



Research article

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



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 June 2016

Received in revised form 21 February 2017

Accepted 21 March 2017

Keywords:

Qualitative research

Child neglect

Lay people

Child welfare

Child maltreatment

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.

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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

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(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 (Holloway and Valentine, 2003; Tisdall and Punch, 2012; Qvortrup, 1994) 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; Parton, 1991; Rose, 1985) 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 (Hendrick, 2007; Rose, 1999). Mothers in particular are disciplined into choosing to govern their children in accordance with psychological norms and expertise (Parton, 2006; Rose, 1999). 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; Giddens, 2013; Scourfield and Pithouse, 2006) 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 (Brophy and Wale, 1999; Dickens, 2007; White, 1998). 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, & 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 behavioral 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; Archard, 2009; Parton, 2014; Reading et al., 2009). 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, 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 and 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

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