empirical study on community care settings found that social workers sought to contest the construction of their clients as a social risk by emphasising their personal biographies and by positioning them as vulnerable (as well as posing a risk to others). This seems an important finding. It suggests that due to the moral potency of the terminology, labelling groups as vulnerable can circumvent them being seen as 'to blame' for their problems, or can at least appeal against the impulse to condemn them for their actions or lifestyles. Harrison (2010) notes a widened application of ideas of dependency and vulnerability, which he argues are often brought together with risk and threat and are connected with legitimating claims for on-going supplies of secure resources which may otherwise look unreasonable. Elsewhere, I have argued that, in this sense, vulnerability functions in ethics almost like a 'get out of jail free card' (Brown, 2011b: 318).

Yet the review of the academic literature also indicated that whilst certain groups or individuals may be constructed 'officially' as being vulnerable (and by implication 'deserving'), their treatment in practice implies that they might also be considered a risk to society in some way. Moon (2000: 241) specifically focuses on this issue of threat in the area of mental health services, noting the 'juxtaposition of threat and vulnerability' in constructions of mental health service users. Warner (2008: 32) argues that there is in fact a 'vulnerability/dangerousness axis', where 'vulnerability' is used to indicate the risk posed *by* certain individuals as well as *to* them. This idea resonates with those of Harrison and Sanders (2006), who argue that increasing social control is often justified on the basis of the vulnerability of certain groups.

Fawcett (2009) argues that increased emphasis on vulnerability in welfare domains has a tendency to lead inexorably to ideas which reinforce notions of acceptable behaviour. In a quite different arena, Richards (2011) argues that by positioning terrorists as 'vulnerable' (to extremism), the UK government implies (inaccurately perhaps) diminished capacity for decision making. Phoenix and Oerton (2005) and Scoular and O'Neill (2007) show how the 'problem' of prostitution would seem to have been 'officially' reconfigured in contemporary society, from one of criminality to one of 'vulnerability', yet women continue to be disciplined for their involvement in selling sex. What emerges from the literature is a sense that where individuals or

groups are called 'vulnerable' it can imply that they are not behaving in an acceptable way, and therefore require support and control. Thus, how notions of 'vulnerability' intersect with ideas about 'deservingness' is complex.

2.2.4 Summary

When situational vulnerability appears in the literature in relation to adults, this usually acts as a signal of the need to take action. Situational vulnerability is associated with children and young people in two main ways; marking out those who are at extreme risk of harm who require some sort of intervention, and delineating those at risk of failing to thrive at some later stage of life. Some writers have argued that, in certain contexts, 'vulnerability' implies risk and danger from those individuals labelled as vulnerable as well as risk to them. As well as highlighting some sort of risk of adversity to individuals, vulnerability classifications would also seem to be used to indicate that attention is required so that a person or group does not disrupt the social order. Vulnerability can also be a useful concept in that is helps to emphasise precariousness over time, as well as in experiences in the present.

2.3 Vulnerable groups

There are large amounts of literature which refers to the identification, support and management of 'vulnerable groups', but who is referred to within this category varies widely. How 'vulnerability' is constructed within this arena is difficult to summarise as its employment as a term is highly disparate. Rather than a comprehensive overview, this section is designed to provide a flavour of the variety of ways in which vulnerability is used to highlight the needs of specific populations for special attention. Particular attention is given to 'vulnerable groups' of children and young people, as information about which young people were deemed as vulnerable informed part of the sampling strategy for the present study (see 4.4.2).

Most often, when authors refer to vulnerable populations or groups, who they mean by this is not clearly defined. Occasionally, research and official reports or policy guidance give more precise indications of which categories they mean by the term 'vulnerable groups'. As one example, writing about the social exclusion and

vulnerability of children and young people, Bynner (2001) argues that particular groups of children are the 'most vulnerable' to exclusion. For Bynner, these groups include: those who experience weak or absent 'family relations', those who grow up in care, children with absent parents, those whose parents have drug and alcohol problems and/or criminal records, and disabled children (particularly disabled children who grow up in poverty) (p. 293). Such attention to 'vulnerable' groups of children and young people tends to draw on 'human development' understandings of childhood.

A sample of specified and defined vulnerable groups is provided in Table 2.1. This sample shows that although the list of vulnerable groups varies, there are some commonly occurring groups, (like children in care and young offenders for example) indicating a certain tacit level of consensus of understandings at both practice and policy level. There is overlap here with the literature on research methods which focuses on how to conduct research with 'vulnerable groups' (see Liamputtong, 2006; Taylor, 2009; Yates, 2009 for examples). The way in which researchers are often deemed to have certain ethical responsibilities when engaged in direct work with 'vulnerable' groups has received significant attention in the research methods literature and this is explored further in Chapter 4.

Table 2.1: Examples of 'vulnerable groups' of children and young people in official and academic literature

Document	Vulnerable groups of children/young people (CYP) identified	Comments
Every Child Matters (Department for Education and Skills, 2005)	'Most vulnerable' children are those most at risk of significant harm and 'vulnerable' children are those at risk from poor outcomes.	Vulnerability is associated with all children, but groups needing extra attention are listed according to factors associated with poor outcomes.
Think Research (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2008)	'Most vulnerable' and 'disadvantaged' are discussed throughout. Targets 'families at risk' and 'vulnerable families'.	Uses evidence base to argue that 'vulnerable families' are the same population caught at different points in their lives.
Goulden and Sondhi (2001)	School truants and those excluded from school, young offenders, homeless young people and runaways, young people living in drug using families	Research on drug use. Talks of vulnerable groups generally, but seems to be referring to groups vulnerable to substance misuse.
NICE (2007)	Those whose family members misuse substances, CYP with behavioural or mental health problems, excludees and truants, young offenders, 'looked after' CYP, those who are homeless, those involved in sex work, those from some minority ethnic groups	Document on drugs interventions, identifies 'vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people aged under-25 who are at risk of using substances'.
Home Office Vulnerable Groups Research Programme (cited in Cusick *et al*, 2003)	Young people involved in sex work, young people leaving care (including runaways), homeless young people, young drug users in touch with Youth Offending Services	Programme investigating patterns of drug use among vulnerable young people. Like *Think Family* report, alerts reader to same population caught at different points in their lives.
Operating Framework, City Council Vulnerable Groups Commissioning Partnership Board (2009)[10]	Young people who offend, children who misuse substances and alcohol, teenage parents and those at risk of conceiving, children with mental health problems and 'behavioural difficulties', disabled children and those with complex needs, 'looked after' children and those 'on the edge of care'	Local document from the city in which the empirical case study was carried out (Chapters 5–8) showing practice interpretation of policy and more tacit local understandings and priorities.
National Institute for Health Research (2001)	Notes the term means different things to each of us. Lists 28 groups as example vulnerable groups (p. 2): 'children in general', children in care, young carers, asylum seekers and refugees, people whose 'voices cannot be heard', people who cannot read or write English, people who need (but are not receiving) health or social care services.	Document aimed at promoting research in public health and social care. Document refers to vulnerable groups more generally, not specifically children and young people. This list includes a positioning of people in line with their (in)adequate use of services (cf Watts and Bohle, 2003)
Bynner (2001)	Children most vulnerable to exclusion: CYP who experience weak or absent 'family relations', who grow up in care, whose parents have drug and alcohol problems and/or criminal records, and disabled children	Research paper examining 'risks' and 'protective' factors in social exclusion. Example of more 'developmental' approach.

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[10] This was a local document used in the city of the empirical case study. A full reference is not given in the bibliography for reasons of anonymity.

The phrase 'the most vulnerable' appears to be used widely across official and academic writing. The opening of the Executive Summary of *ECM* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003: 5) describes 'shameful failings in our ability to protect the most vulnerable children', which is a reference to the death of Victoria Climbié. The use of this phrase in child protection arenas imagines children's risk of harm from adverse circumstances as a spectrum, with some children and young people at the most acute end. The employment of the term 'the most vulnerable' carries with it a strong implied ethical responsibility to address the plight of these particular children and young people. In academic literature it appears as a summarising concept in articles, abstracts, or even titles of books, though in the main body of text it is rarely referenced let alone defined (see for example Paxon and Haskins, 2009; Dearden and Becker, 2000; Beddoe, 2006). Sometimes, the phrase 'highly vulnerable' is used in the same way (see Scaife *et al*, 2009: 235). This label of most vulnerable is also used in relation to adults, but perhaps less frequently (see Hicks-Coolick *et al*, 2007; Pring, 2003).

At the time of the completion of the main literature review (Spring 2010), all of the 'big 5' children's charities (Barnardos, The Children's Society, NSPCC, Action for Children and Save the Children) emphasised the centrality of vulnerable groups or the 'most vulnerable' in their work. Action for Children's 'strapline' was that they supported 'the UK's most vulnerable and neglected children and young people' (www.actionforchildren.org.uk). Barnardos' mission statement stated, 'We believe in the abused, the vulnerable, the forgotten and the neglected' (www.barnardos.org.uk). Between these five charities, a search for 'vulnerable' on their websites (April 2010) returned 1529 results, which were mainly descriptions of issues related to the 'most vulnerable' children and young people, or descriptions of their work with 'vulnerable children' in various projects or campaigning or research work. The NSPCC highlighted the 'particular' vulnerability of disabled children and young people (nspcc.org.uk).

There are also literatures related to specific adversities faced by some children and young people where vulnerability terminology seems to be particularly heavily utilised. 'Vulnerable families' also appears as a motif in the literature related to

these adversities (cf Scott and Arney, 2010; Morris, 2012)[11]. Substance misuse literature referring to children and young people is one arena where the idea of 'vulnerability' is frequently drawn upon. Information and guidance produced by the Home Office under the Every Child Matters policy initiative includes; *Drug use among vulnerable young people: developing local profiles* (Home Office, 2007). *Every Child Matters: Change for Children: Young People and Drugs* (Department for Education and Skills, 2005a: 1) refers to reducing drug use by young people, 'particularly the most vulnerable'. Vulnerability is also heavily drawn upon as a notion in the official and academic literature related to children and young people who are involved in the sex industry or in 'sexual exploitation' (see Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009, Department of Health and Home Office, 2000; Department for Education, 2011). Often, vulnerability to a specific adversity is merged with the more general term 'vulnerable children'. As one example, Scaife *et al*'s (2009) study on 'vulnerable young people and substance misuse' focuses on young people's 'vulnerability' to drug use, but throughout the research, young people being vulnerable to substance misuse seems to be conflated with, vulnerable groups per se (p. 229). This would not appear to be uncommon; for similar usage see as examples Goulden and Sondhi (2001), Lloyd (1998) and NICE (2007).

For some writers, the rise of the phenomenon of 'vulnerable groups' is heavily associated with particularism (see Levy-Vroelent, 2011). McLaughlin (2012) argues that social activism in contemporary society is now based on 'vulnerable identities', a trend which runs contrary to more collective approaches to social movements such as unionisation. McLaughlin associates 'vulnerable identities' with the individualisation of social problems, arguing that this configuration of issues renders unacceptable the analysis of wider social and cultural factors which shape experiences. Although McLaughlin offers a convincing account of the connection between 'vulnerable identities', 'vulnerable groups' and particularism, the benefits of such classifications for certain groups who are included in constructions of

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[11] There is further comment in Chapter 3 regarding the notion of 'vulnerable families' in relation to anti-social behaviour and configurations of 'vulnerability' (see 3.1.3).

vulnerability are perhaps overlooked to some degree. Levy-Vroelent (2011) sees benefits as well as draw-backs, an issue which is further explored in Chapter 3.

In terms of influential notions of 'vulnerability', literature which draws upon the idea of 'vulnerable groups' would generally seem to reaffirm and/or challenge the dominant conceptions of individuals' or groups' vulnerability. Although there seems to be some degree of tacit agreement about which groups are 'vulnerable', defining where the boundaries are or should be drawn around this population is very difficult, as 'vulnerability' is used somewhat vaguely in this literature.

2.4 'Vulnerability' and 'risk'

There would appear to be similarities and overlaps in the use of the concepts 'risk' and 'vulnerability', and to some extent a lack of clarity across the literature about how far these concepts are the same, or different. Some authors who have been interested in notions of vulnerability have been critical of the relative obscurity of 'vulnerability' when compared to 'risk':

> Too often vulnerability lies in the shadow of risk, or worse still, the concepts are integrated with a net result of losing focus on vulnerability as a distinct contributor to outcomes that we observe but seek to avoid (Sarewitz *et al,* 2003: 810).

As Appleton (1999) notes, the term 'vulnerability' is often used interchangeably with the concept of risk. Taylor-Gooby (2000: 6) also positions these notions as heavily intertwined, arguing that there has been an 'explosion of concern about risk, vulnerability and social need' within contemporary society. Given this inter-relationship, a brief overview of sociological theories of 'risk' is provided here, along with reflections on what this literature can offer in terms developing understandings of vulnerability.

The concept of risk has attracted significant sociological attention (see Lupton, 1999 for a useful overview), with ideas and theories related to this sometimes referred to as the 'risk society' thesis (referring to Beck, 1992). Beck (1992), Giddens (1991) and Bauman (2000) suggest a novelty to the changes in society in 'late modernity',

linking the modernisation process with a loosening of the structural ties that bind us and constrain us. Technological developments are viewed as instrumental to such changes; Beck (1992) links increasing 'risk' to industrialisation, whereas Bauman (2000) and Giddens (1991) emphasise 'speed' and the altering relationship between space and time due to developments in transport and 'globalisation'. Other theorists have used the risk society thesis to explain a growing preoccupation with risk in everyday life, especially risk of hazards such as crime (Garland, 2001; Burney, 2005; Zender, 2006). The risk society thesis suggests that we are less tightly bound to 'structures' within society, so we feel less in control of our lives and more insecure; thus we concentrate more effort on factors which we see as threatening to our security. Such ideas have been used to argue that 'vulnerability' has similarly become a pervasive and defining feature of the state's relationship to the individual (see McLaughlin, 2012; Furedi, 2006, Waiton, 2008; Kemshall, 2002).

In social care policy and practice, risk has also gained prominence and credence as a concept (Mitchell and Glendinning, 2007). A growing body of empirical work has developed about the role of risk in social policy and welfare; for example, Alaszewski (1998) in health, Kemshall (2002) in welfare, Parton (2007) in child protection and Culpitt (1999) on the role of risk in social policy. In her analysis of concepts utilised in the child protection process, Daniel (2010: 233) notes that 'risk' denotes the 'chances of adversity translating into actual negative outcomes for children' and also that risk has a certain predictive element as it plays a role in determining 'likelihood' (a parallel with Sarewitz *et al*, 2003). Waugh (2008: 113) notes a 'narrow' and 'broad' definition to notions of risk. Narrow definitions, she argues, emphasise individual events and risk of harm, whereas broader definitions are based on a more comprehensive assessment from 'ecological and feminist' perspectives.

Something of a consensus has emerged about the pervasiveness of the concept of risk, its link to institutional power, and its function in processes by which official authorities appraise and regulate people. Lupton (1999) argues that 'risk' is central to the way that individuals are monitored and managed by governments, in the context of attaining neo-liberal goals. According to some authors interested in 'risk'

and social policy, the proliferation of commentaries and information which promotes risk-avoiding behaviour by citizens (pregnancy-related health advice is one example given by Lupton) is argued to be a moral enterprise that can be understood within a context of the responsibilisation of individuals (Lupton, 1999; Culpitt, 1999). The literature review undertaken for this thesis would indicate that although it may be a similarly pervasive concept in welfare settings, 'vulnerability' has received much less attention than 'risk' from academics in sociology and social policy. However, references to vulnerability can be found within the 'risk' literature which offer potential insights pertinent to this study.

Kemshall (2002) is one example, whose analysis firmly asserts that the concept of 'vulnerability' functions in a similar way to 'risk' within policy. She argues that as the 'personal social services' became increasingly preoccupied with the auditing and assessment of individuals and with bureaucratic systems of 'risk management', the concept of vulnerability was taken on by local authorities (making explicit reference to welfare for older people) to further enable the implementation of 'top-down' priorities (p. 78). Kemshall sees the rise of 'vulnerability' within social care settings as linked with the ascent of New Right agendas of reducing welfare. As agencies struggled to meet the 'needs' of people, she argues, a shift took place whereby welfare provision was framed in terms of more 'selective' notions:

> Gatekeeping was considerably simplified by replacing the inclusive, ambiguous concept of need with the exclusive and managerially defined concept of 'vulnerability' in which clearer positions could be set. (Kemshall, 2002: 28)

That 'vulnerability' may function as a conceptual instrument by which official bodies are able to more effectively limit the distribution of welfare resources is an issue which will be further explored in Chapter 3 (see 3.2.3).

In terms of how 'vulnerability' is conceptually distinct from 'risk', writing in the field of the human sciences, Sarewitz *et al* (2003: 805) argue that vulnerability refers to the 'characteristics of a system that create the potential for harm', whereas risk is the 'risk of occurrence' or the probability of a particular outcome. These authors

argue that there can be potential for harm present (vulnerability) without a high risk of a certain hazard occurring. In the social sciences, the conceptual distinction is rarely made in the literature, and a lack of clarity about both concepts would appear to be common. Both 'risk' and 'vulnerability' are often used to refer to an ill-defined combination or range of issues. Considering this lack of definition, any attempt to draw a precise distinction between indicators for 'risk' and 'vulnerability' would be to over-simplify the conceptual relationship.

Perhaps two facets of 'vulnerability' would seem to mark it out as conceptually distinct from 'risk' in the literature. Firstly, 'vulnerability' would appear to have stronger ethical connotations than 'risk', perhaps linked in some way to implied duty of care. The concept of vulnerability has a moral weight that is more pronounced than risk, as is highlighted by the vulnerability thesis writers (see 2.1.3). A second key difference is what could be called the 'contingent' nature of vulnerability, meaning the association the concept has of potentiality of harm rather than likelihood of harm. 'Vulnerability' may be more contingent than 'risk' as it may be hard to anticipate or even hidden. Thus there is a variance and even a tension between the way vulnerability can denote something which is potentiality harmful, and at the same time is used to describe the actuality of something negative happening.

To summarise how sociological understandings of 'risk' might relate to influential notions of vulnerability, the risk society thesis could go some way in explaining the trend towards the use and popularity of the concept 'vulnerability' in contemporary policy and social care practice. Furthermore, theories of universal vulnerability (see 2.1.3) draw on sociological theories about modernisation processes. Overlap also extends into obvious parallels between the way in which 'risk' and 'vulnerability' have been 'institutionalised' within systems and processes which appraise and manage people.

2.5 Conclusion

The concept of 'vulnerability' does not rest on well-developed theory. Furthermore, it is not associated with widely accepted indicators or methods of measurement. It

is in fact characterised by a lack of definition, which has led some writers to question if the term is useful at all (see Daniel, 2010; Mackenzie, 2010, Fawcett, 2009). Apparently influential constructions of vulnerability are that it can be seen as 'innate' or 'situational', is often configured in terms of certain interventions or groups and/or in relation to notions of 'risk'. These constructions of the concept would appear to be imprecise, overlapping and complex. Notions of 'innate' or natural vulnerabilities appear to have particular resonance for children and young people, due to dominant contemporary constructions of children as in some way incomplete, not fully developed, and dependant on adults. In addition, some individuals or groups of children and young people would seem to be considered to be particularly 'vulnerable', to a range of various 'harms' or 'poor outcomes'.

Different constructions of vulnerability evidently have a diverse range of trajectories with manifold implications. It is pertinent that vulnerability seems to be a notion that manages to capture something of precariousness over time as well as in the present (Emmel and Hughes, 2010). A further commonality in the use of the notion in the literature lies in the strong moral connotations attached to the idea. Its use seems to signal to us the need for special care or the ethical duty for action to be taken. One of the main points to emerge from the analysis in this chapter is that vulnerability can be a concept utilised in the pursuit of 'universal' social systems, but it can also be tied heavily to particularism in certain contexts. A further point of interest in relation to research questions is that the label of vulnerability is used not only to indicate that an individual is *at risk*, but that they also *pose a risk to others*, highlighting what we might usefully call the vulnerability-transgression nexus. This idea is developed subsequently in the thesis. We now turn to a more detailed analysis of the ways in which vulnerability is significant in social policy, further amplifying and exploring some of the issues which were raised in the course of this chapter.

Chapter 3: 'Vulnerability' in Social Policy

The concept of vulnerability has come to play a significant role in shaping policies and practices targeted at intervening in the lives of certain social groups in the UK. McLaughlin (2012: 113) argues that there has been an 'expansion of the concept of vulnerability' to the extent where it has become 'institutionalized within social policy'. This chapter reports from a general review of national policy trends related to vulnerability as well as a thematic documentary analysis related to policy domains in which vulnerability appears as particularly significant[12]. It gives a tentative overview of the rise of what could be called a 'vulnerability rationale' under New Labour and the Coalition and assesses the significance of this. As I have explored elsewhere (Brown, 2012), at first glance a focus on 'the vulnerable' at policy level would seem to resonate with principles of social justice and appears beneficial to disadvantaged groups. However, on closer inspection policy discourses which draw on vulnerability can be seen to form part of wider policy narratives which establish what is appropriate and 'correct' behaviour, and which subject people to sanctions should they fail to conform.

The chapter begins with an exploration of how 'vulnerability' as a concept has been used in social policy since 1997, focusing on selected policy domains where it was particularly significant (3.1). Continuities and changes under the Coalition government are explored in relation to each policy domain. From this overview, three themes emerge as significant, which are then examined in turn (3.2): governmental power and professional discretion related to vulnerability (3.2.1) vulnerability and citizenship and (3.2.2) how vulnerability operates in resource distribution (3.2.3.). Theories of vulnerability highlighted in Chapter 2 will be explored in relation to their application in a policy context defined by economic liberalism. Finally, there is a brief reflection on how far ideas about vulnerable

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[12] The end date for the review was July 2012. As highlighted in Chapter 1, the focus of the review centred on English policy, but there are also select references to Scottish law where these appear as significant. Further information on the methods used to conduct the documentary analysis is included in Chapter 4 (see 4.2).

groups and citizens are imposed on the population by policy-makers, or how far people connect with conceptualisations of themselves as vulnerable (3.3). It is highlighted that within certain political contexts, focussing attention and resources on 'the vulnerable' can act as a conceptual mechanism which emphasises personal accountability for the difficulties experienced by individuals, and is an approach at odds with rights-based approaches to citizenship.

3.1 The rise of the vulnerability rationale under New Labour and the Coalition

Vulnerability seems to have been used in policy for some time prior to 1997. For example, in 1957, the Wolfenden Report on 'prostitution and homosexual offences' made reference to the need to provide safeguards to those who were:

> Specially vulnerable because they are young, weak in body or mind, inexperienced, or in a state of special physical, official or economic dependence (Wolfenden, 1957: 9-10)

The notion appears to have been particularly significant before 1997 in arenas such as nursing (Appleton, 1999) and natural hazards/disaster literature (see Schiller *et al,* 2007: 5 for a useful summary). Yet a review of the academic and official literature related to 'vulnerability' revealed that notions of vulnerability took on new significance in policy during the New Labour era. 'Vulnerability' as a notion seems most notable within policy arenas related to disability, services for children and families, housing and also crime and disorder, which are selectively explored in more detail below. Discourses of vulnerability have continued to be influential under the Coalition government which came to power in 2010, but in slightly different ways. In relation to each policy domain where a 'vulnerability rationale' was evident, there are reflections on how continuities and changes under the Coalition have shaped and altered the policy landscape. Brief comments on the Coalition's rhetorical reliance on the concept of vulnerability are also included.

3.1.1 The governance of welfare for vulnerable adults

As indicated in the previous chapter (2.1.2), under New Labour, 'vulnerability' came to play a fundamental role in the governance of welfare for adults who were seen

to lack the capacity to protect themselves. The seminal *No Secrets* guidance issued in 2000 had the idea of vulnerability and 'the protection of vulnerable adults' at its core (Department of Health, 2000). Initiated after a series of high profile cases of residential home exploitation of older people, the guidance addressed older people and disabled people under the same banner of 'vulnerable adults'. It appears that this policy enshrined vulnerability as one of the key criteria in the assessment of adults 'qualifying' for various state interventions and safety procedures (Dunn *et al*, 2008; Fawcett, 2009; Hollomotz, 2011). Policy and practice initiatives in this arena are often referred to as the 'protection of vulnerable adults from abuse' or simply 'POVA'.

Safeguarding Adults (ADSS, 2005) revised the language used in policy-making, but the legacy of the idea of vulnerability endures in legislation and the *No Secrets* definition is still widely used in practice (Hollomotz, 2009 and 2011; McLaughlin, 2012). Alongside *No Secrets*, various other initiatives developed under New Labour which addressed the presumed vulnerabilities of disabled people. Having won the right to receive 'direct payments' in 1996, disabled people were entitled to arrange some of their own services and buy help they wanted. New Labour then altered initial plans for the direct payments scheme, with 'vulnerable' disabled people apparently deemed incapable of making these choices (Hasler, 2004). Extensions of the High Court's power to make declarations about interventions into the lives of 'vulnerable' instead of simply 'mentally incapacitated' adults were also granted in the first decade of the new millennium (see Dunn *et al*, 2008).

The vulnerability status of welfare recipients was brought closer to the centre of New Labour policy in social care with the passing of the *Safeguarding of Vulnerable Groups Act* in 2006. This legislated for a 'Vetting and Barring Scheme' (VBS) which would instigate extra checks for people who work or volunteer to support children and 'vulnerable adults'. Under the Act, a national database of the details of these workers/volunteers would also be implemented[13]. For supporters of 'small

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[13] This legislation followed the Bichard enquiry's investigation of the 2002 'Soham murders' in Cambridgeshire, where two school children (Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman) were killed by the caretaker of their school (Bichard, 2004).

government', this policy was alarming and disproportionately far-reaching in scope in relation to the risks posed to vulnerable groups by individuals who sought to harm them. It was seen by some as an inappropriate balancing of the need to safeguard 'vulnerable' individuals with the restricted collective freedoms arising from this; that legislating for the vulnerable had 'gone too far' (*Prospect Magazine*, March 2010). McLaughlin (2012: 113) argues that this policy was a classic example of governmental presumption of citizens' inherent vulnerability, where 'caring relationships are recast as ones of potential harm and abuse'.

The Coalition government made significant changes to the plans for the VBS after they came to power. In June 2010, Ministers announced that the implementation of the VBS was to be halted, pending a thorough review. The *Protection of Freedoms Act 2012* has now been passed, which outlines a scaled- back employment vetting scheme and reform of the criminal records checks system for those working with vulnerable groups. The justification for this move was a need to 'redress the balance' of risk to be less in favour of protecting the vulnerable, and more in favour of avoiding the constraints and implications of this for the rest of society (Department for Education, Department of Health and Home Office, 2011; 3). This was a more cautious approach perhaps, but a discourse of vulnerability nonetheless remains institutionalised within this policy domain.

3.1.2 Children and young people

The previous chapter showed that special protections have been focussed on children for some time, based on assumptions about their innate vulnerability (see 2.1.1). However, under New Labour these notions seemed to move from operating in informal spheres to also playing a role in more formal policy and processing mechanisms for those under the age of 18. As previously discussed (see 2.2.1), *Every Child Matters (ECM)* drew on theoretical notions of all children as positioned along a spectrum of vulnerability (Department for Education and Skills, 2003: 15). The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) initiative, designed to standardise the assessment of children's 'additional needs', was also connected with this idea of positioning all children on a vulnerability spectrum. In the city in which the empirical case study took place (see Chapters 5-8), Local Authority CAF models

encouraged practitioners to position children on a 'windscreen' of vulnerability in order to determine how services responded to their circumstances (see especially 5.1.3).

New Labour initiatives targeted resources at specific groups of children seen to be at elevated vulnerability because of their adverse circumstances. Introduced in 2003, the Vulnerable Children Grant (VCG) was intended to improve access to education for 'vulnerable' children, and encouraged local authorities to develop their 'strategic approach' to dealing with this group (Kendall *et al*, 2004a). This 'block funding' replaced previous 'ring fenced' sums for pre-defined groups of pupils (such as looked-after children or Gypsy and Traveller children), and enabled local authorities to be more flexible about which children and young people received additional educational support (Kendall *et al,* 2004b: i). 'Targeted Youth Support' was also launched under New Labour in 2007, a multi-agency working initiative aimed at supporting 'vulnerable' young people to prevent them reaching the thresholds for statutory 'child protection' interventions (Department for Education and Skills, 2007).

Within youth justice policy and practice, the assessment of vulnerability came to play a role in determining interventions for young offenders under New Labour. Alongside Youth Offending Service (YOS) interventions which were based on risk of re-offending, young people working with the YOS began to be assessed on the basis of their vulnerability (defined as the risk of them being harmed). The vulnerability status of a young person came to be deemed 'highly relevant' when determining 'a suitable response' to young people's actions, especially where a young person might face a custodial sentence (Youth Justice Board, 2006: Appendix 12; 7). The link between young people's (mis)behaviour and their perceived vulnerability status is a particularly interesting area and is considered in more detail later in the chapter.

The influence of the vulnerability rationale in the provision of children's services is still evident under the Coalition, with the Education Minister centring his defence of the new bursary scheme for 16-19 year olds in education on the premise that Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) will be replaced by a fund which

'targets' the 'most vulnerable' in full time education (Gove, 2011). However, Gove has quite tightly defined his 'most vulnerable' children as those in care, care leavers, and those on income support[14], perhaps a narrower view of vulnerability than that informing New Labour's VCG (although the new funding is not necessarily a direct descendant of the VCG). The Department for Education has also announced that it will be 'streamlining funding for the most vulnerable children and families' in a new Early Intervention Grant, with the aim of ensuring local authorities have greater flexibility over allocating such resources (National Youth Agency, 2010; 3). It is possible that we may be seeing narrowing of entitlement in relation to children's 'vulnerability' status under the Coalition.

3.1.3 Crime, 'anti-social behaviour' and terrorism

As we saw in the previous chapter, some academics have argued that a 'politics of vulnerability' underpinned New Labour's approach to order maintenance, operating alongside a new exaggeration of crime (Waiton, 2008: 45). A focus on the vulnerability status of victims of crime has been noted as particularly significant in the field of disability hate crime, with responses to incidents of hate crimes increasingly regarded by police as requiring a different approach in cases where victims were 'vulnerable' (Roulstone *et al,* 2011). Under the Coalition, the idea of punitive interventions being informed by a victim or perpetrator's vulnerability has continued to thrive. Following the inquest into the death of Fiona Pilkington and her daughter Francecca Hardwick in Leicestershire[15], the protection of 'vulnerable' adults seems increasingly to be used as one of the justifications for the continuation of strong control mechanisms to deal with those seen as perpetrating 'anti-social behaviour'. Obligations to 'vulnerable victims' (as opposed to victims generally) and those 'least able to protect themselves' seem to be taking on even further significance (see Home Office, 2011: 1).

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[14] Young people on income support are teenage parents, teenagers living away from parents and young people whose parents have died.

[15] Fiona's daughter was disabled and Fiona had repeatedly reported incidents of 'hate crimes' committed against members of the family to the police before killing both herself and her daughter (see Independent Police Complaints Commission, 2011).

As indicated in Chapter 2 (2.2.3), evidence of an implied relationship between vulnerability and transgression emerged from a review of the literature related to vulnerability. This vulnerability-transgression nexus is also evident in official discourses of vulnerability, especially since 1997. For example, in the governance of prostitution under New Labour, women who sold sex were configured as 'vulnerable' rather than 'criminal', whilst at the same time empirical realities indicated that they were being treated in increasingly punitive ways (Carline, 2011; Phoenix and Oerton, 2005; Phoenix, 2012a). It is notable that the ASB agenda is now being couched in terms of 'tackling troubled families' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011) or 'problematic populations' (Flint, 2006b), but a cluster of other terms are also often used to describe those governed by this agenda, amongst which 'vulnerable families' often features (cf Centre for Social Justice, 2010; Flint *et al*, 2011; Morris, 2012). As Flint (2006b) has argued, this discourse highlights the problematic behaviour of particular individuals or households, distinguishes the actions of these populations from the behaviour of 'ordinary' people, and reflects tendencies to locate the causes of and solutions to 'problem behaviour' within local communities rather than society as a whole.

Some of the terrorism literature also indicates that 'vulnerability' is entwined with 'threat'. Richards (2011: 150) observes that those who cause a threat to the safety and security of the UK via terrorist activities are often positioned as 'vulnerable' people. Indeed, Richards notes that in the updated version of the government's strategy document on terrorism (*Contest 2*, or 'Pursue, Prevent, Protect, Prepare'), the words 'vulnerable' and 'vulnerability' were used a total of 32 times. This use of 'vulnerability' here functions to imply 'diminished capacity for rational behaviour' (Richards, 2011; 51). Or, to put it another way, vulnerability discourses here would seem to serve to underline that people who disagree with mainstream ideas cannot be of 'sound mind'. This is a striking representation of the subtle message that 'the vulnerable' are problematic and need to be dealt with in order that they do not pose a risk to the rest of society.

3.1.4 Housing policy

'Vulnerability' is also one of the three defined predicaments which triggered 'priority need' under the 1977 *Housing (Homeless Persons) Act*, making 'the vulnerable' amongst those classified as needing special 'fast tracking' through the social housing application process. The Act was given renewed support and was updated during the New Labour era, most recently in 2002. Developments in this period continued to refine what did and did not 'count' as vulnerability into one of the key dividing lines in the provision of social housing resources. Decisions about vulnerability status were to some extent guided by precedents in case law, from cases such as *Ortiz v Westminster City Council* (1993), where a woman was deemed ineligible for 'priority need' status because it was ruled that her previous alcohol and drug use did not amount to her classification as 'vulnerable'[16].

Although offering some parameters for decision-making, these precedents left ample scope for housing practitioners' discretion in judgements about whether a housing applicant was 'vulnerable' or not (cf Lidstone, 1994; Niner, 1989: 96). This has resulted in vulnerability being particularly important in terms of the more informal ways in which people are 'processed' within the housing system (Cramer, 2005). New Labour's Supporting People programme was also explicitly aimed at homeless 'vulnerable' individuals and families. Those using services attached to this funding stream were subject to certain behavioural conditionalities. Under the Coalition there have been radical changes to housing services and allocations of social housing. In terms of the ideas related to vulnerability, under the Localism Act 2011 authorities will continue to be obliged to ensure that social homes go to 'the most vulnerable in society' (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011; 15), but the impact of how those who qualify for priority based on vulnerability will be affected by matters such as overall allocations of fixed-term tenancies is as yet unclear.

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[16] The impact of devolution has been significant in some policy areas including housing. Rather than seeking to diverge across the countries within the union, the present study deals only with UK policy. This may mean that trends or debates are often considered in a way that omits aspects of specific practices in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

3.1.5 'Protecting the vulnerable' in an age of austerity: a note on Coalition rhetoric

Increasing rhetorical reliance on the concept of vulnerability would appear to be a trend in the development of the vulnerability rationale under the Coalition. The vow to 'protect' the 'most vulnerable' appeared frequently in most of the Coalition's earlier policy announcements related to the resourcing of public services. For example, pledges to afford special protections to the 'vulnerable' appeared a total of thirteen times in the government's first Comprehensive Spending Review (HM Treasury, 2010). As spending cuts have been made, drawing on notions of vulnerability offers a possible means of reassuring the public that those who need and 'deserve' services the most will not be affected, thereby perhaps bolstering the moral and economic credentials of the government. Given the subjectivity involved in defining who counts as 'vulnerable', such undertakings may be difficult to hold governments to account for, so could be regarded as being relatively safe political promises. Vulnerability rhetoric, however, seems to have been less visible in more recent policy announcements. Perhaps even vague pledges to protect loosely-defined groups and individuals may have been deemed to risk sounding hollow, given the effects of the austerity measures on the poorest.

3.2 The implications of the vulnerability rationale in policy

From this overview of the rise of what could be called a 'vulnerability rationale' in social policy since 1997, three themes emerge as particularly significant: i) links between vulnerability, governmental power and professional 'discretion', ii) the relationship of 'vulnerability' to citizenship, and iii) how notions of vulnerability shape the distribution of resources, which are now considered in turn.

3.2.1 Vulnerability, governmental power and professional discretion

One of the most striking ways in which we see 'vulnerability' manifested in policy since 1997 is as tacit moral justification for stronger social control practices. Often, exceptions made on the basis of perceived vulnerability would seem to enhance the power of welfare professionals to make decisions on behalf of those they support. The 'power of professionals' here refers to the operation of welfare professionals within particular policy environments, rather than the actions of individuals

independent of each other or of certain contexts. Daniel (2010) has argued that the construction of children as vulnerable connects with a sense of them as the passive recipients of our concerns, which results in practitioners within the child protection system frequently over-riding the wishes of children. Hasler (2004) and Hollomotz (2009 and 2011) share concerns that the conceptualising of disabled people as vulnerable has acted to reinforce the power of disability 'professionals'; protecting people with learning difficulties from the risks posed by allowing disabled people the power to control their own destiny, at the expense of enabling independence. Hollomotz (2011) argues that, paradoxically, policies centred on protecting adults with learning difficulties on the basis of their vulnerability in practice have the result of *increasing* the vulnerability of people with learning difficulties.

Within the area of prostitution policy, liberal feminist writers have argued that we have witnessed an 'unethical mobilization of the vulnerability' of women who work in the sex industry (Carline, 2011; 331). Using Butler's (2004 and 2009) work on 'vulnerability' and 'liveable lives', Carline (2009; 53) argues that 'vulnerability' has been used 'perniciously' in sex work policy. She sees the concept as tied to a positioning of sex workers as 'victims', the adoption of a 'moralistic agenda' and the criminalisation of prostitution (p. 38). Scoular and O' Neill (2007) similarly argue that the construction of sex workers as always and inevitably vulnerable is a governance technique which reproduces binary citizenship models, justifying stronger controls where women transgress behavioural norms. Phoenix (2012a) applies these ideas to policy aimed at young people involved in selling sex, or those who are 'sexually exploited'. She argues that policy in this area has been increasingly based on policing young women's sexual behaviours 'in the name of protection' (Phoenix, 2002 and 2012a).

Policy-making on the basis of vulnerability seems to enable a broadening of the regulatory welfare net somewhat by stealth. This may be in part due to the strong resonance with social justice that notions of 'protecting the vulnerable' engender. A critical reading of government attention to 'vulnerability' might consider this shift in the context of a trend towards 'behaviourism' (see 1.3 and also Harrison, 2010). A focus on vulnerability is apparently therapeutic, but can be seen to shade into more

'moralising' mechanisms of state governance. Dunn *et al* (2008; 241) point out that 'substitute decision-making' on the basis of adults' situational vulnerability could lead to actions that are 'potentially infinite in scope and application'. In other words, according to laws based on 'protecting the vulnerable', courts could potentially intervene in the lives of individuals in unprecedented ways in instances where people were deemed to lack the ability to choose the course of action that was least risky. Dunn *et al* (2008; 241) use the illustrative example that, on this basis, individuals could potentially be prohibited from embarking on cohabitations with abusive partners.

Given the subjectivity involved in decision-making about who is vulnerable, 'vulnerability' may be especially important at points in welfare and disciplinary systems where professionals exercise judgement. In increasingly selective welfare systems, clients who conform to commonly held notions of how 'vulnerable' people should behave may find their entitlement to be more secure. For example, researchers have noted a gendered approach to classifications of vulnerability in housing allocations, with women more firmly located within 'vulnerability' classifications due to their being more inclined to behave with deference and accept dependence (Cramer, 2005; and Passaro, 1996 reporting from New York). Fawcett (2009) and Warner (2008) argue that young black men have been ill-served by mental health service provision due to 'vulnerability' constructions operating to exclude this group; as black men have been configured as a threat they are seen as less deserving and therefore less 'vulnerable' and 'in need'. On this basis, it could be argued that vulnerability discourses might potentially be problematic in terms of how they deal with notions of 'difference', a theme which will be explored further in the thesis.

Conceptions of vulnerability also link to pervasive binaries through which the behaviours of individuals and groups are interpreted by state officials and support workers. The imagining of some groups as 'vulnerable' in policy can cause tensions when those imagined as 'vulnerable' behave in ways that are deemed 'problematic' (see Phoenix, 2012b). A pervasive and ill-informed binary seems evident in relation to 'vulnerability' and 'transgression'. Youth justice academics have argued that

under New Labour a dichotomous sense of those aged under-18 emerged, where young people were seen either as 'vulnerable' and incomplete 'becoming-adults', or classified as dangerous and 'other' in the case of wrong-doing (Such and Walker, 2005; Piper, 2008; Fionda, 1998 and 2005; Goldson, 2000). In relation to child trafficking and migration, O'Connell Davidson (2011: 463) shows how policies on child migration are tied to notions of vulnerability, with 'victim/agent' binaries actively constructing the vulnerability of children who migrate. This, she argues, means that where children do not fall neatly into the category of 'vulnerable victims', they are treated more punitively (and she also suggests that this is most often the case). In subtle but pervasive ways, discourses of vulnerability would seem to form part of wider policy narratives which establish what is appropriate and 'correct' behaviour and which subject people to sanctions should they fail to conform. Furthermore, they work to support oversimplified policy binaries related to 'victim' and 'agent' which can result in policies being ill-matched to empirical realities.

The way in which notions of 'vulnerability' have the potential to function as a subtle and informal mechanism for 'social control' has particular relevance for the 'Big Society' project being pursued by the current government. Jordan (2011) argues that 'Big Society' ideas are in part an attempt to 'restore' power to professionals who have supposedly been stripped of professional judgement by cumbersome and debilitating state power[17]. Combined with a continued emphasis on the protection of the vulnerable, in seeking to 'restore power' to professionals, the 'Big Society' agenda may well intensify moral and behavioural regulation of less well-off sections of society. Those who behave in line with common conceptions of 'vulnerability' may be more likely to be accepted as 'worthy' of welfare than those who do not. The practical effects of this may be benefit reductions or harsher criminal punishment for those who do not 'perform' their 'vulnerability' sufficiently. Combined with the Big Society agenda, emphasis on vulnerability – paradoxically – may serve to further exclude certain groups and individuals who are amongst the most in need of welfare and state support.

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[17] See also www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/big-society

Given that in classifying individuals as vulnerable it would seem that there is also sometimes the implication that they need to be controlled, there are significant complexities which underpin the practical implications of the 'vulnerability rationale'. How far policies which aim to 'protect the vulnerable' in fact police and regulate behaviour is open to question. Thus, elements of stigma or labelling may be involved in demarcations of 'the vulnerable', especially given that ideas about 'vulnerability' are most often applied by those in more powerful positions to define those in less powerful ones, an issue considered later in this chapter (see 3.3).

3.2.2 Vulnerability and citizenship

How notions of vulnerability in social policy connect with and map onto notions of citizenship is particularly contested and complex. Drawing on analysis from the previous chapter, I would argue that due to its strong ethical connotations, vulnerability can be seen to function in relation to citizenship models in two very different ways. Some writers see notions of 'the vulnerable' in policy as acting to single out certain groups as 'other', and view these as patronising and oppressive (Wishart, 2003; Hollomotz 2011; Hasler, 2004). Others argue that 'vulnerability' is able to act as a conceptual vehicle for the achievement of equality, autonomy and freedom in society (Turner, 2006; Goodin, 1985; Fineman, 2008). As we saw in the Chapter 2, these writers argue that a 'vulnerability model' is able to offer a new imagining of relations between citizen and state. A more detailed account of the work of the 'vulnerability thesis' writers is included in the previous chapter (see 2.3.1), but these advocates mainly come from theory-driven perspectives.

Criticism of the implications of vulnerability-based constructions of citizens mainly relate to the practical results where vulnerability is applied in social policy. Wishart (2003: 20) argues that the use of the concept creates images of people with learning difficulties as deficient and as having a 'tragic quality', which operates almost as 'victim blaming', painting those with learning difficulties as inevitably at risk of sexual abuse because of their impairment(s). Roulstone *et al* (2011) argue that disabled people are often denied the right to be taken seriously as victims in the criminal justice system, and that their entitlements to legal protections are diminished due to their status as 'vulnerable'. In other words, where the criminal

justice system is preoccupied with a focus on supporting and protecting the 'vulnerable' victim, this negatively affects the apprehension and prosecution of 'perpetrators'. McLaughlin (2012: 112) is highly critical of the institutionalisation of what he calls 'vulnerable identities', arguing that these are a key component of a policy context which 'is no longer primarily concerned with attaining something good but with preventing the worst'.

In the UK, the dominance of the citizenship model utilised in economic liberalism would seem to locate attention given to 'the vulnerable' firmly within a 'paternalistic' welfare model. In practice, notions of 'vulnerable groups' serve to underline a particular construction of individuals which is central to economic liberal models of citizenship; the citizen as 'capable adult', unbound by structural constraints, who needs 'activating' (cf Harrison, 2010; Clarke, 2005; Campbell, 1991). In this sense, conceptualising groups as vulnerable focuses attention on the individual and *detracts attention from the structural forces* that disadvantage people (Wishart, 2003; Hollomotz, 2011). In this light, the vulnerability rationale can be seen as part of wider trends in social policy which emphasise self-regulation and 'responsibilisation' (cf Rose, 1999; Flint, 2006a; Clarke, 2005). Vulnerability discourses in social policy under New Labour and the Coalition would seem to fit neatly with the characterisation of welfare as a 'gift' rather than a 'right'. Used within the paradigms of economic liberalism, government prioritisation of 'the vulnerable' refocuses public policies around personal accountability rather than rights and collective systems (see Levy-Vroelent, 2010). Universalistic systems of support and security are perhaps more inclined to acknowledge the potential for all to be vulnerable, albeit along a continuum or spectrum of emergent levels of needs[18].

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[18] The 'social model' of disability is relevant here (Barnes and Mercer, 1994), which positions all individuals as on a spectrum of impairment. See Wishart (2003) for further insights into how the social model of disability relates to notions of vulnerability.

3.2.3 Resource allocation on the basis of vulnerability

Whilst calling groups or individuals 'vulnerable' may be stigmatising in some contexts, the policy of prioritising 'the vulnerable' can also have positive effects for some individuals and groups. As we saw in Chapter 2, labelling groups as 'vulnerable' can circumvent (or at least attempt to circumvent) their being seen as to blame for their problems, acting as an appeal against the impulse to condemn them for their actions or lifestyles. It is as if 'the vulnerable' occupy the (increasingly rare) position of being without individual agency to control their life circumstances, so can transcend the usual conditionalities applied to resource allocation. This process seems to function as a moral lever to resources for some individuals or groups, by which their welfare entitlement is justified. For example, in the evaluation of New Labour's VGC, we find that stakeholders in children's services received the grant's focus on 'vulnerability' very positively, as it was seen as a notion that could help to overcome prejudice around certain identified groups (Kendall *et al*, 2004b).

Where vulnerability is not taken as universal, but as something which differentiates people based on differences or deficiencies, it is a concept which overlaps with particularism and the rise of specific interest groups. In an era of financial austerity, this has important potential implications for the distribution of resources. Levy-Vroelent (2010) argues that the expansion of the designation of vulnerable groups in European housing policy means that the treatment of these groups has become increasingly specialised, and that this has the result of placing persons and groups into competition for rare state resources, diverting attention from overall reductions in welfare. Touching on similar issues in the UK in the 1990s, Lidstone (1994) argued that assessing vulnerability under the *Housing (Homeless Persons) Act* left ample scope for housing practitioners 'rationing by discretion' in order to ease pressure on scarce resources. The prioritisation of 'the vulnerable' might be seen as sensible financial decision-making in an age of limited welfare resources, but how this strategy contributes to competing interests and competition for scarce resources should not go unnoticed.

3.3 Vulnerable identities: 'top-down' or 'bottom-up'?

Across sociological, policy and official literature, occasional and disparate writings have explored the idea that vulnerable groups may not identify with the label 'vulnerability'. A reflection on this is included here given that one of my research questions was concerned with how far supposedly 'vulnerable' young people identified with constructions of themselves as 'vulnerable' (see 1.4). Chambers (1989: 33) warns that care is needed in the use of the concept vulnerability as it starts as 'our concept, not necessarily 'theirs''. In relation to people with learning difficulties, Parley (2011: 270) notes that rather than the individual concerned, it is other people who decide on 'the vulnerable label or the degree of vulnerability'. Policy in relation to young people who sell sex offers a particular example of potential tensions in this respect. Official documents often state that even though young people who are 'sexually exploited' are some of the most vulnerable young people in society, they may not see themselves in this way (see Phoenix 2012a for a useful exploration of this).

Dunn *et al* (2008) criticise dominant notions of vulnerability as related to external and objective assessments of 'risk', rather than based on understandings of the subjective experience of being vulnerable. Discourses of vulnerability which are evident in policy, they argue, act to disempower the 'vulnerable adult' by reducing them to a series of risk factors, failing to adequately take account of the experiences through which a person with learning difficulties might ascribe meaning to his or her life. Given the conceptual overlap between 'vulnerability' and 'risk' which was indicated in the precious chapter (see 2.4), this question of how far understandings of vulnerability may be reduced to certain factors being present in the lives of young people is an interesting one.

An alternative view is given by McLaughlin (2012), who explores the idea of 'vulnerable identities' in detail. He argues that whilst a vulnerable identity has been 'imposed' through a 'politics of fear' (p. 112), people have largely been receptive to notions of themselves as vulnerable and as having 'suffered trauma', and have been seduced by the rise of a 'therapeutic identity' (p. 98). However, McLaughlin does not explore how particular sub-groups of the population may differ in how far they

identify with constructions of identities as vulnerable. For example, differences in how men and women might position themselves in relation to vulnerability, or working-class populations and middle-class populations are not addressed. How far those who are classified as vulnerable are receptive or resistant to notions of their own vulnerability is an area which seems under-developed in the literature.

3.4. Conclusion: 'vulnerability' – handle with care

Vulnerability would seem to be a powerful concept in social policy, with pervasive practical effects when operationalised. This is largely due to its strong link with morality, notions of obligation, and ability to shift focus away from people being 'to blame' for their circumstances. At first, notions of protecting 'the vulnerable' apparently resonate with the pursuit of social justice and 'fair' systems of governance and welfare allocation. Further analysis suggests that special exceptions and exemptions made on the basis of situational and innate vulnerability may come at a price. Labelling groups as vulnerable can be stigmatising. This process often dovetails with justifications for stronger governmental control and enhancement of professional power. In the discussion above, there were indications that vulnerability is often something of a 'top down' idea, imposed on populations which might be unreceptive to constructions of themselves as 'vulnerable'.

Due to variation and flexibility in understandings of vulnerability, organising welfare or disciplinary interventions according to this notion can connect with certain moral preferences and preoccupations at both practitioner and policy-making level. This seems particularly pertinent in areas where the welfare system is reliant on discretionary rather than more formal processing mechanisms. Within the wider context of economic liberal models of citizenship, a focus on 'vulnerability' emphasises the individual factors which contribute to difficult circumstances, shifting attention from the structural forces which influence life chances and situations. It resonates with paternalistic and 'gift'-based systems of welfare. Whereas notions of vulnerability served to extend government power and control under New Labour, the Coalition seems to have drawn upon the concept more to bolster the moral credibility of welfare cuts. Under both governments though, the

governance of 'vulnerability' has been bound up with the morality of welfare, selective systems of entitlement and 'behaviourism'. Those who do not adequately 'perform' vulnerability – such as those who do not accept welfare with deference and gratitude – have been less likely to benefit from policies influenced by a 'vulnerability rationale'. From reviewing the literature on vulnerability as a concept in social policy, it can be argued that focusing on 'the vulnerable' gives a façade of being a well-intentioned strategy in a 'just' society, behind which a number of more partisan re-moralising messages are able to operate by stealth. The practical effects of such policy developments are explored further in Chapters 5-8 through an empirical case study. The findings from the case study are reported after the subsequent chapter which discusses the methods used in the research process for the thesis.

Chapter 4: Researching Vulnerability

This chapter charts the path that the study took, highlighting both strategic and more opportune aspects of the research process. The investigation employed a mixture of qualitative methods ranging from spontaneous interactions which animated ideas, to more formalised techniques including structured documentary analysis and interviewing. The principal elements of the research will be discussed in turn. The chapter begins with a description of the main practical and theoretical background to the study, including a summary of the research aims and main methods (4.1). Consideration is then given to the scope of the literature review and the documentary analysis stage of the research (4.2). Then, an overview of the empirical case study approach is provided (4.3). Following this, the interviews with 'vulnerable' young people are discussed in detail (4.4) and then the interviews with practitioners are considered (4.5). Finally, techniques and methods of data analysis are addressed (4.6). My 'insiderness'[19] is a significant theme, and is considered in relation to the various aspects of the research process. I had worked in the area under scrutiny for around ten years before starting the research, so the chapter represents an attempt to consider the effect of my particular positioning in the research process.

The empirical case study is also given particular attention in this chapter. This included interviews with young people seen as 'vulnerable' and 'key informants' involved in the provision of services for this group. That there is a need for special treatment of 'vulnerable' groups in the research process is a well-established principle in social science and health methods literature (Liamputtong, 2006; DeMarco, 2004; Yates, 2009; Brazier and Lobjoit, 1991). It is generally considered that researchers have an ethical obligation to balance the requirements of their studies with a duty to 'protect' 'fragile' research subjects from risks posed by participation in research. It is held that this issue is even more important when

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[19] 'Insiderness' can be understood in a variety of ways (see Dobson, 2009 for an overview) but in this instance refers to the researcher's prior experiences working in the professional arena in which the study took place.

research subjects are under the age of 18 (Munro *et al*, 2005; Taylor, 2009; Swartz, 2011). However, there are certain limitations to research strategies which focus on special treatment of 'the vulnerable'. There are problems with definition (see Hurst, 2008; Levine *et al*, 2004) and this approach can also be prone to 'particularism' rather than 'social theorisation' (Emmel, 2009; 272). In this chapter I aim to explore how young people's social positioning framed their engagement in research, rather than viewing their 'vulnerability' as a fixed state requiring a set approach.

4.1 Practical and theoretical background

4.1.1 Origins of the study

The drivers for the study were located in my professional background in voluntary sector services. As outlined in the Chapter 1 (see 1.1), prior to this research, I had worked in support services for those often considered the 'most vulnerable'. Since early employment as a specialist support worker for women and children who sold sex, I had been interested in instances where ideas about 'victimhood' and 'vulnerability' clashed with notions of people being 'challenging' and 'difficult'. Particularly in work with young people, it struck me that policy constructions of 'vulnerable' 'service users' could be mismatched with the complex empirical realities, and that this could shape interventions in ways that had profound implications for individuals and families.

The construction of vulnerability in social policy concerned me. Those whom I had been involved in supporting could often behave in ways which were seen as 'challenging' or 'resistant'. More punitive sanctions were sometimes favoured where such 'transgressions' continued during interventions. Some colleagues seemed to expect service users to behave in ways associated with 'victimhood', which could cause problems with more 'difficult' people being 'left out' of support due to their behaviours (see 1.1). Studying for an MA alongside my work, I undertook an investigation into how young people with ASBOs experienced these interventions. The ASBOs study underlined that something of a vulnerability/transgression binary existed in policy and practice (Brown, 2011a). Within my professional arena, there seemed to be little consensus about who 'the

vulnerable' were, and differing views about what was supposed to happen when people were both 'transgressive' and 'vulnerable'. Young people were a particularly intriguing group to me in this respect. They seemed to present problems and tensions in terms of how their levels of 'vulnerability' were viewed. I wanted to know more about how these issues played out in services, and the idea followed for a study of the concept of 'vulnerability' and its relationship to interventions for young people.

4.1.2 Summary of research aims and processes

The present research project aimed to develop understandings about how 'vulnerability' is used in determining interventions and courses of action for young people seen as in need of special support or protection. A particular focus was to explore complexities arising where young people in the welfare system were seen as 'vulnerable', and at the same time are considered to exhibit 'problem' behaviours. How far vulnerable young people were receptive or resistant to official constructions of vulnerability was also a key issue[20]. A more general aim related to concern in contemporary society about young people as a 'social problem' (Squires and Stephen, 2005; France 2004; Kelly, 2003), an issue which was brought sharply into focus through reactions to rioting in towns and cities across the UK in August 2011 (see Flint and Powell, 2012).

