

Recognising and Addressing Child Neglect in Affluent Families

Abstract

This paper explores how social workers intervene with affluent parents when there are child protection concerns about neglect. Based on data gathered from a small-scale exploratory qualitative study with 30 practitioners from 12 local authorities across England, this study examined three overarching questions: (1) How do social workers identify risk factors for vulnerable children in affluent circumstances? (2) Which factors inhibit or enable social workers' engagement with resistant affluent parents when there are child protection concerns? (3) What kind of skills, knowledge and experience is necessary for social workers to effectively assert their professional authority with affluent parents when there are concerns about abuse and neglect? The findings revealed that indicators of neglect can be difficult to identify and challenging to respond to when parents are affluent. Results indicate that social workers have to navigate complex power relationships with parents who are able to use their class privileges to resist their interventions. The paper concludes with a discussion of social workers' skills and capacities for engaging highly-resistant affluent parents in the child protection system.

Keywords: Neglect, Affluent Families, Social Work Intervention, Social Class

Introduction

Few studies have examined social workers' perspectives of child protection interventions in cases of child neglect in affluent families. Although child neglect is recognised as being the most prevalent form of child abuse in the UK (Radford *et al.* 2011; Daniel, 2015), limited attention has been paid to children in affluent families, because they are considered to be at "low risk". Where social class and economic conditions are addressed in research on neglect and social work practice, typically, the spotlight is on families from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and emphasis is placed on the relationship between poverty and neglect (Howarth, 2014; Bywater *et al.*, 2016; Morris *et al.*, 2018). However, children from affluent families may suffer maltreatment in less visible ways; they might not be materially neglected, dirty or malnourished, but emotionally neglected (Felitti *et al.*, 1998; Bellis *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, it has been suggested that neglectful affluent parents are off the radar of social workers, and are subjected to limited scrutiny by child protection agencies, and are thus less likely to appear in official reported statistics (Bellis *et al.*, 2014).

The study from which this paper is based examined how social workers intervene with families from affluent backgrounds where there are child protection concerns about neglect. Affluence is defined here by wealth and income, as well as by "the interplay between economic, social and cultural capital" that underpins social class (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2008; Savage *et al.*, 2013, p.220). After describing the study and the methods used to gather the data, the paper expands on the themes that arise in the identification and assessment of neglectful parenting in affluent families. It is suggested that the power imbalances between social workers and affluent parents present unique challenges for how social workers negotiate relationships with such

parents. The paper concludes with a discussion of strategies to manage these challenges and maintain a child-centred approach.

Background

As has been shown in existing research, child neglect is the most prevalent type of maltreatment in the UK, and is the largest category of abuse for children subject to a child protection plan (Brandon *et al.*, 2014a; Daniel *et al.*, 2010; Whalley, 2015; Ofsted, 2014; Taylor *et al.*, 2012). There is strong evidence that children living in environments of deprivation and social inequalities are at higher risk for neglect than children from more privileged backgrounds (Burgess *et al.* 2014; Bywaters *et al.*, 2016; Daniel *et al.*, 2011; May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005; Morris *et al.*, 2018; Sidebotham *et al.*, 2002; Sidebotham *et al.*, 2016). Yet, it is important to note that affluence as a category is not routinely recorded when collecting child abuse and neglect data for the Department for Education's Children in Need census in the UK, which tells us little about the specific demographic characteristics of the children featured. Additionally, there is currently little empirical research focusing on the experiences of children in affluent families, with the great majority of research having largely concentrated on the relationship between childhood neglect and poverty. It would seem, therefore, that when socio-economic factors are addressed in the research literature on neglect, the focus is almost exclusively on neglect in poor families. One obvious reason is that the majority of studies examining neglect have used samples that are largely drawn from families who come to the attention of children's services, which tend to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Burgess *et al.*, 2014; Bywaters *et al.*, 2016; Daniel *et al.*, 2011; May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005; Morris *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, most studies generally show that

neglect is more likely to come to the attention of the authorities when it involves families from lower socio-economic groups, and that affluent families are not subjected to the same amount of state scrutiny (Corby, 2006; Radford *et al.*, 2011; Warner, 2015, Burgess *et al.*, 2014; Daniel *et al.*, 2011). The literature thus suggests that there may be non-reporting of maltreatment by higher social classes (Sidebotham *et al.*, 2002; Watson, 2005), resulting in biases by using samples largely drawn from official records.

