Children and Youth Services Review 33 (2011) 715–722

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth

Unmet needs in addressing child neglect: Should we go back to the drawing board?

Jody Hearn

Virginia Commonwealth University, 1001 W. Franklin St., Box 842027, Richmond, VA 23284-2027, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 9 September 2010
Received in revised form 10 November 2010
Accepted 10 November 2010
Available online 17 November 2010

Keywords:
Child neglect
Poverty
Child welfare
Social justice
Intervention
Evidence-based practice

ABSTRACT

Intervention in child neglect faces many challenges to effectiveness, including: (a) The lack of a cohesive, agreed-upon conceptual/theoretical framework and inconsistent definition of the problem; (b) disjointed intervention in various components of the problem; and (c) the social justice issues of inequity based on class, race, and gender. These conditions have led to a situation in which the role of poverty, potentially one of the most important contextual factors in neglect, can be overlooked. This article presents an argument for the need to pay more explicit attention to the definition of neglect, with particular focus on the role of poverty, in order to improve intervention in this pervasive problem. It concludes with recommendations for research, policy, and practice in child welfare.

1. Introduction

Child neglect is the most prevalent form of child maltreatment. Of all maltreated children and youth in the United States in 2006, 64.1% were neglected, 16% were physically abused, 8.8% were sexually abused, and 6.6% were psychologically maltreated (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families [USDHHSACF], 2008). Effective intervention in neglect faces many challenges, not the least important of which is that programming in neglect is built on a fragmented foundation of the conceptualization of the problem itself. Current services to treat neglect are focused on a wide range of problems, the majority of which are somehow related to parents' intrapersonal limitations and related behaviors. It could be argued that many identifiable parenting-related intrapersonal issues seem to be a function of the parents' lack of access to resources and limited social capital, particularly due to poverty. Parents' initial capacity to provide loving and nurturing care to their children can be impeded by these factors, contributing to a situation of neglect. In order to establish evidence-based intervention in child neglect, social work researchers and practitioners must agree on what the problem is, which will inform how the problem should be addressed. Currently, there is little to no agreement on what the problem is. Where such agreement exists, little to no focus on the context in which a family operates is considered, ignoring an entire set of factors to which intervention could be applied to alleviate child neglect.

Prevention and intervention services for parents who are neglecting or are at-risk of neglecting can prepare, equip, and support parents in fulfilling their potential to best care for their children. But without adequate attention to the broader context that may be affecting their ability to parent, the utility and effectiveness of these interventions could be limited. This article discusses the design and effectiveness of services focused solely on prevention and intervention of neglect and how these programs do or do not attend to the contexts for the families involved. A definition for neglect is not presented in this article – the limitations in research, policy, and practice regarding child neglect seem to hinge upon what is already an unclear and inconsistent collection of definitions being used in different venues. Instead, an argument is being made that all of those involved in addressing this issue must collaborate to better define, and subsequently treat and prevent, child neglect.

There are (at least) two potential reasons the relationship between poverty and child neglect has not been adequately reflected in theory and practice. The first is that the efforts to understand the relationship are too disjointed as a result of the complexity of the issues of poverty and neglect, both individually and in tandem. Some of the literature suggests that there is a strong, important relationship between these phenomena where other sources suggest that the relationship is weak, with other factors (such as family characteristics) being more important to address. Divided results do not provide a solid-enough basis on which to establish intervention without further study.

A second potential reason for the current understanding (or lack thereof) of the relationship between poverty and child neglect is that there are political pressures and disincentives to finding evidence that these two issues are tightly intertwined. If the results were to suggest that poverty were the root influencer in child neglect, the suggested

E-mail address: hearnjl@vcu.edu.

0190-7409/$ – see front matter © 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.11.011

intervention would be to reduce family poverty, an intervention that would require a great deal of cost and a shift in ideology of many of those in positions to change policy and the way the system works with poor families. This idea is not a new one. Nelson (1984) has highlighted that the original framers of child abuse and neglect legislation in the 1960s hesitated to include the child neglect in their definitions of child maltreatment because of their observation of its inextricability with the issue of poverty, and therefore little observed political will to address it. As Lindsey and Shlonsky (2008) have pointed out: "Unfortunately, by avoiding child poverty instead of tackling it head on, the child welfare system has proven to be ineffective in solving the larger, more difficult, and, ultimately, more important issues" (p. 377). This article describes the current state of the definition of and intervention for child neglect, calling attention to the challenges to effectiveness in child neglect practice, including: (a) The lack of a cohesive, agreed-upon conceptual/theoretical framework and inconsistent definition of the problem; (b) disjointed intervention in various components of the problem; and (c) the social justice issues of inequity based on class, race, and gender.

2. Definition of neglect

The bedrock of challenges to effective intervention in neglect appears to be the definition of the problem as a result of a lack of a theoretically-based foundational understanding of the causes and underlying factors of child neglect. There is inconsistency and disagreement across and within involved disciplines on how child neglect is conceptualized, approached, and addressed (Combs-Orme, Wilson, Cain, Page, & Kirby, 2003; Goldman, Salus, Walcott, & Kennedy, 2003; Rodwell, 1988; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2002; Stowman & Donohue, 2005; Straus & Kantor, 2005; Tanner & Turney, 2003; Wilson & Horner, 2005). One potential reason there is no unified or centralized definition for neglect is that the definition of neglect is not approached as fixed and objective, but is rather a context-bound fluid decision-making process (Rodwell).

