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Powerful, Weightless, and Free: Reconceptualising Young People's Narratives of Resistance in the Context of Sexual Violence and Exploitation Using Recognition Theory

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ABSTRACT

Meeting the needs of young people affected by sexual exploitation, alongside other forms of extra-familial harm, remains a challenge for social workers, youth workers and other professionals responsible for their safety and well-being. This paper proposes that to more effectively create safety with/for young people, we must re-examine how we understand and interpret their responses to professionals including acts of resistance, drawing upon Recognition Theory to support this. Specifically in this paper we utilise Jackson and Mazzei's method for 'thinking with theory' to bring Recognition Theory into the 'threshold' with data from a three-year participatory arts project with young people (aged 13–25) in England. In applying the work of three theorists who have contributed to the development of Recognition Theory: Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser, and Judith Butler, the paper describes how their theoretical contributions both enable new questions about young people's resistance to emerge and support identification of new answers within the data. Findings highlight the need to shift our focus away from seeing young people's resistance as a problem and instead, recognise the possibilities of resistance—including a more honest and humble awareness of the limits to professionals' influence, and the need to create space for more expansive frames of recognisability where young people's whole, dynamic selves can be known.

1 | Introduction

In the last decade, high profile cases of child sexual exploitation (CSE) throughout the United Kingdom, and increasingly cases involving other forms of exploitation (e.g., criminally exploited children involved in drug distribution), have elevated public and political interest in addressing these forms of harm. Children and young people victimised through sexual or criminal exploitation will be subject to a range of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in the context of relationships with older adults or peers (Firmin 2017). Young people's experiences of victimisation can be made additionally complex if they are also involved in illegal activity (e.g., drug selling networks); seen as being complicit in the exploitation of others; and/or are viewed as troubled, or troublesome within criminal justice and/or child protection systems (Langhoff et al. 2024; Warrington et al. 2025). Experiencing CSE in the UK, and globally, is further complicated by social norms and patterns of gendered power dynamics, sexual violence, and intersectional experiences of oppression due to race, gender, sexuality, and social class (Wroe 2021). Whilst our understanding of exploitation as a form of child abuse has grown over the past decade, the problem of finding ways to engage young people in services intended to improve their safety from exploitation remains challenging. This article seeks to consider the role of theory in helping to address this challenge by providing a new way of seeing and interpreting young people's seeming resistance to professional engagement as intrinsically tied to their strengths, capabilities and therefore protection.

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2 | Cross Disciplinary Approaches to Resistance

Resistance is widely recognised as a generative mode of framing taken up by activists, consumers, and those who might otherwise be seen as victims of abuse (Kelly 1988). It has been a focus for international researchers and critical theorists in fields such as cultural anthropology (Seymour 2006), sociology—including gender-based violence studies (Kelly 1988), political science (Scott 1989) and philosophy (Smith 2016; Butler 2004). The international study of resistance has been described as 'one of the most important and enduring expressions of the twentieth-century political imagination and action and one ever more important in the struggles of the present century' (Caygill 2013, 6). Resistance is a concept that is continuously revisited, and across disciplines, resistance is defined to include both intentional and conscious acts of opposition that may expose people to retribution, retaliation, or harm, alongside the more subtle or covert acts that may feel safer but remain meaningful to those engaged in them (Johansson and Vinthagen 2019). More subtle 'everyday' acts of resistance can themselves be interwoven with acquiescence and accommodation, and sometimes involve only thoughts or emotions that enable someone to feel they are withstanding, repelling, refusing, or opposing abuse, oppression, and the 'conditions that make such acts possible' (Wade 1997, 25).

In the international literature on youth work, resistance has been a focus of study for many decades, understood as part of seeing young people's agency and capacity to affect change in their own lives (e.g., Hall and Jefferson 2006; Wyn and White 1996; Tuck and Yang 2011). It has been conceptualised as a tool for describing how young people are represented within social movements, how they experience power, and as a positive frame for understanding youth subcultures (Johnson 2017). Yet despite the significance in youth work literature, in the field of child exploitation, resistance is not well-conceptualised. Unlike other areas of youth work, this field has not often considered young people's resistance in pro-social or positive ways—or considered the concept in reference to individual acts of 'fighting back' against oppression and subjugation in either interpersonal relationships or institutional contexts (Warnock et al. 2023). The following section considers the development of practice responses to child exploitation and suggests reasons why the sector may have overlooked the rich and diverse ways in which young people's resistance can be understood as a dynamic and transformative force.

3 | Resistance in the Context of Child Exploitation

Since the early 2000s and its subsequent introduction to UK statutory guidance in 2009 (DCSF 2009), CSE has been subject to a growing body of research and practice development. This includes studies seeking to evidence and understand the phenomena from the perspective of professionals (Scott and Skidmore 2006) and young people (Pearce 2002; Beckett 2011; Hallett 2016). Following the 2009 guidance, it remained an area of sustained policy focus with all four UK nations developing guidance to address CSE alongside a wider context of inquiries responding to high-profile cases involving multiple victims and institutional shortcomings (Office of the Children's Commissioner 2013; Jay 2014). With this renewed attention, responsibility for addressing CSE increasingly shifted from a patchwork of primarily NGO-led initiatives—with their roots in youth work and gender-based violence services—to more statutory social work and criminal justice responses.

