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CHILD MALTREATMENT  
THE RELATIONSHIP; THE CAUSE

By

Joyce Elaine Scott

A THESIS

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## ABSTRACT

### CHILD MALTREATMENT THE RELATIONSHIP; THE CAUSE

By

Joyce Elaine Scott

The causes of child maltreatment are unknown. The researcher's purpose in this study was to determine whether any of three experimental conditions--abuse during the abusive person's own childhood, social and emotional isolation, or employment and poverty--is related to one's becoming an abusive adult. In this study, the researcher examined 70 cases of child maltreatment: 43 of neglect, 20 of physical abuse, and 7 of sexual abuse.

The results indicated that a large number of abusive persons reported childhood histories of maltreatment, negative or no social or emotional supports, and regular unemployment. Consequently, it seems that most of the subjects in this study themselves had experienced at least one of the experimental conditions when they were children.

For Mom, Dad, and Butchie.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Child abuse has been and continues to be a major problem facing Americans today. In the broadest sense, child abuse is defined as "any behavior that cripples a child in his effort to achieve his potential as a human being" (Zigler & Rubin, 1985). Child abuse is the harm or threatened harm to a child's health or welfare that occurs through nonaccidental physical or mental injury, sexual abuse, including child pornography, or maltreatment. The three forms of child abuse of interest in this study were child neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.

*Child neglect* is defined as harm to a child under the age of 18. Child neglect constitutes harm to a child's health or welfare by a person responsible for the child's health or welfare, which occurs through negligent treatment including the failure to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, or medical care (MCL 720.623[7]).

*Physical abuse* is the actual physical harm to a child under the age of 18. Such abuse is an act of excessive physical mistreatment or unnecessary force in touching or disciplining a child. Physical abuse can range from a mere push to beating or shaking a child to death.

*Sexual abuse* is contact or interactions between a child (under the age of 18) and an adult (or a person significantly older than the child) in which the child is used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or another person. Sexual abuse ranges from nontouching offenses, such as indecent exposure, to offenses that involve physical contact, such as fondling, oral/genital contact, vaginal and anal stimulation and penetration, incest, and the exploitation of children through pornography and prostitution (see Downer, 1984; cited in Ratto, 1988).

For many years, maltreatment of children was a hidden problem. Only recently has the extent of child abuse and neglect become widely recognized. Many experts claim that, in America, child abuse/neglect is the primary cause of children's deaths. It has been estimated that child abuse takes more lives in the United States each year than all childhood diseases combined (Rhodes, 1977). Child maltreatment cases continue to be reported at an alarming rate.

Today, the terms *child abuse* and *child neglect* are used to refer to a wide range of behaviors, including actual physical harm, emotional abuse or neglect, sexual maltreatment, and medical or educational neglect (Faller & Ziefert, 1980). The continuum of maltreatment ranges from mild to extreme, chronic to intermittent, and single to multiple incidents. The number of cases of child maltreatment that are reported is increasing annually.

Cases of child maltreatment may be reported by school personnel, medical and health professionals, and/or the abused child

himself or herself. In Michigan, every report or complaint of suspected abuse or neglect is assessed by the Department of Social Services to determine whether an investigation by Protective Services is appropriate. No record is kept of cases that are screened out or not accepted. All referrals accepted for investigation by Protective Services are registered, and a case record is established.

The Department of Social Services must determine whether the child can remain in the home with reasonable safety, and whether the parents are able to accept help to improve conditions for the child without the use of court authority (MDSS Services Manual, Item 712, p. 10). If it is determined that the child's safety is at risk in the home, the child is removed and the case must go to court. The court will determine whether the child must remain out of the home until conditions improve.

Americans are beginning to become more concerned as the number of reported child abuse cases multiplies. This deep concern has spurred an abundance of research and theories on the causes of child abuse. To understand child abuse, one must consider not just the parents' personalities, but also the marriage, the family, the child's vulnerability, and the social circumstances. Because there is no single pattern of child maltreatment, it is unlikely that there is only one cause for such behavior. Different personal and environmental dynamics may lead to different types of abuse and neglect.

Theories abound as to the causes of child abuse. However, three dominant theories of child maltreatment that are prevalent in the literature are the following:

1. Having been abused or neglected as a child is positively related to abusive or neglectful parenting (the learned theory) (Atemier, O'Conner, Sherrod, & Tucker, 1984).

2. Being socially inactive and/or having virtually no social or emotional supports is positively related to abusive parenting (the social isolation theory) (Adamakas, Ryan, & Ullman, 1986).

3. Unemployment and poverty are positively related to the maltreatment of children (the unemployment and poverty theory) (Gelles, 1983).

#### Purpose

The researcher's purpose in this study was to determine whether abuse during the abusive person's childhood, social or emotional isolation, or unemployment and poverty were present in the abusive person's history. The intention was to discover whether there is a correlation between being the perpetrator of child maltreatment and being socially isolated, unemployed or impoverished, or the victim of maltreatment as a child. This model supports different theories regarding the causes of child abuse, such as those stated above, which include a number of variables that may lead parents to become abusive. These variables include, but are not limited to, abuse during the abusive person's childhood (parent factor), emotional and social isolation (family factor), and unemployment and poverty

(environmental factors). The researcher's intention was to explore the possibility that at least one of these factors is present in most cases of child abuse or neglect.

It is apparent that all of the factors thought to lead parents to become abusive have one thing in common: They all relate to stress. Thus, a broad theory is that a positive relationship exists between child abuse and stress.

Most people experience stress at some point in their lives. However, this is not to suggest that most people abuse their children. On the contrary, researchers have found that most parents are not abusive to their children. According to Howze and Kotch (1984), the unmanageability of stress is the most crucial factor in child abuse, and this unmanageability is the result of a mismatch between the level of stress and the availability and potency of social support.

Therefore, although a person may be unemployed or indigent, the situation may be tolerable if the individual has adequate social support. But the presence of unemployment or poverty, along with the absence of social support, may be more than one can tolerate. The stress may then become unmanageable.

### Research Questions

In an attempt to discover whether there is a correlation between being the victim of maltreatment as a child, being socially isolated, or being unemployed or impoverished, and becoming the

perpetrator of child maltreatment, the following research questions were posed:

1. Is there a positive relationship between being the victim of child maltreatment and becoming a perpetrator of child maltreatment as an adult (the learned theory)?
2. Is there a positive relationship between having virtually no social or emotional supports and becoming a perpetrator of child maltreatment (the social and emotional isolation theory)?
3. Is there a positive relationship between being unemployed or impoverished and becoming a perpetrator of child maltreatment (the unemployment and poverty theory)?

#### Overview

This chapter contained an introduction to the study, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. Chapter II contains a review of literature on prevalent theories of child maltreatment. The methodology of the study is described in Chapter III; the materials used in the study are explained, and the data-collection procedures are discussed. The results of the study are presented in Chapter IV, followed by a discussion of the findings. A summary of the study, conclusions, recommendations, and limitations are discussed in Chapter V.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Theories of Child Maltreatment

##### The Learned Theory

From the time of its discovery, the child-abuse syndrome has been associated with the abusive parent's having experienced abuse or neglect in his or her own childhood. The most conclusive and influential study on this subject was conducted in 1961 by Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, and Silver (1962), who studied hundreds of children who had been severely injured by their parents. These researchers gave the condition a new medical term: *the battered-child syndrome*.

Legislative action quickly followed the study by Kempe et al. In 1962, the Children's Bureau held a conference to formulate recommendations for meeting the medical and social challenges of child abuse. The result of that conference, published in 1963, was the first proposed mandatory child-abuse-reporting legislation.

By the 1970s, widespread concern about other forms of child maltreatment and an evolution of social responses to the problem led to amended child-protection legislation. The idea that those who abuse their children were physically or sexually abused themselves was a working hypothesis, which subsequently was broadened. It was



believed that the majority of abusive parents either had been physically abused themselves or had been otherwise neglected. This broader view was shared by many writers (Caplan, Waters, White, Parry, & Bates, 1984; Spinetta & Rigler, 1972). More than 40 states subsequently amended their laws to require the reporting of suspected child neglect as well as child abuse.

