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## Child neglect as a culture-based concept: A systematic review and implications for studying and measuring child neglect

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Child neglect is widely acknowledged as a culture-based concept. The conceptualization, thresholds, and definitions of child neglect are heavily informed by cultural norms on “good parenting”. Yet, the cultural nuances in the definitions are not reflected in the widely accepted instruments that are used to measure neglectful behaviours.

**Objective:** This systematic review aims to unravel the cultural norms that underpin the conceptualization and definition of child neglect across different communities, and to discuss how these cultural norms are implied in the measurement tools used for studying child neglect.

**Methods:** Following the PRISMA procedure for systematic reviews, we conducted a search from four databases (Scopus, PubMed, CINAHL and PsychInfo) for relevant articles published between 1960 and 2024. Findings from 25 articles that met the inclusion criteria were analyzed thematically.

**Results:** The included studies were conducted in countries from four continents: Africa, North America, Asia and Europe. Norms of community collective responsibility to childcare, gender norms, intergenerational kinship and lineage norms, and norms on obedience and respect, were the cultural norms that influenced the conceptualization of child neglect. Norms that sanction and mandate all community members to be responsible for the care of children underpinned the construction of child neglect as a ‘community failure’.

**Conclusion:** The findings highlight the need to develop context-based and culturally informed tools for measuring child neglect behaviours in different communities. It also underscores the need to critically investigate cultural norms within the context of child wellbeing, as some of the cultural norms could legitimize child exploitation.

### 1. Introduction

Child neglect is a parenting and social issue (Horwath, 2007), which is highly influenced by culture-based understanding of “good parenting” or “good childrearing practices” (Dickens, 2007). The nexus between culture and the conceptualization of good parenting amplify discussions on the lack of consensual definition of child neglect (DeLong-Hamilton et al., 2016), which inadvertently impacts on how child neglect is studied and measured. As such, the existing findings, from cross-cultural studies and pooled effects from meta-analysis, that identify child neglect as the most common, reported, and substantiated form of child maltreatment in the last few

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decades (cf. Clement et al., 2016; Radford et al., 2013; Stoltenborgh et al., 2013; Vanderminden et al., 2019), may not be an accurate reflection of the true prevalence of child neglect due to the cultural influence on the conceptualization and understanding of child neglect behaviours in different communities. Variations in the definition of neglectful behaviours across different cultures and communities impacts on threshold determination, assessment, and intervention in child neglect issues (Abdullah, 2022; DeLong-Hamilton et al., 2016; Lonne, 2015).

Also, it has become axiomatic in the research literature that Western cultural practices are individualistic, and non-western cultures are collectivist (Hofstede et al., 2010). Thus, collectivist values are characterized in opposition to Western individualistic cultures (ibid). A classic distinction between individualistic and collectivist cultures borders on the different values underpinning parenting and childcare practices. Because child neglect behaviours are influenced by community understandings of parenting and childcare (Horwath, 2007), and there are cultural variations (e.g., individualistic vs. collectivist) in the understanding of childcare practices among different communities, the way neglectful behaviours are defined or measured in empirical studies may also vary across cultures and communities. This is because the basis for measuring an act or a social behaviour/construct is the operational definition of the concept or behaviour. A recent systematic review study on measurement models for child neglect confirmed that the existing empirical measurement models for studying child neglect do not adequately account for the complexity of child neglect behaviours, such as the cultural elements in neglect (Haworth et al., 2024). As a result, this systematic review aims to tease out evidence on the various ways culture influences the conceptualization of child neglect, and to provide useful suggestions for the development of context-based measurement instruments that are culturally sensitive and specific to the socio-cultural and legal context of a particular country or community.

### 1.1. Definition of child neglect, measurement, and culture

Child neglect is commonly described as “parental omission in care which results in actual or potential harm” (Hua et al., 2014, p. 2). For example, the Department of Health and Human Services in the United States, defined child neglect as ‘any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caregiver which results in death, serious physical, or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation’ or as ‘an act or failure to act which presents eminent risk of serious harm’ (DePanfilis, 2006, p. 9). The definitions characterize neglect as an act of omission, which differentiates it from other types of maltreatments that constitute acts of commission (Horwath, 2007). However, these definitions of neglect highlight some implicit assumptions about parenting and childcare: 1) it assumes that the primary agent responsible for neglect is either the parent or caregiver of the child, and 2) it assumes that parents and caregivers are the people who are responsible for the upbringing of children. These assumptions may be true in individualistic cultural contexts where only primary caregiving parents are responsible for childcare duties. However, they may be considered reductive in a wide variety of collectivist contexts (key examples include Indigenous, African and some Asian communities) where the responsibilities for childcare and the daily upbringing of children are diffused among community members (Chilwalo, 2020; Mayaka & Truell, 2021).

Yet, these conceptualizations of child neglect and associated assumptions on childcare are implied in the widely used measurement instruments for examining child neglect perpetration. For instance, the widely accepted measurement instrument for child neglect, the Parent Child Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-PC) (Straus et al., 1998) measures child neglect behaviours following the implicit assumption that conceive parents as the main agents responsible for childcare duties. The CTS-PC scale measures child neglect by asking parents to record the number of times they “were so stressed that they had problems taking care of their child.”, and “were not able to make sure their child got the food he/she needed” among others. It may well be the case that the parent was stressed within the period and had problems providing food to the child. But it may also be the case that during the same time, the child went and stayed with the neighbour or community member who provided necessary care and food to the child, to make-up for the parents’ absence. Unfortunately, such parents will be considered neglectful since the CTS-PC scale and other measures do not provide room for the parents to justify whether the child received the care. A similar measurement approach is evident in the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ), and other measures of child neglect (see. Finkelhor et al., 2005; Haworth et al., 2024).

Additionally, a review of the screening and assessment tools employed by child protection/welfare workers in assessing child neglect behaviours (such as the widely used structured decision-making assessment tools) revealed that they also assesses child neglect occurrences using the same implicit assumption of primary caregiver responsibility for child care (Bartelink et al., 2015). Which suggest that parents from varied cultural backgrounds (especially minority groups living in multicultural societies) may be wrongfully accused of being neglectful or have their children removed due to the lack of culturally appropriate screening tools for determining neglectful behaviours in diverse contexts, including multicultural societies. Indeed, the limitations of child neglect or child protection screening tools have received attention in the research literature (Chandraratne et al., 2018; Runyan et al., 2009), with some researchers suggesting that they undermine the development of professional expertise (Gillingham & Humphreys, 2010), increase workload, and develop organizational culture that do not support sound practice (Alfandari, 2017).

### 1.2. Cultural relativism and hierarchy in child neglect

Discussions about cultural norms and values and their applications across borders requires a careful review of cultural relativism (cf. Spiro, 1992), and cultural hierarchy (Levine, 1990). While cultural relativism promotes the idea that culture should be analyzed and interpreted within its own context (cf. Spiro, 1992), cultural hierarchy attempts to place value on one culture over another (Jæger et al., 2023). Although analysis of behaviours that constitute child neglect in some communities (including those from collectivist and individualistic cultures) may suggest a possible misapplication of neglect measurement and screening instruments, it is important that such analyses remain consistent with the principles of cultural relativism (cf. Spiro, 1992) and devoid of cultural hierarchy. For

example, one may inadvertently engage in hierarchical comparisons of cultures if the measurement instruments examining child neglect are based on tools that are specific to a particular cultural viewpoint but universally applied to all families. Instead, one may promote cultural relativism by developing and utilizing culturally-informed tools to adequately examine child neglect in different cultural contexts, including multicultural societies. This systematic review seeks to unravel the various cultural interpretations, and definitions of child neglect in order to inform the development of context-based culturally appropriate instruments. The following research questions guided the review:

1. How is child neglect defined in the research literature?
2. What cultural norms or values are implicit in the definitions of child neglect?
3. What are the implications of the cultural elements (norms and values) in the definitions for the study and measurement of child neglect?

