

**SOCIAL WORKERS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE OF CHILD  
NEGLECT**

**by**

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requirements for the degree**

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**UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA**

**FACULTY OF HUMANITIES**



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## DEDICATIONS

I would like to dedicate this research to:

My Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, who has held my hand throughout my life and by His grace I am who and what I am.

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Lastly, to all those children silenced by the act of child neglect, may this bring a light on your situation and hope to your hopelessness.

**Thank you**

**Michelle De Bruin**

## ABSTRACT

### SOCIAL WORKERS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE OF CHILD NEGLECT

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In South Africa and the rest of the world, the incidence of child neglect is escalating at an astounding rate. To add to the devastation of the increasing phenomenon is the challenge that professionals face daily in trying to combat child neglect. Child neglect is ever so often overlooked or dismissed. The reason for this dismissal may be due to other more prominent forms of child maltreatment, a lack of resources to be able to combat the problem or a lack of adequately trained social workers. One of the primary reasons why child neglect may go unattended throughout the world is due to the incoherence in defining and understanding child neglect as a phenomenon.

The ability to define a concept or concepts correctly provides professionals with the ability to combat the problem at hand. Thus, a lack of understanding of a concept or phenomenon such as child neglect hinders one from being able to combat this social ill. There is evidently a need for clarity on the concept of child neglect in legislation and at practice level.

To address the identified gap as discussed above, the researcher utilised applied research within a qualitative research approach to explore the understanding of social workers of the concept of child neglect.

The research methodology used during this research study included purposive sampling followed by snowball sampling to select participants with experience in the field of child neglect. The researcher used semi-structured email interviews for data collection to reach the specified sample of social workers in private practice with experience in child neglect for the past five or more years.

Main themes that arose during this research study were, amongst others, that there is a definite need for more clarity on the specific nature of child neglect and the general confusion around service delivery concerning neglected children.

Clarity of the concept of child neglect together with South African literature and definitions for child neglect will enable social workers working with child neglect to be more equipped to deal with the phenomenon of child neglect, both legally and therapeutically.

Recommendations include that the Department of Social Development develop and assist social workers with training and tools to be able to deal with this phenomenon. Another key aspect that became apparent during this study was that there is a definite need for more social workers to be employed to be able to deal with child neglect in South Africa.

The following key concepts are used in this study:

- Social worker
- Perceptions
- Child
- Child maltreatment
- Child neglect

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## CHAPTER ONE

### GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

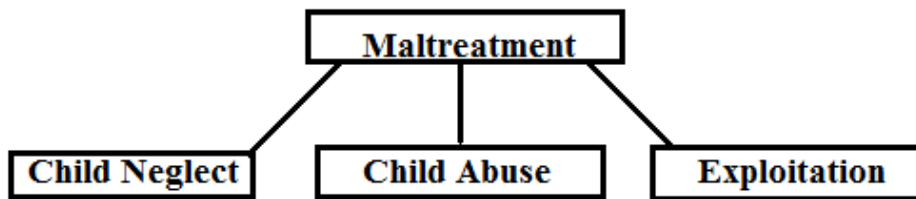
*“Defining child neglect in legal or social terms can in no way give an accurate picture of the neglected child. Such a child must be seen to appreciate the true hopelessness of their existence”*  
*(Crosson-Tower, 1996:92).*

#### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The above quote refers to the helplessness of neglected children and implies that even if the concept of neglect was adequately defined, the circumstances of the child’s existence would seemingly not improve. In order to define child neglect, one must look at the broader spectrum of child maltreatment. Maltreatment refers to the interchangeable term that describes a complex set of social phenomena where the child’s caregiver is not able to provide for the child’s needs, health and well-being (Giardino, Christian & Giardino, 1997:3). Maltreatment can further be categorised into three primary forms. These in the above authors’ opinions are child neglect, child abuse and exploitation (Giardino et al., 1997:3). For this research study, the researcher, however, only focused on neglect as a form of child maltreatment.

In South Africa, children are lawfully entitled to family/parental care, basic nutrition, health, social services and protection as embedded in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 28 (1)(b)(c)(d). However, it is apparent in South Africa and the rest of the world that child neglect is an ever-increasing and deep-rooted phenomenon affecting more and more children (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:819). Karam (2013), a social worker currently working in the field of child protection, agrees that there are a large number of neglected children in South Africa. Child maltreatment includes physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse and sexual abuse (Miley, O’Melia & DuBois, 2009:223). Schwartz and Scott (2010:340) emphasise that in the United States maltreatment deaths of children are due more to neglect than any other form of abuse. The following figure assists to understand maltreatment:

**Figure 1: Categories of maltreatment**



As can be seen above, maltreatment can be divided into three primary categories namely: child neglect, child abuse and exploitation. Conceptualising the phenomenon of neglect is necessary in order to understand it. The Children’s Act 38 of 2005 provides a broad definition as follows: “Child neglect may be defined as the inability to rightfully satisfy a child’s basic needs or an inability to exercise parental responsibilities” (Children’s Act 38 of 2005). The definition as provided in the Children’s Act, although answering the question of what child neglect is, may appear to be too broad to clarify and provide understanding on this continuously evolving and culturally dynamic phenomenon.

In the opinion of Beckett (2007:69) and Kay (2003:42), child neglect refers to the persistent failure of the caregiver to meet the child’s basic needs. This act of commission could likely result in the child suffering various health and developmental impairments (Beckett, 2007:69). Although the reference to Crosson-Tower (1996) is dated, the researcher deemed it important to include the information for the purposes of the study due to the value thereof. Crosson-Tower (1996:93) elaborates on the above definition as child neglect being a ‘condition’ in which the caretaker who is responsible for the child deliberately or by lack of attentiveness allows the child to undergo present suffering by failing to meet their needs that are deemed essential for the development of the child’s physical, intellectual and emotional capacities.

From the above authors’ definitions, it is evident that the act of child neglect is an act of omission rather than actively harming the child as in child abuse (Kay, 2003:42). This form of child maltreatment in Crosson-Tower’s (1996:100) opinion has many variables. Authors such as Beckett (2007:69), Kay (2003:64) and Crosson-Tower (1996:92) agree that some of the variables of child neglect include physical neglect, emotional neglect and medical neglect. However, Crosson-Tower (1996:92) adds

mental health, supervision, abandoning a child, housing hazards, housing sanitation, personal hygiene and nutrition to the above variables of neglect.

In order for the definition of child neglect to be correct it must encompass the cultural norms, values and beliefs of the country (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:818). A challenge to define child neglect in the South African context is the difference in cultural attitudes and beliefs (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:820). Social workers in South Africa are challenged with neglected cases as it is not easily defined and thus not easily understood, therefore creating confusion as to how to intervene or protect a child from neglect (Karam, 2013). This lack of clarity around the concept of child neglect makes it difficult to explain to the parents or caretakers what is expected from them or where their shortcomings are and thus makes it difficult to combat child neglect (Karam, 2013).

Another key aspect in defining child neglect is the need for the definition to encompass religious beliefs and social values as well (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:818). This may be why, in Karam's (2013) opinion, another factor contributing to the challenge of protecting neglected children is the fact that neglect in itself is a relative term, thus implying that what constitutes neglect for one child may not constitute neglect for another (Karam, 2013). In most cases, neglected children are left in the care of the person responsible for neglecting them due to the neglect not being 'severe enough' to be able to protect the child, yet at the same time, it is not in the best interests of the child to remain in the care of their caregiver (Karam, 2013).

Neglect in South Africa must not be confused with lack of resources and lack of basic knowledge and skills; neglect should be seen in context and thus carefully assessed according to the values, norms and standards of parents and caretakers, as well as their financial ability.

The above variables of child neglect refer to the following:

- Physical neglect: the failure of the caregiver to provide adequate food, clothing and shelter (Beckett, 2007:69; Crosson-Tower, 1996:92, 93; Kay 2003:42).
- Emotional neglect: the failure to protect the child from emotional harm (Beckett, 2007:69; Crosson-Tower, 1996:92, 93; Kay 2003:42).

- Medical neglect: Failing to ensure that the child receives adequate medical care and/or treatment (Beckett, 2007:69; Crosson-Tower, 1996:92, 93; Kay 2003:42).
- Mental health: Failing or denying the child mental health care if necessary (Crosson-Tower, 1996:92, 93).
- Supervision: Failure to provide the child with adequate supervision both inside and out of the home (Crosson-Tower, 1996:92, 93).
- Abandoning the child: The parent abandoning the child or not returning within 48 hours to the person who the parent placed in charge of the child (Crosson-Tower, 1996:92, 93).
- Housing hazards: Failing to protect the child from danger in the home (Crosson-Tower, 1996:92, 93).
- Housing sanitation: Failure to protect the child from spoiled foods, garbage or human excrement; this may also include the malfunctioning of toilets (Crosson-Tower, 1996:92, 93).
- Personal hygiene: Failure to keep the child and their clothes in a state of cleanliness (Crosson-Tower, 1996:92, 93).
- Nutrition: Failure to provide regular and ample meals to the child that are developmentally appropriate (Crosson-Tower, 1996:92, 93).

Social workers rendering services to children often have to prove that a child is neglected; if they do not have clarity on what the nature of neglect is, they would not be able to justify their assessment in court procedures (Miley et al., 2009:223). Therefore, it is critical that the definition and understanding of neglect is clear to all social service providers and other professionals working to protect children. This is especially important when working with neglect in South Africa, as neglect may be more difficult to define in the South African context due to the nature and extent of poverty and the diverse cultures, norms and values in society.

**The following key concepts apply to this study:**

- **Perception**

The concept 'perception' refers to the ability that an individual has to be able to grasp and understand a concept or phenomenon (*Oxford Dictionary*, 2002:660). Therefore,

in this research study, the term ‘perceptions’ refers to the social workers’ understanding of the phenomenon of child neglect.

- **Social service provider**

Social services as defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* (2002:860) refer to public services that are provided by the government for the citizens of a country. A provider then refers to a person who ensures a service to someone (*Oxford Dictionary*, 2002:719). In the case of this research study, the researcher focuses on social workers who provide private services to the public, in this case children.

- **Understanding/understand**

A person’s understanding is the ability for that person to grasp or intellectualise a concept in such a way that he or she is able to make sense of it (*Oxford Dictionary*, 2002:990). Understanding may thus also refer to a person’s judgement of a specific phenomenon (*Oxford Dictionary*, 2002:990). Therefore, the researcher focuses on the participants’ ability to intellectualise the topic of child neglect.

- **Concept**

The word ‘concept’ can be defined as a building block in an individual’s way of thinking in order to understand his or her world (De Vos, Strydom, Schulze & Patel, 2011:29; Porta & Keating, 2008:179). According to the *Oxford Dictionary* (2002:178), a concept refers to an intangible thought.

- **Child neglect**

Child neglect is defined in the Children’s Act 38 of 2005 as “the failure in the exercise of parental responsibilities to provide for the child’s basic physical, intellectual, emotional or social needs”. Talley (2005:55) defines child neglect as the caregiver’s inability to meet a child’s major needs.

## 1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Neglect refers to the failure to meet the child’s basic needs, namely physical, intellectual, social and emotional needs as well as a failure to exercise parental rights and responsibilities (Children’s Act 38 of 2005; Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:821).

According to Berk (2009:571), neglectful parents are uninvolved, do not accept their children, have little control over their children's lives, and are generally indifferent towards their children. The parents might be able to provide for some of the children's immediate needs but often fail to provide for their long-term needs (Berk, 2009:571). Extreme non-involvement of parents is a form of abuse otherwise known as child neglect (Berk, 2009:571). Child neglect is therefore in essence the inadequate or insufficient provision for the children's needs by the child's parent or caregiver.

In the researcher's opinion and substantiated by the literature, child neglect is a challenging and changing phenomenon which is both difficult to define and protect children from. The researcher's experience is supported by the experiences of practitioners in the field. Strijdom (2013) and Strydom (2013) both agree that neglect is difficult to prove in court and lacks a clear definition, which hinders the understanding of the concept. This presents social workers with a serious problem as it is their primary role to protect children, and neglected children may thus not be protected.

The problem arises when one attempts to define social or emotional neglect. The above statement by the researcher can be supported by the definition of a child in need of care and protection as stated in the Children's Act 38 of 2005, Chapter 9. The Children's Act 38 of 2005 (1)(f)(g)(h)(l) states that a child may be in need of care due to neglect in the following circumstances:

"If the child lives in or is exposed to circumstances which may seriously harm that child's physical, mental or social well-being"; "if there is reason to believe that the child's physical, mental or social well-being is at risk"; "if the child is in a state of physical or mental neglect or if the child is being deliberately neglected."

Although the Children's Act provides stringent guidelines to when a child may be in need of care due to neglect, it does not seem to necessitate the actual criteria for assessing or concluding whether the child has been neglected. This is ironic seeing as the Act itself provides instructions for the social worker to carry out assessment of a child – in other words, investigating any circumstances that may lead to harm of the child (Children's Act 38 of 2005 (ss1)). The dilemma increases when social workers



are ordered to investigate cases of child neglect that pertain mainly to the social and/or emotional neglect of children.

The Act also provides an overall definition of 'neglect' in relation to children as "the failure to exercise parental responsibilities to provide for the child's basic physical, intellectual, emotional or social needs" (Children's Act 38 of 2005 (ss1-5)). Therefore, in defining 'child neglect' the emphasis seems to be placed on the onus of the parental responsibilities towards the child, leaving room for confusion in the actual understanding of the concept of neglect and the different facets that constitute it.

This area may not be addressed due to the poor understanding and lack of clarification of the concept. In a preliminary exploration of the perceptions of social workers of the concept of neglect, it appeared that both Strydom (2013) and Strijdom (2013) had never removed children on grounds of neglect. The question arose as to whether this may have been due to the lack of clarity of the concept.

Social and emotional neglect have consequences for children with regard to their future development. In the opinion of Geldard and Geldard (2008:74), child neglect might be a possible cause of children's poor behaviour. Little is known about the impact of child neglect, namely, what it causes in the child's life. Blom (2006:184) understands the impact of neglect as having an influence on a child's physical behaviour and emotional functioning, thus implying that emotional and social neglect of children may lead to their emotional and social malfunctioning. Berk (2009:219) mentions that maltreatment, including neglect, impairs cognitive and emotional development, resulting in serious learning and adjustment problems. It is thus important that social workers should be aware of the nature of neglect in order to prevent long-term impact.