A history of childhood abuse has stood out as a distinguishing characteristic of abusive parents. Recent researchers have come to the general consensus that abusive parents themselves were physically or emotionally abused or neglected, at one time or another, by their parents (Main & Goldwyn, 1984).

Because a history of abuse during childhood is the most consistently reported characteristic of abusive parents, there is a strong belief that being abusive as a parent could be a learned response to being a victim of abuse during childhood (Korbin, 1986). Various authors have reported that abusive parents were abused as children (Caplan et al., 1984). In a survey of American families, Strauss, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) found that individuals who were subjected to or witnessed violence in their childhood were more likely to be involved in intrafamilial violence as adults than were those who had not experienced violence as children. Atemier et al. (1984) also suggested that abuse during childhood may be the foundation that leads one to become an abusive adult.

Early childhood experiences, especially those within the family, determine in large part how a child will be molded. Thus, a

person's child-rearing approach and how he or she will eventually adapt to the external environment are molded during the early childhood years (Reiner & Kaufman, 1989). Having been abused as a child often results in a person's becoming a psychologically impaired, frequently abusive parent (Gabinet, 1983). For the purpose of the present study, this notion was termed the learned theory of child maltreatment.

It is suspected that the abuser maltreats his or her children because it is the only form of discipline and sometimes affection the person knows. Several researchers have shown that child battering and the physical punishment of children are degrees of the same continuum (Peltoniemi, 1982). Many of the child-battering cases handled by the courts began as physical punishment (Korpilahti, 1981).

In one study, babies of neglectful or abusive parents were observed (Main & Goldwyn, 1984). The researchers noted that these parents seemed to share certain behavioral characteristics, one of which was an inability to respond appropriately to others. The tendency for a rejected child to become rejecting, and for an abused child to become abusive, seems to be established very early in childhood.

### The Social Isolation Theory

Abusive parents frequently have reported that, as abused children, they often chose solitude; they were not interested in relationships, especially with adults but also with peers.

According to a study done by Zimrin (1986), abused children, in contrast with other children, believed they were bad, stupid, and worthless. Attempts at establishing contacts were usually superficial, temporary, and ridden with suspicion. The inability to form significant personal relationships adversely affected these children's lives when they reach adulthood. Often, their social isolation began a new cycle of abuse of their own children.

An abused child often isolates himself or herself from his peers, and continues to do so as an adult. The child comes to believe that people are bad and hurtful, and that one should keep one's distance from them (Zimrin, 1986). This belief often accompanies the child throughout his or her life (Martin, 1977). The youngster continues to carry feelings of inadequacy and fear into adulthood. This situation supports the learned theory as well as the social isolation theory of child maltreatment.

Just as isolated children are unable to build constructive and happy lives for themselves, the same holds true for isolated adults. Many of them do not have relationships of any kind, but those who do, seem to build superficial ones. These people are not able to create or sustain a meaningful and genuine association with other human beings, so they remain socially and emotionally isolated from others. Although they seem to desire love, warmth, and affection, they often find themselves warding off the human intimacy that could provide the comfort they so desire (Prodgers, 1984). When they do

enter into relationships, they often tend to choose someone very much like themselves.

Several researchers have noted that abusive persons who have been abused as children may tend to turn inward and be socially isolated as adults (Steele & Pollock, 1974). They seem to have lower self-esteem, to be more isolated, to have had more life stresses, and to have difficulty forming relationships (Howze & Kotch, 1984). The abusive parent has a poor and fragile self-image. The abuser, therefore, emerges as someone who lacks a sense of personal worth and consequently undervalues his or her own capabilities.

Just as low self-image is an important factor, so is the lack of coherence of what one's "self" constitutes. The abuser tends to have no clear self-identity and often blurs the boundaries between self and others. Prodgers (1984) noted that many abusers have "an identity based on a loose collection of unintegrated, disparate concepts of the self." Prodgers believed that this core problem resulted from a damaged self-esteem, caused by having "one firm concept of what they should be and another of what they are."

Maltreating parents frequently experience feelings of low self-esteem (Steel, 1974). Often they think that they are worthless, incompetent, or bad people. Many neglectful parents neglect themselves as well as their children, and these patterns continuously remind them what worthless people they are (Faller & Ziefert, 1980). When parents abuse their children, the behavior frequently is an effort to exert some control and to enhance the

parents' feeling of adequacy. Unfortunately, the maltreatment has the opposite effect because it reinforces the parents' belief that they are bad and worthless.

Many abusive families seem cut off from their social environment (Polansky, Chalmers, Bittenweiser, & Williams, 1978). Many do not have a telephone or transportation. Often they shun contacts with neighbors and do not participate in community activities. Social support has been considered as a potentially important variable in mediating stress (Crnic, Greenberg, Ragozin, & Robinson, 1983) and is typically defined as the factors that lead individuals to believe they are cared for, are esteemed, and have people to whom they can turn in times of need (Cobb, 1976). Social support is seen as a buffer, facilitating an individual's ability to cope with stress. For example, by providing temporary relief from child care responsibilities, help in inhibiting abusive impulses, and/or information and guidance on how to meet the child's needs, social support might prevent a parent from being overwhelmed by socioeconomic or child-rearing stressors and becoming abusive (Adamakas et al., 1986).

Many researchers have found that isolation from social contacts correlates positively with child maltreatment (Howze & Kotch, 1984). The absence of contacts with relatives and friends, lack of participation in formal and informal organizations, and even the lack of a telephone are all clearly associated with child abuse (Kempe et al., 1962). Writers have suggested that the isolation of

child abusers means that they do not have ongoing reciprocal relationships with friends, neighbors, or relatives to relieve them of the everyday burdens of child rearing. In addition, they seem to have no companions with whom to share their concerns and problems; as a result, their worries often become blown out of proportion. Finally, in times of crisis, they have no one to turn to, and abuse and neglect can occur.

The adolescent who has a child while she herself is still a child can also face problems. Disrupting the developmental stage of the young mother can cause many difficulties for both the young mother and her child (Steele & Pollock, 1974). Becoming a parent at such a young age is even more problematic when the adolescent is single. Irresponsibility, which often is a characteristic of adolescence, can be disastrous in a parent. With the absence of available relatives or social supports, the responsibility for the child's care and upbringing has increasingly fallen on the young single mother, and she must fend for herself (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

Single parents seem to be overrepresented among abusive and neglectful parents (Seagull, 1987). According to a study done by Spearly and Lauderdale (1983), a higher abuse rate was significantly associated with being a single mother. Unless the parent has help from outside the family, he or she must perform the domestic functions of two parents, as well as provide for the financial support of the family.

In the first nationwide survey of child abusers, Gil (1970) suggested that "no mother should be expected to care for her

children around the clock 365 days a year." Many times the single parent simply cannot manage the responsibilities of two parents, and some of these demands go unmet. If these unmet responsibilities are in the area of child rearing, the parent can be defined as neglectful. Alternatively, the strain of trying to perform two roles may lead to abuse (Polansky, DeSaix, & Sharlin, 1972).

According to a study conducted by Belsky in 1980, there are two key community-level characteristics of those who maltreat their children: isolation from systems of social support and unemployment. Several recent studies have shown informal support networks to be important moderators of stress for a variety of physical, psychological, and social disorders (Pilisuk & Froiland, 1978). Straus (1984) believed that child maltreatment is not a product of either stressful factors or social isolation alone, but that it is the result of stress in the absence of social support.

The single parent also is at a disadvantage in disciplining children. It is easier to exert control over children if two people are doing it rather than one (Faller & Ziefert, 1980). The single parent might not have the energy to control the children, thereby neglecting them; she might overreact to the children's behavior and punish them excessively; or she might alternative between the two responses.