Simultaneously a related body of research responded to growing recognition of criminal exploitation involving children and young people. While acknowledging important distinctions between different forms of child exploitation, both child criminal and sexual exploitation share a characteristic as primarily extra familial forms of harm, particularly (though not invariably) impacting adolescents (Langhoff et al. 2024). Despite over a decade of increasing research and policy focus on issues of extra familial harm, McAllister's 2022 review of social care in England revealed that the system, as it currently exists right now, does not work well 'for tackling extra familial harms' (p. 105). Recognised aspects of this challenge include the fact that traditionally, social work responses to child abuse are designed to respond to forms of harm that occur within the family network and typically target younger children (Firmin 2017). Such approaches present challenges for professionals responsible for protecting older children and young people from forms of extra familial harm where they are required to work alongside young people's own developing sense of agency and independence (Ibid). Tensions then surface for young people and professionals when interventions reflect a rescue imperative (McAllisters 2022) negating young people's desire for agency and influence, or in cases where young people enact an inadequate performance of the expected 'victim' role (Beckett 2011). Specific challenges noted by professionals include: young people resisting recognising exploitation in their own lives or not self-identifying as victims (Jago et al. 2011, Hallett 2016); young people's 'unwillingness' to engage with helping professionals on the terms offered (Warrington 2013, Hallett 2016); their perceived complicity in risk or harm to others (Firmin et al. 2022); and a seeming refusal to practice behaviours that keep them safe (Warrington 2013). Meanwhile young people often describe limited faith in the ability of professionals to protect them from powerful and abusive individuals and networks (Beckett et al. 2013) or wider distrust of professionals rooted in prior experiences. In such a challenging practice context, statutory interventions tend towards competing dynamics of paternalism or victim blaming (Hallett 2016) and hence continue to foreground control or 'welfare surveillance', often conflating young people's vulnerability and the 'risks' they may pose to others (Mythen and Weston 2023). This is true beyond the UK; for example, when Canadian girls' experiences of exploitation are framed as a 'high risk lifestyle' (Radek 2019), when exploited young people in some US state jurisdictions are criminalised (Pullmann et al. 2020) or in European countries that have adopted a welfare model within youth justice systems, but continue to struggle when young people are simultaneously victims of harm and causing harm for others (Firmin et al. 2022; Wroe et al. 2026).

One potential consequence is that professionals working in the field of extra familial harm struggle to see resistant behaviours in more nuanced or strengths-based ways, interpreting resistance as 'an avoidance tactic' to be largely ignored or a 'barrier to treatment' that needs to be overcome or remedied (Feldwisch et al. 2024, 7). Like Munford and Sanders (2017), who wrote about young people's resistance in the context of youth services

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in New Zealand, we contend that professionals perhaps continue to struggle to work productively with resistance in young people because they do not adequately understand it and they work within a system that compels them to frame it as a problem rather than a resource. Practice responses to child exploitation therefore still tend to focus on trying to convince young people to acquiesce to adults' conceptualisations of their experiences (including adult assessments of risk and harm) and struggle to see how young people's acts of resistance may facilitate their survival in unique and important ways (Thomas et al. 2023). Consequently, the full range of resources young people draw upon to mitigate the impact of violence is likely to remain unknown (Kelly 1988). Relatedly, such resources will be unaccounted for in intervention services (Anderson 2006) and an ongoing mismatch remains between what services offer and what young people think they need or feel able to accept.

We contend that the lack of understanding regarding resistance represents a form of misrecognition (Honneth 1996) where young people's actions to resist or counter diverse forms of harm (interpersonal OR institutional) are still seen as symptoms of pathology rather than self-preservation (Munford and Sanders 2017). This article therefore argues that we need new ways of seeing and understanding young people's resistance. To a degree, it builds on and aligns with proponents of strengths-based approaches (Yeo et al. 2023), championing the need to focus on young people's existing resources in the face of sexual violence and abuse. However, it seeks to go further—not just seeking to foreground young people's strengths and resources—but reconceptualising—in partnership with young people themselves—their acts or practices of resistance (Johansson and Vinthagen 2019).

Below, we summarise recognition theory, drawing particularly on the work of Honneth (1996), Fraser (2001) and Butler (2004, 2021), who—among others—contributed significantly to the theory's development before turning to examples of how theory has been used in this study as a tool to think critically with and about young people.