## 2. Methods

Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) (Page et al., 2021), we conducted a comprehensive review through academic databases to coalesce and synthesize evidence on how child neglect is conceptualized. A University librarian provided step-by-step guidance throughout the process. Prior to commencing the review, we conducted a search through Cochrane library and PROSPERO databases to confirm the review has not been replicated elsewhere. Subsequently, we registered the review in PROSPERO, registration ID: CRD42023431510.

### 2.1. Search strategy

Articles were searched from the following databases: Scopus, PubMed/MedLine, CINAHL and PsychInfo, for eligible studies on the conceptualization of child neglect. A combination of relevant keywords on child neglect, and Boolean operators were used to conduct the search. To ensure that we captured all relevant articles on the topic, we implemented a two-stage iterative search process, consisting of focused and broad searches (see Tables 1 and 2). The focused search was conducted using a combination of keywords that are relevant to the key concepts under investigation (see Table 1 for the keywords of the focused search). The keywords were developed and grouped into three groups, based on the three key concepts in the study: 1) child neglect, 2) conceptualization, and 3) culture. Each group provides an exhaustive list of variations in the keywords, thus presenting different ways each keyword could be defined in the literature. For example, variations for “child neglect”, included “child maltreatment”, “neglect”, and the various subtypes of neglect.

During the actual search, we searched within article titles, abstracts, keywords in full text, and subject terms in each database, by combining each keyword in group 1 along with each keyword in group 2, using the Boolean operator “AND”. We also implemented the same iterative search technique for keywords in group 1 along with keywords in group 3. Finally, we repeated the entire process again by combining keywords in group 1, 2, and 3 using the Boolean operators “AND” as well as “OR” (where necessary). The outputs from each search in every database were saved as “RIS” files and exported into Covidence.

After retrieving evidence from the databases and exporting them into the Covidence program, we conducted a broad search as part of a recommended strategy for enhancing rigour in the search process. The broad search entailed the addition of other keywords that are not considered close enough to the key concepts but may result in retrieving articles on the margins. Specific keywords that were added during the broad search included abandonment, deprivation, and customs (see Table 2 for the full keywords). Outputs from the broad search were exported into the Covidence program for processing. The entire search process was completed in February 2023. However, it was replicated in October 2024 to search for new articles that were published between February 2023 to 5th October 2024. This updated search was limited to articles published between 2023 and 2024, but it did not yield any additional eligible articles.

### 2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The following criteria were defined to screen for eligible studies that focused on the conceptualization of child neglect. The main inclusion criteria was that articles report evidence on the conceptualization or definition of child neglect. Specifically, studies were included if they satisfied the following criteria:

1. Article had child neglect definition as the main focus or part of the outcome.

**Table 1**

Boolean search strategy and keyword combinations.

Group 1: Key variable and variations	Group 2: Key variable and variations	Group 3: Key variable and variations
“Child neglect” OR “child maltreatment” OR neglect, OR Abuse, OR “physical neglect” OR “supervisory neglect”, OR “educational neglect: OR “environmental neglect” OR “medical neglect” OR “basic needs neglect” “psychological neglect” OR “emotional neglect” OR “cultural neglect”	Definition OR define* OR conceptuali*ation OR construct* OR construction OR meaning	Culture OR values OR norms OR “social norm” OR “cultural values” OR tradition

**Table 2**  
Search strategy for the broad search.

Group 1: Key variable and variations	Group 2: Key variable and variations	Group 3: Key variable and variations
“Child neglect” OR “child maltreatment” OR neglect, OR Abuse, OR “physical neglect” OR “supervisory neglect”, OR “educational neglect: OR “environmental neglect” OR “medical neglect” OR “basic needs neglect” OR “psychological neglect” OR “emotional neglect” OR “cultural neglect” abandonment, OR abandon* OR deprivation OR *deprive	Definition OR define* OR conceptuali*ation OR construct* OR construction OR meaning	Culture OR values OR norms OR “social norm” OR “cultural values” OR tradition OR beliefs OR Custom*

2. Article reported empirical qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, or evidence from conceptual and theoretical discussion on the conceptualization of child neglect.
3. Article is published in a peer-reviewed academic journal using English language between 1960 and 2024.

Articles that did not meet the above criteria were excluded.

### 2.3. Search outcomes and screening

Outputs from the focused ( $N = 4032$ ) and broad searches ( $N = 108,988$ ) yielded 113,020 results. Two key factors were responsible for this large output: 1) non application of filters for inclusion criteria during the search (such as year of publication, non-peer-reviewed articles), and 2) inclusion of broad concepts such as “deprivation”, which alone generated over 70,000 extra results because deprivation is connected to several issues across multiple databases.

We screened all 113,020 articles. Duplicates,  $n = 82,137$ , were automatically identified by Covidence, and an extra 14 duplicates were identified through the manual screening by the first and second authors. Titles and abstracts of the remaining 30,869 articles were screened individually by the second author and a research assistant (Felix Mensah) based on the inclusion criteria. Discrepancies ( $n = 74$ ) were automatically detected by Covidence software after the independent screening process. These discrepancies were resolved during the fortnight project meetings after the articles were reviewed by the first author.

A total of 144 articles were screened in after completing title and abstract review process. The 144 articles were read by the two authors and assessed for eligibility of which 119 were removed after full-text reading. For example, 99 of the articles were removed because they did not define child neglect as part of the outcome or focus. No discrepancies were recorded during the full-text review stage. The remaining 25 articles were included in the study. The entire article screening and full-text reading process spanned six months, from March 2023 to August 2023. Fig. 1 below presents the entire screening process in a PRISMA flow chart:

### 2.4. Data extraction and quality appraisal

The included studies were checked for quality using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018). The MMAT tool comprises seven appraisal questions categorised by different methodological designs (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods). All 25 articles satisfied the MMAT criteria for inclusion in the review (see Supplementary document for details of the quality appraisal). Using the MMAT tool facilitated the analysis process, as it ensured that all included articles reported key information, such as study objective, making them suitable for further narrative thematic analysis. Further, we developed a data extraction template in Covidence to extract key information from the included studies (see Table 3). Information, such as author name and year, study method, context, and key findings were extracted from each of the included studies.

### 2.5. Evidence synthesis procedure

A separate document was created in Microsoft word for each of the 25 included studies to organize the evidence (titled, evidence document). These evidence documents contained detailed narratives from the articles, including verbatim quotes, and quantitative classifications about how child neglect is defined. The evidence documents were imported into NVivo 12 software for analysis. Each evidence document was treated as a transcript representing one included study. We were influenced loosely by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis process in synthesizing the evidence. First, findings and results contained in the evidence documents were coded line by line using common phrases, and themes used in the studies. Phrases such as, “child registration and neglect”, and “community parenting”, were used to represent key ideas in the evidence documents. Second, because the review focused on cultural issues in the conceptualization of neglect, we conducted a focused coding by analyzing each code to specify the cultural element(s). Focused codes such as gender expectations, beliefs on child registration etc., were created. The focused codes were reviewed, and those representing similar ideas were merged to form themes.

