



**A synthesis of Contextual Safeguarding and commonly used
child safeguarding theoretical models and approaches**

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ABSTRACT

Title: A synthesis of Contextual Safeguarding and commonly used child safeguarding theoretical models and approaches

Background: Contextual Safeguarding is a relatively new approach in the UK that directs attention to extrafamilial contexts outside the control of caregivers. The approach challenges conventional safeguarding thinking and practice for being overly focused on parental failings and instead directs attention to extrafamilial abuse. While Contextual Safeguarding contributes immensely to the existing knowledge base, there are considerable practice implications for its integration within existing safeguarding practice. Hence, there is the need for conceptual clarity about how Contextual Safeguarding fits in with the system-wide safeguarding practice.

Purpose: This conceptual paper argues that Contextual Safeguarding complements existing theoretical models and approaches. Its successful integration with dominant thinking and practice in safeguarding potentially offers new insights to improve system-wide practice.

Design: A theory synthesis design was used to purposively identify, summarise, and compare selected safeguarding theoretical models and approaches to establish both convergence and divergence.

Findings: The arguments provided in this paper suggest that synthesising theory offers a confluence of perspectives that promise to develop a more eclectic and holistic approach to safeguarding practice. The paper demonstrates how Contextual Safeguarding can be integrated with existing theoretical models and approaches.

Conclusion: This paper's conceptual insights include that integrating Contextual Safeguarding with existing theoretical models and approaches can broaden the knowledge base to whole system-wide safeguarding practice in the UK. The paper also confirms that the methodology used is feasible, although more work is required to test its efficacy on a larger scale.

Keywords: Contextual Safeguarding; Ecological systems; Extrafamilial; Family safeguarding model; Intrafamilial; Social model; Systems theory; Theory synthesis; Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model

Introduction

Historically, social work's theoretical base draws on other disciplines including psychology, philosophy, sociology, psychoanalysis, and other fields (Howe, 2009; Thompson, 2020). However, not having a strong theoretical base of its own has often led to questions about social work's professional identity (Parker and Doel, 2013; Webb, 2017). Social workers use theoretical knowledge to gain a deeper understanding of the service users' situations, to inform assessment, subsequent analysis, and planning for interventions.

Musson, (2017, p.4) argues that the application of social work theory to practice is a professional requirement. Similarly, theory alongside evidence from research is seen as one of the main pillars for the knowledge base of social work in the UK (Pawson et al, 2003; Trevithick, 2008). Thompson (2020) cautions against the fallacy of theory-less practice, arguing that social workers should rather view theory as part of the profession's knowledge base, and not solely apply the narrow scientific definition to social work theory. For example, the international definition of social work is explicit about the profession being 'underpinned by theories of social work' (IFSW, 2014) while the Professional Capabilities Framework specifies that social work students should 'apply knowledge of social sciences, law and social work practice theory' (BASW, 2015). Similarly, Social Work England (2019) professional standards commit social workers to apply knowledge and skills (including theory) of both their own and other professions.

However, social workers often find theory application overwhelming because the multiple and overlapping perspectives often present challenges regarding which theories or models are appropriate for a particular purpose (Pound and Campbell, 2015; Thompson, 2020; Turner, 1991). Social work academics and practitioners tend to use terms such as theories, models, methods, perspectives and approaches interchangeably, further adding to the confusion. Furthermore, because of the interdisciplinary nature of social work, drawing on theories of other disciplines can arguably lead to a fragmented knowledge base (Moller, 2013). Thus, this fragmentation of knowledge can present challenges to the critical application of theoretical frameworks to different situations.

Any critical discussion of theories can raise questions regarding what is and what is not theory. There is a considerable amount of published literature defining what theory is and distinguishing it from other terms that are often used interchangeably (Langer and Lietz, 2014; Musson, 2017; Stepney and Ford, 2012; Teater, 2019). Stepney and Ford (2012) define theory as 'a framework of understanding or cluster of ideas which attempt to explain reality' (p.xi). Likewise, Langer and Lietz, (2014) describe theory as 'an organized set of ideas that seek to explain a particular phenomenon offering greater direction for practice' (p.9). Teater (2019) asserts the value of a theory is that it describes, explains, and predicts what might happen in different situations.

Furthermore, Teater (2019) argues that because of the ability to predict what might happen, theories help us understand what action needs to be taken. Most of those terms that are used as a substitute for theory such as methods, models, or approaches denote the action and practice perspectives that represent viewpoints that are informed by theory but do not have predictive ability (Langer and Lietz, 2014; Musson, 2017). Developed from theory, models such as solution-focused practice and motivational interviewing can foster the creation of manuals and frameworks that guide practice (Langer and Lietz, 2014). Sibeon (1990) describes social work methods as representing sets of ideas prescribing appropriate actions in particular situations. Methods include the more formal written accounts about how to do the job and are therefore support and promote practical ways of undertaking tasks such as using the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (Department of Health, 2000), which is commonly used to guide and frame child safeguarding assessments.