Confusion also arises around what a neglectful parent is. Berk (2009:571) attempts to answer this by stating that neglectful parents are often uninvolved with their children and as a result do not exercise their parental rights and responsibilities. This may be because parents or caretakers do not accept their children and thus have little or no control over their lives (Berk, 2009:571). However, this too seems vague and debatable.

Beckett (2007:69) and Kay (2003:43) state that child neglect is the 'persistent' failure of the caregiver to meet the physical and psychological needs of a child and that this deliberate neglect from the caregiver toward the child will result in serious harm to the child's development and health. Perhaps the most important aspect in the researcher's opinion is the statement provided by Crosson-Tower (1996:93) that the morals, values and culture of a society at any given time profoundly influence child neglect. Brier, Berliner, Bulkey, Jenny and Reid (1996:5) state the definition of neglect is tangible depending on the stance that one takes to define it, in other words, whether one attempts to define it from medical, social, legal, psychological or layperson's terms.

Perhaps the most significant statement that supported the need for this research study is the statement made by Pierce and Bozalek (2004:829) that child neglect in South Africa does not evoke as much anger as other forms of abuse would. This creates an even bigger problem regarding the phenomenon of child neglect because other social ills such as abuse seem to be ranked as more severe in South Africa and thus seem to be addressed more efficiently and effectively. If the above is true, it appears that the severity, implications and effects of child neglect, regarded as an escalating problem in South Africa, is swept under the proverbial carpet (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:829).

From the above literature discussion, it became eminent that there is an increasing problem of neglect facing children. The question arose as to whether the concept of neglect is not well understood or clearly defined and is thus inappropriately addressed.

### **1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

*Social work has evolved from a discipline that relies on other professions to develop social constructs and theories to one that has started to develop its own unique constructs that solely rely on an intricate inter-play and understanding of social policy, legislation and literature (Cooper, 2001:721,725)*

In the context of this research study, the researcher used constructivism as the theoretical framework for the research. The central goal in using constructivism in research was to study the social processes that people use to describe and understand their world (Cooper, 2001:721). The researcher would thus be exploring social workers' understanding of child neglect which would be determined (according to this theory) by their interaction in their working environment. Constructivism was used in this study to explore the social workers' understanding of neglect which was made up from their active engagement with their social environment (Hoffman, 1990:1), therefore suggesting that the interaction between the social workers and their working environment largely determines their ideas and views about certain social phenomenon (Hoffman, 1990:3).

The researcher used the constructivist approach to de-construct the social workers' constructs or understanding of child neglect. Constructivist understanding of knowledge is characterised by qualitative research methods as the most appropriate way to gain understanding (Wilson, Ruch, Lymbery & Cooper, 2008:97). Miley et al. (2009:33) emphasise that constructivism questions the view of knowledge as constructs formed in the mind and creating a unique reality. The researcher explored the perceptions of social workers of the construct of neglect in intervention with children.

The researcher also used constructivism from a social point of view as the theory enabled her to distance herself from her own understanding of child neglect and objectively study neglect from the view of her participants (Hoffman, 1990:1, 4). By doing this, the researcher ensured that her subjectivity in the research was 'paramount' as she would be focusing on the participants' social understanding and experience of the phenomenon (Cooper, 2001:725). The relationship between the researcher and the participants was open and equal as the researcher relied on the participants for the necessary information to complete the research study (De Vos et al., 2011:8). The inclusion of the participants throughout the research process in the opinion of De Vos et al. (2011:8) will ensure the most accurate research data at the end of the process.

## 1.4 RATIONALE AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

The researcher worked for an organization called BADISA in a statutory position investigating cases of children being either in need of care or not, according to the Children's Act 38 of 2005. During this time, it became obvious to the researcher that child neglect is a grey term in South Africa due to the extreme extent of poverty in the country. Thus, defining whether a child is neglected and if so whether this is due to omission or commission play a key role in determining child neglect in South Africa. The researcher conducted a literature review as well as consulted with colleagues in the field and it seems as though the definition of child neglect is not clear for understanding and acting on the phenomenon.

Although a dated reference, the most valuable discussion of child neglect that the researcher has found in literature is from Giardino et al. (1997:4). The discussion states that when defining child neglect the social service professional should consider history, sociological theory, societal beliefs and attitudes, power and political theory, medicine, law, violence and criminality, family systems and family violence, psychological theory, education, children's rights and biological views of aggression. In the researcher's opinion, a more profound definition which encompasses all spheres of this phenomenon would enable the social worker to deliver a more appropriate and thorough service to the victims of child neglect. The researcher thus proposed to explore whether this 'lack of clarity' on child neglect is a common challenge to social workers in South Africa today.

The researcher used a research question because this is in line with the qualitative research approach. For this research study, the research question was the following:  
**What is the understanding of social workers of child neglect?**

## 1.5 GOAL AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

The goal of the study is to explore and describe the understanding of social workers of the nature child neglect. The objectives of the research study are:

- To conceptualise theoretically what child neglect as an act of commission and as act of omission means

- To explore social workers' understanding of the concept of child neglect
- To determine the challenges social workers experience to identify and report child neglect

## **1.6 TYPE OF RESEARCH**

The researcher used applied research to study a social phenomenon in order to have an impact on the specific social phenomenon (Jackson, 2003:19). The aim of the research study was to achieve social change in the form of new knowledge provided for understanding the social and emotional neglect of children (Jackson, 2003:19). The researcher used her skills to gain an understanding of this social phenomenon to create social change (Jackson, 2003:19). The research was exploratory in nature, as the researcher explored social workers' understanding of the nature of child neglect.

## **1.7 RESEARCH APPROACH**

A qualitative research design is most appropriate when the research topic is relatively unknown and the aim of the research study is to gain a more profound understanding of the specific social phenomenon (Fouché & Delpont, 2011:66). Thus, the qualitative research approach was most applicable for this research, as the researcher explored the understanding of social workers regarding child neglect within the theoretical framework of constructivism.

The qualitative approach attempts to explore social phenomena and thus directs the researcher to study the meaning people attribute to their everyday lives (Boeije, 2010:9). The goal of qualitative research is to compose profound descriptions of social reality (Fouché & Delpont, 2011:66; Jackson, 2003:135; Marshall & Rossman, 2011:3). It is for this reason that the qualitative research approach is applicable to explore the personal understanding of social workers of the concept of child neglect.

## **1.8 RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research design that the researcher used is the collective case study design. A collective case study is a study extended to a group of people (Fouché & Schurink,

2011:322). Thus, in this case the researcher contacted via email a group of social workers who work with children and used these emailed interviews to build on existing definitions and concepts of social and emotional neglect (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:321). The researcher also used this research design to attempt to define neglect, which could possibly assist social workers in identifying and addressing child neglect. When conducting a collective case study the researcher ensured that comparisons could be made between the responses from the participants in order for the researcher to be able to generate theories from these answers (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:322). The collective case study was valuable in this research study as it allowed the researcher to view the 'whole' picture. All the participants' responses form part of this 'whole'.

## **1.9 RESEARCH METHODS**

The researcher was not able to study the entire population of social workers and therefore selected a research sample from the population (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:164; Boeije, 2010:34; Strydom, 2011:224). For this study, the sample consists of social workers in private practice with experience in child neglect. The researcher therefore made use of purposive sampling that forms part of non-probability sampling, to find professionals that would best suit the goal of the study:

- Social workers in private practice
- Work experience between 5 to 7 years
- Social workers with experience in child protection

The sampling method that the researcher used was purposive sampling which then also included snowball sampling. The researcher used this type of sampling method to ensure that an adequate percentage of the social workers chosen for the study would be able to represent the entire population of social workers sufficiently (Strydom, 2011:230). The researcher chose participants for the sample according to their knowledge and experience in the field of child neglect and this was therefore the homogeneous characteristic amongst the respondents. The researcher made use of purposive sampling in order to contact more participants. When using this sampling method the researcher asked the participants who matched the selective criteria

whether they were able to provide the researcher with other possible candidates who also matched the selective criteria. The researcher then contacted these participants.

The email interview occurs on a one-on-one basis between the researcher and the research participant via email by means of an interview schedule (Greeff, 2011:354). The process differs from a personal face-to-face interview as the researcher may never personally meet or have contact with the participant. The research process may also be ongoing as a question sent via email from the researcher to the participant may then lead to another question (Greeff, 2011:354).

The researcher is of the opinion that for this specific research topic, of which the sample is made up of professionals occupied in intervention during the day, using emailed interviews was the most appropriate way to reach the professionals, in a time most convenient for them (Mason, 2014:44). This may also make their experience of and approach towards the study a positive one.

## **1.10 CONTENTS OF THE RESEARCH REPORT**

- *Chapter one: General introduction to the study,*

In chapter one the researcher outlined the research problem and discussed the rationale for the research study as well as the theoretical framework in which the study was conducted.

- *Chapter two: Comprehensive literature review on the topic of child neglect*

In chapter two, the researcher conducted an in-depth literature study of the phenomenon as well as the various definitions of child neglect. The researcher also included child neglect in the context of South Africa and South African legislation. The researcher added some of the perceptions available in literature of the concept of child neglect.

- *Chapter three: Research methodology, data analysis and interpretation*

The researcher used the chapter to demonstrate trends and patterns that had become evident through the data collection and analysis and discuss commonalities and differences of the perceptions service providers had of child neglect within the constructivist theory.

- *Chapter four: Conclusions and recommendations regarding social workers' perceptions of the concept of child neglect*

In the final chapter of the research paper, the researcher made conclusions and recommendations about the findings of the research study.

### **1.11. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Due to the nature of this study, there are limitations that can be discussed.

- The number of participants who participated in this study could have been more. This possibly would have brought additional themes regarding social workers' understanding of child neglect to light. However, as the population of social workers in private practice is vast, an infinite percentage of the total population of social workers in private practice who have experience in the field of child neglect were used.
- The fact that the researcher only made use of social workers in private practice could also have influenced the research results. Social workers who work in statutory organisations or in welfare organisations would also have experience in the field of child neglect that could have been useful for this study.
- The research study was conducted in a relatively short time. This could also have influenced the research results. The researcher acknowledges that more social workers in private practice could have been included which would have influenced the research results.



## CHAPTER 2

### CHILD NEGLECT

*“In many ways the case of a toddler walking the streets while her mother partied with friends is hardly newsworthy. Indeed, this sort of thing happens all the time, although it rarely comes to the attention of authorities. Often when we hear the term child abuser, we envision an angry and violent person lashing out against an innocent and helpless child. Child neglect, however, is an act of omission rather than commission and is the most common form of child maltreatments. Sometimes children are neglected because parents do not know how to parent, do not have the financial means to be a good parent, or are consumed with personal problems that make it difficult to be a good parent. These various issues complicate matters on cases like the one above, because it is not clear whether the mother’s behaviour illustrates a criminal indifference (which might mean she needs to be prosecuted) or whether she is simply an incompetent parent in need of social services and parent training”*  
(Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:3)

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Becoming apparent in South Africa and the rest of the world is that child neglect is an ever-increasing and deep-rooted phenomenon that affects children (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:819). This neglect and abuse accounted for more than 50% of all child homicides in South Africa in 2012 (Matthews, Abrahams, Jewkes, Martin, Lombard, 2012:2). Social workers currently working in the field of child protection agree that there are a large number of neglected children in South Africa. The increase in child neglect hints to the fact that South Africa is failing to protect its children, a promise that the country makes to ‘her’ children in the Constitution (Matthews et. al., 2012:1). Child maltreatment includes physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse and sexual abuse (Miley et al., 2009:223). Schwartz and Scott (2010:340) emphasise that in the United States, maltreatment deaths of children are due more to neglect than any other form of abuse. Howe (2009:111) purports that what is also apparent is that most types of child maltreatment involve some element of neglect.

The issue of defining child neglect has bemused many researchers and social service professionals over the years. Thus, according to Munro (2008:56) and Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:152, 153), child neglect can only be defined by asking the following questions:

- What constitutes the seriousness of child neglect?
- How severe must the child neglect be to be considered severe?
- What is considered serious impairments from child neglect?

Most definitions on child neglect are solely dependent on the beliefs that society and individuals have on what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in child-rearing (Munro, 2008:56). Another challenge is that different groups in society have different beliefs and values about raising their children (Munro, 2008:56). According to research from Pierce and Bozalek (2003:818), Munro's above challenge is highlighted as South Africa is a country with many cultures, values, religions and beliefs and defining, intervening and preventing child neglect must keep these key aspects in mind. This is in line with the theoretical framework for the study, namely constructivism.

Child neglect is usually viewed as an act of omission rather than commission (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:151). The perpetrator of the neglect is usually unaware that they are committing the neglect. For example, an infant's mother leaves the infant in the bath filled with water to go and answer the phone. In this scenario, the mother although acting negligently may be unaware of her negligence, versus child neglect committed intentionally or with commission where a mother for example leaves her five-year-old son to look after her one-year-old daughter while the mother goes out to a party. Therefore, although both of these scenarios illustrate a form of child neglect, some may believe that the neglect in itself does not lead to serious consequences or is done unintentionally (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:151). Child neglect may also seem to many professionals insurmountable as there are too many cases of neglected children or professionals may feel that it is not in their responsibility or right to judge those who are poverty-stricken and are "doing the best that they can to survive" (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:152). It is for this reason that the authors, Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:151) state that child neglect has not been given much attention by professions throughout history.

In the research conducted by Lampinen and Sexton-Radek (2010:223) it became evident that the most recent type of abuse studied in the world is emotional abuse and emotional neglect. However, contradictory to the fact that this is the

phenomenon highlighted in research, are the various challenges to studying this phenomenon. Thus, due to these challenges, emotional abuse and emotional neglect are now amongst the last forms of child maltreatment to be investigated (Lampinen & Sexton-Radek, 2010:223). Neglect, however, has many faces and does not only include the emotional aspects, as will be discussed in this chapter.

## **2.2 THE PHENOMENON OF CHILD NEGLECT**

### **2.2.1 Defining child neglect**

As stated in Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:152), the complex nature of child neglect is the very reason why professionals have struggled to define this phenomenon and this has in turn led to a serious lack of information needed to understand the consequences, characteristics and causes of child neglect as a form of child maltreatment. Although there is literature that would agree that attempting to define child neglect is an insurmountable task, the researcher will now attempt to do this for the sake of the research paper and with the help of many authors and professionals from literature reviewed.

