article

What about my dad? Black fathers and the child protection system

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This article explores social work practice with black fathers within the child protection and family court systems through the analysis of case studies involving black fathers whose children 'nearly missed' the chance to live with them. Drawing upon theories of social justice, this article explores the construction of black men as fathers and contextualises the discussion in relation to gender, race, poverty and immigration issues, as well as the current policy and legal context of child protection work in England. The article examines how beliefs and assumptions about black men can influence how they are constructed, and subsequent decision-making processes. The article concludes with some suggestions for critical social work practice within a human rights and social justice framework.

key words child protection • care proceedings • black fathers • intersectionality

Introduction

It has become customary to see 'near misses' in the child protection system as referring to risky situations where death or serious injury has been a possibility but then averted (Bostock et al, 2005). The study of such situations, based on systems theory and research on safety in the airline industry, has been useful in promoting the importance of a learning and risk-sensible organisational culture. However, these ideas have not been used to learn from cases where the keeping of a child safely within family networks has nearly not happened and, thus, a potential breach of human rights has nearly happened. Within the literature on 'near misses', there has been very limited engagement with wider structural factors and issues of social justice when working with marginalised and multiply disadvantaged populations. In this article, we critically examine case studies involving black fathers whose children 'nearly missed' the chance to live with them and remain within their birth family. Using theories of social justice, we examine practices that reinforced or challenged the family members' marginalisation and oppression.

In the three cases discussed, the men are black, unmarried, non-resident birth fathers living in poverty. The immigration status of two of the fathers is also of relevance. While concerns have been raised in the research literature on father engagement about

how unmarried non-resident birth fathers can be rendered invisible by professionals, we would suggest that insufficient attention has been paid to intersections of race, class and immigration status. We argue that black fathers are often precariously positioned in relation to citizenship rights in a policy climate that is increasingly marked by conditionality and authoritarianism, and suggest that there is an urgent need for further research on the issues highlighted in this very exploratory article.

When using the term 'black fathers', we are referring to men of African and African-Caribbean descent. In using this term, we do, however, recognise 'the heterogeneous nature of this group, whose lived experiences are differentiated by their histories, cultures, ethnicities and social circumstances' (Bernard and Gupta, 2008: 2).

The current policy context

While it is not possible to provide a detailed critique of the current state of child protection practice in England, it is important to provide a brief summary in order to place the discussion of the case studies in a wider policy context. When and how to intervene in private family life where there are concerns about child maltreatment are dilemmas that policymakers and child welfare professionals continually have to grapple with (Parton, 2014). Compulsory intervention by the state has lifelong consequences and the permanent removal of a child from his or her birth family is one of the most draconian actions that a state can take. Alternatively, a lack of timely and appropriate responses to children at risk of abuse and neglect can result in serious harm or even death.

Value perspectives in relation to the importance of birth family ties and the role of the state in family life along a supportive versus controlling spectrum influence policy development and have been subject to pendulum swings over the decades (Fox-Harding, 1997). In recent decades, Lonne et al (2008) identify a child protection paradigm across a range of countries driven by risk-averse practices focusing on child protection, rather than child welfare and family support. While the last two years of New Labour saw a clear re-emergence of a child protection orientation (Parton, 2014), the shift away from a family service orientation significantly escalated under the coalition government and has continued unabated since the election of a Conservative government in May 2015. Not only has it been seen as important to 'rescue children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes' (HM Government, 2013: 22), but it has been government policy to take more children into care, place more for adoption and speed up the process (Gupta and Lloyd-Jones, 2014).

It is argued that the social justice aspect of social work is being lost in a child protection project that is characterised by muscular authoritarianism towards multiply deprived families (Featherstone et al, 2014) and is a reflection of what Wacquant (2009: 290) refers to as the 'remasculinization of the state' under neoliberalism. The policy context for social work practice supports a deficit view of parenting difficulties that blames families for their problems, including poverty (Gupta, 2015). The current *child-focused* orientation of the child protection system, it is argued, regards the child simply as an individual unanchored in place and with an identity that can be reconstructed at will (Featherstone et al, 2014).