4 | Recognition Theory

4.1 | Honneth

For Axel Honneth (1996), the social integration that allows us to co-create just, ethical communities occurs when individuals experience recognition via emotional connection within primary relationships (*love*); the demonstration of respect through granting legal (*rights*); and a shared commitment to reciprocal understanding and esteem (*solidarity*). Love, rights and solidarity are thus set forth as the foundation for self-realisation in his interpretation of Recognition Theory (Boddy and Wheeler 2020). These forms of intersubjective recognition are connected and cumulative, forming the preconditions for an individual's positive relationship with the self: love leads to positive self-relation; rights leads to self-confidence; solidarity leads to self-esteem (Honneth 1996; Fraser and Honneth 2003). In instances where recognition is not granted or received, Honneth notes that these interactions constrain—rather than facilitate—an expansion of rights, and a struggle for recognition might ensue, which may allow the institutional social order to be questioned and sometimes, transformed. However, there is also an acknowledgement that often times the struggle for recognition does not lead to transformation. For example, Honneth notes that when someone is abused or harmed within the context of an interpersonal relationship, in civil society (where they feel their rights have been rescinded) or via the wider political system (i.e., they are excluded from a community of shared values) they experience *misrecognition*, which results in the erosion of trust in their social world and subsequently the 'collapse in one's own basic self-confidence' (p. 133). When we are misrecognised, we may resist (individually or collectively) as a means of communicating that misrecognition.

In recent years, Honneth's work has been increasingly applied to considerations of social work and youth work practice, including how it helps us understand professional relationships (Turney 2012); to explore shame and recognition in social work (Houston 2016; Frost 2016) or youth work practice (Munford and Sanders 2020); thinking through collaborative work with children (Husby et al. 2019); and exploring young people's relationships with institutions (Välimäki and Husu 2023). Together these examples highlight both the relevance and promise of Honneth's approach to recognition theory for understanding young people's relationships with services in the context of exploitation.

4.2 | Fraser

Meanwhile Nancy Fraser (2001)'s work on recognition theory urges some caution about its application—critiquing Honneth for his expansive interpretation of recognition—highlighting a number of key limitations. In the book she wrote with Honneth (Fraser and Honneth 2003), she argued that whilst the 'recognition paradigm' (p. 12) helpfully addresses injustices through challenging problematic patterns of representation, communication, and interpretation, it does not provide a way for redressing systemic and historical injustices that require structural change and the redistribution of resources (Boddy and Wheeler 2020). According to Fraser, when members of a marginalised group experience concentrated disadvantage, simply recognising them is not enough to bring about an expansion of rights. Whilst recognition might lead to wider solidarity with marginalised groups (i.e., providing the impetus for others to advocate on their behalf) it is not enough. She argues that though Honneth's approach holds analytical value for understanding misrecognition that arises from injustice it also has limits, and addressing such injustice will require action that facilitates both recognition *and* redistribution. For young people engaged in our study, this requires an attendance to both issues of identity and wider forms of structural inequity.

4.3 | Butler

Finally we turn to the work of feminist and gender studies theorist, Judith Butler whose work has also long engaged with the concept of recognition (e.g., Butler 2004), and who has more recently also written about it in conversation with Honneth (Ikäheimo et al. 2021). Butler's writing on recognition concerns

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problems arising within social contexts that set limits around what is possible to recognise. Butler shares in Honneth's understanding that as social creatures, we are hardwired with a desire to be recognised and that recognition 'transforms those who participate in it' (Butler 2021, 42). However, they note that transformation might also require people to acquiesce parts of themselves that are not currently recognisable within the terms set out in a particular social order. By wanting and receiving recognition, they note that we might experience a degree of freedom that comes with mattering and belonging; however we may also conversely experience '*freedom-undermining domination*' (Stahl 2021, 161) as we become forced to accept and become subject to the limited range of recognisable identities available. This means that when the options available within one's social context do not enable them to express the fullness of their identities or selves, they might silence or suppress those parts of themselves; or indeed they might resist. In this instance, resistance might be understood as 'evidence of something which cannot be integrated into recognition' (Ikäheimo et al. 2021, 7). It is here, that Butlers' contribution to our analysis lies—highlighting the tensions between young people's desire for recognition and the limiting available discourses surrounding their experiences of sexual violence and exploitation.

5 | Methodology

This paper draws upon empirical data from Imagining Resistance, a novel three-year participatory arts-based research project with 20 young people aged 13–25. The overall project was designed to explore the potential of creative arts research methodologies to enhance our understanding of resistance in partnership with young people affected by sexual violence, abuse and exploitation and we have written elsewhere about the methods (Warnock et al. 2023; Warrington et al. 2025).

