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Article:
Casey, Beth and Hackett, Simon (2021) Deconstructing Discourses in Assessments of Child Neglect. British Journal of Social Work. pp. 2097-2115. ISSN: 1468-263X

https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab044

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British Journal of Social Work (2021) **51**, 2097–2115
doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcab044
Advance Access Publication March 12, 2021

Deconstructing Discourses in Assessments of Child Neglect

B. Casey[1,*] and S. Hackett[2]

[1]*Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York, YO10 5DD, York, UK*
[2]*Department of Sociology, Durham University, DH1 3HN, Durham, UK*

*Correspondence to Beth Casey, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York, YO10 5DD, A/C/115, York, UK. E-mail: *beth.casey@york.ac.uk*

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of a qualitative study exploring how child neglect is 'performed' in social work practice. Informed by Foucauldian and feminist theoretical positions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten local authority social workers, eight Children's Centre professionals in England and eight parents who had received professional intervention due to concerns about child neglect. In addition, ten case files were analysed where child neglect was a substantive concern. This article explores the discourses that were produced in social workers' assessments of child neglect. In a neo-liberal context in which cuts are being made to childcare services, professionals were preoccupied with the identification and management of neglectful families by risk. Professional debates surrounding contested thresholds into services and categorisation of neglectful families are explored. Judgements of 'good enough' mothering as well as bureaucratic and managerial constraints to holistic, analytical and quality assessments are identified. The article also explores the bureaucratic performance of children's assessed identities through which children become the objects of the assessment rather than active subjects. The article concludes with recommendations for practice and future research.

Keywords: child neglect, discourse, feminist theory, Foucauldian theory, gender, social work practice

Accepted: February 2021

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Introduction

Neglect is the most prevalent form of child maltreatment in the UK and the most frequently used category of abuse for children who are subject to a child protection plan (DE, 2018). Research strongly supports the view that neglect can lead to poor outcomes for children in both the short- and long-term (Daniel and Taylor, 2006) with a deleterious impact upon emotional, physical and cognitive, psychological and behavioural development (Turney and Tanner, 2001; Glaser and Prior, 2002; Parton, 1995). Social workers' identification of cases of neglect, as well their assessment of its impact, is key practice concerns. The practice of such assessments can be complex and is somewhat contested in the literature in several important regards:

Definitions and thresholds

Working Together (DH, 2018, p. 104) defines neglect 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 or development'. Applying this definition of neglect in practice becomes problematic given a lack of guidance on the application of the broad statement and explanation of key terms (Turney, 2000). Defining and assessing neglect occurs within a context of bureaucratic and managerial demands generated by neo-liberalism with increased emphasis on accountability and efficiency and the standardisation of social work practice (Carey, 2008).

Brandon *et al.* (2008) found that there was often a preoccupation with threshold levels into services and with which professional group was responsible for a child. Limited resources and work pressures impact on threshold levels and eligibility criteria (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010; Turney *et al.*, 2011). Thresholds are therefore not static, but can vary between local areas. Difficulties in meeting the threshold for child protection are particularly acute in neglect cases (Brandon *et al.*, 2008). High threshold levels for children being subject to a child protection plan in cases of neglect can result in families not receiving services early enough (Farmer and Lutman, 2010). Further, delays in action being taken can result from 'inconsistency… about whether the threshold for proceedings had been met' (Oftsed, 2014, p. 28) and can have a significant impact on the child (Oftsed, 2014). Studies have also found examples of re-referrals not resulting in appropriate follow-up; services being withdrawn too quickly; cases closed without the completion of core assessments (Brandon *et al.*, 2008) and patterns of interventions ending and then resuming (Oftsed, 2014). Broadhurst *et al.* (2010, p. 359) found that, within a system dictated by performance timescales and auditing, 'speed practices' can become normalised. Working Together (DH, 2018, para. 16) recommends

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the production of a local threshold document, including criteria for action. Emphasis is also placed on the importance of early help services on a continuum of support as 'more effective in promoting the welfare of children than reacting later' (DH, 2018, p. 12).

