

## TOWARD BETTER RESEARCH ON CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT: MAKING DEFINITIONAL ISSUES AN EXPLICIT METHODOLOGICAL CONCERN

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**Abstract**—In the United States, research on child abuse and neglect is frequently criticized for being poorly performed and largely irrelevant to the important policy questions facing the field. Many of the problems plaguing research on child abuse and neglect are endemic to social science research generally, and this paper does not tread over such issues, which are well known and well described elsewhere. Instead, this paper describes how the inadequacy of definitions of "child abuse" and "child neglect" used by research studies places an additional—and largely unnoticed—burden on research, which aggravates the impact of these more general problems. Existing definitions of "child abuse" and "child neglect" fail to meet research needs because they lack: (1) comparability, (2) reliability, and (3) taxonomic delineation. As a result, they compromise the findings of incidence studies, sequelae studies, etiological studies, and program effectiveness studies. Therefore, if real progress is to be made in understanding child abuse and neglect, definitional issues must become an explicit methodological concern. Specifically, future research should include: (1) a careful determination of definitional needs, (2) the development of operational definitions to meet those needs, and (3) the circumspect statement of findings based on the limitations imposed by such definitions.

**Résumé**—Aux Etats-Unis, on dit souvent que la recherche dans le domaine de la maltraitance d'enfant est mal conduite et sans lien rationnel avec la politique d'intervention. L'auteur pense que ce reproche peut se faire à l'égard de toute la recherche sociologique en général, qui souffre de laxisme dans les définitions. En ce qui concerne "la maltraitance d'enfant" et "la négligence à l'égard d'enfant," la recherche est gênée par des définitions qui manquent de "comparabilité," de fiabilité et de délimitation taxonomique. Le résultat des études de fréquence, des études sur les séquelles, des études sur l'étiologie ainsi que celles sur l'efficacité des programmes de traitement en est sérieusement compromis. Il faut donc d'abord se concentrer sur les définitions si l'on veut faire des progrès.

IN RECENT YEARS, large sums of money have been spent performing research on child abuse and neglect. (Between 1974 and 1980, for example, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect spent over \$50 million on research, demonstration, and evaluation activities.) While many research studies have made important contributions to understanding this serious national problem, the general quality of research is often criticized for being poorly performed and largely irrelevant to the important policy questions facing the field. In the best known survey of past research efforts,

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EDITORIAL COMMENT: Mr. Besharov addresses a critically important point in this paper. I would suggest the following definition of abuse and neglect as a *starting point* for research endeavors: "Any interaction or lack of interaction between a caregiver and a child which results in nonaccidental harm to the child's physical or developmental state." Beginning with this definition, a researcher then is expected to define, in detail, the specifics of the nonaccidental harm under study and what measure(s) is/are being used to determine the effect of this harm on the child's body or development. This approach will help bring some order to the confusion which Mr. Besharov describes so well.—R.E.H.

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The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author.

Holmes concluded that "the majority of studies are so poorly designed that no generalizations should be made from the 'findings'" [1].

The weakness of research in child abuse and neglect is a serious concern. The ambiguity that surrounds incidence studies, as described below, has prevented agreement about the nature and severity of the problem and about the consequent need for remedial action. Similarly, the inconclusiveness of efforts to document the effectiveness of promising preventive and treatment approaches, also described below, has denied to planners (and program advocates) a concrete agenda to implement it. Better research on the subject is essential, if policymakers—and the general public—are to understand the nature of the problems facing the existing child protective system and how to remedy them. As Giovannoni and Becerra point out: "Social policy regarding social problems can begin to take on a rational stance only when informed by valid data" [2, pp. 13–14].

Many of the problems plaguing research in child abuse and neglect are endemic to social science research generally, and it is not the purpose of this paper to tread over issues already well known and well described elsewhere [3,4]. Instead, this paper describes how inadequate definitions of "child abuse" and "child neglect" are an additional—and largely unnoticed—obstacle to more successful research in the area, which aggravates the impact of these more general problems.

## HOW DEFINITIONS FAIL RESEARCH

Definitions of "child abuse" and "child neglect" are the basic building blocks of many research studies. As Giovannoni asks: "If one cannot specify what is meant in operational terms by abuse and neglect, how does one specify what it is that is being studied? How are populations to be selected and how are crucial variables to be measured?" [5]. Unfortunately, existing definitions often fail to meet research needs because they lack: (1) comparability, (2) reliability, and (3) taxonomic delineation.