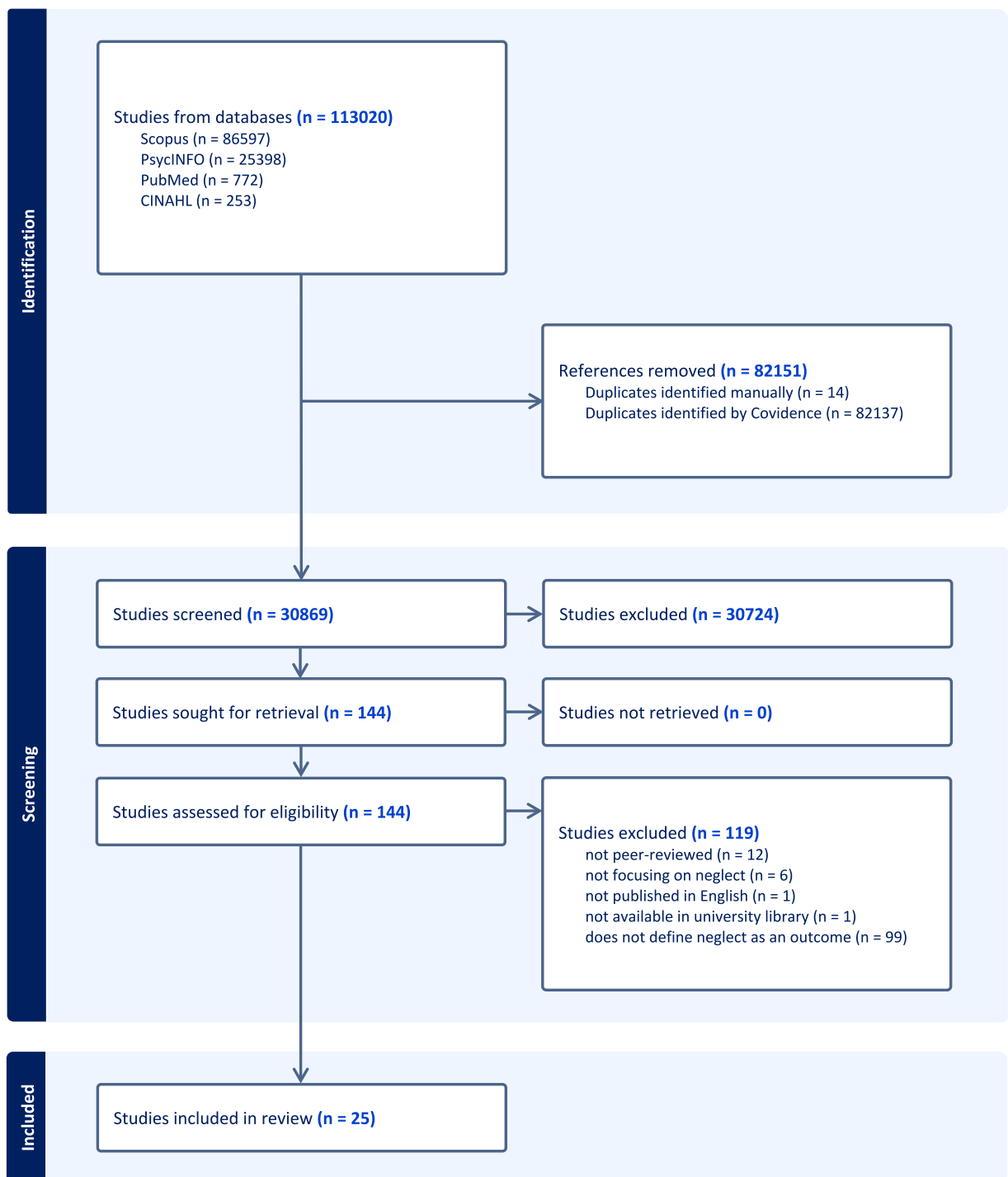


Fig. 1. PRISMA flow diagram

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Study characteristics

All 25 included articles came from separate empirical and conceptual studies. Fourteen of the included studies were conducted in the United States (Blumenthal, 2021; Coohy, 2003; Dickerson et al., 2017; Dickerson et al., 2020; Dubowitz et al., 1998; Dubowitz,

**Table 3**  
Characteristics of included studies.

Author and year	Study aim	Country/area	Study method	Study participants	Sample	Key findings
Shor (1999)	Explored what immigrant parents in Israel consider to be the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate child rearing practices, and the beliefs that underlie such practices.	Israel (but immigrant parents from Russia, Ukraine the Caucasus)	Mixed methods: semi-structured questionnaires and vignette interviews	Male and female parents	105	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parents largely (moderate to high) identified situations of inadequate supervision, such as parent leaving their five old children alone during the day, as inappropriate.</li> <li>- Potential harmful effects on the child were highlighted as the justification for identifying the supervisory behaviour as inappropriate.</li> <li>- Few Caucasus parents argued that they see no wrong with a child staying at home alone during the day, and half of the respondents felt there is nothing wrong for a 7-year-old child to stay at home and prepare meals for herself. Some argued that the 7-year-old will benefit from learn the skills of cooking.</li> <li>- About half of the parents argued that it is appropriate for a parent to ignore his eight-year-old child for several days if she does not clean or fail to organize his/her room. They believed that such behaviour would enable the child to learn how to keep the room clean and organized. Those who disagreed cited possible effects or unintended outcomes for the child, such as children becoming disobedient.</li> </ul>
Dickerson et al. (2020)	Explored what laypersons consider to be child neglect, and whether laypersons conflate child neglect with poverty.	United States	Mixed method: Vignettes, questionnaires and open-ended questions	People aged 20–75 years	365	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 55 % of the participants affirmed the legal definition of neglect as per the laws of California. However, these judgements were influenced by the participants' poverty, neglect and socioeconomic status.</li> <li>- The probability of rating a behaviour as neglectful correlated positively with the participants' perceived satisfaction of their basic needs. Participants from wealthy background had lower threshold of neglect and had much wider indicators of neglect.</li> <li>- Participants' perception of their basic needs being met predicted the probability of them judging a parents' behaviour to be intentional neglect or not.</li> <li>- Participants often conflated poverty and neglect, especially in circumstances of homelessness.</li> </ul>
Amoah (2019)	Investigated independent child migrants' experiences and perceptions of parental neglect.	Ghana	Concurrent mixed method: questionnaires and in-depth interviews	Male and female child migrants	170	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The concept of neglect was understood and experienced in diverse ways among the children. Their narratives</li> </ul>

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Table 3 (continued)

Author and year	Study aim	Country/area	Study method	Study participants	Sample	Key findings
				between 12 and 17 years		<p>highlighted different forms of neglect they had encountered, emphasizing the complexity and multifaceted nature of neglect experiences.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Physical and supervisory neglect as significant indicators of neglect by parents and guardians. Examples included persistent corporal punishment, lack of food, denial of education, and voluntary kinship care/fostering.</li> <li>- However, some children considered instances of physical and verbal abuse as forms of parental concern rather than indicators of neglect, adding a layer of complexity to how the children interpreted and responded to their experiences of neglect.</li> <li>- 41 % of the sample did not feel neglected by their parents, and only 11 % of them felt happy.</li> <li>- Being independent does not mean neglect as children saw migration as a way to contribute to family wellbeing.</li> </ul>
Blumenthal (2021)	Highlighted how societal factors play a significant role in shaping parental behaviours and the ability to provide for children, moving beyond individual-focused explanations of neglect to consider broader systemic issues.	United States	Literature review	-	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The dominant definition of neglect focuses on the caregiver's failure to provide for a child's basic psychological and physical needs, emphasizing parental omissions in care.</li> <li>- Defines child neglect as a collective failure of society to prioritize justice, equality, and economic sufficiency, which are essential foundations for the healthy growth and development of children.</li> <li>- Shifts the focus from individual parental omissions to the collective failure of society (structural inequality) in prioritizing justice, equality, and economic sufficiency for children.</li> </ul>
Calheiros et al. (2016)	Defined types of maltreatment by integrating perspectives from laypeople and community professionals.	Portugal	Qualitative method: semi-structured interview, convenience and snowball sampling	Males and females aged between 18 and 68 years	282	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Physical, psychological, educational, sexual, and neglect abuse were the identified types of child maltreatment.</li> <li>- Lack of consensus in 9 of the 20 subtypes of maltreatment, with physical abuse and sexual abuse being the most consensual types among participants, as opposed to psychological abuse and neglect.</li> <li>- Defined child neglect as a type of maltreatment that includes subtypes such as lack of supervision, lack of physical provision, and lack of mental health monitoring.</li> </ul>

