The power in data and how to share it

Introduction

This is a think piece exploring themes arising from data from Bespoke Support Projects (BSPs) and from my wider work with authorities and partnerships on using data to understand and tackle exploitation and extra-familial harm.

In this piece, I will argue that data is an instrument of power in our society and within our systems, and, as such, requires strategic leaders to pay reflective attention to the design and operation of those systems to ensure that data use is ethical and explicitly informed by values. The production, management and use of data and data systems are often seen as operational tasks, left to experts with the relevant skills and an understanding of IT systems, databases and programming languages. But this approach ignores the influence that these data systems have over strategic decision-making, practice, and the lives of children, young people and families.

This piece sits alongside a discussion of **using data to explore disproportionality** within our systems, and the need to challenge our own assumptions and biases when using data. This is one example of using the power of data responsibly, through applying professional curiosity to interpreting what the data appears to show, and by using our understanding of structural inequality to start to explore why such patterns might emerge.

The power in data

Administrative data informs decision-making. It is a source of information that leaders, managers and practitioners draw on in their pursuit of knowledge about the lives of children, young people and families, and about the operation of services providing support to those families. What data we collect, and don't collect, how we collect it, and the value we place on it compared to other sources of information, is therefore a strong influence on what we think we know, and the decisions we take as a result.

Administrative data is collected and used for a range of purposes, informing decision-making at a national, organisational and individual level.

Strategic decision-making and planning

Strategic leaders use administrative data to understand activity within both the local system and their organisation, and to plan resource allocation based on capacity and demand. Joint Strategic Needs Assessments, police problem profiles and sufficiency planning for school and care placements all rely on administrative data as a primary source of information. This use of data as intelligence is discussed in this article. The data available for this kind of decision-making is often shaped by the data produced for accountability.

Accountability

Data collection and analysis often forms part of central government's exercise of its power over local government and other agencies. Government departments and non-departmental public bodies define statutory data collections used in inspection and other accountability mechanisms, and require quantitative measures of impact to qualify for funding for innovation and evaluation. In turn, local organisations as commissioners of services from the private and voluntary sector use quantitative performance measures to manage contracts and allocate funding, and as employers, use data-driven targets and dashboards to monitor the performance of teams and individuals. In this scenario, data is used directly as a tool to exert influence over another part of the system, through the offer of rewards, or the threat of punitive action. There are no such requirements yet for national data collection around the various forms of exploitation, leaving more power in the hands of local areas to decide what data they collect and what they use it for.

Eligibility for services

Public services make decisions about individuals based on a wide range of information from different sources. These decisions include whether someone is eligible for a service, or whether a service should stop support, whether a legal threshold has been crossed, enabling more powers of surveillance and compliance. This information is mostly qualitative and shared as text or verbally in meetings. Sometimes, administrative data is used in this process, particularly for deciding eligibility. Examples include the Troubled Families (now Supporting Families) programme's use of education and employment data, or free school meal eligibility checks. In exploitation services, the number of missing incidents within a particular time frame can be used as a trigger for referral, or additional scrutiny. Some local areas are exploring how they might use administrative data about individual children to identify those at risk of exploitation, or extra-familial harm. The more reliance is placed on the quantitative aspects, the more administrative data becomes a tool of power – the power to say 'yes' or 'no' to requests for help (Redden et al., 2020).

In all of these instances, data is used to make things visible, to quantify activities and experiences and identify patterns and trends. Those who oversee data systems have the power to define what is quantified, how it is counted and how the results are used to influence decision-making. Wrapped up in technical design decisions are questions about values and priorities, about privacy and consent, and about power and powerlessness (Redden et al., 2020). By acknowledging the role of data in shaping decision-making, and the power that strategic leaders do have to change that data, we can begin to think about how that power can be shared more widely, with those working in and experiencing the complex reality of exploitation.

The power to make things visible, or invisible

'Making an injury visible and public is usually the first step in remedying it, and political change often follows culture as what was long tolerated is seen to be intolerable, or what was overlooked becomes obvious. Which means that every conflict is in part a battle over the story we tell, or who tells and who is heard.'