Child neglect is the consistent failure of the child's caretaker to meet the child's basic physical and psychological needs, which may result in the child suffering chronic impairment in both health and/or development (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:152; Munro, 2008:49). Giardino, Christian, Giardino (1997:169) define child neglect as:

...a condition in which a child's caregiver, either deliberately or by extraordinary inattentiveness, permits the child to experience avoidable suffering and/or fails to provide one or more of the components generally deemed essential for developing the child's physical, intellectual and emotional capacities.

Crosson-Tower (2002:63,64) and Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:152) define child neglect as a 'condition' in which the caretaker who is responsible for the child either deliberately or by lack of attentiveness allows the child to undergo present suffering by failing to meet the child's needs which are deemed essential for the child's developing physical, intellectual and emotional capacities.

Therefore, these authors are indirectly stating that child neglect can be either an act of omission, in the above definition referred to as “extraordinary inattentiveness” or commission, in the above definition referred to as “deliberate neglect”. Some authors are, however, of the opinion that child neglect is always an act of omission rather than actively harming the child as in child abuse (Kay, 2003:42). Thus, the differences between the two ‘types’ of neglect are the caregivers’ intentions either to purposefully neglect the child, or neglect the child out of ignorance of the child’s needs. According to Beckett (2007:69) and Kay (2003:42), child neglect refers to the persistent failure of the caregiver to meet the child’s basic needs. This act of omission could likely result in the child suffering various health and developmental impairments.

Lampinen and Sexton-Radek (2010:106) define child neglect as:

... any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act which presents imminent risk of serious harm.

In research from Lampinen and Sexton-Radek (2010:106), statistics stated that in 2006, 1530 infants and children died in the USA because of abuse or neglect. Further research from the above authors indicated that child abuse and neglect declines with age with 80% of abused or neglected children being under the age of 12 years (Lampinen & Sexton-Radek, 2010:106).

### **2.2.2 Forms of child neglect**

An example of child neglect provided by Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:152) which enables us to gain a clearer picture of the phenomenon is adjusted and provided below:

- a) A child Sarah is left to care for her baby brother Tom who is two, while their father goes out to the local bar to drink.
- b) Natascha, the mother of two-year-old Bianca, fails to provide her child with her chronic medication for the seizures that she suffers from.

- c) Mike, the father of fifteen-year-old Alison, does not let his daughter back into their family home after she has been out and says she can now find her own accommodation.
- d) Rachel and Steve, living with their three small children in a dirt-ridden house which has the scent of urine, and there is no food for the children in the house or money for them to buy food.
- e) Betty, mother of Patricia who is one year old - Betty leaves Patricia in a bathtub filled with water to go and answer the phone.

The scenarios above display some of the forms of child neglect, which were defined above. The complex nature of what constitutes neglect has led authors Miller-Perin and Perrin (2013:156) to use different forms of neglect when attempting to define the phenomenon.

The form of child maltreatment in the opinions of Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:156), Crosson-Tower (2002:63) and Munro (2008:49) has many variables. Most of the above authors agree that some of the variables of child neglect include physical neglect, emotional neglect and medical neglect (Beckett, 2007:69; Crosson-Tower 2002:63, Giardino, Christian & Giardino, 1997:170; Kay, 2003:64). However, Giardino et al. (1997:170) add to the above variables of neglect, mental health, supervision, abandoning a child, housing hazards, housing sanitation, personal hygiene and nutrition. Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:156) also add to this perhaps the newest form of child neglect: prenatal neglect. This refers to the neglect of the unborn baby while still inside the mother.

The above variables of child neglect refer to the following:

- **Physical neglect:** the failure of the caregiver to provide adequate food, clothing and shelter (Beckett, 2007:69; Crosson-Tower, 2002:63; Giardino et al., 1997:170; Kay 2003:42; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161). Physical neglect may be defined as the absence of appropriate parental care and supervision as well as a failure to provide the child with the necessary clothing, shelter and nourishment in order for the child to thrive (MacDonald, 2001:68; Munro, 2007:65, 69; Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:821). This is the most well known and most readily recognised form of child neglect worldwide (MacDonald, 2001:68).

- **Emotional neglect:** the failure to protect the child from emotional harm (Beckett, 2007:69; Crosson-Tower, 2002:64; Giardino et al., 1997:170; Kay, 2003:42; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161). Emotional neglect forms part of the non-physical maltreatment of children (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:821). Emotional neglect in the opinions of MacDonald (2001:75) and Munro (2007:63, 69, 70) involves purposeful psychological maltreatment, which intends to control, dominate and demoralise an individual. This may be in the form of spurring, terrorising, degrading, isolating and exploiting. Munro (2007:63) adds to the above the inability to provide the child with a developmentally appropriate environment which promotes the child's attachment with the primary caregiver and thus enhances emotional and social development. Emotional neglect may also restrict the child from the supportive environment that the child needs in order to be able to grow socially and emotionally and to develop essential trust relationships (Munro, 2007:63). Thus, the carer is essentially unavailable to the child emotionally (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161).
- **Medical neglect:** failing to ensure that the child receives adequate medical care and/or treatment (Beckett, 2007:69; Crosson-Tower, 2002:64; Giardino et al., 1997:170; Kay 2003:42; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161). Medical neglect involves the failure of the parents or caregiver to provide or seek medical or dental health for the child (Jewell, 1999:12; MacDonald, 2001:69) after the child has either directly confronted them with his or her need or the need has been obvious to the parent (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161; Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:823). Medical neglect may include the deliberate withholding of medical care or denial of essential surgery which, left unattended to, may result in severe danger to the child's health and well-being (Jewell, 1999:12; MacDonald, 2001:69; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161), therefore highlighting the dilemma between parental choice and the child's welfare (MacDonald, 2001:69).
- **Mental health:** failing or denying the child mental health care if necessary (Crosson-Tower, 2002:64; Giardino et al., 1997:170). This occurs when the child is deprived or denied interventions specifically developed to address behavioural and emotional disorders (MacDonald, 2001:68).

- **Supervision:** failure to provide the child with adequate supervision both inside and out of the home (Crosson-Tower, 2002:64; Giardino et al., 1997:170).
- **Abandoning the child:** the parent abandoning the child or not returning within 48 hours to the person who the parent placed in charge of the child (Crosson-Tower, 2002:64; Giardino et al., 1997:170; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161).
- **Housing hazards:** failing to protect the child from danger in the home (Crosson-Tower, 2002:64, Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161).
- **Housing sanitation:** failure to protect the child from spoiled foods, garbage or human excrement; this may also include the malfunctioning of toilets (Crosson-Tower, 2002:64; Giardino et al., 1997:170; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161).
- **Personal hygiene:** failure to keep the child and his or her clothes in a state of cleanliness (Crosson-Tower, 2002:64; Giardino et al., 1997:170; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161).
- **Nutritional neglect:** failure to provide regular and ample meals to the child, which are developmentally appropriate (Crosson-Tower, 2002:64; Giardino et al., 1997:170; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161). Nutritional neglect refers to failure to provide adequate nutrition for a child for a period of 24 hours or, in the case of an infant, to feed the child only milk and not solid food (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:824).
- **Educational neglect:** the child is denied services and provisions that promote the child's cognitive development (Jewell, 1999:12; MacDonald, 2001:69; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161). This may also include not adhering to various legal school-attending requirements (Jewell, 1999:12; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161).

- **Moral neglect:** the lack of adequate guidance from the parent, which would have allowed the child to develop positive social values; this includes parents who teach their children negative traits such as stealing (Jewell, 1999:68).

Jewell (1999:11) provides some guidelines for social service professionals to be able to identify emotional abuse where it takes on some of the following forms:

- punishing a child for normal childlike behaviour;
- violent emotional treatment of a child by a parent which discourages parent-child attachment;
- punishing a child for showing potential signs of a positive self-esteem;
- punishing a child for using the correct interpersonal skills to thrive in unfamiliar contexts
- Failure in the provision of psychological nurturance, which is necessary for the child to be able to grow and develop psychologically.

According to Beckett (2007:73) and Kay (2003:43), the following may be seen as examples of child neglect, namely failure to:

- provide the child with adequate nutrition
- provide the child with appropriate clothes or bedding
- Provide the child with basic physical care
- Provide the child with a basic routine
- Provide the child with boundaries and consistency
- Provide safety for the child
- Attend to the child's medical needs
- Meet the child's emotional needs
- The child is not developing according to the developmental milestones
- The child is not provided with basic sanitation and hygiene

With the above discussion in mind, social service professionals are still asking the question whether emotional abuse and emotional neglect are the same phenomenon. Unfortunately, the Children's Act 38 of 2005 does not provide a definition that clarifies this uncertainty.



According to Kay (2003:64), emotional abuse also forms part of child neglect. This in Kay's (2003:64) opinion is because a child's emotional needs are as important as physical needs. Crosson-Tower (2002:63, 70) is of the opinion that when defining neglect one should adopt an ecological perspective. Crosson-Tower (2002:70) states the above is due to the dependency child neglect has on culture, community, the neighbourhood, the economy and society itself.

### **2.2.3 Problems defining child neglect**

Defining child neglect is a tricky task due to the 'grey areas' that encompass the variables in child neglect (Beckett, 2007:69; Kay 2003:43). Perhaps these 'grey areas' are the multidimensionality of the cases that present with child neglect that make it such a challenging phenomenon to understand (Ferguson, 2011:138). Alternatively, in the words of Miller-Perrin & Perrin (2013:160,161) the lack of ability to measure most of the consequences of neglect leads to the challenge to define or understand the concept adequately.

These problems with defining child neglect as a phenomenon, in the opinion of Munro (2008:49), may also have serious implications on policy made to explain or define the phenomenon and thus have an implication on various interventions and assessment programmes. Munro (2008:55) states that other problems that the practitioner may face due to lack of being able to define neglect are firstly that they may struggle to identify the phenomenon due to lack of clarity on the concept. Secondly they may struggle to know when and how to intervene also due to lack of clarity on the phenomenon and the severity of the phenomenon and when intervention is a necessity.

In the opinion of Munro (2008:56) it is not only the changing nature of the social phenomenon that is the problem but also the difficulty in defining it so precisely that agreement is reached on which actions are abusive and how serious they are.

It may be for the above lack of clarity and slight sense of confusion that Crosson-Tower (2002:64) states that trying to define child neglect may in no way enable the practitioner to gain an adequate picture of what a neglected child is. Kay (2003:43)

elaborates on the explanation from Crosson-Tower when stating that neglected children usually tend to be neglected in numerous ways and therefore the child's misery may be increased. The understanding then of the child's misery stated by Kay (2003:43) above may also thus be hindered by the multiple 'injuries' a child suffers from neglect. Kay (2003:43) provides an example for the reader to understand what she is trying to communicate: "a child may be suffering from malnutrition due to neglect". However, neglect as such may be overlooked by the child's state of health, which is then medically treated rather than actually seeking the cause of the malnutrition (Kay, 2003:43).

It is evident from studying literature that neglect has to be understood and interpreted in context (Beckett, 2007:74; Munro, 2008:49). The reason for the previous suggestion by Beckett, according to Crosson-Tower (2002:64) and Kay (2003:43), is that neglect may be misinterpreted as a low socio-economic class phenomenon.

Misinterpreting neglect may also happen to low-income families who have all the intentions to meet their children's basic needs yet lack the necessary resources (Kay 2003:43).

Therefore, it is evident that it is very difficult to clearly determine the cause of child neglect in an unequal society as children and families have different levels of care, which is in most cases determined by the family income and their resources (Kay, 2003:64). In addition, although status, level of income and cultural heritage may not necessarily determine whether the family is guilty of neglect it might very well contribute to the family defined or reported as neglectful (Crosson-Tower, 2002:68). This is why low-income families may be misinterpreted as being neglectful (Kay, 2003:43; Crosson-Tower, 2002:68–69). Child neglect is therefore difficult to define due to the many causes that may lead to the child being neglected (Kay, 2003:68). In addition, this is why neglect is becoming an increasing perplexing phenomenon and efforts to develop a scale to measure neglect increasingly tricky (Crosson-Tower, 2002:68–69).

We may conclude that neglect may not be defined in absolute terms, as what is acceptable to one family may not be acceptable to another (Beckett, 2007:74; Kay,

2003:68, Munro, 2008:49). Thus, it is of central importance to establish what the cultural, religious, social and moral values are of specific families in order to determine whether they are acting in accordance with what they believe is correct or right for their children or whether they knowingly neglect their children (Munro, 2008:49).

Beckett (2007:74) suggests the following questions when attempting to define neglect:

- Is the behaviour normal in the community where it is taking place?
- Is the behaviour harmful to the child or does the behaviour carry risk?
- If the behaviour is harmful, what is the extent of the harm and what is the evidence for it?
- Is the risk of the possible harm similar to the benefit if the child is unharmed?
- Has the situation been properly thought through?
- Is the overall relationship that the parents have with the child neglectful?
- Do the neglectful parents display more pervasive parental indifference towards the child?

Perhaps these questions by Beckett (2007:74) would allow the practitioner to adequately define and understand child neglect.

## **2.4 DYNAMICS OF CHILD NEGLECT**

In literature by Crosson-Tower (2002:72), she states that she is of the opinion that child neglect involves the entire family and that most often it is babies from birth to one year who are neglected. In research conducted by Matthews et al. (2012:1–2) children between the ages of 0–4 years are the most vulnerable for being abused or neglected. Girls are also more likely to die due to abuse or neglect during these years than boys (Matthews et. al., 2012:1–2). Recognising and protecting infants from neglect is even more difficult due to their absolute dependence on the caregivers and inability to speak for them. McCoy and Keen (2009:77) state that the age and developmental level of the child at the time of the neglect are the determining factors of the consequences of the neglect on the child. The authors further elaborate by providing the example of a child being deprived from food for a

day versus an adolescent that is also deprived from food for a day (McCoy & Keen, 2009:77). From the above explanation, it may be seen that although neglect is detrimental to children of all ages, the dependency of the child on the carer makes the neglect more harmful. Thus, the infant who misses a day or more of feeds may become detrimentally ill, whereas adolescents who have the ability to look after themselves may not be that dependent on food from their carer. Therefore as the child becomes more able to look after himself or herself, it becomes less obvious that the carer is not looking after the child (McCoy & Keen, 2009:78). The age of a child thus plays an important role in determining neglect (Matthews et al., 2012:2). This is due to the dependence of the younger child on their carer.