There is growing evidence to show that child neglect also occurs in significant amounts in affluent families (Bellis *et al.*, 2014). Evidence suggests that child abuse and neglect in affluent families may be much more widespread than is currently thought and that recognising neglect and its impacts for children is a significant challenge (Asthon *et al.*, 2016; Bellis *et al.*, 2014a; Hughes *et al.*, 2014).

Research on neglect in affluent families in the USA and Australia has pointed to the particular risks and problems facing children in affluent families (Felitti *et al.*, 1998; Luthar *et al.*, 2002; Watson, 2005). Luthar & Becker (2002) maintain that parental emotional neglect is often the cause of psychological problems suffered later in life by children from affluent families. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) is defined as experiencing traumatic events such as exposure to domestic violence, intra-familial abuse and neglect, parental mental health and substance misuse problems, and other early life stressors (Felitti *et al.*, 1998). While many ACEs are disproportionately found in economically-disadvantaged communities, it is important to note that research has identified that ACEs are far from absent in more affluent families (Bellis *et al.*, 2014). For example, the ACE studies in the UK, which drew their sample from

the general population to look at associations between childhood trauma and long-term health consequences, report evidence of abuse and neglect in the higher socio-economic strata (Bellis *et al.*, 2013; Bellis *et al.*, 2014a; Bellis *et al.*, 2014b; Hughes *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, a retrospective study on childhood maltreatment emphasizes that children from affluent families suffer childhood neglect in less visible ways (Bifulco & Moran, 1998). Furthermore, Watson (2005) asserts that wealthier families may have the material resources to hide physical and supervisory neglect while being psychologically or emotionally neglectful; this point is key to understanding why neglect may go undetected in affluent families. Researchers have also commented on the disconnect between some affluent parents and their children (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Crossman, 2013). The claim is made that many affluent parents do not spend enough quality time with their children and put excessive pressure on their children to be high achievers, and that such factors create psychological and emotional problems for the children in adulthood (Luthar & Becker, 2002). Luthar & Latendresse (2006) observed that some affluent parents are emotionally disconnected from their children because they work very long hours, often leaving their children alone or with a range of paid carers.

It has been suggested that the issue of neglect in affluent families is made more complex because of differing values. For example, Luthar & Crossman (2013) noted that affluent parents have a more relaxed attitude to drug use, sexual activity and sexuality, and as a consequence their children can be exposed to greater risks. Furthermore, although children may be living in affluent households, they may also be affected by parental alcohol and substance abuse, and/or domestic violence (Bellis *et al.*, 2014b).

Method

This study set out to explore the issues that arise for social workers of identifying and intervening in cases of parental neglect in affluent families. Neglect is defined here as:

“The persistent failure to meet a child’s basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child’s health and development” (DfE, 2015).

The recognised categories of neglect include physical neglect, medical neglect, supervisory neglect, emotional neglect, and educational neglect (Flood & Holmes, 2016).

Three specific questions guided the research: (1) How do social workers identify risk factors for vulnerable children in affluent families? (2) Which factors inhibit or enable social workers’ engagement with affluent parents when there are child protection concerns? (3) What kind of skills, knowledge and experience is necessary for frontline social workers to effectively assert their professional authority with affluent parents when there are concerns about abuse and neglect?