#### The Unemployment and Poverty Theory

A recent study provided even stronger evidence of the demands on single parents and working mothers relative to economic factors

(Spearly & Lauderdale, 1983). The findings were consistent with the view that child maltreatment is not a function of poverty, per se, but depends on the availability, adequacy, and use made of a family's supportive resources in the community (Garbarino & Crouter, 1978).

For years, experts and nonexperts alike have said that there is a relationship between unemployment and poverty and the abuse or neglect of children (Krugman, 1986; Segal, 1984; Steinberg, 1981). Unemployment and poverty are considered stresses on the family. A stress, in this case, is a condition, change, or problem with which a family has difficulty coping. Poverty exists when a family's income is low enough to qualify them for public assistance.

Poverty is the most widespread chronic stress that can lead to child abuse or neglect. Sociologists who have examined the demographic characteristics of families reported for abuse and neglect have found a high correlation between being reported as an abusing or neglectful parent and being poor (Gelles, 1983).

Gelles (1983) examined the incidence of child abuse among a representative sample of the national population and found a linear relationship between income and maltreatment. Low family income was related to a high probability of child abuse.

Unemployment in and of itself does not cause child abuse. It has been said, however, that conditions associated with poverty, such as poor housing, frequent evictions, inadequate nutrition, frequent illness, inadequate education, and poor medical and dental



care, are increased "psychological stressors" (Gil, 1970) and create some of the most "pervasive socioeconomic determinants" of child abuse (Howze, 1984). These problems lead to high levels of tension and/or stress within the family, which may get defused into child abuse.

It makes sense that parental unemployment may contribute to the abuse of children. The unemployed parent is forced to stay home, thus spending more time with the children, and the youngsters are more available to be abused.

Another issue with unemployed persons is low self-esteem. It is frustrating and humiliating to parents not to be in a position to provide for their children. Because unemployed parents realize that they cannot support their children, they often feel worthless, incompetent, and depressed.

Although a large majority of reported child abuse and neglect cases involve families from the lower socioeconomic class, the belief that child abuse occurs only in lower-socioeconomic, minority homes is no longer sustained. The fact is, "abusive parents come from every segment of the socioeconomic spectrum" (Fontana, 1973).

#### Summary

In sum, the literature suggested that certain stressful situations, such as being a victim of abuse or neglect as a child, social isolation, unemployment, and poverty, are positively correlated with maltreatment of one's children. Further, it has been suggested that the neglectful or physically or sexual abusing

parent may have been the victim of one or more of the stressful situations cited above.

This researcher examined the similarities of the child maltreatment cases studied with regard to the above-mentioned stressful situations. This study was intended to determine whether there is a correlation between being a perpetrator of child maltreatment and being a victim of maltreatment as a child, social isolation, unemployment, and/or impoverishment.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### The Subjects

The researcher sent a letter requesting approval to use official case files to the Director and Administrator of the Jackson County Department of Social Services in Jackson, Michigan. (See Appendix A.) That approval was granted.

Forty-three cases of child neglect, 20 cases of physical abuse, and 7 cases of sexual abuse were studied. The subjects, hereafter referred to as clients, were the actual perpetrators of child maltreatment; they were parents, stepparents, and "friends" of the abused children. Thirty-one (44%) of the clients were black, 34 (49%) were white, and 5 (7%) were races other than black or white. All 70 cases were derived from the case files of the Jackson County Department of Social Services.

Each case that was studied was counted as a separate family. Therefore, although a family might have included four maltreated children, it was counted as only one family in the analysis, with emphasis placed on the actual perpetrator of the maltreatment.

### Materials Used in Gathering the Data

#### The Initial Service Plan

Letters were sent to the clients to schedule the initial interview to complete the initial service plan. (See Appendix B for a copy of this letter.) This was done within 20 days of the date the child had been placed into care.

An initial case (service) plan is a written document that:

1. Describes the type and appropriateness of placement.
2. Discusses how the agency responsible for the child will carry out the judicial determination regarding the youngster.
3. Presents a plan for ensuring that the child receives proper care and that services are provided to the parents, child, and foster parents.
4. Provides services to improve the conditions in the parents' home and facilitates return of the child to his or her own home or the permanent placement of the child.
5. Includes a discussion of how the plan is designed to achieve a placement in the least restrictive (most family-like) setting available and in close proximity to the parent(s)' home, consistent with the best interests and special needs of the child.
6. Includes a description of the services offered or provided and the reasonable efforts made to help the child remain with the family or to return home (Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, 1989).

### The Initial Service Plan Outline

The initial service plan outline (see Appendix C) is completed if a child is placed in a home other than with his or her parent(s), guardian, or custodian. It must be documented that reasonable efforts were made to prevent or eliminate the need for the child's removal from his or her home or to make it possible for the child to return home (Department of Social Services Service Manual, Item 722, pp. 34-36).

### Petition

In this study, a petition was a legal document stating why the child or children were in need of protective custody and had been removed from their home.

### Client Interviews

Although clients were usually seen together to explain the purpose of the interview and to answer any questions they might have had, they were later separated and questioned separately. During the initial meeting, the social worker explained that the interview was a way to begin the family reunification process. The importance of honesty also was stressed. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

In some cases, it was necessary to interview people other than the child and the actual perpetrator. Grandparents, siblings, baby sitters, and neighbors often were the most honest and informative sources of information.

### Data-Gathering Procedures

The data for this study were gathered from the written initial service plans, which contained the results of the initial meetings with the clients. The researcher concentrated on the following sections of the initial service plan: Family Composition, Family Involvement in Present Problem, Child-Rearing History and Behavioral Management, Health/Legal, and Social Support Network.

The Family Composition section addresses issues of who was living in the home at the time of the abuse, the client's employment history, relationship of the abuser to the child, marital status, and economic status. Items in this section are used to establish whether the client was employed or when and if he or she was last (or ever) employed. Employment status was divided into four categories: regularly employed, irregularly employed, unemployed, and never employed. Clients who were categorized as regularly employed were ones who had held paying jobs for six months or longer. Irregular employment was defined as being unemployed at the time of the interview but having been employed within the last 12 months. Included in this category were clients who were presently employed but who had been unemployed within the six months preceding the interview. Unemployed clients were those who reported being without a paying job for 12 months or longer. Clients classified as never employed were those who reported never having held a paying position.

Issues regarding the client's income also are addressed in this section. In the present study, income levels were divided into

three categories: assistance level, subsidized assistance level, and strongly independent level. If clients were eligible for General Assistance (GA) or Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), their income level was considered to be impoverished or at the assistance level. Clients who had minimal income but were eligible for partial public assistance were categorized in the subsidized assistance income level. Clients who were ineligible for any public assistance because of their income were categorized in the strongly independent income level.

The Family Involvement in Present Problem section of the initial service plan addresses the client's involvement in the situation that led to court jurisdiction. This section distinguishes the type of maltreatment perpetrated upon the child.

The Child-Rearing History and Behavioral Management section is intended to determine how the client handles discipline. It includes a discussion of the disciplinary practices of the client's parents or custodians. This section is used to determine whether the client was a victim of abuse or neglect as a child.

The Health/Legal section is designed to gather relevant information about the client's tendency to abuse controlled substances and/or involvement in illegal activities.

The section entitled Social Support Network is intended to determine whether the client has any external social supports. Contacts with other family members, friends, and social agencies are also noted in this section. Issues of the presence or absence of

social supports are addressed in this section. If the client reports having no social supports, this information is recorded. If the client reports a support, there is an in-depth discussion of the person or persons named. Often the individual or individuals named have criminal, substance-abuse, and/or protective-service histories. When this is the case, the support is considered to be negative. In cases in which the named person or persons have no prior criminal, substance-abuse, or protective-service histories, they are considered to be positive social supports.