### *1. Lack of Comparability*

There are thousands of different—and conflicting—definitions of "child abuse" and "child neglect" in use today. Definitions have legal, social work, medical, psychological, or sociological orientations. Some describe child maltreatment in terms of proscribed parental conduct; some focus on the harm to the child; and many are couched in terms of both. While many definitions share common approaches, elements, and even phraseology, the different combinations and permutations seem endless.

Because no one definition has achieved wide acceptance, researchers have been impelled to develop their own idiosyncratic definitional measures and variables. (Often, they adopt whatever definition the program they are studying uses [6,7].) As a result, there are almost as many definitions as there are research projects. Unfortunately, even the slightest difference can include or exclude large and significant groups of child rearing situations, making resultant findings all but impossible to compare. Comparability of research findings is thus a major victim of definitional diversity:

... Valid results may thus be rejected on the ground that they are not corroborated by similar work, when in fact the studies were not comparable in the first place because the populations being studied were different. Thus research intended to inform policymakers as to the nature of the problem may simply be exasperating to them because of the unexplained, conflictual findings [2, p. 15].

Incidence studies most dramatically demonstrate the lack of comparability of research findings. Since a study's findings are a direct consequence of the definition it uses, estimates of the total number of children abused and neglected each year range from 60,000 to 4.5 million [8], as the accompanying chart illustrates. Comparing these findings is indeed like comparing apples with

Table 1. Selected Incidence Studies

Category	Investigator	Definition of Countable Situation*	Finding
Abuse	Gil [9]	Abuse that resulted in some degree of injury	2,500,000–4,070,000
	Helper and Kempe [10]	Officially reported abuse	60,000
	Light [11]	Re-analysis of Gil's data	200,000–500,000
	Nagi [12]	Officially reported abuse	167,000
	Nagi [12]	Unreported abuse	91,000
	Gelles [13]	Parent-to-child violence	1,400,000–1,900,000
	American Humane Association [14]	Abuse officially reported to social services agencies	111,072
Neglect	Light [11]	Neglect and other forms of maltreatment excluding abuse	465,000
	Nagi [12]	Officially reported neglect	432,000
	Nagi [12]	Unreported neglect	234,000
	American Humane Association [14]	Neglect officially reported to social services agencies	202,227

\*Please refer to the actual study for the precise definition it used.

oranges. Giovannoni and Becerra comment: "Estimates of the incidence of child abuse have been based on work using no further definition of 'abuse' than that it was the label assigned to the act. There is no way of knowing whether the cases being counted represent similar or diverse phenomena, and hence no way of knowing what the numbers actually mean, save for an indication of the volume of cases being processed under particular labels through various reporting and protective systems" [2, p. 14]. And yet, the impact of a study's definition on its count of child maltreatment is hardly ever emphasized. Only those who have closely examined these studies understand that a major cause of the differences among them is differences in the nature and quality of the definitions used—and, therefore, the child rearing situations being counted [8].

In fact, since there is no widely accepted definition of "child maltreatment," the findings of incidence studies can be subtly manipulated—by altering the study's operational definition. For example, when the feasibility study for the National Study of the Incidence and Severity of Child Abuse and Neglect defined child maltreatment in terms of harmful parental conduct without specifying a minimum level of harm, indeed without requiring the proof of any actual harm, it estimated that 30% of America's children were "neglected" [15]. Later, the study's definition was limited to parental conduct whose harm to the child could be documented in accordance with specific criteria [16]. (For example, a physical injury had to leave a mark on the child for at least 48 hours.) Consequently, the estimate went down to 1% of children. Which of these estimates one deems to be correct depends on the degree of harmfulness one considers sufficient. The National Study could just as easily have selected 24 hours or 72 hours—or some other criterion—as the cut off point.

## 2. Lack of Measurement Reliability

The one characteristic that all definitions share is their imprecision [17]. Definitions often contain such phrases as: "a child who lacks proper parental care" [18] or "a child whose environment is injurious to his welfare" [19]. Even relatively more precise definitions provide little guidance about how they should be applied. The noted authority, Dr. C. Henry Kempe reflected the feelings of most child protective professionals when he asserted: "Child abuse is what the Courts say it is" [20].

