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SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS  
OF CHILD EMOTIONAL ABUSE

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Karla Aurora Lara

June 2012

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Karla Aurora Lara

June 2012

Approved by:



Dr. Janet Chang, Faculty Supervisor  
Social Work

6/6/2012  
Date



Dr. Rosemary McCaslin,  
M.S.W. Research Coordinator

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to assess graduate level social work students' perceptions of child emotional abuse. This study employed a survey design with self-administered questionnaires. Data were collected from 41 participants. Participants were presented with eight emotionally abusive behaviors and were asked to indicate their level of acceptance and the abuse status of those behaviors. Furthermore, participants were asked to identify their level of agreement with regards to multiple statements that reflected their personal views and experiences with issues related to emotional abuse.

Findings of this study indicated that most social work students regarded most behaviors presented as unacceptable but were more hesitant to categorize those actions as emotional abuse. Finally, social work students regarded child emotional abuse as a critical, common, and important issue. Nevertheless, they felt that they lacked direction, education, and training on handling the emotional abuse of children. Therefore, this study urges social work programs, child welfare agencies, and legislators to provide more education, training, and direction for future professionals in properly addressing child emotional abuse.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Janet Chang for her guidance and support in supervising this project. Many thanks to Sandy Howard for encouraging me and "helping me see the hope inside myself." Very special thanks to my dear friend and fellow classmate Lengpea Yang. I could not have done it without her help this past year. Finally, I thank my family and friends for all their support and love.

## DEDICATION

Este proyecto representa la culminacion de un logro mas en mi vida. Quiero dedicar este proyecto a mi hija, Alexa, a quien aun no conozco y ya amo mas que a nada en la vida. A mi madre, Guadalupe Inzunza por darme la vida y su amor incondicional. A mi hermana Liliana, por que siempre a sido mi razon y fuerza para seguir luchando. A mi tia Evelia, por nunca perder la fe en mi, por todo su cariño y su apoyo. A mis abuelas, por que me enseñaron a ser una mujer fuerte y por que me siento muy orgullosa de mis humildes raices. Y a Dios, gracias por estar siempre conmigo, por bendecirme y por haverme transformado en una mejor persona.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The content of this chapter will present an overview of the problem, which will include some background information to provide a context and explain why studying child emotional abuse at this point in time is important, especially within child welfare. In addition, the purpose of the study and a broad overview of the research methods to be employed in the study will be discussed. Finally, the significance of the study for social work practice will be presented.

#### Problem Statement

Compared with other subtypes of child maltreatment, society has taken much longer in recognizing the existence and impact of child emotional abuse (Iwaniec, 2006). Even more, it has taken much longer for child welfare agencies to intervene for the mere protection of a child's emotional well-being. According to the U.S Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families (2009), 7.6% of the total number of maltreated children is emotionally abused annually. Moreover, Sedlak,

et al. (2010) in their most recent National Incidence Study of child abuse and neglect (NIS-4) estimated that each year, a total of 148,500 (2 in 1000) children are being emotionally abused, and 193,400 (2.2 in 1000) children are being emotionally neglected.

Nevertheless, and although these reports represent the two major sources of national epidemiological data on child maltreatment, it is believed that these statistics underestimate the true incidence of child emotional abuse (Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009). One reason, for example, is that the data collected and analyzed by these reports represent only the records of child maltreatment documented by government agencies such as child protective services (CPS) or law enforcement. Although CPS agencies investigate an important number of the emotionally abused children, these children represent only the "tip of the iceberg" because the great majority of emotional abuse cases are particularly unknown or unrecognized by the agency (Sedlak et al., 2010).

Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (CDFS), for example, reported that in 2009, the incidence of emotional abuse ranged from 9.2% to 9.9% of the total cases each month. These statistics, however,

were not corroborated by Trickett, Mennen, Kim, and Sang (2009). In their study, the researchers utilized a sample of 303 new substantiated cases of maltreatment identified by the same county DCFS. Using a coding system, and through a detailed case record abstraction, almost 50% of the sample was found to have experienced emotional abuse compared to the 9% maltreated youth that was initially labeled as emotionally abused by CDFS at the time of the referral.

Therefore, the prevalence of emotional abuse is much more common than government reports and society often recognize. In fact, emotional abuse has been suggested as the "core issue" of child maltreatment (Loue, 2005; Wright, Crawford, & Del Castillo, 2009) and many researchers have considered it as the most underreported, hidden, and less investigated form of child abuse (Iwaniec, Larkin, & McSherry, 2007; Romeo, 2000; Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009).

The scars of this type of abuse are long lasting and highly destructive to the psychological functioning of children and adults (Kaplan, Pelcovitz, & Labruna, 1999). Childhood exposure to emotional abuse has been associated with profound reduction of the medial prefrontal cortex volume of the brain that is responsible for regulating

emotions (Van Hamerlen et al., 2010). Previous research indicates that children who have been emotionally abused tend to suffer from anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress symptoms, and eating disorders (Goldsmith & Freyd, 2005; Harmelen, et al., 2010; Mazzeo & Espelage, 2002; Spertus, Yehuda, Wong, Ilalliganm, & Seremetis, 2003).

Adding up, multiple other studies suggest that adults who have been emotionally abused as children tend to have lower levels of self-esteem and resilience, and higher levels of aggression, self-directed anger, frustration, and pessimism (DeRobertis, 2004; Manly, Kim, Rogosch, & Cichetti, 2001). Furthermore, experiencing emotional abuse has been linked to the disruption of normal attachment processes evidenced by individuals adopting maladaptive coping mechanisms that interfere with their social functioning and mental health development (Iwaniec, Larking, & McSherry, 2007; Riggs, 2010; Wright, Crawford, & Del Castillo, 2009).

Therefore, child emotional abuse represents a critical social issue that affects the normal development of individuals. As a result, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), enacted by the federal government in 1974 to ensure the development of programs

and services for abused and neglected children, identified emotional abuse as a distinct subtype of child maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway). Nevertheless, the CAPTA failed to provide a specific definition for emotional abuse, as did for physical and sexual abuse and neglect. Instead, every state was left the task of developing its own definition of emotional abuse (Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009).

The state of California developed the following definition under the Welfare and Institutions Code § 300: "A child is considered dependent if he or she is suffering serious emotional damage, or is at substantial risk of suffering serious emotional damage, as evidenced by severe anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or untoward aggressive behavior toward self or others, as a result of the conduct of the parent or guardian, or who has no parent or guardian capable of providing appropriate care" (Manual of policies and procedures Child Welfare Services, 1993, pg. 6.2).

This definition, however, has been argued as vague and incomplete, given that it only lists some of the possible indicators of emotional abuse, and it does not specify on what parents' behaviors can be considered

emotionally abusive (Baker, 2009; Bryant & Baldwin, 2010). Therefore, the lack of a specific legal definition that encompasses child behaviors, child outcomes, and parental behaviors has been suggested as the primary reason impeding professionals in taking action to properly address emotional abuse (Baker, 2009; Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Hamarman & Bernet, 2000; Levi & Portwood, 2011; Loue, 2005). Moreover, the use of different terms to describe the same concept of emotional abuse, such as mental injury, emotional neglect, psychological abuse, psychological battering, and psychological maltreatment, have been considered an additional factor limiting the integration of research findings and the development of one encompassing definition (Baker, 2009). Finally, in assessing emotional abuse, the current inconsistency in measurement construction regarding the components or indicators of emotional abuse, and cut-off points for differentiating between emotionally abused individuals and individuals who have not been emotionally abused continues to be another problem in being able to intervene in emotionally abuse cases (Loue, 2005).

In summary, child emotional abuse is an important child welfare issue. Nevertheless, there appear to be

multiple factors that currently impede or affect professionals in reporting, investigating, and/or prosecuting emotional abuse cases. Meanwhile, many children continue to live in family environments that are extremely destructive to their normal development by attacking and neglecting their sense of self-worth.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine graduate level social work students' perceptions of emotional abuse in order to understand the underlying thought processes that affect the response and decision-making of these future professionals who will likely be responsible for reporting, investigating, and/or treating emotional abuse of children. Some of these students, for example, will become mandated reporters. Mandated reporters have the legal mandate to report knowledge or suspicion that a child has been a victim of maltreatment to a county welfare department, probation department, police or sheriff's department (California Department of Social Services Office of Child Abuse Prevention). Therefore, and given that emotional abuse has been suggested as one of the most underreported types of maltreatment (Romeo,

2000), it is relevant to investigate some of the attitudes, knowledge, and capacity of future mandated reporters regarding emotional abuse in order to better understand the factors affecting reporting behaviors.