The researcher spent approximately 45 minutes to an hour on each case to locate the specific sections in the initial service plan needed to determine whether there was a correlation between a client's being a victim of child maltreatment and being a perpetrator of child maltreatment. Cases were considered in terms of four independent variables: type of maltreatment, if any, the perpetrator suffered as a child; the perpetrator's social support system; the perpetrator's income level; and the perpetrator's employment status. The pertinent information was recorded and tabulated; the results are presented in Appendix D.

It should be noted that although there were several instances of dual and sometimes triple complaints of abuse in the same case, only the original complaint was considered in this research. Thus, if a child was originally placed in care because of neglect, even if it was discovered that he or she had also been sexually molested, the sexual-abuse complaint was not included in this study. The



research was based solely on the original issue that brought the child into care.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

In this study, data were gathered to answer the following three research questions:

1. Is there a positive relationship between being the victim of child maltreatment and becoming a perpetrator of child maltreatment as an adult (the learned theory)?

2. Is there a positive relationship between having virtually no social or emotional supports and becoming a perpetrator of child maltreatment (the social and emotional isolation theory)?

3. Is there a positive relationship between being unemployed or impoverished and becoming a perpetrator of child maltreatment (the unemployment and poverty theory)?

This writer is not suggesting that everyone with background issues such as those mentioned above is abusive to his or her children. Rather, the intention was to identify possible or probable causes of child abuse.

Case files were researched, and the characteristics of perpetrators that were of interest in this study were recorded on a tally sheet. The findings were recorded according to the type of child maltreatment that occurred: neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.

## Findings Pertaining to the Research Questions

### Research Question 1

To answer Research Question 1 (the learned theory of Atemier et al., 1984), 70 cases of maltreatment were studied to determine whether the majority of the abusive persons had themselves been abused or neglected during their childhoods. (See Appendix D for a tabulation of the data.)

Forty-three cases of child neglect were studied. Of the 43 neglecting persons, 21% (9) had been neglected, 33% (14) had been physically abused, and 16% (7) had been sexually abused as children. Therefore, 70% (30) of the 43 neglectful parents reported that they had been victims of some form of abuse during their childhoods.

Twenty cases of physical abuse were studied. Of that number, 20% (4) reported that they had been neglected, 35% (7) had been victims of physically abusive parents, and 10% (2) had been sexually abused as children. Therefore, 65% (13) of the 20 physically abusive persons reported that they had been sexually or physically abused or neglected as children.

Seven cases of sexual abuse were studied. Of the seven perpetrators of sexual abuse, 14% (1) had been neglected and 14% (1) had been sexually abused as children. The other 72% (5) reported no history of child abuse or neglect during their childhoods.

### Research Question 2

To answer Research Question 2 (the social isolation theory of Adamakas et al., 1986), 70 cases were studied to determine whether

the majority of abusive persons had few or no social and emotional supports. (See Appendix D for a tabulation of the data.)

Forty-three cases of child neglect were studied. Of the 43 neglectful clients, 35% (15) had negative social or emotional supports, and 21% (9) had no social or emotional supports. Therefore, 56% (24) of the 43 neglectful clients had no positive social supports.

Twenty cases of physical abuse were studied. Of the 20 physically abusive clients, 30% (6) reported having negative social or emotional supports, whereas 45% (9) said they had no social or emotional supports. Therefore, 75% (15) of the 20 physically abusive clients reported having no positive social supports.

Of the seven cases of sexual abuse that were studied, 29% (2) of the perpetrators reported having negative social or emotional supports, and 57% (4) said they had no social or emotional supports. Therefore, 86% (6) of the 7 sexually abusive clients reported having no positive social or emotional supports.

### Research Question 3

To answer Research Question 3 (the unemployment and poverty theory of Gelles, 1983), 70 cases of maltreatment were studied to determine the employment status of the abusive person at the time the abuse occurred. (See Appendix D for a tabulation of the data.)

Forty-three cases of child neglect were studied. Of the 43 neglectful clients, 26% (11) were unemployed, 37% (16) had never been employed, and 21% (9) were irregularly employed. Therefore,

84% (36) of the 43 neglectful persons had not been steadily employed.

Twenty cases of physical abuse were studied. Of the 20 physically abusive clients, 30% (6) were unemployed, 25% (5) had never been employed, and 20% (4) were irregularly employed. Therefore, 75% (15) of the 20 physically abusive clients had not been steadily employed.

Seven cases of sexual abuse were studied. Of the seven perpetrators, 29% (2) were unemployed, 14% (1) was irregularly employed, and none had never been employed. Therefore, 43% (3) of the seven sexually abusive clients had not been steadily employed.

To answer the second part of Research Question 3, the 70 cases of maltreatment were studied to determine the abusive person's income level at the time the abuse occurred. (See Appendix D for a tabulation of the data.)

Forty-three cases of child neglect were studied. Of the 43 neglectful clients, 16% (7) were classified at the strongly independent income level, 26% (11) were at the subsidized assistance income level, and 58% (25) were impoverished or at the assistance income level.

Twenty cases of physical abuse were studied. Of these perpetrators, 15% (3) were at the strongly independent income level, 50% (10) were at the subsidized assistance income level, and 35% (7) were classified as assistance level or impoverished.

Of the seven sexual abuse cases that were studied, 29% (2) of the perpetrators were at the strongly independent income level, 42%

(3) were at the subsidized assistance income level, and 29% (2) were at the assistance or impoverished income level.

### Summary and Analysis of the Results

Seventy cases of child maltreatment were studied. Of the 70 cases, 61% (43) involved neglect, 29% (20) were physical abuse, and 10% (7) were sexual abuse cases.

Of the 70 cases that were studied, 31% of the clients reported being victims of physical abuse, 20% reported a childhood history of neglect, and 13% reported that they had been sexually abused as children. Therefore, 64% of the clients reported that they had been victims of abuse or neglect as children.

The social and emotional support systems of the 70 abusive or neglectful clients were assessed. Sixty-four percent of the clients reported having either negative (33%) or no (31%) social or emotional supports.

The employment status of the 70 clients also was studied. Twenty-seven percent of the clients reported being unemployed (without a paying job for 12 months or longer), 30% reported that they had never held a paying position, and 20% reported irregular unemployment (unemployed at the time of the interview but had been employed within the last 12 months, or presently employed but had been unemployed within the six months preceding the interview). Therefore, 77% of the abusing persons in this study reported irregular employment or lack of employment.

The socioeconomic class of the abusive persons was another important element of the study. According to the findings, 17% (12) of the 70 families studied were of the upper socioeconomic class, whereas 34% (24) were middle-class clients and the remaining 49% (34) were in the lower socioeconomic class (eligible for GA or AFDC).

### Discussion

Many behaviors are considered child abusive and neglectful. These behaviors include, but are not limited to, physical harm, sexual maltreatment, emotional abuse, and educational neglect. This study was limited to cases of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. The subjects in this study were 70 perpetrators of child abuse and/or neglect.

Cases of child maltreatment may be reported by school personnel, medical and health professionals, and/or the abused children themselves. In Michigan, every report or complaint of suspected abuse or neglect is assessed by the Department of Social Services to determine whether an investigation by Protective Services is appropriate. All referrals accepted for Protective Services investigation are registered, and a case record or file is established.

The Department of Social Services must determine whether the child can remain in the home with reasonable safety, and whether the parents are able to accept help to improve conditions for the child without the use of court authority (MDSS Services Manual, Item 712,

p. 10). If it is determined that the child's safety is at risk in the home, the youngster is removed and the case must go to court. The court then determines whether the child must remain out of the home until conditions improve.

### The Learned Theory

Many abusive and neglectful parents develop inappropriate child-rearing patterns as a result of how they were treated during their own childhoods. Consistent with Korbin's (1986) and Caplan's (1984) findings, 64% of the abusive and neglectful clients in this study reported having suffered from at least one form of child abuse or neglect.

This study was intended to probe for instances of clients' early deprivation and evidence of their having been abused or neglected as children, through interviews with the abusive parents and family members. To assess whether parents were abused or neglected as children, clients were asked the types of disciplinary techniques and child-rearing practices their parents employed while raising them.