McCoy and Keen (2009:78–83) and Matthews et al. (2012:2) provide a discussion about the effects of neglect on the infant, child and adolescent:

- **Neglect in infancy**

- Infants are most at risk of physical neglect (between the ages of 0 and 4 years old)
- Out of these valuable infants girls are more vulnerable than boys
- Extreme forms include nonorganic failure to thrive (NFTT)
- Psychomotor delays and continued growth problems, school failure and mental retardation
- Infants emotionally deprived may lose weight and withdraw

- **Neglect in Childhood**

- Language delays
- Intellectual problems or academic problems
- Impaired socialisation

- **Neglect in Adolescents**

- Runaways, leaving the home early due to needs not being met
- Social isolation, having no support outside of the home
- Intellectual or academic problems
- Delinquency
- Psychiatric disorders and a higher suicide rate

From the above definition, it is evident that child neglect is an all-encompassing phenomenon, which involves the entire family. A child of any age or developmental level can fall victim to neglect. The infant whose dependence rests solely on the carer is usually the most detrimentally effected by the act of neglect. Research does illustrate clearly that neglect paralyses the human spirit and delays or prevents most social and intellectual development.

## **2.5 CAUSES OF NEGLECT**

According to Crosson-Tower (2002:70–71) and Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:167) there are four primary causes of child neglect, namely: economic, ecological, societal and personality. These will now be discussed under their own individual headings below:

### **2.5.1 Economic**

Economic causes of child neglect may be seen as a response to stress and poverty and is thus an all-pervasive tension (Crosson-Tower, 2002:70; Howe 2009:111). Poverty has a negative effect on the parents' ability to care for their child and this leads one to ask the question, "Does neglect stem from poverty?" (Crosson-Tower, 2002:70; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161). Alternatively, is poverty inevitable due to the personality structure and the inability to manage everyday tasks (Crosson-Tower, 2002:70; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161)? In this case, the child may be in an atmosphere of physical despair, hopelessness and a generally rundown home and community (Howe, 2009:111). Therefore, it appears that poverty and neglect go hand in hand either due to the lack of adequate resources or feelings of demotivation by their caregivers.

### **2.5.2 Ecological**

Giardino et al. (1997:171) and Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:168) state that the ecological approach towards child neglect focuses on the caregivers' environment and how this environment either encourages or deters neglect, and which resources are available in the environment to help the caregiver to overcome the neglect. A

factor to consider from an ecological perspective, according to Munro (2008:84), is the family's culture, as this will influence how they raise their children.

Crosson-Tower (2002:70) and Howe (2009:111) state that neighbourhoods where there are more cases of child maltreatment tend to be more 'run-down' and 'unfriendly'; this makes the author ask the question whether this low-morale leads to child maltreatment. However, in the researcher's opinion, this is a stereotype of people in low-income groups as being the only ones neglecting their children and this form of neglect may be regarded as purely an act of omission.

An additional factor that these types of neighbourhoods may be characterised by is stress, as the parents are constantly under stress to survive and provide for the family's every-day needs.

Another aspect that is apparent in these neighbourhoods is lethargy for everyday tasks such as housekeeping and home repairs, and lack of communication with neighbours (Crosson-Tower, 2002:70). This may also contribute to maltreatment, as the parents constantly feel unable to meet their everyday tasks and lack motivation to do so. Thus, not being able to meet their children's needs is just another task that the parents are unable to meet. In other words, if the parents' ability to care for their children is influenced by the total social context in which they live, then feeling unsupported by their surroundings could well create parents who neglect (Crosson-Tower, 2002:70).

In a country like South Africa, the ecological perspective is favoured as it sufficiently encompasses the theory to handle the form of maltreatment that has as many variables as neglect. The ecological perspective leads the practitioner to view the neglectful family in the context of their environment, their neighbourhood, culture and their society (Crosson-Tower, 2002:70; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161). One must, however, always remember that a family is a complex system and that their strengths are as important as the problems they have (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:160,161).

Another important aspect that the authors Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:160,161) mention that is especially relevant to South Africa is that the family's' problems must be seen in relation to the community's ability to provide resources and social supports for them. Therefore, one can understand that, in Crosson-Tower's (2002:70) perspective, the ecological approach places more emphasis on the interventions that stress social support.

It appears that the ecological approach towards child neglect would be appropriate in the South African context as it identifies the social problem or cause of neglect in the environment as well as encourages a possible remedy (Giardino et al., 1997:171). For example, a baby may be brought to a clinic due to malnutrition, which could be perceived as neglect. However, when the practitioner uses the ecological approach to understand the problem it becomes evident that the mother is not able to afford sufficient formula for the baby and thus dilutes the formula inaccurately. The practitioner then helps the mother to apply for a social grant, which enables the mother to provide the child with sufficient formula and thus eliminates the cause of the potential unintentional neglect (Giardino et al., 1997:171). Thus, taking the ecological approach towards neglect in South Africa will enable the social worker to identify and assist carers in order to prevent neglect.

### **2.5.3 Parenting**

Neglectful parents have long been a burden to society and it is difficult to understand how a family slips into the confusion, disorder, indifference and lack of cleanliness that are exhibited by neglectful families (Crosson-Tower, 2002:71). Kay (2003:44) and Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:160,161) are of the opinion that child neglect may result from parental indifference or a gross lack of knowledge of the needs of the child. Another possible cause of neglect in Kay's (2003:44) opinion is the parent suffering from mental illness or a learning disability. The result of such a condition in a parent who is a victim himself or herself is that they are then unable to meet the child's need (Kay, 2003:44). In Kay's opinion (2003:65), neglect may be due to either poor parenting, or parents that are struggling to cope.

Yet Crosson-Tower (2007:71) states that there are segments of the population that know little more than being isolated by others and having limited opportunities to learn or improve their chances in life. Research by Ferguson (2011:138) shows that women head most neglectful houses. Women may be single due to their inability to maintain heterosexual relationships (Ferguson, 2011:138). Fathers who are absent from their families may also contribute to the mothers' poor ability to cope.

In the opinions of Crosson-Tower (2002:71) and Ferguson (2011:138), the typical types of neglectful parents are isolated individuals who struggle to form relationships or to carry out everyday tasks. They are burdened with anger and sadness over their unmet childhood needs and therefore find it impossible to consistently recognise and meet the needs of their children.

## **2.6 INDICATORS OF NEGLECT**

Identifying child neglect in Munro's (2008:56) opinion requires a profound assessment of the childcare over a period. In a study conducted by Ferguson (2011:6), the conditions at home were a significant indicator of child neglect and thus fundamental in the assessment process. This statement by the above author in the researcher's opinion is a generalisation of the lack of understanding of the complex nature of child neglect. The reason for this is that child neglect has in the past been solely related to poverty and a lack of general personal and ecological resources. However, as is evident in this research paper already is that child neglect is a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot solely be contributed to poverty. One also has to understand the terms omission and commission when trying to define and understand the indicators of child neglect (Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:164).

Identifying child neglect may be challenging, as 80% of children who are abused and neglected in the USA are under the age of 12 years and this makes the child's ability to testify on accounts of child abuse and neglect difficult (Lampinen & Sexton-Radek, 2010:120). Perhaps the only other person who could account for the neglect or abuse is the actual perpetrator and this testimony in the opinions of Lampinen and Sexton-Radek (2010:120) would most likely be unreliable. In South Africa, more than 50% of all child homicides are due to neglect and abuse (Matthews et. al., 2012:1).



This means that South Africa as a country is failing its children as it is failing to protect the children as stated in the Constitution.

According to Munro (2008:93), the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour and thus the family history and past behavioural patterns should be assessed and considered when assessing a family for child neglect. Kay (2003:65) states that one of the best indicators of child neglect is the child's height and weight chart; one must be aware that neglect is always only one of the possible explanations.

The practitioner can use various indicators to identify child neglect. Kay (2003:65) provides the following indicators for the professional to be able to recognise neglect in children:

- Poor physical development, being underweight and having a short stature for the age of the child.
- The child may appear thin and may generally look unhealthy.
- The child may be unhealthy looking in appearance.
- The child may have poor hygiene (dirty or smelly clothes, unwashed body and hair and/or persistent nappy rash).
- The child may present with a general lack of interest or may be difficult to stimulate.
- The child may have continuous minor illnesses e.g. colds, cough and diarrhoea.
- The child's illnesses or injuries will not have been attended to.
- The child will not have sufficient or appropriate clothing.
- The child may be hungry and thus may overeat when food is available.
- The child may be overtired.
- The child may be continuously late for school or may be frequently absent from school.
- The child may be generally unresponsive towards adults and therefore may be constantly seeking attention from adults.
- There may be some improvements when the child is placed in a care situation.

In studies conducted by Crosson-Tower (2002:66, 67) and Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:170,171), children who were neglected had the following indicators:

- They had dull eyes.
- They tended to face the wall and could not respond to friendly touch.
- Their infections had gone untreated.
- They had lice.
- They were slightly bruised, with minor dislocations.
- Their eyes were big and their faces hollow.
- They were dehydrated almost to the point of death.
- They were barely capable of speech.
- Their language was inappropriate.
- They were fed inappropriate and innutritious foods.
- They had traces of medicine that was unintended for children.
- The children looked terribly lost, they never laughed and seldom cried and seemed indifferent.

Although the above indicators also tend to lean towards low socioeconomic status, the following may be more relevant to any income group (Crosson-Tower, 2002:66, 67; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:170,171):

- The child may appear thin and may generally look unhealthy.
- May be unhealthy looking in appearance.
- May present with a general lack of interest or may be difficult to stimulate.
- The child's illnesses or injuries will not have been attended to.
- May be overtired.
- May be continuously late for school or may be frequently absent from school.
- May be generally unresponsive towards adults and therefore may be constantly seeking attention from adults.
- There may be some improvements when the child is placed in a care situation.

There are various indicators of child neglect used to identify and assess whether children are being neglected. It is recommended that these assessments are conducted over a reasonable period of time. Some of the aspects recommended to

use include the child's appearance, development, weight, height, hygiene and health. It is also recommended that these be viewed together with family history.

It is necessary for professionals working with child neglect to use these guidelines to assess neglect as the children themselves may be too young to be a reliable source for assessment. The only other person who may assist is the perpetrator of the neglect and their testimony may be faulty.

## 2.7 CONSEQUENCES AND SYMPTOMS OF NEGLECT

Child neglect, in the opinion of Howe (2005:111), starves the child's developing mind from stimulation and therefore denies the child the ability to gain information and interest about themselves. This neglect 'eats' away at the child's spirit and leaves the child with little or no will to connect with the world around them (Howe, 2005:111). Child neglect, in the opinions of Giardino et al. (1997:172) may have various physical, emotional and intellectual effects on the child as a result of the child's needs being unmet. The above authors add that the effects that child neglect will have on the child depend on the following: the type of neglect, the developmental stage of the child during which the child is neglected, the severity of the neglect and the intervention to prevent future neglect (if intervention has been planned) (Giardino et al., 1997:172).

Below is a brief description of the various effects of child neglect on the child (Beckett, 2007:93; Giardino et. al., 1997:172; Howe, 2005:112; Kay 2003:65):

- **Physical:** Neglect may result in long-term physical injury, as it is a failure to meet basic needs of the child. Thus a child which is neglected in the area of stimulation for example in infancy, may develop slower or lack certain developmental skills later in life than a child who is stimulated from birth.
- **Emotional:** The child may show signs of depression due to the lack or deterioration of parental relationships. Therefore, it seems that neglect can do as much psychological harm as child physical abuse.
- **Intellectual:** The child may also be a poor performer when it comes to academics at their school. Added to that are the consequences listed above

by Beckett that the child might also show developmental delays. These developmental delays may encompass delayed language development as well as social, maturational and behavioural difficulties.

Howe (2005:111) elaborates on the physical aspect of child neglect by providing indicators to identify possible physical neglect in children:

- Poverty
- Hopelessness
- Dirt, mess
- Poor hygiene
- Rundown homes
- Low immune systems
- Children smell and are untidy
- The families live aimless lives
- Babies' nappies are not changed frequently, as a result nappy rash and burn bum is prominent
- Hair thin and brittle
- Children are tired and apathetic
- Children often suffer from skin diseases

An important aspect that the practitioner must remember when conducting an assessment on neglect is that they should have a profound knowledge and insight in child development, as they will have to differentiate what is different from the norm (Munro, 2008:56).

Below are some of the indicators the practitioner may use to assess neglect (these however cannot be solely relied on, rather used as guidelines) according to Munro, (2008:56) and Crosson-Tower (2002:70, 72):

- Inappropriately dressed, dirty and smelly
- Poor communication: states that in neglectful families, poor communication and the inability to have needs met are typical.
- Feelings of disinterest or hostility: Another symptom, which may be prevalent in children who are neglected, is feelings of disinterest or hostility. These feelings

may stem from their caregivers' hostility or lack of interest towards them; the parents may feel like their children are too demanding and the infant may thus experience this emotion as negativity towards them.

Probably the most detrimental consequence of neglect is that it hinders the child's developing mind from receiving the necessary stimulation to develop. This causes the child to lose interest in the people and world around him. Physically, neglect can lead to physical injury, while emotional neglect may hinder the child from developing meaningful relationships. Intellectual neglect may lead to language and developmental delays.

It would in Kay's (2003:65) perception, be inappropriate to solely contribute any or all of these symptoms presented in children to child neglect. The reason for this is because many families suffer traumas, illnesses that affect the child's development and children develop differently. Another possible contributor is that the family may have limited resources and have a low income (Kay, 2003:65). According to Kay (2003:65) and Crosson-Tower (2002:72, 73) some primary symptoms that are apparent amongst children who have 'chronic neglect' are similar to the indicators of neglect in that people use symptoms to identify neglect.

According to Crosson-Tower (2002:72), symptoms of child neglect are not obvious to such a degree; however, one of the most prevalent symptoms of child neglect is non-organic failure to thrive (NFTT). The author also includes the following as possible symptoms of child neglect (Crosson-Tower, 2002:72):

- The child has fallen below the 5<sup>th</sup> percentile in weight and height
- The infant was once of a weight and height within the expected norm
- The infant demonstrates a delay in psychomotor development

Crosson-Tower (2002:72) also states that it is important not to solely contribute NFTT to neglect, as it may also be a result of the parents' inexperience and not knowing what is considered to be adequate food or not knowing how much an infant should consume daily. The parents may also provide the child with inadequate or too little food due to lack of resources (Crosson-Tower, 2002:72).

