Exploring the Complexities of Child Neglect: Ethical Issues of Child Welfare Practice

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Abstract

This study sought to provide an understanding of how child welfare workers go about assessing child neglect. Four themes emerged from this study; neglect is complex, concern regarding legal issues of child welfare work, differing worker and parent values, and differing perceptions of neglect.

Key Words: Child Neglect, Assessment, Ethics and Values, Qualitative Research

1.   Introduction

In the United States, approximately 695,000 children were estimated to be victims of maltreatment with child neglect representing 78% of this maltreated population (DHHS, 2010). Despite the fact that more than one-third (32.6%) of child maltreatment fatalities are associated with neglect compared to physical abuse (22.9%), children who are neglected remain an invisible and vulnerable population (DHHS, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to explore child welfare workers' and MSW students' experiences with child neglect. The aim of the study was to find out if a standard definition of child neglect was used by all workers and how neglect was assessed. However, during the focus group interviews, researchers discovered that child welfare workers, within the same agency, did not have a unified definition and operational standards for assessing and intervening with neglect. This paper will address potential value conflicts that child welfare workers face, due to inconsistencies within agencies, when working with families who are charged with child neglect.

2.   Defining Child Neglect

One of the key conflicts within child welfare is defining, assessing and intervening in child neglect cases. The lack of a cohesive, agreed upon definition and framework for child neglect affects assessment and intervention and eventually the outcomes of the case (Combs-Orme, Wilson, Cain, Page, & Kirby, 2003; Goldman, Salus, Walcott & Kennedy, 2003; Hearn, 2011; Rodwell, 1988; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2002; Tanner & Turney 2003; Wilson & Horner, 2005). Child neglect is generally defined as a parent or caretaker's inability to meet the child's basic needs, potentially placing the child at risk of serious harm. Basic needs consist of attending to a child's emotional, environmental, physical, educational, and medical well-being (DHHS, 2010). Child neglect is also the primary form of maltreatment that greatly

hinders healthy child development and growth (Cichetti & Toth, 2005; Toth & Manley, 2011; Widon, Kahn, Kaplow, Sepulveda-Kozakowski, & Wilson, 2007).

Social workers in the field of child welfare are reporting that child neglect is "subjective" and "harder to prove" as it often requires waiting until the severity of "proof" is increased in order to proceed with any type of intervention (Bundy-Fazioli & DeLong Hamilton, 2007b). Failure to intervene with neglect in a timely manner can result in a child's removal from the home, longer stays in out-of-home care and an increased number of families experiencing termination of parental rights because of non-compliance with case plan or agency goals (Bundy-Fazioli & DeLong Hamilton, 2007a; Courtney, Piliavin, & Wright, 1997; Dawson & Berry, 2002; Wells & Guo, 2004). However, child neglect often receives the least amount of time, attention, and research when compared to physical and sexual abuse.

3.   An Ethical Crisis

Over 20 years ago, in August 1990, the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect issued a 177 page statement on the national crisis of child maltreatment. This Board "concluded that child abuse and neglect represents a national emergency" (p.vii). This statement was based on the fact that the system for protecting children 20 years ago was inadequate. But what has changed since this statement was published? What accounts for the significant increase in child neglect each year? Scholars purport that Americans ignore the needs of neglected children and their families when compared to other forms of child maltreatment (Dubowitz, 1994; Wilson & Horner, 2005). Child neglect is not a high priority for most organizations providing child protective services and consequently, is "taken less seriously because the effects are usually insidious and not obvious" (Dubowitz, 1994, p. 557). The emergent discourse on child neglect highlights chronic neglect and multiple co-occurring factors (Bundy-Fazioli & DeLong Hamilton, 2007a; Wilson & Horner, 2005).

4.   Factors of Neglect

Research findings signify that child neglect factors are usually correlated with or are co-occurring with other issues (Allin, Wathen & MacMillan, 2005; Connell-Carrick, 2003; Harder, 2005; Hearn, 2011). Currently, there is no unifying approach or a comprehensive understanding of child neglect; however, we do have an emerging understanding of familial and societal factors that contribute to child neglect. Contributing risk factors include poverty (Hearn, 2011), perhaps the most noted, along with marital status (Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo & Bolger, 2004), family structure (Wilson & Horner, 2005), number of persons residing in the home, support systems (Connell-Carrick, 2003), family resources (Paavilainen & Astedt-Kurki, 2003), mental health concerns, substance abuse, domestic violence, race, and parental childhood abuse (Newmann & Sallmann, 2004).

