Chapter 8

Claire M. Richards and Stuart Gallagher

Common Vigilance: A perspective on the role of the community in safeguarding children

Introduction

Since the Children Act 2004 (HMG, 2004), it has become commonplace to read that *safeguarding is everyone's responsibility*. No distinction is made, though, between 'everyone' *individually* and 'everyone' *collectively*, with the result that efforts to unpick exactly how everyone is able to respond to children's safeguarding and protection needs are frustrated. This chapter asks whether or not 'community' is a useful concept to help organise these efforts and to prevent the slogan from unhelpfully collapsing the issue of responsibility together. It considers Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994) to understand how community might animate child protection efforts at a level beyond the scope of distinct families but without encompassing statutory responsibility either. Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (Shusterman, 1999) is used to examine the social worlds of children in their respective communities to understand the risk and vulnerabilities of children, on the one hand, and the safeguarding responses by concerned adults in the community.

Recent analysis of serious case reviews (SCRs) and inquiries relating to child sexual exploitation to understand how the 'community' inform the discussion of community-level communication regarding common concerns for children's safety and well-being. The chapter proposes that *common vigilance* may serve as a more robust concept than does community in efforts to produce social conditions that secure children's safety from maltreatment. The chapter encourages you to consider your position as a professional who embodies interest in children's safety from harm as well as compliance with statutory procedures and expectations of competence.

Individual/group task

Before you continue to read, please reflect on your own childhood experiences of your local community. How did it feel to live in your community? Was it a safe place and if so, what made it feel safe to you as a child? If it did not feel safe, can you recall why?

Consider what the concept of *community* means to you on a personal level and how you view *community* in a professional context. What differences and similarities emerge?

In the olden days before TVs and social workers

In 1651, Hobbes wrote that the life of man was 'nasty, brutish and short' and this was particularly true of children who died of hunger, neglect, disease, poverty and violence (Cunningham, 2006). Pages of history document diverse experiences of childhoods, some much more idyllic than others. Cunningham writes of childhood in the Middle Ages, 'If you survived your first few hours, days, weeks and months of life, your prospects improved, but perhaps as many as half of all children would fail to live to reach the age of ten' (p.21). Victorian Britain saw the contrasting childhoods consequent to the Industrial Revolution when the divisions between the wealthy and the poor were stark. There was growing concern for the welfare of children exploited for their labour in factories, which resulted in the earliest legislation for improved protection of their welfare by the Factory Act in 1833. Ferguson (2004) suggests that modern child protection was developed between 1870 and 1914 at a time of governmental transformations in Britain. Indeed he refers to Victorian sentiments and concern of the realities of child maltreatment as 'the public even in the most deprived neighbourhoods, showed its concern by bringing cases forward' (p. 25) to the Magistrates' courts. We know that history reveals evidence of child abuse and that the introduction of legislation and the concept of the welfare of children has made some positive impact in the reduction of fatal child abuse since the Victorian era.

The much quoted African proverb 'It takes a whole village to raise a child' bears some relevance to the notion that the community (village, town or city) has an informal and perhaps largely undefined role in protecting children and in being vigilant about their welfare. The proverb is given significant mention within Chapter 10 in the context of the politicised concept of 'the big society' and how the notion of community responsiveness may also resonate with safeguarding children. There may be tensions that are related to the suggestion that the community should and does have a role in looking out for the welfare of children. There may be a wealth of knowledge and awareness of children and families in the community not normally accessible or privileged to professionals which could be tapped into as a means of enabling early help and support for vulnerable children. However, the collective community may see this role of 'the protection of children' laid securely at the door of the State and its agents, such as social workers, police, health visitors or early years practitioners.

Warner (2015) introduces the concept of emotional politics in describing the public outcry in the wake of media attention to a child's death as a consequence of abuse and neglect. The distinction between the community and the official role of the State appears to become blurred as there is a collective shame and guilt as to how and why the child protection systems, both formal and informal have failed.

