

Families, Relationships and Societies

Poverty and Child Neglect - The Elephant in the Room?

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Abstract:	<p>There has been much discussion in the past few years about how social workers in England should respond to cases of child neglect, with calls to take more children into care and speed up the process towards adoption. In this paper it is argued that current dominant discourse framed in terms of individual pathology disregards the substantial body of knowledge on the effects of poverty and the complex inter-relationships between poverty and neglect; perpetuates the blaming of parents; and ultimately fails to serve the interests and promote the rights of many children and their families. Drawing upon the Capability Approach and the work of Lister, the paper concludes with an initial exploration of the development of a more sophisticated and multi-dimensional analysis of poverty and parenting that incorporates both psychological and social causes in ways that challenges the polarization of the debate on poverty and neglect.</p>
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Poverty and Child Neglect – *The Elephant in the Room?*

Introduction

There has been much discussion in the past few years about how social workers in England should respond to cases of child neglect. The former Secretary for Education, Michael Gove (2012) spoke about the need to rescue children from ‘a life of soiled nappies and scummy baths, chaos and hunger, hopelessness and despair’. The Government Advisor on Children’s Social Care, Martin Narey, has also criticized social workers for not removing children soon enough from neglectful homes (Narey, 2013). In March 2014 two reports were published into child neglect: one by Ofsted (2014) and the other an Action for Children (2014) report. The messages are similar in what they say and, more crucially, what they don’t say. Consideration of issues of poverty and related inequalities, including the impact on families and services of Coalition Government cuts in welfare spending, are largely absent from the dominant discourse.

Whilst the vast majority of parents living in poverty do not neglect their children, the clear association between poverty and neglect has been highlighted for many years (Stevenson, 1998; Baldwin and Spencer, 2005; Hooper et al, 2007). In this paper the construction of neglect and links between poverty, neglect and services to children and families is explored. It is recognized that neglect can be harmful to children, and in some cases significantly so, requiring the removal of a child from his or her parents’ care. However it is argued that the current

discourse framed in terms of individual pathology disregards the substantial body of knowledge on the effects of poverty and inequality and the complex inter-relationships between poverty and neglect; perpetuates the blaming of families and social workers for not addressing the problem; and ultimately fails to serve the interests and promote the rights of many children and their families. The paper concludes with an initial exploration of the development of a more sophisticated and multi-dimensional analysis of poverty and parenting that incorporates both psychological and social causes in ways that challenges the polarization of the debate on poverty and neglect.

The construction of neglect

The ways in which a social problem is constructed vary over time, between and within societies. Neglect as a form of child maltreatment was considered 'neglected' in the eighties and mid-nineties, when physical abuse and then sexual abuse preoccupied child protection practice (DH, 1995; Stevenson, 1996). However now neglect is the main form of child maltreatment identified by professionals in the United Kingdom (Burgess et al, 2013). In England neglect is consistently the highest category under which children were made subject to child protection plans (DfE, 2013) and the most common type of harm identified in care proceedings (Masson et al, 2008). However it has also been suggested that this does not reflect the 'true' number of children who suffer neglect and that professionals often do not identify child neglect, especially in relation to adolescents (Radford et al, 2011; Hicks et al, 2011). There is a considerable body of research that suggests that neglect can cause a range of harms to children and lead to poor outcomes in the short and long-term, especially when it is significant

in its extent and sustained in its duration (Daniel et al, 2011). This paper seeks to deconstruct the concept of neglect: how it is defined, understood and responded to. However it is not the intention in the process to minimise the painful and damaging lived experiences of many thousands of children living in neglectful circumstances. On the contrary the aim is to explore ideas about policy and professional practice that addresses the complexity of factors impacting on the lives of children and families in humane and transformative ways.