Participants for the study were recruited from twelve local authorities, county councils and unitary authorities in England. The research sites were selected using The Department for Communities and Local Government’s *Open Data Communities* platform. Indices of deprivation (*Income, Health, Education, Housing, Crime etc.*) by geographical areas were used to select five counties and seven local authorities which

represented a geographical mix and a range of socioeconomic divisions. Therefore, some of the authorities in the sample were characterised by extremes of affluence and deprivation. The sample consisted of expert stakeholders from across children's social care and included frontline social workers, team managers, an Early Help team manager, principal social workers, designated safeguarding leads, service managers, a Head of Service for Safeguarding Standards and a Local Authority Designated Officer. The goal was to include a diverse representation of professionals with particular experiences of child protection who were either active in frontline practice, or are managers and leaders in children's services. Data were gathered using individual interviews and focus group interviews with a total of thirty participants. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews of 45-70 minutes were conducted with six participants in six authorities (a Local Authority Designated Officer, a service manager, a team manager and three frontline social workers). Focus groups of 60-90 minutes comprised 3-5 participants in six authorities, made up of frontline social workers and managers (first-line, middle and senior). The focus groups were organised by the Principal Social Worker at each site, benefitting from a naturally occurring group where members could share experiences and reflect on neglect from different vantage points, facilitating discussion between a range of practitioners and managers at different levels in the same organisation. The interview questions explored aspects of the practitioners' experiences of how they engage affluent parents when there were safeguarding concerns. The interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed in full, and anonymised. Ethical approval was obtained from the authors' University ethics committee.

A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The central research questions were used as a guide to an initial reading of the transcripts to generate a coding scheme. Each interview was carefully read and re-read and a line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts was conducted. During this stage, new codes were added and initial codes were merged or removed. The final stage of analysis involved more detailed selective coding and breaking down the codes into several subthemes, which were then placed into broad categories, to analyse the relationships between them (Braun & Clark 2006). Qualitative data analysis software Nvivo was used in the systematic identification of themes and common patterns that were consistent in the data. Four core themes emerged from the data, namely recognising and intervening in neglect; privilege and entitlement; barriers to escalating concerns; and factors that make a difference for authoritative practice. This paper focuses on the first three themes.

Findings

Identifying and Intervening in Cases of Neglect

The findings suggest particular challenges for social workers in identifying and intervening in neglect, the impact of parents' sense of privilege and entitlement, and obstacles to effective intervention. The majority of the cases discussed by participants concerned emotional neglect – that is “responding to a child’s basic emotional needs” (Brandon *et al.*, 2014a). The findings suggest that neglect is challenging to identify in affluent families, because the practitioners typically look for indicators such as poor hygiene and living conditions, inadequate clothing, poor diet, as well as other environmental risk factors. Participants indicated that the ambiguous nature of emotional neglect was one possible factor making it difficult to interpret and to assess

indicators of the emotional aspects of neglect. At the same time, a number of participants accounts' revealed that deeply held beliefs that associate neglect with poverty meant that affluent parents, and indeed, some professionals perceive that neglect is primarily about the failure to provide for a child's basic physical needs.

A team manager commented:

“Affluent families, they are not the people who can't afford to clothe their children, they're not the people who can't afford to feed their children, so quite often those basic care needs are being met even if you've got an alcoholic parent, for example. They may be quite high- functioning, may be still be working, and childcare comes into that quite a bit too. The children are picked up from school, their attendance is still good, it might be somebody else actually meeting the child's needs, so it might be more difficult to find out what's really going on in the family.”.

Another participant remarked:

“Those children are quite hidden, because parents know their rights, they are articulate, and they can be quite avoiding. I would say that social workers are quite often concerned that working with affluent parents rather than with other parents because they are educated and they are very challenging”.