There is evidence to suggest that these informal safeguarding responses within the community, provided by families, neighbours and friends are important and effective (Conley and Berrick, 2010; Holman, 1981; Jack and Gill, 2010). Allnock (2016) poses a challenge in questioning from whose perspective child neglect should be measured and although her question may be pitched to a professional audience, there is merit in advocating the expert view of the public where daily encounters with a child and their family can provide a more persuasive assessment of the child's welfare. Similarly Horwath (2016: 77) may be illustrating the potential for the role of the community voice by stating that 'any assessment should start with establishing, from a variety of sources, what life is like for the child.' Of course, as will be considered in the chapter, the recognition of the community, and those who speak out from within about the welfare of a child, is not without its challenges.

B is for Bronfenbrenner and Bourdieu

In Chapter 1, Rozsahegyi provides the theoretical grounding for a critical understanding of Uri Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and more recent bio-ecological model for professional practice and research in children's development. The intention here is to consider this model and its application to the inter-relationships of the child within their family and the community in the context of child protection and safeguarding.

Let us begin by seeing whether or not it is possible to establish a common understanding of the meaning of community for the purpose of this chapter and to enable further discussion of its standing to safeguard children. Holman (1981) cites 94 known definitions and concludes that none is satisfactory, while Stanley (2010) by states that 'Communities are not easily defined and are not always cohesive or caring.' (p. 77). For the purpose of this chapter, let us take one as a reference point:

> [Community is] A specific group of people, often living in a defined geographical area, who share common culture, values and norms, are arranged in a certain social structure according to relationships which the community has developed over a period of time. Members of a community gain their social identity by sharing common beliefs, values and norms which have been developed by the community in the past and may be modified in the future. They exhibit some awareness of their identity as a group, and share common needs and a commitment to meeting them' (World Health Organisation, 1998: 5).

The definition invites a reflection on a community's shared beliefs about children, how they are expected to be cherished and protected by their families which is perhaps further augmented by a vigilance of the wider community. The critical issue is where the community intervenes when a child's welfare is at risk, particularly where the family is seen to be failing a child. The sense of connectivity between the child, family and community emerges as an informal safeguarding system.

For many years, children's welfare and well-being was the sole preserve of those with whom they shared their private lives. As the twentieth century unfolded, local government provided social welfare services, including universal services such as

education as well as more acute services including the provision of places of safety and corporate parenting. Towards the end of the century, the UK ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 1989), thereby agreeing to ensure children 'such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being' (UNICEF, 1989, article3.2). The UNCRC formalised the principle that children's best interests were paramount in all matters concerning them and expected that States would take 'all appropriate legislative and administrative measures' to secure children' wellbeing. These measures were to take into account 'the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her'(ibid.) Thus, the close relationship of State and individuals (and legal responsibilities pertaining to them) became the model by which children's well-being is secured. Securing each and every child's welfare, then, would be collaborative accomplishment of a range of people, but in particular families and statutory bodies, as well as normative ideas of well-being.

Shortly afterwards, the Children Act 1989 detailed this collaboration in terms of parental responsibility (see Part I, Sections 2-3) and the statutory duties of local authorities (see Part III of the Act). The collaborative relationship between State and private family lives here is characterised by *direct* assessment and intervention in matters concerning children's safety: the creation of statutory categories such as *children in need* and *children at risk of harm* became the focus of professional attention.

Some softening of this dualistic view became apparent at the turn of the century, when the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families* (DoH, DfEE and HO, 1990) categorised children's safeguarding needs according to three domains: the child's developmental needs, the family's parenting capacity and the family and environmental factors. The closest this framework came to acknowledging a child's interaction with anything like a local community was factors such as the family's social integration and community resources, intertwined with more concrete environmental factors such as housing, employment and income. Importantly, though, the State was acknowledging that children's protection from harm would require attention to dimensions other than the direct, unmediated relationship between families and the State.

Rozsahegyi in Chapter 1 refers to the integrated systems of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model and there is cogency in her use of the term 'distance' between the nested levels. Arguably, the position of the community (mesosystem) as an intermediary in its watchfulness over children (microsystem) and in raising safeguarding concerns with the formal agencies of health, social services or the police (exosytem), is challenging and complex. However, there is some value in accentuating the legitimacy of the community and reducing the 'distance' with the State agents, as a means of ensuring more robust connections in raising early warning signs about a child's welfare next door or, as observed in a local supermarket.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (1979) proposes that any State action in the private life of a child must be understood as *mediated* by different but inter-related social systems. The bio-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994) acknowledges that, over time, the individual's capacity to engage in State action and shape it is similarly mediated, and that this changes in degree and in kind according to the development of child, from ante-natal care through to possible incarceration in youth offending institution, for example. The bio-ecology of any individual, according to Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994), is more varied and layered than any model of State–family co-dependency could allow. It therefore offers the possibility of exploring the extent to which concepts of *community* – existing beyond the individual but never fully comprising the State on its own terms – serve to identify child maltreatment and organise themselves to protect children from harm.