Whilst the main focus of this paper is on the complex causal factors leading to child neglect, it is first relevant to consider definitions of neglect. Clarke and Cochrane (1998: 26) argue that 'how we name things affects how we behave towards them. The name, or label, carries with it expectations'. Children's experiences of neglect or unmet needs are varied in extent and duration from mild and episodic to severe and chronic (Daniel, 2013). However *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (HM Government, 2013: 86), the inter-agency guidance on child protection work in England, defines 'neglect' as being: '...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 or development'. This definition covers a wide range of behaviours and different dimensions of children's development. As an Action for Children (2013: 4) report explains: 'Neglect can take different forms, ranging from obvious physical signs such as being inadequately clothed to young children being left alone in their home or on the streets for long periods of time. Children may lack parental support to go to school, miss health appointments, and be ignored when distressed'. Given the different behaviours that can constitute child neglect, as well as issues of severity

and chronicity, decision-making in cases of neglect is not straightforward, is open to interpretation and influenced by professionals' values, emotions and organisational contexts (Howarth, 2005; Burgess et al, 2013). Inherent in any professional decisions regarding child neglect are moral judgements about normative parenting. However when the term 'neglect' is used in the wider policy and political discourse on child protection, it is often uncritically assumed that what is being talked about is a universally accepted, easily defined concept.

The Ofsted (2014) and Action for Children report (2014) talk about the scale of the problem and devastating impact of neglect without clearly defining the parameters of the concept. An implication being that it is 'common sense' and that parenting capacity can be judged in absolute rather than relative terms. The Brown and Ward (2013: 48) report, *Decision-Making with a Child's Timeframe*, states that: 'Exposure to toxic stress in early childhood can cause permanent damage to the brain and have severe and long-term consequences for all aspects of future learning, behaviour and health. Neglected children may experience chronic exposure to toxic stress as their needs fail to be met'. This is stated without any attention being paid to 'dosage issues', such as the degree or type of neglect (White and Wastell, 2013). Brown and Ward's (2013) interpretation of the evidence and more generally the over-reliance on contested neuroscience research to inform policy on early intervention has been highly criticised (Wastell and White, 2012; Munro and Musholt, 2013; Edwards et al., 2014). Yet the Brown and Ward (2013) is part of the Ministry of Justice's 'Knowledge Hub,' to be used to inform decisions in the family courts in England. It is as if once

labelled as a case of 'neglect' in the child protection process, the harmful and irreversible long term consequences are assumed to be inevitable.

When considering the construction of neglect in the dominant discourse it is essential to analyse what claims are made about the diagnostic frame that attributes causality, blame and responsibility (Loseke, 2011). The definition of neglect outlined above is linked to the concept of 'significant harm', which triggers child protection procedures and is the threshold for compulsory state intervention in private family life in England. The definition of 'significant harm' as outlined in s31 of the Children Act 1989 states that the harm must be 'attributable' to the care being given or not given by a 'reasonable parent'. Judgments about the causes of the neglect of children are therefore central to policies and practices to prevent neglect, as well as how to respond when children are assessed as suffering from neglect. As with issues of severity and chronicity, when neglect is referred to in child protection discourse it is often uncritically assumed to be attributable to parental care. However for many families identified as neglecting their children, the concerns are taking place in a context of the family living in circumstances of social deprivation and chronic poverty (Stevenson, 1998; Hooper et al, 2007; Daniel et al, 2011). The construction of neglect thus has real implications practically and politically for all concerned and, in many cases, life long consequences for the children and families.

In terms of the causes of neglect, the dominant political and policy discourse is unequivocal in its presentation of neglect as being about parental pathology and

individual blame. The former Education Secretary's likening of children who experience neglect to 'victims of any other natural disaster' (Gove, 2012), highlights the perspective that parents' are to blame and social factors play a limited role, thereby absolving government of responsibility. The construction of neglect is of a problem that children need to be rescued from rather than one that their parents can be supported to address. The state's role is therefore primarily to that end. The response to the problems of child neglect has been to urge social workers to take more children into care, make earlier and quicker decisions, and increase adoption numbers. In addition social work academics have been criticized for overly focusing on structural inequality, in ways that 'rob individuals of the power of agency and breaks the link between an individual's actions and the consequences' (Gove, 2013).