The analysis revealed that because the children involved were in affluent home environments, with excellent housing, a nutritious diet, first-rate educational opportunities and access to a range of enrichment opportunities, it was often difficult to differentiate when their home environment lacked emotionally-nurturing parenting behaviours. Indeed, families may be materially advantaged, and the children's physical needs are being met, but there may be little or no emotional connection with the children, and the parents may not be emotionally available. The participants described that the families were often involved with private providers, such as GPs, therapists, nurseries, and schools, and there were often difficulties in getting them to understand emotional neglect. Moreover, some participants expressed the view that

these children largely experienced inadequate parenting from emotionally-unavailable parents, as their mothers and fathers were not investing parental time in them. It was clear in some cases that the children experienced the majority of their “parenting” from carers who were paid to look after them. Some participants expressed that the parents’ detachment from their children was often a contributory factor in the emotional and behavioural difficulties that brought them to the attention of children’s social care, and that parents were often affronted that the quality of their parenting was being questioned, or that they were being accused of neglecting their children. What remained consistent in participants’ accounts is that it is a challenge to get affluent parents to understand the issues pertaining to their children’s relational attachments and their emotional experiences of care. Thus, any questions about their parenting and the emotional home environment were often met with hostility and parents strongly resisted any intervention; in some cases, their obstruction towards social workers manifested in formal complaints to senior managers and elected councillors, or in the threat of legal action.

Several participants made reference to high levels of domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and parental mental ill-health issues, which were a feature of a number of cases of neglect they had dealt with. Often these issues were hidden and only came to light when parents were going through acrimonious separations and a Section 7 Report was ordered by the Court in accordance with Section 8 of The Children Act 1989. Briefly, a Section 7 report is written by an Independent Social Worker when the Court requires information about the child’s welfare and living arrangements in cases of divorce or separating parents (HMSO, 1989). Getting parents to understand the adverse effects on the children was often very difficult when they did not

acknowledge that the negative family dynamics placed their children in a vulnerable position.

One participant made the following point:

“Especially with domestic violence, we have had some cases where parents have said they are having couples therapy which means the risks are higher but they have been able to pay for that, and if we can't influence the impact on that child right now, we can't be involved and that's really difficult”.

Participants' narrative noted the obvious advantage affluent parents had in being able to purchase services, such as nannies, and other forms of help, to effectively “do their parenting for them”, and the hired help was doing a lot of the day-to-day interacting with children's private health-care providers, private schools and nurseries. Therefore it was easier for parenting-capacity problems to be masked and for issues of neglect to be missed by practitioners.

Some of the cases described in the interviews indicated that parents had the financial resources to purchase private substance or alcohol abuse services to address their problems if practitioners flagged it up as an issue, so they therefore removed themselves from the spotlight of social services through private means.

As this participant noted:

“The child had been seriously neglected because of alcohol misuse. That's another area which is hidden in a different way because sometimes in affluent families' misuse of alcohol there is an acceptance of its a thing that they do, and if it becomes a problem they refer themselves to a clinic and deal with it and then come out and then the cycle starts again. And then the children may well be in private schools or boarding schools and then maybe some sort of positive figure out there that keeps it ticking over but the neglect that

the child is suffering remains, and it almost comes out by the second time they came to our attention”.

All of the children’s social care departments that participated in the research had high numbers of fee-paying and independent boarding schools in their geographical area. Many children that attended had family homes outside of the local authority, and in some cases the parents even lived overseas. Such situations added to the complexity of safeguarding children when concerns about neglect were flagged up. Practitioners described the difficulties in getting schools to acknowledge and take seriously their safeguarding responsibilities to ensure that all safeguarding allegations were handled appropriately. Participants consistently reported that the independent boarding schools struggled to see these children as being in need or at risk of significant harm as a consequence of neglect. They described that, in their dealings with boarding schools, staff were not always clear about signs and symptoms of neglect, and they had limited awareness that neglect may be an indicator that other forms of abuse may be taking place. Participants reported that, in some cases, the designated safeguarding leads in fee-paying and boarding schools were often very reluctant to raise concerns with parents and to report safeguarding concerns about neglect to children’s social care. A number of participants also stated that some schools’ reluctance to report signs of abuse stemmed from the parents’ transactional arrangements with the schools, so there was hesitancy from schools to pass judgement on parenting behaviours and to confront child neglect. Interview participants raised questions about whether the schools prioritised their relationship with the parents over the needs of the child as a consequence. Some participants expressed the view that boarding schools foster what they refer to as “normalised parental deprivation”; which is not widely discussed. Thus, a number of fee-paying schools were also resistant to joint working and dealt

