

Parenting in Fear: Child Welfare Micro Strategies of Nigerian Parents in Britain

Abstract

Parental engagement with British child-rearing normative practices and policies has been a source of conflict between Black African parents and professionals involved in child-safeguarding in Britain. These professionals include teachers, police, health care practitioners such as health visitors, nurses and doctors, and most importantly, social workers, because Children Act 1989, section 47 legally tasks social workers to investigate child-safeguarding concerns. Child-rearing norms and practices across all four UK countries are largely similar, although substantive legislative differences necessitate the application of only child welfare laws/policies of England and Wales in this study. The paper focuses on Nigerian parents' experiences of British child welfare system, tensions ensuing from those interactions and how parents mitigate them. Insights are drawn from 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions with Nigerian parents living in Greater London. Honneth's recognition theory and Fraser's participatory parity undergird the conceptual framework. The findings reveal an interplay of the structural forces of race, power and cultural differentials on participants' thinking processes and actions. Thus, suggesting that social workers perpetuate the British public's misrecognition of Nigerian parents through uncritical social work practices, which are implicated in further disempowerment of Black African parents, to the detriment of the families' well-being.

Key words: African, parents, child safeguarding, strategies, experiences, social workers

Introduction

Good enough parenting, which is often characterised by the quality of care provided to children and how sensitively parents are able to wield authority to ensure optimum development of their children (Sangawi *et al.*, 2018) tends to be complicated for African parents in Britain because of challenging intersection of race, culture, and child welfare policies (Gupta and Blumhardt, 2016). Nigerian born persons, officially numbering 191,000 at the last census in 2011, make up the largest foreign-born African group in England and Wales, and are concentrated in Greater London (ONS, 2015). Black African persons account for 1.8 percent of the general population, while 4.8 percent of children with child protection plans are Black African, thus suggesting an over-representation (see Gov.UK, 2019). There is, however, scant research information about the parenting practices of this population. It is essential that social workers simultaneously intervene where there are real or perceived child maltreatment and also support African children's welfare without exacerbating existing pressures for families (Bilson *et al.*, 2017). Understanding some of the parents' experiences may be crucial to balancing such competing requirements. The voices of Nigerian parents are therefore privileged in this article to articulate their realities, underscore respect for them as experts regarding their lived experiences (McDonald *et al.*, 2013), while providing a vital window for social workers into the parents' child-rearing practices and reasoning. The experiences and voices of Nigerian heritage children in Britain, although not examined in this study, are equally important for exploring the issues being raised.

Conceptual Framework – Child-rearing as a *Social Struggle*

Established parenting research and theorisations are Eurocentric, accentuating the originality of this study as an attempt to decolonise parenting knowledges linked to chauvinistic neo-colonial sensibilities that sustain Western perceptions of Africans as subordinate recipients of knowledge and culture (see Connell, 2014). Honneth's (1995) recognition theory is employed as the study's substantive conceptual framework within which Fraser's (2009) participatory parity paradigm is

invoked to apply representation. Honneth maintains that where certain moral (cultural) rights are denied some groups, often those on the margins of society, they create conditions for social struggles or misrecognition (1995). Fraser assents to Honneth's argument but argues further that representation and participation are important social justice instruments to address misrecognition or similar social injustices associated with unequal economic distribution (Fraser and Honneth, 2003; Fraser, 2009).