Moreover, some of these graduating social work students will likely be at the frontline of Child Protective Services (CPS), the agency mandated by law to conduct an initial investigation of reports of child emotional abuse. Research findings suggest that CPS agencies often fail to protect the emotional wellbeing of children due to the minimum number of cases the agency investigates where the emotional abuse of a child is the concern (Sedlak, et al., 2010). In the County of Riverside, for example, it appears that the numbers of investigations have been decreasing considerably over the past decade. According to the Riverside County, Department of Public Social Services Children's Services Division (CSD) 2009 fact sheet, only 1% of the total number of reports made in that year was investigated for emotional abuse. This constituted a dramatic drop in investigations of emotional abuse compared to those on 2004, when 12.6% of the total cases of child maltreatment were investigated for emotional abuse by the agency.



Thus, it is imperative that research is conducted with future child welfare professionals to understand them as, hypothetically, one of the factors involved in the CPS agency's response to emotional abuse investigations. The present study will consist of a quantitative cross-sectional research design. The data, in this case graduate social work students' perceptions, will be collected through a self-administered questionnaire survey which will be distributed to respondents via school mailbox. Some of the advantages of questionnaires include the gathering of data inexpensively and quickly, with the need of 4 to 6 weeks for the collection of the information (Grinnell & Unrau, 2011). In addition, questionnaires provide more accurate answers than interviews when it comes to questions of a sensitive nature, such as that of emotional abuse, and it eliminates the problem of interviewer bias.

#### Significance of the Project for Social Work

There appears to be a tendency for society to accept as traumatic those forms of abuse that involve a physical component but to question or ignore the reality of

emotional damage (Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004). Nevertheless, emotional abuse is a social issue that is extremely harmful to children but that continues to be underreported and misunderstood (Baker, 2009; Iwaniec, 2006; Loue, 2005; Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009). Therefore, its investigation is much needed. The findings of this study could contribute to the efforts of addressing emotional abuse proactively by understanding the underlying thought processes of those professionals who are responsible for reporting or responding to emotional abuse cases. Attitudes of these future professionals are especially the interest of this study due to the speculation that if individuals do not believe in the critical harm of emotional abuse, their reporting behaviors, assessments, and interventions could be then affected.

Furthermore, it is hoped that this study will serve as a reference for social work programs and child welfare agencies to provide more extensive training in the identification and intervention of emotional abuse cases. In addition, it is expected that this study will help social workers realize the importance of making more detailed assessments regarding the potential harm of

caretaker's emotionally abusive behaviors. Moreover, this type of study hopes to encourage professionals to be more vigilant and to report suspicions of emotional abuse. It is also hoped that this study will promote further research in the area of awareness and effective prevention programs to stop emotional abuse from being perpetuated from one generation to the next. Finally, urge the need to develop a specific and encompassing legal definition of emotional abuse that can assist social workers and other professionals in the identification and pursuit of perpetrators of child emotional abuse.

This study is especially relevant to child welfare practice as it is attempting to understand why professionals struggle in reporting emotional abuse and why child welfare agencies have difficulty in protecting children's emotional well-being. The findings of this research are envisioned to help child welfare agencies and social workers in developing new strategies for conducting efficient investigations and provide the necessary interventions to children who suffer emotional abuse. Finally, the findings of this study are expected to be helpful in developing strategies to resolve the irrelevance that is given by society to the emotional

wellbeing of children.

The part of the generalist intervention process that will be informed by the study will be in the assessment phase of the problem. This represents an understanding of the problem in general terms and the identification of some of the causes, which are expected to be determined through the investigation of social work students' perceptions.

Thus, the research question this study will attempt to answer is: what are the perceptions of social work students regarding emotional abuse?

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

The content of this chapter will present current literature regarding the difficulties in handling emotional abuse and its implications in the child welfare practice. In addition, research findings related to possible factors, such as the role of culture and perceptions that influence individuals' decision making processes in making and handling reports of emotional abuse is discussed. Finally, the theory of symbolic interactionism, the cognitive integrative perspective theory, the prosocial behavior theory and the ecologic theory are discussed in terms of their relevance and guidance to this study.

#### Struggles in Dealing With Emotional Abuse

One of the main complaints expressed by researchers addressing emotional abuse is that there are no clear, uniform, or operational definitions assisting professionals in their decision-making process when it comes to identifying, reporting, and intervening in cases

of emotional abuse of children (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Iwaniec, Larkin, & McSherry, 2007; Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009). Therefore, it appears that there is much disagreement among professionals, researchers, and legislations on what exactly constitutes emotional abuse and what are its indicators.

Different legal definitions are used by each state to determine whether emotional abuse has or is taking place. Hamarman, Pope, and Czaja (2002) found that the rates of emotional abuse varied considerably across the states depending on how each state defined it. Furthermore, they pointed out that reports of emotional abuse were especially low for those states that did not have a well-defined emotional abuse statute. Therefore, they concluded that definitions affect reporting behaviors when it comes to emotional abuse.

Sirrione (2010), for example, conducted a qualitative study to interpret Utah's definition of emotional abuse, and to investigate how cases of emotional abuse were being handled in the court system. The researcher collected the data by gathering the legislative history of the legal definition and cases that had come before the court, and by interviewing professionals who had dealt with emotional

abuse cases. The study concluded that child emotional abuse was not being addressed adequately in the court system when emotional abuse was solely in question and that Utah's definition lacked enough direction to prosecute emotionally abuse cases. One of the issues, as observed by Baker (2009), may be that the majority of legal definitions tend to refer only to the impact on the child and not on the parental acts, which makes prosecution almost impossible. In other words, many definitions of emotional abuse are silent with respect to the intention or harm of the caregiver's behaviors.

Furthermore, in addition to legal definitions, the variability in the literature regarding definitions and indicators of emotional abuse is also broad and inconsistent; some conceptual definitions only focus on parental behaviors while others focus on child outcomes (Baker, 2009). For example, Glaser and Prior (2002), define emotional abuse as a carer-child relationship that is marked by patterns of harmful interactions, requiring non-physical contact with the child. According to CAPTA (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008), emotional abuse is a pattern of parental behaviors that impairs a child's emotional development or sense of self-worth by constantly

criticizing, threatening, or rejecting, as well as by withholding love, support, or guidance. Similarly, Johnson (2000) define emotional abuse as "a repeated pattern of parent or caregiver behavior that conveys to a child that he or she is worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or only of value to meet someone else's needs" (p. 110).

Furthermore, Brassard and Donovan (2006), who developed a classification system of parental/caregiver behaviors on the child based on a definition framework published by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC), include spurning, terrorizing, isolating, and exploiting/corrupting the child as categories of emotional abuse. In addition, Mitchell (2005) suggests that having unrealistic expectations of the child, persistent hostility, and failure to respond and care for the child's physical, emotional, intellectual, and social needs are some other important categories of emotional abuse and emotional neglect. Furthermore, Glaser (2002) includes "harsh discipline, conditional parenting, insecure attachment, denigration and emotional unavailability as additional dimensions of



emotional abuse" (as cited in Iwaniec, Larkin, & Higgins, 2006, p. 73).

Finally, the National Clearing House (2003), reports that emotional abuse can be suspected when "a child shows extremes of behavior such as being overly compliant or overly demanding, extremely passive, or inappropriately aggressive, is either inappropriately adult or inappropriately infantile, manifests delays in physical and or emotional development, has attempted suicide, and or reports a lack of attachment to the parent" (p. 3). Although these signs can in fact suggest emotional abuse effects, these indicators are vague and can easily be confused as common displays of other types of maltreatment, personality traits, developmental stages, or related to other types of environmental and cultural factors. Thus, this lack of consistency and uncertainty constitutes one of the primary reasons preventing professionals and protective service agencies from intervening in most cases of emotional abuse (Kaplan, Pelcovitz, & Labruna, 1999).