(Solnit, quoted in Featherstone et al, 2018)

The development of policy and practice around child exploitation is a good example of how making things visible drives change. Through research and advocacy, exploitation was recognised as a form of harm to children and young people, reframed away from child prostitution and drug gangs, then, as government policy acknowledged the shift, exploitation and local responses to it became a concept visible in first case records and then quantitative data (Jay, 2014). As local partnerships develop and embed processes to record and analyse data about exploitation, it is helpful to consider how those systems contribute to our knowledge and to be aware of the power we wield when designing these processes and systems.

That power of visibility is constrained by resources, by government regulation and by local capability to design and implement the recording and reporting systems that reflect our view of the world. The term 'child prostitution' was still found in local IT systems a few years ago, at least up to the point where legislation changed through the Serious Crime Act 2015. Such historical perspectives are retained, not necessarily by deliberate design but because of the slow pace of change in software in public services.

Making measurement what matters

Quantitative data generated from administrative systems is a preferred source of information for many reasons, not least because of the ability to measure key metrics that can help decision-makers understand service activity and change over time. These measures become what matters, because they are visible in dashboards and reports, and a topic of conversation between strategic leaders and those who hold them to account. Prioritising this source of knowledge over other forms, such as the stories of individual lives of children and families, or the voices of those who support and advocate for them, assumes we know what is important enough to be measured.

In structuring information into IT systems to output consistent quantitative measures, we inevitably reduce complex lives and experiences into a series of categories, dates and processes. In doing so, we exclude knowledge about a person that does not fit in the box and extract the facts we do record from the wider narrative, and we miss the rich detail and the powerful structural forces that shape those facts. In one study of people with autism, the descriptor 'asocial' used in recording systems was found to obscure individuals' desire for social connection, even when they found such connections difficult to manage (Catala et al., 2021). Because of the descriptor, this group's need for support to access social connections was overlooked.

Administrative data isn't the only information we draw on to inform our knowledge. The voices of practitioners, families and communities offer different perspectives on the same areas of family life and the operation of services. This intelligence isn't quantifiable or measurable, and it takes ongoing effort to listen and analyse themes and draw conclusions. In the BSPs, we hear time and again that the most important insights are held in case notes, in practitioners' minds, and in the voices of children and families, but that there's no available time or resource to extract them.

The TCE team **reflects in this resource on young people's voices in strategic decision-making**. What if we spent as much on consulting children and families and engaging in reflection on what we learned from doing so as we did on the practitioner time, IT systems and infrastructure that produce our administrative data?

Deciding what to measure

Data can be collected on a range of aspects of children's lives, and their interaction with services and organisations. This data can be used for either evaluation or impact measurement. In the BSPs, many areas were seeking to understand, 'What difference are we making?' This then raises the question – 'What difference are we trying to make?'

Given the current budgetary constraints, it is unsurprising that many local areas are seeking to take actions that reduce spending, particularly on high-cost, intensive services. The need to make budget reductions or to justify an 'invest to save' approach drives a data collection process that prioritises 'monetiseable' processes and outcomes. Some outcomes are less easy to measure, or to attribute costs and savings to.

By choosing to record, measure and analyse what is monetiseable, strategic decision-makers and researchers are prioritising knowledge about finances over knowledge about other outcomes. This is an example of where strategic leaders' choices might be constrained by the wider context and power structures in which they work. If evidence of cost saving is required as a condition of government funding, or by the internal budget mechanisms of the local partnership, then costs and cost savings must be included in what we measure. If this is the *only* measure of success, then the wider impact on outcomes for children and families will be missed.

To quote a recent conversation I had with an academic, 'If it is more expensive but better for children and families, we need to recognise that as a good thing'. To measure if something is better we need to define a good outcome for children and families. Is getting good GCSEs the ultimate good outcome, or being in education, training or employment at 18? Is reducing the number of missing episodes of children being exploited a measure of increased safety? Or are these just what is measurable with our current systems and understanding, and so that is what we measure?

Deciding on what outcomes to measure is a value-laden activity, good and bad are not objective, but contextual and personal. This raises the question of who gets to decide what outcomes to aim for and what good looks like. Focusing on a predetermined outcome, particularly one that is being used to judge the performance of the practitioner or the service, may be a barrier to engagement and to offering a personalised support package that meets individual needs (Lowe et al., 2020).