with any safeguarding concerns in-house. Participants stated that developing a shared understanding of neglect was often very challenging, highlighting that effective joint work to build a picture of children's experiences was often very difficult.

Privilege and Entitlement

All of the participants recounted that affluent parents' higher social class placed them at an advantage over the social workers and formed a major barrier to the level and depth of potential intervention. The common view expressed was that economically privileged parents had access to powerful social networks, which some used to resist interventions. As noted by this participant:

“They know where to go with complaints...they'll get on to their local councillor, someone who they go hunting or shooting with or playing golf, that's the reality of working in a very small place like this...they know people in high places and they threaten you with people as well. So you've got to be confident when you arrive and know what you're talking about”.

For example, in one of the smaller counties in the sample, one of the cases that came to social workers' attention involved a child whose parents were well-established with high status in the county; the parents therefore called on their social networks to give personal testimonies attesting to how upstanding they were. Participants elaborated the ways that the parents' class backgrounds gave them an unspoken advantage, because they had access to resources and information. Thus, they were generally knowledgeable about the workings of organisations such as children's social care and the safeguarding process; perhaps more crucially, their class status brought a greater confidence to challenge the practitioners. A number of participants expressed that because of parents' affluence, educational backgrounds, and social status they looked

down on social workers, who they considered were beneath them, thus their intervention was often seen as an unwarranted intrusion; which undermined the credibility and power of the social worker. Such class elements formed a major obstacle to developing relational ways of working with parents.

Essentially, the parents devalued the social workers' authority and expertise. For example, some participants spoke of being belittled and humiliated by parents in meetings, leaving them feeling as if they had to prove themselves to establish their credibility. Some reflected the view that, from the perspective of affluent parents, being told what is in their children's best interests by social workers was not an experience they welcomed, resulting in the wishes and feelings of the parents taking precedence over the needs of the children. Some also pointed out that certain parents felt that, if they needed to have any social work involvement at all, they would go directly to senior managers.

The following observation was made:

“With our less-affluent families they may stand in reception and shout and get kicked out, and they might make threats to go to the newspaper. With affluent families, they want the manager and then they want the director and then they go to the MP...with our usual families that doesn't happen, once they have got the assistant manager there, they are quite happy to work with them”.

One of the biggest challenges described by participants was that parents with abundant financial resources were able to hire legal advocates to help them resist social work interventions, and were therefore more likely to make threats to complain, and/or make unjustified complaints, thus attempting to dilute the assessment of risk that social workers undertook.

A participant remarked:

“When you go into an affluent area...you find that they are more likely to use the complaints processes. So a lot of time and energy is spent trying to unpick what has and what has not happened, and it makes social workers worried about actually getting to the hub of the issue, because they know a complaint will follow”.

According to participants, parents exercised power through their use of solicitors and lawyers. They also referred to a “scattergun approach”, where affluent parents use their power to write long letters or emails quoting the relevant passages from The Children Act (1989), Working Together to Safeguard Children (2015), or to directly contact senior managers, elected council members and MPs with their vexatious complaints.

“I had found that families who are more affluent, we communicate with them in a different way. They send emails, they write to us formally...we get a long list, almost to the point where it becomes almost harassing...almost like they want a response and they want it immediately. They are much more articulate, they are much more able to challenge...I sometimes wonder whether they do get a different service than a family who are less articulate”.