Nevertheless, it has also been suggested that the very nature of emotional abuse makes it difficult for professionals to report and handle this problem

adequately, even if the person is concerned about the likely damage of emotional abuse (Kalichman, 1999). Both emotionally abusive behaviors and child behavioral indicators of emotional abuse are difficult to identify. The scars of emotional abuse tend to not have immediate distinct visible injuries compared to other types of maltreatment, and these usually only manifest many years after the abuse has occurred (Romeo, 2000).

Loue (2005) also points out that the relative inattention given to emotional abuse, compared to other forms of maltreatment, is because emotional abuse does not require an immediate response as cases of physical and sexual abuse because of gravity and extent on harm being inflicted. Therefore, uncertainty of identification and immediate evidence of harm casts doubt among observers on its actual occurrence and is often the cause of significant underreporting (Loue, 2005).

In addition, emotional abuse is often hidden behind other types of maltreatment. Studies have found that emotional abuse often occurs along with other subtype of maltreatment (Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009). In fact, emotional abuse by itself often receives relative inattention unless is accompanied with another form of

maltreatment. Therefore, the majority of the available data on emotional abuse is found in combination to other types of maltreatment. As a result, it has been difficult for researchers to separate components specific to emotional abuse in order to be sure which aspects of emotional abuse are felt more strongly by the child (Iwaniec, Larkin, & Higgins, 2006). Without an ability to discriminate the extent of harm resulting from specific parental behaviors, cut-off points cannot be determined (Baker, 2009). Thus, this creates an incapacity for professionals to intervene in most cases because they lack the measures for discriminating emotionally abused children from non-abused children.

In summary, the struggles in dealing with emotional abuse are many. It is evident that the literature suggests multiple explanations as to why emotional abuse has received little attention compared to other forms of maltreatment. Nevertheless, the prevalence and importance of emotional abuse cannot be ignored or untreated much longer because while society continues to struggle with technicalities of definitions and stagnation, many children continue to pay the price of our relative indifference.

## The Impact of Perceptions on Emotional Abuse

There are three expectations regarding professionals involved with the field of child welfare. First of all, there is the assumption that professionals will bring expertise, knowledge, and skills that are useful in resolving child maltreatment (Rose-Wilson, 2010). In addition, that their professional knowledge and ethics will supersede personal attitudes or biases that could interfere with their duty of protecting children's well-being. Finally, it is also expected that individuals who are mandated reporters will report any knowledge or suspicion of child abuse and neglect to the pertinent agencies regardless of their level of confidence or possessed evidence suggesting the occurrence of child maltreatment (Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004).

Nonetheless, the literature suggests that professionals hold their own perceptions regarding child maltreatment and that they often make use of these, in addition to their professional knowledge, ethics, and mandates when responding or handling child abuse cases (Rose-Wilson, 2010). Therefore, professionals' attitudes or perceptions that reflect only their personal experiences or views aside from their professional or

agency values and responsibilities are often used and can affect their response to child maltreatment.

Meyer (1993), for example, explains the assessment process in child welfare as both "art and science." "Science" is concerned with objective, observable data that is ordered and can be analyzed. Nevertheless, "art" or personal judgment often comes into play and objectivity is, therefore, compromised. According to Meyer, social workers utilize both, their personal perspectives that derive from their own life experiences and their education when conducting assessments. Similarly, Stein and Rzepnicki (1984) suggests that all points in the decision-making process from the initial point in determining relevant information, to the final decisions regarding what actions to take are guided by the subjective discretion of individual workers (as cited in Rose-Wilson, 2010). Therefore, these authors believe that even with the presence of rules to guide the decision-maker, social workers' judgments still play an important part in making a final decision in cases of child maltreatment, where ambiguities are often common.

Some studies that have explored perceptions of child maltreatment have found that background and

characteristics of the observer influence their handling of child maltreatment cases (Ashton, 2004; Rose-Wilson, 2010). In a qualitative study, Rose-Wilson (2010) examined the influence of culture on the perception and decision-making of 13 Caribbean immigrant masters-level social workers that worked in child welfare agencies in Washington and Maryland. The results of her study suggested that having an understanding of the child rearing and disciplining techniques of a particular culture can affect how social workers from diverse groups intervene on behalf of maltreated children. In the study, Caribbean social workers noted that they tended to retain values from their cultures about child rearing and discipline that were in conflict with American values and expectations, and that they often relied on these when they intervened in child abuse and neglect cases.

Ashton (2004) examined personal characteristics of social services workers. The researcher found that ethnicity and immigrant status were related to the likelihood of reporting. It was found that Whites were most likely to report; Asians were least likely to report; and Black Americans, Latinos, and Black Caribbeans were in-between. Additionally, the researcher found that the

combined impact of ethnicity, immigrant status, and workers' approval of corporal punishment had a strong effect on reporting decisions. For example, White workers, who were born in the U.S., disapproved corporal punishment, and perceived it as maltreatment were more likely to report maltreatment to Child Protective Services compared to those who were non-White, born outside the U.S., approved of corporal punishment, and who did not perceive parental behavior as maltreatment.

Therefore, these studies suggest a strong correlation between cultural background and perception and decision-making of workers regarding child maltreatment. According to Westby (2007), disciplining, childrearing practices, perception, and attitudes about child maltreatment are generally developed from cultural systems, which are often difficult to change. Furthermore, Levi and Portwood (2011), suggest that factors such as individual attitudes towards discipline, personal experiences of abuse, and confidence in child protection service agencies produce significant variability in determining whether an individual suspects abuse, the level of suspicion, and whether the individual believes should make a report. Thus, one can speculate that despite agency and legal

guidelines to assist social workers in investigating, assessing, and treating emotional abuse, other information such as background and personal experiences affect the actions of professionals.

Carleton (2006), for instance, conducted a study of 157 mandated and non-mandated reporters to investigate perceptions of the seriousness of child emotional abuse, willingness to report, and confidence in CPS competence handling emotional abuse cases. The participants were presented with 20 vignettes suggesting emotional abuse and a scale of sensitivity to teasing. The results of the study showed that those who were more sensitive to teasing were more likely to report potentially abusive situations. In addition, the findings indicated that both mandated reporters and non-mandated reporters' willingness to report was most affected by their view of the seriousness of the situation portrayed in the vignettes, but that non-mandated reporters were also influenced by their faith in CPS adequately addressing this type of abuse.

Thus, these findings indicate that there are different personal beliefs influencing individuals' decision-making when it comes to determining a need to report emotional abuse. This can, therefore, be considered



an issue when trying to resolve emotional abuse because individuals often underestimate the seriousness of parental behaviors that harm children emotionally. Verbal aggression, for example, the primary vehicle of emotional harm, appears to be widely acceptable in society. For instance, Daro and Gelles (1992) in a nationally representative sample noted that 45% of 1250 parents admitted to being verbally aggressive towards their children by constantly insulting and calling their children denigrating words.

According Bryant and Milson (2005), another contributing factor for the failure of mandated reporters to report or act on behalf of emotionally abused children is their sense of a lack of strong evidence or the perception that evidence is not enough to generate a report. Moreover, abuse is perceived as more harmful when it is observable. In one study of 131 undergraduate students, psychologically aggressive behaviors were rated as more abusive when harm to the recipient was evident (DeHart, Follingstad, & Fields, 2010). Moreover, in another study, 459 primary, preparatory, and secondary school teachers, social workers, and school physicians were assessed to investigate their perceptions of child

maltreatment and their ability to identify child maltreatment (Youssef & Atta, 1998). The results of the study indicated a low overall identification ability rate to identify types of abuse where the signs were less apparent. One-third of the participants reported only encountering physically abused and neglected children. Therefore, the lack of professionals' encounter of emotional abuse cases is behind the fact that they only rely on observable physical evidence of maltreatment rather than other implicit indicators of abuse, and that they lack the ability to assess and identify other hidden signs of abuse.

