

EDITORIAL

Defining psychological maltreatment: Reflections and future directions

This special issue of *Development and Psychopathology* provides an important opportunity to assess the status of efforts that have been made toward defining psychological maltreatment. In 1987, *American Psychologist* directed our attention to this very issue in their section on Psychology in the Public Forum. According to Garrison (1987), the section was designed "to elucidate the concept of psychological maltreatment and to stimulate further interest in efforts to examine the prevention, treatment, research, and policy aspects of [the] phenomenon" (p. 157). It was hoped that the articles on psychological maltreatment would generate interest and lead to advances in theory and research that could guide prevention and intervention efforts for maltreated children.

When I received the article by McGee and Wolfe, I was struck by the continued need for research efforts in this area. After receiving input from peer reviewers who underscored my belief in the importance of the issue of psychological maltreatment, I felt that inviting leading researchers, clinicians, and policy advocates in child maltreatment to respond to McGee and Wolfe's article could promote open communication on this important topic.

I want to commend McGee and Wolfe for their willingness to present their views of psychological maltreatment in a forum such as this. It is only by committing to and articulating a position that others can learn, thereby facilitating overall progress in an area. I believe that the article by McGee and Wolfe, in conjunction with the responses it has elicited and their reply, will result in significant advances in theory and research as they relate to psychological maltreatment. Efforts such as this also will ultimately advance the application of research to policy development and intervention for maltreated children.

The contributors to this special issue represent a diverse group of individuals with regard to theoretical orientation, professional training, and field of expertise. I considered multidisciplinary input to be critical, as psychological maltreatment cannot be confined to one area of inquiry. Because professionals in many fields must grapple with questions related to the occurrence of psychological maltreatment, the phenomenon can only be understood adequately if the views of all of those confronting psychological maltreatment are considered.

In reviewing the articles in this special issue, I was struck by some common themes that emerged despite the diversity of the contributors. The importance of conceptualizing maltreatment within a broader societal context was discussed by many authors, thus reflecting an increasing emphasis on the importance of broadening

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views of maltreatment beyond an exclusive focus on parent–child interaction. In a related vein, authors frequently recognized the potential impact of theory and research on psychological maltreatment for policy development and intervention efforts. Increasingly, work within maltreatment must be conceptualized with the knowledge of the consequences, both positive and negative, for policy development and implementation (Cicchetti & Toth, in press). Finally, the concerns regarding the necessity of defining, operationalizing, and assessing psychological maltreatment, and the progress that has been made toward this goal, emerged clearly.

The field of developmental psychopathology can be helpful in achieving these goals in several ways. Research developed within a developmental psychopathology framework will enable us to assess the merit of various definitional approaches. For example, as increasingly precise definitions of various subtypes of maltreatment emerge, we will be in a position to evaluate how a given occurrence of maltreatment relates to current or future developmental outcome. Because not all maltreated children manifest negative sequelae, assess-

ments of resiliency in the face of adversity will be especially important. Additionally, because developmental psychopathology maintains that multiple pathways may result in the same outcome, an articulation of the processes whereby psychological maltreatment leads to maladaptation, as well as the processes associated with non-maltreatment histories that yield similar maladaptation, will be important.

In closing, I believe the contributions to this special issue of *Development and Psychopathology* reflect significant progress in the definition of psychological maltreatment. Conversely, however, the commentaries elucidate many challenges that remain. Even when a clear resolution of conceptual and definitional issues is achieved, concerns associated with limited resources for addressing the needs of maltreated children and differing philosophies on what forms of maltreatment warrant intervention into the family unit will remain. However, by approaching questions such as these from a sound base of knowledge, we will be in a position to make decisions more effectively regarding the needs of children, families, and society as a whole.

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