



Negotiating stigma: Understanding mothers' responses to accusations of child neglect

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ABSTRACT

Current child protective service policies encourage family preservation and reunification. Yet little is known about how mothers accused of child neglect experience being labeled neglectful or how this influences compliance with child protective services (CPS) service plans. This paper reports the results of a case study of mothers' perceptions of being labeled neglectful. Drawing on symbolic interactionist theories of identity, interviews with sixteen mothers and sixteen child protective service caseworkers, and content analysis of interview data obtained, this paper describes the strategies mothers employ to resist the stigma of being labeled a neglectful mother, strategies that ultimately put them at odds with child protection goals. Findings suggest that mothers' identity preservation and maintenance have powerful implications for CPS policy.

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1. Introduction

Parents accused of neglecting their children experience a very powerful and public intrusion into their family lives, yet research has not attended to the identity responses of this population. All mothers want to self-identify as a “good mother,” no matter what the reality may be. Identifying oneself as a “good mother” may be especially important among low-income women with low educational attainment who have limited long-term economic prospects (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Mothers who undergo child protective service (CPS) investigations have this identity called into question and may wrestle with the profound stigma as a result (Scholte et al., 1999). Goffman (1963) describes such stigma as “a process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity.” When neglectful mothers' children are removed from their care, the rebuff of their “good mother” status becomes public, resulting in what Goffman calls a “spoiled identity.”

Mothers are important actors in the process we call child neglect (Swift, 1995; Turney, 2000). CPS caseworkers label mothers neglectful. Mothers then decide whether to cooperate with CPS to ensure family preservation or reunification. More than 80% of parental neglect cases handled by CPS involve unmarried mothers living in poverty (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). An essential step in addressing child neglect is therefore understanding such mothers' receptivity or resistance to intervention.

Given how important the mothers' role is in child welfare outcomes, we know little about how mothers labeled “neglectful” view their experiences with CPS, how they talk about parenting, and how they grapple with the negative label of “neglectful.” This study

explores how neglectful mothers understand their parenting identity as they work with CPS. Drawing from Goffman's (1961a,b, 1963) work on identity, I explore how mothers' “identity work” following the stigma of having a confirmed neglect case shapes the meanings mothers attach to CPS intrusion into what is normally a private domain. I identify strategies mothers adopt to preserve their sense of positive motherhood in the face of having their parenting behavior judged deviant from community norms. Specifically, I consider the “identity talk” of mothers, defined by Snow and Anderson (1987) as the ways in which individuals converse about themselves to “construct, assert, and maintain desired personal identities” (p. 1348). It is especially useful to consider the identity talk of this group given that the positive parenting identity most mothers seek to maintain is in stark contrast to the identity the state assigns these mothers. Utilizing the symbolic interactionist practice of considering personal identity as being crafted by one's reaction to other actors, I incorporate the perspectives of caseworkers who found that these sixteen mothers neglected their children to contextualize these mothers' accounts.

1.1. Background

My study seeks to develop ways of understanding mothers' participation in services by highlighting their identity needs. Current research calls for better understanding of mothers' decision-making around child welfare services participation (Altman, 2003, 2008; Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, & Vesneski, 2009). Even parents who express an interest in reunification may behave in a manner inconsistent with these stated goals (Wald, Carlsmith, & Leiderman, 1988). Such parental ambivalence may originate from personal forces (such as parents' financial resources, experiences, and characteristics)

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or social forces (such as parents' roles when children are placed in care and caseworker expectations) (Hess & Folaron, 1991). Inconsistency between parents' stated goals and follow-through behavior may be partly due to mothers' feelings of being alienated by the child protection system (Brown, 2006; Dumbrill, 2006). Research suggests that caseworkers' focus on parents' acceptance of culpability may be problematic for parents (Dubowitz, Black, Starr, & Zuravin, 1993; Swift, 1995). Parents who have their children removed may find accepting blame especially difficult; Hess and Folaron (1991) note that "having a child in placement defines a parent's role in ways that can contribute to parent's ambivalence" (p. 419). Indeed, parents indicate a desire for a more caring relationship with caseworkers – one based more on support than blame (Altman, 2008).

Some studies indicate parents may doubt the relevance of service plan provisions (Smith, 2008; Altman, 2003). Mothers who choose to engage in services may do so to keep their families together, rather than improve their mothering skills. They may "go through the motions" (Yatchmenoff, 2005) of services plans, because they want to keep their family together, but they view service plans as punishment (Smith, 2008) rather than as a means to improve behavior case-workers see as problematic.

1.2. Neglect, poverty, and identity

Mothers accused of neglect are often socially disadvantaged in some way. While researchers can make only modest claims to understanding neglectful mothers, studies show neglect occurs most frequently in households headed by unmarried females and is associated with low educational attainment, more than two children in the home, very low-incomes, government assistance, low employment, symptoms of depression, and low levels of social support (Azar, 2002; Drake & Pandey, 1996; Jones & McCurdy, 1992; Wilson, Kuebli, & Hughes, 2005) though not (when controlling for these factors) with race (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996).