Moreover, in the handling of emotional abuse, there appears to be a double standard that is often used when it comes to emotional abuse in comparison with other types of child maltreatment. For example, the literature compares and often suggests great disparities among professionals' standards in decision-making involving different types of child maltreatment (Rose-Wilson, 2010). For instance, sexual and physical abuse frequently prompts a response by law enforcement authorities and/or protective services once they are discovered (Loue, 2005). In the case of emotional maltreatment however, although some signs may be

visible to individuals, this rarely provokes any response. In taking action, for instance, due to the lack of seriousness and somewhat higher level of acceptance that is given to emotional abuse, relatively few children are removed from their homes and relatively few adults are prosecuted for emotional abuse (Iwaniec, 2006).

When an emotional abuse case is taken to court, no action is usually taken due to the determination that there is not enough evidence for the case to proceed. In sexual abuse cases however, although there is also seldom times evidence of the abusive act, the alleged occurrence of an act is considered abuse regardless of the documented or visible harm (Baker, 2009). What is more, there is no need for the establishment of a negative outcome for the child or the child's response to the event in order for it to be considered abuse and be penalized. This, apparently, is what society considers morally unacceptable and is therefore prosecuted. Emotional abuse, on the contrary, is minimized by society and, as a result, no action is usually taken to prosecute emotionally abusive behaviors of parents.

Finally, individuals' acceptability or awareness of experiences of emotional abuse is also often undermined or

denied. It appears that some individuals are unwilling to accept experiences of emotional abuse. To illustrate this, Varia, & Abidin (1999) conducted a study to assess individuals' experiences and perceptions of psychological abuse. The findings of the study, which included 90 participants, indicated that some individuals, identified as "minimizers," reported experiences of emotional abuse but failed to label themselves as having been abused. This was an interesting finding given that those who denied being emotionally abused presented similar levels of emotional abuse experiences as others who labeled themselves as being emotionally abused during childhood.

As pointed out by Firestone (1993), child-rearing practices in American culture that are often abusive may be minimized or denied by some individuals as a defense mechanism or as a way to maintain an idealized image of parents. Similarly, Baker (2009) believes that some individuals have forgotten or rationalized their own parents' mistreatments of them which results in great recall error and bias found in retrospective adult recall of emotional abuse. Therefore, this constitutes a problem given that individuals may be less sensitive or more accepting of emotionally abusive behaviors of parents.

In summary, the literature suggest that social workers' own values and attitudes play an important role in the decision-making and assessment process, despite the presence of professional guidelines outlining what constitutes child maltreatment. Nevertheless, more thorough evaluation is needed to understand how perceptions of social workers affect their assessments and decision-making on emotional abuse cases specifically.

#### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

There are four existing theories explaining the processes explored by this study. First of all, the effects of professionals' perceptions on actions taken concerning emotional abuse explained by the theory of symbolic interactionism. The basic tenets of this theory propose that persons act on the basis of the meaning that things have for them, that the meanings of such things are drawn from social interactions, and that persons handle or act upon such things based on their own modified interpretation of the things (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, these sets of beliefs are crucial for assessing and understanding individuals' attitudes and behaviors towards emotional abuse. Based on this perspective, one can assume

that a person will be as vigilant, as likely to report, and/or as likely to properly address emotional abuse depending on the significance the person gives to the matter. In other words, the person will react to the issue based on the acceptability given to emotionally abusive behaviors and its implications. Moreover, one can speculate that a person's reactions will also be influenced by the observation of how others view emotional abuse. For instance, if the person knows that others do not view emotional abuse of a child as critical, the person may be less likely to report suspicions of such type of abuse.

Similarly, Berlin's (2002) cognitive integrative perspective describes a comparable pattern. According to Berlin, people are constantly trying to make meaning out of every event encountered and react accordingly to their sense of those events. Furthermore, Berlin proposes that the mark of culture, family, experiences, and daily life conditions shape people's meanings and continue to influence their perceptions, decisions, and understanding throughout their lives. Therefore, this theory suggests that a person's behavior is guided by the person's understanding of the situation, which in turn is

influenced by the person's environment and culture. Thus, it is likely that individuals will give emotional abuse the level of importance that they have experienced this has on their own personal lives. In addition, it is likely that they will give emotional abuse the level of attention that their own families, communities, or related institutions give to it.

Both symbolic interactionism and the cognitive integrative perspective informed the researcher's initial thinking about this research. However, the theory of prosocial behavior was also considered for the purpose of understanding when and why professionals do or do not report suspicions of emotional abuse. According to this theory, in order for a person to act prosocially, there has to be a willingness to put forth some effort to help another person in the knowledge that there will not likely be any remuneration from the act (As cited in Carleton, 2006). Furthermore, this theory suggests that prosocial behaviors are reflections of personal values and that these are generated regardless of external pressures. Therefore, it is likely that individuals who value the emotional wellbeing of children and are convinced that they have the moral responsibility to protect children

from abuse, will be more likely to make a report to child protection agencies regardless of others' views on emotional abuse.

Lastly, the ecologic theory was additionally implemented in understanding emotional abuse of children as a social issue and its difficulty in addressing it properly. The ecologic theory has been for long helpful in understanding and dealing with the interrelationships among attributes of child, parent, family, and social setting (Stokols, 1995). The issue of child emotional abuse can be explained through this theoretical context as a symptom of disturbances in a complex ecosystem with many interacting variables. Here, one must strive to reach a holistic notion of why child emotional abuse occurs, and how society's view affects its response to the problem.

### Summary

There are many factors involved in the difficulty or reluctance of professionals and child welfare agencies in appropriately responding to the emotional abuse of children. For example, the struggles that are encountered in identifying indicators of emotional abuse, the lack of an encompassing definition that provides direction for



professionals in handling cases of emotional abuse, and the lack of a measurement for determining the experiencing of emotional abuse. Finally, the effects of views and perceptions of individuals that often undermine or condone emotionally harmful behaviors. Therefore, further investigation of these factors is necessary in order to better respond to this common and critical child welfare issue.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

The contents of this chapter will present the research methods that will be used for this study. In particular the study's design, sampling, data collection and instruments utilized to collect the data, the procedures associated with data gathering, the protection of human subjects, and the quantitative data analysis will be discussed.

#### Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore social work students' perceptions of emotional abuse of children. Particularly, the study aimed to examine master level social work students' acceptability and abusive nature of some parental behaviors that the literature has suggested as emotionally harmful. In addition, this study assessed some of the personal views, feelings, and experiences of social work students, as individuals and professionals, regarding emotional abuse. This was important to study in order to understand the current difficulty and reluctance

experienced by some professionals in identifying, reporting, and resolving emotional abuse of children.

In collecting the data, this study employed a quantitative, cross sectional, survey design using self-administered questionnaires to evaluate social work students' perceptions on emotional abuse. The utilization of this research method was appropriate for the current study because it allowed the collection of the data inexpensively and quickly, given the lack of financial resources and time constraints of the researcher. In addition, this survey method was opportune because this type of research method offered participants the ability to fill out the survey at their convenience time and setting. Furthermore, this method eliminated the problem of interviewer's bias as it removed the possibility that the interviewer's manner of asking a question influenced the respondent's answer. In addition, greater frankness may have been obtained, as respondents remained anonymous, and anonymity may have been especially important considering the personal and sensitive nature of some of the questions involved in the questionnaire.

Nevertheless, a limitation of the self-administered questionnaires was that there was no opportunity to

explore information into more detail with each participant, or evaluate the non-verbal behavior of the respondents. Moreover, this type of survey method faced the problem of non-response bias, which caused a low response rate, especially as no incentive was provided for participation. Another considered limitation was that it is likely that participants who took the trouble to complete the survey and return it were those who felt strongly about the topic, thus compromising the representativeness of the sample.

The study did not have a hypothesis. Instead, the study attempted to answer a research question in an exploratory way. What are the perceptions of social work students regarding emotional abuse?