Data was collected through an initial exploratory focus group and three workshops (from 2021 to 2023, see Table 1) with young people receiving services from three charities in two English cities that provided support for children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse, violence, and exploitation. Two of the three charities specifically worked with young people who had experienced sexual violence alongside other forms of child exploitation. We consciously chose not to collect structured demographic data, which we assessed to hold limited value to our research design, and risked foregrounding distinctions between 'them' and 'us' (as research professionals). Instead, we engaged with young people's subjective and intersectional identities as they surfaced in discussions of resistance, including their experiences of disabilities and being racial and sexual minorities within schools, communities, and British society. The three sets of workshops were each organised differently, dependent upon the availability of young people and the agency partners' capacity to support the project. During workshops, we engaged young people in a range of activities to support their understanding of resistance and how it is practiced in everyday life. Some of these activities involved explicitly engaging with the concept of resistance (e.g., brainstorming responses to the question 'What do I resist?') while other activities were intended to scaffold young people's visual literacy so that they could talk confidently about symbolism and metaphor, and begin to think about the 'felt sense' of resistance (Johnson 2017) in more complex ways. Other activities sought to help young people 'think like photographers and artists' (Sandlin et al. 2017, 60) supporting their fullest participation in the project and contribution to a collectively emerging understanding and representation of resistance. We also conducted brief interviews with young people ($n = 10$) who responded to our request—during workshops—to tell us stories of resistance.

We drew upon O'Neill's (2012) concept of 'ethno-memesis' to collect both ethnographic data alongside visual and poetic representations created by participants (for more detail, see:

TABLE 1 | Summary of workshop structures.

Project	Workshop sessions	Participants	Data
Exploratory focus groups	2 focus groups and 2 individual interviews	6 young people aged 16–25	Transcripts for audio recording of focus groups and interviews
1	• 1 two-hour introduction • 4 day-long workshops • 2 three-hour follow up workshops	5 young women aged 16–25	• Field notes for sessions and analytic summary for project • Transcripts: 2 group discussion and 4 individual interviews • 48 images
2	• 3 full day workshops • 5 three-hour afternoon workshops	5 young women aged 13–19	• Field notes for sessions and analytic summary for project • Transcripts: 5 group discussions and 3 interviews • 201 images
3	5 full day workshops	4 young people aged 16–18	• Field notes for sessions and analytic summary for project • Transcripts: 3 group discussions and 3 individual interviews • 91 images

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Langhoff et al. 2024). The project was funded by [funder] and ethical approval granted by [university]. Initial consent for participation in workshops was gained at the project outset, but participants engaged with consent on a recursive basis and gave consent for additional research elements as the project progressed, aligned with young people's developing understanding of the project's purpose and image use (Warnock et al. 2023).

6 | Analysis and Knowledge Production

Throughout the workshops, we recognised ourselves (project team) as influential members of the group shaping shared understandings of resistance alongside young people. Larsen and Schwennesen (2023) describe this as a 'diffractive' way of knowing, in which the researchers and the data are entangled together, within the phenomenon being studied. As a result, we found Jackson and Mazzei's (2013, 2022) 'thinking with theory' method useful for analysis, as a way of making sense of the knowledge production process. Their method provided a framework for how we 'plugged' theory into data, arranging and fitting theory together with data in order to arrive at the production of new knowledge. In particular, we '*thought with*' Recognition Theory as variably articulated within the works of Honneth, Fraser, and Butler (outlined above), using it to influence how we understood both the forms of resistance we observed, and the meaning(s) young people gave to the concept alongside our experience of collecting data.

Jackson and Mazzei's process of 'plugging' theory into empirical data lends itself to deep analysis of individual pieces of data (Sparrman and Aarsand 2023; Larsen and Schwennesen 2023); for example, in their book 'Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research', they wrote about data collected with just two participants from a larger study, which they revisit through the lens of different theorists throughout the book. In this article, we thus followed the method they outlined by choosing to focus in-depth on a single semi-structured interview conducted during a workshop. The process of 'plugging in' involved repeatedly reading the interview together and individually alongside reading and discussing the work of each theorist. It is this process that Jackson and Mazzei (2013) referred to as entering the 'threshold' bringing together engagement of data and theory with researchers' subjective selves. In order to move the process of meaning-making forward, and following their approach, we spent time developing a series of analytical questions that we could ask in relation to the interview, as if we could raise questions in conversation with each theorist (Jackson and Mazzei 2013). The questions are outlined below:

1. Thinking with self-efficacy and esteem (Honneth): *How can re-visiting young people's experiences through the lens of recognition offer them permission for defiance, power, and freedom in new ways?*
2. Thinking with power (Fraser): *How does resistance signal distributive injustice in young people's lives?*
3. Thinking with recognisability and hope (Butler): *How does the language of resistance provide space to expand young people's' recognisability, particularly by professionals?*

In this method, it is important to note that these questions are not the only questions that could be asked of the data; rather, they were chosen to 'help us extend our thinking' (Jackson and Mazzei 2013, 265) and use theory to engage with the data in new ways. Choosing to engage with each of these theorists in turn, through the three distinct questions, allowed us to offer a range of possible insights into our understanding of resistance. Honneth's psychodynamic articulation of Recognition Theory helped us understand how young people's behaviours might be reframed as acts of resistance, communicating a desire to feel loved, to access rights, and to experience solidarity. Meanwhile Fraser's (Fraser 2001; Fraser and Honneth 2003) counter-arguments regarding recognition and redistribution surfaced the profound impact of being unseen and misunderstood within a wider cultural context in which our participants experience multiple forms of disadvantage, shaped by structural injustice. Finally Butler's (2004, 2021) work illuminated the ways in which available narratives for young survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation fall short in representing the whole of their experiences, and how introducing resistance into their own narratives of self, via the use of creative methodologies, enabled young people to curate a representation of themselves that transcends the inadequate categories currently available to them within popular and professional discourses of surviving and moving forward after sexual abuse and exploitation.