In child safeguarding practice, complementary theories, models, methods, practice perspectives, and approaches are routinely combined. Safeguarding being the work that we do to protect specific children who are suffering, or are likely to suffer, significant harm and to promote their wellbeing (HM Government, 2018). As Contextual Safeguarding continues to gain currency in academic commentary, policy, and practice, the need to explore how this approach can be merged with other commonly used theoretical models and

approaches is even greater. The arguments advanced in this conceptual paper seek to shed light on how the Contextual Safeguarding approach can be integrated with other theoretical models and approaches to further inform child safeguarding practice.

Background

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to understanding and responding to young people's experiences of significant harm beyond the confines of their families (Firmin, 2020). The Contextual Safeguarding approach is used to respond to young people's experiences of risk of significant harm which occurs within the extrafamilial environmental contexts that parents and carers have no control over (NSPCC, 2019; Firmin, 2017; 2020; Firmin and Knowles, 2020). The central premise of Contextual Safeguarding is that as young people grow and develop, they are in turn, influenced by a whole range of environments and people outside of their families such as school or college, the local community neighbourhoods, their peer groups, or online communities (Firmin, 2020; NSPCC, 2019). The different relationships that young people form in locations such as their neighbourhoods, sports grounds, parks, shops, corridors, toilets in schools and online can lead to violence and abuse (Firmin, 2020).

Underpinning Contextual Safeguarding is the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu which describes the interplay between social rules within the young people's environment (social field) and their decisions and risk-taking behaviours (social, economic, cultural, or symbolic capital) to be accepted and achieve status (habitus) (Firmin, 2017). The model illustrates how young people draw on the rules from their social field and encounter various 'capitals' in the different spaces they live in and experience risk as well as the desire to achieve status and be accepted in their habitus.

These extrafamilial contexts adversely undermine the relationship dynamics among parents, carers, and their children; hence, the importance of working in partnerships with parents or caregivers within this approach (Firmin, 2020). Proponents for Contextual Safeguarding argue that understanding the risks that children and young people encounter in extrafamilial contexts, therefore,

determines the types of interventions required to keep them safe and free from risk of harm (NSPCC, 2019; Firmin, 2017; 2020; Firmin and Knowles, 2020).

Evidence shows that children who experience extrafamilial abuse may also endure intrafamilial abuse (Department for Education, 2020). For example, there is significant evidence of child sexual abuse occurring within a family environment (Fischer and McDonald, 1998; Hayes, Longfield and Schooling., 2017; Horvath et al., 2014; Longfield, 2015). However, the recent "Characteristics of Children in Need" report (Department for Education, 2020) demonstrates, by and large, intrafamilial forms of abuse such as domestic violence, abuse, and neglect perpetrated by parents continue to constitute the most identified risk factor at the end of the assessment.

Whilst evidence suggests that prevalence of extrafamilial safeguarding concerns increased regarding issues including involvement in gangs, drug misuse by children and trafficking of young people when compared to the previous year, incidence rates were still comparatively lower than cases of intrafamilial abuse (Department for Education, 2020). Home Office (2015) define a gang as having one or more characteristics that enable its members to be identified as a group by others. Although the limitation in existing data is that there is no explicit category for intrafamilial or extrafamilial abuses, evidence suggests the former constitutes the largest category of risk for children, hence it is logical that future theoretical safeguarding perspectives must seek to understand both sources of risk to children. Accordingly, this paper examines how social workers can synthesise theoretical approaches and practice models that deal with both intrafamilial and extrafamilial abuse more effectively.

The term "synthesis" means to combine separate elements to form a whole (Henning, 1999); suggesting that theory synthesis involves combining aspects of different theoretical models and approaches to create a fuller new theoretical understanding. Payne (2021) describes taking ideas from several theories and combining them as eclecticism while arguing that the challenge is in using them both, eclectically, yet selectively. Langer and Lietz (2014) assert the eclectic

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3 approach to combining complementary theories as offering 'more breath and
4 flexibility and providing multiple perspectives to different preferences and
5 situations' (p.20). However, Langer and Lietz, (2014) acknowledge that while
6 theories may supplement each other by making up for individual limitations and
7 broadening theoretical understanding, this requires broad competence in each
8 theory that is applied to ensure success.
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14 Theory synthesis is not new; despite limited literature in the field of social work,
15 there is evidence of merging theoretical perspectives in related disciplines such
16 as health and medicine (George and Engel, 1980; Pound and Campbell, 2015).
17 Synthesis has been driven by the desire for theoretically informed interventions
18 (Pound and Campbell, 2015), and involves conceptual integration across
19 multiple theoretical perspectives (Jaakkola, 2020). For instance, the
20 biopsychosocial approach synthesised biomedical and psychosocial theories
21 out of the inadequacies and limitations of the traditional biomedical model, the
22 dominant model in medicine today (George and Engel, 1980; Fava and Sonino,
23 2007). Similarly, the Ecological systems theories by Soporin (1979) and
24 Bronfenbrenner (1979) emerged out of the synthesis of the ecological and
25 systems perspective because of similarities between these two distinct theories
26 (Munford, O'Donoghue, and Nash, 2005).
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38 However, the philosophical grounds for theory synthesis have been challenged.
39 Positivists question the truthfulness of results achieved from merging different
40 theories (Payne, 2021; Smith, 2003) and similarly the validity of combining
41 multiple theories has also been questioned (Moravcsik, 2003; Payne, 2021;
42 Sheldon and Macdonald, 2009). On the other hand, pragmatists highlight the
43 benefits of combining different approaches in areas such as research
44 (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Plano Clark and Creswell, 2008; Creswell and
45 Plano Clark, 2011). Yet, some critics of theory synthesis argue that it is not a
46 straightforward exercise, but one that can lead to the selection of what is felt to
47 be more comfortable with when evidence might suggest otherwise (Thyer,
48 2008; Payne, 2021). Proponents for theory synthesis have admonished against
49 being drawn into the paradigm wars, preferring to focus on the potential for
50 theory development potential and practice implications across various
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disciplines (Hellmann, 2003; Pound and Campbell, 2013; Sibeon, 2004; Turner, 1985).

