Parenting, class and culture: exploring the context of childrearing

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Abstract
This paper highlights the central role of social class in shaping experiences of childrearing. Drawing on material from qualitative interviews with a range of working class mothers it explores and contextualises day-to-day family practices. It examines the different ways in which parents cope with disadvantage and shows how their decisions and practices are grounded in a material and social reality. In contrast to evaluative and outcome-focused literature on parenting, it demonstrates how decisions and practices that make less sense from a middle class vantage point shift their meaning when viewed from a working class perspective. The paper illustrates how the promotion of parenting 'skills' as neutral technical tips obscures normative, culturally specific assumptions about what constitutes successful childrearing. The implications of this for health visitors' practice will be considered.

Key words
Class, social exclusion, parenting, values, childrearing

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Parenting is under the policy spotlight at the moment. An ongoing raft of proposals and initiatives are being targeted at parents, including Sure Start and the Parenting Fund.[1] There are also proposals to extend the role of health visitors to monitor and regulate the development of parenting skills. Such interventions tend to be aimed at socially excluded parents with the intention of guiding and regulating their childrearing activities.[2] However, this support can shade into the realms of authoritarian control if it is resisted. Parenting orders have been introduced to compel wayward parents to attend weekly classes to learn 'parenting skills'. Other measures include fines and imprisonment, and even more severe proposals are currently being considered, including benefit cuts for errant families, and sending parents to residential homes for 'intensive support'.[3] A full review of policy trends is available.[2]

This new policy focus has seen particular parenting practices isolated from their situated, interpersonal context and presented as methods that must be taught for the public good. Such an approach has significant implications in terms of the monitoring and support role provided by health visitors. Drawing on qualitative research, this paper will challenge the assumption that good parenting can be distilled into a series of detachable, universally applicable skills, and will illuminate a less visible logic underpinning practices and values. The focus will be on three practices that politicians and the media commonly criticise working class parents for:[4]

- Disinvestment from their children's school;
- Defence and protection of their children's behaviour;
- Provision of treats and comforts that are deemed inappropriate.

A detailed empirical analysis of working class parenting practices highlights the extent to which they are grounded in particular material and social realities, thereby providing health professionals with important contextualising knowledge.

The research framework

This paper draws on data derived from the project 'Resources in parenting: access to capitals'.[5] The project had two phases, with the first based on an extensive survey of parents of children aged eight to 12 years and the second involving follow-up intensive interviews. Details of the sample rationale and theoretical framework followed are provided elsewhere.[6] Our intention with the first survey phase of our research was to determine consensus, or lack of it, in parents' publicly expressed norms about appropriate sources of support.

The second, intensive phase of our research involved pursuing what resources parents themselves draw on and provide, in the complex and specific circumstances that face them in their own lives. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 25 mothers and 11 fathers from a wide range of 27 households across England and Scotland. It is data from this later phase that form the major focus of this paper. The parents interviewed for this study were approximately evenly divided between working class and middle class on the grounds of their access to economic/material, social and cultural resources. More specifically, a range of characteristics including occupation, education, family background, social networks, household income, housing status and geographical location were taken into consideration in allocating parents to a social class.

Although the majority were white, the sample also included a family of Indian, Ugandan Asian and Sudanese origin, as well as two African-Caribbean mothers. Data

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collected from the semi-structured interviews were subjected to a detailed interpretive analysis. For more details, see Edwards and Gillies 2005.[6] The Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines[7] were adhered to in conducting and writing up the research, following ethical approval for the project from our university faculty ethics committee.

While generalisations cannot be drawn from this qualitative study, important insights into the daily life of specific parents are revealed. A central finding in our study was the enduring relevance of class for the parents in our sample. Clear relationships were evident between the resources held by particular parents and the childrearing practices they pursued. Parents with access to middle class resources, such as money, education and high status social contacts, utilised them and tended to invest heavily in their children's education as a method of transferring this privilege. Previous research has produced similar findings. For example, Allatt[8] and Bates[9] have demonstrated how the minutiae of middle class parenting practice is founded on an active manipulation of social and financial resources to ensure advantage gets passed down through the generations.