However, inconsistency in definition and assessment of child neglect has important implications for practice with neglecting families. Different stakeholders seem to define neglect differently, affecting the ability to understand it for its most important influencing factors. For example, defining neglect as a parent's failure to provide for a child's physical needs may have different implications than defining neglect as the conditions under which a child's normal development is impaired by his or her environment. An intervention based on the first definition may look very different from an intervention based on the second.

Perhaps the most dangerous implication is the potential to misdirect focus toward family characteristics and behaviors that may not be the most pressing (or pertinent) factors associated with child neglect (e.g. substance abuse, mental illness, and inadequate stress-coping skills). This is not to say that these issues are not fundamentally related to child neglect, just that they may draw attention away from underlying factors (such as poverty) that also need to be addressed. What might be needed is an agreed-upon set of definitions, making up a foundational theoretical understanding of neglect that includes attention to all of the important factors including families' characteristics, behaviors, and social–environmental contexts.

Without a comprehensive foundational conceptualization of neglect (perhaps based on an agreed-upon set of definitions), it is difficult to study the problem at its most elemental level, and therefore results in various different approaches to one problem (Wilson & Horner, 2005), with virtually no way of evaluating the relative effectiveness of each type of approach in comparison with one another. This has important implications for the ability to develop and maintain an evidence base in working with child neglect effectively. In addition, child neglect and child abuse, while usually defined separately, are often grouped together for intervention, without definitive evidence to support or reject the claim that these two issues can be treated effectively in the same way. The lack of an agreed-upon conceptual framework (made up of a set of definitions that reflect the multidimensional nature of neglect) for guidance in addressing child neglect may also impede researchers' and practitioners' abilities to separate factors associated with neglect from those associated with abuse to treat these problems individually and effectively, should separation of these types of problems and their interventions be necessary or appropriate.

One associated factor that appears to be overlooked in its potentially direct influence on child neglect (or risk for neglect) is poverty. Some authors have noted that issues of housing and financial need are the foundational underlying issues for families needing child welfare services and that policy and practice must address poverty in order to be effective at reducing the risk for outcomes like foster care placement (Fanshel, Finch, & Grundy, 1992; Lindsey, 2004). Other authors have suggested that poverty is a reflection of greater overall need, and poorer families and children experience increased risk of problems such as child maltreatment causing an overrepresentation in caseloads (Jonson-Reid, Drake, & Kohl, 2009). Some authors have even stated explicitly that child welfare services, intensive casework practice for families at risk of foster care placement, are ineffective *because* they do not address poverty (Lindsey, 2004; Lindsey & Shlonsky, 2008), and that child maltreatment is actually a "red herring" (Lindsey, p. 177) in child welfare policy in that it draws attention from this more fundamental social problem.

Poverty is a concept even more complicated in its definition than child neglect. Bordieu's (1990) perspective on poverty (as applied to social work by Fram (2004)) suggests that there are complicated structural forces underlying the circumstances of the unprivileged, and social processes exist that are intended to keep the unprivileged classes from becoming aware of those structures. This creates a situation in which those who are living in poverty experience many barriers to social/financial mobility: (a) Limited choices from which to select in making change in their lives (low situational autonomy), (b) Patterns of behavior that reinforce their position in the unprivileged class (habitus), (c) Poor social networking opportunities, (d) A lack of opportunity to come into contact with those who are privileged and therefore can better navigate social structures (homophilous interaction), and (e) A lack of access to social and cultural capital (that disguises the lack of access to economic capital) (Fram). Given this perspective, parents living in poverty operate within circumstances that are likely to make it very difficult for them to be able to best provide for their children's needs, financially and socially.

There is a dearth of literature on how poverty is or could be related to child neglect, and very few studies of the potential direct relationship between the two. Three studies (two empirical and one conceptual) that have been conducted relatively recently did focus directly on the role of poverty in child neglect. Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, and Bolger (2004) suggest that some aspects of poverty (like lower employment and higher perceived material hardship) are more predictive of child neglect than others, even when controlling for parental characteristics. Carter and Myers (2007) suggest that parental characteristics (such as substance abuse and mental health concerns) play a greater role in the likelihood of substantiated physical neglect. When controlling for parental characteristics, these authors found that poverty variables alone did not predict substantiated physical neglect. This study may suggest that it is not poverty alone that influences a family's risk of neglecting its children, but does not definitively suggest that poverty does not play a role in the parental characteristics that influence risk of neglect. It also does not address the potentially differential treatment by the child welfare system of parents with mental health and substance abuse concerns regarding the substantiation of physical neglect.

Wilson and Horner (2005) suggest that child welfare interventions have little to no focus on addressing chronic neglect (strongly conceptually connected to poverty) and highlight the need for policy changes to draw attention to it. Wilson and Horner suggest that impoverished neglecting families experience demoralization that prohibits them from having a sense of hope and control in their lives and their families. According to Carter and Myers (2007), "the literature lacks consensus regarding which parental characteristics and which indicators of poverty are associated with neglect" (p. 113). Researchers, policy makers, and practitioners need to conduct further study on the relationship between poverty and parental characteristics influencing the risk of neglect (e.g. mental health and substance abuse) in both families experiencing and not experiencing neglect, in order to truly argue that poverty does not play just as important a role in child neglect as such parental characteristics. This type of study is needed in order to be sure to apply interventions in neglect in the most ethical and effective way.