Subsequently, in the findings section below, we articulate how our thinking developed through the lens of these questions and describe what we learned about resistance in the process. Like Larsen and Schwennesen (2023) we used this method to consciously position ourselves within the phenomenon we were studying. Whilst our analysis—and the discussion of findings below—focusses on a single interview, we recognised when findings aligned with wider project data (i.e., observations, group discussions and interviews and outputs), and supplement our discussion of findings with additional examples from the data. In choosing this analytic approach, we also acknowledge its limitations, particularly in relation to the generalisability of findings and subjectivity (Mwita 2022)—even if that subjectivity is intentionally built into the research design.

7 | Findings

7.1 | Thinking With Self-Efficacy and Esteem (Honneth)

7.1.1 | How Can Re-Narrating Young People's Experiences Through the Lens of Recognition Offer Them Permission for Defiance, Power, and Freedom in New Ways?

When Lizzie (pseudonym) was asked to tell a story of resistance, the first thing she talked about was her children and the frustration when others doubted the kind of mum she would be after giving birth to her first child as a teen. Below is an excerpt from this conversation between Lizzie and Kristi (first author):

Lizzie: 'Everyone thought I was gonna be this trashy arsed mum, still doing the same stuff and I kind of feel like I've proved you all wrong. I've got two intelligent kids...I know I haven't

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failed. My kids are very well-mannered...they have discipline. My kids have routine. Like no one thought I would have routine, but I have routine.'

Kristi: 'Routine is resistance: so lovely, yeah!'

Lizzie: 'Do you get it? I've proved people wrong, I'm still here, I'm still breathing, I've changed as a person...'

Kristi: Could I say...that in some way this is a kind of resistance to other people's expectations? It's about like 'I have a right to reinvent myself'...

Lizzie: Yeah. I have a right to be the person I want to be...and I have a right to a full life as the next person...Your start doesn't determine what your future is...like, I resist the fact that you are who you are; you can always change your life at any point. Do you get it?

Here Lizzie's plea ('do you get it?') is to been seen as a person who has changed, beyond the expectations others had for her. She notes how she transformed herself and now meets conventional societal standards for a 'good mother'. The significance of Lizzie's identity, her role as that good mother, and her desire for this role to be recognised was further foregrounded in the photographic portraits she directed of herself.

In the interview excerpt, and throughout the data, we see how offering opportunities to young people to explore and relate to the concept of resistance enabled them to begin re-narrating stories of powerlessness, interpersonal victimisation, or structural violence (e.g., racism, sexism) as stories that included their own strength, particularly in relation to how they managed to self-preserve and keep themselves safe. In this way, resistance acted as a conceptual prompt allowing space to re-tell a story to themselves and others in which they emerged agentic and powerful.

Thinking with Honneth enabled us to make sense of two things. First, we saw the struggle for recognition in interactions with the services offered to young survivors of sexual violence exploitation. Honneth (1996, 163) said that we all have 'deeply rooted expectations regarding recognition', as being recognised by others enables us to develop our own person identities and understand who we are within our socio-cultural environments. If being recognised is essential for building self-respect, self-confidence and self-esteem, then it is crucial to consider how support offered to young people provides opportunities for recognition. Secondly, we considered how resistance indicates misrecognition. This simple but fundamental (re)framing of how we understand young people's acts or practices of resistance is a challenge to the system status quo. Where resistance within professional practice is used to describe a problem or deficit within the individual—for example, as in a young person resisting services designed to protect them (Feldwisch et al. 2024); considered through this lens, it also offers an opportunity to reframe resistance as a signifier of perhaps strength (and unmet needs). Here, it is a commendable display of personal power and a means of making injustices within abusive contexts and safeguarding systems more visible. Engaging in this reframing of resistance collaboratively with young people might also facilitate their access to building blocks for self-respect (through feeling seen in personal relationships with others); self-confidence (through feeling their rights are respected); and self-esteem (through both legitimising and valuing their own personal safety strategies and recognising as part of wider collective efforts to address social injustice).

In group activities and interviews, when reflecting on how they understood their own behaviour through the lens of resistance, young people described efforts to experience feeling '*weightless*', '*free*' and '*fun*'; they highlighted the ways these behaviours served important human needs for autonomy and joy while countering the restrictive dynamics that can occur within encounters with professionals. Furthermore, the act of naming and reframing these acts of resistance was itself described (in the project film) as a moment of both relief: 'understanding resistance has brought a weight off my shoulders' and engendered confidence to 'be who I am'.

