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Title: Redrawing the line: an exploration of how lay people construct child neglect

Abstract

While there has been an increasing professional and political focus on the prevalence and harmfulness of child neglect, little has been done to explore what child neglect means outside child protection circles. This qualitative study explores lay constructions of child neglect by thematically analyzing focus group discussions between 46 self-defined 'lay' people in England.

Participants viewed neglect as extremely damaging for children and as arising when children's physical, emotional, training and supervisory needs were unmet due to abnormal parental behavior. Children with unmet needs were positioned as deprived, unloved, uncontrolled and escaping. They were only positioned as neglected when failure to meet their needs was attributable to a lack of parental knowledge and skill (clueless parents), a lack of appropriate parental disposition (underinvested parents) or both (unsuitable parents). 'Normal' parents - those with the appropriate parental disposition, skills and knowledge – who failed to meet their children's needs were not seen as neglectful but rather as overburdened.

As 'normal parenting' has fragmented in late modernity, society wide consensus on child neglect was felt by participants to have retreated to child protection definitions, alienating lay understandings. If child neglect really is 'everybody's business', then it is important that lay people are included in forging new definitions of and responses to meeting the needs of children.

Key words: Qualitative research, child neglect, lay people, child welfare, child maltreatment,

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1. Introduction

This article is based on research carried out in England in 2013 to explore how lay people construct child neglect. The substantial increase in public, political, campaigning, professional and research interest in child neglect that the 21st century has witnessed (Dubowitz, 2007; Gardner, 2008) may obscure the fact that the category of neglect itself is contested, and what is considered to be child neglect varies over time, between cultures and

within cultures (Horwath, 2007; James and James, 2004; Stainton Rogers, 1992). What is seen as child neglect very much depends on the construction of childhood that is in operation.

Psychological and sociological models of child development and maturation provide the dominant framework through which the modern child is understood. Children are positioned as unfinished, requiring assistance and direction to become finished adults (Woodhead, 1990/1997; Jenks, 2005; Mayall, 2006). This knowledge holds that normal mental and physical development occurs during the early stages of the life course within a specific environment tailored to bring it about (childhood). The progress of this process of child development can be scientifically measured and if it is not accomplished correctly can result in ongoing and even intergenerational ill-effects. Children are by definition positioned as incompetent and unfinished in comparison with adults (Qvortrup, 1994; Holloway and Valentine, 2003; Tisdall and Punch, 2012) as a result of which adults need to direct their lives and activities (Mayall, 2006:13). This so-called psy-complex knowledge produced by the professions of psychology, psychiatry, social work, medicine, cognitive science, neuroscience and criminology (Ingleby, 1985; Rose, 1985; Parton, 1991) has succeeded in gaining widespread acceptance both within professional and/or academic constructions of childhood, and in common-sense conceptualizations of children (Jenks, 2005; Mayall, 2006; Wyness, 2012).

Children and parents are disciplined to commit to the aims, morals and values of society through the process of therapeutic familialism (Rose, 1999; Hendrick, 2007). Mothers in particular are disciplined into choosing to govern their children in accordance with psychological norms and expertise (Rose, 1999; Parton, 2006). Expert knowledge about child rearing is widely circulated throughout society (Ferguson, 2004) disseminated through direct expert advice and guidance but also through education provided by parenting manuals, parenting literature, peer support networks, popular culture and media productions (Scourfield and Pithouse, 2006). Expert knowledge spirals back and forth through lay systems (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Scourfield and Pithouse, 2006; Giddens, 2013) and lay people are part of this circulation of expertise. In making child protection 'everybody's business', non-professionals are allocated the role of ensuring others observe the norms of child rearing and alert responsible authorities where the non-observance of these norms leads them to become concerned about children (Bloor and McIntosh, 1990; Peckover, 1998).

Psy-complex discourse is also embedded in the legal constructions of child neglect in England (White, 1998; Brophy, Wale and Bates, 1999; Dickens, 2007). The criminal law (the Children and Young Persons Act 1933) positions child neglect as something that blameworthy adults willfully do to children for whom they are responsible – neglect here is a form of child cruelty. In contrast child welfare and child protection provisions are located within the civil law system in England and are largely contained within the Children Act 1989 (CA 1989) (Broadhurst, Grover and Jamieson, 2009; Hoyano and Keenan, 2010; Stafford, Parton, Vincent & Smith, 2012). Within that Act, children are framed as having health and developmental needs. Health is defined as physical or mental health and development as physical, intellectual, emotional, social or behavioural development (section

17(10) CA 1989). Where such needs are not met and/or where the child is disabled, the child is positioned as 'in need' and therefore as potentially eligible for state services. Where a child is at risk of suffering serious harm (defined in psy-complex terms), the state may have a duty to intervene, but only if that harm results from the child not receiving a standard of care that it would be reasonable to expect from a parent or from being beyond parental control (s31 CA 1989). Unlike in the criminal construction, parental blameworthiness is unnecessary but the duty of parents is to provide children with an objectively defined sufficient level of care and keep them under a sufficient level of control. Where they cannot do this, the state will secure the required care and/or control for the child.

An alternative construction of child neglect is the children's rights framework as exemplified by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This construction allows that the state and institutions can affect the wellbeing of children every bit as adversely as lack of parental care. Under the UNCRC children are afforded social, political and legal rights; not only to protection from neglect, abuse, exploitation, and discrimination, but also to participation in society and to state services (Alderson, 2008; Reading et al, 2009; Archard, 2009; Parton, 2014). So, for example, the UNCRC guarantees children rights to an adequate standard of living, privacy, freedom of association, respect for their views, education, health care, extra support if disabled, leisure, play, and culture. In not upholding and promoting all these rights the state can be said to be neglecting children.