## 2.8 PROBLEMS WITH INTERVENTION

There are various challenges to preventing child neglect. In South Africa, practitioners need to strengthen their response towards child neglect through education and training (Matthews et al., 2012:4). There is also a need for South African practitioners to be better equipped in management of child neglect and legislation (Matthews et al., 2012:4). Crosson-Tower (2002:71) describes the following problems with interventions in families with child neglect:

- Families are too many to be able to deal with
- The cases seem very elusive, no one knows what to expect from the parents and neglect is very challenging to document
- The neglect is often also due to material deprivation
- Therefore if a family appears affluent it is easier to ignore the emotional and physical neglect of children
- Coordination of these cases is extremely difficult

Crosson-Tower (2002:71) states that a general frustration is that neglect is often perpetuated from generation to generation. Another challenge is that when the practitioner eventually recognises the neglect and is able to mobilise the family, the family has few tangible resources and this together with cutbacks in funds, programmes and personnel cannot help the families to meet their ever-increasing needs (Crosson-Tower, 2002:71).

Munro (2008:85) suggests that a thorough assessment be conducted of the family on a 'base-line' against which the practitioner can measure if the family has changed at all. This would enable the practitioner to see whether the family wants to change or whether they are stagnating and maintaining the neglect of their children.

## 2.9 NEGLECT IN SOUTH AFRICA

### 2.9.1 Defining child neglect in the South African context

All South African children are lawfully entitled to care and protection from harm; this includes protection from abuse and neglect (Matthews et al., 2012:1). All children who are hurt due to abuse or neglect can be protected, and their death possibly prevented (Matthews et al., 2012:3). In order to prevent child neglect, we have to understand the phenomenon in the South African context.

Pierce and Bozalek (2003:818) state that in order for the definition of child neglect to be correct it must encompass the cultural norms, values and beliefs of the country. Thus, a challenge to define child neglect in the South African context is the difference in cultural attitudes and beliefs (Pierce & Bozalek, 2003:820).

Another way to understand or define neglect may be according to Barnes, Noble, Wright and Dawes (2008:185) as deprivation of the child from a specific thing or resource they require. For example, the child may experience income or material deprivation (Barnes et al., 2008:185). The above form of child neglect may be more unintentional neglect, or neglect as omission as the parent may not have access to the specific resource that the child requires.

In order to understand or define child neglect it is first necessary to define child maltreatment, which forms the broader spectrum of child neglect. According to Pierce and Bozalek (2003:818), child maltreatment in the South African context must be characterised by the following six variables:

Child maltreatment must be:

- Deliberate
- Socially censured in the area in which it has taken place
- Abusive according to the South African consensus
- Perpetrated by an individual
- Cause harm to a child or children
- By perpetrated by an individual who is considered a person by society

The Children's Act 38 of 2005 provides a broad definition: "Child neglect may be defined as the inability to rightfully satisfy a child's basic needs or an inability to exercise parental responsibilities" (Children's Act 38 of 2005). Neglect refers to the failure to meet the child's basic needs, namely physical, intellectual, social and emotional needs, as well as a failure to exercise parental rights and responsibilities (Children's Act 38 of 2005; Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:821).

The definition as provided in the Children's Act, although answering the question of what child neglect is, seems too broad to clarify and provide understanding on this continuously evolving and culturally dynamic phenomenon (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:829).

The Children's Act 38 of 2005 (1)(f)(g)(h)(l) states that a child may be in need of care due to neglect in the following circumstances: "if the child lives in or is exposed to circumstances which may seriously harm that child's physical, mental or social well-being"; "if there is reason to believe that the child's physical, mental or social well-being is at risk"; "if the child is in a state of physical or mental neglect or if the child is being deliberately neglected". Although the Children's Act provides stringent guidelines to when a child may be in need of care due to neglect, it does not seem to necessitate the actual criteria for assessing or concluding whether the child has been neglected. This is ironic, as the Act itself provides instructions for the social worker to carry out assessment of a child – in other words, investigating any circumstances that may lead to harm of the child (Children's Act 38 of 2005 (ss1)). The dilemma increases when social service professionals are ordered to investigate cases of child neglect that pertain mainly to the social and/or emotional neglect of children.

The Act also provides an overall definition of 'neglect' in relation to children as "the failure to exercise parental responsibilities to provide for the child's basic physical, intellectual, emotional or social needs" (Children's Act 38 of 2005 (ss1-5)). In the definition of 'child neglect' the emphasis seems to be placed on the onus of the parental responsibilities towards the child, leaving room for confusion in the actual understanding of the concept of neglect and the different facets that constitute it.



Pierce and Bozalek (2003:823) identified certain types of neglect prominent in South Africa:

- **Selective neglect**
  - The parents who selectively neglect their children would opt to feed the male children first and the female children would only receive the food that remains after the male child has eaten.
  - The parents abandoned their daughters on the streets.
  - The parents refused to feed their 'deformed' child.
- **Supervisory neglect (In Barnes et al., 2008:187 this is referred to as adequate care deprivation)**
  - The parents often leave their children unattended outside their dwelling.
  - The parents leave their children unsupervised or alone inside their dwelling.
- **Cleanliness (this is similar to "living environment deprivation" as defined in Barnes et al., 2008:186)**
  - The parents leave their children dirty and in dirty clothes.
  - The parents do not wash their children at all.
  - The parents do not make any effort to keep their children clean.
- **Medical neglect**
  - The parents ignore their children's cry for help due to pain.
  - The parents ignore their children when they are ill.
- **Nutritional neglect**
  - The parents regularly fail to feed their children (for at least 24 hours)
  - The parents only give their children milk.
- **Educational neglect (this may be similar to the educational deprivation as described in Barnes et al., 2008:186)**
  - The parents frequently keep their children from school.

## 2.9.2 Prevalence of child neglect in South Africa

Child neglect in South Africa is, in the opinions of Pierce and Bozalek (2003:819), a serious and escalating problem. The above authors also add to this statement that child neglect affects children of all races and not solely black or coloured children, as may be misperceived (Pierce & Bozalek, 2003:819). Figures studied by Pierce and

Bozalek (2003:820) reflected that in 1997 and 1998, there were 23 231 cases of intentional child neglect that were reported. If we combine this with the authors' opening statement then it can only be evident that cases of child neglect since have drastically increased. In 2012, 633 child deaths were reportedly due to child abuse or neglect (Matthews et al., 2012:1–2). It is difficult to understand the true nature of the problem, as these are only the most drastic cases, which have resulted in the death of the child. Most of the cases of child neglect and abuse are rarely or never reported.

According to Barnes et al. (2008:188), 81% of children experienced some kind of income or material deprivation, 50% experienced employment deprivation (the above two may account for certain lack of resources or food). Seventy-seven per cent (77%) of children experienced living environment deprivation (this includes sanitation and hygiene) and 25% experienced adequate care deprivation, similar to the supervisory neglect defined by Pierce and Bozalek (2003:819) and Barnes et al. (2008:188).

A challenge to record the exact statistics of child neglect is that many cases of child neglect (perhaps unintentional) go unreported, while some research on child neglect goes unpublished (Pierce & Bozalek, 2003:820). A further hindrance to the study of child neglect in South Africa according to Pierce and Bozalek (2003:820) is that statistics are not properly kept, and there are no standard definitions and tools for measuring the cases of neglect (Matthews et al., 2012:4).

A further problem to working with child neglect is the lack of economic resources as well as other political problems which make working with this social phenomenon nearly impossible (Matthews et al., 2012:3 ,4; Pierce & Bozalek, 2003:820). Statistics from research conducted by Barnes et al. (2008:191) indicate that the Eastern Cape is the province in South Africa where child neglect is most prominent. This is also the most economically challenged province in South Africa. Furthermore, research by Barnes et al. (2008:192) demonstrates that the Western Cape is the province with the lowest levels of neglect and deprivation in South Africa.

South African children are lawfully entitled to family/parental care, basic nutrition, health, social services and protection as embedded in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 28 (1)(b)(c)(d). However, it becomes apparent in South Africa and the rest of the world that child neglect is an ever-increasing and deep-rooted phenomenon that affects children (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:819). Thus as a country we are failing to provide our children with the care and protection that we promise to provide them with in our constitution (Matthews et al., 2012:1).

## **2.10 CONCLUSION**

In this literature review on child neglect, the researcher explored some of the various facets of child neglect. These different facets and the multidimensional characteristics of child neglect make it a challenging phenomenon for researchers and professionals to define, understand and work with.

It appears that when child neglect was first assessed a couple of decades ago, it was mainly assessed from the condition in which the child's home was, the child's self was and the child's carers were. What became evident through this study is that poverty or the traits that attach themselves to poverty-stricken areas and people are not the sole determining factor for neglect as a phenomenon. The phenomenon of child neglect has evolved to include culture, social class and society as a whole, thus presenting researchers and professionals with a lengthy and challenging task when trying to understand child neglect.

The South African Constitution promises South African children care and protection from neglect. However, what has become evident in research as discussed in the literature review is that child neglect is largely increasing and may be one of the most life-threatening and silent forms of child maltreatment in South Africa and the rest of the world.

The impact of child neglect on the child as can be seen in the above literature study is detrimental. Children often suffer from developmental, cognitive, social and emotional damage. These consequences of neglect are also used to assess the phenomenon but usually only become obvious once they are very severe.

One of the main problems that South Africa as a country is presented with when trying to combat this phenomenon are the diverse cultures, races, religions and values. These make defining, understanding and ultimately attending to neglect as a social problem nearly impossible.

In this study, it became apparent that all child deaths and child problems due to child neglect are preventable.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **EMPIRICAL RESEARCH**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

The researcher worked for an organisation in the Western Cape as an intake social worker investigating concerns of children in need of care and protection according to the Children's Act 38 of 2005. During this time, the researcher became aware that the concept of child neglect often seemed vague to numerous social workers and social service providers. This lack of clarity on the concept of child neglect hindered the researcher's ability to intervene and assist children who were neglected.

The researcher then conducted an in-depth literature study on the concept of child neglect and consulted with colleagues in the social work field to determine how the concept is understood and interpreted, and whether other social workers working with child neglect experience the same lack of clarity, which the researcher experienced in the field while working with child neglect.

#### **3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH**

A qualitative research design is most appropriate when the research topic is relatively unknown and the aim of the research study is to gain a more profound understanding of the specific social phenomenon (Fouché & Delport, 2011:66). The researcher explored the social workers' understanding of child neglect to determine if the concept is clearly defined and understood. The qualitative research approach was most applicable for this research, as the researcher explored the understanding of social workers regarding child neglect within the theoretical framework of constructivism.

The qualitative approach attempts to explore social phenomena and thus directs the researcher to study the meaning people attribute to their everyday lives (Boeije, 2010:9). The goal of qualitative research is to compose profound descriptions of social reality (Fouché & Delport, 2011:66; Jackson, 2003:135; Marshall & Rossman,

2011:3). It is for this reason that the qualitative research approach was applicable to explore the social workers' personal understanding of the concept of child neglect.

### **3.3 TYPE OF RESEARCH**

The researcher used applied research to study a social phenomenon in order to have an impact on the specific social phenomenon (Jackson, 2003:19). The aim of the research study was to achieve social change in the form of new knowledge that is provided for understanding the social and emotional neglect of children (Jackson, 2003:19). The researcher used her skills to gain an understanding of this social phenomenon to create social change (Jackson, 2003:19). The research was exploratory in nature, as the researcher explored the social workers' understanding of the nature of child neglect.

### **3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.4.1 Research design**

The research design that the researcher used is the collective case study design. A collective case study is a study which is extended to a group of people (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:322). Thus, in this case the researcher contacted a group of social workers via email who work with children and used these emailed interviews to build on existing definitions and concepts of social and emotional neglect (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:321). The researcher also used this research design in an attempt to clarify the understanding of neglect, which could possibly assist social workers in identifying and addressing child neglect. When conducting a collective case study, the researcher ensured that comparisons could be made between the responses from the participants in order for the researcher to be able to generate theories from these answers (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:322). The collective case study was valuable in this research study as it allowed the researcher to view the whole picture. Thus, all the participants' responses form part of this whole.

### **3.4.2 Research population, sample and sampling**

The researcher was not able to study the entire population of social workers and therefore selected a research sample from the population (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:164; Boeije, 2010:34; Strydom, 2011:224). For this study, the sample was made up of social workers in private practice who have experience in child neglect. The researcher therefore made use of non-probability purposive sampling and thereafter snowball sampling. The researcher used snowball sampling to find more possible research participants through the participants that already responded. The researcher developed criteria for selecting the most appropriate research participants in order to ensure accurate results about the research goal (Strydom, 2011:232):

- Social workers in private practice
- Social workers with work experience between 5 to 7 years
- Social workers with experience in child protection

The researcher chose participants for the sample according to their knowledge and experience in the field of child neglect and this was therefore the homogeneous characteristic amongst the respondents. The researcher also made use of purposive sampling in order to contact more participants. When using this sampling method, the researcher asked the participants who matched the selective criteria whether they were able to provide the researcher with other possible candidates who also matched the selective criteria; this was then the snowball sampling. The researcher then contacted these participants.

### **3.4.3 Data-collection method**

The email interview occurs on a one-on-one basis between the researcher and the research participant via email by means of an interview schedule (Greeff, 2011:354). The process differs from a personal face-to-face interview as the researcher may never personally meet or have contact with the participant. The research process may also be on-going, as a question sent via email from the researcher to the participant may then lead to another question and in so doing, open the possibility for more information (Greeff, 2011:354).

Although email has been in use for quite some time, the process of using interview schedules by means of electronic mail messages is relatively new (Greeff, 2011:354). There are many benefits to using the email interview schedule making it of great value to the researcher (Mason, 2014:40; Meho, 2006:1284). Some of the advantages that the researcher benefited from include the following (Greeff, 2011:354; Mason, 2014:40, 41; Meho, 2006:1288):

- The researcher did not have to travel to the various practices of the different social workers thus enabling the researcher to save both time and money.
- The researcher was able to reach a wider group of social workers from different cities and provinces, thus adding more value to the study in the South African context.
- Both the researcher and the social workers were able to review the interview schedule before it was sent or resent thus providing each respective party the opportunity for reflection.
- In the light that the issue of child neglect may in fact be a sensitive and personal subject to some practitioners, the emailed interview then provided them with the opportunity to say things that they would not necessarily have had the courage to say if they were facing the researcher, thus adding more value to the accuracy of the study.
- The last and perhaps most important advantage of the email interview is that the research participants had the opportunity to complete the interview schedule in a time fitting to their schedule, be it at 23:00 at night, when the researcher might not have been able to accommodate the participant. Thus, the researcher might have been able to get more research participants to participate in the study, as it may have been more convenient for them to participate.