Despite the promise of this approach, understanding resistance on these terms did not immediately resolve problems associated with the consequences of having resisted authority figures or rules within the numerous systems governing participants' lives. As each workshop progressed, we tried to tease out the complexities of having resisted in ways that adults approved of whilst also resisting in ways that had negative consequences—without jumping to solutions or advice regarding how to avoid resisting in ways that brought those negative consequences. We were also conscious from the outset of the project that we needed to avoid victim blaming (i.e., inferring it was young people's responsibility to resist being victimised). We found that young people could experiment with re-telling their stories, infused with new evidence of resistance, without blaming themselves. For example, one young woman articulated a moment within an abusive relationship she was unable to leave but thought: 'even though I'm with you...you can't change the fact that I don't want to be with you'. Here, the potential for foregrounding resistance as a conceptual tool in support work with young people impacted by sexual violence is evident. In this example, having identified and narrated this story of resistance, the story's retelling (to herself and others) can always be infused with her defiance and strength.

Yet there are still limits to this understanding of resistance for young people. Most obviously it does not account for the structural constraints 'Lizzie', and others, faced as young women from racially minoritised backgrounds with histories of violent victimisation and criminal justice involvement. To make more sense of these constraints, we now turn to thinking with power, through the work of Nancy Fraser.

7.2 | Thinking With Power (Fraser)

7.2.1 | How Does Resistance Signal Distributive Injustice in Young People's Lives?

When 'Lizzie' shared her resistance story, recall that she said:

> I have a right to be the person I want to be...and I have a right to a full life as the next person.

This declaration, of her 'right to a full life', is one we came back to often throughout the project. What was the underlying

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assumption, in having to make known her right to a full life? Perhaps she was cognisant of the limiting/limited way professionals' expectations are framed for some young people—itself a marker of discrimination? Was she inserting herself into an imaginative space where young people are supported to achieve their 'potential', beyond just surviving?

After 'Lizzie' made this point, she went on to talk about the need to be strong, determined, and capable, in order to build the life she wants. When we asked, 'Do you think sometimes…the things that make people really strong and able to do that are the same things that professionals push back against?' she responded:

> Yeah. Like the social workers…I kind of feel like they always degrade me. 'Oh yeah, well you've done this but we want you to do this…we need you to be like this…' and that's not me though. That's not me. I can't be that person, do you get it? I wasn't brought up to be…it's not what I know. I could show you a version that I know, and I could tweak it and make it better but I can't do what you're telling me to do.

Lizzie's frustration exemplifies the disconnection many of the young people experienced, as the expectations placed upon them by adults (and the systems these adults represented) misaligned with what they felt able to give. In group activities, young people indicated that following experiences of sexual violence and exploitation, the ability to cope with competing demands becomes harder as ever more expectations (e.g., from social workers, teachers, parents) are placed upon them, as victims. They spoke of the energy it took sometimes to just show up at all and recounted getting into trouble when adults asked for more than they could give. They told us that what adults missed in these moments was just how much work it took for them to show up, and how sometimes the only way to survive the sensory overwhelm of these moments was to resist, and in doing so create a protective barrier between their core selves and the pressure of expectations. They also described 'choosing misbehaviour' in moments when they knew there would be consequences, explaining how it could give them a momentary sense of relief.

Like Lizzie's story, many of these resistance narratives were classed, gendered, and racialised. They did not just deal with the overwhelm of professional or family expectations, they also suffered racism in schools and in interactions with peers and professionals alongside sexism in social relationships that layered additional expectations of who they were and what they were capable of. In the excerpt from Lizzie's interview, above, she described the feeling of being misunderstood as 'degraded'. If she is used to being misunderstood and feeling that she is always on the back foot—without space to vent frustration or receive solidarity, and to be seen for her unique potential—then it makes sense that she might feel like she exists outside that system, entirely disenfranchised.

Fraser's critique of Recognition Theory is useful to bring into the threshold with Lizzie's story here. Although Fraser does not deny the value of being seen and recognised in each context Honneth identifies, she argues that being recognised is not enough to remedy problems of misrecognition resulting from structures that restrict rights and perpetuate marginalisation and oppression (Fraser and Honneth 2003); instead, a redistribution of resources is required, for example, to address the lack of power young people experience through wider structural issues and marginalisation (for example racism or poverty). In turning our attention to the distribution of resources, we can see that one problem with the system 'Lizzie' says '*degrades*' her is the structure of the system. It is constrained and stressed, with only the resources to work well when young people acquiesce to adults' limited perspectives on their problems (Marshall 2024) which fail to address wider distributive injustice. Her words were echoed through interviews with other participants, who told us they simply often cannot acquiesce:

- I feel like I resist everything…everything they give me, every task, I'll say 'why do I need to do this, and for what reason'? ('Jannay')
- 'I don't like it when people are on my case…it's just not in my dictionary. Like I don't see it in my dictionary…there's no need to rush' ('Layla')
- 'When I say no to people, like I feel like I'm resisting, and it gives me a sense of power. I'm trying to be my own person… they don't let you be your own person, they don't let you express yourself. The expectations are unreasonable…yeah, that's resistance' ('Feyi').

