



Neglected voices: Lessons from forensic investigation following neglect[☆]



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ABSTRACT

In the field of child maltreatment research, it is known that child neglect is a relatively neglected phenomenon. The current study addresses children's perceptions of neglect and the importance of taking into account the processes that children undergo while providing their perceptions. This qualitative study used thematic analyses of forensic investigations of children with external evidence suggesting high probability of neglect. The aim of the study is to characterize the manner in which children narrate their experiences and perceptions following neglect and what lessons can be learned from these narratives. Forensic investigations were carried out with fifteen children, five girls and ten boys, aged seven to twelve years. All of the suspects were the children's biological parents, nine mothers and six fathers. The narrative analysis of the children's interviews generated five themes. These predominant themes represent the children's experiences regarding the maternal or paternal neglect: (1) Difficulties identifying neglect; (2) neglect revealed as the narrative of family life unfolds; (3) loyalty to parents; (4) collective view (siblings and me); and (5) prominent feelings (hope for the future, fear, and sadness). This study has implications for understanding children's testimonies in cases of neglect and for welfare practices. The inability of children to verbalize the neglect they underwent in the initial interview contributes to the understanding of the importance of allocating resources to families and community services and not only relying on report-response strategies.

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Neglect is a deficit or shortfall in the provision of a child's basic needs (Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 2010). As one of the subtypes of child maltreatment (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993), neglect is frequently found to be the most prevalent form of child maltreatment in developed countries (Schumacher, Slep, & Heyman, 2001). However, there is more to neglect than meets the eye, and there are several complexities in the identification of neglect. First, in many cases, neglect is overlooked because it is chronic and leads to a worsening of the child's condition over a long period of time (Barnett et al., 2010; Jones & Gupta, 1998). Another main cause of difficulties in tracing neglect is that this subtype of child maltreatment is highly context- and culture-dependent (Erickson & Egeland, 2002). Finally, neglect has had various definitions that depend on context or on the researcher examining the phenomena and/or other stakeholders (Schumacher et al., 2001). With this complexity in mind, the current study presents yet another neglected viewpoint on neglect, namely, the perspective of neglected children. The study was set out to examine what is the *narrative of neglect* as experienced by the neglected children and what lessons can be learned from these narratives, for practitioners and researchers within the field.

1. Definitions of neglect

Neglect characterizes situations where children's basic needs of adequate shelter, food, health care, clothing, education, protection, and nurturance are not met. Neglect occurs on a spectrum of optimal-to-harmful conditions for children, with variance not only in type of neglect, but also in its severity and chronicity (Dubowitz, Black, Starr, & Zuravin, 1993). Unlike physical or sexual abuse, which are typically incident-specific, neglect often encompasses chronic situations that are not as easily identified as specific incidents (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). Adding to the difficulty, there may not be clear distinctions in determining whether a behavior constitutes mild, moderate, or severe neglect. This lack of clarity occurs partially because defining a behavior as neglecting also depends on whether or not the behavior is a one-time occurrence or a chronic event. Because neglect is often an act of omission, it is difficult to identify, prevent, and treat (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

When addressing the definition of neglect and what is included within the scope of neglect, an important distinction should be made between three major subtypes of neglect: poverty-related neglect, deprivation abuse, and selective neglect.

The first subtype of neglect is highly related to poverty, hence the term *poverty-related neglect*. In general, the link between poverty and neglect is virtually inseparable. Of all types of child maltreatment, neglect is the most related to low socioeconomic status (SES) (Tuck,

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2000). Children in low-SES households were about seven times as likely to be neglected than other children were (Sedlak et al., 2010). As Spencer and Baldwin describe it, “The powerful association of child neglect with poverty and low income suggests that rich societies with high level of child poverty associated with their economic and social policies are increasing the probability of child neglect within families” (Spencer & Baldwin, 2005, p. 31). Neglect that is related to poverty and is not intentional, according to Golden et al., “almost always results from the impoverished circumstances and life stresses affecting the family” and “the mother’s time, energy and thoughts are concentrated elsewhere in an effort to cope; in this respect the neglected child is part of the family and ‘shares’ it distress and deprivation” (Golden, Samuels, & Southall, 2003, p. 106).

However, there are types of neglect that are not as linked with poverty and have other etiological origins. Indeed, related to this distinction, some researchers stressed that neglect because of poverty should be distinguished from other types of neglect. Golden et al. (2003) distinguish between neglect and derivational abuse. *Derivational abuse* entails parental deliberate deprivation of food and care. Neglect that does not answer this characteristic is not considered derivational abuse.

Related to derivational abuse, scholars had referred to yet another non-poverty subtype of neglect, *selective neglect*, which includes allocating resources in a discriminatory way. Differential investment is demonstrated by caretakers in the form of consciously or unconsciously denying resources to children who are less preferred. Neglect is selective because the children who do successfully bond with their mothers are provided with enough care to survive (Finerman, 1995; Scheper-Hughes, 1992). Studies have addressed this issue by describing differential allocation of food and healthcare in accordance to age and gender (Jinadu, 1980; Larme, 1997; Messer, 1997).