In social work, theory synthesis was attempted in the seventies (Goldstein, 1973; Payne, 2021; Pincus and Minahan, 1973). During that time, Pincus and Minahan (1973) argued that the strength of the social work profession lies in recognising and working with the connections between elements of different models, while recently, Payne (2021) questioned the merits of combining models of practice without an integrated theory.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the potential clarity at theoretical, conceptual, and practice levels that theory synthesis presents for merging Contextual Safeguarding with other theoretical models and approaches is already emerging. For instance, in their briefing exploring the relationship between Contextual Safeguarding and the Social Model, Featherstone et al. (2018) concluded that there were potential benefits in merging the two. Underscoring the call for adopting a Social model, the briefing questioned the 'view that the greatest threats to children's safety and wellbeing are posed by their parents or carers' intentional negligence or abuse' (p.7). Similarly, in another briefing, Owens et al. (2020) compared relationship-based social work with Contextual Safeguarding, while Firmin et al. (2021) compared the Signs of Safety approach with Contextual Safeguarding. However, there is a dearth of studies that have gone beyond such binary comparisons leaving a significant knowledge gap that prompts the purpose of this paper.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper:

- (i) To identify areas of convergence and divergence between the Contextual Safeguarding approach with existing theoretical models and approaches that inform safeguarding children practice.
- (ii) To demonstrate how Contextual Safeguarding approach can be synthesised with existing theoretical models and approaches to provide conceptual clarity.
- (iii) To provide a methodological basis for synthesising different but complementary theoretical models and frameworks in social work.

Design

This conceptual paper draws on the theory synthesis approach developed by Turner, (1985) and adopted by Pound and Campbell, (2015) which consists of three stages namely:

- (i) Stage 1: Synthesis preparation,
- (ii) Stage 2: Synthesis
- (iii) Stage 3. Synthesis refinement

The paper also draws on a case vignette below to illustrate how the Contextual Safeguarding approach can be combined with complementary theoretical models and approaches:

A Case Vignette:

Various elements of a case vignette are woven seamlessly throughout this paper to ensure clarity about the practice implications for merging complementary theoretical models and approaches. Hughes and Huby (2002, p.383) argue that there is consensus across the literature that the chief purpose of vignettes is 'to provide entry points to what can be complex research questions as they selectively stimulate elements of the research topic under study'. Likewise, Kandemir and Budd, (2018, p.1) concur that case vignettes can be a 'helpful tool for framing complex or sensitive topics'. The case vignette described below is therefore used in this paper as an aid to simplify and illustrate the theory synthesis and its application to practice:

A teenage boy aged 13 is reported missing from home to the Police. The school is concerned about his attendance and behaviour. It turns out he has gone missing without being reported on a few previous occasions but always returned after one or two nights away. The boy has a difficult relationship with his single mother who struggles with setting boundaries for him. The family is entirely dependent on benefits. On this occasion, the boy is finally located at a train station - some 200 miles away from his hometown, with two other young people who have been excluded from school. The boys are also known to Social Care and the Police for

using drugs and committing petty crimes locally. A large quantity of cash, heroin, and three temporary mobile phones are seized by the police.

(i) Stage 1: Synthesis preparation:

The synthesis preparation involves extracting and summarising parts of relevant theories that have been identified (Pound and Campbell, 2013; Turner, 1985; 1991). Extraction involves drawing out those parts of the theories that you are concerned with such as their key propositions, focus, domain, values, and principles (Pound and Campbell, 2013). Theoretical models and approaches synthesised with Contextual Safeguarding in this paper were purposively chosen because although, not an exhaustive list, they are some of the commonly used theoretical models and approaches used in safeguarding children in the UK (see below):

- Ecological Systems theory
- Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model
- Family Safeguarding model
- Social model

As with sampling in qualitative research, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted in this instance. Purposive sampling has been described by Bryman (2012) as a sampling procedure of choice in qualitative research; providing the best opportunity for choosing a sample that is likely to yield useful findings for the researcher. However, purposive sampling can be seen as judgemental sampling because of the role played by the researcher (Whittaker, 2009). A synopsis of the purposively selected theoretical models and approaches is provided below.