Neglect is also linked to material hardship. The association between child maltreatment and poverty in general has been well-documented (Coulton, Korbin, Su, & Chow, 1995; DiLeonardi, 1993; Drake & Pandey, 1996; Jones & McCurdy, 1992; Pelton, 1989; Saunders, Nelson, & Landsman, 1993). While the association between poverty and *all types* of child maltreatment has been well-established, the relationship is most evident among child neglect cases (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). Mothers with children in foster care are especially likely to face economic impoverishment, along with multiple barriers preventing employment, which suggests even further disadvantage (Wells & Shafran, 2005).

The relationship between caseworker and parent is fraught with complicated identity issues for both caseworkers and mothers (Mandell, 2008; Reich, 2005). For caseworkers, work with parents embodies "inherent contradictions" of authority and care and presents challenges to personal identity (Mandell, 2008). Yet for mothers, working with caseworkers is even more fraught with identity challenges. Differences in financial resources and educational levels mark a social distance between caseworker–parent pairings which can be profoundly felt by the parent accused of neglect. Reich's (2005) important descriptive study demonstrates that the authority relations between caseworker and parents can become problematic. Caseworkers who wield power expect parents to show deference in complying with service plans. Yet some parents bristle at the need to show deference to caseworkers, leading to behavior that is not viewed as productive by CPS. Further research into the complicated identity issues mothers accused of neglect struggle with is in order.

If one thinks of mothers as acting instrumentally, my findings suggest a puzzle. On the one hand, neglectful mothers assert a positive parenting identity, in spite of the state's case against them. On the other hand, these mothers also describe reluctant compliance and, in some cases, overt noncompliance, with CPS service plans. Given the

high stakes involved (potentially losing their children), why would these self-described loving mothers not be more cooperative with CPS?

The answer, I argue, is that like almost all mothers, these mothers need to identify as a "good mother." How mothers preserve this identity when the state labels them neglectful, lists them in state registries, and removes their children, is a central concern of this paper. Most neglectful mothers defy parenting stigma by declaring CPS an illegitimate arbiter of their parenting abilities. Most mothers reject the premise on which CPS bases its intervention and resist the CPS label of "neglectful mother." Because these assertions of good motherhood fly in the face of CPS investigations, findings of neglect, and child removals, mothers are not persuaded by the CPS "case" against them. Like other examinations of disadvantaged or low-status groups facing stigma (Anderson, 1976; Snow & Anderson, 1987), I find that mothers employ strategic measures to combat the negative label that CPS places on them. Mothers reject many CPS rules or standards and complain of unfair discretionary enforcement of those rules (institutional distancing). They also distance themselves from those they see as worse mothers (associational distancing). Both distancing techniques explain how they are able to assert a positive parenting identity in the face of negative outside judgment and why they see CPS as an illegitimate judge of their parenting abilities. Mothers describe deep reluctance to meet the requirements CPS imposes. They struggle against the premise of CPS intervention and deny that changes in parenting are needed. Mothers articulate ways in which they overtly do not comply with CPS, signal to CPS their unenthusiastic compliance, or "fake it." Evaluating how mothers respond to a negative parenting label and the associated stigma, and how they enact their denial of that label, illuminates how issues of identity construction and maintenance have powerful implications for policy and programs that rely on client engagement with CPS services.

2. Method

I used purposive sampling to reach a group of neglectful mothers in a rural Michigan county. Participants were unmarried mothers who had open, substantiated neglect cases with CPS. I selected only mothers who were working toward family preservation or reunification and had at least one of their children removed. Sixteen Caucasian mothers were recruited through a parenting skills training program offered by a non-profit organization. Mothers were referred to this program by CPS caseworkers. Parents in this parenting program can be classified as "nonvoluntary," as their participation was based not on their own desire for services, but rather on the pressure from child protection and welfare services (Rooney, 1992). Program instructors invited all unmarried mothers with open neglect cases to participate in the study. Mothers were told the purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of how parents experience CPS. All sixteen eligible mothers agreed to participate (an exceptional response rate, which I attribute to a \$20 financial incentive). Though the number of respondents is modest, it represents all neglectful mothers enrolled in the parenting skills program at the time of recruitment. Recruiting through this program offered the distinct advantage of symbolic distance from CPS. However, it limits this sample to mothers who were participating—at least to some degree—in the CPS process.

Mothers were interviewed in person using a flexible interview schedule that allowed for purposive conversation while allowing mothers to feel comfortable sharing personal stories and experiences. The interviews ranged from 1.5 to 3 h long. Fifteen interviews took place in participants' homes. One mother who was living in a shelter was interviewed at a community center. No other adults were present during the interviews. Participants were asked open-ended questions about their experiences, perceptions and attitudes about parenting in general, and about their CPS experience in particular. The majority of data reported on in this paper comes from the narratives parents

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