### Sampling

The sample of this study included master-level social work students from California State University, San Bernardino. The researcher utilized a non-probability purposive sampling to recruit participants because of its usefulness in accessing the targeted sample quickly. The only specific sampling criteria included social work students currently enrolled in the master's program at the

university. After the university's school of social work gave its authorization for the study to be conducted, the surveys were distributed to 138 graduate level social work students. The researcher anticipated at least 50 participants to take part on this study. Participants who were surveyed ranged in regards to gender, age, ethnicity, and parenthood.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

The data for this study was collected through self-administered questionnaires (Appendix B). The questionnaire was made up of three sections and was self-constructed by the researcher for this particular study. Section one assessed social work students' views of seriousness of certain parents' behaviors and whether they considered those behaviors as emotionally abusive. Participants were presented with eight parents' behaviors and were asked to indicate whether they considered these behaviors acceptable in a three-point Likert scale (always, sometimes, never). Additionally, they were presented with another three-point Likert scale asking participants to indicate whether they considered those same behaviors emotional abuse (is not, can be, is). In

section two, participants were presented with eleven different statements regarding possible factors that have been suggested by the literature to possibly influence individuals' decision-making in properly responding to emotional abuse of children. For each statement, participants were asked to indicate whether they agreed with each statement as it referred to their beliefs or experiences in a four-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree). Finally, in section three, participants were asked some demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and parenthood.

The instrument had to be developed, as no other available instrument was found appropriate for the specific purpose of the study. The instrument was pretested using social workers that did not participated in the actual study. Suggestions and feedback from the volunteers who participated in the pretesting was used to revise and improve the instrument. One of the strengths of this instrument included its ability to measure exactly what the study was interested in examining, which were perceptions, feelings, and experiences on emotional abuse. A limitation of the study included the validity and reliability of the instrument.

## Procedures

Upon school of social work's approval, the researcher began the data collection. Data collection was conducted from February 27 through March 12, 2012. On February 27, 2012 the researcher deposited the Informed Consent form, questionnaire, a debriefing statement, and an envelop (Appendix A, B, & C) in each student's mailbox located in the student resource room of the school. Participation for this study was solicited by providing pertinent information in the form of Informed Consent regarding the purpose of the study, the content of the questionnaire, the procedures involved, and the risks, benefits, and rights of the participants should they agree to participate. It was expected that participants took no more than ten minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Once social work students completed the questionnaire, they were asked to introduce the survey in the envelope provided by the researcher and keep the debriefing statement copy for their own records. Then, participants were asked to return the envelop to the main office of the social work department located in the fourth floor of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Building, room 432. The working office hours were Monday to Friday 8a.m.

to 5p.m. In case the office was closed, participants were encouraged to slide the envelop under the door. The receptionist received and secured the completed questionnaires until the principal investigator collected the questionnaires on March 12, 2012. Data analysis occurred in March 14, 2012, and the dissemination of the results occurred in April 2012.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

All preventative measures were taken in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants. No identifiable information was used during data gathering. Participants were provided an Informed Consent form and were asked to check a box, instead of using a signature, if they consented to participate in the study. Participants were informed that completing the questionnaire was voluntary and that they could stop at any time and skip any question for any reason. Although they did not receive a direct benefit from completing the questionnaire, it is likely that participants felt some satisfaction from participating in a study designed to better understand emotional abuse of children, and how to best help professionals in responding to this pervasive



and misunderstood social issue. The participants were also informed of the possible risks of the study to them. The anticipated risks in participation were small and limited to possible minor discomfort at answering certain questions such as past emotional abuse experiences. A possible inconvenience for participants could have been the time it took to complete the questionnaire, which was approximately ten minutes.

Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants were provided with a debriefing statement outlining the purpose of the study, and contact phone numbers for further discussion of issues related to their participation in the study. When questionnaires were collected, the data was entered into a computer database, and participants were identified by serial ID numbers. All data was kept in password-protected files accessible only by the principal investigator. Completed questionnaires were discarded after the study was completed.

### Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through a quantitative data analysis method. Descriptive statistics including frequency distributions were used to analyze demographic

variables. Furthermore, inferential statistics were employed in order to examine the relationship of the variables. Specifically, statistics that were utilized included chi-squares tests to examine the relationship between variables.

### Summary

The primary purpose of the study was to explore the correlation between social work students' perceptions, feelings, and experiences and how these may affect their response to emotional abuse cases. In order to assess these variables, this study employed a quantitative, cross sectional, survey design using self-administered questionnaires to evaluate perceptions on emotional abuse. The sample of this study included social work students that were currently enrolled at California State University San Bernardino in the masters' program. All preventative measures were taken in order to protect the human subjects.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This chapter will present a description of the characteristics of the respondents surveyed in this study. In addition, a description of the variables used and analyzed using univariate descriptive statistics is discussed. Finally, an overview of the sample and the variables studied are presented.

#### Presentation of the Findings

Surveys were distributed to 138 master-level social work students from California State University San Bernardino via student mailbox. Out of the 138 surveys that were distributed, 41 surveys were completed and returned. Of those who participated in the study, 90.2% were female and 9.8% were male. In addition, 43.9% of the participants were parents and 56.1% were not parents. Of the participants, 29.3% were between the ages of 26 and 30, 19.5% were between 31 and 35, 17.1% were 25 years or younger, 9.8% were between 36 and 40, 4.9% were between 41 and 45, 9.8% were between 46 and 50, 4.9% were between 51

and 55, and 4.9% were age 56 or older. In regards to the ethnic breakdown of the participants, 45% were Caucasian, 32.5% were Hispanic, 7.5% were African American, 2.5% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 12.5% identified themselves under the "other" category. A summary of these demographic findings is included in Table 1 (Appendix D).

Table 2 presents the results of the 8 questions asked to respondents indicating their acceptability of some parents' behaviors. Each of these questions was presented to measure participants' perceptions of behaviors considered acceptable. A three point Likert scale beginning with "always," "sometimes," and "never" were provided for response (Appendix E).

In regards to the parent behavior of constantly criticizing the child, results showed that 82.9% felt it was "never" acceptable while 17.1% of the participants felt it was "sometimes" acceptable. Regarding the behavior of constantly calling the child derogatory names, 95.1% stated that it was "never" acceptable while 4.9% of the respondents disagreed responding that this behavior was "always" acceptable. As to the behavior of constantly threatening to abandon the child, 4.9% of the participants responded that it was "always" acceptable, while 95.1%

responded that it was "never" acceptable. In regards to constantly telling child other children are better, 2.5% of the participants believed it was "always" acceptable, 5% "sometimes" acceptable, and 92.5% "never" acceptable. As to the behavior of constantly restricting the child from social interactions, 41.5% felt it was "sometimes" acceptable and 58.5% felt it was "never" acceptable. In regards to a parent never hugging the child, 2.4% of the participants responded that it is "always" acceptable, 17.1% "sometimes" acceptable, and 80.5% "never" acceptable. As far as using the child to meet parents' needs, 2.4% felt it was "always" acceptable, 12.2% "sometimes" acceptable, and 85.4% "never" acceptable. With regards to constantly making demands which child is unable to meet, 24.4% felt it was "sometimes" acceptable and 75.6% felt it was "never" acceptable.

The results of participants' classification of parental behaviors that can be, are, or are not considered emotional abuse are presented in Table 3 (Appendix F). Respondents were given eight parent behaviors and asked to classify each behavior as either "can be," "is," or "is not" emotional abuse. In regards to constantly criticizing the child, 41.5% of the participants responded that it

"can be" considered emotional abuse, while 58.5% responded that it "is" emotional abuse. As to constantly calling the child derogatory names, 2.4% felt it "can be" emotional abuse while 97.6% assured that it "is" emotional abuse. Regarding a parent constantly threatening to abandon the child, 9.8% responded that it "can be" considered emotional abuse and 90.2% that it "is" emotional abuse. As to constantly telling the child other children are better, 2.5% stated that it "is not" emotional abuse, 35% that it "can be," and 62.5% that it "is" emotional abuse. In regards to constantly restricting the child from social interactions, 2.5% of the participants stated that it "is not" considered emotional abuse, 67.5% that it "can be," and 30% that it "is" considered emotional abuse. As to never hugging the child, 46.3% felt it "can be" considered emotional abuse while 53.7% that it "is" emotional abuse. Regarding the behavior of constantly using the child to meet the parent's needs, 41.5% felt that it "can be" considered emotional abuse, while 58.5% felt that it "is" emotional abuse. Finally, in regards to constantly making demands which child is unable to meet, 46.3% of the participants felt that it "can be" considered emotional

abuse, while 53.7% felt that it "is" considered emotional abuse.