Child neglect is not solely a child welfare problem. Numerous social systems are affected by the problem of child neglect including public welfare services and public and private agencies aimed at addressing issues related to substance abuse, mental illness, and domestic violence. The confluence of co-occurring factors in child neglecting families makes assessment and intervention efforts very complicated (Hearn, 2011). Thus, the challenge for social workers is to provide a comprehensive assessment that addresses the "immediate needs" of family members to ensure the safety and well-being of the child. Such an assessment would assist social workers in better identifying services for families that could mitigate the harmful impact of child neglect. There is also a need for increased education and training of social workers to conduct effective child neglect assessments and identify the interventions that are most successful with this population.

5.   Assessment and Intervention

One of the inherent systematic problems in responding to multi-problem families is that services are fragmented, and as a result, families

often deal with multiple service providers (i.e. parenting classes, substance abuse counseling, mental health counseling, and child welfare services). Practitioners must be equipped with the necessary skills to assess co-occurring factors, engage parents in the change process, and collaborate with multiple service providers to ensure positive outcomes (Smokowski & Wodarski, 1996). Connell-Carrick and Scannapieco (2006) suggest that effective intervention in child neglect will depend heavily on how it is defined. Additionally, the lack of a consistent framework for assessment can hinder the social workers ability to separate neglect and abuse factors, inhibiting effective and appropriate intervention in each of these types of maltreatment (Hearn, 2011).

Newmann and Sallmann (2004) argue that in order to improve service delivery, practitioners need to be trained to ask assessment questions that gather crucial information about a parent's history. Benedict and White (1991) assert that "using all assessment information available, is crucial to ensure positive outcomes" and avoid out of home placement for the child (p.45). The challenge for practitioners is navigating the complex terrain of child neglect assessment. DePanfilis (2005) proposes a thorough assessment including an understanding of familial risk and protective factors (i.e. environmental, family parent or caregiver, and child factors). Similarly, other scholars have stressed the importance of evaluating environmental factors to determine parenting skills, social supports, and available resources (Burke, Chandy, Dannerbeck, & Watt, 1998). Additionally, Stowman and Donohue (2005) suggest that a standardized method of assessing child neglect must be developed that uses an ecological framework to reduce parent blame/responsibility, and takes into account the frequency, severity and type of neglect being assessed. The challenge for practitioners assessing child neglecting families is where to begin? Therefore, the guiding research question for this study asked, how do child welfare workers and MSW students assess and intervene with families where child neglect is the presenting concern?

6.   Methodology

This research was guided by a constructivist inquiry. The epistemological belief of the constructivism (interpretative) inquiry is that findings are co-created between the "knower (the inquirer) and the known (or knowable)" (Guba, 1990, p. 18). The inquiry "starts with the experience and asks members to construct it" (Charmaz, 2010, p. 187). This methodological stance is focused on meaning-making for "groups and individuals around those phenomena" (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011, p. 116). The phenomena in this research being child neglect. Thus, the use of focus group methods aligns with this stance in understanding the social constructions of individuals and groups focused on a specific phenomenon. Focus group research provides an opportunity to gather data on a specific phenomenon through the use of a collective action where "multiple understandings and meanings" are generated (Ivanoff & Hultberg, 2006, p. 129). Focus group research aligns with qualitative inductive methods in the exploration of understanding the participant's perception of child neglect (Morgan & Krueger, 1998).

7.   Sample

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants through the use of announcements and flyers distributed at the County Department of Human Services (DHS) and within the School of Social Work in a western state. Convenience sampling "represents sites or individuals from with the researcher can access and easily collect data" (Creswell, 2007, p. 126).

Three focus groups were conducted in October 2007. The first focus group was held at the County Department of Human Services with workers from child protection services. This group of participants (n=8) was predominately female (n=7). All the participants had an undergraduate degree in applied human sciences (3 social work, 2 psychology, 3 human development and human studies). Of the participants in this group, two were intake workers, five were ongoing

caseworkers, and one participant was a parent educator. The number of years in the child protection unit consisted of less than one year to 28 years.

The second focus group was held in a reserved room in the School of Social Work, at a university in a western state. This focus group consisted of six MSW students with child welfare knowledge or experience. The group consisted of all females with years of experience ranging from 1.5 years to 28 years. The third focus group was also held in a reserved room in the School of Social Work at a university in a western state. This group also consisted of six female participants. Child welfare experience ranged from 2 months to 3 years in this group.