Ecological Systems Theory

The origins of systems thinking in social work can be traced back to the general systems theory of von Bertalanffy (1967 cited in Payne, 2021). However, current social work practice mainly draws on Ecological systems theory which accentuates the quality and context of the environment in which the child develops and the interactions between various subsystems that constitute the

environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). The subsystems include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, impacting on child wellbeing and development. The chronosystem relates to the temporal aspects and mirrors the lifespan approach by Chisnell and Kelly (2019). Bernstein and Gray (1997) described how the Ecological systems theory could effectively illustrate the system-wide interrelationships among the family (microsystem), neighbourhoods, school, and social life, including online networks (mesosystem), and the community and the broader society with its socio-cultural institutions, beliefs, and practices which constrain actions (macrosystem). Siporin (1980) describes the Ecological systems theory in social work as representing a conceptual system that includes a person in a transactional relationship with their physical, social, and cultural environment to achieve some degree of equilibrium and balance. The Ecological systems theory involves interactions among people in groups, families, and societies in their life situations, resulting in either well-functioning or dysfunctional behaviour patterns.

Ecological systems thinking, and particularly, the notion of dialectical exchange among various domains underpins assessment approaches such as the "Framework for the Assessment for the Children in Need and their Families" (Department of Health, 2000), which systemically links three key domains, namely, child development needs, parenting capacity, and wider family and environmental factors. Each of these domains affects and contributes to understanding the child and their family (Department of Health, 2000; Horwath, 2002). In application to the case vignette, this approach would require one to explore the system-wide transactional interrelationships between the young person, his family, physical and online network of friends, and school. The wider neighbourhood community and the broader society with its socio-cultural institutions, beliefs, and practices which constrain or spur on the behaviours and actions of the young person would also need to be understood as part of the wider environmental context. The Ecological systems theory has an overarching holistic role in safeguarding practice because of its ability to simplify the complex interplay between the various subsystems of a social system, hence, it informs the dominant Framework for existing safeguarding

practice (Department for Education; Department of Health, 2000; Horwath, 2002).

Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model

The Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model, is a family-focused model for working across adult mental health and children's services (Diggins, 2011; Falkov, 1998; 2012; Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE), 2009). Falkov (2012) describes the model family systems model because it draws on the ecological model. The model illustrates the close link between the child's and adult members' mental health and wellbeing in a family where a parent is mentally ill. According to this model, an adult's or parent's mental health needs affect the parenting and family relationships influencing the child's mental health and development (Diggins, 2011; Falkov, 2012; Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE), 2009). In turn, the child's mental health and development needs affect the adult or parents, affecting parenting and family relationships.

A central tenet of the model is the belief that parental mental health has a critical and enduring influence on the whole family and is, therefore, relevant to intrafamilial and extrafamilial safeguarding issues. This family-focused model assesses both the risks and stressors that affect the child and focuses on the protective factors, such as resilience and resource factors that inform their interaction with children or adult services, their cultural needs, and other factors within the community environment (Falkov, 2017). For example, the adverse impact of the behaviour of the young person in the case vignette could potentially aggravate his lone mother's mental health and wellbeing as well as his own; thus, rendering the whole family in need of support and services.

Family Safeguarding Model

Developed by Hertfordshire County Council in 2015, the Family Safeguarding model aims to improve children and their families to make the desirable changes (Forrester et al., 2017). The model, which is based on a behaviourist conception of human development, uses motivational interviewing to help families overcome their ambivalent behaviour through reflecting on their current behaviour and comparing it with desirable future behavioural outcomes (Miller

and Rollnick, 2012). This whole system model involves a partnership between families, social workers, police, health (including mental health), probation, and substance misuse services (Forrester et al., 2017; 2018; Miller and Rollnick, 2012). The model also centrally locates an adult social worker within the child safeguarding team.

Applied to the case vignette, the Family Safeguarding model could help support the lone parent's motivation and capacity to set appropriate boundaries and guidance, whilst the child is supported to address concerns around potential drug misuse and criminality through the support of the other specialists within the team. In short, the Family Safeguarding model is a whole family-focused model with a focus on safeguarding by improving outcomes through behavioural changes in children and their parents or caregivers.

Social model

As indicated above, the adoption of the Social model in social work draws on a framework applied in disability and mental health (Featherstone et al, 2018; Featherstone and Gupta, 2018; Stalker, 2015). Featherstone et al, (2018), argue that 'what is defined as child abuse is socially constructed and historically changing' (p.14). By challenging the 'view that the greatest threats to children's safety and wellbeing are posed by their parents or carers' intentional negligence or abuse' as previously cited above, Featherstone et al, (2018, p.7) argued, the Social model directs attention from the intrafamilial sphere to the extrafamilial contexts of harm.