Therefore, although there are disadvantages of using the emailed interview schedule, such as: ethical issues, missing non-verbal cues, impersonality and asynchronicity (Greeff, 2011:355) in this study, the advantages of using this form of semi-structured interview schedule outweighed the disadvantages.



The researcher is thus of the opinion that for this specific research topic, of which the sample is made up of professionals mostly working from nine to five, this was the most appropriate way to reach the professionals in a time most convenient for them. There was a possibility that this may have made their experience of and approach towards the study a positive one (Mason, 2014:44).

### **3.4.4 Data analysis**

In this research study, data analysis was carried out by means of the researcher reading and re-reading each emailed interview. The researcher also sent out a second email to all participants to ensure that they and the researcher herself understood every question clearly and to ensure that there were no misunderstandings, biases or feelings of incompetency created by the research study. The researcher made use of the emailed interviews, as this was the most appropriate form of communication for the participants. They are all employed and have working hours with limited time available. The emailed interview therefore created the researcher the opportunity to connect with these professionals in a time which was most suitable for them. The emailed interviews, once thoroughly read, were coded, classified and categorised into various themes and categories that the researcher was able to form from the emailed interviews. The researcher was thus able to ensure that all the participants' responses were adequately understood and represented.

In Schurink, Fouché and De Vos (2011:403–417) the authors set up a practical guide for the researcher to follow during the data analysis process. This is set out below:

#### **Step 1: Planning for the recording of data:**

A primary aspect of data analysis is preparing for the analysis of data (Boeije, 2010:72). The researcher should organise and prepare for the analysis by planning a stringent process of data analysis (Boeije, 2010:72; Lietz, Langer & Furman, 2006:443). Planning for a rigorous data analysis process would eliminate the chance of including unnecessary bias and increase the trustworthiness of the qualitative research (Lietz et al., 2006:443). The researcher created a file to store the printed messages in hard copy. The researcher stored digital copies of the messages.

The researcher first made contact with participants in an introductory email. This email clarified whether the participants met the selective criteria for the research study. The introductory email also ensured that the participants were willing to be part of the research sample. This then formed part of the informed consent, as the participants were not able to sign a letter; this was thus done in the form of the participants agreeing to be part of the study via an email.

## **Step 2: Data collection and preliminary analysis**

Lietz et al. (2006:445) regard data collection as the first stage of the research process. During this stage, the researcher collected data through the email interviews from the participants. Data analysis refers to disassembling the data into workable parts and then reassembling the data into a comprehensive whole (Boeije, 2010:76). During qualitative data analysis, researchers plunge themselves into the data in order to discover various themes, patterns and characteristics that answer the research question (Jackson, 2003:141). In this research study, the data analysis occurred immediately after data collection and continued throughout the data collection process until saturation was reached.

It is important to acknowledge that during this stage the researcher will imprint some of her own understandings and experiences (Lietz et al., 2006:447). This above-mentioned 'reflexivity', or imprinting of 'self' onto the research should be conducted cautiously to ensure trustworthiness of the research (Lietz et al., 2006:447). In some ways, the researcher's personal experience and understanding may hinder the study, and in other ways promote it. The researcher used discretion to stay objective to promote the research study. Jackson (2003:165) suggests various steps in the data analysis process, namely: reading and in-depth studying of the participant's transcripts, identifying characteristics of the participants' statements that link to the phenomenon, and identifying and naming the various themes linked to the topic.

While collecting data, the researcher preliminarily started to analyse the data. This occurred whilst the researcher read through and studied the emails as she received them. The researcher was then able to clarify via another email if there was any uncertainty or confusion. The researcher was then also able to start to identify

various themes and categories that began to emerge from the data. Once the researcher gradually received more and more emails, the researcher was then able to compare the themes and categories emerging from them to identify commonalities and differences. This enabled the researcher to develop various topics and themes.

### **Step 3: Managing Data**

The third aspect of data preparation is for the researcher to identify and remove any information that could harm the participants (Boeije, 2010:73). During this phase, the researcher removed any information that could violate the participants' anonymity, privacy or confidentiality. This is especially true for the emailed interviews. The researcher used the information that the participants provided in the mail but not their identifying particulars. The researcher made use of the audit trail as described by Lietz et al. (2006:450) whereby the researcher could implement various procedures to ensure freedom for the research to develop while still ensuring its scientific value.

During this process, the researcher ensured that all emails were treated as valuable. In order to ensure this, the researcher kept a printed copy of the email in a file (safe and secure) as well as a copy on her computer; this may only be accessed with a password. Two hard copies of the emailed interviews were made: one to be filed with the researcher and one to be attached to the research paper. The researcher also made additional notes whilst analysing the data in order to assist in the development of themes and categories.

### **Step 4: Reading and writing memos**

This part of the research process involved a thorough reading and re-reading and studying of the data collected (Lietz et al., 2006:449). The researcher did the disassembling and reassembling with the research question and goal in mind (Boeije, 2010:76). At this stage, the researcher deleted all irrelevant information that did not pertain to the central goal of the research study, reducing the amount of information. The researcher kept in mind that priority should be given to the experience of the participant above that of the researcher (Lietz et al., 2006:443).

### **Step 5: Generating categories and coding the data**

The researcher focused and was objective while recording the emailed interviews and reviewing the literature in a systematic manner; this enabled the researcher to generate themes, categories, typologies, matrixes and clusters (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:205,214). It is important that this process of constructing various themes and categories is an active process in which the researcher applies a profound amount of critical observation (Lietz et al., 2006:443).

According to Schurink et al. (2010:410), generating various themes and categories is the most intellectually challenging part of the data analysis process. During this process the researcher dismantled the information provided by the participants through the emailed interviews and reconstructed it according to various categories and themes. This was then essentially seen as the coding of the data. The researcher was then able to use these themes and sub-themes to determine whether the research study is supported by the experience of the practitioners and thus ground the research study and answer the research question.

### **Step 6: Testing emergent understanding and searching for alternative explanations**

The researcher read and re-read the transcribed data in an attempt to find themes and patterns that answer the research question. These themes were placed into categories that were coded, thus allowing the researcher to identify themes and patterns easily. The various themes and categories were then tested and the researcher looked for further explanations.

Although the quantity of data can be overwhelming, authors Marshall and Rossman (2011:210) suggest that researchers immerse themselves in the data, in a sense 'cuddle up' with the data in an attempt to get to know it intimately. The researcher spent time studying the data during the analysis process in order to gain a profound understanding of the participants' experiences (Jackson, 2003:165).

Keeping confidentiality in mind, the researcher consulted her supervisor and a fellow social worker to look at the data and then discussed findings with this second party in order to ensure trustworthiness and eliminate unnecessary reflexivity (Lietz et al.,

2006:450). This process mentioned above is referred to as 'triangulation' by Lietz et al. (2006:451) and is important as it allows the data to become more focused on the participant's experience.

### **Step 7: Interpreting and developing typologies**

Qualitative data is a continuous process of questioning and verifying of the data (Jackson, 2003:141). This abovementioned process may include peer debriefing as stated in Lietz et al. (2006:451), which is the process of involving other objective parties in the research process to scrutinise the data analysis conducted by the researcher, and ensure the participants' understanding and experiences receive priority in the findings. The researcher analysed and condensed the data into more compact parts in order to achieve a detailed description of the meaning of the participants' experiences (Jackson, 2003:165). It is essential that researchers remember that their experience will have a role in the meanings created and constructed in the research (Lietz et al., 2006:444). The researcher then identified the characteristic fundamentals of the phenomenon; this involved taking the various themes and linking commonalities among them (Jackson, 2003:165). In this research study, the researcher used clarification with the participants to ensure trustworthiness of the research data. The researcher did this by emailing the participants if there was a matter that needed to be clarified in order to ensure the most credible understanding of the participant is reflected in the data.

### **Step 8: Presenting the data**

While the researcher studied the social workers' understandings of child neglect, various questions and findings unfolded (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:214). The researcher then conducted an intensive study of the data utilising inductive reasoning to determine the understandings of the service providers (Jackson, 2003:141). The researcher also used peer debriefing to discuss the findings with a fellow social worker for extra clarity on the findings (Lietz et al., 2006:452).

Due to the intricate nature of the data analysis, the researcher may have had to return to the participants in order to clarify their experiences (Jackson, 2003:165). The researcher finally displayed the findings of the research question in the form of

the research paper. These findings reflect the meanings and understandings of the research participants (Lietz et al., 2006:443).

### **3.4.5 Trustworthiness**

It is important to acknowledge that during this stage the researcher will imprint some of her own understandings and experiences (Lietz et al., 2006:447). This above-mentioned 'reflexivity, or imprinting of 'self' onto the research should be conducted cautiously to ensure trustworthiness of the research (Lietz et al., 2006:447). In some ways, the researcher's personal experience and understanding may hinder the study, and in other ways promote it. The researcher used discretion to only use reflexivity to promote the research study. The researcher did this by printing all the email interviews so that she could read and conduct an in-depth study of the participant's transcripts, identifying characteristics of the participants' statements that link to the phenomenon, and identifying and naming the various themes linked to the topic (Jackson, 2003:165).

## **3.5 ETHICAL ASPECTS**

In research with human subjects, it is necessary to consider and abide by the discussed ethical considerations.

### **3.5.1 Avoidance of harm**

This ethical aspect refers to the researcher's obligation to protect the participants from emotional and physical harm (Strydom, 2011:115). The researcher ensured that she did not harm the social workers in any way. Fortunately, this topic is more explorative and the participants are all adults, therefore this ethical requirement was easy to adhere to.

### **3.5.2 Voluntary participation**

Social researchers usually enter into the individuals' lives and require the individuals to open themselves up to the researchers (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:521). Therefore,

participation in the research study was voluntary, as forced participation would have contaminated the research and might possibly have harmed the participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:521; Strydom, 2011:116). The researcher thus ensured that all participants were informed that participating in the research study was voluntary and that they could have withdrawn from the study at any time.

### **3.5.3 Informed consent**

The purpose of informed consent is to ensure that participants have adequate knowledge and understanding of what will be expected from them in the study as well as what they can expect from the researcher (Strydom, 2011:117). With this information, participants can make a more knowledgeable decision on whether they want to participate and in what they will be participating. The researcher provided all the social workers with an abstract of the proposed research study; this enabled them to make an informed decision as to whether or not they would like to participate. A letter of informed consent was mailed to participants to request their participation and obtain a voluntary decision.

### **3.5.4 Deception of participants**

Deception of participants is the purposeful withholding of valuable information from the participants with the aim of luring them into participating in the research study (Strydom, 2011:119). In order to prevent deception, the researcher could explain to the participants what the purpose of the research is (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:525). The researcher ensured that the participants had a clear understanding of what was expected of them and that they had adequate information to make all their decisions. Research documents will be safely stored in the Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria for a period of 15 years.

### **3.5.5 Violation of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality**

Privacy refers to the researcher respecting and withholding the personal aspects of the participant's private life (Boeije, 2010:46; Strydom, 2011:119). Confidentiality refers to the way in which the researcher handles the data which must at all times

ensure the privacy of the participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:523; Boeije, 2010:46; Strydom, 2011:119). Anonymity refers to the researcher retaining the participant's personal information and any personal identification in order to ensure privacy and confidentiality (Boeije, 2010:46; Strydom, 2011:119). The researcher was not able to ensure anonymity in using emailed interviews. However, she did ensure that the participants understood that all information was to be treated confidentially.

### **3.5.6 Actions and competence of researcher**

The actions and competence of the researcher were required to be professional and ethically correct (Strydom, 2011:123). The researcher also ensured that all the social workers included in the study had the necessary years of working experience in the field of child neglect and child legislation. The researcher ensured that she had a thorough knowledge on the subject of child neglect and the relative legislation regarding this phenomenon. The researcher conducted the study under close supervision of an experienced researcher.

### **3.5.7 Release of publications of findings**

Publication of research findings facilitated a clear understanding of objective information presented to the readers with valid interpretations and no deception (Strydom, 2011:126). The researcher stated her shortcomings during the research process so as not to deceive readers but rather encourage them to utilise the research as a valid and true construct of the research topic (Strydom, 2011:126). The research report is published according to the specified guidelines provided by the Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria.

## **3.6 PRESENTATION OF EMPIRICAL DATA**

In presenting the research results, the researcher will firstly provide a table with information about the years of experience of the participants in this study. Secondly, the researcher provides a discussion of the data analysis in qualitative themes and sub-themes.



### 3.6.1 Years of experience in working with child neglect

Twelve social workers in private practice formed the participants for the research sample. Their years of experience are set out in the table below:

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Years of experience</b>
Participant one	17 years
Participant two	10 years
Participant three	5 years
Participant four	7 years
Participant five	5 years
Participant six	5 years
Participant seven	15 years
Participant eight	10 years
Participant nine	8 years
Participant ten	5 years
Participant eleven	7 years
Participant twelve	9 years

**Table 1: years of experience**

## 3.7 DISCUSSION OF THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

The analysis of the qualitative research data is discussed according to main themes and sub-themes, based upon the initial themes included in the semi-structured interview schedule sent to participants.

### 3.7.1 The understanding of child neglect in private practice

#### 3.7.1.1 Main theme one: Participants' understanding of the concept of child neglect

The participants' understanding of the phenomenon of child neglect in their private practices was expressed in the following sub-themes:

### **Sub-theme 1: Participants understand the concept of child neglect as an act of omission by their parents or caretakers**

- *“Children are often referred to me for various forms of child maltreatment. Usually the maltreatment is due to some form of parental inattention or the parent placing the child in a vulnerable position by not being present or available.”*
- *“In my experience children who are neglected by their parents are placed in vulnerable positions due to their parents’ inattentiveness.”*
- *“Child neglect may not be a deliberate act but rather done by accident or by lack of another option. For example the parents may have to work long hours and may therefore not be able to look after their children.”*

It appears that most of the child neglect is understood in private practices in the form of children who are not adequately supervised by their parents or caretakers. It is for this reason that Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:151) state that child neglect is mostly seen as an act of omission whereby the mother or other caretaker leaves their child unsupervised or in the care of someone who is not equipped to provide adequate supervision for the child. This would then constitute ‘supervisory’ neglect, as set out by Giardino et al. (1997:170) and Crosson-Tower (2002:64).