During one interview, the mother of a neglected child related a history that was all too familiar. She reported having been abused and neglected by her parents. She became pregnant at age 14; by age 18 she had three children. She reported that she had not received adequate parenting and did not know how to be a parent. This mother reported that she knew how to care for herself at an early age and expected her children to do the same. The young mother did not



understand age-appropriate teaching and disciplining techniques. This corroborates Steele and Pollock's (1974) finding that the adolescent who has a child while she herself is still a child faces serious problems. Often, the young parent never allowed herself to grow up.

Many of the neglectful parents had prior Protective Services histories. Many reported histories of Protective Services involvement dating back to the abuse or neglect they experienced during their own childhoods. Although most of the offenders reported that they had been abused as children, the type of abuse reported most often varied among physical, neglect, and sexual.

In two-parent families, when abuse and neglect occur, both parents have a role to play. Research findings have varied, but most have been consistent with the results of this study, which suggested that either the father or the mother is likely to be the active mistreating person; less frequently are both parents actively involved in mistreatment. In this study, the mother was most frequently the active maltreating person in cases of physical abuse (60%) and neglect (81%). The biological father was the sexually abusing person 100% of the time.

If an adult knows or suspects that a child is being misused in his or her home, it is that adult's responsibility to protect the child. If he or she does not do so, this "other" adult in the home is guilty of neglecting to protect the child.

### Social and Emotional Isolation

Many people believe it is difficult to stay at home with children day in and day out, with nothing to break the routine. They need to have someone to turn to for support. One of the clients in this study reported that she would "go crazy" if she didn't have an adult to talk to. She stated that she "could only talk baby talk for so long." Often, if support is not found in a person, temporary support is found in a controlled substance. The same client reported that she "got high" to "forget" her problems. A large number of the abusive parents in this study reported problems with substance abuse.

Originally, most of the neglectful parents reported having social supports. However, after a more in-depth study was done of the cases, the researcher found that many of the people who were considered to be social supports for the clients also had experienced extreme difficulty in their lives. Many were people whose own children had been placed in protective custody for various reasons. Aside from a few family members, many of the social supports reported in the cases studied were not adequate enough to be considered "positive" supports.

In accordance with Zimrin's (1986) findings, several of the clients reported that they had very lonely childhoods. Although most were not "only children," they reported feeling "left out." They also reported feeling inadequate and worthless as children, and most reported feeling the same way as adults. Along the same lines as in Steele's study (1974), two clients expressed concern about

their choices of mates. Both of these clients had been physically abused as children, yet both reported having physically and sexually abusive men in their lives. One of these young women stated that she had three small children, had never been married, and had no other income besides public assistance. She reported that she was 22 years old and needed help with the children. She went on to state, "I'm not about anything, I have nothing and with all of these kids, I'll never have anyone. So I have to deal with whoever will deal with me and the kids!"

Many of the clients who were interviewed lived in low-income housing or the "projects." These homes were all connected and in most cases had shared walls on each side. Several clients reported that they did not associate with any of their neighbors because they would then be involved in their business. One client reported that the walls were so thin that she could hear everything happening next door anyway, and the neighbors were not doing any better than she was.

Often, the family consisted of maltreated siblings--two or more, and frequently as many as five. For the children to remain out of the home and out of foster care, more often than not the siblings would have to be split up among several different members of the family and extended family.

Historically, the extended family has been the source of emotional support, of child-rearing skills, and of economic resources in times of crisis. The relationship an extended family

has with the nuclear family is an important influence on the functioning of that family. Problems arise when these relationships are dysfunctional or nonexistent.

In neglectful or abusive families, it is more likely than in normal families that the extended family will be absent either physically or emotionally, increasing the parent's loneliness and isolation. This was the situation with the physical abuse cases that were studied. The majority of physically abusive clients reported having no social supports. Along the same lines, it appeared that 64% of the clients studied had no positive social support (see Appendix D).

Although not all of the child-abusing or child-neglecting clients reported a lack of positive supports, the lack of adequate support might have triggered or played an active role in the actions of the sexually abusive clients. The findings of this study supported Straus's (1980) view that child maltreatment is not a product of stressful factors or social isolation alone, but is the result of stress in the absence of social support.

In the researcher's experience as a foster care worker, she has found that grandparents often report their own daughters or sons for neglecting their children, to protect their grandchildren. Several of the grandparents explained that they would continue to support their children, but they felt compelled to turn their children in, in hopes of helping them. The grandparents often professed not to understand why their child had abused the grandchild but would frequently offer to care for the abused child temporarily.

The researcher has has the opportunity to discuss the extended family concept with several family members who have "taken in" other children. Although a majority of the individuals reported some financial difficulty in feeding and caring for another child, they believed it was better than allowing the state to disrupt their families completely. Therefore, they offered themselves as a social support to the families in need.

One of the researcher's most difficult cases as a services specialist involved an impoverished black family, which consisted of a widowed mother, her three young children, and the maternal grandmother. The referral was made by the grandmother, who said the children's mother had left them alone unsupervised, for several days at a time, on more than one occasion.

An investigation of the family was conducted. The children were assessed to be at risk and were removed from their mother's care. The grandmother was the appropriate person with whom to place the children, but she had no one to care for the youngsters while she worked; she did not have adequate funds to pay for a baby sitter. Thus, she was forced to choose between two options.

The first option was to quit her job and accept the small amount of money that state assistance would grant for the care of the children. Choosing this option would not only reduce her income and her ability to provide for herself and the children financially, but it would also reduce her ability to maintain her home. The grandmother's second option was to allow the children to be placed

in foster care because the Department of Social Services was unable to provide funding for day care. Consequently, the children were placed in foster care until their mother could regain custody of them.

The children were removed from an essentially poor home and placed in a middle-class setting. They enjoyed the privileges and life style their new home provided. After placement, the children reported to their foster parents and a therapist that their mother had physically abused them and that they did not want to be returned to her care. These allegations were reported to Children's Protective Services for further investigation.

Children often manipulate the child welfare system to work to their benefit. In this case, the children did not want to return to a life of hunger and poverty. They saw a way to get away from it and seized the opportunity.

#### Unemployment and Poverty

Some sociologists assume that growing up in poverty, especially in a ghetto, is a chief cause of abusive parenting because, statistically, more incidents of abuse and neglect are reported from lower socioeconomic groups. Because of the influence of poverty in limiting the options of those affected by it, a number of observers would like to attribute all abuse, crime, and violence to impoverishment. However, because child abuse and neglect also occur among the more affluent, experts have disagreed about whether

poverty leads to child maltreatment or whether being poor means one is more likely to be reported for abuse or neglect.

Poor people tend to use community agencies, which are prone to comply with the laws concerning the reporting of child abuse and neglect. Thus, reporting of abuse and neglect is more frequent among people in the lower socioeconomic groups because they are often in contact with these agencies. Indigent people take their children to emergency rooms and public health facilities for medical treatment, whereas persons of means will take their children to private pediatricians, who are much less likely to report suspected abuse or neglect. Also, the professionals at emergency rooms and public health facilities usually do not have close personal ties with their patients or clients and hence have less hesitation about reporting them than they would if they worked in the suburbs and served more affluent people.

Although members of the higher socioeconomic classes are involved in crime, violence, and abuse, cases of abuse by these persons often are not reported. If they are reported, the courts and other agencies frequently deal with them differently, if at all. This is not beneficial to the parents or to the child because repeated abuse may occur.

Many experts argue that professionals who are required to report instances of abuse find it easier to believe abuse or neglect by poor people than by those in their own socioeconomic class. Thus, they are more likely to report poor persons.

Despite the preceding arguments, the findings of this research supported the notion that there seems to be a linear relationship between income and maltreatment. The lower a family's income, the most likely the parents are to mistreat their children. It should be noted that poverty is not necessarily a cause of child maltreatment. Many poor people care for their children adequately, and many families of sufficient means mistreat their children. Be that as it may, 77% of the clients in this study were not regularly employed and were eligible for government assistance.