Scourfield (2000) suggests that workers' own definitions of neglect are social constructions patterned on the information they receive. Social workers (in Britain) based their ideas of neglect on a Health Department briefing that suggested that children must be clean and orderly (Scourfield). These workers, according to the author, tended to define neglect as maintenance of the child's body, which proceeded to place the mothers of children in the role of primary responsibility and therefore primary blame (for *failing* to protect the child or maintain his or her body according to their standards). This subjective construction of neglect as definition of neglect poses complex issues in both the practice effectiveness and social justice arenas.

In a slightly different focus, Wilson, Kuebli, and Hughes (2005) presented an analysis of the similarities and differences in characteristics of neglecting mothers in an effort to inform intervention. Similar characteristics among neglecting mothers in these authors' sample were: (a) Low socioeconomic status (SES), (b) low education, (c) low social support, and (d) depressive symptoms. Differences were present in their interpersonal characteristics: (a) Maternal confidence, (b) relatedness, (c) impulse control, and (d) willingness to engage in verbal interactions (Wilson, et al.). Different types of neglecting mothers (based on differing characteristics) differed with regard to ratings of neglect, life stressors, resource problems, and adult problems, suggesting that among low SES neglecting mothers, no one set of characteristics can be linked to the neglecting situation, which might suggest that it is not the maternal characteristics that are the "source" of the problem. However, Connell-Carrick and Scannapieco (2006) suggest that income itself is not a predictor of child neglect, but instead point to dangerous exposure and poor parenting skills. A critique of these findings is that the authors conducted a stepwise logistic regression, maximizing the perceived impact of each factor but therefore ignoring the interactions that are likely operating among various factors that they were studying and their associations with child neglect. It may be more than income alone, but the complex context of poverty overall that may be important.

Effective intervention in child neglect will depend heavily on how it is defined. Researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers cannot provide evidence for whether an intervention is successful at reducing the risks or sequelae of child neglect without definition of the problem. Assessment, measurement, and intervention in child neglect could benefit from the establishment of an agreed-upon conceptual framework for neglect, made up of a set of definitions that address the multidimensional nature of the phenomena and their contexts.

2.1. Assessing and measuring child neglect

The literature reflects a focus on discrepancies in the way that child neglect is approached for study and prevention/intervention. Combs-Orme et al. (2003) suggest that difficulty in defining child neglect is the result of little to no attention to normative, adequate parenting behaviors. They have contributed a framework of "normal" parenting behaviors based on parent sensitivity and responsivity, against which researchers and practitioners could judge a questionable set of parenting behaviors. If the parenting behaviors at question do not rise to the level and meet the goals of the established "normal" parenting behaviors, they can be deemed neglectful (Combs-Orme, et al.). A concern is the standards by which the "normal" parenting behaviors were determined. It is unclear whether the parenting behaviors reflect cultural competence and limited bias based on characteristics of the parent and his or her situation.

In what seems like a response to the above concerns, 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 authors suggest that this method of assessment would provide a foundation for intervention based on shared assumptions regarding the nature of the problem and its solution (Stowman & Donohue). If it is even possible to develop a standardized method of assessing child neglect (given the many constructs that seem to play a role in it), in order for such a shared conceptualized assessment to be an effective one, it is necessary to identify the most fundamental issues underlying neglect, to ensure that the most important influencers of the problem are being measured.

Straus and Kantor (2005) also present suggestions for a coordinated (agreed-upon) method of defining and measuring child neglect. According to these authors, assessment of child neglect should involve the following: (a) A separation of parent behavior from child harm (while still attending to both pivotal concerns), (b) a separation of parent behavior from motives/causes, (c) a distinction between different dimensions of neglect, (d) a distinction between child perceptions and actual neglect, and (e) use of age-appropriate indicators of neglect. In addition, the assessment must identify the chronicity and severity of the neglect, be explicit about the referent time period (in which neglect may have occurred), establish legitimacy for self-report measures, and employ a threshold for presence/absence of neglect (Straus & Kantor). In this case as well, one must actually be operating with a set of definitions for neglect, to ensure that assessment of the situation is actually measuring the challenges the family is facing.

Assessing child neglect in the youngest children (ages zero to three) poses particular challenges, that Scannapieco and Connell-Carrick (2002) have identified: Neglect is often assessed by verbal report of the child victim (which is difficult if not impossible with these children) as well as by the absence of certain parenting behaviors (the *absence* of anything being difficult to measure or assess). Instead, the authors suggest focusing on the failure of the child to meet developmental milestones and the parents' failure to display attachment behaviors, which might better indicate problematic caregiving and potential neglect. The authors mention the importance of social context, but it could be argued that there is a greater need for attention to what role, if any, the family's socioeconomic status and situation might have in the ability to display attachment behaviors and attend to children's developmental needs.