What happens when a system is based on an assumption that young people can and will give up power and control to adults (aquiesce), yet young people repeatedly push back– explaining that they are resisting and rejecting everything (and everyone) as a means of self-preservation? Fraser and Honneth (2003), 24 solution to this problem might begin with 'joining a politics of recognition to a politics of redistribution'. According to Fraser, both recognition and redistribution are concerned with justice and require an examination of institutionalised norms that communicate what is valued in a culture. For our participants, upholding what is valued (i.e., allowing adults to hold power over decisions that govern their lives) required more than they could give, indicating the gap between the values of the system(s) and their values as individuals and as a collective of young sexual violence survivors. Narratives of resistance that surfaced over the course of the project point to a 'two-dimensional conception' of justice—wherein redistribution and recognition are two sides of the same coin (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 35). This enables us to further understand their experiences of misrecognition, suggesting new solutions that take seriously the consequences of distributive injustice. These new solutions require us to imagine spaces sufficiently resourced to permit resistance, seek mutual recognition, and have the confidence and permission to consider alternative values and priorities—enabling young people to feel that their whole selves are both protected and accepted. To do this imaginative work, we now draw on Butler's understanding of recognisability.

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7.3 | Thinking With Recognisability and Hope (Butler)

7.3.1 | How Does the Language of Resistance Provide Space to Expand Young Peoples' Recognisability, Particularly by Professionals?

In a response to Honneth in 2021, Butler acknowledged the ambivalence they feel towards recognition, proposing that 'recognition is always partial' because one can only be recognised within the 'existing norms that establish recognisability' (p. 34). Butler has written extensively about recognisability as an important starting point for any theorisation of recognition. Their work has focussed particularly on how gender is culturally constructed, arguing that in order to receive recognition as Honneth articulates, the aspects of our identities that we want recognised by others must first be recognisable and accepted within the public sphere. Thus, before we can expect recognition within interpersonal relationships, communities that respect our rights, and within wider inclusive social structures that foster solidarity (vs. exclusion), who we are must be recognisable—which means that our identity and experience must fit within an established and knowable category.

If we revisit the initial quote from Lizzie's interview again, we get a sense of how the absence of recognisability is a source of frustration. Remember when she said, 'I could show you a version that I know, and I could tweak it and make it better but I can't do what you're telling me to do'. She went on to explain:

> I push back on a lot of things…like, I push back near enough everything. Everything they pushed at me, I pushed right back. I was like, I'm not doing it…I can't be this person that you want me to be. That's not me. It's not installed in me. You can try to force it on me, I might do it for like one month, two, but I will lapse because it's not who I am, do you get me. I've already been programmed like this. So you can auto tune it but you can't change it. Do you get it?

Bringing Lizzie's words into the threshold with Butler reveals two things. First, we are offered a unique insight regarding why recognisability is a necessary precursor to recognition, as Butler (2004, 2021) argues. 'Lizzie' explains repeatedly that her version of young motherhood—one that enables her to feel most at home in her identity—was not recognised by social workers and other professionals. Lizzie does not feel seen and yet, she does want to find a way forward, to be seen for who she is now. She goes on to say: 'Do you get it? I've proved people wrong, I'm still here, I'm still breathing, I've changed as a person'.

This desire to be seen ('do you get me/do you get it'?) is perhaps the second key insight taken from bringing data into the threshold with Butler (2004, 44), who also said:

> To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other.

We could interpret 'Lizzie's' plea here as a way of petitioning the future, of asking to be seen in a way that is not yet recognisable within the safeguarding system she is supported by and subject to.

In an interview with Willig (2012), Butler explains that 'scenes of recognition' are shaped or set by existing power structures and social norms, establishing who will and who will not be recognisable. To critique these normative scenes (such as the one 'Lizzie' described above) requires some 'reflective distance to these scenes of recognition' (Willig 2012, 139). Whilst this is not a concept we considered at the beginning of the project, we did create some reflective distance when choosing to use (1) unfamiliar language via the word 'resistance' rather than focusing on terms such as 'trauma', 'abuse', 'harm', or 'victimisation'; and (2) unfamiliar methods, via creative art works that young people experimented with and co-created alongside programme staff and researchers. This made it more difficult to fall back into the normative scenes of recognition framed by risk, harm, and exploitation and facilitated by standard verbal/conversation-based interactions. Though we were arguably still limited by existing frames of reference in ways that remain outside our immediate awareness, the project perhaps created space to stretch and expand the terms by which young people could experience recognition and ways of representing themselves. It did this through pulling away from binaries (good or bad coping; good or bad behaviour; good or bad relationships) and choosing resistance as a new and unfamiliar frame through which young people could see themselves.