Government 'austerity' policies have led to increased poverty and inequality and cuts to services that support vulnerable families, and this is likely to continue (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014; Price and Spencer, 2015). At the

same time, in 2013/14, referrals to children's social care increased by 10.8% and the numbers of children on child protection plans by 12.1% (DfE, 2014a). Applications for care orders continue to rise, with new applications in July 2015 being the highest monthly figure ever recorded and a 9% increase from July 2014 (CAFCASS, 2015).

In this context, the promotion of policies such as the speedy removal from parents and the non-consensual adoption of children raises moral, ethical and legal questions about children's and parents' human rights, and these have been recognised by senior members of the judiciary in a number of recent judgements. One very significant judgment in September 2013 from the most senior family court judge in England and Wales – *Re B-S (Children)* [2013] EWCA Civ 1146 (*Re B-S*) – offers a clear challenge to the policy direction. This judgment criticised social workers' and judges' analyses when deciding on adoption and stressed the importance of support provision for families and the promotion of birth family ties. *Re B-S* reiterated that adoption is a 'last resort – when all else fails', to be made 'only in exceptional circumstances … where nothing else will do' (*Re B-S*, para 22).

Black fathers and the child protection system

In the last decades, a small, but growing, research-based literature has emerged exploring some of the issues in relation to fathers and the child protection system. In particular, there has been a focus on why low levels of engagement by practitioners are a feature of many cases and a consequent concern that the risks to, and resources for, children and mothers are not adequately assessed (Daniel and Taylor, 2001; Ashley et al, 2006; Roskill et al, 2008; Featherstone, 2009). The research suggests that birth fathers who are unmarried and non-resident are at particular risk of not being engaged with by practitioners. This has been attributed to the following: a lack of clarity about, or ignorance of, the law in relation to parental responsibility; a lack of time to complete assessments of fathers who may live some distance away; antagonism from some mothers; fears about fathers in relation to their potential for violence and abuse; and fathers' own resistance (for a review, see Featherstone, 2009). Failure to work with fathers has been criticised for placing unfair and unrealistic burdens on mothers, and, within the neoliberal context of individualising responsibility, for leading to more punitive responses to mothers living in adverse socio-economic circumstances (Featherstone et al, 2014).

Over the years, many authors have examined the experiences of black and other minority ethnic children and their families within the child protection system. A complex, and somewhat contradictory, picture of services for black children and their families has emerged. It is suggested that black children and families are more likely to receive a 'compulsion-based' rather than support-based service (Welbourne, 2002: 356), with some studies indicating that family support interventions are shorter in length with black families compared to white families, and that care proceedings are initiated sooner (Hunt et al, 1999; DH, 2000). However, in terms of the representation of black children in the child protection and looked-after systems, the evidence is unclear and, at times, contradictory. Owen and Statham (2009) found that while over-represented among children in need and in the looked-after population, black children were not over-represented among those on child protection plans (CPPs). Recent research by Bywaters et al (2014) found that a child's chances of being on a CPP or a looked-after child (LAC) are strongly statistically related to measures of area-level

deprivation. A child in the most deprived decile of neighbourhoods nationally had an 11 times greater chance of being on a CPP and 12 times greater chance of being an LAC than a child living in the most affluent decile. However, Bywaters et al (2014) found that, after controlling for deprivation, black children were less likely than white children to be looked after by the local authority. These contradictory findings could arguably support Chand's (2000: 67, emphasis in original) hypothesis that black children and their families 'may, due to a number of factors, be more *or* less likely to be subjected to child abuse investigations by social work agencies and allied professionals'. On the one hand, a *pathologising* approach to black families may lead to unnecessarily coercive interventions; on the other, a *cultural relativist* approach may lead to non-intervention when services are required (Chand, 2000).

Research on fathers, especially non-resident fathers, from black or, indeed, any minority ethnic background in the UK is limited and there is little on their interactions with social care or health services. Reynolds (2009) researched black non-resident fathers in order to assess the validity of discourses about their lack of interest in their children. These were not fathers who were involved in children's services, but her findings are of relevance to the concerns of this article. She notes that such fathers have been traditionally constructed as absent from parenting and unwilling to take responsibility for their children. However, she argues the need to see parenting practices contextually and as informed by cultural and historical factors and intersecting identities of race, ethnicity, social class, gender, age and generation. Williams et al (2013) also contend that discourses about the 'absent black father' prevail and that these reinforce stereotypical ideas and fail to recognise the complexity and diversity within the populations of black fathers in Britain.