The fundamental proposition of the Social model is that the broader structural issues are barriers to ensuring children are cared for safely and their relational needs and identities respected. Unequal social structures and institutions are known to cause poverty and social exclusion (Krumer-Nevo, 2016). Recently, evidence linking poverty, child abuse, and neglect (Bywaters et al., 2016) and links between child mortality and social deprivation (National Child Mortality Database (NCMD), 2021) have been established.

The critical elements of the Social model include promoting children and families' hopes and aspirations, human rights and advocacy, positive social connections, and mitigating the broader social, political, economic, and cultural barriers (Featherstone et al., 2020). Levitas (2000) argued that multiple deprivation and barriers to inclusion emanate from structural inequalities such as low incomes, limited educational and employment opportunities, and various forms of social and economic discrimination in their redistributive discourse. Hence, Holman (1988) proposed community efforts to mitigate family poverty and some social disadvantage.

Understanding the extent of structural causes of poverty, social exclusion, inequalities, and various indices of multiple deprivations for families living in certain cold spots is therefore critical for the Social model (Alcock, 2006; Social Mobility Commission, 2017). When supporting families and protecting children, the Social model specifically draws attention to the economic, social, political, and cultural barriers that adversely impact children's safe care, relationships, and identities (Featherstone et al, 2018; Featherstone and Gupta, 2018; Featherstone et al, 2020). Regarding the case vignette, consideration would be given to the structural economic, social, political, and cultural barriers that adversely impact his care, family and peer relationships, and his identity needs.

(ii) Stage 2: Synthesis

Following the synthesis preparation, the actual synthesis involved systematically comparing the selected theoretical models and approaches for points of convergence and divergence and ensuring conceptual clarity. Drawing from Pound and Campbell (2015) and Turner (1991), criteria based on each theoretical model or approach's proposition, the main conceptual focus, the essential domain, and principles or values were developed for the synthesis. Pound and Campbell (2015) describe the process of undertaking a synthesis as involving a careful and systematic step-by-step 'immersion' in the theories. The process is likened to qualitative analysis, although they acknowledge that theories and models are broader in scope, less detailed, and more abstract than qualitative findings (Pound and Campbell, 2015). Thus, this paper satisfies

the vital quality criteria of conceptual paper as outlined in the outline of the design above.

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Table 1: Abstracts comparing selected theories and models for convergence and divergence

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(iii) Stage 3: Synthesis refinement

Synthesis refinement strikingly, resembles the final stages of qualitative synthesis in which the aim is to generate a novel interpretation or conceptual advancement (Campbell et al., 2011; Pound et al., 2005; Pound and Campbell, 2015). In this instance, synthesis refinement involves interrogating the synthesis for new conceptual insights using straight-forward criteria comprising proposition, focus, critical domain, and principles or values for each theoretical model and approach. The abstracts for each of the selected theories and models in Table 1, were compared with Contextual Safeguarding for synthesis by extracting and clarifying what each one of them proposes, as well as what its focus, domain, and principles or values are. Below is the integrated discussion and analysis of the findings and their practice implications for this synthesis.

Findings, discussion, and practice implications

From this synthesis, and drawing on the case vignette, it can be discerned that within the different theoretical models and approaches, there are areas of convergence, divergence, and overlaps. For instance, a common thread in all the theoretical propositions (see Table 1 above) is that the interplay between various factors in intrafamilial and extrafamilial environments influence a child's risk. However, there are varying degrees of emphasis. The Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model proposes that there is a complex systemic interplay between mental ill-health in parents, the development and mental health of their children, and the relationships within family units affected by mental ill-health (Diggins, 2011; Falkov, 2009; 2012; 2017; SCIE, 2009). In much the same way, the Family Safeguarding model proposes that parents are adversely impacted by their ambivalence which makes it difficult to manage their children's emotional and behavioural challenges (Forrester et al, 2017; 2018; Miller and Rollnick, 2012).

Similarly, the Contextual Safeguarding spotlights the child's exposure to the extrafamilial risk, leading to significant harm to children. In the case vignette, for example, while there is evidence of extrafamilial peer pressure, there is also evidence of poverty and issues with maintaining boundaries by the boy's

mother. The boy's risk of harm occurs in the social field, consisting of friends who follow similar rules about non-school attendance, travelling to far places without parental supervision, engaging in criminal behaviour, among other behaviours. The rules in their social field act as pull factors for the teenage boy that enable him to achieve his status and acceptance in the habitus. That is compounded by the family's experiences poverty and a mother who is unable to impose parental boundaries. Although the Contextual Safeguarding approach accentuates the point that parents and caregivers have no control over extrafamilial risk and harm, it still acknowledges the vital role parents play in managing intrafamilial harm with their children (Firmin, 2017; 2020).