8. Data Collection

Key stakeholders, child welfare workers, and MSW students with child welfare experience, were invited to participate in focus groups in order to explore assessment and intervention with families receiving services for child neglect. Recruitment flyers and announcements provided information about the study's intent to meet with participants who had experience working with child neglecting families. The County DHS announcement and flyer targeted frontline staff and supervisors. The School of Social Work flyer targeted MSW students who had child welfare knowledge or experience. This study received approval from the University Institutional Review Board.

At the onset of each focus group, participants were informed of consent procedures and the voluntary nature of the research. Each participant chose a different name to use during the focus group process in order to remain anonymous. Researchers felt anonymity was important in order to assist participants in feeling comfortable with sharing in a group environment. Focus group interviews were moderated by both authors. A graduate student was present for each of the interviews to serve as an observer as well as note taker; documenting content and substance of group participant interactions. The interview guide (Appendix A)

consisted of seven questions exploring participants understanding of child neglect assessment and intervention. All focus group interactions were audiotaped and transcribed.

9. Data Analysis

Focus group transcripts were analyzed using a constant comparison approach to generate codes and categories (Charmaz, 2010). The authors (including one graduate student) read the focus group transcripts independently coding identified passages within the text and naming each selected passage with a descriptive name (Charmaz, 2010). This initial coding process involves sorting through the data and distinguishing units of information that would eventually be placed into categories (Charmaz, 2010). The researchers then met as a group and conducted focused coding which "requires decisions about with initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize" (Charmaz, 2010, p. 57). This was an iterative, give and take process of constant comparison with the intention of identifying categories and emergent themes.

10. Findings

Child welfare workers and MSW student participants provided rich data for understanding work with families where child neglect is the presenting issue. Four emergent themes will be discussed; neglect is complex, legal issues of child welfare work, differing worker and parent values and differing perceptions of neglect.

11. Neglect Is Complex

One of the first focus group questions asked participants to share their experience in working with families where child neglect had occurred. What emerged in the data was a consensus that neglect as an identifying issue and concern was not easy to operationalize. As one participant stated, "I think neglect is really complex and you know that there are so many underlying reasons." The underlying reasons identified by participants included "poverty," "mental health

issues," "developmental level" of the child, "health care," and "generational neglect." In the context of underlying reasons, participants highlighted the depth of these complex issues by noting macro issues relating to national and regional differences in defining neglect. One participant raised the concern of neglect being a subjective process due to geographical differences,

> *I think that the neglect can be more subjective, than you know, sexual abuse or physical abuse, and that you know that part of the problem might be that what's neglectful in [this town] isn't going to be neglectful in New York. It isn't going to be neglectful in Chicago. (Katie)*

Another participant also shared her experience working in different counties and the lack of congruence and agreement across counties within the same state. "I've worked in child welfare services in [this state] for about 28 years now (laughter) and I've worked in three different counties so there are certainly regional differences" (Jamie).

It appears reasonable that if neglect is hard to define and differences exist regionally and nationally, about how to operationalize child neglect, then child welfare workers will continue to struggle to intervene on behalf of neglected children. In addition to the issue of operationalizing child neglect, two subthemes emerged that highlighted the concern child welfare workers have about legal issues and the differing values and beliefs related to child neglect.

12.   Legal Issues

Legal issues where brought up by participants in the context of safety and eminent risk. It appeared that legal guidelines help to provide some structure and clarity for child welfare workers. However, overwhelmingly, participants spoke to the challenges involved in "proving" child neglect. Lisa shared her difficulties related to proving that child neglect is occurring, "I would say and

I would agree, I think it's harder to prove when I think, as an on-going worker, it's one of the harder cases to have because it isn't clear cut. Is it a poverty issue?" Jackie also spoke to the challenges of proving neglect:

> *I guess my experience with neglect is that it's, I mean, I obviously agree with everybody it's harder to prove. You have to let things continue on, knowing that potentially neglect is going on, but if don't have substantial proof there's sometimes not a whole lot you can do for awhile until there's a pattern or there's a history.*

Chris spoke to the "different standards" of knowing that neglect is occurring but proving that it is occurring is another matter. Jackie also added, "I think the legal system gets in the way a lot too, like trying to file on a family instead of, neglectful or not, parents not being protective or what have you and then our attorney saying 'well, you know there's just not enough yet' and so then we're stuck with closing out something [case] and waiting for another one [report] to come back in [on the same family]."

Adding to this challenge of proof is the concern regarding perception and fact. Sally added her perspective regarding the differing objectives between child welfare workers and lawyers, "Because they can't prove it or because it's more [than] we're very comfortable with grey [areas] and the lawyers are black and white."

The legal issue most discussed by participants was proving that child neglect was occurring. Child neglect reports can be substantiated once there exist evidence that the child is unsafe and at risk. However, the participants in this study appear to raise the issue that child neglect needs earlier intervention, before safety and risk is established.