Disadvantaged parents in our sample were engaged in a different task of 'getting by',[9] and often prioritised the passing on of more basic survival skills to their children. These parents were orientated towards helping their children negotiate disadvantages and challenges that rarely trouble middle class children or their parents. This more fundamental concern with ensuring children are equipped to deal with instability, injustice and hardship often clashes with the normative values that structure new family policy initiatives. In short, poverty, low social status and high vulnerability to emotional and physical violence are rarely compatible with middle class ideals such as parental investment in education. This is reflected in the different kinds of emotional investments made by the working class parents in our sample, in comparison with a more middle class concern with academic performance. These parents employed a range of strategies to boost their children's self esteem and to resist any positioning of them as inferior. Three of these practices will be discussed in more detail to show how they often collide with middle class values. A discussion of the significance of this for health visitors' practice will follow in the conclusion.

Disinvesting from school

A practice that was very common among the working class mothers in our sample was a disengagement from their children's school.[10,11] Middle class parents were likely to view education as a crucial foundation for future success and one which must be secured at any cost. But for working class parents, formal education was viewed from a distant position characterised by a desire for their children to do well, but contained by resignation and realism. For most of these parents, education was associated with disappointment and failure, both in terms of their own personal histories and their experiences of being parents.

Working class mothers appeared to experience very little of the sense of power taken for granted by the middle classes and, as a result, detachment and lack of control over their children's education were commonly expressed. When discussing school visits many recounted experiences of humiliation and or conflict. Involvement with teachers tended to be associated with children getting into trouble and, consequently, the school was often viewed as a hostile, dangerous world in which their children were successful if they avoided attention from the teachers. In this context, school was more likely to be seen as an experience to be survived rather than capitalised on.

Nevertheless, most of the working class mothers recognised, and were emotionally invested in, the instrumental benefits of education. Many expressed a poignant wish for their children to achieve academic success, but this was invariably tempered by an awareness of how the odds stack up against them. School was more often a site of conflict and failure for parents and their children. Home, on the other hand, was viewed as a sanctuary where alternative values could be promoted to affirm and repair the self worth of children. In this context advice from health professionals was commonly viewed as an unwelcome intervention to be ignored. The following view from Paula was shared by a range of working class mothers in the sample:

Paula: *'Aye, I wouldn't go for advice, because half of them don't know what they are speaking about anyway. It's like half of that district nurses, I mean they have not got bairns so how can they read it out of a text book; the text book is a load of rubbish! (LAUGHTER)...when the kids were little, they tell you to do this and do that and do the next thing and you think, "how do you know?"'*

Interviewer: *'So what did you do with their unwanted or unrequested advice?'*

Paula: *'Just ignored it.'*

It was very noticeable that the middle class parents in our sample were heavily invested in presenting their children as bright (and almost all used this specific term), while working class mothers prioritised values around kindness and good behaviour.[4] For example, Denise is a white working class mother with a 10-year-old son, Liam, who is struggling at school:

'I mean, I'm not blowing me own trumpet, but I get complimented on how he is with people so that's a good thing for yourself, it boosts you. But there's never been, like I say, there's never been anything negative. He's no angel and he can kick off like other kids can. But he is a good kid. I've been lucky that I've had a good 'un. Yeah, yeah I think we've done alright.'

So while he is labelled as failing at school, Denise is able to emphasise his non-academic qualities of likeability and good behaviour. But this represents an alternative value system articulated outside of school. In school Liam is a problem, a slow learner with particularly poor literacy skills. Outside of school he is a kind, polite and good child. Consequently, Denise sustains a certain disconnection from school to ensure Liam's worth is recognised. Reflecting back, Denise explained how she began disengaging from professionals when Liam was a baby:

'Me mum were alive then, bless her, and she used to say, "tell them what they want to hear Denise, but you do what works". So I used to go in and she [health visitor] used to say, "you're not giving him rusks are you?" I'd say, "no he's just on milk, Pam". I'd come home and give him a rusk to settle him at night and that were that. She did everything by the book, she had no kids of her own.'