This is the UK context within which current research and policy interest in child neglect is situated. Reviews have highlighted the potentially catastrophic effects of child neglect on social, psychological, behavioral, physical, and cognitive functioning (e.g. Daniel, Taylor, & Scott, 2011; Davies & Ward, 2012; Meadows, Tunstill, George, Dhudwar, & Kurtz, 2011; Rees, Stein, Hicks, & Gorin, 2011), and indicated that child neglect is associated with lifelong dependence on public services and resources (Burgess et al., 2012; Davies & Ward, 2012; Meadows et al., 2011). In addition, research indicates that child neglect is both more dangerous (Brandon, Bailey, Belderson, & Larsson, 2013) and more widespread than previously believed. Gilbert et al (2009) concluded that between 6-11.8% of all children in the US and UK will at some point experience persistent absence of care and/or injury due to insufficient supervision. In a UK prevalence study 16% of those aged 18-24 were categorized by researchers as having been neglected at some point in their childhoods (Radford et al., 2011), and Wald (2015, p. 60) estimates that in the US 20% of all children will receive "seriously inadequate parenting at some point during their childhood". The researchers note that unlike physical and sexual maltreatment, neglect does not appear to be declining over time (Radford et al., 2011; Wald, 2015).

Harker et al (2013) argue that the vast majority of neglected children go unnoticed by state agencies and that if this were not the case, the financial implications of providing an adequate state response to all neglected children would be enormous. In addition, some question the extent to which the state should be solely responsible for preventing child neglect. In Britain the 2010 election of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government brought with it a 'Big Society' discourse associated with leader of the conservative party David

Cameron. The Big Society placed the primary emphasis on the community rather than the state to respond to children's needs (see for example Fisher & Gruescu, 2011). The failure of this initiative (Helm, 2014; Wright, 2014) coupled with the increasing demand on public resources (Sloccock, 2015) has increased the urgency of community engagement in responding to child neglect in Britain. However the extent to which lay people should be involved in rearing other people's children is similarly contested, as seen by the opposing views in the US taken by (then) First Lady Hilary Clinton's (1997) bestselling book "It Takes a Village and Other Lessons Children Teach Us" and Senator Santorum's (2005) response "It takes a Family: Conservatism and the Common Good".

Community involvement in supporting the welfare and protection of children is a policy issue not simply a practical one. Lay knowledge is increasingly afforded its own legitimacy and importance alongside expert knowledge; a democratizing discourse that began to take shape in the health field in England in the 1970s (Pickard & Smith, 2001). Researchers, particularly in the US but also around the globe, have also tried to identify lay 'attitudes', 'definitions', 'opinions' and 'perceptions' in relation to child neglect. For some, ascertaining lay views is of political and ethical importance (e.g. Giovannoni and Becerra, 1979). Others explore culturally acceptable parenting norms to help professionals avoid stigmatizing and oppressing particular communities (e.g. Evans-Campbell, 2008). Research has also explored how well lay people 'understand' expert definitions of child neglect (e.g. Dhooper, Royse and Wolfe, 1991) and tested the efficacy of new instruments and technologies for use by professionals or researchers, e.g. the Childhood Level of Living Scale (Polansky and Williams, 1978; Polansky, Ammons and Weathersby 1983) and the Community Norms of Child Neglect Scale (Goodvin et al, 2007). Finally, researchers have looked at how well lay people recognize the causes, symptoms and outcomes of child neglect, and how they respond to children who they believe to be neglected (e.g. Korbin, Coulton, Lindstrom-Ufuti and Spilsbury, 2000; Price et al, 2001; Bensley et al, 2004b). These studies were all conducted within the US.

In England, the political importance of lay knowledge within public policy was particularly acknowledged in the 1990s when the New Labour political party conducted "experiments in democracy" (Featherstone, 2006, p. 297) which sought to access public opinion on issues of the day by using focus groups (Parker & Tritter, 2006; Wilkinson, 2004). Following similar moves in the health sector a decade earlier, in 2009 lay people were given a direct voice within the child protection system in England. Local Safeguarding Children Boards were urged to recruit "lay members representing the local community" (HM Government, 2015, p. 68) as a means both of accessing lay support and disseminating expert understandings on child protection work. This demonstrates the increasing recognition that child protection and child welfare must be a community responsibility not simply an expert one.

Whilst research has explored professional constructions of child neglect in different jurisdictions (e.g. Stone 1998; Gardner 2008; Horwath 2005; Horwath 2007; Hoskins & White 2010; Burgess et al. 2012; Tufford et al. 2015) little has been done to explore lay constructions of the concept. When asked, lay people in Britain state that they are concerned

about child neglect and how best to respond to neglected children (Action for Children, 2009; Burgess et al., 2012, 2014; Burgess, Daniel, Scott, Mulley, & Dobbin, 2013; Daniel et al., 2011; Gardner, 2008). However ‘child neglect’ is not explored presupposing consensus between public and professional definitions that may not in fact exist. If we are to engage lay people it is ethically, practically and politically important to consult them, not only on how to respond to the ‘problem’ of child neglect, but also to identify what the ‘problem’ is (Korbin, Coulton, Lindstrom-Ufuti, & Spilsbury, 2000).

2. Method:

I chose to use a method of discourse analysis that is broadly Foucauldian to analyse lay constructions of child neglect. Discourse prescribes the allocation and operation of expertise (Foucault, 1965; 1972) and in England expertise relating to child neglect is overwhelmingly related to psychological and sociological discourses around childhood and child development. Developmental discourse is reaffirmed and reasserted within the training of professionals working with children. I am such a professional as I have psychological, legal and social work expertise in relation to child neglect. To explore lay views I needed to find a research method that problematized and critiqued my own professional claims to truth, common sense or expertise (Mills, 2003).