An individualizing neo-liberal discourse of welfare that obscures the social and structural difficulties that many vulnerable families face has its roots in the Thatcher years, was continued under New Labour, and is linked to global trends. Gillies (2013) argues that at the end of New Labour's time in government the conviction that poor parenting practices were at the core of persistent social problems had taken root, and parenting was constructed as a classless activity. The neoliberal authoritarian ideology of the Coalition Government (Featherstone et al., 2014; Parton, 2014) has further recast poverty as a personal deficit rooted in perceived individual failings and moral blame (Ridge, 2013). A report by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2014) provides a damning critique of current party-political strategies for tackling inequality and child poverty, however also offers up the familiar scapegoat of 'bad' parenting (Gillies,

2014).

These ideas would seem to have permeated the discourse more widely with organisations linked to child welfare also being largely silent on the impact of poverty and inequality on the lives of children and families where neglect is a feature. The Ofsted (2014) report *In the Child's Time: Professional Responses to Child Neglect* indicates that professionals are often not responding in timely and effective ways in cases of child neglect leaving children in harmful situations for too long. The recommendations focus on professional practice, including increased training to identify the signs of neglect, analyse risk factors and take decisive action where this is required, in addition to 'robust management oversight of neglect cases' (p.7). However, nowhere in this report is there any reflection on whether it is appropriate, or indeed feasible, to place the responsibility on individual practitioners for recognizing and addressing such a complex issue as neglect and, crucially, no mention at all of any of the research evidence on the impact of poverty on the lives of vulnerable children and families.

The Action for Children (2014) report *Child Neglect: The scandal that never breaks* argues that despite the scale of the problem, and the devastating impact that neglect has on children's lives, it does not receive the political attention it deserves. The report calls for the Government to produce a national strategy on neglect that includes increased training for professionals, a public awareness campaign, and the updating of the criminal law on child neglect to include emotional harm. The Action for Children report highlights the need for measures

to identify and promote evidence-based practice to tackle child neglect, whilst at the same time omitting to draw upon findings from their own commissioned research. For example Burgess et al (2014) found that professionals and parents felt the most common reason for increased child neglect was poverty exacerbated by Coalition Government cuts in welfare spending, but nowhere is this mentioned in the Action for Children (2014) report.

Another report by the Sutton Trust, *Baby Bonds*, (Moullin et al, 2014:28) draws upon attachment theory to argue that secure attachment in the first three years serves as a 'secure base' for children's later development and life chances, and therefore social mobility. The report claims that problems with attachment were particularly widespread among poor, working-class people. It estimated that 'in very high-risk populations – where families face multiple problems – up to two-thirds of children are insecurely attached' (Moullin et al, 2014:10). However when considering recommendations for how policy can promote secure attachment, it fails to mention the evidence on increasing poverty and inequality, instead suggesting that 'much existing policy in the UK already supports the conditions for good parenting and secure attachment' (Moullin et al, 2014: 20).

Since the Coalition Government came to power in 2010 there have been significant changes to the social policy context for child welfare provision in England. These include major changes to the welfare benefits system. There is evidence of increasing numbers of children and families experiencing poverty and deprivation (Ridge, 2013), with the poorest children and families bearing the brunt of the recession and of austerity measures (Browne, 2012). Reports

from children's charities and advocacy groups regularly highlight the suffering experienced by many children and families as a result of the Coalition Government's austerity measures (OCC, 2014; Royston, 2014). The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2014) reports that there are increasing numbers of children in working households who are living in absolute poverty after housing costs. Affordable housing, particularly in areas such as London, is getting harder to obtain and more families are placed in temporary accommodation away from family and friends. At the same time large reductions in local authority funding for community and family support services and over-stretched local authority social work teams limit the availability of early help for families struggling to care for their children in the context of social adversities (Ridge, 2013). Alongside the cuts in benefits and public spending, there has been increasing public and media discourse fuelled by the Government's political ideology that stigmatises and demonises people living in poverty (Parton, 2014). Whilst the majority of families living in poverty do not neglect the needs of their children, many studies over the past two decades have demonstrated a relationship between child neglect and poverty, inequality, and social deprivation (Stevenson, 1998; Hooper et al, 2007; Daniel et al, 2011). However links between the economic, social and policy contexts and child neglect are lacking in the dominant child protection discourse.

