

'We're giving you the sack' - Social Workers' Perspectives of Intervening in Affluent Families When There are Concerns about Child Neglect

Abstract

Few studies have examined social workers' perspectives of child protection interventions in cases of child neglect in affluent families in the UK. Using the findings from a qualitative study, this paper explores social workers' experiences of intervening in affluent families when there are child protection concerns. Focus groups and in-depth interviews were used to gather data from 30 child protection professionals from 12 local authorities across England. Findings from the study are used to explore the complex relational dynamics and power relationships that practitioners have to traverse when intervening with affluent parents that have the material resources to resist social work intervention. The paper concludes with a discussion of the skills and knowledge that are necessary for authoritative practice.

Keywords: Neglect, Affluent Families, Social Work Intervention, Class Privileges, Resistant Families, Power

Introduction

Few studies have examined social workers' perspectives of child protection investigations in cases of child neglect in affluent families. While child neglect is recognised as being the most prevalent form of child abuse in the UK (Action for Children 2014; Burgess *et al.*, 2014; Daniel *et al.*, 2011), children in affluent families remain a marginal part of the debates about child neglect in the social work literature. The dearth of attention given to the neglect experienced by children in affluent families is largely due to the perception that affluent children are low risk. When social class factors are addressed in research on neglect, the focus is overwhelmingly on families from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, because emphasis is placed on economic deprivation and material deficiencies (Howarth, 2005; Bywater *et al.*, 2015; Morris *et al.*, 2018). However, there is evidence to suggest that children from affluent backgrounds may suffer maltreatment, including neglect, in less visible ways (Felitti *et al.*, 1998; Bellis *et al.*, 2014). It has been suggested that neglectful parents from affluent backgrounds slip under the radar of social workers, and thus seldom come through the child protection system, so are less likely to show up in official reported statistics (Bellis *et al.*, 2014). Featherstone *et al.*, (2014) remind us that a great deal of social work practice is focused on families from impoverished backgrounds. Of particular consequence is that for affluent children, neglect might go undetected and their needs unrecognised, because the thresholds for determining neglect is differently interpreted (Luthar and Becker 2002; Luthar and Latedresse 2006; Luthar and Crossman, 2013). Drawing upon findings from a qualitative study that investigated how social workers intervened in affluent families when there are concerns about child neglect, this paper considers the special challenges child

protection practitioners have to traverse when intervening with affluent parents who have the material resources to resist social work intervention. The discussion examines the intricate and complex relational dynamics and power relations that social workers have to navigate to maintain a child-centred approach. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for practice and considers the necessary skills and knowledge to achieve authoritative interventions.

Child Neglect: Social Work Interventions with Families from Affluent Backgrounds

There is a dearth of empirical research that has looked at social work interventions with affluent families where there were child protection concerns of neglect. Despite child neglect being the most prevalent type of maltreatment and the largest category of abuse for children subject to a child protection plan in the UK, there are few studies of social work practice of child neglect in affluent families. Rather, emphasis is on factors such as poverty and material deficiencies, as to date, research has mostly focused on families from socio-economically disadvantaged groups, since it is recognised that some categories of neglect are often linked to material disadvantage (May-Chahal and Cawson, 2005; Taylor *et al.*, 2012; Brandon *et al.*, 2014a; Bywaters *et al.*, 2015; NSPCC, 2014; Ofsted, 2014). Research shows that children living in environments of deprivation and social inequalities are at higher risk for neglect than children from more privileged backgrounds (Sidebotham *et al.*, 2002; May-Chahal and Cawson, 2005; Daniel *et al.*, 2011; Burgess *et al.* 2014; Bywaters *et al.*, 2015; Bywaters *et al.*, 2016; Sidebotham *et al.*, 2016; Morris *et al.*, 2018). Yet significant studies also show that neglect is more likely to come to the attention of the authorities with families from lower socio-economic groups, and that middleclass and affluent

families are not subject to the same amount of state scrutiny (Corby, 2006; Radford *et al.*, 2011). Thus, the ways in which social workers intervene with affluent parents is not widely discussed in the literature.