Broad and imprecise legal definitions are sometimes defended on the ground that child protective personnel and courts need freedom to exercise their sound judgment in determining, on a case-by-case basis, whether particular child rearing situations should be considered child maltreatment [21]. Many reported court decisions take the position that, since "neglect" is the failure to exercise

the care that a child needs, and since such care must vary with the specific facts of the case and the context of the surrounding circumstances [22], the word "neglect" can have no fixed or measured meaning, and each case must be judged on its particular facts [23]. In effect, these courts are saying that, although they cannot define child maltreatment, they know it when they see it [24]. The resulting potential for arbitrary application—and the evidence that injustices frequently occur—are the reasons why existing definitions have been so harshly criticized [17].

Researchers do not have the luxury of claiming that case-by-case decision-making is beneficial. If a study's definition cannot specifically describe the types of child rearing situations that should be labelled as "child abuse" and "child neglect," data coders must make individual—and personalized—assessments of each case in the study. The unpredictability of their decisions undermine the study's measurement reliability. (This is why so many studies use the existence of an official report of "child abuse" or "child neglect" as the determinant of whether the case falls within the scope of the study [6,7].)

The plight of program evaluations illustrates the problems caused by measurement unreliability. To determine whether a program improves a family situation, evaluations must be able to compare the family situation before the onset of services with the family condition afterwards. But because existing definitions cannot reliably determine when "maltreatment" is present, they cannot tell when "it" has been removed. (Like the initial determination that the case falls within the scope of the study, recidivism is often judged by whether a subsequent official report concerning the family was received. Unfortunately, a subsequent report may not have been made for a large number of extraneous factors, even though the parents continue to abuse or neglect their child.)

Even a definition that could tell if the maltreatment had ended would not be sufficient. In order to be useful in doing evaluation studies, it would also have to be able to identify *relative improvements* in the quality of child care. The alternative, treating successful intervention as an "either/or" issue, can be unfair to the program, and to the parents, because it may understate the ability of parents, with the program's help, to improve their child rearing practices.

To fill this gap in outcome measures, program evaluations often turn to proxy measures that seek to gauge the improvement in child care by assessing changes in parental attitudes and behaviors *deemed* related to child maltreatment. Elaborate scales have been developed to assess parental attitudes about children and child rearing, parental knowledge of good child rearing practices, parental expectations toward the child, parental self-esteem, and the willingness to keep appointments [25]. Unfortunately, the validity of such proxy measures has been widely questioned [26], and, indeed, an evaluation of the Parents Anonymous program found that maltreatment was reduced even though parental attitudes toward children did not change [27].

### 3. *Lack of Taxonomic Delineation*

Contrary to popular usage, there is no single behavioral entity called "child maltreatment," or "child abuse," or "child neglect," for that matter. Society uses these general terms to encompass a variety of different—and distinct—forms of parental conduct that are harmful to children. Hence, maltreating parents are not a uniform group; there are many different behavioral patterns involved—each with its own characteristic psychosocial dynamics. For example, the factors that lead one parent to forcibly rape a child presumably are not the same as those that cause another to neglect a child by failing to obtain needed vaccinations. As Zigler points out:

The nature of child abuse is . . . in need of a more differentiated and conceptually based classificatory system. Child abuse is a phenotypic event having a variety of expressions and causes, and we will make little headway so long as we insist on viewing every act of child abuse as the equivalent of every other [28].

While some researchers attempt to identify and isolate the particular form or forms of child maltreatment they are studying [9,29], most do not. Instead, they tend to use a generalized

definition of "child abuse and neglect" which lumps together the caseload of the particular agency they are studying [6,7]. When this is done with a population that has similar behavioral dynamics, for example, battering parents as defined by the Battered Child Syndrome [10], the findings are not necessarily invalid. But, in most cases, assuming that the population being studied is somehow representative of all maltreating families and generalizing the study's findings to all forms of child maltreatment is a prescription for strikingly conflicting conclusions.

An example of conflicting findings stemming from differences in population definitions concerns two studies done in different settings, a hospital and a public department of social services. Findings from the hospital-based study were that high levels of maternal stress, measured by family mobility, broken homes, and a history of violence or neglect, differentiated children admitted to a hospital for "failure to thrive" or for "abuse" from the children admitted because of an accident (Newberger et al. 1975). The social services department study, which included no "failure to thrive" children and no abused children, only those identified by the department as "neglected," found that the social and family background factors did not differentiate neglectful mothers from adequate mothers. (Giovannoni and Billingsley 1970) [2, p. 15].