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Table 3 (continued)

Author and year	Study aim	Country/area	Study method	Study participants	Sample	Key findings
Coohey (2003)	Developed and tested a classification system for different types of supervisory neglect.	United States	Review of reports	–	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Neglect involves parent omissions that jeopardize the child's safety and well-being, such as inadequate hygiene rules, inadequate housing conditions, lack of physical health monitoring, inadequate feeding, insecurity in the environment, and unattended developmental needs.</li> <li>- Child neglect is defined as the failure to provide basic necessities by a parent or caretaker that may or does result in physical, emotional, social, or cognitive harm to a child.</li> <li>- Three types of child neglect: physical, supervisory, and emotional are proposed</li> <li>- Not watching a child closely enough, leaving a child with an unsuitable caretaker, failure to protect from a third party, and allowed, encouraged, or forced a child to engage in a harmful activity are some types of supervisory neglect.</li> </ul>
Dickerson et al. (2017)	Explored the perception of laypersons on child neglect and the factors influencing their decision to make a referral.	United States	Qualitative method: vignette	Males and females, aged 18 to 69 years	219	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Men viewed fathers as more culpable than mothers for the neglect of their son, and viewed mothers as somewhat more culpable for the neglect of their daughter.</li> <li>- Men also perceived absent mothers as more intentionally harmful than absent fathers.</li> <li>- Both men and women were more likely to qualify parental behaviour as legally neglectful when the genders of the custodial parent and child matched.</li> <li>- Gender bias may exist in laypersons' perceptions of child neglect and may influence their decisions to report.</li> </ul>
Dubowitz et al. (1998)	Examined the views of child neglect among African American and White middle and low income community members, and professionals.	United States	Qualitative methods: vignette, questionnaires	Females	248	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Middle income participant group rated psychological care more severely than lower income participants.</li> <li>- Middle income participants rated psychological care more negatively than physical care.</li> <li>- Demographic variables of participants did not add variance beyond group membership.</li> </ul>
Dubowitz, Pitts, et al. (2005)	Explored empirical support for conceptual definitions of child neglect.	United States	Quantitative method: questionnaire	Children (4 to 8 years) and caregivers	377	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identified latent constructs that support the conceptual definition of support: social support, father's support, maternal support, family affection, affection, family conflict and community safety.</li> <li>- These latent constructs represent three categories of children's basic needs:</li> </ul>

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Table 3 (continued)

Author and year	Study aim	Country/area	Study method	Study participants	Sample	Key findings
Dubowitz, Newton, et al. (2005)	Compared how neglect is defined by Child Protection Services (CPS) official codes with neglect defined by a review of CPS narrative data.	United States	Quantitative method: questionnaire	Children (4 to 8 years) and caregivers	740	<p>emotional support/or affection, exposure to family conflict/or violence and exposure to community violence/or lack of neighbourhood safety.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Moderate correlations (0.24 to 0.54 range) observed among the modified Maltreatment classification system (MMCS) neglect subtypes and the CPS General Neglect type.</li> <li>- Correlations were strongest in the areas of food, sanitation and supervision. Clothing and shelter problems occurred least frequently, and their associations were on the lower end of the spectrum.</li> <li>- Neglect was only modestly associated with some of the measures of children's functioning.</li> <li>- The MMCS identifies 9 neglect types, including failure to provide (food and medical) and lack of supervision, sanitation, shelter, etc.</li> <li>- Significant associations with children's total and externalizing behaviour problems, impaired socialization, and impaired daily living skills.</li> <li>- Neglect of children's medical needs was related to externalizing behaviour problems, impaired socialization, and impaired daily living skills.</li> </ul>
Goodvin et al. (2007)	Described the development of the Community Norms of Child Neglect Scale (CNCNS).	United States	Quantitative methods: vignette, questionnaire	Males and females	3809	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participants' description of neglect corresponds well with conceptually identified ones.</li> <li>- Four subtypes of neglect were identified: failure to provide for basic needs, lack of supervision, emotional neglect, and educational neglect.</li> </ul>
Hayashi (2022)	Developed a definitional conceptual framework to clarify the nature of the definitions of psychological/emotional abuse and neglect (PEA) and to test the efficacy of this framework by applying it to three different types of definitions.	Japan	Literature Review	-	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Analyses three PEA definitions from theory to practice: abstract definitions; operational definitions; and professional definitions.</li> <li>- Shows a considerable variation and lack of clarity about how PEA is understood and defined within and across the three types of definitions.</li> <li>- Definitions of abuse and neglect, including PEA, thus involve at least the following eight conceptual components: abuser characteristics, abusive behaviour, frequency, intention, consequences, interaction, child age, and other child's characteristics.</li> </ul>
Laird (2016)	Explored the contradictions and proposes alternative	England	Explorative study; literature Review	-	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supervisory neglect is defined as the failure of a parent to</li> </ul>

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Table 3 (continued)

Author and year	Study aim	Country/area	Study method	Study participants	Sample	Key findings
	considerations in the conceptualization and assessment of supervisory neglect between Western countries and sub-Saharan African countries.					<p>'provide the child with adequate protection from harmful people or situations'.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Infants being left in the care of another child</li> <li>- Pre-school children growing up in a home that is not 'child proof', being left alone or left to play outside unsupervised.</li> <li>- Primary school children left alone at home or left to play outside unsupervised, required to cook meals without guidance or expected to supervise younger children.</li> <li>- Secondary school children left to their own devices or parents unaware of the movements of their children.</li> <li>- The conditions in both Western countries and sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are distinct affecting the conceptualization of what constitutes supervisory neglect. For instance, the home environment and the supervision of infants are varied with low social and economic resources such as electricity, adequate housing facilities, and income in SSA compared to the developed countries.</li> <li>- The nature of the socio-economic environment in SSA and the effects on child neglect challenges the notion of supervisory neglect as a deliberative act by parents.</li> </ul>
Lavi and Katz (2016)	Explored children's perceptions of neglect and the importance of taking into account the processes that children undergo while providing their perception.	Israel	Qualitative study; forensic investigations, interviews	Male and Females, aged between 7 and 12 years	15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participants had difficulties in identifying alleged child neglect because the acts are embedded in their daily routines.</li> <li>- Neglect is revealed in the narratives of family life.</li> <li>- Participants elaborated on neglect incidents while stressing their love and loyalty for their parents.</li> <li>- Participants expressed a range including emotions of fear and sadness as they expressed their views of maltreatment.</li> </ul>
Manful and Abdullah (2021)	Explored the perception and causes of child neglect among practitioners and parents.	Ghana	Qualitative study; interviews	Males and females aged between 21 and 49 years	28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Child neglect is defined to include: the inability to provide basic needs; shrinking of responsibilities; child abandonment; and lack of emotional support.</li> <li>- Practitioners' perceptions differed from those of the parents, whereas the practitioners focused on both male and female parents' failure to provide a child's basic needs, the mothers, on the other hand, blamed only fathers for child neglect.</li> </ul>

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Table 3 (continued)