13. Child Welfare Worker and Parent Values and Perceptions of Child Neglect

Factors associated with child welfare worker values appeared to be the center of issues related to culture, bias, self awareness, and class. One of the participants addresses the difficulty in defining neglect and how this related to her values, as well as, her child welfare experience. She shares:

You know, when I worked at the family treatment facility, one of the things that I wrestled with was defining neglect 'cause I know how I define it from my white middle class background. I work with a lot of Native American families from the reservation that have moved off the reservation and the state became involved and in their ummm… Native people, and I can't speak for nationwide, but all I can speak for is South Dakota, what I know of Native people there, is that they have different views on their rearing of children that don't necessarily mesh with white middle class…so children are left to explore their environment a lot more freely. Mom and dad are not part of the direct discipline, that falls to uncles and grandparents, and so that was an issue that, because unfortunately I think that I probably judged them harsher because I was coming from my white middle class background and not understanding the cultural issues. (Julie)

Another participant also brought forth issues regarding cultural bias which connected with her values. Jill states:

I think it's really important to be aware of your cultural biases, and like I said, not just race or ethnicity, but the way you were raised as compared to the way that other people might have been raised. [When] talking about a dirty house, well my opinion of a dirty house is completely different from most of my clients, especially before I had children. And being aware of those [biases] I mean, that I think that you're always in the back of your head going to have those biases, but if you're aware of them, you can sort through them and come to a more accurate, you know, picture of what's going on.

Participant Lisa brought forth the metaphor of the suitcase and the backpack. Her metaphor aptly captures the struggle that workers have in assessing and intervening in families where neglect has occurred. Lisa struggled to share her thoughts:

You try not to [let your values influence your work so] you get rid of your baggage. You've got to leave your suitcase [at the door] and then you get in there and you realize you still have your backpack on and you're like, oh my gosh, and I think that it is so hard, like not to bring that in with you.

Participants appeared to wrestle with awareness of their white, middle class values and how this identity affects their ability to assess and intervene effectively. To further complicate this issue, a number of participants shared their perception of how their values appear to conflict with the neglecting parents' understanding of neglect. Julie addressed this issue when sharing that she may be concerned about what the child is eating, but the parent views this differently, "You know so often families will say 'well no, maybe this isn't the most nutritious meal' but I'd never hit my kids and they go to school every day and they wear decent clothes."

One participant shared her perspective as a teacher of parenting classes and how her

values are different from parents in her class. Abby stated:

> *I see a different take on what parents say is neglectful and sometimes we might think of a messy house or the children's needs not being attended to. They see neglect as maybe that they didn't get their food stamp bill or… their idea of neglect is completely different than what we think neglect is.*

Participants shared a multitude of issues that make assessing and intervening with families, identified as having child neglect concerns, difficult and complex. These issues appear to span from macro concerns (lack of clear definitions and inconsistency regionally and nationally) to micro concerns (conflicting parent-worker values and perceptions).

14.   Limitations

It is important to note that this study included a number of limitations. First and foremost, due to the nature of qualitative research, this study is not generalizable to the overall population. Although the knowledge gained is valuable and transferable, one must take into consideration the geographical context and sample limitations (gender and race). Sample participants in this study were predominately female. An additional sample limitation is that participants were not asked to disclose their ethnic and racial identification. It appears that the majority of participants were Caucasian but this cannot be confirmed without confirmation by participants. Furthermore, although all participants stated that they had child welfare knowledge and or experience, a distinction between currently employed or not currently employed participants, depth of knowledge, and years of experience could have influenced the findings of this study.

Through the exploration of child welfare worker experiences with child neglect, researchers discovered potential value conflicts that child welfare workers face, due to definitional and assessment inconsistencies within agencies, when working with families who are charged with child neglect. The following will address some of the ethical dilemmas child welfare workers face on a daily basis when working with families who neglect.

15.   Practice Implications

As noted by many researchers, families who neglect children often have co-occurring problems that need a multitude of services or interventions in order to alleviate these problems (Allin, Wathen & MacMillan, 2005; Connell-Carrick, 2003; Harder, 2005; Hearn, 2011). However, as participants discussed in this study, one of the major issues in completing an assessment of neglect is operationalizing or defining, what constitutes neglect in a multi-problem family. The issue of operationalizing or defining goes hand-in-hand with the ability to adequately assess and intervene.

