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# Celebrating child welfare models of social work is everybody's business

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# About me

- 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*

# Rationale for the research

- **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)
- **Practical – lay concern and confusion** (e.g. Burgess et al, 2012, 2013, 2014)
- **Political – Big Society** (e.g. Fisher & Gruescu, 2011)
- **Lay involvement in expert decision making** (e.g. lay involvement in Local Safeguarding Children Boards)

- 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

- 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.

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# Defining neglect: needs

- *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)*

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



# Defining neglect: parenting

- *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)*

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# Failure in normal parenting

- 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

# Explaining unmet needs

- **Neglect –**
  - Parent has emotional bond but no skills and knowledge –  
**CLUELESS**
  - Parent has skills and knowledge but no emotional bond –  
**UNDERINVESTED**
  - Parent has no emotional bond and no skills and knowledge –  
**UNSUITABLE**
- **NOT Neglect**
  - Parent has emotional bond and skills and knowledge -  
**OVERBURDENED**

# Overburdened parents

- *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)*
- *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)*

# Constructing 'social services'

- *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)*
- Media driven, negative constructions of an all powerful, punitive, failing and incompetent service.

- 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)*

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# What participants wanted

- Keep children within their families
- Support for parents (from professionals and community)
- Support for children within families
- Education for everyone about what children need
- Non-stigmatising services
- Non-threatening and non-frightening services

# Meeting children's needs

- *Kam: At the moment it's just getting so difficult with funding being cut back and what's happening with childcare and stuff especially linked to community centres. (Group 9)*
- *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).*



# Celebrating welfare models

- Focus on social work and supporting child welfare
- Focus on working with children and families not child removal
- Support available from easily accessible non-stigmatising universal services
- Engaging communities in supporting children and families
- Reframing social services in terms of family support rather than child removal

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