Child-rearing in Nigeria and much of sub-Saharan Africa usually occurs within mutually dependent, often communal, relationships, where parents and older and/or extended family members demonstrate commitment and vital practical care to children, usually through intense personal labour and sacrifice (Ekane, 2013). Children are required to respect parents and elders, which is crucial to ensuring that they (children) also take on responsibility for younger ones (Onwujuba *et al.* 2015). Inadequate social security in Nigeria compels parents to be *firm* with their children, to ensure that children grasp every opportunity provided, even in wealthy families (Irukwu, 2014). Conversely, racism is a similar driving force for Nigerian parents in Britain, where the parents imagine that unless their children worked hard in education and training and obeyed the authorities, their chances for *the good life* would be severely impacted (Okpokiri, 2017). Life in a typical Nigerian family is thus aspirational and hierarchical; parents and older family members would enforce rules through various means of discipline, sometimes using physical chastisement (Ekane, 2013). Such norms are commonly accepted in Nigeria, but second-generation Nigerian children growing up in Britain may struggle with some of these family practices; research by Cyril *et al.* (2016) with African immigrant families in Australia found similar challenges. The problematic concept of physical chastisement in Britain further compounds the issues (Barn and Kirton, 2016).

Baumrind (1996, p. 412) identified four main parenting styles – authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and unengaged:

Authoritative parents are both highly demanding and highly responsive, by contrast with authoritarian parents, who are highly demanding but not responsive; permissive parents, who are responsive but not demanding; and unengaged parents, who are neither demanding nor responsive.

These brief definitions imply positive hierarchy, with authoritative being the best and unengaged the least favourable parenting style, although Baumrind and fellow writers acknowledge the impact of environmental and cultural influences on the effectiveness of particular parenting styles. This article underscores that *Nigerian parenting* may not fit into any of these four parenting styles, which are Western constructs that have inadequately conceptualised race, ethnicity, culture and environmental contexts within parenting. A sequel to this article will draw on *requisite parenting* – a theorisation of Black parenting styles – obtained from the parents’ narratives of child-rearing (see Okpokiri, 2020).

Deficiency discourses based on Western parenting theories tend to problematise African parents as having limited knowledge of appropriate parenting practices, laws and policies, as well as poor interpersonal skills necessary for learning and negotiation (Bernard and Gupta, 2008). Prevalence of allegations of physical chastisement within referrals for Nigerian families in England and Wales reinforces perceptions of authoritarian parenting, therefore indicative of inferior cultural practices (see Barn and Kirton, 2016). Bilson *et al.* (2017) explain that irrespective of race or ethnicity, parents are increasingly apprehensive of child protection services in England. They also highlight that where child protection investigations lead to *No Further Action* (NFA), family support services for such families are negligible. Parents generally report that fear and disempowerment characterise the aftermath of these child-safeguarding interventions (Losoncz *et al.*, 2015). Bernard and Harris (2018, p. 5) lament ‘the lack of deep probing of the ways multiple inequalities coalesce to structure the lived experiences associated with the parenting environment for Black children’. The convergence of challenges means that African parents are ‘render[ed]... dangerously visible to apparatuses of the state’ (Maier and Coleman, 2011, p. 450). For Fraser, such people on the margins of society without positive representation may converge as ‘*subaltern counterpublics* in ...parallel discursive arenas

where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser 1990, p. 67, original emphasis). Fraser (2009) accordingly links injustice with participation disparities in society.

Following the 2011 riots in London, several Black parents, including those of Caribbean heritage, interviewed by journalists complained that the government had eroded their authority and ability to parent (Bristow, 2013). Such powerlessness is associated with negative experiences including, immigration history and ensuing fear of authorities, as well as fear of removal of children into care if social workers assess their parenting as not being *good enough* (Williams and Graham, 2014). Given conventional interpretations of good parenting as involving authoritativeness, an important but under-explored question highlighted by Clarke *et al.* (2017) is how parents who feel significantly disempowered maintain authority with their children. Such parents, including Nigerian parents in a USA study by Onwujuba *et al.* (2015), may adapt their practices or develop alternative ways to manage their children's welfare and behaviour. Participants' expressions in this paper suggest that parents without experiences of child protection investigations share similar concerns with those who have undergone investigations (see Bilson *et al.* (2017). It is important however to emphasise that parental behaviour is only *a* part of this multi-pronged issue.