Similarly, a means for separating lay from expert participants needed to be chosen. As an expert myself, any attempt on my part to divide people into expert or non-expert categories risked my becoming part of the powerful “legitimizing machinery” that patrols the boundaries of expertise (Berger and Luckman, 1966:105; see also Foucault, 1972; Mills, 2003). All social categorization can be an exercise of power and ‘common sense’ discourses may position people in collective social identity categories against their wishes and their interests (Burr, 1998). I tried to avoid categorizing participants either into lay/expert binaries or into other social categories by class, ethnicity, race, age, culture, sexual orientation, ability or other factors that might or might not have meaning for them to avoid “implicitly created assumptions about the characteristics of the respondents and possibly even their knowledge base” (Shaw, 2002:297). As far as deciding who was a lay person was concerned, I took the view that expertise advertises itself as such and both experts and non-experts know which category they are in within any given context (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Potential participants could better assess their level of expertise than I could. As a result, I did not stipulate what I considered to be professional expertise, instead asking participants to rule themselves out of the project if they felt they had been given professional training in relation to child neglect.

Other research studies in different countries have chosen different ways of managing the lay/expert divide. Research on lay perceptions and attitudes has been conducted with the adult resident population of a particular area (e.g. Dhooper, Royse and Wolfe, 1991; Sigler and Johnson, 2004; Schmid and Benbenishty, 2011), a student body (e.g. Roscoe, 1990; Hong and Hong, 1991; Ashton, 2004), particular groups of parents (e.g. Polansky, Ammons and

Weathersby, 1983; Maiter, Alaggia and Trocme, 2004; Evans-Campbell, 2008) or any combination of the above (e.g. Ferrari, 2002; Shor, 2000). Bensley, Ruggles and Simmons (2004a) and Bensley et al (2004b) recruited ‘civilian’ adults. Researchers using opinion poll data to sample public opinion do not state whether any distinction is made between lay and expert responders and if so, how this is made (e.g. Schmid and Benbenishty, 2011; YouGov/NSPCC, 2012). This means there is no clear guide within the existing literature as to what constitutes a lay person and what constitutes an expert.

I chose to use focus groups for data collection as they are argued to produce more naturalistic, dynamic and elaborated data than interviews usually produce (Smithson, 2008; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007; Sussman, Burton, Dent, Stacy, & Flay, 1991; Wilkinson, 2004). I was not seeking to recruit a randomized or representative sample as I was engaged in focus group research and generalizing data across environments or situations is highly problematic due to the extreme contextual sensitivity of the data such groups produce (Wilkinson, 1998; Breen 2006). I chose to seek participants within pre-existing groups as these better engage those everyday social processes that shape our constructions (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001; Davidson, Kitzinger, & Hunt, 2006; Wilkinson, 1998). “Natural clusterings” (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 106) of families, work colleagues, friends, neighbors, shared interest groups are the types of contexts within which lay conversations around child neglect are likely to take place.

In total I held 10 groups, each containing between 3 and 6 participants. Ethical approval for the project was obtained in 2012, and recruitment proceeded through convenience sampling conducted by utilizing the contacts of people who had expressed an interest in the project over the previous two years. Interested parties functioned as recruiters, acting as project managers or as information providers and signposters using the project materials to recruit their friends, colleagues, and/or neighbors to the research. Using these contacts suitable participants were identified who became core members of prospective focus groups and they were then responsible for recruiting others within their networks to engage in the focus group discussion.

Convenience sampling is criticized for producing homogenous groups of participants (Sturgis, 2008). To explore this within my sample I asked participants for information relating to their age, gender, occupation, ethnic identity and whether they were or had been parents, guardians or carers. In total, 46 self-defined lay adults living in England in 2012 took part in my study. 34 of the 46 declared themselves to be white British, English or Scottish, 38 participants described themselves as female, 8 as male. Participants lived in a number of rural and urban locations in England and covered a wide age range: the youngest being 18 and the oldest was 90. 24 participants said that they were or had been parents, guardians or carers and all but one of these was female. As gender is relevant to child neglect (Swift, 1995; Featherstone, 2006; Daniel and Taylor, 2006) it would be useful to capture constructions from fathers, and male carers and guardians in future research.

Occupation data confirmed that no current children's social workers, psychologists, pediatricians, child protection police officers or legally recognised child protection specialists were among my participants. Participants identified themselves as follows (in alphabetical order): arts manager and teacher, baker, bar worker, business development officer, care worker for the disabled/learning disabilities, communications manager, exam officer, full time mother, full time operations manager, full time paid, legal assistant, legal secretary (x 2), paid administrator, part time barmaid, part time McDonalds, P.A., Ph.D student, product management, retired (10 participants), retired teacher, sales manager, student (5 participants), student/part time barmaid, teacher, teacher (paid), teacher (secondary), teacher/mother/carer, teaching assistant/housewife, translator, university student, waitress. Class identification was not specifically requested, but during the discussions several participants identified themselves as working class. Interestingly employment or volunteering within schools was not sufficient for people to consider themselves as child protection experts.

As moderator (and child protection expert) I chose not to use a protocol (Fern, 2001; Parker & Tritter, 2006) to allow the groups to develop their own themes and constructions. I began each group by asking participants to complete the sentence "my name is... and when I hear the words 'child neglect' I think of....". Then, participants were invited to discuss how they would respond to an alien who asked them as a group what child neglect was. It was then up to the group to take the discussion further. It is important to consider what effect my presence (as an ESRC funded Ph.D researcher, former family law solicitor and qualified social worker) had on the discussions and the data (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999; Parker, 2005). In the preliminary discussions I emphasized that I was not taking part in the group discussion as I was only interested in participants' views, and also that it was not a test and there were no 'right' answers.