Tanner and Turney (2003) suggest the incorporation of research-based evidence in practice with chronically neglecting families. They state that practice and practitioners are not basing their work on what is "known" about child neglect, as there has been a limited research base and limited "research literacy" (practitioners' ability to think critically about the research that has been conducted). Tanner and Turney suggest that interventions in child neglect should: (a) Be multidimensional to address the multiple "causes" of neglect; (b) reflect a greater focus on the effects of neglect on children (defining child neglect by child harm); (c) be more lengthy, but purposeful and

focused; and (d) emphasize strong relationships among worker, parent, child, and others involved to repair attachment outside of the parent–child relationship. Recommendations such as these (based on research evidence) are useful, but still appear to hinge on the identification of the root factors involved in neglect, including contextual factors that seem to be absent from the varied definitions making up the current foundational conceptualization of neglect.

3. Interventions in neglect

Many models for intervention in child neglect have been proposed, implemented, and tested. The varying types and different foci of interest reflect the lack of a shared conceptual framework to explain child neglect. Different approaches reflect different conclusions about the nature of the problem and solution. Some interventions are multidimensional in an attempt to attend to various components of neglect where others attend to one or two specific components. Some are built on case management and coordination of services where others attempt to improve some particular skill or ability of the parent. Together, these interventions reflect the diversity in conceptualization and approaches to prevention and intervention of child neglect.

3.1. "State of the art"

In a review of the interventions that are being conducted in child neglect, Berry, Charlson, and Dawson (2003) present the range of different models being implemented and two model programs that appear to attend to the most important issues in the most effective way. The following interventions were identified: (a) Focus on the Family (a long-term holistic case management-based program in which a caseworker assists the parent in caregiving), (b) mental health services (particularly treatment and medication for maternal depression), (c) substance abuse treatment (including addressing negative perceptions and expectations on the part of practitioners who may believe that no intervention can work with substance abusing caregivers), (d) concrete services (assisting families' immediate needs of housing, transportation, employment, public assistance, and child care), (e) in-home support (ecobehavioral interventions that teach parents skills in the environment in which they will be practiced/used), (f) early childhood programs (involving parents in early childhood intervention), and (g) Community supports and social networks (to assist parents to become self-sufficient in the long run). The two model programs identified by Berry, et al. were (a) Project SafeCare (a 15-week one-on-one video-based social learning intervention focusing on home safety, infant and child healthcare, bonding, and stimulation) and (b) Learning About Myself (a 12-week psychoeducational support group in which parents focus on issues of self-esteem, increasing assertiveness, making better choices, and improving self-perception of the performance of the role of "parent").

These intervention models collectively focus on diverse factors that may influence the risk for child neglect. Respectively, they suggest that child neglect is a result of: (a) An inability or impeded ability to navigate the world of parenting with other responsibilities and needs; (b) mental health problems, particularly maternal depression; (c) substance abuse (suggested to be effectively treatable); (d) material hardship and lack of access to financial, economic, and material resources; (e) underdeveloped skill sets of basic parenting behaviors; (f) a disconnect between parent and child in early development and little to no involvement of the parent in child development; and (g) a disconnect between family and the community, including a lack of a social support network from which one could draw assistance as needed. Each or a combination of these factors may be key influencers in a family's child neglect experience, reflecting different initial definitions and conceptualizations of the problem. The model programs also address different sources of the challenges that families experiencing neglect face. Project SafeCare reflects a conceptualization that neglect is the result of a lack of a skill set in keeping the child safe, inadequate bonding/attaching with the child, and failure to facilitate development through stimulation of the child. Learning About Myself suggests the origin of child neglect is a parent's sense of self-worth and self-efficacy (that a parent with low self-esteem and poor self-concept as a parent will be unable to adequately care for his or her children).

When viewed together, these interventions and model programs may reflect a comprehensive picture of child neglect. If one assumes that all of these factors are related to neglect, then focusing on each factor singly may make it possible to overlook important aspects of the etiology of neglect, therefore inadequately addressing families' needs. Additionally, the evaluation of these programs often focus on indirect outcomes (e.g. self-esteem, social networking) instead of some direct measure of neglect or risk, inadequately assessing the effect (or lack thereof) of these interventions on the problems they purport to address. The "state of the art" of child neglect intervention could be strengthened by an agreed-upon set of definitions of neglect to guide intervention and its evaluation.

3.2. Example case management-based services

The pool of interventions for neglect include case management-based programs that attempt to provide families with extra services in addition to general social services to improve the outcomes of families at risk of, or who already are, neglecting. The Family Enhancement Program (Ciliberti, 1997) is a culturally-based relational model of family preservation that provides services with an Africentric focus with African American parents who are, or are at risk of, neglecting. This model was designed to meet the outcomes of family preservation (avoiding placement, shortening placements, improving the quality of placements) while attending to cultural issues pertinent to African American families (e.g. multigenerational family relationships) that are often ignored by the child welfare system. This program had improved outcomes with African American families in comparison to those who received the state-offered family preservation services (Ciliberti).

Families First is another case management-based program with a family preservation foundation. According to Campbell (1997), this program (modeled after the Homebuilders program) combines traditional family preservation services with a cognitive-behavioral intervention and concrete, practical support. Families First attends to family history, social isolation, disability, and the pertinent policy context, recognizing that each family's unique context will require different emphasis on different components (because families' needs will differ from one another as will their willingness to cooperate with intervention). Evaluation of the success of this program suggests that a family's willingness to cooperate depends on how well the program assesses and fits its unique context and meets its unique needs (Campbell).