Children may be left because their parents need to work long hours for income or the parents are not ‘interested’ in their parental responsibilities and thus delegate their responsibilities to a ‘nanny’. When child neglect is due to economic stressors or strains, Crosson-Tower (2002:70) and Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:161) agree that this is not always something the parent can willingly avoid, as it is the parent’s only way to provide adequate resources for their children. Poverty and stress may also surround the family with feelings of hopelessness and despair (Howe, 2009:111).

### **Sub-theme 2: Participants understand child neglect as an accompanying factor of other forms of child maltreatment**

- *“In my understanding child neglect is often an accompanying factor to other forms of child maltreatment.”*

- *“Children may be referred to private practice for other ills and neglect may be the underlying one which becomes more and more evident during therapy or assessment.”*

In practice, children are referred to private practitioners for various forms of child maltreatment including child abuse, sexual abuse and molestation. Child neglect is usually a dominant characteristic that accompanies these other forms of child maltreatment. This could be due to the extensive rise in child neglect in South Africa (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:819) and the fact that other forms of maltreatment involve to some extent a form of neglect (Miley et al., 2009:223).

It is for this reason that child neglect is not often seen at the forefront but may in some cases be the reason that the other form of child maltreatment occurred (Miley et al., 2009:223). This may be due to lack of supervision or lack of interest in a child or abandonment of the child.

### **3.7.1.2 Main theme two: Participants’ understanding of the definitions of child neglect adequately addressing the multifaceted phenomenon**

Are practitioners in private practice of the opinion that there are sufficient different definitions for the various different forms of child neglect?

#### **Sub-theme 1: Practitioners understand that there is vagueness in the definitions on forms of child neglect**

- *“The definitions of child neglect and the various different forms of child neglect are invariable general and open to interpretation. This means that every practitioner may interpret neglect in their own way and thus there may be a lack of a single coherent definition.”*
- *“Child neglect seems to lack adequate definitions and descriptions to enable us to understand the phenomenon clearly”.*
- *“Defining child neglect is imperative as it provides an umbrella under which one is able to understand and address the problem of child neglect. The more defined the terminology the better it is for principal practice.”*

- *“Child neglect is a grey area needing more literature and legislation”.*

Practitioners have understood that child neglect and the various forms of child neglect are not well defined or explained. According to Miller-Perrin and Perrin (2013:152), the challenge to define child neglect adequately may be due to the complex and ever-changing nature of child neglect.

This means that each individual practitioner may interpret the phenomenon in their own unique way, which may lead to confusion as to what constitutes child neglect and its different forms as it becomes open to interpretation and debate. This is central to the constructivist theoretical approach in which social workers rely on legislation, literature and social policy to develop their own unique, practice-based understanding of child neglect (Cooper, 2001:721,722). In Karam’s (2013) opinion, another factor contributing to the challenge of protecting neglected children is the fact that neglect in itself is a relative term, thus implying that what constitutes neglect for one child may not constitute neglect for another (Karam, 2013).

Munro (2008:55) substantiates this above statement by mentioning that a lack of ability to define the complex nature of neglect clearly may lead to an inability to identify and solve the problem of neglect, thus implying that individual interpretation and problem solving of neglect are the only solutions that remain. Private practitioners experience that child neglect is not well defined. There is thus no concrete definition guiding practitioners to assess, interpret and work with child neglect. Therefore, policy formation and implementation are hindered when a concept is not clearly and adequately defined (Ferguson, 2011:138; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2013:152; Munro, 2008:55).

### **Sub-theme 2: Definitions on child neglect are not in coherence**

- *“It has in my experience been a tedious task to link definitions of child neglect from legislation, research and literature and this prohibits me from being able to work with this challenging phenomenon.”*

- *“There needs to be less subjectivity surrounding child neglect and this will only come about if there is a more coherent and cohesive definition and literature on the topic.”*

In private practice, when the practitioner conducts research on the forms of child neglect and accompanying definitions, there is no coherence between different sources. This could, in Beckett’s (2007:69) and Kay’s (2003:43) opinion, be due to the multidimensional dynamics of child neglect. Munro (2008:49) substantiates this statement from a private practitioner by mentioning that practitioners may feel unable to address child neglect due to lack of concept clarity and thus lack of resources to address the problem.

Thus, legislation and research may contradict or differ from one another on what constitutes child neglect and what the various forms of child neglect are. Practitioners are therefore left to function in a grey area with a mundane and insurmountable task (Beckett, 2007:69; Kay 2003:43). From a constructivist point of view this may indicate that the ‘grey areas’ may result in different constructs of the concept of child neglect.

### **3.7.1.3 Main theme three: Clarity of the concept of child neglect**

If practitioners understand the concept of child neglect as clearly and adequately defined it would assist them in the following ways as cited in the following themes:

#### **Sub-theme 1: Clarity on the concept of child neglect would enable the practitioner to address the matter of child neglect as understood in practice**

- *“In my opinion, clarity on the concept of child neglect would enable me to adequately address and intervene with cases of child neglect.”*
- *“A clear definition on child neglect would assist the practitioner to know when to act and this would thus ensure the child’s safety. Therefore clear concepts provide practitioners with a tool to protect children from understanding child neglect, by allowing practitioners to intervene earlier.”*
- *“Clarity of concepts would allow practitioners to protect children by assisting them in addressing the problem of child neglect.”*

From the responses of participants, it became clear that if the concept of child neglect was adequately defined, the practitioners in private practice would be able to ensure appropriate intervention and diagnosis of child neglect and this would lead to a more thorough service. Crosson-Tower (2002:64) states that if child neglect were adequately defined then it would enable the practitioner to gain an adequate picture of what encompasses child neglect. The practitioner would then be able to address the issue of child neglect more sufficiently.

The lack of concept clarity surrounding child neglect prohibits the social workers in private practice to be able to intervene early enough to prevent serious neglect (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:829). If the practitioners are able to identify child neglect earlier then they will therefore be able to provide more security for children that fall victim to neglect (Karam, 2013).

### **Sub-theme 2: Concept clarity would assist in legal procedures**

- *“One of my main concerns around the issue of child neglect is whether or not the child that has been neglected has a case fit for court. I therefore feel that if there were adequately defined concepts I would feel more comfortable addressing this issue from a legal perspective.”*
- *“It is crucial to understand the concept of child neglect and to have adequate literature and resources on the phenomenon if one is having to present a case in court.”*

Due to the lack of coherence, understanding the concept of child neglect as discussed previously together with the lack of adequate legislation on child neglect, practitioners feel powerless when they have to represent child neglect cases in court (Miley et al., 2009:23). This is highlighted in constructivism and social workers rely on an intricate inter-play between legislation, social policy and literature to develop practice-applicable procedures (Cooper, 2001:721,722,725). The neglected children do not receive the correct or adequate services that would be necessary to ensure the children’s safety.

Strijdom (2013) and Strydom (2013) both agree that neglect is difficult to prove in court and lacks a clear definition, which hinders the understanding of the concept. Although the Children's Act provides stringent guidelines to when a child may be in need of care due to neglect, it does not seem to necessitate the actual criteria for assessing or concluding whether the child has been neglected (The Children's Act 38 of 2005 (1)(f)(g)(h)(l)).

#### **3.7.1.4 Main theme four: Child neglect as an evolving phenomenon**

It is evident that social workers in private practice understand that the phenomenon of child neglect has and still is changing with times, therefore requiring constant attention in literature and research.

##### **Sub-theme 1: Children are neglected due to the demands placed on parents by society**

- *“In my opinion, more and more children are being subjected to neglect. No longer just children in poorer, poverty stricken communities but children from more affluent families whose parents are forced to work to be able to provide for their families.”*
- *“Child neglect seems to be shunned on, but in my opinion it is a dangerously growing phenomenon”.*
- *“Parents are having to work long hours (9:00–17:00) and their children are therefore left unsupervised.”*

In the past, child neglect may have been labelled as issues amongst people of a lower social class in society. However, due to the increase in *passé* in society and the economic demands that are now placed on parents, child neglect now effects middle and upper class children as well.

Parents from more affluent backgrounds are living more exorbitant lifestyles and have therefore increased financial demands and stresses placed on them to be able to uphold this lifestyle. It is therefore necessary for both parents to work nine-to-five jobs and children are then placed in alternative care. Parents spend less and less

time with their children and when they are spending time with their children, their concentration and thoughts are elsewhere, thus they are emotionally absent. The children thus hardly ever experiences quality time with their parents and thus have many unmet emotional and cognitive needs. Severity, implications and effects of child neglect, regarded as an escalating problem in South Africa, is swept under the proverbial carpet (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:829). Child neglect has drastically increased in South Africa and it is now a problem affecting children from all races, and cultural and social backgrounds (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004:819).

### **3.7.1.5 Main theme five: How practitioners have identified, assessed and dealt with socially and emotionally neglected children in practice**

The following emerged about the way that the practitioner goes about identifying, assessing and treating neglected children in their practice.

#### **Sub-theme 1: Identifying child neglect by means of referrals**

- *“Most of the neglected children that come to my practice are identified by their school teachers, pastors and other people that are functioning on grass level in the children’s lives.”*
- *“Child neglect is often hidden and the children are thus referred to therapy for other more obvious forms of child maltreatment. The neglect then surfaces at a later stage in the therapeutic process.”*

Practitioners often rely on other sources of referral to identify neglected children. This could be because child neglect may present itself as another form of child maltreatment that is more easily identified (Jewell, 1999:1; Mac Donald, 2001:69; Munro, 2007:69). These children are usually referred to therapy for reasons other than neglect and the actual neglect then becomes evident to the practitioners at a later stage.



## **Sub-theme 2: Practitioners use a holistic perspective to analyse child neglect**

- *“I use the holistic approach to assess child neglect. In my opinion this is the perspective that provides the most insight and information pertaining to the child and their socio-emotional circumstances.”*

It has become apparent that some practitioners use some form of holistic approach when they assess children affected by neglect. This holistic form of assessing child neglect encompasses the child’s culture, norms, beliefs and values (Pierce & Bozalek, 2003:818). This perspective allows them to understand the child in their environment and the inter-play that the family unit, community, society and environment have on one another (Crosson-Tower, 2002:93).

## **Sub-theme 3: Practitioners sometimes feel ill equipped to be able to address child neglect**

- *“Due to a lack of clarity of concepts and thinly spread social services, I think most neglected children remain unattended to.”*

Another common factor amongst the practitioners is that practitioners are not always able to identify, assess and intervene in child neglect. The reason stated by some social work practitioners was a lack of time or lack of interest from other parties, for example parents. Practitioners mention that there are not enough well-equipped social workers to be able to deal with the magnitude of the problem. Furthermore, even those practitioners who were better equipped to be able to deal with the problem of child neglect felt that they did not know enough and were not provided with sufficient literature and resources to be able to influence this social pathology. As some practitioners mentioned they felt ‘ill equipped to be able to deal with child neglect’ or that the concept itself seemed ‘vague and needed more ‘clarity’. Another practitioner mentioned that they would not be able to address the problem, as it seemed to be a ‘grey area’, which needed more clarity. Once again, this grey area relates to a highlighted concern in constructivism in social work, which states that social workers’ knowledge base is heavily reliant on a knowledge base developed from practice, social policy and legislation (Cooper, 2001:721).

### **3.7.1.6 Main theme: South African legislation does not provide an ample framework to understand the phenomenon of child neglect**

The majority of the practitioners agreed that legislation and research relevant to child neglect in the South African context does not provide an ample framework to be able to understand the phenomenon.

#### **Sub-theme 1: There is a need for more literature and legislation to address and define child neglect in South Africa.**

- *“As a professional in South Africa, I find that proving child neglect in court according to the Children’s Act 38 of 2005 very difficult.”*
- *“If there were clarity of the concept of child neglect then the cases would be valid in court.”*
- *“Child neglect is assessed too subjectively and would therefore not be fit for court.”*

South African legislation needs to provide practitioners with a more specific definition on child neglect in order for practitioners to be able to interpret and understand the phenomenon sufficiently (Karam, 2013). Due to the lack of defining the concept adequately in the South African context, practitioners do not know which procedures to follow when faced with a neglected child (Miley et. al., 2003:23).

Various practitioners also agree that the definitions provided do not provide for all the facets of child neglect (Karam, 2013). Practitioners agree that child emotional neglect is very often overlooked due to a lack of information and legislation on this type of neglect.

### **3.7.1.7 Main theme 7: Neglect as an act of omission versus an act of commission**

There is still vagueness around whether the cause of child neglect is due to an act of omission or an act of commission.

### **Sub-theme 1: Neglect as an act of omission or commission**

- *“I am not able to say whether neglect usually occurs as an act of omission or commission, perhaps one should look at each case specifically. This is also an ad to the difficulty of understanding and intervening in child neglect cases as the perpetrator and cause of the neglect are case specific.”*

Whether neglect is an act of omission or commission is case specific. Perhaps this adds to the difficulty in defining the concept because each case needs to be viewed individually; whether neglect is done out of negligence or deliberately depends on the case. Therefore, whilst neglect can be seen as an act of omission, where according to Kay (2003:47) the parents are not aware that they are neglecting their children, neglect may also be seen as an act of commission whereby the parents deliberately neglect their children Kay (2003:47).

### **3.8 CONCLUSION**

To explore and describe social workers' understanding of the concept of child neglect, the study required twelve to fifteen social workers in private practice to participate or until the study had reached saturation. In this study the researcher studied the social workers' constructs of the concept of child neglect. These constructs that the social workers have developed on this concept of child neglect have been formed by a complex inter-play between social policy, legislation and literature together with the social workers' practical experience.