Warner's (2013) analysis of media reporting following the death of Peter Connelly can help inform our understanding of the current construction of neglect. She uses the term 'Baby P' to emphasize the '*metaphorical child*' that the death of Peter Connelly produced and argues that the moral panic was about the

way Baby P lived as well as his brutal death. Reaction focused on 'wider and more diffuse anxieties about 'new' dangerous underclass formations in contemporary Britain, the behaviours of the 'feckless poor', and fears of contagion' (Warner, 2013: 218). The media reporting following Baby P served to further 'other' families living in poverty enabling more intensive moral regulation and social control of 'them', and in the process was also constitutive of 'our' middle-class notions of respectability relating to parenting and family life (Warner, 2013). Gove's (2012) evocation of 'soiled nappies and scummy baths, chaos and hunger', is not dissimilar to what Warner (2013) identifies as the visceral disgust in the media about the living conditions of Baby P.

Garrett (2009: 537) also drawing upon newspaper reports of Baby P highlights the class contempt in the frequent use of the underclass construct and links this to the 'regulatory social agenda of neo-liberalism'. In his book *Chavs*, Jones (2012) argues that media and politicians alike dismiss as feckless, criminalized and ignorant a vast, underprivileged swathe of society. Stereotypes, he suggests, are used to avoid genuine engagement with social and economic problems and to justify widening inequality. The construction of neglect in contemporary discourse needs to be seen in the context of increasing public and media discourse fuelled by political ideology that stigmatises and demonises people living in poverty and holds them responsible for their children's neglect because of their behaviour and poor choices.

Clapton et al (2013) argue that claims making, often led by large children's charities, reflected in the media and supported by politicians, is a regular feature

of the contemporary child protection discourse, policy and practice. Claims makers can set agendas and contribute to a process of net widening which takes practice away from supportive to more coercive forms of intervention (Clapton et al, 2013). These net-widening processes can be seen in the addition in June 2014 to the Queen's Speech of an announcement that emotional neglect and psychological harm will become a criminal offence, the so-called 'Cinderella Law'. The proposals for a 'Cinderella law' on child neglect have received a mixed response, including that the proposed law is 'at best a distracting and time-consuming irrelevance – and at worst a blueprint for draconian state intervention where ordinary help is all that is required' (White et al, 2014). Whilst it is not suggested that these issues are not serious, a consequence of a net widening is that an increasingly blaming and punitive form of professional practice towards primarily families living in poverty continues to develop unabated, especially when preventative and supportive services are diminishing. Gillies (2013) rightly asks 'how did we get to the point where regulating the intimate family practices of the poor and disadvantaged, while simultaneously cutting benefits and services in the name of austerity, can be broadly accepted as caring and progressive?'

Too often debate surrounding the relationship between neglect and poverty is caricatured by an unhelpful polarization, i.e. poverty is irrelevant because most poor people don't neglect their children or that the problem of neglect is caused solely by material poverty. The former perspective is currently dominant, with the prevailing discourse constructing both poverty and poor parenting as being a failing of the individual. It is not the contention of this article to promote the

latter perspective, but in the sections below the interrelationship of psychological and social factors such as poverty and other structural inequalities are discussed. As Featherstone (2014: 14) explains: 'If we really want to ensure children are protected it is imperative that we understand and work with complexity rather than the binary thinking displayed so often in Mr Gove's speech. Many problems manifest themselves at a range of levels: material, psychological and moral and can and should be tackled at all these levels'. Dominant discourses, political ideology and value perspectives regarding the impact of inequality, the role of the state, and understandings of social justice will inevitably influence policy and practice approaches (Fox-Harding, 1997). It is therefore essential to acknowledge and critically examine the pervasive effects of these and the implications on professional practice and the lives of society's vulnerable children and families.