Methodology

Sampling and Data Collection – Honneth's recognition and Fraser's participatory principles influenced how data was collected and participants treated. This is a qualitative study that involved culturally sensitive considerations and interactions with Nigerian parents, from conception of the research to data collection, analysis, discussion and conclusion. The research followed recommended ethical guidance including on ensuring informed consent from participants and maintaining their confidentiality, for which it received ethical approval from a UK university research ethics committee. Through purposive sampling, Nigerian parents were accessed with the help of gatekeepers from

community associations, religious organisations and other networks of Nigerian populations in England. Participants including 18 women and seven men provided 25 in-depth individual semi-structured interviews, after which two focus group discussions (FGDs) were organised from the pool. Challenges with organising participants for the FGDs meant that only eight participants were involved, four in each group.

The average length of individual interviews was 1.5 hours; interviews were carried out in participants' homes at their choosing. Interview schedule included questions about what constitute good parenting in Nigeria and Britain. The FGDs used vignettes to draw out underlying perspectives on issues including participants' collective interpretations of child-rearing practices and safeguarding professionals' activities as known within their respective African networks. Each FGD lasted about three hours and likewise occurred in a participant's home following agreement with group members. Reflexivity was applied throughout the study, including during interviews by paraphrasing, quoting and prompting participants for clarification (*member checking*), which improved trustworthiness (McClellan et al., 2020).

The youngest participant was in her early thirties while the oldest was late fifties. Twenty-one parents were university educated, one parent had up to primary education, while three had up to secondary. At least 12 parents had received unwanted child-safeguarding interventions prior to the study, although having such experience was not a requirement for participation. Nine parents had been referred to social services for what each stated was mild and appropriate physical chastisement: one for child restraint where the father refused his 14-year-old daughter to attend an all-night *rave* (house party); three for neglect (one over-weight and two non-supervision). All child-safeguarding cases were closed prior to the parents' involvement in the research. The adult children of two participants had left home and were reportedly living successful independent lives, while 23 parents were living with and raising children of various age ranges. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were:

- Inclusion criteria: participants should be – hetero-normative adults born and raised in Nigeria; have raised or currently caring for children in Britain; married to or in partnership with a Nigerian.
- Exclusion criteria: no immigration restrictions on their residency – supported by overwhelming evidence that immigration restrictions such as *No Recourse to Public Funds* significantly complicate parenting experiences, especially in socio-economic terms (Farmer, 2017).

Analysis – Data analysis necessitated meaning-making of participants’ juxtaposed perceptions and experiences of Nigerian and British child welfare contexts. Being of Nigerian heritage enabled me as a researcher gain real insider insight into nuances in the participants’ responses; although this introduced other challenges about how to ‘make strange what appears utterly familiar’ (Riemann, 2005, p. 90). Where possible, participants’ words have been kept verbatim, with exception of terms that are colloquial to Nigerian populations and so could be misunderstood by some readers; such terms have been translated into their common English interpretations. Thematic analysis was applied to obtain key ideas from the trove of textual data, as King (2012) recommends thematic template analysis for qualitative data obtained from 20 to 30 interviewees. The *template* comprised of five of the 25 interviews with the richest information, which were entered into NVivo computer assisted qualitative data analysis tool for coding (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). Initial themes were derived through inductive process by re-reading each of the five selected transcripts line by line multiple times, and keywords and phrases were highlighted to obtain basic codes. The study’s substantive theory (recognition) was applied to deduce further ideas and meanings embedded in the text and to acquire broader codes. Codes with similar meanings were merged to create categories of themes. Initial or ‘lower-order’ themes were condensed into ‘master’ themes, and then ‘organising’ (higher-order) themes like ‘parenting in fear’ for example, to create a ‘constituent’ hierarchical tier of the analytical framework (King, 2012, p. 258). The framework aligned with the research questions to aid triangulation. All the data are anonymised and pseudonyms allocated to participants by the researcher

to protect their privacy. It is nevertheless likely that participants in the focus group may recognise one another's information, although each person committed to maintaining confidentiality.