Likewise, the Ecological systems theory, when adopted with the family of the boy in the case vignette, would require the exploration of the whole family's transactional relationship with, and how it's impacted by, the various levels of their physical, social, and cultural environments (Bernstein and Gray, 1997; Siporin (1980). Similarly, from the perspective of the Social model, it would be acknowledged that the structural environment poses barriers to the boy's safe care (Bywaters, 2016; Featherstone et al., 2020). Therefore, when merging the Contextual Safeguarding approach with the Ecological systems theory in the case of the boy in the vignette for this paper, one would need to understand the systemic interaction of the immediate (microsystems), intermediate (mesosystems), and wider ecological environments (macro/exosystems) that provide the social rules, capital, and status for this boy. Similarly, competence in the knowledge of the Social Model would be complementary in providing a helpful framework for understanding the socio-economic structural implications for the level of poverty of the boy's family and how to intervene in this case.

In refining the synthesis further, at the focus level (see Table 1 above), for each theoretical model and approach, other areas of convergence and complementarity and lack of exclusive focus become more apparent. For instance, the Family Safeguarding model and the Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model seem to focus, but not exclusively, on intrafamilial needs or harm. Likewise, when applying the Contextual Safeguarding approach to the boy in the case vignette, one can draw on the knowledge from the Think Child,

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3 Think Parent, Think Family model, focusing mainly on the impact his behaviour
4 is having on his single mother's and his mental health and well-being, as well
5 as their ambivalent relationship. Equally, therefore, there would be implications
6 on how one could go about employing aspects of the Family Safeguarding
7 model. For example, motivational interviewing could be used to explore the boy
8 and his mother's ambivalent relationship.
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11 While there seems to be evidence of overlapping propositions and areas of
12 convergence, hence complementarity in the sample of theoretical models and
13 approaches considered in this paper, there are, however some subtle areas of
14 divergence (as illustrated in Table 1 above). For example, despite the positive
15 evaluation of the Family Safeguarding model, involving four Local Authorities
16 (Forrester, et al, 2017), one potential divergence is that motivational
17 interviewing adopts a behaviourist conception of human development which
18 focuses on parental failings. Yet, in contrast, the Contextual Safeguarding
19 approach and the Social model are focused more on extrafamilial harm and not
20 mainly on intrafamilial harm and family deficiencies.
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23 On the other hand, the Ecological systems theory, when adopted in social work,
24 focuses on the whole system-wide interactions; the three domains consisting
25 of the development of the child or young person; parents and carers; and family
26 and environment. That systemic interplay is aptly illustrated through the
27 Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (Department for Health,
28 2000; 2012; HM Government, 2018; Diggins, 2011; Horwath, 2002). However,
29 when integrating practice these subtle differences in the theoretical models and
30 approaches would account for their individual emphases rather than any
31 dissonance.
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34 The proposition by each of these theoretical models and approaches seems to
35 be in their focus and emphasis, yet, in practice, they embrace much more. For
36 example, while Contextual Safeguarding targets extrafamilial harm, it still
37 recognises the importance of collaborative partnership between working
38 parents and other professionals (Firmin, 2017; 2020; Firmin and Knowles,
39 2020). Contextual Safeguarding with the boy in the case vignette, therefore,
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there would be a role for partnership working with him and his mother as well as with other multidisciplinary professionals.

Notwithstanding the common criticism that existing safeguarding practice entirely focuses on preventing abuse within the home environment that emanates from parenting capacity limitations (Firmin, 2017; 2020), Contextual Safeguarding recognises the key role of the family within the wider context. In the same vein, by focusing on the economic, social, and cultural barriers that adversely impact the safe care of children, the Social model still promotes children and families' hopes and aspirations, human rights and advocacy, and positive social connections (Featherstone and Gupta, 2018). Thus, under the criterion of focus (as illustrated in Table 1 above), the thread that is woven through all theoretical models and approaches in the sample, is their convergence, complementarity, and lack of exclusive focus, on either, interfamilial or extrafamilial issues of concern as exemplified with the boy in the case vignette above.

Regarding the domain criterion (see Table 1 above), what seems to be the central area of convergence is the interface between the child, family, and the multi-level structural environment. This interface is more apparent in the Social model, Contextual Safeguarding, and Ecological systems, which emphasise extrafamilial concerns. Yet, the Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model also identifies risks, stressors, and protective factors interacting with services, culture, and the community environment as its domain. Similarly, the Family Safeguarding model also characterises itself as being ecological and being evidence-based, collaborative, as well as rights and strengths-based. What this suggests, as with its propositions and focus, is that there is convergence, complementarity, and no exclusive domains for each of the models and approaches (as illustrated in Table 1 above).

Similarly, enabling the child and family's capacity and strengths and human rights principles and values (see Table 1 above) is a common thread in the Social model, Contextual Safeguarding and Family Safeguarding model, and the Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family models. The Ecological systems

theory ultimately provides insights into how all subsystems and actions are interconnected. Likewise, someone working with the boy in the case vignette would be able to find a lot of synergies in the values of these theoretical models.

In the same vein, when applying Contextual Safeguarding to the same case, one would be guided by principles of being collaborative, ecological, rights-based, strengths-based, and evidence-informed practice, while also using their practice knowledge and understanding of the principles of interactive and transactional systems and subsystems of the Ecological systems theory. Yet, when addressing the teenage boy's mother's motivation and ambivalent relationship with him using the Family Safeguarding model, one would need to explore the young person and mother's mental health and well-being by drawing from the Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model. Amidst all this, the family-focused Social Model would ensure that the young person and her mother's hopes, aspirations, and human rights are advocated for and positive social connections within the broader social, political, economic, and cultural barriers are enhanced.