Poverty, parenting and neglect

Whilst poverty does not necessarily lead to neglect as the vast majority of families living in socially adverse circumstances do not neglect their children, a key question is therefore the nature of the relationship between neglect and poverty. Hooper et al.'s (2007) study explored the complex relationships between poverty, parenting and children's wellbeing in diverse social circumstances. The authors suggest that the most widely accepted perspective in the academic literature is now that of stress (and resilience) often combined with poor neighbourhoods; with the 'culture of poverty' argument given much less credence, in part due to the lack of evidence to support it (Hooper et al,

2007: 99). However as indicated above an individual blame, 'culture of poverty' perspective is reflected in the dominant political and policy discourse.

In their study Hooper and colleagues (2007: 105) found that 'stress, unless buffered by sufficient social support and/or mitigated by other sources of resilience, is likely to be significant in the increased risk of some forms of maltreatment among parents living in poverty'. The authors concluded that the range of harms that children living in poverty experience suggest that poverty should at least be seen as a form of societal neglect. The study highlights the importance of a sophisticated and nuanced analysis of how poverty interacts with and often compounds problems such as violence, attachment insecurity and mental health difficulties (Hooper et al, 2007). The Action for Children commissioned research studies similarly identify neglect as being associated with poverty. Burgess et al.'s (2014) study found that although most parents living in poverty do not neglect their children, there is an undoubted association that is attributed to a complex interaction of factors compounded by poverty and inequality. They explain that 'it requires extraordinary levels of organisation and determination to parent effectively in situations of poor housing, meagre income, lack of local resources and limited educational and employment prospects' (Burgess et al., 2014:14).

Material poverty clearly does impact on a parent's ability to meet his or her child's basic care needs and on the child's development. Income determines parents' abilities to provide adequate nutrition, clothing, educational opportunities, decent housing and social activities. Whilst an increase in income

would certainly be of benefit, more money alone will not resolve all problems. The complex interactions between material aspects of poverty, other forms of structural inequality, and the psychological and emotional experiences of individuals, including long-term lack of respect, opportunity and hope, need to be considered when analyzing how poverty impacts on a parent's ability to effectively care for her or his child. The cumulative effect of adversity can be mitigated by protective factors, both psychological and social (Hooper et al, 2007). In the sections below consideration is given to how ideas from the wider literature on poverty can be useful in developing alternative ways of understanding and responding to the impact of poverty on parents and their capabilities to meet their children's needs.

Perspectives on Poverty

The Capability Approach (CA) developed by the Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen and feminist philosopher and ethicist Martha Nussbaum argues that poverty is best understood as capability deprivation. According to the CA income levels are instrumental to what really matters, namely a person's capabilities. A person's capabilities represent the effective freedom of an individual to choose between different kinds of life that she may value and has reason to value (Sen, 1999). In general, income is a means to an end, and capabilities are the end (Nussbaum, 2011). People differ in their ability to convert means into valuable opportunities (capabilities) or outcomes (functionings). The differences in the capabilities to function can arise even with the same set of personal means for a variety of reasons, such as: 1) *Physical and mental heterogeneities among persons* (related, for example, to disability or

illness); 2) *Variations in non-personal resources* (such as health care or community resources); 3) *Environmental diversities* – (such as physical or built environment or threats from local crime); 4) *Differences in relative position vis-à-vis others* (for example relative income poverty in a rich community may translate into absolute poverty in the space of capability; (5) *Distribution within the family* – Distributional rules within a family determining, for example, the allocation of food and health care between children and adults, males and females (Sen, 2005; 2009).