Research conducted by Rosalind Edwards and Pam Alldred[12] on home-school relations shows that strong boundaries between home and school are often sustained by working class children ▸

themselves. Attempts by working class parents to become more involved in their children's school lives can be met with fierce resistance by their children. Also, many parents struggle to understand the work their children bring home. For middle class mothers and fathers, helping their children complete homework sheets or discussing their latest set reading book could represent a cosy, intimate point of connection. For working class parents it is more likely to represent a site of conflict, uncertainty and vulnerability.

Nevertheless, working class parents in our sample expressed deep concern about education and they worked hard to ensure their children were not left behind. Significantly though, their strategies tended to bypass the school system. For example, Julie, an African-Caribbean lone mother dependent on welfare benefits, has a 16-year-old son who has given up on school after countless disputes with teachers. She also has a 10-year-old daughter who is experiencing severe problems with maths. Julie's response is to try to encourage her son to apply for a further education college, while desperately trying to save up enough money for a maths tutor. Research demonstrates that seeking alternative education or supplementary schooling is particularly common among the African-Caribbean community as an attempt to mediate against the racism they experience.[13,14] This highlights how issues around class are shaped by ethnicity as well as gender.[15,16] But white working class parents in our sample were also forced into pursuing educational strategies outside of the school sector. Kelly's nine-year-old son was regularly sent home from school because of his disruptive behaviour and she has since discovered that his reading age is extremely low:

'It's very, very low [his reading age]. It's about year two, the work that he can do. I, I've started teaching at home as well to try and build that up but he still can't do two-letter words. He still has trouble with the two-letter words so he's very, very behind.... Cos they said he needs to learn the basics and that as well, and I'm aware that they haven't got the facilities there to do it. They've got all them kids there that they've got to teach, they can't devote the time to one. So I've said that I'm quite happy to have him at home and when he's at home we've got books that we do and we've got the learning one for the computer that he does as well and so, it's picking him up a little bit. He's getting a bit more confidence now, he does try and read, although he can't do it he will sit and try and do it.'

While Kelly expressed her shock and disappointment that teachers had not been able to provide her son with basic reading skills, she is resigned to the prospect of relying on her own efforts to teach him. Yet Kelly's deep concern for her son's education is largely invisible in the context of her disengagement from the school.

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Defending and protecting children

As well as disinvesting from school, working class parents in our sample also needed to actively defend and protect their children in ways far fewer middle class parents did. For example, middle class parents worried desperately about stranger danger and sought to make sure that when their children played outside they were always with other children in the neighbourhood. However, for many working class parents, other children in the neighbourhood were the focus of their fears.

Several had to contend with regular violent attacks on their children by children living nearby. For example, Meena, an Indian working class mother, described a desperate situation she and her husband Sal find themselves in over the constant bullying and harassment of her two sons. Both boys are regularly beaten up by children who live on their council estate, and this bullying continues in school. The boys have often had bikes and brand name clothing stolen from them. Meena doesn't feel the school have responded appropriately, despite their frequent visits to complain. Instead they are regularly called in to school to account for their sons' bad behaviour in the classroom. Meena was particularly angry at the way teachers automatically appeared to blame their sons if they were caught fighting with other children. While she was anxious not to see her sons get into trouble, she clearly identified with the frustrations and provocations faced by the boys.

For other mothers, perceived injustices led to more serious conflict with teachers or even a complete breakdown in relationships. For example, Denise, a white working class mother, described how her son had been a victim of chronic bullying. When her repeated complaints to the school achieved little, she felt compelled to keep her son at home until the head teacher dealt with the problem. While this example of parent-sanctioned truanting was driven by a combination of intense concern and limited power, her son's place in the unauthorised absence statistics pathologise Denise as an irresponsible, uncaring mother.

