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The Moral Gaze: A Pluralistic Analysis of the Impact of Social Judgement on Parents, Parenting and Access to Support, to Benefit Children and Families

Emma Maynard[1] | Kate Blake-Holmes[2]

[1]King's College London, Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Palliative Care, Methodologies Division, London, UK | [2]School of Social Work, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

Correspondence: Emma Maynard (emma.l.maynard@kcl.ac.uk)

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores parents' narratives about encountering moralized expectations of parenting. We contribute original and significant findings which identify moralized judgement as a determinant between concealing potential child maltreatment and help-seeking to support child protection and welfare. We adopted a rigorous plural qualitative approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis and narrative analysis of $N = 24$ parents in England, who had experienced parenting support from children's services. Participants revealed that moral judgements from their birth families and child's school were particularly relevant. While fear of moral judgement deterred parents from open dialogue, feeling accepted and valued enabled greater self-efficacy and acceptance of support needs.

1 | Introduction: Moral Judgement

Making social and moral judgements about others is a core aspect of sociocultural behaviour. Haidt and Graham (2007) identified five domains within their Moral Foundations theory which appear to be global: *Harm/care, Fairness/reciprocity, Ingroup/loyalty, Authority/respect* and *Purity/sanctity*. In context, these reflect socialization to norms and values (Haidt and Bjorklund 2006; Pinker 2008), with deference to standards set by authority figures (Fraser 2012). There appears to be a global desire to punish people for moral transgressions; however, there are cultural and gendered differences in how transgressions are prioritized and forgiven (Hong 2023). This includes a preoccupation for moralizing about parenting (Bhattacharyya and Ray 2017; Hong 2023), and Thomas et al. (2016) comment that in the United Kingdom and United States, parenting choices deemed normal in previous generations can now lead to criminalization. Kirby et al. (2019) note shame and parenting are enmeshed from childbirth onwards over matters such as breastfeeding and children's behaviour, and cite Zero to Three's (2016) (United States) finding that 90% of mothers and 85% of fathers feel socially judged by others, with 50% reporting they feel this shame continually. Further, parents who experience mental illness, disability and poverty may encounter additional stigma and more readily come to the attention of services (Dickens et al. 2022; Blake-Holmes et al. 2023), where they are expected to engage in support or child protection measures, with an underlying assumption that their parenting requires correction (Ostner and Stolberg 2015).

UK child protection arrangements originate from 19th century discourse which separated deserving and undeserving families amid scrutiny for irresponsible or immoral behaviours (Sims-Schouten et al. 2019). This was furthered by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990) who signalled that poverty was a sign of a deficient character. Fenton (2020) notes

Summary

- Parents' perception of moral judgement was both a motivator for, and a barrier to, engagement with services. Motivation was expressed as resulting from the fear of the consequences of non-engagement, and being deemed *'an unfit mother'*.
- Parents were able to admit to potential risk factors when they did not feel morally judged for their difficulties.
- Parents feared moral judgment from children's social services.
- Parents experienced moral judgement from their families of origin, their child's school and the wider public.

the neoliberalist framework of UK social work, which expects parents to learn *correct* ways of parenting, while overlooking the deeply complex reasons for their difficulties.

Similarly, Aamann (2020) writes that Danish neoliberalism enables people to be controlled through their freedoms; the freedom to self-determine intensifies the responsibility to make the *right* choices. Moralizing is a response to outward expressions of assumed moral deficiency, such as obesity or alcohol consumption (Hong 2023; Aamann and Erlik 2023). These markers are viewed through a sociocultural lens, with risky or degenerate lifestyle choices associated with working classes, while their more affluent counterparts are assumed to be respectable or bohemian, and therefore protected from moralized judgement (Aamann and Erlik 2023; Nichols et al. 2021). Belgian authors Roets et al. (2015) note moral panic and public accountability surrounding social work practice with emotive concepts of risk, danger and irresponsibility, while disciplining families towards 'good' parenting. In Germany, parenting support is approached as a pedagogy for increasing competence (Ostner and Stolberg 2015), mirrored in expectations for change in the United States (Chaviano et al. 2018) and Spain.

In the current study, we examined parents' lived experience of receiving support amid the expectation they change their parenting, as determined by a hierarchical professional body (Chaviano et al. 2018; Ostner and Stolberg 2015). Research on parents' lived experiences of children's services is limited and indicates low satisfaction (Wilkins and Forrester 2021). We aim for our findings to help inform these gaps, pertaining to parents' motivations for engagement with children's services (Chaviano et al. 2018) and about the nuances of their support experiences (Mason et al. 2020). Our analysis contributes to this area, having connected moralized discourse with parents' withdrawal from some services, including schools, and fear of judgement as both a motivator for engagement with children's services and a barrier to *effective* engagement. We illuminate the nuances of judging and accepting parents, and the impact this has on their motivations for engagement and their feelings about perceived improvement as verified by authority figures (children's social care practitioners, their child's school and their birth families). This has potential implications for engaging with parents and negotiating fears associated with social work mandates for child protection, including helping to reduce the risks of disguised compliance, which remain a consistent concern in the United Kingdom (Dickens et al. 2022; HM Government 2022).