Family Connections is yet another case management-based program. According to DePanfilis and Dubowitz (2005), this community-based program combines case management with in-home services and crisis intervention. It offers emergency material assistance, home-based family intervention (including assessment and individual and family counseling), service coordination, referrals targeted toward risk and protective factors, and multi-family recreational opportunities. The risk factors to which this program attends are caregiver depressive symptoms, parenting stress, and everyday stress. The protective factors on which this program focuses are parenting attitudes, parenting sense of competence (satisfaction and self-efficacy), family functioning, and social support. According to the authors, enhancing these protective factors and reducing risk factors will decrease the risk for child neglect (DePanfilis &

Dubowitz). As a result of this intervention, parents had fewer depressive symptoms and perceived less parenting and everyday stress. Parents reported greater satisfaction with themselves as parents, felt a greater sense of self-efficacy, and experienced better social support (DePanfilis & Dubowitz).

The Social Network Intervention Project (Gaudin, Wodarski, Arkinson, & Avery, 1990) is another case management-based intervention, where the goal is to enhance families' informal network of supports through personal networking, mutual aid groups, neighborhood helpers, volunteer linking, and social skills training. This program combines case management with intensive casework, advocacy, and social network bolstering to improve parents' adequacy of parenting. According to the authors, this intervention results in improvement in parenting status (e.g. severely neglecting to marginally adequate parenting) in the cases where the intervention was longer (greater than nine months) (Gaudin, et al.), as indicators of improved parenting behavior. In considering the usefulness of this intervention in neglect, a "threshold" would be important to establish. One would need to know the practical and conceptual differences between those families deemed "neglecting" and "not neglecting." The practitioner and family can benefit from understanding how much harm to the child and how much need for the family is indicated by a label like "marginally adequate." It is possible that an agreed-upon set of definitions of neglect could strengthen this area as well.

3.3. Proposed services

One model that was proposed but not tested in the literature was of a visitation-centered foster care program. In this program, proposed by Lee and Lynch (1998), traditional foster care services were reinforced with a more in-depth birth family component to engage the foster care triad to best serve family reunification and combat foster care drift. This proposed intervention included: (a) An adequate foster home and immediate visitation with the birth family; (b) stabilization of the birth family (providing practical support, involving all potentially-involved adults, and involving birth family in agency procedures); (c) individual therapy and crisis counseling for the child and the family; (d) meeting families' longer term needs (alleviating environmental stressors); (e) therapy involving the extended family; (f) psychoeducational interventions; and (g) traditional family therapy for the foster and birth families (Lee & Lynch). This proposed comprehensive program suggests that in families where the children have been removed due to neglect, a disconnect occurs in the services provided and the birth family loses touch with the child (where family supports are not engaged and larger issues may be overlooked). This proposed model could be enhanced by greater attention to the neglecting situation itself.

Another model that was proposed but not tested in the literature was the Employment-Based Neglect Program (McSherry, 2004) where the assumption is that employment-based problems (related to poverty) and child neglect have a cyclical relationship, and intervention in employment needs can affect the neglecting situation. This program combines employment assistance with a social learning intervention where neglecting parents experiencing employment difficulties engage in and facilitate a family support program. According to McSherry, this proposed program would employ neglecting parents part-time, promote them to full-time positions, and then place them in related employment. The goals are ultimately to increase an internal locus of control and provide parents with a sense of hope and achievement, reducing the likelihood that they will neglect their children. McSherry's own important critique of the program is that parents with severe learning disabilities, major substance abuse, or profound attachment difficulties may not be well-served by this type of social learning intervention and may require additional services or preliminary treatment before this type of service could be beneficial. In addition, the link to child neglect is an indirect one (improve employment to improve self-efficacy to, then, improve parenting). It is important to note that an intervention that facilitates employment for parents must also address families' need for quality child care, a corollary concern for families experiencing neglect. Proposed interventions such as this one that directly address contextual issues may still need to build on or provide some evidence for the link between those contextual issues (in this case) and the neglecting behavior and situation.

3.4. Interventions in poverty

Should future research and efforts to understand the relationship between poverty and neglect confirm the expected intricate interaction, interventions intended to directly address poverty may also alleviate child neglect concerns. A very wide range of policy and programs have been implemented and proposed to specifically address the issue of poverty in the United States. A full review of what has been effective and what has not is not possible here, but the need for this type of review when considering addressing poverty to alleviate child neglect must be mentioned. A purposeful review of how welfare reform has and has not been effective in assisting families to lift themselves out of poverty by Edin and Kissane (2010) has reflected the difficulties, barriers, and limitations faced by broad-sweeping policy and practice intended to address the poverty-related needs of families in the United States. Smeeding (2009) argues that this type of broad-sweeping effort (in the form of the federal stimulus bill signed into law by President Barack Obama) can be effective and calls for national prioritization of antipoverty programming. Other authors have argued that smaller-than-federal policies and programs can and have been effective at addressing poverty on the individual and community levels. Dymski (2009) has suggested that private banking practices with communities in development can drastically improve community-level poverty, which can be expected to influence individual-level poverty. Tinker (2000) makes a compelling argument for the potential benefits of microloans and microfinance programs for women experiencing poverty.