Most of the neglectful parents in this study were young, and the vast majority of them had not completed high school. Without an education, it is difficult to find a job that pays more than AFDC (and will cover the cost of child care if the children are not of school age). A young mother of 24 with four children under age eight reported that she did not receive much money on public assistance, and therefore she needed to get a job. She had not completed high school and had no marketable skills. Although she had expressed an interest in working, she would have needed to obtain a position that paid more than AFDC plus food stamps plus day care for the baby. It would be almost impossible to obtain such a position without at least a diploma.

The idea that those who abuse their children were physically abused themselves was a working hypothesis initially stated by Kempe et al. (1962); later researchers have broadened and added to this hypothesis. The broader view includes the idea that the majority of abusive parents were either physically abused or otherwise neglected



as children. Neglect is difficult to define, but it suggests unmet needs and emotional or maternal deprivation.

The results from this study offer a slightly different viewpoint from the traditional concept about the etiology of child abuse; i.e., child abuse results from one of three independent factors--an abusive person's own abusive childhood, unemployment and poverty, or social or emotional isolation. Because being abused during childhood, unemployment and poverty, and social or emotional isolation are all strongly related to multiple types of stressful life events, the three factors might not be independent of one another. Very clear is the finding that the abusing persons in this study exemplified at least one of the above-mentioned risk factors. The profile chart in Appendix E supports this finding. Each of the abusing persons had a history of at least one of the risk factors mentioned.

The term *child abuse* frequently is used without being defined, and hence its meaning is open to subjective interpretation. Concepts of what constitutes child abuse are broadening. Child abuse now includes neglect, maltreatment, and degrees of physical abuse that are not represented in much of the literature on child abuse. Nonetheless, classic risk factors are used to assess children's chances of being abused in the future. The presumed risk factors include parents' history of childhood abuse, social or emotional isolation, and unemployment and poverty.

### General Discussion

In 65% of the cases studied, victims of physical abuse were raised by single parents who were, in most instances (60%), their mothers. Many people believe that the physically abusive parent is often the child's stepparent. Throughout history, there have been horror stories of child abuse by a stepparent. However, the findings of this research did not support the commonly held image of a physically abusive person.

Goldstein et al. (1983) held that the best parents are the biological ones. Their opinion was based on the belief that natural parents care for their children more and better than anyone else. This research did not support Goldstein's theory. Although the stepparent was the perpetrator in some of the cases studied, in 67% of the cases it was the biological mother who abused the children.

Consistent with the findings of Spearly and Lauderdale (1983), there seemed to be a relationship between being a single parent and the neglect or physical abuse of the children. Single parents (including divorced and separated parents) were overrepresented among abusive and neglectful parents (73%) in this study. In an adequately functioning two-parent family, parents rely on each other for nurturing and support in raising their children. Because single parents lack this support, the real strains of single parenthood must not go unnoticed.

In a large number of single-parent families, the mother is the custodial parent. In 60% of the case studied, victims of physical abuse were being raised by single parents. In 11% of the cases, the

mother's boyfriend or live-in partner was the abuser, but most often (67%) the abusive person was the mother. This could have been because she was with the child more often than anyone else was. The stresses she experienced could have been intensified because of her own background of deprivation and abuse. Add to this the lack of social support and her marginal economic resources, often public assistance, and the potential for child maltreatment was present.

An interesting finding that emerged from this research is that most of the physical abuse cases involved white families at the subsidized assistance (50%) or assistance (35%) levels. (See Appendix D). This is not to suggest that physical abuse does not occur within the black population; it does. Rather, this finding does suggest that instances of child abuse in black families are not reported as often as those in white families. There are a number of explanations for this finding. One is that physical bruises show more readily on people with fair complexions, and might not be as visible on blacks.

Another explanation is the fact that extended families are prevalent within the black community and surface when a child is abused or neglected. There is an open line of communication within the black community, and when a child is mistreated, the word spreads quickly. Another family member, a godparent, or a close friend will take and, if necessary, raise the child.

The findings of this research suggested that more and more black families are being reported for neglect. Often the people who report these families are distressed family members who are fed up with the way the neglectful parents have been living.

The intention to reunify the families is understood by all involved. Although extended family members take the children into their homes as a support to the family, it is intended that the biological parents will straighten themselves out enough to regain custody of the child or children. Unfortunately, what usually happens is that the abusive parent feels a sense of freedom, without the responsibility of caring for children. The parent feels free and single and becomes more and more self-serving and less and less mindful of the children. In such cases, the children often remain with their relatives or extended families until they are old enough to care for themselves.

There is a prevalent belief that abusive parents were themselves victims of child abuse (the learned theory). In this research, 30% of the abusive parents reported having been physically abused as children, 20% reported being neglected, and 24% claimed they were victims of sexual abuse as children.

A large majority of the families in this study were reported because of neglect and substance-abuse issues. According to the findings, 75% of the neglected children came from homes in which there was substance abuse. Substance abuse is an increasingly common issue among neglectful parents. A large majority of the neglectful and abusive parents in this study were substance abusers.

In fact, in 70% of the cases studied, the perpetrators had histories of substance abuse and/or criminal activity that had been related to substance abuse.

Parents who are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol are at very high risk for abuse and neglect. Neglect is common in substance abusers, who become immobilized, semi-conscious, or pass out and are unable to perform everyday tasks while they are high. Very few substance abusers are able to hold steady jobs, which often leads to poverty and depression.

After interviewing many adults, including people (mainly black) outside the study sample, the researcher realized that there is some uncertainty about what constitutes physical abuse. In this report, physical abuse was defined as an act of excessive physical mistreatment. Such mistreatment usually surfaces when a child is being disciplined or punished.

Many of the people who were interviewed reported that they had been spanked when they were children. In many instances, they were spanked as a form of discipline, but frequently spanking was done to show affection. Many of the abusive parents reported the belief that "an undisciplined child is an unloved child."

Certain stereotypes surface when one envisions a perpetrator of sexual abuse. For example, sex offenders are often thought of as the child's stepparent or "dirty old men" who are unknown to the child. Victims of sex offenses often are considered promiscuous females who provoke their own assaults. The findings of this study

revealed that the sexual perpetrator was not necessarily a substance abuser, unemployed, or poor. The offender did not always have past involvement with Protective Services or criminal activity. Actually, most of the sexual perpetrators were married, and all of them were the biological fathers of the abused children (see profile in Appendix E).

An unemployed person is indigent and ultimately lives in poverty, which can be a highly stressful situation. As the stress builds, child care responsibilities become more burdensome, and child abuse or neglect can occur. Abusive acts often carry feelings of inadequacy and depression for the abusive person. Substance abuse helps these people numb their negative feelings and allows them to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. It is difficult, if not impossible, to remain employed if one is constantly out of control and irresponsible. All of these conditions together form a series of negative events that frequently lead to abusive situations.

Neglect takes many forms. In this study, neglect was defined as not taking adequate care of the children--more specifically, not feeding, supervising, or clothing the youngster sufficiently. In this study, considerably more cases of neglect (62%) than of physical abuse (29%) or sexual abuse (10%) were reported and confirmed.

A notable finding with regard to this research sample is that very few black families (14%) were reported for sexual abuse. According to the findings, 86% of the reported sexual abuse cases

involved white families. This is not to imply that sexual abuse does not occur in black families; rather, it suggests that sexual abuse is not reported as often in black families as it is in white families.

In the profile of the physically abusive client, a large number of clients reported having been physically abused as children; others claimed no history of childhood abuse of any kind. A history of abuse as a child is consistent with the literature on physically abusive individuals and was the expected response. However, concern must be expressed with regard to the large number of clients who claimed they had absolutely no history of childhood abuse. These reports can be explained in several ways.