I digitally recorded and transcribed the focus groups. Participants' names were generated by using an internet name generator although I sought to preserve ethnic markers of the original names. As stated earlier I used Willig's (2008a; 2008b) Foucauldian inspired template to analyze my data. This was consistent with the theoretical orientation of the project and required me to adopt a skeptical approach to my own expertise (Kendall and Wickham, 1999). Willig's (2008a; 2008b) framework for Foucauldian discourse analysis proceeds through the following six steps:

1. identifying the ways in which discursive objects are constructed,
2. locating these constructions within wider discourses;
3. examining the action orientation of constructions in the context within which it is used
4. exploring the subject positions made available by the discourse
5. identifying the relationship between discourse and practice
6. exploring the relationship between discourse and subjectivity

Analysis of data was based on a repeated reading of the transcripts to identify the ways in which child neglect was being constructed, exploring the differences between those constructions and locating those constructions within wider discourses. I then explored the different subject positions made available by these constructions (of 'normal', 'neglected',

and ‘neglector’) and the effects of these constructions on child neglect and children in general. Finally, I looked at the action orientation of different constructions together with the subjectivities the constructions made available. I found Willig’s (2008a; 2008b) method of analysis relatively simple to follow, elegant and capable of directing analytical focus onto the issues raised by my research questions. As an expert, I may have imposed expert frames upon lay knowledge during analysis, but I tried very hard not to do so, by focusing on the words and concepts elaborated by the participants within their discussions.

3. Findings:

The discourses participants used to explore child neglect operated together to produce a psy-complex approved ‘common sense’ version of the ‘normal’ developmental childhood. Normal childhood was constructed as taking place within the normal family under the watchful eye of a supportive community. In normal childhood normal parents are responsible for educating themselves in how to use particular knowledge and child rearing techniques to produce normal adults. I recognised this to be the dominant psy-complex discourse discussed above and circulated by the media and campaigners and recycled by the lay community itself.

3.1 Constructing the ‘Neglected’

Participants within all focus groups overwhelmingly constructed child neglect as children not getting what they ‘need’ from a parent or parents.

When I think of neglect that is the first thing I think of: not providing a child with what it needs (Group 4)

Ros: ...what a growing child needs whether it's in terms of nutrition or hygiene or discipline or love or anything else, umm or stimulation... (Group 1)

Children’s needs were defined in relation to developmental models deriving from psychology and sociology and children’s needs fell into four distinct clusters. Participants spoke of children’s need for appropriate nutrition, clothing, shelter, medical attention, warmth - a category that many explicitly referred to as ‘physical needs’. Juxtaposed alongside these needs were the needs children were said to have for love and affection, touch, stimulation and attention - often referred to as ‘emotional needs’. These were the two main axes of need - the physical and the emotional.

Ruth: ...the child's needs were not being met both physically and emotionally. (Group 3)

Participants tended to speak about the catastrophic effects of not meeting a child’s physical needs as if they were self-evident, but they often sought to emphasize the importance of emotional needs:

Eliz: To be loved by their parents, I think that's the most, more important than anything. (Group 2)

Talib: ...when I think of child neglect I think of someone that's not loved... (Group 5)

Each domain of need was associated with an undesirable outcome for the child and for society as a whole. It was this potential outcome that made child neglect 'everybody's business'. For participants, scrutiny of and interference in family life is not justified by current childhood misery, but rather on the basis that where normal development does not take place, problems for society will be stored up.

Ros: the problem is its society's problem... Neglected children come up again and again in terms of causing trouble... (Group 1)

The effects of not meeting children's physical and emotional developmental needs were constructed as very different but equally catastrophic. Unmet physical needs could cause permanent damage or even death. For participants, unmet emotional needs could also cause permanent damage and even death, but this damage tended to be less immediate and apparent, resulting in long term and even intergenerational emotional, psychological and psychiatric harm:

Angela: I think of it more, in terms of the like the psychological effects it would have. (Group 8)

Zoe: emotional neglect can cause

Sue: more damage

Zoe: Way way more damage (Group 4)

This ongoing and intergenerational legacy fractured relationships and emotional and parenting problems caused by unmet emotional needs meant that many participants positioned this as more serious than unmet physical needs.

Alongside these two clusters of child neglect, participants also constructed children as having what I termed training needs and supervisory needs. Supervisory needs related to the need for adult oversight over all aspects of a child's life to ensure that the child was not in danger. The unsupervised child was at risk of physical accident or danger and moral danger from others and needed to be protected against both:

Peter: ...somebody where there is no adult overseeing or close presence of an adult as there perhaps should be. (Group 2)

Kell: ...and you see children find a refuge on the Internet

Sheila: yes they do

Kell: and if they're not getting their care

Sheila: yes the Internet friends

Kell: yes and then of course you can get up to all sorts of mischief there are people who lock into you and make mischief for you. (Group 1)

Children were also constructed as having training needs - the need to be rendered fit for society both as children and as adults. This involved parents imposing appropriate

boundaries, correction and social/moral education on children on behalf of the adult world. Without this training children were positioned as being incapable of contributing properly to good society, which would be forced to manage these anti-social children and later anti-social adults:

Lola: I'd say [it is neglect] definitely because it's neglecting to provide them with the necessary boundaries and it's neglecting to make them fit in with society. (Group 7)

Kas: it's the way you actually make them understand...you know like morals and about people (Group 10)

Unmet physical, emotional, supervisory and training needs each gave rise to a different 'type' of child who could be seen as neglected. I have termed these four constructions the 'deprived child', the 'unloved child', the 'escaping child' and the 'uncontrolled child'.

The deprived child whose physical needs were not being met was seen as the type of child most likely to be identified as neglected and to attract the attention of the authorities. This child was easy to spot:

Emma: ...You think of, of a child sort of dirty, smelling unpleasant and hasn't had a decent meal in a while: that is the most obvious form of neglect to me. (Group 2)

Kirsty: ...And they're dirty. And they come in and they say 'oh I haven't had I haven't had any breakfast this morning and I'm hungry'... (Group 6)

In contrast, the unloved child, whose emotional needs were not being met was less easy to recognise.

Lola: I mean you can spot a bruise, you can spot a child that's severely malnourished but to actually be able to, to see the hurt inside a child is I think a very different thing (Group 7)

That a child was an unloved child was inferred from the behavior of those expected to meet his/her emotional needs. Unloved children were usually positioned away from the primary parental figure: although often with a parental substitute: boarding school, child minders, the TV.