Participants spoke of the extra effort, skill, and time they had to dedicate to cases involving affluent parents, due to this extra scrutiny from parents. All participants felt that the parents’ affluence privileged them to subject their practice to a level of scrutiny that families from less affluent backgrounds did not. In part, responding to the demands that were made meant it was sometimes difficult to retain a focus on the child’s needs. Put briefly, affluent families who came to the notice of children’s social care were more likely to have the resources and capabilities to resist social workers’ intervention. There was often a great concern that the parents would make a formal

complaint; thus, the subtleties and nuances of affluence and privilege had a key role to play in parents' ability to resist child protection investigations.

Obstacles to Escalating Concerns

A recurring theme that permeated through the participants' accounts was the challenging behaviours they encountered when attempting to escalate concerns for a section 47 investigation (required when local authority social workers have 'reasonable cause to suspect that a child who lives, or is found, in their area is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm' [HMSO, 1989]). Specific barriers included difficulties engaging parents, and the gathering of information to build up a picture for the assessment of the safety needs of children. Participants noted that it was a considerable challenge to gain knowledge of families' histories and functioning for assessing emotional neglect, or its severity and chronicity.

Participants also revealed that parents resisted the level of probing and questioning that is required, and in some cases their non-compliance made it significantly more challenging to make the children the subject of a child protection plan. Other factors influencing this process included the parents' use of lawyers and solicitors to challenge the decisions of social workers, or to avoid social work intervention. A frequently recurring issue raised by participants is that highly-resistant parents were more likely to use legal advocates or the complaints procedures to challenge social workers when they attempted to escalate their concerns to child protection, which could have considerable influence on the outcomes of the case. The majority of participants reported being put under a lot of pressure to respond to the demands of the parents, which made it difficult to maintain a child-focused approach. Some

participants reported feeling intimidated by parents and needing good support from their managers in order to carry out a robust risk assessment as parents did not often engage with social workers and actively resisted their interventions. They expressed the importance of being able to focus on the child but highlighted that there were very few opportunities for direct observation of the child's relationship with the parents, particularly, in situations where children were in schools that were failing to recognise child neglect, leaving the children at risk of significant harm.

One participant said:

“I think it is very important to build that rapport with the child because once they trust you they will tell you about the daily routine. What they don't like Mum and Dad doing. In that particular case we got lots of evidence from the older brother who just reached a point where he had had enough and told the social worker everything. And on that occasion they had both been neglected, it was emotional neglect”.

In one site it was highlighted that there were some differences in how social workers engaged with affluent families from minority ethnic backgrounds. For example, it was noted that social workers were much more likely to rely on stereotypical ideas about religious beliefs and cultural traditions in assessing risks for the children concerned, which resulted in added difficulties in keeping a focus on the child.

A participant commented:

“With affluent families from minority ethnic backgrounds, social workers can react the other way because they are different, they are constantly looking for other things which are not always rooted in the cause. So it plays out in a different way. You have perhaps got English as a second language and the interplay can

be different. And you know you could swing the other way and not let go when you should”.

More often than not, parents prevented practitioners from seeing and listening to the child. Therefore, practitioners were often left with insufficient evidence to progress to a Section 47 investigation, resulting in drift and delay in some cases. Findings suggest that when the social workers were able to get good outcomes for the children this stemmed from their direct contact with them, especially with older children, who had a greater ability to express themselves and discuss what it is like for them living in that household.

There was widespread agreement among participants about the tensions inherent in having to devote a great deal of time to responding to the demands and complaints of affluent parents while keeping focus on the safeguarding needs of the child. In order to persevere and not be intimidated by the parents, the social workers needed to have good knowledge of child neglect, good communication skills and confidence in their ability to navigate the complexities and dynamics that arise in such cases.