This is a worthwhile enterprise given the UK has acknowledged the limitations of the State-family relationship in securing children's safety. The arrangements of the Children Act 2004 (HMG, 2004 ss.10-11) were summarised in the slogan, *Safeguarding is Everyone's Responsibility*. The tightly articulated child-welfare model of State-family (as proposed in the UNCRC and Children Act 1989) was exploded in order to reflect a new children's safeguarding and child protection vision in which all professionals working with children would take responsibility for checking each child's wellbeing and critical action should concerns arise. Guidance continues to be issued under the title of *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (DfE, 2015).

This slogan is perhaps undermined as it collapses together everyone's individual responsibility to take care to note children's wellbeing and the collective responsibility of a child protection system in which concerns are escalated and de-escalated across formal thresholds of intervention.

Individual/group task

Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility

- What distinguishes my individual responsibility from my professional responsibility?
- How might the private individual work together with the public servant to safeguard the wellbeing of somebody else's child?
- Is there a danger of assuming that, since everyone else is taking responsibility, I can shirk my own responsibility to safeguard children's wellbeing?

The French social theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, offers further insights regarding the intricate nature of power and culture within communities and indeed the wider ecosystems as described by Bronfenbrenner. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is one of his most enduring and is popularly cited in the literature. It is best simply described as a system of dispositions, which Laberge (2010) explains are acquired over time by the individual. The notion of disposition (or character) warrants some focus in respect to the role of the citizen within the community, and their *habitus* in the context of the inter-relatedness of the child, family and the State. Wagner and McLaughlin (2015: 206) helpfully illuminate this point with reference to the way habitus 'reflects the position of an individual or group in societal structures [and] not only refers to attitudes, beliefs, and concepts of self and the world, but also to individual and collective action'.

The perception of a sense of place or *knowing one's place* is interesting, particularly in relation to the structures of organisational cultures and the status and power taken by, or given to professionals in the context of their expert position in child welfare (Richards, 2015). The dilemma for the concerned citizen in the community may be experienced in two ways. The first is their perceived *non-expert* position (*habitus*) in intervening in concerns about child abuse and neglect. The decision not to get involved may be based

on their reasonable expectation that the State and its agents are *more expert* and therefore will be performing their duty in response to safeguarding a child. The second is that the citizen (neighbour, taxi driver or shopkeeper) may try to intervene by raising their concern about a child but are powerless as they are not heard or taken seriously because of their non-professional position. This response by the State's agents may negatively reinforce the habitus of the individual (and community) and therefore troubles the inter-connectedness as described by Rozsahegyi in furthering the distance between the micro, meso and exosystems of the child's world.

Individual/Group Task

In order to further understand Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' and to further contextualise its relevance to communities and safeguarding children we advise you to read Vitellone (2004).

Community or common vigilance?

We are not aware of any single community, imagined in the everyday meaning of the term, ever being charged with child abuse. We are more familiar, though, with Ofsted condemnations of entire local authority children's services departments (think of Doncaster and Rotherham in the context of child sexual exploitation, recently) and tabloid scandals exposing shameful parenting and practices of acute neglect and abuse. Powerful discourses of child abuse such as these gloss over the situatedness of people's lives within relationships and places and relationships with places and other people. The way we discuss child abuse often sidesteps common and everyday understandings of what counts as community in a social world. Instead, we are tempted, in the wake of a child abuse tragedy, to see the world in terms of combined local authority failure and parental failure – that family–State co-dependency that was exploded in efforts to remind us that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Efforts to determine 'lessons' to learn from child welfare tragedies (DfE, 2015) are made for the purpose of professional learning rather than social recreation so, why we have settled for this way of discussing child abuse and its prevention?