The limited literature available suggests that neglectful affluent parents rarely come under the scrutiny of child protection services, so they do not show up in official reported statistics (Watson, 2005). It is suggested that affluent parents are more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt when allegations of abuse and neglect arise (Watson, 2005). It has been noted that a primary difficulty for social workers engaging affluent parents directly relates to the ways in which these parents use their privileged status, which can result in abuse and neglect going unrecognised and unchallenged (Brabbs, 2011; Carmi and Walker, 2015; Watson, 2005). Thus, it has been suggested that socio-economic biases play a pivotal role in determining which families come under the scrutiny of the child protection services (Asthon *et al.*, 2016; Bellis *et al.*, 2014a; Burgess *et al.*, 2014; Daniel *et al.*, 2011; Hughes *et al.*, 2014).

Lessons from Serious Case Reviews

Findings from two recent Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) involving affluent families where children have been seriously harmed or died have suggested that professional biases based on class affected the child protection decision-making processes. These SCRs highlighted the central role that the social status of the parents had in constraining and shaping the social workers' interaction with the families and more importantly, the outcomes for the children. For example, the SCR involving Child B, C, & D (Brabbs, 2011) concerned three siblings aged 11, 13 and 14 that were seriously harmed by their adoptive parents. In particular, the SCR concluded that the

social worker's perceptions and assumptions regarding the parents' social class, professional status and high academic qualifications got in the way of making a rigorous assessment (Brabbs, 2011, p21). This, Brabbs notes, detracted attention from the needs of the children, and the social worker thus failed to correctly assess the dynamics of the parent-child relationships. As Brabbs (2011) cautions, social workers may often feel intimidated in scrutinising the care-giving of affluent parents when there are child protection concerns.

In the second SCR, concerning Child A (Carmi and Walker-Hall 2015), involved three siblings, twin boys aged 3, and a girl aged 4, with severe disabilities, who were killed by their mother, similarly notes the role of social class in framing the outcomes for these children. The SCR found that, although the family was well known to children's social services as well as to a high number of health professionals; they were in contact with up to sixty professionals leading up to the time of the children's death, yet the statutory child protection process was never initiated. The SCR described this family as posing challenges to the professionals involved because of their socio-economic status, social positioning, and assertiveness. According to Carmi and Walker-Hall (2015), the social class of the family inhibited the professionals' capacity to maintain a rigorous focus on the risks these children were exposed to, and to identify indicators of neglect. Moreover, they conclude that the professionals involved all felt falsely reassured by the parents, thus comprising the children's safety. It is also suggested that the social workers may have been overawed by these parents' affluence and social status and therefore may have found it difficult to conceive of parental omissions in care, thus rendering them unable to confront the parents with their concerns. Consequently, the SCR suggests that the health and

social care professionals failed to place the children at the centre of the assessment and to correctly identify the risks the children were exposed to.

Both SCRs highlighted the centrality and importance of social class in influencing the child protection workers' interactions with the families. Brabbs (2011) maintains that both the social workers and health care providers were "lulled by the parents' disguised compliance" (p18). In particular, the SCR for Child A posits that biases and assumptions concerning the family's material wealth and social status potentially played an important role in the social workers not investigating the children's vulnerability in a timely manner (Brabbs, 2011). It should be noted that both SCRs concluded that the social workers involved struggled to understand disguised compliance in these cases and that the social class of the parents was an influential factor in their lack of appropriate action. Additionally, both SCRs have elaborated that social workers and other child welfare professionals can often feel intimidated when scrutinising affluent parents (Brabbs, 2011; Carmi and Walker-Hall, 2015). In short, these two SCRs throw a spotlight on the major challenges posed for social workers in engaging highly-resistant parents that have the status and power to evade scrutiny from the child protection system. What is perhaps most important to note is the challenge for social workers in detecting disguised compliance and assessing levels of risk. As analyses of serious case reviews have found there is a general deficit in professional skills, confidence and experience in engaging parents when neglect is the presenting problem (Brandon *et al.*, 2012; Brandon *et al.*, 2014b).

The present study therefore seeks to explore how social workers respond to parental neglect in affluent families. For the purposes of this study, we have used the

definition of neglect stated in the national child protection guidance *Working Together to Safeguard Children*:

“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” (HM Government, 2015).

The recognised categories of neglect, namely physical, medical, supervisory, emotional, and educational neglect were included in the definition (Flood and Holmes, 2016).

Method

The research was guided by three questions: (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 are necessary for frontline social workers to effectively assert their professional authority with affluent parents when there are concerns about abuse and neglect?