Rebecca: ...it's got left in the cot as a baby for quite a bit of the day or a playpen or other circumstances like that and because it's not getting that emotional attachment with a parent...it's causing backwards delay (Group 8)

Sarah: ...and of course if they are ignored at home and the parents aren't around, I think that is where they start finding a gang who can make them feel belonging to something (Group 2).

Participants spoke of the uncontrolled child and the escaping child as being far more common than the deprived child and the unloved child, and many spoke of being familiar with children in both categories. The escaping child is evading adult surveillance in some way: a child who seen out a little too late at night, or who should be in school, who is left to their

own devices, who is not where they should be, who is inhabiting parts of the adult world too young. This child is the product of parental inattention, at risk from elements within the physical environment and also from predatory others who may take advantage of the child's inexperience and innocence:

Mark: if school finishes at four and Johnny gets home at six, and it's never occurred to them where Johnny has been for those two hours every day, well that's neglect (Group 6)

Eva...the little kids you see playing out a little bit too late at night... (Group 7)

Sophie: ...leaving them alone in the house...(Group 8)

In contrast the uncontrolled child was constructed as rude, selfish, a troublemaker, potentially criminal, lacking in self-discipline and contemptuous of authority. Rather than being seen as at risk or as a victim, this child is rather seen as a risk to good order and to society or as a villain, with authority needing to find a means of bringing them under control for the good of everyone.

Vic: ...I think they don't conform to society as those of us who have perhaps not been neglected and have grown up thinking that laws are a good thing, and it's a good thing to be able to get on with your neighbor and that there are certain boundaries you don't cross... (Group 1)

Laura: the neglected children... must be the ones who are creating a more difficult environment for the rest of us to live in possibly because they know no better. (Group 6)

Morag:.. People are not going to like her wherever she goes, people are going to say "oh she's horrible". (Group 9)

3.2 Constructing the 'Neglector'

Positioning the child as neglected required more than simply seeing them as deprived, unloved, escaping or uncontrolled. Seeing a child in one of these ways opened up the possibility that the child was neglected. Having seen the child as potentially neglected, the participants' attention then shifted to the adult who was expected to take care of that child. Children were overwhelmingly seen in relationship with a parental adult who was expected to behave in particular ways towards that child.

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)

Where expected parental behavior was lacking, participants sought explanations for what was happening, as placing the child in context would allow a judgement to be made about whether the child was being neglected or not.

Participants recognised that parenting was a difficult activity and that at times all parents failed to live up to the standards that they would expect of themselves for a variety of structural reasons. However, to be good enough (i.e. non-neglectful), participants viewed parents as needing to have both a particular level of knowledge and skill in relation to parenting and an appropriate disposition towards the child they were required to parent. The presence or absence of these factors also placed parents within different clusters of parenting which I have termed: the 'normal parent', the 'overburdened parent', the 'underinvested parent', the 'clueless parent' and the 'unsuitable parent'. Only once the parent's behavior has been appropriately categorized can a decision be made about whether or not the child is neglected, and if so, what the correct response to that neglect would be.

The normal parent understands the child's physical, emotional, supervisory and training needs and recognizes the importance of meeting these needs at whatever cost to themselves. This privileging the needs of the child before all other needs, alongside the fear that one was still not doing enough was often seen as the hallmark of good parenting.

Claire: and yet I spend most of my time feeling incredibly guilty I don't spend enough of my time with my kids [laughs] ...

Laura: yes, yes

Anna: but you lot are always with your kids, you know every time you possibly can be with your kids, you're always out there with them.

Claire: mmm yes, but it doesn't stop me feeling guilty when I'm not.

*Mark: that's because you're a good mum. Good mums are supposed to feel guilty(!)
(Group 6)*

For participants it was understandable that a normal parent could through temporary illness or circumstances be prevented from parenting as they would wish. In addition, economic circumstances might also impede normal parenting.

Kas: ...you know sort of like the rundown council houses not like, not up to, 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)

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 centers. (Group 9)

Under such circumstances, the normal parent could not be considered neglectful - they were doing the best that they could to assist their child and so had the appropriate parental disposition, and in other circumstances could demonstrate the appropriate skills and knowledge to parent. Whilst they were not currently able to fully meet the needs of their child, this was not because they were unable or unwilling to do so.

Sarah: If someone is living on their own with children and they have to go to work, to tell that person that they are neglecting their child because they spend periods outside the home earning money for their children so that the household can go on, to say that is child neglect is simply cruelty and I think would give that person offence (Group 2)

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)

As a result, such parents were positioned as not neglectful and the child was not neglected; a category I have termed 'overburdened parent'. Participants recognised that children were still suffering, and expressed themselves more ready to step in and help the overburdened parent (where this could be done tactfully) than any other parent who was not meeting the needs of their child.

The underinvested parent category consisted of parents who had the necessary knowledge and skills to parent effectively but lacked the appropriate parental disposition. For most participants there was a specific quality of parental relationship that was required for children to develop emotionally - parental love - that parents alone could provide. The underinvested parent is lacking this disposition, evidenced in their choice to prioritize something above the needs of their child (be it through financial choices, the selection of an unsuitable partner or a particular lifestyle that is not easily compatible with the parental role):

Ruth: I suppose it is when the child is significantly less important than those around them... (Group 3)

Claire: she's a stay at home mum and theoretically she should have more time, and yet you know they're not interested, they'd rather be reading the newspaper, playing tennis with their friends or you know. (Group 6)

Where such disengagement from children's emotional needs also resulted in parents choosing not to meet children's physical, supervisory and training needs such parents were more likely to be classified as unsuitable (see below).