Assessing attachment

Attachment theory is acknowledged as helpful in identifying and understanding neglectful relationships; observing a parent and child together can give insight into the process of caregiving (Stone, 2003). Brandon (2014) argues that indicators of neglect are best observed through child and parent interactions. However, often not enough emphasis is placed in assessments on observing parent–child interactions and attachment behaviours (Oftsed, 2014). Although routinely accepted, attachment theories can be criticised for their cultural, class and gender bias and for their tendency to examine parent–child relationships in isolation from their social context. Aldgate (2006) advocates the use of a 'developmental-ecological' model of child development, recognising that normative attainment needs to be understood within a social context, including friendships, school and community. Such a developmental–ecological model of neglect recognises different contexts of maltreatment, including the 'interactional context' that focuses on parent–child interaction and the broader context including community and cultural (Belsky, 1993).

Unbalanced assessments

Ofsted found that the quality of assessments in neglect cases was variable (Ofsted, 2014). Not enough consideration was given to family history, particularly the impact of a parent's childhood on their own parenting (Ofsted, 2014). There has been concern that assessments can become unbalanced, without due attention to all three dimensions of the *Assessment Framework* (DH, 2000) triangle and the interconnections between them. With local areas developing local protocols for assessment (DH, 2018), Single Assessment Procedures, encompassing early help and statutory assessments, are still informed by the principles of the Assessment Framework. Studies of assessment in cases of neglect have found: an overriding focus on assessing the developmental needs of the child (Horwath, 2002); the marginalisation of parenting capacity and social and environmental context (Horwath, 2002; Cleaver and Walker, 2004); a focus on parenting capacity when professionals comprehend neglect as an omission of care without considering the impact on the child (Horwath, 2002); and an overriding focus on parents' issues rather than analysing the impact of 'adult behaviours' on the child (Ofsted, 2014).

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Empathy with parents can also result in a lop-sided assessment that overemphasises the family context (Horwath, 2002). Turney *et al.* (2011) argue that the dimensions of the assessment triangle should not be viewed as discrete categories, but that systematic thinking should be used to explore interconnections and interacting risk factors (Brandon *et al.*, 2009; Turney *et al.*, 2011).

Timescales

The importance of a 'timely' assessment has been recognised by Munro (2011a,b, para. 2.1) who states that 'from a child or young person's point of view, the earlier help is received, the better'. Embedded within the modernisation agenda, timescales were introduced as part of the DH (2000) *Assessment Framework*. Whilst the desire to reduce delay for children and families is laudable, there may be inadvertent consequences, including social workers making quick categorisations (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010) and negative impact on the quality of assessments (Horwath, 2002). Rigid timescales are particularly problematic in neglect cases which are often chronic, complex and multi-faceted (Stone, 2003). An over-emphasis on bureaucratic procedures and processes adversely impacts on relationship building and face-to-face contact. Munro (2011a,b, para. 1.11) reflects that bureaucratic demand, including prescription and documentation, were introduced to improve practice and increase 'transparency and accountability'. However, she argues that this has led to the over-standardisation of practice and the undervaluing of social workers' skills. The demand for services means that assessments can become crisis-driven and incident-led (Horwath, 2002) and, as a result, cases of neglect go 'to the bottom of the pile' (Horwath, 2007).

The invisible child

Despite the centrality of the importance of observing the child and interactions within the family, the child is often not seen as part of neglect assessments. Ofsted (2014) found some assessments to be child focused, with clear descriptions and analysis. However, the impact of neglect on child's development was considered in only half the assessments. Few addressed the child's views and experiences, together with potential for change and the long-term impact of neglect on the child (Oftsed, 2014). A common finding is a failure to consider and understand the child's lived experience (Brandon *et al.*, 2014). This can result in practitioners having a limited understanding of the impact of neglect on the child and their own perspectives (Horwath and Tarr, 2015). Brandon *et al.* (2009) stress that the 'invisible child' is a theme of most serious case reviews.