Twelve local authorities in England were chosen as research sites to gather the data. The Department for Communities and Local Government, *Open Data Communities* data platform was used to select the research sites. Indices of deprivation (*Income, Health, Education, Housing, Crime etc.*) by geographical areas were used to select five counties and seven local authorities, representing a geographical mix and a range of socioeconomic divisions. The approach to select the sites was informed by the idea of social class, which links not exclusively to wealth and income, but “to the

interplay between economic, social and cultural capital”, as well as around several “social and cultural indicators, such as mortality rates, educational attainment, housing conditions and forms of leisure participation’ and the status of acquaintances” (Savage *et al.*, 2013, p. 220; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2008). A number of the authorities in the sample had significant divides of wealth and poverty. The sample consisted of children’s services professionals, including frontline social workers, team managers, an Early Help team manager; principal social workers, practice leaders, designated safeguarding leads, service managers, a Head of Service for Safeguarding Standards and a Local Authority Designated Officer. The intention was to have a broad sample of key stakeholders working in child protection either in frontline practice, or with a remit for learning and development and as well as managers in the same organisation.

Data collection procedures included semi-structured interviews and focus groups with a total of 30 participants. Focus groups in each research site afforded the opportunity to gather a group of practitioners situated at different levels in their organisation to reflect on neglect from their particular vantage point. Overall, a very diverse group of children services practitioners were interviewed. The interview questions primarily focused on the practitioners’ experiences of how they engaged affluent parents when there were safeguarding concerns. The interviews and focus groups lasted on average one hour and were audio-recorded, transcribed in full, and anonymised. Ethical approval was gained from the authors’ University Research Ethics Committee and the research team adhered to the BSA guidelines throughout the research.

A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data (Braun and 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 and Clark 2006). NVivo, the qualitative data analysis software program, was used to organise and group segments of the data. NVivo supported searching for themes and identifying common patterns that were consistent in the data. To establish a degree of coding reliability, the research assistant audited the documentation for four interviews as a validity check on the analysis.

Findings

The data yielded broad themes addressing neglect, parents' sense of privilege and entitlement, and barriers to escalating concerns. For a detailed discussion of these, see (Authors' Own, In Press). The data discussed in this paper focuses on the theme of authoritative practice.

The findings highlight several challenges for social workers in their attempts to intervene with affluent parents. Participants reported that thresholds for emotional neglect were not always well understood, with differentiated perceptions of what constitutes neglect; important to emphasise that emotional neglect is a notoriously difficult category of neglect to identify and evidence.

According to one participant:

“It is not necessarily that kids that would immediately come to mind, that the teachers pick up on. With the more affluent families it takes longer to identify... because it is masked by the fact that the children turn up to school on time, in their nice clothes, having been driven in their nice car by the au pair. You know that then disguises an awful lot of other stuff that’s going on”.

Another participant stated:

“So we tend to see it, in my experience, when children hit puberty... So we see quite a lot of that and not only with privileged families. That is one thing that makes us wonder how effective we are at detecting neglect, and particularly emotional neglect, in these wealthy families where it is not so much on people’s radar and it comes out much later when the children are older and start self-harming”.

Some participants explained that with affluent families, some practitioners may view neglect as less serious than other forms of abuse such as physical or sexual abuse, and may therefore fail to identify neglectful parenting. Participants emphasised that the children’s physical needs were often met because families had the required economic resources, however, parents were sometimes emotionally unavailable to their children. Participants identified what they termed “the outsourcing of their parenting”; meaning that children often had multiple paid carers who effectively become their primary caregivers. In the circumstances it was often very difficult to carefully assess nurturing parenting relationships, and in particular, parents’ emotional engagement with their children.

Attempts to see Children and Elicit Their Views and Perspectives

The findings indicate that a high number of the neglect cases involved adolescents with emotional and behavioural difficulties who were in independent fee-paying or boarding schools, often with minimal parental contact. Participants also described cases in which some of the children were experiencing other categories of abuse,

including emotional abuse, sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation. The findings also highlight that some of the children were exposed to the adverse effects of domestic abuse, alcohol and substance misuse, as well as parental mental health problems in the home environment. Participants made repeated references to the efforts they had to make to see and speak to the children, which often involved complex negotiations with parents.