One explanation is that the client were telling the truth. Many of the clients who were interviewed said that they perceived the physical discipline they received as children to be mere spankings. Ironically, those same disciplinary actions today would probably be perceived by Protective Services as beatings. In fact, several subjects admitted that they probably would have been placed in protective custody if Protective Services had existed when they were children.

A very real issue is determining the difference between spanking and beating or abusing. A fine line separates the two. An issue that must be considered is who decides where that line is drawn. Often the determining party is a professional who has no

consistent criterion with which to make a decision but is usually free to make a determination according to his or her values and upbringing. Hence, there is a wide range of connotations of what constitutes physical abuse, ranging from pushing the children to shaking them to death.

Another explanation of the finding that many clients reported no history of childhood abuse is that these individuals often give unreliable histories. People feel humiliated and often frightened when they have abused a child. Under direct questioning, clients often resist divulging information and frequently lie to the interviewer.

The profile of the physically abusive client in this study is consistent with that portrayed in the literature. The profile supports the theory that the physically abusive client has experienced one or more of the stressful factors. In this study, the lack of support or social and emotional isolation was evident in the physically abusive individuals.

The profile chart in Appendix E was intended to illustrate whether there was a meaningful difference in the profiles of physically abusive, neglectful, and sexually abusive clients and whether there was a correlation between the profiles of the abusive and neglectful persons and the types of child abuse they committed. The researcher intended to delineate different characteristics for each type of abuse. However, no such distinction was evident.



Although the findings of this study did corroborate the theory propounded in the literature--that the person who maltreats his or her child had been the victim of abuse or neglect as a child, socially isolated, and/or unemployed or indigent--none of the profiles proved to be completely negative. That is, none of the profiles portrayed persons who had been abused or neglected as children and unemployed and of the lower socioeconomic class, with negative or no social supports. Each profile reflected at least one positive situation in the perpetrator's history. For example, although the perpetrator may have been physically abused as a child, and may have been unemployed and at the assistance income level, he or she might have had positive social and emotional support systems.

No differences were evident in the backgrounds of the abusing clients. Child abuse happens in affluent families as well as in indigent families. It happens with or without social and/or emotional supports. It is committed by the employed as well as the unemployed. People who have never been neglected or physically or sexually abused, as well as those who have suffered such maltreatment, are child abusers.

Although no meaningful differences were found in the profiles of the clients studied, the results did allow room for some generalizations. According to the profiles in Appendix E, physical abuse was the type of maltreatment the clients most often reported having experienced as children. Most of the clients were unemployed or had never been employed and had no social or emotional supports.

Thus, according to the profile developed in this study, most child-abusive and child-neglecting clients were themselves victims of child abuse, were unemployed, and/or lacked social or emotional supports.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

The researcher's purpose in this study was to determine whether abuse during the abusive person's childhood, social or emotional isolation, or employment and poverty were present in the abusive person's history. The intention was to discover whether there is a positive relationship between being the perpetrator of child maltreatment and being socially isolated, unemployed or impoverished, or the victim of maltreatment as a child. To accomplish this purpose, the researcher attempted to answer the following three research questions:

1. Is there a positive relationship between being the victim of child maltreatment and becoming a perpetrator of child maltreatment as an adult (the learned theory)?
2. Is there a positive relationship between having virtually no social or emotional supports and becoming a perpetrator of child maltreatment (the social and emotional isolation theory)?
3. Is there a positive relationship between being unemployed or impoverished and becoming a perpetrator of child maltreatment (the unemployment and poverty theory)?

The data for this study were gathered from written documents in 70 official case files of child abuse cases from the Jackson County, Michigan, Department of Social Services. Forty-three cases involved neglect, 20 cases involved physical abuse, and 7 cases involved sexual abuse. The subjects of the study were the actual perpetrators of child maltreatment.

#### Conclusions, Limitations, and Recommendations

According to the findings of this study, a client's having been abused or neglected as a child was positively related to his or her abusive or neglectful parenting. Sixty-four percent of the abusive clients reported that they had been victims of abuse or neglect when they were children. Although these results supported the theory that abusive parenting is directly related to one's having been abused as a child, the researcher had expected to find that many more people had experienced abuse during their childhoods. It is possible that many of the clients who reported no history of abuse were ignorant about what actually constituted abuse, and/or they might have been dishonest in their responses.

In future research, subjects should be provided with written, straightforward descriptions of abuse and neglect. It may be necessary to give examples of specific instances of the different types of abuse, to avoid any discrepancies in responses.

The results also supported the theory that abusive parenting is positively related to a parent's being socially inactive and/or having virtually no social or emotional supports. Sixty-four

percent of the abusive or neglectful clients reported having either negative or no social or emotional supports.

The scope of this study was much too broad. It allowed just a brief examination of each theory pertaining to child maltreatment. Too many issues and too many causal factors were introduced in this single project. Hence, further research should be limited to one theory, such as the learned theory, or to one specific type of abuse, to allow an in-depth study of the subject. In addition, a future study of this nature should include a much larger sample.

The research findings also supported the idea that unemployment and poverty are positively related to the maltreatment of one's children. Seventy-seven percent of the child-abusing or child-neglecting clients reported irregular employment or lack of employment, and 49% were eligible for public assistance.

Although indigent or unemployed clients were reported for child abuse and neglect more often than people in better financial situations, there are plenty of abusive and neglectful affluent families, as well. Affluent children who are abused may be more difficult to detect because they seem to be well provided for. But the problem is real and must be studied further.

A major concern with this study is that the findings might not be totally accurate. According to this study, only seven cases of sexual abuse were reported out of the 70 total abuse cases. This figure is somewhat misleading. The research was based on the original complaint, and subsequent complaints documented in the case files were not included. Upon rereading the case files, the

researcher discovered that 15 cases of sexual abuse had been reported after the original complaint.

Many methodological concerns arise in obtaining service-outcome information directly from child welfare clients. To some extent, the problems are the same as those encountered in asking anyone "sensitive" questions or in interviewing "deviant" persons. Evidence that responses concerning child welfare cases are valid is largely impressionistic because there often is no practical way to verify parents' self-reports of their behaviors or family situations. In most studies, researchers have found that parents voluntarily disclosed at least some negative or embarrassing information about themselves or their families. Presumably this disclosure can be attributed to the promise of confidentiality, adequate rapport with the researcher, and the basic desire to be honest.

In conclusion, consistent with past research and the theories presented in this document, stress in the form of such situations as unemployment, poverty, social isolation, and being a victim of abuse or neglect as a child seems to be positively related to maltreatment of one's own children. Further, the research supported the theory that abusing clients had been victims of one or more of the above-mentioned stressful situations.

A study should be undertaken to determine whether specific experiences lead to particular forms of abuse or neglect. The exact type of abuse the abusive person suffered as a child should be

documented, and the type of abuse or neglect he or she later committed also should be documented. Then it might be determined whether people who experience specific types of maltreatment as children abuse their own children in the same manner. For example, were physically abusive adults physically abused as children? Were neglectful parents neglected as children? Were sexually abusive adults sexually abused during their childhoods?

Research also should be done on the frequency with which instances of sexual abuse come to light after a child is placed into care.

## APPENDICES



APPENDIX A

LETTER OF PERMISSION

Jackson County Department of Social Services  
301 Lewis Glick Highway  
Jackson, Michigan 49204

To Whom It May Concern:

I am currently in the process of writing a thesis for my Master's degree in the social sciences at Michigan State University.

I am requesting your permission to include general case studies in my thesis, along with a copy of a blank petition and an Initial Service Plan Outline (Item 722, page 34 of the Michigan Department of Social Services Service Manual).

I will not reveal the identity of the subjects, nor will I discuss specific information of the cases to violate the rules or regulations of confidentiality. I will only discuss the case studies in general terms.

I will submit a copy of the completed thesis to the department.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Joyce E. Scott

## APPENDIX B

### LETTER TO COMPLETE INITIAL SERVICE PLAN

COUNTY BOARD  
Margaret Eaton  
Genevieve Hartwig  
Nate Jackson, Jr.