Regardless of the positive effects (or potential benefit) of programs and policies intended to address poverty, there is not yet enough evidence to support that these types of improvements would automatically address child neglect among families experiencing poverty. The mechanisms behind both of these complex problems and their relationship to one another remains to be seen, definitively, and any adoption of anti-poverty policy and intervention to address child neglect would be exploratory at best, given the current state of the literature and research. Antipoverty policy and programming is important in its own right, and a connection to child neglect intervention has the potential to strengthen the approach to improving families' overall well-being, should we be able to really solidify an understanding of and approach to the relationship between these two complex issues.

4. Social justice issues

In reviewing the state of child neglect intervention, it becomes evident that the fragmented definition (and therefore conceptualization) of child neglect has resulted in divided, uncoordinated approaches to addressing many different influencing factors in child neglect and historical marginalizing of the contextual, social–environmental challenges to parenting. These conditions have social justice implications for the families and children receiving services for neglect. Poverty itself is a social justice issue as it reflects the inequitable distribution of resources and the deliberate oppression by social structures against those who do not have access to those resources (Bordieu, 1990; Freire, 1970). If one were to agree with Wakefield (1988) that the purpose of social work is distributive justice (Rawls, 1985), an intervention in child neglect would be at the

very least essentially ineffective and at the most unethical if it did not address the structural oppression of those living in poverty. Lindsey (2004) suggests that child neglect intervention, as it is designed, actually draws attention away from this important issue, supporting Bordieu's perspective on poverty.

Compounding definitional challenges, the role of values in working with families at risk of child neglect seems to occlude the role a family's social–environmental context may play in parenting, and therefore poses many social justice concerns for practice in this field. Mothers (even those with adequate or above-adequate financial resources and access to services) are routinely, negatively, societally judged for their parenting behaviors, and the public has developed its own standards by which they believe parents (but especially mothers) should care for their children (Gottlieb, 2010). Researchers, policy makers, and practitioners are not unbiased with respect to these value-based judgments on what constitutes child maltreatment. The introduction of poverty and the value-based judgments that accompany its complex manifestations complicates attention to the real issues even further.

Destitute families in which caregivers engage in self-destructive behavior that endangers the health, safety, and future prospects of their children evoke strong moralistic reactions in neighborhoods, schools, law enforcement agencies, and often within the extended family of the parents (Wilson & Horner, 2005). Definitions of neglect have been criticized as imposing middle-class values as interpreted by professionals on lower class families, and having a lack of cultural consideration for diversity in families' behavior (Stowman & Donohue, 2005). Class, culture, and race are important issues when considering oppression and lack of access to resources (the difficulties for those who are minorities and experiencing poverty may be compounded) and the standards of parenting that are applied to all clients are usually those of the white middle class, often of the workers assessing the problem of neglect themselves (Brun, 1993; Scourfield, 2000). In addition to differentially affecting families of low socioeconomic status, the conceptualization of child neglect has also been unfair to women, who bear the brunt of care and are thus blamed for a lack of care even when other (contextual) factors are present (Scourfield). Women are disadvantaged from another perspective, as well: Societally, there is far less attention paid to the father's responsibility in caring for children (Berry et al., 2003). This places an unfair focus on the neglecting mother who must take on all of the responsibility of parenting and all of the blame for parenting challenges.

While judgments about neglect are typically value-laden, this position is further complicated by bias in another direction: Social workers' general unwillingness to pathologize families who may already be disadvantaged by poverty based on social work values. The lack of an objective (or as close to objective as possible) "threshold" for identifying child neglect subjects clients to social workers' reactivity and subjective opinions (Tanner & Turney, 2003). Decision-making in family preservation is likely, therefore, to be complicated by workers' own conflicting perspectives of neglect, the families they serve, and the most appropriate course of action. For example, the policy context guiding the out-of-home placement of neglected African American children has contributed to inappropriate removals and destructive interventions which have been detrimental to the very children supposedly protected, through institutionalized discrimination, cultural insensitivity, or racism (Ciliberti, 1997). The institution of an established conceptual framework based on an agreed-upon set of definitions of child neglect might give workers in this field the guidance necessary (replacing value-laden assessments) to provide evidence-based practice to support them in their decision-making.

As one considers the usefulness and effectiveness of child neglect intervention, it can be argued that one type of intervention for neglect, brief intervention, is actually unethical and can be damaging to families. Interventions for neglect require convincing families to trust outsiders, addressing their loneliness, and improving their outlook for the future. Withdrawing to terminate services before actual changes can be made effectively is unethical, particularly because families who are neglecting live in hostile physical and social environments (Campbell, 1997). In light of families' contextual challenges, removal of children also poses ethical concerns. With out-of-home care, it sometimes occurs that no reunification would be made as a result of the birth families' lack of ecosystemic resources. In these cases, the removal of children is essentially the result of being poor and oppressed, even though the justification may claim otherwise while sill pointing to *manifestations* of the poverty the families are experiencing (Lee & Lynch, 1998).

Workers do not appear to be encouraged or motivated by the child welfare system to deal with the social and economic conditions that may contribute to neglect. Society's historical emphasis on maternal deficits (e.g. mental illness, indifference to children's needs) as being the cause of neglect is one that has served the interests of the powerful by taking attention away from societal factors influencing neglect such as poverty and marginalization. Neglect indicates a more general societal failure to build and maintain an infrastructure that promotes parenting and values children (McSherry, 2004). Therefore, the inattention to structural causes/factors of neglect has essentially served the interests of those who have power, in refocusing attention away from the inequitable distribution of resources, something that ensures they will not lose their own access to resources. This supports, again, Bordieu's (1990) perspective on poverty, and Lindsey's (2004) interpretation of the underlying mechanisms behind a focus on child welfare issues to draw attention away from poverty.