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There is often an absence of direct work undertaken with children when assessing needs (Horwath, 2002) and it is sometimes not clear how much contact social workers have with children and in what context (Dalzell and Sawyer, 2007). The literature has highlighted several reasons for this, including: an overriding focus on adults leading to the marginalisation of children (Holland, 2011); parents' difficulties and issues overwhelming the professional (Turney *et al.*, 2011); high workloads and timescales making the establishment of meaningful relationships with children difficult (Horwath, 2002) and an over-bureaucratised system that has reduced the capacity of social workers to spend time with children and develop meaningful relationships (Munro, 2010). Even when they are involved in assessments, children's voices may not be given much weight. Holland (2011, p. 97) found that children remained 'minor characters' within assessments and decision-making. Children's needs were presented as standardised and prescriptive. Children were often portrayed through the use of developmental charts or viewed in terms of how they 'fitted' with a certain tool rather than through close observation and using the tool as an aid to analyse behaviour or experiences (Holland, 2011). Bland descriptions of the child, an absence of children's voices and 'automatic thinking' can be viewed as a consequence of rule-driven systems of social work (Higgins, 2019). *Working Together* (DH, 2018, p. 25) emphasises the importance of a child-centred, holistic assessment, ensuring the voice of the child is heard. Further, in response to recent recommendations, some Single Assessment Frameworks have included the My World Triangle interpretation of the *Assessment Framework*.

Mothers

Research highlights the gendered nature of child welfare policy and practice in relation to neglect with mothers 'overwhelmingly identified as perpetrators of neglect' (Daniel and Taylor, 2001, p. 24). The question of responsibility for child maltreatment is 'key gender controversy' (Scourfield, 2003, p. 23). Turney (2000, p. 50) argues care and nurturing are identified with the feminine in the west and this 'has particular salience for a consideration of child neglect'. Social workers' holding of women responsible in cases of neglect (Strega *et al.*, 2008) builds on and reproduces traditional psychoanalytical positions and attachment theory, specifically around the 'good enough' mother. Although, increasingly, research has focused on the importance of father–child attachment (Ahnert and Schoppe-Sullivan, 2020), in practice, it still draws heavily on the notion of motherhood. The association between femininity and caring has implications for understanding neglect with any breakdown in care being attributed to women (Daniel and Taylor, 2006).

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In summary, the existing literature highlights some of the ongoing debates, problematic issues and constraints to quality assessments in cases of child neglect: a pre-occupation with threshold levels into services; challenges to analytical assessments; impacts of managerialism and bureaucratisation; the theme of the 'invisible child' and mothers as responsible. These issues set the context for this study, which sought to investigate evidence from a sample of assessments and information from professionals about their experiences of assessing child neglect.

The study

This study explored the performance of child neglect in social work practice. The aim was to explore constructions, subjectivities and discourses produced within social work assessments of neglect and to consider the implications of these discourses and constructs for improving social work practice in relation to the assessment of child neglect.

The study used a theoretical approach which combined Feminist poststructuralism and Foucauldian thought. Key aspects included the relationship between subjectivity, discourse, language and power. Drawing on performativity theory (Butler, 2008), the study explored how binary relations constitute identities, subject positions and discourses (Butler, 2008). Language was treated as being socially and historically located in discourse (Weedon, 1997). Discourse was understood as being reproduced in social institutions and individual subjectivities. The position was taken that power is 'exercised through the control of discourse' (Fook, 2002, p. 66) and as a result, certain discourses are privileged and constitute dominant subjectivities (Gavey, 1989; Davies *et al.*, 2006). The study aimed to explore how subjectivities were 'performed' within interviews and case files by reproducing certain discourses.

