Lay Constructions of Child Neglect

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About me

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- Senior Lecturer in Social Work at University of Huddersfield
- Registered Social Worker
- Solicitor (non-practising) formerly working in family law and immigration and asylum law
- Graduate member of the British Psychological Society
- PhD awarded in 2015 entitled: *Drawing the Line: An Exploration of How Lay People Construct Child Neglect*

What is child neglect?

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- Legal and professional definitions construct child neglect differently
  - Criminal law (child neglect as child cruelty)
  - Child protection (child neglect as significant harm resulting from parenting failure)
  - Child welfare (child neglect as failure to meet developmental needs of child)
  - Children's rights (child neglect as refusal to respect children's rights to protection, participation and services)

Rationale for the research

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- Personal interest
- Professional – extent and effect of child neglect became research focus (e.g. reviews by Daniel, Taylor, & Scott, 2011; Davies & Ward, 2012; Meadows et al, 2011; Rees et al, 2011, Brandon et al, 2013, Radford et al, 2011)
- Political – Big Society (e.g. Fisher & Gruescu, 2011)
- Lay involvement in expert decision making (e.g. lay involvement in Local Safeguarding Children Boards)
- Practical – lay concern and confusion (e.g. Burgess et al, 2012, 2013, 2014)

Research methods

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- Qualitative (discourse analysis)
- 10 focus groups
- Pre-existing groups
- Convenience sampling
- Potential participants asked to exclude themselves if they had received professional training in child neglect or considered themselves a child protection professional

Participants

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- 46 adults in total
- Aged 18-90 (one group of 18 year olds)
- 38 female, 8 male
- 34 declared themselves to be white British, English or Scottish, 12 declared themselves to be of other ethnic origin
- 24 participants said that they were/had been parents, guardians or carers, 22 had not.

Defining neglect: needs

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- All the groups began trying to define child neglect by talking about what children need.
- Neglect was constructed through the unmet needs of children
- *Sue: my way of defining [child neglect] is not providing a child with what it needs to develop fully (Group 4)*
- *Kirsty: …the word 'needs' was the first word that came into my mind… (Group 6)*

Types of needs

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- 4 domains of needs
  - Physical needs
  - Emotional needs
  - Training needs
  - Supervisory needs
- Unmet needs cause damage – everybody's business
- Unmet needs NOT same as neglect

Constructing the neglected

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Not meeting each area of needs resulted in a different construction:

- Unmet physical needs resulted in the DEPRIVED CHILD
- Unmet emotional needs resulted in the UNLOVED CHILD
- Unmet training needs resulted in the UNCONTROLLED CHILD
- Unmet supervisory needs resulted in the ESCAPING CHILD

Defining neglect: parenting

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- All the groups constructed parents as primarily responsible for meeting children's needs as part of normal parenting
- Neglect was constructed as failing to behave as a normal parent
- *Mel: …it's not doing what you should be doing as a parent. (Group 4)*
- *Ros: ..where the very basics of parenting has not been provided. (Group 1)*

Failure in normal parenting

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- 2 aspects to normal parenting:
  - emotional bond to the child, AND
  - parenting skills and knowledge.

- Failure of normal parenting PLUS unmet need allows child to be positioned as neglected and parent as neglectful

Constructing the neglector

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- CLUELESS PARENT - Parent has emotional bond but no skills and knowledge
- UNDERINVESTED PARENT - Parent has skills and knowledge but no emotional bond
- UNSUITABLE PARENT - Parent has no emotional bond and no skills and knowledge
- Different responses would be required for each category

Not neglect

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- Normal parenting (i.e. the appropriate parental disposition and the appropriate parental skills and knowledge) was not constructed as neglectful
- Children's unmet needs not neglect
- OVERBURDENED PARENT

Overburdened parents

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- *Cora: …there was nothing she could do about it, if she could if she could have done something about it she would have, so although it looked, you know, it looked as if her children were being neglected it actually, she wasn't neglecting them. (Group 3)*

State neglect?

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- *Maddy:…in the context of austerity and cuts being made not just to benefits but to services that must increase the pressures that parents experience and will make it more likely that children are neglected. (Group 3)*
- *Laura: …and you're just muddling through and often there's not the help and support there (Group 6).*
- *Kas: …like the rundown council houses, not clean, not up to standard and children are living in there so would you class that as neglect of parents or would you class that as neglect of the government? (Group 10)*

What is ‘Normal childhood’?

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- Huge cultural variations in ‘normal’ parenting
- No society wide consensus about what normal childhood should look like
- Tension between childhood and childhoods
- ‘Neglect’ constructed as subjective definition
- In absence of consensus reversion to child protection intervention thresholds

Fragmenting normality

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- *Kell: then of course you come up against the problem of.. 'cultural differences'. (Group 1)*
- *Sophie: but traditional Muslim mothers will think that Western mothers are neglectful, they end up going to work and like yes, they probably say that of our culture… (Group 8)*
- *Zoe: I think culture is quite a lot to do with it, but then whose neglect would that be? Are they neglecting their freedom, like neglect because kids should be allowed to do what they want, or are our parents neglecting us? (Group 4)*

Constructing ‘social services’

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- Responding to child neglect was almost exclusively constructed as involving social services
- Media driven, negative constructions of an all powerful, punitive, failing and incompetent service.
- *Ruth: but then I think [long pause] social services have got such a, those two words can strike a lot of fear into people, can't they? (Group 3)*
- *Sheila:... the word social services drives the parents away. (Group 1)*

Social work responses

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- Removal
  - *Jen: I do believe that quite often it happens, you know swoop and grab. (Group 2)*
- Failure to remove
  - *Lucy: ...you'll read of different cases where social workers have visited two or three times and yet the child is very badly neglected and it's missed. (Group 1)*
- Narrow focus on wrong children
  - *Mark: ….there's nothing a social worker is going to do about it because there are so many of them. (Group 6)*

What participants wanted

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- A redefinition of child neglect that does not simply reflect child protection thresholds
- A better consensus about what children need and what normal childhood entails
- More attention given to meeting children's needs not simply to tackling child neglect
- Non-stigmatising services and more support for families
- Social workers to focus on family support rather than child removal

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