While there is a body of literature on the experiences of asylum-seeking and refugee children (including those who are unaccompanied and trafficked) and some research with the mothers and fathers of asylum-seeking and refugee children families, very little attention has been paid to their experiences of the child protection system, especially to the experiences of undocumented migrant families. One study by Brophy et al (2003) suggests that the psychological problems associated with seeking refuge from war-torn countries, alongside the insecurity attached to awaiting the outcome of immigration applications, as well as language difficulties, were central factors in the complexity of cases involving African children. More generally, a body of research has highlighted the challenges that are faced by families seeking to care safely in such circumstances, and has suggested that they may be particularly vulnerable if involved in the child protection system. Immigration and asylum status determine income, employment opportunities and access to support services, with many families with irregular migrant status living in overcrowded housing, having insecure incomes and being at high-risk of destitution (Bloch et al, 2014).

It is clear from the literature that social inequalities, discrimination and oppression can impact in various ways on families and on child protection practice. However, studies tend to focus on a single category of difference, for example, ethnicity or gender, with less attention paid to intersectionality or how multiple categories are linked in their effects. Moreover, the literature on child maltreatment and child protection does not, in the main, address the intersection of multiple interlocking identities at the micro-level with multiple interlocking structural-level bias and inequality at the macro-level of society (Nadan et al, 2015). Researching material poverty and how this interacts with other forms of 'status inequality' (Fraser, 2008)

is also uncommon. An exception to this is Burman et al's (2004) study of domestic violence services for minoritised women. They highlight the 'over-emphasizing [of] the role of culture at the expense of analysing its intersections with gender inequalities and relations' (Burman et al, 2004: 352). The impact of state policies and practices, including immigration processes and welfare services, on the lives of women was considered in the study, which recommended paying attention to the intersectionality of the race, gender and class inequalities that frame people's lives (Burman and Chantler, 2005).

Theories of social justice

In this article, we draw on concepts from critical race theory (CRT) and intersectionality to make a contribution to understanding how macro-level structural power relationships intersect with and impact on micro-level social work practices and the lives of service users. CRT emerged in the US as a critique of the alleged objectivism of the legal system and its underlying idea of colour-blindness (Möschel, 2011; Chadderton, 2013). CRT recognises experiential knowledge and suggests the use of legal narrativism or the telling of personal stories to learn from micro-aggressions (Möschel, 2011). Ortiz and Jani (2010: 176) suggest that CRT is a paradigm based on assumptions 'that race is a social construction, race permeates all aspects of social life, and race-based ideology is threaded throughout society'. Proponents of CRT are committed to social justice and to using the concept of intersectionality to understand how multiple identities, such as gender and socio-economic status, intersect with race at the individual level (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Nadan et al, 2015).

In this article, we also draw on Fraser's (2003) theory of social justice based on parity of participation. According to Fraser, justice requires social arrangements that permit all members of society to interact as peers. However, for participatory parity to be possible, at least three conditions must be met. Fraser's 'three-dimensional' view of justice encompasses economic, cultural and political considerations. Redistribution, recognition and representation are presented as three analytically distinct facets of justice, which are intertwined, but none of which can be reduced to the others (Fraser, 2010). The various forms of injustice will differentially impact on individuals. Fraser's (2003) separation of material and cultural injustice is of relevance to an analysis of poverty and parenting. Pelton (2015) argues that the probability of child abuse and neglect may be indirectly related to material hardship, through the stresses on parents that such hardship may generate, but is also directly related to material hardship in very pervasive ways. In addition, Fraser (2010: 370) identifies the 'global poor', or those whom she prefers to refer to as 'the transnational precariat', as being subject to multiple intersecting forms of injustice. Given that issues of immigration are central to the case studies discussed in the following, this aspect of Fraser's framework is also very relevant.