As one participant explained:

“Because quite a lot of the cases we’ve got where there’s safeguarding issues, the parents think it is the child’s behaviour that’s the problem. As soon as you start to delve you uncover that it’s actually, um, neglect, mostly emotionally. Then want to sack us, because they don’t have to work with us. And they use that terminology - ‘we’re giving you the sack’. Or they demand a different worker, which I find quite interesting, their perception of the service that they’re being provided with is one that totally see as disposable and, well it is a choice of anybody to work with us, it’s by consent only, but if it’s not the child that’s got the problem and it’s the parent, then they, you know, 9 times out of 10 they will sack us as soon as we get close to that. And we can’t do anything unless the safeguarding issue is one that meets a threshold. So we have little power over being sacked”.

It was also a challenge for practitioners to engage the designated safeguarding leads in the independent fee-paying and boarding schools, as they were often apprehensive about raising concerns with parents. Thus, the practitioners had difficulty speaking to the children themselves whilst also needing to be mindful of the tensions between children’s rights and parents’ rights. When social workers directly engaged with the children, significantly more positive outcomes were achieved.

As one participant commented:

“The social worker was able to get the voice of the child as that’s something we really do focus on; what does the child

want? These children were very able because they were older, to express what it was like living in that home, how the tension in the home changes as soon as Dad walked in the door, and actually living with two parents that actually didn't communicate with each other. You know, so in that respect I think it is about social worker skills in actually engaging that child, but they were teenagers so when you've got a younger one I think it is much harder”.

A large number of the interventions by children’s social care came as a result of undertaking Section 7 Reports as a requirement of the Children Act 1989. These cases involved children who were caught up in private family law proceedings because their parents were going through acrimonious divorces, and the parents’ solicitors were usually more focused on financial arrangements, with the children’s wishes and feelings being low down on the list of priorities. In these situations, privilege based on social class manifested in nuanced ways to remove affluent children from the child protection system. For instance, participants’ accounts focused on how parents were able to use their money to obtain private psychological services for their children’s emotional and behavioural issues. Some participants saw private counselling as an encouraging result for the children involved, while others had some healthy scepticism; though they acknowledged that therapeutic support for the children was a positive outcome, they also believed it was a tactic for parents to shift focus away from their deficient parenting practices, and to ultimately withdraw from the statutory child protection system, thus evading attention from children’s services.

For a number of participants, at the forefront of their thinking was how parents used lawyers and other legal advocates to question their professional judgements and ultimately to shield themselves from child protection scrutiny. In particular, participants reported that affluent parents were inclined to send lengthy letters and

emails for which they insisted on an immediate response.

Here one participant explained:

“It is incredibly intimidating and it’s a lot of being bombarded with requests for information. And constantly attacking you as a professional and asking you, ‘Why did you make that decision at that point?’ ‘Where is it recorded?’ ‘Why was it recorded that way?’ And if they have good legal advice (which usually they do,) you are so bogged down with the detail of what you have written, that we won’t be able to see the child because they are not allowing us access”.

These examples illuminate the enormous pressure on practitioners to answer the parents’ constant requests, undermining their capacity to stay focused on the children. Participants described being acutely aware that these parents were highly resistant and were more likely to use solicitors or the complaints procedures to dispute practitioners’ recommendations when there were attempts to escalate concerns to a child protection investigation. This, they noted, emphasised the need to keep the child as the focus of attention in the assessment so that the needs of the child were not overshadowed by the parents’ complaints. Therefore, key enabling factors included practitioners’ confidence, wide experience of child neglect, professional curiosity and importantly, good support from managers, enabling focus on the child whilst not allowing the demands of the parents to affect their professional judgements.

Skills and Knowledge for Intervening with Parents

An underlying theme within the participants’ narrative was the notion of being skilled and knowledgeable when working with resistant parents. Due to the level of risk accompanying child protection work, coupled with the fact that it is complex and emotive, with an ever present fear of blame, perhaps it is not surprising that

practitioners can feel very anxious (Shoestring, 2016). Participants reported that considerable experience, practice wisdom and a good understanding of neglect were crucial for engaging highly-resistant parents with the financial wherewithal to dispute practitioners' recommendations. An understanding of child development was needed to comprehend the impact of child neglect, because an understanding of the threshold for emotional neglect was especially important, since a high level of professional judgment was required in the assessment. For well-timed and appropriate interventions, participants emphasised that self-confidence and assertiveness were critical, along with the social worker's personal attributes. Most frequently, participants highlighted the need to have a repertoire of skills for negotiating the hurdles, because affluent parents often engage lawyers and the requisite resources behind them. Therefore, social workers must be resilient and competent to engage highly resistant affluent parents.