2 | Experiences of Parenting Intervention

In the United Kingdom, children's social care ranges from early help (a prevention measure), to the statutory protection of children by social services. The umbrella term 'Safeguarding' refers to the prevention of harm to children and promotion of their wellbeing and safety (DfE 2023). In this paper, we use the term 'children's services' as families had experienced both early help and children's social services. Parents become involved with children's services when they are unable to meet their child's needs without support. Issues may include risk, or occurrence, of abuse or neglect (DfE 2023). Common categorizations of abuse are physical, emotional, or sexual abuse and neglect. However, these can manifest in a multitude of ways and the root causes are complex, including parenting capacity, past trauma, social disadvantage, mental health difficulties, domestic abuse, and/or learning disability (Skinner et al. 2022, and Dickens et al. 2022; Maynard et al. 2023). Parenting support aims to prevent harm to the child by enabling the parent to meet their child's needs consistently. Pycroft and Bartollas' (2014) discussion of complexity theory illuminates potential tensions between the family's view of themselves and those of the powerful professional agencies who intervene where there is a potential for harm (Children Act 1989; DfE 2023), and whose authority is reflected in theories of moral reasoning (Haidt and Graham 2007). Parents' measures of adequate parenting is informed by their own family norms and systems, and may differ significantly from others' (Pycroft and Bartollas 2014; Chaviano et al. 2018). Noted are Mason et al.'s (2020) observations that many parents known to children's services have experienced past trauma, which can influence their relationships with services. They refer to shame, blame and re-traumatizing interactions, described by one participant as 'worse than the abuse' (11). Furthermore, additional adversities, such as mental illness and substance misuse can intensify stigma especially when combined with parenting and social services involvement (Nichols et al. 2021; Purtle et al. 2022), adding to the shame already experienced by the majority of parents in competitive, westernized cultures (Kirby et al. 2019). Seemingly, moral judgement and fear may affect motivation for the changes in parenting expected by these agencies (Chaviano et al. 2018) Despite significant social and health inequalities and past trauma among these families there is a pervading (false) stereotype that such parents wilfully harm their child and are not loving (Stephens 2022). Consequently, intervention by children's social care can feel pejorative and stigmatizing. UK social policy has reinforced these stigmas through an intervention culture which is prescribed, moralized and norm-led (Thomas et al. 2016), with significant pressure on practitioners to remove families' dependence on the state, (Hayden and Jenkins 2014; Aamann 2020). The rhetoric is correctional, requiring conformity to ideals upheld by professional and political agents (Sims-Schouten et al. 2019), and public perceptions (Nichols et al. 2021). These judgements are morally configured and in themselves evoke inflated perceptions of risk (Thomas et al. 2016; Adams and

Millie 2021). This fails to consider the systemic disadvantage, discrimination, past trauma and health inequalities which evoke cycles of deprivation and impede parenting (Maynard et al. 2023; Featherstone et al. 2018; Bywaters et al. 2016).

3 | Stigma and the Moral Gaze

Stigma develops in opposition to normalized values and assumptions shared by the majority. Those characteristics are attributed to people and groups, who then become othered, leading to prejudice and discrimination (Tyler 2022); a *'social disqualification'* (Scholte et al. 1999, 373). The phenomena of stigma lead to a concealment of the true self in order to self-protect (Tyler 2022) and can derail efforts made in overcoming barriers to social inclusion. This can result in low engagement, high drop-out, and a view shared among parents that involvement with support services tarnishes their identity; yet, the shame of moralized discourses about parenting and support can be both a motivator for (Symonds 2018) or a barrier to engagement (Mason et al. 2020; Kirby et al. 2019).

In the United Kingdom and in other parts of the West, there have been calls to centre safeguarding around a public health agenda and workforce (Foreman 2019; Munro 2011), which is regarded as less stigmatizing than social services (Barlow and Calam 2011). However, the perception of stigma is not solely based on the professional group addressing it, but rather the interface between private family life and the socially constructed parameters expectations of 'good' parents (Nichols et al. 2021). Some patterns of behaviour and values may be shared within family and social contexts, yet still jar with master narratives of 'good enough' parenting (Fivush et al. 2019; Pycroft and Bartollas 2014), and with the corrective nature of professional intervention (Chaviano et al. 2018; Edwards and Mauthner 2012).

3.1 | Narrative Identity

McAdams (2019) explains human beings have told stories about themselves and others through time, enabling individuals to show themselves as prosocial, influential actors, who reflect ingroup priorities. Master narratives form, and determine expectations which are communicated and reinforced through social discourse, legal frameworks and policy. Behaviours and values which contradict shared expectations become stigma narratives; representing a social threat, policed by other members of the group (McAdams 2019).