Table 4 presents the results of the 11 statements made to participants regarding their emotional abuse perceptions and experiences (Appendix G). Participants were asked to indicate their opinions in a four-point Likert scale beginning with "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." In regards to the statement of feeling comfortable about the clarity of the law in adequately addressing emotional abuse, 70% either "disagree" or "strongly disagree," while 30% "agree," with the statement. As to feeling satisfied with education and training received on identifying and treating emotional abuse, 40% either "strongly agree" or "agree," while 60% "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with the statement. Regarding feeling confident with ability to identify signs of emotional abuse, 63.4% either "strongly agree" or "agree," while 36.6% disagree. As far as having made a child abuse report for emotional abuse, 29.3% "strongly agree" or "agree," and 70.7% "disagree" or "strongly disagree."

With regards to believing emotional abuse to be as critical as other types of maltreatment, 100% either

"strongly agree" or "agree" with the statement. As to being emotionally abused by at least one parent during childhood, 41.5% of the participants "strongly agree" or "agree," while 58.5% "disagree" or "strongly disagree." Regarding participants believing emotional abuse to be detrimental to the normal development of children, 100% either "strongly agree" or "agree" with the statement. As to participants' perceptions of emotional abuse being very common in families, 75.6% "strongly agree" or "agree," and 24.4% "disagree" with the statement. In regards to participants' views of child protection agencies intervening for the mere protection of the emotional well-being of children, 85.4% "strongly agree" or "agree," and 14.6% disagree. Finally, 24.4% of the respondents "strongly agree" or "agree," while 75.6% "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with the statement of being acceptable or common of parents calling children derogatory names within their cultures.

### Summary

In an attempt to obtain a better understanding of future professionals' perceptions of child emotional abuse, graduate level social work students were



investigated in relationship to their views and experiences of emotional abuse during childhood. This chapter has presented the findings of univariate statistics that were employed and were illustrated in tables to demonstrate participants' response for each of the variables studied.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

In this chapter, the results of the study will be discussed. Following this, a discussion of the significance and contribution of the study findings in light of the existing knowledge is discussed. This chapter also presents a discussion of limitations of the study and recommendations for further social work practice, policy, and research. Finally, this chapter summarizes key findings as part of the conclusion of the study.

#### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how master-level social work students perceived the issue of child emotional abuse. To accomplish this goal, the participants were presented with a questionnaire that required them to identify their acceptability status and categorize the abuse status of certain parental behaviors. In addition, participants were asked to identify their level of agreement or disagreement with regards to multiple statements that were presented to them as to reflect their

personal views and experiences with issues related to emotional abuse.

Most of the master-level social work students who participated in this study were Caucasians and Hispanics. The majority of the participants ranged from age 25 to 35 years old. In addition, females were overrepresented in the study. The study consisted of 37 females and 3 males. Lastly, nearly half of the participants were parents, while the other half were not parents yet.

The study found that the majority of the participants considered most emotionally damaging behaviors as unacceptable. For example, over 90% of the participants rated the categories of constantly calling child derogatory names, constantly threatening to abandon child, and constantly telling child other children are better as "never" acceptable. Other actions such as constantly criticizing child, never hugging the child, constantly using child to meet parent's needs, and constantly making demands which child is unable to meet were also considered unacceptable by the majority of the respondents, although with a small percentage of respondents considering them as "sometimes" acceptable. Finally, more variability was observed regarding the behavior of constantly restricting

child from social interactions, as this action was considered as "sometimes" acceptable by nearly half of the respondents and as "never" acceptable by the other half.

The study also found that the majority of the participants categorized constantly calling child derogatory names and constantly threatening to abandon child as being emotional abuse. With regards to the rest of the behaviors, however, more variability in responses was observed. Approximately half of the participants categorized behaviors as "can be" emotional abuse, while the other half consider them as "is" emotional abuse. Therefore, this suggested that half of the participants showed levels of uncertainty when classifying most actions as emotional abuse or as is not emotional abuse. Nevertheless, it is important to note that almost no participants regarded any of the eight behaviors as "always" acceptable or "is not" abuse. Thus, participants did not condone and undermined the potential of those behaviors as being emotionally abusive.

In summary, it was noted that most participants similarly regarded the actions of constantly calling child derogatory names and constantly threatening to abandon child to be unacceptable and as abuse. This reflects the

uniformity of response with regards to this behavior, and shows that this behavior had strong disapproval ratings among the participants explored. For all other actions, participants' response varied between "sometimes" acceptable or "never" acceptable and "can be" abuse or "is" abuse. In addition, one can make the observation that the majority of the respondents seemed more willing to regard behaviors suggesting emotional child abuse as unacceptable than as abuse. Therefore, participants were less hesitant to classify a behavior according to its acceptability status than to categorize it according to its abuse status. This is consistent with a similar study that found that individuals categorized potentially emotionally harmful behaviors more as unacceptable than as abuse (Elliot, Sian, & Thomas, 2002).

Therefore this is further consistent with Loue's (2005) observation that there is a general unwillingness of observers to impose their judgment on potential emotionally abusive behaviors. It is also possible that more participants opted for categorizing behaviors as "may be" emotional abuse because they felt that they lacked enough evidence to attest those acts as being, indeed, emotional abuse.

This study revealed that 70% of the respondents felt uncomfortable about the clarity of the law in adequately addressing emotional abuse. This is consistent with other researchers and professionals involved with child abuse issues who have shared their discontent with the legislation regarding the lack of a clear child emotional abuse definition (Baker, 2009; Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Festinger & Baker, 2010; Hamarman & Bernet, 2000). Moreover, 60% of the participants felt unsatisfied with regards to the education and training received on identifying and treating emotional abuse. Again, this is consistent with other professionals who also feel like they lack the knowledge and skills to properly identify and address emotional abuse of children (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010; Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004; Romeo, 2000).

Thus, these findings have especially important implications for the protection of children's emotional well-being. The results of this study indicate that the majority of these future social work professionals will possess very limited knowledge, training, and direction in identifying and handling the emotional abuse of children.

Another important finding of this study is that although 95% of the participants are or have been mandated

child abuse reporters, only 29% have actually made a report for emotional abuse. Nevertheless, it is curious to find that all the participants believed emotional abuse of children as critical as other types of child maltreatment and detrimental to the normal development of children. What is more, 85% believe that child protection agencies should intervene for the mere protection of the emotional well-being of children. Therefore, it is perhaps possible that it is not that professionals underestimate the effects and importance of this type of abuse, but the fact that they lack the tools necessary to address the problem, which in turns forces professionals to overlook the issue out of impotence.

Yet another interesting finding was that 75.5% of the respondents reported that emotional abuse was very common in families, and 58.5% of the participants reported having been emotionally abused by at least one parent during childhood. This is consistent with another research study, which suggests similar percentage rates with regards to the number of individuals who experience emotional abuse during childhood (Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009). This discovery, however, has additional implications for these future professionals' well-being as they prepare to

join the child welfare workforce. In one study, Festinger and Baker (2010) assessed abuse history of 253 child welfare personnel in relationship to their current well-being. The results of their study indicated that recalls of childhood emotional abuse was strongly associated to lower self-esteem, lower satisfaction with life, and lower level of social support. Thus, future child welfare workers need to be attentive to their background history and how this can affect their well-being and the delivery of their services to clients.

Inferential statistics, specifically chi-square tests, were utilized to examine the relationship between the demographic variables of culture and parenthood and social worker's perceptions. Nevertheless, the relationship of these variables was found non-significant. This author speculates that the small sample size of this study and the few ethnic groups that participated in the study was the reason for this lack of findings with regards to the relationship of the variables. Therefore, it would be interesting for future studies to examine these same variables but with a much larger sample.

Overall, the results of this study are congruent with other past research observations (Bryant & Baldwin, 2010;



Elliot, Sian, & Thomas, 2002; Loue, 2005), except for the general belief that professionals undermine the criticalness of emotional abuse. Instead, it appears that the lack of direction and training received on emotional abuse from the legislation, child protection agencies, and university programs has the biggest impact on the way that professionals respond to the issue.