As one participant commented:

"I think it takes a really skilled practitioner, because you have to acknowledge, hear and listen to what parents are saying. You need to give them sufficient attention so they feel what they have said has been heard, whilst at the same time just keep bringing it back to the child and the impact on the child".

Another stated:

"I say a clarity of understanding about thresholds, a focus about what is good enough, a very clear knowledge and understanding of the different categories of abuse and how they can intertwine and present as something different. Somebody with good organisation skills because if you don't get back to someone who is constantly writing to you or you don't respond to their phone calls then that becomes a reason to deflect at a meeting."

Participants highlighted being very conscious of their personal attributes, including how they dressed and spoke and being able to present themselves as knowledgeable, as they perceived that such elements could constrain their encounters with affluent families. Two examples were given of social workers being taken off cases by their managers because of parents complaining that their accents could not be understood.

A participant noted:

“You need to be articulate because you have lost them if you have got an accent or English is not your first language and that's not on at all but that's how it is”.

Complicated questions are thus raised if discriminatory judgements have been made concerning the social worker's ability to communicate. In particular, prejudice about foreign accents remained unchallenged, leaving social workers from minority ethnic backgrounds vulnerable to unwarranted criticism and often unsupported by their managers

The participants emphasised that they were under greater scrutiny, and thus to intervene competently and with authority, social workers had to be able to articulate a clear understanding of the statutory guidance and legal framework informing the decision-making processes, since affluent families frequently had good legal knowledge and support, and thus were more likely to question their decisions.

Given these pressures, participants underlined that strong support from their managers and appropriate supervision were particularly important.

A participant indicated:

“You need line managers who are completely behind you all the way, and won't undermine you. You need a confident but child centred approach from line managers as well”.

The need for excellent supervision was emphasised, as it allowed space for the social workers to think through the issues raised which may have undermined their confidence and their strategies. Participants illuminated specific factors that assisted their practice in this complex area including the opportunity to discuss cases with co-workers, having reflective supervision and supportive managers, participating in targeted learning events about child protection, as well as an understand of the knowledge base of child neglect, and a supportive organisational culture. Whilst they needed immense confidence so as not to be deterred by the threats of complaints, the quality of support provided by managers played an important role in the decision-making, since the approach of managers can hugely influence the outcome of some investigations.

One participant noted significant struggles with their manager:

“There were barriers for me within our own organisation managing that case. It had hit the threshold for CP and we needed to have a legal planning meeting. But my managers had their own ideas around why it should not escalate up to court quite quickly, which were influenced by the family's social status, in that they had money for example. A manager had said to me 'well very soon the children are going to be going off to residential boarding school, we're only a year off that so, you know, therefore we won't take any further action”.

Similar issues arose for another participant:

“But I really had to work hard with my managers to be very clear about, 'This is the evidence of significant harm and it's about parenting and as a result, the significant harm is attributed to the parenting, the money and the social status, that's irrelevant here, let's put that to one side and not let it inform your thinking, because these are two children that are suffering significant harm, attributable to the parenting they're receiving.' And the parents are very clear they do not want to work with us. If that had been say, for example, a family from, the most

deprived areas in the borough, I think we would have already completed a Section 47 investigation”

In a number of the research sites, process-orientated reflective supervision activities fostered critical thinking that better enabled the practitioners to assess risk when factors associated with class privilege came into play to undermine the social workers. For example, one site in the sample employed an action-learning approach to regularly explore specific issues pertaining to child neglect for improvements in their practice. Participants especially emphasised that space for reflection enabled them to unpick the complexities and challenge their preconceived ideas and assumptions to identify different ways to address the problems arising when confronted with what they called “the affluent family effect”.

In certain research sites, practice frameworks, including Signs of Safety, were named as tools for practice that enhanced practitioners’ abilities to assess risk and to navigate and explore difficult and emotive interventions. In several sites, principal social workers had a key role in facilitating professional development activities for ensuring that practitioners were provided with effective support to work in this complex area.