'Youth researchers' have noted a dilemma in terms of trying to address concerns about young people. It has been argued that studies focussing on 'youth' can contribute to a pathologisation of this young people, unintentionally bringing them under further scrutiny and governance (Kelly 2003 and 2006). At the same time, many young people feel alienated from policy agendas due to what they perceive as a lack of respect for their own concerns and negative portrayals of them (Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2008; UK Children's Commissioner's Report, 2008; Youth Net and British Youth Council, 2006), and studies which challenge some of the ways in which young people's lives are (mis) represented might function as routes into approaching these issues. As it aims to offer insights into

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[20] See Chapter 1 for a list of the research questions in bullet format (1.2).

how young people from inner city areas make sense of their own social worlds, and into the systems underpinning their experiences, it is hoped that this study could make some contribution to debates about the perceived 'problem of youth' (France, 2004 and 2007).

The research methods for the study had several distinct strands:

- A literature review of apparently influential constructions of the concept of vulnerability in academic and official literature (see Chapter 2). This included writings from socio-legal fields, ethics and philosophy, as well those located within the social science arena (see Brown, 2011b);

- Documentary analysis related to how vulnerability functions within policy arenas where the concept appeared to be particularly significant (see Chapter 3). This was undertaken through desk-based research charting the rise of the concept in policy and practice (see Brown, 2012);

- A local case study of the operationalisation of vulnerability, which involved immersion in the local infrastructures of vulnerability-related services, 15 semi-structured interviews with key informants and 25 interviews with 'vulnerable' young people. Alongside this I undertook more informal immersion in the practitioner world via various meetings, conversations and reference to local documentation.

Figure 4.1: Summary of key research methods

- **Literature review** • Exploration of influential constructions of 'vulnerability' in adademic and official writings
- **Selected policy analysis** • Investigation of use of 'vulnerability' in policy since 1997
- **Empirical case study** • Interviews – 'vulnerable' young people • Interviews – professionals involved with 'vulnerable' young people • Immersion in local context
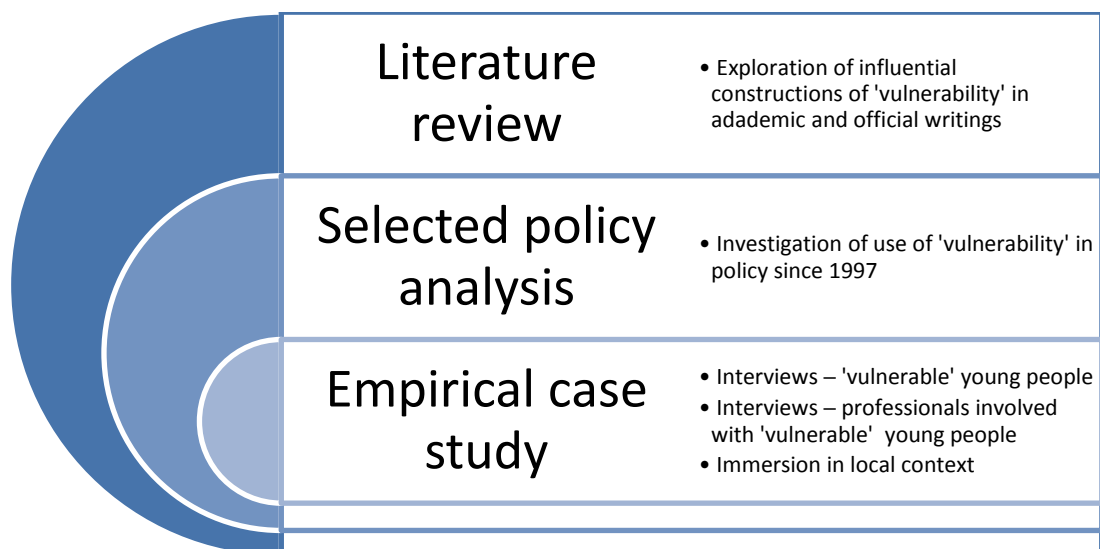
Desk-based work generated insights into which groups of young people were considered to be 'vulnerable' (see 2.3), information which informed the sampling for the case study. Interviews with both young people and key informants took place during 2011. In terms of the empirical case study, informants were professionals who were in some way connected to shaping interventions for vulnerable groups of young people. They included a mixture of front-line workers, managers, commissioners of children's services and key strategists across a range of services. Interviews with these informants investigated the ways in which professionals understood vulnerability and explored the use of the concept in their practice. Interviews were also conducted with 25 young people who were seen as 'vulnerable', with deliberate incorporation of young people seen as 'transgressive'. These interviews generated insights into the young peoples' own perceptions of 'vulnerability' and the interventions they had received as a result of being classified in this way. A number of agencies were used to gain access to participants, making work with 'gatekeepers' a significant aspect of the research process. The access agencies were mainly connected to a network of services associated with support for vulnerable young people in the case study city. Interviews with young people employed 'task-based' techniques, where particular activities were undertaken by interviewee and researcher together, with the aim of eliciting 'richer' data.

4.1.3 Theoretical approach

The study was informed by 'post-positivist' ideas about research providing one view of a particular phenomenon which may be subject to multiple interpretations and perspectives (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Denzin and Lincoln; 2005). The approach was taken that although validity of knowledge cannot be assessed with certainty, phenomena do exist independently of our claims concerning them, and that our assumptions can appropriate them in some way (Hammersley, 1992). In addition, social structures as well as social events were seen as forming social reality. The literature review, documentary analysis, and various strands of the case study methods were not employed with the intention of 'proving' one 'truth', the approach was more to collect and seek to understand various perspectives on

'vulnerability'. Data generated from interviews with young people may for some readers raise questions about the 'truth' of interviewee's accounts. It should be noted that the purpose of the interviews with young people was to accept and report young people's perspectives, on the understanding that seeking to appreciate how young people make sense of vulnerability can offer valuable insights when viewed alongside other research carried out in this field. Any insights are presented together with information about the research approach, with the aim of enabling the reader to judge for themselves the researcher's interpretation of how vulnerability can be better understood (Chapter 9).

As noted in Chapter 1, there is a particular theoretical emphasis on ideas related to 'social control', 'governance', and the 'regulation of behaviour'. This reflects an ontological concern with the way in which caring social interventions can shade into more disciplinary processes. The view that contemporary society can be characterised by a 'culture of control' was one which informed the development of the study (Garland, 2001). An interest in resistance and how this might occur within context of regulation and power (see Foucault, 1980) is also a theme. As outlined in the introductory chapter (see 1.4), one of the underpinnings of the view taken throughout this thesis is that public policy is modified or disrupted by those who receive or deliver services in ways that shape policy according to their own preferences and preoccupations (cf Barnes and Prior, 2009).

Where studies have engaged in researching children and/or young people, it is often argued that the way in which a researcher perceives the status of children is an important influence on their methods and research outcomes (Punch, 2002; Fraser *et al*, 2004; Heath *et al*, 2009). Neale (2004: 8) sees two main ways of viewing children in society and research: as 'incompetent and vulnerable' dependents, or as 'young citizens', with particular 'strengths and competencies'. Developmental psychology traditions have heavily influenced conceptions of children as incompetent objects of socialisation, casting this group in a state of continuous progression towards eventual adulthood and 'full' competency, ideas now heavily criticised by sociologists (Mayall, 1994). A standpoint known as the

'sociology of childhood' informed the approach taken in this research[21]. The investigation started out from a commitment to children and young people's social worlds as having meaning in their own right, rather than seeing these as trivial, poor imitations of the adult state of being (Mayall, 2002; Jenks, 1982; James and Prout, 1997). Children and young people's role in social relations is seen here as one in which they are highly valued participants, but where they are often side-lined due to socio-economic status and other factors. When viewed in this way, children are considered as having different strengths and capabilities to adults, rather than as incapable or deficient in some way (Punch, 2002).

Within the paradigms of the 'sociology of childhood' there is perhaps a danger of locating all children in a group which is oppositional to adults, and of attributing uniformity to this group that fails to acknowledge differences within it (Jenks, 2004; Heath *et al*, 2009; Punch, 2002). Especially in terms of the case study investigation, the aim was to try to appreciate a 'diversity of childhoods' (Punch, 2002: 322). This meant giving consideration to young people's varied social competencies and life experiences *as well as* their particular stage in the life course. The role that age played in the research process was seen as an important factor, but as one which needed consideration alongside other issues of 'difference' such as gender, ethnicity, class, local area, disability, and educational background.

It has been noted that applying principles of the study of childhood to 'youth' can be problematic, as young people's experiences can be substantially different from younger children's (France, 2004, Heath *et al*, 2009; McLeod and Malone, 2000; Bennett *et al*, 2003). Influenced by Heath *et al*'s (2009) commentary on this potential problem, I started from a point which saw young people's social worlds as different from children's in that they are: (i) shaped by specific cultural and historically-specific constructions associated with their stage in the life course, (ii) framed by age-specific policies, and (iii) influenced by widespread societal concern with the monitoring of young people's activities. In more practical terms, I understood that young people may be seen as 'less vulnerable' than children, and

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[21] Moran-Ellis (2010) provides a particularly useful overview of the development and theoretical ideas of this paradigm.

that this could mean that issues of powerlessness may operate more subtly in youth research than in childhood research, so sensitivity to this was required.

My 'insiderness' to the area under scrutiny was of particular relevance for consideration of 'reality', as my actions, values, and strategies in the research process have been intimately linked with the findings. Influenced by Dobson (2009), I understood my insiderness as acting on the research process in a dynamic way. My experiences of services and interventions for 'vulnerable' groups shaped reflections and decisions I made, changing in different environments and contexts. A variety of privileges and limitations have been put forward as related to insiderness. Claims of advantage tend to relate to how the 'insider' is more sensitised to the issue under scrutiny and the social worlds of the respondents (see Coy, 2006). Limitations are largely seen as connected to an inability to be 'detached' (see Dobson, 2009). In terms of my study, shared language, attitudes and experiences were sometimes very helpful, especially in terms of accessing more 'tacit' understandings and systems. In other respects it could be problematic. For example, in interviews with young people, my knowing something of how services worked could help gain trust or add 'authenticity' to my motivations, but this may also have meant that interviewees could have been more reluctant to criticise certain services or systems which they may have seen me as associated with.

My experiences working with 'vulnerable' groups also informed the methods I selected. I approached the study with a commitment to the idea that young people should have a positive and beneficial experience from any involvement they had with it. Although I make no claims that the research represents Participatory Action Research (PAR) in any orthodox sense (where participants are located firmly at centre stage in the research process, cf Kellett *et al*, 2004), 'participatory' approaches have been an interest in my professional practice for some time (see Brown, 2006). Furthermore, basic training in a number of 'therapeutic' approaches had left me with the view that young people are able to offer expert insights into their lives. Reading sociology has given me an appreciation of the importance of setting those individual views within broader social structures, which PAR could

perhaps be criticised for failing to take sufficient account of. Such considerations provided an important backdrop to the research process.

4.2 The documentary analysis

During the first year of study (2009/10), a literature review was conducted which investigated official and academic ideas about vulnerability. I used key terms such as 'vulnerability' and 'vulnerable' to guide a review of writings which focussed on vulnerability in some way. This led to engagement with works from across the social sciences, socio-legal fields, ethics and philosophy and also other 'grey' literature (see Brown, 2011b; Brown 2012). Particular attention was paid to theories of 'vulnerability' and also to where the term 'vulnerability' was applied to young people. The various ways in which authors of academic and also 'grey' literature seemed to understand vulnerability as a concept were explored and recorded in a general way, then mapped through diagrams which highlighted inter-connections and overlaps in the various representations of 'vulnerability'. Attempts were then made to categorise understandings of 'vulnerability' in terms of the most influential representations of the concept (see Chapter 2). The main literature review was then added to over the course of 2010-2012, with inclusion of material in instances where publications focussed on or heavily related to the themes which had been identified at the time of the main review.

Through the more general review of the academic and 'grey' literature related to vulnerability, it emerged that the concept appeared to be especially significant in particular policy domains (see 3.1). This led to a more detailed analysis of the way that vulnerability operated within these social policy arenas. Official policy documentation related to these areas was explored and further academic reading undertaken which offered views about the way 'vulnerability' functioned as a concept within these particular domains, or arenas which were closely related. An attempt was made to chart in outline terms the 'rise' of the concept in policy, with a particular focus on continuities and changes in how the concept has been used by New Labour and then the Coalition government. Particular themes emerged as significant in the way 'vulnerability' was drawn upon in policy, which seemed worthwhile to draw together (see 3.2) as this broader view of the function of the

concept of vulnerability in policy appeared to be relatively absent from the literature.

Some of the principles of critical discourse analysis were useful to me in this work (Fairclough, 2003 and 2001; Wood and Kroger, 2000), especially when exploring policy texts and 'grey' literature. Critical discourse analysis focuses on the detailed analysis of texts, positioning language as an important element of the 'material social process' (Fairclough, 2001). According to this view, social practices have a semiotic element, which features in the process of change within society. As this thesis is in part an exploration of discourses of 'vulnerability', I understood that the ways in which this idea or word was configured in texts would provide clues as to hegemonic social practices and resistance against these. My understanding of 'discourse' was influenced by definitions provided by Fairclough (2003: 123-124) who sees discourse as the 'rules' which 'govern' groups of statements or 'bodies of texts'[22].

The process of the literature review and selected analysis of policy domains where 'vulnerability' seemed particularly important produced valuable information regarding which groups tended to be seen as 'vulnerable'. Although there was a vast array of ways of configuring 'vulnerable groups', there were also some recurring themes in this respect (see 2.3), findings which informed the fieldwork in the empirical case study. Documentary analysis also generated understandings of academic critiques of how vulnerability functions as a concept in welfare, alongside appreciation of some of the theories which had expounded the potentially transformative power of the concept as an organising principle in society. Desk-based work exploring interpretations of vulnerability and its use in policy helped to design interview schedules which aimed to give attention to complexities and contradictions in the operationalisation of the concept. In particular, analysis of the policy literature revealed examples of how 'vulnerability' had functioned in both caring and controlling capacities, which subsequently fed into ideas for interview discussions.

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[22] Fairclough's understandings of discourse are heavily influenced by Foucault (1972 and 1984), as are more general approaches to critical discourse analysis.

4.3 Qualitative methods: the city-based case study

To complement and build upon the documentary analysis, an empirical and geographically-based case study investigation was undertaken during the second year of the study. A single locality was selected as a case study site in which to conduct the empirical study. This strategy was considered the strongest in terms of generating the 'richest' understandings of the operationalisation of vulnerability within welfare and disciplinary interventions for young people. A mixture of qualitative methods were selected for the case study investigation, including immersion in the local infrastructures of vulnerability-related services, 15 semi-structured interviews with key informants and 25 interviews with supposedly vulnerable young people.

Qualitative methods seemed appropriate for the study, particularly as they are associated with the celebration of 'nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity' (Mason, 2002; 1). The semi-structured interview was selected as the basis for the empirical investigation with young people due to its numerous benefits when researching 'hard-to-reach' groups, largely related to its flexibility (May, 2001; Noaks and Wincup, 2004). Semi-structured interviews tend to be viewed as well-suited to taking account of subjects as competent and active 'storytellers' and also as organisers of the meanings they convey (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; May, 2001). This makes them well suited to discovering how 'marginalised' groups construct and frame meanings, identities and experiences (Noaks and Wincup, 2004), especially of more 'intimate' or 'private' spheres (Birch and Miller, 2000) as would be required with a study of young people's 'vulnerability'. Qualitative methods were also selected for generating understandings of how 'official' systems relating to 'vulnerability' operate, as they are considered to offer particular benefits in terms of exploring interactions, contradictions and conflicts, and uncovering subtle shades of meanings at work in complex and multi-faceted processes (Duke, 2002; Hertz and Imber, 1995).

Where research involves children and young people, techniques such as more formal interviewing have been accused of emphasising the unequal power relationship between the adult researcher and the young person researched

(Maunther, 1997; Conolly, 2008). I was aware that this power imbalance had the potential to be further exacerbated given the 'vulnerable' nature of interviewees in this project. Qualitative approaches seemed to me to offer the means to adopt a more 'informal' approach in the interviews with young people, allowing the researcher to work in ways that were conducive to maximising mutual understandings and shared language as far as was possible. 'Task-based' or 'task-centred' approaches were selected, where a range of activities are undertaken to elicit responses which can be analysed in themselves or which can be used to generate conversation which is then analysed (see Punch, 2002; James *et al*, 1998; Harden *et al*, 2000). The task-based approach was a particularly distinct aspect of the methodological approach used in the research and is discussed in further detail later in the chapter (see 4.4.6 and 4.4.7).

A large northern city (population around 750 000) was decided on as the case study locality, for two key reasons. Firstly, the city had a large local authority with a varied infrastructure in place for supporting vulnerable children and young people. At one point within the local authority's governance arrangements for children's services, there had been a 'Vulnerable Groups Commissioning Partnership Board'[23]. Although the board was no longer active at the time of the study, core elements of frameworks generated by the group were still in place; some services were explicitly targeted at 'vulnerable' children and young people and senior strategists within the Local Authority had formal roles related to vulnerability, such as 'Lead Commissioner for Vulnerable Groups'. From initial information gathering, vulnerability seemed to be a key concept within children's services in the case study city, from strategic level through to service delivery. Secondly, the particular city selected for the case study offered me the opportunity to utilise my understanding of the local context which had been generated though previous work, as well as to take advantage of established contacts within local agencies working in children's services within that area. I felt that the selection of this case study site would help

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[23] This had had around 30 members, and had aimed to deliver an 'integrated' joint-commissioning programme for 'vulnerable groups' of children and young people.

me to gain access to research participants and would also be useful in enabling the gleaning of more subtle and tacit processes.

A substantial amount of 'scene-setting' and pilot work in the city was fundamental. Throughout the first year of the study, I undertook meetings with various practitioners in children's services in order to discuss their possible involvement in the fieldwork stage of the project. These conversations generated insights into how practitioners saw vulnerability, as well as discussion of examples from their practice, and were particularly useful in the design of practitioner interviews. I had stayed on in employment in a part-time capacity for the first four months of the study, which created opportunities to discuss the scope and nature of the research with colleagues and for me to gauge reactions to my approach and generate ideas.

When fieldwork commenced, two 'pilot' or 'pioneering' interviews were conducted prior to the main interviews being undertaken, and were subsequently included in the data analysis. These were transcribed and reflected upon with supervisors and colleagues, with a watchful eye on how my insiderness had functioned within the interview situation. The pilot of the young person's interview was one of the most challenging interviews I undertook, which helped with preparation for the rest of the fieldwork. The young person fell neatly into the practitioner identification of 'vulnerable' (she was living in emergency hostel accommodation and was an ex-asylum seeker), but she did not respond at all to the idea that she was vulnerable, or had experienced particular difficulties. The conversation was stilted and I struggled to connect with the young person. This proved invaluable in the design of the other interviews as I then worked at designing a process that took better account of where similar problems might arise. The practitioner interview pilot was also an informative exercise. The transcription showed that in places I had lapsed into the role of 'fellow practitioner'. As I wanted to generate findings which would give insights into practices which were in some respects deeply ingrained, I reconsidered the treatment of my insiderness with key informants with the aim of being more 'detached' (see 4.5).

4.4 Interviews with 'vulnerable' young people

4.4.1 'Child-friendly' methods?

Reflections on empirical dilemmas arising from research with groups of 'vulnerable' children and young people also informed research choices. As previously indicated, although a particular emphasis on 'the vulnerable' in research ethics has limitations (Levine *et al*, 2004; Hurst, 2008, Emmel, 2009), this approach also usefully takes into account the importance of minimising power differentials between 'non-vulnerable' researcher and 'vulnerable' research participants (Munro *et al*, 2005; Connolly, 2003; Steel 2001). In the present study, the aim was to employ flexible and collaborative research methods and to seek co-construction of knowledge where possible, as part of a commitment to avoiding reinforcement of the subordination of groups likely to be marginalised in research processes in some way (see Liamputtong, 2006).

'Child-friendly' methods are often advocated as an effective way of addressing power differentials. Research techniques would seem to be seen as more 'child-friendly' where they enable communication between the conceptual outlooks of children and young people on one hand, and those of researchers on the other (see Fraser *et al*, 2004). The logic behind such techniques is that by using certain activities during communication, this enables the researcher to assess and respond to a particular child or young person's competencies during the interview process. In my study, rather than viewing 'child-friendly' methods as necessarily bridging the gap between adult communicator and young person, I took the approach advocated by Conolly (2006) that although certain methods can help reduce power differentials these can never be overcome and must be reflected on and dealt with through a reflexive approach.

Striking a balance between 'protecting' research subjects and treating them as fully competent presented particular challenges. Views of children as 'competent' in a different way to adults have raised questions about how far children should be treated as a distinct group in research (Harden *et al*, 2000; Punch, 2002). I opted for an approach that positioned young people as 'fragile' and marginalised in some

ways, but which also appreciated them as potentially skilled social actors, who would be able to participate most fully in communications with me if I was capable enough of finding ways of 'tapping into' their competencies.

Of particular relevance for this study is the idea of a 'mutual language dilemma', a phrase used by Punch (2002: 328) to describe the way that children and young people use a vocabulary and frame of comprehension that relates to their own social positioning. In other words, young interviewees might sometimes use different language to adults, and vice versa, creating problems in mutual understanding. According to Fraser *et al* (2004), comprehension of a range of relevant vocabulary is crucial for those carrying out empirical work with children and young people, as researchers may lack specific knowledge of the concepts used by children and young people. That 'vulnerability' might be more commonly used as a word in adult social worlds than in young people's meant that I would need to take account of this in my research methods. For example, I worked to establish a range of 'proxies' for the concept which could be mutually understood (see 4.4.7).

4.4.2 Sampling strategy

The broad sampling frame for the young people's interviews contained individuals who were classified by agencies or policy-makers as 'vulnerable' within the case study city. That is, those seen as requiring intensive support or control in some way. 25 participants were interviewed as this size of sample was seen as sufficient to achieve results in terms of understanding young people's experiences, but not unmanageable given the timescale of the project. Within the broader sampling frame, a 'purposive' sampling technique was employed to enable comparisons within the group. This was a proactive approach to ensuring that a range of experiences were included, rather than a set of precise sampling variables. I aimed for reasonable representation of both male and female perspectives, and, although ethnicity was not used to delineate inclusion, a mix of young people with different ethnicities was sought. This was on the understanding at the outset that a large proportion of the group were likely to be white, reflecting the overall demographic pattern of the city.

The subjective nature of the concept of 'youth' is well documented (Muncie, 1999; Lee, 2001), with official policy documents tending to draw on varying ideas of where 'youth' begins and ends. This presents particular challenges to sampling in studies undertaken with young people. As the age of 18 tends to be the point at which young people are seen as having access to the same legal range of obligations and entitlements as adults (perhaps with the exception of involvement with the labour market), I designed the study to involve young people who were aged 17 or below. The lower-age limit to the sample group was less straightforward. With the current age of criminal responsibility in the UK set at 10 years old, selecting this age as the boundary was one option. The problem with that strategy would have been that a wide range of 'competencies' and externalities would be encountered for the researcher focussing on an age range so large.

The overarching government strategy document related to young people when the study began was *Youth Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2005b), which drew on notions of 'youth' as between the ages of 13-18. I took the decision to focus on the age group in line with this, so from aged 13 up to (but not including) the age of 18, with a particular interest in including some older participants who may be able to offer more extended 'histories' of involvement with services. Although age 13 was originally selected as the lower age limit, during the research process the age range was extended down to 12, in order to include two young people who seemed especially appropriate to include in the research. One young man who was 18 was also interviewed. This was because the gatekeeper had not been aware that he had very recently had his 18th birthday before the date of the interview.

Central to the sampling strategy was the inclusion of young people perceived simply as 'vulnerable', and also those seen additionally as both transgressive and 'vulnerable' in some way. Indicators for young people's status as 'transgressive' and/or 'vulnerable' were likely to be imperfect given the complexity and subjectivity of these classifications (an issue under scrutiny itself). As the study progressed, the literature review, along with practice experiences and preliminary informal discussions with practitioners, indicated that although not formally agreed

upon or noted, a collection of situations, circumstances, or histories seemed to be broadly understood to 'flag' young people as vulnerable in the eyes of key informants (see 2.3). Notable examples included homelessness, exposure to domestic violence, drug use, offending, learning difficulties, physical impairments, mental health problems, anti-social behaviour, selling sex or sexual 'favours', poor attendance at or exclusion from school, and experience of abuse or neglect from parents. It became possible to attempt to keep track of these 'types' of 'vulnerability' during the sampling process, and I sought to include a range of these circumstances, histories or situations in my sample[24]. Access to young people was achieved through gatekeepers, and is considered further below (see 4.2.2).

Table 4.1: Sampling variables for interview with young people

Sampling considerations for interviews with young people
Gender
Experiences of particular 'vulnerabilities'
Whether considered 'transgressive' as well as 'vulnerable'
Age
Ethnicity
Length of time accessing services

For the purposes of this study, offending histories, criminal behaviours or association with anti-social behaviour were taken as indicators of young people's status as transgressive, along with exclusion from school. I deliberately sought to include young people with experience of the youth justice system in my sample, as well as those who had received interventions based on their 'anti-social behaviour'. During fieldwork it also transpired that school exclusions were considered pertinent to understandings of 'poor' behaviour, so this was a taken as a further indicator of young people being transgressive. Although 'anti-social behaviour' is a highly contested label, heavily criticised in academic research (Burney, 2005; Squires and Stephen, 2005; Nixon, 2005), this study focuses in part on classifications, so it is a

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[24] Generally, I avoided interviewing siblings in order to include as broad a range of experiences as possible. However, there was one exception. Sam (M, 14) and Elle (F, 14) were brother and sister. The pilot interview had been with Elle (F, 14) and at this early stage I was aware of potential problems accessing young people who had moved to the UK from abroad (the family were living in a hostel after moving over from Eritrea). As I was keen to include this experience, I decided to include siblings in this instance.

relevant label to invoke due to its current popularity and dominance in policy and practice with young people (see Stephen and Squires, 2005; Brown 2011a). According to these parameters, over half the sample of young people were both 'transgressive' and 'vulnerable' at the same time (n=13).

The sampling was 'staged', with pauses after each 'round' of interviews, and reflection undertaken on the breadth of experiences the sample reflected at that 'stage' in the process. This enabled me to adjust the sampling strategy as the fieldwork progressed, targeting those groups who were underrepresented in any of the particular aspects listed above. Just under half were young men (n=11). Interviewees were from a range of different ethnic groups, with the largest being White UK (65%), African Caribbean (including UK and non-UK) (13%) and Indian or Pakistani (including Dual Heritage Indian or Pakistani and White UK) (13%). Around 90% of the young people spoke English as their first language, with the other 10% speaking English fluently enough that they were able to participate in interviews without the use of a translator.

The specific circumstances, histories or characteristics that associated young people with 'vulnerability' formed part of the sample and also part of the findings. These can be viewed as a matrix in Chapter 6 (see Table 6.1). To give some indication of the level of risk and vulnerability the young people were seen to be at, we can note that 11 of the 25 young people were under statutory child protection orders or had been in the past. Family circumstances or economic background were not sampling variables, but later chapters reveal that most young people lived in areas associated with deprivation and had faced multiple difficulties in their family's lives and living conditions.

4.4.3 Access to young people through gatekeepers

My early research indicated that variation in funding pathways, ethos and what particular organisations sought to achieve ('outcomes') differed across children's services, which seemed to influence the interventions received. I wanted to incorporate this dynamic into the study, so young people were accessed through a range of agencies operating in the case study city, all of which were involved in

supporting vulnerable young people. Some were more 'supportive' services and some could be considered to have been more 'disciplinary' in orientation. The range was not intended to be comprehensive, but to provide good general coverage of a variety of agencies. Spreading the workload across different services also helped to make the fieldwork feasible in a year (2010/2011) when many services were experiencing substantial funding cuts and more limited resources. In total, six projects acted as gatekeepers; five from the voluntary sector and one private sector provider. Examples of gatekeepers' client groups included 'young carers', young people using drugs/alcohol, sexually exploited young people, those who were excluded or underachieving, children/young people living in emergency accommodation, young 'runaways', and refugee or asylum-seeking children/young people.

Access through gatekeepers has well-documented benefits and disadvantages when working with 'vulnerable' groups (Emmel *et al*, 2007; Miller and Bell, 2002; Lee, 1993). In the present study, working through gatekeepers was central to answering the research questions, and therefore formed a key part of the research strategy. A core element of the study was to investigate which young people were identified as 'vulnerable', and working through gatekeepers was one way of generating information about such classifications. There were also substantial ethical advantages. Had I selected young people who were not receiving support from agencies, risk of them being affected negatively by interviews may have been increased as it would not have been possible to implement post-interview support were this required. Working through access projects also reduced risk to my personal safety, linking me with a professional body and enforcing mutually protective boundaries between researcher and participant. In many cases, agencies provided a safe location from which to conduct interviews, and information to help me assess and manage risks.

Accessing young people through agencies also had major advantages in terms of generating 'richer' data. Working through gatekeepers is recognised as a way of increasing levels of trust between researcher and participants (Emmel *et al,* 2007). To capitalise on this, I encouraged staff to be present for initial introductions to the

interviewees. However, there were two main disadvantages to working in this way with gatekeepers. Firstly, young people may have felt more inhibited disclosing negative views of gatekeepers. I tried to deal with this during the opening section of the interview, explaining confidentiality carefully. More significant though was that my strategy left me heavily reliant on those agencies having sufficient resources and motivation to support the study. Despite the dedication of a number of key individuals, at a time of welfare cuts the pace of interview recruitment was significantly slower than I had hoped.

The methods I used to engage with young people needed to be appropriate and workable within the context of the interventions each gatekeeper provided, so the recruitment process varied according to the agency I was working with. I usually approached a contact within the organisation whom I knew from previous work, or who was recommended via another contact. I would then send them a basic information sheet about the project (not included in Appendices for reasons of space) along with an information sheet for young people (Appendix A). Where services indicated they could recruit larger numbers of young people, I offered to write a brief report outlining young people's feedback on their particular service in return, as an incentive for recruiting interviewees. After initial contact, I usually attended a team meeting or a meeting with my named contact, which helped clarify what would be expected if the organisation agreed to take part. These meetings also provided a forum for discussion of concerns or questions workers had (such as confidentiality arrangements, interview procedures and rewards), and also gave staff a clear idea of what the project was about and what interviews with young people would be like. I hoped this would mean that information about the study would be relayed more clearly and accurately to young people. The meetings also gave me the opportunity to demonstrate to staff that I was sensitised to issues related to working with 'vulnerable' groups of young people.

Recruitment of young people was often carried out via support workers talking to young people on a one-to-one basis, after an informal discussion with me about the young person they had in mind and why they thought they were suitable. Informal discussions about whether or not a young person was 'suitable' represented a joint

effort on behalf of the support worker and the researcher to 'protect' participants and work together to assess if their participation would be a positive experience for them. Staff tended to put forward potential participants in terms of their level of 'vulnerability', but also their ability to cope effectively with an interview situation. Inevitably, this shaped the sampling process to some degree in that practitioners were consulted in the recruitment process. However, as I kept a note of them in my fieldwork diary, these conversations about 'suitability' also offered useful insights into how practitioners viewed vulnerability. In a small number of instances, I recruited participants more directly, speaking to them informally about the study during drop-ins, gym sessions, or educational settings, and arranging future appointments for interviews.

Throughout recruitment, the opportunity to participate was framed in terms of interviews being a chance for young people to get their 'voices' heard and to help shape services for other young people, placing value on young people as 'experts' in this arena. When I spoke to young people directly, I would take care to stress what the interview process would be like, giving practical examples of the questions and areas that would be covered. I also emphasised that the interview would be relatively 'in-depth' and would last for around an hour, so that young people would be prepared for the experience of being asked to reflect in some detail on their lives and views. Rewards are discussed below, but these were never the main emphasis in recruitment.

4.4.4 Ethical considerations

Whether parental consent was required for young people's participation in the research was something which was assessed on a case-by-case basis, depending on the recommendation of the project providing access. Obtaining verbal parental or guardian consent was explored as a matter of good practice, although the majority of young people were over the age of 13, so participation was possible without parental/guardian consent due to *Gillick Principles* generally applying to those aged 13 and above [25]. In instances where parental consent was sought, a form was

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[25] *Gillick Principles* are also often referred to as the *Fraser Guidelines*. These guidelines refer to the landmark legal case in 1985, where Lord Fraser ruled that a doctor could give

sometimes completed (Appendix B) with the parent through the gatekeeper or by the researcher via the telephone. Parents were generally happy for their children to participate, but where young people were in the 'runaway' group, their whereabouts could be a particular concern. How they would attend and get home from the interview was carefully planned and communicated to parents in such cases.

In the consent process, every effort was made to ensure that young people were as well-informed as possible about the nature of the research and the potential uses. The individuals recruited for interviews were able to give consent without intermediaries or advocates. Before each interview took place, either the support worker or researcher would explain the purpose of the research and what being interviewed would be like. At the start of each interview I repeated this process, encouraging discussion and checking understanding through questions. An information sheet written in simple language and which contained pictures was used as a prompt to aid this discussion (this was very similar to Appendix A but is not included for reasons of space). I then took young people through a brief consent form (Appendix C), explaining each point verbally before finally gaining written consent. During these discussions I tried hard to take account of young people's different ages, levels of understanding, and literacy or written English skills, pitching my language and approach appropriately.

Young peoples' contributions were anonymised in the findings of the study, by ensuring that names, stories, ages, family characteristics, and locations did not identify them in any way. Interviewees selected their own pseudonyms, so they would retain the ability to recognise themselves in findings. Young people were told they would have full confidentiality, except in circumstances where information they disclosed indicated risk of significant harm, where I would share this information with their support worker, or Children and Young People's Social Care (formerly Social Services). Should an instance of serious risk have been disclosed, I

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contraceptive advice or treatment to a young person without parental consent provided; i) the young person understood the intervention and, ii) they may be harmed if they did not access it. This principle is now widely used in policy and practice and governs the majority of the support work with young people in the UK that is done without parental consent.

planned to inform the young person that I intended to share information and try to secure their agreement, but the scenario did not arise. Should there have been instances where young people disclosed things which were distressing and upsetting for them, the option of sharing this with an appropriate third party would have been discussed, but there were no such instances. How I dealt with more sensitive personal matters raised in interviews is explored later in this section (see 4.4.8).

Young people were given a £10 voucher for undertaking the interview. Payment of 'vulnerable' participants is a contested issue (Wardhaugh, 2000; Lee, 1993), and whilst I recognise the criticism that this could be interpreted as 'buying' young people's participation, this approach is located in a political and ethical belief that supposedly vulnerable people should be paid for their time. This is treating research participants as we 'professionals' expect to be treated, and also serves as a thank you to young people for their time, experience and knowledge, underlining the value and importance of this. Although some researchers using payments have argued that paying participants before interviews helps to minimise the sense of obligation to participate and alleviate anxiety about saying the 'right' thing (Taylor, 2009), I preferred to give the young person the voucher at the end, as a way of emphasising my gratitude for what they had shared with me.

As discussed previously, working through gatekeepers to gain access to young people reduced risk to my personal safety. I used each project's on-going process of risk assessment to inform my own risk management strategies, discussing any possible risks to my personal safety with workers prior to the interview and planning ways of minimising these. I operated a 'ring-in' system with someone after each interview, where I would agree a time by which I would let a designated person know I was safe. In all home visits, workers were present for an introduction, so I was not arriving at the young person's house alone. In terms of 'emotional labour' (Sanders, 2008), I recognised that actively listening to young people's stories of neglect, abuse, or precariousness could impact significantly on the researcher. Where interviews raised particular emotions for me, I was proactive about de-

briefing and discussing this with supervisors, colleagues, and others who I trusted to offer insights.

4.4.6 'Task-based' interviewing methods

Both research and practice experiences (see Brown, 2006 and Brown, 2011a) had led me to believe that some young people could be reluctant to discuss their lives in a more formal interview situation, usually due to a mixture of shyness and lack of trust, or simply because the experience was unfamiliar. In an effort to address this issue, I designed a series of activities which were undertaken with young people during the interviews as the basis for conversation. This approach has sometimes been described as 'task-based' interviewing (Punch, 2002). What constitutes the 'tasks' in 'task-based' interviews with children varies in nature, but may include such things as drawing timelines which chart biographical events (Punch, 2002; Conolly, 2005), sentence completion tasks (Conolly 2005; Harden *et al*, 2000), photo elicitation (Conolly, 2005) and spontaneous drawings (Punch 2002).

'Task-based' interviews are considered especially suitable for research undertaken with children and young people, as they offer an effective way means of 'tapping into' interviewee's particular talents and interests, maximising their competencies and minimising the 'language gap' between researcher and researched. Such methods have also been put forward as a particularly effective practical way of promoting a more 'active' involvement in the research process for 'socially excluded' young people (Conolly, 2008). They are thought to be well suited to encouraging young people to express their views and opinions more freely, promoting 'two-way' conversation, and fostering 'rapport' between researcher and young people (Punch, 2002). Bagnoli (2009: 566) advocates that task-based approaches encourage 'non-standard thinking', encouraging the interviewer to remain responsive to participants' own meanings and associations.

Activities worked well in that they stimulated discussion and alleviated some of the awkwardness involved in discussing (with someone they did not know well) what could be sensitive and personal issues. From previous experience as a practitioner, I felt these methods had the added benefit of providing researcher and interviewee

with somewhere to look other than at each other, which could play a large role in easing any tension where young people did not feel comfortable meeting the eyes of the researcher. Through the use of such activity-based interview techniques, 'richer' data was generated with young people, and I also felt that a more mutually fulfilling and enjoyable interaction was achieved.

Tasks were designed with a particular eye on drawing out 'structural' as well as 'individual' factors and issues in young people's social worlds. That children and young people have a particular tendency to underestimate the role of structural forces in their experiences has been noted by researchers (Heath *et al* 2009; MacDonald *et al*, 2005). This could be seen as a parallel to the research responses from other 'marginalised groups', whose narratives are often underpinned by a 'discourse of individualisation' (McNaughton, 2006). Life-course approaches to interviewing are one particular approach which it has been argued have a tendency to emphasise personal construction at the expense of structural forces which shape experiences, which has been of particular concern amongst 'youth transition researchers' (for example, see Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). Although some life-course activities were undertaken in the present study, these were alongside other activities which focussed on social positioning and consideration of systems and services which had helped/hindered young people's lives. In efforts to design the various tasks to encourage young people to discuss more 'structural' issues (albeit in their own terms), the information likely to be elicited via each task was analysed and reflected on with thesis supervisors prior to and over the course of the interview programme, with tasks refined and adjusted accordingly.

As advocated by Connolly (2008) and Punch (2002), a range of tasks were used in the hope that each young person would be able to find something in the interview process which best suited the way they preferred to communicate with the researcher in the interview scenario. I designed four tasks, making use of three in most interviews, but using the fourth in order to generate more data in instances

where interviews were relatively brief[26]. I developed an interview schedule which functioned as a guide for discussion during the completion of tasks (see Appendix D). This helped create a basic framework for the discussions which took place alongside the activities, enabling more 'structural' comparisons. The design of the activities was based on experience of and basic training in 'therapeutic' activities which encourage participation and discussion in interactions with vulnerable young people, as well as techniques discussed in the methods literature relating to this group. I generated and refined ideas on the design though discussions with a local practitioner contact whom I considered to be extremely innovative in her use of creative techniques when working with young people. More detail about the specific nature of tasks and the data they generated is included in the following account of the process of conducting the interviews.

4.4.7 Conducting the interviews

Interviews took place in a variety of locations: the offices of gatekeepers, hostel accommodation spaces which could be used privately, young people's own homes and education environments. All of the interviews took place in a confidential space. Where interviews were conducted in young people's own homes, this offered particular grounds for discussions of 'vulnerabilities'. For example, one young person had recently moved in to his first flat and had no furniture or carpets. He was totally unfamiliar with the large housing estate in which he was now living. In another instance, I undertook an interview at a young person's home and there were signs of Cannabis use. Such insights could be useful for questioning during the interviews.

The first 'task' was a 'life-mapping' activity which focussed on the young person's past. The aim of the task was to find out what the young person felt had contributed to or led to their classification as 'vulnerable', and what in their lives had contributed to them being more or less vulnerable at different points (services, people, circumstances, for instance). On flipchart paper, I drew a road, asking the young person to tell me about the 'road' from their birth to the point of them

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[26] I am grateful to Kirsty Blay and Daniel Gower for their assistance and ideas when designing the tasks.

receiving a service from the access project. I would focus on vulnerability through asking about it using proxies, such as 'difficulties' or 'things that were hard'. The map was co-constructed through the researcher and young person annotating it together in coloured pens. Choosing this format enabled me to structure narratives in a way that took up set themes, but also gave young people space to direct the discussion and add detail that they felt was important. The 'road map' approach acted as a visualisation to encourage young people to reflect upon their 'journey' or 'vulnerability' in a more extended way, beyond the very recent past. This approach also meant that after a chronological picture of a young person's life emerged, more thematic detail could be drawn out (using different coloured pens), such as what services and/or people had 'helped along the way', what 'had not helped', and instances where problems or difficulties could have been avoided if support had been better.

I would encourage young people to take the lead with writing or drawing, but where they preferred me to do it, I took words they had used or asked for direction in drawing. For example, I would often start the life-mapping by inviting them to draw themselves as a baby on the map, but where they felt shy I would ask them how they looked as a baby and then draw something which represented something of what they had said.

Figure 4.2: Example of past 'life-map', co-produced by researcher and young person
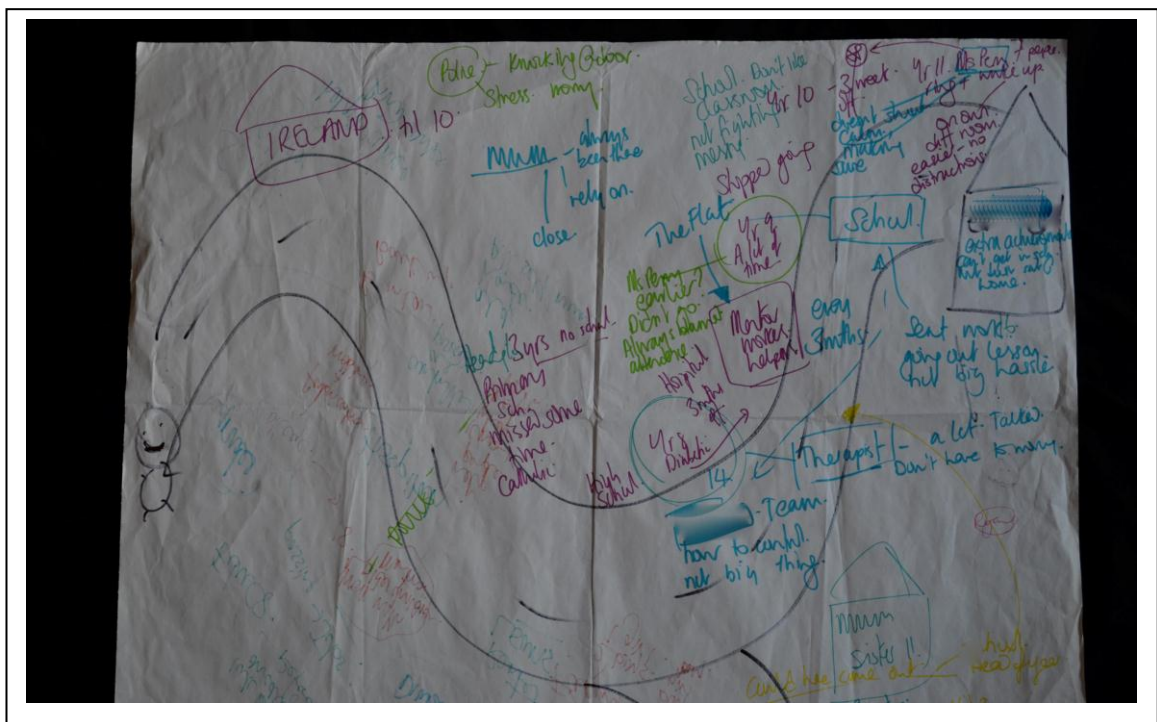
This task also functioned as a 'getting-to-know' activity. Through descriptions of key events in their lives, young people had scope to communicate issues and ideas that were important to them. This provided clues as to what the young person felt was most relevant in their social settings, which would then inform decisions I made throughout the rest of the interview. Some young people drew doodles on the sheet as they talked which seemed to help with concentration or dealing with tension. Although often messy and illegible, along with the story telling, the life map sheet came to represent a clear narrative and chronology to both interviewee and interviewer, which was referred to throughout the course of an interview.

The second activity involved two vignette-based video clips which enabled relatively detached consideration of the concept of 'vulnerability'. Two clips of around a minute and a half were played, which showed 'vulnerable' young people talking about their lives and their life histories (these were extracts from television documentaries which were accessed online). One showed the story of a 17 year old young woman who had come to the UK from Zaire as an unaccompanied minor; the other was a young man telling the story of how he got involved in using and selling drugs. Transcripts of the clips were prepared for inclusion as an appendix, but this has been omitted due to reasons of space. There was a brief discussion after each clip which centred on 'how the young person was getting on in life' and 'what should happen to the young person'. Young people would often identify elements of their own story as present in the vignettes.

Figure 4.3: Video vignette task

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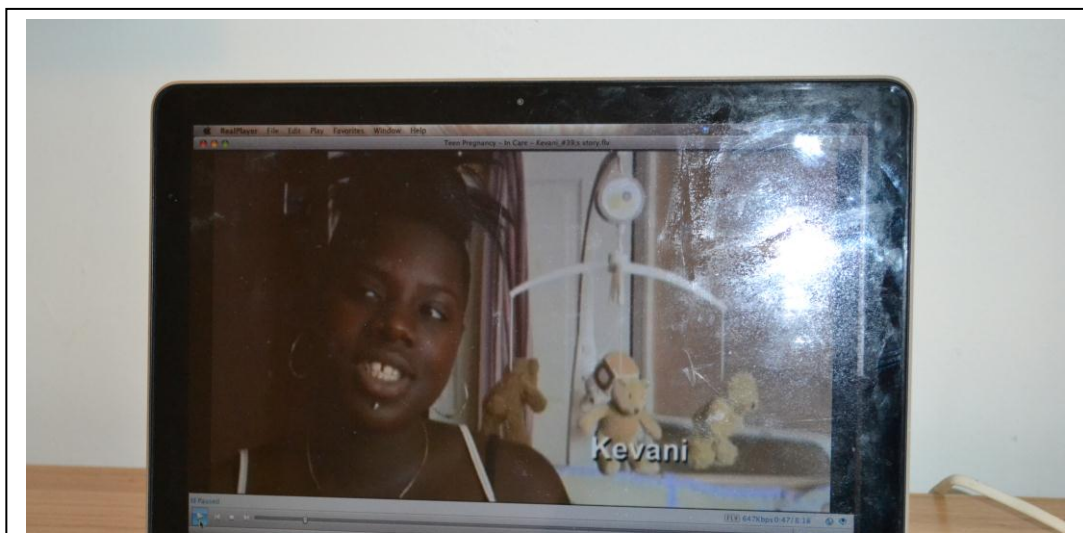
The purpose of the activity was to create opportunities for discussion around how services perceived 'vulnerable' young people, and how they viewed 'transgressive' young people, and to gather ideas about young people's views on how appropriate they felt service responses were. From speaking about the 'vulnerability' of the young person in the vignette (often using the term directly) I would then move into questions about whether they young person saw themselves as vulnerable. I was able to ask potentially sensitive questions such as 'some workers might see you as a vulnerable young person, can you think why that might be?' and 'do you agree with them?' The second video vignette of the young offender created the opportunity of talking about how far behaviour was a factor in 'vulnerability', which was often particularly effective in terms of the data which was generated.

The third activity was another life map, this time of a 'road' which represented the young person's future, from present day to the young person in their later life. This drew inspiration from methods literature which has highlighted that young people's 'imagined futures' offer important insights into young people's social worlds and their outlook on the society in which they live (Nilsen, 1999; Brannen and Nilsen, 2002; Devadason, 2008). Future life-maps were again co-constructed, with the researcher or young person being a scribe whilst the young person talked. Often young people would write on the life map themselves at this point, feeling more confident as the interview progressed.

Figure 4.4: Example future life map
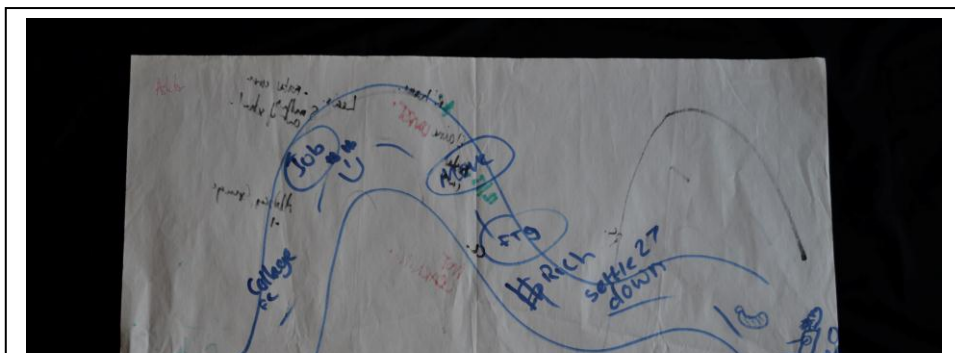
Setting out the 'road' in terms of the young person's whole life was a way of making the purpose of the activity clear, but I would then focus on a shorter time frame, usually ten years into the future, although this varied according to young people's individual preferences. 'Imagined future' tasks have been put forward as a particularly effective method for gaining insights about young people's sense of the structures which may limit or enable their individual agency, of role expectations and of their life course as a personal construction. As I wanted to get a sense both of limitless aspiration and of constraining factors, most often I opted for a focus on 'hopes' (rather than 'dreams' or 'plans').

Figure 4.5: Example future life map
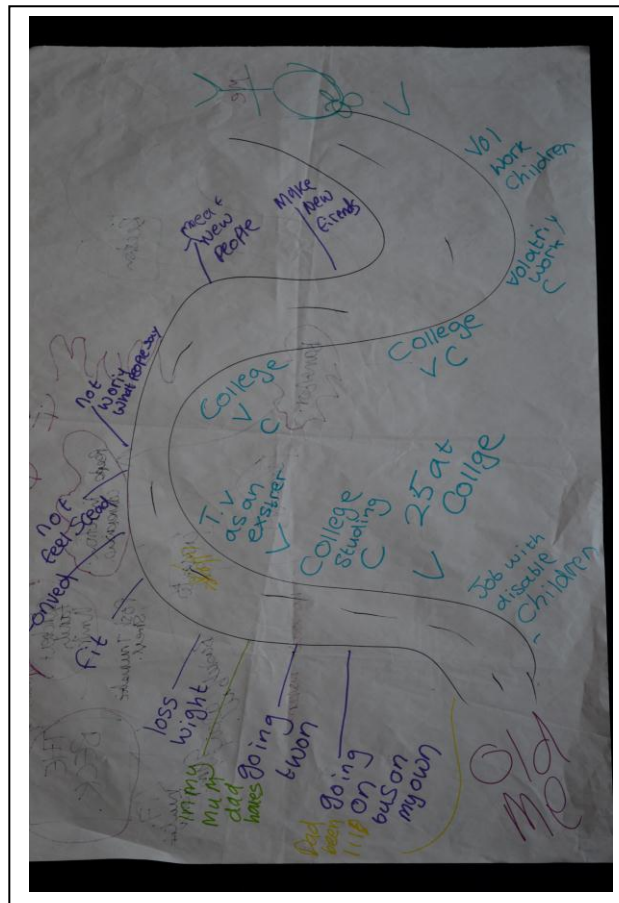
Discussing the future is generally recognised as a relatively difficult activity for most people, given that it is the least familiar temporal modality. Accounts of the future require that we face the long-term consequences of our everyday existence, which can be upsetting, unnerving, and hard to comprehend (Adams, 2007). Although it generated perhaps the least forthcoming discussion, with creative prompting most young people connected with the task and offered explanations of how they saw their lives in the future. Futures that were imagined were usually positive in tone, which meant that it was an 'upbeat' activity to finish the interview with, except for in a small number of cases where young people imagined their futures with distinct bleakness.

Figure 4.6: Young person's imagined future self. She hoped to become a singer

Where interviews were briefer than I had hoped, I used a fourth activity as well. This involved producing pictures representing a number of 'vulnerable groups' of children and young people (such as Gypsy and Traveller young people, disabled young people, young people using drugs and alcohol etc.) and asking the young person to place these on a scale according to 'most vulnerable' and 'least vulnerable'. I would then ask about where they would place themselves on this

spectrum and why. The purpose was again to gain insights about how they perceived their own and other people's 'vulnerability' (similarly to the second task). This fourth activity was used in around five of the interviews. In other instances I followed the three standard tasks with some open discussion if it seemed more appropriate than a fourth activity.

Table 4.2: Summary of tasks used in interviews with young people

Task number	Description
1	Life map of the past, discussion of 'difficulties' and support systems
2	Video vignettes, discussion of 'vulnerable' young people's situations and support systems
3	Life map of the future, discussion of future 'difficulties' and potential support systems
4	Vulnerability spectrum, discussion of which groups were most/least 'vulnerable'

Using this interviewee-led technique meant that there were differences across the interviews in terms of which areas were given priority. Some interviewees preferred to concentrate on the 'life history' activity (task 1), whereas others were more comfortable giving views on services or interventions (also task 1). A minority of young people found it easier to communicate in more detail during activities which were less personal and involved discussion of other young people's lives (task 2), which the planning of the activities left room for. Despite this flexibility, consistent use of the same tasks and similar questions meant that clear themes which were comparable across the interviews still emerged.

As quotations in Chapters 6-8 demonstrate, young people were often frank in their accounts of difficulties and gave considered insights into such experiences, sometimes with candid humour[27]. They frequently gave feedback at the end of the interview that indicated they had found the process a productive, useful or even enjoyable one. One or two young people said to me after being interviewed that the interview had felt long, which I took as indication that the process was not always an easy one. Generally speaking though, rather than seeming to be a damaging or traumatic process for young people, comments following interviews

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[27] For analysis of the role of humour as a coping strategy see Sanders (2004).

would indicate that the interview process seems to have been useful in some way, which was confirmed in some instances by support workers. My experiences as a practitioner may have had some bearing on the way in which sensitive issues were dealt with, and is reflected on further below.

4.4.8 'Insiderness' and researcher/practitioner complexities

In many respects, key factors clearly marked me out as an 'outsider' to 'vulnerable' young people's social worlds. Amongst other things, I was 15-20 years older than interviewees, dressed differently, spoke with a more 'southern' regional accent, and used dissimilar language. However, my positioning in relation to interviewees was also coloured by my 'insiderness' to a certain extent. I usually explained to participants that I had worked in a supportive capacity with young people, drawing a comparison to the service they were receiving support from. I felt this meant that young people were usually more trusting of my motives as 'genuine', and as far as I could tell tended not to see me as profoundly 'voyeuristic' or 'naïve' about their social world. As we shared some experiences of services for young people, albeit from very different positions, I felt that to some extent this 'insiderness' provided me with a certain amount of 'cultural capital' to communicate with them about this (Bourdieu, 1977).