The CA argues for a multidimensional assessment in poverty analysis and adopts a broad perspective of the many kinds of constraints that can limit people's lives similar to the ecological approach as outlined in the Assessment Framework (DH, 2000). However it additionally provides a lens for poverty analysis, which emphasizes its ethical dimension and the intrinsic importance of people's capabilities as part of a broad theory for social justice that promotes human dignity for all: a way 'to address questions of enhancing justice and removing injustice' (Sen, 2009: ix). The intersection of unequal power relations is highlighted by the approach as the CA recognises that people are not equally placed to realise their human capabilities arising from structural inequalities and social divisions, such as class, 'race', gender and disabilities. Governments' responsibilities to tackling these are central to the CA's theory of social justice (Carpenter, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011). From a capabilities perspective it could be argued that Coalition Government policies increasing poverty and inequality serve to reduce the 'means' available to families, whilst cuts to local authority and community-based support services are at the same time diminishing

'conversion' factors that would enhance capabilities in these adverse circumstances. Families involved in the child protection and family court systems face a 'triple jeopardy' of punitive practices that fail to recognize and address the impact of the socio-economic context of their lives.

The work of epidemiologists Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) have highlighted the impact of the rise in inequality in the United Kingdom. Their findings suggest that there is a very strong link between ill health, social problems and inequality. Differences in average income between countries are important up to a certain level of development, but differences within developed countries are key. Sen, like Wilkinson and Pickett (2009), also recognizes issues of relativity and the social construction of shame and stigma associated with poverty and other inequalities. As Sen has argued poverty leads to the deprivation of certain basic capabilities, and these can vary, 'from such elementary physical ones as being well nourished, being adequately clothed and sheltered, avoiding preventable morbidity, and so forth, to more complex social achievements such as taking part in the life of the community, being able to appear in public without shame, and so on' (Sen, 1995: 15). Chase and Walker (2012: 740) describe poverty as 'a meta arena for the emergence of shame' and discuss how shame is co-constructed (feeling shame and being shamed), including people being dehumanised by the systems and structures that govern access to social and material resources.

Lister (2004: 7) also highlights the material as well as non-material manifestations of poverty, and quotes Jones and Novak's (1999) perspective that 'poverty has to be understood not just as a disadvantaged and insecure economic *condition* but also a shameful and corrosive social *relation*'. Lister (2013: 112)

argues that research with people living in poverty has highlighted 'the psychological pain all too often associated with poverty: disrespect, humiliation and an assault on dignity and self-esteem; shame and stigma; and also powerlessness, lack of voice, and denial of full human rights and diminished citizenship. These stem in part from a process of 'othering' by which people in poverty are treated as the 'other'. This 'othering' process can be seen in the media and political discourse on families living in poverty, as discussed earlier in this article. The process of 'othering' is compounded when material inequality intersects with status inequality that is linked to factors such as race, gender and disability, as well as 'misrepresentation' which acknowledges the political dimension of social injustice (Fraser, 2008; Lister 2013).

Lister (2013) argues for a human rights approach to poverty, which invites a structural analysis to the causes of poverty and challenges the dominant discourses that employ individualistic explanations. She suggests that the CA 'enhances a human rights approach from shifting the focus from formal rights to the ability of people to exercise those rights' (Lister, 2013: 116). In the CA there is an acknowledgement of the need for the state to impose limits on some parental rights and freedoms in order to protect and promote the capabilities and rights of children (Nussbaum and Dixon, 2012). However a capabilities perspective does raise uncomfortable moral issues for our society whilst government policies are increasing inequality, cutting services that can support vulnerable families, and promoting policies such as the speedier removal from parents and forced adoption of children.

It has been suggested that a focus on structural inequality minimizes the role of individual agency in people's problems (Gove, 2013). However both the CA and the work of Lister offer alternative perspectives. A crucial element in the CA is agency freedom. Sen (2009) argues that agency freedom must be conceptualized as intrinsically important. Capabilities are substantive freedoms; the potential to do, or to be something that is social valued, and capabilities are diminished by poverty and other forms of inequality. Similarly Lister (2004: 157) cites a range of empirical material to demonstrate how 'people experiencing poverty are actors in their own lives, but within the bounds of frequently formidable and oppressive structural and cultural constraints, which are themselves the product of others' agency'. Both approaches highlight the relationship between agency and structure as pivotal to the contemporary conceptualization of poverty as a dynamic process rather than a fixed state.