Findings – Parenting Micro Strategies

Key findings of the study, which include participants' experiences and interpretations of British child-rearing norms, practices and policies that they imagined other African parents would identify with, are organised into four key parenting strategies. De Certeau's (1984, p. 37) essay on strategy associates it with the powerful, where 'the weaker the forces at the disposition of the strategist... the more the strategy is transformed into tactics'. As participants have arguably tenuous control over these *strategies* the term *micro strategies* seems more appropriate. These micro strategies are theoretical frames used by the researcher to capture themes in the findings; participants have therefore not directly contributed to their being grouped into the patterns of micro strategies described in this paper as follows: *passive*, *introvertive*, *active*, and *transpositional participation*.

Passive Participation as a Parenting Micro Strategy

A prevalent perception amongst social workers in Britain is that African parents revered their heritage parenting practices and were therefore fixed in their traditional views of child-rearing (see Laird and Tedam, 2019). However, a number of participants supported total adherence to British child welfare system. They also approved unquestioning embrace of the norms and lifestyle of their adoptive country. Irulo, a mother with teenage children, implored other immigrant parents to: 'absorb any circumstances wherever you go; you must sink into the background and do like them' [sic]. Likewise, Binta observed:

They say when you're in Rome you do [behave] like the Romans. The way we sometimes treat our children, smacking them and all, it's not allowed here, because when they start going

to school, they won't take it anymore. You'll begin to see the changes. Nigerian children, when you smack them, they cry now and it's finished and that is it, gone. They won't think about it, but here they'll start withdrawing and saying, 'Oh, I'm being punished too much'. Oh, my God, they make a big deal out of it, which is not like that in Nigeria [Laughing]. And teachers ask them what happened when they see them start withdrawing, 'are you okay?' And they [teachers] put words in their mouths; make a big deal out of it and it becomes a problem.

With humour, Binta suggests that children in Nigeria understand her notion of chastisement better than those raised in Britain. Her impression differs slightly from Charity's, who subscribes wholly to the British child welfare system:

'I like the government here [Britain]; I like how they go about it... how do I put it? ...don't abuse that child'.

However, Abiola, a female participant, criticised some Nigerian parents as taking extreme measures to blend into the cultures of their adoptive country:

Some of them who want to raise their kids the English way say, 'my child is reasonable [educated], valuable, I don't even want him to speak the traditional Yoruba language. I only want my kid to speak English'. You find Nigerian kids here that cannot speak any other language but English; they cannot even understand our dialect. There are even parents who say 'don't speak that language, don't speak Igbo to my kid; speak to him yeah, only in English'.

Such parents probably sought proficiency in English language to counter stereotypes and discrimination that ensue from speaking English with a foreign accent (see Ryan *et al.*, 2010). The perhaps simplistic notion of language as the pathway to successful integration for immigrants is

widely accepted within Nigerian networks in Britain. The broad, distinctive accents of some Nigerians, including Yoruba people who comprise the largest African population in London (*Migration Observatory*, 2018) infamously attract some mockery, even amongst other Africans (Okpokiri, 2017). One father believed that African families do indeed have limited knowledge necessary to improve their living standards in Britain, which suggests some internalisation of the deficiency discourse:

Andu: Lack of knowledge is failing our Black children because we don't know much about the law. White British children know the law. This is their country; there are certain things they will do that will protect them from trouble, like how to handle the authorities. But African children struggle; they struggle because they don't know the law. And they will play into their [authorities'] hands, and then they will be in trouble.

Implicit in Andu's observation are two key issues: firstly, that Black children, and by default, their parents, have little or no knowledge of the laws in Britain. However, although a small number of participants had some inconsistent understanding of some child welfare legislation, most were relatively knowledgeable. Besides, second-generation African children would have even better comprehension of British laws, as they are raised in Britain. Secondly, from his observation – 'this is their [white British children] country', Andu problematised the '*Britishness*' of second-generation African children despite their British upbringing and citizenship, which raises questions about their identity and well-being, and thus their participation in the British political economy (see Fraser, 2009).