Participants recognised the enormous difficulty in identifying and responding to underinvested parenting where children's needs in other areas were apparently being met. This difficulty was most apparent in discussions about parents who chose to send their children to boarding school. For some participants this was neglectful and wrong - parents should be primarily responsible for the care and rearing of their children:

Morag: ...I think that's a form of neglect as well, leaving someone else to bring up your child and discipline your child. (Group 9)

Sue: you can't form a mother and father relationship if you're not seeing them for a week. (Group 4)

For others, the situation was more complex: parents sending their children to boarding school to give them greater opportunities in life were doing the best for their children (part of the normal parental disposition). These parents were often positioned as making sacrifices for their children to have such opportunities:

Sue: ...I thought that it's their way of giving their kids what it is they think their kids need.

(Group 4)

Others however were seen as using boarding school and other forms of delegated parenting to allow them to lead a child free existence:

Mark ...for parents who genuinely don't really want to have contact with their kids on a day-to-day basis [boarding school is] almost very easy isn't it. (Group 6)

In direct contrast to the underinvested parent, the clueless parent had the appropriate parental disposition to bring up their child but lacked the skills and knowledge necessary to parent normally. Parents within this category were constructed as unaware of the psy-complex norms of child rearing. Without psy-complex knowledge and the ability to use it, clueless parents do not know what their children need or how to parent them appropriately.

Participants spoke of clueless parents failing to observe the requirements of normal family life such as having appropriate family meals, overseeing homework, supporting children's education, limiting time spent on computers and in front of the TV, setting and enforcing house rules, interacting appropriately with children and being a role model for them.

Cluelessness was overwhelmingly positioned as resulting from such a parent's own experiences of inadequate parenting combined with an absence of formal education about child development and parenting skills. Importantly, within my data the failure within this category was identified as resulting from a lack of education about what parenting involves rather than any emotional inability to connect with the child. It can therefore be remedied:

Ros: I think quite a lot of neglect these days, the impression I get, it's from ignorance and not having a good role model then where people are in a parental role and they were poorly parented themselves, they actually don't know the basics... (Group 1)

Zoe: Because if I had a kid now I don't think, I haven't learnt anything from school or anything on how to raise a child (Group 5)

Emma: ...[and they think that] they're being kind and the result is disastrous. (Group 2)

Finally, there were those parents who were viewed as unsuitable parents. Unsuitable parents included those I have termed criminal parents and those I have termed disqualified parents. Within my data criminal parents are constructed as parents who deliberately deny a child something that it needs when they are able to provide it. They are therefore deliberately not rearing their children correctly and are also by definition underinvested as no normal loving parent could possibly behave in such a way. Such parents are worthy of extreme censure and seen as unnatural. This willful behavior often takes such parents beyond the boundaries of the neglect construction altogether and positions them as abusive.

Ruth: I think there can be things like willful neglect as part of cruelty towards the child, sort of on purpose. (Group 3).

Disqualified parents in contrast lacked the disposition, skills and knowledge to parent and should ideally not have children at all. Disqualified parents, unlike criminal parents were not necessarily choosing to be neglectful, they simply could not help it. This category included

parents with profound cognitive disability or mental disorder who were unable to recognise or meet the needs of their children for a significant period of time, alongside those who were not socializing their children to fit into society appropriately (for example by promoting anti-social values or providing deviant role models for them). The disqualified parent is often constructed through underclass discourse and contains the debased account of delinquent and deviant parents handing down their damaging parenting styles through the generations: the undeserving poor perpetuating itself into the future (Social Justice Policy Group, 2006; 2007; Allen and Smith 2008; Welshman, 2013).

Laura: the poorest can't afford to feed them, but they actually don't want to spend any time with them either. (Group 6)

This construction was often associated with the wish to prevent such people becoming parents in the first place as the way of preventing child neglect:

Rebecca:...but they can still go and have children, there's nothing stopping them. (Group 8)

Claire: ...my mother always used to say 'you have to have a dog license, you should have a license to have kids as well'. (Group 6)

Morag: .. before somebody has a child there should be some, you have to have a license to have a dog in this country, anybody can have a child. (Group 9)

4. Discussion: constructing 'child neglect'

Child neglect was constructed within a complex interplay between theories of child development and norms around parenting. Participants drew on medicine, functionalism and in particular on developmental psychology to understand childhood needs. Although Kendall-Taylor et al (2014) argued that the effects of child neglect on child development was not well understood by the public, I found participants to be generally familiar with expert knowledge in this area. Participants spoke of child neglect causing the same type of behavioral, psychological and social dysfunction as the expert literature (Davies & Ward, 2012; Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002; Meadows et al., 2011). Participants placed particular emphasis on the emotional needs of children, and that failure to meet these needs was related potentially to lifelong problems across a range of areas.

This supports the idea that expert knowledge continues to be disseminated for and by lay people through popular culture, the media, and public campaigns by the government and interested bodies. Therapeutic familialisation continues to operate forcefully in producing lay constructions of normal and abnormal parenting which accord with professional and expert definitions. This finding that lay people are familiar with expert knowledge replicates the largely vignette based research of others particularly in the US indicating that the public as a whole shares a single definition of child neglect (e.g. Johnson and Siegler, 1995; Dubowitz et al, 1998; Siegler and Johnson, 2004; Dhooper et al, 1991; Price et al, 2001). Indeed Polat et al (2010: 128) go so far as to argue that similarities between their findings from Turkey and

vignette research conducted in the US demonstrates the existence of “universally accepted norms” of child neglect.