Young people often shared things that were concerning to hear, and which they indicated had been distressing or upsetting for them at the time when they had occurred. During these situations I made every effort to respond with empathy and understanding. I recognised a tension between my roles as 'objective' and 'detached' observer, and taking on more 'supportive' or 'caring' roles (Bochner, 2001). This was something I reflected on throughout the programme of interviews. I was conscious initially that I could be inclined to 'lapse' into an inappropriately 'supportive' role at times, out of habit rather than strategy. Yet in an effort to manage this and try to ensure it did not colour findings to a level which would be unacceptable to me, I could be inappropriately detached. An early interaction had been of particular concern to me, when during an interview a young woman aged 15 told me that she was raped by her father at the age of five. On reflection afterwards, in light of previous experiences dealing with such disclosures, I was

uneasy about the way in which I had dealt with this. I felt than in an effort not to swing too far into a 'supportive' role, I had responded in a way that was too impersonal.

Through reading methods accounts of 'insiderness' and from discussions with colleagues, I gave further consideration to my practitioner inclinations to respond to such stories actively and with emotional sensitivity. Given the particularly 'intimate' sphere which discussions about someone's sense of their own vulnerability involved, I felt that as well as a role as data gatherer, I had an ethical responsibility to ensure that I participated in interactions that helped young people feel positive about themselves (cf Birch and Millar, 2000). I opted for a more 'caring' role from this point onwards, seeing interviews as requiring that the interviewer makes use of similar emphatic listening and witnessing of disclosures that I had been involved in as a practitioner (Coy, 2006). For example, I would also always make a point of offering the interviewee some feedback about what was useful about their interview and insights they had given, in an effort to maximise the chances of young people feeling valued and appreciated.

4.5 Researching practitioners

In addition to interviews with vulnerable young people, the other key aspect of the case study involved semi-structured interviews with professionals who were involved in designing and/or delivering services for 'vulnerable' young people. This work was undertaken in order to acquire a diversity of perspectives on the management of young people's vulnerability, albeit within specific and structured contexts. Qualitative methods were again selected as the method of data generation with key informants. Such methods are well-suited to the study of 'official' systems, as they can explore complexity, interactions, contradictions and conflicts and are appropriate for uncovering subtle shades of meanings (Duke, 2002; Hertz and Imber, 1995). These approaches also recognise the importance of the influence of individual actors as well as helping to reveal how the individual may influence, link and work with and against the broader system within which they are operating. Semi-structured interviews were chosen rather than less structured discussion, due to the need to expose and understand connections between the

topics discussed in the young people's interviews and the informant interviews. More 'tacit' knowledge was gleaned from informal interactions with professionals throughout the study via conversations, meetings and e-mails.

The key informants who were interviewed worked across a range of different settings, at different levels of seniority (see Table 4.4). Although this work did not constitute 'researching the powerful' in the most traditional sense (see Duke, 2002; Hunter, 1995; Gusterson, 1995) – which tends to refer to where interviewees may be 'upper-class' or socio-economically privileged – the informants did have a 'reach of power' within a system of services for young people which operated as a pertinent methodological consideration (Hertz and Imber, 1995: viii). Sensitive to the notion that a lack of knowledge and understanding about 'the powerful' can leave certain aspects of social systems relatively unexplored, this study sought to understand and seek out 'official' categorisations of vulnerability alongside 'receivers' of policies and interventions in question.

4.5.1 Sampling and access

The sample frame for key informants included professionals involved in providing services for young people seen as vulnerable in some way. Although coverage was not intended to be comprehensive, a cross-section of job roles was important to achieve in the sample, in order to reveal as broad an operationalisation of vulnerability as possible. The rationale was that the sample needed to include roughly equal numbers of front-line workers, operational managers, commissioners and strategists, in order to give an adequate mix of positions of responsibility, as well as reasonable coverage of agencies involved with vulnerable (and also 'transgressive') groups of young people. As I conducted the key informant interviews, I would discuss with interviewees their recommendations for other contacts as a technique for refining my sampling. I had ideas about who to approach from my time working in service provision, but garnering interviewees' opinions about who might be suitable acted as a complementary process. The more people that suggested a particular individual might be good to get input from, the more likely I was to ask this person to be interviewed, or to seek out another more

informal interaction with them. An overview of sampling considerations is given below in table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Key informants sampling considerations

Key sampling considerations for key informant interviews
Seniority and strategic influence
Extent of front-line work
Professional exposure to young people who were 'vulnerable'
Professional exposure to young people who were 'vulnerable' and also 'transgressive'
Nature of the interventions offered by the service (welfare/disciplinary)
Coverage of key agencies which were involved with 'vulnerable' young people
Sector (public/private/voluntary etc.)

The influence of my 'insiderness' is again pertinent to note in terms of the key informant sampling process, as this may have been a factor which influenced the nature of the study to a certain extent. The sample of key informants included some people I had known and worked with previously, and others whom I had not met before. There were no major distinctions in practice which arose from this. However, I suspected that a widened sample which was less affected by my personal networks and contacts may have perhaps generated some more authoritarian or hostile commentaries on young people. In other words, I felt that the informants I selected were those who were more inclined towards tolerance and inclusive approaches in their work, although this may not be entirely representative of the wider situation across services which govern and influence 'vulnerable' young people's lives. More negative views of young people's behaviour, particularly in terms of transgression, may have been under-represented. Findings (especially in Chapter 5) should be viewed in light of this sampling bias.

Accessing commissioners and strategists was one of the most challenging aspects of data collection. Methods reflections on research with 'elite' groups have noted that securing access to such people can be challenging due to their power and ability to position themselves beyond scrutiny (Hertz and Imber, 1995). I tended to have to rely on commissioners with whom I had previously worked. Where I made

approaches to others, my requests were sometimes ignored or met with resistance. At a time of budget cuts, many strategists and commissioners were not only engaged in wide-scale reorganisation of resources, but were facing uncertain circumstances themselves. Nonetheless, good coverage was achieved across the various agencies and professionals involved in supporting 'vulnerable' young people, with representatives including staff from psychiatric services, education services, welfare services and also more disciplinary services such as the YOS and a Family Intervention Project (FIP). A recently retired commissioner's inclusion was especially helpful for accounts of the commissioning process that went beyond the 'official line' of the local authority. There was also a reasonable mixture of voluntary sector, local authority and private sector employees. A matrix giving information about key informants is included below.

Table 4.4: Key informant sampling overview

Job Title	Nature of role	Type of Agency	Sector	Gender
Development Worker	Front-line worker	ASB project	Voluntary Sector	F
One-to-one Support Worker	Front-line worker	Support service for 'vulnerable' CYP	Voluntary Sector	F
Senior Clinical Psychologist	Front-line worker	CAMHS	Health Authority	F
Alcohol Support Worker	Front-line worker	Young people's drugs service	Voluntary Sector	F
Young Person's Worker	Front-line worker	Service for 'sexually exploited' girls and women working in prostitution	Voluntary Sector	F
Director	Manager with front-line duties	Counselling and mental health service for young people	Voluntary Sector	F
Director	Manager with front-line duties	Education provision for young people who have problems at school	Private Sector	F
Team Leader	Manager	Homeless assessments	Local Authority	F
Team Leader	Manager	FIP	Local Authority	M
Manager	Manager	Support service for 'vulnerable' CYP	Voluntary Sector	F
Service Manager	Manager	Social Care (Child Protection)	Local Authority	F
Senior Manager	Manager and policy maker	YOS	Local Authority	M
Commissioner, Vulnerable Children	Commissioner/policy maker	Strategic unit, City Council (Education)	Local Authority	F
Commissioner, Vulnerable Children	Commissioner/ policy maker	Strategic unit, City Council	Local Authority	M
Commissioner (retired)	Commissioner/ policy maker	Strategic unit, City Council	Local Authority	F

4.5.3 The nature of the key informant interviews

Key informant interviews took place during 2011, alongside the programme of young people's interviews. 15 interviews took place with professionals involved in service interventions for 'vulnerable' young people, which lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a half. These were held at the offices of informants, or in one case at a cafe. Discussion was largely based on the following areas: how informants made use of the concept or idea of 'vulnerability' in their work, their understandings of the notion, how they measured and classified 'vulnerability', and how they saw it functioning in services more generally. Although not of the same magnitude as during interviews with young people, account was taken of ethical considerations. Respondents' interview records were anonymised in order to increase protection and confidentiality. The names of interviewees, their agencies and the city in which the research took place have been omitted from the study.

A series of prompts were used to guide discussion. This interview schedule is included as Appendix E. One task-based activity was also used, which was the same video-vignette activity undertaken with young people (see 4.4.7). The aim of this was to generate opportunities for comparison between the way young people and practitioners conceptualised, measured and classified 'vulnerability'. Differing accounts were not seen as problematic in terms of 'truth', but as illuminating the idea of 'vulnerability' from various perspectives. The second clip, which focussed on the life story of a young offender was especially useful for drawing out more nuanced attitudes and views of how behaviour related to vulnerability status. Interviews tended to be 'in-depth' and to include explanations and reflections on the more 'theoretical' or abstract aspects of practice as well as the 'practical'. Informants often commented after interviews that the process had made them consider or verbalise things that they had not articulated or reflected on before.

My 'insider' status was again influential in the data collection process with key informants. My positioning in relation to the informants was coloured not only by my status as a researcher, but also by power dynamics conferred via previous roles. For example, I tended to be more deferential and formal where informants were people known to me locally for their seniority or professional reputations. Where I

had worked in roles which were senior to informants, I was aware that questions could risk sounding like a 'test' of their practitioner approaches and knowledge and I would try to phrase questions in a way that would minimise this risk. With informants known to me already, interviews were more informal and conversational.

When it felt appropriate, I would sometimes imply in my questioning that my own practice was an issue was under scrutiny, through asking why 'we' might do certain things or follow certain practices. Used with care, this seemed helpful in establishing higher levels of trust and the chance of more detailed discussions. Generally speaking, I felt that my insiderness gave me a greater awareness of where to locate information (Roseneil, 1993; Labaree, 2002; Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). My understanding of the nature of certain systems and processes meant that rather than seeking extensive descriptions in order to understand them, I could devote more time to probing reasoning or motivations behind these. An appreciation of the setting helped to encourage some of the more detailed discussion which is evident in the following chapter, enabling me to access more 'back stage' responses, or to 'get beyond the official line' (Duke, 2002). My previous work in the field may also have lent the study more 'credibility' in terms of motivations, which seemed helpful with access. However, I was also aware of the risk that shared experiences could mean that certain practices would sometimes not enter into the conversation and data. In instances where I knew interviewees through previous work, I emphasised before the interview began that my job as a researcher was to be more 'detached' than usual, and I would stress that although they might feel that some of their professional concepts or approaches would be understood by me without explanation, it would be helpful if they detailed these anyway. Where I was asked about my own views of the issues under question, I avoided giving these in case it made informants reluctant to disagree during the interview.

4.6 Data processing and analysis

Data from the case study took the form of interview transcriptions, grey literature about service provision for vulnerable groups, and a fieldwork diary kept for the duration of the project which provided a record of more informal interactions and

my thoughts about the research process. Items produced during the interview 'tasks' (timelines, drawings etc., see 4.4.7) were not analysed as data in themselves, as I was undertaking interview 'tasks' for the purposes of enhancing the 'richness' and quality of the data. The transcription process for the two data sets ran alongside the interviews throughout the nine month period of the main fieldwork, which enabled me to reflect on and refine my interview technique throughout this process. However, there was a pause in the transcription process from about half way through the fieldwork with the remainder transcribed after interviews had finished. A digital voice recorder was used to record the interviews (with permission), and interviews were typed out in full, with the voices of the interviewee and interviewer both transcribed. Around a quarter of the transcriptions were undertaken by me, whilst other transcripts were completed by a transcription service (due to wrist and back problems).

Key points from each key informant interview were e-mailed to interviewees for verification and approval. This was not feasible with young people given difficulties of access. In addition to interview transcriptions, analysis of the fieldwork diary played an important role in exploring insights gained through interactions between researcher, gatekeepers, participants and informants. The usefulness of this tool in data analysis has been highlighted in case studies with small numbers of participants (Emmel and Hughes, 2008). Emmel and Hughes (2008) argue that paying attention to the analysis of access issues in small-scale research amplifies theoretical detail and helps gain insights into the relational and transactional nature of participants' lives. This was particularly important for exploring the ways in which vulnerability was mediated by relationships and contexts. For example, I often observed how project workers framed or 'pitched' the research study when speaking to young people, which generated insights which I went on to develop as key themes.

Text from the interview transcripts was coded using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package NVIVO. This allowed the researcher to concentrate on conceptual issues without storage and retrieval barriers that can be associated with manual techniques. Data analysis was undertaken by producing a preliminary

coding frame for each data set (young people and key informants) based on themes emerging from around four or five interviews from each data set. This was then used as the basis for an NVIVO coding framework which used over-arching themes with more detailed sub-themes. The NVIVO coding frame was then piloted and refined throughout the fieldwork. Taking inspiration from 'thematic network' approaches (Attride-Stirling, 2001), I noted global themes emerging during the data analysis, and refined the more detailed coding frameworks in light of these. In particular, links or overlaps between the two data sets were given attention, and the coding frame altered to draw these out accordingly. Commonalities, differences and contradictions emerged through this method.

4.7 Summary

This chapter has given an overview of the methods used in the research for this study. The various 'strands' of the research process were considered in turn, as well as consideration given to how these findings might relate to and be read alongside one another. The sampling strategy was reflected upon in relation to research findings. In describing the key aspects of the research process, it is hoped that the chapter demonstrated how the research process was informed by a reflexive approach as the researcher reflected upon, changed and improved research practices as the study progressed. Given that the researcher had worked in the area under scrutiny, the influence of my 'insiderness' was a theme given particular attention. This 'insiderness' was mobilised, with previous experiences and personal networks capitalised on in the research process. An effort was made throughout the chapter to notice what effect this may have had on the production of knowledge.

A further distinctive feature of the investigation was the involvement of vulnerable young people in the case study investigation, and the ethical and practical considerations arising from this. One aspect of this process which was given particular consideration was the use of 'task-based' interviewing techniques as a way of eliciting 'rich' data from groups which are sometimes considered 'difficult to reach'. Using tasks as a way of focussing and generating discussion worked well in terms of keeping young people engaged in the interview process. As quotations in

subsequent chapters will illustrate, this generated data which was detailed and in-depth. Young people's interview accounts were often colourful and candid, with the tone and narrative content offering unique insights into the social worlds of the interviewees.

Chapter 5: Vulnerability Management

This chapter presents findings from interviews with professionals involved in service interventions for 'vulnerable' young people: practitioners, managers, commissioners and policy-makers. Accounts indicated that most of the informants were drawing heavily on the concept of vulnerability in the course of their practice, but a minority were disapproving of its utilisation. The interviews suggested that there was a lack of clarity around official understandings of the ways young people's vulnerability might be perceived and managed. Despite this, there was some agreement around more informal or tacit understandings of such processes. Generally speaking, informants drew on the concept of vulnerability to describe both individual young people and also particular groups of young people who had certain circumstances or problems in common. 'Vulnerability' also functioned as a classification which helped to organise resources, systems and interventions. How vulnerability was applied in practice was often tied to discretion. The notion seems to have lent itself well to use as a conceptual basis for flexible service delivery. At the same time, the malleability of vulnerability seems to have engendered a rather 'messy' operationalisation of the concept.

The chapter begins with an overview of how informants understood vulnerability in relation to young people and explores which young people were considered as 'vulnerable' (5.1). It then gives an overview of the practical ways in which 'vulnerability' operated in welfare and disciplinary services for young people (5.2). A brief reflection on resistance to vulnerability-based constructions follows (5.3), after which the chapter explores practitioner views of the relationship between 'vulnerability' and also 'transgression' (5.4). Finally, gender and vulnerability constructions are also considered (5.5). The inter-relationship between behaviour, gender and perceived vulnerability emerges as a complex dynamic underpinning how services for 'vulnerable' young people were delivered. This chapter attempts to unpick some of this complexity as well as offering more general insights into the operation of services for groups and individuals who are considered 'vulnerable'.

5.1 Meanings of 'vulnerability' for informants

> *Vulnerability is something that's always there at the forefront; it's always in your mind* (Manager, welfare service for 'vulnerable' children)

> *... it's become a sort of – not a catchphrase exactly, but it's become one of those terms that you hear used a lot now* (Manager, Social Care)

> *... the term 'vulnerability' is common parlance* (Senior Manager, YOS)

> *... it seems like it's the current buzz word* (Project Worker, welfare service for 'vulnerable' children)

There was almost uniform agreement amongst key informants that the notion of vulnerability was heavily ingrained in the lexis and practices of their professional contexts. A number of interviewees also expressed the opinion that the use of the concept of vulnerability within children's services was increasing. Experienced professionals and earlier career practitioners alike commented that the pervasiveness of the term was a relatively new development in the provision of welfare and disciplinary services. Summarising what practitioners understood by 'vulnerability' is not easy. Explanations or definitions of the notion usually involved references to a cluster of ideas which were overlapping and at times difficult to unravel. An overview of practitioner understandings of 'vulnerability' is given here, as well as insights into which particular young people tended to be seen as 'vulnerable'.

5.1.1 'Vulnerability' and 'risk'

Most commonly drawn upon to explain the notion of vulnerability were references to 'risk'. The close relationship between these concepts for practitioners has been highlighted elsewhere, for example, in research done in the area of learning difficulties (Parley, 2011). Given the significant sociological attention given to 'risk' (see 2.4 and also Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990; Kemshall, 2002), this is interesting to explore. Findings supported Appleton's (1999) work which asserts that 'vulnerability' and 'risk' seem to be used alongside one another in social welfare settings. The perceived inter-relationship between these concepts was complex,

but, generally speaking, young people who were considered to be 'at risk' also tended to be seen as 'vulnerable'. The Social Care Manager was one of several informants who used the terms almost interchangeably:

> *Well, a most vulnerable child could well be a child who's at risk.* (Manager, Social Care)

Despite this close inter-relationship, informants unanimously presented 'risk' and 'vulnerability' as distinct. The following quotation from an interview with a Manager from a service for 'vulnerable' children is illustrative of the way informants acknowledged some difficulty in articulating the relationship between the two notions:

> Kate: *How's vulnerability different from risk? Why do you think we have both those words?*
>
> Manager: *I think vulnerability… they are very different in the sense that risks is… erm… risks I guess are done at various different levels and it can relate to different things and, I think… I don't know they just are different though aren't they; it's just hard to explain.*

That 'risk' is a highly contested and subjective term has been extensively chronicled (see Lupton [1999] for an overview), yet there was a view that 'vulnerability' was more discretionary and less officially defined than 'risk', which was seen as more specific:

> *... we have definite risk factors that are organisational and statutory, I'm seeing vulnerability is more of a... of a state, if that makes sense* (Senior Clinical Psychologist, CAMHS)

Empirical evidence supported Daniel (2010) and Sarewitz *et al*'s (2003) arguments that where risk is used to describe high chances of negative outcomes, vulnerability is used more to describe a *potentiality* for significant adversity occurring, what I have referred to as the 'contingent' nature of vulnerability (see 2.4):

... risk rings different bells, risk is something that can happen, it's a fact, it's an incident, it rings more alarm bells. Vulnerable is a softer word (retired Commissioner, City Council Children's Unit)

... vulnerability is about a young person having more potential to not deal with risk as well as others, or negotiate risks. (Project Worker, young carers' service)

According to this understanding, it would follow that a young person could be classified as vulnerable without being viewed as at risk, but is always seen as vulnerable when they are deemed at risk.

5.1.2 Other explanations of the concept 'vulnerability'

Aside from overlapping with ideas about 'risk', definitions of 'vulnerability' varied, with informants often giving several accounts of what they understood the concept to mean throughout the course of one interview. Their definitions seemed to fall into a number of themes, summarised in table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Practitioner understandings of 'vulnerability'

How vulnerability was defined by informants	Number of interviewees
Related to risk	15
Lack of support systems	5
Behaviours and activities	5
Easily influenced/exploited	5
Poor 'outcomes' (in terms of *Every Child Matters*)	5
Lack of participation/underachievement	4
Less able to cope with difficulties	4
Lack of physical safety	3
Having stresses and difficulties	2
Related to disadvantage	1

'Vulnerability' was often constructed as 'innate' as well as 'situational' at the same time (see Chapter 2). For example, whilst a certain practitioner could consider lack of support systems to be significant in a young person's vulnerability, they could consider behaviour to be a key factor too. One Project Worker explained:

... factors such as, it might be, you know, disruptive housing or schooling or parental mental health problems or inappropriate peers that are hanging round, things like that. And alongside that they've got, I suppose, low resilience or low coping skills so they've not got the inner strength or self-esteem or confidence to necessarily make the right choices or seek help. So I see it as a bit of a combination of the two really, like poor external factors alongside internally not being as strong or emotionally developed. (Project Worker, young carer's service)

The government strategy document *Every Child Matters* was often cited as a point of reference, with 'vulnerability' being seen as related to the risk that a child may not attain the five positive outcomes set out in the document[28]. That some practitioners saw vulnerability as referring to the presence of difficulties in an individuals' life and problems coping with these was of particular interest. This highlights that the working definition of vulnerability adopted in this study – based on the work of Watts and Bohle (1993) and Emmel and Hughes (2010) (see 1.3 and 2.2.2) – resonated with practitioner understandings to some extent.

In some cases, metaphors were used by practitioners as a way of explaining how they understood vulnerability. These all involved precariousness: childhood being a race in which some children fall behind and fail to get to the end; 'youth' as a mountain which young people might 'fall off' with various 'valleys' at the bottom such as teenage pregnancy and drug use; young people's lives being a tight-rope from which they might 'topple' into a negative outcome. 'Resilience' and 'protective factors' were frequently drawn upon as the opposite of vulnerability, and also 'competence' or independence in a small number of cases[29]. Also common in descriptions of the notion of 'vulnerability' were references to specific circumstances or groups, an area explored later in the chapter (see 5.1.4).

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[28] The five outcomes set out in *Every Child Matters* are: 'enjoying and achieving', 'staying safe', 'being healthy', 'making a positive contribution' and 'economic well-being'.

[29] I chose not to ask interviewees to define the other concepts they drew on to explain 'vulnerability', due to time constraints. For an overview of the inter-relationship of relevant concepts in social care settings with children and young people see Daniel, 2010.

5.1.3 The vagueness of vulnerability and practitioner discretion

Perhaps the most consistent point in relation to the meaning of vulnerability for informants was that they presented the notion as difficult to explain or define. This supports previous academic assertions that the concept is characterised predominantly by a lack of clarity (Daniel, 2010; Chambers, 1989; Mackenzie, 2009). A sense that vulnerability was a notion imbued with subjectivity was virtually uniform across the interviews. An informant from the project for 'sexually exploited' young people commented, "when I describe someone as vulnerable that might mean something different to somebody else". Informants were asked where they considered 'vulnerable' children and young people as being positioned within the Local Authority's Framework of Common Assessment (sometimes referred to as CAF), which was designed to encourage shared understandings of children and young people's situations across different agencies. The title of the tool refers to 'service responses to vulnerability'. The framework shows a 'windscreen' with four segments shown below:

Figure 5.1: 'Service responses to levels of vulnerability and harm'
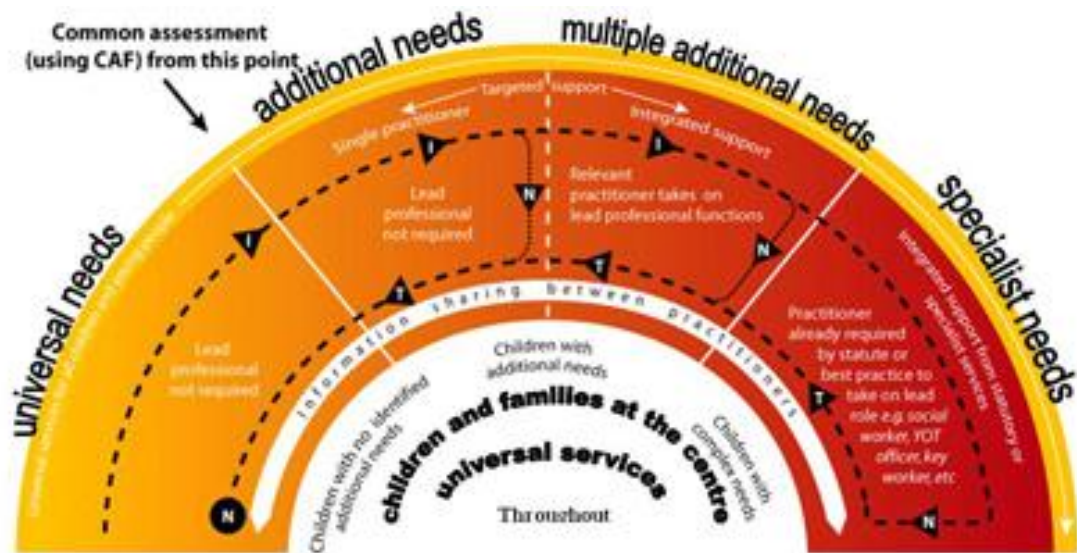
Whilst many of the informants positioned 'vulnerable' young people throughout all the four quadrants, there were others that placed them in the middle two quadrants. Some positioned the group within the two right-hand quadrants, and

one person specified them as being in the third quadrant[30]. One commissioner felt
that confusion about 'vulnerability' reflected a lack of clarity from higher-up in the
commissioning framework:

> *A number of government initiatives have used vulnerability in a different*
> *way and that's reflected in a local authority structure and the result is a lot*
> *of debate and confusion around where boundary lines are drawn around*
> *vulnerability.* (Commissioner A, City Council Children's Unit)

For others, differences of opinion about vulnerability related to the value
judgements of welfare professionals:

> *... there's always differences in people's levels of acceptability I would guess.*
> *But the more you work somewhere like here as I'm sure you'll know, the less*
> *shocked you get and sometimes you do, probably you'd think, you have*
> *different expectations of what people's lives are gonna be. So probably*
> *someone, if someone, one of my friends in my personal life saw it they would*
> *probably totally think someone else was totally vulnerable where I'd be like*
> *it's not, they're alright, that's just their life actually.* (Project Worker, ASB
> project)

A recurring theme in the interviews was that perceptions of vulnerability were
highly contingent on the context in which practitioners were operating and had
experienced in the past:

> *…* [professionals] *have different kind of ideas about... depending on their*
> *experiences and where they've worked... what makes someone vulnerable*
> *or not*. (Project Worker, young carers' service)

This may well indicate that vulnerability is a relational and culturally specific
concept. A certain amount of frustration or disapproval amongst interviewees was
sometimes evident in the accounts of such differences of opinion. As she gave me a
lift home, the practitioner from the anti-social behaviour project told me that a

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[30] Responses did not appear to vary according to whether the informant was a practitioner,
commissioner or manager.

particular statutory service for young people called "every young person they worked with 'vulnerable'", which she considered unhelpful.

Indeed, informants often noted that the appeal and popularly of the concept of vulnerability might in part be linked to its conceptual ambiguity:

> [welfare projects] *could say 'we're working to support vulnerable young people' and that can mean a hundred different vulnerabilities, a hundred different things, so they'll use that term to encompass everything rather than being specific about what they are going to target* (Project Worker, 'sexual exploitation' service)

This echoed findings from the evaluation of the New Labour government's Vulnerable Children Grant (VCG) (Kendall *et al*, 2004b: appendix 2), which suggested that education authorities felt that the concept's flexibility was useful when designing and commissioning effective services.

Three informants stood out as having more apparently defined understandings of 'vulnerability'. They worked at services whose work included 'discipline-orientated' components (the YOS, the FIP and the Local Authority housing unit). These agencies were using vulnerability as an 'official' criterion in delivering their services (for further details see Chapter 3). The YOS manager described 'vulnerability' directly in line with the definition of the concept in the official YOS documents, which was that it referred to the risk a young person poses to themselves, rather than to society:

> *… 'risk' means risk to the public of serious harm, risk to the public in terms of likelihood of offending, and 'vulnerability' means risk to themselves, either risk to themselves from their own behaviour or because of the behaviour of other people round them* (Senior Manager, YOS)

The informant from the Local Authority's housing unit indicated that vulnerability was clearly defined in statutory terms within her setting:

I'm conditioned to think of what it [vulnerability] *is in terms of how our legislation sets it out to be honest, and the way that our legislation sets it out is anyone that is less able to fend for themselves if they became street homeless* (Manager, Local Authority Housing Service)

Yet even where clearer operational definitions were in place, it did not necessarily follow that discretion was any less important in decision making. Discussions brought out the potential importance of discretion where vulnerability was operationalised. The relationship between behaviour and vulnerability was particularly pertinent to the research and is explored later in the chapter (see 5.4).

5.1.4 Which 'young people' are 'vulnerable': circumstances and behaviours

When asked about which young people they considered were vulnerable, informants drew upon particular groups as illustrative examples. Table 5.2 shows the distribution of the examples of groups of young people who were referred to as 'vulnerable'.

Table 5.2: Vulnerable groups of young people cited by key informants

Vulnerable group or circumstances given as example	Number of informants
'Sexually exploited' young women[31]	9
Parental abuse/neglect/poor parenting	7
Drug and alcohol use*	6
Homeless/poorly housed	6
Offending behaviour/ getting 'in trouble'*	6
Parental drug/alcohol use	5
Parental domestic violence	5
Looked after children	4
Not achieving at school	4
Mental health issues	4
Learning difficulties	3
Gypsy and traveller young people	3
Significant health problems	3
Parents who offend	3
Young carers	3
English as second language	3
Disabled young people	2
Asylum seekers and refugees	2
Those who run away*	2
Living in poverty	2
Self-harm*	2
BME backgrounds	2
Parents with mental health issues	2
NEET*	2

*Denotes 'behavioural' vulnerability

Examples of vulnerable groups seemed to fall broadly into two categories: where young people were experiencing particular problems which might be considered part of their social environment or circumstances, and where young people were considered to display 'problem' behaviour (marked in the table with asterisks). Where young people were involved in offending behaviours, they tended to be classified as 'vulnerable' in some way. One informant explained this during discussion about the video vignette of a young offender's life story:

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[31] Informants indicated that they understood 'sexual exploitation' as a set of circumstances which young people did not have choice in, rather than a set of behaviours. This issue is considered specifically later in the chapter (see 5.5.2).

He wanted to be seen to be hard so he was constantly thinking about what other people think of him and getting into a cycle of drugs, dealing and not telling people; also that made him more vulnerable (Project Worker, welfare service for 'vulnerable' children)

Warner (2008: 32) has described a 'vulnerability/dangerousness axis', where vulnerability can be used to indicate risk posed by an individual as well as to them. Such a relationship was supported by the narratives of informants. As the retired Commissioner phrased it, calling a young person vulnerable was "better than saying the child is stupid or is neglected or deviant". Given that 'axis' can have binary connotations in certain contexts, to emphasise the connectedness of vulnerability with 'deviance', a 'vulnerability-transgression nexus' is perhaps a more useful way of describing this inter-relationship, an idea developed throughout the thesis (see also 2.2.3 and 2.5).

Another significant factor which was viewed by many as increasing vulnerability concerned periods of transition. By and large, vulnerability was considered to vary over time and throughout a young person's life course. Most informants felt that where a young person belonged to a particular vulnerable group this did not mean that their classification as vulnerable would apply for their entire life-course. However, there were two exceptions where practitioners felt that if someone was vulnerable at any point in their lives then they would always remain so. Many informants highlighted that 'vulnerable' young people were often those who were dealing with a number of the issues indicated in Table 5.2, or as Commissioner B said, "kids sit in different numbers of vulnerable groups". Although there were categories which were associated with vulnerability, the classification was still seen by most as something which operated on an 'individual' basis. The same informant also commented:

... vulnerability is an assessment that is made about an individual child and so you just don't just become vulnerable because you're in a category (Commissioner B, City Council Children's Unit)

Right across the sample of informants, young people's responses to their circumstances was central to practitioner understandings of young people's vulnerability.

> *... it's not just about your home and your environment and your relationships but what your own individual personality brings into the equation* (retired Commissioner, City Council Children's Unit)

This is particularly pertinent in terms of exploring tensions between 'vulnerability' and 'transgression' in services for young people, and is considered in more detail later in the chapter (5.4).

5.1.5 'Universal' Vs 'particular' understandings

The variety of positions in which practitioners placed 'vulnerable' young people on the 'windscreen' common assessment tool (see figure 5.1) and more general comments about the malleability of 'vulnerability' often indicated a tension was evident between 'universal' and 'particular' notions of the concept. In other words, sometimes all children were positioned as 'vulnerable', sometimes it was only a notion applied to particular groups. That all children were potentially vulnerable seemed to be an aspect of the management of vulnerability which was in some way troublesome when the concept was operationalised:

> *... we can describe almost any young person as vulnerable* [laughs] *because they are! Young people have to go out and risk take, and find out for themselves what their identity is and what their strengths are, so I think there's a slight problem in that it is not easily defined, and it might be that what I see as vulnerable even what another agency sees as vulnerable, so I think there is some difficulty in that it's a bit of the vague word* (Senior Clinical Psychologist, CAMHS)

Such discussions were often located within considerations of developmental models of childhood:

> *... it's about recognising that young people and children by their very nature are vulnerable. In terms of development, when a child is born they are*

massively... They are about as vulnerable as they can be, and as they grow

up and develop it's almost like you're equipping them with the skills to be

less vulnerable and more self-sufficient (Manager, FIP)

A number of informants also commented that *all individuals* (not just children) are

vulnerable to a certain extent. As my literature review highlighted, there has been

an interest amongst certain academics in 'universal' notions of vulnerability as a

potentially powerful citizenship model (see 2.1.3 and also Turner, 2006; Beckett,

2006; Goodin, 1986; Fineman, 2008). Findings from this case study would suggest

that ideas about universal vulnerability would seem to be shared by practitioners to

some extent. Furthermore, amongst the strongest themes to emerge from such

understandings of vulnerability was an emphasis on its relationship to social

support systems (see table 5.1). This underlines a sense that vulnerability had a

conceptual resonance with more socially constructed ideas of disadvantage which

the 'vulnerability thesis' writers are interested in emphasising. However, looking

more generally at how the concept is drawn upon, it would seem that in practice its

deployment is more inclined towards particularism. In summary, 5.1 has discussed

that informants considered vulnerability to be a popular concept in children's

services. The concept appeared to mean different things to different people and

judgements about vulnerability seemed to some extent to be tied in with discretion

and personal opinion.

5.2 The principal uses of vulnerability in interventions

This section provides an overview of the principal practical applications of the

concept of vulnerability within services. Such uses were mainly related to

assessment and classification of young people, which then triggered certain

responses. Due to this, the notion could be associated with 'net-widening'[32]

processes, with particular implications for young people who were considered

'vulnerable' and also 'transgressive'.

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[32] 'Net-widening' here refers to expansionary trends in the criminal justice system, or
processes connected to the prevention of crime which lead to more subjects being drawn
into judicial arrangements (see Cohen, 1979 or McLaughlin and Muncie, 2013: 282-283)

5.2.1 Assessment and use as a child protection 'flag'

Vulnerability seemed to be most commonly utilised in the classification and measurement of young people's need for welfare and/or disciplinary interventions. The concept was a key term employed to alert other professionals to a serious problem and the need for some sort of action. Often the term was considered a tool in efforts to trigger 'child protection' statutory responses:

> *I think there's words that will be used within the Social Care environment to kind of highlight a young person's needs, as in 'extremely vulnerable' or 'significant risk of harm'... I think they're the ones that will get the support and recognised, because those words are there* [...] *You've just gotta say that word* [vulnerability] *really!* [laughs] (Manager, welfare service for 'vulnerable' children)

Despite a lack of clarity in what 'vulnerability' meant to informants, it was standard for consideration of young people's vulnerability to form part of the 'assessments' made by agencies; that is, the procedures which practitioners used in order to measure or classify young people before interventions were planned and delivered:

> *... it might be that from looking at referrals, we identify the children we think are most vulnerable and needed seeing more urgently possibly than others.* (Project Worker, young carer's service)

In the case of the services which had stronger disciplinary components to their practice (YOS, the Local Authority Housing Unit and the FIP), there were more clearly delineated lines along which assessment of vulnerability operated:

> *... it's part of our risk screening, risk and vulnerability screening processes and procedures, when we do assessments of risk, we are assessing vulnerability as well, and that's made explicit in the documentation and also in the training that we have done, looking at young people and adults that are vulnerable.* (Manager, FIP)

Several informants indicated that assessing vulnerability was also important for their work with adults[33]. The assessment of young people's 'vulnerability' was described by the YOS senior manager as "absolutely critical" to the organisation's national screening tool, Asset, as 'vulnerability' was one of three key areas on which interventions were decided and planned:

> *... having a high vulnerability rating therefore triggers actions and the intervention plan and accountability from that, and the intensity of that intervention*" (Senior Manager, YOS)

As the idea of vulnerability as being connected with the social control of young people is a key driver of this research, this issue requires further consideration.

5.2.2 Net-widening and the policing of vulnerability

Although assessments of vulnerability were undoubtedly well-intentioned and designed to be supportive, young person's perceived vulnerability could also trigger more intensive interventions, which they could then be disciplined for not responding to. This connects the identification and management of young people's vulnerability with net-widening. Perhaps the most obvious example of this was in the assessment processes for the YOS, where the Senior Manager indicated there had been debate on the matter:

> *... if you had two people who went out and committed an offence, who burgled a shed, one of them had no issues whatsoever but our Asset* [assessment tool] *says, you know, 'fairly minor offence and from a stable background'; and the other one's* [Asset assessment] *said 'well fairly minor offence but all these vulnerabilities', one of them could be sentenced to a more punitive disposal* [sanction] *than the other one. And actually, that more punitive disposal means a higher restriction on their liberty and more chance of breaching it and therefore more chance of going into custody and everything else. So actually, you are being pushed into more punitive*

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[33] The assessment of vulnerability has been shown to be significant in the provision of adult services. For explorations of how notions of vulnerability function in services for adults see Beckett (2006), Hollomotz (2011) and also Brown (2012).

disposal on the grounds of your vulnerability, not on the grounds of the

seriousness of your offence. (Senior Manager, YOS)

The language of this quotation might sound technical to some readers. Just to underline the meaning here, the manager is suggesting that when a young person is assessed by the YOS as having high vulnerability, the responsibility of the agency to act is greater. If another person committed an identical crime and was assessed as 'not vulnerable', the YOS' responsibility to act is not as great. The implications are that within the YOS' interventions, young people could potentially be deemed as vulnerable, assigned certain interventions as a result, and then be disciplined or disapproved of for not accepting the intervention. A more critical reading of this process is that it may result in increasingly punitive responses to young people with higher 'vulnerabilities'.

The YOS manager also suggested that the duties of disciplinary agencies like the YOS to respond to young people's vulnerability had increased in recent years. Although he felt that this had led to more effective services in some respects, he also saw a risk that young people's vulnerability would be increasingly be subject to monitoring with potentially punitive implications. When I asked him what happened in instances where young people had 'high vulnerability' but posed a low risk to the public, he answered as follows:

That's the million dollar question really. Things have changed. Some time

ago, a young person who came to our service with high levels of vulnerability

but low risk of reoffending may have generated a low score and we might

have been - not saying totally - but we might have been closer to taking the

stance that the risk of reoffending is low, therefore our agency has less to

offer. [...] *Now that has changed. The expectations have changed on us. You*

know, we're part of the safeguarding board and that sort of thing, and quite

rightly, and you know, let's be honest about where this is driven in terms of

the expectations of the inspectorate. When they come in, they're asking us

three questions. The three questions are: do you protect the public from the

risk of serious harm? Do you protect the public from the likelihood of

offending? And do you safeguard those young people? And we get scored in each one of those categories. You know, do we do that well enough or not? So that is, that's important to us, or equally important to us. (Senior Manager, YOS).

In other words, it would seem that the YOS has had increasing responsibilities to manage young people's 'vulnerability' as well as 'offending'. The implication is that more young people have been brought into contact with the YJS on the basis of vulnerability. Also, the nature of a young person's mandatory contact with the YOS may be more intensive where they are deemed 'vulnerable'. Seen within a broader context of increasingly punitive responses to disadvantaged young people within the criminal justice system (see Jacobson *et al*, 2010, Goldson and Peters, 2000, Goldson, 2002b), this is concerning. That young people's behaviour is increasingly policed 'in the name of protection' is an issue which has been raised in relation to young women involved in prostitution (Phoenix, 2002). Evidence from my case study would suggest that this may be a wider trend applicable more generally to 'vulnerable' young people, and especially those whose behaviours or family life brings them into contact with the youth justice system. This net-widening via responding to young people's vulnerability could perhaps be viewed as having certain facets in common with the policing of anti-social behaviour, which is now heavily associated with the idea of 'vulnerable families' (cf Flint, 2011).

5.2.3 Non-blaming discourse

Another common practical use of vulnerability was lexical. The concept was seen as offering a means for referring to young people who had experienced considerable difficulties in a way that indicated that they were not to blame for these problems. This mechanism was valued highly in many cases:

> *… it's about being sensitive, but I think in a way vulnerability is like a kind term […] it's trying not to put blame on anybody, it's the situation maybe that they're in* (Project Worker, welfare service for 'vulnerable children')

> *… it's an empathetic word, and a word that people kind of like. It's non-judgemental* (Senior Clinical Psychologist, CAMHS)

One informant noted that drawing on the notion of vulnerability offered practitioners a means of actively avoiding young people being seen negatively, shaping interventions they received in a positive way:

> *... it's used subconsciously, partly to gain another agency's sympathy; you know, if you're making a referral to another agency, as a hook that people will feel more sympathy perhaps towards say a teenager who's an offender who's described as vulnerable because of their background, who may also be an offender. But if you're referring them to an agency who doesn't specialise in offending and started off describing them as an offender that might sort of limit the response you'd get. Whereas, if you described them as a vulnerable young person who happens to offend, that might get a more sympathetic response.* (Retired Commissioner, City Council Children's Unit)

This would seem to support the contention I have argued for elsewhere (Brown, 2011b), that labelling people as 'vulnerable' seems to offer a way to circumvent (or at least attempt to circumvent) them being seen as to blame for their problems, and acts as an appeal against the impulse to condemn them for their actions or lifestyles (see p. 45). In this sense, vulnerability can operate as a way of emphasising structural factors which contribute to a person's difficulties or disadvantages.

5.2.4 Use as an organising principle in resource distribution

Finally, commissioners and policy-makers as well as practitioners reported that the classification of vulnerability was an integral part of claims-making on resources and the organisation of services. Perceived vulnerability status acted as a trigger or mechanism whereby young people 'qualify' for interventions, with 11 of the 15 practitioners, managers and commissioners commenting that addressing vulnerability was an important part of commissioning processes for services for children and young people. At the time of the case study, there were several commissioners within the City Council whose job titles referred to particular responsibilities to 'vulnerable groups'. One of the commissioners interviewed explained that the notion was central to his role:

I use it to characterise services and directions of services, so which bits of

services are going to deal with more vulnerable, less vulnerable

(Commissioner A, City Council Children's Unit)

Five of the informants had been involved in the distribution of New Labour's VCG (see 3.1.2), which seemed to have given rise to some of the council's commissioning infrastructure which was aimed at addressing 'vulnerability'. There was agreement that the idea of the grant was to "bring all these little funding streams, all sort of unmanageable, under one sort of umbrella" (retired Commissioner, City Council Children's Unit). The commissioner for vulnerable groups within Education services described that when the money for the VCG appeared in her budget, she pulled together all of the services working with various groups and "we developed a policy and a strategy" (Commissioner B, City Council Children's Unit). A particularly candid view of the VCG's implementation was given by another commissioner; in a quotation that illustrates how problems with defining 'vulnerability' have been pertinent in commissioning processes:

There were various forms of strategy development locally and nationally

with people going, 'great! This programme is going to deal with vulnerable

kids', 'The vulnerable kids, yeah, you know the ones!', 'Yeah! The ones! We

all know who the vulnerable kids are!', 'so we're gonna start tomorrow with

domestic violence', 'no, they're not the vulnerable ones, the vulnerable ones

are the looked after.' You know, I'm not sure if it's any more considered than

that, actually. (Commissioner A, City Council Children's Unit)

The informant from the FIP confirmed the impression given by analysis of official documentation (see Chapter 3) that resources for his service were linked to concerns about "vulnerable families". That FIPs are concerned with the management of 'vulnerable families' is highlighted in the literature on these programmes (see Batty and Flint, 2012) which also links the concept the anti-social behaviour policy agenda, most recently evolving in part into a policy agenda around 'troubled families' (see Department of Communities and Local Government, 2001a and 2001b).

The Senior Manager at the YOS felt that the presence of vulnerability in commissioning was more by the "back door" rather than being something "on the front door":

> *… commissioning follows priorities, so I mean, you know, the substance misuse commissioning says 'here's your pack of money for substance misuse commissioning in the YOT. Here's the target to, you know, screen x number of people and, you know, do it by, within y timescale', et cetera. And that's probably what we're commissioning for. So probably vulnerability is not coming into that. In* [city]*, we're saying 'what are our priorities'? Our priorities follow the children and young people's plan.* (Senior Manager, YOS)

As this quote illustrates, commissioning processes for 'vulnerable' groups of young people tended to centre around specific problems or circumstances, rather than on views of the vulnerability of young people *per se*. Particular services are commissioned to address particular difficulties or issues which young people (and their families) might encounter. This range of service provision is seen as addressing the needs of 'vulnerable' young people, meaning that the concept of 'vulnerability' seemed to function as an organising principle in how services were commissioned and distributed, but more implicitly rather than explicitly.

By way of a summary of 5.2, we have seen that the main use of 'vulnerability' in services for young people related to the ways in which users of services were classified and awarded priority. The use of the notion by welfare professionals was considered a way of positioning young people as 'needy' without blaming them for their circumstances. There were some indications that where young people were seen as vulnerable they were more likely to be brought into more intensive interventions. In instances where 'vulnerable' young people did not respond to such interventions positively, there could be punitive implications, connecting the concept with net-widening.

5.3 Disapproval and non-use

At the same time as drawing heavily on notions of vulnerability in practice, most informants also recognised problems with the idea as a conceptual basis for their

work. There were also two informants who eschewed vulnerability-based constructions of young people altogether. The reasons behind such resistance are explored in this section. Furthermore, the use of the notion did not often extend into direct work with young people and their families. This was of particular interest to the researcher and is explored further in this section.

5.3.1 Vulnerability-based constructions of identity and the neglect of 'agency'

Around half of the practitioners mentioned that constructing young people as 'vulnerable' also seemed to position them as 'weak' or 'fragile'. The informant from the FIP noted that calling someone vulnerable was to "question somebody's ability to be self-sufficient". Although vulnerability emerged as a popular term with informants, there were two informants who rejected vulnerability-based views of the young people altogether on this basis, implying that vulnerability-based constructions undermined the extent of young people's agency:

> *... it means sort of a weakness to me and I don't think these young people are weak. They've got lots going and people … I don't know, they class them as if they're some sort of pathetic, 'can't do this' and 'can't do that', but really if you give them the chance and give them that opportunity. It's a funny one, I wouldn't ever refer to anybody as vulnerable, I don't think it's a term I've ever used.* (Manager, Education Service)

As well as the term implying weakness, informants saw 'vulnerability' as potentially individualising problems to some extent. That the notion of vulnerability functions a label in welfare services has been argued by Hollomotz (2011) in relation to adults with learning difficulties. The majority of informants seemed to share such a view to some extent:

> *... it kind of puts it on them* [young people] *almost in some ways, like you're vulnerable, rather than looking at it's a vulnerable situation*. (Project Worker, young carer's service)

As well as concerns about 'labelling', 11 of the informants also discussed the risk of "self-fulfilling prophecies" related to 'vulnerability':

> *... if you're constantly telling someone, 'You're vulnerable, you're vulnerable', that might actually impact on their sense of who they are and that might become part of their identity which could be, 'Yes, I want to fight against this; I want to make sure that my children are in a position where they have everything and they're not so vulnerable', but it might work in the opposite where they think, 'I'm vulnerable; there's nothing that I can do', or they might feel powerless by that or trapped in a box in some way.* (Project Worker, welfare service for 'vulnerable' children)

Such concerns about the potentially debilitating implications of drawing on such a deficit-orientated notion in welfare practices are shared by some academics that are critical of the imposition of 'vulnerable identities' (see McLaughlin, 2012; Furedi, 2004).

5.3.2 Overuse

In the eyes of some informants, the increasing prevalence of the concept of 'vulnerability' in welfare and disciplinary services was connected with a de-valuing of the notion, which was seen by some to have decreased its usefulness:

> *... it wasn't a word that was used nearly as much when I first started practicing, so if you did describe a child as vulnerable it meant a lot more* (retired Commissioner, City Council Children's Unit)

Overuse was mentioned repeatedly and tended to be met with disapproval. That vulnerability was overused seemed to be most significant for respondents in terms of how the concept functioned in the distribution of resources. The same informant cited immediately above went on to explain that she sat on a panel for a major grant-giving organisation in the UK and that in applications for funding, 'vulnerability' had "lost its currency":

[voluntary groups] *will routinely say that they work with vulnerable children or young people and because they all say it, actually it doesn't press any buttons anymore* (retired Commissioner, City Council Children's Unit)

The Social Care Manager's interview underlined potential problems with overuse, with her suggesting that the word 'vulnerability' was not enough to indicate that the threshold for a Social Care intervention had been reached, contrary to some of the practitioner impressions that drawing on this concept acted as a safeguarding 'flag' (see 5.2.1).

5.3.3 Absence in direct work with young people and their families

The pervasive vulnerability-based rhetoric which most of the informants were apparently utilising in their everyday practice did not tend to extend to the arena where they worked directly with young people and families. With the exception of two informants (the retired commissioner and the clinical psychologist), all interviewees gave an impression that vulnerability-based constructions of young people were used between professionals and not with receivers of services[34]. There were two main reasons given for this; the word 'vulnerability' was viewed as one which might not be understandable to young people and families, but, more commonly, informants felt that young people would be resistant to the idea of themselves as 'vulnerable':

> *… my reluctance to use it sometimes with young people is because I anticipate it might - it can be perceived like it's a weakness in them. To describe someone as vulnerable can not really sound very empowering to them, I don't think.* (Project Worker, young carer's service)

That the use of the term in direct interactions with young people might potentially cause them offense was repeatedly noted:

> *I just think that young people would think, 'you don't know me' you know, 'I can look after myself' sort of thing. It is a bit, I would say derogatory, but it's*

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[34] Most informants said that although they drew on the concept in their work with young people and their families, they would be inclined to avoid the term 'vulnerability' when speaking with service users.

not that, it's more like, making that young person feel quite young, I guess. Making them feel like they are a child. (Project Worker, 'sexually exploited' young people)

In discussions with one another, practitioners seemed to construct some receivers of services as fragile and precarious. However, they were also aware that this construction may not be viewed favourably by their service users. This raises interesting questions about how far young people's feelings about their own identities shaped and informed the systems and processes by which they are supported and disciplined. In summary of 5.3, we have seen that there is evidence of resistance to practitioners about vulnerability discourses. Such resistances usually centred around the way that notions of 'vulnerability' were considered to imply diminished agency and overuse of the concept. Although we saw in 5.1 that vulnerability discourses are popular with informants, the use of the notion remains largely reserved for practitioner interactions and generally did not extend into use with service users.

5.4 Vulnerability and transgression: the subtleties beyond the binary

As was outlined in Chapter 1, since 1997, a dichotomous sense of those aged under 18 has tended to prevail in policy, with this group being seen as either passive, incompetent and 'vulnerable', or as being granted full agency in the case of 'wrong-doing' (see 1.3 and also Such and Walker, 2005; Piper, 2008; Fionda, 2005). Piper (2008) suggests that a 'vulnerability/transgression' binary is a central premise of social policy and practice in relation to children and young people. Empirical findings from my study strongly supported such understandings. Many informants noted that young people tended to be seen as either culpable for their transgressions or vulnerable enough not to be held to account for them:

... writing a social inquiry report you tend to write one that sort of asks the judge or the magistrates to take a lenient line by stressing the things that have happened, the sort of things that have made that young person vulnerable, have determined their behaviour outside of that young person's

own sense of who they are. But the judge or magistrates will look at them as the author of their actions and see them as responsible rather than vulnerable and there's a sort of, a kind of two different approaches there really (retired Commissioner, City Council Children's Unit)

The Senior Manager in the YOS compared the situation to Victorian understandings of the "deserving and undeserving" poor, with young offenders often seen as non-vulnerable and undeserving. Several informants suggested that over recent years this was perhaps becoming a less pervasive view, with 'poor' behaviour not necessarily being associated with being non-deserving. However, the binary remained central to the accounts in many ways – its usefulness was not questioned by informants. Yet there was also considerable complexity and nuance in how services operated for vulnerable young people who were at the same time seen as 'transgressive', which is explored in more detail here.

5.4.1 Transgression and the withdrawal of vulnerability status

... poor behaviour and vulnerability is absolutely the hardest thing to deal with. Without question. Because if you're vulnerable and you're compliant... you know... vulnerable and awkward is a totally different ball game. (Commissioner B, City Council Children's Unit)

Significant tensions and contradictions were evident in how informants understood the ways in which young people's behaviour related to their vulnerability. As well as noting that certain activities or conduct could lead to the attainment of vulnerability status (drug taking or offending, etc.), informants also indicated that certain other activities or behaviours could lead to a withdrawal of this status. "Compliance" was considered one of the primary factors on which conferring vulnerability status was contingent:

... if people are compliant and, you know, accepting of help or appear to be compliant – I think then, generally, workers – well, everybody finds them easier to work with. You know, the youngster who's constantly challenging

and in your face and non-compliant with everything, you know, can be quite
frustrating to work with and people can sometimes give up on them
(Manager, Social Care)

Young people's willingness to share personal information which helped to account for problem behaviours seemed to be a key part of this 'compliance'. For example, when asked if the young offender in the video vignette was vulnerable, Commissioner B's response was as follows:

That's very difficult to assess. He has no explanation at all of where these
behaviours came and he just says 'I didn't like school', you know, well, is he
talking about learning or is he talking about other kids you know. I mean he
says his family were very supportive but he doesn't actually say much about
them. He moves on really quickly doesn't he. (Commissioner B, City Council
Children's Unit)

Findings from the present study indicate that supposedly vulnerable young people could in fact be resistant to notions of their vulnerability and also reluctant to share information which they consider that professionals do not have a right to know (see Chapter 7). This may lead us to question the likelihood of 'vulnerable' young people meeting expectations associated with 'compliance'.