Some parents' individual characteristics limit their access to parenting intervention, indicating another important social justice issue. For example, learning disabilities and other impairments bar employment and successful participation in parenting interventions that are cognitive-behaviorally focused (Berry et al., 2003). Employment itself is considered a corollary parenting skill, and if joblessness is the reason for child placement, then it must be a target of intervention (Berry, et al.). In addition, substance abuse is a treatable public health problem with cost-effective solutions, yet nearly half of substance abusing parents also involved in child welfare were not offered or provided with any substance abuse services (Berry, et al.). A major concern derived from this result is that the child welfare system is blaming substance abusing parents (and parents with other problems connected to structural issues of poverty) and treating them as undeserving of parenthood. This may stem from the values-based judgment by family members, professionals, and society that if the parent's behavior does not match class, race, or cultural standards of parenting, then it must be "bad parenting." Together, these characteristics are also examples of parent deficits that are often blamed for child neglect, turning attention away from the context that may play an important role. This is yet another argument for a foundational conceptualization of neglect based on an agreed-upon set of definitions of the problem, which can address many of the overarching social justice issues presented by the way neglect is conceptualized, approached, and treated.

5. Conclusion

The problem of child neglect is facing many challenges: (a) The lack of a cohesive, agreed-upon conceptual/theoretical framework and inconsistent definition of the problem; (b) disjointed intervention in various components of the problem; and (c) the social justice issues of inequity based on class, race, and gender. There are many contextual-based factors that may impede parents' ability to provide adequate care for their children. The literature and research have covered many of these topics, but generally without a sense of focus on how they might be related to one another. In addition, many

interventions are currently being used to address the issue of neglect, but again these interventions are not centrally focused on one (or even a few) factors that are key in the problem of neglect. The state of the literature and intervention in child neglect suggests a need for change in research, policy-making, and practice with the problem, specifically as it relates to poverty.

The first recommendation is that more attention in research is needed to develop a more comprehensive and cohesive set of definitions of neglect based on evidence of its characteristics and mindful of its various contexts (e.g. what might make child neglect different, if at all, from other types of child maltreatment?). This research should include methods such as multilevel modeling and structured equation modeling to continue to explore the role of poverty among the cadre of potential variables influencing poverty and the relationships among these variables themselves. Defining neglect more comprehensively will require collaboration among researchers, policy makers, and practitioners from development to implementation. The second recommendation is that those involved in defining and addressing child neglect must catalyze a value shift regarding parenting that better includes attention to contextual factors (particularly poverty), with which families may need more (potentially different) assistance.

The third recommendation is that practitioners and agencies who work with families experiencing neglect carefully assess (aided by an agreed-upon set of definitions) each family's needs and provide individualized services. Service delivery organizations could develop a model that is multidimensional and flexible (addressing various aspects of child neglect in the various ways families may experience it) while being attentive to context (as poverty may be experienced differently by different families experiencing neglect). The current collection of interventions reflect attention "to pieces of the puzzle," when instead, the field should offer a comprehensive, flexible, and evidence-based approach.

The final recommendation is that social justice for families experiencing neglect must have a larger role in the attention given to the problem of neglect by research, policy, and practice. Social justice for families receiving services to address child neglect may be improved by: (a) Including context and poverty in definitions and understanding of neglect; (b) involving fathers when possible and safe; and (c) focusing on evidence-based definitions and threshold(s) of child neglect when assessing needs. The purpose of such actions would be to (a) address the system's tendency to blame parents for limiting factors that they might be unable (without assistance) to address on their own; (b) reduce or eradicate the system's blame of, and placing an unfair amount of responsibility on, women (and releasing men of this responsibility) for parenting; and (c) ameliorate racial disproportionality and blaming those who are already limited by oppressive socioeconomic structures through the use of value-based (regarding race and class) assessment in child neglect.

An important and perhaps easily-overlooked component of social justice for families experiencing context-influenced neglect would be the *ability* of parents to care for their children adequately, given their financial situation and other contextual factors. It is not difficult, when focusing on context, to get "caught up" in an image of the impoverished family as helpless and inherently unable to provide for its children. In the midst of considering context and how it might affect families negatively, it is important to remember that families in poverty do possess strengths and resilience factors that result in their ability to provide many necessary resources for their children, including love and warmth. Those working with families must be careful not to impinge on families' own power to contribute that which they are able to in caring for their children.

Approaching success in each of these goals is possible by starting with a foundational conceptualization (based on agreed-upon definitions) and understanding of child neglect. The conceptualization of child neglect in a context that influences families' choices and behaviors needs development. The avoidance of naming poverty (as a complex construct made up of many dimensions) as a key component of child neglect may come from value-based judgments, political motivations, the lack of a comprehensive focus, or a lack of clarity in the construct of poverty itself. More work needs to be done to bring this vital issue to the forefront of research, scholarship, and practice in the realm of child neglect.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Drs. Mary Katherine O'Connor and Leanne Heaton for their close review and constructive, challenging feedback regarding earlier versions of this article.

