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## Conceptualising Child Neglect in Namibia – Challenges & Strategies - Brief Note on Research in Progress

**Key Words:** Child Neglect, maltreatment, Namibia, Research, sub-Saharan Africa, Schools

### **Abstract**

Child neglect is a pervasive and complex public health issue which has significant cultural variance across social ideologies and traditions. This note identifies a gap in the conceptualisation of neglect within Namibia, and recognises an opportunity for development of culturally-relevant knowledge within the context of normative child rearing practice.

### **Introduction**

This brief note describes an emerging cross-national research collaboration between academics at the University of Namibia, University of Bristol, and Cardiff University to increase knowledge of child neglect. The key purpose of the proposed research study is to understand what constitutes neglect for the Namibian child. It highlights a need for a culturally-relevant social work response (Gray et al, 2008) to neglect within the local context of child-rearing practice in Namibia (Brown, 2007 & 2011; Neingo, 2012; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). Following the passing of the Child Care and Protection Act in March 2015 (Kangandjela & Mapaure, 2017) the Act has not yet been implemented as the associated regulations and guidance are yet to be finalised by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare (Amukwelele, 2017; Unicef, 2017). This note recognises a gap in country-specific research and practice guidance for practitioners responding to child neglect through early and preventative services.

## **Global Landscape of Neglect**

Child neglect is a chronic global issue. Identifying whether the care a child is receiving is poor enough to be labelled neglect is particularly difficult, as neglect is not based upon a specific incident as with other types of abuse. Neglect can be said to be rooted in the notion of what is considered 'good enough' parenting within a specific society and at a specific time (Horwath, 2005, 2013). However, because it is usually broad-based with a myriad of causes (Horwath, 2007; Daniel et al, 2011), responding to neglect appropriately and at the right time to meet the child's needs is a considerable challenge for practice.

The environment in which a child is raised affects the very nature in which they form relationships with others in later life, and ultimately how they parent their own children (Horwath, 2007). Child neglect impacts the health, development and overall wellbeing of our children worldwide (WHO, 2002; Dubowitz et al, 2016). It is a complex public health issue (Daniel, 2017) which has significant cultural variance within diverse ideological frameworks and traditions (Spyrelis, 2013). Neglect is not a fixed concept but a social construct which moves and changes over time, dependent upon the cultural values and beliefs of a particular society (Scourfield, 2000). Attempting to apply an agreed single definition of neglect which extends across local and global environs is problematic (Daniel et al, 2011). For this reason, further insight into child neglect in the context of traditional childcare practices is needed to inform culturally-relevant practice responses within the country.

## **Local Landscape of Neglect**

Namibia is a country in south west Africa which borders Angola and Zambia to the north, Botswana to the east and South Africa to the south. Namibia gained independence from South Africa in 1990, following the Namibian War of

Independence. Although Namibia is categorised as an upper middle-income country, it has one of the most unequal distributions of income per capita in the world (with a GINI coefficient of 0.572) (Ministry of Health & Social Services, 2013; World Bank, 2016). Despite being one of continent's more affluent countries (World Bank, 2016), almost a third of the population live below the national poverty line (28.7%) (GRN, 2013). Although there is no known empirical research specifically on child neglect in Namibia, a small literature exists in the wider context of sub-Saharan Africa (Laird, 2016a & 2016b; Lartey, 2008; Mbagaya et al, 2013; Pierce & Bozalek, 2009). That said, research studies into the implementation, and assessment of child maltreatment prevention and protection services in Namibia provide many insights in this area (Amukwelele, 2017; GRN, 2013).

Laird (2016a&b) critically evaluates the relevance of conceptualisations of child neglect in sub-Saharan Africa, stating that philosophies and principles from academics in the US and United Kingdom have been transferred and embedded in practice through the domestication of the Convention on the Rights of the Child since its inception in 1990. Laird (2016b) argues child neglect to be an ethnocentric notion which requires examination so as to test its suitability before applying it within differing cultures. Meinck et al (2015) go further to caution against trusting evidence from Western samples of child maltreatment. They highlight the dangers of assuming transferability from Western studies to African countries, instead recommending local research studies are undertaken within specific societies that will inform preventative and evidenced-based interventions.