The case studies

The three cases discussed in the following are drawn from one of the authors' work in the public law family court system in England. All names have been changed, details that are not considered directly relevant to the discussion have been omitted

or altered, and care has been taken with the specific information provided on each of the cases in order to avoid the possibility of identification. The decision to analyse these three case studies was influenced by Fook and Gardner's (2007) work on critical reflection, which promotes the importance of learning from experience to develop an understanding of the interrelationships between individuals (service users and professionals) and their social contexts. The use of these particular case studies was also influenced by writings placing 'moral outrage' and the translation of personal distress into public issues at the heart of the political project of social work (Williams and Briskman, 2015). Briskman (2013: 51) has argued that as 'practice ethnographers', social workers are privileged by a proximate relationship in the lives of marginalised and oppressed people and are thus well placed to bear witness to such lives by exposing injustices and challenging dominant discourses.

All three cases involved care proceedings where the children had been permanently removed from their mother. The local authorities' initial plans for all of the children involved either adoption or long-term fostering. In all three cases, however, following independent assessments, the courts agreed that the children should live with their birth fathers with continuing contact with their birth mothers. In light of the assertion in the Court of Appeal judgment *Re B-S* that children's interests are served by remaining within their birth family if at all possible, and that 'family ties may only be severed in very exceptional circumstances and … everything must be done to preserve personal relations and, where appropriate, to "rebuild" the family' (*YC v United Kingdom* (2012) 55 EHRR 967, cited in *Re B-S*, para 134), we argue that the three cases do represent 'near misses' in relation to the children and their parents' human rights; injustices that were averted. As such, we suggest that lessons can be learnt about the factors that may be influencing decision-making in local authorities when recommending permanent separation.

All three cases involved black fathers who came to Britain from Africa or the Caribbean. Frank is from a West African country, Trevor from a Caribbean country and Abdul from an East African country. All three men had either claimed asylum or applied for indefinite leave to remain after arriving in the UK. One, Abdul, had leave to remain at the time of the court proceedings. Trevor and Frank had lived with no immigration status for many years and were in the process of trying to secure leave to remain. Trevor had temporary leave to remain. Frank had been brought to the UK as a trafficked child, had no documentation and was in 'immigration limbo' as he was subject to a deportation order but there was nowhere for him to be deported to. All three men were on low incomes and lived in shared housing. Abdul had a full-time job but was on the minimum wage; Trevor worked on building sites when work was available; Frank was unable to work and was dependent on his girlfriend and her family.

All three fathers had had involvement in the children's lives but were not living with the children or their mothers at the time of the initiation of proceedings. In all three cases, the children were aged 10 or under and were involved in sibling groups of two or three. Two of the mothers were British, one white and the other of mixed parentage. The third mother was an East African woman who came to the UK as an asylum seeker. All three women were in receipt of benefits when the children were living with them. The children were all removed from their mothers' care during care proceedings due to concerns about mental health and/or substance misuse problems.

In none of the cases were there any significant concerns expressed about the men's interactions with the children during contact sessions.

Analysis of the cases

When discussing the experiences of minoritised women experiencing domestic violence, Burman et al (2004) draw on Phoenix's (1987) characterisation of the ways in which black women are represented in social policy and academic discourses as a homogenised absence/pathologised presence. We would argue that similar dynamics are present in the experiences of the three black fathers.

Researchers have consistently highlighted the importance of effective parental engagement with parents in child protection practice (Featherstone et al, 2012). There has been a particular research emphasis on the challenges for social workers intervening with 'difficult-to-reach' or 'involuntary' families in child protection services where children are at risk (Forrester et al, 2008; Platt, 2012; Turney, 2012). However, as Ashley et al (2006) suggest, it is important to reflect upon what may be occurring in what are social interactions and to interrogate the ways in which cooperation and resistance are co-produced at a range of levels. In the three cases of concern in this article, we explore how such processes of co-production worked from 'engagement' to intervention.

Trevor

Trevor was not directly informed about the initiation of care proceedings in relation to his children. The local authority sent a letter to an address on their records, but he had not lived there for several years. Research studies have found that it is not uncommon for the father's contact details on file to be incomplete or out of date (Roskill et al, 2008; Osborn, 2014). No attempt was made to confirm whether Trevor had, in fact, received the letter. It was assumed that his non-engagement was from choice. He was eventually told about the ongoing proceedings and that his children were in foster care with a plan for adoption by a relative. Stereotypes of the 'absent black father' could have pathologised his absence (Williams et al, 2013) and compounded existing dynamics where fathers are often not engaged in child protection and family court proceedings (Ashley et al, 2006). Trevor has a large and close family network and several family members put themselves forward as potential carers for the children if the children were unable to live with him. This is a reminder that a lack of engagement with fathers can also lead to 'near misses' in relation to wider paternal family members (Ashley et al, 2006).