Author and year	Study aim	Country/area	Study method	Study participants	Sample	Key findings
Manful and Karim (2023)	Explore what low-income families deem as child neglect to inform more acceptable interventions for both social workers and families to ensure better outcomes for children.	Ghana	Qualitative method; in-depth interviews	Parents – males and females above 18 years	18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The causes of child neglect include poverty, belief in matrilineal inheritance, and family disruption resulting from parental separation or divorce.</li> <li>- Participants expressed various views on neglect, including failure to provide basic needs, parental inability or willingness, lack of parental guidance, poverty, and behavioural factors of the child.</li> <li>- Neglect for children below 10 years was primarily linked to parental failure, especially in providing the necessary basic needs such as food, clothing, and education. This neglect was often attributed to factors like poverty, divorce, or the death of a parent.</li> <li>- Neglect for children in the 10–17 age group was linked to the child's behaviour and failure to conform to expected social norms and reciprocal relationships between parents and children. Parents perceived neglect in this age group as a result of the child's actions or attitudes.</li> </ul>
Mennen et al. (2010)	Described the nature of neglect in child welfare Clients to understand how different types of neglect co-occurred with each other and with other types of maltreatment.	United States	Case record abstraction and Modified Maltreatment Classification System (MMCS).	Youth – males and females	303	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Five types of neglect were identified:</li> <li>- a) Care neglect: Failure to provide the child's basic needs such as adequate food, clothing, hygiene, and sanitation.</li> <li>- b) Environmental neglect: Conditions such as homelessness, unsanitary living environments, or unsafe conditions.</li> <li>- c) Medical neglect: Failure to address the child's medical needs or conditions.</li> <li>- d) Educational neglect: Failure to ensure the child's educational needs are met.</li> <li>- e) Supervisory neglect: Lack of appropriate supervision or protection for the child.</li> <li>- Neglect was present in 71.0 % of the sample, compared to the 41.0 % classified as neglected by Child Protection Services records.</li> <li>- The most common type of neglect was supervisory neglect (72.5 %), followed by environmental neglect (61.6 %).</li> <li>- Except for medical neglect, all types of neglect were significantly correlated with each other.</li> </ul>

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Table 3 (continued)

Author and year	Study aim	Country/area	Study method	Study participants	Sample	Key findings
Newton (2017)	Investigated the perceptions and experiences of child neglect from Aboriginal parents and human services workers in a rural community.	Australia	Qualitative; Community forum, interview, vignettes	Parents and social workers – males and females	27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participants expressed that child neglect was primarily attributed to the parents prioritizing their own needs and wants above those of their child, which could result in the child becoming at risk of physical or emotional harm or expose them to social deviance.</li> <li>- Violence and substance abuse were the main risk factors for child neglect, and intergenerational trauma, racism and discrimination, and feeling powerless were prevalent in the community.</li> <li>- There were few differences in how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people defined child neglect in this study.</li> </ul>
Ogle et al. (2022)	Examined latent classes of neglect defined by co-occurring neglect types and multiple forms of abuse.	United States	Modified Maltreatment Classification System (MMCS)	Children and parents	390	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Latent class analysis yielded 5 classes: exposure to violence, failure to provide, supervisory lapses, substance-related endangerment, and non-specific.</li> <li>- Exposure to violence and substance-related endangerment classes were characterized as highly severe.</li> <li>- High and low severity classes were associated with distinct child, parent, and family characteristics.</li> <li>- The latent classes were also differentiated by distal outcomes, including the probability of law enforcement investigation, child removal from home, and offender removal from home.</li> </ul>
Polat et al. (2010)	Evaluated the perceptions and attitudes about child neglect of a group of mothers in Turkey, and to determine the factors affecting perception and attitudes of these mothers about child neglect.	Turkey	Quantitative; questionnaire	Mothers	513	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participants considered failure of a parent to attend parent-teacher conferences and not controlling the child's homework as neglect.</li> <li>- Not taking the child to the doctor when he was sick was considered neglect</li> <li>- Participants considered that where the mother keeping detergents in an easily accessible unlocked cabinet as neglect.</li> <li>- A statistically significant relation was found between the neglect perception of mothers and (1) the mothers' and their spouses' educational levels, (2) monthly family income, (3) the mother's occupation, (4) smoking during pregnancy, and (5) existence of smoking at home.</li> </ul>
Rebbe (2018)	Compared State legal statutory definitions with the Fourth National Incidence	United States	Review			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Most states do not include many of the NIS-4 components in their definitions. This is particularly true in the subtypes of</li> </ul>

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Table 3 (continued)

Author and year	Study aim	Country/area	Study method	Study participants	Sample	Key findings
	Survey (NIS-4) operationalization of neglect.					<p>educational and emotional neglect.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Overprotectiveness, inadequate structure, and unstable custody are not included in any of the definitional statutes for states.</li> <li>- The aspects most frequently found in state definitions were: food/nutrition, abandonment, shelter, supervision, and clothing.</li> <li>- There is no consensus among states as a whole about what to include in defining neglect.</li> </ul>
Scourfield (2000)	Discussed the construction of child neglect in a child and family social work team in the UK, based on ethnographic research in the social work office.	United Kingdom	Review	-	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The interest in neglect arose from the response to several child deaths. In one case, the death was retrospectively constructed as a 'neglect' case, although the direct cause of death was violence from the mother's boyfriend.</li> <li>- Neglect is often defined in professional discourse based on physical care, or the servicing of the child's body - the neglected child is dirty and smelly.</li> <li>- The home condition is often judged against tacit standards. Investigations of neglect were tied to the home situation, in terms of hygiene.</li> <li>- Adequate feeding and diet is another concern about the servicing of the children's body - the concern about children being given enough food and the right kind of food are used to construct child neglect.</li> <li>- At times professionals rely on the account of others to describe cases of neglect, especially the behaviours of the parents. Social workers often refer to the negative influence of parents in terms of the lack of engagement with the routine tasks of parenting.</li> </ul>
Sharley et al. (2019)	Explored practitioners' constructions of child neglect among practitioners.	Namibia	Qualitative methods; interviews	Practitioners	15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teenage pregnancy and substance misuse emerged as central to the conceptualization of neglect within the local context.</li> <li>- Parents who are using drugs or alcohol often prioritize their own need for substances over the basic physical and emotional needs of their children.</li> <li>- Tension between Western and Indigenous child-rearing practices.</li> </ul>
Tanner and Turney (2000)	Assessed physical and emotional neglect from a social work perspective.	England	Review			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Neglect is best understood as an absence of care, that is, a breakdown in the relationship between the primary carer and child which results in</li> </ul>

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Table 3 (continued)

Author and year	Study aim	Country/area	Study method	Study participants	Sample	Key findings
Williams (2017)	Explored lay constructions of child neglect by 46 self-defined 'lay' people in England.	England	Qualitative study; focus group discussions	Males and females	46	<p>difficulties in offering reliable and adequate care.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Observation, through its focus on both practical content and emotional climate, helps in developing an accurate assessment of the complexities of the mother-child relationship.</li> <li>- Participants viewed neglect as extremely damaging for children and as arising when children's physical, emotional, training and supervisory needs were unmet due to abnormal parental behaviour.</li> <li>- Participants conceived that children are neglected when failure to meet their needs was attributable to a lack of parental knowledge and skill (clueless parents), a lack of appropriate parental disposition (underinvested parents) or both (unsuitable parents).</li> <li>- Normal parents (those with appropriate parental disposition, skills and knowledge) who failed to meet their children's needs were not seen as neglectful but rather as overburdened.</li> </ul>

Newton, et al., 2005; Dubowitz, Pitts, et al., 2005; Goodvin et al., 2007; Mennen et al., 2010; Ogle et al., 2022) and the United Kingdom (Scourfield, 2000; Tanner & Turney, 2000; Williams, 2017). Four studies were conducted in two African countries, namely Ghana (Amoah, 2019; Manful & Abdullah, 2021; Manful & Karim, 2023) and Namibia (Sharley et al., 2019), and one each from Australia (Newton, 2017), Turkey (Polat et al., 2010), Japan (Hayashi, 2022), and Portugal (Calheiros et al., 2016). Broadly, all 25 articles focused on how child neglect is defined using different groups of participants, but only a few had explicit focus on culture (e.g., Manful & Abdullah, 2021; Manful & Karim, 2023; Newton, 2017; Sharley et al., 2019). Definitions of child neglect in five studies focused on lay people in different countries, such as the United Kingdom (Williams, 2017), United States (Dickerson et al., 2017; Dickerson et al., 2020) Ghana (Manful & Karim, 2023) and Portugal (Calheiros et al., 2016). Other studies explored child neglect definitions by specific groups or populations, including immigrants (Shor, 2000), migrants (Amoah, 2019), Indigenous people (Newton, 2017), and low-income families (Manful & Karim, 2023). Also, the included studies involved evidence obtained from variety of sources using different research approaches, such as vignette interviews, qualitative interviews, case records, conceptual analysis of reports, and quantitative surveys (see Table 3).