Lack of "engagement" or motivation for "change" was a further issue that could mean the withdrawal of services for young people considered 'vulnerable':

You can keep throwing services at families for as long as there are hours in
the day but if they don't – I'm not saying something unique you know – if
they don't actually want to change or want to do something different or
want to have a better something or even see that what you're offering them
is better you're on a hiding to nothing - you're wasting your time.
(Commissioner B, City Council Children's Unit)

Where 'vulnerable' young people repeated or failed to desist from 'problem' behaviours, their entitlement to services was affected. One informant from a young person's counselling service cited the example of young people who self-harm:

> *... if young people present regularly with self-harm they will get treated not*
> *particularly – well we are told I think it's patchy – I think they try quite hard*
> *and I think if you can get to see the practitioner you may not have a bad deal,*
> *but you've got to get past the receptionist that's seen you three times that*
> *week* (Manager, young people's counselling service)

In the following example, the informant from the Housing Service describes how her discretion about vulnerability status of particular individuals was shaped by repetition of offending behaviour:

> *... if someone's lived at home and they're just being naughty and they keep*
> *going into prison, we wouldn't say that's vulnerability, that's just them,*
> *they're not abiding by the rules and they just think it's a joke and they think*
> *it's a game.* (Manager, City Council Housing Service)

Lacking contrition for transgressions and being perceived as having 'agency' was of central importance in how vulnerability was assessed and managed. Commenting on the video vignettes of a young offender (see 4.4.7), the retired commissioner explained:

> *... he was making choices from a certain point where he perhaps would be*
> *seen as less vulnerable because* [...] *he was saying, 'well I want to have fun*
> *by offending'.* (retired Commissioner, City Council Children's Unit)

Findings supported the idea that perceptions about young people's agency play a key part in how vulnerable they are seen to be (see Fionda, 2005; Goldson, 2002a and Piper, 2008). Such and Walker (2005) raise interesting questions about the importance of young people's perceived agency, which seems to be shaped in part by norms related to the innocence of childhood and the full responsibilities of adulthood. In relation to the 'rights and responsibilities' agenda, they argue that there is a certain amount of ambiguity about the way young people's agency is viewed, in that children are seen as lacking agency where they are labelled as 'vulnerable', but then often migrate to a position of being considered to possess full

agency in instances where they offend or transgress. That manners and demeanour were significant elements of vulnerability classifications and sentencing outcomes for young offenders seemed to be implied by the YOS manager:

> *You will still get some sentencers, magistrates, judges, et cetera, who see before them, you know, a six foot three seventeen year old, or sixteen year old, and will sentence them on the grounds that they're a six foot three sixteen year old, or seventeen year old, and fail to take account of the fact that they are working at the cognitive ability of a twelve year old* (Senior Manager, YOS)

Cramer (2005) and Passaro's (1996) work on housing provision has highlighted the influence of behaviours such as deference on classifications of vulnerability, which findings in this study seemed to underline. The informant from the anti-social behaviour project felt that "if someone's cocky and rowdy stuff like that" then that could lead to "people thinking that they're not vulnerable". However, an alternative view was expressed by one other informant who felt that transgressive young people were actually advantaged in the intervention process in some ways:

> *The kids that I have that shout, scream and smash things, they get a lot of attention, they get the support. They get Youth Offending Service, a lot of help but actually the really quiet ones, they often slip underneath the radar.* (Project Worker, welfare service for 'vulnerable' children)

Nonetheless, findings would suggest that behaviour and the 'performance of vulnerability' are key factors in how 'vulnerable' young people receive welfare and disciplinary services. Failure to perform vulnerability in a manner deemed appropriate by service providers and professionals would seem to have significant consequences for 'vulnerable' young people. This idea is a key theme emerging from the research and is developed further throughout the thesis. The manager from the Local Authority Housing Unit expressed such 'conditionality' (see Dwyer, 2004) in her approach to assessing vulnerability when giving a case example of a

young man who had spent several periods in prison, and had on a number of
occasions found his own accommodation between custodial sentences. On a
further occasion he had been denied support:

> Kate: *So what was your reasoning for finding him not vulnerable?*

> Housing Manager: *That basically, he knows exactly, he understands the
> system, he knows what he's doing. Had he come out of prison, then come to
> us and said, 'look I don't know what I'm doing, I've got nowhere to go'... but
> he was only coming to us, he only came to us once actually and that was
> after he'd been in prison for a year because no landlord would take him. So
> he'd already tried to find accommodation himself so he knew exactly what
> he was doing.*

In this instance 'understanding of the system' seemed to indicate insufficient
performance of vulnerability. As the tone of this quote indicates, the moral
standards of practitioners seemed to play a part in judgements about vulnerability.
The retired commissioner noted, "young people's attitudes do shape professional's
responses, perhaps more than they should actually". Whilst acknowledging the
extent of the impact of young people's behaviours on how services operated, it
should also be noted that certain comments and stories from informants about
supporting vulnerable young people revealed how challenging the young people's
behaviour could be. I noted in my fieldwork diary that I could not help but feel that
even the most patient and non-judgemental practitioner could understandably find
dealing with some cases of young people's behaviour difficult and personally
wearing. Nevertheless, 'vulnerability' is shown here to be part of wider discourses
and policy narratives which establish what is 'correct' and 'appropriate' behaviour,
and which could render someone subject to disciplinary mechanisms should they
fail to conform.

5.4.2 'Compliance', 'cherry-picking' and judgements about vulnerability in context

'Vulnerable' young people might benefit more from services where they were
compliant with practitioner standards. However, this is not simply due to the moral

judgements and discretion of individual practitioners. Wider structures, systems and processes underpinning the provision of services for 'vulnerable' groups of children and young people were also revealed as significant context. Given that services for vulnerable groups were mainly commissioned to tackle specific issues (see 5.2.4), informants implied a tension between the service being able to stick to its agreed performance indicators (aimed at reducing specific difficulties) and the significant challenges which 'vulnerable' young people's behaviour could pose in the course of achieving these targets:

> Social Care Manager*: ...vulnerability is a phrase that's used a lot, but I guess I tend to think that a lot of the people who provide the services for vulnerable children, if you like, cherry-pick the easy to engage. I'm not sure they always reach the most needy and the most vulnerable.*

> Kate: *Why do you think that?*

> Social Care Manager: *Well, I guess because if you're being commissioned to provide a service, you want to show that, you know, you've been very successful, so you pick the quick wins [...] I think it can sometimes mean that those who are most vulnerable, most in need, most at risk get less services.*

Although no informants admitted 'cherry-picking', some did allude to a tension between achieving 'outcomes' and managing 'problem' behaviour. The informant from the education service spoke about her efforts in trying to include a young person who had been volatile whilst working with a particular member of staff:

> *… it's just the way she talks, 'fucking bastard' and that sort of stuff, I said it's just not* [acceptable] *… and it's starting right back at that and how she dealt with people on a day to day basis, but you're trying to do that alongside trying to do five lots of GCSE coursework...* (Manager, education service)

It was often implied that working with vulnerable young people who were transgressive required comparatively more resources than where 'vulnerable' young people were well-behaved.

Also significant in how services responded to young people who were deemed vulnerable and also transgressive were the particular goals which each service was commissioned to achieve. It seemed that at times, differences in the intended outcomes of the various services could cause friction. The informant from the 'sexual exploitation' service spoke of how a young person she was supporting was "in fear of her life" due to threats from a group of men she was involved with sexually. Several men had been raping the young woman repeatedly on the grounds that she owed them £300 for drugs. The informant told me how the young person "hated" the police because of dealings with them in the past, so was reluctant to co-operate with enforcement agencies who wanted to pursue prosecutions against the men. The informant felt that this had affected how the young person's vulnerability was perceived, as well as service responses:

> Project Worker: *sometimes they don't see* [the young person] *as a victim because she's not saying it, she's not making a statement, you know I've had people ask me if I believe her and I say, 'Of course I believe her'. Not only is it my job to believe the young person, and I do put responsibility on the young people to tell me the truth, I'm not a police officer, I don't need to question them left right and centre, but I actually do believe her. You know there's some young people who have told stories in the past... you still need to believe them then, but…*

> Kate*: Ok so you think there's something about her not taking the action…*

> Project Worker*: Uncooperative.*

> Kate*: Uncooperative. You think that had an effect on how she was perceived?*

> Project Worker*: Yeah. And what they are willing to do for her. And again it's almost putting blame on her about 'cos she's not doing what we want her to do, she's you know, involved in it, or she's lying, or you know, she must not be that scared because she doesn't want to do anything about it, although she does want to do stuff about it, you know, she's allowing me to do stuff for her, you know…*

As this case account indicated, moral judgements of particular individuals or values of particular professional approaches seemed to mingle together with an organisation's needs to achieve certain goals or outcomes, with the result being withdrawal or alternation of service provision for vulnerable young people who were seen as less 'compliant'.

The rise in public animosity towards some groups of young people and a perceived increase in deviance amongst this social group has been widely chronicled (Squires and Stephen, 2005; Brown, 2005; Kelly 2003). Several informants made reference to such negative public opinions about certain groups of young people and how these had an effect on children's services:

> *... getting money for young offenders project is much more difficult than getting money for a kid who has got a disability which is not his own fault and they are photogenic and lovely and grew up in this country* (Commissioner A, City Council Children's Unit)

Accountability to the public also seemed to shape the provision of services, as noted by the informant from the FIP, whose 'outcomes' were driven largely by reductions in young people's 'anti-social behaviour':

> *... different people have different views and it's not just about the young person and where they're at, all the services take into account other people, say the community and so on...* (Manager, FIP)

When the need to ration limited welfare resources was factored in, vulnerable young people with difficult behaviours were left as those whom it made most sense to withdraw services from. One commissioner implied that it was not always possible to continue to support the more 'difficult' vulnerable young people due to the need to ration resources and target them at those young people who were more receptive:

> *... it's exhausting, it's exhausting, you're constantly presenting the child with a new challenge or a different thing or this that and the other and you just reach a point when you go 'I can't do this anymore'. It's really exhausting*

when you don't get the response back and you just – you do reach a point when you've got to think of the greater good. That's what happens in society when there aren't endless resources. (Commissioner B, City Council Children's Unit)

Paradoxically, young people ceasing problem behaviours could also lead to the withdrawal of services:

... if we've got a young person and they stop running away, they're therefore no longer vulnerable so we have to stop work with them. Whereas if they know that they will get service from us if they run away, some of our young people start running away (Project Worker, welfare service for 'vulnerable' groups).

Limited resources and pressures on services to deliver certain 'outcomes', as well as the moral judgements of professionals, and the wider influence of societal attitudes towards young people were all factors touched upon in how interventions played out for young people who were considered vulnerable and also transgressive.

5.4.4 Narrowing views of vulnerability in times of austerity?

It has been noted that vulnerability is a concept that can operate as a mechanism for narrowing resources (see Levy-Vroelent, 2010; Brown, 2012). Indeed, coping with declining funding was seen by Commissioner B as having been a driver of New Labour's VCG. There were indications from some informants that they felt a narrowing of vulnerability classifications might occur as pressure on welfare resources increased. Talking about a 'vulnerable' young person whom she had struggled to find services for, the clinical psychologist commented:

Often what happens is that in times of economic plenty when government spending is higher, then people are more generous in terms of applying their criteria, and at times where government spending is restricted, people are a bit more clear about drawing lines around their referral criteria. And so the pool of the young people which don't fit into any category becomes bigger. (Senior Clinical Psychologist, CAMHS)

This informant felt that 'vulnerable' young people were likely to be excluded from services as a result. She was particularly concerned about older young people who were on the cusp of being eligible for adult services, where cuts had been more severe. In times of austerity, services are likely to experience more pressure to secure certain improved 'outcomes'. Findings from this study would suggest that vulnerable young people who are least compliant may be some of those who are most at risk from such a narrowing of vulnerability. Due to their difficult behaviour, they offer the least potential return for services in terms improved 'outcomes' and therefore securing continued funding.

In summary of 5.4, this section highlighted that young people tended to be seen as either culpable for their transgressions or vulnerable enough not to be held to account for them. How such judgements are made have a strong relationship with behaviour. It would seem that as well as their circumstances, young people's performances of vulnerability may well be significant. That is, where they behave in ways which are more commonly associated with vulnerability, they may find their entitlements to services to be more secure. There were suggestions that for various reasons, services may be more inclined to support more compliant and less transgressive 'vulnerable' young people, which may have particular implications at times of shrinking welfare resources.

5.5 Vulnerability and gender: "girls and boys do it differently, don't they"

The previous section highlighted that young people's behaviours and demeanour are highly significant in judgements about their vulnerability. How far gender played a role in such matters was an inter-connected theme emerging from the interviews. From this small-scale geographical case study, 'vulnerability' would seem to be a state which was much more associated with young women than with young men. Such gendered imaginings of 'vulnerability' had various implications for how services operated for young people of both genders.

5.5.1 The feminisation of vulnerability

… if you went into a group of YOS staff, and you can include the YOS Manager in this, and say 'shut your eyes and think about a vulnerable client' you know, we probably think about the girl that drinks before we think about the six foot three person that's done a few robberies, I think without a doubt. [...] how quickly you'll think about that fifteen year old boy that lives in a family of chronic domestic violence... [I don't know]. (Senior Manager, YOS)

Most informants felt that by and large young women tended to be seen as more vulnerable than young men. Some respondents felt that this was because young women actually *were* more vulnerable in reality, but most felt that young women's association with vulnerability was just more pronounced or obvious. Indeed, such views would appear to have a long history. Writing in 1962, Walker saw 'wayward' girls as 'less criminally inclined' than boys, and more vulnerable and 'in need of care and protection' (p. 26).

There were several examples given of how young men's performance of 'heteronormative' masculinities could exclude them from vulnerability classifications. The informant from the young carer's service talked about a young man that she had been supporting who had been "getting into lots of fights":

… they [other professionals] *don't normally perceive him as someone that's vulnerable, they perceive him as someone that's strong and - strong-willed and strong-minded and does what he wants. But actually the reasons he's doing that is because underneath it all he's quite vulnerable and scared, I think, and so he puts on a front and takes on people because he's on the attack* (Project Worker, young carer's service)

In addition to having tendencies towards 'hyper-masculinity', the young man also actively resisted notions of his vulnerability:

… he would hate to be described as vulnerable because that's the one - it's almost like that's the one thing he's trying to make a show of that he's not,

so that people don't know that he's got any weaknesses. (Project Worker, young carer's service)

Findings from young people's interviews (see 7.1.2) indicated that young people saw vulnerability as something which was not compatible with effective performances of masculinity, supporting views from practitioners that young men accessing their services might object to being classified in this way.

5.5.2 'Sexual exploitation' of young women as the apex of vulnerability

'Sexually exploited' young women were the most frequently cited example of vulnerable groups of young people (see table 5.2). Interviews revealed that young women who were 'sexually exploited' were considered to be amongst the most vulnerable young people in society. This echoes concerns at government level, where young people in this group are constructed as 'particularly vulnerable' (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009: 49, Department of Health and Home Office, 2000: 21), or the 'most vulnerable' (Department for Education 2011: 29). Again, such gendered understandings have a long history. Research has indicated that social control practices within society have tended to focus on the potentially threatening behaviour of boys and the 'promiscuity' of girls (Goldson, 2004; O'Neill, 2001; Hudson, 1989 and 2002), a trend dating back to the nineteenth century (Shore, 2002).

What practitioners understood by 'sexual exploitation' is difficult to pin down, but rather than being seen as the exchange of sex for money, this term is being increasingly applied to young women who are having sex with numerous older men in social situations (see Barnardos, 2011 as an example and Phoenix, 2012a for a more critical view). Broader definitions are illustrated by the following quote referring to a particularly 'vulnerable' young person:

> *... she is putting herself at risk of sexual exploitation. She's fifteen, sixteen and, you know, and that's part of the history. She'd been known to be getting into people's cars when she's drunk, et cetera, and when we dig a bit further on, why is she going to the park and drinking on a regular basis and putting herself at risk of sexual exploitation* (Senior Manager, YOS)

The young people whose perspectives were reported in Chapter 6 shared practitioner views that for young women, their vulnerability was mostly associated with sexual matters (see 7.1.2), though young people who had sold sex were largely resistant to ideas of themselves as vulnerable.

We can make sense of professional concern about the 'vulnerability' of 'sexually exploited' young women in several ways. It may be that the problem is growing and that more young women are becoming involved in such situations, as we see reported in the media on a regular basis. However, such preoccupations may reflect more interesting responses to class, gender and vulnerability. Phoenix (2012a) argues that the growing concern with the vulnerability of young women who are 'sexually exploited' can be seen as tied to concerns about the transgression of traditional ideals of femininity, and, in particular, the violation of such ideals by working class girls. She argues that professional concern with this matter is actually connected with the social control of 'wayward' young women's lives by stealth, through a policing of their sexual vulnerability. Comments from the YOS manager indicated that he recognised this potential difficulty in supporting supposedly vulnerable young women:

> *We're out to chase* [young people] *up if they don't turn up but if we put, if we'd said to that person on* [YOS programme] *'my god, you're so vulnerable and you're, you know, at risk of sexual exploitation and everything else, we need to see you 25 hours a week', and we put them on our most intensive programme, which is something called ISS - Intensive Supervision and Surveillance - we are setting them up to fail*

Young men's sexuality was not of similar concern to practitioners. Only one informant (the Project Worker from the ASB project) raised this as an issue of concern in relation to their 'vulnerability'. Instead, aggression and 'behavioural' concerns permeated classifications of young men as 'vulnerable'. Young men were considered less inclined to demonstrate or perform vulnerability. A number of informants drew parallels about the different ways in which vulnerabilities were conceptualised or imagined for young men as opposed to young women:

… girls and boys do it differently, don't they. With boys, it tends to be crime and getting into bother. With girls, it tends to be getting involved with men who may take advantage of them and being groomed for prostitution, whether that's formal prostitution or more informal prostitution […] the wider audience, if you like, would see the girl as being more vulnerable and they would perhaps just see the boy as being bad. (Manager, Social Care)

5.5.3 Masculinity, transgression and vulnerability

Young men's vulnerability was most often described in terms of their offending behaviours. Differences between young men's vulnerability and the vulnerability of young women were implied, most often on behavioural grounds. As the informant from the young carer's service saw it, young men "tend to go about acting out things in a probably more destructive way". Furthermore, several informants framed the differences in terms of assumptions about 'agency', commenting that young men tended to be seen as "being able to look after themselves", a view which contrasted sharply with concerns about young women being 'victims' of 'sexual exploitation' which were highlighted in the previous section. This suggests that young men may be more likely to be those people who are seen as 'vulnerable' and also 'transgressive' at the same time.

Attitudes of practitioners and also in wider society were often reflected upon in informants' discussions of young men's vulnerability. The manager of the education service reflected: "aggression sometimes from young, 15 or 16... big lads coming in can sort of make you look at them differently. It shouldn't do but it can". Although he acknowledged that young men seemed to be seen as less vulnerable that young women, the YOS manager questioned if this view was in fact mismatched with the empirical realities of disadvantaged young people's lives:

… when I read the local management reports for people who've committed very serious offences of have been, you know, victims of serious… and you sit there and you read it and you think, I could not have scripted this. If you told me to give someone a worse start in life, I couldn't have done it, you

> *know. And invariably, they're boys actually, and that probably is more*
>
> *hidden when it's boys compared to girls I think, sadly.* (Senior Manager, YOS)

The practical application of notions of the concept of vulnerability may (paradoxically) have the effect of increasing the vulnerability of young men. As the Project Worker at the welfare service for vulnerable children saw it, "sometimes boys can be a higher vulnerability or higher risk because they seem as though they can look after themselves". In summary, findings from my case study indicated that gender may well be highly influential in imaginings of vulnerability. There were indications that young men and young women from comparable backgrounds or who faced similar difficulties were viewed differently in relation to vulnerability.

5.6 Conclusion: vulnerability as a mechanism for care and control

How vulnerability operates in practice is a complex process, with manifold implications. Findings from interviews with key informants indicated that as well as the idea of vulnerability 'helping' young people, there seems to be more controlling implications to the operationalisation of the notion. 'Vulnerability' functioned as a basis for prioritising the distribution of resources to those who were seen to 'need' them most, and a flexible foundation on which to design and deliver services. The chapter has shown that young people's behaviour and demeanour are significant in how vulnerable they are considered to be, and in how services respond to them. The popularity of the concept of vulnerability in welfare and disciplinary services would seem to have different implications for young men and young women. Despite undoubtedly well-intentioned deployment in the arena of children's services, vulnerability would appear to offer a basis for policing young women's sexual behaviours, as well to exclude certain 'problem' young men from welfare services. Yet at the same time, the case study revealed that the concept also offered a powerful mechanism thorough which practitioners, managers and commissioners were able to proactively resist condemnation of young people who transgress. Next, we turn to how 'vulnerable' young people's lives and their understandings of vulnerability function within the context of such vulnerability management.

Chapter 6: Vulnerable Young People's Life Stories

This chapter is the first of three to report from interviews with 'vulnerable' young people. Previous chapters have highlighted that professionals involved in interventions for vulnerable young people would appear to consider certain individuals or groups to be vulnerable due to shared circumstances, life experiences and behaviours. This chapter and the two which follow focus on young people who are classified in this way, their experiences, perceptions and the ways in which they receive services. The aim of this chapter is to generate insights into the lives and social worlds of 'vulnerable' young people from the perspectives of the young people themselves. Chapter 7 then focuses on how young people react to notions of their vulnerability and their experiences of being classified in this way. Chapter 8 moves on to consider young people's perceptions of the factors that affect and shape their 'vulnerability'. All three of the forthcoming chapters are closely inter-related and overlapping in their scope. In order to understand more about how 'vulnerability' operates within contexts of regulation and social control, each chapter has a particular focus on the views of young people who were deemed 'transgressive' and were also considered 'vulnerable' (see 4.1.2).

The present chapter has three main parts. Firstly, an overview is given of difficulties which were significant in vulnerable young people's life stories (6.1). Secondly, relationships between vulnerability and transgression are considered (6.2). The nature of young people's transgressions are outlined, as well as their understandings of how their behaviours related to certain 'vulnerabilities'. Finally, the chapter considers how young people saw their futures (6.3). 'Imagined futures' have been used as a research tool by youth researchers seeking to reveal something of young people's priorities in day-to-day life, their values and their sense of their own 'structural' location in society (Irwin, 1995). The hope here is that by considering how vulnerable young people see their futures, this provides a sense of interviewees' outlooks on their lives and opportunities. Findings are presented thematically, but pen portraits are also included in Appendix F which

offer additional insights into the individual life stories of each young person in the sample. Narratives indicated that most of the young people seemed to have experienced a range of substantive difficulties and challenges in their lives. There were also indications of a complex inter-relationship between 'bad' behaviour and difficult circumstances.

6.1 Difficult lives and multiple disadvantage

Although divergences and differences emerged in their accounts, there were substantial commonalities in vulnerable young people's narratives of how they came to be involved with welfare services. Stories of familial abuse, neglect and sexual abuse were notable for their frequency and severity. Where there was not direct abuse described, life stories often revealed complex and multiple challenges being faced by young people within their family contexts. Aside from family circumstances, other 'vulnerabilities' related to young people as 'individuals' or 'young adults' moving towards more independence from their families. Particular precariousness seemed to characterise these more 'independent' experiences such as growing up in the care system, running away, selling sex, homelessness, mental health problems, self-harm and being 'bullied'.

Young people frequently reported experiencing a range of these issues together, which researchers have highlighted can cause particular problems in terms of young people achieving successful 'outcomes' (Barnes *et al*, 2011; Feinstein and Sabates, 2006; Social Exclusion Task Force, 2007). Rossman's (2001; 40) idea of 'adversity packages' is perhaps useful here, a term used by the author to describe the multiple stressors which he argues accumulate in the lives of young people who experience domestic violence. The average number of 'vulnerabilities' or 'adversities' reported by young people in the present study was around 4.5. However, it should be noted that this may well reflect differences in responses to the process of being interviewed as much as the range or number of difficulties which had been experienced. A case-by-case overview of the various 'vulnerabilities' which were reported by young people across the sample is presented in a 'vulnerability matrix' below (see Table 6.1). Following the matrix, themes which emerged as particularly

significant are considered selectively in order to give an impression of the nature and range of the key difficulties which were reported by interviewees.

Table 6.1: Matrix of 'vulnerabilities' as reported by young people

	Physical Abuse/Neglect	Sexual Abuse	In Care	Parental Drug/Alc use	Mental Health/Self-Harm	Bereavement	Homelessness	Refugee/Asylum Seeker	Learning Difficulty	Domestic Violence (Parents)	Bullying	Caring	Health Condition	Youth Offending	Own Drug/Alc use	ASB	School Exclusion	Absence from school	Anger Issues	Selling Sex or Favours	Running Away
Alicia (16)	●		●	●	●	●	●							●	●					●	●
Anna (12)							●	●		●											
Brook (16)				●			●			●				●	●			●			
Charlie (16)	●		●	●										●							
Chris (17)	●						●				●										
Elle (14)							●	●													
Hayley (16)					●		●					●							●		
Jade A (17)					●				●		●	●									
Jade B (16)	●		●	●						●									●		
Jay Jay (17)	●	●								●	●			●		●	●		●		●
'Jeremy Clarkson' (15)							●														
Jess (15)	●	●	●		●									●	●		●			●	●
John (16)					●		●							●	●			●			
Keith (16)	●					●				●				●	●	●	●	●			
Kotaa (12)						●				●	●										●
Laura (16)											●										
Mackenzie (16)													●					●			
Mercedez (15)				●								●						●			
Naz (14)		●								●				●			●	●		●	●
'Peter Schmeichel' (16)	●		●															●			
Sam (14)							●	●													
Scott (18)	●	●	●	●	●		●							●	●	●	●	●			●
Stephanie (16)					●	●				●								●			
Wadren (17)					●					●							●	●			
'2Pac' (14)										●	●							●			

6.1.1 Abuse and neglect

'Problem' parental behaviours featured heavily in young people's life stories. Ten of the 25 young people reported instances or prolonged periods of abuse (physical and/or sexual), as well as emotional neglect. Some of the young people's stories of physical abuse by their parents were particularly brutal. Jay Jay (M, 17) reported that his father used to "batter him":

> *… he used to – not fully punch me – but, like, hit me hard. And I were only a little kid. Like, proper batter me – not proper batter me – but hit me, punch me and that… And he put my finger in the fire one day and burnt all my finger.* (Jay Jay, M, 17)

Another young man reported being beaten every day after being taken to Pakistan for a period of six years to live with his extended family:

> *I used to get beaten up in Pakistan about lots of stupid things really. A brick or a belt or a brush or a tree. That beating started when I was in Pakistan when I was 10 years old.* […] *the first two months they were quiet, after that they beat me up until I came here* [to England]*.* (Chris, M, 17)

During the six years he spent in Pakistan, Chris was allowed to return to England once for a short period, but was too afraid to report the violence he was being subjected to; "they warned me that if I said *anything* to *anyone…* they threatened me, they'd kill me or they'll do something". A considerable consensus appears to exist in the childhood studies and behavioural psychology literature regarding the serious long-term impact of such negative family experiences (Howe, 2005; Stainton Rogers, 1992; Hooper, 2005).

Parental neglect was indicated in a number of cases. In social work and childhood 'development' research, neglect now tends to be considered to be as detrimental to the well-being of children as direct physical abuse (Egeland *et al*, 1983; Erikson *et al*, 1989; Horwath, 2007; Hildyard and Wolfe, 2002). Charlie (F, 16) reported that her mother would call the police and report her children for criminal activities "when she wanted us out of the house for the day". Jade B (F, 16) described how

her sister cooked for her and took her to school: "… Mum were too lazy to do it and she just … like, she didn't care about anything apart from men and that's it." She reported that she was often late for school, suffered with illness frequently, and used to fall asleep in classes "because I didn't have any food in me". In some cases, neglect seemed closely tied in with poverty and with parents not providing basic food, housing and clothing (see also 6.1.2). The relationship between parenting and poverty is complex and has received extensive attention in research (Katz *et al*, 2007; Hooper *et al*, 2007; NSPCC, 2008). The consensus seems to indicate that young people who grow up in poverty are more likely to experience neglect and abuse, although most parents who are bringing up their children in poverty do not abuse or neglect their children.

In instances of abuse and neglect, it did not necessarily follow that young people considered their family environments as unsupportive. Affection for parents was often expressed alongside acknowledgements of abuse. Scott (M, 18) was taken into care after an incident where his mother attacked him with a knife. Scott displayed strong regard for his parents throughout the interview, although events he described often included parental strategies which some may consider highly unacceptable or transgressive:

> *We'd always stick together, me and my Mum and my Dad and that. It's like my Dad used to rob pubs, like fruit machines, and he used to come back with grands* [thousands of pounds] *and stuff like that. I don't know... We were living ok and, to be honest, my Mum always made sure we had a meal every night and that. But she was still aggressive and she was on Heroin and she was on drink, so obviously she had a habit and all my stuff got sold.* (Scott, M, 18)

Jay Jay (M, 17) seemed to experience a tension between the negative feelings he had towards his parents resulting from abuse, and the strength of the emotional connection he felt for them in spite of this:

> *… my Mum, I never talk to my Mum. I'm not even near my Dad, don't know my Dad; 'cos what they've done to me… do you know what I mean. I've still*

got to see them, and yeah it's my flesh and blood, my Mum and Dad, but at the end of t' day, it hurts me for seeing them do that to me. But it doesn't stop me still thinking a lot about them. I do 'cos it's my Mum and Dad, my Mum and Dad but can't do owt about it. (Jay Jay, M, 17)

Other young people who had experienced abuse were more condemning about the poor treatment they felt they had received from their parents. Jade B was one example, who at one point described her mother as a "psychopath":

We used to go to like contact meetings with social workers, and my Mum, like , when she did turn up she'd be drunk, and when… or she just used to not turn up at all so we used to just sit there waiting for hours and hours 'cos we hadn't seen her for ages, so we used to be proper excited to see her... she used to just come in drunk or she used to come in proper late, or she'd just not turn up at all. (Jade B, F, 16)

Jade was one of a number of interviewees who had very little or no contact with biological parents.

The under-reporting of sexual abuse has received a great deal of public attention in the wake of the Savile scandal of 2012, and the idea that sexual abuse has been (or is) perpetrated against particularly 'vulnerable' young people seems highly concerning to the media, the public and the government. The present study suggested that 'vulnerable' young people's seemed to have experienced higher levels of sexual abuse than the general population of children and young people (cf Cawson *et al*, 2000), as four of the 25 young people reported sexual abuse (two young men and two young women). Jay Jay had been abused by a 'friend' of his mothers':

… it would be about when I were just turning fifteen. My Mum were with a really good mate of hers, a bloke, and I got touched by him, so and he got took to thingy and that when I were younger… To t'police and then nowt come of it. (Jay Jay, M, 17)

Scott (M, 18) explained that 'something had happened to him' in the third care home he lived in, when he was aged 14. The researcher understood 'something' to mean that he had been sexually abused by a staff member of the care home. He described how the things that had happened in the home still caused problems in his life:

> *What happened is never going to go. It's like my girlfriend the other day, she moved proper quick and I just burst out in shock and nearly crying and that's because it's how I used to move when the door opened. I don't know. There's still things there that have just fucked my head about it and that.*
> (Scott, M, 18)

Studies have shown that young people are unlikely to report sexual abuse largely due to fear of being disbelieved or of being blamed (Wattam, 1999), a factor which could be exacerbated in the case of vulnerable young people who are facing a range of other difficulties in their lives.

In all four cases where young people discussed sexual abuse, disappointment or frustration resulting from inadequate responses to their disclosures of abuse was evident. Naz (F, 14) told me that she was raped by her father when she was five years old, and her mother's response to this still caused problems for her:

> *… it's like, my Mum always calls me a slag and stuff and she's always like calling me names and saying that me Dad raped me and this and that.* (Naz, F, 14)

Another young person who had been sexually abused by her father was taken into care as a result. She described a situation with her mother in her doctor's surgery before she went into care:

> *… my Mum was just sat there going 'she's got a mental problem, can you put her in a secure unit?' which proper hurt my feelings. 'Cos it's my Mum saying that about me.* (Jess, F, 15)

Three out of the four young people who had been sexually abused discussed not being believed by their families or by the authorities, which research has suggested can be particularly damaging to young people who have suffered sexual abuse (Corby, 2001). One young person never disclosed the abuse to the authorities at all because of feelings of shame. It was only Naz (F, 14) whose rape by her father at the age of five had been 'officially' recognised in some way.

Aside from the direct experiences of sexual abuse, interview narratives seemed to suggest high levels of awareness of the sexual abuse of other young people, usually friends, boyfriends or girlfriends. One reading of this might be that the possibility of sexual abuse seemed relatively familiar to 'vulnerable' young people. At aged 15, Mercedez had an understanding of her boyfriend's experiences of rape:

> *… Darren said that the woman that did it to him, her husband threatened him with a big knife and saying 'playing fucking sleeping logs, that's the way it is or you're getting stabbed' or whatever, right in his own house, not in their house, in his house.* (Mercedez, F, 15)

Wadren's (M, 17) narrative referenced sexual abuse at several points, in relation to different people; his girlfriend had been raped by two of her cousins. Naz (F, 14) reported that a close friend of hers had been sexually abused and exploited by several older males:

> *… she got raped and stuff by loads of men and that, and one man were inviting all his friends and stuff and they were getting money and stuff, his friends were giving her money so they could have sex with her.* (Naz, F, 14)

In each of the seven interviews where sexual abuse was discussed, no formal charges had been brought against the perpetrators. In Chapter 8, this issue of the prosecution of sexual abuse is given further consideration in relation to service responses to 'vulnerable' young people (see 8.4.5).

6.1.2 Complex family situations

The family contexts described by young people might usefully be thought of as characterised by multiple difficulties and challenges. Issues such as family

homelessness, parental substance use, domestic violence and parental mental health issues were common across the sample. Rather than one or two discrete issues appearing, it was more often the case that young people reported a variety of substantive difficulties within the family situations, which were experienced together and which were closely linked[35]. As one example, Jade B's father was left physically disabled following an accident, following which her family dealt with his physical impairment, problematic mental health and substance misuse:

> *My Dad's got mental depression which we've only just found out now, but he used to like try to kill himself, commit suicide, you name it he just wanted to do it. He used to hear voices, he was in the psychiatric unit for quite a long time, saw people in there that was, oh they were horrible. He used to drink because he thought it was the only option he could do, stuff like that.* (Jade A, F, 17)

Many interviewees indicated that they had grown up in an environment where there had been a problematic lack of access to material resources. Hayley (F, 16) had been responsible for feeding her sister and taking her to school for a number of years, but was not given money to do this. She lived with her father at that time: "he wouldn't leave me no money for food, so I'd be lending money off of people. It were 'orrible".

Often there would be one 'primary' issue present in the narrative, which would be experienced against a backdrop of more complex issues. For Mercedez, her central 'problem' was related to her parents' use of alcohol. Colourful descriptions of incidents of her mother's behaviour featured very heavily in her narrative, such as this one where her mother had been drinking and had been discovered:

> *Flaked out on the bed, fat stomach out, fanny hanging out, just like that* [mimes action], *asleep. So my grandma's gone and got a big glass of water, and just gone* [actions throwing water] *in her face, and my Mum's gone 'ugh, ugh'. And she's walked out of the bed, not even noticing we were*

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[35] The inter-relatedness and complexity of problems within family contexts is highlighted also through the 'pen portraits' of young people included as Appendix F.

there, and like 'do you think I'm a bit drunk do you' … And she'd walked out of there to go into there and the door wouldn't open, so Darren [Mercedez's boyfriend] *seen her, and she had all everything hanging out, tits and everything, and I just felt proper disgusting. Not me disgusting but disgusted in her.*

Although she saw her parents' use of alcohol as the primary focus of her difficulties, other family concerns she described were that her father had been raped when he was young, and that her mother had severe mental health problems and struggled to cope with the behaviour of her children.

Homelessness was referenced as a point of difficulty in ten of the accounts. Experiences associated with homelessness were sometimes described as especially difficult to cope with. Scott (18), who had lived in various hostels with his family whilst growing up, described events at one of the hostels he had lived in with his mother and sister as follows:

… [A couple have] *moved in and he's killed her. Like, killed his girlfriend. And that's actually not a lie. It was in the thing* [media] *and the hostel got shut down and everything for it. Then the hostel got set on fire. There were smackheads* [Heroin users] *that were leaving like needles int' toilets and stuff like that, syringes in toilets and everything. I don't know. It was horrible. Some stuff that you don't even want to see in there.*

Five young people had experienced homelessness with their parents (rather than as homeless single adults), and experiences of this 'type' of homelessness were mixed. Whilst some young people who had lived in hostels experienced this environment as relatively safe, others felt very threatened within these environments, depending often on who other residents were. Sam (M, 14) indicated that sharing could be difficult: "in here you've got like [bad] people or summat".

A growing body of research has highlighted the severe emotional difficulties which can result from children living with parental domestic violence (Holt *et al*, 2008; Hester *et al*, 2007; Mullender and Morley, 1994). The present study indicated that

exposure to parental domestic violence was a particular theme in terms of the difficult family contexts or 'adversity packages' experienced by vulnerable young people (see Rossman, 2001). Hayley (F, 16), who had also been in an abusive relationship herself, described that her mother had regularly fled from domestic violence for short periods, and would then return:

> *My Dad used to be really violent and to grow up watching that it's… like, my first tooth came out in a hostel for Mums and babies and my brother wasn't even – not eight weeks old* (Hayley, F, 16)

Domestic abuse was explicitly reported in nine of the young peoples' stories, but, in a number of other interviews, descriptions of parents "arguing" or "fighting" seemed to imply 'code' for this. In each case, the violence they had witnessed was the abuse of their mother by their father/'step-father'/and/or another partner. In some cases it involved a number of different men, as Anna (who spoke English as a second language) poignantly described:

> *When I was three years old, right, my Mum and Dad was, like, didn't live together. And I just remember that thing* [violence] *right. I opened the door and my Mum just get my little brother and me and we go downstairs and I can't remember nothing else. And after* [months or years]*, my Mum was having a boyfriend, and he just hits her and my Mum didn't like it* (Anna, F, 12)

As well as first-hand experiences of domestic violence, young people told stories of it having taken place in their families. Wadren described events in his family as follows:

> *… my real Dad was like a complete arsehole. He beat my Mum up, he raped her and did all these horrible things to her.* (Wadren, 17)

In Naz's case, her mother had experienced a forced marriage as well as violence from her extended family, which Naz seemed to have a detailed awareness of:

> *… she got took to Pakistan, beaten up and stuff like that, they were gonna*
>
> *kill her – she were pregnant with my brother – they threw her down the*
>
> *stairs and everything. And then her Mum brought her back to England and*
>
> *then her Mum goes that it's her fault and stuff and they put a knife to her…*
> (Naz, F, 14)

Awareness of domestic violence or having witnessed it was sometimes a factor linked with young people's sense of their 'vulnerability' (see Chapter 7).

Particular difficulties in family functioning often seemed to appear within a more general context of volatility or precariousness in family life. Hayley was homeless and staying temporarily at her grandma's house. As well as describing how her Aunt was in prison for killing a partner, Hayley seemed to have a difficult relationship with her parents:

> *My Mum's got depression; my Dad's just a stress head and he's telling me*
>
> *that I'm not his daughter anymore; it's like… he doesn't call me his daughter*
>
> *no more*. (Hayley, F, 16)

Hayley indicated that it was not easy for her to cope with her feelings during difficult times, as she felt a responsibility to play a role in supporting other members of the family.

> *When my Auntie got sent down it was just a bombshell for everyone and I*
>
> *didn't want to speak about how I felt 'cos I felt it would trigger them.*
> (Hayley, F, 16)

Contrary to 'common sense' understandings of young people as emotionally 'incompetent', Such and Walker (2005) have argued that a sense of duty and care towards others is in fact central to experiences of childhood and youth. Feelings of responsibility towards loved ones frequently featured in the narratives of the young people.

In four cases, a sense of shared responsibility in family life extended to fuller and more formal 'caring responsibilities' for siblings and parents. '2Pac''s mother had

been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis when he was aged 12, which led to him needing to "do everything" in the house, including cooking, cleaning, ironing, and washing:

> *My life was crap. I hated it. It was like I had to craft my personal life around my Mum because I'd never know if she would be fine of if she would just… sometimes she can't get out of bed…* ('2Pac', M, 14)

Even where caring responsibilities were less formalised, young people described feelings of responsibility towards adults in their families. Mercedez was very concerned that her father might die from his alcohol use:

> *I keep threatening him with it, saying Dad, I want you to be there for my marriage and walk me down aisle, thinking it'd come into his head and think 'right, I can see some sense now'. But there's still nothing…* [so I] *said to him 'well, I guess you don't want to walk me down the aisle then'. And then he said 'well I guess I fucking don't then, don't bother asking me'. But that's something that was said that probably weren't ever meant, because you know what these people are like*. (Mercedez, F, 15)

Descriptions of difficult family contexts often indicated that at the same time as dealing with issues which were emotionally or practically problematic in their own lives, young people were often supporting family members and loved ones with the same issues. Narratives often gave the impression that young people were able to manage such issues with a substantial degree of independence from adults and parents.

There were a very small number of interviews in which young people gave the impression that their family contexts had been relatively free from such substantive issues. Laura (F, 16) reported that her greatest difficulties were around meeting new people during the transition to high school and incidents of bullying which her parents had supported her with. This indicated perhaps not particularly exceptional experiences of 'youth'. John had attended a public school until he stopped going at aged 14, when he had started using drugs heavily. Although he had argued with his

parents extensively for a number of years and the relationship had eventually broken down, he indicated that difficulties in his life were related to bereavement and drug use rather than complex or disadvantaged family circumstances, saying of his childhood that "The only really significant event I can remember from around there [point on life map] is a ginger cat and being stung by a wasp" (John, M, 16). The relative absence of difficulties in John's family context was indicated by the more 'everyday' things he chose to discuss in his life story, a situation which was notable for its rarity in the interviews. For the most part, young people revealed knowledge, understanding and experience of a range of complex situations and numerous problems within their social and familial circles.

6.1.3 Precariousness as young people moved towards independence

'Vulnerability' was not always reported in relation to family experiences. Many young people spoke about difficulties or challenges related to them more as independent 'individuals'. Such issues ranged from bullying and mental or physical health issues to experiences of being homeless as single young adults, or of being 'in care', and were often experienced within a context of difficult family environments where support might be limited or where they may have had caring responsibilities themselves (see Table 6.1).

A range of physical and mental health issues were reported by young people. Depression was referenced in several interviews. Four young people reported self-harming, including one young person (Wadren, M, 17) who had attempted to commit suicide by trying to hang himself. John (M, 16) had recently been incarcerated due to concerns about his mental health and drug use, and Scott (M, 18) discussed receiving substantive interventions from the NHS for his mental health issues, which he described as "schizophrenia" and "ADHD". Mackenzie was exceptional in the sample in that his 'vulnerability' stemmed largely from a physical health problem, diabetes, which he was diagnosed with at aged 12. This had been especially problematic in terms of non-attendance at school for long periods:

I ended up like having like three month off school 'cos I were in hospital for most of the time. But – but then like when I got out I didn't want to go back

> *to school anyway cos I bothered about people saying stuff.* (Mackenzie, M,
> 16)

Negative experiences with peers and instances of bullying also featured frequently. This could be seen as a reflection of general experiences of bullying in young people's lives, but could also be linked with the presence of certain 'risk' factors associated with high levels of bullying, such as where children have special education needs or are from minority ethnic families (cf Gorman-Smith and Tolan, 1998 and 2003; Farrell and Bruce, 1997). For Jade A, who had learning difficulties, bullying was particularly central in her narrative:

> *… I used to get bullied, I used to get all sorts of people used to call me names, horrible names that you couldn't… ah they were just horrible. Then after that I got attacked about three years ago, so my life changed from then on. I suffer with post-traumatic stress disorder and then I had to go to the Children and Family Unit* [NHS Mental Health Provision] *and then they've helped me from then on and then I'm still going to see them and then I got bullied in a play scheme that I was in and stuff like that …* (Jade A, F, 16)

Research has indicated that experiences of bullying may be heavily influenced by peer perceptions of 'difference' (Elgar *et al,* 2009), which appeared to be borne out in the data gathered for the present study. For example, '2Pac' (M, 14), who was a relatively tall and slim young person, described on-going problems related to his peers' response to previous problems with his weight: "I didn't have many friends 'cos I got bullied 'cos I was really fat. I still get bullied for being fat." Experiences of bullying seemed equally prevalent amongst young women and young men, which was consistent with research suggesting that there is no particular gender bias in terms of frequency or seriousness of bullying (cf Sourander *et al*, 2000).

Accounts of being victims of 'bullying' might be perhaps best understood in the context of evidence suggesting that 'urban youth' are subject to increasingly high rates of community violence (cf Gorman-Smith and Tolan, 1998; Bell and Jenkins,

1993). In the present study, stories of 'bullying' often included serious physical assaults. Jade A's account stood out as a particularly brutal example:

> *… I just went down to see the trains and I said to my Mum, 'oh look at this train', and then this girl come up to me and she just basically just said, 'oh you've called me so and so, a slag' and then she just dragged me across the floor, literally by my hair, I had my hair down. So she just dragged me across the floor and punched me at the side and my Mum kept saying to her, 'what're you doing, that's my daughter' and then she got punched, I got punched and I was, in my kidneys, I got two black eyes …* (Jade A, F, 16)

Jay Jay (17) reported that he had been hospitalised in one instance of community violence: "I got jumped there by two lads, got a bike, put it on my head, started stamping on the bike and that." As a result, he was afraid to go into certain areas of his locality. The consequences of experiencing bullying appeared to be particularly far-reaching when compounded by other 'vulnerability' factors. Alicia was bullied in one of the care homes she lived in:

> *In the end I ended up running away and being homeless and they wouldn't find me anywhere else to live because I was getting bullied this children's home.* (Alicia, F, 16)

Alicia slept in a tent for one month during this period of homelessness, at the age of 15.

Like Alicia, six other young people had experienced being homeless as single 'young adults' (rather than as children within their family units). Of the six, most had lived in hostels as they waited for their own tenancies, or had spent periods sleeping at the houses of friends and relatives. Such stories highlighted that in instances where young people sought independent living this was seen as a necessity rather than something aspirational. Mostly, decisions to pursue independent living arrangements were driven by family breakdown or abuse from parents, as has been highlighted by other research (Monfort, 2009; Randall and Brown, 2001; Fitzpatrick, 2000). Brook (F, 16) felt she could not live with her family due to not getting on

with her stepfather and had moved into an adult women's hostel. There had been several incidents involving the police as a result of conflict between her and her stepfather. Chris (M, 17) had experienced physical abuse from his father, who had also threatened to kill him. Independent living was in most cases characterised by 'making do' with difficult living arrangements of various forms, but these were in most cases preferable to living with parents or other relatives.

One other theme to emerge from young people's stories was bereavement, which tends to now be considered an issue of significance in young people's 'development' (McCarthy, 2006; Corr and Balk, 1996; Thompson, 2002). Kotaa (F, 12), John (M, 16), Alicia (F, 16), Stephanie (F, 16) and Brook (F, 16) all mentioned that deaths of family members or friends had been connected to major difficulties in their lives. John (M, 16) explained that the death of his uncle had been a shock: "I just wasn't ready for it... I just wasn't ready and I didn't handle it very well at all". Sometimes young people had experienced several bereavements in close succession. Kotaa (F, 12), the only Romany Gypsy young person interviewed in the study, had lost her uncle and her father within two years, which she identified as key turning points in her life. For both Kotaa and for John, coping with death was linked with a behavioural change, as Kotaa explained, "I started running away from home when my Dad died 'cos I felt that it were people in my house's fault." Research on the implications of bereavement in young lives suggests that experiencing the death of a loved one may particularly increase the 'vulnerability' of those who may already be 'at risk' for other reasons (Thompson, 2002; McCarthy, 2006), as seemed to be the case in the present study.

6.1.4 Transitions

Transition is arguably one of the most researched areas of 'youth', and has been extensively chronicled from various different perspectives (see Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Irwin, 1995; Henderson *et al*, 2006; Social Exclusion Unit, 2005). Transitions which were prominent in vulnerable young people's narratives seemed to relate to four key areas: (i) moving house (either within the city or within the UK – often both had been experienced); (ii) moving to the UK from abroad; and (iii)

moving schools. Each is now considered in turn along with some more general comments about transitions.

Almost uniformly across the sample, young people had experiences of moving a number of times. Moving was a particularly notable theme, discussed in relation to moves within the care system (6 interviewees), moving to the UK from abroad (3 interviewees), and moving to a different city, town or region within the UK (9 interviewees). Brook (F, 16) described how she had moved within the case study city five times, commenting "I've been about a bit, haven't I?". Whereas Brook joked about this, other young people acknowledged more serious consequences (see 8.1.2). The prevalence of moving house is perhaps unsurprising given that there is some evidence to suggest that the most disadvantaged families are those most likely to move around a lot (cf Gasper *et al,* 2010). There was sometimes a sense that moving house was a response to the housing system or other aspects of the welfare system. Keith's story was one example:

> *I've been at my nana's for the past five years, but I've had like a couple of month of that because she couldn't get me into – well she got me into school, but she couldn't get help. You know like things I needed, like benefits and stuff like that. 'Cos I'd come from one area and moved straight into another area without letting them know, they couldn't do it all straight away. So she had to send me back to my Dad for a couple of month.* (Keith, M, 16)

Another reason indicated for young people's moves seemed to relate to the fracturing of family units. Interviewees would often discuss having lived with different members of their family after or during the breakdown of parental relationships or during periods where their parents were struggling to cope in one way or another.

Five young people in the sample had moved to the UK from abroad. These young people had often moved several times since arriving in the UK, to different towns and cities, and also appeared to have moved around extensively within the case study city. Difficulty in leaving family members and friends behind in the country of

origin was cited as the most difficult aspect of moving to the UK, along with not being able to speak English. Anna (F, 12), who had moved from Lithuania at around the age of nine, explained:

> Anna: *when I come to England, it was difficult 'cos I can't even talk, I can't understand what somebody talks, and I just stay at home, and after, my Mum was talking better than me, but now she can't talk better than me* [smiles]
>
> Kate**:** *You're really good now, aren't you. And were you scared when you came?*
>
> Anna**:** *Yeah I were really scared. When we go to the airport and we were waiting for the aeroplane I was really scared and I was crying 'cos I didn't want to leave my Dad.*

Anna had not seen her father since she had moved to the UK three years ago, but hoped to see him the following year. Starting school in this country also seemed to be particularly stressful for young people who had moved from abroad. When I asked Elle, who had moved from Eritrea, what her first day at school in the UK was like, she explained:

> *…it was scary 'cos it was our first day and yeah, I couldn't speak much English at that time, so yeah, it was hard.* (Elle, F, 14)

Moving home was often experienced along with moving to a different school. Life stories largely supported the existence of a connection between moving house and periods of absence from school (Haveman *et al*, 1991; Grumen *et al*, 2008). Peter Schmeichel (M, 16) had attended several schools as a result of moves within the care system, which had caused major problems in terms of absence:

> *I were with* [High School A] *and then I went into foster care. Then moved to* [city in the Midlands] *and then moved back. Went to – spent six months out of school or eight months out of school – then went to* [High School B]. *'Cos*

I'd been out of school that long, I wasn't up to it, so they put me on

[Specialist off-site education provision]. ('Peter Schmeichel', M, 16)

Transitions within the care system were a particular theme which will be further considered in Chapter 8 (see 8.1.2). As well as periods of school absence, moving schools was most commonly reported to cause problems in terms of peer groups and making new friends:

… once you move you have to start all over again, make friends and just get to know everyone. It's like a game, once you just get something new and start again. ('Jeremy Clarkson', M, 15)

Bullying (see 6.1.3) was also often mentioned alongside the descriptions of moving schools.

Generally speaking, young people recounted childhoods characterised by a series of what might be viewed as substantial transitions in various areas of their lives. This supports broader research which has indicated that that 'socially excluded' or 'vulnerable' young people in particular face an increasingly uncertain world (Johnston *et al*; 2000; MacDonald *et al*, 2005). Yet it was not unusual for complex stories of movement and transition to be covered with brevity:

I got adopted when I were four. I stopped with my Mum when she were taking Heroin and my Dad were in prison at the time and they couldn't look after me. And then my adopted place was broke down when I were 12, then my Mum died when I were 11… 11. Then it broke down when I was 12 and I went to live with my grandma, my birth grandma. And from living with her I went into care (Alicia, F, 16)

A tone of acceptance was present in many of the young people's descriptions of substantial transitions they had experienced. Generally speaking, 'vulnerable' young people appeared to feel as if such transitions were an inevitable or familiar part of their experiences of childhood and youth, but this is not to say they did not see certain difficulties or problems as associated with them (see 8.1.2).

6.2 Transgression and vulnerability

The connotations attached to the concept of vulnerability would perhaps lead to the assumption that 'vulnerable' young people might behave in ways that are seen as submissive or timid (see Chapters 2 and 3). The life stories of vulnerable young people brought such assumptions about the concept of vulnerability into question. At the same time as being 'vulnerable', many of the young people reported 'transgressive' or 'problematic' behaviours[36]. One of the central aims of this thesis is to investigate what happens in instances where vulnerable young people are also deemed as needing to be socially controlled (see 1.3). Therefore young people's narrative accounts of 'transgressive' activities or experiences were particularly interesting for the researcher to explore, and are given consideration here.

6.2.1 Transgressive behaviours reported by young people

Analysis suggested that 'vulnerable' young people's 'transgressive' behaviours centred around three overlapping areas: criminal activities (such as theft, assault, criminal damage and the use of prohibited drugs); behaviours usually considered 'anti-social' (being present on the streets, congregating in groups); and aggression and/or violence, often described by young people in terms of their 'anger' or 'attitude'. Any categorisation of young people as 'transgressive' (or not) is likely to be imperfect, but by way of an overview, 12 young people in the sample of 25 discussed these 'problem' behaviours. Seven young people reported that they had been excluded from school either temporarily or permanently, seven young people reported heavy use of drugs and/or alcohol, eight had been disciplined within the youth justice system, two had been sentenced to periods in Youth Offending Institutes (YOIs) and one had been served with an ASBO and had also spent time in an adult male prison.

Criminal behaviours which 'vulnerable' young people had been punished for within the youth justice system ranged from lower-level matters such as criminal damage through to serious crimes such as burglary and physical assault. As one example of a

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[36] For further details about the sampling methods in relation to 'vulnerability' and 'transgression' see 4.4.2.

case of offending, Jay Jay (M, 17) had received a YOS sentence after threatening his girlfriend:

> Jay Jay*: It were, I did something stupid 'cos I were on, I were on Facebook and one thing led to another with my, with the person I were going out with at the time, this lass, she was talking about my Mum. And she knew how to click my buttons and stuff, so.*

> Kate*: Your Mum? She was talking about your Mum?*

> Jay Jay*: Yeah. And she got me angry and then I went up and I did criminal damage, holding an offensive weapon and threatening to kill.*

The criminal behaviours reported by vulnerable young people firmly challenged notions of vulnerability which imagine 'the vulnerable' as those who are behaviourally compliant or 'weak'. Findings suggested that young people seen as vulnerable could also be involved in criminal activity which would be deemed highly transgressive:

> *I used to be shoplifter, innit, and then I thought, well, I might as well just sniff better drugs and go out and do stupid things for stupid amounts of money. So I just… if you leave an iPod in your car, there's a very, very high chance that iPod will be gone if you don't lock it up, stuff like that, just stupid things* (John, M, 16)

Table 6.2: Criminal behaviours described by young people

Young person	Criminal matters disclosed	Background information
Alicia (F, 16)	Shoplifting, Class A drug use (Heroin)	Caught for stealing tanning wipes from a shop and a television from a children's home
Brook (F, 16)	Violence, drunk and disorderly, Cannabis use	Interviewee linked violence with domestic violence incidents at home
Hayley (F, 16)	Assaulted Police Officer	During dispute between family and ex-boyfriend
Jay Jay (M, 17)	Criminal damage, possession of weapon, threats to kill	Incident with ex-girlfriend after contact on Facebook
John (M, 16)	Theft (drug-related), use of a range of class A drugs	Heavy user of Mephedrone ('MCAT'). Used to shoplift and steal from stationary cars.
Keith (M, 16)	Theft, criminal damage	Stole from his grandma on regular basis to fund Cocaine use.
Scott (M, 18)	Burglary, assault, use of a range of class A drugs, assault (various), drug running (Heroin), shoplifting, theft, skipping train fares	Offending began aged 9 with sale of Heroin. Interviewee had received treatment for a range of mental health issues. He had also been served with an ASBO.
Wadren (M, 17)	Arrested but not prosecuted for rape	Ex-girlfriend pressed charges and later dropped them.

Most of the young people who talked about using drugs and alcohol mentioned their drug use in relation to offending:

> *… I got in trouble 'cos that was the first time I ever robbed money off my nana for drugs. And I got a 12 month Supervision Order which that just left getting breaches and like I say, 'cos I took more money. So they gave me so many chances and I blew my last chance.* (Keith, M, 16)

A causal relationship between drug use and offending behaviours is often assumed, yet the evidence in this area remains decidedly unclear and the relationship may well be more complex (see Monaghan, 2011). However, there was no doubt that drug use and crime were related in the minds of those young people who talked about drug use, and particularly in young men's discussions of their offending.