Lessons learnt from Serious Case Reviews (SCRs)

Implicit in the safeguarding slogan are possibilities for individual negligence, at one end of the scale, and vigilantism, at the other. Viewed through Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological framework, neither case co-ordinates community-level mediation of State arrangements and individual development and wellbeing goals. The DfE's (2016) analysis of 175 serious case reviews describes some historical instances of the difficulty in aligning individual responsibility for safeguarding children with collective, systems-level responsibility:

> In one final report, it was clear that on at least two occasions someone from the local community alerted children's social care about the young person's behaviour and appearance, making allegations of physical abuse and neglect and concerns about sexualised behaviour but the allegations were not investigated. (DfE, 2016: 108)

In this case, the proactivity of members of the local authority found their concerns carried no value in the eyes of professional assessment. In another example, when professionals did take account of local knowledge and concern, excessive weight was given to the views of the child's mother and the community and professional concerns were over-ridden:

> In another case a neighbour raised concerns about a young person after he had seen a suicide note. In that case, there was a quick response from children's social care and a safety plan was put in place but that did not involve a visit to the young person as the mother claimed that he was "attention seeking and didn't want to see a social worker." (DfE, 2016, para 5.2.1, p 108)

Let us consider whether or not community really is a sufficiently animating concept in safeguarding practice, given its potential to animate collective responsibility at the level of statutory duty but also its position as negligible evidence in assessment of children's needs. One characteristic of community is something stable, enduring over time. Where such articulations of community pivot on something static and unifying, Bauman (2000) argues that modernity is characterised by fluidity, not hard, static commonality. This

suggests that we ought not to assume that community represents only stability, reliability and predictability. Communities are not *necessarily* the outcome of individuals making a long-term commitment to a place or practice, but instead are fluid formations and reformations of mutually attractive possibilities at only ever one point of time. Community, in this sense, is characterised by contingency rather than stable organisation. Where Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (1979) suggested the consistent, stable mediation of community between an individual child and their wider world, the bio-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994) indicates the contingency of time – of being in the right place in the right moment – in the child's development and well-being. Here, the combination of *habitus* and the opportunity and threats provided by a child's *bio-ecology* may be a powerful means of developing the safety of children in their social worlds.

To illustrate this distinction, we take two examples from the child protection literature. First, the DfE's recent triennial analysis of 175 serious case reviews (DfE, 2016) highlights the particular vulnerability of children in families characterised by a 'transient lifestyle':

> Several serious case reviews involved families who appeared to live a very transient lifestyle, with frequent moves and little sense of attachment to any geographical location or community. This has the potential effect of creating an environment in which the child experiences little stability and can, as a result, have few ongoing relationships with potentially caring family members or others (DfE, 2016, p 87, para 4.3.2).

Here, community is synonymous with stability and good quality, close and ongoing relationships with 'others'. Second, revelations regarding the scale of child sexual exploitation in Rotherham (Jay, 2014), Oxford (OSCB, 2015) and Doncaster (Drew, 2016) have shone a light on the role of community in the protection of vulnerable children. For example, the so-called 'Jay Report' (Jay, 2014, p 91, para 11) notes that:

> There was too much reliance by agencies on traditional community leaders such as elected members and imams as being the primary conduit of communication with the Pakistani-heritage community. The Inquiry spoke to several Pakistani-heritage women who felt disenfranchised by this and thought it was a barrier to people coming forward to talk about CSE.

This example indicates that the community was characterised by stable practices of exclusion, established hierarchy and unequal access to power and collaboration with local authority. In this case, it is this stability of community that has proven to be a substantial barrier to child protection since caring family members and others are not approached as equals. Yet within this community there is an emerging demand for the enfranchisement of women to support the best interests of children, in this case enabling members of the community to speak out about experiences of, and concerns about the sexual exploitation of children. A community of children's safeguarding is coalescing in the light of the Inquiry's investigations into the scale and prevalence of child abuse. Here, the liquid, fluid formation of a new community of safeguarding practice, rather than the traditional understanding of stable community as a source of caring relationships, is the source of community-level hope for child protection. Children's protection from harm is characterised here by a group's *common vigilance* regarding children's needs, rather than the implicit benefit of an enduring, stable community.