#### Limitations

One of the limitations of the study include the reliability and validity of the questionnaire used. The questionnaire was self-developed and lacks supporting reliability evidence. In addition, this research study had a low response rate (30%). This low rate might have compromised the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the population sample was primarily White and Hispanic females. Thus, the generalizing the findings of this single study, which is a cross-sectional study of a non-random graduate level social work student sample, is compromised. Furthermore, the study is limited by the gathering of the data through self-report. It is likely that the results may be skewed due to social desirability issues. Also, due to the sensitive nature of child abuse,

many participants may have been reluctant to respond truthfully to the survey (Sikes, Remley, & Hays, 2010).

#### Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

For multiple reasons, emotional child abuse continues to be an often-disregarded yet important issue in the field of child welfare. According to Youssef and Atta (1998), cases of child abuse are often underreported and mishandled by professionals because they often fail to recognize the signs of child maltreatment. Therefore, additional studies are necessary to extend our knowledge in identifying emotional abuse so that professionals are better prepared to report and prosecute emotionally abusive behaviors in order to improve the overall mental health status of children.

The results of this study point out that, overall, the majority of social work students consider most behaviors presented as unacceptable and as potentially emotionally harmful to children. Furthermore, most participants regarded the emotional abuse of children as critical, common, and an important child welfare issue. Nonetheless, the majority of the participants indicated

that the clarity of the law about emotional abuse, and the education and training received regarding the identification and handling of emotional abuse of children has been unsatisfactory. Therefore, these findings imply direct recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research with respect to the protection of children's emotional well-being.

First of all, it is necessary that social work education programs provide students with adequate education and skills so that future professionals are better prepared to identify and handle emotional abuse cases. Recent research studies indicate that emotional abuse is more widespread than is currently acknowledged and that society is failing to address it timely (Iwaniec, 2006; Iwaniec, Larkin, & McSherry, 2007; Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009). In addition, it appears that emotional abuse represents a "core" issue in child welfare as it is often accompanied by other types of maltreatment, yet often hidden or overlooked in the presence of other forms of child abuse (Iwaniec, 2006; Loue, 2005; Westby, 2007). Consequently, it is imperative that social work educators give this problem a higher level of importance by including it in the curriculum of social work programs.

Moreover, public consciousness needs to be raised in order to prevent and stop the emotional harm that is inflicted on children by their parents. Prevent Child Abuse America (2010) proposes that public awareness campaigns are launched to both "educate the public and professionals about the seriousness of the issue, help them identify the role they can play in preventing and resolving child emotional abuse, and recognize their shared responsibility in helping optimize children's emotional development" (p. 1).

In addition, more intervention programs need to be developed to target family patterns of emotionally abusive behaviors. It is crucial to provide mental health services, mutual aid support, and training for parents in order to stop the perpetuation and intergenerational transmission of child emotional abuse. In helping parents address risk factors or maladaptive patterns of interaction that harm children emotionally, Prevent Child Abuse America (2010), further recommends the development of programs that can "offer education on child development and appropriate expectations of children of different developmental stages, instruction on effective and appropriate strategies for disciplining and communicating

with children, and guidance on how to support and nurture children" (p. 1).

As to providing support for professionals who offer direct services to families, such as mental health providers, the American Psychiatric Association needs to be urged to investigate and publish parameters on the subject of emotional abuse. It is important to note that the DSM-IV TR provides diagnostic criteria for all other types of child maltreatment, except for the emotional abuse of a child.

All the same, it is important for child welfare agencies to enforce extensive investigations and detailed assessments regarding the potential harm of caretaker's emotionally abusive behaviors. Moreover, these agencies should assess the knowledge of professionals on emotional abuse and provide the necessary training, given that these workers have a unique role to play in recognizing children at risk and families needing assistance before or after the maltreatment has been established. Finally, child protection agencies should give emotional abuse a higher priority and devote more resources than they have to combat emotional abuse of children.

Adding up, it is imperative to press legislators

regarding the need for an encompassing definition that permits the intervention in cases of emotional abuse. Without a definition for professionals to follow, the emotional abuse of children will continue to be a difficult to enforce and prosecute task. An encompassing definition should specify the parent behaviors that could be considered emotionally harmful, and include child implicit and explicit indicators. Furthermore, Sirrine (2010) recommends that specific legal guidelines are developed for removing a child from their home in cases of severe emotional abuse and for making severe emotional abuse a criminal offense.

Finally, research efforts to improve our understanding of child emotional abuse, such as its nature, extent, causes, consequences, and prevention are necessary in addressing this perpetuating social issue (Prevent Child Abuse America, 2010). Extending our understanding of child emotional abuse is fundamental in guiding policy makers and practitioners in the development of policies and programs to help stop the emotional abuse of children.

## Conclusions

The findings of this study indicated that

participants regarded parents' behaviors that attacked a child's emotional well-being as unacceptable.

Nevertheless, it appeared that participants felt some reluctance when it came to regarding a behavior suggesting emotional damage as abuse. All the same, social work students perceived emotional abuse to be a critical, common, and an important child welfare issue. However, these professionals felt they lacked direction and training in appropriately handling emotional abuse cases.

Therefore, this study urges the development of a legal definition that allows professionals to intervene and penalize parents who severely affect children emotionally. Furthermore, it is recommended that social work programs provide more education for students in identifying and treating children who experience emotional abuse. Finally, it is stressed the need for child welfare agencies to provide training and allocate the necessary funds and resources so that more thoroughly investigations, assessments, and interventions are conducted by social workers that focus in the protection and treatment of children's emotional health.

APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT



## **INFORMED CONSENT**

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to investigate child welfare social workers' perceptions on emotional abuse. This study is being conducted by graduate student Karla A. Lara under the supervision of Professor Janet Chang, Ph D. at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). This study has been approved by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the CSUSB Institutional Review Board.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study is to investigate social workers' perceptions on emotional abuse.

**DESCRIPTION:** If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding your views and experiences regarding emotional abuse, as well as some demographic information about yourself.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in the study is voluntary, and refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You may stop at any time or skip any question for any reason.

**CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONIMITY:** Your participation will be maintained confidential and anonymous. No identifiable information will be used during your participation in this study. All questionnaires will be collected and kept in a locked cabinet and data will be kept in password-protected files accessible only by the Principal Investigator. Once data is entered into a computer base to be analyzed, it will then be destroyed.

**DURATION:** The expected duration in completing this questionnaire is ten minutes.

**RISKS:** There are no foreseeable risks in taking part in this study except for some possible minor discomfort at answering some of the questions.

**BENEFITS:** Although you will receive no direct benefit from completing this questionnaire, you may feel some satisfaction from participating in a study designed to learn about how to best assist social workers in addressing emotional abuse of children.

**CONTACT:** For answers to pertinent questions about the research and research subjects' rights, or in the case of research-related injury to the participant, please contact professor Janet Chang, Ph D at (951) 537-5501.

**RESULTS:** The results of this study will be published at the end of Fall Quarter 2012 and you may contact the Pfau library at California State University, San Bernardino located at 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407 to obtain a copy of

the results from this study.

By marking below, you agree that you have been fully informed about this survey and are volunteering to take part.

Place a check mark here \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX B  
QUESTIONNAIRE

## QUESTIONNAIRE FOR SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

### Part 1

The following are a list of parents' behaviors. For each of these behaviors, please indicate how acceptable you find it to be by checking the appropriate box on the three point Likert scale on the left. Please also indicate whether or not you would classify it as emotional abuse by checking the appropriate box on the three point Likert scale on the right.

	In your opinion, how acceptable is this?			In your opinion, is this emotional abuse?		
	Always	Sometimes	Never	Is not	Can be	Is
1. Constantly criticizing child	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Constantly calling child derogatory names such as "useless"	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Constantly threatening to abandon child	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Constantly telling child other children are better	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Constantly restricting child from other social interactions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Never hugging child	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Constantly involving child in drug-dealing on their behalf	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Constantly making demands which child is unable to meet	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Part 2

The following are questions related to your personal values, beliefs, feelings, and experiences as an individual and as a social worker in relationship to child emotional abuse. Please read each statement carefully and answer whether you agree or not with each statement in the four point Likert scale.