Non-criminal behaviours which might also be considered as 'transgressive' or which might commonly be described as 'anti-social' were also reported in some interviews. Two young men identified themselves as being part of 'gangs' (Scott, 18 and '2Pac', 14), although '2Pac''s account suggested that this experience was short-lived:

> *… I told my Mum what happened actually and she's like right, you're not going out there anymore, you have to be home by six o'clock every night. 'Cos I used to stay out till like ten. And it's like you're not going out any more, you be home at six and once you're grounded you can't see your girlfriend, that was worse, the thing about seeing my girlfriend. So I managed to pull out of that in the end.* ('2Pac', M, 14)

Several other young men described being involved in the sort of low-level nuisance behaviours which are generally considered to be 'anti-social':

> *There was a fire, not a house fire, just like a normal fire in a barrel by this, by a block of flats, loads of people were doing it. So we got two more barrels by this barrel and we just made it like a triangle and we were all just stood round there cause it were freezing cold and they* [police] *came and put it out* (Wadren, M, 17)

Scott (M, 18) was the only young person to have been formally disciplined for his anti-social behaviour. He had been served with an ASBO and a £280 fine following incidents in a nightclub, which was issued in parallel to criminal charges relating to other issues.

Transgressions amongst 'vulnerable' young people were to some extent gendered in nature. Research has highlighted the gendered nature of 'anti-social behaviour' (see Brown, 2011a) with some arguing that this can be understood in terms of Connell's (1987; 183) ideas about 'hegemonic masculinities'[37] (Deuchar, 2010).

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[37] Connell (1987) argues that particular types of masculinities related to physical prowess and power are more dominant than others within certain social contexts.

Whereas behaviour considered 'anti-social' and/or criminal was reported by more young men in the sample, more young women reported running away:

> *I'm always running out of my house and going with older people and coming home like… once I ran away for like seven days, with this girl and that, all the police were looking for me and they found a dead body in the canal and they thought it were me* (Naz, F, 14)

Absconding from home or from care tended to involve the young person being exposed to high risk situations, which research has highlighted is often the case in instances of 'running' (see Rees and Lee, 2005; Stein *et al*, 1994):

> *I've just come back from Scotland 'cos they had to take me up there because of my behaviour. I was absconding twice a week, just came back, stoned, been prostituting, stood on corners* (Jess, F, 15)

This was also the case for young men in the sample who reported running away. Scott reported a period where he was regularly absconding from a residential care home to stay with a group of Asian men who gave him somewhere to sleep, Cocaine and a job in a takeaway.

Anger, aggression and/or challenging behaviour emerged frequently in the narratives of the more 'transgressive' young people in the sample, but also extended into the stories of 'non-transgressive' young people in a small number of cases. Descriptions of anger and aggression were prevalent amongst both young men and young women, commonly described by the young people in terms of their 'attitude':

> *I just, my attitude against the teachers and staff, and just running away, didn't do any work, and ended up punching the staff, throwing chairs out the window.* (Jess, F, 15)

> *Bad behaviour and getting stoned in school. I think I walked into school drunk one time with my mate, which is probably not the best thing to do.* (Brook, F, 16)

As highlighted in other research, anger issues were often seen by young people as especially problematic for them in relation to their participation in the education system (see Bottrell, 2007). Aggression or temper problems had in some cases led to exclusion from school, either temporarily or permanently:

> *I think my first exclusion was in Year Seven because I used to just bully teachers and then – I don't know, I think it was more the attention thing – it was like 'cos I'd been so quiet through primary school it was finally I could shout out and, I don't know, I got something out of it.* (Hayley, F, 16)

Anger was frequently described as problematic in the context of structured environments, particularly in relation to managing interactions in such settings:

> *It's like a classroom innit and it's like loads of students and that so it's like they'll be at everyone else and then you'll get frustrated 'cos you won't know what to do – And then the teacher takes their time coming over to you and that so I just get stressed out and then I end up walking out lessons and things like that.* (Stephanie, F, 16)

> *… my Mum, like, taught us, like, if somebody hit you, you hit them back and, like, if you don't wanna do it, don't do it. And so, if you get into care, it's completely different. It's like if you don't do it, you have to do it.* (Charlie, F, 16)

As has been highlighted in other studies undertaken with 'disadvantaged' or 'problematic' young people, there was a sense that interviewees did not tend to excel in mainstream schools (see Cole *et al*, 2001; Cooper, 1993). Many of the young people in the sample reported a preference for smaller class sizes and specialist teaching units, and the majority had experiences of these settings.

Stories of anger and challenging behaviour were commonly told about circumstances where young people felt shame or a loss of status:

> *I used to mess about a lot but if someone like has a go at me I won't stand there and take it. I won't let people shout at me, you know, so I used to get*

in trouble a lot 'cos I'd mess about and then when people tried to tell me off I would like shout back and stuff. (Mackenzie, M, 16)

Scott was able to offer substantive insights into his experience and emotions in this respect:

Scott: *I don't know. It's just – I don't know why I'm so angry. It's like I flip out at the slightest thing. Like someone could look at me wrong or someone could talk to me wrong, and especially if I'm getting laughed at, I hate being laughed at, and I don't know, it just makes me angry.*

Kate: *Why do you think you hate being laughed at?*

Scott: *I don't know. Just embarrassed. You get embarrassed when someone's laughing at you. It's like a normal reaction. Everyone does. But I just take it more. My image is everything to me. Like, I don't know. If I don't feel clean that day, I won't go out and stuff like that because, I don't know, I'm paranoid. I am paranoid. It's alt' drugs I took and all the batterings I've had and stuff and I am paranoid about everything. I don't know. I have to look good. I have to look all right. I have to feel good. I have to – my mouth has to – I don't know, It's weird things, I have to look in the mirror and see if I look all right to go out that day, otherwise I won't go out, and it's just – I don't know. And people look at me on the bus and I think they're just looking at me and my bird says to me, 'That's ok. They could be gay. They could like it. It doesn't mean they're looking at you because they want to fight you and stuff'. But obviously –*

Kate: *Or just a bit – some people just stare at you, not even for any reason do they, on the bus, it's like –*

Scott: *That's what I <u>mean</u>, but I take it wrongly. I think, 'oh, this top looks bad, or these jeans look horrible' or something and I'll just think that all day. And I'll actually go home and work myself up that much that I go home and get changed.*

The above quotation clearly illustrates a link between anger and aggression, 'vulnerability', mental health issues and 'problem' behaviours, which has also been highlighted in research undertaken with young offenders and young people who are involved in 'anti-social behaviour' (Fryson and Yates, 2011; BIBIC, 2005; Goldson, 2009). Such inter-relationships are explored further in 6.2.2.

Of the young people that described some sort of 'transgressive' activities in their life stories, the majority implied that they were on a trajectory towards more compliant and conformist behaviours. This was consistent with other research which has indicated that young people 'grow out' of transgressive behaviour as they grow older and experience increased responsibilities (Rutherford, 2002 and also see Henderson, 1994; Jessor *et al*, 1993; Squires and Stephen; 2005). Contrary to populist constructions of young people as taking pride in their problematic behaviours (see Brown, 2011a), the young people who were interviewed were inclined towards thoughtful and reflexive accounts of their transgressions. Jess' (15) behaviour had deteriorated rapidly when her father started sexually abusing her, and she expressed how unhappy her own behaviour made her:

> *I hated myself for it. It was the only way I could share how I felt because I couldn't talk to my Mum, I couldn't sit down with my Mum and say how I feel. So I had to show how I felt in different ways.* (Jess, F, 15)

There were exceptions in this respect. A small number of young people seemed in the most part to be unrepentant and un-reflexive about transgressions they relayed. Wadren (M, 17), who had been reprimanded for an assault on his ex-girlfriend, admitted that he had physically restrained her and indicated that he saw no problem with this:

> *When me and* [girlfriend] *got together,* [ex-girlfriend] *said I raped her and all these things. I got arrested for that but then she said she lied about it so they let me go no charge or nothing. Excuse me* [yawns]*… and then she went to, what did she do? She started spreading rumours about me saying a load of shit like I'm crap in bed and all these things and I was like '[ex-girlfriend],* *I'm not really bothered. You're a little tramp'.* (Wadren, M, 17)

Naz (F, 14) was the only young person who seemed at least partially to take enjoyment in the rule-breaking behaviours she had engaged in. She talked excitedly about an incident where she had been expelled from school:

> *I've been excluded now, I'm not allowed back in. 'Cos me and this girl threw milkshake all over the teachers office and everything. And we're always skiving and just not going into our lesson when teachers are telling us to go into it and stuff, and we just walk out of school and stuff.* (Naz, F, 14)

Young people may well be inclined to give a different account of their transgressions depending on whom they are relaying this information to and the 'impression' they may be trying to create (see Goffman, 1959 and 1963; Brown, 2011a). Nevertheless, most young people demonstrated sensitivity and reflexivity as they discussed behaviours that would be considered 'problematic'. Indeed, 'problem' behaviours were most often discussed in terms of their link with difficulties, challenges and problems – or so-called 'vulnerabilities' – a relationship which we now move on to examine in more detail.

6.2.2 Relationships between vulnerability and transgression

At policy level, pervasive binaries can be argued to characterise the governance of young people's lives, where young people are either constructed as 'vulnerable victims' or 'dangerous wrong-doers' in situations where they transgress (see Such and Walker, 2005; Fionda, 2005; Muncie, 2006). That this dichotomy is ill-matched with the complexities of young people's experiences has been highlighted in research carried out with young offenders (Goldson, 2002a; Jacobson *et al*, 2010), and was underlined by the life stories of young people in the present study. 'Vulnerable' young people's descriptions of their lives revealed a complex inter-relationship between patterns or instances of transgression and the presence of 'vulnerabilities' or multiple disadvantages (see 6.1):

> *In 2009, I was abused by my Dad and that was when I got my social worker. They tried to get me a foster home, but because I didn't want to stay there, my behaviour got bad. That's when I was selling sex.* (Jess, F, 15)

When I was home I'd get stressed out a lot cos I just I'd be either cleaning or babysitting. And it used – I used to get annoyed and that with myself and then I'd take it out in school. My temper out in school and that – (Stephanie, F, 16)

There were numerous other examples of this inter-relationship. 16 year old Alicia had been involved in selling sex, had been a Heroin user in the past and had been prosecuted for shoplifting. She discussed how she had got involved in some of these 'transgressions': "my Mum took Heroin so I wanted to know what was so good about it". Keith (M, 15), who had spent time in a YOI for offences related to his heavy Cocaine use and theft, explained how his life started to move towards behaviours considered 'anti-social':

Because [Dad] *were an alcoholic, he were beating me up every day, well not every day but it were like every time he didn't have a drink. So obviously I were roaming the streets 'cos he were drinking all the time.* (Keith, M, 16)

Jay Jay (M, 17) talked about his "anger problem" in the context of his experience of being sexually abused. He still had to see the perpetrator regularly, and no action had been taken after Jay Jay reported the abuse:

One day I will turn round and I will hit him because I'm... he doesn't know how much it hurt me for him doing that 'cos I thought he were really a good mate of my Mum's and he'd never do nowt like that. And that's what scares me 'cos I know I've got a bad anger problem and that, and I will turn on him. I know I will. (Jay Jay, M, 17)

Empirical evidence suggested that rather than 'vulnerability' and 'transgression' being mutually exclusive states, 'vulnerability' in the context of young people's lives might be best be understood as symbiotically and intrinsically linked with 'transgression' in many cases.

Scott's case seemed to illustrate this inter-relationship particularly vividly. Scott (M, 18) reported the greatest range of difficulties or 'vulnerabilities' in his childhood (see Table 6.1), but he was also the young person with the most prolific offending

history in the sample. Here he describes how he got involved in serious criminal activities at the age of nine years old. Readers may recall from earlier in the chapter (6.1.1) that Scott's Mum had been a Heroin user and had frequently sold his belongings to pay for drugs:

> Scott: *This guy that I know who was on the street was kind of a mate. I went to school with him and stuff. He said to me, 'Oh, I can get you a job innit' because I was moaning because he had fresh trainers on and I said, 'They're boom, them trainers.' He said, 'Oh yeah, yeah, I'm getting fresh clothes, me.' I said, 'Is your Mum buying them?' He went, 'Nah, nah, nah, me, I'm buying them. I'm buying them.' I said, 'How are you getting that?' He said, 'I'll get you a job if you want.' I said, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah', thinking that it was just going to be something dumb or something. Obviously I'm nine, but I had the mind of a fifteen-year-old when I was nine.*
>
> Kate: *In what way?*
>
> Scott: *I had to grow up quicker than … quicker than anything. I don't know, he just said, 'Do you want to do it?' He said, 'All you've got to do is...' and he gave me these wraps. Obviously they're wraps of Heroin. I didn't know they were Heroin. He said, 'All you've got to do is, when the phone rings, go and meet them and tell them where, or they'll tell you where they want to meet you and you go and meet them.' And I used to just put it in my mouth, walk round with it in my mouth, and then I'd spit it on the floor when they come, I used to just spit it on the floor and I'd be sly about it. I got away with it for a while and then the drugs squad came down on me…*

Scott had recently assaulted a GP whilst intoxicated on the drug Mephedrone. He had repeatedly burgled houses, committed street robberies and also reported that whilst using steroids heavily he had assaulted a man "and proper nearly killed him and everything". He disclosed during the interview that he continues to "work" or "go out making money" (illegally) on the streets. At the age of 18, he had already been incarcerated twice. Alongside such transgressions he reported chronic and multiple disadvantages; recounting experiences such as abuse from his parents,

serious mental health issues from an early age, sexual abuse whilst in care, homelessness, parental drug use, parental criminality and growing up in poverty. Tendencies for 'vulnerable' young people to be seen as less 'vulnerable' where they displayed transgressive behaviours (see 5.4) would appear to be particularly significant in cases such as Scott's. Due to his age (18) and also the seriousness of his offences, Scott would be unlikely to be considered as 'vulnerable' in some respects, even though his life story (see Appendix F) would indicate that his childhood involved dealing with problems which were amongst the most multi-faceted and extreme across the sample.

If taken as an independent subject of study, young people's stories of 'bad' behaviour could be alarming, casting the story tellers as delinquent or even perhaps 'amoral', and as posing significant dangers for others in society. Seen in the context of the young person's life story, accounts of transgressions might be understood differently. To draw on the example of Scott's story again, parts of his narrative were troubling in terms of the risks he apparently posed to others:

> Scott: *Say you're trying to knock someone's teeth out, it's just a buzz. And then when they hit you back, I don't know, you just get that nice feeling. It's a good feeling. It feels good. It sounds weird that.*
>
> Kate: *Can you say about why it feels good?*
>
> Scott: *It lets out something. It lets out something that's inside you. It lets out a feeling that's been inside you for a long time. And when you fight, it's like more of that feeling is coming out. So it means that you feel fresher. Even though you could be bruised and cut open the next day, you don't feel as angry because you're letting all that anger out and it just feels good... sometimes... It's better than just keeping it bottled up. But, also, you can't keep fighting all the time. That's what I keep getting told. So I'm trying to stop.*

Kate: *So when I said, 'Oh, you were lucky to get away with it'* [referring to superficial bruising and cuts rather than serious injury], *you've sort of got a buzz from it so you sort of don't mind that you've got the –*

Scott: *I've got big scars on my arms and that where I've been attacked with knives and stuff because, I don't know, I've been in* [housing estate in city] *and I've been on my own and I've still looked for a fight. I don't know, I like being on the floor getting booted in the head sometimes. I don't know why it is. I think it's how my Mum – with my Mum, innit. My therapeutic team told me this. They said, "Oh, when you were a kid, they say you get used to violence because you brought up around violence", and they said, "You get used to getting battered. So you still crave, sometimes, to get hit." And because my Mum and Dad just hit me quite a lot when I was a kid and that, I don't know, I think that's why I still like to get hit sometimes.*

Bottrell (2007) argues that for young people from inner city housing estates, transgressions function as resistances which are important to create a positive identity, and are seen by young people as necessary in the context of their marginalisation. Taken in isolation, Scott's continued assaults on others and robberies constitute serious crimes, but set within the more detailed contextual picture of his 'vulnerability' and the adversity he had dealt with, these are perhaps less easy to dismiss as simple 'wrong-doing'. Hayley (F, 16) had self-harmed regularly in the past. A counsellor had helped her to develop strategies to stop hurting herself, but since this, her behaviour in school had become more difficult for others:

Ever since then I've just been angry 'cos I don't take it out on myself any more, I take it out on everybody else. So I suppose I'd rather be excluded from school than all cut up. (Hayley, F, 16)

Jess, who had been sexually abused by her father explained:

My behaviour was showing them because if I told them what had been happening, then it would all just kick off, like a big fuss. So I found my own way around it. (Jess, F, 15)

That young people might perceive certain 'rewards' as well as 'risks' as attached to behavioural transgressions has been noted by researchers (Hayward, 2002; Hagan, 1991; Bottrell, 2007). Appreciation of this view did not appear in the interviews with informants (Chapter 5), which may indicate a point of divergence in the views of young people and professionals. Chapter 5 highlighted that for professionals, resistance on the part of young people often led to them being seen as less 'vulnerable'. Yet the current chapter has indicated that such resistances may be understood within a broader context of coping strategies, and that young people may see these as necessary in order to deal with the challenges and difficulties they face.

6.3 Imagined futures

'Disadvantaged' young people's aspirations have been given extensive attention in government policy and in the academic literature (see Barnes, 2011; Brown, 2011), which might best be understood within the context of the promotion of active and responsibilised neo-liberal citizenship ideals (see 1.3 and also Raco, 2009; Clarke, 2005). Many studies have highlighted an increasing array of complex and 'non-linear' progressions into adulthood (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; McDonald *et al*, 2011; MacDonald *et al*, 2005; Johnson *et al*, 2000), and yet young people's imagined futures would seem to have remained relatively conventional in nature (Barry, 2001; Croll *et al*, 2010).

As discussed in Chapter 4 (4.4.7), young people's 'imagined futures' are considered to offer important insights into their social worlds and outlooks on the societies in which they live (Nilsen, 1999; Brannen and Nilsen, 2002; Devadason, 2008; Winterton *et al*, 2011). Some writers engaged in research about 'imagined futures' have argued that young people may lack understanding of the ways in which structural conditions and opportunities may affect their future lives (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002; Devadson, 2008), however, there was evidence in the present study

that vulnerable young people were aware of such potential constraints. The structural forces which young people saw as underpinning both their past, present and future are less of a focus here as they are a key focus for Chapter 8, which also considers how young people saw their 'vulnerability' as mediated. This chapter focuses more on biographical details of young people's views of their futures.

Despite governmental concerns about the limited aspirations of 'vulnerable' or 'disadvantaged' young people, research has indicated that this group are inclined to see education as a way to secure a better future (Bottrell, 2007; Croll *et al*, 2010). Almost all young people in the present study saw attending college as something that would be important for their future, often envisaging themselves achieving vocational qualifications rather than studying the more 'academic' subjects. Four young people aspired to go to University, of which two were very concerned that the fees might be something which affected their ability to do this. 'Jeremy Clarkson' (M, 15) now intended to be a mechanic because going to university would be too expensive. '2Pac' (M, 14) also expressed concerns about the costs of university education, but felt it was still necessary: "To do anything, I have to go, even though it's got to nine grand a year. So it's now 27 grand". It is perhaps worth noting that '2Pac' appeared to have considerably more access to material resources than 'Jeremy Clarkson', who was living in a homeless hostel. Research has indicated that those from less well-off social groups are much more likely to be deterred from going to university because of their fear of debt than those from other social classes (Callender and Jackson, 2005; Forsyth and Furlong, 2000; Connor *et al*, 2001).

Employment was another core concern for the majority of the interviewees. Imagined future professions were highly gendered, as has been consistently highlighted in other research (Francis, 1996 and 2002; Kintrea *et al*, 2011; McDonald *et al*, 2011). Young women mainly aspired to work with children or as hairdressers and young men predominantly saw themselves as learning a recognised skilled trade or doing a sports-related job (see Table 6.3 below). Keith (M, 16), who wanted to be a hairdresser and Brook (F, 16), who wanted to teach sport, were notable exceptions. Both of the young people who saw themselves as working in highly skilled 'professional' jobs were from the same Eritrean family; Elle

wanted to be a doctor or a pharmacist, Sam planned to become a civil engineer. Indeed, other research has indicated that most minority ethnic children tend to have higher aspirations than their White British peers, particularly in the case of those who have moved to the UK from abroad (Strand, 2007; Fuller, 2009; Morrison Gutman and Akerman, 2008).

Table 6.3: 'Vulnerable' young people's imagined professions

Imagined profession	Young people
Supporting 'disadvantaged' children	Stephanie, Jess, Alicia, Jade A, John, Mackenzie, Naz
Working with children	Hayley, Laura
Skilled trade (mechanic/plumber etc.)	Scott, Jay Jay, 'Jeremy Clarkson', Mackenzie
Highly skilled professional (engineer/doctor etc.)	Sam, Elle
Hairdresser	Keith, Charlie, Mercedez
Celebrity	Anna, Jay Jay, Kotaa
Sports professions (teacher/coach/physiotherapist)	Brook, 'Peter Schmeichel', '2Pac'
Army	Chris
Catering	Jade B
Paramedic	Wadren
Unsure	John, Jess, Scott

'Celebrity-influenced' aspirations were evident in some of the narratives. Jay Jay had a "back-up" strategy of being a plumber, but aspired to become a famous singer:

> *Yeah, I proper love it. I went on X Factor last year but didn't get through. 'Cos I hit, I like, I was singing Ronan Keating, but the note I hit at the end like, I like lasted it longer than I should have done, except I sang the song really well and I would have got put through if I didn't put that last bit of the song on.* (Jay Jay, M, 17)

Other young people indicated that although they desired celebrity status, they felt that it was unlikely they would achieve it. Wadren's (M, 17) dream was to play for Manchester United, but he said this was "never gonna happen". As has been noted in other studies, most of the young people's desired careers were more 'realistic' in

their nature (Kintrea *et al*, 2011; Brown, 2011). In some instances, aspirations had been moderated based on both positive and negative life experiences. Brook, who was due to start a Saturday job coaching children in sport shortly after the interview, explained:

> *I always wanted to be a policewoman at first, till I got arrested. No, even after, I still did wanna be one. But then I realised that I was good at sport and I've always known that, and people have always told me that, so when I got all of these things out of the Academy and that, I just thought I might as well just go for it. So that's what I'm doing.* (Brook, F, 16)

John (M, 16) had wanted to be a dentist, but as he had not attended school for some time he felt that he would not achieve the necessary qualifications so had decided to study youth work at college instead.

A significant number of young people wanted their future employment to involve supporting 'disadvantaged' people. They saw their life experiences as equipping them with insights which would be valuable in such settings. Although Jess' main goal was to have children at 16, she wanted to work helping young people afterwards:

> *I think I can help people with what I've been through sort of thing. So I know what they can have to deal with and I can help them all sort of thing. Like 'cos I saw how much like Miss P* [a teacher] *and stuff helped me so I wanna like do the same thing for others.* (Jess, F, 15)

Work and employment tended to be seen as connected to achieving financial security. Alicia (16) wanted to be employed by the time she was aged 18. 'Peter Schmeichel' (M, 16) wanted to be a football coach, but also indicated that he was more interested in financial reward than vocation. Scott (M, 18) hoped for a "steady job" and for him, his girlfriend and any children to be "living well". In some instances employment was seen as a route for securing material goods:

I want nice things in my life so I know I'll have to work for them, so just a job really and so I can buy a nice house and have things that are nice that I want. (Alicia, F, 16)

As in Alicia's narrative, the desire to purchase a house was commonly mentioned.

Evidence overwhelmingly indicated that the young people's aspirations were structured by powerful normative assumptions about marriage and children (cf Thompson and Holland, 2002):

I see a nice car and a nice house. I see one of those, you know, one of those cheesy American, like the cheesy English American lives that, like, nice big house, nice wife, nice kids. That's cool. ('2Pac', M, 14)

The only exception was Naz, (F, 14), who said that children "did her head in" and that she did not want to get married: "I don't like it [marriage]. I like me friends". In some cases, future family scenarios were envisaged with a significant level of detail and consideration, perhaps indicating that young people had given their futures serious thought:

I know this sounds really childish, but I can still see me and my boyfriend staying together because he's got a wise head on and he ain't like all other knob heads and I've got a wise head on, and we're not like one of them couples who do piss about. And he eventually will get the, you know, finish his college and then get a job and I will, like a year after. Eventually we'll keep having holidays and whatever, but eventually, because he'll be doing mechanics, he'll get his own car, get his own, and then eventually we'll move into a house, hopefully. Our house. Then if it's all still going well, settle down and have kids. We'll still have fun.

Both Brook (F, 16) and Jay Jay (M, 17) said that they wanted their children to "look up" to them. Jay Jay thought this would be achieved if he was "a good father figure, like someone, like, say I own my own business or I'm a big singer and stuff like that." When I asked him the sort of qualities that would make him a good father figure he explained: "Well, be generous, happy, like always thinking of good things,

not bad." Several interviewees indicated that they wanted their children to have better childhoods than they had experienced themselves, particularly in terms of family stability.

Perhaps a more surprising theme to emerge was the desire to travel, which appeared in eight of the 25 interviews. To be able to have holidays often seemed to young people to be closely associated with the achievement of a suitable disposable income. One of Alicia's (F, 16) main goals was to pay for herself to go on holiday. Jay Jay (M, 17) wanted to have a wife and children and "have a bit of money behind us so we can go away and that". He wanted to go to "Cuba or Barcelona, somewhere like that". There was also a sense that holidays were opportunities for new experiences and leisure. For his first holiday, Keith wanted to go to "Magaluf or Ibiza", because he was "more of a party person". Some young people who mentioned travel also said that they had not yet travelled abroad. Brown (2011) argues that a desire to travel is often articulated by young people from social classes where parents and grandparents have travelled extensively. Findings in the present study indicated that such aspirations could also be found amongst young people where this had not been the case.

Some young people struggled with the task of imagining their futures. Their aspirations indicated that they were much more focussed on immediate and present day concerns:

> *You can't predict your future can you? So you don't know what's going to happen until you reach that age or you just take what comes to you through life.* (Keith, M, 16)

John (16) was heavily involved in drug use and mainly saw a future where he would "stop raving". He was unsure about the age to which he would live to, so found 'imagining' his future to be difficult:

> *I was taking enough drugs to kill me easily at any particular day, like on a stupid day. So I used to think I wasn't going to live, I wasn't even going to*

> *live 'til I'm 30 but I think I'm probably going to live a little bit longer than*
>
> *that now, at least sixty-ish.* (John, M, 16)

Kotaa said that she wanted "a modelling career and I want my Mum to be alive when I get married", which connected with earlier experience of the death of her father and her uncle, which had been very difficult for her. Scott (M, 18) was very concerned with finding a job. He also wanted to desist from criminal behaviour, as he felt this got him into too much trouble; "I need to get into boxing or something… so I'm not paggering heads [fighting] on a weekend and that".

Generally speaking, more cautious or pessimistic futures represented the minority view. As is consistent with other research on the aspirations of disadvantaged young people, there was a positive tone to the narratives of the young people's imagined futures, indicating an optimistic outlook (see Brown, 2011; Kintrea *et al*, 2011). However, the age range of the young people is a factor to consider here, as some studies have indicated that as they get older, 'vulnerable' young people can be particularly prone to losing faith that they will achieve their goals and hopes (Princes Trust, 2011). Overwhelmingly though, despite the challenges which they had faced, most 'vulnerable' young people perceived their futures with optimism and also determination. For Hayley (F, 16), it was the need to achieve her goals independently which was her most important ambition:

> *I could have so easily just done something purposely to get locked up and*
> *just go into prison for, what, three months and come back out and get a flat*
> *given to me, money given to me, everything and not have to do anything.*
> *But I don't want to do that, I don't want to be one of them lazy people. I*
> *want to live a life and go to uni and do what normal people do. I want to,*
> *like, prove all my family wrong, the people that just dropped out, like, here, I*
> *just want to show them all. When they come back to me and say, 'Yeah,*
> *you've done it,' I'll be, like, 'Yeah, without you.'* (Hayley, F, 16)

It has been argued that some young people employ optimism as a technique to help them to mitigate adverse circumstances (cf Garmezy, 1991; Benard, 1991),

which seemed plausible given the significant difficulties which some of the young people had experienced.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted certain experiences and aspirations which appeared significant in the life stories of young people who are considered 'vulnerable'. Vulnerable young people had faced numerous and complex difficulties, both within their family contexts and also as independent individuals. Empirical findings showed that many of the young people also behaved in ways which were criminal or 'problematic'. Thus, young people's narratives brought into question assumptions which appear to underpin notions of vulnerability that connect the concept with ideas about passivity or weakness. Vulnerable young people's experiences indicated that a more nuanced understanding of vulnerability would perhaps acknowledge that people's responses to difficulties, challenges and 'vulnerabilities' may often involve transgressions of behavioural norms. In other words, 'vulnerability' in the context of young people's lives might best be understood as symbiotically and intrinsically linked with (rather than exclusive to) 'transgression'. Empirical evidence suggested that vulnerable young people dealt with differentiation and marginalisation in differing ways, including resistance and conformity (cf Bottrell, 2007).

Despite governmental concerns about the aspirations of 'disadvantaged' young people, it would appear that, on the whole, vulnerable young people saw positive and relatively conventional futures for themselves. Whilst there were some young people who found it difficult to discuss their aspirations in a context of working hard to manage the challenges of day to day existence, most of the 'vulnerable' young people in the sample demonstrated substantial reserves of optimism despite the significant adversities they had encountered. Findings presented in the present chapter related the more biographically-orientated aspects of young people's views of their futures. The structural constraints which young people saw as underpinning both their past, present and future are the focus for Chapter 8, which also considers how young people saw their 'vulnerability' as mediated by people, social systems, processes and interventions. Before this attention to more structural concerns,

however, we turn to young people's understandings of their 'vulnerability', and views of this classification.

Chapter 7: Young People's Understandings of Vulnerability

Whilst 'vulnerability' has come to play a significant role in policies and practices which intervene in the lives of certain groups, how supposedly vulnerable people might respond to this classification is rarely given consideration. This chapter seeks to make a contribution in this area. It considers how 'vulnerable' young people understood vulnerability and explores their responses to, and experiences of, being classified as vulnerable. Vulnerability was a notion which all of the young people in the sample were able to connect with and respond to. In a small number of interviews, young people were unfamiliar with the word 'vulnerability', so in these instances the concept was discussed in terms of various proxies such as 'difficulties' or 'difficult lives' (see 4.4.7). Although rare, a small number of young people spontaneously employed the term 'vulnerable' to position themselves, before being asked about vulnerability directly.

In Chapter 3, we saw that ideas about vulnerability are most often applied by those in more powerful positions to define those in less powerful ones (see 3.3 and also Chambers, 1989; Parley, 2011). This leads to questions about whether elements of stigma or labelling may be involved in demarcations of who is vulnerable, and such issues are addressed in this chapter. More broadly, the chapter aims to develop understandings of vulnerable young people's sense of 'identity' or ideas of self[38]. This exploration is undertaken according to an understanding of 'identity' as something fluid, multiple and subject to continuous reassessment (Goffman, 1959; Giddens, 1991), as well as contingent on the political, social, economic, ideological and interpersonal conditions of the situations in which people find themselves (cf Hall, 1996; Bhavnani and Phoenix, 1994).

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[38] 'Identity' is a much-researched, complex and contested concept within the social sciences. Some writers are critical of tendencies to conflate 'identity', 'self' and 'self-identity' (Lemert, 1994), but for present purposes these three terms are all used interchangeably to denote the 'practices of self-constitution, recognition and reflection' (Hall, 1996; 13).

The chapter has four main sections. It begins with an exploration of the various meanings that 'vulnerability' had for young people (7.1). It then moves on to consider whether interviewees positioned themselves within a frame of vulnerability, and if so, how (7.2). Attention is given to young people's perceptions of the implications of being classified as 'vulnerable' (7.3). Finally, more general comments about the 'optimistic' ways in which young people approached their identities are included (7.4). Generally speaking, interviewees were resistant to notions of themselves as 'vulnerable'. Young people saw the classification as either an entry point for social control but also as beneficial in terms of offering a gateway into additional support services. More generally, young people's understandings of vulnerability indicated that it is a socially and culturally constructed concept, with a relative dimension.

7.1 The meanings of 'vulnerability' for young people

For the young people interviewed, vulnerability was largely associated with personal weakness or with some sort of deficit-orientated state of being. Although the small numbers involved in the study mean that any interpretation should remain tentative, a young person's gender and ethnicity appeared to influence the ways in which they understood vulnerability. Across the sample, young people's views of what it meant to be vulnerable were linked to notions of blame, culpability and responsibility, which to some extent resonated with practitioner understandings (see 5.4.1). The concept of vulnerability could sometimes have multiple connotations for young people; again in keeping with practitioner understandings (see 5.1). Indeed, young people's conceptualisations may to some extent have been informed or influenced by practitioner understandings, particularly where interviewees were aware of instances where they had been classified as vulnerable.

7.1.1 Vulnerability as lack of self-determination

In the literature which considers 'vulnerability', it tends to be widely acknowledged that the concept is heavily laden with implications of deficiency (see Chapters 2 and 3). Such negative connotations were mirrored in young people's understandings of the notion. Instances of young people connecting vulnerability with anything

positive were limited, and it was generally associated with naivety or a lack of self-determination. Although John (M, 16) felt he was vulnerable in some ways, mainly related to his substance use, his resistance to being thought of in this way was based on his sense of active agency: "I can be very, very strong minded. It just depends on what subject. I can think for me sen [myself]." The idea of vulnerability as being related to the capacity to take control of one's own life appeared in several other young people's interviews. Chris' response to the young woman in the video vignette (see 4.4.7) was as follows:

> *I don't think she's vulnerable … She was six years old, she faced tough challenges. She knows how life has things. I don't think she's vulnerable. She can sort herself out.* (Chris, M, 17)

In several instances young people discussed vulnerability in terms of how far a person's "head was screwed on". Sometimes this sense of the concept was linked with an ability to reject various 'temptations' such as sex or drug use:

> *… I think* [someone's vulnerability] *depends what kind of stage you are at in your head, whether you can walk away from something like or say 'oh yeah, I'll do that'.* (Alicia, F, 16)

In Scott's (M, 18) case he saw that he had been vulnerable almost became he had too much self-determination, due to a sense that he "had no leads" when he lived with foster carers:

> *I had no one telling me what to do. They weren't my real parents, and I could tell them that. I could just turn round and say, 'You're not my real parents'. I could do whatever I wanted, I felt I could. I was vulnerable enough to do whatever I wanted, and that's what I did. I don't know. I was chillin' with the wrong kind of people when I was in there and started getting myself into robbery and stuff like that to obviously make money* (Scott, M, 18)

This quotation would seem to indicate that for Scott, the concept of vulnerability was associated with a process of social marginalisation.

7.1.2 'Difference' and understandings of vulnerability: gender and ethnicity

Lacking the capacity to deal with malign influences from a third party is one of the most prevalent understandings of vulnerability which appears at policy level (Chapter 3). That 'vulnerability' connected with a lack of capacity to protect oneself seemed to resonate with the understandings of young people. However, there was a strong gender dimension to the forms which third party malign forces were seen to take. In young men's narratives, being 'vulnerable' was frequently related to a lack of physical power:

> *It's like how you can back yourself up and that 'cos if you're vulnerable people will take the mick out of you, and you just have to tell 'em about yourself.* ('Peter Schmeichel', M, 16)

> *I'm vulnerable because I keep thinking in my head I'm losing my reputation now. It's like I went out the other night and no one ever used to start on me because — I'm not saying I'm a big dog and that – Look at me; I'm tall and skinny. I don't think I'm hard or owt. I've got a name for myself though.* (Scott, M, 16)

Physical prowess and the ability to deal with confrontations was sometimes implied to be the antithesis of vulnerability. Connell's (1987) idea of 'hegemonic masculinities' is again useful here (see 6.2.1). That young men tended to understand 'vulnerability' in this way may reflect that, in certain communities, 'traditional' masculinities associated with physical power, aggression and anger might be pursued as a coping strategy (see Deuchar, 2010; Karner, 1998). There is some evidence to suggest that young men in urban environments may face particularly high risks in terms of being victims of 'community violence' (Gorman Smith and Tolan, 1998), which may be related to 'hyper-masculine' identity constructions. Asked if he thought he was vulnerable, '2Pac' explained:

> *Not as much but it depends on the situation really. If I'm like out and about in town then no, not really, because obviously I did tai kwon do for three*

years and then karate for two years and I did a little bit of boxing in between that, so I can defend myself pretty well. ('2Pac', M, 14)

Whereas vulnerability was most often seen as a 'masculinity-deficit' for young men, it tended to be associated with the sexuality of young women. When asked what she took 'vulnerable' to mean, Charlie (F, 16) replied, "Easy to, like, use", wording echoed in many other interviews. The ease with which interviewees saw that young women could be "taken advantage of" appeared often. Female vulnerability was sometimes associated with socialising and situations where drugs might be used. Resonating with official concern with the 'vulnerability' of young women who are 'sexually exploited' (see Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009; Barnardos, 2011; Phoenix, 2012a), some young people understood the sexual vulnerability of young women to be related to them dealing with a lack of financial security: "Anyone can give her money and stuff or do summat, to have sex with her and stuff" (Naz, F, 14).

Such gendered understandings of 'vulnerability' echoed practitioner understandings of the concept (see 5.5). Gender-orientated vulnerability constructions might relate to a wider context of longstanding traditions of highly gendered care and control practices within society which focus on the potentially threatening behaviour of boys and the 'promiscuity' of girls (Goldson, 2004; O'Neill, 2001; Hudson, 1989 and 2002), dating back to the nineteenth century (Shore, 2002). Just as interviews with informants indicated that gendered imaginings of vulnerability had implications for how the institutional gaze fell upon young people (5.5), this was also evident in the interviews with young people. Alicia (F, 16) felt that 'vulnerability' tended to be a classification applied to young women rather than young men:

Alicia: *… women are seen more as vulnerable than men, aren't they?*

Kate: *What makes you say that?*

Alicia: *They just are. I don't think I've ever heard of someone saying 'he's a vulnerable lad' ever, but I've heard loads and loads of people say 'oh, she's a vulnerable girl' and all this. But never, like with workers and things, have I heard 'oh, he's a vulnerable lad'. Maybe because lads like do the wrong thing, don't they, like, I don't know. They probably think 'lads can look after themselves'.*

The idea that young people were sexually vulnerable was not exclusively applied to girls. Two young men indicated that malign third-party sexual predators were a risk to both genders. Jay Jay (M, 17) understood vulnerability as "Vulnerable to, people, like, men - stuff like that". Scott (M, 18), who had been sexually abused whilst in care, related vulnerability to "wanting to be liked". Both of the young men who seemed to associate vulnerability with sexuality of young people (rather than female sexuality) had been sexually abused. More sexuality-based understandings of vulnerability were particularly apparent in the narrative accounts of those three young women who had experience of selling sex or 'favours' and the four young people who had been sexually abused.

An alternative meaning attached to 'vulnerability' in some interviews was that it related to opportunities in life, most frequently expressed in relation to success (or lack of) at school. Again, to some extent this mirrored the understandings of some practitioners (see 5.1.2). It appeared that views of vulnerability as a lack of educational achievement or success were most apparent in the narratives of the young people who had moved to the UK from abroad or who were from black and minority ethnic families. 'Jeremy Clarkson' was of British Bangladeshi heritage and explained vulnerability as follows:

You find that some like in my class that are smart or something, I, I don't think they could have huge problems 'cos like they're getting their grades, they're getting good education so they can get into Uni but obviously if someone else that, that are taking drugs and stuff and is not concentrating then they have big problems more with them get in the way to go to college

or they might not get a place in college something like that. ('Jeremy Clarkson', M, 15)

The number in the sample was too small to draw conclusions about this, but it could be that how young people understand vulnerability might be shaped in part by wider cultural factors, or that awareness of the notion might be linked to specific group positionings.

7.1.4 Multiple meanings and general precariousness

In some cases, young people indicated an understanding of vulnerability that was particularly illuminating and nuanced in terms of meaning. Rather than seeing 'vulnerability' as tied into one particular 'type' of deficit, some young people conceptualised the notion as a more general precariousness. Keith (M, 16) said that vulnerability "comes in all different shapes and sizes". Kotaa (F, 12) used the metaphor of a boat to describe how she saw vulnerability:

> *It's like for example say you have a boat and then 'cos you're so close to your Mum and stuff it starts to rock 'cos you're taken away from her and then it starts to rock a bit more because you don't know anything and you've been taken to a different country then it starts rocking even more and then you get pregnant at a certain age.* (Kotaa, F, 12)

Young people's conceptualisations of vulnerability often seemed to offer insights into the challenges they had faced or were currently facing in their own lives. Keith (M, 16) explained the 'vulnerability' of the young woman in the video-vignette as follows:

> *She looks like she's gone through loads, but it depends dunnit on her background. It can feel lots but then it depends doesn't it on what it is. It could be her father doing all wrong to you. Or doing stuff like that. It could be any family problems, it could be drugs, it could be sexual nature behind it. Or it could be all, could be reasons for someone dying in the family. Or your mother just can't cope at the time. Or she's that stressed out she can't cope with you and she's not looking after you properly. She says that 'I can't look*

> *after her' and stuff like that. And she's willing to pay for stuff that she needs*
> *and stuff like that.* (Keith, M, 16)

Given details which had emerged in Keith's life-mapping activity (see Appendix F), I wondered how far his imagining of the 'vulnerability' of the young woman in the video vignette was informed by his own experiences. He had been heavily involved with drugs, had experienced bereavement, and his mother had given up custody of him. How interviewees considered 'vulnerability' appeared to offer insights into the variety of threats or difficulties which they encountered in their social worlds. In imaginings of vulnerability, there were often references to relationships not always being equal in power; difficulties arising from this; the need to carefully convey an impression of strength in order to stay safe, and the management of emotional strains connected to difficult life events.

7.1.5 Risk, culpability, blame and vulnerability

Reviewing the literature related to vulnerability indicated that 'vulnerability' and 'risk' can be seen as conceptual cousins (see 2.4). In policy arenas, 'vulnerability' tends to be ascribed to populations who are 'at risk' or 'a risk' in some way, with the two concepts frequently used interchangeably (see Chapter 3). This inter-relationship was evident in young people's understandings of vulnerability. John (M, 16) implied a sense of vulnerability closely related to danger of harm or 'risk':

> Kate: *So in what ways do you think that you would be vulnerable?*

> John: *I can be a bit slack sometimes; I can get myself into some stupid*
> *situations too easily. I just, sometimes I don't really think and just take drugs*
> *instead.*

The literature review suggested that one key difference between the terms 'risk' and 'vulnerability' related to how vulnerability is more strongly linked to a construction of an individual as *not to blame* for the circumstances they have found themselves in (see 2.4). Young people's understandings of 'vulnerability' hinted at this too. In Scott's case, notions of his 'vulnerability' were drawn upon as context for his offending history:

… it all started — I don't know. I started going to that kind of big life of crime when, basically, I left my Mum and I was in care because I was vulnerable and that. I didn't really want to be in there, so I was running all the time. And every time I ran away, I was getting into trouble. (Scott, M, 18)

Here we see the use of the concept of vulnerability functioning as a kind of discursive 'get out of jail free card' (see 2.2.3 and also Brown, 2011b: 318)[39], which was also present in practitioner understandings of the concept (see 5.2.3).

Young people's various conceptualisations of vulnerability were almost always framed within understandings about young people's 'culpability' and 'agency'. When asked their views on whether people in particular situations were vulnerable, interviewees tended to assess how far 'choice' had been exercised. Discussing the vignette of the young offender, Alicia said:

No I wouldn't say he's vulnerable. I think he's got… well he chose to sell Weed [Cannabis]*, didn't he? So he made that decision himself, it's not someone else saying it to him why don't you sell weed or trying to like persuade him to do something like that, he's made that decision on his own to do that.* (Alicia, F, 16)

In discussions about 'vulnerability' and 'transgression', young people were apparently largely in agreement with what might be understood as 'rational-actor' configurations of offending behaviour, which tend to dominate government policy and public understandings of young people's transgressions (Goldson and Muncie, 2006; Hopkins Burke, 2008; Smith, 2003). As Brook explained:

… he chose that life. So if he chose it, like he said there, he had fun doing it, so no, I've got no sympathy for him. The other lass I had, but not him. She didn't choose that life. She had to do that. She got forced, if you like. He didn't get forced to do that. He was in school. He had an education. He

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[39] I have used the term 'get out of jail free card' as a phrase to summarise ethics analysis from writers such as Goodin (1985) who have argued that vulnerability status transcends the degree to which people have themselves to blame for their circumstances.

> *spoke English. He's English. So, you know, he made life bad for himself.*
>
> (Brook, F, 16)

'Rational-actor' views of transgressions were not simply deployed in relation to views of other young people's vulnerability. References to 'choosing' behaviours appeared in descriptions of their own circumstances too. Scott (M, 18) considered himself as vulnerable and also as exercising considerable agency at the same time:

> Kate: *So you saw yourself as vulnerable when you were in care because some of your behaviour was bad?*
>
> Scott: *Yeah. I chose that though. I chose to do that. I did it for the money. I didn't do it because I wanted to be liked. I didn't give a fuck what anyone thought about me. I did it because I wanted money. I wanted to get my money.*

This suggests that interviewees shared broader societal attitudes towards vulnerability as related to the idea of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' citizens or individuals, a theme which is further developed in Chapter 8 (see 8.5.4).

Despite unambiguous judgements about blame and transgression, discussions of vulnerability often exposed tensions in how young people made sense of culpability and victimhood. When Charlie (F, 16), a young person who had offended in the past, was asked about whether 'young offenders' were vulnerable she answered: "I don't think they're vulnerable. They're just stupid. Well, they might be a bit vulnerable. I don't know." John (M, 16), a drug users who had been involved with the YOS, also seemed to feel conflicted about 'blame' as he discussed the young offender in the vignette:

> Kate: *Do you think that he would be vulnerable?*
>
> John: *I'd have to class him in this situation as a 'no' because he got addicted to something… I suppose he is. If he is that addicted, he is vulnerable. But if he's going out of his way, dealing drugs, then I suppose he isn't vulnerable*

'cos if he's well enough to go out and deal drugs, he's well enough to sort his life out.

Where they were asked to make judgements about the vulnerability of young people who had transgressed behavioural norms, interviewees frequently commented that they found this "hard". This could perhaps indicate a certain level of ambivalence towards their own transgressions. One potential explanation for this might relate to the confused societal attitudes towards young people's capacity for decision making and culpability as actors or 'agents' (Goldson, 2002a; Goldson, 2006; Fionda, 2005).

Although young people mostly saw vulnerability as shaped by a capacity for limited decision-making, there were also instances where vulnerability was seen as beyond an individuals' control (see 7.1.6). There also seemed to be a point at which young people considered that the seriousness of the circumstances meant that despite the part an individual had played in the risk situation developing, they were 'vulnerable' regardless of their life chances and choices. The video vignettes could elicit such understandings:

> *He had good parents, he didn't come from a background, a really bad background, he decided to go in, to get involved with those type of people, it was his choice, no one made him do that. He could've said no and walked away from them and not get involved in that sort of thing. Whereas I think now, I think he really does need someone to help him and just give him a little bit of encouragement and support, a little bit.* (Jade A, F, 17)

> *He could be* [vulnerable] *now but he wasn't - it's his own fault for it. But he could be now 'cos obviously he's in trouble with the police and they might want to change that but he shouldn't have got – he shouldn't have started in the first.* (Mackenzie, M, 16)

Goodin's (1985) theory of the ethics of vulnerability is perhaps useful here. Goodin (1985:129) argues that at the point where an individual's opportunity for self-help has passed, this is when people are uniquely and most vulnerable, as this is the

point at which others possess most power and ability to prevent harm to them. This, he argues, is where the transformative potential of the concept as a vehicle for social justice lies.

Those academics who have been more critical of the way that 'vulnerability' as a concept functions in social policy and welfare have argued that the label is sometimes used as a by-word for dangerousness (see 2.2.3; Warner, 2008; Moon 2000; and this is also touched upon in the present author's previous work). A sense of vulnerability as intimately linked with transgression and individuals being *a risk* as well as *at risk* appeared frequently in the discussions with young people. '2Pac' saw his vulnerability as something indicative of potential for violent or aggressive behaviour: "they [peers] go on about my Mum and that's when it turns a bit vicious. So that's where I'm most vulnerable." Wadren (M, 17) seemed to understand vulnerability as almost synonymous with criminal behaviour. When I asked him why he thought the young man in the video vignette was vulnerable, he answered: "That the fact that he dealed drugs before and he'll do it again". It was also common for 'vulnerability' to be seen as a label:

> Alicia: *I think they just give loads of kids that name in care, 'vulnerable'.*
>
> Kate: *Go on…*
>
> Alicia: *I don't know I just think they do give it loads of kids… like, say they're vulnerable, even if they aren't.*

Some young people indicated resistance to 'vulnerability' on the basis of its operation as a 'label', yet others had responded to this classification positively, which is explored further under 7.2.

7.1.6 The social construction of vulnerability

Within the academic literature on 'vulnerability', some writers have argued that rather than being seen as an innate characteristic, vulnerability should be viewed as 'socially constructed' (see Chapter 2 and also Wishart 2003; Fineman, 2008; Butler, 2004). Such writers understand 'vulnerability' to be universal and mediated by the state and the institutions of society (see 2.1.3 and Brown, 2011b). Echoes of this

idea were often present in young people's discussions of their own vulnerability, where it was imagined as contingent on systems which were in place to help either themselves or others deal with challenges and set-backs. Again, this represented certain similarities with professional views of vulnerability (see 5.1.5). Jay Jay (M, 17) stayed for most of the week with an elderly couple whom he helped to look after. He did not have very much contact with his parents (see Appendix F). He saw his vulnerability as shaped by the support networks around him:

> Kate: *… if workers did say that you were vulnerable, would you agree with them?*
>
> Jay Jay: *I would agree and I wouldn't agree. I would because I've, I ain't got a lot of family behind, I have got a lot of family behind me, yeah, but I never hardly talk to my really close family. And I aren't vulnerable because like the people who do look after me, they're the ones what'll stick by me and don't let ought happen to me do you know what I mean?*

The idea that vulnerability was in some way mediated by society appeared in 18 of the 25 interviews undertaken with young people.

This appeared to represent something of an ambivalent view of 'agency' when compared to accounts of 'transgressions' (see 7.1.5). Even where transgressions were judged harshly, within the same interview there were often comments that indicated an understanding that young people's vulnerability could be 'structural', or due to patterns of disadvantage and lack of opportunity. Although Scott indicated that he had 'decided' to commit crimes, he did not appear to extend the 'rational-actor' model to all young people:

> Scott: *It's the kids out there that are born on council estates, born into a gang and have to choose whether to live or die, they're the people that you've got to feel sorry for, people that have got no choice.*
>
> Kate: *Do you think they're vulnerable?*

> Scott: *Yeah. They're born into a life of crime. Of course they're going to be vulnerable...*

There were also frequent indications that young people saw vulnerability as something which varied over time as support systems altered. Some young people indicated that they felt that vulnerability status was contingent on past situations. John (M, 15) felt that whilst vulnerability was related to decision-making, "your past also changes that decision". For Keith, life experience was central to his understanding of vulnerability:

> *It depends on your history of your life and stuff like that. So you could have had the best life that you've ever had, but something bad could have happened one day and your vulnerability is changed and stuff like that. So it's all the history of your life.* (Keith, M, 16)

Such views move beyond 'individual' understandings of vulnerability towards more 'universal' ideas about vulnerability (see 2.1.3). How young people saw 'vulnerability' as reduced and/or augmented by social systems and structures is given further consideration in Chapter 8.

7.2 Young people's responses to vulnerability classifications

In most of the interviews there was resistance from young people to the idea of themselves as 'vulnerable'. The majority rejected their ascribed vulnerability status altogether, and discussions revealed that being 'labelled' in this way could incite feelings of anger and resentment. Others felt that they were vulnerable *to a certain extent*, or that they had been in the past or could be in the future, but were not currently. Only two young people saw themselves as vulnerable without qualification. Particularly interesting in terms of how far young people identified with notions of their vulnerability were those who recalled experiences and stories of being explicitly classified by services as 'vulnerable', which was the case in seven of the 25 interviews.

7.2.1 Resistance to vulnerable identities

Across the literature on 'vulnerability', concerns have been raised about the potential for the concept to function as a problematic label which encourages assumptions about particular groups as being weak and passive (Lein, 2009; Wishart, 2003; Hollomotz, 2009; Parley, 2011). Certainly amongst the young people interviewed there was some evidence of resistance to notions of vulnerability on this basis, and that vulnerability classifications applied to them was something which young people frequently objected to on the basis that that they were capable of exercising high levels of agency:

> *… if my mates are doing like MCAT* [Mephedrone] *or something like that, I'm easily persuaded to take it, if they're going 'oh come on, take it'. But then I think in my head that's my decision, everyone makes decisions like that every day, but it dun't mean your vulnerable it just means that you've made a decision to do something like that.* (Alicia, F, 16)

In Brook's (F, 16) case, the deficit-orientated nature of the term seemed to be her main objection to being seen in this way:

> Kate: *Some workers might call you vulnerable. What do you think about that? Do you agree with them?*
>
> Brook: *No. I don't, no.*
>
> Kate: *Why not?*
>
> Brook: *'Cos no-one wants to think of themselves as vulnerable, do they? I think I'm perfectly fine.*
>
> Kate: *What makes you say nobody wants to think of themselves as vulnerable?*
>
> Brook: *Because the word 'vulnerable', it sounds like you're a self-harmer or summat, doesn't it? …'Vulnerable.'*

The 'label-quality' to the term 'vulnerability' seemed to be a particular focus for resistance:

Kate: *If a worker that you had said that they felt that you were vulnerable –*

Hayley: *I wouldn't like it.*

Kate: *And why's that?*

Hayley: *It means, like… you're not vulnerable, you're just different. To me, vulnerable means, like, that's personal. To me, it's like, I've put myself there, where other people have done it to me. So it's like fair enough I am vulnerable, but it's not my fault.*

Kate: *Yeah and you think it's almost like a personal thing?*

Hayley: *Yeah, it's not fair.*

That vulnerability was seen as 'un-masculine' (see 7.1.2) appeared to have particular implications in terms of how far young men identified with the notion. For Chris, who had felt vulnerable whilst he lived in homeless hostel for adult males, being classified as 'vulnerable' was experienced as posing more risk than it offered protection:

> *It doesn't feel good if you say 'vulnerable'. 'Cos what if someone listens, they* [workers] *say 'you're vulnerable', they* [other people] *can do anything – they get advantage.* (Chris, M, 17)

McLaughlin (2012) has argued that the ascendance of vulnerability as a concept in social policy has led to a rise in 'vulnerable identities' being taken on within contemporary society. However, evidence about young people's responses to their supposed vulnerability would lead to questions about how far 'vulnerable identities' have been accepted uniformly, and how different social groups might respond to vulnerability classifications.