The stories we tell about ourselves are autobiographical narratives, conveying moral, social and psychological rhetoric to justify and contextualize life events (Fivush et al. 2019; McAdams 2019). Given the significant psychological reaction human beings have to social rejection (Eisenberger 2012; Kirby et al. 2019), normalizing and reasoning our behaviours is a key strategy for self-affirmation (McAdams 2019). Narrative is used to make meaning and develops over time, confirming self-identity (Fivush et al. 2019; McAdams 2019). Redemption narratives create a story arc of overcoming difficulties, transforming adversity into an advantage and ultimately seeking to benefit others (McAdams 2006a). Repeated use of a narrative trope or retelling of a redemptive story may help refine a personal identity; a reinvention in favour of a preferred and outwardly projected sense of self (Brandon et al. 2017; McAdams 2006b; McAdams and McLean 2013; Lund et al. 2016).

3.2 | Social Judgement and Parenting Along Gendered Lines

Despite advances in gender equality in the latter half of the 20th century, the parenting landscape remains gendered, bestowing master narratives of care and nurture on mothers. Amato (2018) argues that fatherhood itself is marginalized; fathers are typically afforded fewer automatic rights, and their parenting role is frequently sidelined in favour of the mother (Maynard et al. 2023). While social constructions of women have shifted towards equality, constructions of *mother-as-carer* and *father-as-provider* persist. These assumptions are an identified obstacle for fathers, particularly in children's social care, including care and custody proceedings (Phillip et al. 2020). Becoming a parent holds heightened social esteem; however, the prescribed expectations of a good parent mean that an individual's worth as a parent is measured against an unattainable ideal (Johnson and Yudilevich Espinoza 2018; Nichols et al. 2021). The habitual assumption that the woman provides task-focused care means that they may feel more enmeshed in parenting than fathers and is associated with higher levels of parental stress, depression and overload (Rina and Feinberg 2012; Mirick 2018). These pressures play out within the community of women and mothers, including performativity in peer environments and the urge to hide away in shame when encountering social judgement (Aston and Peckover 2017; Liss et al. 2013; Kirby et al. 2019).

The current study aimed to explore the lived experience of parents needing and receiving support from children's services and about their experience thereafter, in the context of moralized expectations of parenting.

4 | Methods

The current study collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews from 24 parents experienced in children's services support. The data has been analysed through an interpretative lens, which centralized lived experience as subjectively 'real'. The experiences related by participants were orientated to highly emotive events and relationships with agencies, reflecting power differentials and hierarchical expectations of change (Chaviano et al. 2018). Therefore, despite the socially constructed nature of those teams and expectations, the issues and power battles reflected by our participants have assumed a reality; and so we have adopted a critical realist perspective (Bhaskar 2010). Participants recounted their experience in a narrative style through semi-structured interviews, which we applied through a pluralistic approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Narrative analysis (NA). Shaw et al. (2018) and Frost et al. (2014) note that pluralism is a contemporary

development within qualitative psychology and has encouraged greater creativity and depth of analysis. The combination of IPA and narrative with critical realism has been used previously by this research team (Maynard et al. 2023) and others: Kimberly (2022) who also combined IPA and NA with critical realism; Hood (2016); and Shaw et al. (2023). Arguably, adopting a plural analysis can enable greater understanding than one method alone (Shaw et al. 2023; Frost et al. 2014; Hood 2016).

IPA is a phenomenological approach which we have used to explore the parents' experience as interpreted by them. Narrative analysis, a dialogic approach, has enabled us to acknowledge and understand the way in which their experiences have been presented to us, in a similar vein to Shaw et al. (2023). The plural approach seemed particularly beneficial to this study given the potential performativity in recounting experiences of stigma, judgement and heavily socially constructed parenting, so that we could understand how experiences were reasoned and justified, in an ontological framework which explains the causal factors beneath the empirical lived experience of the moral gaze (Hood 2016). The plural approach enabled us to interpret our participants' experience of relationships and events (IPA), with their negotiation of master narratives held about them (narrative analysis) (McLean et al. 2020; Goodbody and Burns 2011; Fivush et al. 2019) in combination. The ability to consider both the lived experience and presentation of self within a given context is noted as a strength of pluralism (Frost et al. 2014; Hood 2016; Shaw et al. 2023).

The sample was $N = 24$ parents who had been known to children's services with their last contact at 'step-down' level. The inclusion criteria encouraged an inclusive sample, specifically targeting parents who had experienced early help and/or children's social care intervention. We excluded parents currently receiving support as an ethical measure to avoid the risk of emotive conversations during a potential episode of child protection.