2. Indicators of neglect

Many of the risk factors for child neglect overlap, so the distinction between each risk factor’s contributions is not clear. Three indicators have been reported consistently in the literature: physical indicators, substance abuse, and child’s testimony. One of the most prevalent physical indicators is hunger. Poverty does not necessarily cause child neglect but probably increases the risk of it, considering that “most poor families do not neglect their children” (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012; Duva & Metzger, 2010).

Child neglect is more likely to occur if there is parental substance abuse. Substance abuse impairs decision making, for example, by choosing to spend resources on alcohol and/or drugs, parents consequently choose to put themselves before their children needs (DePanfilis, 2006b).

When asked about family life in a non-investigative interview, children usually blame themselves for the occurrence of neglect incidents (Ney, Moore, McPhee, & Trought, 1986). Ney et al. (1986) noted that although neglected children blame themselves, they would try to find an explanation of why they are neglected. This implies that children would not report neglect on their own. However, studies on forensic interviews and disclosure patterns following neglect rarely exist, and this area requires exploration.

3. Issues in identifying neglect

In the United States, people can report neglect if they suspect it. However, the definition of “mandatory reporters” varies depending on the state. Typically, physicians, social workers, educators, mental health professionals, childcare providers, medical examiners, and police officers are considered to be mandatory reporters (DePanfilis, 2006a). Generally, reports are made to the Child Protective Services (CPS), but communities can intervene depending on the severity of each case.

When CPS workers need to establish whether maltreatment has occurred, risk assessment tools are used. These evidence-based tools are intended to improve consistency of decision making (e.g., Munro,

1999; Shlonsky & Wagner, 2005). In other countries (e.g., the United Kingdom and Ireland), establishing a maltreatment allegation depends on an Assessment Framework (UK Department of Health, 2010). Such a framework is based on an ecological approach and requires considering three “domains”: the developmental needs of children, parenting capacity, and family and environmental factors (UK Department of Health, 2010).

Both approaches to data collection are not sensitive to the question of how case-related information is constructed and interpreted in light of a practitioner’s personal, professional, and organizational situation (Horwath, 2007). For instance, it has been shown that professionals rank safety and physical needs as more pressing in comparison to other needs (Horwath, 2007). Such ranking not only leads to lesser attention given to other needs of the child but also marks a reverting to the incident-driven approach that dominated child welfare practices in the past, giving less attention to chronic patterns and more attention to idiosyncratic harsh treatment (Horwath, 2007; Jordan & Jordan, 2000).

A related issue is the “head” versus “heart” activity in decision making in welfare (Taylor & White, 2001, p. 40). Contemporary maltreatment screening procedures take into account various ecological levels, but do not address the fact that clients usually do not fall neatly into classification boxes. In addition, in the screening process, the practitioner’s and the welfare agency’s manager’s personal and professional values and beliefs influence judgments (Taylor & White, 2001). As Horwath put it, “Making decisions to refer is not just a technical-rational activity, dependent on the application of research, developmental theories and practice experience of a particular case; it is also a practice-moral activity. That is, practitioners’ feelings, experiences, values and beliefs routinely influence practice” (Horwath, 2007, p. 1299).

These issues have direct relevance to the process of identifying neglect, and indeed, the forensic interview has a crucial role in establishing an allegation. However, the forensic investigation is an extremely challenging task for both the children and the practitioners (Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011; Malloy, Lamb, & Katz, 2011). Many times the children are the sole source of information, and there is no external evidence suggesting child maltreatment took place. Adding to this, often motivational barriers along with developmental ones hamper these interviews. That said, previous studies (e.g., Katz, 2014) had indicated that forensic investigations can be a unique platform for learning about children’s experiences and perceptions. More generally, studies including interviews with children in the welfare system are rare. The few studies that report on interviews conducted with children have been found to be of great value in asserting issues in foster care policies (Testa, 2002; Testa & Poertner, 2010).

In the current study, the aim was to characterize how children narrate their experiences and perceptions following neglect, and what lessons can be learned from these narratives. When addressing the definitions of neglect and the viewpoints regarding this type of maltreatment, the voice of the neglected child is rarely heard. This study aims to address this gap and give indication as to the processes behind how the child understands neglect.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

The current study used in-depth forensic investigations with fifteen children. These interviews were conducted with children following external evidence suggesting high probability that neglect had occurred. The forensic investigations were conducted in Israel between 2009 and 2011. Inclusion criteria for selecting cases to the current study included the following: (A) Interviews were part of substantiated cases, meaning that there was clear evidence in these cases pointing to neglect (e.g., parent admitted the neglect, eyewitness testimony, or physical evidence); (B) during the interview, the child disclosed the alleged

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