### 3.2. Consensus and threshold

A common finding from the majority of the included articles ( $n = 21$ ) is that there is no general/broad consensus on the definition of child neglect and the thresholds of neglect. Evidence obtained from studies that used data from practitioners (Newton, 2017; Sharley et al., 2019), community members (Calheiros et al., 2016; Dickerson et al., 2017; Dickerson et al., 2020; Manful & Karim, 2023; Williams, 2017), legal documents (Dubowitz, Pitts, et al., 2005), and case records (Mennen et al., 2010) in different jurisdictions (such as UK, USA, Portugal, Ghana, Namibia, Australia) revealed several nuances pertaining to behaviours that constitute child neglect in different contexts. The majority of the differences in the definitions of child neglect stem from the: 1) lack of agreement on the subtypes of neglect due to the vast category of behaviours classified as neglect (Calheiros et al., 2016; Coohy, 2003), 2) impact of structural factors (e.g. poverty) in defining child neglect, and 3) influence of cultural expectations on childrearing and parenting in defining neglectful behaviours (Blumenthal, 2021; Hayashi, 2022; Polat et al., 2010; Rebbe, 2018; Williams, 2017).

For example, compared to international evidence on child neglect, Rebbe's (2018) analysis of legal definitions of child neglect in 50 States in the USA revealed that none of the States classified behaviours, such as inadequate structure to support childcare, parental overprotectiveness, and unstable custody of children, among neglectful behaviours. Similarly, parental lack of affection to a child, enabling child maladaptive behaviour, and inappropriate expectations of parents from children were all not classified in the definition

of child neglect by at least one State in the United States (Rebbe, 2018).

Additionally, cultural expectations on parenting and structural factors, including socio-economic conditions, also contributed to the varied definitions of child neglect and different threshold standards (Blumenthal, 2021; Hayashi, 2022; Manful & Abdullah, 2021; Polat et al., 2010; Williams, 2017). Normative standards that disregard children's rights, such as rights to participate in decisions (Polat et al., 2010), norms on kinship (Amoah, 2019), and communal responsibility to childcare (Blumenthal, 2021; Laird, 2016; Manful & Abdullah, 2021; Manful & Karim, 2023; Sharley et al., 2019), were among some key contributors to the varied definitions of child neglect in different communities. Blumenthal (2021) suggests that the impacts of community cultural expectations and structural inequalities (such as poverty and racism) require that child neglect be considered as a collective societal failure instead of parental responsibility.

*"...child neglect might best be viewed as a collective failure of society to prioritize justice, equality, and economic sufficiency – the necessary foundations for the healthy growth and development of children."*

(p. 31)

This evidence highlights the complex nature of child neglect. The remaining parts of this section will present evidence on key cultural norms and how they influence child neglect definitions in different contexts.

### 3.3. Themes relating to cultural norms and values in the conceptualization of child neglect

#### 3.3.1. Community normative responsibility to childcare

Definitions of child neglect contained in some of the studies highlighted cultural norms of community responsibility to childcare as a key factor that regulates the conceptualization of child neglect (Amoah, 2019; Laird, 2016; Manful & Karim, 2023; Sharley et al., 2019; Williams, 2017). Norms that sanction and mandate all community members to be responsible for the care of children in their neighbourhoods/communities was emphasized in the definitions by parents and community members in studies conducted in Ghana, Namibia (Amoah, 2019; Laird, 2016; Manful & Karim, 2023; Sharley et al., 2019) and Turkey (Polat et al., 2010). Laird (2016), identified varied definitions of supervisory neglect in her study in Africa. According to Laird (2016) childhood for most African children is characterized by high levels of autonomy and mobility. As a result, African children are expected to socialize and engage in group play activities with other children without being supervised by their parents (Laird, 2016). However, it is expected that adults, including kin (Amoah, 2019), living within the vicinity of wherever children play will monitor the children as part of their normative commitment to childcare (Laird, 2016). Laird (2016) found that although the parent's failure 'to watch closely enough' or leave the child 'alone or left to play outside unsupervised' constitute supervisory child neglect based on the standards in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), no local community member perceived such acts to be neglectful because of the normative expectation that the children will be supervised by residents in the community.

Similarly, Amoah's (2019) study in Ghana revealed intergenerational relationships enforced by kinship values as a key community cultural norm that enforce collective community responsibility to child care. Kinship values and norms ensure that extended families (such as aunts and grandparents) and community members are actively involved in childcare, thereby diffusing the duty of childcare among all kinship members. Specifically, 41 % of children who were interviewed in the study by Amoah (2019) rejected claims that "being away from home and not being supervised by their parents" is an indicator of neglect. Instead, they argued that adults in the community, including members of their kinship network, supervised and cared for them. Evidence in another study by Manful and Karim (2023) revealed that the norm of community responsibility to childcare is bidirectional, as children are also expected to undertake some caregiving duties in the family and community. As a result, some community residents in Ghana defined child neglect, for children between 10 and 17, as "an outcome of children's actions/inactions and attitudes", due to the normative duties expected of children in the home and community contexts.

It appears the role of cultural norms in child neglect extends beyond societies characterized as collectivist. Williams (2017) study in the United Kingdom revealed that societal norms about child rearing and parenting influenced how parents constructed child neglect. Also, both Laird (2016) and Shor (2000) acknowledged the potential tension that could arise among parents who are exposed to different cultural norms, such as immigrants, in their construction of child neglect.

#### 3.3.2. Gender norms and parenting

Interpretations of gender norms and associated parenting responsibilities appeared in the conceptualization of child neglect in some of the included studies (Dickerson et al., 2017; Manful & Karim, 2023; Sharley et al., 2019). Societal expectations on the role of fathers and mothers in childcare were reflected in the definitions of child neglect, and community members' judgement of neglect occurrence. Sharley et al.'s (2019) study among practitioners in Namibia revealed that there is collective agreement (norms) about parenting activities carried out by fathers and mothers, which influence judgement about who is responsible for child neglect. Specifically, fathers are expected to register their children with the birth registration department, while mothers' take leadership on sending their children to school. As a result, a lack of registration of a child's name is a type of neglect perpetrated by fathers, since mothers have no role in such activity.

Similarly, children's failure to attend school is conceptualized as neglect largely attributed to the mother. This implies that "acts of omission in care", which underlie most definitions of child neglect, is gendered due to the defined normative parenting duties for mothers and fathers.