Similarly, the evaluators of the first major federal child abuse and neglect demonstration treatment program reported that lay therapy was the most successful method of treating "child abuse and neglect" [25]. Unfortunately, as Giovannoni and Becerra describe: "... although ten different programs were compared by the researchers, no uniform definition was used, save admission to the program, of the mistreatment involved that brought the cases into the program in the first place. How, then, is it possible to compare treatment outcomes when this crucial datum on treatment inputs has been omitted?" [2, pp. 14-15]. Consequently, neither the field nor the evaluators themselves were able to tell whether the finding about lay therapy applied to all forms of child maltreatment or to only some forms of it. And yet, the difference is crucial.

The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (P.L.93-247) has accentuated the problems caused by definitional inadequacy. Before its passage, most major research studies were performed by experienced clinicians studying families within their own treatment programs, families with whom they were intensely familiar. Distinctions among the relative and diverse forms of child maltreatment came naturally to these clinicians. In this regard, it is noteworthy that much of this work was done on—and identified—specific syndromes such as: the Battered Child Syndrome [10], the Child Maltreatment Syndrome [30] and the Apathy Futility Syndrome [29].

The Federal Act, with its expansive and undifferentiated definition of "child abuse and neglect,"\* broadened research concerns to include all forms of child maltreatment. At the same time, the additional funding that it made available for research meant that many more researchers became involved in child abuse and neglect studies. However, unlike many of the earlier researchers, most of these subsequent researchers were not clinically associated with the treatment programs whose clients they are studying. While being outsiders offered many advantages, it also made it more difficult for them to reflect the relativity and diversity of child maltreatment in study designs. In this respect, then, the problems caused by inadequate definitions are comparatively new, but they are growing.

Child abuse and neglect is not the only area of social research plagued by inadequate definitions. However, few writers have commented on the problems caused by definitional inadequacy [8, p. 1]. In most discussions of research findings, they are only briefly mentioned, if at all. Instead, the discussion quickly turns to the incidence, the causes, the effects, the prevention, and the treatment of "child abuse and neglect"—ignoring the fact that there is no agreement about the nature of what is being discussed. (For example, research reviews often begin by complaining that inadequate definitions undermine all research findings, but then go on to describe and compare the findings of various studies as if there were no problem with existing definitions [8].) This apparent indifference to the harmful effects of definitional inadequacy makes them all the more serious.

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\*The Act provides that: "child abuse and neglect" means the physical or mental injury, sexual abuse or exploitation, negligent treatment, or maltreatment of a child under the age of eighteen . . . under circumstances which indicate the child's health or welfare is harmed or threatened thereby . . ."

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Partly because definitions of "child abuse" and "child neglect" have been considered preeminently legal concepts, there has been a tendency to believe that better research definitions must await better legal definitions. As a result, efforts to improve definitions have been dominated by lawyers, and researchers have not been deeply involved. (In 1978, for example, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect announced that it was willing to support taxonomic studies of child abuse and neglect [31]. Although 436 applications were submitted to the Center, no one applied to perform this kind of research, despite the explicit invitation to do so.) In fact, a number of researchers have argued that no attempt should be made to define the terms "child abuse" and "child neglect." Gelles described why, for his study of family violence, he decided not to attempt the "impossible task" of defining "child abuse":

The term "child abuse" is a political concept which is designed to attract attention to a phenomenon which is considered undesirable or deviant. As a political term, "child abuse" defies logical and precise scientific definition. Malnourishment, sexual abuse, failure to feed and clothe a child, beating a child, torturing a child, withholding medical care from a child, allowing a child to live in a "deprived or depraved" environment, and helping a child stay out of school have all been defined at various times and in various laws as "child abuse." The definition of child abuse varies over time, across cultures, and between different social and cultural groups [32].

But, as this paper has described, definitional weaknesses can no longer be ignored. Research studies need to use more widely accepted, more precise, and more taxonomically delineated definitions if they are to describe, count, compare, and understand the various forms of child maltreatment. It is not just that researchers have such an important stake in better definitions; they also can make an indispensable contribution to efforts to improve definitions. Only with their skills can a definition be fashioned which reflects the complexity of the harmful child rearing situations that society labels as "child abuse" and "child neglect."