The synthesis refinement of the sample of theoretical models and approaches considered in this paper is illustrated in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: An illustration of the synthesis of Contextual Safeguarding with existing theoretical models and approaches to safeguarding children

The diagrammatic illustration of the synthesis of Contextual Safeguarding with existing theoretical models and approaches to safeguarding children in Figure 1 above is intended to provide clarity on areas of overlapping convergence, divergence, and emphases for each of these. For example, when working with the boy in the case vignette, the emphasis would be, but not exclusively, on the Family Safeguarding and Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family models for the interfamilial issues. Similarly, at the extrafamilial level, Contextual Safeguarding and Social model would be preferred, albeit, not exclusively, while the whole system-wide interaction between the various subsystems would be better understood from the overarching Ecological systems perspective. Figure 1 illustrates how these can be used in a systematic and eclectic manner. That is made possible because of the explicit and implicit overlapping commonalities and complementarity as well as levels of emphasis at the proposition, focus, domain, and values and principles levels among child safeguarding theoretical models and approaches.

Having a much broader suite of tools to work with should enable a more holistic approach to safeguarding practice. Rather than supplant the existing theoretical models and approaches, this paper has sought to demonstrate that Contextual Safeguarding and the theoretical models and approaches in the sample, complement each other in many ways. However, that may have implications beyond other theoretical models and approaches considered in this sample.

While this paper has attempted to satisfy the critical quality criteria for a conceptual article, it is important to note that theory synthesis does not always lead to compatibility and successful integration of theoretical models and approaches. For example, Moller (2013) argues that some incompatible theoretical assumptions cannot be integrated. Likewise, Payne (2021) cautions that in some instances, theoretical eclecticism from elsewhere might not transfer fully to the different contexts of social work. Other critics of theory synthesis also argue that merging different theoretical models and approaches could lead to practitioners selectively cherry-picking what they feel more comfortable with, even when evidence might suggest otherwise (Payne, 2021; Sheldon and Macdonald, 2009). Payne (2021) also points out that there is

another potential problem with theory synthesis in that practitioners without the relevant knowledge and understanding might use theoretical models or approaches in an inconsistent manner that devalues them because of superficial and lack of in-depth synthesis.

For the synthesis of Contextual Safeguarding with other commonly used child safeguarding theoretical models and approaches to be robust, it, therefore, requires broader and deeper knowledge, skills, and understanding. Theory synthesis provides a confluence of perspectives that hold promise for the development of a more eclectic and holistic approach to applying theory to safeguarding practice. Synthesising Contextual Safeguarding with other commonly used child safeguarding theoretical models and approaches has implications far beyond those considered in this paper.

Conclusion

The theory synthesis discussed in this paper demonstrates how complementary theoretical models and approaches can be merged; thus, broadening the knowledge base about the whole system-wide safeguarding practice in the UK. More specifically, the arguments presented in this conceptual paper demonstrate how the Contextual Safeguarding approach can be merged with other complementary theoretical models and approaches, such as Ecological systems theory, Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model, Family Safeguarding model, and the Social Model theory synthesis. Using a case vignette, this synthesis also illustrates how to, and when to apply different but complementary theoretical models and approaches to practice. It has been particularly highlighted how practitioners may draw on specific theory depending on whether the context is primarily extrafamilial issues or intrafamilial concerns.

This paper locates the experiences of the young person, such as the boy in the case vignette, firmly within the family, neighbourhood, and the broader community of society's socio-economic-cultural environment they live in. However, the multiple challenges that children and their families face can be

far too complex; requiring more lenses to mitigate them effectively. Hence, this paper aims to inform safeguarding children practice through demonstrating how complementary aspects of the other theoretical models and approaches can be carefully combined with Contextual Safeguarding.

Synthesising Contextual Safeguarding also contributes to the knowledge base, especially, the methodological considerations for integrating theoretical models and approaches, but more work is required. In the same vein, the paper explores philosophical issues for a theory synthesis design; arguing that the pragmatism involved in merging disparate theories within the same purview benefits from their combined complementary strengths while minimising their unique weaknesses and limitations. However, practical implications and not necessarily philosophical considerations influenced the design adopted for the paper.

Finally, the arguments presented in this paper also supports the view that one theoretical model or approach is not enough to provide solutions to safeguarding children and supporting families. Neither is it a binary issue requiring only a combination of Contextual Safeguarding and just another model, which at the outset was highlighted as the most common approach. Rather, what is needed is a systematically, synthesised combination of complementary aspects of different theoretical models or approaches, as this paper has argued. Therefore, based on the key arguments presented in this conceptual paper and the evidence of overlapping and complementary propositions, focus, domains, and principles and values, these new conceptual insights have important implications for improving system-wide safeguarding practice in the UK and further research.