In one BSP we saw a performance framework that included counting the number of young people who had achieved an outcome of their own choosing as a measure of success. This approach provides us with less information about what outcomes are achieved, but perhaps tells us more about what achieving that outcome meant to the young person, and the way in which power is shared between practitioners and those with whom they work.

Beyond specific outcomes, the information we collect about the children and families we work with expresses, and sets in stone some of our assumptions about the problems that children and families might face.

The decisions about what needs to be recorded influence how visible these needs are in the information provided to commissioners and strategic decision-makers. But often what is visible is what is recorded in our current data systems. This is not necessarily in line with either the evidence or the organisation's values.

In children's social care, legacy IT systems designed to support policy from several decades ago often:

> **Reflect an individualised model of harm to children and families:**
In children's services, data centres on the individual child, rather than the family, and struggles to systematically report peer groups and perpetrator networks and community-wide threats and assets. Decisions based on this data will tend towards individualised solutions, focused on the young person rather than the wider context and structural forces at play. In another area of social care, this focus on individual children had, until recently, led to women experiencing repeat removals of their children being rendered invisible (Boddy et al., 2020).

> **Focus on symptoms, not causes:**
Data about needs of children and families are often limited to those 'factors in assessment' required by the statutory data return. This means that needs related to housing, debt, unemployment or financial difficulty are not recorded or reported. Social and economic factors that might help our understanding of the causes of family and social problems are ignored. These blind spots are only exacerbated when pattern matching and decision-making are supported by machine learning algorithms, when the invisibility of poverty can lead to targeting based on characteristics (including ethnicity) that are closely correlated with deprivation. Invisible social and economic factors, combined with an individualised approach, leads us to ask the wrong questions of our data – looking for causal relationships between personal characteristics and harm, when the answers might lie in social dynamics and context.

> **Emphasise risks and deficits, not strengths and assets:**
> Risk assessment tools that 'score' risk based on the presence or severity of a number of factors exemplify this approach. When data is drawn from these tools, it inevitably depicts a population of children, young people, families and communities with no resources or power to change their own outcomes or contexts, and situates the power to solve the problem with practitioners and the organisations they work for. If having more than four Adverse Childhood Experiences inevitably marks a young person out as 'at risk', what power does the young person have to change their risk score? (Edwards et al., 2019).

Relying on data from children's social care, then, imposes a particular mental model about the risks young people face and potential solutions. Inevitably, this approach focuses our attention on young people experiencing harm, not the contexts and people influencing that harm.

Each agency will have its own blind spots, for example focusing on young people as only offenders or only victims, or considering events in isolation rather than as an emerging trend. In the BSPs, we have seen the benefit of a partnership approach to using data to give a more holistic picture of the lives of children and families, as different agencies collect and report on different aspects.

Recent analysis of local authority early help data showed that many local areas do record financial difficulties, debt, housing and unemployment in their early help databases (Brooks, 2021). Education data provides information on eligibility for free school meals, exclusions and alternative provision. Police and community safety services have quantitative and qualitative data on criminal networks and gang activity. Public Health and Corporate Business Intelligence teams hold data on a range of social and economic indicators and data from other parts of the authority.

Developing a shared mental model or theory of how exploitation happens and how services can prevent or disrupt exploitation or protect victims can help local partnerships to identify the gaps in the data, and where they can learn from other parts of the system about what else they might want to record.

Deciding how to collect data

The information in administrative databases is collected through the interactions of practitioners in a range of agencies with children, young people and families. Strategic leaders set the culture and practice of data collection through policies and procedures setting out what tools practitioners should use, what and when they should record on IT systems, and the management activity around ensuring compliance with these policies.

The requirements to collect certain types of information, in particular forms, shapes the conversations the practitioners have with families, and how practitioners spend their time when they are not with families. If data collection about families is prioritised over practice with families, then practitioners might take a 'tick-box' approach to talking with families. A checklist approach to collecting information can be alienating, and miss important information relevant to the family, but which isn't included on the general list. Practitioners might spend more time inputting data into IT systems than they do writing and analysing more detailed case notes and reflecting on them with peers and managers (Munro, 2011).