Many young people saw vulnerability as something which applied to other people, but not to them. Several comments were made which implied that interviewees considered 'vulnerability' to be something extremely serious, and that this classification applied to people who were considerably worse off than themselves. Charlie felt that being in care was an "awkward situation" whereas being vulnerable

"is like someone living on the street and getting into crack [Cocaine] and stuff" (Charlie, F, 16). Young people frequently expressed a view that although they might have had struggles in their own lives, other people's situations were worse:

> *… 'cos all mine is like basically having to clean up and that I never got like never got hit or owt like that never got abused or anything like that so I'd be least at risk.* (Stephanie, F, 16)

That a young person can be considered vulnerable by official agencies and not see themselves in this way might well indicate that 'vulnerability' is a concept which is culturally specific. Indeed, interviews with key informants also suggested this (see 5.1.3). In the following passage, Alicia describes herself as "a little bit" vulnerable when she was involved in Heroin use and prostitution at the age of 14, which was in marked contrast to her keyworker's description of her vulnerability as "off the scale".   This was Alicia's response to being asked if she thought she was vulnerable:

> *I don't know. A little bit with Heroin, like he* [boyfriend] *were the only one that ever injected me and I wanted to make him happy by letting him do that. And I wanted to make him happy by getting money to get Heroin and things like that. So that's probably where I wor' a bit, but … I think the only reason I was vulnerable is 'cos I were like upset at that time and I wont in the right place in my head. If I had of been… like now, and someone came up to me and said oh do you want to do a bit Heroin, a bit of prostitution; 'no'.* (Alicia, F, 16)

Useful insights about the strengths and limitations of using relational concepts in social research and policy can perhaps be found in the literature on discourses of 'social exclusion' (see Room, 1995, Levitas, 1998; Young, 1999; MacGregor, 2003). Amongst other reasons, 'social exclusion' became a more popular concept within research and policy arenas in the New Labour period as it was believed to be less stigmatising than the notion of 'poverty'. However, as certain writers pointed out, those who were deemed 'excluded' rarely saw themselves in this way (Dean and Melrose, 1999).

7.2.2 Resistance and resilience: tension with others over 'vulnerability'

Resistance to being classified as 'vulnerable' revealed tensions between professional views of young people's lives and interviewees' own sense of their circumstances and behaviour. There was often a defiant tone when young people distanced themselves from professional views of their vulnerability, as in Charlie's (F, 16) interview:

> Kate: *What about if workers said that you were vulnerable?*

> Charlie: *I'd tell them to shut up.*

> Kate: *Why?*

> Charlie: *'Cos I'm not vulnerable. They just chat a load of shit*.

'Vulnerability' appeared to be connected in some ways to judgements about behaviour:

> *I think I'm doing well for myself, and if* [Social Worker] *just said that I was vulnerable, then it'd make me feel like I'm doing loads of things I shouldn't be.* (Charlie, F, 16)

Scenarios where the young people indicated negative reactions to being classified as vulnerable echoed practitioner views that young people were likely to object to notions of their vulnerability (5.3.3).

There was the impression given by some young people that they saw their vulnerability as dependent on the context in which they were asked to reflect upon it. For example, Hayley said that the nature of the relationship she had with the person calling her 'vulnerable' was important:

> *If it was a worker and, obviously, I knew her, like say – my CAMHS worker I wouldn't like it, at this age where I am now and I've learnt that I have got a voice, I'd probably kick off. Whereas with my* [counselling] *worker at* [college] *we had that better relationship, I'd probably go, 'Please don't call me that', and she'd find a different word.* (Hayley, F 16)

Alongside what could be quite fierce rejections of the label of vulnerability, young people sometimes indicated that a personal tension lay behind this. Although Jess (F, 15) said she would respond to being called 'vulnerable' by saying "I'm not vulnerable" and "walking off", she also indicated that something more reflexive would accompany this reaction:

> *I'd be questioning myself. And then I'd start crying 'cos I couldn't decide between the two sides. One side of me 'd be like 'am I'? and the other side 'd be like… I'd be questioning myself, but then I'd be reassuring myself.* (Jess, F, 15)

John (M, 16), who had been sectioned for his own safety due to his heavy drug use, said that people had told him he was vulnerable "all the time". Although he was resistant to notions of his vulnerability coming from staff within welfare services, to a degree he also accepted these in hindsight.

> Kate: *…what do you think your response* [to being seen as vulnerable] *would have been?*

> John: *Said that I ain't vulnerable, simple as, I'm fine, but, I would have been fine but if I kept on going the way I was going, it'd have been different. But I've got to figure it out for me sen* [myself]*, otherwise I'm not going to do it. I'm not going to do it for anyone but myself… I wouldn't see myself as vulnerable but if I took the time to look at it, I suppose I was…*

Ability to cope with difficulties was highly valued by the young people, and drawing on the concept of vulnerability seemed to some extent to undermine or invalidate their perceptions of their ability to do this. Mackenzie's (M, 16) response to his supposed vulnerability was one example:

> Kate: *If somebody said 'oh I think that your diabetes and the time out of school makes you a bit vulnerable' what would you say to them?*

> Mackenzie: *Probably maybe like the amount of time I had off of school 'cos obviously like doing my exams and that is harder for me like revising and*

stuff harder 'cos some of the stuff I don't know but that's – that were my

own fault so I don't want people to like feel sorry for me or owt 'cos I can still

cope with it.

That views about their own 'vulnerability' might depend to some extent on the context in which they were asked to acknowledge them appeared to be linked with resistances to 'official' involvement and perceptions of regulation. Bottrell (2007; 598) argues that whilst 'deficit positioning' of young people is popularly pursued by 'official' agencies and can provide opportunities for young people to access support, this may promote opposition amongst young people who she argues pursue these resistances as 'necessary identity work, given the context of their marginalisation' (p. 597). It may be the case that vulnerability-based constructions of young people's identity are likely to be rejected by those who are more inclined to use resistance as a way of managing in difficult circumstances.

7.2.3 Receptiveness to being seen as vulnerable

Alongside resistance to the idea that they were 'vulnerable', most young people also indicated that they saw themselves as vulnerable to a certain (qualified) extent. It was not unusual for young people to position themselves as 'vulnerable' *to some extent* at one point in the interview and then later indicate resistance to this classification. Quicke and Winter's (1994) argument that the way a particular label is received is to a large extent context-dependent is perhaps relevant here. There was sometimes a temporal dimension to young people's acceptance of their vulnerability; interviewees were much more receptive to the idea that they had been vulnerable at certain times in the past – or would be at points in the future – than that they might be 'vulnerable' in the present. Chris felt that he was 'vulnerable' when he was being physically abused by his family in Pakistan and in the UK:

I had no idea. I couldn't do anything, couldn't see anything. I just do what

they say. I don't know a thing. Then I had no idea what life was like, no idea

what to do. (Chris, M, 17)

However, his view of his situation now, as a young man of 17 who had recently moved into his own tenancy was that "I am absolutely not vulnerable at all". Hayley was about to leave full-time education, and felt she might be vulnerable in the future:

> *So I'd have no-one from here* [access project] *and have no Mum and no Dad and be on my own. I think I would be vulnerable then, especially with the past I've had as well* (Hayley, F, 16)

A sense of future precariousness is something which Emmel and Hughes (2010) argue characterises experiences of being 'vulnerable', and there were certainly echoes of this in the narratives of some young people.

Receptiveness to vulnerability status in some cases appeared alongside descriptions of criminal behaviours in the narratives. Vulnerability as a label was not necessarily always considered harmful or damaging, and indeed 'official' vulnerability classifications appeared to 'validate' young people's experiences in some instances. The way in which Keith (M, 16) discussed how his YOS worker applied a vulnerability classification to him appeared to indicate that this had altered his view of himself:

> Kate: *... when your worker said to you that you were vulnerable because of what happened with you Dad, what did you feel about that?*

> Keith: *I was shocked because I didn't know. I didn't see myself as vulnerable.*

The potentially beneficial implications of labelling have been noted by some disability writers, indicating that differential treatment can be positive (Gallagher, 1976; Riddick, 2000; Quicke and Winter, 1994). This is considered further in the following section (see 7.3). In considerations of how 'vulnerability' functions as a label, generalisations are best approached cautiously. There are many variables which would seem to influence how a particular label is received by a particular person (see Hargreaves, 1976).

When asked directly about whether they were 'vulnerable', only one young person responded without any degree of ambivalence or resistance. That was Mercedez (F, 15):

> Kate: *… if they said about you now, that you were vulnerable, would you…*
>
> Mercedez: *What, would I agree? Yeah, because I don't know what's coming up next. I don't know if my Mum and Dad are going to start drinking when this new thing's* [parenting programme is] *starting, which I can imagine happening, or I don't know - I don't know what's coming. I don't know if they're going to go down the right path and just recover, unlikely, or they're just going to go from drinking to drinking more and more. I don't know it 'cos that's down to them, not us.*

That Mercedez was entirely receptive to her vulnerability classification was intriguing. She was one of a small number of young people who had actively sought out support from agencies to deal with the problems she faced at home (rather than being quite strongly encouraged or compelled to seek help). She also saw her vulnerability as predominantly shaped by her parents' drug use; something outside of her control and which she judged harshly. This may have been a factor in how she framed and made sense of her difficulties.

There were two other young people (Wadren, 17 and '2Pac', 14) who stood out as *fairly* receptive to notions of themselves as vulnerable, although they still qualified this in some limited way.

> Kate: *If staff at services said that you were a vulnerable person what would you say to that?*
>
> Wadren: *In a way I'd agree with them because I suffer from a type of depression which is uncalled, unknown. I'm not in a fit state to be myself...*

'2Pac' saw his vulnerability as related to being bullied:

> '2Pac': [name of worker] *still does see me as vulnerable. He told me.*
>
> Kate: *Did he?*

> '2Pac': *And I'm like, 'I know I am' … He said 'look, I know that that part of your life's got to be quite vulnerable to people pinching there* [focussing on that]*'. 'Cos people do find it amusing, but what they don't find amusing is when I flip, 'cos it doesn't take much anymore.*

Wadren and '2Pac' were slightly different to other young people in the sample in that they both seemed to indicate that they had relatively higher levels of access to material resources. For example, whereas other young people quite often said they desired to own particular consumer goods, Wadren and '2Pac' spoke about owning items such as headphones, expensive mobile phones and fashionable clothing. Wadren said he was "spoiled" and '2Pac' pointed out that he "didn't live on an estate". They also seemed exceptional in that they appeared to display more of a sense of victimhood in their narratives. The extracts from the interviews given immediately above were examples of instances where I felt this to be evident. Whilst difficult to interpret through these individual cases, it seemed plausible that there may be a link between an individuals' socio-economic positioning and their receptiveness to vulnerability concepts. This possible explanation might consider the narrative of John (M, 16), who indicated his relatively privileged socio-economic background as the privately educated son of a GP and an academic. John did not display as strong a sense of victimhood about his circumstances, seemed to feel mixed about whether he was vulnerable or not, and appeared to perceive that he had enjoyed certain social and economic benefits during his childhood in relation to others. Taken together, a tentative explanation of these exceptions might be that 'vulnerability' is a relative and culturally constituted concept[40].

One of the most interesting aspects of how young people conceptualised their identities was their receptiveness to the idea that they had had 'difficult lives', in contrast to their resistance to 'vulnerability' classifications. Although Jay Jay (M, 17)

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[40] A further interpretation of these cases and narratives might be that those at the higher and lower ends of the socio-economic spectrum may identify with 'vulnerability' rather less than those who are positioned between them. Further research would be needed to test and refine this theory. Were this to be the case, there could be significant implications at points where welfare systems are particularly inclined to reward (or be less punitive towards) the effective 'performance' of 'vulnerability' amongst welfare recipients (see 5.4.1).

did not feel that he was vulnerable because he had people in his life who would support him if he needed it, when the question was phrased slightly differently, there was a different response:

Kate: *Do you think that you're someone who's had a difficult life?*

Jay Jay: *Yeah, very difficult life. Now I'm trying to sort myself here, coming here and getting some qualifications.*

Brook (F, 16), who was highly resistant to notions of vulnerability (see 7.2.1) was candid about how she saw her upbringing:

… in a way, like, I have been dragged up and I haven't had time to slowly see things and have a normal life. I've got a normal life but, yeah, I think I got dragged up really and that's why it's so clear now 'cos bad things like violence and domestic violence and that happened at a young age. (Brook, F, 16)

Again, understandings of difficulties were often constructed in relation to other people's lives and experiences, as in Kotaa's (F, 12) interview:

Kate: *Would you say that you're somebody who's had a lot of difficulties in your life to face that you've dealt with?*

Kotaa: *A little bit.*

Kate: *Yes and compared to other people?*

Kotaa: *A bit 'cos some people's life can be like harder but some people's life can be like a bit more secure you know what I mean?*

Kate: *Yes. So what would make you say that it's not as secure as some people's lives?*

Kotaa: *Like some people have Mums and Dads and some people's Mums and Dads don't argue and some people like don't have to move house and stuff like that when they're still young and when they start new schools more people go from that school with them.*

The way in which young people responded positively to the idea of themselves as having experienced difficulties, and yet largely negatively to 'vulnerability' classifications may well suggest that it is the deficit-orientated connotations of 'vulnerability' which young people would appear to object to. John argued that the concept of vulnerability was unhelpful in this respect:

> *… don't tell them* [young people] *that they're vulnerable. Find out why you think they're vulnerable first instead of just telling them they're vulnerable, 'cos they're gonna put up a block and go like, 'well no I'm not' … So don't just have a shot in the dark, with the word 'you're vulnerable'. You should try and figure it out first* (John, M, 16)

This raises questions about the deficit-based assessments which might be used in agencies who engage with 'vulnerable' young people (see 5.2.1). It may indicate that were assessment procedures to make use of more 'positive' conceptual tools, they might be responded to more favourably by young people.

7.3 The implications of being 'vulnerable': care and control

Some of the young people who were interviewed recounted direct experiences of instances of vulnerability classifications. Even where they did not, many still had opinions on what judgements about their vulnerability meant for them and how these might affect their daily lives. As Chapter 1 outlined, young people's lives tend to be managed in 'official' systems according to processes which are a mixture of care and control (see 1.2 and also Goldson, 2004). We might imagine that notions of vulnerability would be aligned with experiences of more 'caring' processes amongst 'receivers' of services, yet young people's narratives indicated a more complex picture. Vulnerability classifications could be experienced as a gateway to extra support or assistance, as an entry point for social control, or in some cases were experienced as a mixture of such processes.

Vulnerability classifications were certainly viewed as helpful in terms of gaining additional support. Jade A (F, 17), who had learning difficulties, felt that she was not vulnerable because of support from her friends and family, but she recognised that being seen in this way was an opportunity:

Kate: *How do you think you'd react if somebody said you did* [need special support]?

Jade A: *I don't know, I think I would, it would surprise me really. But I would, if it were there for me I would take it.*

Kate: *Would you?*

Jade A: *I would take it because then I know that I've got someone there that can help me. If it wasn't there in place, then you know, then I would just get on with my life.*

Keith (M, 16) relayed direct experiences of the way the YOS used 'vulnerability' in the assessment of young offenders and in determining interventions for this group (see Chapter 3; and also Youth Justice Board, 2006, Appendix 12: 7):

Keith: *I was vulnerable before I went into* [secure unit].

Kate: *Were you?*

Keith*: Yeah. They put me down as 'vulnerable' for some reason.*

Kate: *Did they?*

Keith: *Yeah. It were my YOS worker that told them to do it. I think my YOS worker didn't want me going into* [name of YOI] *or anywhere like that. So she said that I were vulnerable in certain ways. In how I wor', do you know, just certain ways in my life as being, stuff like that.*

Kate: *Can you remember what sorts of things?*

Keith: *My Dad beating me up, that's what made me vulnerable, my YOS worker said.*

Keith saw certain benefits in being classified in this way:

… you did have that little bit more support than other people did have. But it wasn't as much, but that little bit more support were better than no support

I thought. So alt' support I got while I were in [name of YOI]*, I took it all in.*

(Keith, M, 16)

Secure units tend to be viewed by practitioners in the youth justice system as offering a more supportive environment for young people than YOIs (see Goldson, 2002c). Accounts such as Keith's indicated practitioner discretion in classifications of vulnerability operated to mediate or 'soften' disciplinary responses to transgressive young people. Professionals involved in the assessment of young people's vulnerability in the YOS also offered insights related to this (see 5.2.3). That vulnerability classifications could be experienced as beneficial in how they provoked differential treatment is consistent with other work highlighting the potentially positive aspects of 'labels' (see Gallagher, 1976; Riddick, 2000; Quicke and Winter, 1994).

On the other hand, there was also the perception that being seen as 'vulnerable could entail stronger controls on behaviour. Naz (F, 14) was to some degree receptive to the idea of herself as vulnerable in situations where she was spending time with older men, often in their houses during periods where she had run away. She said that these men "could do anything … 'cos they might think that it's all right to do stuff". However, she felt it was important to conceal her vulnerability as far as possible from controlling influences, in order that she could keep taking risks she enjoyed:

Kate: *… if people were to describe you as vulnerable, how would it make you feel?*

Naz: *I'd say to 'em 'I'm not vulnerable and I'm all right and I'm safe, and I'm gonna go out' and stuff'*

Kate: *OK. Why?*

Naz: *I don't know, 'cos like, my Mum will carry on with me and stuff, like, say stuff to me and that*

Similarly, John (M, 16) indicated that certain behavioural restrictions could be associated with being seen as 'vulnerable':

> Kate: *Did anyone ever say you were vulnerable?*
>
> John: *Yeah, all the time.*
>
> Kate: *Did they? Can you give me an example?*
>
> John: *'We think you're taking too many drugs'. I don't know really, they just gave me a great big lecture on how I'm ruining my life … I've got so many good chances going for me and all I can do is take drugs, and not look at life and just drop out of college and put myself in vulnerable situations.*

That 'vulnerability' appeared to be connected in some ways to judgements about normative standards of behaviour was a recurring theme:

> *I think I'm doing well for myself, and if* [Social Worker] *just said that I was vulnerable, then it'd make me feel like I'm doing loads of things I shouldn't be.* (Charlie, F, 16)

If additional support was experienced as one aspect of 'vulnerability' status, social control was another. Yet for some young people these were seen as inter-related:

> Kate: *What do you think* [saying they are vulnerable] *means for young people, do you know?*
>
> Alicia: *They really are protecting them a lot more, or something like that, and they are - they don't get to do as much things - yeah.* (F, 16)

Alicia's judgement was informed by experience, as she told me that she had attended a "school for vulnerable girls" when she had been involved in selling sex. Whether it be experienced as a mechanism for care, control or both of these things, emerging from the narratives was a sense that the label of 'vulnerability' had practical effects on 'vulnerable' young people's lives.

7.4 Optimism, identity and vulnerable young people

As discussed above, resistance to vulnerability classifications did not mean that young people felt that their lives had been free from difficulties or problems. However, discussions of vulnerability with 'vulnerable' young people often suggested that they had a positive view of how they had dealt with life's set-backs and challenges. Experiences which many professionals would consider as harmful and damaging were consistently framed as having equipped them with valuable life skills:

> *So I'd seen it all. So now, by the time I've got to this stage, I know what's right and I know what's wrong.* (Brook, F, 16)

Relative maturity was cited by young people as a beneficial effect of what might otherwise be considered adverse life experiences:

> *... growing up and getting my house, I think that changed me a lot. Getting my own house, I grew up quite a lot when I got me own house. Like other people my age, like I look at like lads in my college, my age, and they're proper immature. And I think like being in care I think it makes you more mature as well and how to deal with things better.* (Alicia, F, 16)

This sense of 'growing up fast' was discussed in many of the interviews. Detailed reflections on life circumstances and what could be considered as somewhat complex and challenging life-courses seemed to support the notion that 'vulnerable' young people have a developed capacity for reflexivity about their lives and behaviours.

Even though some of the young people who were interviewed had experienced what might be judged as extreme hardship and injustice, the opinion that there were others who were worse off than them appeared time and again during the interviews. Chris (M, 17) had been taken against his will to Pakistan, where he lived for 6 years and was regularly beaten by his uncle. He had also fled from his abusive father in the UK, been homeless for a period and had recently secured his own tenancy. He explained:

People have even more difficulties than me. This might not be such a big thing. I've seen other people have more difficulties even worser than these. Yeah it's difficult, but not <u>difficult</u> difficult, I'd say. (Chris, M, 17)

Discussions of life's setbacks and challenges tended to have a distinctly optimistic tone. Hayley was homeless and was about to leave school. I noted in my research diary that her life circumstances seemed particularly concerning and precarious and her support workers shared this view. Although she was frank about the problems in her life and saw herself as potentially vulnerable in the future, an upbeat tone underpinned her account:

I see things as, like, positives and negatives now. That sort of calms … I don't look at the negatives, just think of the positive and it helps you pull through. Obviously, I'm getting a house soon; I'm on the waiting list, so I'm just looking forward to that. I've got college waiting for me in September, I've got – even though it's not ideal the way I see my Mum and my Dad separately and got to go over to my Mum's or to my Dad's and arrange everything first, but the relationships there are a lot better now. (Hayley, F, 16)

Anna (F, 12), also homeless but living in emergency accommodation, said that she considered herself 'least at risk' in comparison with groups of 'vulnerable' young people. This was because "something is [things in her life were] quite good. And if you like believe that it's gonna be good then it will be good." As was noted in the previous chapter (see 6.3), it has been argued that some young people employ optimism as a technique to help them to mitigate adverse circumstances (see Garmezy, 1991; Benard, 1991). Just as young people's imagined futures (see 6.3) highlighted determination and optimism, so did their attitudes towards the extent to which the saw themselves as 'vulnerable'. That positive outlooks and tenacity might be more commonly associated with supposedly 'vulnerable' young people's identities is a point which is reflected on further in the concluding chapter (see 9.3).

7.5 Conclusion

Young people's understandings of vulnerability were predominantly deficit-orientated. Interviewees conceptualised the notion in a number of ways: as lack of self-determination; weakness to third party influences; in relation to problems with education and in terms of general precariousness. Despite the small scale of the study, there were indications of gendered interpretations of vulnerability, with this concept being seen as related to the sexuality of young women, or deficiencies in 'hyper-masculinity' in the case of young men. More difficult to interpret due to the small number of young people sampled was the impact of ethnicity, although there was a suggestion that vulnerability might be seen by young people of particular BME backgrounds as related to a lack of educational opportunity or success. Ideas about culpability, blame and 'rational-actor' models of transgression permeated young people's understanding of vulnerability. Despite this, most of the young people indicated that they saw vulnerability as socially constructed to some extent. How young people conceptualised 'vulnerability' offered insights into the social worlds they inhabited, characterised by unequal power relations and precarious support systems which needed careful attention and management. Although they could be receptive to being classified as vulnerable within certain social and relational contexts, generally speaking the narratives were marked by a resistance to the idea that they were 'vulnerable'.

Being seen as 'vulnerable' was experienced as a deficit-orientated positioning, and one which seemed to some extent to undermine or invalidate young people's perceptions of their ability to cope with life's difficulties and setbacks. Data generated on how far young people positioned themselves within a frame of vulnerability revealed 'vulnerability' to be a socially and culturally constructed concept, which is also relative. Resistances to 'official' involvement and perceived regulation of behaviour also emerged through the exploration of young people's understandings of vulnerability. It may be the case that 'vulnerability-based' constructions of young people's identity will inevitably be rejected by those who are more inclined to use resistance as a way of managing in difficult circumstances, which could have implications in terms of how those young people are processed in

welfare systems. Being categorised as 'vulnerable' was viewed by young people as a gateway to extra assistance and also as an entry point for social control. One of the key themes in this chapter has been that young people saw 'vulnerability' as mediated by the people and services they had access to. This raises questions about the ways in which they saw it as being mediated, which we now move on to consider.

Chapter 8: Young People's Vulnerability in Context

The previous chapter highlighted that 'vulnerable' young people saw their 'vulnerability' as mediated by support systems, processes, interventions, and other social structures. This chapter seeks to locate 'vulnerable' young people's life stories and views about 'vulnerability' within a broader context. It gazes beyond the young people's immediate biographies, towards their perceptions of the state systems and structures in which their life events took place. As young people felt that immediate family or 'private' support networks were an important influence on their 'vulnerability', attention is given to these issues. However, the main focus for the chapter is how 'vulnerable' young people received social policy mechanisms and interventions. As one of the key aims of the study was to develop understandings about how young people who are 'transgressive' as well as 'vulnerable' might receive such interventions (see 1.4), there is particular attention given to young people's experiences of particular processes or interventions where they were being 'cared for' and/or were at the same time being 'controlled' or 'disciplined'. Thus, insights are generated about how vulnerable young people experienced some of the tensions that result from the 'deserving/undeserving' schism in interventions for young people (Goldson, 2002a and 2004) which was highlighted in the opening chapter (see 1.2).

Firstly, brief consideration is given to the biographical factors which young people felt influenced their vulnerability, such as family, friends and events (8.1). Secondly, an overview is provided of the welfare and disciplinary services young people discussed in interviews (8.2). Thirdly, young people's views on what aspects of interventions they considered as having been helpful (or unhelpful) in reducing their vulnerability are presented (8.3). Following this, young people's experiences of the 'care/control' process (see Goldson, 2004) are highlighted (8.4). Finally, the chapter explores young people's understandings of broader social structures within society which they perceived as having influenced their vulnerability, namely: power dynamics related to their age, access to financial resources and gender (8.5).

The interventions and processes which are considered in the chapter are likely to represent something of a partial view of state and welfare involvement in young people's lives, as the focus is explicitly young people's views of such systems. However, young interviewees' discussions of the services generated unique insights into the people and social processes they saw as having had a formative impact on their lives.

8.1 Biographical factors as mediators of young people's vulnerability

When asked about what factors shaped their lives most, 'vulnerable' young people most often focussed on biographical events and experiences in their families. This was perhaps unsurprising as 'vulnerable' young people's childhoods were notable for their difficulty and complexity. Indeed, this section dovetails with the data presented in Chapter 6 about vulnerable young people's life stories, but rather than focussing on their descriptions of their biographies, here the focus is on what they reflected upon as having had a particular effect on their 'vulnerability'. Family and friends were seen as particularly formative in shaping 'vulnerability', as were significant transitions. There is a note included which also discusses competency, or excelling in a particular field or activity, as a 'resilience' factor for young people.

8.1.1 Family and friends

The factor most commonly cited by young people as having had the greatest influence on their vulnerability was their relationship with their parents. Of particular relevance to young people were experiences of parental domestic violence, separation and the shifts in living arrangements which often followed separations where parents had met new partners. Keith (M, 16) felt that witnessing violence and acrimony in his parents' relationship had had an enduring effect on his own life:

> …it's awful when you see your Mum and Dad arguing over I don't know what. It's awful though when you see it. So I think that's where it started all from round about there [on life map]. It's all gone downhill not uphill like it's meant to. (Keith, M, 16)

As well as references to families being the 'cause' of difficulties or vulnerabilities, there were instances where young people set out the importance of relationships with family members as 'protective' influences in their lives. Brook (F, 16), who at the time of the interview was living in a homeless hostel, felt that her mother was the most important 'helpful' factor in her life so far, as her and her mother had "always been close":

> Kate: *And how has she helped you and supported you?*
>
> Brook: *I don't know. It's just how Mums do. I don't know how they do it. They just do it, don't they?*
>
> Kate: *Yeah… What sorts of things?*
>
> Brook: *I don't know. Making me laugh, treating me, you know, telling me not to ruin my life. But basically telling me not to be like me brother and be a shithouse really and not get owt out of life in grades…*

Where parents were considered by young people to have helped them in life, in all but one case (Laura, F, 16) it was mothers that were referred to rather than fathers[41]. Parents were the primary focus of much of the discussion about where young people's families had acted as 'protective' factors, but there were other key sources of support.

There was some evidence to suggest a link between family behaviours and attitudes and the ability to access social welfare resources on offer. There were two particular cases where young people implied that they saw their mothers as having provided an important gateway function to wider systems of support. In both cases, young people had severe health problems or a disability. Jade A (F, 17), who had learning difficulties; felt that her mother's determination and hard work had been very important for her getting access to the help she needed:

> Jade A: … *she used to ring up, the phone bill used to be really surprising, she used to ring people up saying, oh no you have to report to this one, that one,*

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[41] Three of the young people's fathers had died, which may have had some effect on the prominence of discussion of mothers in the interviews.

other places and it just got to be where eventually we got to have a meeting with these people, they come to your house and then they helped […]

Kate: *What do you think your life would be like if your Mum hadn't …*

Jade A: *It would be horrible, there would be nothing for me to do, or no one to turn to.*

In instances where young people's families had not functioned to mediate the impact of certain events or difficulties, this was seen as having had lasting and profound effects. After Scott (M, 18) was sexually abused by a member of staff in one of the care homes he lived in, the first person he told about the abuse in the care home was his mother, whom he felt had responded inappropriately:

What happened, I never pressed charges. My Mum told me I should have. She only said I should have because I'd have got a claim. I'd have got money for it and stuff like that. But I never did because I felt embarrassed. (Scott, M, 18)

In my research diary, I commented that where young people described problems in family functioning or a lack of support from their family, there was an impression given that services and interventions could take on an enhanced significance.

The importance of grandparents was particularly notable in some young people's discussions about support from family members, echoing research which has recognised the significance of grandparents in children's lives (Rutter and Evans, 2011; Hughes and Emmel, 2011; Dench *et al*, 2000). Six young people felt their grandparents had played an extremely important role in their lives in terms of both practical and emotional support. This is consistent with other research carried out with low-income families, which has emphasised that Grandparents play a crucial role in 'fire fighting' where there are difficult family circumstances (Hughes and Emmel, 2011; Emmel *et al*, 2011). Since she had moved to the UK from Lithuania, Anna (F, 12) missed her grandma very much:

…she's the best, she can do anything… I was with her about three months and I don't need a Dad or Mum, she can be that. And she's like, I can tell any secret, and like, about my Mum, what I don't like about her, and I tell her and she don't tell anybody. […] *if you've got headache and in my country it's like* [she gets] *a load of flowers, put it in tea, and she makes me drink that!* (Anna, F, 12)

The idea of grandparents being "like parents" was drawn upon frequently where grandparents were discussed, echoing Hughes and Emmel's (2011) findings that the type of support grandparents offered could be characterised as 'rescue' and 'repair':

… my Nana's been like my second mother. So obviously, obviously I love my Mum like you're meant to, but I love my Nana more in a way, because my Nana's been there for me (Mercedes, F, 15)

Three young people reported that they spent extensive periods living with their grandparents full-time, and several others had lived with grandparents for shorter periods or during family crises.

A number of young people considered close friends and/or boyfriends/girlfriends as a significant influence on their vulnerability. For three young people, partners or boyfriends/girlfriends were seen as mediating their vulnerability in a significant way, due to mutual emotional support and understanding. Where friends were discussed, this was usually in terms of them being important sources of emotional and sometimes practical support. Charlie (F, 16), who was in care, discussed how a friend she had made who was also in the care system was one of the most important sources of support in her life:

She used to come to my house and, like, get me and tell me to sort my head out […] *'Cos she is in care, she gets everything as well, doesn't she? She understands.* (Charlie, F, 16)

As well as being seen as important as protective influences, friends could be seen as contributing to vulnerability in some instances, usually due to fractures in

friendships and bullying. Scott (M, 18) was one of two young people in the sample of 25 who cited the importance of 'gangs' in their life courses. He described how being in a gang in the past had made him 'vulnerable':

> *That was a gang I used to chill with and I'd never chill with them again. I've left them now. They're going to kill me when they see me. They're going to stab me because I've left* [...] *That fucked up my life. That messed up my life to this day.* (Scott, M, 18)

Peers and friends were often discussed by young men as being important for their physical protection, whereas for young women their friendships were more important in terms of emotional support.

8.1.2 Transitions

As discussed in Chapter 6 (see 6.1.4), vulnerable young people's life stories were characterised by what could be viewed as considerable transitions of various kinds, particularly in terms of family-life, living arrangements and their 'journey' through welfare services. Emerging clearly from young people's narratives was a sense that many interviewees saw these transitions as tied to enhanced 'vulnerability'. In discussions of what had helped and what had not helped them in life, transitions were a frequently occurring theme:

> *I ain't had a stable life, I never have, never will. Been moving from place to place all the time, never had a stable life in one home.* (Jay Jay, M, 17)

Scott felt that more security in his living arrangements would have reduced his vulnerability:

> *...a suitable home, a home that — because I was getting moved to five different care homes every month or something, so I was never settling down. I was meeting new people —* (Scott, M, 18)

For 'Peter Schmeichel', who had also been in care, moving to another city was the thing he felt had been most difficult in his life:

I went to live with family in Birmingham, but most of the people that I know

are in Leeds so that's why I didn't like going ('Peter Schmeichel', M, 16)

The difficulty of coping with multiple transitions was also noted by other young people in care, as has been well chronicled in other research (Ofsted, 2012; Jackson and Thomas, 1999; Leathers, 2002; Munro and Hardy, 2006). For example, Charlie (F, 16) told me how she was moved fifteen times in three years, between foster carers and care homes.

For those young people that had experienced the transition of moving to the UK from abroad, not being able to speak English was a particular issue:

It was really hard 'cos when you go t' shop and you need to buy something,

my Mum would say to buy me sugar but I bought her salt! (Anna, F, 12)

Where young people had moved from abroad and did not speak English as a first language, often they mentioned English Language services in school as one of the most beneficial services they had received in terms of reducing their 'vulnerability'. Literature on migrant and transnational identity has highlighted that when young people arrive in the UK they have a number of issues to contend with which may undermine feelings of safety and security, amongst which language may be a particular difficulty or obstacle (cf Sirriyeh, 2008; Rutter, 2003).

8.1.4 A note on competency

Studies undertaken which seek to understand more about the relationship between structure and agency in young people's lives have argued that as young people make sense of their identities over time, they may increasingly recognise that 'doing well' at particular endeavours (school subjects, craft-related undertakings, arts, sports etc.) can lead to various investments and returns, and that this process of development is significant in their trajectories (Henderson *et al*, 2007, Honneth, 1995). In the interviews carried out for the present study, this sense of young people developing particular skills or competencies was not very pronounced. However, where young people displayed a sense of competency or virtuosity for a particular skill, the impression was given by them that this was a major source of

'resilience' or pride. Brook talked about how her 'talent' for sport had resulted in major positive changes taking place in her life. She planned to study and teach sport in her adult life, and was about to start a Saturday job as a coach to children, and discussed how being 'good at' sport had helped her:

> *I always wanted to be a policewoman at first, till I got arrested. No, even after, I still did wanna be one. But then I realised that I was good at sport and I've always known that, and people have always told me that, so when I got all of these things out of the Academy and that, I just thought I might as well just go for it. So that's what I'm doing.* (Brook, F, 16)

Scott saw his talent as how 'street-wise' he was. Whilst he saw this as problematic in lots of ways, he also took pride in his aptitude in this area:

> *I'm streetwise. I'm not paranoid about the streets. I'm a night-time person and I cheer up more in the night because I like the dark. I love being out in the dark and stuff* [...] *Since I was a kid I've worked - thingi'd ont streets, been ont streets and stuff like that.* (Scott, M, 18)

Scott's comments highlight that for some 'vulnerable' young people, 'resistances' may be important 'identity work' (Bottrell, 2007) and may be part of how 'vulnerability' is experienced, mediated and dealt with. That these instances of young people describing their aptitudes or particular skills were infrequent across the interviews may indicate that 'vulnerable' young people could perhaps have a relatively under-developed sense of their developing aptitudes as they progress through their transitions into adulthood.

8.2 Interventions overview

Seeking to explore young people's experiences of vulnerability in context, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the social structures which young people understood as shaping their life experiences and biographies. Their views and experiences of disciplinary and welfare social policy mechanisms and the inter-connection between care and control mechanisms are a particular focus for exploration. Before more detailed commentary is provided on experiences of care

and control, it is useful to set out an overall sense of the interventions which young people had experiences of, and present the findings of analysis of some of the patterns which appeared frequently in the interventions young people talked about having received. For this purpose, a matrix of the welfare and disciplinary services discussed by young people is included in Table 8.1. By way of drawing out some of the patterns which may be of interest within the interventions which young people had a received, a further table is included (Table 8.2). A brief comment on some of the more salient points to emerge from the table is then included.

Table 8.1: Matrix of welfare and disciplinary interventions discussed by young people

	Fostering &Adoption	Residential care homes	Social Care	Social Care /CPR	YP Housing Provider	Hostels (adult /YP/family)	Housing	Specialist residential care	CAMHS	Vol Sector Support CYP	Specialist Ed. provider	Connexions	Police (victim)	Youth Services	Mentor /teacher	YP Drugs Service	YOS	YOI/Secure Unit/Prison	Police (perpetrator)	Other
Alicia (16)	●	●	●	●	●		●	●	●		●					●	●			Leaving care team
Anna (12)						●	●			●										
Brook (16)			●	●	●	●	●							●			●		●	Sports academy
Charlie (16)	●	●	●	●		●					●				●	●				Children's Rights
Chris (17)			●		●	●	●			●			●	●	●					
Elle (14)						●	●			●										Language Support
Hayley (16)						●	●		●		●								●	Counselling Service
Jade A (17)									●	●●			●	●						
Jade B (16)	●		●	●							●				●					
Jay Jay (17)			●								●	●	●	●	●		●		●	
'Jeremy Clarkson' (15)						●	●				●		●		●					
Jess (15)		●	●	●				●	●	●					●		●		●	
John (16)						●		●	●		●					●	●		●	Public school
Keith (16)											●				●		●	●	●	
Kotaa (12)			●	●						●										
Laura (16)											●			●						
Mackenzie (16)											●				●					
Mercedez (15)			●	●						●					●					School Attendance Officer
Naz (14)			●	●						●●			●							
'Peter Schmeichel' (16)	●		●	●							●									
Sam (14)						●				●										Language Support
Scott (18)		●	●	●		●	●	●	●		●		●		●	●	●	●●	●	ASB Unit, Probation
Stephanie (16)			●												●	●				
Wadren (17)			●						●				●	●					●	
'2Pac' (14)										●					●					Church group, participation

Table 8.2: Patterns of intervention as described by 'vulnerable' young people

Theme	Patterns of intervention	Analysis and explanatio
Child protection	10 interviewees had been on the Child Protection Register (CPR). Six young people in the sample were 'in care'.	'Vulnerable' young people at various points in their childhood received relatively intensive state intervention and monitoring via Social Care.
Mental health services	12 young people discussed having had mental health interventions. Of these, seven cited formal psychiatric interventions from CAMHS, and 11 cited other 'informal' counselling, usually via voluntary sector agencies. Of the seven involved with CAMHS, four had also been involved in the YJS. Of the eight involved in the YJS, four had been involved with CAMHS at some point.	Only a minority of 'vulnerable' young people would appear to have received mental health interventions. Of those that did, 'informal' counselling had often been experienced along with 'formal' interventions, indicating that certain 'vulnerable' young people had received substantially more mental input than others. Many 'vulnerable' young people who offend appear to receive high-level mental health input (see Fryson and Yates, 2011; BIBIC, 2005; Goldson, 2009)
Youth Justice	8 young people had received formal involvement in the Youth Justice System (YJS). The number of services discussed by interviewees with experience of the YJS was substantially higher (average of 9 services) than for those not involved with the YJS (average of four.) Of the eight young people who had been involved with the YOS, six had been on the CPR. Of the 10 young people on the CPR, half of them had also been involved in the YJS	'Vulnerable' young people who are involved with the YOS tend to receive a greater range of interventions than young people who are not. The YOS is an important source of state interventions for 'vulnerable' young people (cf Phoenix, 2012b) A strong inter-relationship is apparent between 'care' and 'control' systems in the governance of 'vulnerable' young people's lives.
Transgression	13 young people could be considered as 'transgressive' and also 'vulnerable'. Data suggested that 'transgressive' 'vulnerable' young people were in contact with more agencies (an average of around 7) than those who were not transgressive (an average of around 3).	Vulnerable young people are often also deemed 'transgressive' in some way, often access interventions for these 'transgressions'. Vulnerable young people who are also seen as 'transgressive' would appear to receive more input from services than 'vulnerable' young people who are not

It was apparent from the interviews that young people considered as 'vulnerable' received a broad range of interventions, but that involvement from services was much more frequent and substantive in some cases than in others. The numbers of services cited in each interview ranged from two up to sixteen, with the average being around five or six. In some cases (see Scott, for example), the range of interventions was extensive and young people described a catalogue of interventions which they had received throughout their whole lives. In terms of the research questions driving the study, one significant point is that many vulnerable young people would appear also to receive interventions which indicate that they are seen as 'transgressive' in some way. Furthermore, a significant proportion of vulnerable young people receive formal youth justice interventions. This is something which is rarely acknowledged at policy level (Goldson, 2002a and also see 1.2), raising questions about how far state interventions reflect the empirical realities and complexities of vulnerable young people's experiences and social worlds.

8.3 Experiences of controlling interventions

Fifteen of the 25 young people had received interventions which were not of their choosing. Generally speaking, compulsory interventions tended to be met with varying degrees of resistance. Such interventions were mainly provided by Social Care, the Police and YOS and in some instances Education (for example, via 'attendance officers' with the power of issuing parenting orders). There were certain areas which emerged as particularly significant in relation to the more disciplinary processes which young people had encountered, and these were as follows: family loyalty, control without consultation, lack of protection from certain control mechanisms and the implications of the 'vulnerability/transgression' binary. There are considered in more detail below.

8.3.1 Family loyalty and differences of opinion about 'risk'

A prevalent factor in young people's resistance to compulsory interventions was related to feelings of loyalty or protection towards parents and other family members. Wadren (M, 17) had received a Social Care intervention when he was a child, due to concerns about his anger, but had disapproved of this as he felt it was

insulting to his mother, "… they were basically blaming my Mum so… which made me lose my temper". Of the nine young people who had experiences of the Child Protection Register for reasons related to their parents[42], around half disagreed with judgements made about their parents' potential to cause harm to them. Even where young people appeared to feel that their parents did indeed pose some risk to them, there could be strong reactions to compulsory Social Care interventions. Scott (M, 18) recognised that he had been in danger when his mother threatened him with a knife when he was aged 14, but despite this, he demonstrated considerable resistance to the monitoring of his wellbeing, saying that Social Care "were pricks":

> *… butting in too much. As soon as I got a bruise, man, that's it, they'd jump on me. I don't know. I think it's right that a kid has a bruise. I think you should worry if a kid doesn't have a bruise, if you know what I mean, because they fall over and stuff like that and it means they're doing something. Like they're messing about, they're playing. But as soon as I get bruise now, they jump on me: 'His Mum's beating him again.'* (Scott, M, 18)

A tension between professionals and young people over what was deemed 'acceptable' parenting was evident in several other interviews, echoing tensions between young peoples' and professionals' understandings of vulnerability (see 7.2.2).

8.3.2 The care, control and consultation balancing act

Control without consultation was a major theme which emerged in some form in twelve interviews. In all but one case, this theme was apparent during interviews with young people who could be considered as 'transgressive'. Alicia had been involved with various compulsory interventions and her resistance to control without consultation was a particularly prominent theme in her narrative:

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[42] Of the 10 young people who had been on the Child Protection Register, one young person had been put on the register for issues unrelated to her parents, which was Naz (F, 14) (see Appendix F).

Social services never really used to like, you never used to like go, like get to go see where you were gonna be living first, things that, they just used to take you and leave you there whether you liked it or not. At one time I'd even said that I never ever wanted to live in children's home, the social worker took me to this children's home and I'd said I didn't wanna live there, and she left me there. And in the end I ended up running away and being homeless and they wouldn't find me anywhere else to live (Alicia, F, 16)

A tension between the benefits of professionals 'protecting' them and the 'control' they experienced as a result was identified by some young people, who could find this difficult to reconcile. Jess, who had been selling sex since the age of 14, explained:

[Social Worker] *helped by putting me in care, but she didn't really help me 'cos I'm not allowed to go out by myself 'cos I put myself in too much risk.* (Jess, F, 15)

Disapproval of not being 'asked' or 'told' prior to compulsory interventions was also a theme. John (M, 16) had been sectioned under the Mental Health Act due to concerns about his drug use. This had been a particularly frightening experience for him. Although he recognised a need for the intervention, he felt he should have been informed before it had happened:

I just could have been informed to what was like going on, instead of, 'we think you need help, we think you need help'. Explain to me why we think you need help and not when you're blatantly wrecked when the police arrive, especially when you're on acid. (John, M, 16)

Tensions between professionals' need (and legal obligation) to 'protect' 'vulnerable' children from risks and young people's desire (and right) to choose are something which would appear to become more acute the greater the degree of 'risk' a young person is deemed to be at (cf Brown, 2006)[43].

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[43] On the basis of findings generated from the key informant interviews and the young people's interviews taken together, it would appear that tensions between control and

When encouraged to reflect on the duty of practitioners to keep young people safe, interviewees sometimes indicated that whilst they disapproved of compulsory interventions at the time they had taken place, in hindsight, they saw benefits to this course of action. Brook's (F, 16) key worker at school made a referral to Social Care after a bruise had appeared, which Brook had "kicked off" about at the time. However, at the time of the interview her feelings had changed: "now I understand that when I look at it because I think I would've done the same." Charlie (F, 16) did not want to be taken into care at the time this had happened, but reflected that it had helped her in life: "Probably if I didn't go into care, I'd be a little tramp and probably dossing it up at home". However, there were other cases where young people felt the balance was misjudged in an enduring way:

> *… some things they do are alright but you don't think they are at the time. And other things they aren't all right though that they do* (Alicia, F, 16)

The results of such resistance to control mechanisms for 'vulnerable' young people could be extremely concerning. As mentioned in Chapter 6, Alicia was accommodated in a residential home where she did not want to stay due to bullying. She responded by running away and living in a tent for around a month, arguably leaving her exposed to a greater risk.

A small number of young people seemed to respond positively to certain directive or compulsory interventions. Keith (M, 16) felt he had benefitted from time he had spent in a secure unit, where he had been compelled to stop using drugs and had re-engaged with education and with his family:

> *People nudging me, not nudging me but trying to push me down the right road. […] Push me the right way. Give you that big shove you need. 'Cos some kids just need that shove to get them into the right way. I'm one of them kids, I know I need that big push […] Basically I need someone to get*

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consultation might well be particularly pronounced in instances where young people are 'sexually exploited' (see 5.5.2). This might be because young women who sell sex or 'favours' are often considered to be exceptionally 'vulnerable'.

me, pick me up, put me there and just stick me to the floor so I can build my way round (Keith, M, 16)

Some young people said that YOS interventions were beneficial due to the support and care that had been attached to them, others felt they were interfering and unnecessary. Brook said that her YOS worker was a "bastard":

Basically, he wanted to know the ins and outs of a cat's arse. He wanted to know everything. Things that he didn't need to know, he just wanted to know. You know, he'd just have a little pop all the time because he was so ignorant. He should get sacked really. (Brook, F, 16)

Taken together, these findings suggest that how controlling interventions were received by 'vulnerable' young people depended on their attitude, the relationship they had with those providing the interventions, and also on the amount of consultation which was involved prior to compulsion. Young people's responses to formal youth justice interventions can perhaps be understood in this context.

One further theme was evident in how vulnerable young people experienced more controlling interventions; they recognised the potentially controlling forces which could be activated as a result of accessing more 'caring' interventions, and this could make young people reluctant to access the support that was on offer. Despite his own concerns about his drug use, John concealed the extent of it from his drugs worker: "then I wouldn't get me head drilled over and the negative consequences" (John, M, 15). Jess had been sexually abused by her father. Her behaviour had deteriorated, but she did not tell anyone:

I knew if I said something that they could go to the police. And it just, I just didn't want that. There were enough going on without a big riot with my parents. (Jess, F, 15)

That vulnerable young people were reluctant to access protective mechanisms due to a desire to avoid control is something which may well have an influence on the ways in which they are supported and assisted, especially in instances where they may also have been seen as 'transgressive'.

8.3.3 Experiences of the vulnerability/transgression binary

Some authors have argued that there is a problematic binary which operates in relation to the construction of young people's identities in the social welfare system, with this group positioned as either 'vulnerable victims' or 'dangerous transgressors' (Such and Walker, 2005; Fionda, 2005; Goldson, 2002a and 2004). Although Chapter 6 indicated that such a binary is ill-matched with the complexities of young people's lives, interviewees appeared to share such dualistic understandings of their behaviours in some instances. Naz's (F, 14) description of herself was as follows: "I was well good in primary school. My Mum keeps telling my teachers that I'm bad now and they can't believe it." Other young people felt that they could not be classified neatly in terms of a vulnerability/transgression binary, again indicating certain problems with policy constructs in this arena:

> *I can be good and I can be bad, but yes, but I don't do the things that other people do. I can shout, I can carry on, but I don't smoke Weed* [Cannabis] *and I don't do that sort of stuff 'cos I don't want to get into that.* (Jade B, F, 16)

> *I started going to that kind of big life of crime when, basically, I left my Mum and I was in care because I was vulnerable and that. I didn't really want to be in there, so I was running all the time. And every time I ran away, I was getting into trouble.* (Scott, M, 18)

Just as was suggested by young people's life stories (see 6.2.2), such narrative accounts suggested that rather than being binaries, 'vulnerability' and 'transgression' were intimately linked.

Despite the apparent pervasiveness of this binary and its shortcomings, data also indicated that young people experienced or perceived a link between how they behaved and how they would be responded to by 'officials'. Jade A (F, 16) felt that the young man in the video vignette (see 4.4.7) may receive different treatment due to his 'bad' behaviour:

> Jade A: *… because services might go, 'oh he's just one of those horrible kids off the streets'.*

> Kate: *And you think that might affect what happens, what help he's given?*

> Jade A: *Yes. Because they'll just turn a blind eye because they won't want to know him, whereas with good people and they do good things for other good people then they'll want to help them.*

There was sometimes strong resistance to instances where they were seen as 'transgressive', on the basis that their difficulties meant that such a perception was not deserved. School was cited as a particularly problematic environment in this respect:

> *… they* [teachers] *didn't give me the chance even when, like, I don't know because I get stressed a lot and the teachers knew that, then they used to say to me, 'If you feel yourself getting bad excuse yourself from the lesson', and that were fine, that was what was settled and there were so many teachers, like, that obviously taught the subjects, that didn't like me, and I'd say, 'Please can I be excused?' and they'd be, like, 'No', and it'd be, like, 'Well, I've got this to show you', and they'd, like, 'No, you're not leaving my lesson' and it's like, I'd get even more angrier and I'd just end up flipping out and do summat bad that I'd get excluded* (Hayley, F, 16)

As some of these accounts indicate, in instances where young people were positioned as 'transgressive' they often saw themselves as 'vulnerable', which could trigger anger, leading to more disciplinary interventions. By way of a summary of the insights generated in relation to young people's experiences of more controlling interventions, there appeared to be considerable complexity and ambivalence in young people's attitudes towards how professionals should balance the different facets of their work. Caring for young people appropriately, disciplining problems with their behaviour, listening to their 'voices' and managing differences of option about risk would appear to be key factors in how more controlling interventions are received. In addition, findings indicated that the 'deserving-undeserving' schism

which Goldson (2002a and 2004) identifies (see 1.2) would appear to have a direct effect on the ways in which 'vulnerable' young people receive interventions.

8.4 How services influenced 'vulnerability' for 'vulnerable' young people

Moving beyond more 'control-orientated' interventions, more generally, interviews with young people indicated that they saw that a broad range of services had been influential in shaping their vulnerability. There was little continuity or correlation in young people's perceptions of the helpfulness, or otherwise, of particular agencies or interventions. Instead, a number of themes emerged about the characteristics or features of services (or individuals who provided interventions) young people saw as having an impact on their well-being. The most apparent themes in this respect were: the timeliness of interventions, 'trust' and the importance attached to 'being listened to', the time-bound nature of interventions, the limitations of 'speaking'-orientated interventions, and the way that they saw the balance between 'action' and 'inaction' from services. Each theme is explored below.

8.4.1 Timeliness

Timeliness was consistently cited by young people as a facet of service-delivery that they felt had implications for their vulnerability. This was both in terms of the length of time young people were required to wait before accessing a particular intervention, and the amount of time taken by staff to respond to incidents of difficulty. If gaining access to a certain service was delayed, this could be seen as limiting usefulness:

> *I don't get why they gave me* [sexual exploitation service], *'cos when I were involved in prostitution that were about a year before or something like that, and then they gave me* [sexual exploitation service], *a year after it happened so it didn't not really help me, no.* (Alicia, F, 16)

Once engaged with a particular service, response times of workers were often cited as the reason they were seen as valuable to a young person (or not). John, who had used drugs very heavily, felt that there were periods related to his 'come downs'

which were missed opportunities for support. He felt that a more timely response to these periods of difficulty would have helped:

> *When someone's actually like that, book another* [appointment] *for like two days to see if they're still like that. And you know, you know to go over it from there 'cos it might have changed entirely by next week.* (John, M, 16)

It would appear that whist structuring appointments and managing waiting lists might well be an effective strategy for services to pursue in terms of reaching higher numbers of young people over a period of time, this also seemed to have implications in terms of being able to respond to the day-to-day uncertainty of vulnerable young people's lives.

There was evidence to suggest that where services were not delivered in a timely way, this could have particularly pervasive practical implications for 'vulnerable' young people. Short-term options for coping with delays often seemed extremely limited. Scott (M, 18) was attending education sessions at his local youth centre, but he felt that this attendance conflicted with his need for money, a problem which was exacerbated by the time taken to process decisions about welfare entitlements:

> Scott: *… it's the money part of it. That's what's doing my head in about it. If I was getting my EMA* [Educational Maintenance Allowance] *sorted out, which is taking a while, and I was staying here and my EMA was getting sorted out and I was getting money, I would come here. I would come here and graduate. But all I worry about every day is money, paying the bills, paying water bills and electric and gas. Know what I mean?*
>
> Kate: *What's happening with your EMA then?*
>
> Scott: *I've gotta wait for a letter to come through the post, another application form, which I'm still at college and that, but that's going to take a while to come through. I've got an interview today, but that's only an interview. I don't sign on for another two weeks or something.*

In the meantime, Scott was stealing things to sell in order to fund his living expenses. Alicia (F, 16) lived in a high-crime area and felt she had been left particularly vulnerable due to delays in a response from her housing provider to a broken front door: 'they left me without a door handle, so I put an ironing board behind my door to shut it of a night, for three days'. After Jay Jay was seriously assaulted and hospitalised by two young men, the delay in response by the police led to disengagement with the process of pursuing a conviction:

> *They said, 'oh I'll get in touch with you', I went 'okay' and then nowt come of it. Rang them back, 'oh we haven't got no information yet'. About a month later, I rang them back again and they still had no information. I just left it after that*. (Jay Jay, M, 17)

In the majority of the descriptions of problems with timeliness, young people were not simply describing the practical effects of delays in services. They often seemed hurt or disappointed when services had not responded quickly. As one example, Mercedez had contacted her Social Worker via text message at a time of crisis. Her Social Worker had taken four days to respond:

> *… it felt like she were pissing me about because she's saying I can trust her and I can say, you know, I can ring - text her whenever I can and it's like well obviously not at all.* (Mercedez, F, 15)

As indicated by Mercedez, interviewees frequently implied that they felt undervalued or even foolish if they sought a particular response from a service or individual practitioner and did not get this. Thus, for 'vulnerable' young people, there appeared to be therapeutic as well as practical implications to slower response times.

8.4.2 Trust and 'being taken seriously'

Perhaps the most consistent theme to emerge in the discussion about how services had been helpful or unhelpful in addressing young people's 'vulnerability' was the significance which interviewees attached to being listened to and having their opinions valued. The importance attached to this might perhaps be understood

within a context of 'vulnerable' young people's experiences of consultation, care and control balance, which was outlined in the previous section (see 8.3.2). Alicia gave several examples of situations where she felt she had not been 'listened to'. Whilst selling sex she had contracted Chlamydia and was not aware that she had it for some time[44]. She had repeatedly asked for an infertility test, but felt this had not been taken seriously:

> *… I've asked Social Services if I can one of them tests where I know if I can have kids, but they just think it's funny or something. Like they don't like take it seriously, do you know what I mean? 'Cos I'm not telling them I wanna have kids now, I'm just saying that I wanna know if I can have them in future, but they don't really do owt about it.* (Alicia, F, 16)

Being "treated like" or called "a kid' was highly disapproved of by interviewees. Chris (M, 17) reported that although he was shy, being called "a kid" by his social worker had led him to raise this with her: "I just told her off really, I said 'don't call me a kid, I don't like you calling me that'". Sometimes, young people linked their 'problematic' behaviours to circumstances where they felt they were not listened to. For Scott (M, 18), feeling foolish seemed to be connected to problems with his anger:

> *I couldn't stand the teacher because he'd never listened to me. I'd put my hand up and everything and they'd never talk to me. And that's when I used to flip a chair over and walk out and shit because I'm not going to waste my time putting my hand, like I did, and them just turning me down like I'm some kind of doyle* [fool]. *So I turned round and just walked out and stuff.* (Scott, M, 18)

Scott's behaviour at school had resulted in him being permanently excluded at aged 13.