Trevor sought legal advice and requested an assessment during the proceedings, but the local authority refused this. The stated reasons were the delay that it would cause given that the plan was for adoption and because, according to local authority records, he had a history of drug use and domestic violence. His presence was similarly pathologised without an attempt to critically appraise the recorded information, find out about him as an individual and, importantly, recognise his significance in the lives of his children. When the documents were later scrutinised closely, it transpired that the Class A drug conviction was a case of mistaken identity. Osborn (2014) argues that professional responses to fathers tend to focus on risk without also assessing them as a potential resource. In Trevor's case, it is also relevant to question how assumptions

about African-Caribbean men and drug use may have led to the incorrect information being given and uncritically received even in the face of Trevor's protestations.

The issue of domestic abuse is quite rightly of serious concern to children's services given the evidence of its prevalence and the damaging consequences for children. However, the overwhelming evidence of the victimisation of women by men can serve to obscure differing types of violence and also the interactional dynamics that can be involved (Featherstone et al, 2014). As women continue to have to contest the denial of its seriousness for them on the part of many agencies, it has proved difficult to move debates in relation to policy and practice forward in ways that engage with the complexity of violence and abuse within families and communities. When the historic file records regarding the reports of domestic violence were scrutinised, the police reports suggested either that Trevor was actually the victim of violence from the children's mother or that no further action was taken because there was no evidence of crimes having been committed. Trevor fell foul of universalising assumptions about men and their responsibility for abuse and may also have been subject to those that racialise dangerousness. The 'othering' of Trevor may also have been compounded by his proximity to the children's mother, a white woman marginalised by her poverty and stigmatised by her substance misuse and involvement in the child protection system (De Benedictis, 2012).

Frank

Frank was refused an assessment because, as the social worker wrote:

> he has no evidence to confirm who he is or where he is from.... Not being able to verify who Frank is and also to doubt his ability to be open and honest makes it impossible to complete a sound risk assessment.

The court-appointed psychiatrist agreed. As discussed by Ortiz and Jani (2010) when discussing CRT, micro-aggressions refer to covert and not-so-covert actions directed at persons, often without overt malicious intent and frequently reflecting stereotyped beliefs, values or behaviours that reinforce social location and structural inequalities. Frank was viewed with suspicion, as a 'non-person'. This was due to his immigration status, but may have been compounded by his race and gender. It was as if his very existence was questioned, someone without the 'right to have rights' (Arendt, 1973). Tyler (2013) discusses the concept of social abjection in relation to the exercise of state power through the exclusion of asylum seekers and other irregular migrants. She argues that 'the state exercises power through exemption – the withdrawal of the law, and the withholding or removal of rights and recognition for people within or at the borders of its territorial space' (Tyler, 2013: 46).

While decision-making in this case was complicated by immigration issues and social workers have to assess the best course of action within a highly risk-averse climate, it is, in our view, relevant to question whether the 'culture of disbelief' (Tyler, 2013) about irregular migrants and anti–immigration public discourse impacted on professionals' responses. Fraser (2010: 367) argues that injustices of misframing occur when a:

> polity's boundaries are drawn in such a way as to wrongly deny some people the chance to participate at all in its authorized contests over justice. In such cases, those who are constituted as nonmembers are wrongly excluded from the universe of those entitled to consideration within the polity in matters of distribution, recognition, and ordinary political representation.

Frank was in the paradoxical position of being outside the legal protection of citizenship but nevertheless subject to the full force of state power, which, in this context, meant the possibility of permanent separation without an assessment from his children and them from him, with both his and their human rights compromised.