So far, we have seen examples of community-level concerns being both ignored by professional assessment but also used as prompts to investigate. We have also seen how stable aspects of community can act as a barrier to particular members of that community being seen as suffering maltreatment. Yet fluid reformations of that community around children's safeguarding interests suggest that there is hope that this barrier can be overcome. The concept of community itself is charged as both barrier and source of hope. Consequently, it is unlikely to prove a sufficiently useful concept in developing the effective child protection actions that mediate between the State and private families and still co-ordinate 'everybody's responsibility'. The concept of community itself does not appear to prevent unilateral action being taken with regard to assessments of children's wellbeing. It may be suggested that factors such as that *common vigilance* may be a more appropriate and helpful concept to promote in the interests of children's well-being than community.

The case for common vigilance in safeguarding children

Jack and Gill (2010) underline the significance of the ecological model in the inter-connections between the child, family, community and the formal mechanism of the child protection systems. They lament the fact that despite legislative and organisational developments since the Children Act 2004, there is still a reliance on formal systems of safeguarding to the exclusion of the community. The authors make reference to previous public inquiries on fatal child abuse (as discussed above), including the death of Victoria Climbié, mentioning, 'only one of the inquiry's reports touching on community-level factors' (p.86).

Sally Holland's case study (2014) of a Welsh community's informal and formal child safeguarding heralds some interesting features, which she describes as 'enablers'. She examines the features of a safeguarding community and its relationship with community workers that helps to provide for a culture of responsive safeguarding of children. The five enablers identified are *proximity* (that of being a local, raised within and known within the community, which helps to create of trust and connectedness between practitioners and local residents), *temporal* (the sense of availability of practitioners within the community, which is indicative of the futility of a restricted office-hours-only service provision), *biographical* (meaning the community's valuing those practitioners and other residents with whom they could identify and relate to, perhaps due to some recognition that they too had experiences of troubled family life or hardship, therefore likely to increase understanding and empathy), *style* (the relaxed and easy-going approach of a practitioner helped local residents to feel more at ease and less overlooked in comparison to more formal experiences with professionals) and *scope* (describing the range of knowledge or advice a practitioner may be asked to give in their communications within the community, from 'gas fires to relationship breakdowns' (p. 393) which can avoid unnecessary signposting). Holland comments on the contrast to specialist posts within specialist services often involving journeys of travel to imposing unfriendly buildings, which may alienate families and children, further distancing them from help.

This study signifies some valuable lessons in determining the nature and style of local safeguarding services and practitioner dispositions and approachability within a

community. There may be a correlation in galvanising community engagement and more specifically community status in recognition its safeguarding role.

Individual/group task

Consider the benefits and opportunities of the five enablers as described by Holland in the context of early-years (EY) services. What enablers do you recognise in current EY services and where are the gaps? Make suggestions on how the enablers may be developed.

Conclusion

The chapter has presented a case to highlight and underline the role of the community in safeguarding children within the bio-ecological framework. There is a tacit recognition of the potential strengths and input of the community in raising concerns about a child and adapting informal advocacy to see that the "right thing is done for the child". Evidence from previous public inquiries and SCRs has demonstrated the tenacity and courage of members of the community in voicing their concerns. Sometimes, those voices are not heard or taken seriously by the professional experts or the community's own authorities, much to the detriment of the child. It is important that you as a professional or a developing professional in the field of childhood studies consider your professional identity and disposition in your safeguarding role and that you are encouraged to identify the enablers as described, which may assist you in being an effective advocate. This advocacy in terms of giving voice to your safeguarding concern is enacted within your multi-professional world and can also be expressed within the world of your own community. The challenge for the practitioner is to be mindful of negotiating their professional role within the regulated professional setting and to how they are seen outside their professional context within the community, with whom we share a *common vigilance*?

Summary Points

- The concept of community may be difficult to define but there is recognition of the different cultures, values and norms that comprise a community.
- Community is not only characterised by stability but also fluidity. Due to this contradiction, its usefulness in organising child protection actions is undermined. Instead, the contingent just-in-time formations of groups who share a *common vigilance* may instead prove a more robust concept.
- Children's life experiences in their community will vary and may be determined by factors such as poverty, crime, isolation or in contrast connectivity with others, positive economic factors and community safety.
- Arguably, the community does have an informal role in safeguarding children.
- The safeguarding potential of a community is perhaps linked to the relationships with formal safeguarding agencies and the community voice that is listened to and responded to in raising a concern about a child.

Recommended reading

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