The idea of universally accepted norms in relation to child neglect may seem at odds with the concept of neglect as a social construction, but comparative research looking at how neglect is perceived by members of different social groups has produced mixed results. Some vignette studies have shown that there are elements of discordance between specific ethnic groups and dominant professional norms (e.g. Evans-Campbell, 2008, in relation to American-Indian/Alaskan Native participants; Rhee, Chang, and Youn, 2003, in relation to Korean pastors in the US and Hong and Hong, 1991, in relation to Chinese immigrants in the US). Qualitative studies asking members of particular communities to identify cultural parenting norms which may conflict with expert and/or legal understandings of child neglect have also identified points of divergence (e.g. Gray and Cosgrove (1985) and Gopaul-McNicol (1999)). These differences are complex though – while the above studies indicated that the minority groups being researched had a looser definition of neglect than professionals, other studies showed the reverse. Hong and Hong’s (1991) Hispanic group, Rose and Meezan’s (1995) black and Latino mothers and Giovannoni and Becerra’s (1979) Hispanic and black respondents all rated vignettes more severely than the white lay group and the professional group. The same mixed results apply to class: while no class effects were noted in Giovannoni and Becerra’s (1979) study, Dubowitz et al’s (1998) study found both ethnicity and class effects in ratings of neglect subtypes: between lower and middle income white and African American mothers.

A range of other studies utilizing a variety of research methods have not been able to identify ethnic or culture related differences in perceptions of child neglect. Maiter, Alaggia and Trocme (2004), Polansky, Ammons and Weathersby (1983), Ringwalt and Caye (1989), Ferrari (2002) and Korbin et al (2000) all reported that there appeared to be little or no difference between different racial/cultural/ethnic groups. Polansky, Ammons and Weathersby’s failure to isolate differences between mothers from different races (black/white), income levels (working/middle class) or geographical locations (rural/urban) led them to conclude that: “...it appears there is such a thing as an American standard of minimal child care that is commonly held and that may be invoked in the definition of child neglect for legal and social work purposes” (1983: 9345). Similarly, having compared urban neighbourhood groups with different child maltreatment profiles containing African-Americans, European-Americans, Hispanic-Latinos and Native and Asian-Americans Korbin et al (2000) concluded: “the major categories of child maltreatment identified in the literature... are consistent with categories that emerge from lay or community definitions.” (1523-1524).

In light of this, it is worth analyzing not simply what participants consider to be child neglect, but on what basis these judgements are made. In this study, categorizing a child as neglected resulted more from the behavior of the parent than the unmet needs of the child, implying a construction influenced by blameworthiness. This is more in keeping with English criminal law definitions than with child welfare ones. A child whose physical and supervisory needs

were not being met could be positioned as ‘not neglected’ if the parent was seen as overburdened. On the other hand, a child whose physical, supervisory and training needs were apparently all being met could be positioned as unloved and therefore ‘neglected’ if a parent was seen as underinvested.

Particular types of neglectful parenting were associated with particular types of unmet need. A clueless parent could be associated with an escaping child or (more usually) an uncontrolled child, but never an unloved child. An overburdened parent could not be associated with an unloved child. An unsuitable parent would always be associated with an unloved child.

These categories matter because the proper response to each type of parent was constructed in different ways. An overburdened parent is in effect a normal parent in extremis – participants wanted the pressure to be relieved so that the person is enabled to parent normally. Participants were prepared to extend direct help to overburdened parents but also supported structural solutions to relieve the burdens on parenting and family life (universal services, day care, etc.). Importantly, the situation resulting in overburden must be involuntary. If a parent is positioned as not doing their utmost to meet a child’s needs then they risk being positioned as underinvested, and if they are failing to meet the child’s needs due to a lack of knowledge then they may well be seen as clueless.

This is not to say that participants ignored the effects of structural features on children’s lives. Poverty harms and kills far more children than child abuse (Hacking, 1999; Barnardos, 2014) and research has repeatedly demonstrated that poverty and child neglect are connected in some way (see for example Pelton, 1978; Wolock and Horowitz, 1984; Parton, 1995; Ghate and Hazel, 2002; Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo and Bolger, 2004; McSherry, 2004; Spencer and Baldwin, 2005; Katz, Corlyon, La Placa and Hunter, 2007; Meadows et al, 2011; Burgess et al, 2014; Jutte, Bentley, Miller, and Jetha, 2014). The nature of the association is unclear but examining statistics over a time shows that social services are involved in the lives of a disproportionate number of low income families with children in comparison to families not in poverty (Pelton, 1978; Garrett, 2002; Jutte et al, 2014). For participants though, where poverty was seen to undermine normal parenting, i.e. where poverty was the primary issue, the child was not positioned as neglected. This does not mean that participants considered the needs of poor children to be met, they did not. However participants did not construct unmet need as synonymous with neglect. For participants neglect was associated with blameworthy parental conduct and participants did not wish to blame poor people for their poverty (see above). Instead, they wanted some form of universal services to provide support and services to alleviate the poverty of those too poor to meet their children’s needs in the ways they would wish.

The clueless parent is associated with an entirely different response. Here participants drew on ideas relating to the intergenerational transmission of parenting to explain cluelessness and blamed the lack of parenting education in schools for failing to provide children who had been badly parented with the knowledge and skills to parent their own children. Clueless

parents were positioned as deficient, but they were not constructed as culpable for this deficiency - they could not help the situation they were in and they were positioned as trying their best. Here education and support was seen as the answer: changing the parent rather than changing the situation in which the parent is currently in. Participants considered that neglect resulting from remediable deficits in parenting skills was in many ways the easiest category of neglect to remedy through public education programs, parenting classes, hands on support from professionals and changes in educational curricula.

In contrast underinvested parenting was constructed as the most difficult category of neglectful parenting to remedy. The association of underinvestment with emotional harm and psychological damage evoked tremendous concern in participants. While the unsuitable parent was likely to be the recipient of attention from the authorities (see below), and the clueless parent might find a way of compensating for their deficits, the underinvested parent was likely to evade scrutiny - particularly when protected by wealth and privilege - and so continue to inflict emotional harm on children. In addition, as participants constructed the emotional bond between parent and child as the essence of normal parenting, to be without this bond was, by definition, to be abnormal. The response here was heightened moral condemnation, incomprehension and concern. This category seems to include elements of Lindland and Kendall-Taylor's (2013) Social Class Stereotype which 'Upper-class parents' and their classless construction of the Selfish Parent model. In both constructions, parents put their own lifestyle choices, wants and needs ahead of caring for their children.

