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**Expanding Our Vision in Child Welfare:  
Child Neglect from a Structural Violence Perspective**

Mohan V. Krishna, LMSW, MA  
Graduate Center - City University of New York

Child neglect is the most prevalent type of child maltreatment in the United States (Allin, Wathen, & MacMillan, 2005; Roditti, 2005; Petras, Massat, & Essex, 2002). Children who experience neglect comprise more than half (59.2%) of all child maltreatment victims (Roditti, 2005). Child neglect is the most lethal form of child maltreatment, leading to more than a third of all child fatalities compared with 25.6% for victims of abuse (Roditti, 2005). Despite this widespread prevalence, child neglect has received limited attention in the health and social sciences literature compared to child abuse (Allin et al., 2005; Roditti, 2005). Child neglect emerges through a variety of factors, including family systems issues, parent-child interactions, individual pathologies of parents, and interactions between the parent and the environment (Petras et al., 2002). Despite this complexity, the problem of neglect has generally been framed and addressed in narrow terms. Policymakers, researchers, and practitioners have often viewed neglect through personal and gender-specific terms, most often as the failure of mothers to carry out their mothering responsibilities (Swift, 1995). As a result of all of these factors, effective practice models for working with families affected by child neglect are lacking (Petras et al., 2002).

In this paper, I will examine recent shifts in child welfare policy and their impact on families affected by child neglect. Using Structural Violence Theory, I will discuss what these shifts reveal about recent definitions and responses to child neglect and about the tension in child welfare policy between child protection and family preservation. One way in which values and ideology infuse practice is through theory, both theories that are used to shape practice and theories implicit in practice. Ideology, according to Therborn (1980) (as cited in Garvin and Lee, 2003), sets boundaries by defining what exists, what is good and what is possible. Using examples from the theoretical and practice literature and principles of Social Democracy, I will explore how Structural Violence Theory can expand our vision for child welfare by advocating for the fundamental human rights of all families and the eradication of inequities which undermine the conditions necessary for families to not only survive, but to flourish.

**Recent Shifts in Child Welfare Policy and Practice**

Child neglect has been categorized into different subtypes including physical, emotional, medical, educational, environmental, and psychological neglect. Dubowitz, Black, Starr, and Zuravin (1993) define neglect as an act of omission rather than commission that occurs when children's basic needs are not adequately met. Defining neglect as the absence of particular

actions or conditions leaves room for much interpretation in the investigation, assessment, and diagnosis of families. Gordon (1988) claims that historically, the notion of child neglect has been a “container for residual anxieties about child-raising which [do] not fit any of the more precise definitions of family problems” (p. 118).

Several themes emerge when one examines the history and evolution of child neglect from the early nineteenth century. Definitions and responses to child neglect have been inextricably linked to prevailing norms about childhood and about the proper societal roles and functions of the family. A second theme is that the construction of child neglect as a social problem has helped shape and has been shaped by prevailing attitudes towards women and mothering and have over time taken the form of mother-blaming, particularly towards poor women of color. Third, there has often been confusion among the populace and among child protection officials between child neglect and the effects of poverty on child and family well-being.

In 1997 lawmakers passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). Through ASFA, for the first time in the history of child welfare in the U.S., federal law mandated the timeline and conditions for states to file a termination of parental rights for children in foster care. ASFA stipulates that if a child has been in out-of-home care for fifteen of the past twenty-two months and the state is not moving towards returning the child to her/his biological parent(s), the state must file to terminate the parents’ rights over the child. By reducing funding for preventive services, shortening time frames for families to complete reunification service plans, reducing barriers to terminating parental rights, and providing incentives to states to promote adoption of children in foster care, ASFA marked a shift away from family preservation and toward concurrent planning and adoption. The primary goal of concurrent planning is to achieve timely legal permanency for children by providing reunification services to the child’s biological family while simultaneously developing an alternate plan in case it is needed (Katz, 1999).

These policy shifts have had a particularly powerful impact on families charged with neglect. Due to reduced time frames and pressures on agencies to seek adoptions for children, there has been a greater tendency to not only pathologize families more severely, but to use these pathologies as grounds for severing the ties between a child and her family. Child neglect and the conditions associated with it are seen not only as deficiencies, but as sources of imminent danger from which a child must be protected. Krane and Davies (2000) describe this shift in focus from child well being to risks as a “rhetoric of concern” (p. 38) for the welfare of children. Shortened time frames for reunification have had dramatic effects on families affected by mental illness (McWey, Henderson, & Tice, 2006) and substance abuse (Karoll & Poertner, 2003). McGowan and Walsh (2000), in an analysis of the combined effects of welfare reform and ASFA legislation on families in the child welfare system, critique “quick-fix solutions” (p. 11) that have scapegoated poor women and children and have polarized the dual objectives of child protection and family preservation.

Current debates about how best to respond to families charged with child maltreatment often result in battles between protecting the “best interests of the child” and preserving the rights of parents. What functions are served by perpetuating this dichotomy? Second, to what extent do definitions of child neglect help social service providers understand the distinctions between neglect and poverty and promote conditions for the well being and growth of all families? Structural Violence Theory offers an alternate lens through which to view the functions of the family as a social institution and the relationships between the state and the private lives of families. In the next section, I will highlight key tenets of Structural Violence

Theory and examine the implications of these tenets for how child neglect might be viewed and responded to as a social problem. I will also explore the potentials of Structural Violence Theory for developing a broader vision in child welfare policy and practice, one that promotes social and economic justice for all families.