In understanding how child neglect is conceptualised in Namibia, it is necessary to consider the context of traditional child-rearing practices in sub-Saharan Africa (Twum-Danso Imoh & Ame, 2012). Brown (2011) highlights the dominance of extended family in child-rearing practices (Neingo, 2012; Wusu & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2003), over the western model of a nuclear family where care is commonly provided by biological parents (Weisner et al, 1997). Brown (2011) describes the practice of 'child fosterage', as the process of raising a child, both socially and biologically,

by somebody other than the child's biological parent(s) (Wusu & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2006). Child-rearing is a collective task delivered by a range of extended family members (Levine et al, 1994), through a semi-permanent but also flexible agreement with the child's biological parent(s) (Goody, 1973). Within this arrangement, a person has many reciprocal duties and accountabilities to extended relatives outside of their immediate family unit (Nukunya, 1992). Child fosterage extends and reinforces a family's existing networks, whilst also reducing imbalance in the number of children between households (Payne-Price, 1981; Vandermeersch, 2002).

There are many reasons for child fosterage within African cultures. Brown (2007) suggests that motivations include a household's need for a helper or an heir, a symbol of prosperity, or purely as a token of friendship and giving between families. It is also proposed that provision of a fruitful fosterage arrangement could improve a woman's place within her household or wider networks (Bledsoe, 1990). Conversely, explanations for the fostering-out of a child include illegitimacy, poverty, death of parent(s), promotion of independence, increased discipline, or improved educational or work-related development. Motives aside, children of lower social position are known to be treated as household servants or farm-hands, whilst also experiencing less educational opportunities and a lower sense of well-being (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1985). The greater the level of socio-economic disparity between families, the greater the hardship the fostered child is likely to endure whilst in their care (Brown, 2011). This emphasises the significance of the context in which the child enters the fosterage arrangement, and consequently is central to understanding their propensity for experiencing inadequate or neglectful care.

### **Research In Progress**

Further insight is needed to understand how child neglect is conceptualised within the Namibian context. A small collaborative research study between academics at the University of Namibia, University of Bristol, and Cardiff

University is in progress with the purpose of gathering rich qualitative data in this field. The cross-national study aims to investigate what constitutes child neglect within Namibia's normative child-rearing system (Twum-Danso Imoh & Ame, 2012). The study will collect data using semi-structured interviews with social workers and a range of school staff who work with child neglect in their professional roles.

The study will investigate three diverse regions (out of fourteen) in Namibia: Kavango (North), Khomas (Central) and Karas (South). Two primary schools in each region will be sampled, with two members of staff from each school participating in interviews ( $n=12$ ). The interviews will explore their thoughts, feelings and understandings of child neglect within the local social environment. In addition to school staff, one statutory child protection social worker ( $n=3$ ) in each of the regions will also be interviewed with the purpose of gathering rich country-specific data on child neglect from the perspectives of both education and social care. Interviews ( $n=15$ ) will be undertaken by two teams of researchers, each team comprising of a researcher from the University of \*\*\*\*\* to increase sensitivity to traditional and cultural understandings of neglect within the country's ethnically diverse context.

The study aims to provide insight into how child neglect is conceptualised in Namibia, and how neglect is identified and responded to at the individual and community levels by a small number of practitioners in schools and social care organisations. Findings of the project hope to provide insights into knowledge in this area, and support the potential development of a larger-scale study which will inform future policy or practice for early childhood practitioners in Namibia. A larger-scale study in this field will also create a platform for comparative analysis of practitioner responses to child neglect in schools between Namibia and the United Kingdom.

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