Introvertive Participation as a Parenting Micro Strategy

Parents in this second micro strategy group were resistant to complete assimilation through what could be termed passive-aggressive ways, as they were disinclined to engage meaningfully with British child-rearing norms but did not want to overtly reject them. Three fathers including, Simbi,

Olatunde and Andu, recommended remaining 'true' to their background values and way of life through the following three ways:

- having as little contact as possible with authorities and health and care professionals
- resisting aspects of the law that they found abhorrent and which allowed children too much freedom
- maintaining minimal integration with the host community.

In some ways, this attitude involves some secrecy, as it includes ignoring and avoiding the authorities and services. Simbi came to a similar conclusion following an intervention triggered by a nurse who weighed his child and incorrectly declared her overweight:

So after that we thought, the less intervention the better and we just stopped weighing our child. It's not a good thing, but we said, 'no more, we know what we're doing, we don't need the help...'. So we steer clear as much as possible of any kind of help from social services, from anybody, from doctors, from nurses.... Generally, because of the stories of social services, my wife and I agreed we will never let any professional of any kind come into our home.

Like Simbi, some participants confirmed their fears through other parents' stories, allowing them conclude that British child welfare structures did not sufficiently represent them, which speak to Fraser's parallel counter-discourses (1990, p. 67). While covertly maintaining their background values and practices, such participants made adjustments to minimise 'risky' contact with the authorities, as Simbi continued:

Well, to be honest, because of the fear of the system I had to play along with the system, as I didn't want to go to prison, but still they [children] know, because I have to let my children know that if I pull my child's ear and the child calls the police we know who will suffer. I tell the children: 'if they lock me up, then you won't see your daddy and me anymore. I will go for rest; I won't even have to go to work to feed you. You will go to work and feed yourself

or you go to a foster home and see if they will treat you the way me and your mother treat you’.

Simbi disclosed using emotional blackmail on his children and exhibiting an attitude of false ‘compliance’ (Reder and Duncan, 2013, p. 106) towards social workers in order not to appear uncooperative. His account suggests that better-informed social work practices might reduce secretive behaviours employed by parents and ensure more effective child-safeguarding practices. It did appear that a level of fear influenced some of the resistance; the focus group discussions in particular highlighted this, with parents echoing one another’s apprehensions:

Amanda: They [children] have rights to call the social worker or the child line or whoever they need to call and get their parents into problems and forget that if they are then taken into care that does them more harm than perhaps their parents trying to bring them up or educate them the right way.

David: You have to be extremely, extremely careful with the way you support your kids as well, so that you won’t get yourself into trouble... that shows you are not really caring for your children properly.... You can lose your child.

An assumption underpinning both comments is that any involvement with social workers is an avenue for children to be removed into care. As Losoncz *et al.* (2015) observed, other races and ethnicities in Britain share some similar concerns about safeguarding interventions; although, race and historical factors seem to exacerbate this fear for African parents. Nonetheless, such fear apparently did not deter about a quarter of participants from engaging with British child welfare norms.

Active Participation as a Parenting Micro Strategy

Active participation frames parents who choose to engage with their adopted society. The micro strategy includes taking part in socio-political activities in Britain; being open to new child-rearing ideas while resisting bad practices in constructive ways.

I think we should pick up the good in both societies and use them for our benefits to ensure that we get the best of both worlds, which we actually do because for instance a parent in Nigeria will not know any different from that society and a parent here will not know any different from this society. Whereas having seen both, you pick up the best from both societies and use it to your advantage and to the advantage of your children (Amanda).