What is the relevance to policy and practice regarding child neglect?

It has been argued above that, contrary to the dominant discourse on child neglect, poverty does matter when thinking about how to prevent future neglect and work with families where neglect is already occurring. Whilst the dominant child protection discourse about neglect focuses on individual blame and parental pathology, there is much evidence from a range of disciplines that indicate structural causes of poverty impact in complex ways on individuals' psychological and social functioning. Poverty and other forms of inequality are central issues for social justice and considerations of how a society treats its most vulnerable.

If Government truly wanted to address child neglect and promote the welfare of children, serious attention needs to be paid to the range of policies that are increasing poverty, inequality and social deprivation across our society. Bywaters (2013: 4) defines child welfare inequalities as, 'unequal chances, experiences and outcomes of child welfare that are systematically associated with social advantage/disadvantage' He suggests the reframing of child welfare in terms of social inequalities in ways that parallel the well-established health inequalities discourse. A public health approach to reducing poverty and inequalities would also serve to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who may be suffering from neglect, but are not identified as such by professionals.

Whilst not within the scope of this article to discuss in detail, there is much literature to suggest that poverty and inequality have a direct negative impact on children's development, irrespective of parental characteristics and behaviour, especially in adolescence (Hooper, et al, 2007; Bradshaw, 2011; Cooper and Stewart, 2013). For example Viner et al (2014) conclude that the lack of gains made by the UK in child, adolescent, and young adult mortality as compared to other some countries are substantially caused by structural risk factors. Hartas' (2014) analysis of cohort studies found that family income and maternal education have a greater impact on children's educational attainment and well-being than any particular parenting styles. Silence about inequality and the adoption of a 'poverty-blind approach' by child welfare agencies and practitioners can only serve to reinforce the blaming of individual families, the

decontextualisation of their lives, and in the process fail to promote their capabilities and improve the well-being of many children and their families.

Over the past decade a considerable body of research has developed regarding effective family support services, including those for children and families where neglect has been identified (Daniel, 2013). Due to the complex nature of neglect, it is generally recognised that there are rarely easy solutions or a single intervention that addresses the different dimensions of neglect. Studies, such as Hooper et al (2007) and Burgess et al (2014), highlight the importance of social support to mitigate the risk of neglect among parents living in poverty. Accessible and effective early help community-based family support services, such as family centres have been widely recognised as being key in preventing problems escalating and strengthening protective factors (Tunstall et al, 2007; Munro, 2011; Daniel et al, 2014).

Featherstone et al, (2014: 32) provide a powerful critique of the current *child-focused* orientation of the child protection system that promotes 'the child simply as an individual unanchored in place and with an identity that can be reconstructed at will'. They argue for change that includes recognition of the centrality of relationships and the role of family and community in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. Drawing on the CA, Bartley (2006) found that the two factors that make resilience possible and increase people's capabilities are the quality of human relationships and the quality of public responses. Bartley (2006) suggests that the key to promoting children's well-being is to help their parents and increase the living standards of poor families,

including the improvement of social housing, schools and other public services. Children experiencing neglect are therefore likely to be assisted by a reversal in the significant reduction of community and formal support services, such as children centres (Ridge, 2013).

In terms of individual social workers and other professionals' practice, Burgess et al (2014) suggest that assessments of neglect should explicitly attend to the impact the wider social and environmental factors that place additional pressure on parents and effect children's lives, and packages of intervention need to address these factors. Although the ecological approach outlined in the Assessment Framework (DH, 2000) requires environmental factors to be considered, studies by Hooper et al (2007) and Burgess et al (2014) found that that practitioners can tend to overlook and fail to assess adequately socio-economic factors. Hooper et al (2007) found in discussion with professionals that poverty often slipped out of sight. They concluded that: 'A limited conception of poverty, lack of resources to address it, and lack of attention to the impacts of trauma, addiction and lifelong disadvantage on the choices that people experience themselves as having may contribute to overemphasizing agency at the expense of structural inequality' (Hooper et al, 2007: 97). Given the current policy context and dominant discourse this is unsurprising, but must be challenged.