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Table 1: Abstracts comparing selected theories and models for convergence and divergence

Criteria for comparing selected theories for convergence and divergence	Contextual Safeguarding approach	Ecological Systems theory	Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family model	Family Safeguarding model	Social Model
Proposition	A child or young person's experiences of interaction with the extrafamilial environment can expose them to the risk of significant harm that parents and caregivers have no control over. Hence, extrafamilial environmental contexts.	A person is in a transactional relationship with their physical, social, and cultural environment to achieve some degree of equilibrium and balance.	There is a complex systemic interplay among mental ill-health in parents, their children's development and mental health, and the relationships within family units affected by mental ill-health. Key concerns are risks and stressors or protective, resilience, or resource factors interacting with children or adult services, culture, and other issues within the community environment.	The obstacle to behaviour changes in children and their parents or caregivers is ambivalence. Motivational interviewing is required to help people explore and resolve their ambivalence by managing conversations to help them introspect and reconsider their fundamental values and compare them with their current behaviour.	The broader social, political, economic, and cultural contexts are barriers to ensuring children are cared for safely and their relational needs and identities respected.
Focus	Keeping children safe within the extrafamilial contexts	When adopted in social work, the focus is on whole system-wide changes to safeguard and promote the child's welfare.	Considers the child, the parent, and the family when assessing the needs of and providing support for families with a parent suffering from a mental health problem.	Keeping children safe from risk by improving outcomes through behaviour changes in children and their parents or caregivers	The focus of the Social model is on the economic, social, and cultural barriers that adversely impact the children's safe care and meeting their relational needs and identities
Domains	Contextual safeguarding system consisting of target, legislative Framework, partnerships, outcomes measurement. (Focused on extrafamilial harm but also promotes partnership working with parents)	Whole ecological system-wide (her family (micro-level), her school and social life (mezzo-level), and her community and the socio-cultural beliefs and practices which constrain actions (macro-level).	The systemic interplay among child's development, the parent's mental health, parenting capacity, and the family relationships.	Children and their parents or caregivers. It is evidence-based, collaborative, rights-based, strengths-based, and ecological.	Structural causes to safeguarding concerns such as poverty, social exclusion, inequalities as well as lack of or inadequate social protection
Principles or values	Collaborative, ecological, rights-based, strengths-based, and evidence-informed practice	Component or parts of a system within the context of the transactional relationships between systems and subsystems	The family plays a central role in a child's life while concerns such as parental mental health or child protection issues have a critical and enduring influence on the whole family	Root causes of many children's issues and outcomes are linked to parental issues such as their ambivalent behaviour	Promotes children and families' hopes and aspirations, human rights and advocacy, positive social connections within the broader social, political, economic, and cultural barriers.

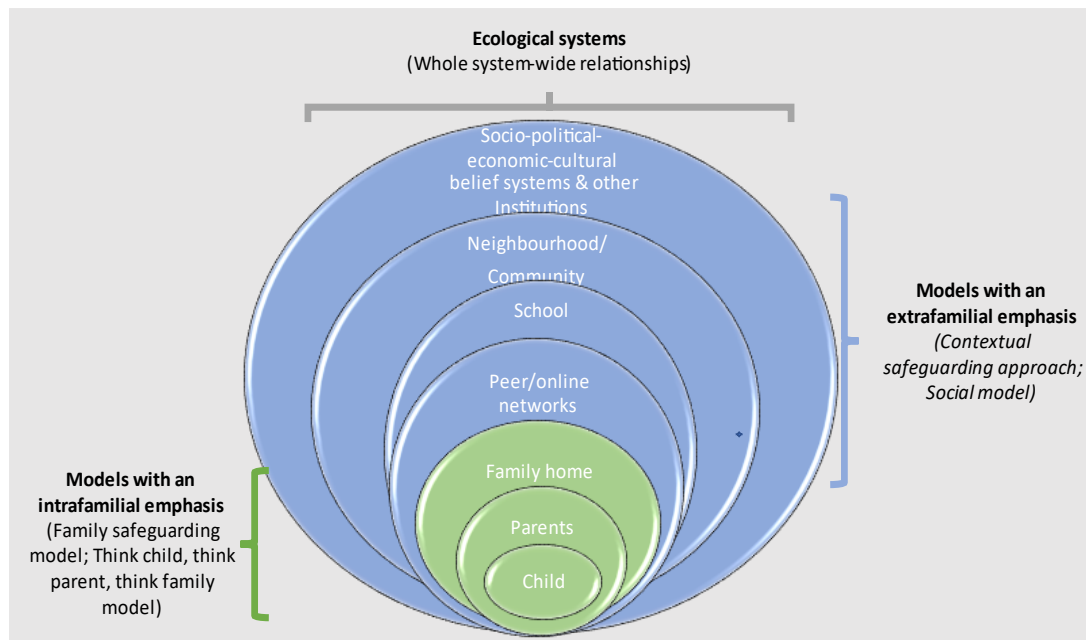


Figure 1: An illustration of the synthesis of Contextual Safeguarding with existing theoretical models and approaches to safeguarding children