Practitioners can collect and record information without directly talking to families about what it is that is being recorded about them. This approach leaves the power of defining that information with practitioners, so that it is the practitioner's opinion that enters the official record (Wroe & Lloyd, 2020). This might mean an inaccurate record of ethnicity, or assumptions about mental health or domestic abuse that the family themselves don't recognise.

By sharing the family's case notes with the family and getting their consent, practitioners are actively sharing the power of categorisation with the people they work with. If the data we collect about families reflects our mental model of the challenges they face, then sharing those records with families provides an opportunity to talk with them about why these categories are important, for example, discussing why particular questions are included on an exploitation screening tool and why practitioners might be concerned.

Beyond these general observations about how data is collected, exploitation and extra-familial harm prompt some more specific challenges around data collection methods.

A number of local areas are exploring innovative approaches to tackling exploitation and extra-familial harm, such as contextual safeguarding and transitional safeguarding. Some elements of these approaches require careful exploration of issues of consent and justification for sharing information without it. In particular, peer mapping, and the application of legal safeguarding thresholds for information sharing about young people over 18 raise important questions about the collection and recording of data about individuals, as well as the role of consent. These issues, among others, are being explored through **the Innovate Project**, an ESRC-funded project exploring innovative approaches to extra-familial harm.

Online activity, and the associated harms, are now a part of children and young people's daily lives. Practitioners and strategic leaders are understandably considering how they can get a better understanding of the online world. Much of this 'digital footprint' is public (e.g. Facebook profiles or YouTube videos) and data about online activity is tracked and harvested by a range of private companies, as well as for police operational activity. This, along with the increased use of CCTV, automatic number plate recognition, and smart cities, opens up the uncomfortable possibility of surveillance of young people and families without their consent or knowledge (Berman & Albright, 2017; Byrne et al., 2019). This new source of data should prompt strategic leaders to think about the relationship between privacy and risk, and the ethical implications of collecting information about families without their knowledge. Are we willing to use our power in this way?

Not all agencies will have the same processes for collecting information about children and families, and operate within different legal and professional frameworks for categorisation, consent, and sharing of information with families. Partnerships examining data from a range of sources might want to consider how that data is collected, and the power that families have to review or challenge it.

Deciding how to share data

To hold data about a person is to hold power over them – the power to use or share that data in ways that they do not necessarily agree to. The legislation and policy around the handling of personal data gives individuals a certain amount of power over the data that is collected and held about them. There are of course exemptions for safeguarding and the purposes of crime detection that allow data sharing without consent. With that power, comes a responsibility to consider how the data might be used, or misused. Strategic leaders within local partnerships might ask themselves and each other, 'How might this information be viewed differently through another agency's lens?' For example, how might a risk score or a flag of exploitation be misunderstood when shared with another agency, where it will be seen without the nuances of professional judgement that went into it?

Concerns about how personal data will be interpreted and used underpins the reluctance of some practitioners and services to share individual data with local partnerships. This concern is not about the legalities of sharing, but about the effect on the young people and families if they are criminalised, stigmatised, or retaliated against as a result of information being shared. Sharing information without consent can be experienced as a breach of trust by young people and families and may lead to them withdrawing from any support at all. Given the importance of themes of consent, empowerment and self-determination in supporting those experiencing exploitation, sharing information without consent needs very careful consideration of the risks and benefits.

Strategic leaders who authorise data sharing about individuals are balancing the desire to protect families from significant harm with avoiding missed opportunities to intervene and disrupt exploitation, as well as concern over the potential negative consequences of damaged trust and prejudiced decision-making. This balancing act requires thinking about how the data will be used, and how young people's families will be supported to understand the implications of data sharing.

See this article by Social Finance on five principles supporting data sharing in practice.