Neglect is complex and often multi-dimensional. It is not argued that psychological factors are unimportant; on the contrary, assessments require a level of sophisticated analysis that recognizes both psychological as well as social

influences on parents' and children's capabilities and the inter-relationship between these. Nussbaum (2011) ideas on *combined capabilities* can help develop of understanding of these connections. Combined capabilities are freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and political, social and economic contexts that support these capabilities. She identifies internal capabilities or characteristics of a person, including personality traits, intellectual and emotional capacities, states of bodily fitness and health, internalized learning, skills of perception and movement, as being highly relevant to combined capabilities. However internal capabilities are developed in interaction with the social, economic, familial and political environments. A role of society and governments is to support the development of internal capabilities and create environments that facilitate opportunities for people to function in accordance with these capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011). This must also be the aim of child welfare professionals.

Not only are detailed assessments that incorporate analyses of the impact of poverty and inequality likely to produce more appropriate and effective intervention plans, but also serve to uphold both children's and parents' human rights. The Supreme Court case *Re B (A Child) (Care Proceedings: Threshold Criteria)* [2013] UKSC 33, [2013] 1 WLR 1911 is clear that 'before making an adoption order ... the court must be satisfied that there is no practical way of the authorities (or others) providing the requisite assistance and support' (paragraph 105). For some children and families greater attention to poverty, other structural inequalities and support provisions may not change the outcome of care proceedings, but the process will have been more just. For

others, however, detailed attention to the complex interactions between parents' life histories, their current social circumstances and effective support services could result in the child remaining in the family (Gupta et al, 2014).

Finally attention to poverty and inequality also requires critical consideration of professionals' relationships with parents and children. Both the CA and the work of Lister require attention to be paid to understanding the use of power and harnessing it to develop strengths and capabilities, whilst diminishing experiences of shame, stigma and powerlessness. In this respect we need to listen to the experiences of families living in poverty who have experienced the child protection system. In workshops with families the importance of recognizing structural causes of psychological distress was highlighted. These emotions were compounded by experiences of a child protection system that left many feeling powerless, voiceless, unfairly blamed and on occasions 'set up to fail' (Gupta and ATD Fourth World, forthcoming). The 'us' and 'them' 'othering' processes associated with poverty were reinforced by their status as parents involved with child protection services. However social work can also be experienced differently through practice that recognizes the complex interactions between personal problems and structural inequality and challenges the dominant discourse individualizing risk and blaming families for their poverty. Professionals must use their power in ways that promote rather than diminish human dignity and family members' capabilities.

Conclusion

The current construction of neglect within the child protection discourse reflects a political and policy context that blames individual families for their problems, and promotes the 'rescue', and forced adoption of children. Social workers have been urged to 'be more assertive with dysfunctional parents, courts to be less indulgent of poor parents', and to increase the number of adoptions (Gove, 2012). This is occurring alongside cuts in benefits and family support services and a lack of acknowledgement that poverty plays a part in the problem. In this article it has been argued that poverty and inequality do matter and need to be taken seriously if we truly want to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

The association between poverty and neglect is demonstrated in the research on poverty and parenting. Our understanding of the interrelationship of psychological and social factors can be enhanced by wider theories on poverty, inequality and social justice, such as the work of Sen, Nussbaum and Lister. In terms of improving the lives of children and working with families deemed to be neglectful, change is required on many levels, including poverty reduction strategies and an increase in family and community support services. For social workers and other professionals, assessments and packages of support must incorporate analyses of the wider contexts of families' lives, as well as attention to their use of power and what relationship-based practice means in an unequal society. For all of us there will be benefits of living in a society that is a more just and humane place for our most vulnerable children and their families.

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