Young people's 'voice' and opinions being taken seriously by agencies or practitioners was seen as the basis of a trusting relationship, which in turn seemed

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[44] The length of time Chlamydia goes untreated has a link with higher risk of infertility.

to function as a catalyst for reducing vulnerability. Mercedez (F, 16) felt that the only factor helping to reduce her vulnerability at the time of her interview was the support from her keyworker at a voluntary sector agency. When asked why that particular relationship was so important to her she explained:

> "*She's just a leg-end* [legend] *int' she. She just - I don't know, I can just sort of get it out and feel - I don't have to feel - I feel comfortable in front of her.*" (Mercedez, F, 16)

For Wadren, the thing he valued most about the local youth project he was engaged with was related to "respect":

> *If you show them* [staff at the project] *respect they'll show you respect. They don't treat you like a kid. They speak to you as an adult which I like. I get sick and tired of being spoken to like I'm a little two year old kid. I'm a 17 year old boy. I'm nearly 18 for God's sake. I'm nearly an adult*. (Wadren, M, 17)

Societal ambivalence about young people's citizenship status and capacity for decision-making and responsibility might well be relevant context in which to view these comments (see 1.2 and also Muncie, 2006; Goldson, 2002a and 2004). Some 'vulnerable' young people seemed to feel that there was a lack of appreciation of them as capable human agents, an issue explored further later in this chapter (see 8.5.1).

8.4.3. Short-term interventions and struggles with transition

The way some young people seemed to experience the time-bound nature of certain welfare interventions was an interesting theme. Although it was only raised as an issue in five of the 25 interviews with young people, it seemed significant in these interviews. Young people spoke about how they found that various interventions helped whilst they were receiving them, but then following the end of the intervention, problems returned:

> *They discharged me from there* [CAMHS] *when they thought I was okay. And as soon as I left there, I got worse, my anger got worse and everything*

because, when I was going there, I was happy. And then when you leave

there, obviously you've still got all these emotions and anger and I just...

(Scott, M, 18)

Naz (F, 14) had a history of running away and described how her behaviour improved when she was receiving support from a voluntary sector agency, "I weren't that bad and stuff, I didn't climb out me window or anything because I were all right by going to the group and that." When the intervention ended, the problem behaviours resumed:

… when I stopped going and my Mum started, like, being all bad again to me

and stuff, and then I just used to climb out my window and jump on the roof

and off the roof, and get ladders, my mates used to bring ladders (Naz, F, 14)

For certain young people, it appeared that their 'vulnerability' was likely to endure rather than be resolved after a particular intervention. The continuous nature of young people's difficulties and precariousness seemed to some extent to be mismatched with the service model of receiving a particular intervention focussed on a specific difficulty.

This issue of the time-bound interventions seemed to be connected in part with transitions related to the move from being seen as 'children' to being seen as 'adults'. As they grew older, young people more frequently encountered expectations that they would no longer require certain interventions (see 5.1.5). This was not always received positively:

I was with [voluntary sector agency] *for about, maybe three to four years.*

Then I eventually moved on because I got older and they didn't want to help

anymore and it was just my Mum that kept looking for different agencies, so

then she found [other voluntary sector agency] (Jade A, F, 16)

The government has recently acknowledged that this transition from children's services to adults' services can be problematic in terms of 'vulnerability' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2012). Although some young people looked forward to freedoms which they associated with being attached to being part of

'adult' services, the move from being a receiver of children's services to being seen as belonging in 'adult' services was experienced as particularly brutal in some cases:

> *… as soon as I turned eighteen, my life just went down the wrong road because I didn't have as much support. Before, you could go in care, and I wish I could have gone in care instead of a hostel or on the streets or* [crisis centre hostel] *or something like that, but obviously you have to learn how to look after yourself. So I was shop lifting and I was getting more criminal record for that, theft from shops and that because I was nicking my meals every night and shit.* (Scott, M, 18)

The transition to adulthood as a point of concern appeared to some extent to be tied to young people's precariousness and their higher levels of dependency on welfare. Given that most of the young people in the sample had not yet reached the stage where they were making a full transition to adult services, this may be a particular area which might be worthy of further investigation[45].

8.4.4 The limitations of 'speaking' interventions

When young people discussed the services that had been 'helpful', 'talking-orientated' interventions such as counselling or 'one-to-one' sessions with other 'professionals' seemed to feature particularly commonly. Findings were perhaps surprising in that there appeared to be a strong sense from certain narratives that the impact of such 'talking-orientated' interventions could be somewhat limited. Alicia (F, 16) - who was in care, had used Heroin and sold sex - felt that "talking wouldn't make things go away or anything like that, it just don't work". For John (M, 16), there were limitations to the support he received around his drug use: "They go through the drugs, but they can't really do anything apart from say 'stop taking drugs'". More than 'speaking' interventions being ineffectual though, there was sometimes criticism that they were intrusive, which was resented:

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[45] Indeed, one of the key informants described her role within CAMHS as having been created specifically to address the enhanced 'vulnerability' of young people who were moving from children's services into adult provision, as local research and information had indicated that this was a major problem within meeting mental health needs in the case study city.

I was speaking about things I didn't really want to be speaking to, like, the people, just like they were intruding in my life and made me talk and I didn't want to talk. (Hayley, F, 16)

The NHS psychiatric mental health service for young people (CAMHS) seemed to be subject to particular criticism in this respect.

Where interventions had a more practical and 'action-orientated' focus, this was often perceived as reducing vulnerability substantially. Jade B valued the help of her foster carers:

… they let me live at their house and they do a lot for me, they cook for me and I can talk to them whenever I want and they buy me stuff. (Jade B, F, 16)

Charlie (F, 16) had been particularly affected by a mentor from her school, who took a more 'hands-on' approach to interventions:

Charlie: *… he came to my house once 'cos I wouldn't get out of bed to go to college.*

Kate: *And that was important to you?*

Charlie: *It was. Then I felt that I'd have to go to college now or he'd just come to my house every day. So since then I've been going to college really.*

Kate: *And who was that?*

Charlie: [Name]. *He just got one of the staff to knock on my door: 'Your teacher's here' and I thought 'what the fuck?!, the teacher's here to wake me up.' He told me the day before though, 'If you don't get up, I'm coming to your house', but I didn't think he actually would. But he did.*

Although certain 'speaking' interventions were viewed as having reduced vulnerability, this was usually related to the rapport which young people had enjoyed with a particular person as a result of the intervention, rather than skills

they had learned from it. Overall, therapeutic value seemed to be more often placed on 'action-orientated' or practical approaches.

8.4.5 The balance between action and inaction

Young people indicated that they saw themselves as needing 'official' support of some sort to address problems, and there were examples in most interviews which suggested that they felt that such action was not always forthcoming. As highlighted in Chapter 6, Jay Jay (M, 17) had been sexually abused by a male friend of his mother's. He had reported this to the police but the man was not charged. He had also been physically assaulted by two other young men several years after, and saw these incidents as part of a catalogue of inaction from enforcement agencies:

> *Alt' stuff that I've told them, they're just putting it in a sleeve or something, that's what it feels like to me, so they're not doing owt about it. 'Cos about the attack, that wor bad, how my face was smashed in like that, couldn't even see. I've got permanent ear damage in my left ear…. they took pictures, everything. The pictures were bad as well, 'cos I seen them myself. And then they just, like they just went 'I'll get in touch with you' and they never got in touch back and that's when I told them about getting in touch, and that's when they still didn't do nowt about it, and that's why I'll never have faith in police, never ever. (Jay Jay, 17)*

Stephanie (F, 16) felt that Social Care had not helped to reduce her vulnerability: "they only came out once. So really they didn't do very much". Wadren discussed a feeling that he needed to take action to protect himself as he saw the appropriate protections as inadequate:

> *Think about them riots in London they did naff all out of that. Apparently they controlled it well. How did they control it well? People were getting burnt alive and stuff. How's that controlling it? If that's controlling it I don't feel safe then. I don't feel safe by the Police. I'd rather have a machete in my back pocket then I'd feel safe. It's completely wrong. (Wadren, M, 17)*

Evidence from earlier in the chapter pointed to young people receiving services as a mixture of care, control and consultation (see 8.3.2). A fourth factor would seem to influence how 'vulnerable' young people received interventions: inaction, or lack of protection. Whist some interventions were seen as over-bearing, unnecessary, and interfering, young people also seemed to also report that in some cases the action taken to address their 'vulnerability' was inadequate.

8.5 Vulnerability in context: experiences of structural influences

As well as biographical influences, many interviewees also indicated that they perceived there to be structural dimensions to their vulnerabilities (see 7.1.6). How vulnerability was seen as being shaped by structural influences tended to centre around the following themes: power dynamics related to age, access to material resources and gender. Each is explored in more detail below. A minority of young people also indicated that the reason they felt vulnerability was also shaped by more cultural factors such as race and ethnicity. This may well reflect sampling to some extent. With numbers being relatively small and sampling broadly reflective of the wider population, the numbers of BME young people were still smaller. Interviewees were encouraged to discuss other potential structural vulnerabilities such as disability, but most were not as forthcoming about such topics. As disability was not a key focus of the research, sampling did not include the deliberate targeting of disabled young people, again meaning small numbers of disabled young people were interviewed which may well have had an impact on the findings in terms of which structural issues were most discussed.

8.5.1 Age and vulnerability: the power dynamics of childhood and youth

Many of the narrative accounts revealed a sense of being part of a social group who, due to age, were sometimes in positions where they enjoyed less power than others around them. The power imbalance resulting from age and status seemed to engender 'vulnerability'. Firstly, adults were in some cases seen as taking advantage of their relative position of power. Chris (M, 17) was beaten daily in Pakistan. He felt this was partly due to structural responses, "there was no control there, no one was doing nothing." Mercedez indicated that her mother and father manipulated

the welfare system to avoid control, and that due to their status as adults, this disadvantaged her:

> *I just think it's funny that when* [Social Worker] *comes - 'right make sure that's clean and go'. Right. 'Yes, everything's fine' - no it's not.* (Mercedez, F, 16)

Several interviewees commented that adults' accounts of certain situations were believed over their own. Frustrations were evident in relation to this, as it appeared to be seen as an 'injustice'. During problems at home, Stephanie (F, 15) felt that "really everyone basically just judge me saying it was my fault, not my Mum." Charlie (F, 16) put this more candidly, commenting that staff within the care system "just made loads of shit up." In some cases, young people indicated that they felt that 'official' agencies could be prejudiced against them: "They look at me and they snub their nose down at people. It is totally disrespectful." (Wadren, M, 17).

Several young people indicated they saw a role for services in terms of mediating age-related vulnerabilities. 'Peter Schmeichel' (M, 16) felt there was a need for improvement in this respect "they shouldn't judge a book by its cover. Because they don't know what goes on really." Charlie (F, 16) felt that the Children's Rights service had played a substantial role in mediating her vulnerability through their advocacy work: "they were just like, 'We hear this thing all the time', and they know how the carers are." Interventions being age-appropriate for young people was also mentioned in a number of interviews, with comments indicating that where interventions were not appropriate to young people's age, this could augment vulnerability. At the age of 16, Chris (M, 17) had stayed in an emergency hostel for adult men who had offended: "I was the only one, 16 years. I hadn't heard of jail. That was scary".

As noted above, being 'taken seriously' (see 8.4.2) and being 'listened to' (see 8.3.2) by services were amongst some of the most important factors which young people felt influenced their 'vulnerability'. The importance attached to issues related to 'voice' can perhaps be understood within a context of structural age-related power dynamics:

… we need more people who can ask us for our opinion not just say it for us.
(Wadren, M, 17)

Scott (M, 18) indicated that the most important thing that agencies could do to best help 'vulnerable' young people was establish a rapport where they were not marginalised due to age or status. He felt that the best thing about his local youth work project was:

The way they talk to you. They talk to you normal. They have a joke with you. They don't talk to you like you're in here because you're a dude, because you're a div. They talk to you like you're normal. They treat you normal. Not like you're a different race, like you're an alien or something or a rebel or something. They just treat you normally. (Scott, M, 18)

Given the particular relationship between young people being 'vulnerable' and assumptions about the need for them to be controlled in order to keep them safe (see section 7.3), it could be argued that such age-related power dynamics might be especially significant in welfare provision for this particular group of young people.

8.5.2 Gender and vulnerability: "lasses are bitches, boys are arseholes. Normal."

Gender emerged as one of the most significant structural forces which interviewees saw as shaping young people's vulnerability. This was particularly prevalent in the narratives of the young women in the sample, but was also apparent in many of the young men's interviews. Where the relationship between gender and vulnerability was discussed, almost uniformly young women were seen as more vulnerable than young men, mostly in relationship to their vulnerability within intimate relationships. Young women's potential to be affected by domestic violence was a particular theme:

... with violent relationships and things like that it's, like, I've been in one myself, and it's always the girl that's vulnerable and it's bad to say, 'cos sometimes it's probably the other way round, but you don't hear of Action Aid for Men, it's all for women. (Hayley, F, 16)

For Brook (F, 16) too, potential problems in her future centred around her choice of partner: "not finding the right man and finding a straight arse instead, so it all goes wrong". Jade A felt that young women's 'vulnerability' related to their self-image:

> *Because girls are like, the image and how they look and the body and how they fit in with guys and stuff like that and how they fit in around other people and stuff like that...* (Jade A, F, 17)

Jade's comments can perhaps be viewed in a broader context of feminist concerns with the increasing 'sexualisation' of girls (Coy, 2009; McRobbie, 2007; Tankard Reist, 2009; Duschinsky, 2012), and what McRobbie (2007) calls the 'normative discontent' experienced by young women in relation to their body-image.

A lack of economic independence was also seen as augmenting young women's vulnerability, particularly in respect of women's role as carers:

> *... [girls]* have to think, like, like, the girl we saw, about their life, what they're going to do what they're thinking, like, what are the people you know I mean what like about their family, their children... (Sam, M, 15)

> *'Cos they* [young men] *don't really think about things. They don't have to think about, like, caring for a kid really. They, some guys just go, just dunno, get someone pregnant and then that's it… they're not bothered basically.* (Jess, F, 15)

Naz (F, 14) saw a relationship between young women's sexual activity, their lack of economic security and their 'vulnerability':

> *'Cos like girls that are pregnant and stuff they go, when they're on their own and they can't afford money and stuff to pay the bills and stuff they go out and sleep with guys and get loads of money and stuff (*Naz, F, 14)

Phoenix (2010) argues that the increasing prominence of consumption in contemporary life (see Bauman, 1998) has particular implications for young women who lack access to sufficient financial resources. She argues that as some young women struggle to participate in consumption-related activities, they may engage

in sexual activity with older men in order to achieve this. Such an explanation of 'sexual exploitation', however, tends to be marginalised in both research and populist commentary, in favour of a focus on 'grooming'.

There was certainly a sense from the transcripts that young women's sexuality was seen as shaping and influencing their vulnerability. As Jay Jay (M, 17) said, "it's harder for young women because there's a lot more danger out there for women than there is for men". Asked to elaborate he said "there's paedophiles and stuff like that, int' there." There seemed to be quite a common view that women could be exploited by men due to reasons of physical strength:

> *You see women are more vulnerable than men are. Cos men can stand up for themselves, some women can't stand up for themselves towards another man wragging them around sayin'… trying to rape them, you know what I mean? If they see a vulnerable woman they're going to go target her aren't they?* (Keith, M, 16)

Only one young person (Mercedez, F, 15) seemed to feel that vulnerability was experienced equally by both men and women. Both her father and her boyfriend had been raped:

> *… some men take advantage. Like even men take advantage over other men, like what happened to my Dad. And also they can just take advantage by like –* [boyfriend] *said that the woman that did it to him, her husband threatened him* […] *right in his own house, not in their house, in his house, so you know. We're all really vulnerable.* (Mercedez, F, 15)

A recurring theme throughout this thesis has been the relatively higher level of concern with the sexual vulnerabilities of young women (see especially 5.5 and also 7.1.2), which seemed to have been reflected in the young people's interviews.

Where gender was seen as contributing to young men's vulnerability, this was largely due to the problems which 'hyper-masculinity' could bring for young men. Brook (F, 16) felt that boys were more vulnerable than girls:

Brook: *Girls, I think, personally, are more switched on than boys. I think girls grow up a little bit faster than boys.*

Kate: *So do you think girls are a bit less vulnerable?*

Brook: *Yeah, because some boys love to fight. Some boys love to show off in front of their mates and wanna be this big-time drug dealer. You don't see a lot of girls wanting to be a big-time drug dealer, do you, and wanting to fight and things?*

Yet such views of the vulnerability of young men remained largely confined to the interviews with young women. Mackenzie (M, 16) was unusual in that he was the only young man to suggest that he saw young men as more vulnerable than young women. This, he implied, was due to society's responses to normative gender roles of young people:

> *They just have more like stereotypes like the police and stuff always think it's always boys that are causing trouble in school and they always think it's boys that always cause trouble and stuff. But sometimes it ain't like girls are just as bad.* (Mackenzie, M, 16)

Jade A (F, 17) indicated that she felt that society's ideas about sexuality and gender shaped vulnerability in a more problematic way for young men, who could be at risk of being bullied for being gay by their peers: "especially boys, you know... you can experiment but some people say 'they are who they are' and that's it".

In certain interviews, young people implied that they saw an inter-relationship between class, gender and vulnerability. Hayley (F, 16) gave the impression that she understood 'hyper-masculinity' almost as a direct response to vulnerability in young men from certain inner city areas:

Hayley: *Like you can tell when someone's had to bring themselves up.*

Kate: *What sorts of things would you be able to tell about, what might make you think someone's brought themselves up?*

> Hayley: *Well, I think when children, like, say boys when they're on a bus and they're standing up and they're just staring at people, they're rude and their back's just up all the time.*
>
> Kate *Do you think them people, do you think they're vulnerable?*
>
> Hayley: *Yeah.*
>
> Kate: *Why?*
>
> Hayley: *They're just doing that to protect themselves, it's obvious and they think it's a good look. But it's not; you can tell that they've had some shit in their life and there's obviously a need. They want someone there, but they ain't got no-one there.*

Naz seemed to feel that young women's opportunities and behaviours were shaped by opportunities resulting from class and gender:

> *Some people, when they're older, they might not be going to college and stuff. They might just be going out with people and stuff, people and stuff like that and like, getting drunk and like doing stuff with 'em. Like sexual stuff with 'em and that.* (Naz, F, 14)

In summary, young women tended to be positioned by young people as vulnerable because of their lack of independence from men, whereas where young men were considered vulnerable it was seen more as a failure to perform normative levels of 'hyper-masculinity' associated particularly with young working class male identities. After her assertion that all young people were vulnerable by virtue of their position in society, Mercedes (F, 15) alluded to the idea that there were different behaviours which emerged as a result: "Lasses are bitches, boys are arseholes. Normal".

8.5.3 Vulnerability and access to resources

Many interviewees reported childhood experiences that related to poverty (see 6.1.2). The majority of the young people discussed how they considered the vulnerability of young people to be shaped by economic well-being or access to

resources. Stephanie felt that this was the case because people "can do everything with money":

> *With people on the dole as well they can't really afford much. 'Cos you only get paid so much on the – so it's like harder for them. 'Cos if like if they borrow money off people and they pay that debt off when they get that money and that they've only got a little money to provide for themselves. So it's a lot harder.* (Stephanie, F, 16)

Considerable detail was sometimes given about the ways in which money was related to vulnerability. At 12 years old, Anna displayed what might be considered an astute awareness of the financial problems which shaped the opportunities she had access to:

> *... you need to pay for loads of things and that's if like, if you have kids, you can't go to work 'cos you can't leave* them [...] *Like some of 'em* [young people] *have got good education and they get good work and you feel like if they're the only kid in the family then they can get money from their Mum and get what they want. 'Cos right, when I ask my Mum for something, to buy me it, only for me, anything like a phone, she's like no 'cos you're big brother gonna need it.* (Anna, F, 12)

The way in which Anna saw her family's financial precariousness as tied in with opportunities to work was echoed in other young people's narratives. Brook (F, 16) saw financial resources as providing access to gaining training which may eventually lead to employment, a view shared by a number of the older interviewees:

> *... if you've got money, you could pick a different career, couldn't you? I don't know. You could, like, go to a company and pay to get trained up. And then once you're trained, that's it, you're employed in a top job, you know. Yeah, I think things do work a little bit differently if you've got loads of money.* (Brook, F, 16)

Access to financial resources did not tend to be a desired state in and of itself, but more in terms of how this could shape other life experiences and, in particular, help with the alleviation of stresses and strains:

> *When you've got money, like, everything seems to be fine, there's, like, no stress to lead to family arguments or things like that* (Hayley, F, 16)

> *So say if you're trying to do something and then you go out and get robbed if you're like saving up for something and then on your way home from work or wherever you get robbed it just makes everything harder* [...] *if you've got enough money you can just - not buy everything - but having money makes stuff easier doesn't it like you can buy like buy stuff to help you rather than having to do it all yourself like* (Mackenzie, M, 16)

Young people felt that although vulnerability was not entirely shaped by money and financial matters, access to resources offered some sort of 'buffer' against negative experiences associated with vulnerability. Mercedez (F, 15) felt that although she would not be less vulnerable if she had more money, having money would limit the impact of the difficult experiences she was having: "It'd just help me being happy". Such an account of 'vulnerability' resonates with Emmel and Hughes' (2010) understanding of the concept as linked to an individual's lack of capacity to cope with crises and stresses due to limited material resources (see 2.2.2).

A small number of interviewees understood access to resources as important because of their influence on where a person lived, which was perceived as closely linked with future life experiences and opportunities:

> *When I was doing alright at school I had a lot of rich friends and their families seemed perfect compared to mine and then I've got friends who are from, like, the roughest estates in Leeds and their Mums are barely there for them. They're so streetwise it's untrue. Like, you'd be able to tell – like, I'd be able to tell, like, where a person lives by the way they act and how they've been brought up as well. Like you can tell when someone's had to bring themselves up.* (Hayley, F, 16)

Susceptibility to community violence was also cited frequently as a factor which was deemed to influence the vulnerability of young people (and particularly young men, see 7.1.2), which was again tied to geographical locality:

> *... where I live I had – there's like people like not like gangs as such but like people who go round robbing people and stuff and it just makes everything harder and stuff 'cos you have to worry about where you're going and who you're gonna be with and all stuff like that.* (Mackenzie, M, 16)

> *you come in* [large estate], *there is some idiots and you get some all right people, you get them everywhere. You can't change that but you just keep away from them or try your best anyway.* (Jay Jay, M, 17)

Although young people saw their vulnerability as shaped by access to financial resources, this perception was bound up with a sense of themselves as in charge of their own opportunities, which is particularly interesting and worthy of further consideration.

8.5.4 Young vulnerable neo-liberal citizens?

Running alongside but to some extent contrary to the idea that vulnerability was shaped by material resources were young people's ideas about the capable agent as able to overcome vulnerability. Here, there were echoes of Campbell's (1991) theorising that contemporary economic liberalism has at its heart the idealised notion of the non-vulnerable citizen: rational, free, independent beings with a dislike of dependency (see also 2.1.3). Evident in young people's narratives were ideas that they were free and rational actors in a society where money was not imperative to achieving a state of 'non-vulnerability', as this extract from Alicia's (F, 16) interview indicates:

> Kate: *Do you think that* [money] *helps you to be less vulnerable or more vulnerable?*

> Alicia: *Not really, because if you want something that bad, you can get it. So I don't think it'd make me vulnerable*

Analysis of where young people held opinions that money did not shape vulnerability revealed that some young people seemed to be grappling with a contradiction between a sense of themselves as disadvantaged and also as capable agents. Asked if she thought money helped people with difficulties in life, Jade (F, 16) said "it does in a way and it doesn't, because money doesn't solve all your issues." Where young people indicated views that individuals were in control of their lives and that money did not shape vulnerability, there was usually some degree of conflict in their narratives in relation to this, as in Jay Jay's (M, 17) interview:

> Kate: *Do you think that people have a more difficult future who don't have money?*

> Jay Jay: *No because you can have exactly the same future with money or without money 'cos you can be the same person with money, that you are without money. But people can do owt with money, can't they?*

Rather than revealing young people to be expecting state assistance to address the vulnerability of themselves and others, this tended to be seen as an individual endeavour. As Keith explained:

> *It's not your YOT worker's decision; it's your decision to change your life. It's not - there's only one person that can do it and it's not anybody else it's you that can only help change your life. It's only you that can do anything. It's only you that can do it.* (Keith, M, 16)

Although young people saw vulnerability as shaped by structural factors in certain respects, more often than not, they felt the way in which they could overcome their vulnerability was down to them as individuals, rather than the society in which they lived. Asked what things could help them to achieve the lives they wanted in the future, young people tended to defer to individual behavioural matters mainly centred around working hard at school: "Not skiving school" (Naz, F, 14), not "wasting your time on TV" (Elle, F, 14), or as Sam (M, 14) saw it, "revise more and more".

Dependency on the state was predominantly viewed as undesirable. Hayley was homeless, had been 'disowned' by her mother and father after living with her violent father since she was small, and was about to leave education:

> *I wanna do it on me own, to be honest with you. I wanna be able to say, when I've done it all, you know, 'I did that on me own'.* (Hayley, F, 16)

Charlie (F, 16) was one exception in this respect, she saw herself as financially supported by the state in a way that reduced her vulnerability. She expressed that she had experienced lots of difficulties earlier in her life, but appeared to view this as resulting in beneficial state financial support:

> Charlie: *I think because I'm in care, I'm gonna have a lot of mon— cos until I'm eighteen, my rent will get paid for me and everything like that. And until 21, all your college courses. And we'll be getting £3,200 to, like, do our house. My brother didn't get that cos he wasn't put in care. So, like, he has half an empty flat. People just have to build on it. But instead, for us, we just get it all at once.*
>
> Kate: *Yeah, so that's good, getting it all at once?*
>
> Charlie: *Yeah. Cos our brother, like, he has a fridge and not a cooker, and it's like not very helpful. People have to work for it, don't they? We just get given it.* (Charlie, F, 16)

It could be that less stigma may be attached to welfare dependency for young people in care, as this group is commonly cited as exceptional in its legitimacy to make claims for state support (see 3.1.2 for an example). For other older young people who had experienced overt dependency on the state already, there was evidence of feelings of resentment about this. After he transitioned into 'adult' entitlements and support systems at the age of 18, Scott felt claiming benefits had been a struggle and so he had become more entrenched in crime as a means of supporting himself and his girlfriend:

I just went down the wrong path there and I thought, 'fuck it, if the government's not going to help me, I'm not going to help myself'. And I thought, 'fuck it, I'm going to do what I want to do, me', and I went sour for a bit. I went that sour that I thought, 'fuck t' government, fuck t' Jobseekers. I'll never been a doley.' I said I'd fucking never take anything from the government and what they've done for me. And that's when I just started making money [committing robberies]*. (Scott, M, 18)*

On the whole, analysis of narratives suggested conflicting and unresolved tensions in understandings of how vulnerability was shaped and mediated by the financial distribution of resources in society. There were suggestions that vulnerable young people had been successfully 'responsibilised' in terms of viewing themselves as mediators of their own vulnerability to some extent, but at the same time they often also saw money as important in shaping opportunities and vulnerability.

8.6 Conclusion

Young people's lived experiences of vulnerability appear to be mediated by formative relationships and events in childhood and youth, and also by processes, institutions and systems which govern and shape their lives. Empirical evidence suggests that for some vulnerable young people, the role of services in mediating vulnerability is particularly significant, given that they have limited recourse to other options when dealing with difficulties. How far various interventions might address and mediate young people's vulnerability was perceived by young people as being tied in with a range of issues such as the timeliness of the provision, the relationship they developed with their support workers, the time-span and practical impact of a given intervention and the amount of action that they saw as having been taken. From this discussion, it would appear that 'vulnerable' young people receive services according to how they perceived levels of care, control, consultation and inaction.

In terms of the broader structural processes shaping interviewees' lives, particularly significant findings emerged in relation to age-based power dynamics, access to financial resources and gender. That they were vulnerable due to being

marginalised within society as having less power and control than adults was evident from the narratives. Furthermore, the group in the sample experienced a social world where sexuality and choices of partner shaped the vulnerability of young women, whereas for young men it was their 'hyper-masculinity'. Such findings supported themes raised in the preceding chapter about how young people understood 'vulnerability' as a gendered concept (see 7.1.2). There was some evidence to indicate that young people's behaviour and responses to interventions could also be located within class and gender dynamics which shaped their life experiences and vulnerability. This chapter was the last of four to explore data gathered from the empirical case study. Findings generated from both desk-based and empirical work are now explored together, in a final concluding chapter.

Chapter 9: Towards a Better Understanding of 'Vulnerability'

This thesis has drawn together official understandings of vulnerability enshrined within policy and guidance documents, influential constructions of the concept in academic literature, tacit understandings of vulnerability from practitioners and policy-makers, and young people's own perceptions of this concept and the interventions they receive as a result of being classified as 'vulnerable'. Research highlighted the pervasiveness of the concept of vulnerability in welfare and disciplinary interventions. Findings from the study had 'applied' dimensions, highlighting lived experiences of 'vulnerability'. More 'theoretical' insights were also generated, which related to the dimensions of the concept of vulnerability.

This chapter draws together and discusses themes and findings which emerged from the various strands of the research project. It begins by summarising the aims of the research, the scope of the project and key findings from each part of the thesis (9.1). Following this, findings from the study are discussed thematically. Firstly, an overview is given about the ways in which vulnerability would appear to be operationalised in welfare and disciplinary interventions during the period under review (9.2). Secondly, insights into the social worlds of 'vulnerable' young people are highlighted (9.3). Thirdly, an exploration of relationships between 'vulnerability' and 'transgression' is included (9.4), with the way in which gender intersects with a 'vulnerability-transgression nexus' given specific attention. The contribution the study makes to how vulnerability might be understood (9.5) and in terms of how 'vulnerability' can most usefully be conceptualised is then discussed (9.6). Following the thematic discussion, potential implications of the research for policy and practice are tentatively advanced (9.7) and some final reflections are included (9.8).

9.1 Overview of the research: aims, methods, findings

The overarching aim of the study was to seek to understand more about how the concept of vulnerability might shape welfare and disciplinary interventions. Taking young people as a case study group through which to explore this, an area of

particular interest was to consider tensions arising where young people were seen as 'vulnerable' and also 'transgressive'. Positioning 'vulnerability' as an idea which may be more relevant in the regulation of behaviour than might initially be assumed, there were several other research questions which underpinned and guided the work, which related to:

- How the concept of 'vulnerability' is constructed in policy
- 'Vulnerable' young people's perceptions of the concept of vulnerability and their responses to being classified as 'vulnerable'
- Similarities and differences in practitioners', policy-makers' and 'vulnerable' young people's understandings of 'vulnerability'
- Complexities arising where young people are seen as 'vulnerable' and also as needing to be socially controlled
- 'Vulnerable' young people's understandings of their own lives

The research built on previous empirical work on young people's experiences of ASBOs (Brown, 2011a) and the researcher's experience of nearly ten years' working in voluntary sector support services for 'vulnerable' groups. Fieldwork for the case study was grounded in connections into and knowledge of a specific local context where the researcher had been living, working and studying for around seven years. The various strands of the research process were pursued with the intention of collecting and seeking to understand various perspectives, and to linked detailed analysis of a locality with broader conceptual and policy issues.

The mixture of qualitative methods used in the investigation included three main strands: a literature review of the academic and official literature on vulnerability; a general review of national policy trends related to vulnerability; and a geographically-based case study exploration of how the concept of 'vulnerability' operated in practice in relation to 'vulnerable' young people in a large Northern city. The initial review of academic literature related to vulnerability illuminated particular areas within policy where the concept seemed particularly significant, which led to the more detailed policy-based reviewing of national trends. Such reviewing generated insights as to which groups and individuals tended to be seen

as 'vulnerable' and about interventions for such groups, which then shaped and informed the development of the empirical case study.

The case study work included interviews with 'vulnerable' young people, interviews with practitioners and policy-makers involved in services supporting 'vulnerable' young people, and also more informal immersion in practitioner worlds through meetings and interactions. The sample of 'vulnerable' young people who were interviewed for the case study involved a range of participants aged 12-18 who were from various groups who tend to be classified as 'vulnerable' within policy and practice (see 4.4.1). Young people who were seen as both 'transgressive' and 'vulnerable' were deliberately incorporated. Although young men and young women were sampled, it was not possible to systematically cater for other aspects of 'difference' given limitations of time and resources, and such an investigation could be an area for further research. 'Task-based' interviewing techniques were used in the interviews with 'vulnerable' young people, which might be seen as a relatively novel way of eliciting data from groups who are often considered 'difficult to reach' by researchers.

The **introductory chapter** of the thesis outlined some of the background and context for the study, along with the main aims of the project, its key components and the research questions. It was suggested that the ways in which 'vulnerability' is 'imagined' has significant effects on the lives of those who are considered to be vulnerable, yet this area is surprisingly under-researched. The first chapter also outlined why 'young people' were a particularly useful group on which to focus the investigation. It was highlighted that the policy context which forms the backdrop to 'vulnerable' young people's lives would appear to be characterised by ambiguity, complexity and contradiction, as 'caring' and 'controlling' processes clash and overlap (see Goldson, 2002a, 2002b and 2000; Muncie, 2006).

Chapter 2 reported from a review of the academic and official literature on 'vulnerability'. It was suggested that 'vulnerability' tends to be constructed in two main ways, as either 'innate' or as 'situational'. The review indicated that the

concept of vulnerability is intimately tied to notions of blame, accountability and agency. Influential ideas about 'vulnerable groups' were explored, revealing certain trends in which populations tend to be considered as vulnerable. Academic writings on 'risk' were shown to be illuminating when considering the concept of vulnerability. Although 'vulnerability' and 'risk' were revealed as conceptual cousins, distinctions also seemed to be evident, mainly related to the strong moral connotations attached to the idea of 'vulnerability'. The use and significance of 'vulnerability' in social policy formed the focus for **Chapter 3**, which considered particular domains where the concept has been prominent since 1997. This chapter indicated that whilst vulnerability discourses work to the benefit of certain selected groups or individuals, in the current context, vulnerability-based rationales can 'otherise' rather than 'include' certain populations, emphasising the 'individual' rather than the 'structural' nature of life events or circumstances. The complex ways in which ideas about 'vulnerability' resonate within a context of neo-liberal social policy were explored, highlighting that the concept can be viewed as part of the systems by which certain individuals and groups are reviewed and monitored as well as supported and assisted.

Detailed consideration was given in **Chapter 4** to the research methods which were used in the study. Particular attention was given to the use of 'task-based' interview techniques with young people, where a variety of activities were undertaken by interviewee and researcher together, with the aim of encouraging discussion and eliciting 'richer' data. The use of these methods supported other research which has indicated that these interviewing methods may be an effective practical way of promoting a more 'active' involvement in the research process for 'socially excluded' young people (Conolly, 2008). The implications of the researcher's 'insiderness' to the area under scrutiny were also considered, as this gave the study significant strengths in terms of qualitative detail, but also had potential drawbacks in terms of 'detachment', which required management through a continuous process of reflection and adaptation.

Findings from qualitative interviews and informal data-gathering with professionals involved in service interventions for 'vulnerable' young people were presented in

Chapter 5. The chapter contained some important data for the thesis in terms of how understandings of vulnerability shape interventions for young people who are deemed 'vulnerable' as well as 'transgressive'. It was noted that where young people are 'non-compliant' as well as 'vulnerable', this was as one informant put it, "a totally different ball game" from where they were simply 'vulnerable'. The researcher found illuminating both the prominence of 'vulnerability' as a concept in children's services and the practical implications of its use in this arena.

Chapter 6 was the first of three findings chapters which reported from interviews with 'vulnerable' young people. Taken together, these three empirical chapters (Chapters 6-8) generated unique insights into the social worlds of 'vulnerable' young people. **Chapter 6** focussed on the life stories and imagined futures of young people, generating insights into the circumstances which 'vulnerable' young people face and the way they themselves see these situations. Young people's understandings of vulnerability were then discussed in **Chapter 7**, with particular attention given to whether young people positioned themselves within a frame of vulnerability. Most young people in the sample were familiar with and responded to notions of vulnerability, but in some instances the word 'vulnerability' was discussed in terms of various proxies such as 'difficulties' or 'difficult lives'. Data generated on how far young people positioned themselves within a frame of vulnerability revealed that most interviewees considered others to be more vulnerable than they themselves were, indicating that the concept of vulnerability is socially and culturally constructed, with a relative dimension.

Chapter 8 sought to explore the ways in which young people felt their vulnerability was shaped and influenced. Young people's lived experiences of vulnerability were shown as mediated by formative relationships and events in their childhood and youth, and also by processes, institutions and systems which influenced their lives. 'Vulnerable' young people appeared to receive services in a variety of ways, according to their perceptions of levels of care, control, consultation and inaction which were attached to particular welfare or disciplinary interventions. In terms of the broader structural processes shaping 'vulnerable' young people's lives, age-

based power dynamics, access to financial resources and gender were all factors which young people saw as significant in influencing 'vulnerability'.

When findings from interviews with young people are seen alongside those generated from the interviews with key informants and from the review of literature and policy related to 'vulnerability', four principal themes emerge: (i) vulnerability as a mechanism for care and control; (ii) insights into 'vulnerable' young people's social worlds; (iii) the vulnerability-transgression nexus and its relationship with gender and (iv) the conceptual dimensions of 'vulnerability'. These four major themes are now explored in more detail.

9.2 Vulnerability as a mechanism for care and control

This thesis has highlighted that 'vulnerability' is a powerful conceptual mechanism which underpins the delivery of interventions for certain groups, with pervasive practical effects. How vulnerability is viewed and presented in social policy is important because discourses and policies relating to vulnerability play a part in hegemonic social practices related to vulnerable individuals or groups, which in turn help shape lived experiences of 'vulnerability'. One of the findings from a review of academic and official literature indicated that notions of vulnerability seem to have become increasingly influential since New Labour came to power in 1997 (Chapter 3). Although we are seeing some changes in the use of a 'vulnerability rationale' under the Coalition government, vulnerability-based policy rhetoric appears set to continue as an enduring feature of contemporary social policy. Notions of 'vulnerability' have been particularly influential in the arenas of services for children and young people (see Daniel, 2010; Fawcett, 2009), the 'protection of vulnerable adults' (see Hollomotz, 2011; Wishart, 2003; Beckett, 2006) housing (both in the UK and abroad, see Cramer, 2005; Passaro, 1996; Levy-Vroelent, 2010) and also crime and disorder (see Furedi, 2008; Waiton, 2008; Richards, 2011).

The concept of vulnerability within social policy arenas has special relevance for children and young people. As well as being seen as a condition or state linked intrinsically to childhood (James and Prout, 1997) and to a lesser extent 'youth', 'vulnerability' is heavily utilised in policies and initiatives targeted at children and

young people seen as having particular problems or at risk of 'poor outcomes' (cf Daniel, 2010). Interviews with key informants and analysis of official documents showed that 'vulnerability' features heavily in the language and practices of service provision for young people. As some informants indicated during the present investigation, it has become something of a "buzz word" in children's services. Its functions would seem most often related to the assessment of young people and professional processes for agreeing on particular interventions. It is also influential in the commissioning process for services and in the distribution of resources. In the interviews with young people, we saw that the classification and management of 'vulnerability' could have important implications for 'vulnerable' young people's everyday lives, with some young people recounting direct experiences of being classified as 'vulnerable' by support workers, with varying effects.

One of the ways in which 'vulnerability' tends to be most apparent within the governance and delivery of services for young people is in references to 'vulnerable groups'. This phrase is a way of defining groups or individuals who share certain substantive difficulties in their lives. In the case study city, the concept of vulnerability was drawn upon by professionals as a classification which helped to organise resources, systems and interventions for young people seen as particularly in need of support or discipline. Drawing together official and academic understandings of how young people are 'vulnerable', how informants understood 'vulnerability', and the life stories of 'vulnerable' young people, the following framework might be a useful way of thinking about which groups of young people tend to be seen as 'vulnerable':

Table 9.1: Groups of young people seen as vulnerable

Type of vulnerability	Groups of young people seen as 'vulnerable'
Behavioural	'Sexually exploited' Drug/alcohol users Those who offend Those who display 'anti-social' or non-compliant behaviour Those who run away
Familial	Parental abuse and/or neglect Parental substance use Homeless parents/family Parental domestic violence Parents' mental health issues Offending parents Young carers
Particular circumstances	Mental health issues, including self-harm Disabled young people (including those with learning difficulties) Those with significant health problems Looked-after children Young people living in poverty Homeless or poorly housed individuals Those who are 'bullied'
Cultural factors	Gypsy and traveller young people Speak English as a second language BME backgrounds Young asylum seekers and refugees
Educational	Poor attendance or significant problems at school NEET

It should be noted that a young person could well be a member of several 'vulnerable' groups. Indeed, the interviews with young people suggested this was usually the case (see Table 6.1).

The framework above is put forward cautiously. Given the absence of official or agreed upon definitions of young people's 'vulnerability', tacit and taken-for-granted understandings come into play where the concept is operationalised. This makes 'vulnerability' a notion which tends to be well-suited to delivering services in a flexible way. However, the malleability of 'vulnerability' means that discretion is important in how the classification is applied in practice. The lack of clarity around the notion seems to engender a relatively complex picture in terms of how the

concept is deployed, enabling certain elements of practice in this arena to perhaps continue unquestioned. A small body of work on 'vulnerability' exists across the academic literature in social policy, sociology and ethics, but these writings most often tend to focus on one particular environment within which notions of vulnerability are applied. This means that the implications of a 'vulnerability rationale' in welfare more generally are rarely subjected to scrutiny, and the effects of classifying certain groups as 'vulnerable' seems to remain surprisingly under-researched.

Attention to the ways in which the concept of vulnerability has been utilised across various policy arenas has revealed some significant themes. There would seem to be two main ways in which the idea of vulnerability appears in writings touching on social policy. One is tied to paternalistic systems of welfare particularism or selectivity, where emphasis is given to how some individuals are in need of special care and attention (see Wishart, 2003; McLaughlin, 2012; Levy-Vroelent, 2010). The other is as a means of emphasising 'universal vulnerability', where vulnerabilities and efforts to address these are framed in terms of institutional factors and forces which persist over time and shape the choices, views and lives of individuals (see Turner, 2006; Goodin, 1985; Beckett, 2006). The present study has suggested that 'advanced' liberal democracies like the UK are more inclined to draw on 'particular' rather than 'universal' understandings of vulnerability. When applied within a context of neo-liberal citizenship models, focussing attention and resources on 'the vulnerable' tends to act as a discursive mechanism which emphasises accident, misfortune or personal accountability for the difficulties experienced by individuals. It is an approach at odds with structural accounts of disadvantage and rights-based approaches to citizenship.

At the same time, for some people, there would appear to be certain benefits associated with social welfare organised around 'vulnerability'. Being classified as 'vulnerable' offers certain individuals a route to accessing additional state resources, and would also seem to act against the urge to condemn 'transgressions' which might otherwise be seen more pejoratively. For example, vulnerability is one of three key elements which form the basis of the YOS's national screening tool,

Asset, and chapters of the present study have suggested that a young person's 'vulnerability rating' according to Asset was a factor which shaped and informed sentencing outcomes for young people. One young man who was interviewed for the research had served a custodial sentence for drugs and theft offences and described how his classification as vulnerable meant that his sentence was served in a secure unit, rather than a YOI (secure units are generally considered to be a less punitive sanction than YOIs). As well as functioning at the level of individual assessment, the classification also works favourably at group level in some instances. People who share certain characteristics who come to be seen as vulnerable are then also often seen as requiring particular attention, action, or duty of care on the basis of one particular 'problem' or issue in their lives (drug use, mental health issues, housing problems etc.).

Yet the positive effects of discourses of vulnerability would appear to come at a price. Although young people saw being categorised as 'vulnerable' as a gateway to extra assistance, they also experienced this as an entry point for social control. One of the major ramifications of vulnerability-based welfare mechanisms is that they would also appear to function as a basis for heavier state intervention in the lives of certain individuals. Young people who are seen as particularly vulnerable may be subject to more intensive interventions. In instances where they do not then respond in the required way to the prescribed strategy, or are resistant to it, this may result in disapproval or punitive sanctions. In effect, 'vulnerability' can be seen as part of a broader 'net-widening' process which appears to be taking place within social policy. As a young woman who had attended a school for 'vulnerable girls' said, when workers call young people vulnerable, "They really are protecting them a lot more", but "they don't get to do as much things" (cited previously in 7.2).

9.3 Vulnerable young people's social worlds

One of the central points confirmed by this thesis is that young people who are classified as 'vulnerable' have often faced substantial difficulties. Particularly prevalent in young people's narratives were stories of familial abuse, neglect and/or sexual abuse, as well as complex and multiple challenges that had arisen within their family contexts, such as domestic violence, parental substance misuse

and caring responsibilities. Alongside family circumstances, there were often other 'vulnerabilities' which were perhaps more specific to young people as 'young adults' moving towards independence, such as precarious living arrangements and homelessness, running away, selling sex, experiencing mental health problems, self-harming and being 'bullied' by others at school or in their local community.

A complex inter-relationship between 'bad behaviour' and difficult circumstances was evident in the data from the interviews with young people. Interviewees' descriptions of the empirical realities of their lives undermined dichotomous understandings of 'youth' seen at policy level, where young people seem to be represented as either 'transgressive' or 'vulnerable', rather than them being seen as both these things at the same time. Indeed, young people perceived their 'transgressions' and 'vulnerabilities' to be intimately related. Whilst most young people saw themselves as having faced substantial difficulties, they also expressed a strong sense of having the capacity to cope with life's setbacks and challenges. Determination, optimism, and a sense of competency were distinctive features of the young people's narratives, qualities which are not perhaps commonly associated with supposedly 'vulnerable' young people. Their imagined futures indicated that education was seen as a vital part of a desirable future, at the core of which tended to be aspiration for some sort of employment they deemed 'valuable', financially and/or morally. The futures young people imagined were highly conventional in most cases. A minority of the young people, however, were more focussed on the day-to-day practicalities of 'making it through' and struggled to think about their lives in the future.

Although most young people saw themselves as having been vulnerable at certain points in their past, with a few exceptions they tended to be resistant to notions of themselves as vulnerable in the present. Being classified as vulnerable tended to be seen by young people as an affront to their sense of being capable of coping with their circumstances. It also seemed to undermine their sense of control over their lives, and was largely met with disapproval and resistance. The exceptions were interesting and hinted at the possibility that a young person's cultural and material environment might to some extent shape how receptive they may be to notions of

their 'vulnerability'. More generally, young people's discussions about 'vulnerability' revealed tensions with adults and professionals over what behaviours and circumstances constituted real 'risks', and a certain amount of ambivalence about how far young people exercised 'agency' in their lives. Often young people saw certain benefits associated with behaviours which professionals classified as engendering 'vulnerability'.

In some cases, young people had received interventions from a vast array of services which focussed on different 'vulnerabilities'. During one of the interviews, an 18 year old interviewee made reference to 17 different interventions that he had received at various points in his life (see Table 8.1). For some 'vulnerable' young people, the role of services in shaping their 'vulnerability' had been particularly significant, given their limited recourse to other options or resources when dealing with difficulties. The broader structural processes which young people saw as influential in augmenting or decreasing 'vulnerability' were mainly related to age, access to financial resources and gender. In terms of how welfare and disciplinary services could best 'reduce' their 'vulnerability', the following factors appeared to be significant for 'vulnerable' young people:

- Interventions geared towards a particular issue were considered best where they were provided promptly and at the time the issue occurred
- The short-term nature of interventions was a point of criticism. Some young people felt they struggled after services withdrew their interventions
- Where young people's 'voices' were considered in the planning of the interventions, this was valued highly by them
- 'Action-orientated' interventions and positive relationships with workers tended to be valued much more highly than 'talking-orientated' interventions

Rather than encountering a care/control continuum which tends to dominate academic understandings of services, young people experienced responses to their vulnerability via welfare and disciplinary agencies as a mixture of care, control, inaction and consultation. By consultation, it is meant that young people felt

included in decision-making about the nature and course of interventions they received. Instances where they experienced this were viewed positively and could operate as a way of strengthening young people's engagement with services during periods of difficulty. Inaction from services was experienced very negatively by young people.

My investigation generated insights into how 'vulnerable' young people see their 'vulnerability' as being situated and influenced. To help summarise the views of factors which shape and influence 'vulnerability' in the eyes of 'vulnerable' young people, the following diagram is useful. A mixture of 'constructions' and 'realities' are evident, which reflects the way that the 'structural' and the 'personal' were not easy to separate in the narratives:

Figure 9.1: Key influences on young people's vulnerability
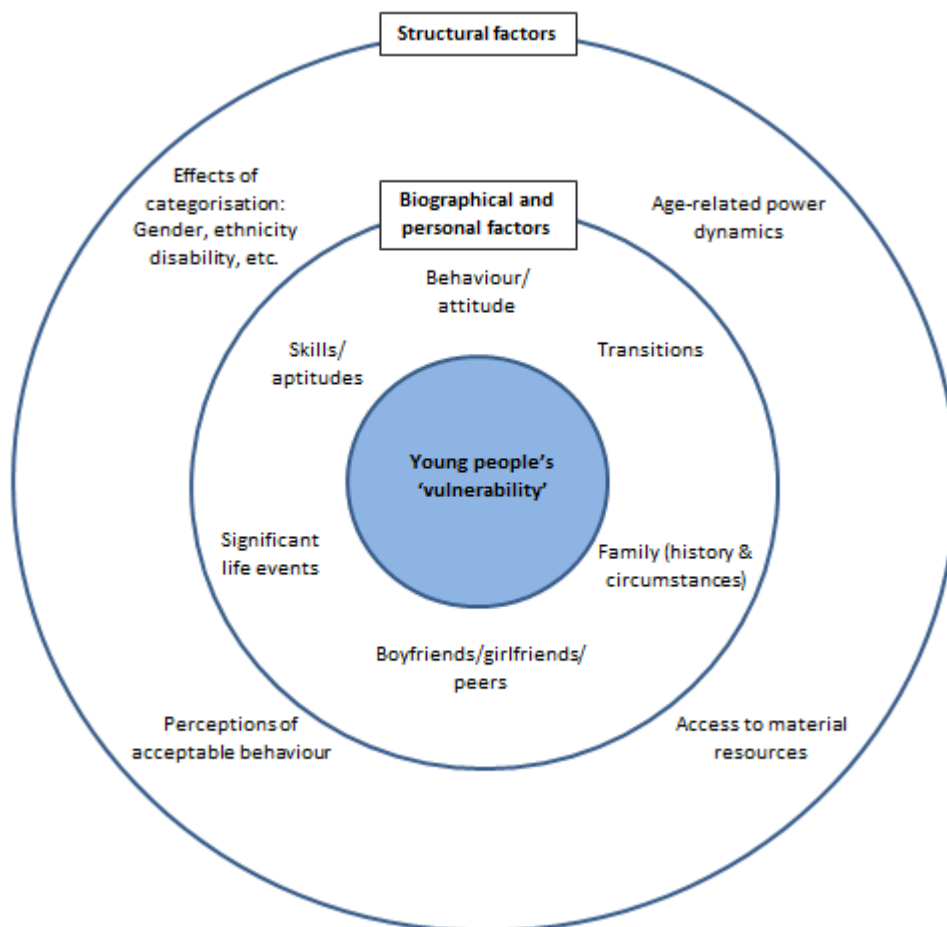
It is worth noting that young people's conceptualisations of 'vulnerability' might to some extent reflect and relate to practitioner understandings, particularly in cases

where young people had experiences of being classified as 'vulnerable' through services or interventions they had received. A further note of caution should accompany this representation of lived experiences of 'vulnerability'. Given that most 'vulnerable' young people were resistant to notions of themselves as vulnerable, it might be questioned if the notion of vulnerability is an appropriate way of conceptualising the adversity which certain young people face. Due to the importance of concepts such as 'vulnerability' and 'risk' in responses to young people's circumstances, perhaps more work by researchers and practitioners is needed to develop methods of assessment and classification which are more aligned with the way in which 'clients' view and make sense of their own social worlds.

9.4 The vulnerability-transgression nexus and its relationship with gender

This thesis has shown that welfare provision for 'vulnerable' groups is characterised by a close relationship between 'transgression' and 'vulnerability', which acts as a complex dynamic underpinning the delivery of services. Where individuals are described as 'vulnerable' there can also be a sub-text implied by this classification; that an individual or group also represents some sort of threat to social order, and needs to be controlled. Useful illustrative examples of such a scenario are the treatment and constructions of groups such as sex workers (Scoular and O'Neill, 2007; Phoenix and Oerton, 2005), people with mental health problems (Warner, 2008) and even people who might commit acts of terrorism (Richards, 2011).

In services for young people, an unresolved problem lies at the heart of perceptions of the 'vulnerability' of this group, which relates to how far young people should be classified as 'children', unaccountable for their lives and actions, and how far they should be treated as 'adults' with full agency and a complete set of citizenship responsibilities. Often, those under the age of 18 seem to be treated as either 'vulnerable victims' with very little 'agency', or dangerous wrong-doers with full responsibilities in situations where they transgress (Such and Walker, 2005; Fionda, 2005). To further complicate matters, at the same time as being seen as 'vulnerable', some young people are also 'difficult', 'non-compliant' or criminal. This

seems to have particular implications for the ways in which policy and practice intervenes in the lives of some of the more 'problematic' 'vulnerable' young people. Just as is the case with other supposedly 'vulnerable' groups, young people are often described as vulnerable when they have behaviours which are deemed problematic (see Table 9.1). As one key informant explained, calling young people 'vulnerable' is "better than saying the child is stupid or is neglected or deviant". This vulnerability-transgression nexus has subtle but pervasive practical implications for those who are classified as 'vulnerable'.

Where young people are 'vulnerable' and also 'non-compliant' or 'transgressive' they seem to pose particular challenges to services. Commissioned according to particular 'vulnerabilities' or 'social problems', on the condition that they demonstrate 'improved outcomes' in these areas, services which support 'vulnerable' young people appear to be inclined to target resources at those who are most responsive to them. Accounts from key informants indicated that services might "cherry-pick" the more 'compliant' 'vulnerable' young people (see 5.4.2). This seemed to stem partly from a funding context which was focussed on particular 'vulnerabilities' or problems, as well as workload and cost implications, but was also the result of certain moral judgements made by practitioners and policy-makers about who 'deserved' help or discipline the most.

There were indications that views about the 'deservingness' of young people seemed to underpin practitioner understandings of who is 'vulnerable'. This appeared to be in part shaped by dominant societal tendencies to see 'youth' as a 'social problem' (see Squires and Stephen, 2005; Brown, 2005; Kelly, 2003). Those young people considered most 'vulnerable' would most often seem to be those who were deemed to have exercised minimal 'choice' in their difficult circumstances. The interviews with 'vulnerable' young people showed that they were affected by binaries of deservingness and vulnerability. Chapter 7 highlighted that to some extent young people's ideas about their own positionings resonated with neo-liberal ways of thinking. They perceived a relationship between their own difficulties and transgressive behaviours, but at the same time they judged other young people's transgressions harshly. Practitioner and policy research also

indicated that those young people who were seen as unwilling to 'do something' about their lives or behaviours in the ways deemed necessary by service providers were often seen as less vulnerable and more 'to blame' for their circumstances.