As workshops progressed, we made explicit the opportunity to curate a version of the self that foregrounds resistance. This enabled young people to reposition themselves in narratives that included- but were not defined by—experiences of victimisation. This self-curation also enabled young people to reposition others' expectations as a challenge or problem—and their efforts to resist (i.e., to self-preserve in the face of this 'expectation overload') as evidence of strength and capacity. The hopefulness inherent in young people expanding frames of recognisability is evident throughout Lizzie's interview. She asks us '*do you get it*' and then repeats the question again and again. She really does want us to get it, to understand her and the version of her that might be '*auto-tuned*', as she says, but never really changed.

8 | Discussion and Conclusion

In bringing together data and theory in this way, we offer a novel conceptualisation regarding the role of all three theorists in deepening understanding of both recognition and resistance. From Honneth we take the foundational ability to name the concern of misrecognition and its impact on the lives of young people affected by violence and exploitation. In addition, resistance is revealed as a conceptual framing that young people might use to re-narrate their experiences of victimisation in new and powerful ways and which contribute to their self-confidence and self-esteem. Yet Honneth's work alone seems insufficient for explaining the wider structural conditions that were often central to young people's narratives of resistance, and the distribution of power that both governed and disadvantaged young people following experiences of violence and exploitation. Here, the

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specific contributions that both Fraser and Butler have made to Recognition Theory become evident.

In our discussion of Fraser, we explored how distributive injustice is a useful concept in articulating the role of unequal distributions of power in young people's experiences, and its centrality in narratives of resistance that articulate a rejection of the expectations and demands upon their attention or lives (i.e., 'I resist everything'). From Butler, too, we are asked to foreground the distribution of power, and the way in which careful reflection on the limits of young people's recognisability (by professionals)—helps us make further sense of their narratives and their need for practices of resistance. Butler's work helps us to see how structural power and privilege creates professional blind-spots and limits our ability to imagine more fully the possibilities of young people's lives. Noticing how young people sense and experience their own 'unrecognisability' provides a reminder of the inequalities imbued in 'helping relationships'. When 'Lizzie' felt a need to articulate (and remind us of) her '*right to a full life*', she revealed the ways in which she felt her rights, and potential, were not only hidden from view but also curbed by the imaginations and blindspots of professionals.

Butler's focus on recognisability also draws attention to our own experiences (as professionals) of recognition as a two-way process. Both Fraser and Butler emphasise the role of power relationships in determining the asymmetry of that process and the different terms under which we (as professionals) come to engage with young people. This is about much more than our differences in roles; it is about the validity, or knowability, of our identities and the consequences for those whose lives and future selves are being shaped by our decision-making and intervention.

Returning to a moment from the start of the project serves to illustrate this well. During the first few days of the first workshop, some of the young women who had children were talking to [first author] about being a mother, who also had a young child. This conversation was lively and felt like a bright spot of connection during a fragile period of trust building- when one of the young women exclaimed 'Oh, you're one of those rice cakes and hummus mums, aren't you!' then explained that she sees mums like [author] at the park, with their 'healthy' snacks. My [first author] first thought was surprise, at how easily she identified how I fit within the boundaries of recognisability and try to behave in alignment (at least publicly) with cultural expectations for 'good' mothers. It was also clear that this was a bid for recognition: the subtext beneath this humorous calling-out seemed to be: I recognise you, I know your type- and I am still showing up here, in a space where there is not yet a sufficiently expansive frame of recognisability for my whole self to exist.

This uncomfortable, illuminating moment revealed how bringing our data into the threshold with theory also offered new insight regarding the need for far greater humility, recognising our limits/barriers to know, understand and frame hopes for young people. This awareness has implications for professionals in social work, youth work, clinical/mental health, education, and youth justice: Where resistance occurs, it requires us to acknowledge not just the insufficiencies of our approaches but also how deeply these entwine with the structural inequities built into the systems we work within and related harms that form the context of our work. It demands that we each engage deeply with the problematic nature of power relationships between professionals and young people. It highlights the need for a deeper collective commitment to embedding mutuality within helping relationships and the structures that frame and define them. Finally, in recognising the existence, value, and possibilities of resistance, it enables us to see more clearly the limits of our own influence and to create space for more expansive frames of recognisability in our work with them, where young people's whole, dynamic selves can be known.

Author Contributions

Kristine Langhoff: conceptualisation, investigation, funding acquisition, writing – original draft, methodology, writing – review and editing, formal analysis, project administration, supervision, resources. **Camille Warrington:** conceptualisation, investigation, writing – original draft, methodology, writing – review and editing, formal analysis. **Becky Warnock:** conceptualisation, investigation, writing – original draft, methodology, formal analysis.

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Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with research ethics norms, including the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice and the University of Sussex Research Ethics Policy. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Sussex Social Science & Arts Research Ethics Committee (application number ER/KH342/9, amendments ER/KH342/10; 13; and 21). Ethical approval included permission to obtain informed consent at several stages of the project (e.g., at the outset, and once photographs and other creative outputs had been developed), ensuring participants were fully informed before giving consent. Each participant did give their consent, and signed consent forms are stored securely, in GDPR-compliant file storage platform.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Figshare at http://doi.org/10.25377/sussex.29098046.

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