Discussion

This study has revealed particular challenges for social workers in engaging affluent parents when there are concerns about child neglect. It found that the challenges were multi-faceted as neglect is often hard to determine and respond to in affluent families. The findings show that parents’ attempts to downplay the significance of emotional neglect is a key factor, as well as the difficulties for some professionals to recognise indicators of emotional neglect in affluent families (Luthar and Becker 2002; Luthar

and Latedresse 2006; Luthar and Crossman, 2013). These factors meant that the social workers' task of assessing the child in their familial situation was particularly difficult, as they were essentially striving to engage highly resistant parents that had privilege and power at their disposal to navigate their way out of the child protection system (Brabbs, 2011; Nicolas, 2014; Carmi & Walker-Hall, 2015). The findings also raised questions about how well some staff in independent schools understand the signs of emotional neglect of affluent children and young people that live outside of their home authority, and raised questions about the safeguarding practice in some of the schools; concerns included whether they overlooked the vulnerability of some children who were at risk, whether they made referrals appropriately, and how they worked collaboratively with children's services when cases are being investigated.

Overall, the findings point to the ways in which the threats of complaints from affluent parents can sometimes immobilise social workers' interventions (Laird, 2013). In terms of knowledge and skills, participants frequently referred to the need to have a clear understanding of the threshold for neglect for making authoritative intervention. In short, practice wisdom, confidence and self-awareness, combined with a child-focused approach and the capacity to deal with conflict and challenges, along with competent problem-solving abilities (Keys, 2009), were essential if social workers were to be confident in their professional authority with affluent parents. Concerning interventions that were effective with resistant affluent families, a number of participants reflected that risk assessment tools like the neglect toolkit helped to keep the child at the centre when assessing risks and for escalating concerns if and when necessary. However, they were keen to stress that, social workers must have the necessary confidence and assertiveness in their professional judgements in identifying and naming neglectful parenting in affluent families. Participants lay emphasis on the

support social workers received from their managers to help them handle difficult situations and process issues pertaining to the emotional challenges and the complex power relations at play.

Some of the challenges of working with involuntary and highly resistant parents in child protection work are by no means unique to intervention with affluent families. However, the findings reveal some particular manifestations of power when intervening with affluent parents who are better able to “play the system” because they have the necessary resources at their disposal. Notably, the social workers emphasised that they needed to pay much more attention to how they presented themselves to affluent families, including how they dressed and spoke, to convey themselves as authoritative sources of knowledge, compared to when intervening with families from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This highlights how status hierarchies and class privileges are brought into sharp focus in the worker-service user relationship in social workers’ encounters with affluent families. A striking feature of the findings is that although all the local authorities where the data was gathered regularly intervened in affluent families, participants reported that their learning and development events focusing on working with resistant families exclusively concentrated on families from lower socio-economic backgrounds, thus reinforcing notions of neglect as normatively associated with the poor.

Conclusion

This paper reported on a qualitative study of how social workers intervened in affluent families to safeguard children affected by neglect. There are, of course, some limitations to the study. We are careful to stress that as the sample size is relatively small and therefore not representative, we are not advocating that the findings are

generalizable to all social work intervention with affluent families. Another possible limitation concerns how affluence is defined and measured. It is also important to note that the definition of the families as affluent was based solely on the reports of the participants. There were at times 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 (such as professionals, managers, etc.) and those that have extensive economic wealth. The limitations of the study notwithstanding, the perspectives of practitioners who intervene with affluent families provide significant insights into the particular challenges that social workers have to navigate through the child protection processes. What these findings clearly indicate is that although much has been written about relations of power between social workers and service users, particular consideration needs to be given to the power dynamics that come to the fore when social workers are seeking to engage parents who are able to use their class privileges to resist interventions. The study also has important implications for how we recognise class hierarchies to better understand specific issues arising for social workers in their endeavours to safeguard and promote the welfare of vulnerable children in affluent families. Yet, although it is widely recognised that socio-economic factors lie behind much of social workers' encounters with families in the child protection system, social class as a construct currently remains under-examined in social work education and practice in the UK (Nicolas, 2014). As such, the findings from this study suggest that the class biases that maintain affluent parents' privileged position are at the core of the difficulties in responding to child neglect in affluent families, pointing to the need for further research and different approaches to this largely hidden problem.

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