Inclusion:

- Parents who had previously received support from early help and/or children's social care.
- Parents who were not currently receiving support from early help and/or children's social care.
- Parents who could communicate fluently in English for the purposes of a semi-structured interview.

Exclusion:

- Parents who were currently receiving support for their parenting and child/children.
- Parents are unable to participate in a semi-structured interview in English.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university. An early help service in urban Southern England acted as a gatekeeper by passing on a verbal invitation and open letter from the researcher to prospective participants as a non-threatening introduction. Participants gave consent for the researcher to contact them directly. The local family hub offered a familiar and accessible research environment. Any personal details and case histories communicated by the participant themselves during interviews, and all accounts were accepted as true. The nature of the support provided by the service indicated that participating parents would have experienced issues such as managing positive relationships with children, managing behaviour, parenting capacity, their own mental health difficulties and/or substance misuse, or that of their child, and domestic abuse. The informed consent process included a clause that should a participant disclose a current risk to a child, the researcher would refer to the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub as per their obligations under relevant UK legislation (Children Act 1989). This was discussed openly with each participant prior to the interview. There were no objections, and all interviews proceeded with audio recording. No safeguarding concerns arose.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out in two waves of data collection. Other findings arising from this study pertained to parents' self-reported sustainability of 'better' parenting and have been reported on elsewhere (Maynard et al. 2023). The interviews were commensurate with IPA approaches in form and philosophy (Smith et al. 2009). The interview schedule allowed for probing questions to gain a thick description of experiences. Narrative analysis applied the Big Three analytic codes to the qualitative data: *autobiographical reasoning, motivation and affect* and *evaluative and referential structural aspects* (McLean et al. 2020). We followed IPA inductive analysis with deductive analysis via the narrative codes. Twenty-one of the full $N = 24$ discussed issues of moral and social judgement. Care was taken to bracket the researchers' personal responses, which reflected differences in privilege, social class and parenting histories. This enabled us to get closer to the authentic experience of participants rather than approaching the data through our biased lens without due reflection (Smith et al. 2009).

Interviews took a conversational style around three key questions;

1. What led to your need for support?
2. What was it like receiving support?
3. What has happened since your support?

Participants were invited to a focus group to discuss the initial findings of the project. Two attended and confirmed that interpretation resonated with their experience.

5 | Results

The qualitative data from $n = 24$ interviews were analysed according to IPA methodology and by the Big 3 factors of narrative analysis. This resulted in ordinate and superordinate level themes and narrative factors as presented in Table 1.

Findings have been presented as the two phases in which the analysis took place—we first present the data as IPA, and then the narrative analysis. The Discussion brings both approaches together.

TABLE 1 | IPA themes and narrative aspects.

Participants	Ordinate themes	Superordinate themes	Narrative factors
Tina, Hanna, Jess, Sofia, Rachel, Denise, Lisa, Meg, Rosie, Jenny	School	The source of the moral gaze	Autobiographical reasoning: *Exploratory processing, meaning making*
Esther, Rachel, Alison, Sofia.	Family		
Hanna, Tina, Helen	Getting ready	Being better, being normal	Autobiographical reasoning: *Change connections, self-event connections* Motivational and affective: *Agency; Affective tone (determination)*
Tina, Rosie, Nathalie, Rachel, Thea, Sarah, Dave	Being Better		
Tina, Jess, Nathalie	Normal family		Autobiographical reasoning: *Self – event connections*
Hanna, Tina, Helen, Jess, Sofia, Esther, Rachel, Thea, Denise, Lisa, Meg, Dave	What they think about us	(I'm not an) unfit parent	Autobiographical reasoning: *Exploratory processing, meaning making* Motivational and affective: *Affective tone (fear of judgement)*
Tina, Helen, Jess, Sofia, Esther, Rachel, Zoe, Alison, Thea, Denise, Sarah, Viv	What will people think		
Alice, Viv, Jenny, Angela	Useless and blamed		
Tina, Helen, Rosie, Jess, Esther, Rachel, Zoe, Alison, Thea, Densie, Sarah, Viv, Lisa	I'm (not an) unfit parent		Autobiographical reasoning: *Interpretations, exploratory processing,* Motivational and affective: *Agency and Communion*
Jess, Jenny	Something really wrong		Autobiographical reasoning: *meaning making, exploratory processing* Motivational and affective: *Affective tone (fear)*
Hanna, Nathalie, Rachel, Sarah, Dave	Other people	Judge all you like	Autobiographical reasoning: *exploratory processing* Motivational and Affective *Affective tone (relief)*
Jess, Sofia, Esther, Rachel, Dave	Me, now		Autobiographical reasoning; *change connections,* Motivational and Affective: *Agency (not hiding)*
Rosie, Nathalie, Rachel, Zoe, Denise, Lisa	What parents (like me) need	What parents (like me) need	Motivational and Affective: *Communion*