The idea of getting the best from both cultures conveys a desire to culturally integrate but not completely assimilate by parents who approved of holistic involvement in Britain like Meji, a female participant:

The community doesn't get involved, and actually, that has detrimental effect on the child because when they are going astray society is afraid to correct them because they feel: 'well he or she is not my child, they are not my responsibility, so I cannot get involved'. In this society you cannot talk to a child who is going wrong. In fact the child will insult you and say: 'how dare you correct me?' And actually there are times [when] the parent will take the side of their children, 'well, you have no right to correct my child'.

Meji was perhaps reflecting on to her own upbringing in Nigeria and was keen to see communal child-rearing practices replicated in Britain, which has numerous implications. Another mother, Nma, also wanted to influence changes where she could. She shared that she underwent child protection investigations from social workers following the school's referral for physical chastisement in response to her discipline of the child after the teacher's report that her son was disruptive in class:

Let me say that the school and teachers are bigoted in their opinion. But, thank God that I'm not that kind of person who runs away at the first problem. I will deal with it... I'm not going anywhere. If you chase me out of this school you're going to chase me out of another school, yeah. Let's finish it... and shake hands and laugh.... I have to change things.

Bunmi, a mother struggling with an adolescent son's behaviour, thought it was necessary to explore what her rights and options were during intervention into her family:

I found out because I went out to interview other people and ask questions and I read books. I went on all the safeguarding websites, family websites, children who have families. I read up everything I could... parents don't know their rights. And sometimes some people come to me and say we have these issues and the social workers say this and say that. I say 'you have right to instil discipline in your children... 'Go and read it up, don't panic. They don't know what they are doing? This is your family. If they take your child your life is busted, just hang in there and find out what's going on.'

Taking such assertive position may imply that the onus is on parents to ameliorate what they might experience as oppressive practices and underplays the power imbalance between parents and the authorities. Pamela, a mother with young adult children, and Amanda imagined that community organising would positively impact policy-making and practice:

Amanda: I think sometimes we, the public actually, is at fault because we don't always you know, hear, voice, or give our point across and fill the questionnaires and answer questions. And so, of course they need to focus on those who responded and to use those results to make the rules or the laws, which they subsequently then put into practice.

Pamela: Yeah, like either on the radio or on the television, or go round the churches or the mosques, or go round Nigerian organisations, Black organisations. There could be pamphlets... explaining to people, 'look, we can look at this, we can do this in order to help the policy or the law of this country'. And being British, we will be listened to by the government, even though I doubt it.

Pamela's scepticism at the end of the comment somewhat diminished her initial enthusiasm for motivating other immigrant parents to seek to effect change. Meanwhile, for Amanda, if immigrant parents do not stay alert for new policy initiatives, keep informed and respond to surveys, then they lose the right to complain when policies that do not serve them are enacted. Other participants opted for an exit position if the challenges of managing children's welfare in Britain became untenable.

Transpositional Participation as a Parenting Micro Strategy

The final micro strategy comprises those who thought or knew parents who found child welfare management in Britain too difficult for various reasons. For such parents, finding an alternative temporary residence, notably Nigeria, especially to rein in out-of-control children, was seen as a valid option (see Onwujuba *et al.*, 2015). Also within this spectrum were parents who reasoned that participation was a myth statistically and ideologically because the Nigerian immigrant population was too insignificant to propel any changes in English laws or values.

David: Even if we make our opinions known to the government, that we don't want this, we don't want that, what is the population of Nigerians in England? And if the people of this country say 'no, this is what we want', and it becomes a law, there's nothing you can do, it is either follow the law, or go back to your country. That's why the English say that ignorance of the law is not an excuse; 'this is the way we behave in our country, if you like it, stay, if you don't like it, go'.

Other anxieties shared by these parents include being afraid of children's reactions to measures of parental control. Some parents explained this in terms of how policies and practices intended to ensure children's safeguarding had become tools that create fear in parents:

Eleoma (male): They have rights here, and that is why I said the law, despite the protection it offers children, also handicaps parents from giving them proper moral upbringing and discipline. So, children now exploit, even abuse the laws designed to protect them; the laws are now used negatively to intimidate their parents with such threats as: 'If you touch me I will tell my teacher in school'. And, the teachers incite them: 'call the police if anything happens'. They give them phone numbers at school, social services they can call, so they are very knowledgeable about what to do if they feel you've trampled on their rights... so that actually injects fear into you.