References

Berry, M., Charlson, R., & Dawson, K. (2003). Promising practices in understanding and treating child neglect. *Child and Family Social Work*, *8*(1), 13–24.
Bordieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Brun, C. (1993). *A naturalistic inquiry into the lives of six women labeled "at-risk" for child neglect*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.
Campbell, L. (1997). Child neglect and intensive family preservation practice. *Families in Society*, *78*(3), 280–290.
Carter, V., & Myers, M. R. (2007). Exploring the risks of substantiated physical neglect related to poverty and parental characteristics: A national sample. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *29*(1), 110–121.
Ciliberti, P. (1997). *An innovative family preservation and support program in an African American community: Analysis of six- and twelve-month follow-up data*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Portland State University, Portland, OR.
Combs-Orme, T., Wilson, E. E., Cain, D. S., Page, T., & Kirby, L. D. (2003). Context-based parenting in infancy: Background and conceptual issues. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, *20*(6), 437–472.
Connell-Carrick, K., & Scannapieco, M. (2006). Ecological correlates of neglect in infants and toddlers. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *21*(3), 299–316.
DePanfilis, D., & Dubowitz, H. (2005). Family connections: A program for preventing child neglect. *Child Maltreatment*, *10*(2), 108–123.
Dymski, G. A. (2009). Financing community development in the U.S.: A comparison of "War on Poverty" and 1990s-era policy approaches. *Review of Black Political Economy*, *36*(3–4), 245–273.
Edin, K., & Kissane, R. J. (2010). Poverty and the American family: A decade in review. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *72*(3), 460–479.
Fanshel, D., Finch, S. J., & Grundy, J. F. (1992). Serving the urban poor: A study of child welfare preventive services. *Child Welfare*, *71*(3), 197–211.
Fram, M. S. (2004). Research for progressive change: Bordieu and social work. *The Social Service Review*, *78*(4), 553–576.
Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York, NY: Continuum.
Gaudin, J. M., Wodarski, J. S., Arkinson, M. K., & Avery, L. S. (1990). Remedying child neglect: Effectiveness of social network interventions. *The Journal of Applied Social Sciences*, *15*(1), 97–123.
Goldman, J., Salus, M. K., Walcott, D., & Kennedy, K. Y. (2003). What is child maltreatment? In *A coordinated response to child abuse and neglect: The foundation for practice*. Retrieved from: http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/foundation/foundationc.cfm
Gottlieb, C. (2010). Reflections on judging mothering. *Baltimore Law Review*, *39*, 371–388.
Jonson-Reid, M., Drake, B., & Kohl, P. L. (2009). Is the overrepresentation of the poor in child welfare caseloads due to bias or need? *Children and Youth Services Review*, *31*(3), 422–427.
Lee, R., & Lynch, M. (1998). Combating foster care drift: An ecosystemic treatment model for neglect cases. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, *20*(3), 351–370.
Lindsey, D. (2004). *The welfare of children* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
Lindsey, D., & Shlonsky, A. (Eds.). (2008). *Child welfare research: Advances for practice and policy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
McSherry, D. (2004). Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Examining the relationship between child neglect and poverty. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *34*(5), 727–733.
Nelson, B. J. (1984). *Making an issue of child abuse: Political agenda setting for social problems.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Rawls, J. (1985). Justice as fairness: Political not metaphysical. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, *14*(3), 223–251.
Rodwell, M. (1988). *Policy implications of the multiple meanings of neglect: A naturalistic study of child neglect*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS.
Scannapieco, M., & Connell-Carrick, K. (2002). Focus on the first years: An eco-developmental assessment of child neglect for children 0 to 3 years of age. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *24*(8), 601–621.
Scourfield, J. (2000). The rediscovery of child neglect. *The Sociological Review*, *48*(3), 365–382.

Slack, K. S., Holl, J. L., McDaniel, M., Yoo, J., & Bolger, K. (2004). Understanding the risks of child neglect: An exploration of poverty and parenting characteristics. *Child Maltreatment*, *9*(4), 395–408.

Smeeding, T. (2009). The stimulus and poverty: First steps toward a strong antipoverty policy. *Spotlight on Poverty and Opportunity*. Retrieved from: http://www.spotlightonpoverty.org/ExclusiveCommentary.aspx?id=7e5e73f6-7891-4046-a5b9-41bd3aa2275a

Stowman, S. A., & Donohue, B. (2005). Assessing child neglect: A review of standardized measures. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *10*(4), 491–512.

Straus, M. A., & Kantor, G. K. (2005). Definition and measurement of neglectful behavior: Some principles and guidelines. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *29*(1), 19–29.

Tanner, K., & Turney, D. (2003). What do we know about child neglect? A critical review of the literature and its application to social work practice. *Child and Family Social Work*, *8*(1), 25–34.

Tinker, I. (2000). Alleviating poverty: Investing in women's work. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, *3*(66), 229–242.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families [USDHHSACF] (2008). *Child Maltreatment 2006.* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Wakefield, J. C. (1988). Psychotherapy, distributive justice, and social work, part 1: Distributive justice as a conceptual framework for social work. *The Social Service Review*, *62*(3), 353–382.

Wilson, D., & Horner, W. (2005). Chronic child neglect: Needed developments in theory and practice. *Families in Society*, *86*(4), 471–482.

Wilson, S. L., Kuebli, J. E., & Hughes, H. M. (2005). Patterns of maternal behavior among neglectful families: Implications for research and intervention. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *29*(9), 985–1001.