Social work practice was understood in terms of its occurrence within a neo-liberalist context. Neo-liberalism or advanced liberalism encompasses specific strategies including individualism, market rationalities, governing at a distance (Parton, 1999) and the development of techniques of budget, accountability and auditing (Rose, 1993). Risk thinking has become a major feature of neo-liberalist governing (Pollack, 2010). Parton (1999, p. 121) argues that in the face of resource constraints and cuts to social service provisions concern about risk has become a central concern 'differentiating high risk from the rest' and allowing cases to be prioritised. Increasingly, the professional task becomes to regulate and manage populations through the development of techniques to identify, classify and manage populations (Rose, 2000). The study aimed to explore how individuals' subjectivities are organised and structured through standardised assessments and online databases. Research identifies that assessment records and forms can be used rigidly (Cleaver and

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Walker, 2004) or as an information-gathering tool marginalising an analytical understanding (Horwath, 2002). This occurs within the increasingly managerial and bureaucratic context of social work, where increased emphasis on efficiency and accountability (Carey, 2008) is reflected through auditing, monitoring and procedures (Burton and van de Broek, 2009), constitutive processes (Chambon *et al.*, 1999) and new technologies which regulate practice (Carey, 2008).

Method

Data were collected from twenty-six face-to-face interviews with professionals and parents involved in neglect assessments, with further documentary analysis of ten case files. Interviewees comprised eight social workers and two team managers from two local authority Children's Services teams (targeted and specialist) in England, as well as two children centre managers and six family support workers from four Children's Centres. Eight parents who had received professional intervention as a result of concerns about child neglect were also interviewed, but the results are reported separately (Casey, 2013). A non-probability criterion and snowballing sampling method were used with participants able to suggest other agencies and further participants. Interviews with professionals were carried out at their place of work. In addition, ten case files were analysed where child neglect was a substantiate concern. This included five 'child in need' (CIN) and five 'child protection' cases.

Prior to contacting agency sites and embarking on the collection of data, ethical approval was gained from the School of Applied Social Sciences' Research Ethics Committee at Durham University as well as from the ethics committees of each of the participating agencies.

Interviews were informed by narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry moves away from 'expert-led' research and traditional assumptions around the researcher/researched relationship 'toward the idea that interviewees are narrators with stories to tell and voices of their own' (Chase, 2005, p. 60). Through this method, when participants told their narrative, they performed the 'self, experience and reality' (Chase, 2005, p. 657), including, for example, the performance of assessment of neglect and constructions of subjectivities in relation to the neglectful mother. Professionals constructed detailed narratives about their professional life, for example, around their assessment of families and which family members they were most likely to engage with. Epiphanies (Denzin, 2001) or turning points were also identified.

Although the interviews were semi-structured in part by an interview schedule, this was used as a guide. Broad-based, open-ended and non-blaming questions and prompts were used with a minimum of

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interruptions. Recommendations were also invited, specifically regarding changes to social work practices in neglect cases.

All interviews were recorded and then transcribed and NVIVO used to identify, code and analyse the main themes in the interview and case file data. A feminist post-structural discourse analysis approach was used to analyse the data drawing upon Foucault, feminist post-structuralism and 'performativity theory' (Butler, 2008, p. 189) and deconstructive textual analysis (Opie, 1992; Fawcett, 2000). Given that the study was concerned with the performative nature of identities (Butler, 2008), emphasis was placed on how subjectivities were constituted by drawing upon different discourses. Attention was paid to those discourses that were privileged (Davies *et al.*, 2006) and presented as 'common sense' and to words that were repeated and emphasised within assessments and what they connote, particularly in relation to discourses, for example, attachment theory. In addition, emphasis was placed on which subjectivities were marginalised (Strega, 2009) and discourses omitted and the significance of these omissions. Crucially, the analysis identified multiple and contradictory subjectivities within and between narratives and how alternative positions challenged dominant and accepted subjectivities.

Results

Four core themes emerged from the analysis of interviews with professionals and case file data are as follows.