Folake (female): The kids know that the reason the parents are not smacking them is because of what the authorities say and they will continue to do wrong because they know they will not get disciplined. And some parents even say, 'oh no, he is a London child'. I don't have London children. My children are good children. God forbid! Instead, they will find themselves in Nigeria.

Sele (female): Some Nigerian parents have difficulties, especially when the children are 15, 16. It's difficult, and it's like they can't say anything. And we've seen some people, when social services are done, they take the children, they pretend, 'that's okay do whatever you want', and they will take them back [to Nigeria] for three years. By the time they come back, you see a different [better] person....

One mother stressed that value differences between Nigeria and Britain imposed constraints that ultimately forced her to send her daughter to live in Nigeria for a few years. Her experiences return us to Honneth's interrogation of the relegation or *pursuit* of immigrants to the margins of society (Brink and Owen (2007).

Binta: No matter what you as an African are in this country, you are still seen as an immigrant; whatever they want to call you, they'll call you. No matter what you become, they will remind you where you came from even if you don't know where you came from. So, I decided, 'okay, I have to take this girl back home, for her to go and see and appreciate what she's got there. That's why when she came back she appreciated it because I'm sure they worked hard to make her understand.

Interviewer: What informed your decision, and I want to clarify, did she show any challenges before you decided to do that?

Binta: Oh, yes, ...my daughter was getting a bad name in school. That's where I said all right, before it goes out of hand, I need to do something about it. Let me use this opportunity for her to go and meet her sisters, brothers and my family to know that we don't live in trees; we live in a house, so I used that opportunity to do that.

Binta's decision to translocate her daughter arose from a confluence of factors but could be framed within the term 'provincialise' which means '...relocating western narratives of progress in their wider colonial histories (Nash, 2002, p. 222). The notion that a person develops through adversity is particularly African rather than a Western narrative of progress – and this *African* aspiration, as well as the desire for her daughter to have a sense of belonging and connection to her family, outweighed Binta's other concerns about sending her daughter to what was for the girl, an alien environment.

Discussion and Recommendations

The participants' underlying considerations highlight multiple facets of misrecognition-related fear. Various micro strategies are thus employed to ameliorate misrecognition, counter fear and increase participation. Certain elements in the parents' accounts draw attention to other differences amongst them. Unsurprisingly, those who experienced child-safeguarding interventions were more disapproving of social workers and British child-rearing norms, although men were more likely to disengage and employ *introverted participation* while women were more likely to respond *passively* or *actively*.

The mother who spoke of 'standing her ground' in the face of what she felt was prejudice by her son's school might have appeared belligerent – given her perception of power imbalance between her and the professionals – and therefore inclined the professionals to perceive her as unable to accept responsibility for the impasse and make requisite changes. Selwyn and Wijedasa (2011) highlight concerns about African families who may respond with defiance to child-safeguarding professionals. In a complicated cycle, fear of authorities, fear of losing children to the care system, and the strangeness of state intervention in ordinary family matters, may compel some African parents to resist child-safeguarding professionals, who in turn may uncritically assess the parents as being uncooperative or antagonistic (see Cyril *et al.*, 2016). Meanwhile, recurrent anti-migration rhetoric and policies from various UK governments exacerbate exclusion and fear in immigrants (Honneth, 1995; Bain, 2018). British institutions and authorities, including the police, social services, hospitals and GP surgeries, schools, and religious centres are actively deployed to monitor and enforce some of these policies, which underscore the participants' distrust of institutions like social services (Yesufu, 2013).