Achieving wide agreement over comprehensive definitions of "child abuse" and "child neglect" which are both precise and taxonomically delineated will take a long time, if it is even possible. Governmental and academic pressures for immediately "useful" research [33] make it unrealistic to suggest that all research in child abuse and neglect be suspended—while the field waits for such optimal definitions. Nevertheless, research studies should not be planned and conducted as if inadequate definitions do not strike at the heart of the project's purpose. Many of the problems described in this paper can be mitigated *if* definitional inadequacy is acknowledged as a major obstacle to more successful research, and *if* steps are taken to limit the damage it causes.

A good model of what should be done is found in the Federal Government's approach to the National Study of the Incidence and Severity of Child Abuse and Neglect mandated by the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act. The work statement for the project characterized the development of operational definitions for the study as "one of the major tasks of this contract," and it went on to say that "it shall be essential to develop these definitions as clearly as possible to indicate what is and what is not included" [34]. Thus, a major goal of the first phase of the study was the development of operational definitions that could decisively identify situations that the study defined as child maltreatment, such as the 48-hour rule mentioned earlier. The result was a 145-page report on operational definitions which systematically described: the role the definition was required to play in the incidence study, the consequent characteristics required of it, the advantages and disadvantages of the various alternate definitional approaches available, the particular approach selected, and a reiteration of its limits as well as its advantages [16]. The study's procedures were then designed within the constraints imposed by the definition adopted. These definitions are far from perfect; many observers will have cause to take issue with them. But they exemplify the degree to which definitional questions must become an explicit methodological concern.

To maximize its utility, research on child abuse and neglect should include: (1) a careful

determination of definitional needs, (2) the development of operational definitions to meet those needs, and (3) the circumspect statement of findings based on the limitations imposed by such definitions.

### 1. Careful Determination of Definitional Needs

Not all research studies need precise and delineated definitions of "child abuse" and "child neglect." For example, research on agency operations can use the organization's internal definition. On the other hand, careful attention to definitional issues is required in most studies of incidence, effects ("sequelae"), causation ("etiology"), and program effectiveness. Therefore, prior to the initiation of a research study, a specific assessment should be made of: (a) the study's definitional needs, and (b) the practicality of developing a definition to meet such needs.

### 2. Development of Operational Definitions

If it is determined that the study requires an operational definition of "child abuse" or "child neglect," its development (or adoption from another study) should be an early project task. The specificity of the definition, as well as its comprehensiveness, should depend on the study's needs. For example, the study may focus on only one form of child abuse or child neglect, thereby obviating the need to develop an exhaustive definition of all other forms of child maltreatment. Most studies, though, will require a definition which systematically describes: (1) the specific parental conduct, and (2) the consequent harm to the child.

To operationalize these two fundamental elements, each will have to be placed within a formulation which enables its reasonably objective assessment. Parental conduct may have to be described in terms of: (a) the specific act or omission, (b) the parent's state of mind, and (c) the immediate or chronic cause of the parent's conduct. (The catalogue of behavioral circumstances present in cases of child abuse that Gil developed illustrates how the effort needs to be approached [9].) Similarly, the harm to the child may have to be described in terms of: (a) its form (physical, emotional, or cognitive), and (b) its degree. Describing the form and degree of consequent harm to the child may well be the most difficult aspect of the definitional work that needs to be done. (Elmer's work in assessing the effects of "child abuse" exemplifies the difficulties involved [35].)

Unless definitional issues are of minor importance, all of the above information should be presented in a separate or easily identifiable section of the study's final report, which also explains and justifies the definition selected. (Such a section on definitional issues would be like, and could be incorporated within, the traditional section in research reports on methodology.)

### 3. Circumspect Statement of Findings

No matter how promising a study's definitions seem to be, the study should be planned to highlight and, to the extent possible, limit the consequences of possible definitional inadequacy. In addition, the study's findings should be described as a function of the definition adopted by the study. It is not sufficient to add a *caveat* about the possible weaknesses in the findings caused by definitional inadequacy at the end, or even the beginning, of a report. Whenever findings are discussed, they should be clearly, unmistakably, and repeatedly stated in terms of the study's definition. Thus, a finding should not be stated as: "The effects of child abuse were found to be . . ." But, rather, as: "When defined as 'x, y, but not z,' child abuse was found to cause. . . ."

## CONCLUSION

If real progress is to be made in understanding child abuse and neglect, research studies must use more widely accepted, more precise, and more delineated definitions of this serious social

problem. By describing the harmful effects that definitional inadequacy now has on research, this paper has sought to make definitional issues an explicit methodological concern in future research.

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