Discussion

While working with involuntary and highly resistant parents is a common feature of child protection work, there were some distinctive factors when intervening with resistant affluent parents. A particular challenge is that, while social workers were cognisant of their power as professionals, they also faced hierarchical power relations between themselves and affluent parents, which meant that the parents were often very knowledgeable about the workings of the system, and socially well placed to

challenge decisions. The findings suggests that affluent families resented having to deal with social workers and tended to oppose their decisions, thus using status and privilege to undermine and disempower practitioners. Some recurring themes included that affluent parents' confidence and sense of entitlement meant that they felt they could diagnose their own needs, expected children's social care to accommodate them, and had the confidence to challenge those in authority. Practitioners reported that active engagement techniques, such as a formal signed agreement and goal setting, often did not work with affluent parents; the parents essentially used formal complaints to deflect attention away from a robust assessment, a finding also identified in other research (Laird, 2013). Most participants indicated that the use of complaints procedures concentrated their thinking on holding the child as a central focus of the assessment, so that the parents' interests did not outweigh consideration of the child's best interest. Arguably, the social workers were challenged to develop strategies to speak directly to the children whilst still respecting and acknowledging the status of the parents (Gardner, 2008). Where the practitioners were able to engage directly with the children and were not intimidated by the parents, they were much more likely to achieve better outcomes (Brandon *et al.* 2014; Ofsted, 2014). In such situations, what made a difference was that the social workers had the self-confidence, practice wisdom, professional curiosity and most importantly, the support of their managers, which enabled a focus to be kept on the child without letting the complaints from parents cloud the risk assessment. The participants' narratives offer key insights into the ways in which the threats of complaints instil fear and operate to deescalate concerns in some cases. One factor concerns how supported by their managers some social workers felt (Brandon *et al.*, 2014). This is an important consideration, given the key role that managers have in

supervision to help social workers process the complex emotional demands of the work (Ferguson, 2005), and since the view of managers significantly influenced the direction that the investigation would take in some cases.

Overall, it seems that engaging affluent parents to address specific parenting behaviour to make robust risk assessments of children's needs was often time-consuming and resource-heavy, as well as frustrating and stressful. Arguably, given the considerable number of children's social care personnel that tend to be involved in a single case (including senior managers and legal teams), it is important to consider whether there is a qualitative difference in the level of service that affluent families received. It is also worth asking whether in some cases professional judgements were particularly susceptible to unconscious bias as a result of the families' affluence, which has been highlighted in a number of serious case reviews (Brabbs, 2011; Carmi & Walker-Hall, 2015). Thus, practitioners must engage with complicating factors such as class privilege which gets in the way of child protection work (Brabbs, 2011; Nicolas, 2014; Carmi & Walker-Hall, 2015).

Limitations

There are some limitations to the research. As this is a small-scale study and not representative we are therefore careful to emphasise that the findings are not generalisable to all social work intervention with affluent families. Another limitation concerns how affluence is defined. It is important to note that while interview questions were framed around affluence, there was variance in how families were described; participants used terminologies such as highly-educated, middle-class, upper-class and affluent interchangeably and did not distinguish between the

moderately wealthy and those with extensive economic wealth. Additionally, some focus groups included frontline social workers were participating alongside their supervisors and managers, which may have influenced their capacity to be fully open about their practice or the managerial support and the quality of the supervision they receive.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the issues regarding how social workers intervene with affluent families when there are child protection concerns about neglect. The findings revealed that identifying neglectful parenting in the context of material affluence is a multi-faceted process. Social workers have to navigate complex power relationships with highly-resistant parents who have the economic, social and cultural capital to resist their interventions. A striking example is that even in those agencies where a significant proportion of their interventions involved affluent families, training and learning events on working with resistant parents only used case scenarios depicting working class families, thus reinforcing the idea of neglect as a social and economic disadvantage phenomenon. In effect, social class as it frames the lens through which neglect is analysed needs to be a central focus of practitioners' discussions and reflections on child neglect. The findings from this study thus highlight the need to have more critical dialogue about affluence and class privilege as it frames an understanding of risk factors for children in affluent families.

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