5.1 | IPA Analysis

5.1.1 | The Source of the Moral Gaze

Parents acknowledged generalized social and moral judgement, but particularly focused on that conveyed by birth families, and their child's school. Judgement from school appeared the most significant across the sample, with 10 (female) participants giving particular emphasis. Judgement from children's social care was anticipated, rather than recounted, and explained as a defensive rejection of judgement (see *(I'm not an) Unfit mother*). Only one positive reference to school was found, when Jenny, a grandmother with parental responsibility, stressed the head-teacher's support, yet was still concerned about her daughter being judged: *'I went to the school and I spoke the head and they were brilliant. And all I was thinking was, they're going to think she's a bad mother'. Jenny.*

Other related references to the perception of moral judgement included the following:

> *I felt the school held it against me.*
>
> Tina

> *I just did not want [to go to] the school anymore … every time I picked her up, I was told Holly's done this, Holly's done that, Holly's done this.*
>
> Hanna

> *'... it was making me ill him being there [school], because I would have 15, 20 texts a day and I'd have phone calls, and phone calls ...[saying] ' we are going to have to send them home, they are unmanageable'.*
>
> Jess

Parents also revealed the position of the school in potential child abuse cases. Tina's words 'tried to claim' reveals significant tension. Despite their agreement with doctors, she seems focused on the school's judgement:

> *... it wasn't Social Services that tried to say his hand had been dunked [in hot tea]. It was actually the school that tried to claim that because they said it was unnatural for it to be in a straight line .... And, the doctors basically.*
>
> Tina

Esther, Rachel, Alison and Sofia emphasized judgement from their birth families. Esther explains how this led to significant isolation:

> *I didn't really have family support because again it was 'he's naughty ... you need to sort him out, he's a little shit, this is all your fault, ... if he had a dad we wouldn't be having any of it'.*
>
> Esther

5.1.2 | Being Better, Being Normal

This theme encapsulates the parents' motivations and aspirations for engaging in parenting support. Some, such as Hanna, Tina, and Helen, explained this as a positive proactive endeavour to prevent future stress:

> *I might as well do all of these things just as a kind of precaution... Well, like so I'm prepared basically for her teenage years.*
>
> Hanna

However, Helen and Tina had more complex motivations. Tina explained she was motivated to gain support for herself as a single parent of four, but also wanted to prove herself to be a *good* parent in the eyes of the authorities. Tina emphasized her struggle and performativity. She reiterated she would *prove, whatever it takes*. In this extract, she accepts support to satisfy others:

> *I went to every parenting class because I'm like, on my own, because my husband died ... then I met my ex, and he had a stroke .... So. I've had to fight to sort of prove to social services. And, I used to say to them 'look I'll have all the help you've offered me. I'll take anything, whatever it takes.'*
>
> Tina

Self-presentation as a good, or 'better' parent was prominent for Tina, Rosie, Nathalie, Rachel, Thea and Sarah and as a 'normal' family for Tina, Jess and Nathalie. Similarly to Tina's extract, above, Rachel shows performative motivation for accepting support. She explained; *'It's a commitment to your child and it's a commitment to show that you're not a shit mum'*, again indicating an external judgement and a strong motivation to prove her worth to others, as well as to make improvements for her child.

Thea's words reveal the highly emotional position of improving parenting;

> *What I try and do is prevent things ... causing me to feel like that and then I can't be the mum that I need to be. That's my absolute ultimate ... Am I being the parent he needs me to be? And when I'm not doing that, my world was like ... its over.*
>
> Thea

Thea's excerpt shows autobiographical reasoning; being the best possible parent to her child is her entire world—if she cannot do that, it (life) is over. She also demonstrates how she avoids feeling overwhelmed through proactive effort.

5.1.3 | (I'm not an) Unfit Parent

The theme *Being better, being normal*, sat alongside *(I'm not an) unfit parent*, and reflects defensive self-talk and self-presentation as parents proclaimed themselves as *not unfit*. This was their self-defence measured against the judgement they perceived from authority figures such as schools, social services and their own parents (see Maynard et al. 2023). Thea challenges assumptions made about her, angrily stating:

> *They suggest I go on a parenting course and I said: 'this is not about my parenting. I am very good at being a parent. It's the best – best thing I've ever done, and I'm a fantastic parent and I'm very comfortable of that. However there are limits to what a person can do and I need you to give me pointers.'*
>
> Thea

Denise reveals a constant battle for her confidence in the face of social judgement:

> *My confidence and strength had to grow, to fight for her. And to defend my family, you know, from these people that were judging me ... that judgement is a really big thing for me, that people judge me – and what gives them the right? ... you're charged as soon as your child has a problem ... They think the problems are within you.*
>
> Denise

Denise shows anger and reveals a palpable power imbalance – she had to *defend* herself from being *charged*; both terms also used in legal settings. Fear of professional judgement was also evident with other participants. Rosie states her motivation for engagement with parenting support 'to cover my own bum, to be honest'. She goes onto explain:

> *If I refuse, I'm going to be deemed unfit … and you have the whole thing of social services then getting involved … it was 'I'm going to do this to shut everyone up. … I think a lot of people go onto the course for fear of the consequences if they don't do the course'.*
>
> Rosie

Again, the language conveys a formal judgement within which she holds no power. Below, Rachel illustrates the relief of not being judged:

> *[in the peer support group] you're not being judged, oh endlessly judged, judged, judged, judged, judged, judged … It doesn't help to tell people that they're doing it completely wrong.*
>
> Rachel

Several parents combined master narratives of caring and fighting for their children with counter-culture narratives of leaving their children. The parents' concerns about judgement extended to families of origin. Sarah, parent to eight children aged between 2 and 22, explained that she had fled domestic violence, leaving her younger children with their father. Sarah uses sarcasm to deflect moral judgement; *'And when I did leave, I was the black sheep of the family! Left my kids! What parent does that?!'*

However, Sarah also judged others in order to show herself in a better light by identifying evidence of her *better* parenting. Talking about another family, she says:

> *… she's got a five year old little girl and she's got a friend … the godfather, he's about eighteen, nineteen, he's a bit of a boy racer. She sticks him in the back of the car! With no booster seat right, and just lets them go off swimming together! … I mean is she that desperate to get rid of her children? … [She] says 'oh! I've got to get two children up' and I say 'I've got five!' I'm never late for school and they are all clean and fed and my house us spotless. And I will walk into hers and well, I can't go into hers. Its disgusting.*
>
> Sarah

Similarly, Viv portrays herself as a parent fighting for her children, but also one who left them, counter to cultural expecations of mothers. While she indicates fear of judgement (Scholte et al. 1999; Mason et al. 2020), she minimizes this, maintaining the children did not notice she had left:

> *My two older children didn't know I'd left for a year, because I went back every morning and every evening, to make sure they were okay. Got them to school, fed them and put them to bed. Then I would leave the house …. I always made sure they were safe. I bought them mobiles, so that they could phone me. They had contract mobiles from the age of 8.*
>
> Viv

5.1.4 | Judge All You Like

This theme illustrated parents' defiance against judgement about themselves and their children. Some showed a shift to greater confidence about this, resulting from parenting support. For example:

> *Now [after parenting support] … Its not going to be a big secret any more, whereas before I'd be trying to keep secrets, cover it up for him, … before it would've been 'oh, he's just being naughty … oh, he's a little shit …' now [its] like oh yeah, its just the way it is … hey yeah, we cannot cope, yeah that's right, and I'm quite happy to say.*
>
> Esther

> *… the main thing [parenting support] did was it let me think, well … if people do not understand it, that's over to them, whatever. They do not see it. They do not understand it, they can judge me, they can judge [him] all they like. I do not care any more ….*
>
> Rachel

Rachel appears resilient in this quote, forcibly throwing off judgement. Some parents also judged others and in doing so, presented their own families in a better light, for example, when Sarah, compares her parenting to others (above). Zoe sums this up by saying:

> *There was like someone worse of each time [support group] no matter what you said, some could kind of trump that. But then obviously, other people in the group felt that about my stories too. They were like 'glad my kid don't do that.'*
>
> Zoe

Nathalie also explained that gaining parenting support meant she became more compassionate and less judgmental of others. She says:

> *It makes you think about all this and so you judge people a lot less, you find you are less judge-y, so if the child is throwing a wobbler you're like oh God that poor parent.*
>
> Nathalie

Observing other parents' challenges may help disrupt master narratives that good parenting should feel natural and instinctive and may enable parents to depersonalize their difficulties.

5.1.5 | What Parents (Like Me) Need

The parents had clear recommendations for the ways in which support should be offered to parents, and how they had been part of this themselves in a peer group support setting. Denise explains:

> *Its really difficult for the parent because they don't know where to turn … They're being judged same as I was, therefore we come in and go 'okay, lets just calm all of this turmoil down. Let's just sit and talk, no judgement …They need to be able to tell their story without judgement'.*
>
> Denise

Lisa advised other parents:

> *Definitely to tell, to ask for help. There is no shame, because I thought … I was a bad mum*. Lisa

It is notable within this theme that the parents do not refer to a specific form of parenting support. As many participants reported experience of several structured and unstructured approaches, we deduce that the predominant value is based in non-judgmental, safe interpersonal spaces and that significant validation is gained through peer support.