Retelling stories shared by participants within African communities would inadvertently heighten their anxieties about child-safeguarding interventions. More than two-thirds of the 25 participants recommended temporarily sending children back to Nigeria if their behaviour became unmanageable.

Three parents had already done so and felt vindicated by the outcomes. For those parents, the typical ‘London child’ is spoiled, disrespectful of authority, and irresponsible. Perhaps there are other factors implicated in these behavioural challenges, including intersecting issues like poverty, racism and discrimination, austerity induced closures of youth centres and related facilities, capital driven drug conflicts, low educational attainment, unemployment, complex identity issues, amongst others (Williams and Graham, 2014). The parents however felt *misrecognised* within British child welfare culture, and viewed the power of social workers and the police – who may not have insight into their unique parenting considerations – to remove their children into care, as facilitating poor behaviour in their children, which can, as a last resort, be abated by the removal of the children to Nigeria. Social workers should be aware of situations that influence potential translocation of children, and their implications including, wishes and responses of the child and any siblings, length of stay, future carer for the translocating child, and overall effectiveness of the decision.

By no means essentialising the group and granted certain exceptions, the Nigerian parents appeared primarily aspirational for their children and as such, were afraid of the prospect of failing as parents if their children were unable to thrive. These parents are more likely to act in ways they imagine would ultimately enable their children attain a certain level of success in life, even if such actions might appear inappropriate to others. Professionals should consider this underlying fear of failure, and parents’ likely techniques for countering it, explored through the micro strategies in this study. Aspiration for children is mostly a strength; Kondrat (2014) implores social workers to take aspirations seriously as they can promote individuals’ capacity to grow and change. Where parents are aspirational for their children, professionals could make concerted efforts to minimise the parents’ fears about their children doing poorly or being taken into care, even when initially the parents appear confrontational.

With exemptions in some cases where parents are deemed to be wilfully harming their children, social workers should promote partnership with parents and explicitly invite them to become *active* partners who use information and interventions constructively. *Active participation* would improve the increasingly adversarial style of social work in England, which is often framed within risk; risk management is an important part of children and families social work but over-emphasis on it intensifies resistance and undermines necessary collaborative working with parents (Gupta and Blumhardt, 2016). Child-safeguarding referral procedures to social workers from institutions like schools, hospitals, support workers, health visitors, amongst others, should be reviewed to minimise hostility between parents and such institutions. Multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) teams should also re-evaluate their procedures for initiating child protection investigations to decrease prevalence of outcomes with *No Further Action* (see Bilson *et al.*, 2017). Where investigations are initiated but there is likelihood that children will remain with or return to parents afterwards, social workers should endeavour to project respect and a recognition of parents' important role in the well-being of their children. It is also important that African parents in particular do not feel further disempowered during these procedures, as they may otherwise be compelled to resort to drastic measures like *transpositional* micro strategy to improve future outcomes for their children. The recommended relationship-based practice is nuanced and does not condone child maltreatment (see Sutton, 2018), but requires training and skill to help social workers develop strengths-based practice with Nigerian and comparable African families.

Conclusion

This paper opens up spaces for the empirical and symbolic representation of this marginal group, to aid more balanced and contextualised decision making by child-safeguarding professionals. It seeks to lay bare some of the thinking processes and self-governing practices of a particular Black African population, which may be pertinent to the broader group. Professionals should be aware of the drivers and effects of the different pathways for *participation* that some African parents in Britain are likely to adopt. Principally, parents imagine that child-safeguarding interventions threaten their aspirations

for their children and so, react in a number of ways, here presented as four micro strategies, to counteract such threats. These frames are constructed from participants' self-reports, so there is no intention to recommend a particular strategy to parents. It is hoped that social workers will heed Honneth's recognition theory emancipatory principles, as well as Frasers exhortations for participatory parity, and acknowledge the sheer independence of thought and sophisticated rationalisation displayed by participants, which should stimulate the professionals' interests to genuinely seek to engage with African parents.

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