Management of risk and contesting thresholds

Professionals discussed the difficulties they faced when making a decision about whether threshold levels for service involvement had been reached. This included whether a case was: neglect or 'poverty'; warranted Children Centre support or referral to children's services; could be classified as Children in Need or Child Protection or required further intervention. Women were held responsible for neglect through the construction of specific 'risk identities' highlighting personal and psychological factors. For example, mothers were sometimes constructed as being too absorbed in their own needs to respond to their child's needs:

> the vulnerability there, the depression … they're too absorbed in their own needs to actually appreciate where the child is in all of this (Team Manager 2).

When 'operationalising' neglect this gaze became more ingrained as judgements were made around 'good enough' mothering.

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Several professionals emphasised the difficulty of distinguishing when poverty becomes a neglectful situation. Children Centre Professional X commented:

> it's *(the home)* so bare, so badly decorated, but I know for a fact there's no neglect there, they just haven't got a penny to rub together.

Although poverty does not cause neglect, it is clearly a significant factor in neglect. Some professionals appeared to make a binary distinction between poverty versus neglect. This is problematic and risks an overly liberal response where action is not taken due to assumptions about cultural norms and working under the rule of optimism (Revell and Burton, 2016).

Children Centre support, providing early intervention and a preventative approach, was identified as vital for those families who did not quite meet the threshold for social service involvement. However, several professionals commented that the threshold level before Children's Services become involved remained high. As a result, Children's Services were deemed, as Children Centre Worker 3 explains, to 'only have time to take the most in need'. The more 'borderline' cases can get 'passed back' several times before any action gets taken. High threshold levels were also frustrating for Children's Services social workers, resulting in reactive rather than preventative work due to family problems having 'gone on for longer' (Team Manager 2).

The threshold between a CIN and child protection case also lacked clarity. Team Manager 2 explained that the point at which care is deemed 'good enough' for the family to be re-classified as CIN is not clear. This results in situations of repeated registration, de-registration and re-registration:

> Neglect can ebb and flow … they've (family) done reasonable ok … gone down to child in need … it was good enough, it was ok … what is good enough?

Case closing then does not necessarily lead to the end of problems. Arguably, very high thresholds can cause cases to be closed or de-registered from child protection services too rapidly. This pattern was also present within the case files. Performing neglect becomes part of service rationing strategies, with levels of 'good enough' care determined by available resources. In the face of high caseloads, cases are closed rapidly resulting in changes not being sustained or deteriorating:

> When the children were de-registered, X (mother) evidenced her ability to increase her parenting capacity and she was described as "on the ball". However, over the past two weeks regression has occurred, as she has been seen to be struggling to cope (Case 4).

The consequences of a lack of clarity of measurements and threshold levels of child neglect and reliance on the vague discourse of 'good

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enough' mothering have consequences for mothers who struggle to understand what is expected of them.

Again, the emphasis was placed on establishing whether parenting was 'good enough' when making a decision around fostering or initiating care proceedings. Team Manager 2 reflects:

> there are some improvements but is it good enough, it's trying to get through that threshold of is it serious enough to remove a child.

Decisions here are based primarily on whether parenting is good enough—not on whether a child's needs are being met or whether their development is being severely and adversely impacted. Even in these key assessment decisions, it would appear that the baseline is still the parent and not the child.

Threshold levels: differences between professionals

Several professionals reflected that threshold criteria and standards of 'good enough' parenting differ between social workers and other professional groups. Health professionals were viewed as advocating 'removal' of children when parents were delivering higher levels of care than the levels required by social workers. Professionals also commented that standards were dependent upon experience and that standards of 'good enough' parenting warranting action lowered with experience. Social Worker 2 suggested:

> good enough parenting … newly qualified workers … have a case of neglect and feel that it needs the children perhaps removing … a more experienced worker may go in there and say … the threshold isn't quite met.

More experienced social workers were seen as adopting lowered standards demanded by the institution, although these standards were viewed as clashing with personal standards of basic care, which remained. Social Worker 5 explained that:

> You get a lot of social workers, especially the older ones, saying well it'll do … but in another breath they're saying I wouldn't let my child live there.