Deciding how to analyse and interpret data

Not all data sharing needs to be about individuals. When using data for strategic decision-making and planning, anonymised and aggregated data can offer a range of insights about populations and places without exposing individual personal data to other agencies. Bringing aggregated data together anonymously can support organisations to contribute data beyond the three statutory partners. With more sophisticated infrastructure and information sharing agreements, it is possible to link data about individuals across systems and databases, before anonymising and aggregating it. This supports seeing patterns and trends in the use of multiple services by individuals, informing decisions about multi-agency teams and co-location, rather than identifying or targeting individuals.

There are a range of techniques available for analysing and presenting data, ranging from the descriptive bar charts to more sophisticated methods of linking and grouping data to find patterns and trends. The methods used should be informed by the questions we want to ask, and the mental models we have about the problem we are trying to solve.

Exploitation and extra-familial harm are complex problems. And evidence is still emerging about the drivers and protective factors of harm and how these might relate to children from different backgrounds and in different circumstances.

This requires analysis that:

> **Goes beyond presentation of averages**, to escape the 'tyranny of the mean', and to explore the differential impact of external events, like COVID, or the provision of services and support on young people from different ethnic groups, levels of income or geographical areas (Hagell, 2021).

> **Reflects our thinking about the problem we are trying to solve**, and for whom. For example, when we look for data about young people to inform preventative strategies, do we mean secondary school pupils aged 11-16, 10-18, or do we include young adults up to age 25? Do we group them all together when we present the data to decision-makers, or look at the experience of each age group separately (Holmes & Smale, 2018)?

> **Enables multiple perspectives on the data**, highlighting patterns over time and place, service responses and outcomes, as well as needs and demographics.

These decisions are sometimes made by analysts who are a long way away from the conversations about new ways of thinking about exploitation and extra-familial harm and who are understandably unaware of the need to bridge boundaries and join dots through data. Despite their expertise, and physical control over the data sources, many analysts involved in the BSPs felt powerless or unsupported in using their expertise to support decision-making around exploitation and wider risks to adolescents.

The power to decide how data is analysed and presented can be shared. One way of sharing this power is through publishing open datasets of individual level, anonymised data, like the police open data of crimes and of stop and search activity. This allows for secondary analysis by third parties, including members of the public, to draw their own conclusions or provide a service to allow others to do so. The process for making data public requires a series of decisions about what to publish, and how to ensure the privacy and reliability of the data, while retaining its usefulness for the purpose of research (Quinn, et al., 2019; Smith, 2014). Alternatively, local partnerships might explore working with **ADR UK** (and the newly launched ADR England) to allow academic access to their data in a secure environment in order to get a different perspective.

Not all analysis needs to be quantitative, or only quantitative. Even the most sophisticated analysis of quantitative data leaves important questions unanswered and there will always be **children and young people missing from our data**.

Vital intelligence about what is happening in a local area and why particular patterns and trends have been found are held by practitioners and managers, and children, young people and families. Involving a wide range of people in understanding these patterns can help to identify bias and inaccuracies, add context and detail and suggest potential interventions and solutions. This can take time. As we have seen in the BSPs, many people working across local partnerships are intimidated or confused by charts and tables. Bringing together the expertise of analysts, practitioners and those with experience of services around data can be an empowering experience for all involved.

Conclusion

As policy and practice develops in local partnerships to tackle exploitation, there is an opportunity to explore and discuss the partnership's approach to using personal and aggregated data to inform decision-making.

The limited government guidance in this area leaves much of the decision-making about how to do this in the hands of local partnerships. Local partnerships therefore have the power to decide what data they use and how they use it, whether for evaluation, accountability or strategic planning, or to support decision-making for individual children and young people.

Explicitly considering these choices through a lens that recognises the power of data to make things visible or invisible opens up new possibilities and opportunities for developing data systems that reflect our mental models of exploitation and the other forms of harm that young people face. These opportunities then need to be examined through an ethical lens that recognises that to hold data about someone is to hold power over them, and to consider how that power can be shared across the system.

Each agency brings with it a set of traditions and practices around data that shapes the approaches to its use in order to understand exploitation. Each has different powers to collect and share information without consent under different circumstances, and each is constrained by their own recording requirements and systems. Understanding the data culture and infrastructure across the partnership can support conversations about data ethics and governance that explicitly consider how to exercise the power of data, and, importantly, how to share it with others, including voluntary organisations, practitioners and families.

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