Researchers in child welfare have determined and agreed that there is no unifying approach or comprehensive understanding of child neglect; however, we do have an understanding of familial and societal factors that contribute to child neglect (Combs-Orme, Wilson, Cain, Page, & Kirby, 2003; Goldman, Salus, Walcott & Kennedy, 2003; Hearn, 2011; Rodwell, 1988; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2002; Tanner & Turney 2003; Wilson & Horner, 2005). This knowledge can assist child welfare workers in the assessment and intervention process.

Second, are having the necessary skills to assess the co-occurring problems within the family, but at the same time, engage the family and other service providers in collaborative relationships that will eventually lead to alleviation of the neglect within the family. A barrier to relationship building is differing values and perceptions of child neglect. Consistently discussed in this study is child welfare worker awareness or lack of awareness to differing values and perceptions of child neglect. This skill or knowledge is taught in

undergraduate and graduate social work programs; however, workers in this study, from all experience levels, continually struggled with this issue.

The six core values of the Social Work Code of Ethics are; service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 1999). These core values overlap in child welfare work as evidenced by the comments made by participants in this study. Child welfare workers, engaging with families who neglect, need to rely on their knowledge and competence of all six of the core values of the profession. Providing adequate services to neglecting families requires strong relationship building skills. Research has shown that a positive relationship between child welfare workers and families lead to more positive outcomes than those workers who do not have a positive professional relationship with the families they are involved with (Cooper, 2004; Platt, 2008; Shulman, 2009). In order to build a positive professional relationship with families, a child welfare worker must have the belief that all families have a right to appropriate and effective services (service, social justice, integrity), all families have the right to make decisions in the best interest of their family (dignity and worth of the person), and lastly, all families should be evaluated, taking into account, their values and beliefs, and perceptions (competence, importance of human relationships).

One way child welfare workers can ensure they are practicing according to the Code of Ethics is through the use of values check-ups. Although social work education focuses on teaching ethical social work practice, once in the field, workers may run into barriers that prevent regular processing of ethical dilemmas. Values inventories are one way to improve overall practice and improve assessment and interventions with families who neglect. A values inventory involves reviewing not only the child welfare worker's own values and beliefs, but ensuring that workers are keep in mind the values and beliefs of the families they serve. How often are the values and beliefs of parents, who have been neglectful, taken into account when completing an assessment for intervention? Asking parents simple questions related to their perception or awareness of the current problem (neglect), their own history, their child's development, the child and the family's well-being, supports, and their community and environment, can lead to understanding the family's values, beliefs and perception of the neglect that has occurred. Thus, this additional step in the assessment process may help to ensure more effective intervention services in helping to alleviate the occurrence and reoccurrence of child neglect.

16. Conclusion

Child neglect remains the most predominant form of child maltreatment; however, children who are neglected remain an invisible and vulnerable population in our communities. A unified definition and operational standards for assessing and intervening with neglect would alleviate potential value conflicts between child welfare workers and parents who neglect, as well as, meet the legal requirements necessary to take action on behalf of the neglected child. In addition, child welfare workers who regularly engage in values check-ups, either through self-assessment or during regular supervision, will have a better ability to build a positive, working relationship with the family, leading to better assessments, interventions, and outcomes.

In conclusion, the findings of this research give voice to the ongoing struggles child welfare workers face when intervening with child neglecting families. However, the "voice" of child welfare workers, grappling with the complexities of child neglect, needs a forum. There needs to be allocation of time and space for workers to address the ethical dilemmas and other issues related to child welfare work. We propose two such avenues: education and future research. It is important that social work education and post-education (CEU's or training within agencies) provide training that addresses the values and ethics of child neglect. We believe that the allocations of educational resources will help to foster competent and ethical child welfare practice.

In addition, future research is needed that takes into account a more diverse sample of participants, including different geographical locations, gender, as well as ethic and racial identities. Research is also needed which employs both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to capture more data and fully answer research questions.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Thank you for coming today. We are interesting in learning about your experiences with child neglecting families. We are both licensed social workers with child welfare experience who have become very interested in the problem of child neglect and concerned that it continues to increase and become more pervasive. We want to learn from you about your experiences in the field, how you assess and intervene with these families. So let's begin…

1. We would like to know – what has been your experience with child neglecting families?

2. In your experience, how are child neglecting families similar or different from other families in the child welfare system?

3. How do you assess families that are suspected of neglect?

4. How does this assessment differ than an assessment you would complete for a family suspected of physical or sexual abuse?

5. What type of training or supervision have you received that you feel has helped you to work with these particular families?

6. What type of services do you refer child neglecting families to and do these differ than services for families that physically or sexually abuse children?

7. What interventions do you feel are most effective for child neglecting families?