There were signs that young people were seen as 'vulnerable' until they failed to act in the way that staff would deem acceptable. One useful illustrative example was relayed by an informant who worked as a support worker for 'sexually exploited' young people (who are often considered by practitioners to be some of the most 'vulnerable' young people). A particular young women whom the informant had supported had not wanted to work co-operatively with the police to secure a prosecution of the men who were 'exploiting' her, which meant that professionals involved in her support began to increasingly perceive that she was 'choosing' her circumstances. Patience waned amongst the team of professionals working with her and support for her declined (see 5.4.2 for the direct quotation). Indeed, we saw similar issues arise about the issue of 'choice' in the recent Rochdale case, where social workers had assumed young women (some of whom were also deemed highly 'problematic') were making 'informed decisions' about sexual practices with older men, views which were later criticised as the young women's 'vulnerability' was emphasised (Rochdale Borough Safeguarding Children Board, 2012 and also see Phoenix, 2012a).

These examples would seem to be indicative of a broader issue, that in instances where young people fail to adequately 'perform' their vulnerability, this can contribute to the withdrawal of services or to more disciplinary responses to their behaviour. The vulnerability-transgression nexus appeared to have particular effects on the lives of young people who might be perceived as assertive, aggressive, and/or strong-willed. Interviews with key informants indicated that young people with these sorts of attitudes or behaviours were less likely to be seen as 'vulnerable' and more likely to be seen as having more 'agency' in their circumstances. More broadly, confused and even contradictory attitudes towards 'agency' and 'vulnerability' were evident in welfare services for 'vulnerable' young people, perhaps exacerbated by notions of 'passivity' attached to 'vulnerability' as a concept. How far young people were seen as 'victims' of their circumstances or as

'in control' of their lives oscillated and changed according to behaviours, circumstances and practitioner attitudes.

The importance of 'performances' of 'vulnerability' may lead us to question how the 'most vulnerable' young people are supported by interventions designed to assist them. Young people grappling with the greatest structural disadvantages might well be those least likely to respond positively to services and interventions. Indeed, some individual cases such as Scott's (M, 18) highlighted this (see 6.2.2 and also Appendix F). Yet where those young people have 'problem' behaviours, they would appear to be likely to be considered less vulnerable and on that basis might be accorded fewer resources and less patience, and/or more punitive interventions. Researchers have noted similar trends before. Youth justice academics have convincingly demonstrated that those who are most disadvantaged are those more likely to be 'recidivists', and to be more heavily disciplined by the criminal justice system (Goldson and Muncie, 2006; Jacobson *et al*, 2006; Muncie *et al*, 2002; Wilkinson and Lober in Pitts, 2000).

The 'most vulnerable' young people might well be those who are likely to have 'difficult' behaviours, but discourses of vulnerability paradoxically emphasise adherence to 'good' behaviour as a 'condition' of support. Classifications of 'vulnerability' may therefore work in the direction of excluding from support those who are most 'in need', or who face the most ingrained lack of opportunities. In this respect, drawing heavily on notions of vulnerability in welfare services can be seen as part of a broader 're-moralisation' agenda which would appear to be intensifying in contemporary social policy (see Flint, 2006a; Brown and Patrick, 2012; Harrison and Sanders, forthcoming). Governmental and practitioner discourses drawing on 'vulnerability' would seem to form part of wider policy narratives which establish what is appropriate and 'correct' behaviour, and which subject people to sanctions should they fail to conform.

The vulnerability-transgression nexus had particularly significant ramifications in terms of gender. Data from interviews with both informants and young people, seemed to indicate that in instances where young people had faced a range of

particular difficulties in their lives, young women with similar backgrounds to those of young men may have been be more likely to be seen as 'vulnerable'. As the informant from the YOS indicated, when practitioners imagined a 'vulnerable' young person, "we probably think about the girl that drinks before we think about the six foot three person that's done a few robberies" (previously cited in 5.5.1). There would appear to be two possible explanations for this gendered account of 'vulnerability'. It may be that young women actually *are* more vulnerable, or it may be that young women's association with vulnerability is *more pronounced* or obvious due to the 'performance' of gender (Butler, 1990). Many of the young people I interviewed seemed to experience a social world where sexuality and choice of sexual or life partner was the most influential factor shaping the vulnerability of young women, whereas for young men it was more their 'hyper-masculinity', or lack of this (see 7.1.2).

In the social worlds of young men who were deemed 'vulnerable', it seemed to be considered important to behave in more assertive and aggressive ways, as vulnerability was perceived as a weakness that could be risky in itself. Performances of 'heteronormative' masculinities appeared to benefit young men in certain respects, but interviews with key informants suggested that such behaviours could also mean that young men risked exclusion from vulnerability classifications when operating in a context of service interventions. As one practitioner said, "girls and boys do it differently, don't they"; the implication being that where vulnerable boys were angry and aggressive, girls displayed vulnerability where they were involved in 'risky' sexual practices. Constructions of vulnerability seemed to emphasise the 'dangerousness' of young men, whereas they highlighted instances where young women transgressed accepted norms related to sexual behaviours. The significance attributed to the 'sexual exploitation' of 'girls' within the governance of young people's vulnerability in particular seemed to highlight this (see Phoenix 2002 and 2012a). It is worth noting that even in the case of 'sexually exploited' young women, 'non-compliance' would nonetheless seem to erode vulnerability status. This gendered perspective on vulnerability, transgression and interventions might usefully be understood in relation to the particular group of young people who

formed the focus for the present study, those from inner city urban areas and estates.

Interview narratives indicated that relationships between behaviour, gender and perceived vulnerability constituted complex dynamics which underpinned how services for vulnerable young people were delivered and received. These patterns perhaps have particular implications for the extent to which services respond to young people within a context of economic austerity. There were indications that vulnerability classifications might serve to exclude those who are 'problematic' more than those who were not, which could be particularly important in times of narrowing welfare provision. It could be the case that young men, who tend to be seen as less vulnerable than young women, might be particularly affected as the boundary lines around who is given care and support are re-drawn. Given that younger children are often assumed to be 'more vulnerable' than young people, it might also be the case that 'older' 'vulnerable' young people might be less well-served by welfare agencies in times of shrinking state resources.

9.5 Developing understandings of vulnerability

Despite the powerful ethical connotations attached to notions of vulnerability, this thesis has found that the concept does not rest on well-developed theory. There would seem to be two main ways in which the notion tends to be understood. It can be seen as *innate* (determined by physical and personal factors, which can sometimes be associated with certain points in the life course), or as *situational,* where it relates to situations which develop that can include the input of a third party or 'structural force'. Situational vulnerability tends to be seen as involving some (contested) degree of agency on the part of the 'vulnerable' person or group. Usually, when ideas about vulnerability are operationalised in welfare systems, and sometimes in research, the two senses of the concept are mixed together and differences are implicit rather than specified.

Where it has been used with more precision, the concept has been usefully developed and theorised. The 'co-ordinates of social vulnerability' which are outlined in the works of Watts and Bohle (1993) and Emmel and Hughes (2010) (see

2.2.2) would seem to resonate with empirical understandings of 'vulnerability', especially amongst practitioners and policy-makers. In light of insights from the present study, Watts and Bohle's (1993) and Emmel and Hughes' (2010) co-ordinates can be further developed and built upon. If their co-ordinates are combined and refined to include young people's understandings of 'vulnerability', those of professionals working to support 'vulnerable' groups, and key understandings found in the literature, a useful way of thinking about the concept of vulnerability might be that it:

- Is a relative and culturally constituted concept
- Can be constructed as either innate or situational
- Is connected to a person's risk of encountering difficulties in life
- Is contingent on a person's capacity to cope with stresses and difficulties
- Is constructed and reaffirmed by broader social and economic systems and processes which influence the life of an individual
- Is often associated with a reliance on welfare services and how such services are able to help a person address acute difficulties when they arise
- Seems to be connected with categorisation or differentiation of particular groups or populations
- Is sometimes used as a mechanism through which to distribute resources

Given that ideas about vulnerability are most often applied by those in more powerful positions to define those in less powerful ones, it might also be the case that elements of stigma or labelling may sometimes (unintentionally) be involved where vulnerability is used as a means of classification in research and in policy and practice.

9.6 The key dimensions of vulnerability and its distinctiveness as a concept

This thesis raises questions as to how far 'vulnerability' is conceptually distinct from or similar to other concepts in sociology and social policy, and about its key dimensions as a notion. This section will revisit some of the findings of the thesis with a gaze on such conceptual issues, exploring and amplifying them further. It will

include points that may be taken further by the present author or by other researchers interested in conceptual aspects of vulnerability or in its application in the social world. Firstly, the positioning of vulnerability in relation to other similar concepts will be considered (9.6.1). This will be followed by exploration of the most distinctive dimensions of the notion (9.6.2). Finally, attention is given to mismatched understandings of vulnerability (9.6.3). As well as giving weight to the importance of discourse in the construction of the social world, there are also reflections which highlight that the conceptual dimensions of vulnerability may in part reflect or encapsulate wider social dynamics.

9.6.1 Vulnerability alongside other concepts

Investigation has revealed 'vulnerability' to be one of a number of prominent concepts commonly used by researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to refer to lower-income or 'less-well off' groups. Similar notions include: 'risk', 'resilience', 'need' ('priority need' in the case of housing) and also 'adversity' (see Daniel, 2010), with 'risk' perhaps having received the most sociological attention (Lupton, 1999; Culpitt, 1999; Taylor-Gooby, 2000; Sarewitz *et al*, 2003). A further prominent policy idea within the same constellation is that of 'troubled families', which merges the notions of 'troubled' and 'troublesome' (Ribbens McCarthy *et al*, 2013; Levitas, 2012). All of these notions can prove difficult to define and have amorphous conceptual boundaries. What all of them share is that they are used within welfare and disciplinary processes mainly in relation to those who are seen to represent some sort of 'problem' that requires attention from government in the form of 'support' and/or 'control'.

The present study has highlighted that 'vulnerability' is a close conceptual cousin to 'risk', and unsurprisingly, the 'risk society' thesis (Beck, 1992) is often drawn upon to explain the prominence of ideas about vulnerability (see 2.4). Indeed, Beck himself (2009: 178) has stated that 'vulnerability and risk are two sides of the same coin'. During my fieldwork, risk was a notion drawn upon by all of the key informants in their definitions of vulnerability (5.1), although boundaries between the two terms were not necessarily clear when applied in practice. Analysis of the literature indicated that vulnerability discourses can be associated with ontological

concerns about risk, insecurity and powerlessness. As Misztal (2011: 33) states, 'the language of risk implies a permanent condition of vulnerability'. Similarly to 'risk' and also terms like 'troubled families', 'vulnerability' serves a dual purpose in discourses related to precariousness. It not only highlights that the person or population is 'at risk'; the implication is also that they are 'a risk' to others or to society as a whole (see Warner, 2008; 2.2.3 and 3.2.1).

Within the cluster of concepts which sit alongside 'vulnerability', there would appear to be two main ways of 'framing' social problems or difficulties. There are what Fawcett (2009) describes as 'strengths-based perspectives', such as 'resilience' for example, which emphasises 'positive adaption' (Luthar, 2005). There are also more deficit-based constructions, such as risk, which emphasise immediate concerns about some kind of problem and negative outcome. Some concepts do not seem to fit neatly into either category; 'adversity' might be considered one example. In its most common usages in contemporary policy and practice, however, 'vulnerability' would appear to be firmly located in deficit-based approaches to social issues. My literature review highlighted that particular concepts seem particularly well-suited to the measurement, auditing and assessment of individuals against the neo-liberal ideal citizen: the independent, rational, capable individual (see Lupton, 1999; Campbell, 1991). 'Risk' tends to assume centre stage in such analysis, yet research for this thesis has indicated that when applied in welfare and disciplinary settings 'vulnerability' has a similar significance, drawing attention to how groups and individuals are deficient in the requisite skills or qualities to be able to function to the level required of supposedly 'normal' or 'responsibilised' citizens. Just as has been noted in relation to some of the other concepts in the constellation, 'vulnerability' can be part of a discourse which serves to 'otherise' rather than 'include'. It is a way of denoting how certain populations and groups are 'different' to the 'mainstream'.

9.6.2 The distinctiveness of vulnerability

Despite similarities, several facets of 'vulnerability' subtly but importantly make it distinctive from other notions in the constellation. These are explored in more detail here and relate to: the 'reach' or scope of the notion; what might be called its

'cloak of concern' (Van Loon, 2008; 59); the behavioural conditionalities attached to vulnerability; its dynamic nature; and its role in the social construction of disadvantage.

The 'reach' of the notion

Given its malleability and plurality of meanings, vulnerability is potentially further-reaching than concepts like 'risk' in terms of who is implicated in governance arrangements generated when such ideas are operationalsied. This reflects what I have called the 'contingent nature' of vulnerability (see 2.4). Empirical data indicated that 'vulnerability' is more linked with the *potential* for an undesirable situation or predicament, rather than tangible and *immediate concerns* about a negative outcome (see Sarewitz *et al*, 2003). As one informant said, vulnerability to her was more of a "state", whereas there were "definite factors" associated with risk. Risk, as Van Loon (2008: 50) argues, 'implies a calculation'. 'Vulnerability' seems more open to interpretation. As the idea of someone being 'vulnerable' is increasingly used as a stand-alone term (instead of used in the sense where someone is vulnerable to something specific, see Furedi, 2007 and 2008), policies aimed at addressing presumed vulnerabilities are likely to be broader-reaching than where they address 'risk', 'need', or the development of 'resilience'. As one example, during fieldwork, findings indicated that as the youth justice system has become increasingly concerned with addressing vulnerability, this seemed to have widened and intensified the scope of surveillance, support and interventions (see practitioner accounts in 5.2.2 and also young people's perspectives in 7.3). It would appear that vulnerability in certain respects has an expansionist dimension. When used as an organising principle it may be inclined to extend the 'reach' of state support and/or discipline.

The cloak of concern

Although this thesis has indicated that vulnerability is a mechanism of care and control, it should also be acknowledged that preoccupations with vulnerability appear on the surface as motivated less by control and instead more grounded in 'care'. As one informant put it, vulnerability is a "kind word" (see 5.2.3). The literature review and empirical case study undertaken for this thesis seemed to

indicate that in policy, practice, and also in research, vulnerability was assumed to be less stigmatising than some of the other concepts commonly used alongside it. Indeed, some key informants speculated that the popularity of the concept of vulnerability was related to this less-stigmatising quality, and several explained their own use of the notion in this way (see 5.2.3). The strong ethical dimension to the term (see Mackenzie, 2009; Goodin, 1985) imbues the notion with connotations of empathy and good intention, aligning it with apparently therapeutic approaches (cf Harrison and Sanders, 2006). Such 'therapeutic' approaches may appear to be less controlling and more well-meaning, but may in practice result in encroachments on the activities of behaviours of groups who are constructed as 'problematic' in some way.

There is a strong paternalistic quality to the notion of vulnerability. Ideas about 'vulnerability' can imply that 'officials' or professionals 'know better' than the receivers of services, and that without the 'help' of professionals, service users might not make the decisions that are seen as 'appropriate' (see also Dunn *et al*, 2008 and Hasler, 2004). The paternalistic quality to the concept is seldom recognised, which is in itself almost a defining dimension of the notion. Discourses of vulnerability therefore could be said to give license to governmental interventions and surveillance 'in the name of protection' and well-being (see Phoenix, 2002 and also 5.2.2). Analysing policies on teenage parenting, Van Loon (2008: 59) uses Foucault's governmentality thesis[46] to argue that vulnerability:

> … is a specific label that can be deployed to justify targeted actions towards/against specific groups of people. It enables governmentality to adopt a cloak of 'concern and care' or what Foucault […] has termed 'pastoral power'.

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[46] 'Governmentality' was a term used by Foucault (1980) to describe the nuanced and far-reaching nature and rationalities of political and social practices connected to the exercise of state power and social control. According to Foucault's governmentality theories, state power is dispersed across society via the social practices of a variety of governing authorities and through systems of thought. This theory emphasises individual actions and subjectivities and their role in and effect on such processes, with government power acting in "both an upwards and a downwards direction" (Foucault, 1980: 91).

This 'cloak of concern' is one of the most significant factors which would appear to mark vulnerability out as conceptually distinctive. This facet of 'vulnerability' perhaps makes it a particularly effective conceptual mechanism for the transference of power from the receivers of services to professionals who may administer, implement or manage them (see Hollomotz, 2011 for another empirical investigation which suggests this).

Exclusivity and behavioural conditionalities

The appeal of 'vulnerability' is closely connected with notions of 'deservingness' and undertones of individuals not being to blame for their circumstances (see 5.2.3). Yet at the same time, 'vulnerability' has undertones of 'weakness' and implies behavioural compliance. This combination of connotations is a subtle but potent conceptual prism, with implications which can lead to the exclusion of some people from vulnerability classifications if they fail to 'perform' their vulnerability sufficiently. One informant summed this up particularly succinctly, saying that "if someone's cocky and rowdy and stuff like that" then this could lead to "people thinking that [young people are] not vulnerable" (see 5.4.1). Findings indicated that vulnerability's close association with 'compliant' attitudes and behaviour align it with systems which judge 'transgressive' people as less 'legitimate' in their claims on resources than those who behave in more conformist ways.

This links vulnerability discourses with moralising agendas in social policy, helping to create and sustain binary oppositions about the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' within society. Although concepts such as 'need', 'risk' and 'resilience' perhaps serve similar trends towards behavioural conditionalities, it could be argued that 'vulnerability' discourses are particularly pervasive in this respect, perhaps because of their subtlety. The behavioural expectations which are attached to the concept of vulnerability also shape the way in which the concept functions for different social groups, with it being more closely associated with young women than with young men, for example. This study considered vulnerability primarily in relation to age and gender, but the implications of the conceptual dimensions of vulnerability for various different groups would seem to be an area worthy of further investigation.

Dynamic dimensions and beyond the discursive

Contributions in reference to governmentality have provided particularly useful insights. However, questions have arisen in this study about how far such theories might paint a relatively mechanistic picture. Practice conditions at the 'front-line' showed a more nuanced picture than simply those in power exercising control through the imposition of vulnerability classifications. Chapter 8 discussed how young people were resistant to being described as 'vulnerable', yet where they had positive relationships with the person or organisation which was doing the describing, the process of how they reacted to this was a dynamic negotiation. Depending on their relationships with their workers and their situational circumstances, vulnerability could at certain times be a classification which they were receptive to or could even be positively received.

Equally, in practitioner worlds, whilst 'vulnerability' emerged as somewhat vague and plural in meaning, it also had a degree of shared meaning and tacit understandings made it a concept which helped organise interventions and resources.   Indeed, in relation to social constructionism and social problems, Sheppard (2006: 52) argues that whilst researchers may seek to contest definitions used in practice from the 'outside', from the 'inside' they may be legitimate and objective. Ultimately, vulnerability is a malleable notion, imbued and affected by the possibly irreducible impact of consciousness of the user and receiver of the label. In other words, the intention of vulnerability classifications in policy and in practice are always shaped by the receivers of the interventions and by the dynamic interactions between the 'vulnerable' person and those involved in providing intervention on the basis of 'vulnerability'. Discourses of vulnerability are therefore unlikely to be 'fixed' and uses of the term reflect broader power dynamics and the structures of wider social relations.

There would seem to be a temporal dimension to such dynamics. Vulnerability is a concept that captures something of precariousness over time as well as in the present (cf Emmel and Hughes, 2010). Discussing global environmental dangers, Beck (2009: 178) argues that 'a sociological conception of vulnerability has a pronounced reference to the future, yet it combines with this a profound

rootedness in the past'. That young people were more receptive to the idea that they had been vulnerable at points in their past than that they were vulnerable in the present was a point of particular interest to the researcher and an area which could be explored further. Generally speaking, vulnerability can be seen as a concept which captures something of the dynamic nature of social problems. This is again something which marks out the notion as distinctive in relation to some of its counterparts.

Disadvantage as 'accident' which can be addressed

Finally, notions of vulnerability play a role in the social construction of social problems, which is particularly pertinent in relation to understandings of disadvantage. Although a complex picture has emerged in this thesis, overall, the use of vulnerability discourses seem to contribute to systems of thought which frame disadvantage as circumstantial rather than structural. The idea of vulnerability focuses attention on resources and situations at the lower end of the income and opportunity spectrum, averting attention from a society-wide view of social advantages and disadvantages. For example, only one of the 35 professionals and young people who were interviewed for the present study explicitly connected 'vulnerability' with the idea of disadvantage. This suggests that the concept is more closely aligned with 'individualist' perspectives on social problems rather than explanations or ideas which are focussed on macro-level social processes. Whilst discussion about resources going to 'the most vulnerable' can provide a seemingly 'ethical' rationale for reductions in resources, findings from this study resonated with Kemshall's (1999) claims that the rise of vulnerability in welfare can be linked with agendas of welfare-reduction (see 5.4.4). Unless carefully constructed in a 'universal' way (see 5.1.5), ideas about vulnerability often seem to obscure the politically and economically constituted nature of social predicaments.

Yet although the concept of vulnerability may be inclined to divert attention from structural inequalities, at the same time, it seems also serve to underline something of the role of mid-level social systems in how social difficulties are experienced. Vulnerability's contingent nature alludes to the possibilities of people coping (or not coping) in situations of precariousness (cf Emmel and Hughes, 2010). Drawing on

the idea of vulnerability seems to appeal to what might be seen as a core idea in contemporary social policy, that when people are experiencing difficulties, interventions can mediate the severity or impact of these. Coupled with the capacity of the notion to emphasise dynamics over time, this is a powerful conceptual dimension which gives it special utility for those interested in social justice.

9.6.3 Mismatched understandings of social worlds

Whilst 'vulnerability' was generally considered to be a less stigmatising denigration than 'risk', this was not necessarily a view shared by the receivers of services. To return to one young person's comment on this issue, Charlie (F, 16) indicated disapproval of the term 'vulnerability' as follows:

> *I think I'm doing well for myself and if [Social Worker] said that I was vulnerable, then it'd make me feel like I was doing loads of things I shouldn't be* (see 7.2.2).

There were numerous other examples indicating that young people saw the notion of 'vulnerability' differently to key informants. Indeed, practitioners were aware of this potential mismatch and tended to use discourses of vulnerability in work with other professionals. Most avoided using the term in direct work with service users, as they felt it would be met with resistance. This disjuncture between the intentions of policy-makers, practitioners and researchers and the way policies and discourses are received is perhaps similar to that noted in relation to some other research and policy concepts such as poverty and social exclusion.

More generally, close attention to the operationalisation of 'vulnerability' reveals tensions in how social worlds are understood by the providers and receivers of interventions. As well as focussing on the role of a particular term or organising principle within social policy and practice, this study of vulnerability highlights something broader about the realities and lived experiences of social divisions. Receivers of services do not necessarily see their lives as problematic in the same way that policy-makers and practitioners do. In their work on how individuals on low incomes view themselves as a subject of assessment, Batty and Flint (2013)

highlight profound disconnections in understandings between researchers and residents of low-income neighbourhoods. Vulnerability discourses can be seen as part of this broader picture.

Although exploring particular terminology might emphasise the pertinence of certain discursive 'tools', this thesis has highlighted that systems of ideas and practices which shape the lives of people who are described as 'vulnerable', 'excluded', 'at risk' or 'troubled' move beyond merely the discursive. Tracing the contours of the operationalisation of vulnerability has indicated that whilst particular rationales and technical mechanisms are important to understand better, these form part of a wider process about how social systems shape and mediate realities. Mismatched understandings about vulnerability would appear to form part of a broader gap in perceptions of the social world that exists between policy-makers, policy-deliverers and service users. More understanding about the perspectives of receivers of services can help to address such disjunctures in understandings of social worlds and the dynamics that underpin them. Detailed attention to vulnerability in this thesis has provided particularly rich insights in terms of complex issues of resistance and the implementation of 'top down' frameworks of ideas, which might usefully be taken further and applied in other policy arenas.

9.7 Potential implications for policy, practice and research

Although policy prescription lies beyond the brief of this thesis, during fieldwork, practitioners and policy-makers were keen to glean ideas and feedback about the direct practical application of the ideas which my thesis was exploring. Having been a support worker and manager myself, I also have a longstanding interest in how research ideas are utilised practically. Whilst I appreciate that normative 'problem-solving' conclusions are not a major concern for this thesis, and am aware that conditions within the broader context for the research are changing rapidly, I have included here three tentative suggestions about the possibilities for developments in the governance and management of young people's vulnerability.

Firstly, more overt acknowledgment that 'vulnerability' and 'transgression' are not mutually exclusive states – and that they have a complex co-existence alongside one another – might help moderate some of the tensions and contradictions in the wider social systems and processes which underpin the governance of 'vulnerable' young people's lives. Where links between vulnerability and transgression are explored in research or highlighted in campaigning work undertaken by NGOs, the motivation would often seem to be to 'show' that young people's 'vulnerability' is a causal factor in 'transgressive' behaviour. The extensive youth justice literature has also highlighted such a relationship, but perhaps moving beyond the dichotomy to look at the implications of young people being *both transgressive and vulnerable* might be more useful as a starting point for research and policy arrangements. A more nuanced appreciation of young people's agency (as opposed to 'vulnerable victims'/ 'dangerous wrong-doers' with full decision making capacity) would mean that service responses might be better matched to the empirical realities of young people's lives.

Secondly, the current commissioning systems in welfare and disciplinary services for young people primarily centre on addressing particular issues or vulnerabilities, on a relatively short-term basis. For example, in a given city there is likely to be a service for young people who use drugs, some provision for young carers, extensive input around young offenders, and so on. The time-span of the services is based on dealing with that particular difficulty. This thesis has shown that 'vulnerable' young people invariably access multiple services (often simultaneously) throughout the course of their lives. In this system, 'multi-agency' working takes on considerable significance. Yet 'vulnerable' young people encountered in my study felt that short-term interventions were often unsatisfactory. Young people considered relationships they had with professionals to be the most formative factor in reducing their vulnerability, rather than the specific knowledge or specialty of a particular worker or service.

This could indicate the need for a shift in the way that services are commissioned for 'vulnerable' young people. Particularism and short-termism could be minimised in favour of systems which would enable 'vulnerable' young people to access

services for longer periods, offering on-going relationships for young people to draw upon throughout the range of issues they encounter. A shift of this type might also mean that fewer resources would be needed to finance practitioners spending time keeping up-to-date about the particular functions and access routes of other services that forms such a core part of 'multi-agency' practice. Such a shift seems particularly unlikely at a time where services are under pressure already. However, more locally-based arrangements for service provision might create opportunities for small-scale moves in this direction.

Thirdly, this thesis has suggested that 'vulnerable' young people who are also 'transgressive' would appear to pose particular problems for welfare and disciplinary services. The testimonies of young people, practitioners and policy-makers made clear that such young people may be less likely to respond to support in the desired ways, and so offer less effective 'returns' for services in a competitive funding environment where the focus is on 'improving outcomes'. Questions arise over how far 'vulnerable' young people who are also 'transgressive' might be affected as commissioning moves towards 'payment by results'. For those interested in addressing the problematic behaviour of the young people in question, the suggestion that more transgressive 'vulnerable' young people could potentially be less desirable for services to engage with might be a matter of concern.

More explicit recognition of the resource implications of working with young people who are 'transgressive' at the same time as 'vulnerable' might be one step that could help 'neutralise' the behavioural conditionalities attached to young people's services. In other words, where agencies work with young people who might be 'difficult' in various ways, additional funding could be attached, or further account could be taken of the nature of their service user group in any 'performance monitoring'. As this study suggested that young men might find themselves less well served by notions of 'vulnerability', perhaps more acknowledgement of this at policy level would reduce the risk of punitive sanctions being the mechanisms by which 'vulnerable' young men were dealt with in service interventions.

9.8 Final reflections

As neo-liberal social policy has gathered pace we have seen increasingly authoritarian approaches to dealing with young people (Goldson, 2002b; Goldson and Muncie, 2006; Smith, 2003). This group has come to be viewed as having ever-increasing levels of moral culpability (Piper, 2008; Fionda, 2005; Goldson, 2000). Yet at the same time as a 'responsibilisation' of young people, there has been the rise of 'new' ideas such as social inclusion and partnership which more punitive mechanisms have needed to work alongside (Muncie, 2006). It is within this context that processes which position certain groups of young people as 'vulnerable' have taken root. In many ways, a vulnerability rationale offers some means of reconciling tensions between the somewhat contradictory approaches of stronger discipline and social inclusion. Interventions can become more punitive, but with exceptions made on the basis of 'vulnerability' in order to make the overall system more 'fair'. The malleability of vulnerability would seem to enable localised translations of the broader policy context.

Yet in classifying certain individuals or groups as 'vulnerable', a discursive mechanism is activated which helps focus attention on patience and tolerance towards their need for additional support, rather than a more fundamental re-organisation of society or re-distribution of resources. Arguments about who 'the most vulnerable' people are contribute towards processes which decide how best to ration the limited resources available to those at the 'bottom', rather than encouraging questions about the distribution of resources and opportunities across the whole of society. This means that organising resources around 'vulnerability' has particular implications for welfare in times of austerity. Due to the strong links which the concept of 'vulnerability' has with ethics and morality, targeting or prioritising 'the vulnerable' for interventions or resources has the veneer of integrity, potentially deflecting attention from a narrowing of resources.

For the researcher, the most significant issue raised in this thesis is that individuals who are 'transgressive' as well as 'vulnerable' are those least well-served by discourses of vulnerability. Hegemonic social practices related to 'vulnerability' have been shown to be intimately connected with behavioural conditionality in

welfare, undermining universal citizenship rights. Although well-intentioned, vulnerability discourses would appear to serve the tapestry of increasingly selective welfare systems which are now so pervasive in contemporary social policy. In the opening chapter of the thesis I mentioned that some years ago a young person previously involved in prostitution once said to me that certain people get "left out" of being seen as vulnerable (see 1.1 and Brown, 2004). It appears that she was right. Within welfare and disciplinary systems, being classified as 'vulnerable' is to some extent contingent on 'good' behaviour. For that reason, I plan to use the concept of vulnerability more carefully in future research and practice than I have done in the past. I hope that telling the story of vulnerability might encourage others to do the same.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Young people's leaflet

Young People's Research Project

My name is Kate and I'm a researcher. I used to work at a project in Leeds which supports young people and now I'm doing some research to find out how to improve services for young people.

The research is finding out from young people what difficulties they have faced and how services have helped them (plus what hasn't) and what they think might help other young people.

Every young person interviewed will get a £10 voucher as a thank you for taking part and for giving up their time. The vouchers can be spent in shops like Argos, Boots, Wilkinsons, Superdrug, New Look, Iceland, Matalan, Carphone Warehouse and lots of others.

Interested in taking part?

Here's some things you might want to know before you decide:

What will the interview be like?

It will last about an hour. I will ask you about these sorts of things:

- How you got involved with your support project and what led up to this
- What services have helped you in your life
- What has not helped, or what could have been better
- What help you think other young people need
- What your goals are and what would help you in the future
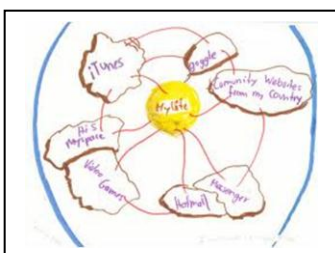
As well as talking, we'll do some activities to help us talk: things like drawing and watching video clips, and then discussing them.
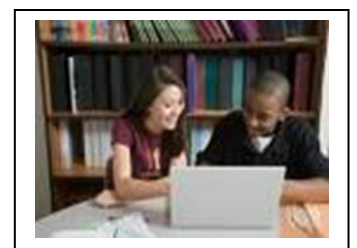
Will I be identified?

You won't be identified in the study in any way. Your name won't be used, and I'll make sure you can't be identified by descriptions of your circumstances.

Will things I say be passed on to anyone else?

No. Not school, your parents, or your workers. But there is one exception to that: if you say something that makes me think that either you or someone else is at serious risk, I will share it with your worker or with Social Services so they can help you.
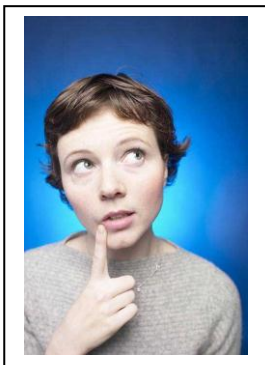
What if the things I say are about my worker?

I might give your support project some information which will tell them the things that young people said about their service, but I won't tell them who said what about the project.

So what next?

If you would like to take part, your worker will arrange a time for you and me to meet up and do an interview at a time and place that's convenient.

Ask your worker any questions you have.

One more thing! If you want to confirm that I am a research student at the University of Leeds, Department of Sociology, please contact Debbie Westmoreland on: 0113 343 4408.

I hope to see you soon ☺

Appendix B: Parental consent form

Parent/Guardian Consent Form: Vulnerability Research

What's the purpose of the study?

To find out how young people have dealt with difficulties in their lives, who has helped them, and what services could help young people in the future.

Who will read it?

This is part of a study about services for young people who are seen as vulnerable in some way. It will be read mostly by people working or studying at universities, but any member of the public will have access to it if they request it.

Will young people be identified?

Young people won't be identified in the study in any way. Names will not be used, and also young people won't be identified by descriptions of their circumstances.

Will it be confidential?

Yes, unless young people say anything that indicates that they or someone else is at risk. If a young person says something that indicates risk, this will be shared with their worker or with Social Care. All personal data will be stored securely.

Thank you

Each young person will be given a £10 voucher as a thank you for taking part and giving up their time.

_____

Name of parent………………………………………………………………………………………

Name of young person……………………………………………………………………………….

I give consent for my son/daughter to take part in an interview for this study

Signed*……………………………………………………………   Date…………………………………………

_____

*Note to workers: verbal parental consent is sufficient, but please go through all the sections on the form and sign/date the form to say you have done this

Appendix C: Young person consent form

Young Person Consent Form

Name……………………………………………………………………………………………………….

I give my permission for information I give in this session to be used in a study about services for young people.

I also give permission for information I give about my support project to be used in reports they write.

I understand that:

- I won't be identified in the study, or in any other reports

- What I talk about will not be passed on to anyone else, unless I say something that suggests high risk to me or someone else

- Anyone could read the study

- Things I say will appear in the report, but my name won't be attached to these quotes

- Notes from the session will be kept in a secure place (computer password or locked cabinet) – and I can see them too if I want to

- I can miss questions out or stop the interview if I want to

Signed…………………………………………………………   Date……………………………………

Chosen name to appear in study………………………………………………………………..

Appendix D: Interview guide 1 (young people)

VULNERABILITY STUDY – QUESTIONS FOR YP

INTRODUCTION

- Introduce myself
- What research is for
- What you need to know leaflet
- Confidentiality – sign form

ACTIVITY 1 – Past to Present: Emotional Mapping

Think of your life as a road leading up to now and you coming to [gatekeeper]

What were the main events that led up to that (stickers if you like, mark the road, or draw on it)

What were the main things in your life that happened along this road? (ask about difficulties if they don't discuss naturally)

What helped you along the way? (Services in particular) What didn't help? (How, in what ways etc.)

Was there a time when you could have gone a different way? (Probe support-related issues)

Do you think you are someone who had quite a lot of difficulties in life?

ACTIVITY 2 – Talking about Vulnerability

NB This section uses the word 'vulnerability', but 'proxies' may be needed depending on if YP can relate to the word. Proxies may include:

- *'in danger'*
- *'at risk'*
- *'having problems/difficulties'*
- *'needs help/support'*

I'm going to play you a couple of short video clips now, where young people describe their lives, then after that we'll talk about them for a while.

A) CLIP 1: Kevani - in care and pregnant:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxjOxW5fkh0

How does that person seem to you? How do you think they are getting on in life?

What do you think should happen to her?

Workers might call that young person vulnerable. Can you think why they might describe her as vulnerable? What is it about her that might make some people say she's vulnerable?

Do you agree with them? Do you think she's vulnerable? Why / why not? What do you think would stop her from being vulnerable?

B) CLIP 2: Young offender (from 30 seconds in)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1z6EBxy6cw

What about him…. How does he seem to you? How does he seem to be getting on in life?

What do you think should happen to him?

So some workers would say that that young person is vulnerable too. Can you think why that might be?

Do you agree with them? Do you think he's vulnerable? Why/ why not? What do you think would stop him from being vulnerable?

C) You

Some workers might describe you as vulnerable. Can you think why they might describe you as vulnerable?

Do you agree with them?

Have there ever been times when your workers have seen you as vulnerable? (probe if yes)

What do you think would stop you from being (thought of as) vulnerable?

Thinking back on the life map you did, where do you think you started to be (seen as) vulnerable? (and why)

What help could you have had that would have made this less likely?

ACTIVITY 3 – Future Goals and Obstacles

A) Another road now. Think about you as an old man/woman (draw at end of road), then imagine where you will be in ten years (vary timescale as appropriate) – what will your life be like? Where do you hope to be?

B) Now think about where you are now and what might get in the way of you reaching these goals.

Is there anything that could get in the way? What would help you along the way?

Do you think your future might be similar to other young people's, or different?

What about being a boy/girl/young man/young woman…. do you think boys and girls face different problems in their lives as they go along their path? (Then probe ethnicity/money/place/ability as appropriate)

ACTIVITY 4 – Who is the most vulnerable? (if time)

Talk through each card (which represents a group of vulnerable people) and who is on it.

Who do you think is most vulnerable? Why?

Who do you think is the least vulnerable? Why?

What about they others – where would they come? Why?

If you had to put yourself on there, where would you put yourself? Why?

Appendix E: Interview guide 2 (key informants)

KEY INFORMANTS INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: VULNERABILITY STUDY

Section 1: About the Interviewee

1) Can you tell me a bit about yourself and what you do here?

- Current role?
- Responsibilities in relation to CYP?
- Ages? Particular groups?

2) Can you tell me a bit about your background?

- How long have you been in post?
- What other particular groups of CYP have you worked with before your role here?

Section 2: Vulnerability in Practice

1) I'm going to ask a bit about vulnerability, especially in relation to YP. Do you think that's a term or idea that gets used much here?

- How?
- How do you think people you work with see vulnerability and use it in their work?
- Can you give an example?
- What sorts of places does it most get used? (Meetings, in the office, conversations, assessments etc.?)

2) Do you use it much in your work?

- How?
- How do you use the idea of vulnerability in your day-to-day practice?
- Can you give me an example?

3) Has its use changed in recent years (increased/decreased?)

4) Is it used more in official or unofficial settings? (reports or verbally?)

- Do you think it comes from policy-makers ('top-down') or practice ('bottom-up')?

5) Is it a term that gets used much with service users?

- How do service users react to idea of vulnerability? Or how you think they would react (if it's not used with them)?
- Especially YP and their families

- Suppose you were talking to a young person and you said they were vulnerable, how do you think they'd respond?
- Are they resistant to the idea they might be vulnerable?
- Why do you think they are, if they are?

Section 3: Understandings of Vulnerability

1) What sort of things does 'vulnerability' mean to you in your practice?

2) Would you be able to put a simple definition on the term 'vulnerable'?

- If you were describing it to someone who didn't know what it meant– what would you say?

3) How do you think 'vulnerability' is different from 'risk'?

- How would you see 'vulnerability' as fitting with child protection/safeguarding issues?

4) Can you see any problems with seeing people as vulnerable?

- Is it a positive or negative thing?

Section 4: Measuring and Classifying Vulnerability (Vignettes)

1) How do you assess and measure vulnerability in your work?

- What factors do you feel increase and decrease vulnerability?
- Are things like age/gender/ethnicity important?
- Anything else?
- Do you think a vulnerable YP ever stops being vulnerable?

2) Are you familiar with the Children Leeds 'windscreen'? Would it be ok to just ask you where you think a vulnerable child comes on this windscreen?

3) Are there ever disagreements about vulnerability? Or differences of opinion between professionals about it?

- For example, can you give me an example of where you felt a young person was vulnerable but other professionals didn't seem to agree?

4) CLIPS on measuring vulnerability.

I'm going to show you a clip where a young person describes their circumstances. Can you tell me after that if you think they are vulnerable? And why?

CLIP 1: Kevani - in care and pregnant www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxjOxW5fkh0

- Do you feel that young person is vulnerable? How? In what ways?

CLIP 2: Young Offender (from 30 seconds in)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1z6EBxy6cw

- Did you think that young person was vulnerable? In what ways?
- Who do you think would be seen as the most vulnerable by services? Why?
- Do you think the young man's behaviour might get in the way of him being seen as vulnerable in some cases?
- If the young man had talked about having a difficult past, say with some trauma in his background, do you think services would respond to him any differently?
- Who do you think was most vulnerable?

Section 5: The Wider Impact of Vulnerability

1) Is 'vulnerability' used in commissioning, and in funding and allocating resources for YP services, that you are aware?

- In Leeds?
- Nationally?
- How might this affect young people in Leeds?

2) Some sociology writers have argued that using the idea of 'vulnerability' is patronising to service users, others have said that vulnerability is helpful as an idea because it avoids blame. What do you think of those views?

3) Do you think how we think about the idea of vulnerability in professional practice has an effect on young people?

- Does the notion benefit some young people more than others?

Kate Brown

April 2011

Appendix F: Pen portraits of young people

All of the young people's names have been changed and pseudonyms were chosen by interviewees.

Alicia, Female, 16, White British

Alicia was adopted at the age of four. Her mother was a Heroin user, her father was in prison, and they could not look after her. She has lived with a number of foster carers and in different care homes. At 14, she became involved in prostitution and started using Heroin. She has now been clean from Heroin for about a year and no longer sells sex. There was a period around her 16th birthday when Alicia 'slept rough' (in a tent) for a month. She now has her own tenancy, which is with an agency that supports young people leaving care. She would like a job before she is 18, and wants to work with children in care or in a prison. She would also like to have children, get married, and pay to go on a holiday.

Anna, Female, 12, White Eastern European

Anna is originally from Lithuania and moved to this country aged nine. She lives in a hostel for homeless families. Before that, she lived in houses shared with other families and lived at another hostel. Her parents separated when she was small. Her mother has told Anna that her father was physically abusive and used alcohol heavily. Anna's mother had another boyfriend who was also violent, but they are now separated. Anna's mother had spent some time working in prostitution, which Anna felt angry and upset about. When she is older, Anna would like to be a singer and to write a book. She also wants to have a house and for her grandma and brother to live with her.

Brook, Female, 16, White British

Brook is currently homeless and living in a hostel, having left her mother's house last year as she did not get on with her mother's new partner. When she lived with her mother she was on the Child Protection Register (CPR); Social Care considered

her mother's new partner to be a risk. Last year she was served with a three month YOS order, which she breached, and was given a further three months. Brook has been excluded for the most part of her final year at school. She attends an off-site alternative education provision. A keen football player, Brook has played in football teams for several years. She plans to teach sport as a job, after studying at university. She hopes to secure permanent accommodation, have her own house, a car, and have a husband and two children.

Charlie, Female, 16, White British

Charlie has been in care for over three years. During that time she has had around 15 foster placements and several children's homes. Her mother is employed and has schizophrenia, her father uses alcohol heavily. Her grandparents are a very important source of support to her. She has recently been charged with criminal damage for an incident that took place at the children's home. She is due to complete a Health and Beauty course next year. Next month she will secure her own tenancy on a house which she will share with her sister. In later life, Charlie would like to run a hairdressing salon and eventually move to America.

Chris, Male, 17, British Pakistani

At the age of 10, Chris was taken by his parents to Pakistan. He lived there for six years with his uncle, who beat him on a daily basis. He did not attend school. He was moved back to England last year to live with his parents and two younger siblings. He continued to be physically abused by his family. His father told him that if he told anyone they would kill him. Earlier this year Chris explained the situation at home to a teacher. The Police and Social Care got involved, and Chris lived in hostels for a period. Several days before the interview he had secured his own property. Chris wants to finish his education and to join the Army at 18. He would also like to get married and have a family during his late 20s.

Elle, Female, 14, Black African

Currently living in a homeless hostel, Elle's family moved to the UK from Eritrea when she was around 8 years old. At the moment she lives in a homeless hostel

with her four siblings (one of whom was Sam who was also interviewed for the project) and her mother. When they have a house her mother and the family will live with her father again, as he lives nearby. She found it intimidating when she first started school because she hardly spoke English, but she now enjoys school. In the future she would like to be a pharmacist or a doctor, and get married. She feels that watching too much television and not working hard enough might get in the way of this.

Hayley, Female, 16, White British

Technically homeless, Hayley is staying at her grandma's house, waiting for her own tenancy. Her mother left the family home last year, and at the same time her father 'disowned' her. She had caring responsibilities for her 11-year-old brother for several years. The separation of her parents followed years of domestic violence. During childhood, Hayley lived periodically in hostels and refuges due to her mother fleeing the violence. Hayley has herself been in a violent relationship, which is now over. Hayley has self-harmed since the age of 11, by cutting herself. She has been excluded from school around 10 times. She received a final warning from the police for assaulting a police officer during an incident between her family and her ex-boyfriend. Having secured a place at college for next year, her ambition is to work with primary school children.

Jade A, Female, 17, White British (Spanish Mother)

Jade has learning difficulties and dyslexia. She has been severely bullied, including an occasion three years ago where she was physically assaulted by another young person whilst with her mother. Since this incident she has suffered with post-traumatic stress syndrome. She also has caring responsibilities for her father, who is physically disabled and suffers with depression and mental health problems. She plans to study childcare at college, and undertake voluntary work with a view to working with disabled children, and also work as an 'extra' on television programmes. She also sees herself losing weight, getting fit, becoming more confident and going into town on her own.

Jade B, Female, 16, White British

In care since the age of seven, Jade B lives with her foster carer, foster carer's husband, and two other young people. She has recently been on holiday to Turkey with them. Her older sister is an important person in her life. She stays with her sister every weekend, but no longer has contact with her parents, who used alcohol very heavily. Her father was violent towards her mother and the children. She has received support in school to improve her behaviour, which she says has at times been challenging in terms of her 'attitude'. After sitting her GCSEs Jade will be starting cookery course at college and she plans to work in catering when she is 18.

Jay Jay, Male, 17, White British

When Jay Jay was smaller, his father was violent and physically abused him. He moved house regularly, with periods spent out of school. When he was aged 13 he began running away. Around this time he was also excluded from school for fighting. When he was 15 he was sexually abused by a male friend of his mother's. He reported the abuse, but no action was taken. He has had lots of problems with bullying. On one occasion he was hospitalised after being assaulted by two young men. He describes himself as having a problem with anger. Six months ago Jay Jay received a community sentence with the YOS, for criminal damage during an incident with his girlfriend. Currently, he lives between his mother's house, his father's, and an elderly couple's house. He befriended the couple and helps them with shopping and household chores. In the future he would like to get a trade such as plumbing, or be a famous singer, get married to a nice wife, and have some money to travel. He is awaiting the outcome of an interview for a cleaning job.

'Jeremy Clarkson', Male, 15, British Bangladeshi

'Jeremy Clarkson' lives in a homeless hostel with his mother and seven brothers and sisters. The family moved there because they had some problems with neighbours where they lived before and his father felt the house was too small. His father currently lives separately, but the family will move back in with him when they are in a house. His father works in 'management and security'. Both his parents are Bangladeshi. He is very focussed on getting good GCSE grades so he can get a

'suitable' job. He has recently applied to study a motor vehicle maintenance course. He also wants to go to university locally, but is not sure he can afford this. As well as a job, in his future he would like to have a house and for his family to live there with him.

Jess, Female, 15, White British

Jess was taken into care last year after being sexually abused by her father from the age of 13. She regularly runs away, sells sex on the street and uses drugs and alcohol. Excluded from school at 14 for violence towards staff and other pupils, Jess has spent time in a residential mental health unit. After three miscarriages since the age of 13, she very much wants to get pregnant. She is currently on a final warning at her care home; if she absconds again she will be taken into a secure unit. Jess would like to work as a care worker in the future, and wants to have a child by the age of 16.

John, Male, 16, White British

John was sectioned two months ago for a period of four weeks, for reasons related to drug use. In the last three years he has used a mix of substances on a regular basis and describes himself as being addicted to the stimulant Mephedrone (or 'MCAT'). At around the same time he got involved in drug use, three people died who he was close to. After he began using Mephedrone he started stealing things to pay for drugs and was caught, receiving a one year order with the YOS. John went to a public school until around the age of 14, when he stopped attending. His father works as a university lecturer and his mother is a doctor. He has a difficult relationship with his parents, and now lives independently. The future is difficult for John to imagine. He is due to start a college course in Youth Work within the next few weeks.

Keith, Male, 16, White British

Last year, Keith spent four months in a YOI, after a period of offending related to Cocaine and alcohol use. He used to steal money from his Grandmother (who he lived with) in order to pay for his drugs. Since he was released from the secure unit

he has not used Cocaine and has used alcohol only twice. He now uses Cannabis regularly. His Mum and Dad used to 'argue' and split up when he was eight or nine. He lived with his Mum until aged 11, with his grandma for a short period, and then at his Dad's for around a year. His Dad used alcohol heavily and Keith was beaten by him nearly every day. Aged 14 he began using Cocaine and alcohol most days, and eventually stopped attending school. He now regularly attends a private sector specialist education provision and sits his GCSEs next week. He is now living at his Grandma's and enjoys some contact with his mother. His father is in prison for domestic violence offences. Keith's ambition is to own a unisex hairdressing salon.

Kotaa, Female, 12, Romany Gypsy

Kotaa's father died when she was 10. Following this, her behaviour changed and she started running away from home. One of her older brothers regularly spends periods of time in prison. Kotaa has been on the CPR in the past due to 'arguments' between her mother and father, and allegations of sexual abuse during a period when she was living with a family friend. She is on the CPR at the moment also. Kotaa has moved several times, including once to a different country, and might be moving to live in mainland Spain within the next few months. When she is older she would like to be a singer and a model and has already done some modelling for catalogue companies. She would also like her Mum to be alive when she gets married.

Laura, Female, 16, White British

Laura experienced some bullying at school when she moved to college at aged 14 and after a falling out with some of her friends. Her parents helped her to deal with this. Tutors at her school were also helpful. Laura was apprehensive about going up to high school from primary school at the age of 11, as she was afraid of meeting new people, but she managed the transition and met new people and made friends. Laura attends an off-site education programme after her school teachers felt she was involved in 'gangs', although Laura never indicated to the researcher that this was an issue. After sitting her GCSEs, Laura plans to study childcare and wants to

work with children. She also sees herself getting married, having children and owning a house.

Mackenzie, Male, 16, White British

Mackenzie has spent substantial periods of time out of school. Having moved from Ireland during primary school, he spent three years out of education waiting for a place in a Catholic school. At 14 he was diagnosed as diabetic. He was absent for around three months at that time, and has had other periods of absence subsequently. During the first year of his GCSEs he usually stayed at home for three days a week, partly due to his health and partly because of negative attitudes towards school. Mackenzie lives with his mother and his younger sister. His father was in prison until he was three years old, and now lives with his new partner and children. Next year Mackenzie will study fabrication and welding at college, though this is a 'backup' strategy; he would like to work as a mentor for older children when he reaches the age of 18. Later in life he would like a family and he thinks he will live in a rented house.

Mercedez, Female, 15, White British

Mercedes lives with her mother and her younger brother. She has a difficult relationship with her parents; both her mother and her father use alcohol heavily and Mercedez has substantial caring responsibilities for her brother. After some problems with attendance and being assessed by Social Care, Mercedez was placed on the CPR. She wants to live independently as soon as possible, and other ambitions are to be a hairdresser and to be able to afford going on holiday to places with a warm climate. She sees herself settling down and having children with her current partner, who is an important source of support for her.

Naz, Female, 14, British Pakistani

Naz runs away from home regularly. Her mother tries to control her movements, which Naz feels is restrictive. When she is away from home she is usually with older men, who drive her and her friends around in cars and give them drugs and alcohol. She regularly absconds from school, and has been excluded in the past. Naz has a

large family, with nine (step) sisters and brothers, some of whom grew up in care. When she was five, Naz was raped by her father. She is currently on the CPR due to 'risk-taking behaviour' and might soon be placed in a 'secure unit' for her own safety. When she is 16 she plans to move into a hostel. She would like to study health and social care at college and go to university, stay single, and to live in a flat with her best friend.

'Peter Schmeichel', Male, 16, Dual Heritage British (African Caribbean/White)

Having been in care since around the age of 12, 'Peter Schmeichel' now lives with foster carers. He was taken into care because people thought his father was not looking after him properly, but his mother and father are an important source of support in his life. He described having behavioural difficulties and being 'disruptive' in school, and had moved secondary schools several times, spending a period of eight months not attending school at all. He now attends a private sector specialist education provision for three days each week. He aspires to be a football coach in the future, and has just been accepted onto a course for this. He wants to be rich, by marrying someone with a large income like a teacher or a doctor.

Sam, Male, 14, Black African

Sam is Ella's brother (see above). He moved to the UK from Eritrea at the age of around 11. He lives in a hostel with his Mum and four siblings. Sam plans to attend university when he leaves school, as he wants to be a civil engineer. However he has some concerns that forthcoming changes in university fees may mean that he needs to be a mechanic instead.

Scott, Male, 18, White British

Scott has been in prison twice, for robbery and violent crime, and also has an ASBO. He started selling Heroin at aged 9 and has also used a variety of drugs regularly himself. He was permanently excluded from school for violence at the age of 13. Scott's mother used Heroin and alcohol for most of Scott's early life. The family lived mainly in bedsits where they would all share a bed. His Stepfather regularly spent time in prison, supporting the family by stealing things. Scott was beaten as a

child and went into care at 14 after his mother attacked him with a knife. He has lived in many different care homes and was sexually abused at one by a member of staff. Whilst in care he often ran away, living with a group of Asian men who gave him food, work in a restaurant, drugs and a place to stay. Since 16 he has lived in various adult homeless hostels but is now staying with his girlfriend. His plans for the future are to control his anger, live a life with no crime in it, get qualifications and a secure job, to live well with his girlfriend and have children with her.

Stephanie, Female, 16, White British

Stephanie has moved out of living with her mother twice, and is currently living with her aunt. She has a difficult relationship with her mother and there have been periods where they have not spoken to each other. She has had caring responsibilities for her six-year-old brother and two-year-old sister, which she found difficult to manage, and which affected her behaviour. Social Care was involved with her briefly after a period where her mother experienced domestic violence. At aged 13 she started self-harming, but does not currently self-harm after support from a youth service in her local area where she now does a lot of sport. Stephanie plans to work supporting disabled children. She is about to start a college course in childcare, and does voluntary work with children every Saturday.

Wadren, Male, 17, White British

Wadren lives with his mother, who suffers with depression and has had several breakdowns, in the property she owns with her husband. Describing himself as 'spoilt', Wadren says that his mother buys him lots of things. Two years ago Wadren became the father of a child with an ex-girlfriend, with whom he has a difficult relationship. He now has a new girlfriend. Having suffered with depression, last year Wadren attempted suicide. He tried to hang himself, and took a large dose of tablets. He finds his anger difficult to manage, and has been excluded from school periodically since primary school. Wadren has been involved with the police on several occasions. He is a keen footballer and plays regularly, but is not sure if he is good enough to play professionally. He would like to be a paramedic, and wants to

move to Holland, as his girlfriend would like to study there to be a child psychologist. They would like to have two children, and two houses (one abroad).

'2Pac', Male, 14, White British

'2Pac' has lived with his Mum most of his life except for a period of three years spent with his Dad. He now lives with his mother, her partner and his baby sister in their private rented house which he says is not on an estate. His mother has multiple sclerosis. Since her diagnosis two years ago there have been periods where he has looked after her and his baby sister. He describes having had a brief period of 'gang life' when he lived in another town. He is now slim but used to be overweight, and he has been bullied because of this. He plays basketball, practises a martial art, and also attends a church youth group several times a week. He has been on holiday abroad and in the UK and has a girlfriend. At school, he receives support from someone who helps him control his anger. He plans to go to university and study physiotherapy.