Where underinvestment is associated with not just the unloved child, but also the escaping, deprived and uncontrolled child the parent was more likely to find themselves positioned as unsuitable - the debased category associated with disgust, censure and sanction. The unsuitable parent was constructed as the only type of parent likely to attract the attention/intervention of child protection services, and children associated with this parent were seen as having deficits in several domains of need (although underinvestment is an integral part of the unsuitable parent). Unsuitable parent was a narrow category where the neglect was either likely to be intentional or reckless and therefore was analogous to abuse (the criminal parent), or it was a manifestation of the parent's severe moral deficits (the disqualified parent). The disqualified parent is the manifestation of underclass discourse associated with child neglect: the account of feckless, irresponsible, incapable, deviant parents, producing delinquent children who will go on to be neglectful parents in their own right: the class of the undeserving poor perpetuating itself into the future (Allen & Smith, 2009; Social Justice Policy Group, 2006, 2007; Welshman, 2013). The unsuitable parent category is similar to Lindland and Kendall-Taylor's (2013) Social Class Stereotype model of child maltreatment; a model they argue is rooted in constructions of the innate traits of a group of people.

For participants, child neglect was not necessarily related to the current presentation of a child. Two children attending identical boarding schools may be positioned as neglected or not neglected depending on the reasons their parents are thought to have had for sending them there. Similarly, two children whose physical needs are not being met in similar ways may be viewed as neglected where the parent is positioned as unsuitable and not neglected

where the parent is positioned as overburdened. In a very real way, for participants the construction of child neglect was not a child centered one. Unlike the different forms of abuse (which participants associated with childhood misery), child neglect is not necessarily associated with sad children: an uncontrolled child may be extremely happy with their situation.

In addition, the definition of child neglect is an adult imposed term. Developmental models of childhood ensure that children were constructed as not knowing what they need, as 'feeling' neglected when they were not actually 'being' neglected. The category of 'disciplinary needs' explicitly requires adults to enforce submission to adult order, to fail to impose such discipline is to fail society and to fail the child. It has been argued elsewhere that developmental constructions of childhood are at odds with notions of children's citizenship and children's rights (e.g. Jenks, 2005; Mayall, 2006; Thomas, 2014; Wyness, 2012). Participants primarily saw children's rights in relation to allowing/forcing children to be children rather than in creating a space in which children themselves participate in negotiating the meaning of child neglect. Children positioned as neglected were further removed from meaningful participation in the debate about the definition of child neglect - their status as 'neglected' implying a lack of proper development towards normal functioning.

Child neglect was positioned as a particular type of departure from normal parenting requiring an understanding of what normal parenting is. Part of the confusion with the concept of child neglect lay in the fact that participants no longer considered there to be a public consensus about what was considered normal. For participants, multiculturalism has brought in its wake a sense that there is no longer one norm of parenting but a variety of norms, and no clear mechanism for identifying which norm should be adhered to. As stated above, normal parenting was associated with an appropriate parental disposition together with a level of appropriate parenting knowledge and skill. Within my data parents are constructed as failing to meet their children's developmental needs because they are overburdened, clueless, underinvested or unsuitable. Participants could not position as 'abnormal' parents who lovingly and skillfully parent in accordance with different cultural norms believing themselves to be acting in the best interests of their children. Such parents are behaving 'normally'.

Constructing child neglect required "social negotiation between different values and beliefs, different social norms and professional knowledges and perspectives about children, child development and parenting" (Parton, Thorpe, & Wattam, 1997, p. 67). One community could not uncritically be categorized as valuing their children less, or being more neglectful of children as a community. Parents from different cultures may have disposition, knowledge and skills appropriate to their own culture but very different from those considered appropriate within other cultures. Under such circumstances participants found it difficult to negotiate the boundaries of child neglect and many questioned the rights of any community to impose their norms and values onto another. In the absence of society wide norms about child rearing, participants positioned their own constructions of neglect as individual - recognizing that the concept was contested.

Abby: everyone has their own view of what's acceptable. (Group 3)

While some attempted to draw on universalizing legal norms, most felt that a consensus about child neglect was urgently needed to ensure all children were properly treated within society. In the absence of such consensus, the residual boundaries of child neglect were felt to be those of child protection. This was wholly unsatisfactory to participants: professionals were said to be exclusively interested in the unsuitable parent / deprived child model - a far narrower concept of child neglect than that constructed by participants. In addition, participants constructed child protection responses as only concerned with child removal rather than with family support. Removing children was considered to be an inappropriate response to most categories of child neglect, leaving participants overwhelmingly unwilling to contact professionals unless a child was in clear danger. Participants overwhelmingly argued that a society wide consensus about what children have a right to expect from society could empower the public to participate more fully in meeting the needs of all children in the community. Renegotiating child neglect could also redraw the professional response to child neglect to focus on family support and universal non-stigmatizing services that parents, children and the public could draw on.

5. Conclusion

How child neglect is defined is “central to how it is recognised, managed and prevented” (Reading et al., 2009, p. 333). Participants within this study were dissatisfied with the narrow child protection definitions of neglect that are on offer, and deeply suspicious of the way in which they believe professionals would respond to neglect related concerns. For my participants, neglect was a far broader and more complex issue than its current position as a subset of child maltreatment will allow. This supports Parton’s view that “essentially neglect is a moral category which is open to wide and differing interpretations...[and] the process of labelling [neglect] is essentially a moral/political process” (Parton, 1995, p. 73). To properly address these very different constructions of child neglect requires a range of services, focused not simply or even predominantly on child protection, but more importantly on child and family welfare and support to assist parents and communities to meet the needs of children within them. It should also be noted that addressing the unmet needs of children is a far more extensive proposition than simply responding to child neglect. This however must be our aim as a society. To do this we must engage the public in discussing the profound political, economic and social implications of children’s rights and children’s welfare beyond the narrow remits of repertoires of child maltreatment.

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