There was a concern that social workers can become so accustomed to accounts of neglect that they become desensitised to its impact. Perceptions of child neglect also differed between social workers depending on individual value bases and beliefs. Threshold levels were also deemed to be affected following serious case reviews, with an influx of referrals to children's services being made.

The 'bad' neglectful mother exists contrast to the mother that is 'good enough'. The phrase, 'good enough' suggests an easily attainable level of adequacy (Lawler, 2000), pathologises 'bad' mothers who are unable to

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provide this level. In a neo-liberalist context, responsibility for 'bad' mothering remains at an individual level: neglectful mothers are expected to become self-reliant through changes to individual parenting. The dominance of this discourse means that the need for changes to socio-economic structures and increased resources for child welfare services falls from view, 'justifying' the rolling back of preventative services.

Bureaucratic constraints

Professionals critiqued bureaucratic and managerial demands placed upon them. There was a concern that the assessment generalises, rather than reflects, individual subjectivities and circumstances. Social Worker 8 exemplified this point:

> Boxes are filled without giving a true reflection maybe of the individual family's situations and it goes back again to generalisation of people.

There was also some concern that the realities of families' experiences were constrained by the standardised nature of the assessment form. Team Manager 2 emphasised that the tick box format can 'break up' thinking rather than enhance an analytic and holistic view of the family.

Professionals reflected on their (limited) use of assessment tools and scales, such as those provided as part of the package of resources introduced by the DH (2000) Assessment Framework. Several reflected that in practice scales are used as a 'tick box' questionnaire. Case file assessments were often 'unbalanced', with more 'weighting' within-case file assessments given towards 'child developmental needs' and 'parenting capacity' rather than wider 'family and environmental' factors, in particular those domains relating to social context and poverty. The 'family and environmental' section was treated as an 'add on' at the end of the assessment rather than integrated with the other dimensions. Further, the 'analysis' section of the assessment was often presented in non-analytical terms, using a summary of material described elsewhere in the assessment.

Social Worker 1 reiterated that a tick box approach to the assessment and a lack of 'linking things together' results from an absence of training on how to 'use' the assessment on a practical level, including analysing information and completing care plans. Team Manager 1 commented that 'most of them (newly qualified social workers) have never been trained in the tools'. Further, when asked directly about the home conditions assessment, Social Worker 5 commented, 'I haven't come across one'. In addition, a holistic and analytical approach to assessment was viewed as hindered by statutory requirements to complete initial and core assessments within a specific time period, high caseloads and an abundance of paperwork. Social Worker 8 reflected concerns in the

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academic literature (Carey, 2008; Parton, 2011) that these demands have adversely impacted on face-to-face and therapeutic work with families:

> massive caseloads so you struggle to get everything in … time constraints … you're monitoring the deterioration of the situation as opposed to going in there and affecting any positive change.

Professionals reflected on pressure to complete assessments within legal timescales and that they have limited time to engage with 'difficult' families, liaise with different agencies and write up the assessment. Performance data are collected on 'compliance' with timescales (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010) emphasising efficiency rather than assessment quality. Social Worker 8 argued that although guidelines were clear in terms of timescales for assessment completion, how to conduct the assessment, the 'quality' and 'content' remains vague. Together with caseload pressures 'boxes are filled … without giving a true reflection maybe of individual families' situations'.

A child-centred approach?

It was common in case files for the child to be depicted as failing to meet expected milestones and experiencing developmental 'delays', without specificity about the nature of that delay or about how it has been measured:

> all children have some level of developmental delay … X is severely delayed educationally (CIN 5).

Within the written assessment documents, descriptions of the developmental needs of the child were sometimes presented as generalised, standardised and lacking in individuality. In CIN 6, for example, the developmental needs described could be those of any child:

> X needs to have all her health needs met … needs to live in a safe, clean, comfortable home.