The case of Victoria Climbié was one of the first to bring to public attention the issues that can be raised by children becoming invisible due to their immigration status, and Frank's story highlights what can happen if such children become adults and go on to have children themselves; vulnerable as a child but dangerous as an adult. He was viewed with suspicion and no attention was paid to the resources and strengths that he would have had to draw upon to have survived life in the UK as an undocumented migrant child and then young adult (Bloch et al, 2014). His one criminal conviction was for identity fraud linked to his lack of documentation. This was viewed as a risk factor, rather than a means of survival in desperate socio-economic circumstances. While a mother in this situation might also face considerable challenges in interactions with social care services, the limited evidence on fathers suggests that there can be a higher degree of suspicion of men (Featherstone, 2009).

Abdul

Abdul was in contact with social workers and other professionals prior to, and following, the children's removal from their mother's care. The social work assessment that he was unable to care for his children was impacted on by different but equally dehumanising constructions of race and gender to those operating in relation to Trevor and Frank. The assessment questioned whether his Somali Muslim culture would permit a single man to look after his children. This view of his 'culture' was formed despite Abdul consistently stating his wish to care for his children and maintain them in their family of origin. While Burman et al (2004) suggest that 'cultural' factors can be used as a reason for non-intervention in cases of domestic violence, Abdul's situation indicates that cultural relativism can also be used to deny children the right to live with their families.

However, Abdul was mainly criticised for not securing appropriate housing. It is increasingly apparent that the implications of living in poverty have not received adequate attention in child protection policy or practice (Gupta, 2015). A neoliberal climate has resulted in the individualising of risk, and in Abdul's case, it can be seen to take a particularly toxic form. His 'failure' to access suitable accommodation in London was assessed as evidence of a lack of commitment to his children. This conclusion of 'lack of commitment' was made despite Abdul's exemplary attendance at contact. It was also made without acknowledgement of the challenges of finding a three-bedroom home in one of the most expensive cities of the world while on a low wage and after years of asylum-seeking status with no history of a tenancy. We would also argue that it reflects a neoliberal authoritarian ideology that has cast

poverty as a personal deficit rooted in perceived individual failings and moral blame (Featherstone et al, 2014; Parton, 2014).

Overall, it is important to note that inadequate income and the lack of housing were issues in all three of the cases, although Abdul's case posed these in their sharpest form. Once the decision was made to place the children with their fathers, the responses of the local authorities varied. Abdul had, by this time, saved a deposit and obtained accommodation, albeit overcrowded, via friends in the Somali community. The local authority were resistant to providing accommodation and income for Frank and the children, but following pressure from the court, did so until he was granted leave to remain in the UK under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the right to respect for private and family life. By contrast, a new social worker working with Trevor recognised that he would struggle to obtain accommodation near his family without financial support due to his low income, insecure employment and lack of a tenancy history given his many years living with relatives and friends as an undocumented migrant. The local authority helped Trevor obtain housing prior to placing the children in his care.

Discussion

This is a very exploratory piece of work focusing on three cases only. However, it is offered to the reader for a number of reasons. The significance of the decisions for the children, namely, permanent separation from a parent, is of particular importance and pinpoints the urgency of further research in order to develop our understanding of how intersecting dynamics of exclusion and marginalisation operate in the child protection and family court systems.

Black fathers are positioned within discourses that are multilayered, and an intersectional approach is necessary to understand their lived experiences. Fraser's (2008) work on social justice and parity of participation can be useful in conceptualising how injustice and exclusion is perpetuated in this context. She discusses distributive injustice linked to material resources, which can be seen in the responses to the fathers' poverty and lack of housing. All three fathers were constrained by a lack of resources to provide accommodation for their children, a prerequisite for being able to care for them. Importantly, Trevor's new social worker acknowledged this and the importance of the local authority's role in supporting Trevor and, in the process, promoting the children's welfare and rights.