Significantly, most working class parents in our sample expressed a strong emotional commitment to vigorously challenging any potential victimisation of their children by teachers. This was evident in responses to questions asking parents what they would do if their child came home from school complaining that a teacher was picking on them. While the answers given by middle class parents were generally conciliatory, suggesting they would assume a mediating role when talking to teachers, working class parents were more likely to envisage a more acrimonious encounter. Again, this needs to be seen in the context of a prevailing balance of power. Such mothers were painfully aware that in the school environment they are positioned as problematic and inferior, and as a result feel they have little alternative but to fight hard.[4] Other formal interventions from health professionals are likely to be characterised by a similar power imbalance. However, such battles were underpinned by a moral claim upon which arguments were sustained or conceded. For example, Carol, a white working class mother, described how she had twice defended her son 'to the realms' only to discover that he had indeed flashed his bottom in the playground and broken a window. On finding out she was wrong Carol paid for the damage and reflected that the teacher had, after all, been reasonable.

Providing treats, surprises and comforts

Another parenting practice that working class mothers viewed as important was the provision of treats and comforts for their children. But, unlike middle class parents, they were more likely to try and give their children what they wanted rather than trying to shape their desires. Consequently, treats given to working class children tended to involve things like visits to fast food restaurants, Playstations or brand name clothing, as opposed to visits to museums, musical instruments or after school activities. For working class parents, giving was more likely to be associated with a notion of worth and deservingness rather than moral appropriateness. When money is scarce such treats were highly meaningful and could also be cheap. Crisps and sweets or a favourite junk food for tea might make a difficult day at school more bearable for a child, while also communicating a strong message of love and care. Clearly this does not sit well with the healthy eating messages promoted by health professionals.

Acquiring a high status or much desired item for a child could convey a range of symbolic meanings, heightened by the scarcity of the financial resources that are required to buy it. The following extract from Julie, an African Caribbean lone mother on benefits, demonstrates the depth of the emotional significance placed on providing:

Julie: *'I've got no money you know, and cos I punch me gas and punch me electric it is difficult and also, you know, I've got like erm the phone, the phone bill. I've got the, I've got the [Playstation] for the children because they're not ones for asking so I feel, well, you know, this is like a reward you know, like for them.... because they don't ask to be brought into this world and because they're here I feel that I need to, you know, give 'em things that they haven't got and because like I'm one parent, you know. And, yeah, they do see the, like, children out there that's got the best this and the best of that but, you know, I do try and provide.'*

Interviewer: *'But what happens if the children really want something but you don't have the money, say like a new pair of trainers or something like that?'*

Julie: *'By hook or by crook I'll get it. Yeah, by hook or by crook I'll get it and I don't mean, like, going out there and steal it, I just mean, like, just if it means, like, me not paying a bill, I'd just not pay a bill and do it that way.'*

For Julie, providing things like a Playstation entails a real struggle that is likely to communicate to her children the extent to which they are valued. As well as recognising the emotional implications it is important to realise that providing children with treats could also have a more practical significance. Televisions in children's bedrooms, Playstations and computer games could be used in an attempt to entice children to stay indoors, safe from drug and gang cultures or bullies. For more wealthy parents spending money is a less obviously significant act and consequently there is more likely to be a tension between curbing their children's materialism and making them happy. These parents were much more likely to apply codes and norms in relation to buying things for their children, for example, helping the child to save for it, or buying it if it's educational or 'needed' for an after-school activity.

Conclusion

This kind of in-depth, qualitative analysis of the actions, values and experiences of working class parents provides crucial knowledge to support health visitors' sensitive and effective practice.

Particular values are institutionalised and enforced through professional discourses around education, child development and, more recently, parenting skills. However, such values are for the most part grounded in middle class privilege. Many of the working class parents in our sample expressed pride in their abilities to parent well in demanding and difficult circumstances.

Professionals giving advice on parenting skills must be careful to respect the particular demands associated with disadvantage in order to avoid cutting across the personal expertise of parents. Working class parents often face challenges that demand alternative values and practice. In spite of attempts by the government to enforce particular codes and norms around childrearing, this research has shown how parenting remains a highly situated practice. By illuminating the context framing working class values and practices, health professionals are enabled in pursuing a flexible and constructive approach.

Although health professionals may be aware of cultural differences in parenting and be keen to adopt a nonjudgemental stance, detailed knowledge of how values are grounded in material and social deprivation will enable practitioners to engage in the most responsive and realistic way possible. Furthermore, while health visitors may have to work within current frameworks, research of this kind has an important role to play in supporting their future input into the continuing development of sustainable and effective health policies.

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