In most cases, some reference was made in the written assessments to the observation of attachment behaviour, that is, the relationship between the child and mother (specifically, with fathers absent from such analysis), although there was wide variation between cases in terms of details of the observation. It was more unusual for case files to include observations of children's relationships with friends, siblings and other relevant adults, which would provide a more holistic view of children's relationships. There was also limited discussion of understanding of the child's developmental needs within a social and ecological context. However, there were some examples where social context had been considered and where opportunities for children to contribute positively to their own development were identified. In one case, a child was

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described as increasing in confidence through attendance at an after-school club. However, often, when reference was made to a child's resilience it was without context, clarity or understanding of the phrase.

Although there was some expression of a child's personality, traits tended not to be supported by examples, incorporating instead vague developmental statements and standardised descriptions about 'age appropriate' behaviour. For example:

> X (child) has always presented as appropriate for her age and gender ... she is age appropriately inquisitive and confidently explores her environment (Case 1).

Within the 'identity' section of the assessment children were described only very briefly and in terms of their 'culture', ethnicity and family relationships. Children's interests, hobbies, friendships, likes/dislikes that would provide a more holistic view of the child's identity, were absent. Although, within most cases children's strengths and difficulties were presented, the 'weighting' tended to be on more deficit descriptions:

> X (child) has been observed to imitate his mothers' behaviour around cleaning, there has been examples of when X (child) has made up stories (Case 4).

On the whole, children were 'seen' and observed through the dominance of child development discourse rather than engaged with. There was little sense of social workers being able to engage or build relationships with children. Social Worker 7 suggested that bureaucratic demands adversely affected her ability to gain children's views:

> how much of the children's views you get depends ... how much time you've got ... when you've got lots and lots of cases ... you can't do what you want to do.

In most cases, children's views and feelings on decisions made, particularly on the aims of plans or assessments, were omitted. Within four cases, in the 'views of the child' section of the assessment, it was stated that the child is unable to comment or express wishes and views as they are 'too young'. There was, however, no discussion of the communication methods employed to gain children's views, including age-appropriate child-centred approaches. When children were considered old enough to express views, they were presented without detail or depth. There was little exploration of the child's understanding of problems experienced within their family and their effect.

Discussion

Informed by Foucauldian and feminist theoretical positions, this article explores the discourses that were produced in social workers'

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assessments of child neglect. The findings of the study identify several problematic discourses produced in the study sample. In a neo-liberalist context in which cuts have been made to child-care services, thresholds for access to support services remained high. This sometimes resulted in re-referrals; a quick closure of cases; a worsening of families' problems before Children's Services became involved and patterns of registration and de-registration. This implies that in some cases, timely assessments, embedded within thinking around early and sustained long-term intervention and therapeutic relationships with families, are difficult for professionals to achieve. There appears to be a significant disconnect between practices which are often short-term and incident focused and the nature of neglect as a longer term, developmental issue.

We believe that our findings indicate that threshold levels still need to be clarified, highlighting a need for better multi-agency training on responses to neglect. We agree with Ofsted (2014) recommendation of greater management oversight, ensuring that professionals are both supported and challenged when working with cases of neglect. It also seems that ecological and analytical assessments, vital for quality assessing in child neglect, are curtailed by limited timescales, high caseloads and an abundance of paperwork. More resources (in terms of both professionals and services) would help to reduce caseloads, providing professionals with more space and time to build relationships and an understanding approach with families.

The 'bureaucratic' completion of the assessment, in which the form itself can structure and lead the assessment, also seems problematic. Improved training and supervision are required on how to use the assessment and engage in analytical thinking whilst also addressing bureaucratic constraints. This would allow professionals to have more time to engage face-to-face with families and it would be less likely that assessments would be standardised, generalised, with professionals also 'fitting' identities to boxes rather than reflecting the realities of lives and subjectivities. However, it needs be acknowledged that supervisors are working within the same adverse neo-liberal context as practitioners, impacting on supervision delivery and effectiveness.