Examples of what Fraser (2008) refers to as misrecognition or cultural injustice linked to status and identity are also evident. The research literature offers evidence that men and fathers are not considered of importance to children and this can be exacerbated by classed and racialised assumptions and their intersections, as well as those relating to age (young men are often assumed to be feckless and unable to offer care to children) (Featherstone and White, 2006). Scourfield's (2003) research found evidence of social work discourses that constructed male service users as dangerous or 'no use'. In this context, we need to be wary of assumptions about why allegations of domestic abuse were not scrutinised carefully enough in relation to Trevor. Moreover, from other research that we have carried out, we have noted that historical stories about danger and risk can circulate in highly dangerous and un-interrogated ways about families who have been known to services. However, we do need to ask whether race was a factor here given the evidence of the coding

of certain groups of men's bodies as dangerous, whether it be due to class, race or age and their intersections (Featherstone et al, 2007). Similarly, was Trevor's record of drug use not scrutinised because of too-ready assumptions about black men and drug use? In relation to Abdul, an essentialist view of Islamic culture meant that his desires to look after his children were assumed not to be legitimate and/or culturally acceptable, and, in the process, he was dehumanised; an 'other' who, despite his protestations to the contrary, could not exercise agency in the context of 'culture'.

The intersection with immigration status impacted in different ways on the lives of the three men, but most particularly through the denial of Frank and his children's human rights, which is an example, we would argue, of misrepresentation, that is, denying people participation on a par with others (Fraser, 2010). Of all three men, Frank's position at the beginning of the proceedings can be most closely aligned with Fraser's (2010) concept of the 'transnational precariat', that is, when economic, cultural and political structures work together to obstruct a person's participation. Fortunately, our legal system still allows representation for parents in Frank's position, and in the end, his and his children's ECHR Article 8 rights to respect for family life were upheld.

In these cases, the assessments by children's services either denied or compounded the consequences of a wider socio-political context that is marked by increasing inequality and social exclusion. It seems that the old adage of love not being enough to live on is turned very firmly on its head here. If you are poor, you have not enough love to improve your living situation. Moreover, it is increasingly vital that we question a childcare decision-making that constructs material deprivation and a lack of immigration status as acceptable reasons for the removal of children, especially in a climate of continued austerity that is demonising and impoverishing the poorest and most marginalised in our society (Featherstone et al, 2014). As social workers, we need to constantly question how our actions are implicated in such processes.

Moreover, we need to interrogate the complexities in a context where practice is highly risk-averse and local authorities are reeling under the impact of huge cuts in their budgets. The promotion of adoption can seem to square this circle nicely as it can apparently be implemented with no ongoing costs and be the 'safest' option for professionals. There are clear benefits for local authorities in promoting adoption over other options, including achieving a better score on government league tables (DfE, 2014b). This is, of course, extremely short-term thinking. Apart from the implications for children and birth families of such removals, adoptive families are increasingly contesting their lack of support. Where adoption is not an option, supporting parents and family members in communities that have seen widespread cuts in family support services can, however, be considered too risky in the current climate, and substitute care may also be seen as an 'easier' and 'safer' option. There is thus an urgent need for more rigorous interrogation of the factors behind the rise in care applications in recent years and the relationship between material deprivation, other social inequalities and the permanent removal of children from their birth families.

In terms of the issues for critical social work practice within a social justice framework, it is essential that the influence of stereotypes and assumptions, and the powerful impact that these can have on the narratives about black fathers, be addressed. Reflexive practice that attends to how practitioners' own identities and social positions influence interactions, decisions and commitments to challenging injustice is essential. Practitioners must recognise the complex interactions between personal problems

and structural inequality and question the dominant discourse of individualising risk and thus blaming families for their poverty and other social problems. Use of the law to promote the human rights of the children and their parents is also essential, and can, as these three case studies show, be highly influential.

Trevor's, Frank's and Abdul's personal characteristics, strengths and determination to care for their children were crucial in terms of the decision to place the children in their care. However, they also benefitted from professionals who could get beyond the labels and prejudice, take time to develop relationships, hear their narratives and recognise their strengths within the context of high levels of social adversity.

Conclusion

The permanent removal of children from their birth parents is one of the most draconian actions of the state. The law in England requires that these decisions are taken only when 'nothing else will do' (*Re B-S*, para 22). However, decisions based upon social work and other professional assessments are influenced by wider policy contexts, organisational agendas and the value judgements of practitioners. Drawing on the idea of the practitioner as ethnographer, we have argued that attention to how intersectional power relationships, based on social inequalities, impact on the lives of black fathers, and also on professional practice and decision-making, is essential. The three cases are offered as a contribution in the hope that further research is carried out in this neglected area, and to open up debate on what is required for all families to flourish and care safely.

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