Studies in Ghana revealed inheritance paths (matrilineal vs patrilineal), reciprocity, and parenting expectations among the core

gender issues in defining child neglect (Manful & Abdullah, 2021; Manful & Karim, 2023). Fathers in the matrilineal system are reported to shirk their parenting responsibilities with the assumption that, under the matrilineal system, children belong to their mothers, and they will inherit the properties of their mothers and uncles (Manful & Abdullah, 2021). Additionally, children in the matrilineal system are obliged to look after their mothers in their old age, compared to their fathers. These normative expectations influenced how parents (including mothers) in Ghana interpreted or defined child neglect (Manful & Abdullah, 2021). Mothers' allusion to these normative expectations as part of their definitions of child neglect underscores the strengths and legitimacy of inheritance norms in influencing parenting.

Compared to the findings from Ghana (Manful & Abdullah, 2021; Manful & Karim, 2023) and Namibia (Sharley et al., 2019), Dickerson et al.'s (2017) study on how laypeople in the United States defined child neglect revealed other nuances about gender role expectations. Community members and laypeople in the United States did not consider a father's absence in a child's life to be neglectful behaviour compared to a mothers' absence:

*[Participants] viewed mothers described as having left to another state to work and live as being more intentionally harmful in their behavior than fathers who engaged in the same behavior.*

(p. 261)

This notion of child neglect is consistent with Manful and Abdullah's (2021) findings that mothers in Ghana are perceived to have ownership of children. However, Dickerson et al.'s (2017) study also revealed gender matching as another way gender norms influence the conceptualization and determination of child neglect:

*"Overall, men viewed mothers as more culpable when they were taking care of girls but fathers as more culpable when taking care of boys"*

(Dickerson et al., 2017: p. 261)

Essentially, community members were more likely to assess an act of omission in care as constituting neglect when the gender of the custodial parent and the child matched.

### 3.3.3. Cultural norms on obedience and respect

Studies involving children (Amoah, 2019), parents and community members (Lavi & Katz, 2016; Manful & Karim, 2023) revealed different ways cultural expectations on obedience and respect underpinned children and community members' conceptualization of child neglect. Disobedience and disrespect by children towards their parents was a crucial factor highlighted by some children and community members in their interpretation of what neglect means (cf. Amoah, 2019). Abandoning a child was not considered an act of neglect if the parent or caregiver did that as a response or punishment for a child's act of disobedience or disrespect (Amoah, 2019).

*"My parents are concerned about me...My father and I quarrelled before I left. He said I shouldn't come [to this new country], but I did not listen so now he says I shouldn't tell him anything about my situation until I return home (Hamzia, female, 14 years)"*

(Amoah, 2019, p. 470)

Some children and community members interpreted neglectful acts [based on a legal definition of neglect] or punishments as a sign of love (Amoah, 2019) or means to correct the children (Manful & Karim, 2023).

Manful and Karim (2023) reported that community members rejected claims about child neglect if a parent failed to provide food to a child who has disobeyed his parents' instructions, such as associating with bad friends.

*"It is a situation parents refuse to provide food, shelter and others to their child because of maybe what the child has done to the parents. I said this because my first child in Junior High School recently developed an attitude I didn't like, he goes out and comes back late. I made sure the door is locked before he returns and this punishment has changed him"*

(Manful & Karim, 2023: p. 83)

*"Although poverty plays a significant role in the emergence of child neglect, the attitude of the child sometimes outweighs poverty. Parents might be poor but will be pushing and working hard to help no matter the circumstance. I abandoned my 17-year-old son because he was chasing young girls instead of focusing on his education. He never listened to my advice as a mother which made me neglect him"*

(Manful & Karim, 2023: p. 85)

It appears this normative construction of child neglect is enforced by the perceived positive outcomes of the punishments. However, this interpretation or construction of neglect may lead to the conflation of child neglect with child exploitation, and potentially lead to the acceptance of cruel and exploitative parental behaviour. It was therefore not surprising that some children in Israel were unable to identify some perceived abusive or neglectful acts by their parents.

*"I don't know why you are asking me if something bad happened to me, bad things are happening to me every day."*

(Lavi & Katz, 2016, p. 174)

*"When you are asking me if something happened to me at home what do you mean? I don't understand."*

(Lavi & Katz, 2016, p. 174)



#### 4. Discussion

This study involved a systematic analysis of empirical evidence from existing studies on the conceptualization of child neglect. It specifically focused on key cultural values and normative expectations in different countries and how they influenced child neglect definitions. The findings, synthesized under key themes, have been discussed within the context of the interaction between cultural expectations, legal requirements, and child wellbeing.

A key theme identified across several studies is that the definition of child neglect is largely influenced by norms of community responsibility to childcare. The norm of community responsibility to childcare expands parenting and childcare obligations by making it a core responsibility of all community members. For instance, in sub-Saharan Africa it was expected that community members will watch over children in the community when they are socializing and playing together with friends in the neighbourhood (Laird, 2016). This normative expectation is shown to affect child neglect definitions by extending the duty of childcare among all community members, which makes it hard to blame only the biological parents in instances of child neglect. It was therefore not surprising that some of the studies recommended “*collective community failure*” as a desirable phrase for defining child neglect in such communities (Blumenthal, 2021; Laird, 2016). The term “*collective community failure*” was used to suggest that the entire community system should be held accountable for child neglect issues, and not a single parent.

Essentially, the cultural element of community responsibility to childcare expands the obligation of childcare rendering duty to report neglect void. However, there are limitations, including the lack of clarification on the specific parenting/childcare responsibilities that are diffused among all community members and those that are retained by the biological parents with respect to the different types of neglectful behaviours. For example, will the community (or a community member) be held accountable if a child is denied adequate healthcare (medical neglect), housing, food (physical neglect), and emotional affection (emotional neglect)? It appears the descriptions contained in these studies is limited to only cases of supervisory neglect—where there has been a failure to provide adequate supervision for a child (Coohey, 2003). Hence, findings on the influence of the norm of community responsibility to childcare could be limited to the conceptualization of supervisory neglect within collectivist communities. Additionally, the findings did not reveal how the norm of community responsibility to childcare may manifest in instances of chronic neglect. And little is known about the mechanisms that exist in such communities to hold community members accountable to children who experience cumulative neglect. Studies that explore these nuances could advance knowledge on this topic.

Evidence obtained from some of the included studies suggests that the norm of community responsibility to childcare is enforced by kinship structures and values. Participants, including children, argued that the parenting responsibilities expected of community members are enforced by kinship norms that support extended family structures as opposed to nuclear family structures. Extended family structures are predominant among Asian, African, and Black American (Glick et al., 1997; Motha, 2018; Nukunya, 2003). The extended family structures are shown to have child welfare benefits, including caring for orphan children (Motha, 2018), promoting grandparent care for parentless children (Chiteji, 2010; Bentum et al., 2024), fostering intergenerational relationships, and supporting teens to disclose and report child sexual abuse cases (Grossman et al., 2015). Evidence from this study suggests that extended family structures provide pathways to enforce collective community responsibility to childcare in the context of child neglect.

Participants in the included studies provided narratives that support the role of gender norms and gender-role expectations in the definition of child neglect. Community members and parents highlighted the impact of the normative expectations of fathers and mothers, and gender matching in the definition of child neglect. In contrast to extant literature on gender norms in parenting; which appear to assign parenting duties exclusively to mothers (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Rehel, 2014), results from this study underscored specific childcare duties, such as registration of children’s names with the birth registration department, among the exclusive duties of fathers. Analytically, the normative duties assigned to fathers (such as registration of children’s names with birth registration department) compared to mothers (such as being involved in daily childcare duties), suggest that women may be more burdened and at risk of being blamed for child neglect incidence. Additionally, the evidence on gender norms and parental role expectations was situated within a heteronormative paradigm or context, whereby there is a traditional understanding of gender as constituting male and female and the acceptance of heterosexual relationships or family structures as the norm. These conceptions of gender and family disregard diverse family structures, including those involving non-binary genders, such as and LGBTQ+ families. Research that examines how child neglect is defined within non-heterosexual families is encouraged.