Saturation was reached after 12 responses. The following was evident through this study: In private practice, child neglect often is not at the forefront. Children are often referred for other forms of abuse or problems and neglect then becomes evident at some stage in the therapeutic process. Practitioners also agree that neglect is no longer a poverty-related phenomenon. Child neglect has now also become apparent amongst children from middle and more affluent classes. The reason for this may be due to an increase in societal and economic demands placed on the parents. Thus, both parents are 'forced' to work nine-to-five jobs to be able to provide their children

with a 'better lifestyle'. This might be seen as the reason for child neglect as an act of omission, as parents are not aware that by them being absent from their children due to work obligations they are actually emotionally and sometimes cognitively neglecting their children.

Some will argue that this reason for neglect is not as serious as neglect when it is an act of commission, such as when a mother deliberately denies her child her chronic medication, or when a father leaves his infant in a bath full of water. The real question, which remains to be answered by research and literature, is whether the impact on the child is similar or more or less severe.

South Africa does not provide an adequate definition of child neglect for the practitioner to be able to identify, assess and address this social ill. Social workers therefore have the impossible task of addressing and preventing this social pathology that remains ever changing and ever increasing in the face of our country and her children.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this brief chapter, the researcher will conclude the research study. The researcher will discuss whether the research goal and objectives were achieved and thus answer the question from the conducted study. The researcher will then discuss the key findings from the research study. This will then be followed by a conclusion and recommendations based on the research findings.

#### 4.2 RESEARCH GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of the study was to explore and describe the understanding of social workers of the nature of child neglect. The goal of this research study was achieved by the following objectives:

**Objective 1: To conceptualise theoretically what child neglect as an act of commission and as an act of omission means**

In chapter two of this study, the researcher presented an in-depth literature study on the concept and definitions of child neglect. The researcher also discussed neglect both as an act of commission, done deliberately or as an act of omission done out of ignorance or lack of adequate skills. After this study, it became evident that there are various challenges and difficulties in adequately defining child neglect as a concept. Seemingly, the most effective way would be to look at each presented case individually and assess the case from an ecological perspective, which includes religious, social, moral values and all other aspects involved or encompassing the affected family.

## **Objective 2: To explore social workers' understanding of the concept of child neglect**

In this research study, the researcher was able to determine that although all the social workers who participated in the study have a general understanding on the concept of child neglect, this is not adequate for them to feel secure and knowledgeable enough to work with neglected children. Most of the social workers who participated in the study thus feel unequipped to deal with this ever-increasing and changing phenomenon.

## **Objective 3: To determine the challenges social workers experience in identifying and reporting child neglect**

It is evident through the research study that social workers experience numerous problems when having to identify and report child neglect. Usually child neglect is not directly identified, as social workers usually see a child for another form of child maltreatment and then the neglect becomes evident at a later stage in the therapeutic process. Most of the social workers in private practice will then refer the neglected children to statutory organisations if necessary for further legal action.

The social workers interviewed for this research study agreed that most of the child neglect that they see in private practice is usually in the form of emotional neglect. This may be due to the other forms of neglect either never becoming obvious and thus they go unattended, or because other forms of maltreatment take a more dominant role in the therapeutic process. There is also the probability that some of the neglected children in South Africa are not identified due to inadequate resources and a lack of concept clarity, thus the social workers are not equipped to be able to identify and combat the phenomenon.

### **4.3 KEY FINDINGS**

Through this study, the researcher was able to identify the following key findings:

- During the literature study of this research paper it became apparent that child neglect may be due to either omission or commission. If it is an act of omission

then it is not committed deliberately; if child neglect is an act of commission then it is committed deliberately.

- There are various forms of child neglect: medical, educational, physical, social, emotional, psychological and nutritional.
- The emailed interviews conducted during this research study produced a vast amount of information on the understandings that social workers have of child neglect as a phenomenon. Even though emailed interviews are not yet that familiar in social research, the utilisation thereof proved effective.
- The findings that arose during this research study make it evident that social workers do not have a clear understanding on the concept and definition of child neglect.
- The research demonstrates how a lack of concept clarity and incoherence in defining child neglect disempowers social workers in their ability to be able to identify, assess and combat child neglect.
- As highlighted in this research study, social workers' ability to understand and intervene in matters of child neglect depends on their ability to understand the phenomenon according to their social constructs. These constructs will be the knowledge base that they are able to practice from and will determine their efficiency in doing so.
- Furthermore, the research was able to identify that because of this lack of understanding of child neglect and no concept clarity, social workers are not able to take the sometimes-crucial steps of statutory procedures to ensure the safety of children who are neglected.
- The research also demonstrates that there is a need for more social workers to be able to deal with neglect as a phenomenon as well as more tools for equipping these social workers.
- Evidentially, social workers may feel less powerless in their fight against child neglect if they had better guidance from a well-defined concept of neglect.

## **4.4 RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **4.4.1 General recommendations**

In light of the research findings, the researcher would like to recommend that:

- In order for this problem to be solved and the impact of neglect to be prevented, we require a national response.
- In South Africa, it appears that more social workers are needed in the field who are trained to be able to combat this phenomenon. There is also clearly a need for greater resources and literature in order to understand child neglect.
- The government of South Africa and more specifically the Department of Social Development develop definitions for child neglect that would assist practitioners to be able to understand the phenomenon clearly and accurately.
- Social workers are to receive adequate training and tools to be able to combat the issue of child neglect.
- Since child neglect is on the increase, also due to economic and social challenges experienced by families, more social workers should be employed to address the escalating problem of child neglect.
- Child neglect should receive more attention in South African literature thus focusing on the escalating problem and emphasising it as a national priority.
- It is thus evident that the way towards combating child neglect is a long and challenging one. It is necessary for the researchers and social policy professionals to start at the beginning by finding adequate definitions to be able to understand child neglect. If South Africa is able to do this, then identifying, assessing and ultimately preventing child neglect will become a more manageable task, and South Africa will thus be a step ahead of the rest of the world in combating this ever-increasing social plague.

### **4.4.2 Recommendations for future research**

The following area of study should be considered when conducting further research on child neglect:



- Child neglect in South Africa; trends, dynamics and statistics.
- Strategies for how to define the term of child neglect in South African context.
- Tools to assess and address child neglect in South Africa.
- Strategies to ensure the safety of neglected children in South Africa.

#### **4.5 CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings of this research study it has become evident that there is a definite need for more clarity in the defining of the concept of child neglect. This clarity is necessary for social workers and other social service professionals to be able to identify, assess and address child neglect in a sufficient way, and for them to have sufficient constructs to address this issue. By providing an adequate definition on the concept of child neglect, the social workers will also be empowered to be able to protect children from the consequences of neglect, thus, ensuring children's constitutional rights to safety and protection. In essence social workers therefore will have a sound theoretical knowledge base to form relevant social constructs to address the issue of child neglect.

The researcher also hopes that this research study has provided a framework that can be used to create a definition for child neglect, which is relevant to neglected children in South Africa and can assist social workers in forming their social constructs to address child neglect adequately. As evident in this study, the most accurate way to start to define and understand neglect is context specific. The social worker will thus have to view each case individually and according to its own framework. It is also evident that the most accurate way to assess child neglect is by using an ecological framework, which helps the practitioner to understand and assess the child's self, family, community, values, norms, religion and community, as these are also crucial in determining whether the neglect occurred as an act of omission or commission. Understanding whether neglect occurred as an act of omission (by accident) or commission (deliberately) will also enable the social workers to address the problem. If social workers are equipped with an adequate and sufficient understanding of the concept of child neglect both in its definition and assessment criteria, then social workers will be more readily able to combat this escalating phenomenon in South Africa.

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# APPENDICES

- Ethical clearance letter
- Letter of informed consent
- Letter of introduction
- Semi-structured interview schedule

## APPENDIX 1: ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA  
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Humanities  
Research Ethics Committee

6 March 2015

Dear Prof Lombard

**Project:** Social workers' understanding of the nature of child neglect  
**Researcher:** M de Bruin  
**Supervisor:** Dr CE Prinsloo  
**Department:** Social Work and Criminology  
**Reference number:** 04342686 (GW20150302)

Thank you for the your response to the Committee's letter of 3 November 2014.

I have pleasure in informing you that the Research Ethics Committee formally **approved** the above study at an *ad hoc* meeting held on 5 March 2015. Data collection may therefore commence.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should your actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

The Committee requests you to convey this approval to the researcher.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely

**Prof. Karen Harris**  
**Acting Chair: Research Ethics Committee**  
**Faculty of Humanities**  
**UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA**  
e-mail: karen.harris@up.ac.za

Research Ethics Committee Members: Prof KL Harris (Acting Chair); Dr L Blokland; Prof MH Coetzee; Dr JEH Grobler; Prof B Hogreij; Ms H Kopper; Dr C Parebianco-Warrens; Dr C Pittergill; Prof GM Spies; Dr Y Spies; Prof E Tajara; Dr P Wood



## APPENDIX 2: LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

01 February 2015

Faculty of Humanities  
Department of Social Work & Criminology

### INFORMED CONSENT

#### 1. NAME OF RESEARCHER

Michelle De Bruin  
Tel: 0828212664

#### 2. RESEARCH TITLE

Social workers' understanding of the nature of child neglect

#### 3. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

The purpose of the research is to explore and describe the understanding of social workers of the nature child neglect.

#### 4. DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

The aim of the research is to explore social workers' understanding of the nature of child neglect. The researcher will send out semi-structured interview schedules in the form of an email to social workers in private practice who have the relevant experience with child neglect. The email response should take approximately thirty (30) minutes to complete and can be done at a time most appropriate to the participant. Each email response returned to the researcher will be printed out, studied and analysed. All the research participants are guaranteed of both confidentiality and anonymity in their responses as well as in the final research report.

#### 5. NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

Twelve (12) to fifteen (15) participants will be selected to participate in the research project.

#### 6. RISKS INVOLVED IN THE RESEARCH STUDY

The participants will not be subjected to any harm and the researcher will make every effort to conduct this research in a manner that will minimize possible harm, however, should the researcher perceive any participants to be negatively affected by the research a debriefing session would be conducted.

## **7. BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH STUDY**

There are no economic benefits for participating in this research project. However, the long-term benefits are that by talking about the nature and understanding of child neglect the research will be contributing towards the general understanding of child neglect. Findings and recommendations may better the understanding of the phenomenon of child neglect and thus aid practitioners in addressing child neglect.

## **8. VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Although the researcher seeks my permission to be part of the research, it does not obligate me to do so. My participation is voluntary. I will be free to withdraw my participation at any point, and will experience no negative consequences.

## **9. RECORDS OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH**

The information provided will be protected and my responses will be kept confidential. Recordings and transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet. The only individuals who will have access to this information will be those directly involved with this research project that have been trained in methods to protect confidentiality. The research information will be safely stored at the Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria for a period of fifteen years. The results of this research may appear in publications but participants will not be identified.

## **10. CONTACT PERSONS**

If I want more information about this research, I may contact the researcher as indicated at the beginning of this document.

## **11. AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY**

My signature indicates that I have read, or listened to, the information provided above and that I received answers to my questions. I have freely decided to participate in this research and I know I have not given up any of my legal rights.

**I hereby freely give my permission to participate in this research project.**

This document was signed at \_\_\_\_\_ on the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_ 2015.

**NAME:** .....

**SIGNATURE:** .....

**SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER:** .....





## APPENDIX 3: LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

01 February 2015

Our Ref: Ms Michelle de Bruin  
Tel: 082 8212664  
E-mail: [debruinmich@gmail.com](mailto:debruinmich@gmail.com)

Dear research participant

### **SOCIAL WORKERS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE OF CHILD NEGLECT MSW (PLAY THERAPY): MICHELLE DE BRUIN**

#### **Background on and reason for the research study**

In my capacity as an intake social worker investigating concerns of children in need of care and protection according to the Children's Act 38 of 2005 at an organisation in the Western Cape, I became aware that the concept of child neglect often seemed vague to social workers and social service providers. My perception is that this lack of clarity on the concept of child neglect may influence the ability to intervene and assist neglected children. I conducted an in-depth literature study on the concept of child neglect and consulted with colleagues in the social work field to determine how the concept is understood and interpreted, and whether other social workers, working with child neglect, experience the lack of clarity regarding the nature of child neglect.

#### **Goal of research study**

The goal of this study is to explore and describe the understanding of social workers of the nature of child neglect.

With the availability of electronic communication, I aim to use emailed interviews. For this study, the sample will be designated social workers in private practice who have experience in child neglect. I will therefore make use of purposive sampling to find social workers that would best suit the goal of the study. Social workers in private practice with five (5) to seven (7) years of experience in child protection are

identified. Participants for the sample are chosen according to their knowledge and experience in the field of child neglect.

An interview schedule will be sent to research participants' email addresses. Participants will then receive the mail and will be able to decide whether they are willing to participate in the research or not. If they are willing, they will provide their responses according to the semi-structured schedule and return it to the researcher's email address.

I would therefore greatly appreciate your assistance in conducting the study on the concept of child neglect and understanding thereof, more profoundly.

***Please note: All participants will remain anonymous and confidentiality will be ensured in every possible way.***

**MS MICHELLE DE BRUIN  
MSW (PLAY THERAPY STUDENT)**

## APPENDIX 4: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### SOCIAL WORKERS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE OF CHILD NEGLECT

Please answer the following for selection criteria

Are you a social worker in private practice?	YES	NO
How many years of experience do you have in the field of child neglect and statutory procedures?		

Please provide your understanding regarding the following:

1. Could you briefly describe your **experience** of child neglect in your current practice?
2. Child neglect has **different definitions**. Do you think that the definitions provided for child neglect allow for sufficient understanding on the phenomenon? Please elaborate on your answer.
3. In your experience, has the **phenomenon of child neglect changed** over the decades?
  - If yes, how?
  - If no, please substantiate.
4. What do you consider **neglectful parents / caretakers**?
5. In your opinion, is there a clear understanding on the **various facets of child neglect** namely: medical, emotional, social and physical? Please motivate your answer.
6. In your experience what is child neglect when it is an **act of omission**?
7. Have you experienced child neglect as an **act of commission**? If yes, could you please elaborate?
8. Do you as a social worker in private practice ever experience **challenges** in identifying, assessing or reporting child neglect? Please motivate your answer.

*Thank-you for assisting me in conducting my research study on the understanding of child neglect in South Africa. Your information is of great value and will be respected and analysed in the most delicate and non-intrusive manner possible.*

**Should you have any questions or if you are uncertain about any question or comment in the interview schedule please contact me at [debruinmich@gmail.com](mailto:debruinmich@gmail.com)**