5.1.6 | Narrative Analysis

Both referential (what happened) and evaluative (why it mattered) aspects of the data were found and were interwoven, which is an indication that the story is perceived as owned and unique, and of personal significance (Fivush et al. 2019). Evaluative aspects were highly emotive. Parents typically reported fears of being *the worst* and being *endlessly judged*, with repeated emphasis. With equal emotion, participants revealed relief in gaining approval, or acceptance. Extreme language was used, for example, 'The relief! … I was no longer petrified' underlining the power imbalance and feared consequences of children's services intervention (Mason et al. 2020). Early in the story, anecdotes were typically about the start of the intervention and therefore reflected the crises within the family, fear of services becoming involved, and social judgements. This extends previous research which identified profound responses to social rejection (Eisenberger 2012) and general, normalized parenting (Kirby et al. 2019), which did not carry the additional stigmatizing experiences these parents had encountered. In these stages, narrative was highly evaluative and used dismissal connections to dismiss experiences which were counter to expectations (McLean and Fournier 2008). This included the parents who left their children in violent households (Sarah, Viv, Angela and Lisa) and social judgement, presented as unfair and unkind (Vicky, Rachel and Lisa). Later on, stories became more redemptive as families worked towards being safe enough to be discharged from children's services, and evaluative aspects revealed affirmation; *this happened because we had got it right …* citing affirmation and approval as evidence of correct parenting (Ostner and Stolberg 2015). Dave had ceased physically abusing his children following children's services involvement, but he also spoke vehemently about men who do; *'The men … or the* **cowards** *who hit their children. That is not parenting. That is not parenting at all'.*

Referential aspects were used to give detail about events, but were rarely stated in a purely factual way, whereas typically referential narratives are more factual and logical (Fivush et al. 2019). In some cases, these illustrated the extreme nature of the stories because of *how* they were told. For example, one parent forgot her children's ages and added her daughter's sexual abuse as an afterthought when recounting that she ran away, became sexually exploited, and was taken into care.

The majority of utterances appeared as autobiographical reasoning, as parents made sense of their experiences. On many occasions, reasons for their difficulties were given particular prominence in the data. Experiences of social judgement were recounted angrily, reflecting how deeply this was felt (Kirby et al. 2019). There was a shift to a more reflective tone when recalling people and places who were more accepting of their difficulties. Motivation and affect appeared more prominent in latter sections of the interviews. Potentially, this reflects the theory that narrating experience supports the development of authentic self-narratives (McAdams 2019).

Self-event connections (McLean and Fournier 2008) appear highly self-affirmative throughout the data. Even as parents appear more self-reflective, their narrative is self-preserving. They reflect redemptive narrative arcs, but locate specific turning points in their support experiences where they saw their situation, and themselves, differently. As explained by Pasupathi et al. (2007) self-event connections and meaning-making both require the narrator to link between a past event and current understanding of self. For example, Viv assured the interviewer that it will not be her fault if her son dies by suicide. While denouncing responsibility for this, she also assumes responsibility for having saved him thus far:

> *I've tried my best, but I've got to accept that I've done everything I possibly can to help him. If he actually manages to commit suicide, it's not my fault.*
>
> Viv

> *They admitted, when they discharged Harry, that it was actually me, that pulled Harry around. It wasn't them, who had done it.*
>
> Viv

The data were abundant with justifications for past, present and future events, both within and external to participants' own sense of control. Angela asserted that her children would really prefer to live with her, but that their father prevents this. Sarah says her daughter was taken into foster care but also says she chose to leave and threatened the family unit by making 'false' accusations. Tina explains that if her son 'goes the wrong

path' it will be due to his choices, despite her calm and responsive parenting. These dismissals identify outliers to the master narratives of good parenting, and parents note them as exceptions, maintaining the integrity of the 'good parent' narrative. Redemption narratives featured both agency and communion (McAdams 2006a) as parents progressed from social rejection towards greater acceptance, via purposeful change and peer support.

6 | Discussion

Our evidence indicates that being able to discuss parenting stress without judgement enabled parents to improve their parent–child relationships, develop confidence and withstand critical observers. Significantly, parents identified that following non-judgemental support they felt able to admit to further difficulties, which is crucial in preventing child abuse and neglect, and supports other findings which report potential damage where parents experience moral judgement (Mason et al. 2020; Kirby et al. 2019).

In adopting our qualitative, plural approach, we have responded to the identified need for nuanced narrative research with marginalized groups (McLean et al. 2020). Our data reveal participants authoring their experience through reflecting on their referrals and support, subsequent changes, and life since. As with other studies, the data reflects parents' related experiences of stigma and criticism (Mason et al. 2020; Sims-Schouten et al. 2019; Nichols et al. 2021) but also their successes and the development of their narrative identity as they recall support and affirmation. Like other similar work (Mason et al. 2020) our participants reported additional stressors such as mental illness, domestic violence and social disadvantage which are stigmatized by the general public (Purtle et al. 2022; Blake-Holmes et al. 2023). Understanding the narrative structure of their stories enabled us to witness how they self-presented following this stigma and intervention by services which may have been unwelcome (Mason et al. 2020; Chaviano et al. 2018) and which evoked pertinent questions about the self-as-parent.