This review shows that normative expectations on reciprocal care influence how child neglect is defined in some countries. Studies, mainly from Africa, showed that norms on inheritance expectations, based on matrilineal and patrilineal lineage systems, influenced neglect definitions in some countries, such as Ghana (Manful & Abdullah, 2021; Manful & Karim, 2023). Children in matrilineal systems are culturally mandated to reciprocate the care received during their childhood by taking care of their mothers in their old age, and those in patrilineal systems will do same for their fathers. Such reciprocal care obligations appear to change the narrative on child neglect given that fathers in matrilineal systems sees themselves as not obliged to perform childcare duties since the children will not take care of them in their old age. Lineage and inheritance are deep-rooted, legitimized, and sanctioned among people of African descent, including African Americans (Bryc et al., 2010; Nukunya, 2003), and they shape the daily activities and decisions of such people. However, the complex linkage among these lineage and inheritance norms with reciprocal care duties and child neglect may not be consistent with the logic and intentions informing such norms. Ethnographic and anthropological research that unpacks these complex relationships would be desired.

Finally, this review underscored various ways norms on obedience and respect influence the conceptualization of child neglect in some jurisdictions. In contrast to WHO characterization of abandonment as a neglectful behaviour, evidence in some of the included studies suggest that child abandonment should be an acceptable form of discipline to ensure obedience and respect among children. Narratives by participants, including some from children (Amoah, 2019; Manful & Karim, 2023), suggest that even children perceive

parental abandonment behaviours, such as locking a child to sleep outside, as acceptable approach for teaching obedience and respect. Therefore, the participants do not perceive such behaviours as neglectful. Analytically, the participants' perceptions and justifications of abandonment behaviours as non-neglect could risk legitimizing and normalizing other maltreatments, including physical punishment, chronic neglect, and child abuse, under the normative framework of teaching obedience/respect. Even if interpreted within the framework of cultural relativism (cf. [Spiro, 1992](#)), it is important to acknowledge limits of culturally sanctioned behaviours to avoid its negative consequences for children. For instance, while the true intension of ensuring a child is obedient is desired, the practice of locking a child to sleep outside could expose a child to other dangers, including extreme weather conditions (cold and heat). These dangers are apparent regardless of the level of perceived safety within the community or neighbourhood. Therefore, we recommend that the cultural narratives on child neglect be critically evaluated within the context of child wellbeing and best interest.

#### 4.1. Implications for studying and measuring child neglect

Evidence discussed in this review has important implications for the measurement and study of child neglect. Broadly, the results confirm an act of omission of care or failure to provide for the needs for children as the key constructs that underlie child neglect. However, the findings revealed cultural differences regarding: 1) who should be held responsible for an act of omission in care? 2) why the act of omission in care was exhibited? and 3) the duties of a child in determining an act of omission in care. For example, the review showed that in some collectivist societies, where norms of community responsibility to childcare are sanctioned, communities, instead of biological parents, should be held responsible for the failure to supervise a child. Even in the context of biological parents, the review showed differences in role expectations among mothers and fathers. Which means that definitions of child neglect may be gender specific based on communities defined responsibilities for a father and a mother.

In addition to our call for increased research in this field, preliminarily, the findings have some impacts on the core measurement models that are used to study child neglect, i.e. including CTSPC ([Straus et al., 1998](#)), JVQ ([Finkelhor et al., 2005](#)) and the childhood trauma questionnaire (CTQ) ([Hagborg et al., 2022](#)). For instance, the findings suggest that these measurement tools may not accurately measure child neglect in communities that diffuse the responsibility of childcare and supervision among all community members, instead of the biological parents of the child. As a result, we recommend that countries and communities should develop their own culturally-informed tools for measuring child neglect behaviours. The development of such culturally-informed tools should take into account the community norms on childcare, the gender role expectations of parents and guard against the risk of enforcing practices (such as abandonment) that pose risk and danger to children.

However, it is worth acknowledging the complexity of creating measurement tools that are consistent with context-based definitions of neglect and parenting, and responsive to cultural diversity. This is because in multicultural societies, such as the United States, Australia, Canada and in most high-income countries, there may be varied cultural norms influencing the conception of neglect due to the dominance of diverse cultural groups. Research that explores the possibility of developing culturally sensitive measurement tools for neglect in multicultural societies are highly encouraged.

#### 4.2. Culture expectations, legal definitions, and child wellbeing: implications for future research and practice

It is important that the findings discussed in this review are considered in further research, specifically the connection between the cultural norms and the wellbeing of children. For instance, the norms about reciprocal care relations and obedience entail elements that have legal implications. Specifically, the notion that sanctioning parental attitudes, such as locking a child to sleep outside as a form of desirable punishment to teach obedience and respect, may violate country-specific legislations. Similarly, norms that justify parental failure to meet the basic needs of children due to the normative expectation that the children will not look after them in their old age begs the question of legal requirements of parental duties. Further, the norm of community childcare duties may have the negative implication of promoting chronic neglect given that it diffuses the duty of childcare to everyone in the community, and that no single person can be held responsible for such acts.

Our review of Children's legislations in the countries included in this review (such as Namibia, Turkey, Israel, USA, UK, Ghana etc.) reveals a potential tension between the legal requirements and cultural expectations. Specifically, almost all the countries included in this review have specific requirements for handling child neglect situations and these requirements center on the biological parents. As a result, we call for the need to study the interaction between parenting responsibilities within the legal frameworks in these countries, and the legal definitions of neglect within the context of the wellbeing of the child. Such comparative and context-specific analysis will provide results to inform the development of measurement models for studying, identifying, and assessing child neglect.

#### 4.3. Limitations

There are some limitations that apply to this review. First, the use of narrative synthesis approach may have biased the analysis favouring qualitative evidence over quantitative. Similarly, researchers may have included or excluded a study due to fatigue from reviewing over 30,000 articles at the title review stage. However, such errors may have been minimized through the independent reviews conducted by two researchers. Also, the findings from this study are limited to published English articles that are contained in the four databases. Similarly, the focus on only empirical, conceptual and theoretical studies on child neglect, meant that evidence in other document types, such as grey literature, are missed. Research that uses an expanded database and includes both grey literature and non-English articles would strengthen the study findings.

There are other limitations pertaining to the articles included in the review. Chief among them is that the majority of the review

studies did not specify the subtype of neglect; instead, they lumped together several behaviours under the wider concept of neglect. The subtypes of neglect (e.g., medical, supervisory, physical, health etc.) are empirically distinct, in terms of causal factors and impacts on children. Hence, future studies should critically analyze the studies within the context of specific subtypes of neglect. Also, the focus on cultural elements in defining child neglect limited the scope of the study to articles with a more explicit emphasis on culture. As a result, themes and associated quotes presented in the study are limited to a subset of the 25 included studies that had explicit focus on culture. Further, there was limited analysis in the included studies that focused on the impact of the definitions of child neglect on its measurement. A thorough analysis of all existing measurement instruments for child neglect and their connection with the cultural issues highlighted in this review are desired.

## 5. Conclusion

This systematic review advances knowledge on how cultural norms and values influence definitions of child neglect in different communities and countries. The review showed that current measurement models, including the CTSPC and JVQ, do not acknowledge the varied cultural interpretations of child neglect. While recommending that context-based and culturally-informed measurement tools be developed to study child neglect, the review also caution against the acceptance of cultural norms without subjecting them to critical analysis within the context of child wellbeing. This is because some of the cultural norms are likely to have unintended consequences, such as sanctioning child exploitation.

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## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Alhassan Abdullah:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Roshni Thattengat:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

Authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest in the writing of the manuscript.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2025.107261>.

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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