1. Overall, I feel comfortable about the clarity of the law in adequately addressing child emotional abuse.

1. Strongly Agree                      2. Agree                      3. Disagree                      4. Strongly Disagree

2. Overall, I feel satisfied with the information, education, and/or training that I have received on identifying and treating child emotional abuse.

1. Strongly Agree      2. Agree      3. Disagree      4. Strongly Disagree

3. Overall, I feel confident in my ability to identify signs of child emotional abuse.

1. Strongly Agree      2. Agree      3. Disagree      4. Strongly Disagree

4. I have made a child abuse report for emotional abuse.

1. Strongly Agree      2. Agree      3. Disagree      4. Strongly Disagree

5. I have been or I am a mandated child abuse reporter.

1. Strongly Agree      2. Agree      3. Disagree      4. Strongly Disagree

6. I believe emotional abuse to be as critical as other types of child maltreatment.

1. Strongly Agree      2. Agree      3. Disagree      4. Strongly Disagree

7. I was emotionally abused by at least one parent during my childhood.

1. Strongly Agree      2. Agree      3. Disagree      4. Strongly Disagree

8. I believe that emotional abuse can be detrimental to the normal development of children.

1. Strongly Agree      2. Agree      3. Disagree      4. Strongly Disagree

9. I believe that child emotional abuse in families is very common.

1. Strongly Agree      2. Agree      3. Disagree      4. Strongly Disagree

10. I believe that child protection agencies should intervene for the mere protection of the emotional wellbeing of children.

1. Strongly Agree      2. Agree      3. Disagree      4. Strongly Disagree

11. Within my culture, it is acceptable or common for parents to call children derogatory names.

1. Strongly Agree      2. Agree      3. Disagree      4. Strongly Disagree

### Part 3

Now I would like to know a little bit about your background. Please circle the appropriate answer. NOTE: This information is anonymous and will be kept confidential.

1. What is your age?

- 1) 25 or younger
- 2) 26 – 30
- 3) 31 – 35
- 4) 36 – 40
- 5) 41 – 45
- 6) 46 – 50
- 7) 51 – 55
- 8) 56 or older

2. What is your ethnicity?

- 1) Caucasian
- 2) African American
- 3) Hispanic
- 4) Asian/ Pacific Islander
- 5) Native American
- 6) Other(specify)\_\_\_\_\_

3. What is your gender ?

- 1) Female
- 2) Male

4. Are you a parent?

- 1) Yes
- 2) No

Created by Karla A. Lara

APPENDIX C  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

## **Study of Social Work Students' Perceptions on Child Emotional Abuse**

### **Debriefing Statement**

This study you have just completed was designed to investigate social work students' perception on emotional abuse. In this study, your view on the acceptability of certain parents' behaviors was assessed and whether you considered those behaviors as abusive. We are particularly interested in the relationship between social work students' perceptions on emotional abuse and how seriously they view emotional abuse, as well as their confidence in responding to cases of emotional abuse.

Thank you for your participation and for not discussing the contents of this study with other students. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Professor Janet Chang, Ph D at (951) 537-5501. If you would like a copy of the group results of this study, please contact the Pfau Library at California State University San Bernardino located at 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407 after December 2012.



APPENDIX D  
DEMOGRAPHICS

**Table 1: Demographics**

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>Age (N=41)</b>		
25-younger	7	17.1
26-30	12	29.3
31-35	8	19.5
36-40	4	9.8
41-45	2	4.9
46-50	4	9.8
51-55	2	4.9
56-older	2	4.9
<b>Ethnicity (N=40)</b>		
Caucasian	18	45.0
African American	3	7.5
Hispanic	13	32.5
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	2.5
Other	5	12.5
<b>Gender (N=41)</b>		
Female	37	90.2
Male	4	9.8
<b>Parenthood (N=41)</b>		
Yes	18	43.9
No	23	56.1

## APPENDIX E

### PARTICIPANTS' ACCEPTABILITY OF PARENTS' BEHAVIORS

**Table 2: Participants' Acceptability of Parents' Behaviors**

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Constantly criticizing child (N=41)		
Always	0	0
Sometimes	7	17.1
Never	34	82.9
Constantly calling child derogatory names (N=41)		
Always	2	4.9
Sometimes	0	0
Never	39	95.1
Constantly threatening to abandon child (N=41)		
Always	2	4.9
Sometimes	0	0
Never	39	95.1
Constantly telling child other children are better (N=40)		
Always	1	2.5
Sometimes	2	5
Never	37	92.5
Constantly restricting child from social interactions (N=41)		
Always	0	0
Sometimes	17	41.5
Never	24	48.5
Never hugging child (N=41)		
Always	1	2.4
Sometimes	7	17.1
Never	33	80.5
Constantly using child to meet parents' needs (N=41)		
Always	1	2.4
Sometimes	5	12.2
Never	35	85.4
Constantly making demands which child is unable to meet (N=41)		
Always	0	0
Sometimes	10	24.4
Never	31	75.6

## APPENDIX F

### PARTICIPANTS' CLASSIFICATION OF PARENTS' BEHAVIORS

**Table 3: Participants' Classification of Parents' Behaviors**

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Constantly criticizing child (N=41)		
Is not	0	0
Can be	17	41.5
Is	24	58.5
Constantly calling child derogatory names (N=41)		
Is not	0	0
Can be	1	2.4
Is	40	97.6
Constantly threatening to abandon child (N=41)		
Is not	0	0
Can be	4	9.8
Is	37	90.2
Constantly telling child other children are better (N=40)		
Is not	1	2.5
Can be	14	35.0
Is	25	62.5
Constantly restricting child from social interactions (N=40)		
Is not	1	2.5
Can be	27	67.5
Is	12	30.0
Never hugging child (N=41)		
Is not	0	0
Can be	19	46.3
Is	22	53.7
Constantly using child to meet parents' needs (N=41)		
Is not	0	0
Can be	17	41.5
Is	24	58.5
Constantly making demands which child is unable to meet (N=41)		
Is not	0	0
Can be	19	46.3
Is	22	53.7

APPENDIX G

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE

**Table 4: Perceptions and Experiences of Emotional Abuse**

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Feels comfortable about clarity of the law in adequately addressing emotional abuse (N=40)		
Strongly Agree	0	0
Agree	12	30.0
Disagree	25	62.5
Strongly Disagree	3	7.5
Feels satisfied with education and training received on identifying and treating emotional abuse (N=40)		
Strongly Agree	1	2.5
Agree	15	37.5
Disagree	21	52.5
Strongly Disagree	3	7.5
Feels confident with ability to identify signs of emotional abuse (N=41)		
Strongly Agree	2	4.9
Agree	24	58.5
Disagree	15	36.6
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Has made a child abuse report for emotional abuse (N=41)		
Strongly Agree	7	17.1
Agree	5	12.2
Disagree	15	36.6
Strongly Disagree	14	34.1
Is or has been a mandated child abuse reporter (N=41)		
Strongly Agree	29	70.7
Agree	10	24.4
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	2	4.9
Believes emotional abuse is as critical as other types of maltreatment (N=41)		
Strongly Agree	22	53.7
Agree	19	46.3
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Was emotionally abused by at least one parent during childhood (N=41)		
Strongly Agree	9	22.0
Agree	8	19.5
Disagree	14	34.1
Strongly Disagree	10	24.4
Believes emotional abuse can be detrimental to the normal development of children (N=41)		
Strongly Agree	34	82.9
Agree	7	17.1
Disagree	0	0
Strongly Disagree	0	0



**Table 4: Perceptions and Experiences of Emotional Abuse  
(continuation)**

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Believes that emotional abuse in families is very common (N=41)		
Strongly Agree	5	12.2
Agree	26	63.3
Disagree	10	24.4
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Believes child protection agencies should intervene for mere protection of emotional well-being of children (N=41)		
Strongly Agree	7	17.1
Agree	28	68.3
Disagree	6	14.6
Strongly Disagree	0	0
Within his/her culture, it is acceptable or common for parents to call children derogatory names (N=41)		
Strongly Agree	1	2.4
Agree	9	22.0
Disagree	16	39.0
Strongly Disagree	15	36.6

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