## STATE OF MICHIGAN



JAMES J. BLANCHARD, Governor

## DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

C. PATRICK BABCOCK, Director

JACKSON COUNTY  
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES  
301 Louis Glick Highway  
P.O. Box 3007  
Jackson, Michigan 49204

Dear

My name is Jodi E. Scott and I am employed with the Michigan Department of Social Services in the Foster Care Unit.

One of my responsibilities in the Foster Care Unit is to complete the Initial Social Study. What this is is a family history. I talk to all members of the household and obtain information on such things as family history, educational background, employment record, health issues, etc.

I will need to complete such a report on your family and would appreciate scheduling an appointment to meet with you in our office on

\_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_  
Day Date Time

If this day and time are not convenient for you, I would appreciate hearing from you to reschedule.

Sincerely,

Jodi E. Scott  
Child Welfare Worker  
788-9431

JES:jaw

## APPENDIX C

### INITIAL SERVICE PLAN OUTLINE



## MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

**SERVICES MANUAL**  
 CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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## INITIAL SERVICE PLAN

IDENTIFYING INFORMATION

Child(ren): (List separately) name, date of birth, case number, placement (if relative, name and address of relative; if institution, name and address of institution; if foster home, note foster home placement only).

Parent(s): Name and relationship, date of birth, address/phone (can list more than one father; name of father should be listed even if whereabouts are unknown).

County of Commitment or Referral: \_\_\_\_\_

Date Entered Care: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Report: \_\_\_\_\_

LEGAL STATUS

Petition (include date), allegation (as contained in petition), Adjudication (hearing date and status).

Reasonable efforts (information from CPS worker).

NOTE: For children who may be Native American, See Services Manual Item 742, "Active" and Reasonable Efforts.

1. Include services that were provided to the child and parent to prevent removal.
2. If services were not provided explain the reason why services were not provided.
3. Likely harm to the child if separated from parent, guardian or custodian.
4. Likely harm if child returned to parent, guardian or custodian.

SOCIAL WORK CONTACTS

Date, with whom, type (i.e., home call, telephone, office, etc.)

FAMILY SOCIAL HISTORY AND ASSESSMENT

NOTE: Areas addressed in the social history will vary depending on the situation. When appropriate, the following areas are to be discussed:

1. **FAMILY COMPOSITION:** List every person living in the home when the child was placed in foster care. Include all adults in home and children in home who are not under court jurisdiction. For each person listed state his/her full name, date of birth, relationship to the child, marital status, religion, education, employment, economic status.


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2. **FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN PRESENT PROBLEM:** For each person living in the home discuss his/her involvement with the situation that led to court jurisdiction. For the child(ren) include their explanation of the problem and attitude toward intervention, their reaction to separation. Some sources of this information, in addition to personal interview, are the PS narrative, collateral sources such as a psychological report, school report, information from other family members.
3. **CHILD-REARING HISTORY AND BEHAVIORAL MANAGEMENT:** Complete for adults only living in the home. Discuss here how the adult handles discipline. Where relevant, include a discussion of the discipline practices of his/her parent or custodian. Indicate if information shared by person is consistent with other available information or whether it conflicts with other information from children, other adults, psychological reports, etc.
4. **INTRA-FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS:** Complete for both children and adults in the home. Where there are adult relationships, note how long they have been together and any observations about their interactions. For children, note progress in school, sibling relationships and any observations on interactions between children in home and caretakers.
5. **HEALTH/LEGAL:** Include any relevant information about the individuals physical, mental and/or emotional health. Include any relevant information about substance abuse, psychiatric treatment, involvement in illegal activities (if applicable to situation). If appropriate, complete a police check of person locally and note here.
6. **SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORK:** Discuss here the family's external social support network. Note other family members, friends or social agencies, involved with family or regular family activities (i.e., religious). Note the nature and frequency of their involvement.
7. **FAMILY ASSESSMENT:** Using all the information gathered in the social history including worker impressions, complete an assessment of the family unit. Include an analysis of the families strengths and weaknesses. (Note the basis for this and how it relates to reunifying this family and/or dismissing court wardship.) Include observations about how the family relates to each other particularly around the situation that led to court jurisdiction of the child(ren). Note parental/custodial acknowledgment of any identified problems and expressed willingness/motivation to change and any barriers to that (i.e., other adult) within the family unit and the basis for stating that. Worker should note the major problems that need to be resolved before the child can be returned or wardship dismissed and indicators that the problem(s) have been resolved. These should be same as were noted in the original petition.



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**CHILD SOCIAL HISTORY AND ASSESSMENT**

(For each child under court jurisdiction)

1. Social history (emotional/physical development, past experiences, problems)
2. Placement Selection Criteria

Describe the type of home or institution in which the child is placed and then evaluate each of the following factors which are to be considered in selecting the most appropriate placement and indicate the priority that is given to any single factor or combination of factors. If the criteria have not been met indicate why. If the placement is an initial placement until a more appropriate permanent placement can be found indicate this and in the progress summary below indicate when a permanent placement will be made.

- . The case plan which includes a goal of permanence.
- . The physical and emotional needs of the child.
- . Proximity to the child's family.
- . Placement with relatives of the child.
- . Placement with siblings of the child.
- . The child's racial, ethnic, and cultural identity, heritage and background.
- . The child's and child's family's religious preference.
- . The least-restrictive, i.e., most family-like setting.
- . The continuity of relationships.
- . Availability of placement resources for the purposes of timely placements.

3. Describe the discipline and child handling techniques to be used while the youth is in placement.

**PROGRESS SUMMARY TO DATE**

Describe efforts during the reporting period by the parent, child and agency to alleviate the presenting problems and enable the family to be reunited. Identify services provided by the worker during the report period to child, parents and family. For child include discussion of adjustment to foster care, school and any other relevant information/observation about behavior, medical needs, etc. Projection of the expected length of stay and anticipated next placement.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Worker recommendation to the court on the case. Includes recommendations about child's placement whether he/she should remain in care, expectations of parent regarding cooperation with agency, time frame for returning home (if applicable).

If child is permanent ward, complete treatment plan and service agreement using format for permanent wards.

If child is temporary ward, complete treatment plan and service agreement using format for temporary wards.



## APPENDIX D

### TABULATION OF THE RESULTS

## Tabulation of the Results

	Type of Abuse						Total	
	Neglect (n=43)		Physical (n=20)		Sexual (n=7)			
	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
<u>Type of abuse the abusive person suffered as a child</u>								
Neglect	21	9	20	4	14	1	20	14
Physical	33	14	35	7	14	1	31	22
Sexual	16	7	10	2	0	0	13	9
None reported	30	13	35	7	72	5	36	25
<u>Abusive person's employment status</u>								
Unemployed	26	11	30	6	29	2	27	19
Never employed	37	16	25	5	0	0	30	21
Irregularly employed	21	9	20	4	14	1	20	14
Employed	16	7	25	5	57	4	23	16
<u>Social and emotional support for abusive person</u>								
Negative	35	15	30	6	29	2	33	23
None	21	9	45	9	59	4	31	22
Positive	44	19	25	5	14	1	36	25
<u>Socioeconomic status (income level)</u>								
Strongly independent	16	7	15	3	29	2	17	12
Subsidized assistance	26	11	50	10	42	3	34	24
Assistance level	58	25	35	7	29	2	49	34

Note: Neglect cases (n = 43) constituted 61% of the total cases in the study, physical abuse cases (n = 29) constituted 29% of the total cases, and sexual abuse cases (n = 7) constituted 10% of the total cases.

## APPENDIX E

### PROFILE OF MOST FREQUENT RESPONSES

## Profile of Most Frequent Responses

Type of Abuse as an Adult	Type of Abuse as a Child	Employment Status	Social and Emotional Support
Neglect	Physical	Never employed	Positive
Physical	Physical/none	Unemployed	None
Sexual	None	Employed	None

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