#### Structural Violence Theory and Child Neglect

Structural Violence Theory holds an expansive view of human nature, one in which people are inherently proactive, reactive and creative (Gil, 1998). Society, through a structural violence framework, is seen as a site of conflict. This conflict manifests in different forms of violence. People are considered fundamentally nonviolent, but are prone to react against violent conditions. The family, from a structural violence perspective, is a site of both harmony and conflict and both growth and destruction. Families have the right to social, economic, and political security. In the absence of this security, familial relationships, including the parent-child relationship, can become inhibited, diverted, subverted, and sometimes destructive (Farmer, 2004; Gil, 1998).

Social problems, from a structural violence perspective are manifestations of social conflict. A social conflict model questions who profits from the existence of social problems and claims that the eradication of social problems requires equalizing social structures (Parillo, 2002). Thus, social policy is a history of conflict, accommodation, and agreement (George & Wilding, 1985). In terms of the role of the state, Structural Violence Theory demands that the state play a central role in alleviating suffering and creating just, humane, and nurturing conditions for all. Consequently, the term “child neglect” is inherently problematic in a structural violence framework, in that it narrows the lens on the deviant behaviors of the caregiver towards the child. In so doing, the term frames a highly complex social and political issue as a “clinical concern” that demands an investigation, assessment and diagnosis. A structural violence lens makes central the question as to why certain families and communities become more likely to be investigated by child protection officials, a question that has taken on even greater meaning in the current discourse on racial disproportionality in the child welfare system (see Roberts, 2008; Rivaux et al., 2008). Anglin (1998) views social and governmental policies that valorize particular family forms, withdraw help, and impose disciplinary techniques as violence in the guise of social stability and order. Furthermore, U.S. adoption practices, she claims, are sites for perpetuating gender-based hierarchies, ideologies of kinship, and practices of domination.

Several authors have offered interpretations of structural violence that are useful for analyzing child maltreatment and child neglect, in particular. Violence against children, according to Korbin (2003), can be individually perpetrated acts of maltreatment, collectively perpetrated cultural rites that prescribe violent acts towards children, and structurally perpetrated assaults, such as the devastating effects of poverty, famine and lack of opportunity on child well-being. Gil (1998) asks to what extent the environment meets the needs of families, in terms of their circumstances of living, relative power, quality of social relations, and overall quality of life. The lack of or inadequate care for a child is an expression of intrapersonal violence within the family (see James et al., 2003) and a form of counterviolence against inequitable social, economic, and political conditions that hinder parents and families from opportunities for life-enhancing activities and from fulfilling their potential (see Gil, 1998). Counterviolence is an expression of blocked developmental energy in the form of destructive and self-destructive behaviors (Gil, 1998).

## Social Democracy and Child Welfare

Structural Violence Theory reflects the social democratic view that societal institutions (such as the child welfare system) are inherently political, skewed, and often unjust (Eitzen & Zinn, 1998). These institutions create norms that give rise to a false sense of consensus, ultimately leading to certain individuals and groups being alienated. Social democracy advocates for challenging institutional norms in order to reorganize faulty societal systems (Parillo, 2002). Social democrats also acknowledge that the current economic system is not designed to meet human needs (Pilisuk & Tennant, 1997). Structural Violence Theory reflects social democracy's focus on the fulfillment of human needs and its insistence that the state has the responsibility and opportunity to create conditions for social, economic and political equality (Mullaly, 1997).

Several examples illustrate how adopting social democratic thought to address child maltreatment can bridge the gap between the personal and the political, and between the individual and the communal. Roditti (2005) proposes the use of social network mapping to examine the community of caregivers for neglected children. In so doing, Roditti offers a way of transforming the process of assessing situations of neglect into an opportunity to challenge prevailing norms of child-rearing and to seek ways of strengthening communities. McGowan and Walsh (2000) similarly advocate for *differential* responses to the wide range of families who come to the attention of child protection agencies and for a commitment to incorporating both social services *and* economic development in poor communities. Reduction in inequalities, according to Mullaly (1997), reduces feelings of isolation and alienation among those who have been marginalized.

Inherent in Structural Violence Theory is a vision of transcending dichotomies between the personal and the social and between the individual and the collective. This tenet mirrors the social democratic ideal of promoting fellowship and collective responsibility over competition and a narrow view of human rights (Mullaly, 1997). Such a perspective can potentially help us rise above polarizing debates between the rights of the child versus the rights of the family and provide children, families, and communities the justice and care they deserve.

## Conclusion

Analyzing child neglect through the lens of Structural Violence Theory can provide practitioners and policymakers with a more nuanced understanding of social work's response to child neglect. At the heart of these complexities lie some of the most fundamental aspects of human experience: childhood, the relationships between parents and their children, human rights, and the enormous potential within individuals, families, and communities. Nurturing this potential requires reflective policy and practice, innovation, and embracing multiple perspectives on social problems and their solutions. The children and families we serve deserve no less.

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