It is important to consider these findings within the current political and social context. More families are likely to see reductions in financial support and increased poverty as a consequence of the roll-out of universal credit, the 'two-child policy' and limits to some welfare payments and benefits caps (Butler, 2018; Savage, 2019). Campaigners have warned that reforms will increase poverty levels (Butler, 2018; Savage, 2019) with cuts in government funding for children's services (Butler, 2019) likely to make it even more difficult for social workers to intervene (Burgess *et al.*, 2014). This context presents a complex challenge to the recommendations outlined, including early intervention, and an increase in therapeutic work with families. Further, the dominance of

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individualised and gendered performances of neglect and 'good enough' mothering upholds neo-liberalist governance. It would be difficult to challenge these constructions effectively without significant changes to the policy context that would encompass the provision of much needed resources and more equal social and welfare policy towards families.

Despite the principle of 'child focused' practice, our findings suggest that assessments still largely draw upon the child being observed (though a theoretical lens of child development and attachment theory) rather than being engaged with. This produces partial and seemingly 'objective' descriptions of children viewed according to whether they meet developmental 'norms'. Both 'delay' and 'need' were addressed imprecisely, routinised and generalised. Although in most cases there was some reference made to the observation of attachment behaviour between the parent and child, details of the interaction and potential impact on the child varied widely. Given that signs of neglect are best observed through parent child interactions (Brandon *et al.*, 2014), and findings indicate increased attention should be given to parent related risk factors (Mulder *et al.*, 2018), it is crucial that professionals are trained in observing attachment behaviours and how such behaviours may relate to neglect. Professionals need to be able to understand all the behaviours that might occur, even when a child presents as 'resilient' (Oftsed, 2014).

We also found very few examples of children being consulted about their views of their situation. Creative and imaginative practice to illicit children's views seems acutely lacking. Findings indicate that professionals could benefit from training on gaining children's views and wishes, particularly around child-centred methods appropriate to age and developmental levels. This could incorporate thinking about both verbal and non-verbal methods, including the use of toys or drawing (Jones, 2003). Case files offered little evidence of meaningful consultation with children about critical aspects of their lives, reinforcing Ofsted's finding (2014) that training on communicating child's experience of neglect within assessments needs development. This could encompass considering children's views in relation to their experience of neglect and its effect on them; how they describe their relationship with their mother and father and/or significant others and what changes the child like to see happen (in their care, at home and other social-environmental contexts).

This study is limited by its small sample size and it is therefore not possible to generalise the findings to wider practice. Additionally, it is important to note that the primary data collection for this study took place several years ago in a time of considerable societal austerity, but before the current global pandemic. Based on our review of the current literature, we have no reason to believe that policy or practice responses to neglect have shifted over the last 5 years or so since these data were collected. Our findings are therefore tentative and are offered as 'food for thought' for those engaged in such assessments. Importantly, the

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study gave voice to the experiences of professionals and parents whose experiences are often overlooked within the research context. More research of this nature is needed in order to better understand how assessments of neglect are being performed across time and context, particularly as policies change and narratives on neglect are reshaped economically and socially.

Conclusion

Although developmental understandings are crucial in identifying neglect, an ecological understanding would encourage 'seeing' children as individuals within a variety of social and environmental contexts (Aldgate, 2006). Reiterating Holland's (2011) recommendations, it is important that in addition to observing the mother–child relationship, children are observed in different contexts (e.g. at school), with significant others (e.g. fathers, siblings and peers) and at different time of day, allowing for a more holistic view of the child. Finally, combining developmental and contextual understanding of neglect with children's rights perspective seems warranted. By viewing neglect in this way, children's rights to their needs being met at socio-economic and structural levels become urgent. It also holds to account institutions and governments that fail to meet children's rights (e.g. to be free from poverty) through inadequate social welfare policies and infrastructure.

Funding

This work was supported by an ESRC doctoral training award.

Conflict of interest: The authors are aware of no conflicts of interest.

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