Our findings indicate a moral gaze is perpetuated by children's services, schools and parents' own parents, all of whom occupy an authoritative status, as well as by generalized disapproval from members of the public. Others have reported evidence of self-stigma (Purtle et al. 2022; Kirby et al. 2019). We have not found particular evidence of this in the current study, but also acknowledge the additional layers of stigmatizing experiences the parents had encountered, including children's challenging behaviour, mental illness and domestic abuse, which may have intensified the defensive psychological response to moral judgement (Eisenberger 2012; Kirby et al. 2019) and moral typecasting (Gray and Wegner 2009). Arguably, families known to children's services have breached master narratives of parenting, having fallen short of being able to meet their child's needs without external support (Mason et al. 2020). There are certain factors which appeared particularly important to the participants and which, we suggest, have practice implications for engaging parents and sustaining their involvement. Redemptive narratives occur frequently in the data. However, by virtue of the research question and population, we know that the families had previously needed social care support and had not recently been re-referred at the time of their interview. Therefore, we could perhaps assume that at the point of data collection, the situation had improved and consequently we could expect a strong representation of redemption. Parents used redemption narratives purposefully to project a preferred self-image by referencing successes which fit expectations (Kirby et al. 2019; Chaviano et al. 2018), while indicating that past challenges were ever-present in their thinking.

Our study focused on how parents noted and responded to social judgement about their need for support, and about their child's behaviour. By and large, parents believed that judgements about their child's behaviour were also a direct judgement on their parenting, echoing findings about generalized parenting experience (Kirby et al. 2019). However, they created more distinction between their child's actions and themselves. We note the apparent change for these parents when reflecting social expectations more closely. Running parallel was a strong indication that non-judgmental support had facilitated acceptance, and parents attributed this directly to confidence in asking for further help. We note that these parents are also recipients of social conventions, and some data indicates their judgement of others, but also a conscious lessening of this and motivation to support other parents as they gained more compassion for them during peer support. Social rejection was felt deeply and personally (Eisenberger 2012; Mason et al. 2020) and named repeatedly, reflecting hurt and frustration. Several parents described feeling overwhelmed with negativity, leading to an avoidance of school and family. Several parents emphasized they knew their shortcomings and shaming them for it was unhelpful (see also Mason et al. 2020). It was noteworthy that despite non-gendered inclusion criteria, only one of the 24 participants was a father. This is illustrative of the gendered landscape of parenting and apparent gender bias in identifying mothers as the primary carer (Phillip et al. 2020; Mason et al. 2020). Despite engendered stereotypes, the themes drawn from the father's interview were broadly in line with those from mothers, including perceptions of moral judgement and desires to be seen as a 'good parent' (Nichols et al. 2021; Roets et al. 2015).

Fear of children's services is reflected in social discourse (Sims-Schouten et al. 2019) and our participants emphasized this as a prime motivator in engaging with support. We suggest that given the extensive reflection participants gave to feeling judged, being judged and judging others, moralized judgement should be understood as a pivotal experience in parents' willingness to engage with children's services, as was found by Kirby et al. (2019), and could be either a risk factor or a protective factor when this is managed successfully. Furthermore, our data indicate that motivation to engage in support which expects change to take place, and individuals' experiences of those services, is strongly influenced by other systemic factors (Pycroft and Bartollas 2014; Chaviano et al. 2018).

Parents reported they currently had greater confidence in their parenting, yet it was apparent that their parenting now reflected social expectations. Their success was self-rated as staying calm and addressing children's behaviour without further conflict. This echoes parents' talk of being judged

in public and by school, as when children's behaviour was less disruptive it did not invoke criticism, reflecting a social assumption that challenging behaviours are inherently wrong and disruptive (Nicholls et al. 2020; Kirby et al. 2019). Essentially therefore, *doing better* is reflected by these parents as *appearing normal*.

7 | Limitations

The sample was brokered via a 3rd party gatekeeper. We note that all participants were White, with a small number from European countries. One family was mixed race but it was the White UK mother who participated. All families were heterosexual, and there was only one father in the sample. Therefore, we are aware that our sample is not culturally representative, and further research should question experiences of different cultural groups and fathers. We acknowledge that pluralism is still an emerging field, and this paper may be superseded with further innovations which we have not reached here. Furthermore, pluralism embraces the notion that data can be interpreted in different ways and, thereby, challenges the idea that findings represent factual reality.

8 | Recommendations

Close attention should be paid to reducing stigma and the communication of disapproval about families, and awareness of past traumas and current stressors should be centred. It is notable that affirmation appears to have had a very positive effect on how parents were able to acknowledge their need for support and engage with it. We recommend that creating non-judgmental spaces for parents actively enables their engagement with support and reflection on their parenting, and that in combination, this supports the likely effectiveness of parenting support for the safety and wellbeing of children.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions. The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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